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# ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY

Aeschylus  
Sophocles  
Euripides

# Ancient Greek Tragedy: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides

Ali Zeus



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**Ancient Greek Tragedy****AESCHYLUS**

*Oresteia (Agamemnon, Choephoroi, Eumenides), Prometheus Bound, Seven Against Thebes, Suppliant Women, Persians*

**SOPHOCLES**

*Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone, Ajax, Philoctetes, Trachiniae*

**EURIPIDES**

*19 Plays! Bacchae, Electra, Medea, Orestes, Herakles, Iphigenia, ...*

*Based on the publicly available translations by [Ian Johnston](http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/)<sup>1</sup> and [George Theodoridis](https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com)<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/>

<sup>2</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com>

<sup>3</sup><http://diz.link/sapientia-at-twitter>

# About

## AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus (/ˈiːskələs/ or /ˈæskələs/; Greek: Αἰσχύλος Aiskhulos; Ancient Greek: [ai̯̯.kʰý̯.los]; c. 525/524 – c. 456/455 BC) was an ancient Greek tragedian. He is also the first whose plays still survive; the others are Sophocles and Euripides. He is often described as the father of tragedy: critics and scholars' knowledge of the genre begins with his work, and understanding of earlier tragedies is largely based on inferences from his surviving plays. According to Aristotle, he expanded the number of characters in plays to allow conflict among them whereas characters previously had interacted only with the chorus.

...more at [wikipedia](#)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeschylus>



## SOPHOCLES

Sophocles (/ˈsɒfəˈkliːz/;[1] Greek:Σοφοκλῆς, Sophoklēs, Ancient Greek: [so.pʰo.klɛ̌ːs]; c. 497/6 – winter 406/5 BC) is one of three ancient Greek tragedians whose plays have survived. His first plays were written later than those of Aeschylus, and earlier than or contemporary with those of Euripides. According to the Suda, a 10th-century encyclopedia, Sophocles wrote 123 plays during the course of his life, but only seven have survived in a complete form: Ajax, Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Oedipus the King, Electra, Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus.

*...more at [wikipedia](#)*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophocles>

## EURIPIDES

**Euripides** (/jʊˈrɪpɪdiːz/ or /jʊˈrɒpɪdiːz/;<sup>[1]</sup> Greek: Εὐριπίδης; Ancient Greek: [eu̯rí̯.pí.d̯ɛ̯s]) (c. 480 – 406 BC) was a tragedian of classical Athens. He is one of the three whose plays have survived, with the other two being Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Euripides is identified with theatrical innovations that have profoundly influenced drama down to modern times, especially in the representation of traditional, mythical heroes as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. This new approach led him to pioneer developments that later writers adapted to comedy, some of which are characteristic of romance. Yet he also became “the most tragic of poets”, focusing on the inner lives and motives of his characters in a way previously unknown.

He was also unique among the writers of ancient Athens for the sympathy he demonstrated towards all victims of society, including women. His conservative male audiences were frequently shocked by the ‘heresies’ he put into the mouths of characters, such as these words of his heroine Medea:

Sooner would I stand  
Three times to face their battles, shield in hand,  
Than bear one child!

His contemporaries associated him with Socrates as a leader of a decadent intellectualism, both of them being frequently lampooned by comic poets such as Aristophanes. Whereas Socrates was eventually put on trial and executed as a corrupting influence, Euripides chose a voluntary exile in old age, dying in Macedonia.

*...more at [wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euripides)<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euripides>

# The Legend of the Trojan War

*This section is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>7</sup> lecture by Ian Johnston*

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This summary, which has been prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC (now Vancouver Island University), for students in Classics 101 and Liberal Studies, is a brief account of a number of different old stories about the Trojan war, arranged in more or less chronological sequence. There are several different, even contradictory, versions of events. There is no one authoritative narrative of the whole war. Many of these stories were obviously current before Homer, and the story continued to be embellished by the Romans and Medieval writers]

1) The gods Apollo and Poseidon, during a time when they were being punished by having to work among men, built the city of Troy for Priam's father, Laomedon. They invited the mortal man Aeacus (the son of Zeus and Aegina and grandfather of Achilles) to help them, since destiny had decreed that Troy would one day be captured in a place built by human hands (so a human being had to help them).

2) When newly constructed, Troy was attacked and captured by Herakles (Hercules), Telamon (brother of Peleus and therefore the uncle of Achilles and father of Telamonian Ajax and Teucros), and Peleus (son of Aeacus and father of Achilles), as a punishment for the fact that Laomedon had not given Hercules a promised reward of immortal horses for rescuing Laomedon's daughter Hesione. Telamon killed Laomedon and took Hesione as a concubine (she was the mother of Teucros).

3) Priam, King of Troy and son of Laomedon, had a son from his wife Hekabe (or Hecuba), who dreamed that she had given birth to a flaming torch. Cassandra, the prophetic daughter of Priam, foretold that the new-born son, Paris (also called Alexandros or Alexander), should be killed at birth or else he would destroy the city. Paris was taken out to be killed, but he was rescued by shepherds and grew up away from the city in the farms by Mount Ida. As a young man he returned to Troy to compete in the athletic games, was recognized, and returned to the royal family.

4) Peleus (father of Achilles) fell in love with the sea nymph Thetis, whom Zeus, the most powerful of the gods, also had designs upon. But Zeus learned of an ancient prophecy that Thetis would give birth to a son greater than his father, so he gave his divine blessing to the marriage of Peleus, a mortal king, and Thetis. All the gods were invited to the celebration, except, by a deliberate oversight, Eris, the goddess of strife. She came anyway and brought a golden apple, upon which was written "For the fairest." Hera (Zeus's wife), Aphrodite (Zeus's daughter), and

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<sup>7</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/clas101/troy.htm>

Athena (Zeus's daughter) all made a claim for the apple, and they appealed to Zeus for judgment. He refused to adjudicate a beauty contest between his wife and two of his daughters, and the task of choosing a winner fell to Paris (while he was still a herdsman on Mount Ida, outside Troy). The goddesses each promised Paris a wonderful prize if he would pick her: Hera offered power, Athena offered military glory and wisdom, and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. In the famous Judgement of Paris, Paris gave the apple to Aphrodite.

5) Helen, daughter of Tyndareus and Leda, was also the daughter of Zeus, who had made love to Leda in the shape of a swan (she is the only female child of Zeus and a mortal). Her beauty was famous throughout the world. Her father Tyndareus would not agree to any man's marrying her, until all the Greeks warrior leaders made a promise that they would collectively avenge any insult to her. When the leaders made such an oath, Helen then married Menelaus, King of Sparta. Her twin (non-divine) sister Klytaimnestra (Clytaemnestra), born at the same time as Helen but not a daughter of Zeus, married Agamemnon, King of Argos, and brother of Menelaus. Agamemnon was the most powerful leader in Hellas (Greece).

6) Paris, back in the royal family at Troy, made a journey to Sparta as a Trojan ambassador, at a time when Menelaus was away. Paris and Helen fell in love and left Sparta together, taking with them a vast amount of the city's treasure and returning to Troy via Cranae, an island off Attica, Sidon, and Egypt, among other places. The Spartans set off in pursuit but could not catch the lovers. When the Spartans learned that Helen and Paris were back in Troy, they sent a delegation (Odysseus, King of Ithaca, and Menelaus, the injured husband) to Troy demanding the return of Helen and the treasure. When the Trojans refused, the Spartans appealed to the oath which Tyndareus had forced them all to take (see 5 above), and the Greeks assembled an army to invade Troy, asking all the allies to meet in preparation for embarkation at Aulis. Some stories claimed that the real Helen never went to Troy, for she was carried off to Egypt by the god Hermes, and Paris took her double to Troy.

7) Achilles, the son of Peleus and Thetis, was educated as a young man by Chiron, the centaur (half man and half horse). One of the conditions of Achilles's parents' marriage (the union of a mortal with a divine sea nymph) was that the son born to them would die in war and bring great sadness to his mother. To protect him from death in battle his mother bathed the infant in the waters of the river Styx, which conferred invulnerability to any weapon. And when the Greeks began to assemble an army, Achilles's parents hid him at Scyros disguised as a girl. While there he met Deidameia, and they had a son Neoptolemos (also called Pyrrhus). Calchas, the prophet with the Greek army, told Agamemnon and the other leaders that they could not conquer Troy without Achilles. Odysseus found Achilles by tricking him; Odysseus placed a weapon out in front of the girls of Scyros, and Achilles reached for it, thus revealing his identity. Menoitios, a royal counsellor, sent his son Patroclus to accompany Achilles on the expedition as his friend and advisor.

8) The Greek fleet of one thousand ships assembled at Aulis. Agamemnon, who led the largest contingent, was the commander-in-chief. The army was delayed for

a long time by contrary winds, and the future of the expedition was threatened as the forces lay idle. Agamemnon had offended the goddess Artemis by an impious boast, and Artemis had sent the winds. Finally, in desperation to appease the goddess, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia. Her father lured her to Aulis on the pretext that she was to be married to Achilles (whose earlier marriage was not known), but then he sacrificed her on the high altar. One version of her story claims that Artemis saved her at the last minute and carried her off to Tauris where she became a priestess of Artemis in charge of human sacrifices. While there, she later saved Orestes and Pylades. In any case, after the sacrifice Artemis changed the winds, and the fleet sailed for Troy.

9) On the way to Troy, Philoctetes, the son of Poeas and leader of the seven ships from Methone, suffered a snake bite when the Greeks landed at Tenedos to make a sacrifice. His pain was so great and his wound so unpleasant (especially the smell) that the Greek army abandoned him against his will on the island.

10) The Greek army landed on the beaches before Troy. The first man ashore, Protesilaus, was killed by Hector, son of Priam and leader of the Trojan army. The Greeks sent another embassy to Troy, seeking to recover Helen and the treasure. When the Trojans denied them, the Greek army settled down into a siege which lasted many years.

11) In the tenth year of the war (where the narrative of the Iliad begins), Agamemnon insulted Apollo by taking as a slave-hostage the girl Chryseis, the daughter of Chryses, a prophet of Apollo, and refusing to return her when her father offered compensation. In revenge, Apollo sent nine days of plague down upon the Greek army. Achilles called an assembly to determine what the Greeks should do. In that assembly, he and Agamemnon quarrelled bitterly, Agamemnon confiscated from Achilles his slave girl Briseis, and Achilles, in a rage, withdrew himself and his forces (the Myrmidons) from any further participation in the war. He asked his mother, Thetis, the divine sea nymph, to intercede on his behalf with Zeus to give the Trojans help in battle, so that the Greek forces would recognize how foolish Agamemnon had been to offend the best soldier under his command. Thetis made the request of Zeus, reminding him of a favour she had once done for him, warning him about a revolt against his authority, and he agreed.

12) During the course of the war, numerous incidents took place, and many died on both sides. Paris and Menelaus fought a duel, and Aphrodite saved Paris just as Menelaus was about to kill him. Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors, slew Cycnus, Troilus, and many others. He also, according to various stories, was a lover of Patroclus, Troilus, Polyxena, daughter of Priam, Helen, and Medea. Odysseus and Diomedes slaughtered thirteen Thracians (Trojan allies) and stole the horses of King Rhesus in a night raid. Telamonian Ajax (the Greater Ajax) and Hector fought a duel with no decisive result. A common soldier, Thersites, challenged the authority of Agamemnon and demanded that the soldiers abandon the expedition. Odysseus beat Thersites into obedience. In the absence of Achilles and following Zeus's promise to Thetis (see 11), Hector enjoyed great success against the Greeks, breaking through their defensive ramparts on the beach and setting the ships on fire.

13) While Hector was enjoying his successes against the Greeks, the latter sent

an embassy to Achilles, requesting him to return to battle. Agamemnon offered many rewards in compensation for his initial insult (see 11). Achilles refused the offer but did say that he would reconsider if Hector ever reached the Greek ships. When Hector did so, Achilles's friend Patroclus (see 7) begged to be allowed to return to the fight. Achilles gave him permission, advising Patroclus not to attack the city of Troy itself. He also gave Patroclus his own suit of armour, so that the Trojans might think that Achilles had returned to the war. Patroclus resumed the fight, enjoyed some dazzling success (killing one of the leaders of the Trojan allies, Sarpedon from Lykia), but he was finally killed by Hector, with the help of Apollo.

14) In his grief over the death of his friend Patroclus, Achilles decided to return to the battle. Since he had no armour (Hector had stripped the body of Patroclus and had put on the armour of Achilles), Thetis asked the divine artisan Hephaestus, the crippled god of the forge, to prepare some divine armour for her son. Hephaestus did so, Thetis gave the armour to Achilles, and he returned to the war. After slaughtering many Trojans, Achilles finally cornered Hector alone outside the walls of Troy. Hector chose to stand and fight rather than to retreat into the city, and he was killed by Achilles, who then mutilated the corpse, tied it to his chariot, and dragged it away. Achilles built a huge funeral pyre for Patroclus, killed Trojan soldiers as sacrifices, and organized the funeral games in honour of his dead comrade. Priam travelled to the Greek camp to plead for the return of Hector's body, and Achilles relented and returned it to Priam in exchange for a ransom.

15) In the tenth year of the war the Amazons, led by Queen Penthesilea, joined the Trojan forces. She was killed in battle by Achilles, as was King Memnon of Ethiopia, who had also recently reinforced the Trojans. Achilles's career as the greatest warrior came to an end when Paris, with the help of Apollo, killed him with an arrow which pierced him in the heel, the one vulnerable spot, which the waters of the River Styx had not touched because his mother had held him by the foot (see 7) when she had dipped the infant Achilles in the river. Telamonian Ajax, the second greatest Greek warrior after Achilles, fought valiantly in defense of Achilles's corpse. At the funeral of Achilles, the Greeks sacrificed Polyxena, the daughter of Hecuba, wife of Priam. After the death of Achilles, Odysseus and Telamonian Ajax fought over who should get the divine armour of the dead hero. When Ajax lost the contest, he went mad and committed suicide. In some versions, the Greek leaders themselves vote and decide to award the armour to Odysseus.

16) The Greeks captured Helenus, a son of Priam, and one of the chief prophets in Troy. Helenus revealed to the Greeks that they could not capture Troy without the help of Philoctetes, who owned the bow and arrows of Hercules and whom the Greeks had abandoned on Tenedos (see 9 above). Odysseus and Neoptolemus (the son of Achilles) set out to persuade Philoctetes, who was angry at the Greeks for leaving him alone on the island, to return to the war, and by trickery they succeeded. Philoctetes killed Paris with an arrow shot from the bow of Hercules.

17) Odysseus and Diomedes ventured into Troy at night, in disguise, and stole the Palladium, the sacred statue of Athena, which was supposed to give the Trojans the strength to continue the war. The city, however, did not fall. Finally the Greeks devised the strategy of the wooden horse filled with armed soldiers. It was built

by Epeius and left in front of Troy. The Greek army then withdrew to Tenedos (an island off the coast), as if abandoning the war. Odysseus went into Troy disguised, and Helen recognized him. But he was sent away by Hecuba, the wife of Priam, after Helen told her. The Greek soldier Sinon stayed behind when the army withdrew and pretended to the Trojans that he had deserted from the Greek army because he had information about a murder Odysseus had committed. He told the Trojans that the horse was an offering to Athena and that the Greeks had built it to be so large that the Trojans could not bring it into their city. The Trojan Laocoon warned the Trojans not to believe Sinon ("I fear the Greeks even when they bear gifts"); in the midst of his warnings a huge sea monster came from the surf and killed Laocoon and his sons.

18) The Trojans determined to get the Trojan Horse into their city. They tore down a part of the wall, dragged the horse inside, and celebrated their apparent victory. At night, when the Trojans had fallen asleep, the Greek soldiers hidden in the horse came out, opened the gates, and gave the signal to the main army which had been hiding behind Tenedos. The city was totally destroyed. King Priam was slaughtered at the altar by Achilles's son Neoptolemos. Hector's infant son, Astyanax, was thrown off the battlements. The women were taken prisoner: Hecuba (wife of Priam), Cassandra (daughter of Priam), and Andromache (wife of Hector). Helen was returned to Menelaus.

19) The gods regarded the sacking of Troy and especially the treatment of the temples as a sacrilege, and they punished many of the Greek leaders. The fleet was almost destroyed by a storm on the journey back. Menelaus's ships sailed all over the sea for seven years—to Egypt (where, in some versions, he recovered his real wife in the court of King Proteus—see 6 above). Agamemnon returned to Argos, where he was murdered by his wife Clytaemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. Cassandra, whom Agamemnon had claimed as a concubine after the destruction of Troy, was also killed by Clytaemnestra. Aegisthus was seeking revenge for what the father of Agamemnon (Atreus) had done to his brother (Aegisthus' father) Thyestes. Atreus had given a feast for Thyestes in which he fed to him the cooked flesh of his own children (see the family tree of the House of Atreus given below). Clytaemnestra claimed that she was seeking revenge for the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigeneia (see 8 above).

20) Odysseus (called by the Romans Ulysses) wandered over the sea for many years before reaching home. He started with a number of ships, but in a series of misfortunes, lasting ten years because of the enmity of Poseidon, the god of the sea, he lost all his men before returning to Ithaca alone. His adventures took him from Troy to Ismareos (land of the Cicones); to the land of the Lotos Eaters, the island of the cyclops (Poseidon, the god of the sea, became Odysseus's enemy when Odysseus put out the eye of Polyphemus, the cannibal cyclops, who was a son of Poseidon); to the cave of Aeolos (god of the winds), to the land of the Laestrygonians, to the islands of Circe and Calypso, to the underworld (where he talked to the ghost of Achilles); to the land of the Sirens, past the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, to the pastures of the cattle of Helios, the sun god, to Phaiacia. Back in Ithaca in disguise, with the help of his son Telemachus and some loyal servants, he killed the young princes who had been trying to persuade his

wife, Penelope, to marry one of them and who had been wasting the treasure of the palace and trying to kill Telemachus. Odysseus proved who he was by being able to string the famous bow of Odysseus, a feat which no other man could manage, and by describing for Penelope the secret of their marriage bed, that Odysseus had built it around an old olive tree.

21) After the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytaemnestra (see 19 above), his son Orestes returned with a friend Pylades to avenge his father. With the help of his sister Electra (who had been very badly treated by her mother, left either unmarried or married to a poor farmer so that she would have no royal children), Orestes killed his mother and Aegisthus. Then he was pursued by the Furies, the goddesses of blood revenge. Suffering fits of madness, Orestes fled to Delphi, then to Tauri, where, in some versions, he met his long-lost sister, Iphigeneia. She had been rescued from Agamemnon's sacrifice by the gods and made a priestess of Diana in Tauri. Orestes escaped with Iphigeneia to Athens. There he was put on trial for the matricide. Apollo testified in his defense. The jury vote was even; Athena cast the deciding vote in Orestes's favour. The outraged Furies were placated by being given a permanent place in Athens and a certain authority in the judicial process. They were then renamed the Eumenides (The Kindly Ones). Orestes was later tried for the same matricide in Argos, at the insistence of Tyndareus, Clytaemnestra's father. Orestes and Electra were both sentenced to death by stoning. Orestes escaped by capturing Helen and using her as a hostage.

22) Neoptolemus, the only son of Achilles, married Hermione, the only daughter of Helen and Menelaus. Neoptolemus also took as a wife the widow of Hector, Andromache. There was considerable jealousy between the two women. Orestes had wished to marry Hermione; by a strategy he arranged it so that the people of Delphi killed Neoptolemus. Then he carried off Hermione and married her. Menelaus tried to kill the son of Neoptolemus, Molossus, and Andromache, but Peleus, Achilles's father, rescued them. Andromache later married Helenus. Orestes's friend Pylades married Electra, Orestes sister.

23) Aeneas, the son of Anchises and the goddess Aphrodite and one of the important Trojan leaders in the Trojan War, fled from the city while the Greeks were destroying it, carrying his father, Anchises, his son Ascanius, and his ancestral family gods with him. Aeneas wandered all over the Mediterranean. On his journey to Carthage, he had an affair with Dido, Queen of Carthage. He abandoned her without warning, in accordance with his mission to found another city. Dido committed suicide in grief. Aeneas reached Italy and there fought a war against Turnus, the leader of the local Rutulian people. He did not found Rome but Lavinium, the main centre of the Latin league, from which the people of Rome sprang. Aeneas thus links the royal house of Troy with the Roman republic.



## The Cultural Influence of the Legend of the Trojan War

No story in our culture, with the possible exception of the Old Testament and the story of Jesus Christ, has inspired writers and painters over the centuries more than the Trojan War. It was the fundamental narrative in Greek education (especially in the version passed down by Homer, which covers only a small part of the total narrative), and all the tragedians whose works survive wrote plays upon various aspects of it, and these treatments, in turn, helped to add variations to the traditional story. No one authoritative work defines all the details of the story outlined above.

Unlike the Old Testament narratives, which over time became codified in a single authoritative version, the story of the Trojan War exists as a large collection of different versions of the same events (or parts of them). The war has been interpreted as a heroic tragedy, as a fanciful romance, as a satire against warfare, as a love story, as a passionately anti-war tale, and so on. Just as there is no single version which defines the "correct" sequence of events, so there is no single interpretative slant on how one should understand the war. Homer's poems enjoyed a unique authority, but they tell only a small part of the total story.

The following notes indicate only a few of the plays, novels, and poems which have drawn on and helped to shape this ancient story.

1) The most famous Greek literary stories of the war are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, our first two epic poems, composed for oral recitation probably in the eighth century before Christ. The theme of the *Iliad* is the wrath of Achilles at the action of Agamemnon, and the epic follows the story of Achilles' withdrawal from the war and his subsequent return (see paragraphs 11, 12, 13, and 14 above). The *Odyssey* tells the story of the return of Odysseus from the war (see 20 above). A major reason for the extraordinary popularity and fecundity of the story of the Trojan War is the unquestioned quality and authority of these two great poems, even though they tell only a small part of the total narrative and were for a long time unavailable in Western Europe (after they were lost to the West, they did not appear until the fifteenth century). The *Iliad* was the inspiration for the archaeological work of Schliemann in the nineteenth century, a search which resulted in the discovery of the site of Troy at Hissarlik, in modern Turkey.

2) The Greek tragedians, we know from the extant plays and many fragments, found in the story of the Trojan War their favorite material, focusing especially on the events after the fall of the city. Aeschylus's famous trilogy, *The Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* [*Libation Bearers*], and *Eumenides* [*The Kindly Ones*]), tells of the murder of Agamemnon and Cassandra by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus, the revenge of Orestes, and the trial for the matricide. Both Sophocles and Euripides wrote plays about Electra, and Euripides also wrote a number of plays based on parts the larger story: *The Trojan Women*, *The Phoenissae*, *Orestes*, *Helen*, and *Iphigeneia in Tauris* (see 21 and 22 above). Sophocles also wrote *Philoctetes* (see 16) and *Ajax* (see 15) on events in the Trojan War.

3) Greek philosophers and historians used the Trojan War as a common ex-

ample to demonstrate their own understanding of human conduct. So Herodotus and Thucydides, in defining their approach to the historical past, both offer an analysis of the origins of the war. Plato's *Republic* uses many parts of Homer's epics to establish important points about political wisdom (often citing Homer as a negative example). Alexander the Great carried a copy of the *Iliad* around with him in a special royal casket which he had captured from Darius, King of the Persians.

4) The Romans also adopted the story. Their most famous epic, Virgil's *Aeneid*, tells the story of Aeneas (see 23). And in the middle ages, the Renaissance, and right up to the present day, writers have retold parts of the ancient story. These adaptations often make significant changes in the presentation of particular characters, notably Achilles, who in many versions becomes a knightly lover, and Odysseus/Ulysses, who is often a major villain. Ulysses and Diomedes appear in Dante's *Inferno*. Of particular note are Chaucer's and Shakespeare's treatments of the story of *Troilus and Cressida*.

Modern writers who have drawn on the literary tradition of this ancient cycle of stories include Sartre (*The Flies*), O'Neill (*Mourning Becomes Electra*), Giradoux (*Tiger at the Gates*), Joyce (*Ulysses*), Eliot, Auden, and many others. In addition, the story has formed the basis for operas and ballets, and the story of Odysseus has been made into a mini-series for television. This tradition is a complicated one, however, because many writers, especially in Medieval times, had no direct knowledge of the Greek sources and re-interpreted the details in very non-Greek ways (e.g., Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare). Homer's text, for example, was generally unknown in Western Europe until the late fifteenth century.

5) For the past two hundred years there has been a steady increase in the popularity of Homer's poems (and other works dealing with parts of the legend) translated into English. Thus, in addition to the various modern adaptations of parts of the total legend of the Trojan war (e.g., Brad Pitt's *Troy*), the ancient versions are still very current.

## The Royal House of Atreus

The most famous (or notorious) human family in Western literature is the House of Atreus, the royal family of Mycenae. To follow the brief outline below, consult the simplified family tree in p. 279 of the text of Aeschylus's play. Note that different versions of the story offer modifications of the family tree.

The family of Atreus suffered from an ancestral crime, variously described. Most commonly Tantalus, son of Zeus and Pluto, stole the food of the gods. In another version he kills his son Pelops and feeds the flesh to the gods (who later, when they discover what they have eaten, bring Pelops back to life). Having eaten the food of the gods, Tantalus is immortal and so cannot be killed. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Tantalus is punished everlastingly in the underworld.

The family curse originates with Pelops, who won his wife Hippodamia in a chariot race by cheating and betraying and killing his co-conspirator (who, as he was drowning, cursed the family of Pelops). The curse blighted the next generation: the brothers Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled. Atreus killed Thyestes's sons and served them to their father at a reconciliation banquet.

To obtain revenge, Thyestes fathered a son on his surviving child, his daughter Pelopia. This child was Aegisthus, whose task it was to avenge the murder of his brothers. When Agamemnon set off for Troy (sacrificing his daughter Iphigeneia so that the fleet could sail from Aulis), Aegisthus seduced Clytaemnestra and established himself as a power in Argos.

When Agamemnon returned, Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus killed him (and his captive Cassandra)—Aegisthus in revenge for his brothers, Clytaemnestra in revenge for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Orestes at the time was away, and Electra had been disgraced.

Orestes returned to Argos to avenge his father. With the help of a friend, Pylades, and his sister Electra, he succeeded by killing his mother, Clytaemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. After many adventures (depending upon the narrative) he finally received absolution for the matricide, and the curse was over.

Many Greek poets focused on this story. Homer repeatedly mentions the murder of Agamemnon in the *Odyssey* and the revenge of Orestes on Aegisthus (paying no attention to the murder of Clytaemnestra); Aeschylus's great trilogy *The Oresteia* is the most famous classical treatment of the tale; Sophocles and Euripides both wrote plays on Orestes and Electra.

One curious note is the almost exact parallel between the story of Orestes in this family tale and the story of *Hamlet*. These two stories arose, it seems, absolutely independently of each other, and yet in many crucial respects are extraordinarily similar. This match has puzzled many a comparative literature scholar and invited all sorts of psychological theories about the trans-cultural importance of matricide as a theme.

For a more detailed account of the House of Atreus, use the following link: [House of Atreus](#).

# Introductory Lecture on the Oresteia, Agamemnon

*This section is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>8</sup> lecture by Ian Johnston*

*[The following notes began as a lecture delivered, in part, at Malaspina College (now Vancouver Island University) in Liberal Studies 301 on September 25, 1995. That lecture was considerably revised in July 2000. This text is in the public domain, released July 2000. Note that references to Aeschylus's text are to the translation by Robert Fagles (Penguin, 1977)]*

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<sup>8</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/aeschylus.htm>

## Introduction

My lecture today falls into two parts. In the first I want to offer some background information for our study of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, specifically on the Trojan War and the House of Atreus, and in the second I will be addressing the first play in that trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, making relatively brief mention of the other plays in the trilogy. Other speakers today will focus in more detail on the second and third plays.

## The Trojan War

With the possible exception of the narratives in the Old Testament, no story has been such a fecund artistic resource in Western culture as the Greeks' favourite tale, the Trojan War. This is a vast, complex story, which includes a great many subsidiary narratives, and it has over the centuries proved an inexhaustible resource for Western writers, painters, musicians, choreographers, novelists, and dramatists. It would be comparatively easy and very interesting to develop a course of study of Western Culture based entirely upon artistic depictions of events from this long narrative. So it's an important part of cultural literacy for any students of our traditions to have some acquaintance with the details of this story, which even today shows no sign of losing its appeal. There is not time here today to go into the narrative in any depth. So I'm going to be dealing only with a very brief treatment of those details most immediately pertinent to our study of Aeschylus. However, for those who want to go over a more comprehensive summary of the total narrative, I have put a few pages on the Internet (to access the site on line click on [Trojan War](#) )

The complete narrative of the Trojan War includes at least six sections: the long-term causes (the Judgment of Paris), the immediate causes (the seduction of Helen of Troy by Paris), the preparations (especially the gathering of the forces at Aulis and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia), the events of the war (climaxing in the Wooden Horse and the destruction of the city), the returns (most notably the adventures of Odysseus and Aeneas and the murder of Agamemnon), and the long-term aftermath. The total narrative is found by putting together many different versions, not all of which by any means agree on the details. Unlike the Old Testament narrative which was eventually codified into an official single version (at least for Christians and Jews), the story of the Trojan War exists in many versions of separate incidents in many different documents. There is no single authoritative account. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* enjoyed a unique authority in classical Greece, but those works deal only with a relatively small parts of the total narrative and are by no means the only texts which deal with the subject matter they cover.

Was the Trojan War a historical event or an endlessly embroidered fiction? The answer to this question is much disputed. The ancient Greeks believed in the historical truth of the tale and dated it at approximately 1200 BC, about the same time as the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Until the last century, however, most later Europeans thought of the story as a poetic invention. This attitude changed quickly when a rich German merchant, Schliemann, in the nineteenth century, explored possible sites for the city (using Homeric geography as a clue) and unearthed some archeological remains of a city, one version of which had apparently been violently destroyed at about the traditional date. The site of this city, in Hissarlik in modern Turkey, is now widely believed to be the historical site of ancient Troy (although we cannot be certain).

What we need to know as background for Aeschylus's play is a comparatively small portion of this total narrative, which Aeschylus assumes his audience will be thoroughly familiar with. The expedition against Troy was initiated as a response to the seduction of Helen by Paris, a son of Priam, King of Troy, and their running

off together back to Troy with a great quantity of Spartan treasure. Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, was married to Menelaus, king of Sparta. His brother, Agamemnon, was king of Argos, married to Helen's twin sister Clytaemnestra (but whose father was not Zeus).

As a result of the abduction of Helen, the Greeks mounted an expedition against Troy, headed up by the two kings, Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus, or the Atreidai. They summoned their allies to meet them with troops at Aulis, where the ships were to take the troops on board and sail to Troy.

However, Agamemnon had angered the goddess Artemis by killing a sacred animal. So Artemis sent contrary winds, and the fleet could not sail. The entire expedition was threatened with failure. Finally, the prophet Calchas informed the Greek leadership that the fleet would not be able to sail unless Agamemnon sacrificed his eldest daughter, Iphigeneia. He did so, and the fleet sailed to Troy, where, after ten years of siege, the city finally fell to the Greeks, who then proceeded to rape, pillage, and destroy the temples of the Trojans. The Greek leaders divided up the captive women. Agamemnon took Cassandra, a daughter of king Priam, home as a slave concubine. Cassandra had refused the sexual advances of the god Apollo; he had punished her by giving her the gift of divine prophecy but making sure that no one ever believed her.

The moral construction put on the Trojan War varies a good deal from one writer to the next. Homer's *Iliad*, for example, sees warfare as a condition of existence and therefore the Trojan War is a symbol for life itself, a life in which the highest virtues are manifested in a tragic heroism. In the *Odyssey*, there is a strong sense that the warrior life Odysseus has lived at Troy is something he must learn to abandon in favour of something more suited to home and hearth. Euripides used the stories of the war to enforce either a very strong anti-war vision or to promote highly unnaturalistic and ironic romance narratives.

In Aeschylus's play there is a strong sense that the Trojan War is, among other things, an appropriate act of revenge for the crime of Paris and Helen against Menelaus. And yet, at the same time, it is something which most of the people at home despise, for it kills all the young citizens and corrupts political life by taking the leaders away. In fact, the complex contradictions in the Chorus's attitude to that war help to bring out one of the major points of the first play: the problematic nature of justice based on a simple revenge ethic. According to the traditional conception of justice, Agamemnon is right to fight against Troy; but the effort is destroying his own city. So how can that be right?

## The House of Atreus

The other background story which Aeschylus assumes his audience will be thoroughly familiar with is the story of the House of Atreus. This story, too, is recounted in more detail in the note on the Trojan War mentioned above.

The important point to know for the play is that the House of Atreus suffers from an ancient curse. As part of the working out of this curse, Agamemnon's father, Atreus, had quarreled violently with his brother Thyestes. As a result of this quarrel, Atreus had killed Thyestes's sons and fed them to him at a reconciliation banquet. In some versions of the story, Thyestes, overcome with horror, produced a child with his surviving daughter in order to have someone to avenge the crime. The offspring of that sexual union was Aegisthus (Aeschylus changes this point by having Aegisthus an infant at the time of the banquet). Aegisthus' actions in the *Oresteia*, the seduction of Clytaemnestra (before the play starts) and the killing of Agamemnon, he interprets and excuses as a revenge for what Atreus did to his father and brothers. *(For a more detailed summary account of the story of the House of Atreus, click [here](#) )*

The House of Atreus is probably the most famous secular family in our literary history, partly because it tells the story of an enormous family curse, full of sex, violence, horrible deaths going on for generations. It also throws into relief a theme which lies at the very centre of the *Oresteia* and which has intrigued our culture ever since, the nature of revenge.



## The Revenge Ethic

Aeschylus's trilogy, and especially the first play, calls our attention repeatedly to a central concept of justice: justice as revenge. This is a relatively simple notion, and it has a powerful emotional appeal, even today. The revenge ethic, simply put, makes justice the personal responsibility of the person insulted or hurt or, if that person is dead, of someone closely related to him, almost invariably a close blood relative. The killer must be killed, and that killing must be carried out personally by the most appropriate person, who accepts that charge as an obvious responsibility. It is a radically simple and powerfully emotional basis for justice, linking retribution to the family and their feelings for each other and for their collective honour.

We have already met this ethic in the Old Testament and in the *Odyssey*. In the latter book, the killing of Aegisthus by Orestes is repeatedly referred to with respect and approval: it was a just act because Aegisthus had violated Orestes's home and killed his father. And we are encouraged to see Odysseus's extraordinarily violent treatment of the suitors and their followers as a suitable revenge, as justice, for what they have done or tried to do to his household, especially his goods, his wife, and his son. Justice demands a personal, violent, and effective response from an appropriate family member.

And we are very familiar with this ethic from our own times, because justice as revenge seems to be an eternally popular theme of movies, televisions, books. It has become an integral part of the Western movie and of the police drama. Some actors create a career out of the genre (e.g., Charles Bronson and Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Godfather). We know from the news also that many immigrants who come from countries where justice is widely understood as revenge bring the ethic to this country and get into trouble because of it. In the next semester we are going to be studying the most famous revenge story in English drama, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

We may not ourselves base our justice system directly and simply upon revenge, but we all understand very clearly those feelings which prompt a desire for revenge (especially when we think of any violence done to members of our own family), and we are often very sympathetic to those who do decide to act on their own behalf in meting out justice to someone who has killed someone near and dear to them. So in reading the Oresteia we may be quite puzzled by the rather strange way the story is delivered to us, but there is no mistaking the importance or the familiarity of the issue. One way of approaching this play, in fact, is to see it primarily as an exploration of the adequacy of the revenge ethic as a proper basis for justice in the community and the movement towards a more civilized, effective, and rational way of judging crimes in the polis.

## An Important Preliminary Interlude

Before going on to make some specific remarks about the *Agamemnon*, I'd like to call attention to an interpretative problem that frequently (too frequently) crops up with the *Oresteia*, especially among students, namely, the desire to treat this work as if it were, first and foremost, a philosophical investigation into concepts of justice rather than a great artistic fiction, a poetic exploration. Why is this important? Well, briefly put, treating the play as if it were a rational argument on the order of, say, a Socratic enquiry, removes from our study of it the most important poetic qualities of the work. We concentrate all our discussions on the conceptual dimensions of the play, attending to the logic of Agamemnon's defense of his actions, or Clytaemnestra's of hers, or the final verdict of Athena in the trial of Orestes at the end, and we strive, above all, to evaluate the play on the basis of our response to the rational arguments put forward.

This approach is disastrous because the *Oresteia* is not a rational argument. It is, by contrast, an artistic exploration of conceptual issues. What matters here are the complex states of feeling which emerge from the characters, the imagery, the actions, and the ideas (as they are expressed by particular characters in the action). What we are dealing with here, in other words, is much more a case of how human beings feel about justice, about the possibilities for realizing justice in the fullest sense of the word within the human community, than a rational blueprint for implementing a new system.

I'll have more to say about this later, but let me give just one famous example. The conclusion of the trilogy will almost certainly create problems for the interpreter who seeks, above all else, a clearly worked out rational system for achieving justice in the community (understanding the rational justification for Athena's decision in the trial or the reconciliation with the Furies, for example, will be difficult to work out precisely). But Aeschylus, as a poet, is not trying to offer such a conclusion. What he gives us is a symbolic expression of our highest hopes, our most passionate desires for justice (which is so much more than a simple objective concept). The ending of the trilogy, with all those people (who earlier were bitter opponents) on stage singing and dancing in harmony, is a celebration of human possibility (and perhaps a delicate one at that), not the endorsement of a clearly codified system.

In the same way Athena's decision to acquit Orestes is not primarily the expression of a reasoned argument. It is far more an artistic symbol evocative of our highest hopes. This point needs to be stressed because (for understandable reasons) this part of the play often invites a strong feminist critique, as if what is happening here is the express desire to suppress feminine power. Now, I would be the last to deny the importance of the gendered imagery in the trilogy, but here I would also insist that Athena is a goddess, and her actions are, in effect, endorsing a shift in power from the divine to the human. Justice will no longer be a helpless appeal to the justice of Zeus in an endless sequence of killings: it will be the highest responsibility of the human community. The play does not "prove" that that's a good idea. It celebrates that as a possibility (and it may well be significant that that important hope is realized on stage by a divine power who is female but who is not caught

up in the powerful nexus of the traditional family, since she sprung fully grown from Zeus' head). This does not mean, I hasten to add, that we should abandon our reason as we approach the play. It does mean, however, that we must remain alert to the plays in the trilogy as works of art, and especially as dramatic works, designed to communicate their insights to us in performance. Yes, the plays deal with ideas, and we need to come to terms with those. But these ideas are never separate from human desires, motives, and passions. To see what Aeschylus is doing here, then, we need to look very carefully at all the various ways in which this emotional dimension, the full range of ambiguity and irony, establishes itself in the imagery, metaphors, and actions. We need, for example, always to be aware of how the way characters express their thoughts (especially the images they use) qualifies, complicates, and often undercuts the most obvious meanings of their words. You will get a firm sense of what I mean if you consider that no one would ever put the Oresteia on a reading list for a philosophy course (except perhaps as background). Yet the work obviously belongs on any list of the world's great poetic dramas. We need to bear that in mind in our discussions, basing what we say on close readings of the text rather than on easy generalizations imposed on complex ironies.

## Revenge in the Agamemnon

In the *Agamemnon*, revenge is the central issue. Agamemnon interprets his treatment of Troy as revenge for the crime of Paris and Helen; Clytaemnestra interprets her killing of Agamemnon as revenge for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia; Aegisthus interprets his role in the killing of Agamemnon as revenge for the treatment of his half-brothers by Agamemnon's father, Atreus. We are constantly confronted in this play with the realities of what revenge requires and what it causes, and we are always being asked to evaluate the justification for killing by appeals to the traditional revenge ethic. But there's more to it than that. For in this play, unlike the *Odyssey*, revenge emerges as something problematic, something that, rather than upholding and restoring the polis, is threatening to engulf it in an unending cycle of destruction, until the most powerful city in the Greek world is full of corpses and vultures. In fact, one of the principal purposes of the first play of the trilogy is to force us to recognize that justice based on revenge creates special difficulties which it cannot solve. To use one of the most important images in the play, the city is caught in a net from which there seems to be no escape. The traditional revenge ethic has woven a cycle of necessary destruction around the city, and those caught in the mesh feel trapped in a situation they do not want but cannot alter.

## The Chorus in the Agamemnon

The major way in which Aeschylus presents revenge to us as a problem in the *Agamemnon* is through the actions and the feelings of the Chorus. For us the huge part given to the Chorus is unfamiliar, and we may be tempted from time to time to skip a few pages until the next person enters, and the action moves forward. That is a major mistake, because following what is happening to the Chorus in the *Agamemnon* is essential to understanding the significance of what is going on. They provide all sorts of necessary background information, but, more important than that, they set the emotional and moral tone of the city. What they are, what they say, and how they feel represent the quality of life (in the full meaning of that term) available in the city.

First of all, who are these people? They are adult male citizens of Argos, those who ten years ago were too old to join the expedition to Troy. Hence, they are extremely old and very conscious of their own physical feebleness. And they are worried. They know the history of this family; they know very well about the sacrifice of Iphigeneia; and they have a very strong sense of what Clytaemnestra is about to do. They are full of an ominous sense of what is in store, and yet they have no means of dealing with that or even talking about it openly. Thus, in everything they say until quite near the end of the play, there is a very strong feeling of moral evasiveness: Agamemnon is coming home, and justice awaits. They know what that means. It is impossible to read very much of those long choruses without deriving a firm sense of their unease at what is going to happen and of their refusal and inability to confront directly the sources of that unease.

Why should this create problems for them? Well, they are caught in something of a dilemma. On the one hand, the only concept of justice they understand is the traditional revenge ethic: the killer must be killed. At the same time, they are weary of the slaughter. They are fearful for the future of their city, since the revenge ethic is destroying its political fabric. And they don't approve of what Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus are up to. They may sense that there's a certain "justice" in the revenge for Iphigeneia, but they are not satisfied that that is how things should be done, because Agamemnon, or someone like him, is necessary for the survival of the city. In that sense their long account of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia is much more than simply narrative background. They are probing the past, searching through the sequence of events, as if somehow the justice of what has happened will emerge if they focus on the history which has led up to this point. But the effort gets them nowhere, and they are left with the desperately weak formulaic cry, "Let all go well," a repetitive prayer expressing a slim hope for a better future. They don't like what's happened in the past, but they cannot come to a mature acceptance of it, because it scares them. The actions of Agamemnon seem to fit the concept of justice, as they understand the term, but the actions themselves are horrific. They want it to make sense, but they cannot themselves derive any emotional satisfaction from the story or from what they suspect will happen next.

Thus, everything they utter up to the murder of Agamemnon is filled with a sense of moral unease and emotional confusion. They want the apparently endless cycle of retributive killings to stop, but they have no way of conceptualizing or imag-

ining how that might happen. Their historical circumstances are too emotionally complex for the system of belief they have at hand to interpret the significance of those events. Since the only system of justice they have ever known tells them that the killings must continue and since they don't want them to continue, they are paralyzed. The physical weakness throughout much of the play is an obvious symbol for their moral and emotional paralysis. In fact, the most obvious thing about Argos throughout this first play is the moral duplicity and evasiveness of everyone in it.

This moral ambiguity of Argos manifests itself repeatedly in the way the Chorus and others refuse to reveal publicly what they are thinking and feeling. Right from the very opening of the play, in the Watchman's speech, what is for a brief moment an outburst of spontaneous joy at the news that Agamemnon will be returning is snuffed out with a prudent hesitancy and an admission that in Argos one does not dare utter one's thoughts. "I could tell you things if I wanted to," admits the Watchman, "but in this city an ox stands on my tongue."

The way in which the watchman's joy is instantly tempered by his guarded suspicion indicates, right at the very opening of the play, that we are in a murky realm here, where people are not free to state what they feel, where one feeling cancels out another, and where there's no sense of what anyone might do to resolve an unhappy situation.

It's important to note here that the political inertia of the old men of the chorus is not a function of their cowardice or their stupidity. They are neither of these. It comes from a genuine sense of moral and emotional confusion. As mentioned above, in order to understand their situation they are constantly reviewing the past, bringing to our attention the nature of the warfare in Troy (which they hate), the terrible destruction caused by Helen (whom they despise), the awful sacrifice of Iphigeneia (for whom they express great sympathy), and so on. The moral code they have inherited tells them that, in some way or another, all these things are just. But that violates their feelings. Revenge, they realize, is not achieving what justice in the community is supposed, above all else, to foster, a secure and fair life in the polis, an emotional satisfaction with our communal life together. On the contrary, it is destroying Argos and will continue to do so, filling its citizens with fear and anxiety.

This attitude reaches its highest intensity in the interview they have with Cassandra. She unequivocally confronts them with their deepest fears: that they will see Agamemnon dead. Their willful refusal to admit that they understand what she is talking about is not a sign of their stupidity—they know very well what she means. But they cannot admit that to themselves, because then they would have to do something about it, and they have no idea what they should or could do. If they do nothing, then perhaps the problem will go away. Maybe Agamemnon can take care of it. Or, put another way, before acting decisively, they need a reason to act. But the traditional reasons behind justice are telling them that they have no right to intervene.

The situation does not go away of course. Agamemnon is killed, and Clytaemnestra emerges to deliver a series of triumphant speeches over his corpse. It is particularly significant to observe what happens to the Chorus of old men at this point. They

have no principled response to Clytaemnestra, but they finally are forced to realize that what has just happened is, in some fundamental way, a violation of what justice in the polis should be all about, and that they therefore should not accept it. And this emotional response rouses them to action: for the first time they openly defy the rulers of the city, at some risk to themselves. They have no carefully worked out political agenda, nor can they conceptualize what they are doing. Their response is radically emotional: the killing of the king must be wrong. Civil war is averted, because Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus do not take up the challenge, retiring to the palace. But the end of the *Agamemnon* leaves us with the most graphic image of a city divided against itself. What has gone on in the name of justice is leading to the worst of all possible communal disasters, civil war, the most alarming manifestation of the total breakdown of justice.

This ending is, in part, not unlike the ending of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus's revenge against the suitors initiates a civil war between him and his followers and those whose duty it is to avenge the slain. But Homer does not pursue the potential problem of justice which this poses. Instead he wraps the story up quickly with a divine intervention, which forcibly imposes peace on the antagonists. We are thus not invited to question the justice of Odysseus's actions, which in any case have divine endorsement throughout.

In Aeschylus's first play, by contrast, the problems of a city divided against itself by the inadequacy of the revenge ethic become the major focus of the second and third plays, which seek to find a way through the impasse.

## Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra

In contrast to the moral difficulties of the Chorus, the two main characters in the *Agamemnon*, Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, have no doubts about what justice involves: it is based upon revenge. And the two of them act decisively in accordance with the old ethic to destroy those whom the code decrees must be destroyed, those whom they have a personal responsibility to hurt in the name of vengeance for someone close to them.

Now, in accordance with that old revenge code, both of them have a certain justification for their actions (which they are not slow to offer). But Aeschylus's treatment of the two brings out a very important limitation of the revenge ethic, namely the way in which it is compromised by the motivation of those carrying out justice.

For in spite of their enmity for each other, Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra have some obvious similarities. They live life to satisfy their own immediate desires for glory and power, and to gratify their immoderate passions, particularly their blood lust. Whatever concerns they have for the polis take second place to the demands of their own passionate natures. They do not suffer the same moral anguish as the Chorus because they feel powerful enough to act on how they feel and because their very strong emotions about themselves are not in the slightest tempered by a sense of what is best for the city or for anyone else. Their enormously powerful egos insist that they don't have to attend to anyone else's opinion (the frequency of the personal pronouns "I," "me," "mine," and "my" in their speech is really significant). They answer only to themselves.

More than this, the way in which each of the two main characters justifies the bloody revenge carried out in the name of justice reveals very clearly that they revel in blood killing. Shedding blood with a maximum of personal savagery, without any limit, gratifies each of them intensely, so much so that their joy in destruction calls into question their veracity in talking of themselves as agents of justice. This is so pronounced a feature of these heroic figures that the play puts a certain amount of pressure on us to explore their motivation. They both claim they act in order to carry out justice. But do they? What other motives have come into play? When Agamemnon talks of how he obliterated Troy or walks on the red carpet or Clytaemnestra talks with delight about what a sexual charge she is going to get by making love to Aegisthus on top of the dead body of Agamemnon, we are surely invited to see that, however much they justify their actions with appeals to divine justice, their motivation has become very muddled with other, less noble motives. Such observations may well occasion some dispute among interpreters. But in order to address them we need to pay the closest possible attention to the language and the motivation of these characters (as that is revealed in the language), being very careful not to accept too quickly the justifications they offer for their own actions. We need to ask ourselves repeatedly: On the basis of the language, how am I to understand the reasons why Agamemnon killed Iphigeneia and wiped out Troy? Why does Clytaemnestra so enjoy killing Agamemnon? If a disinterested sense of justice is all that is in play here, why does she so enjoy killing Cassandra? Why, for that matter, does Agamemnon talk about the total



destruction of Troy with such grim pleasure? Why does he get so much joy in talking about how he is going to bring justice back to Argos with a sword?

And this, I take it, is for Aeschylus a very important limitation on the revenge ethic. It brings into play concerns which have, on the face of it, no immediate connections with justice and everything to do with much baser human instincts. People like Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, who claim (after the fact) to kill in the name of justice, actually are carrying out the destruction to satisfy much deeper, more urgent, and far less worthy human urges (a fact which may account for the fact that in their killing they go to excess, well beyond the strict demands of justice).

For that reason, Aeschylus gives us a very close look at the characters of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon. As I say, we need to pay the closest attention to their language, trying to get a handle, not just on the surface details of what they are saying, but on the emotional complexities of the character uttering the lines. We need to ask ourselves the key question: In acting the way they do and for the reasons they state or reveal to us in their language, are they being just? Or is their sense of justice merely a patina covering something else? Or are both possibilities involved?

For instance, Clytaemnestra states that she killed Agamemnon in order to avenge Iphigeneia. Is that true? If it is a reason, how important is it? What else is involved here? In the second play, she confronts Orestes with this justification. But what is our response right at the moment after she has just done the deed? One needs here not merely to look at what she says but at how she says it. What particular emotions is she revealing in her style of speech and what do these reveal about her motives?

Such questions become all the more important when we compare how they set about their acts of "justice" with the opening of the second play, when we see Orestes return to carry out the next chapter in the narrative of the House of Atreus. For there's a really marked difference between his conduct and that of his parents. A great deal of the second play is taken up with Orestes' preparations to carry out his vision of justice. It's not unimportant that much of that time he's questioning himself, seeking advice from others, involving others publicly in what he feels he has to do. In a sense, he is trying to purge himself of those emotions which drive Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra to their acts of "justice," to make himself an agent of divine justice rather than serving his own blood-lust.

This, I take it, is a key element in Aeschylus's treatment of the theme of justice. So long as the revenge ethic rests in the hands of people like Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, tragically passionate egotists who answer only to their own immediate desires, the cycle of killing will go on for ever, and cities will destroy themselves in the blood feud. The only way out (and it is a hope) is that someone like Orestes will act out of a love of justice as a divine principle, setting aside as best he can (or even acting against) his deepest, most irrational blood feelings, thus moving beyond the revenge ethic. We will get little sense of why Orestes deserves to be declared innocent unless we attend very carefully to the difference between his motives and those of his parents, for it is surely an important element in Athena's final judgment that the traditional revenge ethic, as embodied in the Furies and manifested in the conduct of Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra, and

Aegisthus, is no longer compatible with justice in the community and that Orestes' actions in killing his mother are, as much as he can make them, undertaken in the service of others (Apollo and the community), rather than stemming from a passionate blood-lust (the fact that Orestes is willing to stand trial and abide by the verdict is one important sign of the difference between him and his parents).

## A Final Postscript

Human beings think about justice as a rational concept, institutionalized in their communities, but they also have strong emotions about justice, both within the family and the community. The revenge ethic harnessed to those powerful feelings in Aeschylus's play stands exposed as something that finally violates our deepest sense of any possibility for enduring justice in our community, for it commits us a never-ending cycle of retributive killing and over-killing.

The Oresteia ends with a profound and very emotionally charged hope that the community can move beyond such a personally powerful emotional basis for justice and, with the sanction of the divine forces of the world, establish a system based on group discussion, consensus, juries (through what Athena calls persuasion)—in a word, can unite a conceptual, reasonable understanding of justice with our most powerful feelings about it. This work is, as Swinburne observed, one of the most optimistic visions of human life ever written, for it celebrates a dream we have that human beings in their communities can rule themselves justly, without recourse to blood vengeance, satisfying mind and heart in the process.

At the same time, however, Aeschylus is no shallow liberal thinker telling us to move beyond our brutal and unworkable traditions. For he understands that we cannot by some sleight of hand remove the Furies from our lives. They are ancient goddesses, eternally present. Hence, in the conclusion of the play the Furies, traditional goddesses of vengeance, are incorporated into the justice system, not excluded. And the powers they are given are significant: no city can thrive without them. Symbolically, the inclusion of the Furies in the final celebration, their new name (meaning "The Kindly Ones"), and their agreement fuse in a great theatrical display elements which were in open conflict only a few moments before.

It's as if the final image of this play stresses for us that in our justice we must strive to move beyond merely personal emotion (the basis of personal revenge) towards some group deliberations, but in the new process we must not violate our personal feelings or forget they have their role to play. If justice is to be a matter of persuasion, it cannot violate the deepest feelings we have (and have always had) about justice. If such violation takes place, the city will not thrive. Every time I read the conclusion of this great trilogy, I think of how we nowadays may well have lost touch with that great insight: that justice is not just a matter of reasonable process and debate but also a matter of feeling. For a city to thrive justice must not only be reasonably done but must be felt to be done. Once our system starts to violate our feelings for justice, our city does not thrive. The Furies will see to that.

# A Note on the Mythological Background to 'the House of Atreus'

*This section is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>9</sup> notes by Ian Johnston*

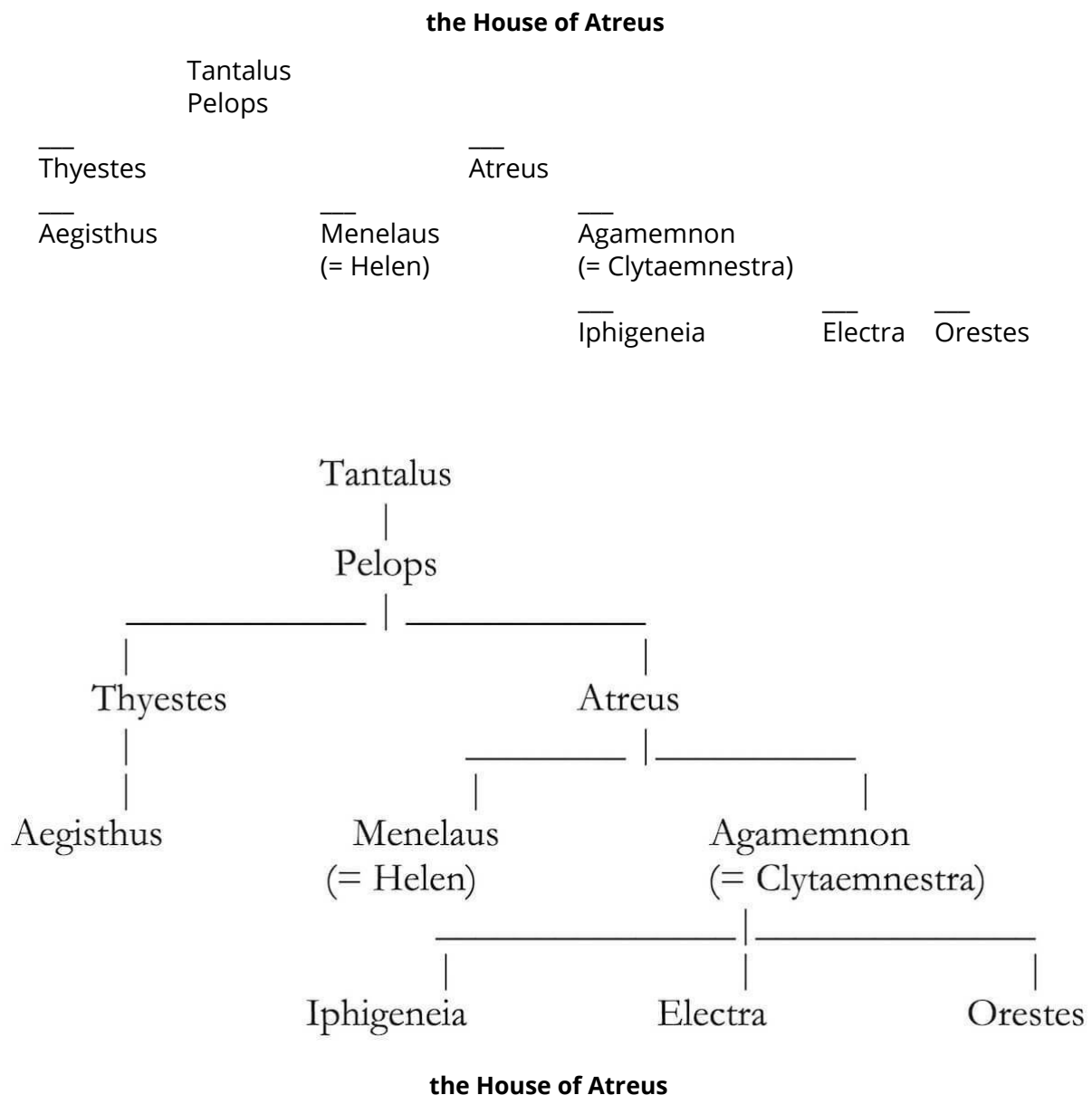
*[This note by Ian Johnston of Vancouver Island University is in the public domain and may be used by anyone without permission and without charge]*

The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of the major events in the long history of the House of Atreus, one of the most fecund and long-lasting of all the Greek legends. Like so many other stories, the legend of the House of Atreus varies a good deal from one author to the next and there is no single authoritative version. The account given below tries to include as many of the major details as possible. At the end there is a short section reviewing Aeschylus' treatment of the story in the *Oresteia*.

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<sup>9</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/HouseofAtreus.htm>

## Family Tree (Simplified)



1) The family of Atreus (father of Agamemnon and Menelaus) traces its origins back to Tantalus, king of Sipylon, a son of Zeus (famous for his eternal punishment in Hades, as described in the *Odyssey*, where he is always thirsty but can never drink, hence the origin of the word *tantalizing*). Tantalus had a son called Pelops, whom Poseidon loved.

2) Pelops wished to marry Hippodameia, daughter of king Oenomaus. Oenomaus set up a contest (a chariot race against the king) for all those who wished to woo his daughter. If the suitor lost, he was killed. A number of men had died in such a race before Pelops made his attempt. Pelops bribed the king's charioteer (Myrtilus) to disable the king's chariot. In the race, Oenomaus' chariot broke down (the wheels

came off), and the king was killed. Pelops then carried off Hippodameia as his bride. Pelops also killed his co-conspirator Myrtilus by throwing him into the sea. Before he drowned Myrtilus (in some versions Oenomaus) cursed Pelops and his family. This act is the origin of the famous curse on the House of Atreus.

3) Pelops does not seem to have been affected by the curse. He had a number of children, the most important of whom were his two sons, the brothers Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus married Aerope, and they had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. And Thyestes had two sons and a daughter Pelopia.

4) Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled (in some versions at the instigation of the god Hermes, father of Myrtilus, the charioteer killed by Pelops). Thyestes had an affair with Atreus' wife, Aerope, and was banished from Argos by Atreus. However, Thyestes petitioned to be allowed to return, and Atreus, apparently wishing a reconciliation, agreed to allow Thyestes to come back and prepared a huge banquet to celebrate the end of their differences.

5) At the banquet, however, Atreus served Thyestes the cooked flesh of Thyestes' two slaughtered sons. Thyestes ate the food, and then was informed of what he had done. This horrific event is the origin of the term *Thyestean Banquet*. Overcome with horror, Thyestes cursed the family of Atreus and left Argos with his one remaining child, his daughter Pelopia.

6) Some versions of the story include the name Pleisthenes, a son of Atreus who was raised by Thyestes. To become king, Thyestes sent Pleisthenes to kill Atreus, but Atreus killed him, not realizing he was killing his son. This, then, becomes another cause of the quarrel. In yet other accounts, someone called Pleisthenes is the first husband of Aerope and the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus. When he died, so this version goes, Atreus married Aerope and adopted her two sons. In Aeschylus' play there is one reference to Pleisthenes; otherwise, this ambiguous figure is absent from the story.

7) In some versions, including Aeschylus' account, Thyestes had one small infant son who survived the banquet, Aegisthus. In other accounts, however, Aegisthus was the product of Thyestes' incestuous relationship with his daughter Pelopia after the murder of the two older sons, conceived especially to be the avenger of the notorious banquet.

8) Agamemnon and Menelaus, the two sons of Atreus, married Clytaemnestra and Helen respectively, two twin sisters, but not identical twins (Clytaemnestra had a human father; whereas, Helen was a daughter of Zeus). Helen was so famous for her beauty that a number of men wished to marry her. The suitors all agreed that they would act to support the man she eventually married in the event of any need for mutual assistance. Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra had three children, Iphigeneia, Orestes, and Electra.

9) When Helen (Menelaus' wife) ran off to Troy with Paris, Agamemnon and Menelaus organized and led the Greek forces against the Trojans. The army assembled at Aulis, but the fleet could not sail because of contrary winds sent by Artemis. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to placate Artemis.

10) With Agamemnon and Menelaus off in Troy, Aegisthus (son of Thyestes) returned to Argos, where he became the lover of Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's

wife. They sent Orestes into exile, to live with an ally, Strophius in Phocis, and humiliated Electra, Agamemnon's surviving daughter (either treating her as a servant or marrying her off to a common farmer). When Agamemnon returned, the two conspirators successfully killed him and assumed royal control of Argos. 11) Orestes returned from exile and, in collaboration with his sister Electra, avenged his father by killing Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. In many versions this act makes him lose his self-control and he becomes temporarily deranged. He then underwent ritual purification by Apollo and sought refuge in the temple of Athena in Athens. There he was tried and acquitted. This action put the curses placed on the House of Atreus to rest.

## Some Comments

The story of the House of Atreus, and particularly Orestes' and Electra's revenge for their father's murder, is one of the most popular and enduring of all Greek legends, a favourite among the classical tragedians and still very popular with modern playwrights (e.g., T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Jean Paul Sartre). However, different writers tell the story in very different ways.

Homer, for example (in the *Odyssey*) sets up Orestes' killing of Aegisthus as an entirely justified way to proceed (Homer ascribes the main motivation and planning to Aegisthus, who has to persuade Clytaemnestra to agree and who, it seems, does the actual killing). In fact, the action is repeatedly mentioned as a clear indication of divinely supported justice (there is no direct mention of the killing of Clytaemnestra, although there is a passing reference to Orestes' celebrations over his "hateful" mother after the killing of Aegisthus). Sophocles and Euripides tell basically the same story but with enormously different depictions of the main characters (in Euripides' version Orestes and Electra are hateful; whereas, in Sophocles' *Electra* they are much more conventionally righteous).

Aeschylus confines his attention to Atreus' crime against his brother (the Thyestean banquet) and what followed from it. There is no direct reference to Thyestes' adultery with Atreus' wife (although Cassandra makes a reference to a man sleeping with his brother's wife) or to any events from earlier parts of the story (unless the images of chariot racing are meant to carry an echo of Pelops' actions). This has the effect of making Atreus' crime against his brother the origin of the family curse (rather than the actions of Pelops or Tantalus) and tends to give the reader more sympathy for Aegisthus than some other versions do.

Curiously enough, Orestes' story has many close parallels with the Norse legend on which the story of Hamlet is based (son in exile is called upon to avenge a father killed by the man who has seduced his mother, perhaps with the mother's consent; the son carries out the act of killing his mother and her lover with great difficulty, undergoing fits of madness, and so on). Given that there is no suggestion of any possible literary-historical link between the origin of these two stories, the similarity of these plots offers a number of significant problems for psychologists and mythologists to explore. This puzzle is especially intriguing because the Hamlet-Orestes narrative is by far the most popular story in the history of English dramatic tragedy.



# (AESCHYLUS) Oresteia - Agamemnon

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>10</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## **Dramatis Personae**

**WATCHMAN:** servant of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra.

**CHORUS:** old men, citizens of Argos.

**CLYTAEMNESTRA:** wife of Agamemnon, daughter of Leda, sister of Helen.

**HERALD:** soldier serving with Agamemnon.

**\*\*AGAMEMNON:** king of Argos, leader of the Greek expedition to Troy.

**MESSENGER:** a servant in the palace.

**CASSANDRA:** daughter of Priam, King of Troy, a prisoner given to Agamemnon, a priestess of Apollo.

**AEGISTHUS:** son of Thyestes, cousin of Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra's lover.

**SOLDIERS** and **SERVANTS** attending on Agamemnon and on Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus.

The brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus, are both kings of Argos and leaders of the expedition against Troy, launched ten years before the action of the play begins. Agamemnon is the senior of the two. The allied forces under Agamemnon are called the Argives, the Achaeans, or the Danaans, as in Homer's Iliad—not Greeks. Priam's city is called Troy or Ilion interchangeably.

*[The scene is in Argos immediately in front of the steps leading up to the main doors of the royal palace. In front of the palace there are statues of gods. At the start of the play, the Watchman is prone on the roof of the palace resting his head on his arms. It is just before dawn.]*

WATCHMAN

I pray the gods will give me some relief and end this weary job. One long full year  
I've been lying here, on this rooftop,  
the palace of the sons of Atreus,  
resting on my arms, just like a dog.  
I've come to know the night sky, every star,  
the powers we see glittering in the sky,  
bringing winter and summer to us all,  
as the constellations rise and sink.  
I'm still looking for that signal flare, the fiery blaze from Troy, announcing it's been  
taken. These are my instructions  
from the queen. She has a fiery heart,  
the determined resolution of a man.  
When I set my damp, restless bed up here,  
I never dream, for I don't fall asleep.  
No. Fear comes instead and stands beside me,  
so I can't shut my eyes and get some rest.

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<sup>10</sup>[http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/aeschylus\\_agamemnon.htm](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/aeschylus_agamemnon.htm)

If I try to sing or hum a tune,  
something to do instead of trying to sleep, since I'm always awake, I start to weep,  
as I lament what's happened to this house,  
where things are not being governed well,  
not like they used to be. How I wish my watching could end happily tonight,  
with good news brought by fire blazing through this darkness.

[The signal fire the Watchman has been waiting for suddenly appears. The Watchman springs to his feet]

Fire gleaming in the night!

What a welcome sight! Light of a new day—

you'll bring on many dancing choruses right here in Argos, celebrations of this joyful news.

[Shouting]

It's over! It's over!

I must call out to wake the queen,

Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife,

to get her out of bed, so she can raise a shout of joy as soon as possible inside the palace, welcoming this fire—

if indeed the city of Troy's fallen,

as this signal fire seems to indicate.

For my part, I'll start things off by dancing,

treating my king's good fortune as my own. I've had a lucky dice roll, triple six, thanks to this fiery signal . . .

[His mood suddenly changes to something much more hesitant and reserved]

But I hope the master of this house may come home soon,  
so I can grasp his welcome hand in mine.

As for all the rest, I'm saying nothing.

A great ox stands on my tongue. But this house,

if it could speak, might tell some stories.

I speak to those who know about these things.

For those who don't, there's nothing I remember.

[The Watchman goes down into the house. Enter the Chorus of Argive elders, very old men who carry staves to help them stand up. As they speak, servants come out of the palace and light oil lamps in offering to the statues of the gods outside the palace doors]

CHORUS It's now ten years since Menelaus,

Priam's great adversary,

and lord Agamemnon,

two mighty sons of Atreus,

joined by Zeus in double honours—

twin thrones and royal sceptres—

left this country with that fleet,

a thousand Argive ships,

to back their warrior cause with force,

hearts screaming in their battle fury,

two eagles overwhelmed by grief, crying for their young—wings beating

like oars, they wheel aloft,  
high above their home, distressed because they've lost their work—  
their fledglings in the nest are gone! <sup>11</sup>

Then one of the supreme powers—  
Apollo, or Pan, or Zeus—  
hears the shrill wailing cry,  
hears those screaming birds,  
who live within his realm, and sends a late-avenging Fury to take revenge on the  
transgressors.

In just that way, mighty Zeus,  
god of hospitality,  
sends those sons of Atreus against Alexander, son of Priam—  
for that woman's sake, Helen,  
the one who's had so many men,  
condemning Trojans and Danaans to many heartfelt struggles, both alike, knees  
splintering as the fighting starts. <sup>12</sup>

Now things stand as they stand.  
What's destined to come will be fulfilled,  
and no libation, sacrifice, or human tears will mitigate the gods' unbending wrath  
of sacrifice not blessed by fire.

But as for us, whose old bodies confer no honour, who were left behind  
when the army sailed so long ago, we wait here, using up our strength to support  
ourselves with canes,  
like children, whose power,  
though growing in their chests,  
is not yet fit for Ares, god of war.

And so it is with old men, too,  
who, when they reach extreme old age,  
wither like leaves, and go their way three-footed, no better than a child,  
as they wander like a daydream.

But you, daughter of Tyndareus,  
queen Clytaemnestra,

what's going on? What news?

What reports have you received that lead you to send your servants out command-  
ing all this sacrifice?

For every god our city worships—  
all-powerful gods above the earth,  
and those below, and those in heaven,  
and those in the marketplace— their altars are ablaze with offerings.

Fires rise here and there and everywhere,  
right up to heaven, fed by sacred oils brought from the palace—sweet and holy,  
their purity sustains those flames.

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<sup>11</sup>Priam was king of Troy, father of Paris (the man who abducted Helen). Agamemnon and Menelaus were the commanders of the expedition against Troy (with Agamemnon in the senior position).

<sup>12</sup>Alexander was an alternative name for Paris, son of Priam.

Tell us what you can,  
tell us what's right for us to hear.  
Cure our anxious thoughts.  
For now, at one particular moment,  
things look grim, but then our hopes, rising from these sacrificial fires,  
make things seem better, soothing corrosive pains that eat my heart.

I have the power to proclaim that prophecy made to our kings,  
as they were setting on their way,  
a happy outcome for their expedition.  
My age inspires in me Persuasion still,  
the power of song sent from the gods,  
to sing how two kings of Achaea's troops, united in a joint command, led off  
the youth of Greece, armed with avenging spears,  
marching against Troy, land of Teucer.  
They got a happy omen—two eagles,  
kings of birds, appeared before the kings of ships.  
One bird was black, the other's tail was white,  
here, close to the palace, on the right,  
in a place where everyone could see.  
The eagles were gorging themselves,  
devouring a pregnant hare and all its unborn offspring,  
struggling in their death throes still.

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,  
but let the good prevail.

Then the army's prophet, Calchas,  
observing the twin purposes in the two warlike sons of Atreus,  
saw the twin leaders of the army in those birds devouring the hare.  
He then interpreted the omen, saying,  
"In due course this expedition will capture Priam's city, Troy—  
before its towers a violent Fate will annihilate all public goods.  
But may no anger from the gods cast its dark shadow on our troops,  
our great bit forged to curb Troy's mouth.  
For goddess Artemis is full of anger at her father's flying hounds—she pities the  
cowering sacrificial creature in distress, she pities its young, slaughtered before  
she's brought them into life.  
Artemis abominates the eagles' feast."

Sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief,  
but let the good prevail.

"And lovely Artemis—  
though you're gentle with the tender cubs of vicious lions and take special joy in  
the suckling young of all wild living beasts,  
promise things will work out well, as this omen of the eagles indicates,  
an auspicious sign, but ominous.  
And I call Apollo, god of healing,  
to stop Artemis delaying the fleet,  
by sending hostile winds to keep the ships from sailing,

in her demand for another sacrifice,  
one which violates all human law,  
which no feast celebrates—  
it shatters families and makes the wife lose all respect and hate her husband.  
For in the home a dreadful anger waits.  
It does not forget and cannot be appeased.  
Its treachery controls the house,  
waiting to avenge a slaughtered child.”

Calchas prophesied that fatal destiny,  
read from those birds, as the army marched,  
speaking by this palace of the kings.

And to confirm all this sing out the song of sorrow, song of grief, but let the  
good prevail.

O Zeus, whoever he may be,  
if this name please him as invocation,  
then that's the name I'll use to call him.  
As I try to think all these things through,  
I have no words to shape my thoughts,  
other than Zeus—if I truly can succeed in easing my heart of this heavy grief,  
this self-defeating weight of sorrow.

As for Uranus, who was once so great, bursting with arrogance for every fight,  
people will talk about that god as if he'd never even lived.  
And his son, Cronos, who came after,  
has met his match and is no more.  
But whoever with a willing heart cries his triumphal song to Zeus will come to  
understand all things. <sup>13</sup>

Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise,  
has established his fixed law—wisdom comes through suffering.  
Trouble, with its memories of pain,  
drips in our hearts as we try to sleep,  
so men against their will learn to practice moderation.  
Favours come to us from gods seated on their solemn thrones—  
such grace is harsh and violent.

So then the leader of Achaean ships,  
the elder brother, Agamemnon, did not blame or fault the prophet,  
but gave in to fortune's sudden blows.  
For Achaea's army, stranded there,  
on the shores across from Calchis,  
was held up by opposing winds at Aulis,  
where tides ebb and flow.  
Troops grew weary, as supplies ran low.  
Winds blew from the Strymon river,  
keeping ships at anchor, harming men with too much leisure. Troops grew hungry.

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<sup>13</sup>Uranus was the original god, who was overthrown by his son Cronos. Then Cronos, in turn, was overthrown by his son Zeus.

They wandered discontent and restless.  
The winds corroded ships and cables.  
The delay seemed endless, on and on, until the men, the flower of Argos, began to wilt.

Then Calchas proclaimed the cause of this—  
it was Artemis. And he proposed  
a further remedy, but something harsh,  
even worse than the opposing winds,  
so painful that the sons of Atreus struck their canes on the ground and wept. <sup>14</sup>

Then Agamemnon, the older king, spoke up:  
“It’s harsh not to obey this fate—  
but to go through with it is harsh as well,  
to kill my child, the glory of my house,  
to stain a father’s hands before the altar  
with streams of virgin’s blood.  
Which of my options is not evil?  
How can I just leave this fleet,  
and let my fellow warriors down?  
Their passionate demand for sacrifice to calm the winds lies within their rights—  
even the sacrifice of virgin blood.  
So be it. All may be well.”

But when Agamemnon strapped on the harsh yoke of necessity,  
his spirits changed, and his intentions became profane, unholy, unsanctified.  
He undertook an act beyond all daring.  
Troubles come, above all, from delusions inciting men to rash designs, to evil. So  
Agamemnon steeled his heart to make his own daughter the sacrifice,  
an offering for the Achaean fleet,  
so he could prosecute the war waged to avenge that woman Helen.

In their eagerness for war, those leaders  
paid no attention to the girl,  
her pleas for help, her cries of “Father!”—  
any more than to her virgin youth.  
Her father offered up a prayer, then ordered men to seize her and lift her up—  
she’d fallen forward and just lay there in her robes—to raise her,  
high above the altar, like a goat,  
urging them to keep their spirits up.  
They gagged her lovely mouth,  
with force, just like a horse’s bit,  
to keep her speechless, to stifle any curse which she might cry against her family.

As she threw her saffron robe onto the ground, she glanced at the men, each  
of them,  
those carrying out the sacrifice,  
her eyes imploring pity. She looked just like a painting dying to speak.

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<sup>14</sup>Calchas tells Agamemnon he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia to appease Artemis and stop the hostile winds.

She'd often sung before her father's table,  
when, as host, he'd entertained his guests,  
a virgin using her flawless voice to honour her dear father with her love,  
as he prayed for blessing at the third libation.

What happened next I did not see.

And I won't say. What Calchas' skill had prophesied did come to pass.

The scales of Justice move to show  
that wisdom comes through suffering.

As for what's to come—you'll know that when it comes. So let it be.

To know would be to grieve ahead of time.

It's clear whatever is to happen will happen, like tomorrow's dawn.

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the palace doors]

But I hope whatever follows will be good,  
according to the wishes of our queen,  
who governs here, our closest guard,  
keeping watch all by herself,  
protecting Peloponnesian lands.

CHORUS LEADER Queen Clytaemnestra, we've come here in deference to your royal authority.

With our king far away, the man's throne

is empty—so it's appropriate for us to pay allegiance to his wife, the queen. I'd really like to hear your news,

whether what you've heard is good or not.

Your sacrificial offerings give us hope.

But we won't object if you stay silent.

CLYTAEMNESTRA It's a welcome message. As the proverb says,  
"May Dawn be born from mother Night."

You'll hear great news, greater than all your hopes—  
the Argives have captured Priam's city!

CHORUS LEADER What's that you say? I misheard your words—  
what you've just said—it defies belief!

CLYTAEMNESTRA I say Troy is now in Achaean hands.  
Is that clear enough?

CHORUS LEADER That fills me with joy.  
So much so I can't stop crying.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Then your eyes reveal your faithful loyalty.

CHORUS LEADER Is this report reliable? Is there proof?

CLYTAEMNESTRA Of course there is. Unless some god deceives me.

CHORUS LEADER Has some vision persuaded you of this,  
something in a dream, perhaps?

CLYTAEMNESTRA Not at all.

As if I'd listen to some dozing brain.

CHORUS LEADER

Perhaps some unfledged rumour raised your hopes?

CLYTAEMNESTRA Now you're insulting my intelligence,  
as if I were a youngster, just a child.

CHORUS LEADER When exactly was the city captured?

CLYTAEMNESTRA I'll tell you. It was the very night that gave birth to this glorious day.

CHORUS LEADER How could a messenger get here so fast?

CLYTAEMNESTRA Hephaestos, god of fire, sent his bright blaze speeding here from Ida, his messenger, flames racing from one beacon to the next— from Ida to Hermes' rock in Lemnos. From that island the great flames sped to the third fire, on the crest of Athos, sacred to Zeus, and then, arcing high, the beacon light sprang across the sea, exulting in its golden fiery power, rushing on, like another sun, passing the message to the look-out towers at Macistus. The man there was not sleeping, like some fool. Without a moment's pause, he relayed the message, so the blazing newssped on, leaping across Euripus' stream, to pass the signal to the next watchmen, at Messapion. Those men, in their turn, torched a pile of dried-out heather, firing the message onward. The flaming light was not diminished—its strength kept growing. Like a glowing moon, it jumped across the plain of Asopus, up to the ridges on mount Cithaeron, where it set alight the next stage of the relay race of fire. Those watching there did not neglect their work— that light which came to them from far away they passed on with an even greater blaze, which dashed across the shores of Gorgopus, to reach mount Aegiplanctus, with orders for those there to keep the beacon moving. They lit a fire, a huge flaming pillar, with unchecked force, speeding the message on— its light visible even at the headland by the Saronic Gulf. It swooped down, once it reached the crest of Arachnaeus, that look-out near our city—and from there jumped down onto the roof of Atreus' sons, flames directly linked to blazing Troy. I organized these messengers of fire, setting them up in sequence, one by one. In that race the first and last both triumph, the ones who sent the message and received it. That's the evidence I set before you, a message from my husband, dispatched all the way from burning Troy to me.

CHORUS My queen, I'll offer up to all the gods my prayers of thanks, but now I'd like to hear the details of your wonderful report.

Can you tell me the news once more?

CLYTAEMNESTRA On this very day Achaea's army



has taken Troy. Inside that town, I think,  
voices cry out in mass confusion.  
If you place oil and vinegar together,  
in the same container, you'll observe they never mix, but separate themselves,  
like enemies—well, in Troy the shouting of conquerors and conquered is like that,  
matching their very different situations.  
Trojans fall upon their family corpses,  
husbands, brothers. The children scream over dead old men who gave them life.  
As captives now, they keep lamenting all their slaughtered loved ones. But the  
Argives,  
famished after a long night's roaming,  
and weary after battle, are set to eat,  
to gorge themselves on what the town affords.  
They're quartered now in captured Trojan homes,  
sheltered from the night sky's frost and dew,  
but not according to official rank,  
rather as luck determines each man's lot.  
They're happy. They'll sleep straight through the night,  
without posting a guard. Now, if these troops fully and piously respect Troy's gods,  
a captured country's divinities and shrines, those who've conquered may not, in  
their turn,  
be conquered. But let no frenzied greed,  
no overpowering lust for plunder,  
fall upon the army from the start,  
so they ravage what they should leave alone.  
For to get safely home, the army needs to make that long journey back again.  
But even if the soldiers do reach home without offending any god, harsh sorrow  
for the dead may still be watching for them, unless some new disaster intervenes.  
Well, I've let you hear my woman's words.  
May good things now prevail for all to see.  
I take this news as cause for common joy.

CHORUS LEADER You speak wisely, like a prudent man.  
But now I've heard that I can trust your news,  
we must prepare ourselves to thank the gods,  
who've given a blessing worthy of our toil.

[Clytaemnestra goes back into the palace]

CHORUS O Zeus, my king, and friendly Night,  
you've handed us great glories to keep as our possession.  
You cast upon the towers of Troy your all-encompassing hunting net,  
and no one, young or old, escaped its enslaving fatal mesh  
that overpowered them all.

I worship mighty Zeus,  
god of hospitality,  
who made this happen.  
For a long time now he's aimed his bow at Paris,  
making sure his arrow would not fall short or fly above the stars and miss.

Men will say it's a blow from Zeus and trace his presence in all this.  
He acts on what he himself decides.  
Some people claim that gods  
don't really care about those men who trample underfoot favours from the pure  
in heart.  
Such people are profane.  
For we now clearly see destruction is the penalty for those with reckless pride,  
who breathe a boastful spirit greater than is just,  
because their homes are full,  
stuffed with riches to excess,  
beyond what's best for them. Let men have sufficient wealth to match good sense,  
not so much  
it piles up their misfortunes.  
There's no security in riches for the insolent man who kicks aside and pushes from  
his sight great altars of righteousness.

Such a man is overpowered by perverse Persuasion,  
insufferable child of scheming Folly. And there's no remedy.  
His evil's not concealed—  
it stands out, a lurid glitter,  
like false bronze when rubbed.  
All men can judge his darkness,  
once he's tested by events.  
He's like a child chasing a flying bird.  
He brands his city with disgrace which cannot be removed,  
for no god hears his prayers. The man who lives this way,  
doing wrong, the gods destroy.  
Such a man was Paris. He came to the home of the sons of Atreus,  
and then abused their hospitality,  
running off with his host's wife.

But she left her people the smash of shield and spear,  
a fleet well armed for war.  
To Troy she carried with her no dowry but destruction.  
Daring what should not be dared,  
she glided through Troy's gates.  
The prophets in this house cried out, "Alas, alas for house and home,  
and for the royal leaders here."<sup>15</sup>  
Alas, for the marriage bed,  
still holding traces of her body,  
the one who loved her husband." As for him, he sits apart, in pain, silent and  
dishonoured.

He does not blame her—  
no, he aches to be with her,  
the woman far across the sea.  
Her image seems to rule the house.

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<sup>15</sup>The lines following describe Menelaus' reaction to Helen's disappearance.

Her husband finds no beauty now in graceful statues, for to his blank eyes all sexual loveliness has gone.

In his dreams he sees sad images,  
with memories of earlier joy—a vain relief, for when the man thinks he sees such beauty there,  
all at once it's gone, slipping through his hands, flying away along the paths of sleep.

These are the sorrows in the house,  
around the hearth, and pain much worse than this. For everywhere,  
throughout the land of Greece,  
in every home where men set out  
to gather in that army there is insufferable grief.  
Many disasters pierce the heart.  
People know the ones who leave,  
but every house gets back weapons and ash, not living men.

For Ares, god of war, pays gold for soldier's bodies. In spear fights he tips the scales, then back from Troy  
he ships a heavy freight of ash, cremated bodies of the dead,  
sent home for loved ones to lament.  
He trades funeral dust for men,  
shiploads of urns filled up with ashes.  
Back home the people weep,  
praising one man for his battle skill,  
another for courageous death.  
Some complain about that woman,  
how she's to blame for all of this—  
but do so quietly. Nonetheless,  
this sorrow spreads resentment against the leaders of the war,  
the sons of Atreus. Meanwhile,  
over there, across the seas in Troy,  
around the city walls, the hostile ground swallows our beautiful young men, now  
hidden in the earth they conquered.

The people's voice, once angered,  
can create dissent, ratifying a curse which now must have its way. And so, in my anxiety, I wait, listening for something murky,  
something emerging from the gloom.  
For gods aren't blind to men who kill.  
In time, black agents of revenge,  
the Furies, wear down and bring to nothing the fortunes of a man who prospers  
in unjust ways. They wear him out,  
reverse his luck, and bring him at last among the dead. There's no remedy. To  
boast too much of one's success is dangerous—the high mountain peak is struck  
by Zeus' lightning bolt.  
I'd choose wealth no one could envy.  
May I never be the sort of man who puts whole cities to the sword.  
Let me never see myself enslaved,

my life in someone else's power.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE This welcome fiery message has spread fast; it's gone throughout the town. But is it true? Sent from the gods or false? Who knows?

CHORUS MEMBER TWO What man is such a senseless child he lets his heart catch fire at this news,  
and then is shattered by some fresh report?

CHORUS MEMBER THREE That's just the nature of a woman—  
to give thanks before the truth appears.

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR Yes, they're far too trusting.  
The proper order in a woman's mind is easily upset. Rumours women start soon die out, soon come to nothing.

CHORUS LEADER We'll quickly know about these signal fires,  
flaming beacons passed from place to place.  
We'll find out if that really did occur or if, just like a dream, this joyful light has come in order to deceive our hopes.

For I see a herald coming from the shore—  
an olive bough of triumph shades his face.  
The dry dust on him, all those muddy clothes,  
tell me he'll report the facts. Nor will he light some flaming pile of mountain wood to pass a signal on with smoke. No—  
he'll shout out to us what he has to say,  
and we can then rejoice still more, or else . . . but I won't think of that. Let's have good news to add to what we know already.  
If anyone is praying for something else to happen to our city, let him reap the harvest of his own misguided heart.

[Enter Herald]

HERALD Greetings to this Argive soil, my father's land.  
On this day, ten years later, I've come back. I've seen many hopes of mine destroyed,  
and only one fulfilled—I've made it home.  
I never dreamed I'd die here in Argos, with a burial plot in this land I love.  
I bless the land, the bright light of this sun—  
and I give thanks to Zeus, our highest god,  
and to Apollo, lord of Pytho.  
May you never fire your arrows at us  
any more. We had enough of those,  
my lord, beside Scamander's banks, when you took your stand against us. But now,  
Apollo, may you preserve and heal us.  
And I greet all gods assembled here,  
including Hermes, whom I honour,  
the well-loved herald god, worshipped as the herald's patron. And next I pray the  
heroic spirits who sent us off will welcome back the remnants of our army,  
those spared being slaughtered by the spear.  
O you hall of kings, you roof I cherish, you sacred seats and gods who face the sun,  
if your shining eyes in days gone by  
have welcomed our king home, then do so now,

after his long absence. He's coming here,  
carrying light into this darkness, for you and all assembled here—our mighty king,  
lord Agamemnon. Greet him with full respect.

For he's uprooted Troy—with the pick axe of avenging Zeus he's reduced her soil.  
The altars of the gods and all their shrines he has obliterated, laying waste all that  
country's rich fertility. Around Troy's neck he's fixed destruction's yoke.

Now he's coming home, king Agamemnon,  
the fortunate elder son of Atreus,  
among all men he merits the most honour.

For neither Paris nor his accomplice,  
the Trojan city, can ever boast again their deeds were greater than their suffering.  
Guilty of rape and theft, he's lost his loot. He's utterly destroyed his father's house,  
the land, too, which sustained his people.

So Priam's sons have paid the price twice over.

CHORUS LEADER All joyful greetings to you, herald,  
as you come back from our army.

HERALD I, too, rejoice.

Now I don't fear death—it's as the gods decide.

CHORUS LEADER Did your love of this land cause you distress?

HERALD

Yes. That's why my eyes are filled with tears.

CHORUS LEADER It's as if you had some pleasing sickness.

HERALD How so? Tell me exactly what you mean.

CHORUS LEADER You suffered from love for those who loved you.

HERALD You mean the country and the army both missed each other?

CHORUS LEADER Yes, so much so,  
often my anxious heart cried out aloud.

HERALD What caused this gnawing trouble in your heart?

CHORUS LEADER Long ago I learned to keep my silence—  
the best antidote against more trouble.

HERALD Why's that? Were you afraid of someone,  
once the kings were gone?

CHORUS LEADER Indeed I was.

In fact, as you have said, there'd be great joy in dying now.

HERALD It's true we have done well.

As for what happened long ago, you could say some worked out happily, and some  
was bad.

But who except the gods avoids all pain throughout his life? If I told what we went  
through—

the hardships, wretched quarters, narrow berths,  
the harsh conditions—was there anything we did not complain about? We had our  
share of trouble every day. And then on shore things were even worse. We had to  
camp right by the enemy wall. It was wet—  
dew from the sky and marshes soaked us.

Our clothes rotted. Our hair grew full of lice.

And it was freezing. The winters there,

beyond endurance, when snows from Ida froze birds to death. And then the heat, so hot at noon, the sea, without a ripple, sank to sleep. . . . But why complain about it? Our work is done. It's over for the dead, who aren't about to spring to life again. Why should the living call to mind the dead? There's no need to relive those blows of fate. I think it's time to bid a long farewell to our misfortune. For those still living, the soldiers left alive, our luck's won out. No loss can change that now. We've a right, as we cross land and sea, to boast aloud, and cry out to the sun, "Argive forces once, having captured Troy, took their spoils of war and nailed them up in gods' holy shrines, all through Greece, glorious tribute from the past!" So whoever hears the story of these things must praise our generals—our city, too. Full honour and thanks to Zeus who did the work. That's my full report.

CHORUS LEADER What you say is true. I was in the wrong—I won't deny that. But the old can always learn from younger men, and what you've said enriches all of us.

[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace]

But your news will have a special interest for Clytaemnestra and her household. CLYTAEMNESTRA Some time ago I cried out in triumph, rejoicing when that first messenger arrived, the fiery herald in the night, who told me Troy was captured and was being destroyed. Some people criticized me then, saying, "How come you're so easily persuaded by signal fires Troy's being demolished? Isn't that just like a woman's heart, to get so jubilant?" Insults like these made it appear as if I'd lost my wits. But I continued with my sacrifice, and everywhere throughout the city women kept up their joyful shouting, as they traditionally do, echoing their exultation through all holy shrines, tending sweet-smelling spicy flames, as they consumed their victims. So now, why do I need you to go on and on about all this? I'll hear it from the king. But, so I can give my honoured husband the finest welcome home, and with all speed—for what light gives a woman greater pleasure than to unbar the gates to her own husband as he comes home from battle, once the gods have spared his life in war?—tell him this, and give him the message to come home as soon as possible. The citizens will love to see him, and when he gets back, in this house he'll find his wife as faithful as when he left, a watch dog of the home, loyal to him, hostile to his enemies,

and, for the rest, the same in every way.  
In this long time, I've not betrayed our bond—  
I've known no pleasure with another man,  
no breath of scandal. About such things I understand as much as tempering  
bronze.

I'm proud to state this, for it's all true—  
nothing a noble lady should feel shame to say.

[Clytaemnestra exits back into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER She seems to speak as if she really wants to tell you some-  
thing, but, in fact, to those who can interpret her words well she's only saying what  
she ought to say.

But tell me, herald, can I learn something of Menelaus, this country's well-loved  
king—

did he make it back safe and sound with you?

HERALD I can't lie with false good news of Menelaus,  
so his friends can enjoy themselves for long.

CHORUS LEADER I wish your news of him was true and good.  
It's hard when both of these don't go together.

HERALD Menelaus disappeared—the army lost sight of him and his ship. That's  
the truth.

CHORUS LEADER Did you see him sail off from Ilion,  
or did some storm attack the entire fleet and cut him off from you?

HERALD Like a master archer, you hit the mark—  
your last question briefly tells the story.

CHORUS LEADER According to the others in the fleet  
what happened? Is he alive or dead?

HERALD No one knows for certain, except the sun,  
moving around the earth sustaining life.

CHORUS LEADER Tell me how that storm struck the soldiers' ships.  
How did the anger of the gods come to an end?

HERALD It's not right I talk of our misfortunes,  
and spoil such an auspicious day as this.

We ought to keep such matters separate in deference to the gods. When a  
messenger arrives distraught, bringing dreadful news about some slaughtered  
army, that's one wound

inflicted on the city. Beyond that,

from many houses many men are driven to their destruction by the double whip  
which Ares, god of war, so loves—

disaster with two prongs, a bloody pair.

A messenger weighed down with news like this should report the Furies' song of  
triumph.

But when he brings good news of men being saved to a city full of joyful celebra-  
tions . . .

How can I mix the good news and the bad,

telling of the storm which hit Achaeans,

a storm linked to the anger of the gods? For fire and sea, before now enemies,

swore a common oath and then proclaimed it by destroying Achaea's helpless forces.

At night malevolent seas rose up,  
as winds from Thrace smashed ships together.  
Pushed round by the power of that storm,  
and driven by great bursts of rain, the ships scattered, then disappeared, blown apart by the evil shepherd's whirlwind. Later,  
when the sun's bright light appeared again, we witnessed the Aegean sea in bloom with corpses of Achaean troops and ships.

As for us, some god saved us in secret or interceded for us—our boat survived, its hull intact. That was no human feat.

Some divine hand was on our steering oar,  
some stroke of Fortune wanted our ship saved,  
not swamped by surf as we rode at anchor or smashed upon the rocky coast. And then, once we'd avoided Hades on those seas, we couldn't believe our luck, as we brooded,

in the bright light of day, on all our troubles,  
this new disaster which destroyed our fleet,  
dispersing it so badly. So on those ships if anyone's still breathing, he'll now say we're the ones who've been destroyed. Why not,  
when we say much the same of them?

But let's hope things all turn out for the best.

As for Menelaus, wait for his return—  
that should be your first priority. If some ray of sunlight finds him still alive,  
his vision still intact, thanks to Zeus,  
whose crafty plans at this point don't include destruction of the entire race, there's hope he'll soon come home again. Now you've heard this,  
you've listened to the truth.

[Exit Herald]

CHORUS Whoever came up with that name,  
a name so altogether true—  
was there some power we can't see telling that tongue what to say, the tongue which prophesied our fate—

I mean the man who called her Helen,  
that woman wed for warfare,  
the object of our strife?

For she's lived up to that name—  
a hell for ships, a hell for men,  
a hell for cities, too.

From her delicately curtained room  
she sailed away, transported by West Wind, an earth-born giant. A horde of warriors with shields went after her, huntsmen following the vanished track her oars had left, all the way to where she'd beached her ship,  
on leafy shores of Simois.

Then came bloody war.

And so Troy's destiny's fulfilled—



wrath brings a dreadful wedding day,  
late retribution for dishonour to hospitality and Zeus,  
god of guest and host,  
on those who celebrated with the bride,  
who, on that day, sang aloud the joyful wedding hymns.  
Now Priam's city, in old age,  
has learned a different song.  
I think I hear loud funeral chants,  
lamenting as an evil fate the marriage Paris brought. The city's filled with songs of  
grief.  
It must endure all sorrows,  
the brutal slaughter of its sons.

So a man once raised a lion cub in his own home. The beast lacked milk but  
craved its mother's teat.  
In early life the cub was gentle.  
Children loved it, and it brought the old men great delight.  
They gave it many things and clasped it in their arms,  
as if it were a nursing child.  
Its fiery eyes fixed on the hands that fed it, the creature fawned,  
a slave to appetite.

But with time the creature grew and its true nature showed—  
the one its parents gave it.  
So it paid back those who reared it,  
preparing a meal in gratitude, an unholy slaughter of the flocks,  
house awash with blood,  
while those who lived inside the home were powerless against the pain,  
against the massive carnage.

By god's will they'd brought up a priest of doom in their own house.

I'd say she first arrived in Troy a gentle spirit, like a calming breeze,  
a delicate, expensive ornament—  
her soft darting eyes a flower which stings the heart with love.

Then, changing her direction,  
she took her marriage to its bitter end,  
destroying all those she lived with.  
With evil in her train and led by Zeus,  
god of guest and host, she turned into a bride of tears, a Fury.

Among men there's a saying,  
an old one, from times long past: A man's prosperity, once fully grown,  
has offspring—it never dies without producing children.  
From that man's good fortune spring up voracious pains for all his race. But on this  
I don't agree with other men.  
I stand alone and say it's the unholy act that breeds more acts of the same kind.  
A truly righteous house is blessed,  
its children always fair and good.

Old violent aggression loves to generate new troubles among evil men—soon  
or late,

when it's fated to be born,  
new violence springs forth,  
a spirit no one can resist or conquer,  
unholy recklessness,  
dark ruin on the home,  
like the destructiveness from which it sprang.

But Righteousness shines out from grimy dwellings, honouring the man who lives in virtue.

She turns her eyes away from gold-encrusted mansions where men's hands are black,

and moves towards integrity,  
rejecting power and wealth, which, though praised, are counterfeit.  
Righteousness leads all things to well-deserved fulfillment.

[Enter Agamemnon in a chariot with Cassandra and a large military escort]

CHORUS LEADER Welcome, son of Atreus, my king,  
Troy's destroyer. How shall I address you?  
How honour you without extravagance,  
without failing to say what's suitable?  
For many men value appearances more than reality—thus they violate what's right.  
Everyone's prepared to sigh  
over some suffering man, though no sorrow really eats their hearts, or they can  
pretend to join another person's happiness, forcing their faces into smiling masks.  
But a good man discerns true character—  
he's not fooled by eyes feigning loyalty,  
favouring him with watered-down respect.  
Back when you were gathering the army in Helen's cause—I won't deny the fact—  
I saw you in an unflattering light, an unfit mind steering our ship astray,  
trying through that sacrifice to boost the spirits of dying soldiers. But now, with  
love, with a full heart, I welcome your return.  
For those who've won final success, the joy is worth the toil. If you enquire, in time  
you'll learn about the men who stayed at home,  
those who with justice stood guard for the city and those who failed to carry out  
what's right.

AGAMEMNON First I salute Argos and my native gods,  
as is right, the ones who worked with me for my safe return and for the justice I  
brought down on Priam's city. The gods refused to listen to their urgent pleas,  
then cast their ballots—there was no dissent—  
into the urn of blood—to kill their men,  
to wipe out Ilion. The other urn,  
the one for clemency, stood there empty—  
only Hope took up her stand beside it.  
Even now smoke from the burning city, an auspicious sign, tells of its capture.  
The storms from its destruction still live on.  
As fiery embers cool, their dying breaths give off ripe smells of wealth. For all this,  
we must give the gods eternal thanks.  
Around Troy we've cast a savage net.

For a woman's sake, the beast from Argos,  
born from the belly of that wooden horse, in the night, as the Pleiades went down,  
jumped out with their shields and razed the city. Leaping over walls, the ravenous  
lion gorged itself on blood of royalty.  
So much for my long prelude to the gods.  
As for your concerns, I've heard your words,  
and I'll keep them in mind. I agree with you—  
we'll work together. By nature few men possess the inborn talent to admire a  
friend's good fortune without envy.  
Poisonous malice seeps into the heart,  
doubling the pain of the infected man, weighing him down with misfortunes of his  
own,  
while he groans to see another's wealth.  
I understand too well companionship no more substantial than pictures in a glass.  
From my experience, I'd say those men who seemed so loyal to me are shadows,  
no more than images of true companions.  
All except Odysseus—he sailed with me much against his will, but once in harness,  
he was prepared to pull his weight for me. I say this whether he's alive or dead.  
For other issues of the city and our gods,  
we'll set up a general assembly,  
all of us discussing things together.  
We must make sure what's working well remains that way in future. By contrast,  
where we need some healing medicine,  
we'll make a well-intentioned effort to root out all infectious evil,  
burning the sores or slicing them away.

[Enter Clytaemnestra with attendants carrying the purple carpet]

Now I'll go inside my palace, my hearth and home,  
first, to greet the gods who sent me off and today bring me back. May victory,  
which has been mine, stay with me forever.

[Agamemnon moves to climb out of the chariot but is held up by Clytaemnestra's speech]

CLYTAEMNESTRA Citizens, you senior men of Argos here,  
I'm not ashamed to speak before you all,  
to state how much I love my husband. With time,  
men's fears diminish. So I'll speak out now.  
I don't talk as one who has been taught by others, so I'll just describe my life, my  
oppressive life, all the many years my husband's been away at Ilion.  
First, it's unmitigated trouble for a woman to sit at home alone,  
far from her man. She has to listen to all sorts of painful rumours. Messengers  
arrive, hard on each other's heels, bearing news of some disaster—and everyone  
tells of troubles worse than those before,  
shouted throughout the house. If my husband had had as many wounds as I heard  
rumours coming to this house, he'd have more holes in him than any net. If he'd  
died as many times as rumour killed him, he could claim to be a second Geryon,  
that triple-bodied beast,  
and boast of being covered up with earth three times, one death for every separate

shape.

Because of all these spiteful messages,  
others have often had to cut me loose,  
a high-hung noose strung tight around my neck. That's why our son, Orestes, is not  
standing here,  
the most trusted bond linking you and me.  
He should be, but there's no cause to worry.  
He's being cared for by a friendly ally,  
Strophius of Phocis, who warned me twice—  
first, of your own danger under Ilion's walls,  
second, of people here, how they could rebel,  
cry out against being governed, then overthrow the Council. For it's natural to men,  
once someone's down, to trample on him all the more. That's how I explain myself.  
And it's all true. As for me, my eyes are dry—  
the welling sources of my tears are parched,  
no drop remains. Many long nights I wept until my eyes were sore, as I kept  
watching for that beacon light I'd set up for you,  
but always it kept disappointing me.

The faint whirring of a buzzing fly would often wake me up from dreams of you,  
dreams where I saw you endure more suffering than the hours in which I slept had  
time for.

But now, after going through all this, my heart is free of worry. So I would salute  
my lord—

the watch dog who protects our household, the mainstay which saves our ship of  
state, the lofty pillar which holds our roof beams high, his father's truly begotten  
son, for men at sea a land they glimpse beyond their wildest hopes,  
the fairest dawn after a night of storms,  
a flowing stream to thirsty travellers. What joy it is to escape necessity!  
In my opinion, these words of greeting are worthy of him. So let there be no envy,  
since in days past we've suffered many ills.  
And now, my beloved lord, come to me here,  
climb down from that chariot. But, my king,  
don't place upon the common ground the foot which stamped out Troy.

[Clytaemnestra turns to the women attending on her who, on her orders, begin  
to spread out at Agamemnon's feet the tapestries they have brought out from the  
house, making a path from the chariot to the palace doors. The tapestries are all  
a deep red-purple, the colour of blood]

You women, don't just stand there.  
I've told you what to do. Spread out those tapestries,  
here on the ground, directly in his path. Quickly! Let his path be covered all in red,  
so Justice  
can lead him back into his home, a place he never hoped to see. As for the rest,  
my unsleeping vigilance will sort it out,  
with the help of gods, as fate decrees.

AGAMEMNON Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,  
your speech was, like my absence, far too long.

Praise that's due to us should come from others.  
Then it's worthwhile. All those things you said—  
don't puff me up with such female honours, or grovel there before me babbling  
tributes,  
like some barbarian. Don't invite envy  
to cross my path by strewing it with cloth.  
That's how we honour gods, not human beings.  
For a mortal man to place his foot like this on rich embroidery is, in my view,  
not without some risk. So I'm telling you  
honour me as a man, not as a god.  
My fame proclaims itself. It does not need foot mats made out of such embroi-  
deries. Not even to think of doing something bad is god's greatest gift. When a  
man's life ends in great prosperity, only then can we declare that he's a happy  
man. Thus, if I act,  
in every circumstance, as I ought to now,  
there's nothing I need fear.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Don't say that just to flout what I've arranged.

AGAMEMNON You should know I'll not go back on what I've said.

CLYTAEMNESTRA You must fear something, then, to act this way.  
You've made some promise to the gods.

AGAMEMNON I've said my final word. I fully understand,  
as well as any man, just what I'm doing.

CLYTAEMNESTRA What do you think Priam would have done,  
if he'd had your success?

AGAMEMNON That's clear—  
he'd have walked across these tapestries.

CLYTAEMNESTRA So then why be ashamed by what men say?

AGAMEMNON But what people say can have great power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA True, but the man whom people do not envy is not worth  
their envy.

AGAMEMNON It's not like a woman to be so keen on competition.

CLYTAEMNESTRA It's fitting that the happy conqueror should let himself be  
overcome.

AGAMEMNON And in this contest that's the sort of victory you value?

CLYTAEMNESTRA Why not agree? Be strong and yield to me,  
of your own consent.

AGAMEMNON Well, if it's what you want . . .  
Quick, someone get these sandals off—  
they've served my feet so well. As I now walk on these red tapestries dyed in the  
sea,  
may no distant god catch sight of me,  
and, for envy, strike me down. There's much shame when my feet squander assets  
of my house,  
wasting wealth and costly woven finery.

[Agamemnon, in bare feet, comes down from the chariot onto the tapestries]  
So much for that.

[Agamemnon turns to call attention to Cassandra in the chariot]

Welcome this foreign girl  
into our house. And do it graciously.  
For god, who sees us from far away,  
looks down with favour on a gentle master.  
No one freely puts on slavery's yoke,  
but this girl, the finest flower of all our loot,  
comes with us as my army's gift to me.  
And now, since you've talked me into this, I'll proceed into my palace, treading on  
this crimson pathway as I go.

[Agamemnon starts to move slowly along the tapestries towards the palace and  
up the stairs. Cassandra remains in the chariot]

CLYTAEMNESTRA There is the sea. Who will drain it dry?  
It gives us crimson dye in huge amounts,  
as valuable as silver, inexhaustible.  
With that we dye our garments. And of these  
our house has a full store, thanks to the gods.  
We're rich. We have no sense of poverty.  
I'd have vowed to tread on many clothes,  
to use what we have stored up in our home, if an oracle had ordered such a  
payment to save your life. If the root still lives,  
the house can blossom into leaf once more,  
growing high-arching shade, protection against the Dog Star's scorching season.  
Your return to your father's hearth and home brings us the summer's heat in winter  
time.

It's like when Zeus makes wine from bitter grapes,  
the house immediately grows cool, once its lord strolls through his own halls in  
complete command.

[By this time Agamemnon has reached the palace doors and has just entered the  
palace]

O Zeus, Zeus, who accomplishes all things,  
answer my prayers. Take care to bring about all things that reach fulfillment  
through your will.

[Exit Clytaemnestra into the palace. The doors close behind her]

CHORUS Why does this sense of dread hover so unceasingly around my heart  
with such foreboding?

My song of prophecy goes on unbidden and unpaid.  
Why can't some calming confidence  
sit on my mind and spurn my fears as enigmatic dreams?  
It was so long ago—

Time has long since buried deep in sand the mooring cables cast when the army  
sailed to Troy.

My own eyes tell me Agamemnon has returned.  
For that I need no further witness.  
But still, here, deep in my heart, the spontaneous song keeps up its tuneless dirge,  
as the avenging Furies chant.

It kills my confidence, my hope.

Everything inside me beats against my chest,  
surging back and forth in tides of grim foreboding—  
something's moving to fulfillment.

But I pray my premonitions prove false and never come to light.

For, as we know, boundaries of vigorous health break down—  
disease is always pressing hard the common wall between them.  
So with the fate of men.

It holds to a straight course,

then, all at once, can crash upon a hidden rock of grief.

But if, as a precaution, men toss overboard some part of their rich cargo,  
and time their throw just right,  
the house, though grieving,  
will not completely founder,  
nor will its hull be swamped.

And Zeus' bountiful rich gifts reaped from the furrows every year hold off the  
plague of famine.

But once a murdered man's dark blood has soaked the ground, who then  
can bring him back through song?

Even Aesculapius, whose skill could raise men from the dead,  
was stopped by Zeus' thunderbolt.

Was that not warning to us all?

If one fate settled by the gods did not prevent another fate securing an advantage,  
my heart would then outrace my tongue— I'd speak out loud and clear, I'd cry out  
my forebodings.

But now it mutters in the dark,  
uneasy, holding little hope for any resolution.

And still my spirit smoulders.

[Enter Clytaemnestra from the palace. She addresses Cassandra, who is still in  
the chariot]

CLYTAEMNESTR You should go in, too—I mean you up there,

Cassandra. Zeus, in his mercy to you,

has made you member of our household,

one who shares its purification rites. So you can take your place before the altar  
of the god protecting all our wealth,  
along with other slaves. So come down.

Leave the chariot. And leave your pride behind.

Men say even Hercules, Alcmena's son,

once long ago was sold in slavery and had to eat its bitter bread. If Fate has brought  
you to the same condition,

be very grateful you serve masters here who've been rich forever. Certain men,  
those who've reaped a harvest of rich goods beyond their dreams, maltreat their  
slaves.

They go too far. But here, with us, you'll get the treatment our traditions say is  
right.

CHORUS LEADER [addressing Cassandra]

Our queen is talking to you. Her meaning's clear.  
Fate has caught you in its nets—you'd best obey,  
unless such action is beyond your power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA If she's not like a swallow, with a song  
all her own, something barbarously obscure,  
I'll speak so she can understand. She must obey.

CHORUS LEADER [to Cassandra]

Go with the queen. Of all your options now what she says is best. Do as she says.  
Step down from your chariot seat.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Come down now.  
I don't have time to waste on this girl here.  
Inside, by our central hearth, our victims  
are already waiting for the sacrifice,  
a joyful time beyond our fondest hopes.  
So if you want to play your part in this, you'd better come at once. If what I say  
means nothing to you, if you can't understand,  
at least use your foreign hand to make a sign.

CHORUS LEADER An interpreter is what this stranger needs.  
She's like some wild thing, freshly trapped.

CLYTAEMNESTRA She's mad, too busy listening to her troubled heart.  
She's just left her newly captured city,  
then come here, without sufficient time to learn to stomach the controlling bit.  
She will, once her anger's been dissolved in foaming blood. But I'll waste no more  
time,  
dealing with her contempt outside the house.

[Clytaemnestra turns and exits into the palace. The members of the Chorus gather  
around Cassandra]

CHORUS LEADER I'll not lose my temper. I pity her.  
You unhappy creature, why not come down?  
Leave the chariot. Why not accept fate's yoke of your own free will?

CASSANDRA [searching the sky for a sign of Apollo and screaming]  
Aieeeee . . . earth . . . sky . . .  
Apollo . . . Apollo . . .

CHORUS MEMBER Why cry out your distress in Apollo's name?  
He's not a god who pays attention to those who mourn like this.

CASSANDRA  
Aieeeee . . . earth . . . sky . . . Apollo . . . my destroyer . . .

CHORUS MEMBER She cried out again. Such ominous words—  
and to a god who's not the one to have around at times of grieving.

CASSANDRA Apollo! Apollo! God of the road . . .  
You're destroying me. Why leave me here beyond all hope a second time?

CHORUS MEMBER It looks as if she's going to prophesy,  
to say something of her unhappiness.  
She may be a slave, but inside her the god's voice still remains.

CASSANDRA Apollo!  
O Apollo! God of the road . . .



You're obliterating me! Where am I now?

Where have you led me? What house is this?

CHORUS MEMBER If you don't know where you are, I'll tell you—  
you're at the house of the sons of Atreus.  
That's the truth.

CASSANDRA No . . . no . . . a house  
that hates the gods . . . house full of death,  
kinsmen butchered . . . heads chopped off . . .  
a human slaughterhouse awash in blood . . .

CHORUS MEMBER This stranger's like a keen hound on the scent.  
She's on the trail of blood.

CASSANDRA . . . I see evidence I trust—young children  
screaming as they're butchered—then their father  
eating his own infants' roasted flesh . . .

CHORUS MEMBER We've heard about your fame in prophecy.  
But here in Argos no one wants a prophet.

CASSANDRA O god what's this she has in mind?  
What new agony inside the house is she preparing? Something monstrous, barbaric, evil . . . beyond all love,  
all remedy. And help is far away.

CHORUS MEMBER I don't understand what she's saying now.  
What she first said, that I understood—  
the whole city talks about it.

CASSANDRA O evil woman, you're going to do it.  
Your own husband, the man who shares your bed—  
once you've washed him clean . . . there in the bath . . .  
How shall I describe how all this ends?  
It's coming soon. She's stretching out her hand . . .  
and now her other hand is reaching for him . . .

CHORUS MEMBER I still don't understand. What she's saying is just too confused. Her dark prophecies leave me bewildered.

CASSANDRA Look! Look over there!  
What's that apparition? Is that death's net?  
No, she's the net, the one who sleeps with him,  
that woman, murder's willing agent.  
Let those Furies insatiably at work against this clan rise up and scream for joy—  
they have another victim fit for stoning.  
CHORUS MEMBER What Fury do you now invoke to shriek throughout this house?  
What you've just said  
makes me afraid.

CHORUS Drop by drop the dark blood flows around my heart—like mortal  
wounds when life's sunset comes,  
when death is near.

CASSANDRA Look over there! Look now!  
Keep the great bull from his mate.  
She's caught him in her robes— now she gores him with her black horn.

A trap! He's collapsing in the bath!  
I'm telling you what's going on—  
he's being murdered in there,  
while bathing—a plot to kill him!

CHORUS MEMBER I can't boast of any skill with prophecies,  
but these strike me as pointing to disaster.

CHORUS What good ever comes to men from prophecies? They talk of evil.  
All those skilful words encourage men to be afraid of what the prophet chants.

CASSANDRA Alas for me! Alas for my unwelcome fate!  
I'm crying out for my own suffering—  
my cup of grief is full, brim full . . .  
Why have you brought me here,  
so wretched, if not to die,  
the second victim? Why else?

CHORUS MEMBER Your mind's possessed—some god is in control.  
And so you wail aloud about your death,  
just like some shrill nightingale that sings, without a pause, of her heart's distress,  
lamenting all her life for her dead son,  
life rich in sorrow.

CASSANDRA O to have that—  
the fate of the singing nightingale!  
Gods gave her body wings and a sweet life.  
She does not weep. But murder waits for me—  
a two-edged sword hacks me to death.

CHORUS MEMBER These vain prophetic cries of woe you chant,  
where do they start? Why introduce such horrific fear into your songs? How do you  
set some limit to the path where what you see so ominously leads?

CASSANDRA Alas for that wedding . . . Paris and his bride . . .  
how it destroyed his loved ones . . . Alas for the Scamander, river of my home!  
By your banks I was raised so long ago,  
brought up to all this misery . . . And now it seems I must soon chant my prophecies  
by Cocytus and banks of Acheron,  
twin rivers of the dead.

CHORUS MEMBER What's that? The words seem clear enough—  
any child could understand. Your cruel fate strikes at me like a bloody fang. It hurts.  
My heart breaks to hear you chant your sorrows.

CASSANDRA Alas for my city's fate—  
totally destroyed . . . Alas for my father's sacrifices,  
all those grazing herds . . .  
offerings to save our walls!  
In vain . . . the city was not spared . . .  
all that misery it's endured.  
Now I, on fire too, must go to ground.

CHORUS MEMBER You keep repeating what you said before.  
Some evil-minded demon, swooping down,  
has fallen on you, forcing you to sing,

to chant your songs of death. Where does this end?

That's what I can't see.

CASSANDRA Then my prophecy will veil itself no more,  
like some new bride half-concealed from view. Let it now rise as clear as a fresh  
wind blowing toward the rising sun, a wave  
cresting through the dawn and bringing on a tide of woe far greater than my own.  
I'll teach you no more in cryptic riddles.

And you bear witness—run the trail with me,  
as I sniff out the track of ancient crimes.

Up there on that roof there sits a chorus—

it never leaves. They sing in harmony,

but the song is harsh, predicting doom. Drinking human blood has made them  
bold—

they dance in celebration through the house.

The family's Furies cannot be dislodged.

Sitting in the home, they chant their song,

the madness that began all this, each in turn cursing that man who defiled his  
brother's bed.

Have I missed the mark? Or like a fine archer have I hit the beast? Or am I selling  
lies,

a fortune-teller babbling door to door?

Tell me on your oath how well I know these old stories of this family's crimes.

CHORUS LEADER How could an oath of ours be any help,  
no matter how sincere, to heal your grief?

But I'm amazed that you, born overseas,

can say so much about a foreign city,

as if you'd lived here.

CASSANDRA It was Apollo,  
god of prophecy, who made me what I am.

CHORUS MEMBER Surely the god was not in love with you?

CASSANDRA I used to be ashamed to talk of this . . .

CHORUS MEMBER When we're doing well, we all have scruples.

CASSANDRA Apollo was like a mighty wrestler, panting all over me, in love.

CHORUS MEMBER Did you go through with it—  
bear him a child?

CASSANDRA I promised to,  
but then I broke my word.

CHORUS MEMBER Did you already have prophetic skill,  
inspired by the god?

CASSANDRA At that time I used to prophesy to all my countrymen.  
I'd foretell disasters.

CHORUS MEMBER How did you escape Apollo's anger?

CASSANDRA Since I resisted him, no one believes me.

CHORUS MEMBER But to us, at least, what you prophesy seems true enough.

CASSANDRA Aieee . . . the pains I feel.

The fearful labour pains of true prophecy seize me, confuse me, as they start again,

full of foreboding. Look there—see those creatures,  
young ones, sitting by the house, dark shapes,  
like something from a dream? They're like children murdered by their loved ones  
. . . their hands are full,  
clenching chunks of their own flesh as food,  
their guts and inner organs . . . it's all so clear . . . that awful meal their own father  
tasted.

For all that, I say, revenge is on the way,  
someone's planning it, a craven lion,  
a beast wallowing in bed, keeping watch,  
waiting for my master to get back.  
Yes, my master—since I must now bear the yoke of slavery. That lord of war,  
who led the fleet and ravaged Ilion,  
has no idea what that cur is up to, what evil plans the hateful bitch is hatching,  
as her tongue licks his hands in welcome,  
ears perked up for joy, like treacherous Ate,  
goddess who destroys. It's outrageous—  
the woman kills her man. What shall I call her?  
What awful monster suits her? A snake?  
An amphisbaena with a head at either end?  
Or perhaps a Scylla living in the rocks,  
preying on sailors, raging mother of hell,  
who breathes relentless war on loved ones. How that woman, in her audacity,  
screamed out in triumph, like a battle cry, pretending to enjoy his safe return!  
Whether you credit what I say or not—  
that doesn't really matter. Why should it?  
What will come will come. And soon enough,  
as you stand here full of pity, you'll say Cassandra's prophecies were all too true.

CHORUS I understand about Thyestes' meal,  
and tremble thinking how he ate his children's flesh. Terror grips me as I hear these  
truths without embellishment. As for the rest,  
hearing that just makes me lose my way.

CASSANDRA I tell you you'll see Agamemnon dead.

CHORUS MEMBER Poor girl, calm yourself. Tone down those words.

CASSANDRA No—no one can heal what my words prophesy.

CHORUS Not if they're true. But may the gods forbid!

CASSANDRA While you pray here, others move in to kill.

CHORUS LEADER What man is going to commit such crimes?

CASSANDRA What man? You've completely missed the point. You've failed to  
understand my prophecies.

CHORUS LEADER Yes I have—  
I don't see who has means to do it.

CASSANDRA Yet I can speak Greek well enough.

CHORUS LEADER So does the oracle at Delphi,  
but understanding what it says is hard.

CASSANDRA O this fire! His fire comes over me once more!

The pain . . . Lycian Apollo . . . burning me . . . That two-footed lioness . . . crouching there with a wolf, once the noble lion's gone . . . She's going to kill me . . . the agony! Now she prepares her drugs, and in her rage, vows I too will be a part of her revenge, as she whets a sword to kill her king. He brought me here. Now we both die. Her retribution. So why do I bear these ornaments that mock me, this rod, these prophet's wreaths around my neck? Let me be rid of you before I die . . .

[Cassandra breaks her wand and throws off the insignia of her office as a prophet]

There, an end to you. With you down there, I get revenge. Make some other woman rich. Let her preach destruction instead of me.

[Cassandra now starts tearing off her clothes]

Look how Apollo now in person strips me, rips my prophetic robes, the god who watched, as my friends in their hatred turned on me, mocked me so savagely in these very clothes—they thought they knew what they were doing. But they were wrong. I heard them call me names, "beggar," "starving wretch"—I endured them all. And now the prophet god is done with me. He's led his prophet to her place of death. No father's altar for me here—instead a chopping block awaits, slaughtered in one hot stroke of bloody sacrifice. But we'll not die without the gods' revenge. Another man will come and will avenge us, a son who'll kill his mother, then pay back his father's death, a wanderer in exile, a man this country's made a stranger. He'll come back and, like a coping stone, bring the ruin of his family to a close. For gods have made a powerful promise—his father's stretched out corpse will bring him home. Why then do I lament so piteously? Since I'm the one who first saw how Troy would be wiped out the way it was, since I see now how those who took the city are being destroyed in judgment from the gods, I'll go to meet my fate. I'll dare to die. I greet this doorway as the gates of Death. Once the death blow strikes, I pray I'll have a gentle end—no struggle, as my life blood drains away. And then I'll close my eyes.

CHORUS LEADER You poor woman, so much pain and wisdom. You've said so much. But if you see your death—see it so clearly—how can you go on so bravely to the altar, like an ox destined by gods for sacrifice?

CASSANDRA There's no way out. My friends, the time has come.

CHORUS LEADER But there's some benefit in going last.

CASSANDRA This is the day. It makes no sense to run.  
CHORUS LEADER You know, you endure your suffering with courage I admire.  
CASSANDRA No one hearing that has reason to be glad.  
CHORUS LEADER But to die well confers some human dignity.  
CASSANDRA [approaching the door then moving back in horror]  
I cry for you, my father, your noble children.  
CHORUS LEADER What's wrong? Why turn around in fear?  
CASSANDRA This house . . . It's horrific!  
CHORUS Why call out in horror? Is there some vision in your mind?  
CASSANDRA It's this house—  
it stinks of murder, blood slaughter . . .  
CHORUS LEADER No, no—that's the smell of sacrifice,  
victims at the hearth.  
CASSANDRA That smell . . .  
it's like an open grave . . .  
CHORUS Do you mean the splendid Syrian incense?  
It's all through the house.  
CASSANDRA [turning back to the palace doors]  
No. But I must go.  
I'll lament my death, and Agamemnon's, too,  
inside the house. Enough of living!  
Alas, my friends, I'm not holding back in fear,  
like some bird trapped in bushes. I want you to witness how I went to meet my  
death, when for me another woman will be killed,  
a man will die for one who married evil.  
This is my last request before I die.  
CHORUS LEADER I pity you, poor creature, and your death,  
which you have prophesied.  
CASSANDRA One last time I feel the urge to speak, not sing a dirge about my  
death. I pray to the sun,  
here in the light of his most recent day,  
that those who carry out revenge for me will make my enemies pay with their blood  
for butchering a slave, an easy victim.  
Alas, for human life. When things go well,  
a shadow overturns it all. When badly,  
a damp sponge wipes away the picture.  
Of these two, the second is more pitiful.  
[Cassandra exits slowly and deliberately through the palace doors, which close  
behind her]  
CHORUS To rest unsatisfied amid great wealth is in the nature of all human  
beings.  
No one can point and order it away from princely homes by uttering the words  
"Dissatisfaction, enter here no more!"  
Take Agamemnon. The powers in heaven  
permitted him to capture Priam's town,  
to return home honoured by the gods.

But now, if he must pay the penalty for blood which other men before him shed and die in retribution for the dead  
he killed himself, what mortal human being who hears all this can boast he lives a life unscarred by fate?

[A scream comes from inside the palace]

AGAMEMNON [from inside]

Help me!

I'm hit . . . a deadly blow . . .

CHORUS LEADER Silence! Who cried out then? Something about a deadly blow.

AGAMEMNON [within]

Aaagh! I'm hit again . . . a second blow . . .

CHORUS LEADER That's the king in there. Those cries, I think,  
tell us what's going on. Come now, let's decide what's best to do, our safest course of action.

[At this point the Chorus breaks up in panic, losing its unity as a group. Individual members speak to each other in great confusion]

CHORUS MEMBER ONE Here's my advice—summon all the people,  
call them to bring help up to the palace.

CHORUS MEMBER TWO I say we must attack the house at once,  
catch them at it, swords still wet with blood.

CHORUS MEMBER THREE My view is we should do something like that. I vote  
we act. There's no time to delay.

CHORUS MEMBER FOUR It's all so clear. This is their opening move—  
a sign they're going to tyrannize the city.

CHORUS MEMBER FIVE We're wasting time. They've thrown aside all sense of  
hesitation. Their hands won't rest.

CHORUS MEMBER SIX I don't know what scheme I could propose.  
It's up to those who can carry out the plan to tell us what to do.

CHORUS MEMBER SEVEN That's my view, too.  
I don't know how to bring the dead to life with nothing but our words.

CHORUS MEMBER EIGHT But just to stay alive, should we bow down before  
these tyrants,  
who desecrate the house?

CHORUS MEMBER NINE No. We can't do that.  
Death would be preferable, a gentler fate than such a tyranny.

CHORUS MEMBER TEN But should we assume,  
just on the basis of those groans we heard,  
that Agamemnon's dead?

CHORUS MEMBER ELEVEN Before we act,  
we must have clearer evidence. To guess like this is not really knowing what is true  
or not.

CHORUS LEADER That's it then—everyone agrees on this—  
we need to know more clearly how things stand with Agamemnon, son of Atreus.

[The palace doors open, revealing the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra.  
Clytaemnestra stands over them. She is covered in blood]

CLYTAEMNESTRA Before this moment I said many things to suit my purposes.  
I'm not ashamed  
to contradict them now. How else could I act on my hate for such a hateful man,  
who feigned his love, how else prepare my nets of agony so high no one could  
jump them?  
I've brooded on this struggle many years,  
the old blood feud. My moment's come at last,  
though long delayed. I stand now where I struck, where I achieved what I set out  
to do.  
I did all this. I won't deny the fact.  
Round this man I cast my all-embracing net,  
rich robes of evil, as if catching fish—  
he had no way out, no eluding fate.  
I stabbed him twice. He gave out two groans.  
Then as his limbs went limp, I hit again,  
a third blow, my prayerful dedication to Zeus, underground protector of the dead.  
He collapsed, snorting his life away, spitting great gobs of blood all over me,  
drenching me in showers of his dark blood.  
And I rejoiced—just as the fecund earth rejoices when the heavens send spring  
rains,  
and new-born flower buds burst into bloom.  
That's how things stand, old men of Argos.  
Be joyful, if that's how you feel. For me,  
this is my triumph. If it were fitting to pour libations on this corpse,  
I'd pour my curses out—that would be just. He filled the mixing bowls in his own  
house with such destructive misery, and now he drinks it to the dregs. He's home  
at last.

CHORUS LEADER What you say I find incredible!  
How can that tongue of yours gloat like this,  
exulting over your dead husband?

CLYTAEMNESTRA You're testing me, as if I were some silly woman.  
But my heart is fearless. Let me tell you what you already know—then you can  
praise or criticize me as you like. I don't care. This man is Agamemnon, my husband.  
He's a corpse, the work of this right hand,  
a work of justice. That's how matters stand.

CHORUS LEADER Woman, what earth-grown poison have you eaten,  
what evil drink drawn from the surging sea,  
that you're so mad to risk the public voice,  
the curses people mutter? You cast him off.  
You cut him down. So now you'll be thrown out,  
exiled from the city—a hateful thing to your own people.

CLYTAEMNESTRA So now you'd sentence me to banishment,  
send me from the city a thing accursed?  
Back then you made no accusation against this man lying here. He sacrificed his  
own child, that dear girl I bore in pain,  
to charm the winds from Thrace—and didn't care.



To him she was a beast for slaughter.  
He had flocks of them—his farms were full.  
Shouldn't you have banished him from Argos in punishment for that polluting crime?  
You're strict enough when you pass judgment on what I've done. So let me caution you—  
I'm prepared to fight you head to head.  
If you win, well then, you can govern me.  
But if god lets me prevail, you old men will learn, old as you are, to behave yourselves.

CHORUS LEADER You're too ambitious, far too arrogant.  
Blood-drenched murder's made you mad. That's plain.  
Your eyes are full of blood. Now stroke for stroke you'll pay for what you've done.  
You've lost your friends, you've lost your honour . . .

CLYTAEMNESTRA [interrupting]  
Then hear this, too, the force behind my oath—  
by that Justice I exacted for my child,  
by Ate, goddess of destruction,  
by the Fury to whom I offered up this man,  
my hopes will never walk these halls in fear,  
so long as Aegisthus stokes the blazing fires in my hearth. And he's as loyal to me now as always, my shield, no man to trifle with.  
He'll boost my confidence. Here he lies, the man who abused his wife, seduced by every captive girl at Ilion—  
and here she lies, his concubine, his spear prize,  
the faithful prophetess who shared his bed.  
She also knew the rowing benches where sailors sweat. They get what they deserve.  
He's dead. She, like a swan, sang her last song,  
then died. Now she lies there, his sweetheart.  
She'll bring new thrills, fresh pleasures to my bed.

CHORUS O that some Fate would soon come, free from suffering and quick,  
bringing endless sleep,  
our last eternal sleep,  
now our gracious lord is dead.  
For a woman's sake he suffered much, and now by a woman's hand he died.

Alas for you, Helen, frantic woman.  
On your own, beneath Troy's walls,  
you slaughtered many lives, and more than many.  
Now you wear your final garland—  
one long remembered for the blood which will never wash away.  
Back then in this house lived a spirit of strife,  
a power that broke our king.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Don't torment yourself like this, invoking death and fate, or redirect your rage on Helen, as if she killed those men, all those Danaan lives, all by herself,

and brought us pain past remedy.

CHORUS O spirit that falls upon this house,  
on Menelaus, on Agamemnon,  
descendants of Tantalus,  
you overpower me through these two sisters,  
each with power like a man.  
You consume my heart with grief.  
Perched on his corpse the hateful raven caws her song,  
her harsh triumphal tune.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Now you're talking sense, when you call on the demon of this house, who's eaten up three generations, the one who nurtures bloodlust in our guts. And so new blood spurts out before the old wound heals.

CHORUS You appeal to that huge fiend haunting this house,  
whose anger weighs it down, to that tale of evil fate insatiably consuming us.  
Alas, alas, the will of Zeus,  
the cause of everything,  
who brings all things about.  
What can come to mortal men except at Zeus' will?  
And in what's happened here what's not caused by the gods?

Alas, my king, my lord— How shall I weep for you?  
How speak of you with love?  
To lie entangled in the spider's web,  
gasping life away—a sacrilege—  
stretched out on this bed of shame,  
struck down in treachery,  
the two-edged sword wielded by your wife.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Are you saying this work is mine? That's not so.  
Don't think of me as Agamemnon's wife. The form of this corpse's wife was taken on  
by the ancient savage spirit of revenge.  
For that brutal meal prepared by Atreus,  
it sacrificed one full-grown man,  
payment for two butchered children.

CHORUS Who would ever say you bear no guilt for Agamemnon's murder?  
How could they? How?  
Yet that avenging spirit acting on his father's crime could well have egged you on.  
Black Ruin moves ahead with force  
through streams of family blood granting vengeance for the young served up as chunks of meat.

Alas, my king, my lord—  
How shall I weep for you? How speak of you with love?  
To lie entangled in the spider's web, gasping life away—a sacrilege—  
stretched out on this bed of shame,  
struck down in treachery,  
the two-edged sword wielded by your wife.

CLYTAEMNESTRA I don't think the man died wretchedly, like some poor slave.

Surely his own deceit brought ruin on this house? His suffering matches exactly what he did himself.

Remember my own Iphigeneia, his daughter, that sweet flower whom we mourn. So let him not boast out loud in Hades.

He was the first to draw his sword,  
and by the sword he's been repaid.

CHORUS There's no clear way, and now  
this family's falling. I'm afraid.  
It's not just bloody drops. No,  
storms of blood rain batter down,  
destroying the house, while fate on yet another whetstone, hones the edge of  
Justice,  
for the next act, one more crime.

O Earth, my Earth—  
how I wish you'd swallowed me before I ever saw my king lying low on such bed,  
a silver-plated bath.  
Who will now bury him?  
Who will lament for him?  
Will you dare to do this, a woman mourning for the spirit of the husband she's just  
killed,  
complete the injustices you've done with wretched favours to the dead to expiate  
your monstrous crimes?  
As people stand around the grave to praise this god-like man, in tears,  
whose sad heart will be sincere?

CLYTAEMNESTRA That business is none of your concern.  
At our hands he collapsed in death. We'll bury him. But this house will not weep.  
No. Iphigeneia will meet him down there,  
as is fitting—the daughter greets her father happily by that swift stream of sorrow.  
Then she'll embrace the man with love.

CHORUS  
One disgrace exchanged for yet another,  
the struggle to decide is hard.  
The man who sins is sinned against,  
the killer pays the price.  
Yet while Zeus sits upon his throne this decree from god remains—  
the man who acts will suffer.  
Who can then cast from this house its self-perpetuating curse?  
This race is wedded to destruction.

CLYTAEMNESTRA Now you're close to getting at the truth.  
For my part, I'm prepared to swear an oath to the demon of the House of Atreus—  
I'll rest content with what's been done,  
hard though that is, if he'll leave this house alone, transferring family murder  
somewhere else,  
to some other clan. I don't need much,  
a small part of our wealth, if I can free these halls entirely of this madness,  
the urge we have to kill each other.

[Enter Aegisthus with armed attendants. The situation now grows increasingly tense, with the soldiers menacing the members of the Chorus, who begin to coalesce as a political unit, rediscovering their strength. This sense of a major irreconcilable political division and the threat of civil war grows increasingly acute until the end of the play]

AEGISTHUS What a glorious day of retribution!  
Now I can say that once again the gods looking down on men avenge their crimes.  
How it fills my heart with joy to see this man stretched out here in a robe the Furies wove,  
full payment for deceitful treachery his father's hand devised. For Atreus,  
king of Argos, was this man's father.  
To set the record straight, my father,  
Thyestes, brother to Atreus, challenged his authority. So Atreus expelled him from  
his home and city.  
But Thyestes in his misery returned, a suppliant at his own hearth, praying Fate  
would save him, he would not be killed, his own blood would not stain his native  
ground.  
Atreus, the godless father of this man,  
welcomed him effusively, but not with love.  
He set up what seemed a celebration—  
a feast day with lots of meat, but served my father flesh of his own children.  
He sliced their toes and fingers off. Over these he diced the other parts, then  
passed this dish to Thyestes, where he sat beside him.  
My father then, in total ignorance, took the food he didn't recognize,  
and ate the meal which, as you've witnessed,  
destroyed the race. When Thyestes learns the abominable thing he's done, he  
screams,  
staggers back, vomits up the butchered flesh.  
Then, kicking down the banquet table to underscore his cry for justice,  
he calls down on the House of Atreus a curse no one can bear, "Let them all die,  
the race of Pleisthenes—all die like this."<sup>16</sup>  
That's why you see this man lying here.  
This murder was my plan for justice.  
For Atreus threw my broken father out,  
and me as well, his third son, still a child,  
an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes.  
But I grew up. And Justice brought me back.  
I seized the man who'd banished me.  
I planned each detail of this murderous scheme.  
Now I see him in the nets of Justice,

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<sup>16</sup>In some legends Atreus had a son Pleisthenes who was raised by his brother Thyestes. Thyestes sent Pleisthenes to kill Atreus, but the latter killed him, not knowing he was his son. This was the cause of the notorious banquet. In other stories Pleisthenes (perhaps another person with the same name) is the husband of Aerope and father of Menelaus and Agamemnon. When Pleisthenes died, Atreus married Aerope and adopted the children. Aerope had a sexual affair with Thyestes, another cause for the quarrel between the two brothers, and was drowned for her adultery.

I can face even my own death with joy.

CHORUS LEADER To me you're contemptible, Aegisthus, getting pleasure from all this agony.

You say you killed the king deliberately, and planned the cowardly slaughter on your own.

I tell you—remember this—when justice comes, your head will not escape the people's cursing or death by stoning at their hands.

AEGISTHUS So you say—but you man the lower oars.

Your masters on the higher tiers control the ship.

You may be old, but you'll learn how painful it is at your age to be taught your place.

Hunger pangs and chains, two worthy teachers, make excellent cures for teaching wisdom, even with old men. Surely you have eyes.

Can't you see this? You shouldn't kick at thorns.

You'll only hurt yourselves.

CHORUS MEMBER ONE You womanly creature!

You stayed at home, waiting out the war, until the men came back. You soiled a real man's bed, then planned to kill our king.

AEGISTHUS This talk of yours will soon give you sufficient cause to weep. The tongue of Orpheus was not like yours—

the pleasure of his voice drew all things to him.

Your puny squawking merely irritates.

But once I chain you up, my force has ways to make you more compliant.

CHORUS MEMBER TWO As if you rule in Argos!

You, the one who plotted Agamemnon's death, but weren't brave enough to kill the man yourself!

AEGISTHUS Clearly it was the woman's role to trick him. I was not a man whom he would trust. After all, I'm an old enemy of his.

But with his wealth I'll try to rule the people.

Those who resist I'll strap under the yoke.

It won't be light—not like a well-fed trace horse.

No. Miserable starvation in the dark—

then we'll see how docile they can be.

CHORUS MEMBER THREE You coward!

Why not kill the man yourself? Why rely upon that woman for the murder, a disgrace to her own country and its gods?

O can Orestes still see the light of day? If his good fortune holds, will he come home,

win out, and kill the two of them up there?

AEGISTHUS If that's the way you want to act and speak, you'll get your lesson fast. Men, stand ready.

My trusty guard, your work's in front of you.

[The soldiers place their weapons at the ready and move into menace the Chorus. The Chorus stands its ground, raising their staves as weapons]

CHORUS LEADER Don't give way. Each of you, get your weapons ready.

AEGISTHUS [half drawing his sword]

My hand is on my sword, as well.

I'm not afraid to die.

CHORUS LEADER You say you'll welcome death. That's good to hear.

We're happy to oblige.

[Clytaemnestra, alarmed at the way in which the conflict has grown, moves quickly between the guards led by Aegisthus and the Chorus]

CLYTAEMNESTRA Stop this, my dearest. Let's not act to bring on further trouble.

Our wretched harvest is bountiful enough—

we've reaped sufficient pain. No more bloodshed.

You honourable old men, go home. Yield to fate,

before you hurt yourselves. What we've done here we had to do. Let our troubles end right now.

That we'll allow, even though our fate

has struck a heavy blow. That's my advice,

what a woman ought to say, if any here will act on it.

AEGISTHUS What about these men who let their tongues prattle on against me, hurling insults in my face, testing fate?

They throw aside all moderate restraint to abuse their master.

CHORUS LEADER Men of Argos will never cringe before an evil man.

AEGISTHUS I'll get my own back soon enough.

CHORUS LEADER Not if fate brings Orestes home again.

AEGISTHUS I understand how exiles feed on hope.

CHORUS LEADER Go on. Fatten yourself up. While you still can, pollute all Justice.

AEGISTHUS

You must know you'll pay

for all this insolence to me.

CHORUS Keep on bragging—  
just like a cock beside his hen.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [pulling Aegisthus towards the palace doors]

Leave them their feeble yelping. You and I control the house. We'll put things in order.

[Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus back slowly into the palace and close the doors, leaving the guards and Chorus still facing each other. Slowly the Chorus disintegrates and its members walk off one by one. The guards form up in front of the palace, an armed defence before the doors]

# (AESCHYLUS) Oresteia - Choephoroi (The Libation Bearers)

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>17</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## **Dramatis Personae**

**ORESTES:** son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra.

**CHORUS:** slave women captured at Troy and serving the royal palace at Argos.

**ELECTRA:** daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, sister of Orestes.

**SERVANT:** house slave serving in the royal palace.

**CLYTAEMNESTRA:** widow of Agamemnon, lover of Aegisthus, mother of Orestes and Electra.

**PYLADES:** friend of Orestes.

**CILISSA:** Orestes' old nurse, a servant in the palace.

**AEGISTHUS:** son of Thyestes, lover of Clytaemnestra. <sup>18</sup>

**ATTENDANTS** on Orestes and Pylades and Aegisthus.

*Scene: Argos, the tomb of Agamemnon some years after his murder by Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. Behind the tomb stands the royal palace of the sons of Atreus.*

[Enter Orestes and Pylades. They have just arrived in Argos]

ORESTES

Hermes, messenger to the dead, guardian  
of your father's powers, help rescue me—  
work with me, I beg you, now I've come back,  
returned to this land from exile. <sup>19</sup> On this grave,  
on this heaped-up earth, I call my father,  
imploping him to listen, to hear me . . .

[Orestes cuts two locks of his hair and sets them one by one on the tomb]

Here's a lock of hair, offering to Inachus,  
the stream where I was raised. Here's another,  
a token of my grief. I was not there,  
my father, to mourn your death. I couldn't stretch my hand out to you, when they  
carried off  
your corpse for burial.

[Enter Electra and the Chorus, dressed in black. They do not see Orestes and Pylades]

What's this I see?

What's this crowd of women coming here,  
all wearing black in public? What does it mean?

<sup>17</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/libationbearers.htm>

<sup>18</sup>Thyestes, the father of Aegisthus, was the brother of Atreus, the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

<sup>19</sup>Hermes, a divine son of Zeus, accompanied the dead down to Hades.

What new turn of fate? Has some fresh sorrow struck the house? Or am I right to think they bring libations here to honour you, my father, to appease the dead below? That must be it. I see my sister there, Electra. That's her approaching with them. She's grieving—in great pain—that's obvious.

O Zeus, let me avenge my father's death.

Support me as my ally in this fight.

Pylades, let's stand over there and hide, so I can find out what's taking place, what brings these suppliant women here.

[Orestes and Pylades conceal themselves from the sight of Electra and the Chorus]

CHORUS

I've been sent here from the palace, to bring libations for the dead, to clap out the hands' sharp beat. Blood flows down my cheeks from cuts my nails have scratched. As life drags on and on, my heart feeds itself on my laments, to the sound of garments torn apart, the sound of sorrow in our clothes, as we rip the woven linen covering our breasts. No laughter any more. Our fortune beats us down.

With hair-raising shrieks, Fear, dream-prophet in this house, breathed a furious cry of terror, at night, while people were asleep. Deep within the inner house the heavy scream re-echoed, all the way to rooms where women slept. Those who read our dreams, who speak by heaven's will, declared, "The dead beneath the ground are discontent—their anger grows against the ones who killed them."

O Earth, my mother Earth, to protect herself from harm that godless woman sends me here with gifts, with loveless gifts. But I'm too scared to speak her words, the prayer she wishes me to say. What can atone for blood once fallen on the ground? Alas for the grief-filled hearth, Alas for the buried home! Sunless darkness grips the house



which all men hate, for now  
their master's murdered.

It's gone—that ancient splendour no man could resist or fight,  
no man could overcome.  
Its glory rang in every ear,  
echoed in every heart.  
Now it's been thrown away. But each man feels the fear.  
For now, in all men's eyes,  
success is worshipped,  
more so than god himself.  
But Justice is vigilant—  
she tips the scales.  
With some she's quick,  
striking by light of day,  
for others sorrows wait,  
delaying until their lives are half way sunk in twilight,  
while others are embraced  
by night that never ends.

The nurturing earth drinks blood,  
she drinks her fill. That gore,  
which cries out for revenge,  
will not dissolve or seep away.  
The guilty live in utter desperation—  
madness preys upon their minds  
infecting them completely.

The man who violates a virgin's bed  
cannot be redeemed. All rivers flow  
into one stream to cleanse his hand  
of black blood which defiles him.  
Such waters flow in vain.

As for me—gods set a fatal noose  
around my city, so I was led  
out of my father's house a slave.  
Now I do what I have to do—  
beat down my bitter rage. Against my inclinations,  
I follow what my masters say,  
whether right or wrong.  
Still, behind our veils  
we weep for her, this girl,  
her senseless suffering,  
as grief, concealed and cold,  
congeals our hearts to ice.

ELECTRA

You women who keep our house in order,  
now you're here attending me in prayers, in supplication, give me your advice.  
What should I say as I pour out these cups,

my offering to grief? How frame my words  
to make my prayer a tribute to my father?  
Shall I say I bring these gifts with love,  
from doting wife to her beloved husband,  
from my mother? I have no strength for that.  
I don't know what to say, as I pour out  
this oil and honey on my father's tomb.  
Shall I recite the words men often use,  
"May those who send this noble tribute  
get back the same."

No, let him give them  
a gift their treachery deserves! Or should I  
stand here in silence and dishonour, the way  
my father died, empty out these cups,  
with eyes averted as I toss the gift,  
let the earth drink, and then retrace my steps,  
like someone sent to carry out the trash  
left over from some purifying rite?  
Help me, my friends, with your advice.  
We share a common hatred in the house.  
Don't hide what's in your hearts. Don't be afraid  
of anyone. Fate waits for each of us—  
the free and those in bondage to another.  
Speak up, if you can think of something better.

CHORUS LEADER

I respect your father's tomb, as if it were  
an altar. So I'll speak straight from my heart, as you have asked.

ELECTRA

Then talk to me,  
out of your reverence for my father's grave.

CHORUS LEADER

As you pour, bless those who are your friends.

ELECTRA

Of those close to me, whom shall I call friends?

CHORUS LEADER

First, name yourself—then anyone who hates Aegisthus.

ELECTRA

Then I'll make this prayer on my own behalf. Shall I include you too?

CHORUS LEADER

That's your decision. In this ritual  
you must let your judgment guide you.

ELECTRA

Who else should I then add to join with us?

CHORUS LEADER

He may be far from home, but don't forget Orestes.

ELECTRA

That's good. You give me excellent advice.

CHORUS LEADER

Remember, too, the guilty murderers.

ELECTRA

What do I say? I've never practised this.

Teach me what I should say.

CHORUS LEADER

Let some god

or mortal man come down on them.

ELECTRA

You mean as judge or as avenger? Which?

CHORUS LEADER

Pronounce these words—and clearly—

"Someone who'll pay back life by taking life."

ELECTRA

Is it a righteous thing for me to do,

to petition gods like that?

CHORUS

Why not?

How can it not be a righteous thing to pray

to pay back one's enemies for evil?

ELECTRA

Oh Hermes, mighty herald, moving

between earth above and earth below,

messenger to the dead, assist me now—

summon the spirits there beneath the ground

who guard my father's house, to hear my prayers.

And call on Earth herself, who, giving birth

and nurturing all things, in due course takes back

the swollen tide of their increasing store.

As I pour out these offering to the dead,

I call upon my father, "Pity me—

and dear Orestes, too! How can we rule

in our own home? We're beggars now,

as if our mother traded us away,

exchanged us for her mate, Aegisthus,

her partner in your murder. For now I live

just like a slave. Orestes lives in exile,

far from his estates. In their arrogance,

those two squander all the wealth you worked for.

And so I pray to you—dear father,

let good fortune bring Orestes home! Father, hear me. Make me more self-controlled,

than mother, my hand more righteous!

Those are my prayers for us. Our enemies—

for them, my father, I pray someone will come

as your avenger, then kill your killers,  
in retribution, as is just. As I pray  
for our well being, I include this curse—  
may they be caught by their own evil.  
Bring us your blessing to the earth above,  
with help from gods, and Earth, and Justice, all combined to bring us victory.”

[Electra pours out her libation on the tomb]

Those are my prayers, and over them I pour  
libations. Your duty now is to lament,  
to crown my prayers with flowers, chanting  
your mournful chorus for the dead.

CHORUS

Come, let our tears begin, fall, and die, as our master died.  
Let them guard us from evil,  
preserve the good, and keep away  
with our outpoured libations the polluting curse.  
Hear me, oh hear me,  
my honoured master.  
May your disembodied spirit  
hear my prayer.

Alas, alas . . . ohhhhhhhh!

Let him come now,  
some forceful man, a power with the spear.  
May he restore this house, bent Scythian bow in hand,  
a fist around his sword hilt.  
Like Ares, god of war,  
let him begin the slaughter!

ELECTRA

My father's now received his offerings.  
The earth has drunk them up. But look—  
here's something new. Come, look at it with me.

CHORUS

Speak up. My heart's afraid. It's dancing.

ELECTRA

I see a lock of hair, an offering . . . on the tomb.

CHORUS

Whose is it? A man's? A full-grown girl's?

ELECTRA

It shouldn't be too difficult to guess,  
to sort out what this indicates.

CHORUS

How so? Let your youth instruct your elders.

ELECTRA

No one but me could have cut this off.

CHORUS

You're right. Those who should make offerings,

cutting their hair in grief, are enemies.

ELECTRA

Look at this . . . It looks just like . . .

CHORUS

Like whose?

I want to know.

ELECTRA

Like mine. It looks identical.

CHORUS

Perhaps Orestes? Did he place it here,  
a secret offering?

ELECTRA

It really looks like his . . . these curls . . .

CHORUS

But how could he come back?

ELECTRA

He sent it here, a token of respect  
for his dead father.

CHORUS

Those words of yours  
give us fresh cause for tears, if there's no chance  
Orestes will set foot in this land again.

ELECTRA

Over my heart, too, breaks a bitter wave.  
I feel as if a sword had sliced right through me.  
Seeing this hair, my eyes weep thirsty drops—  
I can't hold back my flood of grief. There's no way  
I would expect one of the citizens, someone in Argos, to own this lock.  
It's clearly not that murderess' hair,  
my mother's—her treatment of her children  
profanes the very name of mother.  
But how can I accept without a doubt  
this offering's from the man I love the most, Orestes? I'm just clinging to a hope.  
Alas! If only, like a messenger, this hair possessed a friendly human voice,  
my thoughts would not be so distracted. It would tell me clearly what to do.  
If someone I detest had cut it off, I'd throw this lock away, but if it's his,  
my brother's, it could share my sorrow,  
adorn this tomb, a tribute to my father.  
I call upon the gods who understand  
how storms whirl us off course, like sailors.  
But if we're fated to come safely home,  
then mighty trees can spring from tiny seeds.

[Electra notices footprints in the dirt around the tomb]

Here are some footprints—more evidence— tracks of feet, just like my own—in  
pairs—  
two sets of footprints, his own and others,

some companion's. The heels, the arches—  
these prints are shaped just like my own . . .

[Electra traces the tracks from the tomb towards Orestes' hiding place. Orestes emerges to meet her as she follows the footprints]

The pain of this . . . my mind grows dizzy . . .

ORESTES

Pray for what must still be done. Thank the gods  
for answering your prayers. Pray to them  
that all will work out well.

ELECTRA

What? The gods?

What have they given me?

ORESTES

You've come to see  
the person you've been praying for all this time.

ELECTRA

Then you know the man I was calling for?

ORESTES

I know your sympathies are with Orestes.

ELECTRA

Yes, but how have my prayers been answered now?

ORESTES

I'm here. You need look no more for friends.

I'm the dearest one you have.

ELECTRA

No, stranger.

You're weaving a net, a trick to trap me.

ORESTES

If so, I plot against myself as well.

ELECTRA

You just want to laugh at my distress.

ORESTES

If I laugh at you, I'm laughing at myself.

ELECTRA

Orestes . . . is it truly you? Can I call you Orestes?

ORESTES

Yes, you can.

You're looking at Orestes in the flesh.

Why take so long to recognize the truth?

When you saw the lock of hair, that token  
of my grief, and traced my footprints in the dust,  
your imagination flew—you thought  
you saw me. Look. Put this hair in place.

It's your brother's. And it matches yours.

See this weaving here—that's your handiwork.

You worked the loom. Look at this design, these animals . . .

[Electra is finally convinced. She almost breaks down with joy]  
Control yourself. Calm down.  
Don't get too overjoyed. Remember this—  
our closest family is our enemy.

ELECTRA

You dearest member of your father's house.  
the seed of hope through all our weeping—  
trust to your own strength and win back again  
your father's home. How my eyes rejoice!  
To me you are four different loves—fate  
declares that I must call you father,  
and on you falls the love I ought to feel  
towards my mother, who's earned my hate.  
Then there's the love I bore my sister,  
Iphigeneia, that cruel sacrifice—  
and you're my faithful brother. You alone  
sustained my sense of honour. May Power  
and Justice stand with us now, our allies—  
and may almighty Zeus make up the third.

ORESTES

O Zeus, Zeus, look down on what we do!  
See the abandoned fledglings of the eagle,  
whose father perished in the viper's coils, that deadly net. Orphans now, we bear  
the pangs of hunger, not yet mature enough  
to bring our father's quarry to the nest.  
See us like this—I mean me and Electra—  
children without a father, both outcasts,  
banished from our home. If you wipe out  
these fledglings, what respect will you receive  
at feasts from hands like his, their father's,  
who offered you such wealthy sacrifice?  
Kill off the eagle's brood, then who will trust the signs you send? If this royal stock  
decays,  
it cannot consecrate your altars  
with sacrificial oxen in the morning.  
Stand by us. You can elevate our house  
from its debased condition, make it great,  
though now it seems completely ruined.

CHORUS LEADER

Children, saviours of your father's home,  
don't speak too loud. Someone may hear you,  
my children, and to hear his tongue run on  
report to those in charge. O how I wish I see them dead one day, roasting in flames,  
sizzling like pitch.

ORESTES

Apollo's great oracle

surely will defend me. Its orders were  
 that I should undertake this danger.  
 It cried out in prophecy, foretelling  
 many winters of calamity would chill  
 my hot heart, if I did not take revenge  
 on those who killed my father. It ordered me  
 to murder them the way they murdered him,  
 insisting they could not pay the penalty with their possessions. The oracle declared,  
 "If not, you'll pay the debt with your own life,  
 a life of troubles."

It spoke a revelation,  
 making known to men the wrath of blood guilt—  
 from underneath the earth, infectious plagues,  
 leprous sores which gnaw the flesh, fangs chewing  
 living tissue, festering white rot in the sores.  
 It mentioned other miseries as well—  
 attacks by vengeful Furies, stemming  
 from a slaughtered father's blood, dark bolts from gods below, aroused by murdered kinsmen  
 calling for revenge, frenzied night fits.<sup>20</sup>  
 Such terrors plague the man—he sees them all  
 so clearly, eyeballs rolling in the dark.  
 Then he's chased in exile from the city,  
 his body scourged by bronze-tipped whips.  
 A man like this can never share the wine bowl,  
 no libations mixed with love. We don't see  
 his father's anger, but it casts him out—  
 no access to an altar. There's no relief, and no one takes him in, until at last,  
 universally despised, without a friend,  
 he wastes in all-consuming pain and dies.  
 Am I not right to trust such oracles?  
 Even if I don't, the work must still be done.  
 Many feelings lead to one conclusion—  
 the gods' decree, my keen paternal grief,  
 the weight of poverty I bear. Besides,  
 my countrymen, most glorious of men,  
 whose courageous spirit brought down Troy, should not be subject to a pair of women.

For Aegisthus is at heart a woman—  
 if not, we'll learn about it soon enough.

CHORUS

Oh mighty Fates, bring all this to pass.  
 Through Zeus' power, make all things right.  
 For Justice, as she turns the scales

<sup>20</sup>The Furies are the goddesses of blood revenge, particularly within the family.



exacting retribution, cries aloud,  
"Hostile words for hostile words—  
let it be done. One murderous stroke  
is paid off by another lethal blow. The one who acts must suffer."  
So runs the ancient saying,  
now three generations old.

ORESTES

O my unhappy father,  
what can I say for you or do,  
to send you, where you rest  
so far away, some light  
to drive away your darkness?  
But nonetheless some joy  
comes from a funeral lament for glorious sons of Atreus,  
who once possessed the house.<sup>21</sup>

CHORUS

My child, among the dead  
the savage jaws of fire  
cannot destroy the spirit.  
He'll show his rage in time.  
Dead men receive their dirge—  
the guilty stand revealed.  
A father's funeral lament,  
strong and clear and just, searches far and wide,  
confounding those who killed.

ELECTRA

Hear us now, my father,  
as, in turn, we mourn and weep.  
Your two children at your tomb  
now sing your death song.  
Your tomb has welcomed us,  
two suppliants and outcasts.  
What in this is good?  
What free from trouble? Who wrestles death and wins?

CHORUS

But if god wills it, he can turn  
our dirges into joyful songs— instead of funeral laments  
around this monument  
chants of triumph ringing out  
throughout the palace halls,  
a welcome celebration  
for reunion with a friend.

ORESTES

My father, if only you had died hit by some Lycian spear at Troy!

---

<sup>21</sup>Atreus was the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

You'd have left your glory  
with your children in their home.  
In their dealings with the world  
men would now honour them.  
You'd have won a tomb raised high  
in lands across the seas, a death  
your home could bear with ease.

## CHORUS

Dear to the men you loved,  
the ones who died so bravely, you'd stand out under earth,  
as a majestic lord, minister  
of the mightiest gods below,  
who rule the dead. In life,  
you were a king of men—  
the ones who hold the staff  
that every man obeys,  
those with authority  
to sentence men to die.

## ELECTRA

I don't want you dead, my father, not even under Trojan walls,  
with all those other men  
who perished by the spear,  
where the Scamander flows.<sup>22</sup>  
No. I'd much prefer  
your killers had been killed  
by their own families,  
just as they murdered you.  
People then in far-off lands  
would hear about their deaths  
and not our present trouble.

## CHORUS

Children, these things you say  
are merely your desires,  
finer than gold, greater still  
than the great happiness  
of those who live in bliss  
beyond the northern wind.  
But wishing is an easy thing.  
Still, now it's striking home,  
that double whip—for now protectors underneath the earth  
are helping us. Our masters  
are unholy creatures  
with polluted hands.  
The children win the day!

---

<sup>22</sup>The Scamander was the river near Troy, the site of many battles in the Trojan War.

ORESTES

Our words, like arrows,  
pierce down into the earth  
straight to my father's ear.  
O Zeus, Zeus, send us  
from the world below your long-delayed revenge,  
pay back the wickedness  
brought on by human hands.  
O let that come to pass—  
and thus avenge all fathers.

CHORUS

Let my heart cry out in triumph  
when that man is stabbed,  
when that woman dies.  
Why should my spirit hide  
what hovers here before me, when driving hatred, like a storm,  
a biting headwind,  
breaks across my heart?

ELECTRA

Oh, when will mighty Zeus  
strike them with his fist—  
split their skulls apart!  
Alas, alas! Give our land  
some sign—confirm our faith.  
From these crimes I seek  
the rights of justice. O Earth, hear me, and you,  
blessed gods in earth below.

CHORUS

It's the law—once drops of blood  
are shed upon the ground  
they cry out for still more blood.  
Slaughter calls upon the Furies  
of those who have been killed.  
Thus, hard on murder's heels  
destruction comes again.

ORESTES

Lords of the world below, alas, see the mighty curses of the dead.  
See survivors of the line of Atreus,  
here in our helplessness,  
cast out from home, dishonoured.  
O Zeus, where can we turn?

CHORUS

My fond heart races once again  
to hear your pitiful lament.  
But as I listen to your words  
I lose my hope. My heart

grows dark. But then again hope comes to make me strong—  
all my unhappiness is gone.  
I see a bright new dawn.

ELECTRA

To what can we appeal? What else  
but to the agonies we suffer,  
anguish from the one who bore us,  
our mother. So let her grovel.  
She'll not appease our pain.  
We're bred from her, like wolves,  
whose savage hearts do not relent.

CHORUS

Like some Asian wailing woman,  
I beat out my lament, my fists  
keep pounding out the blows  
in quick succession. You see  
my hands—I stretch them out,  
then strike down from above.  
My torment beats upon my head  
until it breaks for sorrow.

ELECTRA

Oh cruel and reckless mother,  
that savage burial, our king, no fellow citizens around,  
no suffering procession—  
you dared place him in the tomb  
without the rites of mourning.

ORESTES

Alas. As you say, totally disgraced. But she'll pay for his dishonour,  
by the gods, by my own hands.  
Let me kill her. Then let me die.

CHORUS

And let me tell you this—  
she first hacked off his limbs,  
then hung them round his neck.  
That's how she buried him,  
to make that slaughter  
a burden on your life—  
a thing you couldn't bear.  
You hear me? Your father's death—  
she made it an abomination.

ELECTRA

You describe my father's death,  
but I too was utterly disgraced,  
worth nothing, set apart, inside a cell, as if I were  
some rabid dog. I wept.  
What had I to laugh about,

as I shed all those tears in hiding?  
Hear that. Carve that on your heart.

CHORUS

Let your ears pick up her story,  
but keep your spirit firm.  
Things now stand as they stand.  
You're keen to know what's next,  
but you must wait, prepared to fight on with no turning back.

ORESTES

Father, I call on you. Stand by your children.

ELECTRA

Through these tears I join his call.

CHORUS

In unison, our voices blend as one—  
hear us. Return into the light.  
Join us against our enemies.

ORESTES

Now war god Ares goes to meet  
the war god Ares. Right fights with right.

ELECTRA

Dear gods, let justice choose what's right.

CHORUS

I hear these prayers and shudder. This doom's been long delayed,  
but it does come for those who pray.

Oh, family bred for torments,  
for the bloody strokes  
of harsh discordant ruin,  
for pains beyond enduring,  
grief that can't be staunched.

For all this evil there's a remedy,  
not from some stranger,  
someone outside the house, but from within, the cure  
that blood strife brings,  
their savage bloody fight.  
To gods beneath the ground  
we sing this hymn.

Hear us, you blessed gods of earth,  
hear this supplication, and assist  
with your good will these children.  
Give them the victory!

ORESTES

Father, you may not have perished like a king, but, in answer to my prayer, make  
me  
the master of your house.

ELECTRA

I, too, father,

have a request of you—let me escape,  
once I've accomplished this enormous task,  
once Aegisthus is destroyed.

ORESTES

Yes.

Then men would set up on your behalf  
those feasts of honour our laws demand.  
But otherwise, when people sacrifice  
burnt offering to Earth at solemn banquets  
they will not honour you.

ELECTRA

And I, too, at my marriage feast, from the full store  
of what I inherit in my father's house,  
will pour libations to you. And your tomb  
I'll honour above all other shrines.

ORESTES

O Earth, send my father up to see our fight.

ELECTRA

O Persephone, grant us glorious power. <sup>23</sup>

ORESTES

My father, remember that bath  
where you were slaughtered.

ELECTRA

Remember the net in which they killed you.

ORESTES

My father, you were trapped in fetters, but they weren't forged in bronze.

ELECTRA

They covered you  
with their deceit and shame.

ORESTES

Father, these taunts—  
do they not stir your spirit?

ELECTRA

Will you raise  
that beloved head of yours upright?

ORESTES

Either send Justice here to stand with us,  
the ones you love, or let us, in our turn,  
catch them in our grip, as they caught you—  
that is, if you want to beat them down,  
after the way they overpowered you.

ELECTRA

Father, listen to my last appeal—  
see your children huddled at your tomb.

---

<sup>23</sup>Persephone is the queen of the underworld, wife of Hades.

Take pity on them, your son and daughter.

ORESTES

Don't let the seed of Pelops disappear.  
With us alive, in death you cannot die.<sup>24</sup>

ELECTRA

For to a man that's dead his children  
are saving testament—like corks,  
they hold up the net and keep the mesh  
from sinking deep into the sea.

ORESTES

Hear us!  
We're making our lament on your behalf.  
Honour our request and save yourself.

CHORUS LEADER

There's nothing wrong expanding your lament.  
For that will honour this neglected tomb.  
But since your heart is rightly set to act, it's time to test your fortune, time to start.

ORESTES

You're right. But first we might ask this question:  
Why did that woman send out these libations?  
What did she have in mind, trying so late  
to heal a crime which cannot be forgiven?  
What she sent here was paltry tribute  
to the unforgiving dead. I don't see what she intends. The gift's too trivial  
for her offence. As the old saying runs,  
"Pour out all you've got to make amends  
for bloodshed, your work is all in vain."  
If you know her reason, tell me now.  
I'd like to hear.

CHORUS LEADER

My child, I know—I was there.  
She had bad dreams. Vague terrors in the night  
upset her. So that godless woman sent these gifts.

ORESTES

Do you know the nature of her dreams?  
Can you give me details?

CHORUS LEADER

She'd given birth, but to a snake. That's what she told me.

ORESTES

How did the dream end up? What happened?

CHORUS LEADER

She set it in bed wrapped in swaddling clothes,  
just like a child.

ORESTES

---

<sup>24</sup>Pelops was the original founder of the royal family of Argos.

And that newborn snake,  
what did it want for nourishment?

CHORUS LEADER

She dreamt she offered it her breasts.

ORESTES

Didn't the monster bite her nipple?

CHORUS LEADER

No. But with her milk it sucked out clots of blood.

ORESTES

It's an omen. Her vision means a man.

CHORUS LEADER

She woke up with a scream, quite terrified. Many torches which stay unlit at night  
were set ablaze throughout the house  
to calm our mistress. Then she sent out  
libations for the dead—in the hope  
they'd work like medicine for her distress.

ORESTES

I pray to Earth and to my father's tomb  
that this dream will fulfill itself in me.

I think it matches me in every point.

If that snake came from the same womb as me,

if it was wrapped up in my swaddling clothes and opened up its jaws to suck the  
milk

that nourished me, mixing sweet milk with blood,

so she cried out in terror at the sight,

then that must mean she'll die by violence,

from nursing such a violent beast.

I am that snake. And I will kill her.

That's the meaning of this dream.

CHORUS LEADER

Your reading of her dream seems right to me.

So let it come. Tell your friends the rest—

what they must do or take care not to do.

ORESTES

My plan is simple. First, Electra here

must go inside. I'm instructing her

to keep this bond with me a secret.

The two in there deceived a noble man,

then killed him. So we'll use deceit on them.

They'll die in the same net. Lord Apollo,

who's never wrong in what he prophesies,

has ordered this. I'll approach the outer gates,

pretending I'm a stranger, prepared

for anything. Pylades goes with me, as guest and ally of the house. We two  
will speak Parnassian dialect of Phocis.

If no one at the gate is in the mood to let us in, alleging that the house



is haunted by some evil demon,  
we'll wait there so any passer-by  
will be intrigued and say, "What's going on?  
Why does Aegisthus shut his doors like this  
against a suppliant? Is he at home?  
Is he aware of this?" If I get past the gate, across the outer threshold, then find that  
man  
seated on my father's throne or meet him  
face to face, his eyes will shift and fall,  
I promise you. Before he's had time to ask,  
"Stranger, what country are you from?"  
I'll kill him quickly with my sword.  
Our Fury never lacked for blood—  
for her third draught she'll drink his pure.  
Now, Electra, keep a close watch in there,  
check what's going on inside the house. We'll need to work on this together.  
You women, be careful what you say—  
keep quiet—speak only when you have to.  
As for the rest, I invoke Apollo  
to cast his eyes down here and be my guide  
when the time comes to fight it out with swords.

[Orestes, Pylades, and Electra leave together]

CHORUS

Earth brings forth many horrors—  
terrors and agonies—the sea's arms  
hold monsters, savage beasts.  
Between the earth and heaven hang fiery lights, suspended high.  
Winged birds and beasts  
that walk along the ground  
can also speak of storms,  
the whirlwind's power.

But who of us can speak  
about the arrogance of men  
or women's reckless passion  
beyond all self-control,  
so they become conspirators in all our lethal woes?  
Passionate desire wins out—  
it gains a fatal victory  
in every woman. It ends all married love  
in men and beasts.

A man with any sense  
should recognize these things,  
once he recalls Althaea,  
ruthless child of Thestius, who planned her own son's ruin.  
She burned the fatal torch,  
knowing that Meleager's life,

from the time he first appeared  
howling from his mother's womb,  
depended on that wood.

And so it was—he stayed alive  
until her fire doomed him. <sup>25</sup>

Another story of a hateful girl  
tells of that murderous Scylla, who killed her father,  
brought to it by his enemies.

Tempted by a gift from Minos,  
a golden necklace made in Crete,  
she plucked out her father's hair,  
the one which made Nisus immortal.

As he lay peacefully asleep,  
then died, murdered by that bitch,  
and Hermes led him off. <sup>26</sup>

As I recall these stories of savagery without remorse,  
it's time to speak of marriages  
in which there was no love,  
which laid a curse upon the house,  
schemes devised by woman's cunning  
against her warrior lord, a man  
his enemies have cause to honour.  
I value hearth and home  
where passions do not rule,  
where women's spirits rein in their waywardness.

Of all such tales of crime, the worst  
concerns the isle of Lemnos,  
where all the women killed their men.  
At that story people moan—  
they weep for that abomination.  
When some new troubles come  
men measure them by Lemnos.  
Horror at that deed brought on  
the hatred of the gods, and thus, cast out by humankind and in disgrace,  
that women's race dies out. <sup>27</sup>  
No man can hold in reverence what gods abhor. So of these tales  
which one can I not justly cite?

---

<sup>25</sup>Althaea was the mother of Meleager. When he was born, the Fates told her that Meleager would live as long as a log in the fireplace. Althaea removed the log and preserved it to keep Meleager alive. However, when Meleager, in an angry fit, killed Althaea's two brothers, she threw the log in the fire and killed her son.

<sup>26</sup>Nilus had a purple lock of hair on which the safety of his kingdom depended. When Minos, king of Crete, besieged their city, Scylla, daughter of the king, cut off her father's lock and presented it to Minos, who promptly abandoned her.

<sup>27</sup>The women of Lemnos offended the goddess Aphrodite, who, in revenge gave them all a dreadful smell. When the men of Lemnos started sleeping with other women, the wives on the island killed their husbands.

Justice wields her sword.  
She thrusts it home—  
hungry and sharp,  
it slices deep, right by the lungs— and so the lawlessness  
of those who flout what's right,  
who violate the majesty of Zeus,  
lies trampled underfoot.

The anvil of Justice now holds firm.  
Fate hammers out her sword—  
she forges it in time.  
At last the brooding Fury comes,  
famous spirit of revenge—  
leading a child inside the house, to cleanse the stain of blood,  
the family curse from long ago.

[Enter Orestes and Pylades, with a couple of attendants. They move up to the front doors of the royal palace. Orestes knocks loudly on the door]

ORESTES

Hey, in there! You hear this knocking on the door?  
I'll try again. Anyone in there? All right, a third attempt. I'm knocking here—  
are you coming out? Anyone in there?  
Hello! Does Aegisthus welcome strangers?

SERVANT [from within] All right. All right. I hear you. Stranger,  
what country are you from? Who are you?

ORESTES

Announce me to the masters of the house. I've come to bring them news. And hurry!

Night's black chariot is speeding overhead.  
It's time for people on the road to rest—  
drop anchor where all strangers feel at home.  
Tell someone to come out who's in control—  
the mistress would be fine, the master  
even better. We could speak our minds.  
After all, politeness can obscure the sense.  
When we talk man to man, we get the point—  
we say just what we mean without reserve.

[Clytaemnestra and Electra enter through the palace doors]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Stranger, welcome. Just ask for what you need.  
Inside we have all luxuries of home—  
warm baths and beds to charm away your pains.  
We live under the eyes of Justice here.  
But if your business is more serious,  
men's work, then we'll send for Aegisthus.

ORESTES

I'm a stranger—a Daulian from Phocis—  
coming to Argos on private business,

carrying this pack. I need to pause and rest.  
On my way here I ran into a man— we'd never met before. He told me  
where he was going and asked my route.  
As we talked, I learned his name—Strophius.  
He came from Phocis, too. And he said this,  
"Well, friend, since you're heading off to Argos,  
here's a message for Orestes' parents,  
something they've a right to know, so please  
remember it: Orestes is dead. Don't forget.  
Then, when you return, you can tell me  
whether his family wants to bring him back or have him buried here in Phocis,  
where he's a stranger, forever outcast.  
Right now his ashes sit in a bronze urn.  
The man was truly mourned."  
That's my message.  
That's what I heard. At this point I'm not sure  
whether I'm telling this to anyone who cares,  
but Orestes' parent ought to be informed.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I . . . this news . . . what you just said . . .  
it's shattering . . . that curse we can't repress.  
It haunts the house, ranges everywhere . . . Someone kept safe and far away from  
here  
the curse seeks out. Its arrow strikes and kills.  
It takes those I love, drives me to desperation.  
And now Orestes. He was well prepared.  
He kept his feet well clear of muddy ground  
where hidden danger lurks. He offered hope  
the Furies' striking revels in this house  
might find a cure. Now, from what you say,  
we've lost that hope.

ORESTES

As far as I'm concerned,  
with hosts as prosperous as you, I wish you'd seen me as the bearer of good news  
and welcomed me for that. What's kinder  
than the link between a stranger and his host?  
But to my mind, it would have been profane  
if I'd not told his loved ones, as I promised,  
as hospitality demands.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't worry.  
You'll receive what you deserve. In this house  
you're no less welcome for your news,  
which, in any case, someone else would bring.  
But now's the time when strangers on the road  
get entertained once their long journey's done.

[Clytaemnestra turns to Electra, ordering her as if she were a servant]

You there—take this traveller to the rooms  
we use to entertain our guests—and with him  
these fellow travellers, his attendants.  
Look after them the way this house requires.  
Those are my orders. See you follow them.  
I'm holding you responsible. Meanwhile,  
I'll go find the master of the house,  
tell him the news. We don't lack friends—  
from them we'll seek advice about this death.

[Electra escorts Orestes, Pylades, and their attendants into the palace. Clytaemnestra enters the palace. The Chorus is left alone on stage]

CHORUS LEADER

Dear fellow slaves who serve this house,  
how long before our words can demonstrate  
just how strongly we support Orestes?

CHORUS

O sacred Earth, heaped-up burial mound,  
lying above that noble corpse,  
commander of the ships,  
hear me now,  
help me now.  
Now's the moment for Persuasion to come in  
with her deceit,  
for that stealthy god,  
Hermes of the lower world,  
to guide the fight,  
the fatal clash of swords.

[Enter Orestes' Nurse, Cilissa, in tears]

CHORUS LEADER

It seems the stranger's mischief is at work.  
Here comes Orestes' nurse. I see she's crying.  
Cilissa, why are you walking by the gates,  
with your unpaid companion Sorrow?

NURSE

My mistress ordered me to fetch Aegisthus  
to meet the strangers—and to hurry up—  
so he can find out clearly, man to man, the news that's just arrived. With servants  
she puts on her gloomy face, but deep down  
her eyes are laughing at how well all this  
has ended up for her. But for this house  
the stranger's news is simply a disaster.  
Once Aegisthus hears, gets the full report,  
he'll jump for joy. How miserable I feel! The old troubles of the house of Atreus,  
so hard to bear, how they've hurt my heart.  
I get these chest pains. But a blow like this—

I've never had to bear such sorrow.  
Other troubles I've endured with patience,  
but dear Orestes, how it breaks my heart!  
When he was born, I got him from his mother.  
I nursed him. I spent all night on my feet,  
answering his cries. So much tiring work—  
all for nothing. A helpless child like that one has to nurse as if he were a beast.  
How'd I do that? By following his moods.  
A child in swaddling clothes can't speak at all.  
So if he needed something to eat or drink, or had just wet himself, his one response  
came from his instincts. So I had to use  
a prophet's skill. But often I was wrong.  
I had to launder linen. Yes, I was  
wet nurse and washerwoman, all in one,  
two special skills. I received Orestes from his own father's hands. Now he's dead.  
That's what I've been told. It makes me cry.  
Well, I must go. I have to fetch Aegisthus,  
the man who brought this house to ruin.  
He'll be glad enough to hear my words.

CHORUS LEADER

Did she tell him how to come and what to bring?

NURSE

How's that? Say it again. I need a clearer sense  
of what you're asking.

CHORUS LEADER

Did she tell him  
to come with guards or unattended?

NURSE

She said he should bring his spearmen with him.

CHORUS LEADER

Don't give that message to Aegisthus,  
that hateful tyrant. Tell him to come alone,  
with a joyous heart, as quickly as he can.  
He won't suspect a thing. The messenger  
can straighten out a crooked message.

NURSE

What? Does your heart feel good about this news?

CHORUS LEADER

Why not, if Zeus turns evil into good?

NURSE

How's that to happen? Orestes,  
the house's hope, is gone.

CHORUS LEADER

Not so fast.

A prophet who claimed that would be a bad one.

NURSE

What are you saying? Do you know something more than what I've heard?

CHORUS LEADER

Go on then.

Relay your message. Do what you've been told.

Let the gods care about what most concerns them.

NURSE

All right, I'll go and do what you suggest.

With blessings from the gods, I pray all this will work out for the best.

[Exit Nurse, off in search of Aegisthus, who is not in the palace]

CHORUS

Now, in answer to my prayers,

I implore you, Zeus,

father of Olympian gods, restore this house,

give it good fortune, so those who rightly love due order may witness it right here.

In every word we cry,

we plead for justice.

O Zeus, protect what's right.

Zeus, Zeus,

inside that palace

place him face to face before his enemies.

If you exalt him

he'll willingly repay you,

three or four times over.

You know that orphan colt,

child of a man you cherish,

stands now in harness,

yoked to a chariot of pain.

Control the way he runs,

preserve his pace, so he will last the course,

and we may see him surge,

as he races to his goal.

You gods inside the house,

in those inner chambers,

where you celebrate its wealth,

hear me, you gods

who sympathize with us.

Cleanse that ancient blood

of crimes committed long ago. Let old murder cease to breed.

And Apollo, you who dwell

in that massive well-built cavern,

grant that this man's house

may raise its head once more,

so with loving eyes we see

the veil of darkness yield  
to freedom's light.

May Hermes, Maia's son,  
support him in what's right. He sends the finest winds  
to hold an enterprise on course,  
when that's his will—  
and when he so desires,  
he will make known  
much hidden from our view, or speak in riddles in the night,  
darkening men's eyes,  
which see no better by the light of day.

Soon at last we'll shout in song of the deliverance of this house—  
no shrill lament of those who mourn,  
but robust songs the sea wives sing  
when the wind sits fair,  
"Good sailing now—for me,  
for me this means more riches—  
no dangers for the ones I love."

But you, Orestes, do your part—  
when your moment comes, be brave.  
When she cries out "My son!" cry in return "My father's son!" Then murder her in  
innocence.

In your heart maintain  
the heart of Perseus.<sup>28</sup>  
Satisfy the rage  
of those you love under the earth,  
and here above.  
With blood murder  
inside the house eradicate the cause  
of all our blood-guilt.

[Enter Aegisthus]

AEGISTHUS

A stranger's story called me here—  
I'm told that travellers have arrived  
with startling and unwelcome news—  
Orestes is dead—yet one more burden  
laid upon this house, a terrifying load,  
while it still bears raw festering wounds  
from earlier murder. But is what they saw  
the living truth? That's what I must confirm. Or is it some fearful women's gossip,  
which blazes up, then dies away to nothing?  
Can you clear my mind? What do you know?

CHORUS LEADER

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<sup>28</sup>Perseus, a son of Zeus, was a famous hero, who, among other things, killed the Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turned people to stone.



Well, we heard the news. But go inside.  
You can learn it from the guests themselves.  
The power in a messenger's report  
is not like hearing what he has to say  
when you confront him face to face.

ÆGISTHUS

I want to see this messenger and check  
if he was present at Orestes' death, or if he's just repeating what he heard  
from some vague rumours. I'll see through him.  
These keen eyes of mine won't be deceived.

[Exit Ægisthus into the palace]

CHORUS

Zeus, O Zeus,  
what do I say? How do I start  
appealing to the gods in prayer?  
How from a loyal heart  
can I find what to say,  
matching words with deeds?  
Now blood-stained blades are slicing men to death  
and totally destroy forever  
Agamemnon's house, or else  
with freedom's blazing light  
Orestes wins the throne,  
and all his father's riches.  
The ambush now is set—  
noble Orestes by himself  
must face two enemies.  
Let him emerge the victor!

[Ægisthus screams in pain from inside the palace]

CHORUS MEMBERS [speaking separately] Listen!

What was that?

What's going on,  
in there, inside the palace?

[Some members of the chorus start to move towards the palace doors]

CHORUS LEADER

Stay back. Until this work is finished,  
we won't get involved in all the bloodshed.  
That way no one can blame us.

[A servant emerges through the palace doors]

It's over.

Whatever the result, the fighting's over.

SERVANT

Oh, it's horrible—my master's killed!  
He's dead. Alas. I'll cry it out again,  
a third time, Ægisthus is no more!

[The servant moves to a side door and tries desperately to pull it open]

Come on! Come on! Open this door! Hurry! Unbolt the women's doors! A strong right arm is all it takes! Not to help Aegisthus—he's already dead. No point in trying. Come on! Am I shouting to the deaf, or are you all asleep?

[The servant gives up pounding on the side door]

A waste of time.

Where's Clytaemnestra gone? What's she doing?

Her own neck's resting on the razor's edge—this justice could strike her down as well.

[Enter Clytaemnestra through the main palace doors]

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What's happening? Why are you shouting all around the house?

SERVANT

I'm telling you the dead are murdering the living!

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I see. I understand your paradox.

We're being destroyed by someone's trickery, just as we destroyed. All right, then, get me a man-killing axe—and quickly!

[Exit servant into the palace]

Let's see now if we win through or lose.

The wretched business brings me down to this.

[The palace doors open to reveal the dead body of Aegisthus with Orestes standing over it. Pylades is beside Orestes]

ORESTES

The very one I seek. This fellow here has had enough.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, not Aegisthus, not my love, my power . . . dead.

ORESTES

You loved this man? Then you'll find your rest in a common grave with him—he's one man you won't abandon when he dies.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Hold off, my son, my child. Take pity on these breasts. Here you often lay asleep. Your toothless gums sucked out the milk that made you strong.

ORESTES

Pylades, what do I do?

It's a dreadful act to kill my mother.

PYLADES

What then becomes of what Apollo said,  
what he foretold at Delphi? We made an oath. Make all men your enemies but not  
the gods.

ORESTES

That's good advice. As judge in this debate  
I say you prevail.

[Orestes turns on Clytaemnestra, pulls her towards the body of Aegisthus]  
Over here.

I want to kill you right beside this man.  
When he was alive, you considered him better than my father, so once you're dead  
you can sleep on by his side. You loved him.  
The man you should have loved you hated.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I brought you up. Let me grow old with you.

ORESTES

What? Kill my father and then live with me?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My child, in this our fate's to blame.

ORESTES

Then, in the same way, Fate brings on your death.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My son, do you not fear your mother's curse?

ORESTES

You bore me, then threw me out to misery.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, no—I sent you to live with a friend.

ORESTES

You sold me in disgrace—a free man's son.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

What's the price I charged for you?

ORESTES

That's too shameful to declare in public.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Don't forget to name your father's failings, too.

ORESTES

Don't charge him with anything—he worked hard while you sat here at home.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My son, it's painful  
for women to go on without their men.

ORESTES

Maybe, but while they stay safely in the home  
their men look after them.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My son, you really mean to do this—  
to slaughter your own mother?

ORESTES

You kill yourself.

I'll not be the murderer. You will.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Take care.

The vicious hounds which avenge all mothers  
will hunt you down.

ORESTES

What about my father's?

If I don't kill you, there's no escaping them.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

It seems as if, while still alive, I waste my useless tears at my own tomb.

ORESTES

My father's destiny has marked you out.

It states that you must die.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Alas for me!

You are the snake I bore and nourished.

ORESTES

Yes. That terror in your dream foretold the truth.

You killed the man you should not kill, and now  
you'll suffer what no one should ever see.

[Orestes pushes Clytaemnestra inside the palace doors. Pylades goes with them.

The doors close behind them]

CHORUS LEADER

The fate of these two victims makes me grieve.

But long-suffering Orestes rides the crest  
of so much bloodshed, we'd prefer he triumph—the bright eyes of this house must  
never fade.

CHORUS

Just as justice came at last  
to Priam and his sons,  
a crushing retribution,  
so a double lion comes  
to Agamemnon's house,  
a two-fold slaughter.<sup>29</sup>

Apollo's suppliant, the exile,  
sees his action through,  
driven on by justice sent from gods above.

Raise now a shout of triumph  
above our master's house, free of misery at last,  
free of that tainted couple  
squandering its wealth,

---

<sup>29</sup>Priam was king of Troy, killed when the city was ransacked at the end of the Trojan War.

and free of its unhappy fate.

He came back with a secret plan,  
fighting to win crafty vengeance.  
The goddess took him by the hand, true daughter of great Zeus,  
his guide throughout the fight.  
Men call her rightful Justice—  
who destroys her enemies  
once she breathes in anger.

Raise a shout of triumph now  
above our master's house,  
free of misery at last,  
free of that tainted couple  
squandering its wealth, free of its unhappy destiny.

From his shrine deep within the earth,  
Parnassian Apollo spoke in prophecy—  
"Well intentioned stealthy trickery  
will conquer long-entrenched deceit."  
I pray his words somehow prevail,  
so I never am a slave to wickedness.  
True reverence should worship heaven's rule.

Look now, dawn is coming!  
Great chains on the home are falling off. Let this house rise up! For far too long  
it's lain in pieces on the ground.

Time, which brings all things to pass,  
will soon move through these doors,  
once purifying rites expel  
polluting evil. That will change  
the roll of fortune's dice—they'll fall  
so all can see the fair result,  
a happy destiny once more  
for all who live within the house.

Look now, dawn is coming!  
Great chains on the home are falling off.  
Let this house rise up! For far too long  
it's lain in pieces on the ground.

[The palace doors are thrown open, revealing Orestes standing above the  
bodies of  
Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra. Pylades stands beside Orestes. With them are  
attendants holding the bloodstained robes of Agamemnon]

ORESTES

Here you see them—this pair of tyrants.  
They killed my father, then robbed my home.  
Once they sat enthroned in regal splendour.  
They're lovers still, as you can witness here  
by how they died, true to the oaths they swore.  
They made a pact to murder my poor father, then die together. Well, they've kept

their word.

[Orestes starts unfurling the robes in which Agamemnon was killed]

Look at this again, all those of you  
who pay attention to this house's troubles.  
This robe they used to trap my helpless father.  
With it they tied his hands and lashed his feet.  
Spread it out. Stand round here in a group—  
put it on display, my father's death shroud,  
so that the Father (not mine—the one  
who sees everything, the Sun) can see  
my mother's sacrilege. Then he will come on the day when I am judged, to testify  
that I pursued and even killed my mother  
in a just cause. About Aegisthus' death  
there's nothing I need say. As an adulterer,  
he dies—our law's just punishment.  
But as for her who planned this evil act  
against her husband, a man whose children  
she carried in her womb—I loved her once,  
but she became my bitter enemy,  
as you can see. What do you make of her? If she'd been born a viper or sea snake,  
she wouldn't need to bite—her very touch would make men rot, so evil is her heart,  
so reckless.

[Orestes stoops and picks up the bloody robe]

What do I call this?

What fine words will do? A snare for some wild beast?  
A corpse's shroud? The curtain from a bath  
wrapped round his legs? No. It's a hunting net.  
That name sounds right—robes to trap a man,  
entangling his feet, something a highway thief  
might use to trick and rob a stranger. With such a net he'd take so many lives,  
his pleasure in the work would warm his heart.  
May I never live with such a woman.  
Before that, let the gods destroy me—  
let me die without a child.

CHORUS

Alas for this horrific act,  
the monstrous way she died.  
But woe on the survivor, too—  
his suffering begins to flower.

ORESTES

Did she commit the crime or not? Come here.  
This clothing is my witness, dyed with blood.  
It's from Aegisthus' blade. These bloody stains  
with time have blotted out the fine embroidery.  
But I can praise my father. Now at last  
I'm here to mourn him, as I hold this robe,

the net that brought about my father's death.  
But I lament my act, my suffering.  
I mourn the entire race, for though I've won,  
I can't avoid the guilt which now pollutes me.

CHORUS

No mortal goes through life unscathed, free from pain until the end.  
One trouble comes today,  
yet another comes tomorrow.

ORESTES [starting to break down] But still, you need to understand . . .  
I don't know how this will end . . . I feel like  
some chariot racer lashing on my team,  
but we're way off track . . . My mind is racing . . .  
it's lost control. Something's overpowering me . . .  
carrying me off . . . Deep in my heart, fear  
prepares its furious song and dance. So while I still have my wits about me,  
to all my friends I publicly proclaim  
I killed my mother not without just cause.  
She was guilty of my father's murder,  
a woman gods despised. What drove me on?  
I cite as my chief cause the Delphic prophet,  
Apollo's priest, who said this to me, "If you carry out this act, you'll go free—  
no charge of evil. But if you refuse . . ."  
I won't describe the punishment— no arrow fired from a bow could reach  
the top of so much pain.

[Pylades hands Orestes an olive branch, the mark of a suppliant to Apollo's oracle at Delphi]

Look at me now—  
armed with this branch and wreath, I go  
a suppliant to earth's central navel stone,  
Apollo's realm, to that sacred flame  
which, people say, never dies away,  
an exile who murdered his own blood.  
Apollo's prophet gave me his orders—  
I'm to go to his shrine, no other place.  
As to how I did this brutal act, I call all men of Argos—be my witnesses  
to Menelaus when he comes back home.  
Remember me in years to come. Now I go,  
wandering in exile from my country.  
Whether I live or die, I leave with you  
your memory of me.

CHORUS LEADER

But you've done great things.  
Why depress your spirit with such talk,  
ominous predictions, evil omens?  
You've freed the city, all of Argos,  
hacking off the heads of those two serpents, a healing blow.

[Orestes is suddenly overpowered with fear by a vision of his mother's Furies coming after him]

ORESTES

No . . . They're here . . .

Look, you women . . . over there . . . like Gorgons draped in black . . . their heads hundreds of writhing snakes . . .

I can't stand it here . . .

CHORUS LEADER

What's wrong? What are you looking at?

Of all men you have a father's strongest love,  
so stay calm. Don't give in to fear

ORESTES

It's no imagined horror, no!

It's real. Out there my mother's blood hounds wait. They want revenge.

CHORUS LEADER

Your hands are still blood stained—  
that's made your mind disordered.

ORESTES

Lord Apollo! They come at me! Hordes of them! Their eyes  
drip blood . . . it's horrible!

CHORUS LEADER

There's just one cure—  
Apollo's touch will cleanse you, set you free  
of these hallucinations.

ORESTES

You don't see them. I do.

They're coming for me. I have to leave . . .

[Orestes runs off. Pylades follows him]

CHORUS LEADER

Good fortune go with you. And may god  
watch over you, protect you with his favours.

CHORUS

The third storm has broken on the palace,  
then run its course across the royal clan.  
First, came the torments of those children  
slaughtered for Thyestes' food.<sup>30</sup> Next came  
the suffering of a man, our warrior lord,  
Achaëa's king. And now the third—  
do I call him our saviour or our doom?  
When will all this cease? When will murder,  
its fury spent, rest at last in sleep?

<sup>30</sup>Thyestes, father of Aegisthus, was a brother of Atreus and thus uncle of Agamemnon. Atreus had killed Thyestes' two sons and served them to him at what was supposed to be a feast of reconciliation. Aegisthus' murder of Agamemnon is his revenge for those killings.



# (AESCHYLUS) Oresteia - Eumenides (Kindly Ones)

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>31</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Priestess:** prophetic priestess (the Pythia) of Apollo at Delphi.

**Apollo:** divine son of Zeus, god of prophecy.

**Orestes:** son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra.

**Clytaemnestra:** mother of Orestes, appearing as a ghost after her murder.

**Chorus:** Furies, goddesses of blood revenge.

**Athena:** divine daughter of Zeus who was born fully grown from his head (without a mother).

## Athenian citizens

*Scene: The play opens just in front of the temple of Apollo at Delphi*

[Enter the Pythia, the Priestess of Apollo]

PRIESTESS

In my prayer, I hold Earth in highest honour, as the first of prophets among all gods.

Then, after her came Themis. That goddess,  
so the legend goes, followed her mother  
at this seat of prophecy. Third in line,  
another Titan, Phoebe, child of Earth,  
was then assigned to occupy this throne.

There was no force—Themis approved the change.

Phoebe then gave it as a birthday gift  
to the god who takes his name from her,  
Phoebus Apollo. He left the island Delos,  
moving from his lake and ridge to Pallas,  
to those shores where ships sail in to trade.

Then he came to live on Mount Parnassus.

A reverential escort came with him—  
children of the fire god, Hephaestus,  
highway builders who tame the wilderness  
and civilize the land. As he marched here,  
people came out in droves to worship him,  
including their king and helmsman, Delphus.

Then Zeus inspired in him prophetic skills,  
and set him on this throne as fourth in line.

Here Apollo speaks for Zeus, his father. My prayers begin with preludes to these gods.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/libationbearers.htm>

My words also give special prominence  
to the goddess who stands outside the shrine,  
Pallas Athena. I revere those nymphs inhabiting Corycia's rocky caves,  
where flocks of birds delight to congregate,  
where holy spirits roam. I don't forget  
how Dionysus, ruler of this land, divine commander of those Bacchic women,  
ripped Pentheus apart, as if he were  
a cornered rabbit. I also call upon  
the streams of Pleistus and Poseidon's power,  
and Zeus most high, who fulfills all things.  
I'll take my seat now on the prophet's throne.  
May I be fortunate, above the rest,  
to see far more than previous attempts.  
If any Greeks are in attendance here,  
let them draw lots and enter, each in turn,  
as is our custom. I will prophesy,  
following directions from the god.

[The Priestess enters the temple, only to return immediately, very agitated. She collapses onto her hands and knees]

It's horrible!

Too horrible to say . . . awful to see.  
It drives me back . . . out of Apollo's shrine.  
My strength is gone . . . I can't stand up.  
I have to crawl on hands and knees—my legs  
just buckle under me . . . An old woman  
overcome with fear is nothing, a child.  
No more . . .

[The Priestess gathers herself together and stands with great difficulty, holding onto the temple doors for support]

As I was entering the inner shrine—  
the part covered up with wreaths—I saw him,  
right on the central navel stone, a man  
the gods despise, sitting there, in the seat  
reserved for suppliants, hands dripping blood.  
He'd drawn his sword, but held an olive branch.  
It had a tuft of wool on top, a mark of reverence—a large one, really white.  
I saw all that distinctly. But then I saw  
in front of him something astonishing,  
on the benches groups of women sleeping—  
well, they weren't exactly women,  
I'd say more like Gorgons—then again,  
not much like Gorgons either. Years ago  
I once saw a picture of some monsters  
snatching a feast away from Phineas.  
But the ones inside here have no wings—  
I checked. They're black and totally repulsive,

with loud rasping snorts that terrify me.  
Disgusting pus comes oozing from their eyes.  
As for their clothing—quite inappropriate  
to wear before the statues of the gods,  
or even in men's homes. I've never seen  
a tribe which could produce this company,  
a country which would admit with pride  
that it had raised them without paying a price,  
without regretting all the pain they cost.  
Where does this end? That is Apollo's work.  
Let that be his concern. His force is strong—  
what he reveals has healing power.  
He reads the omens and can purify  
the home, his own and other men's.

[The scene changes to reveal the inside of the temple, with Orestes clutching the central stone (the navel stone) and the Furies asleep in front of him. Apollo enters from the back of the temple (the inner shrine). Apollo moves to stand near Orestes]

APOLLO

I'll not leave you—no, I'll stand beside you,  
your protector till the end. Close at hand  
or far away, I'll show no gentleness  
towards your enemies. Right now you see  
these frenzied creatures overcome with sleep,  
just lying there, these loathsome maidens,  
ancient children, hags. No god or man  
or animal has intercourse with them.  
They're born for evil. That's why they live  
within the blackest gloom of Tartarus,  
under the earth. Olympian gods and men  
despise them. But you should still keep going.  
Do not give up. They'll chase you everywhere,  
as you move along well-traveled ground,  
across wide continents, beyond the seas,  
through cities with the ocean all around.  
Don't grow weary brooding on your pain.  
And then, once you reach Athena's city,  
sit down, and wrap your arms around her,  
embrace her image. With people there  
to judge your cause and with the force of speech,  
the spell-binding power in words, we'll find  
a way to free you from misfortune.  
For I was the one who urged you on  
to kill your mother.

ORESTES

My lord Apollo,

you have no knowledge how to be unjust.  
That being the case, now learn compassion, too.  
Your power to do good is strong enough.

APOLLO

Remember this—don't let fear defeat you  
by conquering your spirit. And you, Hermes,  
my own blood brother from a common father,  
protect this man. Live up to that name of yours,  
and be his guide. Since he's my suppliant,  
lead him as if you were his shepherd—  
remember Zeus respects an outcast's rights—  
with you to show the way, he'll get better,  
and quickly come among men once again.

[Exit Orestes. Apollo moves back into the inner sanctuary. Enter the Ghost of Clytaemnestra]

GHOST OF CLYTAEMNESTRA [addressing the sleeping chorus]

Ah, you may be fast asleep, but now  
what use is sleeping? On account of you,  
I alone among the dead lack honour. The ghosts of those I killed revile me—  
they never stop. I wander in disgrace.  
They charge me with the most horrific crimes.  
But I, too, suffered cruelty from those  
most dear to me. And yet, although I died  
at the hands of one who killed his mother,  
no spirit is enraged on my behalf.  
Look here—you see these slashes on my heart?  
How did they get there? While it's asleep  
the mind can see, but in the light of day  
we have no vision of men's destiny.  
You've licked up many of my offerings,  
soothing milk and honey without wine.  
I've given many sacrificial gifts  
with fire in my hearth at solemn banquets,  
in that night hour no god will ever share.  
I see all that being trampled underfoot.  
He's gone, eluded you—just like a fawn,  
he's jumped the centre of your nets with ease.  
He mocks your efforts as he moves away.  
Listen to me. I'm speaking of my soul.  
So rouse yourselves! Wake up, you goddesses  
from underground. While you dream on I call—  
now Clytaemnestra summons you!

[The members of the Chorus begin to make strange sounds and to mutter in their sleep]

You may well moan—the man's escaped. He's gone.  
He's flown a long way off. The friends he has

are stronger than my own. You sleep on there so heavily, no sense of my distress. Orestes, the man who killed his mother, has run off! You mutter, but keep sleeping. On your feet!. Why won't you get up? What work has fate assigned you if not causing pain? Sleep and hard work, two apt confederates, have made these fearsome dragons impotent, draining all their rage.

CHORUS MEMBER [muttering in her sleep]  
Seize him! Seize him! Seize him! Seize that man! Look out!

GHOST OF CLYTAEMNESTRA  
You hunt your prey, but only in your dreams, whimpering like hounds who never lose their keenness for the hunt. But you don't act! Get up! Don't let exhaustion beat you down. Sleep makes you soft—you overlook my pain. Let my reproaches justly prick your hearts, a spur for those who act with righteousness. Blow your blood-filled breath all over him. Let those fires in your bodies shrivel him. Go on! Drive him to a fresh pursuit. Go!

[The Furies begin to wake up slowly, one after the other. As they start to get up, the Ghost of Clytaemnestra exits]

CHORUS LEADER [waking up and rousing the other Furies]  
Wake up! Come on, I'll wake you up.  
Now do the same for her. Still sleeping?  
Stand up. Wipe that sleep out of your eyes.  
Let's chant our prelude—that should take effect.

[The Furies, now awake, gather as a group, moving around trying to find Orestes or smell his track. They speak these lines as individual members of the larger group]

Ah ha, what this? Dear sisters, something's wrong.

I've been through a lot, and all for nothing.

We're being made to suffer something bad,  
alas, an evil we cannot endure.

Our quarry's slipped our nets. He's gone!  
Once sleep came over us, we lost our prey.

You're disgraceful, Hermes, a child of Zeus who loves to steal.

For a god you're young— but still you trample on more ancient spirits.

You showed that suppliant respect, a godless man, so vicious to his parent.

You may be a god, but you're a thief.  
You filched a man who killed his mother.

Who can say there's justice in such theft?

In my dreams shame struck—  
it came on like a charioteer  
who gripped his cruel whip so tight, then hit under my heart, deep in my gut.

I feel the executioner's scourge,  
the one who wields a heavy lash, weighed down with pain.

Younger gods are doing this—  
they push their ruling power  
beyond what's theirs by right.

Their throne drips blood  
around its foot,  
around its head.

I see Earth's central navel stone  
defiled with blood, corrupted,  
stained with guilt.

The prophet soils the hearth,  
pollutes the shrine himself,  
acting on his own behalf.  
against divine tradition,  
he honours human things.

He sets aside decrees of fate  
established long ago.

Though he inflict his pain on me,  
he'll never free that man.  
Let him flee underground,  
he'll find no liberty below.

As he seeks to cleanse himself  
he'll meet the next avenger—  
a family member coming for his head.

[Enter Apollo from the inner part of the shrine]

APOLLO

Get out! I'm ordering you to leave this house.  
Move on! Out of my prophet's sanctuary!  
Go now, or else you'll feel my arrows bite,  
glittering winged snakes shot from a golden string.  
Then, your agonies will make you choke,  
spit out black froth you suck from men,  
and vomit up the clotted blood you've drunk  
from murder. This shrine's no place for you.  
No, you belong where heads are sliced away,  
eyes gouged out—where justice equals slaughter—  
where youthful men are ruined by castration,  
where others suffer mutilation, stoning, where men impaled on spikes below the  
spine  
scream all the time. That's the feast you love.  
You hear me? And that's why gods detest you.  
The way you look, your shape, says what you are—  
some blood-soaked lion's den might be your home.  
You must not infect those near this temple  
with your pollution. So leave this place,  
you flock without a shepherd, you herd  
the gods despise.

CHORUS LEADER

Lord Apollo,  
listen to what we say. It's our turn to speak.  
You're no mere accomplice in this crime—  
you did it all yourself. You bear the guilt.

APOLLO

What does that mean? Go on. Keep talking.

CHORUS LEADER

You told that stranger to kill his mother.

APOLLO

To avenge his father is what I said.  
What's wrong with that?

CHORUS LEADER

Then you supported him.  
You helped a man who'd just committed murder.

APOLLO

And I instructed him to come back here  
to expiate his crime.

CHORUS LEADER

Then why insult us,  
the ones who chased him here?

APOLLO

It's not right

for you to come inside my shrine.

CHORUS LEADER

We've been assigned to do this.

APOLLO

Assigned?

What's that? Proclaim your fine authority.

CHORUS LEADER

We chase out of their homes those criminals  
who slaughter their own mothers.

APOLLO

What about a wife who kills her husband?

CHORUS LEADER

That's not blood murder in the family.

APOLLO

What?

What about Zeus and his queen Hera—  
your actions bring disgrace on them.  
You ignore the strongest bonds between them.  
Your claim dishonours Aphrodite, too,  
goddess of love, from whom all men derive  
their greatest joys. With man and woman  
a marriage sealed by fate is stronger  
than any oath, and justice guards it.  
Now, if one partner kills the other one,  
and you're not interested in punishment,  
if you feel no urge to act, then I say  
the way you chase Orestes is unjust.  
I don't see why in one case you're so harsh  
when you don't really care about the other.  
However, goddess Athena will take charge—  
she'll organize a trial.

CHORUS LEADER

But that fugitive—  
he'll never be free of me, never.

APOLLO

Then go after him. Bring yourself more trouble.

CHORUS LEADER

Don't try to curb my powers with your words.

APOLLO

Your powers? Those I wouldn't take,  
not even as a gift.

CHORUS LEADER

Of course not.

You're already great, by all accounts—  
right by Zeus' throne. But for my part,  
since I'm called onward by a mother's blood,



I'll chase this man with justice of my own.

I scent the trail!

APOLLO

I'll help my suppliant  
and bring him safely home. With gods and men  
the anger of a man who seeks redemption  
will be dreadful, if, of my own free will,  
I abandon him.

[Apollo exits into the inner shrine. The scene now changes to Athens, just outside the Temple of Athena. Orestes enters and move up to the large statue of Athena]

ORESTES

Queen Athena,  
I've come here on Apollo's orders.  
I beg your kindness. Please let me enter,  
a man accursed, an outcast. I don't seek  
ritual purification—my hands are clean—  
but my avenging zeal has lost its edge,  
worn down, blunted by other people's homes,  
by all well-beaten pathways known to men.  
I've stayed true to what Apollo told me  
at his oracle. Crossing land and sea,  
I've reached this statue by your shrine at last.  
Here I take up my position, goddess.  
I await the outcome of my trial.

[Enter the Furies, like hunting dogs, still tracking Orestes by his scent. They do not see him at first]

CHORUS LEADER

Ah ha! Here we have that man's clear scent,  
a silent witness, but firm evidence.  
After him! Like hounds chasing a wounded fawn,  
we track him by the drops of blood he sheds.  
Man-killing work—the effort wearies me.  
My lungs are bursting. We've roamed everywhere,  
exploring all the regions of the earth, crossing seas in wingless flight, moving on  
faster than any ship, always in pursuit.  
Now he's cornered here, cowering somewhere.  
I smell human blood—I could laugh for joy!  
Start looking for him! Seek him out again!  
Check everywhere. Don't let him escape.  
That man killed his mother—he must pay!

[The Chorus of Furies catch sight of Orestes and crowd around him]

CHORUS [different individuals]

He's over there! Claiming sanctuary,  
at that statue of the eternal goddess,

embracing it. He must want a trial,  
a judgment on his murderous violence.

Impossible! A mother's blood, once shed,  
soaks in the earth and can't come back again—  
the flowing stream moves through the ground,  
then disappears forever.

No. You must pay me back. I'll suck your blood.  
Drinking your living bones sustains me—  
I feed upon your pain.

Though it wears me out, I'll drag you down,  
still living, to the world below. And there you'll pay for murdering your  
mother.

You'll see there other human criminals  
who've failed to honour gods and strangers,  
who've abused the parents they should love.  
They all receive the justice they deserve.

Hades, mighty god of all the dead,  
judges mortal men below the ground.  
His perceptive mind records all things.

#### ORESTES

My misery has been my teacher—  
I know that men are cleansed in many ways,  
that sometimes it's appropriate to speak,  
sometimes to stay silent. And in this case  
a wise master has ordered me to speak.  
Blood on my hands is dormant now, fading—  
polluting stains from my mother's murder  
have been washed away. When they were fresh,  
Apollo in his temple cleansed my guilt—  
slaughtering pigs to make me pure again.  
It's a long story to describe for you,  
right from the start, all the men I've seen,  
ones I've stayed with, then left unharmed.  
Time destroys all things which age with time.  
Now, with full reverence and holy speech,  
I invoke Athena, this country's queen.  
I beg her help. Let her appear unarmed.  
She'll win true allies in me, my land,  
the Argive people. We'll trust her forever.  
No matter where she is—in Libya,  
in some region by the springs of Triton,

her birthplace, with her covered feet at rest  
or on the move, assisting those she loves,  
or whether, like some bold commander  
in the Phelegraeon plain, battle site  
of gods and giants, she surveys the field—  
I pray she'll come, for she's a goddess  
and hears me, even though she's far away.  
May she come here. May she deliver me.

CHORUS LEADER

But Apollo's power will not save you—  
nor will Athena's. You're slated to die  
abandoned and alone, without a sense  
of heartfelt joy, a bloodless criminal  
sucked dry by demons, just a shade—no more.

[Orestes makes no answer]

What? You ignore my words and won't reply,  
you, a victim fattened up for me,  
my consecrated gift? You'll not perish  
on any altar—no, I'll eat you alive.

[Orestes continues to remain silent]

All right then, hear our song, a spell to chain you.

CHORUS

Come, let's link our arms and dance—  
Furies determined to display  
our fearful art, to demonstrate  
collective power we possess  
to guide all mortals' lives.

We claim we represent true justice.  
Our anger never works against  
a man whose hands are clean—  
all his life he stays unharmed.  
But those men guilty of some crime,  
as this one is, who hide away,  
concealing blood-stained hands—  
we harass them as testament  
to those they've murdered.  
Blood avengers, always in pursuit,  
we chase them to the end.

Hear me, Mother Night, mother who gave birth to me  
so I could avenge  
the living and the dead.  
Leto's child, Apollo,  
dishonours me—he tears  
that man out of my hands,  
the hare who cowers there,  
who by rights must expiate

his mother's blood.

Let this frenzied song of ours  
fall upon our victim's head,  
our sacrifice—our frenzy  
driving him to madness—  
obliterate his mind.  
This is our Furies' chant  
It chains up the soul,  
destroys its harmony,  
and withers mortal men.

Remorseless Fate gave us this work  
to carry on forever, a destiny  
spun out for us alone,  
to attach ourselves to those  
who, overcome with passion,  
slaughter blood relatives.  
We chase after them until the end,  
until they go beneath the ground.  
In death they find small freedom.

Let this frenzied song of ours  
fall upon our victim's head,  
our sacrifice—our frenzy  
driving him to madness—  
obliterate his mind.  
This is our Furies' chant.  
It chains up the soul,  
destroys its harmony,  
and withers mortal men.

These rights are ours from birth—  
even the immortal gods  
may not lay hands on us.  
We share no feasts with them,  
no fellowship—their pure white robes  
are no part of our destiny.

The task I take upon myself is mine,  
to overthrow whole families,  
when strife inside the home  
kills someone near and dear.  
We chase that murderer down,  
the one who's spilled fresh blood.  
For all his strength, we wear him down.

That's why we're now here,  
eager to contest the charge,  
to challenge other gods,  
to make sure none of them  
ends up controlling what is ours.

There will be no trial—  
for Zeus despises us,  
considers us unworthy,  
refusing to converse with us  
because we deal in blood.

The task I take upon myself is mine,  
to overthrow whole families,  
when strife inside the home  
kills someone near and dear.  
We chase that murderer down,  
the one who's spilled fresh blood.  
For all his strength, we wear him down.

Those proud opinions people have,  
who raise themselves so high,  
who puff themselves to heaven,  
will melt away, dissolving  
in dishonour underground,  
when we, in our black robes,  
beat out our vengeful dance—  
when we launch our attack.

Leaping from the heights,  
we pound them with our feet—  
our force trips up the runner  
as he sprints for home,  
a fate he cannot bear.

His mind is so confused  
he does not sense his fall.  
Dark clouds of his defilement  
hover all around the man.  
Murky shadows fall,  
enveloping his home—  
and Rumour spreads  
a tale of sorrow.

Leaping from the heights,  
we pound them with our feet—  
our force trips up the runner  
as he sprints for home,  
a fate he cannot bear.

So things remain.  
We have our skills—  
our powers we fulfill,  
keeping human evil in our minds.  
Our awesome powers  
cannot be appeased by men.  
Dishonoured and despised,  
we see our work gets done.

Split off from gods,  
with no light from the sun,  
we make the path more arduous  
for those who still can see  
and for the blind.

What man is not in awe  
or stands there unafraid  
to hear me state my rights,  
those powers allowed by Fate  
and ratified by all the gods,  
mine to hold forever?

Those old prerogatives  
I still retain—they're mine.  
I have my honour, too,  
though my appointed place  
is underneath the ground  
in sunless darkness.

1 [Enter Athena]

ATHENA

I heard someone summon me from far away.  
I was in Troy, by the Scamander's banks,  
taking ownership of new property,  
a gift from ruling leaders of Achaea,  
a major part of what their spears had won,  
assigned to me entirely and forever,  
a splendid gift for Theseus' sons.  
I've come from there at my untiring pace,  
not flying on wings, but on this whirling cape,  
a chariot yoked to horses in their prime.  
Here I see an unfamiliar crowd,  
strangers to this place, nothing I fear,  
but astonishing to see. Who are you?  
I'm talking to all those assembled here—  
the stranger crouching there beside my statue,  
and those of you like no one ever born,  
creatures no god has seen in goddesses,  
in form a thing unknown to mortal men.  
But to say such things about one's neighbour  
who's done no wrong is far from just  
and contravenes our customs.

CHORUS LEADER

Daughter of Zeus,  
you'll find out everything—and briefly, too.  
We are immortal children of the Night.

Below ground, where we have our homes,  
we're called the Curses.

ATHENA

Now I know your race  
I know what people call you.

CHORUS LEADER

But our powers—  
these you'll quickly ascertain as well.

ATHENA

Those I'd like to learn. Please state them clearly.

CHORUS LEADER

We hound out of their homes all those who kill.

ATHENA

Once the killer flees, where does he finally go?

CHORUS LEADER

Where no one thinks of joy, for there is none.

ATHENA

Your screams would drive this man to such a flight?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes—he thought it right to kill his mother.

ATHENA

Why? Was he forced to do it? Did he fear  
another person's anger?

CHORUS LEADER

Where's the urge  
so strong to force a man to kill his mother?

ATHENA

There are two sides to this dispute. I've heard  
only one half the argument.

CHORUS LEADER

What about the oath?

He won't deny he did it or accept  
the guilt we charge him with.

ATHENA

Where do you stand?

You wish to be considered righteous,  
but not to act with justice.

CHORUS LEADER

How? Teach me.

You clearly have a mind for subtleties.

ATHENA

I assert that no one should use oaths  
to let injustice triumph.

CHORUS LEADER

Question him.

Then make a righteous judgment.

ATHENA

Are you prepared  
that I should be the one to do this,  
to produce a final verdict?

CHORUS LEADER

Why not?  
We respect your worth, as you do ours.

ATHENA

Stranger, do you have anything to say  
by way of a response? State your country,  
lineage, and circumstance. And then,  
defend yourself against their accusations,  
if you really trust the justice of your case,  
as you sit here clinging to my statue,  
a sacred suppliant beside my hearth,  
doing what Ixion did so long ago.  
Speak to me. Address all this directly.

ORESTES

Queen Athena, your last words express  
important doubts which I must first remove.  
I'm not a suppliant in need of cleansing.  
Nor have I fallen at your statue's feet  
with my hands defiled. On these two points  
I'll offer weighty proof. Our laws assert  
a criminal polluted with blood guilt  
will be denied all speech until he's cleansed  
by someone authorized to purify  
a man for murder, who sprinkles him  
with suckling victim's blood. Some time ago,  
in homes of other men, I underwent  
such purification rites with slaughtered beasts,  
at flowing streams, as well. So, as I say,  
there are no grounds for your misgivings here.  
As for my family, you'll know that soon enough—  
I'm an Argive, son of Agamemnon.  
You may well ask his story—he's the man  
who put that naval force together.  
You worked with him to see that Ilion,  
Troy's city, ceased to be. When he came home,  
he died in a disgraceful way, butchered  
by my mother, whose black heart snagged him  
in devious hunting nets—these still exist,  
attesting to that slaughter in his bath.  
I was in exile at the time. I came back.  
I killed my mother—that I don't deny—  
to avenge the murder of my father,



whom I truly loved. For this murder  
Apollo bears responsibility,  
along with me. He urged me to it,  
pointing out the cruel reprisals I would face  
if I failed to act against the murderers.  
Was what I did a righteous act or not?  
That you must decide. I'll be satisfied,  
no matter how you render judgment.

ATHENA

This is a serious matter, too complex  
for any mortal man to think of judging.  
It's not right even for me to adjudicate  
such cases, where murder done in passion  
merits passionate swift punishment.  
Above all, you come here a suppliant  
who's gone through all cleansing rituals,  
who's pure and hence no danger to my shrine.  
You thus have my respect, for in my view,  
where my city is concerned, you're innocent.  
But these Furies also have their function.  
That's something we just cannot set aside.  
So if they fail to triumph in this case,  
they'll spread their poisonous resentment—  
it will seep underground, infecting us,  
bring perpetual disease upon our land,  
something we can't bear. So stands the case.  
Two options, each of them disastrous.  
Allow one to remain, expel the other?  
No, I see no way of resolving this.  
But since the judgment now devolves on me,  
I'll appoint human judges of this murder,  
a tribunal bound by oath—I'll set it up  
to last forever. So you two parties,  
summon your witnesses, set out your proofs,  
with sworn evidence to back your stories.  
Once I've picked the finest men in Athens,  
I'll return. They'll rule fairly in this case,  
bound by a sworn oath to act with justice.

[Exit Athena]

CHORUS

If his legal action triumphs,  
if now this matricide prevails,  
then newly set divine decrees  
will overthrow all order.  
Mortals will at once believe  
that everything's permitted.

From now on parents can expect  
repeated blows of suffering  
inflicted by their children—  
now and in time yet to come.

For Furies who keep watch on men  
will bring no anger down  
on human crimes—so then  
we loose death everywhere,  
all forms of killing known to man.  
So one, seeing his neighbour's pain,  
will ask another, "Where's this end?  
When does our suffering diminish?" But the poor wretch can offer nothing—  
his remedies are vain, without effect.

So when a terrible disaster strikes  
let no one make the old appeal,  
"Justice, you Furies—hear me,  
you powers on your thrones!"  
It may well happen soon—  
a father in despair, a mother  
in some new catastrophe,  
may scream out for pity,  
now the house of justice falls.

Sometimes what's terrible can work  
to bring about what's good.  
Such terror needs to sit on guard,  
to check the passionate heart.  
There is a benefit for men  
to learn control through suffering.  
For where is there a man or city—  
both alike in this regard—  
who still respects what's just  
without a heart attuned to fear?

It's not right that men revere  
a life without controls  
or one enslaved by tyrants.  
Those who practise moderation  
in everything they do  
acquire strength from god,  
though he hands down  
his other gifts in other ways.

Our words stress self-control,  
for arrogance, we know,  
is surely born from sacrilege. From a healthy heart and mind  
comes the happiness men love,  
the joy they ask for in their prayers.

To sum up everything about this case,

I'll tell you this—Justice has an altar.  
Give that full human reverence.  
Don't trample it profanely underfoot  
because self-interest sees advantages.  
Remember punishment will come—  
that outcome's fixed and permanent.  
So each of you, above all else,  
should honour parents,  
pay them the deference you owe,  
respect all guests and strangers  
you welcome in your home.

For happiness will never fail  
the man who follows justice,  
freely and without constraint.  
He'll never be destroyed.  
But the reckless man who goes too far,  
who piles up riches for himself  
in any way he can and disregards  
all justice—I tell you this—  
in time he'll have to strike his sail,  
as storming torments break his ship,  
as his yardarm shatters.

He screams for help.  
But no one listens.  
In the middle of the seas  
he fights—but all in vain.  
Whirlpools suck him down,  
while heaven roars with laughter  
at the sight of this hot-tempered man  
who used to boast with pride  
he'd never come to grief  
now helpless, panic stricken,  
unable to ride out the waves.  
He always lived for wealth—  
now that, too, smashes on the reef,  
the rock of Justice—he drowns,  
unseen and unlamented.

[The scene shifts to the Areopagus, the high court of Athens. Athena enters with a herald and ten citizens, the jury she has selected. A crowd of citizens enters with her. Orestes moves to the place where the accused stands]

ATHENA

Herald, blow the call for order in this court.  
Raise that Etruscan trumpet, fill your lungs,  
let these people hear an ear-piercing blast.  
As they crowd into this court of judgment  
it's better to have silence. The whole city

can listen to my laws, which are eternal.  
So can these litigants. Then all will see  
the justice in our verdict for themselves.

[Enter Apollo. He moves to stand behind Orestes]

Lord Apollo, you have your own domain.  
What's your role here? Announce that to us.

APOLLO

I've come here as a witness. That man,  
the accused, according to our customs,  
came a suppliant to my shrine, my hearth.  
I purified him of the blood he spilled.  
As his advocate, I share the blame  
arising from his mother's murder.  
Start the trial. You understand procedure.  
Confirm that with a just decision.

ATHENA [addressing the Furies]

Then I'll begin the trial. You speak up first.  
The plaintiff opens our proceedings.  
Tell us the facts. Begin at the beginning—  
inform us clearly of the issues here.

CHORUS LEADER

There are many of us, but we'll keep  
our speeches brief.

[Turning to interrogate Orestes]

Answer our questions,  
as we put them one by one. First, tell us—  
did you kill your mother?

ORESTES

Yes, I killed her.  
I don't deny the fact.

CHORUS LEADER

We take first fall.  
Three falls wins the match.

ORESTES

You gloat,  
but your opponent isn't pinned down yet.

CHORUS LEADER

Now you must describe the murder for us.  
How did you kill her?

ORESTES

I'll tell you—  
I drew my sword and slit her throat.

CHORUS LEADER

Who persuaded you to do this? Whose advice?

ORESTES

The orders of this god. He is my witness.

CHORUS LEADER

The prophet ordered you to kill your mother?

ORESTES

He did. And to this moment I have no regrets.

CHORUS LEADER

But if the verdict lays its hands on you,  
you'll change your story soon enough.

ORESTES

I'm confident. My father from his grave  
will send the help I need.

CHORUS LEADER

So you trust the dead,  
and yet you killed your mother?

ORESTES

I do, for she was guilty of two crimes.

CHORUS LEADER

How so? Inform the judges on this point.

ORESTES

She killed her husband and my father.

CHORUS LEADER

But her death evens out the score for her.  
You're still living.

ORESTES

When she was still alive  
you didn't hound her into exile. Why?

CHORUS LEADER

She and her victim shared no common blood.

ORESTES

And my mother and me? Are we blood linked?

CHORUS LEADER

How else could she sustain you in her womb,  
you murderer? Do you now reject  
the closest bond there is, a mother's blood?

ORESTES [turning to Apollo]

You must give evidence, Apollo.

Take the lead for me. Did I kill her justly?

For I don't deny I did the murder.

But whether that act of shedding blood  
was just or not, as you perceive the facts,  
you must decide, so I can tell the court.

APOLLO

Let me address this high court of Athena.

Tribunal members, what I have to say  
will proceed from justice. I'm a prophet.

I cannot tell a lie. And never yet,  
when I've been seated in my oracle,

have I said anything in prophecy  
concerning woman, man, or city state,  
that Olympian father Zeus did not command.  
Make sure you understand how powerful  
his justice is. That's why I urge you now—  
obey the will of Zeus, our father.  
No oath has greater strength than Zeus.

CHORUS LEADER

Then, Zeus, according to your reasoning,  
told your oracle to give the order—  
Orestes must avenge his father's death,  
ignoring any rights his mother had.

APOLLO

Yes. For these two things are not the same—  
he died a noble man, a special king  
who bears a sceptre given by the gods, an honoured king who dies by murder,  
and at a woman's hand, not in a fight  
where arrows fly in from a distance, as with the Amazons, but in a way  
which we'll describe for you, Athena,  
and those here ready to decide this case  
when you cast your votes. He'd just come home,  
returning from a long and harsh campaign,  
where in the eyes of loyal citizens  
he'd won success beyond all expectation.  
She welcomed him. Then, he took his bath.  
As he stepped out—still on the outer rim—  
she threw the cloak, his shroud, around him,  
just like a tent. She caught him in those robes,  
whose endless folds enclosed him like a net.  
Then she hacked him down. I'm telling you,  
that's how the splendid leader of the ships  
went to his death. As for that woman,  
I speak of her to rouse a sense of shame  
in those men chosen here to judge this case.

CHORUS

So your claim is Zeus thinks a father's death  
is more significant? But on his own  
he chained up his old father, Cronos.  
Does that not contradict what you've just said?  
I ask you judges to take note of this.

APOLLO

You monsters—how all the gods detest you!  
Zeus has power to smash those chains apart.  
For that he has a remedy, many ways  
to set us free. But once a mortal's blood  
has drained into the dust, the man is dead.

And then there's no return. My father Zeus has made no charms for that, though he can change all other things without a pause for breath.

CHORUS LEADER

You plead to set him free. But think of this—will this man, who shed his mother's blood, who spilled it on the ground, return back home, to live in Argos in his father's house? Where are the public altars he can use, the family cleansing rites he can attend?

APOLLO

I'll speak to that, as well. Make sure you note how right my answer is. That word mother—we give it to the one who bears the child. However, she's no parent, just a nurse to that new life embedded in her. The parent is the one who plants the seed, the father. Like a stranger for a stranger, she preserves the growing life, unless god injures it. And I can offer proof for what I say—a man can have a child without a mother. Here's our witness, here—Athena, child of Olympian Zeus.

[Apollo points to Athena]

No dark womb nursed her—no goddess bears a child with ancestry like hers. Athena, since I know so many other things, I'll make your city and your people great. That's why I sent this man a suppliant to your own shrine, so he might prove himself, then place eternal trust in you, dear goddess, and you could win a new ally in him, in his descendants, too, and thus create an everlasting bond with his posterity.

ATHENA

Has each side said enough? Shall I now instruct the judges to cast their votes, acting on their judgment of what's just?

CHORUS LEADER

Though we've already shot our final arrow, we'll stay to hear this contest to the end.

ATHENA

Why not? Now, as for you defendants, what can I do to avoid your censure?

APOLLO

You have heard what you have heard.

[To jurors]  
My friends,  
as you cast your ballots, make sure your hearts  
respect that oath you made.

ATHENA

You citizens of Athens, you judges  
at the first trial ever held for murder,  
hear what I decree. Now and forever  
this court of judges will be set up here  
to serve Aegeus' people. This place,  
this Mount of Ares, is where Amazons,  
once marched in force, enraged at Theseus.  
Here they pitched their tents. Then they built  
a new city on the heights, with lofty walls  
to match his own, making a sacrifice  
to Ares, god of war, from whom this rock  
derives its name, the Mount of Ares.  
From this hill Reverence and Terror,  
two kindred rulers of my citizens,  
will guarantee they don't commit injustice,  
by day or night, unless the citizens  
pollute the laws with evil innovations.  
Once limpid waters are stained with mud,  
you'll never find a drink. My people,  
avoid both anarchy and tyranny.  
I urge you to uphold this principle.  
Show it due reverence. As for terror,  
don't banish it completely from the city.  
What mortal man is truly righteous without being afraid? Those who sense the fear  
revere what's right. With citizens like these  
your country and your city will be safe,  
stronger than anything possessed by men  
in Pelops' country or in Scythia.  
So here I now establish this tribunal,  
incorruptible, magnificent,  
swift in punishment—it stands above you,  
your country's guardian as you lie asleep.  
I've gone through this at length to urge you on,  
my citizens, today and in the future.  
But now you must get up, cast your ballots,  
decide this case, while honouring your oath.  
I'm finished—that's all I have to say.

[The members of the tribunal begin to step forward and cast their votes into the urns]

CHORUS LEADER

Watch out. Don't ever show us disrespect.



For our united power can crush your land.

APOLLO

Let me remind you—fear the oracles,  
not just mine, but those of Zeus the Father.  
Don't make them barren.

CHORUS LEADER [to Apollo]

You interfere  
in blood work that's not your proper business.  
Your oracles remain no longer pure.

APOLLO

When the first man-killer Ixion  
went a suppliant to Zeus for cleansing,  
was Zeus wrong to treat him as he did?

CHORUS LEADER

Argue all you want. But in this judgment  
if I don't prevail, I'll be back again  
to bring this country to its knees.

APOLLO

Among all gods, old and new alike,  
you have no honour. I will triumph here.

CHORUS LEADER

Just as you triumphed in the house of Pheres,  
persuading Fate to free all men from death.

APOLLO

Surely it's right to help a worshipper,  
especially when his need is desperate?

CHORUS LEADER

You made those ancient goddesses, the Fates,  
drunk on wine, then got them to suspend  
the oldest rule of order we possess.

APOLLO

Well, you'll soon lose this case. Then you can spew  
your poison and not hurt your enemies.

CHORUS

You're young. You'd ride roughshod over me  
because I'm old. I'll await the verdict,  
see where this trial ends. I have my doubts  
about my anger at this city.

ATHENA

It's now my task to give my final verdict.  
And I award my ballot to Orestes.  
No mother gave me birth—that's why  
in everything but marriage I support  
the man with all my heart, a true child  
of my father Zeus. Thus, that woman's death  
I won't consider more significant.

She killed her husband, guardian of their home.  
If the votes are equal, Orestes wins.  
Now, members of the jury, do your job.  
Shake the ballots from the urns—and quickly.

[The urns are emptied and the ballots counted]

ORESTES

O Phoebus Apollo, how did they vote?

CHORUS

O black mother Night, are you watching this?

ORESTES

Now for the result. Either I hang  
or live on to see the light of day.

CHORUS

Either we're finished or our honour thrives.

APOLLO

Shake out all ballots, friends. Count them fairly.  
Divide them with due care. Make no mistakes.  
Errors in judgment now can mean disaster.  
A single ballot cast can save this house.

[The ballots are shown to Athena]

ATHENA

The numbers of the votes are equal—thus,  
this man's acquitted of the murder charge.

ORESTES

O Pallas Athena, you've saved my house.

I'd lost my homeland—now you give it back,  
and anyone in Greece can say, "This man  
is once again an Argive, occupying  
his father's property, thanks to Pallas,  
thanks to Apollo, and thanks to Zeus,  
third god and all-fulfilling saviour."

Faced with these pleaders for my mother's cause,  
Zeus chose to honour my father's death.

Now I'll go home. But first I make this oath  
to your land and people for all time to come—  
never will an Argive leader march in here  
with spears arrayed against you. If he does,  
in violation of this oath of mine, from the grave we'll see his effort fails.  
We'll bring him bad luck, trouble on the march,  
send birds of evil omen over him.

He'll regret the pains his campaign brings him.

But all those who keep this oath, who honour  
for all time Athena's city, allies  
who fight on its behalf, such citizens  
we'll treat with greater favour and good will.

And so farewell to you, Athena,

farewell to those who guard your city.  
In struggles with your enemies, I hope  
you catch them in a stranglehold, win out,  
and gain the spear denoting victory.

[Apollo and Orestes leave. The Furies move to surround Athena]

CHORUS

You younger gods, you've wrenched our ancient laws  
out of my grasp, then stamped them underfoot.  
You heap on us dishonourable contempt.  
Now my anger turns against this land  
I'll spread my poisons—how it's going to pay,  
when I release this venom in my heart  
to ease my grief. I'll saturate this ground.  
It won't survive. From it disease will grow,  
infecting leaves and children—that's justice.  
Sterility will spread across the land,  
contaminate the soil, destroy mankind.  
What can I do now but scream out in pain?  
The citizens make fun of us, the Furies.  
How can we put up with such indignity,  
daughters of Night disgracefully abused,  
dishonoured, shamed, our powers cast aside?

ATHENA

Let me persuade you not to spurn this trial.  
You've not been beaten—the votes were fair,  
the numbers equal, no disgrace to you.  
But we received clear evidence from Zeus.  
The one who spoke the oracle declared  
Orestes should not suffer for his act.  
So don't be vengeful, breathing anger  
on this land and drenching it with showers,  
whose drops, like spears, will kill the seeds,  
and blast its fruitfulness. I promise you  
in all righteousness you'll have your place,  
a subterranean cavern, yours by right.  
Beside the hearth you'll sit on glittering thrones,  
worshipped with reverence by my citizens.

CHORUS

You younger gods, you've wrenched our ancient laws  
out of my grasp, then stamped them underfoot.  
You heap on us dishonourable contempt.  
Now my anger turns against this land  
I'll spread my poisons—how it's going to pay,  
when I release this venom in my heart  
to ease my grief. I'll saturate this ground.  
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infecting leaves and children—that's justice.  
Sterility will spread across the land,  
contaminate the soil, destroy mankind.  
What can I do now but scream out in pain?  
The citizens make fun of us, the Furies.  
How can we put up with such indignity,  
daughters of Night disgracefully abused,  
shamed, dishonoured, our powers cast aside?

ATHENA

But you've not lost honour—you're goddesses.  
Don't let your anger lead you to excess,  
to blast this land of men past remedy.  
I have faith in Zeus. Why must I mention that?  
Well, I'm the only god who knows the keys  
to Zeus' arsenal where he keeps sealed  
his lightning bolt. But there's no need for that.  
Accept my argument. Don't let rash tongues  
hurl threats against this land, condemning it  
to sterile fruitlessness. Ease your anger.  
Let your fury's black and bitter waves recede.  
You can live with me, receive full honours.  
The first fruits of this fertile land are yours,  
forever, all those offerings for heirs,  
for marriages—from now on they're yours.  
With all this, you'll praise what I'm advising.

CHORUS

Such suffering for me.  
My ancient wisdom driven underground,  
despised, dishonoured.  
The shame, my shame.  
This pure rage I breathe  
consumes me utterly.  
What sinks under my ribs  
and pains my heart?

O Night, my mother,  
the cunning of those gods,  
too hard to overcome,  
takes all my ancient powers,  
and leaves me nothing.

ATHENA

I'll bear with your rage, for you are older,  
and thus your wisdom far exceeds my own.  
But Zeus gave me a fine intelligence as well.  
So let me tell you this—if you leave here,  
for this land you'll feel a lover's yearning.  
As time goes on, my citizens will win

increasing honour, and you, on your thrones,  
seated outside the house of Erechtheus,  
a place of honour, will win more respect  
from lines of men and women filing past  
than you could find in all the world beyond.  
So cast no stones for bloodshed on this land,  
my realm. Do not corrupt our youthful hearts,  
intoxicating them with rage, like wine,  
or rip the heart out of a fighting cock  
to set it in my people, giving them  
a thirst for reckless internecine war.  
Let them fight wars abroad, without restraint  
in those men driven by a lust for fame.  
I want no birds who fight their wars at home.  
That's what I offer you. It's yours to take.  
Do good things, receive good things in honour.  
Take your place in a land the gods all love.

## CHORUS

Such suffering for me—  
my ancient wisdom driven underground,  
despised, dishonoured.  
The shame, my shame.  
This pure rage I breathe  
consumes me utterly.  
What sinks under my ribs  
and pains my heart?

O Night, my mother,  
the cunning of those gods,  
too hard to overcome,  
takes all my ancient powers,  
and leaves me nothing.

## ATHENA

I'll not tire of telling you your gifts,  
so you can never lodge complaints that I,  
a newer god, or men who guard this land  
failed to revere such ancient goddesses  
and cast you out in exile from our city.  
No. But if you respect Persuasion, holding in reverence that sacred power  
whose soothing spell sits on my tongue,  
then you should stay. If that's not your wish,  
it would be unjust to vent your anger  
on this city, injuring its people,  
enraged at them from spite. It's up to you—  
take your allotted portion of this land,  
justly entitled to your share of honour.

## CHORUS LEADER

Queen Athena, this place you say is ours,  
what exactly is it?

ATHENA

One free of pain,  
without anxieties. Why not accept?

CHORUS LEADER

If I do, what honours would I get?

ATHENA

Without you no house can thrive.

CHORUS LEADER

You'd do this? You'd grant me that much power?

ATHENA

I will. Together we'll enrich the lives  
of all who worship us.

CHORUS LEADER

This promise you make—  
you'll hold to it forever?

ATHENA

Yes. I don't say anything I don't fulfill.

CHORUS LEADER

Your magic's doing its work, it seems—  
I feel my rage diminish.

ATHENA

Then stay.

In this land you'll win more friends.

CHORUS LEADER

Let me speak out a blessing on the land.  
Tell me what I might say.

ATHENA

Speak nothing  
of brutal victories—only blessings  
stemming from the earth, the ocean depths,  
the heavens. Let gusting winds caress the land  
in glorious sunlight, our herds and harvests  
overflow with plenty, so they never fail  
our citizens in time to come, whose seed  
will last forever. Let their prosperity  
match how well they worship you. I love  
these righteous men, the way a gardener loves  
his growing plants, this race now free of grief.  
These things are yours to give. For my part,  
I'll see this city wins triumphal fame  
in deadly wars where men seek glory,  
so all men celebrate victorious Athens.

CHORUS

Then we'll accept this home

and live here with Athena.  
We'll never harm a place  
which she and Ares  
and all-powerful Zeus  
hold as a fortress of the gods,  
this glorious altar, the shield  
for all the gods of Greece.  
I make this prayer for Athens,  
prophesying fine things for her—  
bounteous happy harvests  
bursting from the earth,  
beneath a radiant sun.

ATHENA

To all my citizens I'll act with kindness,  
setting in place these goddesses among them—  
powerful divinities, implacable—  
whose office is to guide all mortals' lives  
in everything they do. If there's a man  
who's never felt their weight, he's ignorant  
of where life's blows arise. His father's crimes  
drag him before these goddesses, and there,  
for all his boasting, his destruction comes— dread silent anger crushing him to  
dust.

CHORUS

Hear me speak my blessing—  
let no winds destroy the trees  
nor scorching desert heat move in  
to shrivel budding plants,  
no festering blight kill off the fruit.  
May Pan foster fertility  
and make the flocks increase,  
to every ewe twin lambs,  
all born in season, and in Athens  
may the earth be rich in treasure,  
paying fine gifts to Hermes, god of unexpected luck.

ATHENA

Do you hear that, you guardians of my city?  
The blessings they will bring? They're powerful,  
the sacred Furies, among immortal gods,  
among the dead below. With mortal men  
it's clear they work their wills decisively,  
for some a life of song, for others lives of tears.

CHORUS

I forbid those deadly accidents  
which cut men down before their time.  
And all you gods with rightful powers,

let our lovely girls all live  
to find a husband. Hear our prayers,  
you sacred Fates, our sisters,  
you children of the Night,  
who apportion all things justly, who have a place in every home,  
whose righteous visitations  
at all times carry weight, everywhere  
most honoured of the gods.

ATHENA

I rejoice to hear these love-filled blessings  
conferred upon this land. It pleases me  
Persuasion kept watch on my tongue and lips,  
when I met their fierce refusal. But Zeus,  
the patron god of our assemblies, has triumphed. Our struggle here for justice  
has left us victorious forever.

CHORUS

I pray man-killing civil strife  
may never roar aloud  
within the city—may its dust  
not drink our citizen's dark blood,  
nor passions for revenge incite  
those wars which kill the state.  
Let men give joy for joy,  
united by their common love,  
united in their enmities—  
for that cures all human ills.

ATHENA

You see now how these Furies seek their way  
with well intentioned words? I can predict  
these terrifying faces will provide  
my citizens all sorts of benefits.  
So treat them kindly, just as they are kind.  
Worship them forever. Then you'll keep  
your land and city on the path of justice,  
in everything you do attaining glory.

CHORUS

Rejoice, rejoice  
amid the riches you deserve  
rejoice, you citizens,  
who dwell with Zeus,  
who love that virgin girl,  
Athena—and she loves you.  
You manifest your wisdom  
at the proper time, nestling  
underneath Athena's wings,  
while Zeus looks on in awe.



[Enter a group citizens to lead Athena's procession, some bearing unlit torches, some robes, and some leading animals for sacrifice]

ATHENA

And you too rejoice. I must lead the way,  
show you to your rooms, by sacred torchlight  
carried by your escort. Now you can go—  
move with speed under the earth, and there  
with sacred sacrificial blood hold down  
what would destroy my land and send above  
what brings prosperity, so that our city  
may prove victorious. And now you citizens,  
you children of Cranaus, king of this rock,  
lead our new residents for life away.  
May all citizens look on with favour  
at those who bring such favours to them.

CHORUS

Farewell, once more farewell,  
all those who live in Athens,  
gods and men, inhabitants  
of Pallas' city. Pay us respect,  
while we live here among you—  
you'll have cause to celebrate  
the fortunes of your lives.

ATHENA

My thanks to you for these words of blessing.  
Now I'll send you down by blazing torchlight  
to your homes beneath the earth, with this escort  
of those duty-bound to guard my statue.  
That seems right. For the most precious part  
of all the land of Theseus will come out,  
a splendid throng of girls and mothers,  
groups of older women.

[From the processional company some women bearing scarlet robes move forward to place the robes on the Furies. Athena speaks directly to them]

Invest these Furies  
with their special crimson robes. Honour them.  
Then, move on with the torches, so this group,  
our fellow residents, can show the love  
they bear this land, and for all time to come  
bring our city strength and great good fortune.

[The women dress the Furies in the scarlet robes and sing the final song of joy and thanks, as the entire procession of Athena, Furies, and citizens moves off stage]

THE WOMEN OF ATHENS

Move on with your loyal escort,  
you mighty children of the Night,

children without children, no longer young,  
yet glorious in your honours.  
You citizens, nothing but blessings in your songs.

Deep in those primeval caverns  
far underground, our sacrifices,  
the sacred honours we bestow on you  
will maintain our city's reverence.  
All of you, nothing but blessings in your songs.

Come forward, sacred goddesses,  
benevolent and gracious to our land,  
come forward with the flaming torches,  
rejoicing as we move along our way.  
Now raise triumphal cries to crown our song!

Peace now reigns forevermore  
between Athena's people and their guests.  
For all-seeing Zeus and Fate herself  
have worked together for this ending.  
Now raise triumphal cries to crown our song!

[The entire group moves off singing and dancing]

# (AESCHYLUS) Prometheus Bound

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>32</sup> translation by Ian Johnston

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) was one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

*Prometheus Bound* was apparently the first play in a trilogy (the other two plays, now lost except for some fragments, were *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer*). Although a number of modern scholars have questioned whether Aeschylus was truly the author of the play, it has always been included among his works.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus was a Titan, a descendant of the original gods, Gaia and Ouranos (Earth and Heaven). The Titans were defeated in a battle with Zeus, who fought against his own father, Cronos, imprisoned him deep in the earth, and became the new ruling power in heaven. Although he was a Titan, Prometheus assisted Zeus in this conflict, but later offended him by stealing fire from heaven and giving it to human beings, for whom he had a special affection. Aeschylus' play begins after Zeus has assumed control of heaven and learned about the theft.

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**POWER:** divine agent of Zeus.

**FORCE:** divine agent of Zeus.

**HEPHAESTUS:** divine son of Zeus, the artisan god.

**PROMETHEUS:** a Titan.

**CHORUS:** daughters of Oceanus. <sup>33</sup>

**OCEANUS:** a god of the sea.

**IO:** daughter of Inachus.

**HERMES:** divine son of Zeus.

*[In a remote mountainous region of Scythia. HEPHAESTUS enters with POWER and FORCE dragging PROMETHEUS with them in chains.]*

POWER

We have just reached the land of Scythia,  
at the most distant limits of the world,  
remote and inaccessible. Hephaestus,  
now it is your duty to carry out

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<sup>32</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/prometheusbound.htm>

<sup>33</sup>. . . *Dardanus*: Ilion is an alternative name for Troy, and Dardanus is the name of a famous ancestor of Priam, king of Troy. Hence, the Trojans were often called Dardanians.

those orders you received from Father Zeus—  
to nail this troublemaker firmly down  
against these high, steep cliffs, shackling him  
in adamantine chains that will not break.<sup>34</sup> For he in secret stole your pride and  
joy  
and handed it to men—the sacred fire which fosters all the arts. For such a crime,  
he must pay retribution to the gods,  
so he will learn to bear the rule of Zeus  
and end that love he has for humankind.

HEPHAESTUS

Power and Force, where you two are concerned,  
what Zeus commanded us has now been done.  
There are no further obstacles to face.  
I am not bold enough to use sheer force  
against a kindred god and nail him down  
here on this freezing rock. But nonetheless, I must steel myself to finish off our  
work,  
for it is dangerous to disregard  
the words of Father Zeus.

[HEPHAESTUS addresses PROMETHEUS]

High-minded son  
of our wise counsellor, goddess Themis, against my will and yours, I must bind you  
with chains of brass which no one can remove  
on this cliff face, far from all mortal men,  
where you will never hear a human voice  
or glimpse a human shape and sun's hot rays  
will scorch and age your youthful flesh.<sup>35</sup>  
For you,  
the sparkling stars high in the sky at night  
will hide those rays and offer some relief.  
Then, in the morning, once again the sun will melt the frost. This never-ending  
burden  
of your present agony will wear you down,  
for the one who is to rescue you someday  
is not yet even born. This is your reward  
for acting as a friend to human beings.  
Though you are a god, you were not deterred  
by any fear of angering the gods. You gave men honours they did not deserve,  
possessions they were not entitled to.  
Because of that, you will remain on guard,  
here on this joyless rock, standing upright

<sup>34</sup>. . . *ancient sceptre*: Tantalus was the legendary founder of the royal family of Argos, called the Pelopids after Tantalus' son Pelops. Tantalus was Agamemnon's and Menelaus' great-great-grandfather.

<sup>35</sup>. . . *totally disgraced*: Clytaemnestra's excuse for killing Agamemnon is, of course, the fact that he sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia in order to enable the fleet to sail to Troy.

with your legs straight, and you will never sleep.  
You will often scream in pain and sorrow,  
for Zeus' heart is pitilessly harsh,  
and everyone whose ruling power is new  
is cruel and ruthless.

POWER

Come on. Why wait  
and mope around like this so uselessly? Why do you not despise this deity  
who is so hateful to the other gods?  
He gave your special gift to mortal men.

HEPHAESTUS

We are comrades—we share strong common bonds.<sup>36</sup>

POWER That may be true, but can you disobey  
your father's words? Do you not fear him more?

HEPHAESTUS

Ah yes! You always lack a sense of pity  
and are so full of cruel self-confidence.

POWER

There is no point in wailing a lament for this one here. You should stop wasting  
time on things that bring no benefits to you.

HEPHAESTUS

How much I hate the special work I do!

POWER

Why hate it? It's clear enough your artistry  
had nothing at all to do with causing  
what we are facing here.

HEPHAESTUS

That may be true,  
but still I wish my lot as artisan  
had gone to someone else.

POWER

Well, every task  
is burdensome, except to rule the gods.  
No one is truly free except for Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS

I know. This work is proof enough of that. I cannot deny it.

POWER

Then hurry up  
and get these chains around him, just in case  
Zeus sees you stalling.

HEPHAESTUS

All right. These shackles here  
are ready. Take a look.

---

<sup>36</sup> . . . *still a virgin*: Cypris is a common name for Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love. The name comes from the goddess' frequent association with Cyprus.

[Hephaestus starts chaining Prometheus' arm to the cliff]

POWER

Bind his hands.

Use some heavy hammer blows and rivet him  
against the rock.

HEPHAESTUS

There! This part is finished.

It looks all right.

POWER

Strike harder. Make sure

he is securely fixed, with nothing slack. He is an expert at devising ways  
to wriggle out of hopeless situations.

HEPHAESTUS

Well, this arm, at least, is firmly nailed here.

No one will get this out.

POWER

Now drive a spike

in here as well—make sure it won't come loose.

No matter how intelligent he is,  
he has to learn he is nothing but a fool  
compared to Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS

No one could justly fault

this work I do, except for him.

POWER

Now smash

the blunt tip of this adamantine wedge  
straight through his chest—use all your force.

HEPHAESTUS

Alas!

O Prometheus, this suffering of yours— how it makes me weep! <sup>37</sup>

POWER

Why are you so slow

and sighing over Zeus' enemy?

Be careful, or soon you may be groaning  
for yourself.

HEPHAESTUS

This sight is difficult to watch,

as you can see.

POWER

I see this criminal

is getting just what he deserves. Come on,  
wrap these chains around his ribs.

---

<sup>37</sup>. . . *a water jug*: the shaven head may be a token of mourning or a sign of Electra's low status now or both.

HEPHAESTUS

Look, I know

I have to carry out this work, so stop  
ordering me about so much.

POWER

Hold on—

I'll give you orders as often as I please and keep on badgering you. Move down,  
and use your strength to fix his legs in place.

HEPHAESTUS

Our work is done. That did not take too long.

POWER

Hit the fetters really hard—those ones there,  
around his feet. The one who's watching us,  
inspecting what we do, can turn vicious.

HEPHAESTUS

The words you speak well match the way you look.

POWER

Well, your soft heart can sympathize with him,  
but do not criticize my stubborn will  
and my harsh temper.

HEPHAESTUS

We should be going. His limbs are all securely fixed in place.

[Exit Hephaestus]

POWER [to Prometheus] Now you can flaunt your arrogance up here,  
by stealing honours given to the gods  
and offering them to creatures of a day.  
Are mortal beings strong enough to ease  
the burden of your pain? The gods were wrong  
to give that name 'Prometheus' to you,  
'someone who thinks ahead,' for now you need  
a real Prometheus to help you out  
and find a way to free you from these chains. <sup>38</sup>

[Exit Power and Force]

PROMETHEUS

O you heavenly skies and swift-winged winds,  
you river springs, you countless smiling waves  
on ocean seas, and Earth, you mother of all,  
and you as well, the all-seeing circle  
of the celestial sun—I summon you  
to see what I, a god, am suffering  
at the hands of gods. Look here and witness  
how I am being worn down with torments  
which I will undergo for countless years.

---

<sup>38</sup>. . . *couch of death*: Agamemnon was killed in his bath, trapped under his cloak, as if under a hunting net.

This is the kind of shameful punishment the new ruler of the gods imposed on me.  
 Alas! Alas! I groan under the pain  
 of present torments and those yet to come.  
 Who will deliver me from such harsh pain?  
 From what part of the sky will he appear?  
 And yet, why talk like this? For I possess  
 a detailed knowledge of what lies in store  
 before it happens—none of my tortures  
 will come as a surprise. I must endure,  
 as best I can, the fate I have been given, for I know well that no one can prevail  
 against the strength of harsh Necessity.  
 And yet it is not possible for me  
 to speak or not to speak about my fate.<sup>39</sup> I have been compelled to bear the yoke  
 of punishment because I gave a gift  
 to mortal beings—I searched out and stole  
 the source of fire concealed in fennel stalks,  
 and that taught men the use of all the arts  
 and gave them ways to make amazing things. Now chained and nailed beneath  
 the open sky,  
 I am paying the price for what I did.  
 But wait! What noise and what invisible scent  
 is drifting over me? Is it divine  
 or human or both of these? Has someone  
 travelled to the very edges of the world  
 to watch my suffering. What do they want?  
 [Prometheus shouts out to whoever is watching him]  
 Here I am, an ill-fated god! You see  
 an enemy of Zeus shackled in chains,  
 hated by all those gods who spend their time in Zeus' court! They think my love for  
 men  
 is too excessive!  
 What is that sound I hear?  
 The whirling noise of birds nearby—the air  
 is rustling with their lightly beating wings!  
 Whatever comes too close alarms me.  
 [Enter the Chorus of nymphs, daughters of Oceanus, in a winged chariot, which  
 hovers beside Prometheus]<sup>40</sup>  
 CHORUS

<sup>39</sup>. . . *your house, as well*: Helen and Clytaemnestra were twin sisters born to Leda, but with different fathers—Tyndareus, king of Sparta and Leda's husband, was Clytaemnestra's father, but Zeus, who in the form of a swan raped Leda, was Helen's.

<sup>40</sup>. . . *Castor*: Castor and Polydeuces (also called Pollux), the Dioscuri, were twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra, all born at the same time to Leda, queen of Sparta (hence Castor is an uncle of Electra). Polydeuces and Helen were children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytaemnestra were children of Tyndareus. When Castor was killed (before the Trojan war), Polydeuces turned down immortality, but Zeus allowed them to alternate, living among the gods and men, changing each day.



You need not fear us. We are your friends.  
 The rapid beating of these eager wings  
 has borne our company to this sheer cliff.  
 We worked to get our father to agree,  
 and he did so, although that was not easy. The swiftly moving breezes bore us on,  
 for the echoing clang of hammer blows  
 pierced right into the corners of our cave  
 and beat away my bashful modesty.  
 And so, without tying any sandals on,  
 I rushed here in this chariot with wings.

PROMETHEUS

Aaaiii! Alas! O you daughters  
 born from fertile Tethys, children  
 of your father Oceanus, whose current  
 circles the entire world and never rests,  
 look at me! See how I am chained here,  
 nailed on this cliff above a deep ravine,  
 where I maintain my dreary watch. <sup>41</sup>

CHORUS

I see that, Prometheus, and a cloud  
 of tears and terror moves across my eyes  
 to observe your body being worn away  
 in these outrageous adamantine chains.  
 New gods now rule on Mount Olympus,  
 and, like a tyrant, Zeus is governing  
 with new-fangled laws, overpowering those gods who were so strong before.

PROMETHEUS

If only he had thrown me underground,  
 down there in Hades, which receives the dead,  
 in Tartarus, through which no one can pass, and cruelly bound me there in fetters  
 no one could break, so that none of the gods  
 or anyone else could gloat at my distress.  
 But now the blowing winds toy with me here,  
 and the pain I feel delights my enemies.

CHORUS

What god is so hard hearted he would find  
 this scene enjoyable? Who would not feel  
 compassion for these sufferings of yours,  
 apart from Zeus, who, in his angry mood,  
 has set his rigid mind inflexibly  
 on conquering the race of Ouranos.  
 And he will never stop until his heart

---

<sup>41</sup>. . . *oracles of Loxias*: Loxias is another name for Apollo, the god whose shrine Orestes consults before coming to Argos (as he mentions at line 115 above). But we do not know the text of the oracle (although we later learn it encouraged him to commit the revenge murders), and Electra is, one assumes, ignorant of Orestes' visit to the shrine.

is fully satisfied or someone else  
overthrows his power by trickery,  
hard as that may be, and rules instead.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, and even though I am being tortured, bound in these strong chains, the day  
is coming  
when that ruler of those sacred beings  
will truly need me to reveal to him  
a new intrigue by which he will be stripped of all his honours and his sceptre, too.  
<sup>42</sup> He will not charm that secret out of me  
with sweet honeyed phrases of persuasion,  
nor, for all his savage threats, will I ever cringe down in front of him and let him  
know  
the answer—no!—not until he frees me from these cruel shackles and is willing  
to pay me compensation for his crime!

CHORUS

With that audacious confidence of yours,  
you do not cower before these bitter pains,  
but you allow your tongue to speak too freely.  
A piercing fear knifes through my heart,  
my dread about your fate, how you must  
steer your ship to find safe haven  
and see an end to all your troubles.  
For the son of Cronos has a heart that is inflexible—his character  
will not be moved by prayer.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, I know.  
Zeus is a harsh god and holds the reins  
of justice in his hands. But nonetheless,  
I can see the day approaching when his mind  
will soften, once that secret I described  
has led to his collapse. Then he will abate  
his stubborn rage and enter eagerly  
into a bond of friendship with me.  
By then I will be eager for that, too.

CHORUS

Tell us the whole story of what happened.  
How did Zeus have you seized and on what charge?  
Why does he so shamefully abuse you  
in this painful way? Give us the details,  
unless you would be harmed by telling us.

PROMETHEUS

I find these matters truly unbearable

---

<sup>42</sup> . . . *Nereids*: These are sea goddesses, daughters of Nereus. Achilles' mother, Thetis, was one of them.

to talk about, but remaining silent  
pains me, too. The events that led to this  
are all so miserably unfortunate.  
When the powers in heaven got angry, they started quarrelling amongst themselves.

Some wanted to hurl Cronos from his throne,  
so Zeus could rule instead, but then others  
wanted the reverse—to ensure that Zeus  
would never rule the gods. I tried my best  
to give them good advice, but I could not  
convince the Titans, offspring of the Earth  
and Heaven, who, despising trickery,  
insisted stubbornly they would prevail  
without much effort, by using force. Both mother Themis and the goddess Earth  
(who has a single form but many names)  
had often uttered prophecies to me  
about how Fate would make events unfold,  
how those who would seize power and control  
would need, not brutal might and violence,  
but sly deception. I went through all this,  
but they were not concerned—they thought  
everything I said a waste of time.

So then, when I considered what to do, the wisest course of action seemed to be  
to join my mother and take Zeus' side.

I did so eagerly, and he was keen  
to have me with him. Thanks to my advice,  
the gloomy pit of Tartarus now hides  
old Cronos and his allies.<sup>43</sup> I helped Zeus,  
that tyrant of the gods—now he repays me  
with this foul torment. It is a sickness  
which somehow comes with every tyranny  
to place no trust in friends.

But you asked why Zeus is torturing me like this.  
I will explain. As soon as he was seated  
on his father's throne, he quickly set about  
assigning gods their various honours  
and organizing how he meant to rule.  
But for those sad wretched human beings,  
he showed no concern at all. He wanted  
to wipe out the entire race and grow  
a new one in its place. None of the gods

---

<sup>43</sup> . . . *sons of Atreus*: These lines refer to the centaur Chiron (or Cheiron), half man and half horse, who in the region described, educated Achilles and other heroes. Pelion and Ossa are two famous mountains. Hephaestus is the god who made Achilles' divine armour (at the request of Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis) after his own armour worn by Patroclus had been captured by Hector, the leader of the Trojan forces.

objected to his plan except for me. I was the only one who had the courage.  
So I saved those creatures from destruction  
and a trip to Hades. And that is why  
I have been shackled here and have to bear  
such agonizing pain, so pitiful to see.  
I set compassion for the human race  
above the way I felt about myself,  
so now I am unworthy of compassion.  
This is how he seeks to discipline me,  
without a shred of mercy—the spectacle disgraces Zeus' name.

CHORUS

But anyone  
who shows no pity for your agonies,  
Prometheus, has a heart of iron  
and is made out of rock. As for myself,  
I had no wish to see them, and now I have,  
my heart is full of grief.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, to my friends  
I make a most distressing sight.

CHORUS

Was there more?  
Or were you guilty of just one offence?

PROMETHEUS

I stopped men thinking of their future deaths.

CHORUS

What cure for this disease did you discover?

PROMETHEUS

Inside their hearts I put blind hope.

CHORUS

With that  
you gave great benefits to humankind.

PROMETHEUS

And in addition to hope, I gave them fire.

CHORUS

You did that for those creatures of a day?  
Do they have fire now?

PROMETHEUS

They do. And with it  
they will soon master many arts.

CHORUS

So Zeus  
charged you with this . . .

PROMETHEUS [interrupting] . . . and he torments me and gives me no relief  
from suffering!

CHORUS

And has no time been set when your ordeal comes to an end?

PROMETHEUS

No. None at all, except when it seems suitable to Zeus.

CHORUS

How will he ever think it suitable?  
What hope is there in that? Do you not see where you went wrong? But I do not enjoy discussing those mistakes you made, and you must find it painful. Let us leave that point, so in this anguish you find some release.

PROMETHEUS

It is easy for someone whose foot remains unsnared by suffering to give advice and criticize another in distress. I was well aware of all these matters, and those mistakes I made quite willingly—I freely chose to do the things I did. I will not deny that. By offering help to mortal beings I brought on myself this suffering. But still, I did not think I would receive this kind of punishment, wasting away on these high rocky cliffs, fixed on this remote and desolate crag. But do not mourn the troubles I now face. Step down from your chariot and listen to those misfortunes I must still confront, so you will learn the details of my story from start to finish. Accept my offer. Agree to hear me out, and share with me the pain I feel right now. For misery, shifting around from place to place, settles on different people at different times.

CHORUS [leaving the chariot] Your request does not fall on deaf ears, Prometheus. My lightly stepping foot has moved down from the swift-winged chariot and sacred air, the pathway of the birds, to walk along this rugged rock towards you. I want to hear your tale, a full account of all your suffering.

[Enter OCEANUS on a flying monster]

OCEANUS

I have now reached the end of my long journey, travelling to visit you, Prometheus, on the wings of this swift beast, and using my own mind instead of any reins to guide it here. You know I feel great sympathy for you and for your suffering. It seems to me our ties of kinship make me feel that way.

But even if there were no family bonds,  
no one wins more respect from me than you.  
You will soon realize I speak the truth  
and do not simply prattle empty words.  
So come, show me how I can be of help,  
for you will never say you have a friend  
more loyal to you than Oceanus.

PROMETHEUS

What is this? What am I looking at?  
Have you, too, travelled here to gaze upon  
my agonies? How were you brave enough  
to leave that flowing stream which shares your name  
and those rock arches of the cave you made,  
to journey to this land, the womb of iron?<sup>44</sup> Or have you come to see how I am  
doing,  
to sympathize with me in my distress?  
Behold this spectacle—a friend of Zeus,  
who helped him win his way to sovereignty!  
See how his torments weigh me down!

OCEANUS

I see that, Prometheus, and although you do possess  
a subtle mind, I would like to offer you  
some good advice. You have to understand  
your character and adopt new habits.  
For even gods have a new ruler now.  
If you keep hurling out offensive words,  
with such insulting and abusive language,  
Zeus may well hear you, even though his throne  
is far away, high in the heavenly sky,  
and then this present heap of anguished pain will seem mere childish play. Instead  
of that,  
you poor suffering creature, set aside  
this angry mood of yours and seek relief  
from all this misery. These words of mine  
may seem to you perhaps too old and trite,  
but this is what you get, Prometheus,  
for having such a proud and boastful tongue.  
You show no modesty in what you say  
and will not bow down before misfortune,  
for you prefer to add more punishments to those you have already. You should  
hear me  
as your teacher and stop this kicking out  
against the whip. You know our present king,

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<sup>44</sup>. . . *Maia's country child*: Perseus was the hero who killed Medusa, the most ferocious of the Gorgons (her face turned men to stone). Hermes, divine son of Zeus, assisted Perseus in the exploit. He is called a "country child" because he is associated with farming and hunting.

who rules all by himself and has no one  
 he must answer to, is harsh. I will go  
 and, if I can, attempt to ease your pain.  
 You must stay quiet—do not keep shouting  
 such intemperate things. Do you not know,  
 with all that shrewd intelligence of yours,  
 your thoughtless tongue can get you punished?  
 PROMETHEUS

I am happy things turned out so well for you.  
 You had the courage to support my cause,  
 but you escaped all blame.<sup>45</sup> Now let me be,  
 and do not make my suffering your concern.  
 Whatever you may say will be in vain—  
 persuading Zeus is not an easy task.  
 You should take care this journey you have made  
 does not get you in trouble.

OCEANUS Your nature  
 makes you far better at giving good advice  
 to neighbours rather than yourself. I judge by looking at the facts, not by listening  
 to what others say. You should not deter  
 a person who is eager to help out.  
 For I am sure—yes, I am confident—  
 there is one gift which Zeus will offer me,  
 and he will free you from this suffering.

PROMETHEUS  
 You have my thanks—and I will not forget.  
 There is in you no lack of willingness  
 to offer aid. But spare yourself the trouble,  
 which will be useless and no help to me, if, in fact, you want to make the effort.  
 Just keep quiet, and do not interfere.  
 I may be miserable, but my distress  
 does not make me desire to see such pain  
 imposed on everyone—no, not at all.  
 What my brother Atlas has to suffer  
 hurts my heart. In some region to the west  
 he has to stand, bearing on his shoulders the pillar of earth and heaven, a load  
 even his arms find difficult to carry.<sup>46</sup> And I feel pity when I contemplate  
 the creature living in Cilician caves,

<sup>45</sup> . . . *racing lioness*: This is a reference to the monster Chimaera, a fire-breathing lioness with a goat's body and head growing out of its back. The Chimaera was killed by the hero Bellerophon. The reference to Hector is a reminder that he had to face Achilles' shield in his final and fatal encounter with Achilles (described in Book 22 of the Iliad).

<sup>46</sup> . . . *slipped past the guard*: This line is corrupt and makes little sense in the Greek. The words "someone slipped past the guard" have been put in to make sense of Electra's words, turning the line into a suggestion that some citizen may have eluded Aegisthus' sentries and paid a tribute to Agamemnon. As Cropp points out, omitting the line makes it read as if the Old Man is interrupting Electra, a dramatically implausible action.

that fearful monster with a hundred heads,  
born from the earth, impetuous Typhon,  
curbed by Zeus' force.<sup>47</sup> He held out against  
the might of all the gods. His hideous jaws  
produced a terrifying hiss, and his eyes  
flashed a ferocious stare, as if his strength  
could utterly destroy the rule of Zeus.  
But Zeus' thunderbolt, which never sleeps,  
that swooping, fire-breathing lightning stroke,  
came down and drove the arrogant boasting  
right out of him. Struck to his very heart,  
he was reduced to ash, and all his might  
was blasted away by rolls of thunder. Now his helpless and immobile body  
lies close beside a narrow ocean strait,  
pinned down beneath the roots of Aetna,  
while on that mountain, at the very top,  
Hephaestus sits and forges red-hot iron. But one day that mountain peak will blow  
out  
rivers of fire, whose savage jaws devour  
the level fruitful fields of Sicily.  
Though Typhon may have been burned down to ash  
by Zeus' lightning bolt, his seething rage  
will then erupt and shoot out molten arrows,  
belching horrifying streams of liquid fire. But you are not without experience  
and have no need of me to teach you this.  
So save yourself the way you think is best, and I will bear whatever I must face,  
until the rage in Zeus' heart subsides.

OCEANUS

Surely you realize, Prometheus,  
that in the case of a disordered mood  
words act as healers.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, but only if  
one uses them at the appropriate time  
to soften up the heart and does not try  
to calm its swollen rage too forcefully.

OCEANUS

What dangers do you see if someone blends  
his courage and his eagerness to act? Tell me that.

PROMETHEUS

Simple stupidity  
and wasted effort.

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<sup>47</sup>. . . *Thyestes' son*: Aegisthus is the son of Thyestes (brother of Agamemnon's father, Atreus). Atreus and Thyestes quarreled, and Atreus killed Thyestes' sons and served to him at dinner. Aegisthus survived the slaughter or (in other accounts) was born after the notorious banquet. Euripides' play makes no direct mention of this important part of the traditional story.



OCEANUS

Well, let me fall ill  
from this disease, for someone truly wise  
profits most when he is thought a fool.

PROMETHEUS

But they will think that I made the mistake.

OCEANUS

Those words of yours are clearly telling me  
to go back home.

PROMETHEUS

Yes, in case concern for me  
gets you in serious trouble.

OCEANUS

You mean with Zeus,  
now seated on his new all-powerful throne?

PROMETHEUS

Take care, in case one day that heart of his vents its rage on you.

OCEANUS

What you are suffering,  
Prometheus, will teach me that.

PROMETHEUS

Then go.

Be on your way. Keep to your present plans.

OCEANUS

These words of yours are telling me to leave,  
and I am eager to depart. The wings  
on this four-footed beast will brush the air  
and make our pathway smooth. He will rejoice  
to rest his limbs back in his stall at home.

[Exit OCEANUS]

CHORUS

I groan for your accursed fate,  
Prometheus, and floods of tears  
are streaming from my weeping eyes  
and moisture wets my tender cheeks.  
For Zeus, who rules by his own laws,  
has set your wretched destiny and shows  
towards the gods of earlier days  
an overweening sense of power.

Now every region cries in one lament.  
They mourn the lost magnificence,  
so honoured long ago, the glorious fame  
you and your brothers once possessed.  
And all those mortal beings who live  
in sacred Asia sense your pain, those agonies all men find pitiful . . .  
. . . including those young girls who dwell

in Colchis and have no fear of war,  
and Scythian hordes who occupy  
the furthest regions of the world  
along the shores of lake Maeotis . . .

. . . and in Arabian lands the warlike tribes  
from those high rocky fortress towns in regions near the Caucasus,  
a horde of warriors who scream  
to heft their lethal sharpened spears.<sup>48</sup>

Only once before have I beheld  
another Titan god in such distress  
bound up in adamantine chains—  
great Atlas, whose enormous strength  
was unsurpassed and who now groans  
to bear the vault of heaven on his back.

The sea waves, as they fall, cry out, the ocean depths lament, while down below  
the deep black pits of Hades growl,  
and limpid flowing rivers moan,  
to see the dreadful pain you undergo.

#### PROMETHEUS

You must not think it is my stubbornness  
that keeps me quiet, or a sense of pride,  
for bitter thoughts keep gnawing at my heart  
to see how foully I am being abused.  
And yet who else but I assigned clear rights  
and privileges to these new deities?<sup>49</sup>  
But I make no complaint about such things,  
for if I spoke, I would be telling you  
what you already know. So listen now  
to all the miseries of mortal men—  
how they were simple fools in earlier days,  
until I gave them sense and intellect.  
I will not speak of them to criticize,  
but in a spirit of goodwill to show  
I did them many favours.

First of all,  
they noticed things, but did not really see and listened, too, but did not really hear.  
They spent their lives confusing everything,  
like random shapes in dreams. They knew nothing  
of brick-built houses turned towards the sun  
or making things with wood. Instead, they dug

<sup>48</sup> . . . *I'll accept those words*: Cropp suggests that Orestes' rather odd phraseology in this speech and the previous one stems from the fact that he is using the language of ritual, as if he were consulting an oracle, first hoping that he gets a good pronouncement which he can understand and then accepting the "utterance."

<sup>49</sup> . . . *some new birth*: the Nymphs, minor country goddesses, were associated with physical health, including childbirth and childhood.

their dwelling places underneath the earth,  
like airy ants in cracks of sunless caves.  
They had no signs on which they could rely  
to show when winter came or flowery spring  
or fruitful summer. Everything they did betrayed their total lack of understanding,  
until I taught them all about the stars and pointed out the way they rise and set,  
which is not something easy to discern.

Then I invented arithmetic for them,  
the most ingenious acquired skill,  
and joining letters to write down words,  
so they could store all things in Memory,  
the working mother of the Muses' arts.<sup>50</sup>

I was the first to set wild animals beneath the yoke, and I made them submit  
to collars and to packs, so mortal men  
would find relief from bearing heavy loads.  
I took horses trained to obey the reins  
and harnessed them to chariots, a sign  
of luxurious wealth and opulence.  
And I was the one who designed their ships,  
those mariners' vessels which sail on wings  
across the open sea.

Yes, those are the things  
which I produced for mortal men, and yet,  
as I now suffer here, I cannot find  
a way to free myself from this distress.

CHORUS

You have had to bear appalling pain.  
You lost your wits and now are at a loss.  
Like some bad doctor who has fallen ill,  
you are now desperate and cannot find  
the medicine to cure your own disease.

PROMETHEUS

Just listen to what else I have to say,  
and you will be astonished even more  
by the ideas and skills I came up with. The greatest one was this: if anyone  
was sick, they had no remedies at all,  
no healing potions, food, or liniments.  
Without such things, they simply withered up.  
But then I showed them how to mix mild cures,  
which they now use to fight off all disease.  
I set up many forms of prophecy  
and was the first to organize their dreams,  
to say which ones were fated to come true.

---

<sup>50</sup> . . . *ten days ago*: the "quarantine," Cropp notes, was a period immediately after childbirth in which the mother was kept in seclusion to avoid contamination.

I taught them about omens—vocal sounds hard to understand, as well as random signs encountered on the road. The flights of birds with crooked talons I classified for them—both those which by their nature are auspicious and those whose prophecies are ominous—observing each bird's different way of life, its enemies, its friends, and its companions, as well as the smooth texture of its entrails, what colour the gall bladder ought to have to please the gods, and the best symmetry for speckled lobes on livers.<sup>51</sup> I roasted thigh bones wrapped in fat and massive cuts of meat and showed those mortal beings the right way to read the omens which are hard to trace. I opened up their eyes to fiery symbols which previously they could not understand. Yes, I did all that. And then I helped them with what lay hidden in the earth—copper, iron, silver, gold. Who could ever claim he had discovered these before I did? No one. I am quite confident of that, unless he wished to waste his time in chat. To sum up everything in one brief word, know this—all the artistic skills men have come from Prometheus.

CHORUS

But you should not be giving help like that to human beings beyond the proper limits, ignoring your own troubles, for I have every hope you will be liberated from these chains and be as powerful as Zeus himself.

PROMETHEUS

It is not destined that almighty Fate will ever end these matters in that way. I will lose these chains, but only after I have been left twisting here in agony, bowed down by countless pains. Artistic skill has far less strength than sheer Necessity.

CHORUS

Then who is the one who steers Necessity?

PROMETHEUS

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<sup>51</sup> . . . *be a man*: There is some confusion and argument about the allocation and position of this line, which in the Greek comes after this speech of Electra's and is divided between Orestes and Electra. I have followed Cropp's suggestion and given the entire line to Electra at the beginning of her speech to Orestes.

The three-formed Fates and unforgetting Furies. <sup>52</sup>

CHORUS

Are they more powerful than Zeus?

PROMETHEUS

Well, Zeus

will not at any rate escape his destiny.

CHORUS

But what has destiny foretold for Zeus,  
except to rule eternally?

PROMETHEUS

That point

you must not know quite yet. Do not pursue it.

CHORUS

It is some holy secret you conceal.

PROMETHEUS

Think of something else. It is not yet time  
to talk of this. The matter must remain  
completely hidden, for if I can keep  
the secret safe, then I shall be released  
from torment and lose these shameful fetters.

CHORUS

May Zeus, who governs everything, never direct his power at me  
and fight against my purposes.

And may I never ease my efforts  
to approach the gods with offerings  
of oxen slain in sacrifice  
beside my father's restless stream,  
the ceaseless flow of Oceanus.

May I not speak a profane word.  
Instead let this resolve remain  
and never melt away from me.  
It is sweet to spend a lengthy life  
with hope about what lies in store,  
feeding one's heart with happy thoughts.

But when I look at you, Prometheus,  
tormented by these countless pains,  
I shiver in fear—with your self-will  
you show no reverence for Zeus  
and honour mortal beings too much.

Come, my friend, those gifts you gave—  
what gifts did you get in return? Tell me how they could offer help?  
What can such creatures of a day provide?

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<sup>52</sup>. . . *fleece of gold*: Thyestes and Atreus were brothers who quarreled. Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife, Aerope, and, in revenge, Atreus killed Thyestes' sons and served them up to him for dinner. Aegisthus is Thyestes' surviving son. The golden lamb in question seems to be the symbol of the right to rule in Mycenae.

Do you not see how weak they are,  
the impotent and dream-like state,  
in which the sightless human race is bound, with chains around their feet?  
Whatever mortal beings decide to do,  
they cannot overstep what Zeus has planned.

I learned these things, Prometheus,  
by watching your destructive fate. The song which now steals over me  
is different from that nuptial chant  
I sang around your couch and bath  
to celebrate your wedding day,  
when with your dowry gifts you won  
Hesione, my sister, as your wife,  
and led her to your bridal bed.

[Enter IO] <sup>53</sup>

IO

What land is this? What race of living beings?  
Who shall I say I see here bound in chains,  
exposed and suffering on these cold rocks? What crime has led to such a punishment  
and your destruction? Tell me where I am.  
Where has my wretched wandering brought me?  
To what part of the world?

[Io is suddenly in great pain]

Aaaaiiii! The pain!!!

That gadfly stings me once again, the ghost  
of earth-born Argus! Get him away from me,  
O Earth, that herdsman with a thousand eyes—  
the very sight of him fills me with terror!  
Those crafty eyes of his keep following me.  
Though dead, he is not hidden underground,  
but moves out from the shades beneath the earth  
and hunts me down and, in my wretched state,  
drives me to wander without nourishment  
along the sandy shore beside the sea.  
A pipe made out of reeds and wax sings out  
a clear relaxing strain. <sup>54</sup> Alas for me!  
Where is this path of roaming far and wide  
now leading me? What did I ever do,  
O son of Cronos, how did I go wrong,

<sup>53</sup> . . . *Ammon's land*: This is a reference to North Africa, where Ammon's shrine was located.

<sup>54</sup> . . . *glorious brothers*: Clytaemnestra's brothers are Castor and Polydeuces, or Pollux, the Dioscuri, twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra, all born at the same time to Leda, queen of Sparta (hence Castor is an uncle of Electra). Polydeuces and Helen were children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytaemnestra were children of Tyndareus. When Castor was killed (before the Trojan war), Polydeuces turned down immortality, but Zeus allowed them to alternate, living among the gods and men, changing each day.

that you should yoke me to such agonies . . .

[Io reacts to another attack]

Aaaaiiii! . . . and by oppressing me like this,  
setting a fearful stinging fly to chase  
a helpless girl, drive me to this madness?  
Burn me with fire, or bury me in earth,  
or feed me to the monsters of the sea.  
Do not refuse these prayers of mine, my lord!  
I have had my fill of all this wandering,  
this roaming far and wide—and all this pain!  
I do not know how to escape the pain!  
Do you not hear the ox-horned maiden call?  
PROMETHEUS

How could I not hear that young girl's voice,  
the child of Inachus, in a frantic state  
from the gadfly's sting? She fires Zeus' heart  
with sexual lust, and now, worn down  
by Hera's hate, is forced to roam around  
on paths that never end.

IO

Why do you shout  
my father's name? Tell this unhappy girl  
just who you are, you wretched sufferer,  
and how, in my distress, you call to me,  
knowing who I am and naming my disease, the heaven-sent sickness which  
consumes me  
as it whips my skin with maddening stings . . .

[Io is attacked again by the gadfly. She moves spasmodically as she wrestles  
with the pain]

. . . Aaaaiiii! . . . I have come rushing here, wracked  
with driving pangs of hunger, overwhelmed  
by Hera's plans for her revenge. Of those  
who are in misery . . . Aaaaiiii! . . . which ones  
go through the sufferings I face? Give me  
some clear sign how much more agony  
I have to bear! Is there no remedy?

Tell me the medicines for this disease, if you know any. Say something to me!  
Speak to a wretched wandering young girl!

PROMETHEUS

I will clarify for you all those things  
you wish to know—not by weaving riddles,  
but by using simple speech. For with friends  
our mouths should tell the truth quite openly. You are looking at the one who  
offered men  
the gift of fire. I am Prometheus.

IO

O you who have shown to mortal beings  
so many benefits they all can share, poor suffering Prometheus! What act  
has led you to be punished in this way?

PROMETHEUS

I have just finished mourning my own pain.

IO

Will you not grant this favour to me, then?

PROMETHEUS

Ask what you wish to know. For you will learn  
the details of it all from me.

IO

Tell me who chained you here against this rocky cleft.

PROMETHEUS

The will of Zeus and Hephaestus' hands.

IO

For what offence are you being punished?

PROMETHEUS

I have said enough. I will not tell you any more than that.

IO

But I need more.

At least inform me when my wandering ends.

How long will I be in this wretched state?

PROMETHEUS

For you it would be better not to know  
than to have me answer.

IO

I'm begging you—

do not conceal from me what I must bear.

PROMETHEUS

It is not that I begrudge that gift to you.

IO

Then why do you appear so hesitant to tell me everything?

PROMETHEUS

I am not unwilling,

but I do not wish to break your spirit.

IO

Do not be more concerned for how I feel  
than I wish you to be.

PROMETHEUS

Since you insist,

I am obliged to speak. So listen to me.

CHORUS

No, not yet. Give us a share in this, as well,

so we may be content with what you say.

We should first learn how she became diseased.

So let the girl herself explain to us



the things that led to her destructive fate.  
Then you can teach her what still lies in store.

PROMETHEUS

Well then, Io, it is now up to you to grace them with this favour—above all, because they are your father's sisters.<sup>55</sup> And whenever one is likely to draw tears from those who listen, it is well worthwhile to weep aloud, lamenting one's own fate.

IO

I do not know how I could now refuse you.  
From the plain tale I tell you will find out  
all things you wish to know, although to talk  
about the brutal storm sent by the gods,  
the cruel transformation of my shape, and where the trouble came from, as it swept  
down on a miserable wretch like me—  
that makes me feel ashamed.

During the night  
visions were always strolling through my rooms  
calling me with smooth, seductive words:

"You are a very fortunate young girl,  
so why remain a virgin all this time,  
when you could have the finest match of all?  
For Zeus, smitten by the shaft of passion,  
now burns for you and wishes to make love.  
My child, do not reject the bed of Zeus,  
but go to Lerna's fertile meadowlands,  
to your father's flocks and stalls of oxen,  
so Zeus' eyes can ease his fierce desire."

Visions like that upset me every night,  
till I got brave enough to tell my father  
about what I was seeing in my dreams.  
He sent many messengers to Delphi  
and Dodona, to see if he could learn  
what he might do or say to please the gods.  
But his men all came back bringing reports  
of cryptic and confusing oracles,  
with wording difficult to comprehend.  
Inachus at last received a clear response,  
a simple order which he must obey—  
to drive me from my home and native land,  
to turn me out and force me into exile,  
roaming the remotest regions of the earth—  
and if he was unwilling, Zeus would send  
a flaming thunderbolt which would destroy his entire race, not leaving one alive.

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<sup>55</sup>. . . *Alpheus*: Cropp suggests that this is a reference to the Olympic games.

So he obeyed Apollo's oracles  
by forcing me away against my will  
and denying me entry to his home.  
He did not want to do it but was forced  
by the controlling majesty of Zeus.  
Immediately my mind and shape were changed.  
My head acquired these horns, as you can see,  
and a vicious fly began tormenting me  
with such ferocious stings I ran away, madly bounding off to the flowing stream  
of sweet Cherchneia and then to Lerna's springs.  
But the herdsman Argus, a child of Earth,  
whose rage is violent, came after me,  
with all those close-packed eyes of his, searching  
for my tracks. But an unexpected fate  
which no one could foresee robbed him of his life. And now, tormented by this  
stinging gadfly,  
a scourge from god, I am being driven  
from place to place.

So now you understand the story of what I have had to suffer.  
If you can talk about my future troubles,  
then let me know. But do not pity me  
and speak false words of reassurance,  
for, in my view, to use deceitful speech  
is the most shameful sickness of them all.

CHORUS

Alas, alas! Tell me no more! Alas!  
I never, never thought my ears  
would hear a story strange as this  
or suffering so hard to contemplate  
and terrible to bear, the outrage  
and the horror of that two-edged goad  
would pierce me to my soul. Alas!  
O Fate, Fate, how I shake with fear  
to see what has been done to Io.

PROMETHEUS

These cries and fears of yours are premature.  
Wait until you learn what lies in store for her.

CHORUS

Then speak, and tell us everything. The sick  
find solace when they clearly understand  
the pain they have to face before it comes.

PROMETHEUS

What you desired to learn about before  
you now have readily obtained from me,  
for you were eager first of all to hear  
Io herself tell you what she suffered.

Now listen to what she has yet to face,  
the ordeals this girl must still experience  
at Hera's hands. You, too, child of Inachus,  
set what I have to say inside your heart,  
so you will find out how your roaming ends.

First, turn from here towards the rising sun, then move across those lands as yet unploughed,  
and you will reach the Scythian nomads,  
who live in wicker dwellings which they raise  
on strong-wheeled wagons. These men possess  
far-shooting bows, so stay away from them.  
Keep moving on along the rocky shoreline  
beside the roaring sea, and pass their lands.  
The Chalybes, men who work with iron,  
live to your left.<sup>56</sup> You must beware of them,  
for they are wild and are not kind to strangers. Then you will reach the river  
Hubristes, correctly named for its great turbulence.  
Do not cross it, for that is dangerous,  
until you reach the Caucasus itself,  
the very highest of the mountains there,  
where the power of that flowing river comes gushing from the slopes. Then cross  
those peaks,  
which stretch up to the stars, and take the path  
going south, until you reach the Amazons,  
a tribe which hates all men. In days to come, they will found settlements in  
Themiscyra,  
beside the Thermodon, where the jagged rocks  
of Salmydessus face the sea and offer  
sailors and their ships a savage welcome.  
They will be pleased to guide you on your way.  
Next, you will reach the Cimmerian isthmus,  
beside the narrow entrance to a lake.  
You must be resolute and leave this place  
and at Maeotis move across the stream,  
a trip that will win you eternal fame among all mortal men, for they will name  
that place the Bosphorus in praise of you.<sup>57</sup> Once you leave behind the plains of  
Europe  
you will arrive in Asian lands.

And now,  
does it not strike you that this tyrant god

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<sup>56</sup>Phoebus is a common name for Apollo, the god whose oracle Orestes consulted before coming to Argos. The god advised him to carry out the revenge murders.

<sup>57</sup>. . . *noble twins*: This is another reference to Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux) twin brothers of Clytaemnestra. Strictly speaking only one of them was a child of Zeus (as was Helen, Clytaemnestra's sister). Clytaemnestra and Castor were children of Tyndareus. The twins occupied a position among the stars (we call them the Gemini), and hence were an aid to navigation.

is violent in everything he does?

Because this maiden was a mortal being  
and he was eager to have sex with her,  
he threw her out to wander the whole world.

Young girl, the one you found to seek your hand is vicious. As for the story you just heard,  
you should know this—I am not even past  
the opening prelude.

IO

O no, no, no! Alas!

PROMETHEUS

Are you crying and moaning once again?  
How will you act once you have learned from me  
the agonies that still remain?

CHORUS

You mean  
you have still more to say about her woes?

PROMETHEUS

I do—a wintry sea of dreadful pain.

IO

What point is there for me in living then? Why do I not hurl myself this instant from  
these rough rocks, fall to the plain below,  
and put an end to all my misery?  
I would prefer to die once and for all,  
than suffer such afflictions every day.

PROMETHEUS

Then you would find it difficult to face  
the torments I endure, for I am one  
who cannot die, and death would offer me  
relief from pain. But now no end is set  
to tortures I must bear, until the day  
when Zeus is toppled from his tyrant's throne.

IO

What's that? Will Zeus' power be overthrown?

PROMETHEUS

It seems to me that if that came about  
you would be pleased.

IO

Why not? Because of him  
I suffer horribly.

PROMETHEUS

Then rest assured—  
these things are true.

IO

But who will strip away  
his tyrant's sceptre?

PROMETHEUS

He will do that himself  
with all those brainless purposes of his.

IO

But how? If it will do no harm, tell me.

PROMETHEUS

He will get married—a match he will regret.

IO

To someone mortal or divine? Tell me— if that is something you may talk about.

PROMETHEUS

Why ask me that? I cannot speak of it.

IO

His wife will force him from his throne?

PROMETHEUS

She will.

For she will bear a child whose power  
is greater than his father's.

IO

Is there some way  
Zeus can avert this fate?

PROMETHEUS

No, none at all—  
except through me, once I lose these chains.

IO

Who will free you if Zeus does not consent?

PROMETHEUS

One of your grandchildren. So Fate decrees.

IO

What are you saying? Will a child of mine bring your afflictions to an end?

PROMETHEUS

He will—  
when thirteen generations have gone by.

IO

I find it difficult to understand  
what you foresee.

PROMETHEUS

You should not seek to know  
the details of the pain you still must bear.

IO

Do not say you will do me a favour  
and then withdraw it.

PROMETHEUS

I will offer you  
two possibilities, and you may choose.

IO

What are they? Tell me what the choices are.

Then let me pick which one.

PROMETHEUS

All right, I will. Choose whether I should clarify for you the ordeals you still must face in days to come, or else reveal the one who will release me.

CHORUS

Do her a favour by disclosing one and me by telling us about the other. Do not refuse to tell us all the story. Describe her future wanderings to her, and speak to me of who will set you free. I long to hear that.

PROMETHEUS

Well, since you insist, I will not refuse to tell you everything you wish to know. First, lo, I will speak about the grievous wandering you face. Inscribe this on the tablets of your mind, deep in your memory.

Once you have crossed the stream that separates two continents, [select the route that] leads towards the east, the flaming pathway of the rising son, [and you will come, at first, to northern lands where cold winds blow, and here you must beware of gusting storms, in case a winter blast surprises you and snatches you away.]<sup>58</sup> Then cross the roaring sea until you reach the Gorgons' plains of Cisthene, the home of Phorcys' daughters, three ancient women shaped like swans, who possess a single eye and just one tooth to share among themselves. Rays from the sun do not look down on them, nor does the moon at night. Beside them live their sisters, three snake-haired, winged Gorgons, whom human beings despise. No mortal man can gaze at them and still continue breathing.<sup>59</sup> I tell you this to warn you to take care. Now hear about another fearful sight. Keep watching out for gryphons, hounds of Zeus, who have sharp beaks and never bark out loud, and for that one-eyed Arimasian horde

<sup>58</sup>... *the child I lost*: This is a reference to Clytaemnestra's daughter Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed at the start of the Trojan expedition in order to persuade the gods to change the winds so that the fleet could sail. Clytaemnestra gives details of the story in her next long speech.

<sup>59</sup>... *Aulis*: This was the agreed meeting point for the great naval expedition to Troy. Bad winds delayed the fleet for so long that the entire enterprise was jeopardized. The gods demanded a sacrifice from Agamemnon.

on horseback, who live beside the flow  
 of Pluto's gold-rich stream. <sup>60</sup> Do not go near them.  
 And later you will reach a distant land  
 of people with dark skins who live beside the fountains of the sun, where you will  
 find  
 the river Aethiop. <sup>61</sup> Follow its banks,  
 until you move down to the cataract  
 where from the Bybline mountains the sweet Nile  
 sends out his sacred flow. He will guide you  
 on your journey to the three-cornered land  
 of Nilotis, where destiny proclaims  
 you, Io, and your children will set up  
 a distant settlement.

If any of this  
 remains obscure and hard to understand, question me again, and I will tell you.  
 For I have more leisure time than I desire.

#### CHORUS

If you have left out any incidents  
 or can say more about what lies ahead  
 in Io's cruel journeying, go on.  
 But if that story has now reached an end,  
 then favour us, in turn, with what we asked,  
 if you by chance remember our request.

#### PROMETHEUS

Io has now heard about her travels,  
 a full account up to the very end. But so she learns that what she heard from me  
 was no mere empty tale, I will go through  
 the troubles she endured before she came here,  
 and thus provide a certain guarantee  
 of what I have just said. I will omit  
 most of the details and describe for you  
 the final stages of your journey here.

Once you came to the Molossian plains  
 and the steep mountain ridge beside Dodona,  
 the home of the prophetic oracle of Thesprotian Zeus, that miracle  
 which defies belief, the talking oak trees,  
 clearly and quite unambiguously  
 saluted you as one who would become

<sup>60</sup> . . . *in the same house*: The young girl was Cassandra, daughter of Priam, king of Troy, given as a war prize to Agamemnon. She was a prophetess under a divine curse: she always spoke the truth, but no one ever believed her. She is an important character in Aeschylus' treatment of this story in his play *Agamemnon*.

<sup>61</sup> . . . *others badly*: These lines of pithy moralizing at the end of Electra's speech and in this speech by the Chorus Leader sound very out of place here. Some editors have removed them as a later addition to the text.

a celebrated bride of Zeus.<sup>62</sup> Is this  
 a memory that gives you some delight?  
 From there, chased by the gadfly's sting, you rushed  
 along the path beside the sea and reached  
 the mighty gulf of Rhea and from there  
 were driven back by storms. And you should know an inner region of that sea will  
 now,  
 in days to come, be called Ionian,  
 a name to make all mortal men recall  
 how Io moved across it.<sup>63</sup>

These details  
 are tokens of how much I understand—  
 they show how my intelligence can see  
 more things than what has been revealed.

The rest  
 I will describe for you and her to share,  
 pursuing the same track I traced before.  
 On the very edges of the mainland, where at its mouth the Nile deposits soil,  
 there is a city—Canopus. There Zeus  
 will finally restore you to your senses  
 by merely stroking and caressing you  
 with his non-threatening hand. After that,  
 you will give birth to dark-skinned Epaphus,  
 named from the way he was conceived by Zeus,  
 and he will harvest all the fruit that grows  
 in regions watered by the flowing Nile.<sup>64</sup> Five generations after Epaphus, fifty  
 young girls will return to Argos,  
 not of their own free will, but to escape  
 a marriage with their cousins, while the men,  
 with passionate hearts, race after them,  
 like hawks in close pursuit of doves, seeking  
 marriages they should not rightfully pursue.<sup>65</sup> But the gods will not allow them to  
 enjoy  
 the young girls' bodies. They will be buried  
 in Pelasgian earth, for their new brides  
 keeping watch at night, will overpower and kill them all, in a daring murder,  
 and each young bride will take her husband's life,  
 bathing a two-edged sword in her man's blood.

<sup>62</sup>. . . *given birth*: Some editors find these two and half lines a very odd change of subject for Clytaemnestra, who is now dwelling on her own sorrow. Cropp moves them to the opening of Clytaemnestra's speech at 1380 below, where they do seem more appropriate.

<sup>63</sup>. . . *harvest times*: At this point in the manuscript two lines appear to be missing.

<sup>64</sup>*DIOSCOURI*: It is not clear which of the twin brothers speaks to the human characters or whether they alternate or speak together.

<sup>65</sup>. . . *mad fit*. The Keres are the children of Night, death spirits who prey on living human beings. Although they are different from the Furies (who chase down those who have committed murder in the family), here their function seems quite similar.



I hope my enemies find love like that!  
But passion will bewitch one of those wives  
to spare her husband's life, and her resolve  
will fade. She will prefer to hear herself  
proclaimed a coward than the alternative,  
a murderess. And she will then give birth  
in Argos to a royal line.

To describe all these events in detail would require  
a lengthy story. However, from her seed  
a bold man will be born, who will become  
a famous archer, and he is the one  
who will deliver me from these afflictions.  
My primeval Titan mother, Themis, revealed this prophecy to me in full,  
but to describe how and when it happens  
would take up too much time. And learning that  
would bring no benefit to you at all.

IO

Alas, alas for me! These spasms of pain,  
these agonizing fits which drive me mad  
are turning me to fire. That gadfly's string—  
not forged in any flame—is piercing me.  
My fearful heart is beating in my chest,  
my eyes are rolling in a frantic whirl,  
and raging blasts of sheer insanity  
are sweeping me away. This tongue of mine  
is now beyond control—delirious words  
beat aimlessly against the surging flood of my abhorred destruction.

[Exit IO]

CHORUS

That wise man was truly wise who first  
devised that saying in his mind and then  
whose tongue expressed the words aloud—  
the finest marriages by far are those  
when both the parties have an equal rank.  
The poor should never yearn to match themselves  
with those whose wealth has made them indolent  
or those who always praise their noble birth.

O you Fates, may you never, never see me going as Zeus' partner to his bed,  
and may I never be the wedded bride  
of anyone from heaven. I shake with fear  
to look on this unmarried girl, young Io,  
so devastated by the cruel journey,  
her punishment from goddess Hera.

For me, when a married couple stands  
on equal footing, there is no cause to fear  
and I am not afraid. So may the love

of mightier gods never cast on me that glance which no one can withstand.  
That is a battle where there is no fight,  
where what cannot be done is possible.  
I do not know what would become of me,  
for I can see no way I could escape  
the skilled resourcefulness of Zeus.

PROMETHEUS

And yet Zeus, for all his obdurate heart,  
will be brought down, when he prepares a match  
which will remove him from his tyrant's throne  
and hurl him into deep obscurity. And then the curse his father, Cronos, spoke,  
the one he uttered when he was deposed  
and lost his ancient throne, will all come true.  
None of the gods can clearly offer him  
a certain way to stave off this defeat, except for me. I know what is involved  
and how to save him. So for the moment  
let him sit full of confidence, trusting  
the rumbling he can make high in the sky  
and waving in his hands that lightning bolt which breathes out fire. None of these  
will help.  
They will not stop him falling in disgrace,  
a setback he cannot withstand. For now  
he is himself preparing the very one  
who will oppose him, someone marvellous  
and irresistible, who will produce  
a fiercer fire than Zeus' lightning flash,  
and a roar to drown out Zeus' thunder.  
Poseidon's trident he will split apart,  
the spear which whips the sea and shakes the earth. <sup>66</sup>  
And when Zeus stumbles on this evil fate,  
he will find out how great the difference is  
between a sovereign king and abject slave.

CHORUS

You keep maligning Zeus because these things  
fit in with your desires.

PROMETHEUS

They may be what I want,  
but they will come to pass.

CHORUS

So must we then  
expect someone to lord it over Zeus?

PROMETHEUS

Yes. His neck will be weighed down with chains

<sup>66</sup> . . . of his daughter: Ares, son of Zeus and god of war, killed Poseidon's son, Halirrothius, over the attempted rape of Ares' daughter, Alcippe. Ares was put on trial on Olympus and acquitted by the gods.

more onerous than mine.

CHORUS

Why are you not afraid  
to shout out taunts like this?

PROMETHEUS

Why should I fear when I am destined not to die?

CHORUS

But Zeus  
could load you with afflictions worse than these.

PROMETHEUS

Then let him do it. I am quite prepared  
for anything he may inflict.

CHORUS

But it is wise  
to pay due homage to Necessity.

PROMETHEUS

Well then, pay homage. Bow your heads in awe.  
Flatter the one who has the power to rule,  
at least for now. But as for me, I think  
of Zeus as less than nothing. Let him act  
however he wants and reign for a brief while. He will not rule the gods for very  
long.

But wait! I see the messenger of Zeus,  
a servant of our brand new tyrant lord.  
No doubt he has come here to give us news.

[Enter Hermes]

HERMES

You devious, hot-tempered schemer, who sinned  
against the gods by giving their honours  
to creatures of a day, you thief of fire,  
I am here to speak to you. Father Zeus  
is ordering you to make known this marriage  
you keep boasting of and to provide the name of who will bring on Zeus' fall from  
power.

Do not speak in enigmatic riddles,  
but set down clearly each and every fact.  
And do not make me come a second time,  
Prometheus. What you are doing here,  
as you well know, will not make Zeus relent.

PROMETHEUS

You speech is crammed with pride and arrogance,  
quite fitting for a servant of the gods.  
You all are young—so is your ruling power—  
and you believe the fortress where you live lies far beyond all grief. But I have seen  
two tyrant rulers cast out from that place,  
and I will see a third, the present king,

abruptly tossed from there in great disgrace.<sup>67</sup> Do you think I am afraid and cower down

before you upstart gods? The way I feel  
is far removed from any sense of fear.  
So you should hurry back the way you came,  
for you will not learn anything at all  
in answer to what you demand of me.

HERMES

But earlier with this wilfulness of yours you brought these torments on yourself.

PROMETHEUS

Know this—

I would not trade these harsh conditions of mine  
for the life you lead as Zeus' slave.

HERMES

I suppose  
you find it preferable to serve this rock  
than be a trusted messenger of Father Zeus.

PROMETHEUS

Insolence like yours deserves such insults.

HERMES

It sounds as if you find your present state  
a source of pleasure.

PROMETHEUS

Of pleasure? How I wish  
I could see my foes enjoying themselves the way I do. And I count you among them.

HERMES

You think I am to blame for your misfortune?

PROMETHEUS

To put it bluntly—I hate all the gods  
who received my help and then abused me,  
perverting justice.

HERMES

From the words you speak  
I see your madness is no mild disease.

PROMETHEUS

I may well be insane, if madness means  
one hates one's enemies.

HERMES

If you were well,  
you would be unendurable.

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<sup>67</sup>. . . *off to Troy*: In Homer's account (in the *Odyssey*) Menelaus and Helen take a long time to get home from Troy, being blown off course and spending a few years in Egypt. Proteus is the Old Man of the Sea, who helps Menelaus in Egypt. The story of Helen's being detained in Egypt on her way to Troy and never going to the city at all is not in Homer's epic, but was known before Euripides makes use of it here and in his play *Helen*.

PROMETHEUS

Alas for me!

HERMES

Alas? That word is one  
Zeus does not recognize.

PROMETHEUS

But time grows old  
and teaches everything.

HERMES

That well may be, and yet you have not learned to demonstrate  
a sense of self-control in how you think.

PROMETHEUS

If I had that, I would not talk to you—  
to such a subservient slave.

HERMES

So then  
it seems, as far as what my father wants,  
you will say nothing.

PROMETHEUS

Well, obviously  
I owe him and should repay the favour.

HERMES

You taunt me now, as if I were a child.

PROMETHEUS

Well, are you not a child, or even stupider,  
to think you will learn anything from me?  
There is no torture, no form of punishment,  
that Zeus can use to force my mouth to speak  
before these vicious chains are taken off.  
So let him throw his fiery lightning bolt,  
and with his white-winged snow and thunderclaps  
and earthquakes underground shake everything,  
and hurl the world into complete disorder—  
for none of that will force me to submit or even name the one who Fate decrees  
will cast him from his sovereignty.

HERMES

But now  
you should consider if this stance of yours  
will help your cause.

PROMETHEUS

What I am doing now  
has been foretold, determined long ago.

HERMES

You self-willed fool, for once you should submit,  
given the present torments facing you.  
Let your mind be ruled by what is right.

## PROMETHEUS

It is pointless to pester me this way—  
as if you were advising ocean waves. For you should never entertain the thought  
that I will be afraid of Zeus' schemes,  
turn into a woman, and raise my hands,  
the way that supplicating females do, and beg an enemy I hate so much  
to free me from these chains. To act like that  
is far beneath me.

## HERMES

Well, it seems to me  
if I keep talking to you at great length  
my words will all be wasted—my appeals  
do not improve your mood or calm you down. Like a young colt newly yoked, you  
bite the bit  
and use your strength to fight against the reins.  
But the vehement resistance you display  
rests on a feeble scheme, for on its own  
mere stubbornness in those with foolish minds  
is less than useless. If these words of mine  
do not convince you, think about the storm,  
the triple wave of torment which will fall  
and you cannot escape. First, Father Zeus  
will rip this mountain crag with thunder claps and bolts of flaming lightning,  
burying  
your body in the rock, and yet this cleft  
will hold you in its arms. When you have spent  
a long time underground, you will return  
into the light, and Zeus' winged hound,  
his ravenous eagle, will cruelly rip  
your mutilated body into shreds  
and, like an uninvited banqueter,  
will feast upon your liver all day long,  
until its chewing turns the organ black. Do not expect your suffering to end  
until some god appears who will take on  
your troubles and be willing to descend  
to sunless Hades and the deep black pit  
of Tartarus. And so you should think hard.  
What I have said is no fictitious boast,  
but plain and simple truth. For Zeus' mouth  
does not know how to utter something false.  
No. Everything he says will be fulfilled.  
Look around you and reflect. And never think self-will is preferable to prudent  
thought.

## CHORUS

To us it seems that what Hermes has said  
is not unreasonable. His orders

tell you to set aside your stubbornness  
and seek out wise advice. Do what he says.  
It is dishonourable for someone wise  
to persevere in doing something wrong.

PROMETHEUS

Well, I already know about the news  
this fellow has announced with so much fuss.  
There is no shame in painful suffering inflicted by one enemy on another.  
So let him hurl his twin-forked lightning bolts down on my head, convulse the air  
with thunder  
and frantic gusts of howling wind, and shake  
the earth with hurricanes until they shift  
the very roots of its foundations. Let him  
make the wildly surging sea waves mingle  
with the pathways of the heavenly stars,  
then lift my body up and fling it down  
to pitch black Tartarus, into the whirl of harsh Necessity. Let him do all that—  
he cannot make me die.

HERMES [to the Chorus] Ideas like these,  
expressed the way he does, are what we hear  
from those who are quite mad. This prayer of his—  
how is that not delusion? When does it stop,  
this senseless raving? Well, in any case,  
you who sympathize with his afflictions  
should move off with all speed to somewhere else,  
in case the roaring force of Zeus' thunder  
affects your minds and drives you all insane.

CHORUS

You will have give me different advice  
and try to urge me in some other way  
in order to convince me. For I believe  
your stream of words is unendurable.  
How can you order me to act so badly?  
I wish to share with him whatever pain  
Fate has in store, for I have learned to hate  
those who betray—of all the sicknesses  
that is most despicable to me.

HERMES

As you wish—but remember what I said. Do not blame your luck when you are  
trapped  
in Ruin's nets, and never claim that Zeus  
flung you into torments without warning.  
No—you can blame yourselves. For now you know  
by your own folly you will be caught up in Ruin's web, not by a secret ruse  
or unexpectedly. And from that net  
there will be no escape.

[Exit Hermes]

PROMETHEUS

And now things are already being transformed  
from words to deeds—the earth is shuddering, the roaring thunder from beneath  
the sea

is rumbling past me, while bolts of lightning  
flash their twisting fire, whirlwinds toss the dust,  
and blasting winds rush out to launch a war  
of howling storms, one against another.

The sky is now confounded with the sea.

This turmoil is quite clearly aimed at me  
and comes from Zeus to make me feel afraid.

O sacred mother Earth and heavenly Sky,  
who rolls around the light that all things share,  
you see these unjust wrongs I must endure! <sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> . . . *blessed hill of Cecrops*: The Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land joining the Peloponnese (where Argos is situated) with the main part of Greece. Cecrops is the mythical first king and founder of Athens. The Cecropian Hill is a reference to the Acropolis in Athens.



# (AESCHYLUS) Seven Against Thebes

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>69</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) was one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

\*Seven Against Thebes was first produced in 467 BC in Athens, as the third part of a trilogy based on the attack of an Argive army on Thebes. The first two plays (called Laius and Oedipus) and the satyr play which concluded the performance (Sphinx) have been lost. The production won first prize in the competition for that year.

When Oedipus, king of Thebes, discovered he had killed his father, Laius, and married his mother, Jocasta, he put out his eyes and (in some accounts) left the city. He also quarrelled bitterly with his two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and cursed them, saying that they would one day come to war over their inheritance. Eteocles and Polyneices, agreed to alternate as kings of Thebes, and Eteocles assumed the position first.<sup>70</sup> When Eteocles refused to let Polyneices have his turn, Polyneices raised an army from other regions of Greece, gathered troops at Argos, and marched to attack Thebes, laying siege to the city. The invading army was led by Adrastus, king of Argos. Aeschylus' play begins while the siege is taking place.

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**ETEOCLES:** king of Thebes, son of Oedipus.

**MESSENGER:** a military scout.

**CHORUS:** young women of Thebes.

**ANTIGONE:** sister of Eteocles and Ismene.

**ISMENE:** sister of Eteocles and Antigone.

**HERALD:** a servant of the city council.

**ATTENDANTS:** Servants and slaves of Eteocles.

## CITIZENS OF THEBES

**SOLDIERS:** including the six champions chosen to guard the gates.<sup>71</sup>

*[The action takes place in Thebes, in a public space immediately in front of the royal palace, which stands at the back of the stage. There is a crowd of CITIZENS gathered in front of the palace. Enter ETEOCLES with ATTENDANTS]*

<sup>69</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/sevenagainstthebesweb.htm>

<sup>70</sup>Dirce is one of the rivers beside Thebes.

<sup>71</sup>Hephaistos is god of fire.

ETEOCLES [addressing the crowd]  
You citizens of Cadmus, any man  
who seeks to guard the fortunes of a state  
and guide the city's tiller from the stern  
must never do so with his eyes asleep, and words he utters must be to the point.  
For if we should succeed, the credit goes  
to gods above, but if—and I do hope  
this never comes to pass—we have bad luck, the name Eteocles would then  
become  
a single shout repeated many times by citizens in every part of Thebes,  
as they cried out in discontent and grief.  
May our Protector Zeus, for his name's sake,  
shield our Cadmean town from all such ills! <sup>72</sup>  
But now you men—and I mean those who still  
have not reached full maturity and those  
whom time has taken past their finest years  
but yet whose ample bodies are still strong,  
as well as those now in their prime of life,  
as is quite reasonable—all you men must help to save the city and the altars  
of your country's gods, so that for children  
and their most cherished nurse, our mother earth,  
the honours due to them are not destroyed.  
For she was the one who took the trouble  
to give you all your childish nourishment  
when you were infants, still crawling around  
on her munificent soil. She raised you  
and trusted you to live in houses here  
and carry shields, so you would stand by her  
when she required your help. Up to this point,  
Zeus has favoured us. We have been besieged,  
but, thanks to the will of the gods, the city  
has, for the most part, coped with war quite well.  
But now the prophet tending flocks of birds, who with his ears and his intelligence  
and his unerring skill interprets omens his birds provide without the use of fire,  
this man, this master of such prophecies,  
has told us that in their night assembly Achaeans are now planning an assault,  
their greatest yet, to overwhelm our city. <sup>73</sup>  
So all of you must move and with all speed  
to battlements and gates within the walls.  
Go there with all your armour, fully man  
the parapets, take up your positions  
on tower platforms, and then, once in place,  
wait there bravely for the gates to open.

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<sup>72</sup>Laius was king of Thebes and father of Oedipus. Oedipus killed him (not knowing who he was) and became the next king of Thebes by saving the city from the devastation of the Sphinx.

<sup>73</sup>Zeus Herkeios refers to Zeus of the Courtyard, a patron god of worship within the home.

You need not fear this crowd of foreigners.  
Zeus will take care that things work well for us. I have sent out spies to scout their army,  
men whom I trust to carry out the task.  
When I hear from them, I will not be caught  
by any tricks our enemies might try.

[The CITIZENS leave to take up their positions. Enter the MESSENGER, one of the scouts Eteocles has sent out]

MESSENGER

Eteocles, great king of the Cadmeans,  
I have come back here bearing a report,  
describing what I know about that force  
outside our walls. I scouted them myself  
and clearly witnessed how they moved around.  
Seven of their leaders, mighty warriors, slaughtered a bull on a shield dyed black  
with blood,  
then plunged their hands into the creature's gore,  
and swore by Ares, Enyo, and Terror,  
who delights in blood, that they would either seize  
this city of Thebes, devastate the town, and empty it, or sacrifice their lives  
and have their own blood mingle with the soil.<sup>74</sup>

And on Adrastus' chariot they placed  
some personal tokens, so their parents  
could remember them in their own homes. They shed some tears, but no word of  
sorrow  
passed their lips, for their spirits of steel,  
afame with courage, panted like lions  
with warfare in their eyes. No fear of theirs  
will keep you waiting for the proof of this.  
I left them casting lots, allowing chance  
to organize how each of them would lead  
his own contingent to a chosen gate.  
So you should pick the bravest warriors  
from all the soldiers here inside the city and set them in position at the gates,  
right at the entrances—and quickly, too.  
For the Argive forces heavily armed  
are already drawing near, stirring up  
clouds of dust, and glittering drops of foam  
from panting horses sparkle on the plain.  
So like a careful helmsman on a ship,  
you must secure the city, before the storm  
from Ares strikes us like a hurricane.  
For their army, a massive tidal wave, now roars across dry land, and you must seize  
as quickly as you can an opportunity

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<sup>74</sup>Hades, a brother of Zeus, is god of the underworld, lord of the dead.

to save us. As for me, whatever happens,  
my loyal eyes will still be vigilant.  
You will get clear reports, so you will know  
what is going on out there, beyond the gates,  
and will remain secure.

[Exit Messenger]

ETEOCLES

O Zeus and Earth,  
and all you native gods who live in Thebes—  
and you, the Curse, that powerful Fury  
who will avenge my father, do not let my city be captured by the enemy,  
pulled to pieces, and totally destroyed,  
a place that speaks the language of the Greeks.  
Do not wipe out our homes and families.  
May those enemies of ours never hold  
beneath slaves' yokes this land of freedom,  
and this Cadmean state. Assist us now!  
My words, I think, speak to our common good,  
for a successful state rewards its gods.<sup>75</sup>

[Exit ETEOCLES and the CITIZENS. Enter the CHORUS]

CHORUS

Filled with terror I scream out in grief! Their forces flood our walls!

They've left their camp!

A massive horde of mounted warriors  
is quickly threatening to engulf us all!

The dust-filled air I see around me  
confirms the facts for me—  
that voiceless messenger's report  
is simple, clear, and true.

Horses' hooves  
are trampling on my native soil.  
My ears can hear the noise as it flies here and there,  
the roar of an unbridled river  
crashing down on mountain rocks!

O all you gods and goddesses, save us!  
Raise your shouts high above our city walls  
to turn aside this charging deadly tide!

An army of white shields with weapons raised, has launched a full assault  
against our walls—

their force is pushing our defenders back!<sup>76</sup>

Who will protect us? Which god or goddess will come to our assistance now?

Or should I fall in supplication here

<sup>75</sup>Labdakos is the father of Laius and hence grandfather of Oedipus and great-grandfather of Antigone and Ismene.

<sup>76</sup>Olympus is a mountain in northern Greece where, according to tradition, the major gods live.

before these statues of my country's gods? <sup>77</sup>

O all you blessed ones above, seated on your thrones,  
the moment now has come for us  
when we must clutch your images.

Why waste our time in useless wailing? Do you not hear that noise—  
that din of clashing shields?  
Has that not reached your ears?

If this is not the time, when shall we use  
the sacred robes and garlands in our prayers? <sup>78</sup>

I see the noise—it is no clash of just a single spear.

What will you do, O Ares? Will you betray the land where you have lived since  
ancient times?

O god with the helmet all of gold,  
look down, look down upon our city, which once you loved so well. <sup>79</sup>

Come, all you gods who guard our state,  
defenders of our land! Gaze down on us,  
a group of young girls pleading  
they will never be enslaved, while waves of nodding helmet plumes driven by blasts  
from war god Ares  
smash on our city walls.

O Father Zeus, who brings all things to their fulfillment,  
protect us all from enemy hands. For now the citadel of Cadmus  
has Argives all around it, and our fear  
of warlike weapons makes us tremble,  
for iron bits inside their horses' jaws  
are screaming death.

And seven warriors,  
preeminent spearmen in that army,  
stand fully armed at their allotted posts  
before the seven gates.

And you, O Pallas,  
you Zeus-born power who delights in war,  
become the saviour of our city! <sup>80</sup>

And you, Poseidon, lord of horses, king of the sea, with that fish-spearing  
weapon of yours  
release us from this fear, and bring us some relief.

You, too, Ares—alas! alas for us!—  
preserve the place which carries Cadmus' name

<sup>77</sup>Following common editorial practice, the lines of the Greek have been rearranged here, so that 663-7 come after 671, hence the apparently odd numbering of the lines.

<sup>78</sup>Following the suggestion of Andrew Brown and others, I have moved lines 756-7 in the Greek text so that they come right after line 750.

<sup>79</sup>The killing of a family member could bring on divine punishment in the form of a pollution involving the entire city (as in the case of Oedipus). Creon is, one assumes, taking refuge in the notion that he will not be executing Antigone directly.

<sup>80</sup>Eros is the young god of erotic sexual passion.

and openly display your kinship to him.

And you, Cypris, first mother of our race,  
protect us, for every one of us is born from your own blood. <sup>81</sup>

We come to you in prayer,  
calling to gods to hear our cries!

And you  
Apollo, lord of the wolf, become a wolf,  
and with your howls drive back our enemies! And you, too, Artemis, beloved child  
of Leto,  
prepare to shoot your bow! <sup>82</sup>

Alas! Alas!  
I hear the rattling din of chariots  
moving round our city! O lady Hera!  
The wheels are creaking as they bear  
the axle's heavy load!

Alas! Alas! Beloved Artemis, the frantic air  
is trembling as the battle spears fly past!

What is happening to our city?  
What lies in store? Toward what final end  
is god directing us?

Alas! Alas!  
The slingers' stones from far away  
have struck our outer walls!

O dear Apollo! The bronze shields clash  
before our very gates! O child of Zeus,  
who has the sacred power to sway the outcome of a fight!

And you,  
divine queen Onca, for the city's sake  
defend the seven gates of your own home! <sup>83</sup>

O all you gods whose duty is to help,  
you guardian gods and goddesses,  
defenders of our country's fortresses,  
do not betray our city under siege  
to armies from a foreign land!

Listen, O listen,  
as we young women stretch our hands  
and offer up these righteous prayers!  
O dearest spirits above,

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<sup>81</sup>Aphrodite was the goddess of sexual desire.

<sup>82</sup>Acheron is one of the major rivers of the underworld.

<sup>83</sup>The last two speeches refer to Niobe, daughter of Tantalus (a son of Zeus). Niobe had seven sons and seven daughters and boasted that she had more children than the goddess Leto. As punishment Artemis and Apollo, Leto's two children, destroyed all Niobe's children. Niobe turned to stone in grief and was reportedly visible on Mount Sipylus (in Asia Minor). The Chorus' claim that Niobe was a goddess or semi-divine is odd here, since her story is almost always a tale of human presumption and divine punishment for human arrogance.

surround our city, rescue us,  
and demonstrate your love.

Consider all those offerings  
the people make to you,  
and, as you do, defend us here!

And for my sake remember, too,  
our city's sacred sacrificial rites performed by pious worshippers.

[Enter Eteocles with soldiers]

ETEOCLES

You there! You insufferable creatures! I ask you, is this is the most useful way  
to save our city and encourage our men  
when they are being attacked right here?  
You fling yourselves at statues of the gods  
who guard the city and then scream and howl—  
acts which decent people find offensive.  
Whether in misfortune or in better days,  
I hope I never share my loving home  
with any female! When a woman is strong,  
her boldness makes one shun her company, but when she is afraid, she is even  
worse,  
at home and in the town. And now your shrieks  
and running around, flying here and there,  
have spread a spirit of craven cowardice  
among the citizens—the finest way  
to help our enemies outside these walls,  
while those inside the town are overwhelmed  
by their own people. This is what happens  
when you live with women. So now, if anyone,  
male or female or something in between, fails to acknowledge my authority,  
we'll have a vote to sentence him to death,  
and there is no way at all he will escape.  
The people's hands will stone him. What goes on  
outside the home is the concern of men.  
Let woman play no part in such affairs.  
She should remain inside and not cause trouble.  
Are you women listening to me or not?  
Or am I speaking to the deaf and dumb?

CHORUS

Dear son of Oedipus, I was afraid. I heard the noise of rattling chariots,  
grating axle-hubs on spinning wheels,  
the screaming coming from the horses' mouths  
with harness bits of fire-hot iron.

ETEOCLES

That made you flee? When a ship is labouring in heavy seas, has any sailor ever  
found  
a way to save himself by running off

from stern to prow?

CHORUS But I rushed to the gods—  
our ancient images—and put my trust in them,  
as deadly hailstones hammered on our gates. That's when my fear urged me to  
offer prayers,  
asking the blessed ones to hold their shield  
high above the city.

ETEOCLES

You should pray the wall holds out against those enemy spears.  
If so, that will, of course, be the work of gods.  
But then, they say that when a town is seized  
its gods abandon it.

CHORUS This group of gods—  
never in my life may they desert me!  
And may I never live to see our citadel  
overwhelmed and its defenders attacked with enemy fires!

ETEOCLES

When you call on gods,  
do not act foolishly. For, as they say,  
Obedience is the mother of Success,  
and Success the wife of Preservation.

CHORUS

Yes, that is true. But the power of gods  
is even higher still. When times are bad,  
it often lifts a helpless woman up  
out of her wretched misery and pain,  
with storm clouds hovering above her eyes.

ETEOCLES

When we are struggling with our enemies,  
it is up to the men to carry out  
our sacrifice and offerings to the gods.  
A woman's duty is to hold her tongue  
and stay inside the home.

CHORUS

Thanks to the gods  
our citadel has not been overrun—  
our walls are keeping out those hordes of men  
attacking us. In such a circumstance  
what jealous anger makes you so displeased?

ETEOCLES

I bear you no ill will for worshipping  
whatever higher spirit you may wish. And as long as you do not discourage  
your fellow citizens, you can relax  
and stop being so afraid.

CHORUS

I heard a strange, confusing noise!



And so, shaking in my fear,  
I rushed here to the citadel,  
our holiest place of worship.

ETEOCLES

If you find out that men are being killed  
or suffering from wounds, do not react  
with screams of such distress, for food like this feeds Ares, god of war, with human  
blood.

CHORUS

Wait! I hear horses snorting!

ETEOCLES

What you hear  
is clear enough, but you should not respond  
to what you hear with this excess.

CHORUS

A rumble  
is coming from the ground, as if those beasts  
are moving all around us!

ETEOCLES

I have plans  
to deal with them. Is that not sufficient?

CHORUS

I am afraid. The hammering at the gates  
is getting worse!

ETEOCLES

Why can't you keep quiet!  
Do not talk like this within the city.

CHORUS

O you divine company of gods, do not allow our fortress to be seized!

ETEOCLES

You stupid women! Keep your mouths shut tight,  
and just put up with it!

CHORUS

O you gods,  
our fellow citizens, do not make me a slave!

ETEOCLES

But you are making slaves of all of us,  
me and the city.

CHORUS

O almighty Zeus,  
let your blows fall upon your enemies!

ETEOCLES

O Zeus, what a breed you have created  
by giving us these women!

CHORUS

As sad a breed as men whose city has been overwhelmed.

ETEOCLES

How can you speak such ominous words,  
while clinging to a sacred statue?

CHORUS

My courage is gone. Fear has seized my tongue.

ETEOCLES

What I ask of you is easy to provide,  
a simple thing to do.

CHORUS

Tell us what that is—  
as quickly as you can. I will soon know  
if I can do it.

ETEOCLES

Do not speak at all,  
you wretched woman. Do not make your friends  
so frightened.

CHORUS

I will not say a thing. I must share the fate of all the others.

ETEOCLES

Compared to how you spoke out earlier,  
I find these words of yours acceptable.  
But in addition to this, stay away  
from statues of the gods, and make your prayers  
that the gods fight on our side more forceful.  
When you have heard my vow, then you must sing  
for victory, that joyful sacred cry,  
the holy shout we Greeks by custom raise  
to cheer our friends and take away the fear  
they have of fighting war. And now I speak  
to the gods who live in our own city,  
those dwelling in the plain, and those who watch  
our market place, and to our native streams,  
the springs of Dirce, the river Ismenus—  
to all these I swear that if we do succeed  
and save the city, we will dye blood red  
the altars of the gods with butchered sheep  
and offer sacrificial bulls to them.  
We will give them trophies, and I will hang the spear-pierced battle garments of  
our foes  
as spoils of war within gods' sacred homes  
and place the fighting armour by their shrines.  
That is the way you should pray to the gods,  
without the screaming you enjoy so much  
or all that uncontrolled and futile wailing.  
Such things will not help you evade your fate.  
Now I will go to set six men in place—

and I will be the seventh—to make a stand  
as mighty warriors at our city gates, the seven passages through our walls,  
before some messenger comes rushing here  
or urgent news arrives and dire need  
inflames us all.

[Eteocles exits with his SOLDIERS]

CHORUS

I understand his words.

But fear brings no relief into my heart,  
enveloped as it is by anxious cares,  
which fan the flames of terror there  
about the army now around our walls.

A serpent threatening her bed  
will fill a trembling dove with restless dread for offspring in the nest.

Crowds of men  
arranged in groups are moving up  
against our walls! What will become of me?

And others there are hurling jagged rocks  
and pelting citizens from every side!  
O Zeus-born gods, use every means  
to save our city and our fighting men, those children sprung from Cadmus!

What country will you change for ours,  
what finer stretch of ground, if once you hand our enemies  
this fertile soil and Dirce's springs,  
most nourishing of all those streams  
which flow from the Encircler of the Earth,  
Poseidon, and from Tethys' sons? <sup>84</sup>

And so, you gods who guard our city,  
let fall upon those men outside our walls  
a lethal fate. Let them grow deranged  
and cast aside their weapons!  
Win glorious honours for yourselves from all our citizens! On our behalf,  
act now to save the city!

Stay here,  
in answer to the prayers we cry,  
and shield your splendid thrones.

To throw an ancient city down  
to Hades brings a pitiful regret—  
a ravaged victim of the enemy's spear  
is badly pulverized to dust and ash  
by the will of the gods and an Argive man,  
its women led out as captive slaves, the young and the old—alas, such grief!—  
hauled off like horses pulled by the hair, while enemy soldiers rip at their clothes.

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<sup>84</sup>The Chorus here is offering the traditional suggestion that present afflictions can arise from a family curse originating in previous generations.

These women, now lost, abandon the town  
with howls of pain and mingled screams,  
while the desolate city calls out in grief  
“How I fear for your wretched fate!”

It is a brutal day when modest girls  
are plucked unripe before those nuptial rites  
tradition demands and have to cross the hateful thresholds of their owners’  
homes. <sup>85</sup>

What can I say? I claim that those who die  
enjoy a better fate than captured girls.  
For once a city has been overwhelmed,  
how many dreadful things it has to suffer!  
One soldier drags away or kills another  
or else he kindles fires, and all the town  
is stained with smoke, while savage Ares,  
whose conquest of a people drives his rage,  
pollutes all piety with his foul breath.  
The rumbling moves across the city.  
A towering iron ring now makes its way  
against the citadel. Our men collapse  
beneath the spears of men. Young mothers,  
red with blood, cry for the infant child  
they have just suckled at the breast,  
while their own friends are chased and raped.

Those men with loot now gather for a feast,  
and those with nothing meet with other men  
who have no spoils of war, for when they eat they want their comrades there, men  
whose hunger  
is equal to or greater than their own.  
No need to measure out their portions now! <sup>86</sup>

The ground is littered with all kinds of fruit,  
a painful, bitter sight for servants’ eyes.  
The chaos grows, and many of earth’s gifts  
are carried off and squandered uselessly  
in waves of looting.

Young female slaves  
now face misfortunes never known before  
in a joyful spearman’s dreadful bed, for when the enemy has seized the town  
they must expect this nightly ritual—  
their sole release from tears and sorrow. <sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Polyneices married the daughter of Adrastus, an action which enabled him to acquire the army to attack Thebes.

<sup>86</sup>Creon’s logic seems to suggest that because he is not executing Antigone directly and is leaving her a choice between committing suicide and slowly starving to death in the cave, he has no moral responsibility for what happens.

<sup>87</sup>Persephone is the wife of Hades and thus goddess of the underworld.

[Enter a MESSENGER and ETEOCLES with escort, from different sides of the stage. ETEOCLES has with him the six warrior leaders he has chosen to guard the city gates]

CHORUS MEMBER My friends, I think this scout bring a report,  
some news about the army. His legs and feet  
are really moving quickly as he comes.

CHORUS MEMBER Our king himself is also drawing near,  
the son of Oedipus, in time to hear  
the messenger's account. That rapid pace  
makes how he moves appear uneven.

MESSENGER

I have confirmed the details and can speak  
of what our enemies out there are doing,  
how every champion, according to his lot,  
has been assigned his place. For some time now,  
Tydeus has been stationed at the Proetus gate, making a huge noise. <sup>88</sup> For  
Amphiaraus,  
the prophet, will not let him cross the ford  
of the Ismenus river—the omens  
from the sacrifice are inauspicious.  
But Tydeus, in a rage and thirsting  
for a fight, keeps making hissing noises,  
like a snake at noon, and accusing him,  
saying that Oecleus' son, the prophet,  
a clever man, desires to shirk his fate  
and has no spirit for the coming fight. He shouts these taunts and shakes his  
helmet plumes,  
three overarching crests, while from his shield  
bells made of bronze and hanging underneath  
create a fearful sound. And on that shield  
he bears an arrogant sign—a fiery sky patterned with lesser stars and a full moon,  
the most revered of stars, the eye of night,  
shining from the bright centre of the shield.  
Roaming there with this conceited armour,  
in his eagerness to fight, he bellows  
at the river banks, just like a war horse  
fiercely champing at the bit and snorting,  
as it awaits the trumpet's call. What man  
will you select to stand against him?

<sup>88</sup>In these lines Antigone seems to be talking about both her brothers, first claiming she washed and dressed the body of Eteocles and then covered Polyneices. However, the pronoun references in the Greek are confusing. Lines 904 to 920 in the Greek text have prompted a great deal of critical debate, since they seem incompatible with Antigone's earlier motivation and do not make much sense in context (in addition most of them appear closely derived from Herodotus 3.119). Hence, some editors insist that the lines (or most of them) be removed. Brown provides a useful short summary of the arguments and some editorial options (199-200).

Who can we trust to guard Proetus' gate once the barrier is gone?

ETEOCLES

Those trappings

a man carries will never frighten me.

Mere emblems have no power to wound,

for helmet crests and bells lack any bite

without a spear. And this night you talk of,

which happens to be painted on the shield,

a heavenly sky glittering with stars—

such foolishness might prompt a certain man

to make predictions. If Tydeus dies

and night falls on his eyes, then this proud sign will for its bearer prove quite true and just,

for it will indicate that he is dead.

And so this arrogance of his becomes

a prophecy against himself. As for me,

I will set the trusty son of Astacus

to combat Tydeus and hold the gate.

[MELANIPPUS steps forward]

Descended from a noble line, he honours

the throne of self-restraint and hates proud speech,

a man reluctant to act shamefully,

with no desire to fight like any coward. His family roots are with those warriors

born from the dragon's teeth whom Ares spared,

so Melanippus comes of home-grown stock,

a true son of this soil. <sup>89</sup> By rolling dice,

Ares will choose the victor in their fight,

but Justice flows in Melanippus' blood—

in fact, she is the one who sends him out

to shield his mother from a hostile spear.

[Exit Melanippus]

CHORUS

May the gods make this champion of ours

successful, for, as he sets off to fight for his own land, he does so justly.

But still, fear makes me shudder when I see

the blood-stained corpses of those men who die

in battles on behalf of their own race.

MESSENGER

May the gods indeed grant him success.

The lot was drawn for the Electran gate,

and it picked out a giant of a man—

Capaneus, a greater warrior

than the one I talked about before.

<sup>89</sup>Danaë was daughter of Acrisus, King of Argos. Because of a prophecy that he would be killed by a son born to Danaë, Acrisus imprisoned her. But Zeus made love to her in the form of a golden shower, and she gave birth to Perseus, who, once grown, killed Acrisus accidentally.

His boasting goes beyond all human pride, with terrifying threats against our walls, which Fate, I pray, will not let him fulfil. He says he will destroy our citadel, with or without permission of the gods, boasting that even if Zeus' daughter descended to the plain and blocked his way, she could not hold him back, and he declares her thunderbolts and lightning are no more than noontime heat. The symbol on his shield depicts a naked man who carries fire, two flaming torches ready in his hands, and an inscription in gold lettering announcing 'I will burn down the city.' You must send someone to confront this man.

Who will stand up against such arrogance, without feeling afraid, and hold his ground?

ETEOCLES

This man's bragging works to our advantage, the way the first man's did. For people's tongues betray the truth of their unholy thoughts. As Capaneus makes his threats, he stands prepared to act, dishonouring the gods. His mouth is always shouting empty gibes, and, though a mortal man, he hurls up loud and swollen boasts to Zeus in heaven. I trust a just and fiery thunderbolt will fall on him, and when it does, the heat will not feel like a painted noontime sun. Against this man we will set Polyphontes.

[POLYPHONTES steps forward]

Although he likes to talk, he is a mighty fighter with a fiery spirit. With goodwill from our guardian Artemis and other gods, we can rely on him.

[Exit Polyphontes]

Now talk to me about another leader picked by lottery to assault our gates.

CHORUS

May those who raise such arrogant cries against our city perish! May the power of lightning push him back, before he leaps inside my room and with his boastful spear drives me with force out of my virgin bed!

MESSENGER

Now I will describe another warrior selected to attack our city walls. When their bronze helmet was turned upside down, the third man's lot jumped out—Eteocles, chosen to hurl his group of warriors against the Neistan gate. His team of horses

eager to attack the wall, strain at the bit,  
as he wheels them round. The heavy breath  
from snorting nostrils fills their headgear  
and makes them sound just like barbarians.  
You cannot miss the emblem on his shield, a ladder with a man in armour on it  
scaling ramparts of an enemy town  
he wishes to destroy. And this man, too,  
has written letters that announce his boast—  
'Not even war god Ares can dislodge me  
and hurl me from the wall.' So you must send  
a trusted fighter out to this man, too,  
and guard our people from the yoke of slaves.

ETEOCLES [leading MEGAREUS forward]

I will dispatch this man without delay—  
and choosing him is fortunate for us. There! He is being sent, a man who carries  
what he boasts about in his own hands—  
Megareus, son of Creon, a seed  
of that earth-born race. No roaring sounds  
from frantic horses will make him panic  
or shift him from the gate. No. He is a man  
who will either die and give his country back  
what she paid to raise him, or he will seize  
two warriors and the city on the shield  
and with those spoils adorn his father's home.  
[Exit Megareus]

Now, tell me all about another braggart,  
and give me every detail of his boasting.

CHORUS

O you who guard my home, I pray this man  
will be successful and bring his enemies  
to grief, and as, with their deluded minds,  
they make excessive threats against our city,  
so may avenging Zeus look down on them  
and grow enraged.

MESSENGER

Another man—a fourth—  
is moving up into position now,  
at the gate beside Athena Onca, shouting as he goes—Hippomedon,  
a fighter holding an enormous weapon—  
his shield—which is embossed with a design  
circling around the whole circumference.  
It made me shudder—that I can't deny.  
Whoever made the emblem for that shield  
was no cheap artisan. The figure there  
is Typhon. His mouth is breathing fire  
and heavy smoke thick with flaring embers,



swift sisters of those flames.<sup>90</sup> Along the rim of the round concave belly of the shield  
 are twisting serpents holding it in place. The man himself has raised his battle cry,  
 and, possessed by Ares, rages for a fight,  
 as if he were a follower of Bacchus,  
 with a horrific scowl. We must prepare  
 to make a valiant stand against this man—  
 by now his fearful boasts have reached the gate.

ETEOCLES

Onca Pallas, who lives beside the city,  
 near the gate, hates an arrogant boaster, and she will be the first to hold him off,  
 like a venomous snake from her young brood.  
 But we will also pick Hyperbios,  
 the loyal son of Oenops, to fight him  
 man to man, for Hyperbios is keen  
 to test his fortune and to learn his fate.

[HYPERBIOS steps forward]

In looks, in courage, and in feats of arms  
 he is beyond reproach. And now Hermes,  
 god of chance, has brought both men together,  
 as is appropriate, for these two men will meet in battle as two enemies,  
 just like the warlike gods on their two shields.<sup>91</sup>  
 For Hippomedon's armour proudly shows  
 a fire-belching Typhon, whereas Hyperbios  
 has Father Zeus erect on both his feet,  
 a flaming lightning bolt gripped in his fist.<sup>92</sup> And no one has yet seen a conquered  
 Zeus.

It is true one cannot always count on the goodwill of the gods, but nonetheless  
 we are with the conquerors in that fight, and they are with the conquered, if Zeus  
 is more ferocious in a war than Typhon. So the insignia these warriors bear  
 may well decide the outcome of the clash  
 when they both meet, and our Hyperbios  
 may find in Zeus depicted on his shield  
 a fortunate defence.

[Exit Hyperbios]

CHORUS

I well believe  
 the man opposing Zeus will lose his head

<sup>90</sup>These lines refer to Lycurgus son of Dryas, a Thracian king. He attacked the god Dionysus and was punished with blinding or with being torn apart.

<sup>91</sup>The anger of the Muses at a Thracian who boasted of his flute playing is not normally a part of the Lycurgus story but refers to another Thracian, Thamyras.

<sup>92</sup>The black rocks were a famous hazard to shipping. They moved together to smash any ship moving between them. The Bosphorus is the strait between the Black Sea and the Propontis (near the Hellespont). This verse and the next refer to the Thracian king Phineas, whose second wife blinded her two step sons (from Phineas' first wife Cleopatra) by stabbing out their eyes.

before our gates, since on his shield he bears  
the unloved image of an earth-born spirit, a form detested by all mortal men  
and by the long-lived gods.

MESSENGER

May he prevail!

And now I will describe the warrior  
selected as the fifth one to attack  
from his location at the Northern Gate,  
across from Amphion's grave, a son of Zeus.<sup>93</sup>  
He swears by his own spear, in which he trusts—  
believing it more sacred than a god  
and even more important than his eyes—  
that he will ravage our Cadmean town, in spite of Zeus. These are his very words,  
this child of a mother born up in the hills—  
a handsome man and still a youthful lad,  
with the initial growth of thick, soft hair  
just showing on his cheeks. And now he moves  
with a savage will and terrifying eyes.  
Nothing about him seems like a young girl,  
although his name suggests he looks that way.<sup>94</sup>  
As he moves to his place before the gate,  
he boasts aloud, and on the circular shield  
of hammered bronze he holds in front of him  
an emblem of our city's shame—the Sphinx,  
who eats men raw, a symbol held in place  
with bolts, a skillful piece of work.<sup>95</sup> Her body,  
stamped in bronze, gives off a brilliant glitter.  
Down below she grips a single victim,  
someone from Thebes, so that the spears we throw  
will be directed chiefly at this man.  
He does not look as if he marched this far  
to trade blows in a minor scrap or two and make his lengthy trip a shameful waste.  
[Parthenopaeus from Arcadia  
is not that sort of man. He was received  
in Argos as a resident, and now  
he wishes to repay that city state  
for all their fine support by threatening  
our Theban walls. May Zeus deny him that!]<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup>Cleopatra was the grand-daughter of Erechtheus, king of Athens. Boreas, father of Erechtheus, was god of the North Wind.

<sup>94</sup>Teiresias' offering failed to catch fire. His interpretation is that it has been rejected by the gods, a very unfavourable omen.

<sup>95</sup>This is the second reference to the fact that at some point earlier Teiresias has given important political help to Creon. It is not at all clear what this refers to.

<sup>96</sup>Teiresias here is apparently accusing Creon of refusing burial to the dead allied soldiers Polyneices brought with him from other cities. There is no mention of this anywhere else in the play, although the detail is present in other versions of the story.

## ETEOCLES

O if only the gods would give those men  
the very things they keep imagining  
in those sacrilegious boasts they utter. Then they would surely die in misery,  
completely overwhelmed.<sup>97</sup> We have a man  
to match this one, as well, the Arcadian  
whom you have just described. Our champion  
is not a man who brags, but his hand sees  
what must be done.

[ETEOCLES leads ACTOR forward]

His name is Actor,  
a brother of the one I named before.  
He will not let a man who simply talks  
and does not act come swarming through the gate  
to multiply our troubles or allow any man to pass whose hostile shield depicts  
an image of that hateful, vicious beast,  
who will complain while still outside the town  
to the one who carries her towards the gate,  
when she receives a heavy battering  
below our city walls. If gods are willing,  
may what I say prove true!

[Exit ACTOR]

## CHORUS

These words of yours  
have pierced me to the heart, and when I hear  
the noisy boasts of loud and sinful men,  
my hair stands up on end. I pray the gods destroy them all and swallow them in  
earth!

## MESSENGER

The sixth man I will name is Amphiaraus,  
a forceful warrior—and very wise,  
an extremely strong courageous prophet,  
now in position at the Homoloid gate.  
He keeps on shouting many cruel insults  
at mighty Tydeus, calling him names  
like ‘murderer,’ ‘disturber of the peace,’  
‘greatest source of trouble for the Argives,’  
‘summoner of vengeance from the Furies,’  
‘willing agent of a general slaughter,’  
and ‘counsellor of evil to Adrastus.’<sup>98</sup>

<sup>97</sup>In these lines the Chorus celebrates Dionysus, the god born in Thebes to Semele, daughter of King Cadmus. The bacchantes are those who worship Dionysus. Eleusis, a region on the coast near Athens, was famous for the its Eleusinian Mysteries, a secret ritual of worship. Deo is a reference to the goddess Demeter, who was worshipped at Eleusis. The Theban race sprang up from dragon's teeth sown in a field by Cadmus, founder of the city.

<sup>98</sup>Evoë is a cry of celebration made by worshippers of Dionysus.

He also looked up at the skies and cried  
to your own brother, great Polyneices,  
reproaching him, and in his final words  
he twice divided up your brother's name  
and emphasized each part.<sup>99</sup> When he called out,  
he used the following words:

"This fight of yours—  
will that be something pleasing to the gods,  
a worthy enterprise to hear about and tell in future years—that you destroyed  
your father's city and your native gods  
by bringing in an army from outside  
to attack the place? What sort of justice  
leads you to choke off that nourishing spring  
where you were born? And if, because of you,  
your native land is captured by the spear, how will the country ever be your friend?  
As for me, I will fatten up the earth,  
a prophet buried in a hostile soil. So let us go to war! I do not expect  
to meet a shameful fate."<sup>100</sup>

As he said this,  
the prophet calmly held his plain bronze shield,  
a simple circle which displayed no sign,  
for he does not wish merely to appear  
the finest warrior—he wants to prove it.  
From the deep furrows in that mind of his  
he reaps the fruit where his firm counsels grow.  
I would suggest you send out wise, brave men  
to stand against him, for any warrior who worships gods is someone we should  
fear.

#### ETEOCLES

Alas for those ominous twists of fate  
which in those groups where men associate  
combine the righteous and profane together!  
In all our actions, nothing can be worse  
than evil company. The fruits of that  
are not worth reaping, for fields of folly  
yield a deadly crop. A reverent man  
who sails off in a ship manned by a crew  
of reckless sailors eager to do wrong will sometimes perish with that group of men  
the gods detest, or else a virtuous man  
living with fellow citizens who hate  
all visitors and disrespect the gods  
is caught up with them in a common trap,  
which he does not deserve, and overwhelmed,

<sup>99</sup>Semele, Dionysus' human mother, was destroyed by Zeus lightning bolt, because of the jealousy of Hera, Zeus' wife.

<sup>100</sup>Thyiads were worshippers of Dionysus, and Iacchus was a divinity associated with Dionysus.

struck by god's whip which lashes all alike.  
That how things will turn out for the prophet,  
Oecleus' son, a temperate man—  
just, noble, and respectful of the gods,  
a powerful seer, but now an ally  
of evil men whose arrogant boasting  
defies good sense. Those men are on a march,  
the pathway leading back is very long,  
and so, if it is Zeus' wish, this one  
will be dragged down with all the others. I do not think he will attack the gate,  
not from cowardice or lack of spirit,  
but because he knows he must meet his fate  
here in this fight, if Apollo's prophecies bear fruit, and usually he stays silent  
or else says something truly pertinent.  
But still, I will also appoint a man,  
great Lasthenes, to keep this foreigner  
far from our gate.

[LASTHENES steps forward]

He has the wisdom  
of an older man and a young man's strength.  
His eyes are quick. His hand does not delay  
in thrusting with his spear at naked flesh  
his enemy's shield has left uncovered.  
But man's success is given by the gods.  
[Exit Lasthenes]

CHORUS

O you gods, hear our righteous prayers  
and fulfil them all, so that our city  
may prove successful. Turn aside from us  
the evils which afflict those in a war  
and let them fall on that invading force.  
May Zeus hurl down his thunderbolt  
outside the walls and kill them all!

MESSENGER

Now I will announce the seventh warrior  
beside the seventh and the final gate—  
your own blood brother. I will describe the way he calls down curses on the city  
and the fate he prays for. For he desires  
to scale our battlements and then proclaim  
that he is king of Thebes and raise a cry  
of triumph when he has seized the city.  
He prays to meet and kill you in the fight  
and then to perish by your side, or else,  
if you survive, to pay you back with exile,  
in the same way you once dishonoured him  
and forced him from his home. With words like these, great Polyneices calls his

native gods  
and summons his paternal deities  
to act as close custodians of his prayers.  
He holds a brand new circular shield  
displaying two shapes, skilfully attached—  
a man in armour made of hammered gold  
behind a woman calmly leading him.  
She claims to be a figure of Justice,  
to judge from what the letters say: 'This man I will lead back, and he will have his  
land and will roam free in his ancestral home.' These are the signs created for their  
shields.  
It is now up to you to send out there  
the one you think is best. You will not find  
I have been wrong in what I have announced.  
From this point you must yourself decide  
the proper course to map out for our state.

## ETEOCLES

O all this madness brought on by the gods,  
this great abomination, my family,  
the race of Oedipus, so full of tears. Now, alas, those curses of my father  
are fully realized. But it's not good  
to weep or wail about our lot, in case  
that helps produce an even worse lament.  
As for their champion called Polyneices,  
a most appropriate name, we will soon know  
where that insignia of his will lead,  
whether those babbling letters stamped in gold  
on his own shield and his erratic mind  
will lead him home. If Zeus' virgin daughter, Justice, were with him in his thoughts  
and deeds,  
that might soon come to pass. But as it is,  
when he came from the dark maternal womb,  
when he was raised and reached maturity,  
and when his cheek had its first growth of hair,  
that goddess never recognized or glanced at him.  
And now he seeks to hurt his fatherland,  
I do not think she stands beside him. In fact,  
Justice would truly contradict her name  
if she became the ally of a man who does such shameful things. This I believe,  
so I will be the one to stand against him.  
Yes, I will go in person. What other man  
can say he has a better claim than me?  
One ruling general against another,  
a brother against a brother, one foe  
goes out to stand against another foe.  
We must move quickly! [Bring my armour here

to guard against their spears and stones.] <sup>101</sup>

CHORUS

Son of Oedipus, dearest of all men, do not get angry and be like that man whose name lacks all respect. Cadmeans are going to fight the Argives hand to hand, and that will be enough. The blood they shed we can atone. But when the men who fight share common blood, as you two brothers do, and those who die are killed by their own kin, time never can remove the dreadful stain.

ETEOCLES

If a man can suffer evil without shame, that is all right—the only benefit the dead receive is honour. However, you cannot speak of glory in those acts which injure him and make him a disgrace. <sup>102</sup>

CHORUS

But why are you so keen to go, my son? Do not let mad delusions from the gods cram your soul with passion for this fight and carry you away. Cast out the evil urge, this mad desire for war, while it is young.

ETEOCLES

The gods are driving these events so hard! Let all the race of Laius ride the winds down waves of Cocytus. That is their lot, since Phoebus hates them so. <sup>103</sup>

CHORUS

But this desire which gnaws at you and drives you on to kill, to slaughter other men unlawfully—that urge yields bitter fruit.

ETEOCLES

Yes, that is true.

My loving father made a dreadful curse and on my dry, unweeping eyes his words, those fatal words, still sit and say to me: 'Win something for yourself before you

<sup>101</sup>Amphion was legendary king of Thebes, husband of Niobe.

<sup>102</sup>Megareos was Haemon's brother, who, we are to understand on the basis of this reference, died nobly some time before the play begins. It is not clear how Creon might have been responsible for his death. In another version of the story, Creon has a son Menoeceos, who kills himself in order to save the city.

<sup>103</sup>Laius was the father of Oedipus, Cocytus a river of the underworld. Eteocles is reminding himself and others of how the tragic stories of his family originate in the hostility of Phoebus Apollo. See lines 1032 ff. below for more details of the origin of Apollo's quarrel with the family of Laius.

die.’<sup>104</sup>

CHORUS

But do not let yourself be driven to it. If you preserve your life by acting well, no one will call you coward. And surely that dark avenging Fury with her aegis will quit your house as soon as gods receive a sacrificial gift from your own hands?<sup>105</sup>

ETEOCLES

The gods abandoned us some time ago. But they respect one gift we offer them—the grace we manifest in dying. Why then should I avert my own destructive fate?

CHORUS

Right now your fate is standing close to you, but that demon spirit, still boiling hot, perhaps will alter what it now desires and come on gentler winds.

ETEOCLES

Yes, those curses  
Oedipus pronounced have made it seethe.  
Those phantom visions I saw in my sleep  
dividing up my father’s property  
were all too real!<sup>106</sup>

CHORUS

You should attend to us,  
although you hate to hear what women say.

ETEOCLES

Propose some action that is possible—  
and keep it brief.

CHORUS

Do not go in person, not on that journey to the seventh gate.

ETEOCLES

My resolve to go there has been sharpened.  
You will not blunt its edge by what you say.

CHORUS

But victories are honoured by the gods,  
even those men win without the glory.

ETEOCLES

A fighting man cannot accept those words.

<sup>104</sup>The curse seems to be urging Eteocles to kill his brother before he dies himself, because that will bring him a temporary benefit, presumably the personal satisfaction and glory of winning the battle. The debate here between the Chorus and Eteocles (which has been much discussed) is focusing on the tension between the Chorus’ desire for Eteocles to act with some prudence, so as to avoid continuing the family curse by killing his brother (an act which will prolong the history of disasters for Thebes), and Eteocles’ passionate desire to surrender to his own feelings.

<sup>105</sup>The term aegis most commonly refers to a garment (a collar or cape or shield) which serves as a protection. In traditional Greek stories, the aegis can also serve as a weapon to terrify one’s enemies and paralyze them with fear.

<sup>106</sup>These lines may refer to a passage in an earlier play in the trilogy (now lost).



## CHORUS

What you are seeking is to harvest fruit  
by slaughtering your own blood brother.

## ETEOCLES

But no one has the power to run away  
from evils which the gods themselves present.  
[Exit Eteocles]

## CHORUS

The goddess who destroys entire homes  
makes me shake with fear, for this divinity,  
unlike other gods, always speaks the truth  
in prophecies of evils yet to come.

That Fury summoned by his father's prayer  
will now fulfil those curses earlier  
which Oedipus in his mad fit pronounced.  
This child-destroying quarrel drives her on.

A stranger now divides their legacy.  
A foreign, savage-minded, iron sword forged by the Chalybes in Scythia  
is carving out grim parts of their estate,  
assigning land to them where they may dwell,  
as much as they will need when they are dead  
and have no share at all in these wide plains.<sup>107</sup>

But when they both are gone, two brothers slain  
by one another, and dusty earth has drunk  
the dark streams of their crimson blood, who then  
can offer absolution, cleanse their guilt?

O this house, whose latest evil deeds  
now mingle with those crimes from long ago!

That ancient wrong, so swift in its revenge  
and lasting now three generations long—  
I mean when Laius, against Apollo's will  
thrice uttered at the centre of the earth  
when in his Pythian oracle he said  
the king would save his city if he died  
without producing children, nonetheless . . .

. . . overpowered by folly in his love  
created his own fate, his son Oedipus, who killed his father and then lived on to  
plant his seeds of blood in sacred soil  
where he was born, in his own mother's womb. For madness held that couple in  
its grip.

A sea of evil drives its surge ahead.  
When one wave falls, another rises up,  
its triple-crested water crashing down  
around the city's stern. And the defence

<sup>107</sup>The Chalybes, a people living in Scythia near the Black Sea, were famous for their metal work.

which stands between us and the sea is thin,  
no wider than a wall. I am afraid the city and its kings will be destroyed.

When the moment comes for ancient curses  
to be fulfilled, they bring a heavy freight,  
for deadly threats do not just disappear.  
The wealth of enterprising merchant men,  
once grown too gross, must be hurled overboard  
and cast out from the ship into the sea.

What man has ever been admired so much  
by gods, by citizens who share our feasts,  
or by our people's densely packed assemblies as Oedipus was when he was  
honoured  
that day he rid the city of the Sphinx,  
the deadly beast who snatched our men away?

But when his better judgment realized  
the wretchedness of his ill-fated marriage,  
the overwhelming pain drove his heart mad,  
and he then carried out a double evil.  
With the very hand that killed his father  
he stabbed out both his eyes, dearer to him  
than his own children . . .

. . . and he cried out against the sons he fathered, assailing them  
with wild and vengeful words. Alas, those curses  
from his bitter tongue, which swore that one day  
both of them, with swords in hand, would slice up  
his possessions! <sup>108</sup> And now my fear is this—  
that Fury rushes here to see the curse fulfilled.

[The MESSENGER enters]

MESSENGER

You there! Young girls, nurtured by your mothers,  
take heart! Our city state has just been freed  
from slavery's yoke! And all those boasting words  
from mighty warriors have now collapsed. Our ship is sailing on with sunny skies.  
Though it was hit by many stormy waves,  
our town took on no water. City walls  
are standing firm, and we have reinforced  
the gates with leading front-line warriors,  
who kept us safe by fighting hand to hand.  
We have, in general, had good success  
at six of our city gates, but lord Apollo,  
god of the seventh day, chose for himself  
the seventh gate, and so he has fulfilled upon the family of Oedipus

---

<sup>108</sup>The quarrel between Oedipus and his sons arose because Oedipus believed they were disrespecting him by not obeying his instructions and by serving him inappropriate food at dinner.

the foolishness of Laius long ago. <sup>109</sup>

CHORUS

What strange new things are going on  
which now affect the city?

MESSENGER

Our town is safe.  
But those two kings with common blood . . .

CHORUS

Those kings?  
What are you saying? These words of yours  
drive me insane with fear!

MESSENGER

Calm down and listen.  
The sons of Oedipus . . .

CHORUS

Alas, the sorrow!  
I sense disaster coming!

MESSENGER

Beyond all doubt.  
They are both dead, stretched out in the dust.

CHORUS

Out there? Both lying out there? Such dreadful news!  
What else? Tell me!

MESSENGER

Both sons were killed.  
They slaughtered one another.

CHORUS

And so  
in a single instant each kindred hand  
struck down a brother.

MESSENGER

Yes. That demon spirit  
gave both of them an all-too-equal fate. <sup>110</sup>  
And truly, all on its own it eats away  
that doomed and fatal clan. In what goes on  
we have good cause to weep and to rejoice—  
our city has done well, but both our leaders, the two generals, have divided up  
their property and everything they own  
with swords of hammered Scythian iron.  
Now all they will possess is land enough

<sup>109</sup>Apollo was given this title (god of the seventh day) because traditionally he was born on the seventh day of the month. Some Greek cities offered him sacrifices on that day each month.

<sup>110</sup>The demon spirit (daimon) is a frequently invoked but elusive concept, without a precise English equivalent. It refers both to the fate of the family of Laius (something determined from beyond—i.e., by Apollo) and also to the very nature of the people in the family, who seem in some way cursed by their own self-destructive passion (which arises from their distinctive characters).

to give each man a grave—ill-fated sons,  
who, in accordance with their father's curse,  
were carried off. Our city has been saved,  
but as for our two kindred kings cut down  
by one another, earth has drained their blood.

[Exit Messenger]

CHORUS

O almighty Zeus and you gods who help protect our city and you  
who truly shield Cadmean walls,  
shall I cry out with joyful triumph  
because my city is unharmed,  
or shall I mourn the leaders in this war,  
those poor, ill-fated, childless men,  
so rightly named as 'full of strife,' whose evil purposes destroyed them.

O the carrying out of that dark curse which ends the family of Oedipus! An  
aching chill falls on my heart,  
and, like a maenad, I now frame my song  
to fit the grave, for I have heard  
of those two men so pitifully slain  
and of their bodies dripping blood.  
Alas for that ominous melody,  
that concert played with spears!

The special prayer of Oedipus,  
the father's curse against his sons,  
has taken effect. It did not fail. And Laius' disobedient passion retains its power in  
this. I fear  
what happens to the city now.

Those words once spoken by the gods  
do not lose their sharp edge.

[The funeral procession for ETEOCLES and POLYNEICES begins slowly to emerge,  
carrying the bodies towards the city. ANTIGONE and ISMENE are among the  
mourners.]

CHORUS

O you who bring us so much sorrow  
and have done things beyond belief!  
A heavy time of woe has come to us,  
not from mere words but from your deeds!

It is so obvious, so plain to see, the truth of what that messenger proclaimed.  
I sense a twin-felt sorrow—two warriors slain  
by a brother's hand! A double share of pain  
has been fulfilled. What is there left to say?  
What else but this—O sorrow piled on sorrow  
for hearth and home?

But now, my friends, follow  
the wind of sighs, and let those hands which sweep  
across your heads so rapidly row on

and bear away the bodies of the dead  
in the sacred ship with slack, black sails, which always glides across the Acheron  
to unseen, sunless lands which all men share,  
a place Apollo's foot will never tread. <sup>111</sup>

But look! Ismene and Antigone  
are drawing near, coming to carry out  
a bitter rite, their brothers' funeral song.  
I do not think there can be any doubt  
their deep and passionately loving hearts will chant a fitting dirge to mark their  
grief.

Before their cry, it would be right for us to sing that hymn of praise all men  
detest  
to those avenging goddesses, the Furies,  
and shout out Hades' hateful victory song.

Alas for you two sisters, too, of all women  
who bind their robes beneath their breasts  
the most unhappy in your brothers' fate,  
my tearful sighs come straight from my own heart—  
my shrill lament tells how I truly feel. <sup>112</sup>

[The CHORUS now joins the members of the funeral procession standing over  
the bodies of ETEOCLES and POLYNEICES]

O you hard-hearted, senseless men,  
who showed no trust in your own friends and would not rest when troubles came,  
with your unhappy spears you fought  
and now have won your father's home. <sup>113</sup>

In all the harm done to their house  
to their own misery they found  
a truly wretched death.

Alas, alas!

You two, who sought to overthrow  
the walls of your own home and looked  
with bitter eyes to being the only king,  
have now been reconciled with swords.

<sup>111</sup>This difficult passage is comparing the way in which the mourners beat their heads rhythmically in grief to the hands which row the ship of the dead across the Acheron river into the underworld. Apollo, as the god of light, never visits Hades.

<sup>112</sup>This curious line about how their grief is genuine may refer to the fact that, as we see at the very end of the play, many Thebans had different feelings about Eteocles and Polyneices. The former died defending the city and was thus a hero, worthy of full funeral rites; whereas, the latter died attacking the city and therefore was a traitor. A dispute over the appropriate burial rites for both brothers continued the curse on the family of Oedipus and led to Antigone's death.

<sup>113</sup>In this lament over the dead bodies, the characteristics of one brother are applied to them both, as if they were a single person. The "home" the two brothers have won is the grave. In the scene which follows, the lines are shared by the full Chorus, parts of the Chorus, and by Ismene and Antigone, and there has been much debate about how the lines should be properly assigned (since that is not at all clear from the Greek text). I have separated lines which seem to belong to the Chorus (or part of it) from those which seem to belong to Antigone and Ismene.

And thus, indeed, the sacred Fury  
of Oedipus, your father, ends her work.

[The Chorus Leader removes the cloth covering the bodies]

Struck on your left sides! Yes, wounded there,  
through ribs that shared a common womb.  
Alas, for these divinely fated men!  
Alas for curses seeking death for death!

Yes, deadly blows to house and body  
have struck them down, thanks to that wrath,  
an unspeakable rage and a father's curse.

Here, with this death, their strife is over. And our whole city grieves, the towers  
groan,  
this land, which loves its people,  
moans in sorrow. Now their entire estate  
remains for their posterity, those things  
that launched the war which doomed them  
and found fulfilment in their death.

These men whose anger was so quickly roused  
have split their property between them  
and each one has an equal share—but still  
the one who brought their quarrel to a close has earned the condemnation of their  
friends,  
who find no joy in savage Ares.

So here they lie, struck down by iron.  
And now that iron has laid them low,  
one might well ask what lies in store,  
two shares in their ancestral grave.

Our painful, sharp, heart-wrenching groans,  
the grief we truly feel from our own pain  
in this dejected mood, bereft of joy,  
attend on both of them, as real tears pour from my heart and as it wastes away  
with weeping for this pair of royal sons.

To these unhappy men one might well say  
they did great harm to citizens of Thebes  
and to those ranks of foreigners who fell  
to widespread slaughter in that war.

Of every women who has given birth,  
all those who earn the name of mother,  
the one who bore these men was truly doomed. <sup>114</sup>

She chose as husband her own child and then gave birth to sons, who finished up  
by turning hands produced from the same seed  
to murdering each other.

Yes, both from just one seed,

---

<sup>114</sup>Their mother was Jocasta, wife and mother of Oedipus. When she found out the truth of her marriage, she killed herself.

but split apart, no longer friends, locked  
in that mad fight, then utterly destroyed,  
the final act of their fraternal strife.

Their enmity is done, and their two lives is mingling with the gory earth. So now  
they truly share one common blood.

A bitter stranger from beyond the sea  
resolved their fight with sharpened iron  
snatched quickly from the fire—and bitter, too,  
the one dividing their inheritance,  
destructive Ares, who brought about  
their father's curse and made it true.

In their unhappy state they do possess  
their own allotted shares of heaven-sent grief,  
and beneath both corpses earth will now extend  
the boundless wealth those brothers craved.

O you have wreathed your family home in harsh distress,  
and now to end it, with all your friends  
driven off in flight in all directions,  
those spirits of revenge are screaming out their shrill triumphal song, and in the  
gates

a trophy stands to goddess Ruin,  
where those two brothers fought  
and where the demon killed them both,  
before what she was seeking out was done.

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE move forward to stand by the bodies of their two  
brothers. ANTIGONE addresses Polyneices, and ISMENE Eteocles]

ANTIGONE

You struck and were struck down.

ISMENE

And you were killed while killing.

ANTIGONE

You slew him with a spear.

ISMENE

And from that spear you died.

ANTIGONE

Such a pitiful act!

ISMENE

Such wretched agony!

ANTIGONE

Let our groans sound.

ISMENE

Let our tears flow.

ANTIGONE

Now you lie dead.

ISMENE

You did the killing.

Antigone  
Alas!  
ISMENE  
Alas!  
ANTIGONE  
My mind is mad with grief.  
ISMENE  
My heart groans here inside.  
ANTIGONE  
Aaaiii! You pitiful man!  
ISMENE  
You, too, his wretched brother.  
ANTIGONE  
You lie there dead,  
killed by your own kin.  
ISMENE  
You slaughtered him,  
your own dear relative.  
ANTIGONE  
A double grief  
to talk about!  
ISMENE  
A double sight to see!  
ANTIGONE  
Such sorrow all around them.  
ISMENE  
One brother lies beside his brother.  
CHORUS  
A heavy Fate that carries so much pain—  
the awe-inspiring shade of Oedipus!  
O you dark Fury, your power is so great.  
ANTIGONE  
Alas!  
ISMENE  
Alas!  
ANTIGONE  
Such a horrific sight . . .  
ISMENE  
. . . revealed to me by his return back home.  
ANTIGONE  
But he did not come home, once he had killed.  
ISMENE  
He saved himself and lost his life.  
ANTIGONE  
Ah yes,  
he was destroyed.



ISMENE

And yet he also killed.

ANTIGONE

O this doomed race!

ISMENE

Such wretched suffering!

ANTIGONE

A hapless grief which carries our own name!

ISMENE

A triple tide of sorrow!

CHORUS

A heavy Fate that brings us so much agonizing pain—  
the awe-inspiring shade of Oedipus!

O you dark Fury, your power is so great.

ANTIGONE

You know her now by what you did.

ISMENE

And you in that same instant met her, too.

ANTIGONE

When you came back to your own city.

ISMENE

To face your brother with a spear.

ANTIGONE

A deadly thing to talk about.

ISMENE

A deadly sight to see.

ANTIGONE

Alas, such pain!

ISMENE

Alas, so many troubles!

ANTIGONE

For our own home and land.

ISMENE

And most of all, for me.

ANTIGONE

And more, as well, for me.

ISMENE

O how I mourn your suffering, my king!

ANTIGONE

Alas for both of you, most pitiful of men!

ISMENE

Both gripped by ruinous illusions!

ANTIGONE

Where shall we put them in the earth?

ISMENE

Wherever they get most respect.

## ANTIGONE

More cause for grief!

Alas! For they must lie beside their father.

[Enter HERALD]

## HERALD

I must announce what has just been proposed and what the people's council has resolved

for citizens of our Cadmean city. <sup>115</sup>

They have decreed Eteocles may have  
a grave dug in the land which cherishes him,  
for he despised her enemies and chose  
to die here in the city, thus honouring  
ancestral shrines with his own piety.

He perished free of blame, in the very place  
where there is honour in a young man's death.

Those are the words I was sent here to say about Eteocles. As for his brother,  
the council has decreed that the corpse  
of Polyneices shall be thrown away

without a grave, outside the city,  
as food for dogs. He wanted to destroy  
the land of Cadmus and would have done so,  
if a god had not stood up and stopped him  
with his brother's spear. Though he is dead,  
he still remains polluted from his crime  
against his father's gods, whom he dishonoured, by launching foreign troops  
against our walls

and trying to seize the city. And thus,  
they have declared he will receive no honours—  
his grave will lie beneath the flying birds.

That burial will give him his reward.

No one is to attend to him or raise  
a funeral mound or, on his behalf,  
sing any shrill and reverent lament.

His friends are not to honour him at all  
by bearing him away in a procession.

Our Theban council has set out these laws  
to deal with funeral rites for our two kings.

ANTIGONE Well, this is what I have to say to those  
who rule in Thebes: if no one else is willing  
to help me find a grave for Polyneices,  
then I will take the risk all by myself  
and bury my own brother. I feel no shame  
in going against our city councillors

---

<sup>115</sup>It is not entirely clear where the political authority in Thebes rests, now that both kings are dead. In other versions of the story, Creon (brother-in-law of Oedipus, and hence the uncle of Eteocles and Polyneices) assumes control once the two brothers are gone.

so lawlessly. For with that corpse I share  
an overwhelming bond, the common womb from which we two were born, both  
children

of unhappy and ill-fated parents.

And thus my soul is willing now to share  
the troubles of a man who has no will  
and live in blood communion with the dead.

No hollow-bellied wolves will rip his corpse.

Let no one set that up as a decree!

Though I am a mere woman, I will find  
some way to dig a grave and bury him

with what I carry folded in my robes. I will cover him myself. So spare me  
all those laws which say I may not do it.

And do not fear, for I will find a way.

HERALD

I am saying you must not flaunt the city.

ANTIGONE

And I am saying you should not bother me  
with futile proclamations.

HERALD

The people,  
who have just escaped from a disaster,  
may well be harsh on you.

ANTIGONE

Let them be harsh!

This man here will not remain unburied.

HERALD

But the city hates this man. Will you now give him the honour of a funeral?

ANTIGONE

So far he has not received much honour  
from the gods.

HERALD

That is not true—  
the gods afforded him all due respect  
until he put this land of ours in danger.

ANTIGONE

He was paying back the harm he suffered.

HERALD

But what he did hurt all the citizens,  
not just one man. <sup>116</sup>

ANTIGONE

The final god to bring an end to any argument is Eris, who resolves disputes with  
war. No more of your long-winded reasoning,

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<sup>116</sup>The herald's point here is that the citizens as a group did not harm Polyneices, since he was driven away by Eteocles.

for I will bury Polyneices.

HERALD

As you wish. But I have told you it has been forbidden.

[Exit HERALD]

CHORUS

Alas! Alas for you demonic Furies,  
who boast about a family destroyed  
and have just utterly wiped out the race  
of Oedipus. What happens to me now?  
What do I do? Where is the road ahead?  
How can I endure not weeping for you  
or not escorting you to your own grave? I sense the hatred of our citizens.  
I am afraid. And so I turn away.  
Now you, Eteocles, will have a crowd  
to mourn your death, but no one will lament  
poor Polyneices. A single sister  
will offer him a funeral song alone.  
Who finds that burial acceptable?

[The CHORUS escorts the bodies off stage, half going with Polyneices, and half with Eteocles]

HALF CHORUS Let this city hand out punishment or not  
to citizens who weep for Polyneices.  
We here will still attend his funeral march and help to bury him, since all our race  
shares in the grief we feel and city laws  
have sanctioned different acts at different times.

HALF CHORUS And we will now escort Eteocles,  
as Justice and our city say is right.  
For with the sacred gods and mighty Zeus  
he was the one, of all our citizens, who saved this city of Cadmeans  
from being overwhelmed and foundering  
beneath a wave of foreign warriors.

[The CHORUS and the funeral processions slowly leave the stage]

# (AESCHYLUS) Suppliant Women

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>117</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This translation is based, for the most part, on the Greek text of Herbert Weir Smith (1922, reprint 1930). The line numbers in square brackets below refer to that text; the line numbers without brackets refer to the English translation. Indented partial lines are included with the line above in the reckoning. All endnotes, indicated by an asterisk in the text, have been provided by the translator.

The Greek text of *The Suppliant Women* is in many places corrupt and obscure (often incomprehensible), and various editors have supplied hundreds of possible variant readings. In much of the play, it is impossible to provide an English text without considerable guesswork. Given the difficulties with the text, a translator of the *Suppliant Women* faces a difficult choice: to try to remain as faithful as possible to the Greek and run the risk of a very awkward, unidiomatic English text or to treat the Greek text more cavalierly in order to make more fluent sense of the translation.

Any translator of *Suppliant Women* who wishes to stay close to the Greek text must, I think, experience considerable frustration (that, at least, has been my experience). T. A. Buckley, who castigates translators for not remaining faithful to the Greek, seems to catch this mood in a comment he makes on line 210, "The whole passage, as it now stands, in fact, the whole play, is a mass of hopeless absurdity." Later he repeats the sentiment: "To re-write the author by implication is not the business of the translator. . . . although I am nearly as much in the dark as ever" (p. 229). His translation is a useful example of how an attempt at literal fidelity to the Greek can produce a very awkward and often puzzling English text.

Since my first priority is to produce a translation in an easily grasped modern idiom, a dramatic script that can be read, recited, or performed without a very awkward English getting in the way, I have taken a number of liberties with the Greek, although generally I have tried to steer a middle path between the two options and to remain faithful to the original Greek, as much as that is possible to make out. Those who wish to look at a more literal text which calls detailed attention to the problems with the Greek should consult Alan Sommerstein's translation.

I have relied a great deal on the work of a number of authors, notably F. A. Paley, H. Weir Smyth, Walter Headlam, T. A. Buckley, and Alan Sommerstein.

...

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) was one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did

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<sup>117</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/suppliantwomen.htm>

so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

The Suppliant Women (also called The Suppliants or The Suppliant Maidens) was part of a series of four plays (the other three have been lost). The plays were based on the famous story of the daughters of Danaus, who sailed from Egypt seeking refuge in Greece. It is not clear when the play was first performed. Tradition held that it was a very early play, perhaps Aeschylus' first, but recent evidence has contradicted that widely held view.

Io, a young Greek girl persecuted by Zeus' wife, Hera, had, many years before the play begins, been changed into a cow and forced to flee from Greece to Egypt, where she had given birth to a child by Zeus and established a family line. Generations later, the fifty daughters of Danaus, her descendants, were to be married to the sons of Aegyptus, brother of Danaus and king of Egypt. The daughters, unwilling to go through with the marriages, fled with their father to Argos, the land from which Io had originally left. Their would-be husbands, angry at this conduct, sailed in pursuit of them. The play opens with the arrival of the daughters in Greece.

...

#### **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

DANAUS: a descendant of Io.

PELASGUS: king of Argos.

HERALD: an Egyptian CHORUS: daughters of Danaus. <sup>118</sup>

HANDMAIDENS: servants of the Chorus ATTENDANTS

*[The scene is a rocky shore in Argos, with a stone altar and some large statues of the gods on the stage to mark a patch of higher sacred ground. Enter DANAUS and the members of the CHORUS, who are dressed in foreign (i.e., non-Greek) clothes and carrying the branches of suppliants.]*

CHORUS I pray that Zeus who cares for suppliants will look with kindness on our company,  
whose ship has travelled here across the sea from the fine-grained sandy estuary  
of river Nile. We fled that sacred land,  
whose pastures border Syria, and come as fugitives, not exiled by decree of public  
banishment for shedding blood,  
but acting on our own, because we wished to flee a marriage we could not accept,  
a hateful and sacrilegious match  
with Aegyptus' sons. <sup>119</sup> For Danaus,  
our father, who is our counsellor and leads our group, debated what to do  
and of our painful options chose the best—

<sup>118</sup>... *his tongue*: Tantalus, a son of Zeus, offended the gods, who punished him by placing him in Hades where he is constantly tempted by food and drink which he cannot reach (Odysseus tells us of seeing the shade of Tantalus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*). His offense varies, depending on the story. In some accounts, he stole food from the gods and revealed their secrets to human beings. In others, he cut up his son Pelops and served him up as food for the gods.

<sup>119</sup>... *his brother, Thyestes*: The Fates set a man's destiny at birth by spinning yarn, measuring and cutting it. Traditionally there were three female fates.

to rush away as quickly as we could,  
 sailing across the ocean seas to Argos.  
 We can claim with pride our family line comes from this land, for it sprang up from  
 the hand and breath of Zeus, who touched that cow tormented by a gadfly's sting.  
 To what land could we come which offered us  
 more welcome kindness when our hands hold out these branches wrapped with  
 wool, which indicate that we are here as suppliants. O this city,  
 this land and its clear streams, O gods above,  
 and you beneath the earth, stern punishers,  
 who guard the tombs, and third of all, you too,  
 O Zeus the Saviour, who defends the homes of righteous men, with this land's  
 spirit of care receive our female suppliant band, and before that swarming horde  
 of men,  
 those insolent sons born to Aegyptus,  
 set foot upon this marshy shore, force them and their swift-moving ship back out  
 to sea,  
 and there let them run into violent storms,  
 with lightning, thunder, rain-drenched hurricanes and perish in the wild and  
 stormy waves,  
 before they ever carry us away, their cousins, against our will, and climb into our  
 beds, an act which Right forbids.

And now we call the Zeus-born calf,  
 our champion from across the sea, offspring of our ancestor, the flower-grazing  
 cow caressed by Zeus' breath, who in due time gave birth to Epaphus, whose very  
 name derives from his own birth. <sup>120</sup>

I call on him by name,  
 here in his mother's ancient pasturelands.  
 Remembering the torment she once faced,  
 I will set out for those who live here now trustworthy evidence, and they will see  
 some unexpected proofs, and at the end men will believe the truth of what I say.

Should someone living here and close to us be skilled in understanding songs  
 of birds,  
 then when he hears our melancholy chant,  
 it will seem to him our singing voice,  
 belongs to Metis, Tereus' poor wife,  
 the hawk-chased nightingale. <sup>121</sup>

Forced out from her green leafy haunts, she cries in grief for her familiar woods  
 and sings the tale of her child's fate, who died at her own hand,  
 the victim of a merciless mother's rage.

In the same way, too, I chant my grief,

<sup>120</sup> . . . *all men's eyes*: Phoebus is the name of the god Apollo, whose oracle Orestes consulted before returning to murder his mother and Aegisthus in revenge for his father's death.

<sup>121</sup> . . . *terrible ordeals*: The Eumenides (literally the "Kindly Ones") are the Furies, goddesses of blood revenge within the family, who are tormenting Orestes because he killed his mother. Electra does not call them by their official name but uses a common euphemism, presumably because she does not want to risk offending them.

invoking these Ionian strains.

I tear these tender cheeks of mine

burned by Nile sun and rend my heart which has not yet known tears.

I gather flowers of grief, filled with fear that no friends will appear to stand by us as fugitives from that mist-covered land.<sup>122</sup>

But you gods of our race, O listen to me!

Look for what is righteous in this case!

If you deny young men unjust desires and if you truly loathe their wanton lust, you will uphold the lawful rights of marriage. Even for fugitives worn down by war there are safe altars sacred to the gods.

I pray whatever comes from Zeus will truly turn out favourably for us. What Zeus desires is hard to ascertain, although it clearly blazes everywhere, even in the dark, accompanied by Fate, so riddling and obscure to mortal men.

His will is resolute, and when it falls it is not on its back—for once Zeus nods the deed is then fulfilled.<sup>123</sup> But Zeus' mind stretches on dark and tangled pathways, which no one sees or understands.

Men with hopes as high as lofty citadels he hurls to their destruction, and yet he works without the use of forceful arms, for every act gods undertake is effortless. Seated at ease, not stirring from his sacred throne, he somehow manages to bring about whatever he desires.

So let him see the arrogance of human beings, as in that family it grows again. Thoughts of marriage made it thrive in stubborn hearts and wild intentions. Driven by a spur they cannot check and disappointed in their hopes, they set their minds on madness.

I wail aloud my suffering, my pain, and mixed in with my tears I speak these clear and heavy tones—Alas! Alas!—so like a funeral song! And as I sing, I mourn for my own self, while I am still alive.

O this land, these hills of Apia, I call to you, for you well understand my words, the speech of those from foreign lands. Again and again I seize my veil, this linen veil from Sidon, and tear it into shreds.

<sup>122</sup> . . . *hair and libations*: Placing a lock of one's hair on a burial mound and pouring libations beside it are traditional marks of respect for the dead.

<sup>123</sup> . . . *in Mycenae*: The names Argos and Mycenae are often used interchangeably for the same city, although in some accounts they are two different communities.



Offerings promised to the gods are plentiful when things go well, once death has gone away. Alas! Alas! This suffering so hard to understand! O these surging waves of pain where are they carrying me?

O this land,  
these hills of Apia, I call to you,  
for you well understand my words,  
the speech of those from foreign lands.  
Again and again I seize my veil,  
this linen veil from Sidon,  
and tear it into shreds.

Our oars and wooden rope-bound ship, our refuge from the sea, followed the winds on a storm-free trip, with no cause to complain.

But now I pray that Father Zeus,  
whose eye sees everything, may grant in time an end that is auspicious,  
so that our sacred mother's famous race escape men's beds, unwedded and still free.

And may that holy daughter of Zeus secure within the sacred walls be willing to gaze down on me, so willing to receive her! May she, enraged that we are being pursued,  
come down with all her strength to save us,  
a virgin goddess helping virgin girls,  
so that our sacred mother's famous race escape men's beds, unwedded and still free.<sup>124</sup>

If not, our dark and sunburnt race  
will move with suppliant's branches on to Zeus,  
lord of earth, who welcomes all the dead.  
For if Olympian gods deny our prayers, we will seek death and die by rope.

O Zeus! That vengeful anger from the gods,  
the wrath of those pursuing Io!  
I know of Hera's passionate moods, the sky-conquering rage of Zeus' queen.  
From such harsh winds fierce storms arise.

And Zeus will then confront the charge of acting in a unjust way, if he dishonours the heifer's child, who many years ago  
he sired himself and now averts his gaze away from us when we implore his aid.  
O from his place high in the sky,  
may he hear us when we call!

O Zeus! That venomous anger from the gods,  
their wrath of those pursuing Io!  
I know of Hera's passionate moods, the sky-conquering rage of Zeus' queen.  
From such harsh winds fierce storms arise.

DANAUS Children, you must take care. You came here with a wise and loyal old man to lead that ship at sea—your father. Now on land,  
I have been thinking of what lies in store.

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<sup>124</sup> . . . *of my mother*: Loxias is a common name for Apollo, whose shrine Orestes consulted before killing Clytaemnestra. Themis, the goddess of righteousness, was the original god of the oracle.

So mark the words I say, and write them down—  
preserve them on the tablets of your mind.

I see dust, an army's voiceless herald,  
and whirling axles in their socket hubs do not move silently. I see armed men  
shield-bearing troops, each brandishing a spear,  
with curving chariots and horses. Perhaps the ones who rule this land have heard  
reports and are now marching here to look at us.

But whether the one who leads this force is not a threat to us or is spurred on by  
cruel rage—whatever he may be—

the wisest course, my daughters, is to sit around this rock, a sacred monument to  
the assembled gods. For an altar

is a shield, impenetrable and more secure than any city wall. So you should move  
there with due reverence, as quickly as you can. In your left hands hold up those  
suppliant boughs wrapped with white wool, those righteous symbols which bring  
so much delight to merciful Zeus.

In your response to what these strangers ask,

invite compassion for your painful needs in speech appropriate for foreigners.

Explain to them why you have run away,

and mention that there was no blood involved.

But most of all, no trace of arrogance.

Let your face and eyes remain respectful, calm, and modest. Do not look too eager  
to speak up or too reluctant. These traits the people here will think extremely rude.

Remember, too, to be subservient.

You are a foreigner, a fugitive,

and need their help. Those who have no power should not use words which seem  
too insolent.

CHORUS Father, you have given us good advice,  
and we are prudent. We will take due care to keep your wise instructions in our  
hearts. May Zeus, our ancestor, gaze down on us!

DANAUS Yes, may he look on us with gracious eyes.

CHORUS I would now like to sit beside you.

DANAUS Then waste no time, and move where you propose.

[The CHORUS moves over to DANAUS, who is standing beside the altar and the  
statues of the gods on the stage]

CHORUS O Zeus, have pity on us in our distress  
or we will be destroyed.

DANAUS If Zeus is willing then all will turn out well.

CHORUS [Look over here—  
there is a symbol drawn, some form of bird.] <sup>125</sup>

DANAUS It is the bird of Zeus—invoke his name.

CHORUS We call to the rays of the sun, our saviour.

DANAUS And to Apollo, too, a sacred god,  
who was exiled from heaven. <sup>126</sup>

<sup>125</sup> . . . *from Erebus*: Erebus is the deepest and darkest region of Hades, the underworld.

<sup>126</sup> . . . *navel of the earth*: The navel, or central point, of the earth was, according to tradition, located  
in Apollo's shrine in Delphi.

CHORUS He understands our fate and will have sympathy for mortal beings.

DANAUS May he indeed show sympathy to us and eagerly stand by to help our cause.

CHORUS What other deities should I invoke?

DANAUS I see a trident, symbol of Poseidon. <sup>127</sup>

CHORUS He brought us safely here—and now on land may he receive us kindly.

DANAUS And this one here,  
another god—Hermes the Messenger,  
as pictured by the Greeks.

CHORUS I pray that now his messages announce good news to us and keep us free.

DANAUS Honour these ruling powers at their communal shrine. Seat yourselves here,  
on this sacred ground, like a flock of doves terrified of hawks, who are also birds,  
their kindred, but enemies of theirs,  
who pollute their race. If one bird feeds on other birds, how is that sacrosanct?  
So how could a man who marries someone against her and her father's will be pure?

A man who acts like that, once he has died,  
will not escape a judgment for his crime in Hades, for there, they say, another Zeus  
delivers final judgment on the dead for wicked things they did. Be careful,  
and speak to them the way I have advised,  
so in this confrontation you prevail.

[PELASGUS, king of Argos, enters with armed attendants]

PELASGUS From what place do you group of women come?  
This clothing is not Greek—the robes you wear are thickly woven and luxurious,  
a foreign style. Who am I speaking to?  
Your garments are not those of Argive girls and do not come from any part of  
Greece.

I am amazed that you are brave enough to dare approach this place without a  
herald or a guide or someone to protect you.

I see those branches lying there beside you,  
the usual emblem of a suppliant to those divinities who gather here. But that is all  
a native Greek could know.

In many other matters I could make a reasonable guess, but you are here,  
and you can tell me what I wish to learn.

CHORUS What you have said about what we are wearing is not inaccurate. But  
I need to know how I should frame the words I speak to you.

Are you a private citizen, a herald,  
or the one who rules this land?

PELASGUS I assure you you may speak to me in full confidence and answer  
what I ask. I am Pelasgus,  
the son of Palaechthon, who was born from earth.

<sup>127</sup> . . . *from Tantalus*: Tantalus is the founder of the royal family of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Orestes, and Electra. He was a son of Zeus and a divine nymph.

I rule this land. The people here are named after their lord and called Pelasgians. They are the ones who work this fertile ground. Through every region where pure Strymon flows I rule the regions on the western side.

My realm includes lands by the Perrhaebi, and regions lying beyond Mount Pidnus up to the lands of the Paeonians, and Dodona's mountain range. The ocean sea defines my boundaries. Within these limits I rule as king. This region here is Apia, named for an ancient healer long ago.

For Apis, Apollo's son, a prophet and a healer from far away Naupactos, cleansed this land of man-destroying monsters, a dreadful colony of hostile snakes, which Earth produced, responding to her rage at ancient bloody deeds which had defiled her. With consummate art, Apis found a cure and freed the land of Argos of this plague.

From that time on, as a reward for this, the Argives think of Apis in their prayers. And now that I have told you about Argos, describe your lineage, and tell me more, although our citizens take no delight in speeches which continue far too long.

CHORUS Our story is a short and simple one.

We can boast we are a race from Argos, descended from a cow blest with a child. My words will give full evidence of this.

PELASGUS As I listen to your words, you strangers, I find your story quite beyond belief. How can your family come from Argos? For in appearance you are far more like the women in Libya and not at all like women in this land. The river Nile might have produced a racial group like yours.

Your features look just like those images of females cast by Cyprian craftsmen, or like those nomad women I hear about who ride on saddled camels, just like horses. Their homeland borders Ethiopia. If you were armed with bows, I would have guessed you surely must be Amazons, women who feed on meat and live apart from men.

But tell me more so I can understand how you can trace your family line to Argos.

CHORUS Is there a story here that Io once served as priestess in Hera's shrine at Argos?

PELASGUS Indeed there is. The story is well known.

CHORUS And does that story ever talk about how Zeus made love to someone mortal?

PELASGUS It does, but Hera knew of that affair.

CHORUS How did those two resolve their regal quarrel?

PELASGUS Argive Hera turned the girl into a cow.

CHORUS And when that girl became a cow with horns, did Zeus approach her?

PELASGUS They say he did, but first he changed into a lusty bull.

CHORUS How did that mighty wife of Zeus respond?

PELASGUS She chose an all-seeing guard to watch the cow.

CHORUS Who was that watchful sentinel you mention?

PELASGUS His name was Argus, a son of Earth— Hermes killed him.

CHORUS What else did Hera do to that ill-fated cow?

PELASGUS She sent a fly which keeps the cattle moving with its sting.

CHORUS Those living by the Nile call it a gadfly.

PELASGUS It drove her out of Argos—far away.

CHORUS Your story matches mine in every detail.

Then she moved to Canobus and Memphis. And there, once Zeus caressed her with his hand, he produced a child.

PELASGUS Who claims to be the calf that Zeus created with that cow?

CHORUS He was called Epaphus, a fitting name, “born from Zeus’ touch.”

PELASGUS [And what offspring did Epaphus produce?] <sup>128</sup>

CHORUS Libya—who reaped the fruit from the most extensive region of the earth.

PELASGUS And, in your account, who else was born from her?

CHORUS Belus, my father’s father. He had two sons. <sup>129</sup>

PELASGUS Now tell me your wise father’s name.

CHORUS Danaus.

He has a brother, who has fifty sons.

PELASGUS Do not withhold from me his brother’s name.

CHORUS Aegyptus. And now you understand how far my ancestry goes back, I pray you act to save a group with links to Argos.

PELASGUS It seems to me you share some ancient bonds with Argos. But what was it that took place to make you leave your father’s home like this? What has gone wrong?

CHORUS Lord Pelasgus, men’s evil fortunes come in many different shades, for nowhere do you see their troubles winged with feathers which are identical. Who would have said

a sudden flight would bring us back to Argos,

a kindred race from long ago, fleeing a hateful marriage bed.

PELASGUS Why have you come here as suppliants to these assembled gods holding those boughs fresh cut and wrapped with wool?

CHORUS To avoid Aegyptus’ sons—we have no wish to be their slaves.

PELASGUS Because you hate them? Or are you claiming they are being unjust?

CHORUS Who would buy a master for herself from her own relatives?

PELASGUS That is a way men make their wealth and power grow.

CHORUS And make it easy, should anything go wrong, to get rid of their wives. <sup>130</sup>

<sup>128</sup>. . . *Malea*: Menelaus’ return from Troy (as he tells us in the *Odyssey*) was long delayed. He was blown off course to Egypt, where he stayed for a while. Malea is the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese.

<sup>129</sup>. . . *suppliant branch*: In a formal supplication the petitioner carries an olive branch. Orestes doesn’t have one available.

<sup>130</sup>. . . *something horrific*: West makes the useful observation (p. 210) that the Greeks did not yet have a clear sense of a good or bad conscience. This line suggests something like a sense of guilt arising out of one’s awareness of the moral qualities of an act. As West observes, Menelaus in his response seems confused by the idea.

PELASGUS What should I do for you  
to observe due piety and reverence?

CHORUS When Aegyptus' sons demand to have us back,  
do not comply.

PELASGUS A difficult request—  
you are asking me to run the risk of war.

CHORUS But Justice keeps her allies safe from harm.

PELASGUS Yes—if she has taken part in the affair right from the start.

CHORUS Honour the ship of state when it is wreathed in suppliant branches.

PELASGUS Just looking at the shadows of this shrine makes me tremble. The  
anger of great Zeus,  
the god of suppliants, is hard to bear.

CHORUS O child of Palaechthon, Pelasgian lord,  
hear me with compassion in your heart.

See me, a suppliant fugitive, running  
like a heifer hunted down by wolves along steep mountain slopes, lowing to the  
herdsman to show him her distress and trusting that his strength will save her.

PELASGUS I see your company of suppliants appealing to the gods assembled  
here and shaded by these fresh cut boughs.

This issue of your being the city's guest— may that not prove to be disastrous,  
and may no causes we did not foresee bring unexpected strife into our state. The  
city has no wish for that.

CHORUS May Themis, goddess who protects all suppliants, a daughter of  
apportioning Zeus, look down  
and see our flight brings you no harm. And you with your mature experience  
should understand from younger hearts if you show reverence to a suppliant [and  
piously give offerings to the gods,  
then you will never lack the gods' goodwill]. <sup>131</sup>

PELASGUS But here you are not seated by the hearth inside my home. For if our  
city, as a community, suffers from a stain, then we must work, as a community,  
to find the cure. And so, until I talk to all the citizens about these things,  
I cannot make you any promises or offer help.

CHORUS But you are the city.  
You are the people. Since you are king with no one in authority above you, your will  
alone, all by itself, controls your county's hearth and shrine, and from your throne  
you are the one who rules on everything. Be careful you do not pollute the state!

PELASGUS May such pollution fall upon my foes!

I cannot help you without risking war,  
but it would be unwise to spurn your prayers.

I am confused, and fear now grips my heart,  
to act or not to act and then accept  
whatever outcome fortune may present.

CHORUS Think of the lofty god who watches us from high above, the one who

<sup>131</sup> . . . *are his friends*: I have adopted West's suggestion that this line refers to the god (Apollo) rather than to Orestes himself: "I am not wise, but by nature I am true to my friends (see West 212).

guards all suffering mortals in their pain who cry to those close by and yet do not obtain from them the justice they deserve by customary right. The wrath of Zeus, god of suppliants, lies in wait—and wailing cries of grief from those who suffer punishment will not persuade him to relent.

PELASGUS But if the laws of your own state declare Aegyptus' sons are rightfully your lords once they proclaim they are your next of kin, then who would wish to speak against their claim?

You must defend yourself with your own laws,  
the statutes in the land from which you came,  
to show they have no right to govern you.

CHORUS O may I never find myself subjected to the authority of men! Instead, I would rather choose to run away and chart my journey by the stars to escape a marriage I detest. Take Justice as your ally and decide according to what gods consider right.

PELASGUS This decision is not easy—and you must not require me to render judgment.

I have already said I will not do that,  
although I am the king, before I talk to my own people, in case, at some point,  
should this matter prove more troublesome,  
the citizens declare, "You showed respect to strangers and undermined our city."

CHORUS Impartial Zeus, who shares the blood of either side in this dispute, looks down, dispensing justice fairly—to evil men due punishments to the righteous their reward. With issues weighed so evenly why turn away from acting justly?

PELASGUS

But here we need profound and sure advice, like a diver plunging deep into the sea,  
with his eyes clear, not muddled or confused, so this affair will turn out well for us  
and, more than anything, not harm our state,  
so you will not become a prize of war,  
and we will not surrender you from here,  
the seat and holy sanctuary of the gods,  
and bring down to this land to live among us the grievous spirit of destructive vengeance, who, even in Hades, does not free the dead. Surely you do not think we have no need for counsel to deliver us from that?

CHORUS Reflect on this, and then in piety and righteousness become our patron.

Do not betray a fugitive cast out from far away by godless banishment.

O you who hold all power in this land, do not look on as I am led away,  
abducted from this shrine of many gods.

Think the wanton violence of men, and guard against the anger of the gods.

Do not compel yourself to see all justice flouted, as your suppliants are taken  
from these sacred images  
and then, just like a horse, dragged off,  
seized by the bands around our heads and our finely woven clothes.



Know this—whatever you decide,  
 your children and your house remain to pay the penalty in full. So bear in mind the  
 power of Zeus  
 which works for justice.

PELASGUS I have considered that.  
 Things have now reached the stage where I am forced to fight a major war with  
 one group or the other,  
 a choice determined by necessity, nailed down  
 as firmly as a ship's hull in a winch. <sup>132</sup>  
 There is no way to solve this without grief.  
 If things are stolen from a family home,  
 then Zeus, protector of our property, may graciously restore what has been lost.  
 A tongue may shoot out inappropriate words,  
 rousing a heart to anger and distress,  
 and soothing words can ease that painful speech.  
 But so that we do not spill family blood we surely need to offer sacrifice  
 and slaughter many beasts to many gods,  
 to save ourselves from grief. I had no wish to enter this dispute. I would prefer to  
 have no sense of troubles yet to come than to foresee them clearly. May all go well  
 and prove my judgment false.

CHORUS Hear now the last of all these reverend appeals to your compassion.

PELASGUS I am listening. Speak up. Your words will not slip past me.

CHORUS I have a twisted band around my chest and belts to hold my clothes .

..

PELASGUS Yes. Things like that are most appropriate for female dress.

CHORUS Well then, with these, I have, as you can see, an excellent way . . . .

PELASGUS What do you mean? What are you trying to say? Tell me.

CHORUS If you do not make solemn promises to our group here . . .

PELASGUS How will these bits of clothing be any help to you?

CHORUS . . . these statues here will be adorned with strange new votive plaques.

PELASGUS You talk in riddles. Speak more directly.

CHORUS We will not wait, but hang ourselves right here,  
 on these images of the gods.

PELASGUS I hear your words—  
 O how they lash my heart!

CHORUS Now you understand—  
 for I have made you see more clearly.

PELASGUS This issue is so hard to wrestle with, no matter where one looks—  
 like a torrent,  
 a flood of ruin, bearing down on me,  
 a bottomless sea of sheer disaster

<sup>132</sup> . . . *for Palamedes*: Oeax is the brother of Palamedes, an Achaean warrior at Troy. When Odysseus pretended to be mad so that he would not have to go on the expedition to Troy, Palamedes tricked him into revealing his sanity. Later, in Troy, Odysseus forced a Phrygian (Trojan) prisoner to write a treasonous letter apparently from Palamedes. Agamemnon found the letter and put Palamedes to death.



no one can navigate. I am embarked,  
and there is no safe refuge from the storm.  
If I do not discharge my obligations to you as suppliants, you say you will commit  
an act that brings pollution to our state  
too dreadful to describe. But if I stand before the city walls and move to fight  
Aegyptus' sons, your kinsmen, how can that not have a bitter cost? In a women's  
cause men's blood will stain the ground. However,  
the force of Zeus, who guards all suppliants,  
makes me respect his wrath, since fear of that among all men deserves the highest  
awe.

[Pelagus moves to address Danaus]

So you, the aged father of these girls,  
quickly collect some branches in your arms and set them down on other altars to  
this land's gods, so that all citizens can see a sign that you are suppliants and no  
one utters words against me,  
for people are too fond of finding fault with those who rule. It could well be the  
case that those who see them will be moved by pity,  
despise that band of insolent young men,  
and treat your case with more benevolence,  
since everyone feels sympathy for those whose cause is weaker.

DANAUS It means a lot to us  
to have found someone who feels compassion, a patron for our cause. But you  
should send some of this country's men with us as escorts and as guides, so we  
may find the holy shrines before the temples of the country's gods,  
the homes of those protectors of the state,  
and proceed in safety through the city.  
Our bodies do not look the same as yours—  
a race raised by the Nile is different from one which lives beside the Inachus.  
Take care that boldness does not bring on fear, for men have killed a friend through  
ignorance.

PELAGUS You men, go with this stranger—what he says  
makes excellent sense. Take him to the shrines inside the city and the sacred altars.  
Do not converse at any length with those you meet along the way, while you  
conduct this man who sailed here seeking refuge at our sanctuaries of the gods.

[DANAUS and the ATTENDANTS leave]

CHORUS You told him what to do, and he is gone,  
as you instructed. But what am I to do? What reassurance can you offer me?

PELAGUS Set your suppliant boughs down here,  
the signs of your distress.

CHORUS I will place them here,  
just as you ordered.

PELAGUS Now, move down over there,  
around that level space.

CHORUS How will that place keep me protected? It is not sacred ground.

PELAGUS We will not let those flying birds of prey  
swoop down and seize you.

CHORUS But what if they are worse than hateful snakes and hostile to us?

PELASGUS The words I spoke were meant to lift your spirits. Your reply should be more favourable.

CHORUS But our hearts are terrified. It should be no surprise that we are very troubled.

PELASGUS Excessive fear is always uncontrolled.

CHORUS Then reassure us—  
with words and actions ease our troubled hearts.

PELASGUS Your father will not leave you here for long.

I am going to summon the citizens,  
so I may put them in a friendly mood.

I will instruct your father what to say.

You should stay here to offer up your prayers  
to Argive gods to grant what you desire.

I will go back and see what I can do.

May my words prove persuasive and fortune bring these events to a successful close.

[Exit PELASGUS and his ATTENDANTS]

CHORUS O blessed Zeus, lord of lords,  
holiest of the holy, and of all the perfect powers the great perfection,  
O listen to our plea! Protect your race from these men's arrogant lust,  
which you abominate, and hurl the madness on their black-benched ship into the purple sea.

Gaze down on us,  
and look with favour on our female cause.  
Recall the ancient story of our race,  
that pleasing tale from long ago,  
about our ancestor, the woman you loved. Remember all of it,  
you whose soft caresses fondled Io.  
We claim our race descends from Zeus,  
and a native settler from this land.  
I have returned to ancient tracks where Argus spied on mother Io,  
as in that fertile meadowland  
she grazed among the flowers. Here that gadfly's painful sting drove her insane.  
She ran away,  
wandering through many tribes of men,  
and then, as Fate decreed, sliced through the surging waters of the strait,  
fixing the boundary of the distant shore.<sup>133</sup>

She hurried on through Asian lands,  
through Phrygian meadows full of sheep,  
and past Teuthras where the Mysians live,  
the valley lands of Lydia, across the hills

<sup>133</sup> . . . *twins from Zeus*: Tyndareus and Leda had four children at the same time: Helen, Clytaemnestra, Castor, and Pollux (also called Polydeuces). However, Tyndareus was the biological father of only two of them, Castor and Clytaemnestra. Helen and Pollux were conceived by Zeus (in the form of a swan) and Leda. In some accounts (as here) both Castor and Pollux are children of Zeus.

that mark Cilician and Pamphylian lands,  
racing through ever-flowing river streams,  
through deep and fertile soil, and past the wheat-rich land of Aphrodite. <sup>134</sup>

Forced by her flying herdsman's sting,  
she reached the nourishing groves of Zeus, that snow-fed meadow lashed by  
Typho's rage,  
where waters of the Nile flow past untouched by all disease, driven mad by  
suffering she did not deserve,  
and frantic from that painful goad,  
a frenzied girl possessed by Hera! <sup>135</sup>

The men then living in that land,  
turned pale with fear and trembled at the sight,  
a strange half-human monstrous thing,  
a beast with such a dreadful shape, part woman and part cow!  
Amazement seized them as they looked.  
Who was it, then, who in the end brought peace to wandering Io's pain,  
the torment of that stinging fly?

That was the work of Zeus, who rules through endless time. With the power of  
his own soothing hand and sacred breath he brought her suffering to an end,  
as her tears fell to end her shame. And then, according to a true report,  
she took in Zeus' seed, conceived a child,  
and bore a blameless son . . .

. . . who through long ages has been blessed.  
And after that throughout the land the cry rang out—"This race, in fact,  
is sprung from life-producing Zeus." For who but Zeus could put an end to that  
disease which Hera planned?  
If you proclaim that this is Zeus' work and our race springs from Epaphus,  
then you will state the truth.

To which of the gods could we appeal  
more reasonably for his just deeds?  
He is our father and our king.  
With his own hand he made us grow,  
the mighty parent of our race,  
whose wisdom spans the ages.  
From Zeus, who arranges everything,  
come winds that make things prosper.

<sup>134</sup> . . . *of your wife*: The immediate cause of the Trojan War was Paris' abduction of Helen, Menelaus' wife, from Sparta (Helen went willingly enough). Agamemnon, the senior of the two brothers, took command of the Greek army which assembled at Aulis in response to a promise all the kings had made to Tyndareus, that they would help Helen's husband, should he ever require their assistance. The goddess Artemis prevented the Greek fleet from sailing until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia, an action which Agamemnon carried out.

<sup>135</sup> . . . *double line of Atreus*: The "double line" is the families of Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus. The "golden ram" mentioned refers to an animal in Atreus' flocks, on the basis of which he claimed the throne over the objections of his brother Thyestes. The slaughter at the banquet is another reference to the dinner in which Atreus served up to his brother Thyestes the latter's sons as the main course.

He does not rush to carry out some other god's commands,  
nor is he ruled by someone greater.  
No power above keeps him in awe.  
And once he speaks, the work is done—  
the counsels carried in his heart he instantly brings into being.

[Enter Danaus]

DANAUS Lift your hearts, my children. The people here  
have acted well—with full authority they have passed a public vote.

CHORUS Greetings to you father, a messenger with very welcome news.  
Tell us the outcome of the people's vote.  
What did the majority of hands decide?

DANAUS The Argives did not seem to hesitate—  
they made my ancient heart feel young again.  
The air was thick with arms as all of them in full assembly voted in this law,  
by raising their right hands: we are free to settle in this land. We will not be seized  
by anyone and carried off as hostages. We are protected from what men may do.  
No one—no resident or foreigner—  
can act against us. If any man tries force,  
then those who own some land and do not help will be disgraced and by a public  
vote will suffer banishment. Those were the words delivered by the Pelasgian king  
on our behalf—and he persuaded them by claiming that in years to come the wrath  
of Zeus, god of suppliants, would never let the city thrive. He declared the curse  
would be a double one, for we are strangers and also from this land. It would  
appear before the city and prepare a feast  
of evils they could not resist. At these words the Argive people did not even wait  
to hear the herald speak, but raised their hands to say what should be done. Once  
they heard the way the speaker turned his argument,  
the Pelasgian people were convinced and voted for what he had just resolved.  
But it was Zeus who brought us this result.

CHORUS Come, chant a prayer that blessings fall upon the Argives for their  
blessed work.

May Zeus, the god of strangers, hear these tributes from a stranger's lips and make  
them truly reach their goal,  
so all of them are perfectly fulfilled.

[As the Chorus steps forward to chant this long prayer, Danaus moves to the  
highest point in the back of the stage to look out over the sea]

And now, you Zeus-born gods,  
hear us as we pour forth prayers of blessings for our Argive kin. May fire from Ares,  
god of war,  
who with incessant battle cries cuts down men in foreign fields,  
never lay waste this Pelasgian land,  
for people here took pity on us and voted to support our cause,  
respecting our unhappy flock  
as suppliants of Zeus.

They did not scorn our female plight and cast their votes to favour men.  
For they revered that watchful one,

the agent of divine revenge,  
 a god no one can stand against.  
 What house would have that messenger perch on the roof, which it defiles and  
 where its grievous weight  
 sits hard upon the home. These men revere blood relatives,  
 petitioners to sacred Zeus, and thus with altars left unstained they win the favour  
 of the gods.

And therefore from our shadowed lips may prayers of gratitude fly up to  
 honour them. <sup>136</sup> May no plague ever strike this town and leave it empty of its  
 men, nor any strife  
 stain this country's soil with blood from its own slaughtered citizens. May no one  
 gather up the flower of Argive youth, and may that god who sleeps in Aphrodite's  
 bed, man-killing Ares, not slice away men in their finest bloom.

May altars blaze with offerings,  
 gifts to the elders gathered there,  
 so their city will be wisely ruled,  
 since these men worship mighty Zeus,  
 above all else the god of strangers,  
 who by an ancient law guides Fate. We pray new rulers always rise to serve as  
 guardians for this land.

And may Artemis-Hecate keep watch protecting women giving birth. <sup>137</sup>

Let no man-killing slaughter come to turn the city against itself,  
 by arming Ares, father of tears.  
 He is no friend of dance or lyre and stirs up cries for civil strife.  
 May joyless flocks of foul disease stay far from citizens' heads,  
 and may Apollo always show to all the young his gracious favour.

May Zeus bring earth to yield its crops and bear its fruit in every season.  
 And in their fields may grazing herds produce new calves in great abundance.  
 May good things from the gods be theirs,  
 and may musicians at their altars sing auspicious songs, and from pure lips let  
 hymns of praise accompany the lyre.

May all those here who rule the state firmly protect the people's rights,  
 with prudent counsel for the public good.  
 To strangers may they grant the right,  
 before they arm themselves for war,  
 of honest arbitration with no pain.

And may they always worship gods who guard this land, by holding high their  
 native country's laurel boughs and offering bulls for sacrifice,  
 just as their fathers used to do,  
 for honouring parents is a law,  
 the third of those engraved by Justice,

<sup>136</sup> . . . *on this very day*: The word Pelasgian is frequently used to describe the Argives. The word hearkens back to the original inhabitants of the area.

<sup>137</sup> . . . *by Aegyptus*: The fifty daughters of Danaus married the fifty sons of Aegyptus and killed their husbands (all but one) on the wedding night. In some accounts Aegyptus prosecuted Danaus for the mass murder.

whose honour reigns on high.

[Danaus speaks from his vantage point, looking out to sea]

DANAUS Dear daughters, I commend these prudent prayers.

You must not fear to hear your father's words,

his troubling, unexpected news. From here,

my lookout on this shrine for suppliants,

I see their ship. For it is clearly marked. I could not fail to see it—those sails,

that leather hide along the side, that prow with eyes in front that watch its onward track,

obeying the guiding rudder in the stern,

too skilfully for those who are her foes.

The sailors on the ship are clear to see,

the white clothes make their blackened limbs stand out.

And I can see the other ships, as well,

and those assisting them. The ship in front,

with her sails furled and rowers keeping time, is now approaching land. You must stay calm and face this matter. Keep yourselves controlled.

Do not forget these gods. I will return when I can find our friends and other men to plead our cause. Perhaps a herald will come,

or some ambassador, eager to seize you as stolen property and drag you off.

But they will not succeed. So have no fear.

But still, if we are slow in bringing help,

it would be better if you kept in mind, at every moment, the help these gods provide.

Take heart. In due time, on the destined day,

the mortal man who disrespects the gods will meet his punishment.

CHORUS I am afraid, father,

those ships are sailing in on such swift wings! Before much time has passed they will be here!

I truly am so terribly afraid that our long flight will be no help to us.

O father, this fear is killing me!

DANAUS Since the Argives voted so decisively, be brave, my children. They will fight for you.

Of that I am certain.

CHORUS Aegyptus' vile sons,

lascivious men, are greedy for a war.

You know that, too. In dark-eyed timbered ships they sailed here with a huge black host of men.

That rage of theirs has now caught up with us.

DANAUS Here they will find a force of men whose arms are lean and strong, toughened by midday suns.

CHORUS Do not leave us alone here, father,

I beg you. A woman left by herself is nothing. She has no spirit for war. These men have wicked minds and evil hearts.

Their schemes are devious—like ravens,

they have no reverence for sacred altars.

DANAUS My children, if the gods, as well as you,  
despise these men, then that is good for us.

CHORUS Father, they are not afraid of tridents or objects sacred to the gods—  
these things will not stop them from laying hands on us.  
They are arrogant men, full of impious rage, like shameless dogs, with no thought  
of the gods.

DANAUS But, as the saying goes, wolves can conquer dogs  
and papyrus fruit is not a match for wheat. <sup>138</sup>

CHORUS They have the temperament of savage beasts,  
profane and rash. We must protect ourselves,  
and quickly.

DANAUS When setting out or anchoring a naval force moves slowly. For cables  
to tie up the ship must be hauled onshore,  
and shepherds of the ships do not feel safe as soon as anchors are securely fixed,  
especially when they reach a coast which offers them no harbour, at sunset with  
night moving in. In prudent pilots  
the night time tends to breed anxiety.  
Besides, they cannot properly arrange to disembark their troops before the ship  
is confident it is quite safely moored.  
Although you are afraid, remember this: do not ignore the gods. [I will be back]  
once I have found assistance. The city will not complain about the messenger.  
He may be old, but still his heart and tongue are in their youthful prime.

[Exit Danaus, on his way to the city]

CHORUS O land of hills, for which I feel such righteous veneration, what will  
become of us? And where in Apian land do we now flee,  
if there is anywhere a place,  
a deep dark pit, where we can hide?  
I wish I could become black smoke, move up beside the clouds of Zeus,  
and spreading upward without wings  
completely vanish, like the dust that no one sees, and perish!

I can no longer flee this evil.  
My trembling heart is turning black.  
What my father saw has shaken me,  
and I am overwhelmed with fear.  
I would prefer to meet my doom in a knotted noose than see a loathsome man  
come near my flesh!  
Before that happens, let me die!  
Let Hades be my lord and master!

O for a seat somewhere up high in the upper air, where watery clouds turn into  
snow or else a barren crag,  
a steep and lonely towering peak where no goats roam and vultures fly,  
invisible from below, a place to watch my plunge into the depths, before I am  
compelled to marry and my heart breaks in two.

<sup>138</sup>. . . *those Phrygians*: Talthybius is a character in the Iliad, a herald in the Achaeen army who serves Agamemnon. Phrygians is a term commonly used to designate the Trojans or barbarian Asiatics.

From now on I would not refuse  
to serve as prey for carrion dogs or as a feast for native birds.  
For death delivers us from ills that love to feed our sorrow. Let my death come, O  
let it come,  
before the wedding bed.

What way of flight can I still find to save me from this marriage?

So with a voice that reaches heaven cry to the gods our songs of prayer.

O father Zeus, look down on us,  
fulfill somehow what we desire,  
so we may find relief and peace.

May your just eyes find no delight in violent acts, and may you guard your  
suppliants, almighty Zeus,  
protector of this land.

Aegyptus' sons, whose arrogance is hard to bear,  
are coming after me, a fugitive,  
with cries of lust, in their desire  
to capture me by force. You hold the balance beam that governs all,  
and for we mortal human beings,  
without you nothing is fulfilled. <sup>139</sup>

[Enter an Egyptian HERALD, with an armed escort.]

CHORUS <sup>140</sup>

Aaaiiii! Aaiiii! Here on the land my ravisher approaches from the sea. May you die  
before you seize me! I cry out in my grief and pain!

I see what they are going to do,  
to take me off by force. Aaiiii!

Move off—run to our sanctuary there on the shrine. The savage insolence on sea  
and land we cannot bear.

O lord of earth, protect us!

[The members of the Chorus move up onto the higher parts of the shrine and  
cling to the statues of the gods]

HERALD Come down from there—and hurry!

Move off swiftly to the ships,  
as fast as feet can get you there. If not, we'll rip out all your hair,  
or stab you with our spears,  
or slice off heads in streams of blood!

<sup>139</sup> . . . *shave it close*: The Cyclopan land is a reference to the city of Mycenae whose walls were so big that legend had it they had been built by the Cyclopes. Shaving the head is often an important element in a mourning ritual.

<sup>140</sup> . . . *along the shore*: These lines refer to the origin of the troubles in the House of Atreus. Pelops wanted Hippodamia as his bride. Her father, Oenomaus, demanded a chariot race to determine the outcome: if Pelops won he could wed the daughter, and if Pelops was not successful he would die. Pelops bribed Myrtilus to sabotage the king's chariot and, as a result, won the race. Then he killed his co-conspirator, Myrtilus, by throwing him into the sea. Myrtilus cursed Pelops' family as he was drowning. Myrtilus was a son of the god Hermes, son of Zeus and the nymph Maia (as is mentioned a couple of lines further on), and the god made sure the curse took effect by introducing a golden lamb into the flocks belonging to the sons of Pelops, thus inciting the brothers Atreus and Thyestes to quarrel.



Damn you, get down from there!  
Start moving to the ship! And hurry!

CHORUS Would you had died in your bolted ship while sailing here on the great salt sea,  
you and your masters' arrogant pride!

HERALD I order you to stop these cries. Come on!  
Leave this sanctuary! Move to the ship! One with no city or honour here gets no respect from me.

CHORUS O never again may you behold the stream that feeds our oxen,  
the river Nile, which nourishes by its increase life-giving blood for mortal men. I am native here,  
old man, and from an ancient line.

HERALD I'm ordering you to move to the ship.  
Willing or not, get yourselves on board! If I lay violent hands on you to force you there, you'll suffer.

CHORUS  
Alas! Alas!  
May you all perish helplessly,  
driven off course on the raging sea by eastern winds onto shoals of sand,  
wrecked at Sarpedon's burial mound! <sup>141</sup>

HERALD Keep up these shrieks of yours, these cries,  
and keep on summoning the gods.  
You will not escape an Egyptian ship,  
not even if you scream and wail and chant more bitterly than this.

CHORUS May mighty Nile,  
who nurtures you, dissolve away  
your insolent pride and kill you.

HERALD I'm ordering you to our curving ship,  
as quickly as you can—no stalling.  
We're not afraid to force you down and haul you off by the hair.

CHORUS Aaaiii, father! These sacred images—  
they are not helping me! Step by step the spider creeps to drag me out to sea, a dark black dream, a nightmare!

Alas! Alas! O mother Earth,  
O mother Earth, turn aside these fearful words he shouts.  
O son of Earth! O father Zeus!

HERALD I'm not afraid of these Argive gods.  
They had no part in raising me and will not help in my old age.

CHORUS The two-footed serpent in his rage is closing in on me—like a snake he grabs and bites my foot.

Alas! Alas! O mother Earth, O mother Earth, turn aside these fearful words he shouts.

O son of Earth! O father Zeus!

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<sup>141</sup> . . . *the Pleiades*: The suggestion here seems to be that before this change, the sun did not move from east to west. I have adopted West's useful emendation of the text to read "white horses" rather than "single horse." The Pleiades is a constellation consisting of seven stars.

HERALD If you refuse to move to the ship,  
That dress you're wearing won't be spared—  
we'll rip it into shreds.

CHORUS We are lost!  
O king, the evil pain we must endure!

HERALD It seems I'll have to drag you away by your hair, since you are so slow  
to do what I say.

CHORUS You chiefs and leaders of the city, these men are taking me by force!

HERALD You'll soon be seeing many leading men,  
Aegyptus' sons, and you won't need to ask who is in control. So lift your spirits.

[Enter king Pelasgus with an armed escort]

PELASGUS You there, what are you doing? What insolence has led you here to  
disrespect this land of Pelasgian men? Perhaps you think you've reached a state  
made up of women? For a barbarian confronting Greeks you are far too arrogant.  
Your mind has not been thinking as it ought to do,  
and you have made a number of mistakes.

HERALD Where in this affair have I been wrong and gone against my rights?

PELASGUS First of all,  
you are a foreigner but have no sense of how to act as one.

HERALD How is that true?  
I am taking what I lost and now have found.

PELASGUS To what patron in this land did you appeal?

HERALD To the mightiest patron of them all—  
to the Searcher god, to Hermes.

PELASGUS You talk of gods,  
and yet you disrespect these deities.

HERALD I worship those around the river Nile.

PELASGUS So, as I understand, these gods of ours are nothing to you?

HERALD Unless some person here seizes these girls and takes them from me,  
I'm leading them away.

PELASGUS If you touch them,  
you'll soon have reason to regret you did.

HERALD I hear your words—they're not hospitable.

PELASGUS I don't show hospitality to those who rob the gods.

HERALD I will go now and tell Aegyptus' sons about what's happened here.

PELASGUS To my mind that is no concern at all.

HERALD However, so I may know what's going on  
and speak more clearly—for a herald's task requires a detailed, accurate report—  
what do I say about the man who stole these women away from their own cousins?  
War god Ares does not use witnesses to judge a case like this or take silver to settle  
a dispute. Before all that,  
many will fall and twitch away their lives.

PELASGUS Why should I tell you my name? In due time,  
you and your people will all learn of it.  
As for these women, you may lead them off,  
if you convince them in a righteous argument and they all willingly agree to go.

This issue has been dealt with in a vote of all the people in the city here— it was unanimous: never to give this band of women up to any force.

A bolt through this decree keeps it nailed down.

It is immoveable. Though not inscribed on tablets or sealed up in folds of books, from the tongues of people free to speak you'll hear it clearly. Now go! Out of my sight as quickly as you can!

HERALD It looks as if

we are about to launch a brand new war.

May strength and victory be with the men!

PELASGUS You'll find the people of this land are men—  
their drinks are never brewed from barley! <sup>142</sup>

[The HERALD exits, going back to the Egyptian ships. PELASGUS turns to the women of the CHORUS]

Now, all you women, take courage. Move off with your handmaidens here, who are your friends,

inside our city's massive walls, fenced in with a ring of well-built towers. <sup>143</sup> For lodging there are many homes owned by the people.

I, too, have a house, built at no small expense,

where you may stay with many others in nicely furnished rooms. However,

if you would rather live in your own home,

apart from others, that, too, is possible.

Feel free to choose the place you like the best,

the one you find the most agreeable.

I and all the people in the city who cast their votes are your protectors. Why wait for those with more authority?

CHORUS O noble king of the Pelasgians,

you are so gracious to us. In return may you enjoy your fill of blessings! Be kind enough to send our father here,

brave Danaus. He is our counsellor,

and we are guided by his prudent words.

For, above all others, it is up to him to advise us on the houses where we live and places which will prove hospitable.

For everyone is quite prepared to blame a foreigner.

[Exit PELASGUS]

May all things turn out well!

May we retain our reputation here and incite no angry words from citizens. And now, dear handmaidens, arrange yourselves as Danaus has assigned you to attend on each of us, as servants in our dowry. <sup>144</sup>

<sup>142</sup>. . . *deceitful marriage*: Aerope was the wife of Atreus and the mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus. In some versions of the story, she had an adulterous affair with Thyestes and was executed.

<sup>143</sup>. . . *Scamander*: The Scamander is a river near Troy, right in the middle of the areas where the battles between Greeks and Trojans took place.

<sup>144</sup>There is some dispute about how the Phrygian enters—does he come through the doors (as the Chorus Leader's line about the bolts suggests) or does he come down from the roof (as his opening lines suggest). West, who opts for an entry down from the roof, has a useful note on the point (p. 275-6).

[The HANDMAIDENS move to stand among the members of the CHORUS. Enter DANAUS, with an armed group of Argive soldiers]

DANAUS My children, we must offer prayers of thanks to Argive people—make sacrifice and pour libations out to them, as if to Olympian gods. They have saved us!

They did not hesitate. For once they heard me talk about the conduct of those men, your cousins, towards their family, they were indignant and provided me this band of spearmen as a retinue,

so I might have an honourable rank and not be killed quite unexpectedly, struck by some fatal spear in secret,

and place a lasting curse upon this land.

Those who obtain great favours ought to show deep gratitude, from the bottom of their hearts,

and hold such men in even greater honour.

Among the many other words of wisdom from your father etched into your minds, write down this one, too: a band of strangers proves itself in time. All men are prepared to say bad things about a foreigner.

They somehow find disgusting insults easy.

So I advise you—do not dishonour me.

For at your age men are attracted to you,

and guarding tender fruit is always hard.

Animals and men, of course, destroy it,

and beasts that fly or walk upon the earth.

Cypris proclaims the fruit is ripe and ready,

and every man that passes by, overwhelmed with passionate desire, shoots from his eye a magic arrow at young virgin girls,

so young and lovely.<sup>145</sup> We must not suffer the very things from which we ran away with so much effort, when our ship ploughed across that spacious sea, or shame ourselves and please my enemies. As for our housing,

we have the choice of two: Pelasgus' home

or what the city offers. Both these options come without a cost—a generous gift.

Just take care. Obey your father's words,

and honour modesty more than your life.

CHORUS In other things may the Olympian gods be favourable. As for my ripe young age,

dear father, you can rest assured.

Unless the gods are planning something new,

I will not swerve aside and leave the path my heart has set in what it felt before.

Go now, and let us celebrate the sacred gods who guard the city and those who

<sup>145</sup> . . . *in his bed*: These lines are such a strained evocation of different myths that it's hard not to see them as either satirical or intentionally comical. The reference to the swan is a reminder of Helen's conception, when Zeus in the form of a swan had sex with Leda, wife of Tyndareus. Apollo's polished citadel is a reference to the high tower of Troy. And Ganymede, a prince of Troy, was so beautiful that he was taken up to Olympus as a young boy to be Zeus' cup bearer and sexual playmate. It's not clear what the mention of his "horsemanship" indicates, unless it's a sexual pun. Dardania is a reference to Troy, the land of Dardanus (the founder of the city).

live along the stream of ancient Erasinus. And you there,  
 you handmaidens, join in our song.<sup>146</sup>  
 And let us pour forth chants of praise for this place where Pelasgians live,  
 no longer honouring with our hymns the flowing mouths of river Nile.

- 1 [^note-430] Sing to the rivers here that pour their tranquil waters through t\  
 2 he land,

enrich its soil with fertile streams,  
 and make things grow in great profusion,  
 May holy Artemis look down  
 and have compassion for our band.  
 And may we never be compelled by Cytherea's force into a marriage.  
 Let that prize go to those whom I detest!<sup>147</sup>

CHORUS OF HANDMAIDENS But in this gracious hymn we chant,  
 we mean no disrespect for Kypris, whose power ranks alongside Hera and very  
 close to Zeus. She is revered,  
 the goddess full of devious wiles,  
 for all her sacred works. With her,  
 in their dear mother's company,  
 Desire stands with sweet Persuasion,  
 a deity who will not be denied.  
 Harmonia has received as well a share of goddess Aphrodite and the whispering  
 ways of Love.

I fear what lies ahead for fugitives—  
 winds of evil, pain, and bloody wars.  
 How did they travel here so easily with that swift ship in their pursuit?  
 Whatever Fate decrees will come to pass.  
 The great and infinite mind of Zeus cannot be overcome. This marriage  
 may well be destined to take place the way it has for many women before.

CHORUS O great Zeus, save us from marriage to Aegyptus' sons!  
 HANDMAIDENS That might, in fact, be best.

CHORUS You seek to charm someone whose heart cannot be swayed.

HANDMAIDENS What lies in store you do not know.

CHORUS How could I see into the mind of Zeus?

No one can penetrate that deep abyss.

HANDMAIDENS You need to moderate your prayers.

CHORUS What moderation would you have me learn?

HANDMAIDENS Do not ask for too much from the gods.

<sup>146</sup> . . . *grabbed her*: The followers of Bacchus are the ecstatic worshippers who roam the mountains, often capturing wild animals and tearing them apart. The thyrsus is a plant stem, often with magical properties, which they carry as part of the ritual frenzy.

<sup>147</sup> . . . *from his chariot*: As noted before, Myrtilus conspired with Pelops to trick king Oenomaus in a chariot race, so that Pelops could win Hippodameia, the king's daughter. Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, sabotaged the royal chariot. Pelops then killed Myrtilus by throwing him out of his chariot into the sea. This event launches the disasters which befall the House of Atreus (Atreus is one of Pelops' sons).

CHORUS May lord Zeus save me from a marriage with a wretched man whom I detest, just as he used his healing hand to bring back Io and with gentle force released her from her pain.

And may he make the women strong.  
I will accept a mix of good and bad for that is better than mere trouble.  
So now let justice judge our cause and with my prayers deliver me through saving efforts of the gods.

[They all leave in the direction of the city]

...

#### EPILOGUE

Suppliant Women is the first or second work in a sequence of four plays. The others have been lost except for fragments. However, the general outline of the traditional story is well known. In the ensuing battle between the Argives and the sons of Aegyptus, king Pelasgus is killed, and Danaus becomes king of Argos. The daughters are compelled to go through with the marriages, and, acting on their father's instructions, they kill their husbands on the wedding night—all except Hypermnestra, who refuses to kill her husband, Lynceus. After the death of Danaus, who is killed by Lynceus, Hypermnestra and Lynceus become the new king and queen of Argos. It is not clear exactly how Aeschylus brings the story to a close.

...

# (AESCHYLUS) The Persians

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>148</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## HISTORICAL NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) was one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

Aeschylus' play *The Persians* was first produced in 472 BC. It is the oldest surviving play in our traditions.

Persian armies launched two famous invasions against the Greek mainland. The first (in 490 BC) was sponsored by Darius, king of Persia. It ended at the Battle of Marathon close to Athens with a Greek victory, in which the Athenians played the major role. The second Persian expedition (in 480 BC) was sponsored and led by Xerxes, son of Darius, who had succeeded his father as king, after Darius' death.

A major reason for these invasions was to punish Athens for its assistance to Greek cities in Asia Minor and on some of the islands close by, an important part of the Persians' sphere of influence. These cities had close ethnic links to the Greeks, especially to the Athenians, and resented Persian domination. Hence, they were a source of conflict within the Persian Empire.

...

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ATOSSA: queen of Persia, mother of Xerxes, wife of Darius. <sup>149</sup> MESSENGER: a soldier with Xerxes' army. DARIUS: a ghost, father of Xerxes, once king of Persia. XERXES: king of Persia, son of Darius and Atossa. CHORUS: elder statesmen of Persia.

[The action takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, in front of a large building. <sup>150</sup> The Chorus enters.]

CHORUS LEADER

We are here as trustworthy delegates  
for all those Persians who have marched away  
to the land of Greece. Thanks to our old age, we are the guardians of the royal  
home, so rich in gold, the men Xerxes himself, our king, son of Darius, has chosen  
to supervise his realm. But here inside, my heart has for a long time been troubled

<sup>148</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/persiansweb.htm>

<sup>149</sup>In the text below the speaking label CHORUS designates all speeches spoken by the Chorus collectively, the Chorus Leader, individual member of the Chorus, and special sub-groups of the entire Chorus. In any production of the play, the director would have to determine the speaker(s) for each speech.

<sup>150</sup>The two commanders of the Argive expedition to Troy were the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus.

about our golden army's journey home  
and the king's return. It senses trouble.  
For all the power born out of Asia  
has gone, responding to our young king's call, and yet here in the Persians' capital  
no horseman has come back, no courier. Streaming out of Susa and Agbatana  
and the ancient parapets of Kissa, our forces moved away, some on horseback,  
some by ship, some on foot—a close-packed mass  
prepared for war—men like Artaphrenes, Amistres, Astaspes, and Megabates,  
commanders of Persia's warrior host, all kings and yet all ruled by our Great King,  
leaders of a vast army on the march, experts in archery and horsemanship, fearful  
to look at and terrible in war, their spirits steeled for battle. With them there  
is Artembares the charioteer,  
as well as Masistes, noble Imaeus so deadly with his bow, Pharandaces, and  
Sosthanes, who drives his horses on. The fertile mighty Nile sent others, too—  
Sousiscanes, Egyptian-born Pegastagon, Arsames, great king of sacred Memphis,  
Ariomardos, who rules in ancient Thebes, and from the marshes men who row the  
ships, a frightening horde in countless numbers.

And with them goes a crowd of Lydians,  
luxury loving men, whose force controls  
all mainland tribes, warrior ranks sent out with noble Arcteus and Mitrogathes, a  
royal command, and gold-rich Sardis—  
huge throngs of chariots streaming out,  
row after row of three- and four-horse teams, a terrifying sight! And men who live  
by sacred Tmolus now threaten to hurl  
the yoke of slavery upon the Greeks—  
Mardon and Tharybis, with thunderbolts  
for spears, and Mysians armed with javelins. <sup>151</sup>

And Babylon, awash with gold, sends out  
huge columns of men of different kinds, sailors on ships and other troops whose  
strength  
relies on skill in fighting with the bow. The sabre-bearing races also come  
from all of Asia, following the king, a fearful expedition on the march! Warriors like  
these move out, the flower  
of Persian lands, while all of Asia yearns. Their nurturing mother now longs for  
them  
and groans with fierce desire, as wives and children  
count the days and shudder at the long delay.

CHORUS

Obliterating cities as it moves, our royal army has already marched  
to neighbouring lands on the facing shore, crossing the Hellespont, that narrow  
sea  
which gets its name from Athamas' child, on a floating bridge tied down with cable  
and throwing the yoke of a tight-knit road

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<sup>151</sup> Dardanus, a son of Zeus, was the legendary founder of Troy.



across the neck of the sea. <sup>152</sup>

Through every land  
the fiery king of a massive Asian horde drives on his men—a wondrous warrior  
pack— in a double formation by land and sea, with trust in his brave and stern  
commanders, our golden born and godlike king.

His dark eyes burn  
with the glare of a snake aroused to kill. Soldiers and sailors massing behind him,  
he urges his Syrian chariot on, leading his archers like a war god's host  
to fight against men renowned for their spears.

No man has the strength to repel this force, this irresistible torrent of men, or  
with a strong bulwark to hold in check  
the overpowering surge of the sea.

For warriors fill our Persian ranks, our invincible force of fearless men.

By decrees of the gods since earliest times, Fate has ruled all and has always  
ordained  
that Persians wage war, knocking down towers, fighting in chariots, and demolish-  
ing cities.

By trusting their finely made cables and ships  
our men have now learned how to gaze on the deep  
when tempestuous storms from the howling winds  
whip white surface waters across the broad sea.

But what mortal man can hope to evade  
insidious deceit of the gods? What man  
with nimble feet can leap above that snare?

For fair Delusion, with her welcoming smile, spreads her nets wide and lures  
the man in. There is no escape—that trap she sets  
no man evades by springing back once more.

Such matters hang black thoughts around my heart and tear at it with fear. Alas  
for them, the soldiers of that mighty Persian force! May our great city Sousa never  
hear a cry like that or learn its men have died.

And Kissa's city folk will then all chant  
their own song in reply—Alas! That crowd  
of women screaming out will tear apart  
their splendid robes of linen.

For all our men—  
our horse and infantry—like swarms of bees, have left with the lord who leads our  
army, crossing the cape the two continents share,  
now Xerxes has yoked has them together.

Our marriage beds long for the absent men  
and fill with tears, as Persian women grieve,  
each one with a woman's heartfelt yearning

<sup>152</sup>Many Greek warrior leaders had made an oath to assist whichever one of them was lucky enough to marry Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta, if he ever needed their help. When Paris of Troy abducted Helen, her husband, Menelaus, called upon the Achaean leaders to honour their promise by joining an expedition to attack Troy. Odysseus was very reluctant to join the expedition and had to be tricked into going.

for the fearless warrior she sent away. Her man is gone, and now she sleeps alone.

CHORUS LEADER

Come now, Persians, let us take our seats  
within this ancient place. Let us reflect, for at this time we need to turn our thoughts  
to wise and well-considered counsel  
about what is happening with our king, Xerxes, son of Darius. Have Persian archers  
drawn their bows and won, or have the Greeks  
with the power of their sharp spears prevailed?

[Atossa enters with attendants] <sup>153</sup>

But look—the mother of our king approaches, like light streaming from the eye  
of god. I must prostrate myself before my queen, and all of you must show her  
your respect—

salute her majesty with words of welcome.

[The Chorus Leader prostrates himself and speaks to Atossa from his knees.]

Hail to you, O queen, most illustrious  
of all deep-waisted Persian women—  
Xerxes' aged mother and wife of Darius, once the consort of Persia's god and now  
the mother of their god—unless perhaps  
the divinity they used to have of old  
has now abandoned Persian warriors.

ATOSSA

That is why I have left my gold-decked home  
and the royal bed I shared with Darius  
and have come here. For worries rend my heart. My friends, I will confide in you—I  
am afraid  
that our vast wealth will quickly stir up dust  
and with its foot cast down the great success  
which—thanks to the assistance of some god—  
king Darius achieved. And that is why  
my mind is burdened with a double care, which I find difficult to speak about. The  
common folk do not respect great wealth  
unless backed up with men, and though the poor  
may have great strength, the light of their success will never shine. Now, we have  
wealth enough, but still I fear for what I hold to be  
our finest treasure, true riches in the home, the lord and master's eye. Since that  
is so,  
Persians, you old trustworthy counsellors, advise me what to do, since all my hopes  
for level-headed guidance rest on you.

CHORUS LEADER

You are our country's queen—so rest assured  
you do not need to ask us twice for help, for anything that lies with our power to  
say or do. You have summoned us here  
as counsellors in this affair, and we

<sup>153</sup>The Achaean forces had learned by prophecy that they needed Neoptolemus and the bow of Philoctetes to capture Troy. [Back to Text]

are well disposed to serve your interests.

ATOSSA

Many dreams keep visiting me at night—  
all the time—ever since my son prepared  
his army and set off, hoping to destroy Ionian lands. But this past night  
I had one more distinct than all the rest. I will describe it to you. I seemed to see  
two women dressed in very lovely clothes— one wore Persian robes, the other  
Dorian. <sup>154</sup> They came in view—both of gigantic size, much larger than the women  
of today, and very beautiful. They were sisters, of the same family line. One of them  
lived in Hellenic lands, assigned by lot, the other dwelt among barbarians. <sup>155</sup> And  
as I watched, I seemed to see these two  
begin to fight each other. Then my son, once he learned of this, tried to hold them  
back and calm them down. Around their necks he set  
a collar strap and yoked it to his chariot. One sister carried her restraint with pride  
and kept her mouth compliant in the reins. The other one fought back—her hands  
tore at  
the chariot harness and, freed from her restraint, dragged it so hard she broke  
the yoke in two. My son fell out headfirst, and Darius, his father, who stood close  
by, was grieving. Then Xerxes, when he saw his father there, shred the garments  
covering his body. That was the dream I saw during the night.  
When I got up, I went to wash my hands  
in a flowing spring, and holding up a gift, I stood beside an altar, intending  
to offer sacrifice to those deities  
who ward off evil, with those rituals  
which are their due. But then I saw an eagle  
swooping down for safety at the altar  
of Apollo, and I was terrified. My friends, as I stood there speechless, I saw  
a hawk racing up behind, wings outspread. Its talons clawed and ripped the eagle's  
head. The eagle did not fight but cowered down  
and left its body open to attack. Seeing this visions made me so afraid—  
and hearing them you must be fearful, too. For you know well that if my son  
succeeds  
he will become a man men hold in awe, but even if he fails, those in the city cannot  
hold him accountable, for Xerxes, if he gets safely back, still rules this land.

CHORUS LEADER

Lady mother, we do not wish our words  
to make you fearful or offer you false hope. But if what you have seen is ominous,  
approach the gods with prayers, begging them  
to avert the evil and bring about  
what is of benefit to you, your sons, the city, all your family and friends. Then you  
must pour libations to the earth and to the dead, and with auspicious words  
ask Darius, your husband, whom you say

<sup>154</sup>Chryse refers to the nymph who punished Philoctetes with the snake bite for desecrating her shrine. It is also the name of a small island close to Troy.

<sup>155</sup>Cephalonia was an island in Odysseus' kingdom, but the name is often applied to his territory generally (and his soldiers are commonly called the Cephallenians).

you saw last night, to confer his blessing  
 from underneath the earth up to the light, on you and on your son, and to hold  
 down  
 what works against you and keep it buried  
 deep within the earth, hidden in the dark. From what I understand of prophecy  
 and as a friend I give you this advice. I sense that in these matters everything will  
 turn out favourably for you.

ATOSSA

You are the first one who has offered me  
 an interpretation of the dreams I had, and you have clearly shown in what you say  
 your kindness to my child and family. May things all turn out well! When I return  
 back to the palace, I will carry out  
 those rituals for the gods and loved ones  
 underneath the earth, the way you have advised. But, friends, there is one thing I  
 wish to know.

In what part of the world do people say  
 this city of Athens is located?

CHORUS LEADER

Far away from here, where our Lord the Sun  
 grows dim and sets.

ATOSSA

And is it really true  
 my son desired to conquer such a place?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, he did. For then all lands in Hellas  
 would be subject to our King.

ATOSSA

And these Greeks—  
 does their army consist of many men?

CHORUS LEADER

Their army has been strong enough before  
 to have done much damage to the Medes. <sup>156</sup>

ATOSSA

Are their hands trained to fight with well-strung bows?

CHORUS LEADER

No, not at all—they arm themselves with shields  
 and fight in close with spears.

ATOSSA

What other things  
 do they possess? Do they have wealth at home—  
 all the money they need?

CHORUS LEADER

They have a mine, a fountain of silver—their country's treasure. <sup>157</sup>

<sup>156</sup>Menelaus is king of Sparta, and Agamemnon is king of Mycenae. Neoptolemus was born and raised on the island of Scyros.

<sup>157</sup>Sigeum was a prominent coastal location northwest of Troy.

ATOSSA

Who governs them? Who commands their army?

CHORUS LEADER

People say they are no man's slaves or servants.

ATOSSA

Then how can they turn back a fierce attack  
when warlike men invade?

CHORUS LEADER

Well, they managed to destroy that great and glorious force  
which Darius had sent against them.

ATOSSA

For those whose sons have left, those words of yours  
are ominous to think of.

CHORUS LEADER

It seems to me  
you will soon know the truth of what's gone on. Why else would a Persian man be  
rushing here. He must be bringing news of some event—  
it's clearly something good or bad.

[Enter the Messenger, in great haste. He falls prostrate before Atossa and  
delivers his first speeches from his knees]

MESSENGER

O you cities throughout all Asian lands, O realm of Persia, haven of vast wealth,  
one blow has smashed your great prosperity—  
the flower of Persia has been destroyed! Our men have perished! Alas! Its terrible  
to be first to tell disastrous news, and yet, you Persians, I must now provide  
a full report of that catastrophe—  
our whole barbarian army has been killed!

CHORUS

Such dreadful, dreadful news! So cruel and unforeseen. Alas! Alas! Weep now, you  
Persians, as you learn  
of this calamity!

MESSENGER

Yes, weep, for all those men have been wiped out,  
while I look on this unexpected day  
when I have come back home.

CHORUS

For older men, this life of ours  
has been too long, it seems—  
we have to learn about  
this unanticipated grief.

MESSENGER

I was there—I did not hear what happened from other men—so, Persians, I can  
speak  
directly of the evil things we faced.

CHORUS

Aaaiii! Our great host

with all its different weapons  
set out from Asian lands in vain  
to the mighty land of Hellas!

MESSENGER

The corpses fill the shores of Salamis  
and all the coasts nearby—our wretched dead. <sup>158</sup>

CHORUS

Alas! Such grief! You say  
the bodies of the ones we love are tossing in the surf, being driven back and forth  
and carried by the shifting waves.

MESSENGER

Our bows were no defence. Our men perished. The entire force was overwhelmed  
at sea  
when Ionian ships attacked our fleet.

CHORUS

Cry a sorrowful lament,  
a pitiful dirge for our dead, those ill-starred Persian men! The gods bring all this  
evil! Aaaaaii! Aaaaii! The army is now gone!

MESSENGER

That name Salamis—a hateful word, the most offensive to my ears. Alas, how I  
groan when I remember Athens!

CHORUS

Yes, Athens is hateful to her foes! We well recall how Athens made  
so many Persian women widows  
by slaughtering their men. <sup>159</sup>

ATOSSA

I have kept quiet for a long time here,  
struck silent by the news of this defeat. For this event is too calamitous  
to talk or even ask about the pain. Yet suffering is something mortal beings  
must learn to bear when it comes from the gods. So stand up now and speak. Give  
your report—

and even if you groan at this bad news, describe the full extent of our defeat. Who  
did not die? What about the leaders? Which ones should we mourn? And of all  
those men appointed to a sceptre-bearing post, which ones have died and left a  
vacancy  
among the ranks of our commanders?

[The Messenger stands up]

MESSENGER

Xerxes himself survived—he is alive  
and sees the light of day.

<sup>158</sup>Pactolus was a river in Asia Minor celebrated for its rich deposits of gold. The detail about lions slaughtering bulls seems to suggest (according to Jebb) that the goddess is riding on lions or that her throne is a chariot drawn by lions.

<sup>159</sup>Sisyphus, the founder of Corinth, was famous for his devious ways. According to one story very popular among Odysseus' enemies, he was the father of Odysseus and sold his mother to Laertes while Odysseus was still in the womb. Diomedes was a close comrade of Odysseus.

ATOSSA

What you have said  
brings a great light of hope into my home,  
a bright dawn after grim black drapes of night.

MESSENGER

But Artembares, who led ten thousand horse, is being smashed against the cruel shores

of Salamis, and Dadaces, who led a thousand men, was hit by a spear  
and with an easy leap fell from his ship. Tenagon, the finest of that ancient race  
from Bactria, now moves around the isle

of Ajax, a coastline pounded by the sea. <sup>160</sup> Lilaïos, Arsames, and a third one,  
Argestes are washed around that island, a breeding place for doves, as they are  
thrown

against its rugged shore. Of all those men

living beside the springs of Egypt's Nile, Pharnouchos fell, and three men from one  
ship, Pheresseues and Adeues

and Arcteus. And Matallos from Chryse, who ruled an army of ten thousand men,  
as he died, stained his thick, dark, shaggy beard

and changed its colour with a blood-red dye. Arabos the Magian perished there,  
and so did Artabes from Bactria, who led black horsemen thirty thousand strong  
and now has settled deep in rocky ground, as well as Amistris and Amphistreus,

who held a deadly spear, and Ariomardus, a noble man whose death makes Sardis  
grieve, and Seisames from Mysia. Tharybis, commander of two hundred fifty ships,  
a handsome man, by birth a Lyrnaean, now lies in miserable death—his luck  
abandoned him. And Suennesis, too, who ruled Cilicians and by himself

brought so much suffering to his enemies, for of courageous men he was the best,  
fought valiantly and died. I have listed

these men by name, but we lost so many! What I have told you mentions just a  
few.

ATOSSA

Alas! Alas! I have listened to your words, the height of our misfortune—a disgrace  
to Persia, cause enough for screams of grief. But return to your report and tell me  
this—

What was the number of the Grecian fleet? What made them confident enough to  
risk a fight at sea with Persian ships?

MESSENGER

You can be sure that we barbarians

would have overwhelmed their fleet, if numbers

had been the only thing. For the Greeks had, in total, three hundred ships. Ten of  
these

were chosen as a special group. But Xerxes—

I can confirm this—led a thousand ships, two hundred and seven of which could  
sail

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<sup>160</sup>Thersites, the only common soldier described in detail in Homer's *Iliad*, was well known for his abuse of his superiors. He gives a lengthy speech insulting Agamemnon.

extremely fast. That's how the numbers stood. Surely you cannot think that when we fought we were outnumbered? No. Some deity did not weigh the scales of fortune fairly and destroyed our fleet. The gods protect that city of the goddess Pallas.

ATOSSA

And so, the city of Athens remains unscathed. <sup>161</sup>

MESSENGER

Yes. While its citizens are still alive it has a fortress that will never fail.

ATOSSA

Tell me how the battle with the ships began.

Who was the first to fight? Was it the Greeks? Or was my son happy to engage their fleet, given the huge number of his ships?

MESSENGER

My queen, a demon or evil spirit appeared from somewhere and set in motion everything that led to our complete collapse. A man from the Athenian forces, a Greek, came to Xerxes, your son, and said that after night arrived and it grew dark the Greeks would not remain where they were now, but leap onto the benches in their ships and, by moving stealthily here and there, would try to row away and save their lives.

Xerxes did not sense the Greek man's cunning or the envy of the gods. <sup>162</sup> So once he heard what the man had said, he quickly issued the following orders to his captains:

"When the sun's rays no longer warm the earth and darkness seizes regions of the sky, draw up the ships into a triple line and block the exits to the roaring sea. With other vessels form a tight blockade around that isle of Ajax. If the Greeks escape their evil fate and somehow find a secret way to steal off in their ships, my orders are that all will lose their heads."

When Xerxes said these words, his heart and mind were fully confident—he had no inkling of what the gods had planned. His men obeyed. Their spirits showed no lack of discipline, as they prepared a meal and every sailor

<sup>161</sup>Tydeus' son is a reference to the famous Greek warrior Diomedes, a frequent companion of Odysseus on various adventures.

<sup>162</sup>The reference here is to Sisyphus who ordered his wife not to bury him. When he came to Hades, he complained about his wife's conduct and was given permission to go back to punish her. Once out of Hades, Sisyphus stayed on earth. Calling Sisyphus the father of Odysseus here is the second reference to the insulting story that Sisyphus sold Odysseus while he was still in his mother's womb to Laertes (see line 501 above).



lashed his oar in place against the thole pin.  
Once the sun's light had disappeared and night  
came creeping in, each master of his oar  
and all the soldiers under arms went down  
into the ships, and as the long boats sailed  
to take up their assigned positions, row by row, the men called out to cheer each  
other on.

So all night long the officers and crews  
kept sailing back and forth on their patrol, yet as night passed, the Greek force did  
not try

to slip away in secret. But when the day rode up with her white steeds and radiant  
light

seized all the earth, at first we heard a shout. A resounding cry came from the  
Greeks—

it sounded like a song—and right away  
the echo brought a clarion response  
reverberating from the island rocks.

Then panic struck the whole barbarian fleet. Our plan had failed, for at that point  
the Greeks

did not call out their solemn holy cry

as if they meant to flee. No. They sounded like men who meant to fight with  
courage

in their hearts. And when a trumpet pealed, they all caught fire. Then, once the  
order came, with one united sweep their foaming oars

struck the salty sea, and their fleet of ships

quickly came in sight, all clearly visible. First of all, their well organized right wing  
advanced in order. Then the entire force

moved up, and, as it did, we all could hear  
a mighty cry:

“You offspring of the Greeks, come on!

Free your native home! Free your wives,  
your children, the temples of your father's gods,  
the burial places of your ancestors!

The time has come to fight for all of these!”

We responded with a confusing shout  
from Persian tongues, but by now the crisis

left no time to delay. For right away, the ships began to use their bronze-clad prows  
to ram each other. In the first attack

a Greek ship completely smashed the bow

on a Phoenician boat, and after that

both rival navies went at one another. At first, the bulk of the Persian forces  
held them back. But with so many vessels

confined inside a narrow space, our ships

could provide no help to other Persians. Instead their bronze prows rammed their  
own fleet's ships

and smashed the banks of oars. Meanwhile the Greeks

did not fail to seize this opportunity—  
 they formed a circle round us and attacked. Our ships' hulls capsized, and the  
 waves grew full  
 of shattered boats and slaughtered sailors,  
 so much so we could not glimpse the sea. Beaches and rocks were crowded with  
 the dead. As all the ships left in our barbarian fleet  
 rushed off to escape in great confusion, the Greeks kept butchering men in the  
 sea, hacking away at them with broken oars  
 and bits of wreckage, as if our sailors  
 were schools of mackerel or loads of fish. Groans and screams of pain filled the  
 open sea, until night's shadowy eye concealed the scene. But I could not describe  
 the full extent  
 of the disaster to you, not even  
 if I spoke of it for ten entire days. For you must understand that never before  
 has such an enormous multitude of men  
 all perished in a single day.

ATOSSA

Alas! An immense sea of evil has engulfed  
 the Persians and our whole barbarian race!

MESSENGER

But listen—there is more. I have not mentioned  
 half our troubles yet. For our men suffered  
 evils twice as heavy as the ones before.

ATOSSA

What troubles worse than what you have described  
 could have hurt our army? Speak! You talked of  
 some catastrophe. What could have happened  
 to sink our scale of evil even further?

MESSENGER

All those Persians in their prime of life, the very finest spirits, whose noble birth  
 made them exceptional, the foremost men, who always had the trust of our Great  
 King, have met a most dishonourable fate  
 and died in shame.

ATOSSA

O my friends, this disaster  
 compounds my misery! What kind of fate  
 do you say killed these splendid men?

MESSENGER

There is an island in front of Salamis—  
 a tiny place, but hazardous for ships.<sup>163</sup> Dance-loving Pan lives there, close to the  
 shore. Xerxes had placed his finest warriors here,  
 so that, when our defeated enemies moved from the ships and sought a refuge  
 on that island, his men could overwhelm  
 the Grecian force where it was vulnerable, and they could save the lives of any

<sup>163</sup>The virtuous act Philoctetes is referring to is lighting the funeral pyre for Hercules.

friends

trapped in the sea within that narrow strait. But Xerxes' judgment of events was wrong. For when some god gave glory to the Greeks in the battle out at sea, that very day they walled themselves in armour made of bronze, leapt out of their ships, and formed a circle around the island, so that our soldiers had nowhere to escape. Many of our men were hit with stones thrown by enemy hands or died from falling arrows shot from bows. At last in one concerted charge, the Greeks attacked, hacking away at Persian limbs until the lives of all those pitiful men had been utterly destroyed. From high up on a promontory right beside the sea Xerxes watched. He had an excellent view of his entire army, and, as he looked and witnessed the extent of this defeat, he groaned, tore his robes, gave out a shrill cry, and quickly issued orders to his troops, who ran away confused. This defeat and the other one I talked of earlier—these are the disasters you must grieve.

ATOSSA

O hateful demon, how you have deceived the Persians! That famous city Athens has taken harsh revenge against my son— not satisfied with those barbarians she killed at Marathon in years gone by. By seeking retribution for those men, my son has brought himself a multitude of grief. What about the ships that got away? Tell me where you left them. And do you have a clear idea of where they might be now?

MESSENGER

Those in charge of our surviving ships quickly fled away in great disorder, on whatever course the winds might take them. The remnants of our army was destroyed in lands of the Boeotians—some of them near a refreshing spring where they had gone, driven there by thirst. Others among us, exhausted and short of breath, kept marching into Phocian land—reaching Doris and the Gulf of Malia, where Spercheios pours his fresh waters on the plain. And then, desperate for food, we kept moving on to the Achaean plain, where we were welcomed by Thessalians in their cities. But here, most of our men died of thirst or hunger, for we were suffering from both. From there, we reached the place where the Magnesians live and Macedonian land—the river Axios, Bolbe's reed-filled marsh, and Mount

Pangaeon, on Edonian ground.<sup>164</sup> But during the night  
 some spirit stirred up winter before its time. The stream of the sacred river  
 Strymon  
 was completely frozen, and all those men who had given the gods no thought till  
 then  
 at that point offered up their solemn prayers  
 with supplications to both Earth and Heaven. Once the army had finished calling  
 out  
 its many invocations to the gods, we moved on across the frozen river. Some of  
 us, those who left before the god  
 could scatter his rays, crossed the ice in safety, but once the brilliant circle of the  
 sun  
 with his hot beams had warmed the middle part and melted it with fire, then men  
 fell through, stumbling against each other. And the man  
 who lost the breath of life most rapidly  
 was truly lucky. The ones who got across  
 saved themselves by moving on through Thrace, though not without much pain  
 and suffering. Not many of those fugitives escaped  
 and reached their native land. Now is the time  
 our Persian city should lament its loss, grieving for the most cherished youthful  
 men in all our land. What I have said is true. But I have left out many dreadful  
 things  
 which a god has hurled down on the Persians.

[Exit Messenger]

CHORUS LEADER

O savage demon! With what heavy weight  
 your feet have stamped on all the Persian race!

ATOSSA

This overpowers me—the utter ruin  
 of our entire force! Those visions last night—  
 the ones I saw so clearly in my dreams—  
 how plainly they revealed these blows to me. Your sense of them was far too trivial.  
 But nonetheless, following your advice, I will begin by praying to the gods, and then  
 I will return, bringing offerings  
 for the Earth and for the dead—a libation  
 from my home. I know I will be worshipping  
 after all that has already happened, but I am hoping better things will come  
 to us in future. Given these events, you men should demonstrate your loyalty  
 by offering me trustworthy counsel. And if, while I am gone, my son arrives,  
 comfort him, accompany him back home,  
 so no misfortune comes to trouble him, apart from those we have already faced.

[Exit Atossa]

CHORUS LEADER

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<sup>164</sup>The whirling wheel is a reference to Ixion, the first mortal charged with murder. Zeus pardoned his crime. But then Ixion attempted to seduce Zeus' wife Hera in her own bed. Zeus had Ixion tied onto a wheel of fire in Hades.

O Zeus, king, now you have destroyed  
 the overconfident armed multitude  
 of the Persian army, shrouding  
 the cities of Susa and Agbatana in gloom and overwhelming sorrow. And many  
 women share our grief, ripping their veils with gentle hands,  
 soaking their bosoms drenched in tears. With agonizing female cries the wives of  
 Persia yearn to see  
 those men they married only recently. They leave their wedding beds, the softly  
 quilted joys of youth, and howl with grief that has no end. And I, in great distress,  
 take on myself  
 the dreadful fate of those who are now gone.

# CHORUS

Now indeed all lands in Asia  
 mourn their absent men! Xerxes marched them off to war, alas!  
 Xerxes, to our sorrow, killed our men! Xerxes, in his folly, took them all  
 and set out with a seagoing fleet. Why then did Darius, while he lived  
 and ruled our city's archer armies, remain unhurt and so well loved  
 by those who dwell in Susa?  
 Our troops on foot and sailors left  
 in the dark-eyed ships—alas!—  
 and went away on linen wings. <sup>165</sup> Then other ships destroyed them, obliterating  
 all with their assault  
 at the hands of Ionian sailors. And as we hear, our king himself  
 escaped, but only just, through Thrace, on frozen paths across the plains.

Lament for those who perished earlier, abandoned by necessity—alas!—  
 along Cychrean shores. <sup>166</sup> Such grief!  
 Scream out your sorrow, clench your teeth, let cries of anguished mourning  
 climb the heights of heaven—alas!— draw out your long and piteous moans.

They are torn by the deadly surf—alas!—  
 and gnawed by those voiceless children  
 of unpolluted seas—alas! The grieving household mourns its absent lord, and  
 parents  
 whose children now are dead  
 cry out against the heaven-sent pain, while the old, in sorrow, hear  
 of those men's agonies in full.

Now other men in Asian lands  
 no longer will abide by Persian laws, no longer pay the Persians tribute, under  
 compulsion from our king. No longer will they fall down prostrate on the ground  
 and worship him. For the power of our king is gone!

No more will people check their tongues, for now they have the liberty

<sup>165</sup>These lines are a reference to Hercules who was burned alive at his own request on top of Mount Oeta. Hercules was a mortal son of Zeus and, because of his amazing exploits, he was taken up into heaven as a god.

<sup>166</sup>This is a reference to Hercules, who also suffered a great deal in life and had an agonizing death. Philoctetes is reminding Neoptolemus that whoever owns the bow seems to get punished by the gods who are jealous of any man's possessing such a weapon.

to speak their minds without restraint. The yoke of force has been removed, and on that isle where Ajax ruled, the blood-soaked rocks, washed by the sea, now hold the power of Persia.

{Enter Atossa, this time without an escort}

ATOSSA

My friends, whoever has experienced disaster understands that when a wave of trouble

breaks over mortal men, they are inclined

to be afraid of everything, and then, when good fortune blows their way once more, they start believing that this same good luck

will keep on blowing them success forever. In my case, all things now look full of dread. My eyes can see the gods are enemies, and in my ears echoes a sound that brings

no note of joy. I am so overwhelmed by these disasters—they have made my mind so anxious and afraid. And that is why

I come here from the palace once again

without my chariots, without that pomp I used to have before, bringing offerings for the father of my son, libations

to propitiate and appease the dead—

sweet white milk from an unblemished cow

and splendid honey, distilled from flowers

by the bees, with water from a virgin spring, and from their rustic mother earth I bring

this unmixed drink, the delightful produce

of the ancient vine, and this sweet-smelling fruit

from the plant whose leaves are always green, the golden olive, with wreaths of flowers. But you, my friends, should chant a choral song

to summon up the spirit of Darius, while I pour these libations to the dead

and make an offering for the earth to drink, in honour of the gods who rule below.

CHORUS LEADER

O royal lady, whom Persians all revere, pour out your offerings to the earth beneath, down to the chambers of the dead, while we

in song will beg those gods who guide

the dead down there to treat us kindly.

O you sacred gods of the world beneath, Earth and Hermes, and you, O ruling king

of those who perish, send that man's spirit

from down below up here into the light. <sup>167</sup> For if he knows of any further help in our misfortunes, of all mortal men

he is the only one who can advise us

how to bring that remedy to bear.

CHORUS

<sup>167</sup> Lemnian fire, Jebb notes, seems to be a reference to a volcanic mountain called Mosuchlos on the east coast of Lemnos, near Philoctetes' cave. Hercules was taken up to the top of Mount Oeta by Hyllus, his son, who helped construct the pyre but would not set it alight. Philoctetes did so and, as a reward, got Hercules' bow.

Our sacred, godlike king, does he attend to me, as my obscure barbarian voice sends out these riddling, wretched cries.

I will bewail my dreadful sorrow. Does he hear me down below?

But you, O Earth, and you others,  
you powers beneath the earth, release his splendid spirit  
from your homes—the divine one  
born in Susa, the Persians' god. Send him up here, that man whose like  
was never laid to rest in Persian ground.

The man is loved, as is his tomb—  
we love the virtue buried there. O Aidoneus, Aidoneus, who sends shades from  
the dead,  
send Darius up here to us, send back our godlike king. <sup>168</sup>

That ruler never lost our men  
to ruinous death in war, and Persians hailed him as divine  
in his wise counsel, for, like a god, when he led his army out to fight, he planned  
things brilliantly. Alas!

O king, our old Great King, approach us now, draw near. Rise to the summit of  
your tomb, lift up the saffron slipper on your foot,  
reveal the royal ornaments  
of your imperial crown, and come to us, O father Darius, who never caused us pain.

Come listen to our latest grief, the sorrow felt throughout this land. O king of  
Persia's king, appear. For over us the darkness spreads, a Stygian gloom, since our  
young men  
have just been utterly destroyed. <sup>169</sup>

So come to us, O father Darius, who never caused us pain.

Aaaaiii! Aaaaiii! O you whose death was mourned  
so bitterly among your friends, O great and powerful king, [if you had been in full  
command  
who in this land would now be grieving such twin calamitous defeats?] <sup>170</sup> Our  
three-tiered ships—now ships no more—  
have been completely overwhelmed.  
Our ships are ships no more!

[The Ghost of Darius appears]

DARIUS

You loyal men in whom I placed my trust, you ancient Persians, once my youthful

<sup>168</sup>The Chorus is advising Neoptolemus to take the bow and leave and thus abandon what he is presently intending (to take Philoctetes on board his ship). The trouble they are talking about is what might happen on board once Philoctetes learns that he is going to Troy rather than back home. For them the easiest course seems to be to take the bow and abandon Philoctetes.

<sup>169</sup>Philoctetes is contrasting his willingness to go along on the expedition to Troy with Odysseus' reluctance to join in. When the messenger came to enlist his support, Odysseus pretended to be mad, ploughing with an ox and an ass yoked together. The messenger placed Odysseus' infant son in front of the plough. Odysseus stopped before he could injure his son, thus revealing that his madness was a pretense.

<sup>170</sup>Teucer, a character in Homer's Iliad, is one of the finest archers in the Greek forces. Archery is not normally a skill associated with the most important warriors, other than Odysseus (in the Odyssey).

friends, what troubles are now threatening the state? The soil is beaten down and torn apart—

it groans in great distress. I see my wife  
beside my tomb, and so I grow concerned. I have received the offerings she made  
with favour, while you men have been standing here, close to my grave, chanting  
your laments, as with loud cries to summon up the dead  
you have been calling piteously for me. But there is no easy path from down below.  
Beneath the earth the gods are much more prone  
to welcome bodies than to send them back.

Still, I do have some authority down there, and I have come. But you must not  
waste time, so I do not get blamed for my delay. What new disaster weighs the  
Persians down?

CHORUS

That fear of you I had in earlier days  
makes me too awestruck now to look at you, and reverence inhibits what I say.

DARIUS

But since I have responded to your cries  
and come up here from underneath the earth,  
you must ignore the awe that I inspire  
and speak. Tell me everything that has gone on. But keep the details brief—no  
lengthy story.

CHORUS

I am afraid to act on your request,  
too full of fear to speak directly to you  
and say things hard to tell to those one loves.

DARIUS

Since ancient reverence affects your minds,

[Turning toward Atossa]

will you, noble and venerable queen, who shared my bed, hold back your tears  
and groans

and speak quite frankly to me? We all know  
that mortal blows will fall on mortal men. Many from the sea, many from the land  
afflict all human beings, as their long lives keep stretching through the years.

ATOSSA

O you, whose happy fate made you surpass  
all other men in your prosperity, for as long as you gazed at the brilliant sun,  
you lived a fortunate life men envied, and Persians looked on you as on a god. And  
now I envy you, for you have died  
before you saw the depths of our misfortune. O Darius, you will hear everything.  
A few words tell it all—one might well say the Persian state is utterly destroyed.

DARIUS

How is this so? Has our country suffered  
from some foul pestilence or civil strife?

ATOSSA

No, not at all. But somewhere close to Athens  
all our forces have been overpowered.



DARIUS

What son of mine led our armies there? Speak.

ATOSSA

Impetuous Xerxes—he drained the men  
from our whole mainland plain.

DARIUS

That reckless wretch! Did he launch this foolish expedition  
by land or sea?

ATOSSA

By both. The double force proceeded on two fronts.

DARIUS

How could the men, a group of infantry that size, succeed  
in moving past the Hellespont?

ATOSSA

Xerxes  
used a clever scheme to yoke the river  
and forge a way across.

DARIUS

He managed this? He closed the mighty Bosporus? <sup>171</sup>

ATOSSA

He did. Some spirit must have helped him with his plan.

DARIUS

Alas! Some mighty spirit came to him  
and stopped him thinking clearly.

ATOSSA

Yes. And we can see the result of that, the enormous ruin his actions caused.

DARIUS

Why do you grieve for them? What happened?

ATOSSA

The destruction of our naval forces  
led to the slaughter of our men on land.

DARIUS

And so the entire army came to grief, butchered by the spear?

ATOSSA

Yes. And that is why  
all of Susa mourns—the entire city  
laments its missing men.

DARIUS

Alas for the loss! The help and defence of the army gone!

ATOSSA

All those troops from Bactria are now dead— not even an old man remains.

DARIUS

O wretched Xerxes! So many allies! He has killed off all our youth!

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<sup>171</sup>This short speech of Odysseus is a conjecture based on Jebb's commentary to supply a line which is apparently missing from the manuscript.

ATOSSA

The people say  
he is now by himself, with few attendants.

DARIUS

How will this end? Do you have any hope  
he could be rescued?

ATOSSA

There is some good news—  
he reached the bridge that links two continents.

DARIUS

He returned to Asia safely? Is that true?

ATOSSA

It is. We have had news confirming it  
beyond all doubt.

DARIUS

Alas! Those oracles have quickly been proved true, and Zeus has let  
their full prophetic weight fall on my son. I had hoped the gods would somehow  
hold off  
fulfilling them for several years. But then, when the man himself is in a hurry, the  
god will take steps, too. It seems to me  
a fountain of misfortunes has been found  
for all the ones I love. It was my son  
who, knowing nothing of these matters, with his youthful rashness brought them  
on. He wished to check the sacred Hellespont  
by tying it down with chains, just like a slave, and that holy river, too, the Bosphorus.  
He built a roadway never seen before, enclosing it with hammered manacles,  
creating there a generous causeway  
for his enormous force. Though a mortal man, he sought to force his will on all the  
gods, a foolish scheme, even on Poseidon.<sup>172</sup> Why do that? Surely a sickness of  
the mind  
possessed my son? I fear that our great wealth, amassed by my hard work, may  
well become  
the spoils of anyone who marches here.

ATOSSA

Xerxes spent too much time with wicked men  
and learned to be impulsive. They told him  
how you had won great riches for your sons  
by fighting with your spear, while he, in fear, just used his spear at home and did  
not add  
to the wealth his father left. Gibes like this, which Xerxes often heard from evil men  
led him to organize this expedition  
and launch an armed campaign against the Greeks.

DARIUS

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<sup>172</sup>Asclepius was the Greek hero (or god) associated with medicine. In the Iliad, his sons are the most important healers in the Greek forces at Troy.

And so he has achieved his mighty deed, the greatest of them all, truly immense, whose memory will never be erased—  
 he has removed from Susa all its citizens, something no man has ever done before, not since the time our sovereign Zeus proclaimed  
 one man should have the honour of being king  
 in all sheep-breeding Asia and should hold the sceptre of imperial command. Medos was the first to lead its armies, and then another man, his son, who had a spirit guided by intelligence, finished the work his father had begun. <sup>173</sup> Third after him was Cyrus, a leader  
 favoured by the gods, for his rule brought peace  
 to all his friends. He added to his realm  
 the Lydian and Phrygian people  
 and subdued all the Ionians by force. <sup>174</sup> The god felt no hostility towards him, because his mind was wise. A son of Cyrus  
 was the fourth in charge of Persia's armies, and Mardos was the fifth, a man who shamed  
 his country and disgraced the ancient throne. But noble Artaphrenes with the help of comrades who undertook this duty  
 hatched a scheme and did away with Mardos in his home. [Sixth in line was Maraphis, and seventh Artaphrenes]. When my turn came, I won the lot I wished for. <sup>175</sup> Many times  
 I led our mighty armies in campaigns,  
 and yet I never brought such great disaster  
 to our Persian state. But my son Xerxes, who is still young, has immature ideas and does not bear in mind what I advised. For you whose old age matches mine know well  
 that none of us who have held ruling power  
 was ever seen to cause such great distress.

CHORUS LEADER

But then, lord Darius, these words of yours— what do they imply? What do you conclude? After these events, what should we Persians do to serve this land the best way possible?

DARIUS

You must not organize armed expeditions  
 against Hellenic lands, not even if  
 the Persian force is larger than before. They have an ally—the very land itself.

CHORUS LEADER

What do you mean? In what way is the land

<sup>173</sup>This sudden appearance of a divine figure near the end of the play (the *deus ex machina*) may have had Hercules lowered from above or he may have appeared on a platform above the stage. Hercules was a mortal son of Zeus, but after his death he was made a god.

<sup>174</sup>Hercules himself had in earlier times attacked the king of Troy, Laomedon, and captured the city.

<sup>175</sup>These lines refer to the traditional story that when the Persian nobles who conspired against Mardos succeeded, they drew lots to determine the imperial succession. In different accounts of this event, the names of the conspirators and the succeeding kings differ. Line 778 in the Greek is generally considered an interpolation (hence the square brackets).

their ally?

DARIUS

Those armies which are very large  
she kills with famine.

CHORUS LEADER

Then we will raise some special soldiers and supply them well.

DARIUS

But that army which is still in Greece  
will not get safely home.

CHORUS LEADER

What are you saying? Will all our forces of barbarians not make their way across  
the Hellespont  
and out of Europe?

DARIUS

Not very many—  
only a few of that huge multitude,  
if, after those events we have been through, we still place any trust in prophecies  
the gods have made. For it is not the case that some will be fulfilled and others not.  
If the oracles are true, then Xerxes, convinced by empty hopes, will leave behind  
a specially chosen portion of his army, now stationed where the river Asopus  
waters the plains and brings Boeotian lands  
sweet nourishment. This is the place those men  
remain to undergo their punishment, the very worst disaster of them all, a pay-  
ment for their pride and godless thoughts. For when they first arrived in Greece,  
those men  
did not display the slightest reverence  
but broke in pieces images of gods  
and burned their temples. They ravaged altars  
demolished holy shrines, knocking them down  
to their foundations, leaving scattered ruins. And thus, given their acts were so  
profane, the evils they must suffer are no less—  
and others are in store. They have not plumbed  
the depths of their disasters—more troubles will keep flowing yet. The mix of blood  
and gore  
poured out by Dorian spears across the earth  
of Plataea will be so great the dead, the corpses heaped in piles, will still be there  
when three generations have come and gone, a silent witness to the eyes of men  
that mortal human beings should not believe  
that they are greater than they are.<sup>176</sup> For pride, when it grows ripe, produces as  
its fruit  
disastrous folly and a harvest crop of countless tears. So when you look upon  
the punishment for how these men behaved, remember Greece and Athens. Do  
not let

<sup>176</sup>Darius is here referring to the great land battle of Plataea, in Boeotia, where the Greek forces led by the Spartans, who were of Dorian descent, defeated the Persian land armies, after the naval battle of Salamis.

any man despise the god he follows  
and, in his lust for something else, squander the great wealth he possesses. I tell  
you  
Zeus does act to chastise arrogant men  
whose thoughts are far too proud, and when he does  
his hand is heavy. So now that Xerxes  
has shown he lacks the prudence to think well, you must teach him with sensible  
advice  
to stop being so offensive to the gods  
through his presumptuous daring. As for you, dear lady, Xerxes' venerable mother,  
return back to the palace. Pick out there  
some clothing fit for him, and then prepare  
to meet your son. His grief at his misfortune  
has torn to shreds the embroidered clothing  
covering his body. Use soothing words  
and gently calm him down, for I know this— yours is the only voice he listens to.  
As for me, I am returning to the earth, to darkness down below. Farewell, old men,  
despite these troubling times, you should each day  
discover reasons to rejoice, for riches  
bring no profit whatsoever to the dead.

[The Ghost of Darius disappears]

CHORUS LEADER

To hear about the many troubles  
we barbarians must face, the ones  
already here and still more yet to come, fills me with grief.

ATOSSA

O god, I am overwhelmed with so much bitter sorrow! But one thing  
more than all the others gnaws my heart—  
the disgraceful appearance of my son, the shameful clothing covering his limbs.  
But I will go and get appropriate robes  
and try to find my son. In this distress,  
I will not abandon those most dear to me.

[Atossa exits]

CHORUS

Alas! How glorious and good the life  
we loved here in our well-run city, when our old sovereign ruled this land, our all-  
sufficient and unconquered king, who never brought us war or grief, our mighty  
godlike Darius.

For first of all, we then displayed  
our famous armies, and our traditions,  
like towers in strength, ruled everything. Our men returning from a war faced no  
disasters—they reached  
their prosperous homes unharmed.

Darius seized so many cities and never crossed the Halys stream  
or even left his home—places like  
the Thracian Acheloan towns

beside the Strymonian sea. <sup>177</sup>

And cities on the mainland, too, far from the sea, well fortified  
with walls encircling them  
obeyed him as their king, and so did places on both shores  
along the spacious Hellespont and in the deep bays of Propontis  
and where the Pontus flows into the sea. <sup>178</sup>

And islands close to coastal headlands, surrounded by the sea, right next to us,  
like Lesbos, Samos, where olives grow, and Chios, Paros, Naxos, Mykonos, along  
with Andros, too, adjacent to its neighbour Teos.

He ruled the wave-washed isles, as well,  
which lie far out at sea—Lemnos, the home of Icarus, and Rhodes, with Cnidus,  
too, and Cyprian cities—  
Paphos and Soli and Salamis, whose mother state has caused  
our present cries of anguish. <sup>179</sup>

And wealthy crowded cities of those Greeks  
descended from Ionian stock  
he ruled with his shrewd mind,  
and under his command he had  
enormous armies of warrior men— all nations were allied with him. But now we  
must endure defeats  
in wars inflicted by the gods. We cannot doubt the truth of this, for we have been  
destroyed in war, by massive disaster on the sea.

[Enter Xerxes]

XERXES

O my situation now is desperate! My luck has led me to a cruel fate  
which I did not foresee! How savagely  
a demon trampled on the Persian race. What must I still endure in this distress? As  
I look on these ancient citizens, the strength in my limbs fails. O how I wish  
a fatal doom from Zeus had buried me  
with all those men who perished!

CHORUS LEADER

Alas, my king, for our brave force and the mighty honour  
of Persia's influence, those splendid men  
whom fate has now cut down. The earthlaments  
her native youth, the soldiers Xerxes killed, who filled all Hades with the Persian  
dead. So many men—our country's flowers—slain, thousands perishing from  
enemy bows, a close-packed multitude, all dead and gone. Alas! Alas, for all our  
brave protectors! O sovereign of the earth, all Asian lands

<sup>177</sup>It is not entirely clear what places these phrases refer to, since the meaning of the Greek word Acheloan is disputed. The Halys River in Lydia, the longest river in Asia Minor, marked (for the Greeks) the western boundary of Persia.

<sup>178</sup>The Propontis (now called the Sea of Marmora) is a large body of water between the Bosphorus and the Hellespont. Pontus was normally the name of a region on the south shores of the Black Sea. Here it seems to apply to a river or rivers in the area.

<sup>179</sup>Icarus, son of Daedalus, attempted to fly away from Crete on wings his father, Daedalus, had made. But when he flew too near the sun, the wax holding his feathers melted, and he fell into the sea and drowned. The Icarian Sea in the eastern Mediterranean was named after him.

are now upon their knees, a dreadful sight,  
so dreadful. . . .

XERXES

You see me here, alas, a sad  
and useless wretch who has become  
an evil presence for my race  
and for my native land.

CHORUS

For your return I will send out  
in these harsh-sounding tones  
a cry of ominous grief, one full of tears, a shout  
of Mariandynian sorrow. <sup>180</sup>

XERXES

Then let your sad lament resound, a harsh and plaintive cry. For the god has turned  
against me.

CHORUS

Yes, I will sing my tearful chant  
to honour the men who suffered so in that defeat at sea—a dirge  
from those who mourn this land  
and lament its slaughtered sons. My doleful grief I voice once more.

XERXES

Ionian Ares with those ships of war  
turned the tide of victory  
and swept our troops away—  
the Greek fleet razed the murky sea and that fatal cliff onshore.

CHORUS

Aaaaiii! Cry out your sorrows, and learn the tale in full. Where are they now, that  
multitude  
of other friends so dear to us? Where are the ones who stood by you—  
Pharandaces, and Sousas, and Pelagon, with Agabatas and Dotamas, Psammis,  
and Sousiskanes,  
who came from Agbatana?

XERXES

I left them there. They perished, tumbling out of their Tyrian ship by the coast of  
Salamis, beaten against its rugged shore.

CHORUS

Aaaaiii! Where is Pharnouchus, your friend, and Ariomardus, that glorious man? And  
lord Seualcus or Lilaïos, descended from a noble line,  
or Memphis, Tharybis, and Masistras, or Hystaichmas and Artembares? I am asking  
you about them, too.

XERXES

Alas! Alas! They caught a glimpse of ancient Athens, that hateful place! Now all of  
them at one fell blow—  
the pain of those poor wretches!—

<sup>180</sup>The Mariandynians were a Thracian people, famous for their funeral laments.

lie gasping on the shore.

Chorus

And did you really leave behind  
Alpistos, son of Batanochus, your ever loyal Persian eye  
who tracked men by the thousands?

[.....] <sup>181</sup>

The sons of Sesames and Megabates, with Parthos and the great Oibares—  
did you abandon them, as well, and leave them with the others? Alas, alas, for those  
poor men! You talk of catastrophic woes  
among our noble Persians.

XERXES

What you say truly makes me yearn  
for all my fine companions, when you bring up the evil times,  
that hateful woe I cannot bear. From deep within, my grieving heart  
howls out my pain and sorrow.

CHORUS

But there are other men we miss—  
like Xanthes, who as commander  
captained countless Mardian men, as well as warlike Anchaes, and Diaixis, too,  
and Arsakes, who led the cavalry, and Agdadatas, Lythimnas, and Tolmus, too,  
whose appetite could never get enough of war. I am amazed they are not here  
marching behind you in your train  
with your wheel-drawn carriage tent.

XERXES

Those leaders of our forces are all dead.

CHORUS

They are gone? Alas! And with no glory!

XERXES

Aaaaiiii! The sorrow!

CHORUS

Alas! Alas, you spirits above, you bring us such disaster, so unforeseen and yet so  
clear to see, as if the goddess of folly, Ate, had glanced at us in this calamity. <sup>182</sup>

XERXES

We have been hit by blows, smitten by unexpected blows of fate!

CHORUS

Yes, all too clearly stricken!

XERXES

New troubles, strange disasters!

CHORUS

It was bad luck for us we ran into  
those ships and sailors from Ionia. The Persian race, as we can see, has had no

<sup>181</sup>The “eyes” of the Persian king were officials whose task was to keep him informed about what was going on among the king’s subjects. Some portion of the text is evidently missing after line 981 in the Greek.

<sup>182</sup>Ate, the goddess of folly, caused people temporarily to lose all their judgment, so that they made decisions with disastrous consequences.



luck in war.

XERXES

How can that be? Such a mighty force! And I, a miserable wretch, have now been beaten down!

CHORUS

And of our splendid Persian glory  
what has not perished?

Xerxes

Do you see my robes—  
what's left of them?

Chorus

Yes, I see . . . I see them now.

Xerxes

And my quiver here . . .

Chorus

What are you saying? Is this what has been saved?

Xerxes

. . . this holder for my arrows?

CHORUS

So small a remnant from so many!

XERXES

We have lost all our protectors!

CHORUS

Ionian troops are not afraid to fight.

XERXES They are a warlike race. I witnessed there  
what I did not expect—a great defeat.

CHORUS

You mean the way they beat your warships—  
that massive fleet?

XERXES

When that disaster came, I ripped my clothing.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas!

XERXES

And there were even more catastrophes  
to make one cry "Alas!"

CHORUS

Two and three times more!

XERXES

Crushing grief—but for our enemies great joy!

CHORUS

Our strength has been lopped off.

XERXES

I am now naked—stripped of my attendants!

CHORUS

By deaths of friends who perished on the sea.

XERXES

Weep for that catastrophe! Let your tears fall. Then return back to your homes.

CHORUS

Alas, such grief! Alas, for our distress!

XERXES

Your cries of sorrow—  
let them echo mine!

CHORUS

An answering cry of anguished pain  
from one grief to another.

XERXES

Cry out and link together our laments!

CHORUS

Aaaaaiiii! Misfortunes hard to bear! For I too share your grief!

XERXES

For my sake beat your chests and groan!

CHORUS

My sorrow drenches me with tears!

XERXES

Shout out your cries to answer mine.

CHORUS

We will respond to you, my king.

XERXES

Now raise your voices high in your laments.

CHORUS

Aaaaaiiii! Once more  
we mix our song of grief  
with these dark blows of pain!

XERXES

Now beat your chests and as you do howl out a Mysian strain!

CHORUS

Such grief! Such sorrow!

XERXES

And tear those white hairs on your chin!

CHORUS

With fists I clench my beard and moan!

XERXES Let your shrill cries ring out!

CHORUS

I will cry out!

XERXES

And with your fingers rip your flowing robes!

CHORUS

The pain! The sorrow!

XERXES

Now tug your hair out as you cry  
for our lost army!

CHORUS

With these fists I clench my hair and moan!

XERXES

Let your eyes fill with tears.

CHORUS

They do! They do!

XERXES

Shout out your cries to answer mine.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas!

XERXES

And now, as you lament, go home.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas! Such grief to move  
across our Persian land.

XERXES

Such grief throughout the city.

CHORUS

So much pain, so much distress!

XERXES

Tread softly as you wail your grief.

CHORUS

Alas! Alas! Such grief to move  
across our Persian land.

XERXES

Aaaaaii! Alas, for those destroyed  
in the flat bottomed boats— the force of those three-tiered galleys!

CHORUS

I will be your escort and attend on you  
with mournful cries of sorrow.

[Xerxes and the Chorus exit]

# Lecture on OEDIPUS

*This section is based on the [publicly available](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/oedipus.htm)<sup>183</sup> lecture by Ian Johnston*

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<sup>183</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/oedipus.htm>

## **Fate, Freedom, and the Tragic Experience: An Introductory Lecture on Sophocles's *Oedipus the King***

*[This is the text of a lecture on Sophocles's Oedipus the King written and delivered, in part, by Ian Johnston at Malaspina University-College (now Vancouver Island University) on October 11, 2000, in the Liberal Studies 111 class. The text is an extensive revision of an earlier lecture on the same play. All references to and quotations from the play are taken from the translation by Ian Johnston (available free on line at [Oedipus the King](http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/sophocles/OedipustheKing.htm)<sup>184</sup>). This document is in the public domain, released October 9, 2000. It may be used in whole or in part by anyone for any purpose, without permission and without charge, provided the source is acknowledged]*

*This lecture was last revised in August 2004*

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<sup>184</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/sophocles/OedipustheKing.htm>

## Introduction

This week we are discussing one of the world's most famous plays, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, and my purpose here is to offer a general introduction to this famous and often puzzling work, which, from the time of the Classical Greeks, has set the standard for a form of literature we call *dramatic tragedy*. I shall be addressing that claim in some detail later on, but before getting to that or to the text of the play itself, I would like to clarify a couple of terms which are going to be crucial parts of the interpretative remarks I have to offer. In this preliminary part of the lecture, I shall attempt to link what goes on in this play to other works we have studied (or will be studying).

The lecture thus falls into three parts: first, an initial discussion of some terms I wish to use (particularly the terms *fate* and *hero*), then an application of those terms to what we see going on in *Oedipus the King*, and finally, building on these two concerns, I would like to address the terms *tragedy* and *tragic vision of experience*.

## Fate, Fatalism, A Fatalistic World View

In Sophocles's play, as in other works we have read, we encounter an obviously important notion, the role played by *fate* or *the fates*. The emphasis placed on these words (and sometimes the personalities representing them) gives to the stories and the vision of life they hold up something we might call a *fatalistic* quality. What exactly does this mean? What does a text mean when it invokes the concept of *fate*?

Now, almost everyone will offer a definition of this quality, but it's surprising how those definitions can often differ. So let me attempt to clarify what, for the purposes of this lecture and beyond, I understand by these important terms.

To invoke the concept of *fate* or to have a *fatalistic* vision of experience is, simply put, to claim that the most important forces which create, shape, guide, reward, and afflict human life are out of human control. There is something else out there (where exactly varies from one vision to the next) which, in effect, sets and controls the rules of our lives, determining most or all things of particular importance to us: our good and bad fortune, our happiness and sorrow, and, above all, our death. To have a fatalistic sense of life is to hold that in this game of life, the rules, the flow of play, the success or failure of my team (and my contribution to that), and so on are out of the control of any human being or collection of human beings. The outcome and all the various stages of the game are determined from non-human sources.

The terms fate and fatalistic do assert, however, that something or someone is in control, and hence the universe does not operate by *chance*. We may have little to no accurate idea of why fate works the way it does (although differing fatalistic vision will provide different senses of just how much we can know and deal with fate), but at least there is something out there controlling what goes on. To assert that *chance* rules all things (as Jocasta does in the play) is to claim that there is little we can do to control things and nothing we can learn about it, since the concept of chance suggests that what occurs is quite arbitrary, unrelated to any higher system of order or meaning.

All these points are clear enough, but it is important to insist upon them, because (as I shall mention later) such fatalism is, in many ways, profoundly different from what we believe nowadays, and thus books which hold up a fatalistic view of life (and that includes almost all books up until the eighteenth century) can provide difficulties for us, especially since a fatalistic view of life in some ways challenges some of our most cherished beliefs and can make us profoundly uncomfortable (a factor which is, of course, something which can make such books uniquely valuable to us).

If we hold a fatalistic world view or believe in fate, it is not uncommon to give that fate a name or series of names, that is, to provide some way of talking about or picturing such fatal forces. Hence arises (according to many scholars of myth) the entire concept of divinity or a divine family—superhuman personalities (who may or may not have human forms and attributes) who control the rules and the events of our lives according to their own principles, which may or may not be intelligible to us (more about that later).

For instance, it's clear that the visions of life in *Gilgamesh* and the Old Testament, for all their differences, are fatalistic in the sense I have described. Ultimate control over human life is exercised by non-human forces or personalities. The human beings who believe these fatalistic visions have names for such controlling figures. In the Old Testament there is only one such fatal figure; in *Gilgamesh*, as in the Greek epics, there are numerous controlling figures. But the principle is the same: our lives are not in our own hands.

Giving fate a name or series of names is a necessary imaginative act, for it permits the human subject to such fate to understand his situation. Such a symbolic construct makes the most important features of human life emotionally intelligible, allowing us to explain and generally to accept the game we are all in, even if we are conscious that we did not choose it and can imagine a better one. It also permits us in the process to establish a relationship with the controlling forces of our existence. Such a relationship often forms the basis for personal or communal religious practices, especially if I believe that such fatal presences do listen and can sometimes be persuaded by prayer, sacrifice, penitence, and so on.

Let me give you a personal example. A few years my son was killed very unexpectedly. At once, I, like everyone else, searched for an explanation. Why did this disaster have to happen? What in this best of all possible worlds could justify such an unwelcome event? And after reading all the police reports and talking to countless people, I could come up with only one explanation: The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Now, I'm not a particularly religious person. But that explanation (as unsatisfactory as many may find it) was enormously consoling. My son died because that's what fate, destiny, the Lord, or whatever one chooses to call it, had so determined. The event was not simply fortuitous, inexplicable. I could put a name and a personality on the disaster. I might not have been able to come up with a clear human reason, but I could at least make that event emotionally intelligible to me within the framework of a supportable belief system.

It's important at this stage to stress what such a fatalistic world view does not mean (or not necessarily mean). To call a world view fatalist or to believe in fate is not necessarily to characterize that fate as having any particular form. So, for example, a fatalistic world view might be extremely pessimistic, seeking in the non-human forces an irrational and often malignant force or personality which has little love for human beings and who takes a great delight in human suffering and death (or who, at least, permits it without much scruple). Alternatively, a fatalistic world view might well hold that the controlling forces or personalities of the cosmos are, on the whole, benevolent and friendly and that, if I attend carefully to what they demand, I may lead a generally satisfying life, perhaps even going on to some eternal happiness in the life hereafter. Such conflicting visions are both equally fatalistic, for they both share the sense that there is no human control over the rules and no method humans can devise for changing such rules. But they differ profoundly on how they view such fatal rules, the first being much more pessimistic than the second.

Another important point to note in discussing fatalism or a fatalistic view of life is that it does not therefore mean that human beings have no freedom. This



point is crucial. The fates (or the gods, if I characterize my fatalistic vision in that manner) may indeed control all the rules and determine the good and bad things that happen to me, including my own death. But I am free to adopt towards that fate whatever attitude I choose. In other words, how I confront my fate is my free choice, the way in which I exercise my human freedom.

This point, indeed, should be clear enough after a reading of Exodus or *Gilgamesh*. For the key element in both books is an education in the appropriate stance towards the fatal conditions of life, something over which the people in the stories have complete freedom. God may control the world and the future of the Israelites, but they have freedom whether or not they believe in him. And that story shows us the great difficulty the Israelites, in their freedom in the desert, experience in maintaining the faith. God promises to reward them or their descendants if they believe, He gives them all sorts of demonstrations of His power, He punishes those who break faith and the rules which demonstrate that faith, but He does not determine their belief: they are free not to believe. Similarly in *Gilgamesh*, the hero goes through an extensive education before he freely chooses to accept his fate, return to Uruk, and live his life in the full and free acceptance of how the world operates. Gilgamesh has the freedom not to return, after all.

I stress this point about the importance of free will in a fatalistic universe, because it's the key to understanding most of the ancient stories we read. The quality of being human, in such stories, comes, not from the extent to which the hero controls his own destiny or fate (which is ultimately in the hands of other forces), but from the attitude(s) he adopts in the face of a fatal destiny.

[To appreciate the point one has only to think about a modern sports hero, whose greatness derives not from changing the rules or inventing a new game or whatever, but from operating within the given structure of the game, over which he has no control. What he does control is his own effort and attitude to what is going on. A sports figure who whines all the time about the unfairness of the rules is of little interest.]

For many of you I have been re-stating the obvious. However, for some here this concept of fatalism may seem rather odd or at least strange. For we North Americans (particularly those on the West Coast who are not Natives) are, in many respects the least fatalistic of people, and we spend most of our lives either denying the entire concept of a fatalistic vision of experience or trying hard to forget it. And we do that because we are heirs to a tradition, now about two hundred years old, which has attempted to deny the existence of fate in the old-fashioned sense I have been outlining above and to insist, by contrast, that human beings must be encouraged to take control over their own lives, to make their own rules, and where necessary to fight and conquer the given conditions of life, which are not fatal divine presences but human problems, capable of human solutions. We have all enlisted in the fight against Humbaba, the divine monster in *Gilgamesh* and our most cherished cultural belief is that we can and will eventually win.

We, in other words, have been trying to take control of the game of life, to reshape it to our own purposes, and to deny the existence of some greater powers over which we have no control. We have done this by launching a massive

project to assault as much of nature as we can, so as to bring it under human control, so that we are no longer victims of casual changes in climate, bacterial infections, harvest failures, natural disasters. And we have been, in many quarters, so spectacularly successful that we are encouraged to think that we have only a short route to go before we become, as the saying has it, masters of our own fate.

This point is clear enough if you think for a moment about how everyone in here carries a clear fate, and no one has to have a religious sensibility to accept it. That is, each of us carries a biological destiny in our genes, something which, it seems clear, is going to control a great deal of what happens to us, no matter what we do. But most of us here are aware that we are assaulting that genetic destiny with a vengeance, so as to gain control of it, to subsume the mystery of our biological fate under human rational control. And many of us are extremely confident that once that victory is complete, we will have gained a significant victory over fate, putting human life, and perhaps even that strongest reminder of our fate, our death, into our own hands.

This two-hundred year old project has been accompanied by a general hostility to fatalistic ways of looking at the world (religious and otherwise), because any notion of fatalism, the sense that the controlling forces of the world are much more mysterious and powerful than we can imagine is an uncomfortable reminder that we may be deluding ourselves about our own powers, that what we are up against may be a great deal more complex and unknowable than we can imagine. Severe natural disasters or new outbreaks of massive lethal epidemics and similar occurrences are often unpleasant reminders that, even if we don't like to think about fate, we may not have put our fates as much under our control as we might wish. This very play, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, some have argued, is making precisely that point (I'll come back to this idea later).

## The Hero

If we grasp something about the basic notion of a fatalistic universe (which is, as I say, fundamental to almost all traditional stories), then we can see why the principal character in many traditional stories has a unique importance. It's not simply a matter that the hero is very successful (although he often is) or that he carries out deeds which no one else can carry out (although he frequently does just that). The hero is more likely to be someone who confronts fate in a very personal manner and whose reaction to that encounter serves to illuminate for us our own particular condition.

Most of us, after all, live in a community where we don't have to think about the implications of a fatalistic vision of the universe very much because our social group has educated us in a particular way of understanding the world and has provided, in addition to that education, all sorts of stories, rituals, institutions, and so on to reinforce our common approach to experience. We are all, to a great degree, creatures of habit in this respect. And so we don't constantly explore the basis for our belief or (if we stay more or less within our community) have to cope with any challenge to it.

The story of a hero who challenges or encounters fate and has to respond (particularly outside the community, physically or psychologically) can force us to confront some basic truths about life and about how what we like to believe rests on some fundamental assumptions. That can happen (and often does happen) even if the vision of fate which the hero has to deal with is quite strange to us. For the basic questions about life which a fatalistic vision of life raises transcend the particular details of that vision.

Let me explain. Many of us no longer believe in the Lord of the Old Testament, and we would be unlikely to sign on with Moses in his journey through the wilderness. But when we read that story, we have to confront a challenge: Who does control our lives? What sort of relationship do we have to that divine force? Does an acknowledgement of a fatal divine presence impose any moral obligations on me relative to my fellow believers? And so on. Moses gives us a vision of a particular answer to such questions. We don't have to share it in order for these questions to register as important and challenging. We may well prefer not to have to think about them most of the time. But if we are reading the Old Testament imaginatively, we can scarcely avoid them. And what comes out of that collision does not depend upon whether or not I share the faith of Moses in the Lord and the Lord's promise to His people's historical destiny (although the reader's evaluation of his response will certainly be different if he is a believer or a non-believer).

Similarly, I don't have to believe in the panoply of gods in *Gilgamesh* to sense that this is a fatalistic universe, that the hero's conduct forces him to confront his awareness of and attitude to the fates which control his destiny, and that his various responses (which go from ignoring fate, to challenging it, to accepting it) raise some serious issues for me.

[Incidentally, to digress for a moment, in this business, there's an important difference between someone we call a hero and someone we call a celebrity. The latter is someone who is very successful within the context of the social group,

who has become well known because of his skill in existing within a particular set of rules, without having to question those rules. A hero, by contrast, is someone who confronts issues beyond the social rules, who encounters (often by a long physical journey) the fundamental conditions of life itself and who thus comes to some understanding, as Moses and Gilgamesh do, of the relationship between the way the world runs and the social group which bases itself on a shared community understanding. Celebrities, if you like, show us that our society can produce worldly success; heroes help us understand the reasons why our society works the way it does. Heroes, especially traditional heroes, are usually (often invariably) also celebrities, like Moses, Gilgamesh, and Oedipus. But heroes don't have to be celebrities (like Socrates).

Because heroes explore the roots of their society's beliefs (rather than just exploiting them), their stories will often be particularly illuminating about the particular cultural values of their communities. To understand why Moses is such a great hero (when, for example, he is in many ways unlike heroes from other cultures) is to understand a great deal about why the Israelites behave the way they do. To understand why Gilgamesh is such a great hero is to understand some things that lie at the heart of the vision of fate which *Gilgamesh* illuminates for us. To compare Moses and Gilgamesh as heroic characters is to come to an understanding of some of the fundamental differences between two famous and imaginatively moving fatalistic visions very different from our own understanding of the world.

The most significant feature of a traditional hero in comparison with the others in his community is his willingness to act, to make decisions (usually in response to a crisis of some kind), and to step forward and take risks in the face of fate at a time when such decisions are necessary. In Greek tragedies, nowhere more clearly than in *Oedipus the King*, this quality is what separates the hero from the chorus. The latter typically acknowledge their timidity or bewilderment or anxiety in the face of the crisis and look to the hero for leadership, often placing their hopes in the hero's record of previous successes. They are followers and require someone to step out and assume the risks of making decisions about what the community should do.

## Oedipus the King: Some Initial Observations

I would now like to establish some preliminary observations (at first, some very obvious ones) about Oedipus in order to establish, following some of the remarks I have made above, why we can consider him a great hero and what his famous story reveals about the vision of human life which this play illuminates for us.

Oedipus is, we recognize right from the start, a great celebrity, a national leader of a city-state at a moment of crisis. Thebes has been mysteriously attacked by the plague, something which both Oedipus and the citizen see as a manifestation of the fatal forces of the universe in which they live. The citizens are dying, and they want, if possible, to stop the disaster. The future of their city depends upon that. They naturally turn to Oedipus, their firm and popular ruler.

The opening of the play makes at least two things clear to us. First, the citizens have enormous respect, even love, for Oedipus. They acknowledge not only his political power (which they have given him), but also his pre-eminence among all human beings for wisdom, especially in dealing with things they don't understand: "We judge you/ the first of men in what happens in this life/and in our interactions with the gods" (37-39). Second, we see in Oedipus a person of enormous self-assurance and self-confidence, a man who is willing to take on full responsibility for dealing with the crisis, a task which he clearly accepts as his own unique challenge. Oedipus has, we observe right from the opening lines, an enormously powerful sense of his own excellence, of his own worth (the most obvious indication of this point, something worth attending to throughout the entire play, is the frequency of the pronouns *I* and *me* in all of Oedipus's utterances).

The opening also makes clear to us that both the chorus's confidence in Oedipus and his strong sense of his own worth derive from past experience. Oedipus has saved the city before, at a time when many others had tried. And he did it with his mind, his intellect: he solved the riddle of the Sphinx. So the opening speeches clearly establish a harmonious relationship between ruler and ruled, based on past experience. Oedipus's confidence is not, in other words, merely an illusion. He has an exemplary record, the people have come to him because of that quality, and he fully intends to live up to that standard. Yes, he has a high regard for himself, but we are given to understand that that is quite deserved and shared by those over whom he rules.

And his first steps to deal with the crisis, that is, to send to the oracle for some instructions, are entirely appropriate. Given that fate has brought on the plague, what can fate reveal about its origins? Oedipus has, in fact, anticipated the request of the priest: he has already acted on his own initiative to address the crisis. And when the oracle's report is made public, Oedipus immediately and forcefully proclaims his famous curse against the murderer of Laius, the previous king. All this seems very appropriate. And, in fact, it does serve to reassure the people. Their fears are calmed, because Oedipus, their king who saved them before, is taking care of the problem.

At the same time, however, this scene gives us our first sense of what becomes inescapable later on. Oedipus, in accepting the responsibility, has no room for sharing the problem with anyone else. As a measure of his own greatness, he will

resolve Thebes's distress, and he will do it openly for all to see. That's why he can dismiss Creon's suggestion that he listen to the report about the oracle privately first and why he can confidently declare "Then I will start afresh, and once again/ shed light on darkness" (159). He is taking on the task as a personal challenge, to be dealt with in his terms, not by delegating it to someone else or, indeed, by discussing the matter with others or, as we shall see, by listening to what others have to say and acting on their suggestions.

## Oedipus's Self-Assertion

The quality I have just referred to (Oedipus's determination to deal with the issues himself), hinted at here in the opening scene, becomes increasingly evident as the play progresses. Indeed, it becomes his most obvious characteristic—his will to see this matter through on his own terms, no matter what the cost. And the more we learn about the ironic net of facts which he is uncovering about the murder, the more we see his determination grow. Even as he becomes increasingly aware about his own possible implication in the death of Laius, his commitment to finding an answer by himself remains strong.

This quality is the most puzzling and most important feature of Oedipus's character, and we need to appreciate it in order to understand both certain incidents in the play and the effect the play has on us. For Oedipus is fundamentally different from the heroes we have encountered so far. He is not like Moses, a man with hardly any sense of his own magnificence, a man who sees himself first and foremost as a servant of God charged with bringing religious and political discipline to his community. Nor is he like Gilgamesh, a man capable of learning to listen to others and finally to accept what they tell him about the nature of existence. Oedipus is a fiercely self-assertive man throughout his story. He is, to put the matter simply, a man who answers only to himself, to his image of his own greatness. The fact that he is acting in the interests of Thebes and trying to do the right thing (at least at first) doesn't alter this point at all. Oedipus is trying to live up to a standard, but it is not a standard given to him by God or one taught to him by others: the standard he answers to is the measure he sets of his own greatness. So prominent is this feature of his character, that we cannot separate out clearly Oedipus's desire to help the city from his desire to manifest his own greatness. In his eyes (and those of the chorus), of course, the two are identical.

For that reason, Oedipus has very little political sense, and the play has no political dimension to it at all. Creon seems to be the one with a political sensibility (where caution and a sense of political outcomes matter). Oedipus does everything publicly, as if hiding something would compromise his own greatness. He is Oedipus. He and everyone else recognize his greatness. To practice duplicity or political prudence would be to compromise his own sense of himself.

## Oedipus and Teiresias

The most obvious indication of Oedipus's total commitment to himself is the famous quarrel with Teiresias. To some readers Oedipus's conduct here seems very odd, but this quarrel makes perfect sense if we see Oedipus as someone with no sense of ambiguity in life, as a person wedded to the view that his conception of what matters is, in fact, the truth.

By that standard, Oedipus has good reason to be angry with Teiresias and to suspect him. For Teiresias knows the murderer of Laius and will not tell. Oedipus has absolutely no sense that he might be involved at all. And since he has no conception of that as a possibility, it cannot be true. Thus, when Teiresias announces to Oedipus that "the accursed polluter of this land is you" (421), Oedipus's interpretation is clear enough: Teiresias must be lying, and he must have a reason, a secret agenda. A different man might well stop at this point, calm down, and ask Teiresias what he meant. That is to say, a different man might have stopped hanging onto his own certainties, confident that they were the truth, and have listened carefully to what someone else had to say (as Gilgamesh learns to do). But Oedipus is not that sort of person. In fact, rather than listen to Teiresias, Oedipus reminds everyone of his previous triumph over the Sphinx (stressing that Teiresias failed to help Thebes then)—he derives a sense of what is right from who he is based on his past achievements, rather than from any more flexible appreciation for more complex possibilities.

Many first-time readers of the play are quick to criticize Oedipus here, to say that, in effect, he is too hot tempered or proud or whatever. But it's important to remember that Oedipus has every reason to be fully confident that he is not implicated in the murder of Laius, as well as to be confident in his own abilities to get to the truth (after all, he's done it before). True, he might be more cautious and polite here, but if he had those qualities he almost certainly wouldn't be king of Thebes in the first place or, if he were, he would be too prudent to launch the sort of investigation he does.

This last point (to which I shall return) is crucial to grasp. At the heart of Oedipus's greatness is an enormous (and, as we learn, naïve) self-confidence. And we can be quick to criticize that as a failing. But without this self-confidence, this absolute trust in his own power to act decisively, publicly, and quickly, Oedipus would be like the Chorus, impotent in the face of the crisis, looking around for someone to take charge. The very things that we might find lacking in his character are the very things that enable him to step up to the front, make decisions, and act to meet the crisis (and eventually, let us remember, to deal with it, since he does find the murderer of Laius and cleanse the city of plague).



## The Chorus and Other Characters

The contrast between Oedipus and the Chorus, very prominent in a stage production, is perhaps less evident to a reader. But it's important to note just how incapable they are of acting decisively. They want something done, but they are all too aware of their own limitations, their fear in the face of the unknown, typically addressing their fates with acknowledgements of their own terror or fearful questions:

My fearful heart twists on the rack and shakes with fear.  
O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud  
in holy awe, what obligation  
will you demand from me, a thing unknown  
or now renewed with the revolving years?  
Immortal voice, O child of golden  
Hope,  
speak to me! (185-191)

The Choral utterances are reminders of what we might call a normal response to experience—hesitation, fears, hopes, questions. They want to believe in the benevolence of their gods, but they know all too well that that may not be there. Confronting their fates with such feelings, naturally they lack the assertive self-confidence to do anything significant at the time of crisis, and they look to Oedipus to take actions because they not only have no idea what to do but lack the self-confidence to do anything.

Oedipus's treatment of Teiresias and Creon concerns the Chorus, and they make some attempt to calm things down, recognizing that Oedipus's quick judgment may be leading him to misjudge what Creon and Teiresias are saying. But they will not abandon or criticize Oedipus because they understand that if some decisive action needs to be taken, he's the only one who can do it.

They certainly cannot expect Creon to tackle the problem head on. After all, he makes it clear to everyone (including the readers) that he's primarily a cautious political operator, happy to play that game as second fiddle, with no desire to manifest his own excellence to the full. One gets the distinct sense that if Creon were in charge of the investigation into the plague, he would (like so many college administrators) appoints a series of committees to meet behind closed doors to talk the problem away if possible.

And Jocasta clearly wants the whole matter just to go away. She has precisely the wrong advice for Oedipus (not that he would listen to anyone's advice anyway) when she advises him to cease his investigation into his fate because there's no such thing, inviting him to live his life for the moment:

Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance live in fear—a man who never looks ahead, who has no certain vision of his future. It's best to live haphazardly, as best one can. (1161-1164)

What she's doing here, of course, is inviting Oedipus to be someone else, someone who has no concern for living up to his reputation for knowledge and courage. And, of course, Oedipus doesn't listen to her, just as he doesn't listen to anyone else.

One needs to measure Oedipus's stature against the other characters in the play, taking into account his capacity for decisive action in comparison to their inaction or unwillingness to think through the need for action. Whatever one might like to say by way of criticizing Oedipus, that point remains.

## The Irony of Oedipus's Story: The Interplay of Fate and Free Will

What makes Oedipus's actions in this quarrel with Teiresias and throughout the play so dramatically compelling and increasingly tense is that we, the readers, know the outcome of the story. That is, we are familiar with Oedipus's fate. And yet there's no sense during the story that Oedipus is compelled to act the way he does: he freely chooses to initiate the chain of events which eventually reveals his fate to him. In that sense, the interplay between Oedipus's sense of his own freedom and our sense of his eventual outcome constitutes the main dramatic power in the play (for there's no suspense about the outcome of a story which is so well known to the audience before they arrive at the theatre or pick up the text to read it).

Oedipus has spent all his life dealing with his fate. He has, we learn, been told that he is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. And he has refused to accept that fate. He has spent much of his life moving around, so as to avoid his fate. In other words, he has freely chosen, for reasons which we can surely understand and applaud, to construct a life in which what he has been told will happen will not happen.

And, so far as he can tell, he has been spectacularly successful. In doing what he has done, Oedipus has gained (he thinks) the knowledge that a man does not have to meekly accept an unwelcome fate, and one, moreover, which is morally abhorrent to him and to the play's audience. He can take efforts to change the direction assigned to his life. This fact, once again, gives him powerful reasons for feeling very confident in his own abilities to deal with the mysterious powers which control the world. In his own mind, he is a human being who has thwarted his fate (although he is still very worried that it might eventually happen).

We, of course, know otherwise. So throughout the play there is a powerful sense of irony at work, an irony which manifests itself in the growing discrepancy between what Oedipus thinks is the case and what we know to be the case. We understand why he sees the world and himself the way he does (and we can applaud him for that). At the same time, we know he is wrong. He is deceived about his relationship to the world. In that sense, he is blind (a really important metaphor here).

[As an aside, one might observe that the very name *Oedipus*, which means either swollen foot or knowledge of one's feet or both, is a constant reminder of this ironic tension. Here the greatest of men, famous for his insight into the mysteries of life, is blind to the significance of his own name, an obvious clue to his past.]

The ironic tension builds as the play goes on, of course. The clues about the real murderer accumulate, yet Oedipus persists in believing he cannot be the one, even though he remembers killing a man at a road junction. And so, in his ignorance he redoubles his efforts, resisting all urges from Jocasta, his wife, to abandon the investigation. For Oedipus finding the truth becomes something of an obsession: he has to see this matter through, because that's the sort of man he is. Finding the truth is far more important than what that truth might reveal.

Hence, what we witness here is a strongly pessimistic vision of fate: here we have the best of men, the most knowledgeable, the most successful, and, in many ways, the best intentioned, who sets out to save his own city. And in a very fundamental way Oedipus is entirely *innocent*. He has done nothing by any standard of conventional morality to merit such a fate. But even such a man, for all his excellence and past success, cannot know enough about what fate is really like to recognize what it has in store for him. The truth of what he is and what he has done is even worse than he can possibly imagine. And the course of events which leads him to discover the truth about himself has been freely initiated and maintained throughout by himself.

The vision of life here is very mysterious and very cruel. Even the best and most innocent of men, it seems to say, one who has striven to live the best life possible and who endures to find out the truth of who he really is and what his life really amounts to will be horrified to learn the truth. Fate has not established a reasonable covenant here with some clear rules and a happier future (as in Exodus), nor does fate offer a secure and valued life in the community (as in *Gilgamesh*), nor is there any sense that Oedipus's fate is linked to some sin he has committed. Here fate punishes arbitrarily and mercilessly those who choose to confront the mystery.

## Oedipus as a Tragic Hero

It is time now to turn to a term which I have deliberately kept out of the discussion until this point, the word *tragedy* and its corollaries *tragic hero* and *tragic vision*. But now, having considered very cursorily some of the major points about *Oedipus the King*, I would like to introduce it in order to amplify the discussion of the play and to place that in a wider context.

Oedipus's story, I have argued, focuses our attention on a very particular heroic character, one who insists upon acting according to his own vision of experience, who persists freely in the course of action he has initiated, brushing aside or shouting down the objections or alternative suggestions of other people. He imposes on his life his own views of what he thinks is right, refusing to attend to what others are saying (he insists on agreement, rather than listening to others and weighing what they tell him). Oedipus, in his freedom, sets in motion a chain of events for which he accepts full responsibility and, even as disaster looms, he continues as before, not flinching or assigning blame or tasks to anyone else.

It's worth noting that, even when he learns the horrific truth of his life, Oedipus himself takes on the full responsibility for his own punishment. First, he stabs out his own eyes and then he insists on banishment. At no time in the play does he compromise: what needs to be done is what he decides needs to be done. And even in the face of the disastrous truth, Oedipus does not bend or break or start asking advice. He will act decisively until the very end.

In this respect, Oedipus stands in marked contrast to Gilgamesh, who, in response to the death of Enkidu is placed in a similar situation and for similar reasons—he thought he knew all there was to know about life. But Gilgamesh learns from that experience and changes. His behaviour towards others undergoes a significant transformation, and he comes back to Uruk at the end of the story a changed personality. Oedipus remains at the end of the play, for all the total reversal of his fortune, still the self-assertive man exercising full free control over his own life. If he is going to suffer, then he will determine what form that suffering will take.

Oedipus, of course, is more than just a particular character: he is also a character type. In fact, his story helps to define a certain heroic response to experience which we call *tragic*, and this play is commonly hailed as our greatest dramatic tragedy. While Sophocles's Oedipus is by no means our first tragic hero, he is certainly the most famous (outside of Shakespeare) and hence has exerted a decisive influence on literature in the West. Thus, I would like to spend a few moments looking at the general characteristics of his character, indicating how these help us to understand what we mean by a tragic hero (as opposed to other kinds of heroes), and then suggesting some observations about the vision of life which such a tragic hero exemplifies.

One major component in Oedipus's personality which helps to define him as a character we label as tragic is his attitude towards fate. Rather than aligning himself with it (as Moses does) or learning through experience to accept the mystery of fate (as Gilgamesh does) Oedipus chooses to defy fate. He will make his own decisions in his own way, and he will live with the consequences those

bring. He will answer to his own sense of himself, rather than shape his life in accordance with someone else's set of rules or an awareness of something bigger and more important than himself. That's true of Oedipus at the start of the play, and he's doing the same thing at the end. At no point is he willing to compromise.

He is, if you like, a man totally committed to his own freedom to be what he thinks he must be, to live up to his own conception of heroic greatness. If there is an obstacle in the way (like Teiresias, for example), then that obstacle must be forcibly removed—it interferes with his sense of what's going on. Oedipus makes no effort to conceal what he is feeling or to hesitate about acting on those feelings. Why should he? After all, he is Oedipus, whose greatness manifests itself in being entirely true to itself, without duplicity.

Obviously he has an enormous ego—the central purpose of his life is to assert that sense of himself. With this powerful ego comes a certain narrowness of vision, which has no room for alternative opinions or dissenting views, and often a very powerfully assertive voice (dominated, as I have observed, by the pronouns *I* and *me*). But (and this is crucial) he is also prepared to accept any and all the consequences of his actions. That, too, is a measure of his greatness. The Chorus at the end of the play (like the reader) may blame fate or the gods or the impossible demands of life. Oedipus does not. He remains the master of what happens to him. The responsibility is his, and what happens to him is entirely up to him.

We need to remember that he is always in a sense the chief architect of what is happening to him. What underscores the irony I referred to earlier is that the Oedipus is dealing with a situation in which he is increasingly having to cope with circumstances initiated by his own decisions. This last point is an essential one. What makes Oedipus so compelling is not that he suffers horribly and endures at the end an almost living death (a great many other non-tragic heroes suffer wretchedly). The force of the play comes from the connection between Oedipus's sufferings and his own freely chosen actions, that is, from our awareness of how he himself is bringing upon his own head the dreadful outcome. His freely chosen decisions are (we know) bringing things closer and closer to an inevitable conclusion. Looking forward in the play we can see that Oedipus is free to go in different directions; in that sense he is not compelled to do what he does. Looking back over the action from the conclusion of the play, we can see a link of inevitable consequences arising from the hero's free decisions.

This is an important point because in common language we often use the term *tragic* or *tragedy* as a loose synonym for *terrible*, *pathetic*, or *horrible* (e.g., a tragic accident). But strictly speaking in a literary sense, true accidents are never tragic, because they are accidents; they occur by chance. What makes Sophoclean tragedy so moving is the step-by-step link between the hero's own decisions throughout the play and the disaster which awaits. As Aristotle points out, Sophoclean tragedy works, in part, through this sense of inevitability. Oedipus is doomed, mainly because he is the sort of person he is. Someone else, someone with a very different character, would not have suffered Oedipus's life. They would have compromised their sense of freedom in the name of prudence, custom, politics, or survival.

Such a powerfully egoistic character is entirely different from someone like, say, Moses, who sees his life in terms of service to the Lord and the community

of Israelites (there's little sense that Moses has anything we might call an ego) or like Gilgamesh, who is prepared to wander adrift throughout the world looking for answers and learning from others so that he accepts limitations on own sense of personal freedom. Moses and Gilgamesh both suffer a great deal, but they learn from that suffering and encourage others to do so. Oedipus learns that he has been horribly wrong about life, but that does not induce him to change, or beg forgiveness, or transpose the blame onto someone else or seek to put his life on a different footing.

And the effects of the stories are quite different. Moses's story serves to confirm the validity of the existing social order, to endorse the vision of social order which the Lord has passed down to His people through Moses. Yes, Moses dies, but he has lived a full life and is in sight of the promised land, which his people will reach very soon. And Gilgamesh's story (like the *Odyssey*) confirms the social order of the community (particularly as that is enshrined by relationships with women) as the very centre of the good life.

Oedipus's story has a different effect. Because of what he has done, we have been given a privileged glimpse into the ineluctable mysteriousness and malignancy of fate. Here the social order is not confirmed as an eternal decree of fate: it is, by contrast, exposed as something of an illusion. The story of Oedipus, that is, offers us no consolation that what we believe about the order of the world or the benevolence of the ruling powers or the eternal rightness of our ways of dealing with them bears any relationship to what they are really like. In that sense it is a much more disturbing narrative (more about that later).

## Further Observations on the Tragic Hero

If we take a step back from the story of Oedipus for a moment, we might want to ask ourselves this question: What is the point of telling such a story, or, more interestingly perhaps, why would we ever celebrate such a vision of life? This question is all the more compelling for us because the tragic hero and the vision of life his story holds up for us are something unique to the West, an inheritance passed onto us by the Greeks, something profoundly at odds with most of our religious sensibilities.

Put another way, we might wonder what there is to admire in a character like Oedipus, who confronts the world with a heroic self-assertion so strong that he will never compromise with social custom, prudence, or political strategy—not even when his own survival is at stake. Why should we admire a character who is willing to endure so much rather than to swerve from his self-directed course, even when that leads him to disaster?

The answer to such questions is very complex and much contested, and I can offer only a general indication. But I think it has something to do with our cultural obsession with personal freedom and integrity. For Oedipus (and tragic characters based on a similar vision of life) see life primarily in terms of these two qualities: freedom and integrity. So strong is their sense of the importance of these qualities that they simply ignore all the things which most of us do to remain in a stable well-functioning community, that is, to adjust our sense of our integrity and what we demand out of life to the demands of living in a community, limiting our desires and shaping our identity under certain pressures to conform.

Sophocles's play forces us to confront the disturbing reality about such an attitude: this ultimate expression of my own freedom to express myself, to demand from the world that it answer to me rather than the other way around, leads by a step-by-step process to inevitable destruction. For the fates that rule the cosmos are powerful and mysterious, and we have no right to assume that they are friendly. The human being who sets himself up to live life only on his own terms, as the totally free expressions of his own will, is going to come to a self-destructive end. However grand and imaginatively appealing the tragic stance might be, it is essentially an act of defiance against the gods (or whoever rules the cosmos) and will push the tragic hero to an series of actions (which he initiates in the full sense of his own freedom) culminating in destruction. We cannot live life entirely on our own terms for very long. We may think we can, but Oedipus is a reminder of the consequences. Fate is so much more powerful, complex, and hostile than we can possibly imagine it, no matter what our consoling social narratives tell us.

By way of underscoring the nature of the tragic hero, consider for a moment some different varieties of heroic conduct. In many narratives, the hero, like Oedipus, faces a critical situation. But he deals with them in a very different manner—by trickery, disguise, cooperative action, for example (Odysseus is the great example from Greek narratives of such flexible conduct). In Moses's case, his actions are determined, not by self-initiated assertions of a powerful ego declaring its own preeminence, but by following instructions of the Lord on behalf the people (and he has to learn to trust the Lord and even go against his own sense of his



abilities in order to serve). Gilgamesh becomes a mature leader only because he is capable of learning to move beyond the assertions of his ego, to acquire humility and an acceptance of his community's values.

In all such cases, the emphasis is very strongly on getting back to the community or hanging onto the community at all costs—the hero will do whatever is necessary within the framework of a shared belief system. And his greatness is measured by his success at confirming the importance of that belief system. To do so, the heroes must frequently compromise or hide their identity or undergo humbling experiences or admit they have been wrong, and so on. Once they display these characteristics, such heroes return home to a sense of continuity and happiness (hence, the frequent ending to such stories: “They lived happily ever after”). Such heroes we generally refer to as comic heroes, a term which does not mean necessarily that they are funny but rather that the ending of their stories is a celebration of community values, most often dramatically exemplified in the final dance (the *komos*).

The tragic hero, by contrast, rarely if ever displays such intellectual and emotional flexibility. He doesn't (in his mind) need to, since the purpose of his life is to live it openly on his own terms. And he ends his story with self-destruction, usually a self-chosen death (or suicide) because the only alternative to destruction (or self-destruction) is compromise, something he will not (or cannot) do. True, Oedipus does not die at the end of the story. But in a sense he is dead, moving out into the waste lands, beyond the community where he has created that sense of his own greatness. There is certainly no sense at the end of the play that Oedipus has anything to look forward to except death. In most of the plays we call tragedies the death is physical.

[Parenthetically, we might note here that it's not entirely clear at the end of the play whether Oedipus returns to the palace or stumbles out into the wilderness beyond the city. We know from the full Oedipus story that he eventually wandered out into the wilderness (as he wishes to do), but there are suggestions in the play that Creon is going to wait before allowing him to do that. However, there is no doubt that having Oedipus wander off away from the palace is the more dramatically compelling ending].

## The Appeal of Tragedy

Let me try to explore the differences I have briefly referred to above in another way, using the terminology of an interpreter of the comic and tragic experience, Murray Krieger. Krieger observes that most of us live in communities and that these communities are governed by shared rules of conduct, ethical norms. These ethical norms constitute limits beyond which we do not go, for fear of either fracturing the community or endangering ourselves. Thus, we are all in a sense ethical human beings. We usually keep our disputes and desires and assertions of the self within certain limits, resolving differences of opinion in accordance with procedures and institutions we have set up to deal with them. Such rules may be given to us in our traditions, by our religion, or by a shared rational agreement, or by all three. And we set up civic institutions to ratify this shared social code (courts, churches, schools, legislatures). All around us we place reminders so that we recognize them and act on them. And should we be forced, by circumstance, to recognize that we have become somehow displaced from the community (as Odysseus or Gilgamesh is geographically during his adventures), we strive as hard as possible to get back, to recover the communal joy and security of living within the limits.

Now, acting in accordance with these ethical rules always requires, Krieger observes, certain compromises. We cannot be or do all that we might want, simply because the full range of human possibilities includes things which transgress the limits, the ethical norms upon which the community depends. Thus, an important part of being an ethical member of the community is to control ourselves and, if necessary, to educate ourselves, so that we act within the limits set by the community.

Now, it is clear that in this sense Odysseus and the mature Gilgamesh and Moses are ethical human beings. They do not challenge the basic rules set up for the community; in fact, their survival depends upon recognizing and using those rules. Moses and Odysseus get upset when certain life forms, like the Cyclopes, or certain people, like the rebelling Israelites, do not observe the limits of civilized living. Odysseus is constantly battling bad luck and the various challenges that nature is placing in his way, but he never loses faith in, let alone challenges, the most important shared rules of the community. The same is true of Moses. Both Odysseus and Moses may be displaced from society, outside the community or in the business of creating a community, but they want to get back in, because they believe in and endorse what communal living stands for. At the end of the *Odyssey*, for example, Odysseus and his rivals are prepared to compromise (under the orders of Athena), to end their conflict, in order to achieve tranquility on which the community depends. Gilgamesh is willing to move beyond the loss of Enkidu and his earlier identity and to celebrate the walls of Uruk.

But Oedipus is quite different. He is acting in the interests of the community, but his primary motivation does not come from any sense of ethical propriety or accepted norms of behaviour. He answers only to himself, and he is not willing to compromise his quest for the truth in the name of any social principle which others, like Creon or Jocasta, may offer, because to do so would be to violate his

sense of himself. In that sense, he is like Job throughout most of Job's story: the only answer he will accept is one from god. Like Job, Oedipus is extraordinarily stubborn, resisting any pleas for moderation or limits on his own desires for life on his terms. The main difference between Job and Oedipus, of course, is that when fate reveals itself, Job bows down before it; Oedipus continues to defy it to the end.

This feature of the tragic hero as exemplified in Oedipus makes the tragic character a great paradox. For unlike most of us, the tragic hero emerges as anything but a social person. He apparently may begin that way, seemingly motivated by a genuine desire to help the community, as Oedipus and Job both do, but what emerges in the course of the action is that he is actually, deep down where it really counts, far more concerned with his own sense of himself, his own demands for justice on his own terms, than in compromising his desires with any awareness of ethical norms. He is, in fact, far less concerned about his own survival in the community than he is about being right, seeing things through to the very end.

What is there about such a character that commands our admiration? Why have we in the West placed such a high value on this sort of behaviour? For from one perspective tragic heroes, like Oedipus, are anything but attractive. They are usually very stubborn, egocentric, humourless, relentlessly convinced of their own rectitude, quick tempered, and unswerving in their pursuit of truth as they see it, with no room for those who would persuade them otherwise. These are not people whom one would, at first sight, like to invite to dinner or have as next-door neighbours or in-laws (Odysseus, Gilgamesh, or Moses, one senses, would be much better candidates for a social occasion).

And it's true that many people find the stance of the tragic hero unacceptable. Obviously, anyone who believes that certain ethical norms are laws of nature will find the tragic hero's stance simply idiotic—an vain egotistical posturing for self-glorification in defiance of the established truth of things. So it's not surprising that people who believe in the rational progress of human society will have no sympathy for tragedy. Walt Whitman, for example, the great democrat, expressed the views that America had no place for Shakespearean tragedy, and the first Commissar for Education in the Soviet Union, Lunacharsky, said much the same about the new communist state.

To admire the tragic character requires, not that we like him particularly, but rather that we see in his response to experience something magnificently heroic, an unwillingness to accept any shared understanding of experience, a refusal to compromise with any one else's answer as to what life is all about, a determination to push life beyond all simple ethical explanations and to discover for himself the full meaning of experience (that may not be his original intention, as I say, but as the story unfolds that becomes increasingly manifest). If that desire leads to self-destruction, as it usually does, then that is the price the hero is willing to pay. It's not that the tragic hero necessarily sets out with that goal in mind. But somewhere in the course of his adventures he is faced with a choice: compromise or continue on your own terms. The comic hero, I have suggested, is the one who compromises for survival and a safe return. The tragic hero is the one who chooses not to compromise for the sake of continuing on his own terms, even if that means he will soon come

to a nasty ending.

The really puzzling question is this: Why do some people make that choice not to compromise. How do we arrive at a sympathetic understanding of such a radically individualistic stance? There is no way to do so, short of witnessing it in some way. For the tragic stance is profoundly irrational. It stems from something deep inside some people, and has to do with the way they feel about themselves and about life. Most of us, I take it, are not tragic by nature. We are ethical citizens, compromising all the time with our desires to push life's envelope in order to achieve a secure cooperative life in the community. But imaginatively we can see in the tragic hero the courage and resolution of someone who is not prepared to compromise and who is prepared to endure terribly through life and to accept an early death as the price one must pay to live life entirely on one's own terms. To the extent that the tragic figure represents some ultimate possibility of human striving and achievement, we honour it, even if we cannot find adequate rational reasons for conferring communal worth upon it. A culture which values personal freedom and integrity will see in the tragic hero the ultimate symbol of those values.

What I am referring to is summed up in the famous dictum of Horace Walpole: Comedy is for the person who thinks, tragedy for the person who feels. A thinking person, wedded to some rational communal understanding of life, will often find no sense to the tragic stance, since it seems to violate all that community life demands from the individual in the name of joy, security, and justice. Only if I feel within me an emotionally imaginative contact with the tragic hero can it "mean" anything to me.

Krieger puts it this way. As human beings, he says, we have two basic urges—first, to survive in the community and to live on in our family and its descendants, and second, to have our individual life mean something, to have our integrity, our sense of ourselves as unique individuals uncontaminated with any compromise, count for something which endures. Comedy, Krieger argues, is the literary form celebrating the first impulse; tragedy the literary form celebrating the second. In comedy we are prepared to compromise our human individuality in order to secure a life in the enduring community. In tragedy the hero is prepared to sacrifice everything in order to guarantee his integrity.

That is one reason perhaps why comedy, for all its celebration and fun at the end, its sense of a community happily restored to a meaningful ethical way of life which will provide purpose to life, often contains within in a sense of defeat. There is something unwelcome to some people about that famous conclusion, "And lived happily ever after." For comedy inevitably involves a turning away from ultimate questions about the full importance of an individual life and settling for a significance provided by the community's shared values, even when we think (as we may do) that those values are not true or do not answer to everything we might like to achieve for ourselves.

That sense of a let down may also be the clue to one of our most intriguing characters in literature: the clown with the broken heart (Pagliacci, Rigoletto, Feste, Red Skelton, Tony Hancock, and others), the figure who has turned away from any final confrontation with the mystery of life and has devoted his energies to celebrating the joys that are possible in the community, in the full awareness

of their illusory nature. We celebrate the fun, because the alternative is too dangerous to contemplate or endure.

Tragedy, by contrast, for all the pain and suffering the hero goes through, often brings with it a sense of triumph, at least to the extent that we have witnessed a possibility of the human spirit which is not prepared to define life by the limits imposed by the community and its shared rule-bound expectations. The tragic hero is a reminder that there are those who are prepared to tear apart the comforting illusions of cosmic order and justice by which we live in our communities, who have the courage to demand from life the truth of things, even if that truth is uncomfortable, as it surely is in Sophocles, or devastatingly pessimistic as it is in Euripides.

That sense of triumph is frequently accompanied by a sense of unease. After all, in tragedy we are celebrating the possibility of a human spirit's moving into uncharted territory in which our well loved social values stand revealed for what they may well be: illusions which we like to believe are the truth but which may be quite wrong.

For example, it is common to observe that *Oedipus the King* may well be a prophetic insight into the nature of our human confidence in our ability to confront fate. Perhaps we, in our scientific confidence, in the optimistic spirit with which we think we can deal with fate, may turn out to be like Oedipus, going up against something much more mysterious and complex and malignant than we can imagine. I don't want to push this interpretation here, but such an approach to the play might well help to generate some unease about the self-assertive confidence with which we declare our own superiority over fate and seek to solve all questions with those tools which seem to have served us so well in the past, our intelligence and daring. Do we even fully understand our own swollen feet?

## Interpreting Tragedy

The tragic vision is particularly difficult to interpret, partly because it can be so difficult to accept the vision of the cosmos which it reveals. If the story of the tragic hero is a moving artistic reminder of the extent to which the universe is neither comforting nor rationally just, no matter how much we might like to think so, then as viewers or as readers it is striking at some of those things we most like to believe about the world.

Hence, we often try to moralize the tragic experience away. We try to convert the story of Oedipus from that of a supremely gifted and heroic individual who takes on life on his own terms and discovers the full mysterious destructiveness of the cosmos into a comforting morality story which tells us that Oedipus suffers because he sinned. If only he hadn't been so arrogant or so irascible or so egotistical or belligerent when confronted by his father and his entourage, or whatever, he would have been all right.

This approach to Oedipus or to any Sophoclean tragedy is, of course, disastrous, because it entirely misses the point. Of course, if Oedipus had been someone else, he wouldn't have ended up the way he does. But then he would not be the great person he is either. When we interpret the play in that way, we are like Job's comforters, trying to fit a painful and complex human situation into a moral straight jacket where we can understand it easily and without discomfort.

Oedipus suffers because he is a great human being. Yes, he makes an error, but it is his greatness as a human being which leads him into this error. That word error is important. It comes from Aristotle's concept of *hamartia*, that characteristic of the tragic hero which leads to his destruction. This phrase is often translated as "tragic flaw." And that translation has unfortunately encouraged the moralizing tendency, because the word "flaw" suggests some corrigible moral error, some sin, which he shouldn't have done.

The word "error" is more useful, I think, because it is closer to the Sophoclean idea that the tragic hero initiates his own downfall, not because he is somehow a sinner, but rather because he is so excellent, so capable, so confident of his powers, and so brave that he will take on the consequences. His error is inextricably tied up with his human greatness. If he were a lesser human being, like Creon, he would not suffer the way he does. But then he would not have the tragic greatness Oedipus manifests either.

Putting it another way, we can say Oedipus is capable of doing what he does because he is uniquely brave, excellent, and intelligent. But the tragedy reminds us that even the best and the bravest, those famous throughout the world for their knowledge, are doomed if they set themselves up against the mystery of life itself, and if they try to force life to answer to them, they are going to self-destruct. His error, if that is the word we must use, is not sin but *ignorance*, and he is ignorant of what he is up against because he is a human being. Even the very best of us, the ones with most reason to be confident of our powers of understanding, have no idea what fate is really like, what it has in store.

(One might briefly mention at this point that Oedipus is frequently interpreted as an allegory for the Athens Sophocles lived in, a city which, like Oedipus, is

heading for total destruction because of its amazing achievements. The play is thus not a warning that Athens ought to behave differently but rather a tragic vision of the inevitability of Athens's decline and self-destruction. Others, as I have mentioned, following the same allegorizing tendency, have seen in Oedipus the story of western civilization, especially the story of its confidence in its own powers to shape nature and make it answer to its own conceptions).

This desire to moralize the tragic experience is understandable perhaps, but it takes the human mystery out of this complex vision of experience. It's true there are many stories called tragedies, especially from the middle ages, which see punishment for sin as the main point of the play. Whether we should call these tragedies or not I'm not going to discuss. But I want to insist that they are fundamentally different from what Sophocles is presenting in his play.

That is one reason why so many people find the end of Job something unsatisfying. For Job's stance throughout most of his story is very close to that of a Sophoclean tragic hero (comparisons between Job and Oedipus are frequent). But Job does not push his demands on the cosmos to the limit. When he comes to his recognition of the truth of the universe, he bows in acquiescence to it. That experience does not shatter him. Quite the reverse, it leads to great material and emotional rewards, and thus to a sense of comic closure. When the chips are down, Job does what Gilgamesh does: he bows down before the fates which rule the world, aligning his desires with theirs.

For the same reason, the tragic vision evaporates if we believe that there is some life after death, if, that is, the life of the hero is not over and that his death is simply the door to a future life in heaven or elsewhere. What gives the tragic story so much power is the notion that whatever human life is about, that significance ends with death. To add something about "living happily or unhappily ever after" is to take away that sense of a final ending upon which our admiration for tragic heroism depends. If you think about it, there's a significant difference between someone like Oedipus and, say, a Christian martyr who suffers horribly in the name of a faith shared by a community of Christians and who goes onto an eternal reward. The conduct may be heroic and the suffering just as intense on a physical level, but it is not in the same Sophoclean sense tragic, since individual existence is not over. And the promise of the reward in an afterlife clearly endorses rather than challenges the ethical norms by which the martyr lived and died.. Hence all traditional orthodox Christian views of life cannot be tragic but are inherently comic (a divine comedy).

Parenthetically, it's interesting to observe that although most of Shakespeare's comedies take place in a recognizably Christian community, when he comes to write tragedies, he generally (but not exclusively) prefers to shift the time of the play to a pagan or pre-Christian epoch. Thus, the sense of a Christian afterlife does not enter into the vision of life held up by the play.

## The End of the Tragedy

By way of emphasizing some of the points I have been considering, let me briefly mention another point: how dramatic comedies and tragedies end. Dramatic comedies typically end with some communal celebration, especially of those things most closely associated with the survival of the community: betrothals, weddings, christening, a family feast and dance, from which the evil forces have been excluded (either because they have been exiled, killed, punished, or have reformed). The end of the (non-satiric) comedy thus becomes an enthusiastic endorsement of the ethical norms (often newly reconstituted) which ensure community stability.

The tragic drama, in Sophocles especially, tends to end, not with the death of the hero, but with the community's reflections upon the significance of the life which has just come to an end. In this respect Oedipus is unusual, since he is not dead (although his blindness and his expulsion from the human community indicates that his life in Thebes as a leading citizen is, in effect, over). The tragic hero's death (real or living death) also invites a community celebration, but it tends to be something much more muted, the community's attempts to come to terms with what the hero's story reveals about how the cosmos really works.

The carrying out of the corpse, traditionally the final episode in a tragedy, is thus a reconstituting of the community, but not in a way that emphasizes the joyful fun of community standards. Rather, the citizens are united by a new awareness of the mystery of life, something they, in their daily lives, rarely think about and never discover for themselves. It is given only to the greatest of heroes to take on the intense spiritual journey, and the conclusion of the tragedy, especially in Sophocles, typically confers upon this extraordinary individual the awed respect of a community which has benefited from his willingness to live life to the extreme (even if the reasons for that respect are very hard to explain rationally). They may not know exactly what to make of the experience (for the full tragic sense resists easy moral summation), but they are intensely aware of having been given a glimpse into something truly moving, something beyond the veil of more comforting ethical norms.

So while we wait to see that final day,  
we cannot call a mortal being happy  
before he's passed beyond life free from pain. (1812-1814)



## Postscript: Some Observations on the Historical Development of Tragic Drama

In seeking to elucidate the meaning of the term *tragic drama* we might usefully consider a few historical facts, starting with the point that tragic dramas started as those plays the Athenians put on in the Great Festival of Tragic Drama held at the annual religious festival in honour of the god Dionysus. Writers and actors were commissioned to take part in a competition, and prizes were awarded for the first, second, and third prize. Leading citizens were strongly encouraged to pay for the production.

The festival of tragic drama offered works which focused upon the life, suffering, and death of a great hero, usually one associated with the mythological past—Oedipus, Medea, Xerxes, Agamemnon, Ajax, Achilles, and so on. The audience was invited to witness the depiction and the celebration in art of the culminating event in a great hero or heroine's life, usually the struggle that ended with the main character's death and the community's reflection on that death.

Now, historians of literature, from Aristotle onwards, have for a long time been puzzled about why such a form of drama would emerge in the first place. This is all the more curious, since tragedy is not a form of drama found elsewhere. Unlike comedy, which we can see arising in many different cultures often in very similar ways, tragic drama seems to have been unique to Greece, and tragic drama is one of the most distinctively western traditions passed down to us.

So far as we can tell, tragic drama began in Athens sometime in the sixth century with an actor called Thespis. According to Aristotle's account (in the *Poetics*) originally a tragic drama consisted of a single actor and a large chorus. This feature suggests that tragic drama began as a choral celebration in memory of a dead hero in which someone, probably the leader of the chorus, at some point began to act out the exploits of the person being celebrated. That is, the leader of the chorus took on the role of the dead hero (thus making the celebration dramatic, since for drama to occur someone must pretend to be someone else, take on the role of a different character). Gradually, it seems, the number of actors increased. Aristotle tells us that Aeschylus was the first to introduce a second actor, Sophocles the first to introduce the third actor, and by the time of Euripides it is clear that the number of main actors has increased, and the importance of the massive chorus has decreased.

What should have led the Athenians to this unique form of drama is hard to figure out. Some historians have sought a clue in the word tragedy, which seems etymologically to have something to do with *tragos*, a goat. We know that the first actors clothed themselves in a goat's skin and that the goat was associated with Dionysus, the god at whose festival the tragedies were performed. But beyond that, speculation takes over. One critic has observed that tragedies are like goats, all hairy in front and bald behind. I offer that definition for whatever use you can make of it.

I don't propose here to survey the various theories that have been proposed as explaining the origin of this form of drama, except to observe that the celebration

of the famous hero at the culminating point of his or her life may well have something to do with the Athenians' central concern with human excellence as it manifests itself in competition. For the tragic figure is, above all else, one who engages in the most dangerous and challenging of competitions, the struggle to assert one's human individuality to the fullest possible extent in the face of the most intractable opponent, the very nature of life itself—a subject first explored in Homer's *Iliad*, a source book for many Greek dramatic tragedies.

It is important to note that from the start the Athenians associated tragic drama with an important religious festival. For them, whatever took place in the experience of witnessing a tragedy was central to the religious life of the community. And the fiercely competitive nature of the contest and the esteem given to the winning playwright also indicate that tragic drama was for them a vital part of the community life.

The later history of tragedy is a complex business. As one can imagine, the tragic vision of experience (as exemplified in Sophocles) is not compatible with the much more optimistic fatalism of Christianity, with its emphasis on the good life as one of faith, hope, and charity within the Christian community and an eternity of joy or punishment afterwards. Many Christian writers used the term tragedy for relatively simple morality plays in which tragic figures were essentially great sinners whose death reinforces Christian doctrine, something very different in emphasis from Sophocles's vision.

In the Renaissance something like the old vision reappears in the great tragedies of Shakespeare (comparisons between *Oedipus* and *King Lear*, for example, are commonplace). But once we reach the eighteenth century and the powerful appeal of the new rational reforms of society and the aggressive agenda of the new science, traditional tragic drama becomes harder to write and to sell to a public which has little taste for such a challenge (for our culture is losing that sense of fate on which classic tragedy depends, except in some new literary forms, like the novel) and, with some important exceptions (notably Ibsen) tragic drama loses its vitality as a continuing literary form or artistic vision.

# (SOPHOCLES) Oedipus the King

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>185</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Sophocles (495 BC-405 BC) was a famous and successful Athenian writer of tragedies in his own lifetime. Of his 120 plays, only 7 have survived. *Oedipus the King*, also called *Oedipus Tyrannos* or *Oedipus Rex*, written around 420 BC, has long been regarded not only as his finest play but also as the purest and most powerful expression of Greek tragic drama.

Oedipus, a stranger to Thebes, became king of the city after the murder of king Laius, about fifteen or sixteen years before the start of the play. He was offered the throne because he was successful in saving the city from the Sphinx, an event referred to repeatedly in the text of the play. He married Laius' widow, Jocasta, and had four children with her, two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS: king of Thebes  
PRIEST: the high priest of Thebes  
CREON: Oedipus' brother-in-law  
CHORUS of Theban elders  
TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet  
BOY: attendant on Teiresias  
JOCASTA: wife of Oedipus, sister of Creon  
MESSENGER: an old man  
SERVANT: an old shepherd  
SECOND MESSENGER: a servant of Oedipus  
ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child  
ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, a child  
SERVANTS and ATTENDANTS on Oedipus and Jocasta

*[The action takes place in Thebes in front of the royal palace. The main doors are directly facing the audience. There are altars beside the doors. A crowd of citizens carrying laurel branches garlanded with wool and led by the PRIEST has gathered in front of the altars, with some people sitting on the altar steps. OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]*

OEDIPUS

My children, latest generation born from Cadmus,  
why are you sitting here with wreathed sticks  
in supplication to me, while the city

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<sup>185</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/sophocles/OedipustheKing.htm>

fills with incense, chants, and cries of pain? <sup>186</sup>  
 Children, it would not be appropriate for me  
 to learn of this from any other source,  
 so I have come in person—I, Oedipus,  
 whose fame all men acknowledge. But you there,  
 old man, tell me—you seem to be the one  
 who ought to speak for those assembled here.  
 What feeling brings you to me—fear or desire?  
 You can be confident that I will help.  
 I shall assist you willingly in every way.  
 I would be a hard-hearted man indeed,  
 if I did not pity suppliants like these.

PRIEST

Oedipus, ruler of my native land,  
 you see how people here of every age  
 are crouching down around your altars,  
 some fledglings barely strong enough to fly  
 and others bent by age, with priests as well—  
 for I'm priest of Zeus—and these ones here,  
 the pick of all our youth. The other groups  
 sit in the market place with suppliant branches  
 or else in front of Pallas' two shrines,  
 or where Ismenus prophesies with fire. <sup>187</sup>  
 For our city, as you yourself can see,  
 is badly shaken—she cannot raise her head  
 above the depths of so much surging death.  
 Disease infects fruit blossoms in our land,  
 disease infects our herds of grazing cattle,  
 makes women in labour lose their children,  
 and deadly pestilence, that fiery god,  
 swoops down to blast the city, emptying  
 the House of Cadmus, and fills black Hades  
 with groans and howls. These children and myself  
 now sit here by your home, not because we think  
 you're equal to the gods. No. We judge you  
 the first of men in what happens in this life  
 and in our interactions with the gods.  
 For you came here, to our Cadmeian city,  
 and freed us from the tribute we were paying  
 to that cruel singer—and yet you knew

<sup>186</sup>Semele, Cadmus' daughter and Dionysus' mother, had an affair with Zeus. Hera, Zeus' wife, tricked Zeus into destroying Semele with a lightning bolt. Zeus took the infant Dionysus from his mother's womb as she was dying and sewed him into his thigh, where Dionysus continued to grow until he was delivered as a new-born infant.

<sup>187</sup>A thyrsus (pl. thyrsos) is a hollow plant stalk, usually decorated with ivy, and carried as a symbol of Dionysus in the dancing celebrations (where it can acquire magical powers).

no more than we did and had not been taught. <sup>188</sup>  
 In their stories, the people testify  
 how, with gods' help, you gave us back our lives.  
 So now, Oedipus, our king, most powerful  
 in all men's eyes, we're here as suppliants,  
 all begging you to find some help for us,  
 either by listening to a heavenly voice,  
 or learning from some other human being.  
 For, in my view, men of experience  
 provide advice that gives the best results.  
 So now, you best of men, raise up our state.  
 Act to consolidate your fame, for now,  
 thanks to your eagerness in earlier days,  
 the city celebrates you as its saviour.  
 Don't let our memory of your ruling here  
 declare that we were first set right again  
 and later fell. No. Restore our city,  
 so that it stands secure. In those times past  
 you brought us joy—and with good omens, too.  
 Be that same man today. If you're to rule  
 as you are doing now, better to be king  
 in a land of men than in a desert.  
 An empty ship or city wall is nothing  
 if no men share a life together there.

OEDIPUS

My poor children, I know why you have come—  
 I am not ignorant of what you yearn for.  
 For I understand that you are ill, and yet,  
 sick as you are, there is not one of you  
 whose illness equals mine. Your agony  
 comes to each one of you as his alone,  
 a special pain for him and no one else.  
 But here in my heart, I sorrow for myself,  
 and for the city, and for you—all together.  
 You are not rousing me from a deep sleep.  
 You must know I've been shedding many tears  
 and, in my wandering thoughts, exploring  
 many pathways. After a careful search  
 I grasped the only help that I could find  
 and acted on it. So I have sent away  
 my brother-in-law, son of Menoeceus,  
 Creon, to Pythian Apollo's shrine,  
 to learn from him what I might do or say

<sup>188</sup>The Maenads, who make up the Chorus of the play, are the female followers of Dionysus, who have followed him from Phrygia in Asia Minor to Thebes.

to save our city. But when I count the days—  
the time he's been away—I now worry  
what he's doing. For he's been gone too long,  
well past the time he should have taken.  
But when he comes, I'll be a wicked man  
if I do not act on all the god reveals.

PRIEST

What you have said is most appropriate,  
for these men here have just informed me  
that Creon is approaching.

OEDIPUS

Lord Apollo,  
as he returns may fine shining fortune,  
bright as his countenance, attend on him.

PRIEST

It seems the news he brings is good—if not,  
he would not wear that wreath around his head,  
a laurel thickly packed with berries. <sup>189</sup>

OEDIPUS

We'll know soon enough—he's within earshot.

[Enter CREON. OEDIPUS calls to him as he approaches]

My royal kinsman, child of Menoeceus,  
what message do you bring us from the god?

CREON

Good news, I tell you. If things work out well,  
then these troubles, so difficult to bear,  
will end up bringing us great benefits.

OEDIPUS

What is the oracle? So far your words  
inspire in me no confidence or fear.

CREON

If you wish to hear the news in public,  
I'm prepared to speak. Or we could step inside.

OEDIPUS

Speak out to everyone. The grief I feel  
for these citizens is even greater  
than any pain I feel for my own life.

CREON

Then let me report what I heard from the god.  
Lord Phoebus clearly orders us to drive away  
the polluting stain this land has harboured.  
It will not be healed if we keep nursing it.

OEDIPUS

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<sup>189</sup>Rhea is Zeus' mother. The drums are tambourines. Tmolus is a mountain in Asia Minor. Mount Cithaeron is a sacred mountain near Thebes.

What sort of cleansing? And this disaster—  
how did it happen?

CREON

By banishment—  
or atone for murder by shedding blood again,  
for blood brings on the storm which blasts our state.

OEDIPUS

And the one whose fate the god revealed—  
what sort of man is he?

CREON

Before you came, my lord,  
to steer our ship of state, Laius ruled this land.

OEDIPUS

I have heard that, but I never saw the man.

CREON

Laius was killed. And now the god is clear:  
those murderers, he tells us, must be punished,  
whoever they may be.

OEDIPUS

And where are they?  
In what country? Where am I to find a trace  
of this ancient crime? It will be hard to track.

CREON

Here in Thebes, so said the god. What is sought  
is found, but what is overlooked escapes.

OEDIPUS

When Laius fell in bloody death, where was he—  
at home, or in his fields, or in another land?

CREON

He was abroad, on his way to Delphi—  
that's what he told us. He began the trip,  
but did not return.

OEDIPUS

Was there no messenger—  
no companion who made the journey with him  
and witnessed what took place—a person  
who might provide some knowledge men could use?

CREON

They all died—except for one who was afraid  
and ran away. There was only one thing  
he could inform us of with confidence  
about the things he saw.

OEDIPUS

What was that?  
We might get somewhere if we had one fact—  
we could find many things, if we possessed

some slender hope to get us going.

CREON

He told us it was robbers who attacked them—  
not just a single man, a gang of them—  
they came on with force and killed him.

OEDIPUS

How would a thief have dared to do this,  
unless he had financial help from Thebes?

CREON

That's what we guessed. But once Laius was dead  
we were in trouble, so no one sought revenge.

OEDIPUS

When the ruling king had fallen in this way,  
what bad trouble blocked your path, preventing you  
from looking into it?

CREON

It was the Sphinx—  
she sang her cryptic song and so forced us  
to put aside something we found obscure  
to look into the problem we now faced.

OEDIPUS

Then I will start afresh, and once again  
shed light on darkness. It is most fitting  
that Apollo demonstrates his care  
for the dead man, and worthy of you, too.  
And so you'll see how I will work with you,  
as is right, seeking vengeance for this land,  
as well as for the god. This polluting stain  
I will remove, not for some distant friends,  
but for myself. For whoever killed this man  
may soon enough desire to turn his hand  
to punish me in the same way, as well.  
Thus, in avenging Laius, I serve myself.  
But now, my children, quickly as you can  
stand up from these altar steps and raise  
your suppliant branches. Someone must call  
the Theban people to assemble here.  
I'll do everything I can. With the god's help  
this will all come to light successfully,  
or else will prove our common ruin.

[OEDIPUS and CREON go into the palace]

PRIEST

Let us get up, children. For this man  
has willingly declared just what we came for.  
And may Phoebus, who sent this oracle,  
come as our saviour and end our sickness.



[The PRIEST and the CITIZENS leave. Enter the CHORUS OF THEBAN ELDERS]

CHORUS

O sweet speaking voice of Zeus,  
you have come to glorious Thebes from golden Pytho—  
but what is your intent?  
My fearful heart twists on the rack and shakes with fear.  
O Delian healer, for whom we cry aloud  
in holy awe, what obligation  
will you demand from me, a thing unknown  
or now renewed with the revolving years?  
Immortal voice, O child of golden Hope,  
speak to me!

First I call on you, Athena the immortal,  
daughter of Zeus, and on your sister, too,  
Artemis, who guards our land and sits  
on her glorious round throne in our market place,  
and on Phoebus, who shoots from far away.  
O you three guardians against death,  
appear to me!  
If before now you have ever driven off  
a fiery plague to keep disaster  
from the city and have banished it,  
then come to us this time as well!

Alas, the pains I bear are numberless—  
my people now all sick with plague,  
our minds can find no weapons  
to help with our defence. Now the offspring  
of our splendid earth no longer grow,  
nor do our women crying out in labour  
get their relief from a living new-born child.  
As you can see—one by one they swoop away,  
off to the shores of the evening god, like birds  
faster than fire which no one can resist.

Our city dies—we've lost count of all the dead.  
Her sons lie in the dirt unpitied, unlamented.  
Corpses spread the pestilence, while youthful wives  
and grey-haired mothers on the altar steps  
wail everywhere and cry in supplication,  
seeking to relieve their agonizing pain.  
Their solemn chants ring out—  
they mingle with the voices of lament.  
O Zeus' golden daughter,  
send your support and strength,  
your lovely countenance!

And that ravenous Ares, god of killing,  
who now consumes me as he charges on

with no bronze shield but howling battle cries,  
let him turn his back and quickly leave this land,  
with a fair following wind to carry him  
to the great chamber of Amphitrite  
or inhospitable waves of Thrace. <sup>190</sup>

For if destruction does not come at night,  
then day arrives to see it does its work.  
O you who wield that mighty flash of fire,  
O father Zeus, with your lighting blast  
let Ares be destroyed!

O Lycean lord, how I wish those arrows  
from the golden string of your bent bow  
with their all-conquering force would wing out  
to champion us against our enemy,  
and I pray for those blazing fires of Artemis  
with which she races through the Lycian hills. <sup>191</sup>  
I call the god who binds his hair with gold,  
the one whose name our country shares,  
the one to whom the Maenads shout their cries,  
Dionysus with his radiant face—  
may he come to us with his flaming torchlight,  
our ally against Ares,  
a god dishonoured among gods. <sup>192</sup>

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS

You pray. But if you listen now to me,  
you'll get your wish. Hear what I have to say  
and treat your own disease—then you may hope  
to find relief from your distress. I speak  
as one who is a stranger to the story,  
a stranger to the crime. If I alone  
were tracking down this act, I'd not get far  
without a single clue. But as things stand,  
for it was after the event that I became  
a citizen of Thebes, I now proclaim  
the following to all of you Cadmeians:  
Whoever among you knows the man it was  
who murdered Laius, son of Labdacus,  
I order him to reveal it all to me.  
And if the killer is afraid, I tell him  
to avoid the danger of the major charge

<sup>190</sup>Bromius and Bacchus are alternate names for Dionysus.

<sup>191</sup>Cybele is an eastern mother goddess. The Curetes and Corybantes are attendants on the goddess Cybele. They banged their drums to drown out the cries of the infant Zeus, whose mother, Rhea, was trying to protect him from his father, Cronos.

<sup>192</sup>Evoë is a cry of celebration in the Dionysian rituals.

by speaking out against himself. If so,  
he will be sent out from this land unhurt  
and undergo no further punishment.  
If someone knows the killer is a stranger,  
from some other state, let him not stay mute.  
As well as a reward, he'll earn my thanks.  
But if he remains quiet, if anyone,  
through fear, hides himself or a friend of his  
against my orders, here's what I shall do—  
so listen to my words. For I decree  
that no one in this land, in which I rule  
as your own king, shall give that killer shelter  
or talk to him, whoever he may be,  
or act in concert with him during prayers,  
or sacrifice, or sharing lustralwater.<sup>193</sup>  
Ban him from your homes, every one of you,  
for he is our pollution, as the Pythian god  
In this, I'm acting as an ally of the god  
and also of dead Laius. And I pray  
whoever the man is who did this crime,  
one unknown person acting on his own  
or with companions, the worst of agonies  
will wear out his wretched life. I pray, too,  
that, if he should become an honoured guest  
in my own home and with my knowledge,  
I may suffer all those things I've just called down  
upon the killers. And I urge you now  
to make sure all these orders take effect,  
for my sake, for the sake of the god,  
and for our barren, godless, ruined land.  
For in this matter, even if a god  
were not urging us, it would not be right  
for you to simply leave things as they are  
and not to purify the murder of a man  
who was so noble and who was your king.  
You should have looked into it. But now I  
possess the ruling power which Laius held  
in earlier days. I have his bed and wife—  
she would have borne his children, if his hopes  
to have a son had not been disappointed.  
Children from a common mother might have linked  
Laius and myself. But as it turned out,  
Fate swooped down onto his head. So now,

---

<sup>193</sup>Sidon, in Asia Minor, as these lines inform was, was the place where the royal family of Thebes originated. Cadmus had come from Asia Minor, sent out from home by his father, and founded Thebes.

I'll fight on his behalf, as if this matter  
 concerned my own father, and I will strive  
 to do everything I can to find him,  
 the man who spilled his blood, and thus avenge  
 the son of Labdacus and Polydorus,  
 of Cadmus and Agenor from old times. <sup>194</sup>  
 As for those who do not follow what I urge,  
 I pray the gods send them no fertile land,  
 no, nor any children in their women's wombs—  
 may they all perish in our present fate  
 or one more hateful still. To you others,  
 you Cadmeians who support my efforts,  
 may Justice, our ally, and all the gods  
 attend on us with kindness all our days.

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, since you extend your oath to me,  
 I will say this. I am not the murderer,  
 nor can I tell you who the killer is.  
 As for what you're seeking, it's for Apollo,  
 who launched this search, to state who did it.

OEDIPUS

That is well said. But no man has power  
 to force the gods to speak against their will.

CHORUS LEADER

May I then suggest what seems to me  
 the next best course of action?

OEDIPUS

You may indeed,  
 and if there is a third course, too, don't hesitate  
 to let me know.

CHORUS LEADER

Our lord Teiresias,  
 I know, can see into things, like lord Apollo.  
 From him, my king, a man investigating this  
 might well find out clear details of the crime.

OEDIPUS

I've taken care of that—it's not something  
 I could overlook. At Creon's urging,  
 I have dispatched two messengers to him  
 and have been wondering for some time now  
 why he has not come.

CHORUS LEADER

Apart from that,

---

<sup>194</sup>Agave (Pentheus' mother), Ino, and Autonoe were sisters, all daughters of Cadmus. Actaeon, son of Autonoe, offended the goddess Artemis, who turned him into a stag and had him torn apart by his own hunting dogs (see line 429 below).

there are rumours—but inconclusive ones  
from a long time ago.

OEDIPUS

What kind of rumours?  
I'm looking into every story.

CHORUS LEADER

It was said  
that Laius was killed by certain travellers.

OEDIPUS

Yes, I heard as much. But no one has seen  
the one who did it.

CHORUS LEADER

Well, if the killer  
has any fears, once he hears your curses on him,  
he will not hold back, for they are serious.

OEDIPUS

When a man has no fear of doing the act,  
he's not afraid of words.

CHORUS LEADER

No, not in the case  
where no one stands there to convict him.  
But at last Teiresias is being guided here,  
our god-like prophet, in whom truth resides  
more so than in all other men.

[Enter TEIRESIAS led by a small BOY]

OEDIPUS

Teiresias,  
you who understand all things—what can be taught  
and what cannot be spoken of, what goes on  
in heaven and here on the earth—you know,  
although you cannot see, how sick our state is.  
And so we find in you alone, great seer,  
our shield and saviour. For Phoebus Apollo,  
in case you have not heard the news, has sent us  
an answer to our question: the only cure  
for this infecting pestilence is to find  
the men who murdered Laius and kill them  
or else expel them from this land as exiles.  
So do not withhold from us your prophecies  
from voices of the birds or by some other means.  
Save this city and yourself. Rescue me.  
Deliver us from all pollution by the dead.  
We are in your hands. For a mortal man  
the finest labour he can do is help  
with all his power other human beings.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, alas! How dreadful it can be  
to have wisdom when it brings no benefit  
to the man possessing it. This I knew,  
but it had slipped my mind. Otherwise,  
I would not have journeyed here.

OEDIPUS

What is wrong? You have come, but seem distressed.

TEIRESIAS

Let me go home. You must bear your burden  
to the very end, and I will carry mine,  
if you'll agree with me.

OEDIPUS

What you are saying  
is not customary and shows little love  
toward the city state which nurtured you,  
if you deny us your prophetic voice.

TEIRESIAS

I see your words are also out of place.  
I do not speak for fear of doing the same.

OEDIPUS

If you know something, then, by the gods,  
do not turn away. We are your suppliants—  
all of us—we bend our knees to you.

TEIRESIAS

You are all ignorant. I will not reveal  
the troubling things inside me, nor will I state  
they are your griefs as well.

OEDIPUS

What are you saying?  
Do you know and will not say? Do you intend  
to betray me and destroy the city?

TEIRESIAS

I will cause neither me nor you distress.  
Why do you vainly question me like this?  
You will not learn a thing from me.

OEDIPUS

You most disgraceful of disgraceful men!  
You would move something made of stone to rage!  
Will you not speak out? Will your stubbornness  
never have an end?

TEIRESIAS

You blame my nature,  
but do not see the temper you possess.  
Instead, you're finding fault with me.

OEDIPUS

What man who listened to these words of yours

would not be enraged—you insult the city!

TEIRESIAS

Yet events will still unfold, for all my silence.

OEDIPUS

Since they will come, you must inform me.

TEIRESIAS

I will say nothing more. Fume on about it,  
if you wish, as fiercely as you can.

OEDIPUS

I will. In my anger I will not conceal  
just what I make of this. You should know  
I get the feeling you conspired in the act  
and played your part, as much as you could do,  
short of killing him with your own hands.  
If you could use your eyes, I would have said  
that you had done this work all by yourself.

TEIRESIAS

Is that so? Then I would ask you to stand by  
the very words which you yourself proclaimed  
and from now on not speak to these men or me.  
For the accursed polluter of this land is you.

OEDIPUS

You dare to utter shameful words like this?  
Do you think you can get away with it?

TEIRESIAS

I am getting away with it. The truth  
within me makes me strong.

OEDIPUS

Who taught you this?  
It could not have been your craft.

TEIRESIAS

You did.  
I did not want to speak, but you incited me.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean? Speak it again,  
so I can understand you more precisely.

TEIRESIAS

Did you not grasp my words before,  
or are you trying to test me with your question?

OEDIPUS

I did not fully understand your words.  
Tell me again.

TEIRESIAS

I say that you yourself  
are the very man you're looking for.

OEDIPUS

That's twice you've stated that disgraceful lie—  
something you'll regret.

TEIRESIAS

Shall I tell you more,  
so you can grow even more enraged?

OEDIPUS

As much as you desire. It will be useless.

TEIRESIAS

I say that with your dearest family,  
unknown to you, you are living in disgrace.  
You have no idea how bad things are.

OEDIPUS

Do you really think you can just speak out,  
say things like this, and still remain unpunished?

TEIRESIAS

Yes, I can, if the truth has any strength.

OEDIPUS

It does, but not for you. Truth is not in you—  
for your ears, your mind, your eyes are blind!

TEIRESIAS

You are a wretched fool to use harsh words  
which all men soon enough will use to curse you.

OEDIPUS

You live in endless darkness of the night,  
so you can never injure me or any man  
who can glimpse daylight.

TEIRESIAS

It is not your fate  
to fall because of me. Lord Apollo  
will make that happen. He will be enough.

OEDIPUS

Is this something Creon has devised,  
or is it your invention?

TEIRESIAS

Creon is no threat.  
You have made this trouble on your own.

OEDIPUS

O wealth and ruling power, skill after skill  
surpassing all in life's rich rivalries,  
how much envy you must carry with you,  
if, for this kingly office—which the city  
gave me, for I did not seek it out—  
Creon, my old trusted family friend,  
has secretly conspired to overthrow me  
and paid off a double-dealing quack like this,  
a crafty bogus priest, who can only see



his own advantage, who in his special art  
is absolutely blind. Come on, tell me  
how you have ever given evidence  
of your wise prophecy. When the Sphinx,  
that singing bitch, was here, you said nothing  
to set the people free. Why not? Her riddle  
was not something the first man to stroll along  
could solve—a prophet was required. And there  
the people saw your knowledge was no use—  
nothing from birds or picked up from the gods.  
But then I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing.  
Yet I finished her off, using my wits  
rather than relying on birds. That's the man  
you want to overthrow, hoping, no doubt,  
to stand up there with Creon, once he's king.  
But I think you and your conspirator in this  
will regret trying to drive me from the state.  
If you did not look so old, you'd find out  
the punishment your arrogance deserves.

## CHORUS LEADER

To us it sounds as if Teiresias  
has spoken in anger, and, Oedipus,  
you have done so, too. That isn't what we need.  
Instead we should be looking into this:  
How can we best act on the god's decree?

## TEIRESIAS

You may be king, but I do have the right  
to answer you—and I control that right,  
for I am not your slave. I serve Apollo,  
and thus will never stand with Creon,  
signed up as his man. So I say this to you,  
since you have chosen to insult my blindness—  
you have your eyesight, and you do not see  
how miserable you are, or where you live,  
or who it is who shares your household.  
Do you know the family you come from?  
Without your knowledge you have turned into  
the enemy of your own relatives,  
those in the world below and those up here,  
and the dreadful scourge of that two-edged curse  
of father and mother will one day drive you  
from this land in exile. Those eyes of yours,  
which now can see so clearly, will be dark.  
What harbour will not echo with your cries?  
Where on Cithaeron will they not soon be heard,  
once you have learned the truth about the wedding

by which you sailed into this royal house—  
a lovely voyage, but the harbour's doomed? <sup>195</sup>  
You have no notion of the quantity  
of other troubles which will render you  
and your own children equals. So go on—  
keep insulting Creon and my prophecies,  
for among all living mortals nobody  
will be destroyed more wretchedly than you.

OEDIPUS

Must I tolerate this insolence from him?  
Get out, and may the plague get rid of you!  
Off with you! Now! Turn your back and go!  
And don't come back here to my home again.

TEIRESIAS

I would not have come, but you summoned me.

OEDIPUS

I did not know you would speak so stupidly.  
If I had, you would have waited a long time  
before I called you here.

TEIRESIAS

I was born like this.  
You think I am a fool, but to your parents,  
the ones who made you, I was wise enough.

OEDIPUS

Wait! My parents? Who was my father?

TEIRESIAS

This day will reveal that and destroy you.

OEDIPUS

Everything you speak is all so cryptic—  
like a riddle.

TEIRESIAS

Well, in solving riddles,  
are you not the best there is?

OEDIPUS

Mock my excellence,  
but you will find out I am truly great.

TEIRESIAS

That success of yours has been your ruin.

OEDIPUS

I do not care, if I have saved the city.

TEIRESIAS

I will go now. Boy, lead me away.

OEDIPUS

Yes, let him guide you back. You're in the way.

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<sup>195</sup>The term barbarian refers to non-Greek-speaking people.

If you stay, you will provoke me. Once you're gone,  
you won't annoy me further.

TEIRESIAS

I'm going.

But first I shall tell you why I came.

I do not fear the face of your displeasure—  
there is no way you can destroy me. I tell you,  
the man you have been seeking all this time,  
while proclaiming threats and issuing orders  
about the one who murdered Laius—

that man is here. According to reports,  
he is a stranger who lives here in Thebes.

But he will prove to be a native Theban.

From that change he will derive no pleasure.

He will be blind, although he now can see.

He will be a poor, although he now is rich.

He will set off for a foreign country,  
groping the ground before him with a stick.

And he will turn out to be the brother  
of the children in his house—their father, too,  
both at once, and the husband and the son  
of the very woman who gave birth to him.

He sowed the same womb as his father  
and murdered him. Go in and think on this.

If you discover I have spoken falsely,  
you can say I lack all skill in prophecy.

[Exit TEIRESIAS led off by the BOY. OEDIPUS turns and goes back into the palace]

CHORUS

Speaking from the Delphic rock  
the oracular voice intoned a name.

But who is the man, the one  
who with his blood-red hands  
has done unspeakable brutality?

The time has come for him to flee—  
to move his powerful foot  
more swiftly than those hooves  
of horses riding like a storm.

Against him Zeus' son now springs,  
armed with lightning fire and leading on  
the inexorable and terrifying Furies.<sup>196</sup>

From the snowy peaks of Mount Parnassus  
the message has just flashed, ordering all

<sup>196</sup>Pentheus' father Echion was one of the warriors born when Cadmus, on instructions from the gods, killed a serpent-dragon and sowed its teeth in the earth. The teeth germinated as warriors rising from the ground.

to seek the one whom no one knows. <sup>197</sup>

Like a wild bull he wanders now,  
hidden in the untamed wood,  
through rocks and caves, alone  
with his despair on joyless feet,  
keeping his distance from that doom  
uttered at earth's central navel stone.  
But that fatal oracle still lives,  
hovering above his head forever.

That wise interpreter of prophecies  
stirs up my fears, unsettling dread.  
I cannot approve of what he said  
and I cannot deny it.  
I am confused. What shall I say?  
My hopes are fluttering here and there,  
with no clear glimpse of past or future.  
I have never heard of any quarrelling,  
past or present, between those two,  
the house of Labdacus and Polybus' son,  
which could give me evidence enough  
to undermine the fame of Oedipus,  
as he seeks vengeance for the unsolved murder  
in the family line of Labdacus. <sup>198</sup>

Apollo and Zeus are truly wise—  
they understand what humans do.  
But there is no sure way to ascertain  
if human prophets grasp things any more  
than I do, although in wisdom one man  
may leave another far behind.  
But until I see the words confirmed,  
I will not approve of any man  
who censures Oedipus, for it was clear  
when that winged Sphinx went after him  
he was a wise man then. We witnessed it.  
He passed the test and endeared himself  
to all the city. So in my thinking now  
he never will be guilty of a crime.

[Enter CREON]

CREON

You citizens, I have just discovered  
that Oedipus, our king, has levelled charges  
against me, disturbing allegations.  
That I cannot bear, so I have come here.

<sup>197</sup>At this point, there is a major gap in the manuscript. The text here is reconstructed from what we know about the content of the missing portion.

<sup>198</sup>The Greek text resumes here at the end of the gap in the manuscript.

In these present troubles, if he believes  
that he has suffered injury from me,  
in word or deed, then I have no desire  
to keep on living into ripe old age  
still bearing his reproach. For me  
the injury produced by this report  
is not a single isolated matter—  
no, it has the greatest scope of all,  
if I end up being called a wicked man  
here in the city, a bad citizen,  
by you and by my friends.

CHORUS LEADER

Perhaps he charged you  
spurred on by the rash power of his rage,  
rather than his mind's true judgment.

CREON

Was it publicized that my persuasion  
convinced Teiresias to utter lies?

CHORUS LEADER

That's what was said. I have no idea  
just what that meant.

CREON

Did he accuse me  
and announce the charges with a steady gaze,  
in a normal state of mind?

CHORUS LEADER

I do not know.

What those in power do I do not see.

But he's approaching from the palace—  
here he comes in person.

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS

You! How did you get here?

Have you grown so bold-faced that you now come  
to my own home—you who are obviously  
the murderer of the man whose house it was,  
a thief who clearly wants to steal my throne?

Come, in the name of all the gods, tell me this—  
did you plan to do it because you thought  
I was a coward or a fool? Or did you think  
I would not learn about your actions  
as they crept up on me with such deceit—  
or that, if I knew, I could not deflect them?  
This attempt of yours, is it not madness—  
to chase after the king's place without friends,  
without a horde of men, to seek a goal

which only gold or factions could attain?

CREON

Will you listen to me? It's your turn now  
to let me make a suitable response.  
Once you hear that, then judge me for yourself.

OEDIPUS

You are a clever talker. But from you  
I will learn little. I know you now—  
a troublemaker, an enemy of mine.

CREON

At least first listen to what I have to say.

OEDIPUS

Do not bother trying to convince me  
that you have done no wrong.

CREON

If you think being stubborn  
and forgetting common sense is wise,  
then you're not thinking as you should.

OEDIPUS

And if you think you can try to harm  
a man who is a relative of yours  
and escape without a penalty  
then you have not been thinking wisely.

CREON

I agree. What you've just said makes sense.  
So tell me the nature of the damage  
you claim you're suffering because of me.

OEDIPUS

Did you or did you not persuade me  
to send for Teiresias, that prophet?

CREON

Yes. And I'd still give you the same advice.

OEDIPUS

How long is it since Laius . . . [pauses]

CREON

Did what?

What's Laius got to do with anything?

OEDIPUS

. . . since Laius was carried off and disappeared,  
since he was killed so brutally?

CREON

A long time—  
many years have passed since then.

OEDIPUS

At that time,  
was Teiresias as skilled in prophecy?

CREON

Then, as now, he was honoured for his wisdom.

OEDIPUS

And back then did he ever mention me?

CREON

No, never—not while I was with him.

OEDIPUS

Did you not investigate the killing?

CREON

Yes, of course we did. But we found nothing.

OEDIPUS

Why did this man, this wise man, not speak up?

CREON

I do not know. And when I don't know something,  
I like to hold my tongue.

OEDIPUS

You know enough—  
at least you understand enough to say . . .

CREON

What? If I really do know something  
I will not deny it.

OEDIPUS

If Teiresias  
were not working with you, he would not name me  
as the one who murdered Laius.

CREON

If he says this,  
well, you're the one who knows. But I think  
the time has come for me to question you  
the way that you've been questioning me.

OEDIPUS

Ask whatever you wish. You'll never prove  
that I'm the murderer.

CREON

Then tell me this—  
are you not married to my sister?

OEDIPUS

Since you ask me, yes. I don't deny that.

CREON

And you two rule this land as equals?

OEDIPUS

Whatever she desires, she gets from me.

CREON

And am I not third, equal to you both?

OEDIPUS

That's what makes your friendship so deceitful.

## CREON

No, not if you think this through, as I do.  
First, consider this. In your view, would anyone  
prefer to rule and have to cope with fear  
rather than live in peace, carefree and safe,  
if his powers were the same? I, for one,  
have no natural desire to be king  
in preference to performing royal acts.  
The same is true of any other man  
whose understanding grasps things properly.  
For now I get everything I want from you,  
but without the fear. If I were king myself,  
I'd be doing many things against my will.  
So how can being a king be sweeter to me  
than royal power without anxiety?  
I am not yet so mistaken in my mind  
that I want things which bring no benefits.  
Now all men are my friends and wish me well,  
and those who seek to get something from you  
now flatter me, since I'm the one who brings  
success in what they want. So why would I  
give up such benefits for something else?  
A mind that's wise will not turn treacherous.  
It's not my nature to love such policies.  
And if another man pursued such things,  
I would not work with him. I could not bear to.  
If you want proof of this, then go to Delphi.  
Ask the prophet if I brought back to you  
exactly what was said. At that point,  
if you discover I have planned something,  
that I've conspired with Teiresias,  
then arrest me and have me put to death,  
not merely on your own authority,  
but on mine as well, a double judgment.  
Do not condemn me on an unproved charge.  
It's not fair to judge these things by guesswork,  
to assume bad men are good or good men bad.  
I say a man who throws away a noble friend  
is like a man who parts with his own life,  
the thing most dear to him. Give it some time.  
Then you will see clearly, since only time  
can fully validate a man who's true.  
A bad man is exposed in just one day.

## CHORUS LEADER

For a man concerned about being killed,  
my lord, he has spoken eloquently.



Those who are unreliable give rash advice.

OEDIPUS

If some conspirator moves against me,  
in secret and with speed, I must be quick  
to make my counter plans. If I just rest  
and wait for him to act, then he'll succeed  
in what he wants to do, and I'll be finished.

CREON

What do you want—to exile me from here?

OEDIPUS

No. I want you to die, not just run off—  
so I can demonstrate what envy means.

CREON

You are determined not to change your mind  
or listen to me?

OEDIPUS

You'll not convince me,  
for there's no way that I can trust you.

CREON

I can see that you've become unbalanced. <sup>199</sup>

OEDIPUS

I'm sane enough to defend my interests.

CREON

You should be protecting mine as well.

OEDIPUS

But you're a treacherous man. It's your nature.

CREON

What if you're wrong?

OEDIPUS

I still have to govern.

CREON

Not if you do it badly.

OEDIPUS

O Thebes—

my city!

CREON

I, too, have some rights in Thebes—  
it is not yours alone.

[The palace doors open]

CHORUS LEADER

My lords, an end to this.

I see Jocasta coming from the palace,  
and just in time. With her assistance  
you should bring this quarrel to a close.

---

<sup>199</sup>Aristeus is the husband of Autonoe and father of Actaeon.

[Enter JOCASTA from the palace]

JOCASTA

You foolish men, why are you arguing  
in such a stupid way? With our land so sick,  
aren't you ashamed to start a private fight?  
You, Oedipus, go in the house, and you,  
Creon, return to yours. Why inflate  
a trivial matter into something huge?

CREON

Sister, your husband Oedipus intends  
to punish me in one of two dreadful ways—  
to banish me from my fathers' country  
or arrest me and then have me killed.

OEDIPUS

That's right.

Lady, I caught him committing treason,  
an vicious crime against me personally.

CREON

Let me not prosper but die a man accursed,  
if I have done what you accuse me of.

JOCASTA

Oedipus,  
for the sake of the gods, trust him in this.  
Respect that oath he made before all heaven—  
do it for my sake and for those around you.

CHORUS LEADER

I beg you, my lord, consent to this—  
agree with her.

OEDIPUS

What is it then  
you're asking me to do?

CHORUS LEADER

Pay Creon due respect.  
He has not been foolish in the past, and now  
that oath he's sworn has power.

OEDIPUS

Are you aware  
just what you're asking?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes. I understand.

OEDIPUS

Then tell me clearly what you mean to say.

CHORUS LEADER

You should not accuse a friend of yours  
and thus dishonour him with a mere story  
which may be false, when he has sworn an oath

and therefore could be subject to a curse.

OEDIPUS

By this point you should clearly understand,  
what you are doing when you request this—  
seeking to exile me from Thebes or kill me.

CHORUS LEADER

No, no, by sacred Helios, the god  
who stands pre-eminent before the rest!  
May I die the most miserable of deaths,  
abandoned by the gods and by my friends,  
if I have ever harboured such a thought!  
But the destruction of our land wears down  
my troubled heart—and so does this quarrel,  
if you two add new problems to the ones  
which have for so long been afflicting us.

OEDIPUS

Let him go, then, even though it means  
I must be killed or sent from here in exile,  
forced out in disgrace. I have been moved  
to act compassionately by what you said,  
not by Creon's words. But if he stays here,  
he will be hateful to me.

CREON

You are stubborn—  
obviously unhappy to concede,  
and when you lose your temper, you go too far.  
But men like that find it most difficult  
to tolerate themselves. In that there's justice.

OEDIPUS

Why not go—just leave me alone?

CREON

I'll leave—  
since I see you do not understand me.  
But these men here know I'm a reasonable man.

[Exit CREON away from the palace, leaving OEDIPUS and JOCASTA and the  
CHORUS on stage]

CHORUS LEADER

Lady, will you escort our king inside?

JOCASTA

Yes, once I have learned what happened here.

CHORUS LEADER

They talked—  
their words gave rise to uninformed suspicions,  
but even unjust words inflict sore wounds.

JOCASTA

From both of them?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes.

JOCASTA

What caused it?

CHORUS LEADER

With our country already in distress,  
it is enough, it seems to me, enough  
to leave things as they are.

OEDIPUS

Now do you see  
the point you've reached thanks to your noble wish  
to dissolve and dull what I felt in my heart?

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, I have declared it more than once,  
so you must know it would have been quite mad  
if I abandoned you, who, when this land,  
my cherished Thebes, was in great trouble,  
set it right again and who, in these harsh times  
should prove a trusty and successful guide.

JOCASTA

By all the gods, my king, please let me know  
why in this present matter you now feel  
such unrelenting rage.

OEDIPUS

To you I'll speak, lady,  
since I respect you more than I do these men.  
It's Creon's fault. He conspired against me.

JOCASTA

In this quarrel what was said? Tell me.

OEDIPUS

Creon claims that I'm the murderer—  
that I killed Laius.

JOCASTA

Does he know this first hand,  
or has he picked it up from someone else?

OEDIPUS

No. He set up that treasonous prophet.  
What he says himself all sounds quite innocent.

JOCASTA

All right, forget about those things you've said.  
Listen to me, and ease your mind with this—  
no human being has skill in prophecy.  
I'll show you why with this example.  
King Laius once received an oracle.  
I won't say it came straight from Apollo,  
but it was from those who do assist the god.

It said Laius was fated to be killed  
by a child of ours, one born to him and me.  
Now, at least according to the story,  
one day Laius was killed by foreigners,  
by robbers, at a place where three roads meet.  
Besides, before our child was three days old,  
Laius pinned his ankles tight together  
and ordered other men to throw him out  
on a mountain rock where no one ever goes.  
And so Apollo's plan that he'd become  
the one who killed his father didn't work,  
and Laius never suffered what he feared,  
that his own son would be his murderer,  
although that's what the oracle had claimed.  
So don't concern yourself with prophecies.  
Whatever gods intend to bring about  
they themselves make known quite easily.

OEDIPUS

Lady, as I listen to these words of yours,  
my soul is shaken, my mind confused . . .

JOCASTA

Why do you say that? What's worrying you?

OEDIPUS

I thought I heard you say that Laius  
was murdered at a place where three roads meet.

JOCASTA

That's what was said and people still believe.

OEDIPUS

Where is this place? Where did it happen?

JOCASTA

In a land called Phocis. Two roads lead there—  
one from Delphi and one from Daulia.

OEDIPUS

How long is it since these events took place?

JOCASTA

The story was reported in the city  
just before you took over royal power  
here in Thebes.

OEDIPUS

O Zeus, what have you done?

What have you planned for me?

JOCASTA

What is it,  
Oedipus? Why is your spirit so troubled?

OEDIPUS

Not yet,

no questions yet. Tell me this—Laius,  
how tall was he? How old a man?

JOCASTA

He was big—with hair starting to turn white.  
In shape he was not all that unlike you.

OEDIPUS

The worse for me! I may have set myself  
under a dreadful curse without my knowledge!

JOCASTA

What do you mean? As I look at you, my king,  
I start to tremble.

OEDIPUS

I am afraid,  
full of terrible fears the prophet sees.  
But you can reveal this better if you now  
will tell me one thing more.

JOCASTA

I'm shaking,  
but if you ask me, I will answer you.

OEDIPUS

Did Laius have a small escort with him  
or a troop of soldiers, like a royal king?

JOCASTA

Five men, including a herald, went with him.  
A carriage carried Laius.

OEDIPUS

Alas! Alas!  
It's all too clear! Lady, who told you this?

JOCASTA

A slave—the only one who got away.  
He came back here.

OEDIPUS

Is there any chance  
he's in our household now?

JOCASTA

No.  
Once he returned and understood that you  
had now assumed the power of slaughtered Laius,  
he clasped my hands, begged me to send him off  
to where our animals graze in the fields,  
so he could be as far away as possible  
from the sight of town. And so I sent him.  
He was a slave but he'd earned my gratitude.  
He deserved an even greater favour.

OEDIPUS

I'd like him to return back here to us,

and quickly, too.

JOCASTA

That can be arranged—

but why's that something you would want to do?

OEDIPUS

Lady, I'm afraid I may have said too much.

That's why I want to see him here before me.

JOCASTA

Then he will be here. But now, my lord,

I deserve to know why you are so distressed.

OEDIPUS

My forebodings now have grown so great

I will not keep them from you, for who is there

I should confide in rather than in you

about such a twisted turn of fortune.

My father was Polybus of Corinth,

my mother Merope, a Dorian.

There I was regarded as the finest man

in all the city, until, as chance would have it,

something most astonishing took place,

though it was not worth what it made me to do.

At dinner there a man who was quite drunk

from too much wine began to shout at me,

claiming I was not my father's real son.

That troubled me, but for a day at least

I said nothing, though it was difficult.

The next day I went to ask my parents,

my father and mother. They were angry

at the man who had insulted them this way,

so I was reassured. But nonetheless,

the accusation always troubled me—

the story had become known everywhere.

And so I went in secret off to Delphi.

I didn't tell my mother or my father.

Apollo sent me back without an answer,

so I didn't learn what I had come to find.

But when he spoke he uttered monstrous things,

strange terrors and horrific miseries—

my fate was to defile my mother's bed,

to bring forth to men a human family

that people could not bear to look upon,

and slay the father who engendered me.

When I heard that, I ran away from Corinth.

From then on I thought of it just as a place

beneath the stars. I went to other lands,

so I would never see that prophecy fulfilled,

the abomination of my evil fate.  
In my travelling I came across that place  
in which you say your king was murdered.  
And now, lady, I will tell you the truth.  
As I was on the move, I passed close by  
a spot where three roads meet, and in that place  
I met a herald and a horse-drawn carriage,  
with a man inside, just as you described.  
The guide there tried to force me off the road—  
and the old man, too, got personally involved.  
In my rage, I lashed out at the driver,  
who was shoving me aside. The old man,  
seeing me walking past him in the carriage,  
kept his eye on me, and with his double whip  
struck me on the head, right here on top.  
Well, I retaliated in good measure—  
with the staff I held I hit him a quick blow  
and knocked him from his carriage to the road.  
He lay there on his back. Then I killed them all.  
If that stranger was somehow linked to Laius,  
who is now more unfortunate than me?  
What man could be more hateful to the gods?  
No stranger and no citizen can welcome him  
into their lives or speak to him. Instead,  
they must keep him from their doors, a curse  
I laid upon myself. With these hands of mine,  
these killer's hands, I now contaminate  
the dead man's bed. Am I not depraved?  
Am I not utterly abhorrent?  
Now I must fly into exile and there,  
a fugitive, never see my people,  
never set foot in my native land again—  
or else I must get married to my mother  
and kill my father, Polybus, who raised me,  
the man who gave me life. If anyone  
claimed this came from some malevolent god,  
would he not be right? O you gods,  
you pure, blessed gods, may I not see that day!  
Let me rather vanish from the sight of men,  
before I see a fate like that engulf me!

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, to us these things are ominous.  
But you must sustain your hope until you hear  
the servant who was present at the time.

OEDIPUS

I do have some hope left, at least enough



to wait for the man we've summoned from the fields.

JOCASTA

Once he comes, what do you hope to hear?

OEDIPUS

I'll tell you. If we discover what he says  
matches what you say, then I'll escape disaster.

JOCASTA

What was so remarkable in what I said?

OEDIPUS

You said that in his story the man claimed  
Laius was murdered by a band of thieves.  
If he still says that there were several men,  
then I was not the killer, since one man  
could never be mistaken for a crowd.  
But if he says it was a single man,  
the scales of justice guilt sink down on me.

JOCASTA

Well, that's certainly what he reported then.  
He cannot now withdraw what he once said.  
The whole city heard him, not just me alone.  
But even if he changes that old news,  
he cannot ever demonstrate, my lord,  
that Laius' murder fits the prophecy.  
For Apollo clearly said the man would die  
at the hands of an infant born from me.  
Now, how did that unhappy son of ours  
kill Laius, when he'd perished long before?  
As far as these predictions go, from now on  
I would not look for confirmation anywhere.

OEDIPUS

You're right in what you say. But nonetheless,  
send for that peasant. Don't fail to do that.

JOCASTA

I'll call him here as quickly as I can.  
Let's go inside. I'll not do anything  
which does not meet with your approval.

[OEDIPUS and JOCASTA go into the palace together]

CHORUS

I pray fate still finds me worthy,  
demonstrating piety and reverence  
in all I say and do—in everything  
our loftiest traditions consecrate,  
those laws engendered in the heavenly skies,  
whose only father is Olympus.  
They were not born from mortal men,  
nor will they sleep and be forgotten.

In them lives an ageless mighty god.

Insolence gives birth to tyranny—  
that insolence which vainly crams itself  
and overflows with so much wealth  
beyond what's right or beneficial,  
that once it's climbed the highest rooftop,  
it's hurled down by force—such a quick fall  
there's no safe landing on one's feet.  
But I pray the god never will abolish  
the type of rivalry that helps our state.  
That god I will hold onto always,  
the one who stands as our protector. <sup>200</sup>

But if a man conducts himself  
disdainfully in what he says and does,  
and manifests no fear of righteousness,  
no reverence for the statues of the gods,  
may miserable fate seize such a man  
for his disastrous arrogance,  
if he does not behave with justice  
when he strives to benefit himself,  
appropriates all things impiously,  
and, like a fool, profanes the sacred.  
What man is there who does such things  
who can still claim he will ward off  
the arrow of the gods aimed at his heart?  
If such actions are considered worthy,  
why should we dance to honour god?

No longer will I go in reverence  
to the sacred stone, earth's very centre,  
or to the temple at Abae or Olympia,  
if these prophecies fail to be fulfilled  
and manifest themselves to mortal men.  
But you, all-conquering, all-ruling Zeus,  
if by right those names belong to you,  
let this not evade you and your ageless might.  
For ancient oracles which dealt with Laius  
are withering—men now set them aside.  
Nowhere is Apollo honoured publicly,  
and our religious faith is dying away.

[JOCASTA enters from the palace and moves to an altar to Apollo which stands  
outside the palace doors.

She is accompanied by one or two SERVANTS]

JOCASTA

<sup>200</sup>This part of the choral song makes an important distinction between two forms of self-assertive action: the first breeds self-aggrandizement and greed; the second is necessary for the protection of the state.

You leading citizens of Thebes, I think  
it is appropriate for me to visit  
our gods' sacred shrines, bearing in my hands  
this garland and an offering of incense.  
For Oedipus has let excessive pain  
seize on his heart and does not understand  
what's happening now by thinking of the past,  
like a man with sense. Instead he listens to  
whoever speaks to him of dreadful things.  
I can do nothing more with my advice,  
and so, Lyceian Apollo, I come to you,  
who stand here beside us, a suppliant,  
with offerings and prayers for you to find  
some way of cleansing what corrupts us.  
For now we are afraid, just like those  
who on a ship see their helmsman terrified.

[JOCASTA sets her offerings on the altar. A MESSENGER enters, an older man]

MESSENGER

Strangers, can you tell me where I find  
the house of Oedipus, your king? Better yet,  
if you know, can you tell me where he is?

CHORUS LEADER

His home is here, stranger, and he's inside.  
This lady is the mother of his children.

MESSENGER

May her happy home always be blessed,  
for she is his queen, true mistress of his house.

JOCASTA

I wish the same for you, stranger. Your fine words  
make you deserve as much. But tell us now  
why you have come. Do you seek information,  
or do you wish to give us some report?

MESSENGER

Lady, I have good news for your whole house—  
and for your husband, too.

JOCASTA

What news is that?  
Where have you come from?

MESSENGER

I've come from Corinth.  
I'll give you my report at once, and then  
you will, no doubt, be glad, although perhaps  
you will be sad, as well.

JOCASTA

What is your news?  
How can it have two such effects at once?

MESSENGER

The people who live there, in the lands  
beside the Isthmus, will make him their king.<sup>201</sup>  
They have announced it.

JOCASTA

What are you saying?  
Is old man Polybus no longer king?

MESSENGER

No. He is dead and in his grave.

JOCASTA

What?  
Has Oedipus' father died?

MESSENGER

Yes.  
If what I'm telling you is not the truth,  
then I deserve to die.

JOCASTA [to a servant]

You there—  
go at once and tell this to your master.  
[SERVANT goes into the palace]  
O you oracles of the gods, so much for you.  
Oedipus has for so long been afraid  
that he would murder him. He ran away.  
And now Polybus has died, killed by Fate  
and not by Oedipus.

[Enter OEDIPUS from the palace]

OEDIPUS

Ah, Jocasta,  
my dearest wife, why have you summoned me  
to leave our home and come out here?

JOCASTA

You must hear this man, and as you listen,  
decide for yourself what these prophecies,  
these solemn proclamations from the gods,  
amount to.

OEDIPUS

Who is this man? What report  
does he have for me?

JOCASTA

He comes from Corinth,  
bringing news that Polybus, your father,  
no longer is alive. He's dead.

OEDIPUS

---

<sup>201</sup> *Isthmus*: The city of Corinth stood on the narrow stretch of land (the Isthmus) connecting the Peloponnese with mainland Greece, a very strategic position.

What?

Stranger, let me hear from you in person.

MESSENGER

If I must first report my news quite plainly,  
then I should let you know that Polybus  
has passed away. He's gone.

OEDIPUS

By treachery,  
or was it the result of some disease?

MESSENGER

With old bodies a slight weight on the scales  
brings final peace.

OEDIPUS

Apparently his death  
was from an illness?

MESSENGER

Yes, and from old age.

OEDIPUS

Alas! Indeed, lady, why should any man  
pay due reverence to Apollo's shrine,  
where his prophet lives, or to those birds  
which scream out overhead? For they foretold  
that I was going to murder my own father.  
But now he's dead and lies beneath the earth,  
and I am here. I never touched my spear.  
Perhaps he died from a desire to see me—  
so in that sense I brought about his death.  
But as for those prophetic oracles,  
they're worthless. Polybus has taken them  
to Hades, where he lies.

JOCASTA

Was I not the one  
who predicted this some time ago?

OEDIPUS

You did,  
but then I was misguided by my fears.

JOCASTA

You must not keep on filling up your heart  
with all these things.

OEDIPUS

But my mother's bed—  
Surely I should still be afraid of that?

JOCASTA

Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance  
live in fear—a man who never looks ahead,  
who has no certain vision of his future?

It's best to live haphazardly, as best one can.  
Do not worry you will wed your mother.  
It's true that in their dreams a lot of men  
have slept with their own mothers, but someone  
who ignores all this bears life more easily.

OEDIPUS

Everything you say would be commendable,  
if my mother were not still alive.  
But since she is, I must remain afraid,  
though all that you have said is right.

JOCASTA

But still,  
your father's death is a great comfort to us.

OEDIPUS

Yes, it is good, I know. But I do fear  
that lady—she is still alive.

MESSENGER

This one you fear,  
what kind of woman is she?

OEDIPUS

Old man,  
her name is Merope, wife to Polybus.

MESSENGER

And what in her makes you so fearful?

OEDIPUS

Stranger,  
a dreadful prophecy sent from the god.

MESSENGER

Is it well known? Or something private,  
which other people have no right to know?

OEDIPUS

No, no. It's public knowledge. Loxias  
once said it was my fate that I would marry  
my own mother and shed my father's blood  
with my own hands.<sup>202</sup> That's why, many years ago,  
I left my home in Corinth. Things turned out well,  
but nonetheless it gives the sweetest joy  
to look into the eyes of one's own parents.

MESSENGER

And because you were afraid of her  
you stayed away from Corinth?

OEDIPUS

And because  
I did not want to be my father's killer.

---

<sup>202</sup> *Loxias*: a common name for Apollo.

MESSENGER

My lord, since I came to make you happy,  
why do I not relieve you of this fear?

OEDIPUS

You would receive from me a worthy thanks.

MESSENGER

That's really why I came—so your return  
might prove a benefit to me back home.

OEDIPUS

But I will never go back to my parents.

MESSENGER

My son, it is so clear you've no idea  
what you are doing . . .

OEDIPUS [interrupting]

What do you mean, old man?  
In the name of all the gods, tell me.

MESSENGER

. . . if that's the reason you're a fugitive  
and won't go home.

OEDIPUS

I feared Apollo's prophecy  
might reveal itself in me.

MESSENGER

You were afraid  
you might become corrupted through your parents?

OEDIPUS

That's right, old man. That was my constant fear.

MESSENGER

Are you aware these fears of yours are groundless?

OEDIPUS

And why is that? If I was born their child . . .

MESSENGER

Because you and Polybus were not related.

OEDIPUS

What do you mean? Was not Polybus my father?

MESSENGER

He was as much your father as this man here,  
no more, no less.

OEDIPUS

But how can any man  
who means nothing to me be just the same  
as my own father?

MESSENGER

But Polybus  
was not your father, no more than I am.

OEDIPUS

Then why did he call me his son?

MESSENGER

If you must know,  
he received you as a gift many years ago.  
I gave you to him.

OEDIPUS

He really loved me.  
How could he if I came from someone else?

MESSENGER

Because before you came, he had no children—  
that made him love you.

OEDIPUS

When you gave me to him,  
had you bought me or discovered me by chance?

MESSENGER

I found you in Cithaeron's forest valleys.

OEDIPUS

What were you doing wandering up there?

MESSENGER

I was looking after flocks of sheep.

OEDIPUS

You were a shepherd, just a hired servant  
roaming here and there?

MESSENGER

Yes, my son, I was.  
But at that time I was the one who saved you.

OEDIPUS

When you picked me up and took me off,  
what sort of suffering did you save me from?

MESSENGER

The ankles on your feet could tell you that.

OEDIPUS

Ah, my old misfortune. Why mention that?

MESSENGER

Your ankles had been pierced and pinned together.  
I set them free.

OEDIPUS

My dreadful mark of shame—  
I've had that scar there since I was a child.

MESSENGER

That's why fortune gave you your very name,  
the one which you still carry. <sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup>*still carry*: the name Oedipus can be construed to mean either "swollen feet" or "knowledge of one's feet." Both terms evoke a strongly ironic sense of how Oedipus, for all his fame as a man of knowledge, is ignorant about his origin.



OEDIPUS

Tell me,  
in the name of heaven, did my parents,  
my father or my mother, do this to me?

MESSENGER

I don't know. The man who gave you to me  
knows more of that than I do.

OEDIPUS

You mean to say  
you got me from someone else? It wasn't you  
who stumbled on me?

MESSENGER

No, it wasn't me.  
Another shepherd gave you to me.

OEDIPUS

Who?  
Who was he? Do you know? Can you tell me  
any details, things you are quite sure of?

MESSENGER

Well, I think he was one of Laius' servants—  
that's what people said.

OEDIPUS

You mean king Laius,  
the one who ruled this country years ago?

MESSENGER

That's right. He was one of the king's shepherds.

OEDIPUS

Is he still alive? Can I still see him?

MESSENGER

You people live here. You'd best answer that.

OEDIPUS [turning to the Chorus]

Do any of you here now know the man,  
this shepherd he describes? Have you seen him,  
either in the fields or here in Thebes?

Answer me. It's critical, time at last  
to find out what this means.

CHORUS LEADER

The man he mentioned  
is, I think, the very peasant from the fields  
you wanted to see earlier. But of this  
Jocasta could tell more than anyone.

OEDIPUS

Lady, do you know the man we sent for—  
just minutes ago—the one we summoned here?  
Is he the one this messenger refers to?

JOCASTA

Why ask me what he means? Forget all that.  
There's no point trying to sort out what he said.

OEDIPUS

With all these indications of the truth  
here in my grasp, I cannot end this now.  
I must reveal the details of my birth.

JOCASTA

In the name of the gods, no! If you have  
some concern for your own life, then stop!  
Do not keep on investigating this.  
I will suffer—that will be enough.

OEDIPUS

Be brave. Even if I should turn out to be  
born from a shameful mother, whose family  
for three generations have been slaves,  
you will still have your noble lineage.

JOCASTA

Listen to me, I beg you. Do not do this.

OEDIPUS

I will not be convinced I should not learn  
the whole truth of what these facts amount to.

JOCASTA

But I care about your own well being—  
what I tell you is for your benefit.

OEDIPUS

What you're telling me for my own good  
just brings me more distress.

JOCASTA

O you unhappy man!  
May you never find out who you really are!

OEDIPUS [to Chorus]

Go, one of you, and bring that shepherd here.  
Leave the lady to enjoy her noble line.

JOCASTA

Alas, you poor miserable man!  
There's nothing more that I can say to you.  
I'll never speak another word again.

[JOCASTA runs into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER

Why has the queen rushed off, Oedipus,  
so full of grief? I fear a disastrous storm  
will soon break through her silence.

OEDIPUS

Then let it break,  
whatever it is. As for myself,  
no matter how base born my family,

I wish to know the seed from where I came.  
 Perhaps my queen is now ashamed of me  
 and of my insignificant origin—  
 she likes to play the noble lady.  
 But I will never feel myself dishonoured.  
 I see myself as a child of Fortune—  
 and she is generous, that mother of mine  
 from whom I spring, and the months, my siblings,  
 have seen me by turns both small and great.  
 That's how I was born. I cannot prove false  
 to my own nature, nor can I ever cease  
 from seeking out the facts of my own birth.

CHORUS

If I have any power of prophecy  
 or skill in knowing things,  
 then, by the Olympian deities,  
 you, Cithaeron, at tomorrow's moon  
 will surely know that Oedipus  
 pays tribute to you as his native land  
 both as his mother and his nurse,  
 and that our choral dance and song  
 acknowledge you because you are  
 so pleasing to our king.  
 O Phoebus, we cry out to you—  
 may our song fill you with delight!

Who gave birth to you, my child?  
 Which one of the immortal gods  
 bore you to your father Pan,  
 who roams the mountainsides?  
 Was it some bedmate of Apollo,  
 the god who loves all country fields?  
 Perhaps Cyllene's royal king?  
 Or was it the Bacchanalian god  
 dwelling on the mountain tops  
 who took you as a new-born joy  
 from maiden nymphs of Helicon  
 with whom he often romps and plays? <sup>204</sup>

OEDIPUS [looking out away from the palace]  
 You elders, though I've never seen the man  
 we've been seeking for a long time now,  
 if I had to guess, I think I see him.  
 He's coming here. He looks very old—  
 as is appropriate, if he's the one.

<sup>204</sup>Cyllene's king is the god Hermes, who was born on Mount Cyllene; the Bacchanalian god is Dionysus.

And I know the people coming with him,  
servants of mine. But if you've seen him before,  
you'll recognize him better than I will.

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, I recognize the man. There's no doubt.  
He worked for Laius—a trusty shepherd.

[Enter SERVANT, an old shepherd]

OEDIPUS

Stranger from Corinth, let me first ask you—  
is this the man you spoke of?

MESSENGER

Yes, he is—  
he's the man you see in front of you.

OEDIPUS

You, old man, over here. Look at me.  
Now answer what I ask. Some time ago  
did you work for Laius?

SERVANT

Yes, as a slave.  
But I was not bought. I grew up in his house.

OEDIPUS

How did you live? What was the work you did?

SERVANT

Most of my life I've spent looking after sheep.

OEDIPUS

Whereabouts? In what specific places?

SERVANT

On Cithaeron or the neighbouring lands.

OEDIPUS

Do you know if you came across this man  
anywhere up there?

SERVANT

Doing what?

What man do you mean?

OEDIPUS

The man over here—  
this one. Have you ever met him before?

SERVANT

Right now I can't say I remember him.

MESSENGER

My lord, that's surely not surprising.  
Let me refresh his failing memory.  
I think he will remember all too well  
the time we spent around Cithaeron.  
He had two flocks of sheep and I had one.  
I was with him there for six months at a stretch,

from early spring until the autumn season.  
In winter I'd drive my sheep down to my folds,  
and he'd take his to pens that Laius owned.  
Isn't that what happened—what I just said?

SERVANT

You spoke the truth. But it was long ago.

MESSENGER

All right, then. Now, tell me if you recall  
how you gave me a child, an infant boy,  
for me to raise as my own foster son.

SERVANT

What? Why ask about that?

MESSENGER

This man here, my friend,  
was that young child back then.

SERVANT

Damn you!

Can't you keep quiet about it!

OEDIPUS

Hold on, old man.

Don't criticize him. What you have said  
is more objectionable than his account.

SERVANT

My noble master, what have I done wrong?

OEDIPUS

You did not tell us of that infant boy,  
the one he asked about.

SERVANT

That's what he says,  
but he knows nothing—a useless busybody.

OEDIPUS

If you won't tell us of your own free will,  
once we start to hurt you, you will talk.

SERVANT

By all the gods, don't torture an old man!

OEDIPUS

One of you there, tie up this fellow's hands.

SERVANT

Why are you doing this? It's too much for me!  
What is it you want to know?

OEDIPUS

That child he mentioned—  
did you give it to him?

SERVANT

I did. How I wish  
I'd died that day!

OEDIPUS

Well, you are going to die  
if you don't speak the truth.

SERVANT

And if I do,  
the death I suffer will be even worse.

OEDIPUS

It seems to me the man is trying to stall.

SERVANT

No, no, I'm not. I've already told you—  
I did give him the child.

OEDIPUS

Where did you get it?  
Did it come from your home or somewhere else?

SERVANT

It was not mine—I got it from someone.

OEDIPUS

Which of our citizens? Whose home was it?

SERVANT

In the name of the gods, my lord, don't ask!  
Please, no more questions!

OEDIPUS

If I have to ask again,  
then you will die.

SERVANT

The child was born in Laius' house.

OEDIPUS

From a slave or from some relative of his?

SERVANT

Alas, what I'm about to say now . . .  
it's horrible.

OEDIPUS

It may be horrible,  
but nonetheless I have to hear it.

SERVANT

If you must know, they said the child was his.  
But your wife inside the palace is the one  
who could best tell you what was going on.

OEDIPUS

You mean she gave the child to you?

SERVANT

Yes, my lord.

OEDIPUS

Why did she do that?

SERVANT

So I would kill it.

OEDIPUS

That wretched woman was the mother?

SERVANT

Yes.

She was afraid of dreadful prophecies.

OEDIPUS

What sort of prophecies?

SERVANT

The story went

that he would kill his father.

OEDIPUS

If that was true,

why did you give the child to this old man?

SERVANT

I pitied the boy, master, and I thought  
he'd take the child off to a foreign land  
where he was from. But he rescued him,  
only to save him for the greatest grief of all.  
For if you are who this man says you are  
you know your birth carried an awful fate.

OEDIPUS

Ah, so it all came true. It's so clear now.  
O light, let me look at you one final time,  
a man who stands revealed as cursed by birth,  
cursed by my own family, and cursed  
by murder where I should not kill.

[OEDIPUS moves into the palace]

CHORUS

O generations of mortal men,  
how I count your life as scarcely living.  
What man is there, what human being,  
who attains a greater happiness  
than mere appearances, a joy  
which seems to fade away to nothing?  
Poor wretched Oedipus, your fate  
stands here to demonstrate for me  
how no mortal man is ever blessed.

Here was a man who fired his arrows well—  
his skill was matchless—and he won  
the highest happiness in everything.  
For, Zeus, he slaughtered the hook-taloned Sphinx  
and stilled her cryptic song. For our state,  
he stood there like a tower against death,  
and from that moment, Oedipus,  
we have called you our king  
and honoured you above all other men,

the one who rules in mighty Thebes.

But now who is there whose story  
is more terrible to hear? Whose life  
has been so changed by trouble,  
by such ferocious agonies?  
Alas for celebrated Oedipus,  
the same spacious place of refuge  
served you both as child and father,  
the place you entered as a new bridegroom.  
How could the furrow where your father planted,  
poor wretched man, have tolerated you  
in such silence for so long?

Time, which watches everything  
and uncovered you against your will,  
now sits in judgment of that fatal marriage,  
where child and parent have been joined so long.  
O child of Laius, how I wish  
I'd never seen you—now I wail  
like one whose mouth pours forth laments.  
To tell it right, it was through you  
I found my life and breathed again,  
and then through you the darkness veils my eyes.

[The Second Messenger enters from the palace]

SECOND MESSENGER

O you most honoured citizens of Thebes,  
what actions you will hear about and see,  
what sorrows you will bear, if, as natives here,  
you are still loyal to the house of Labdacus!  
I do not think the Ister or the Phasis rivers  
could cleanse this house. It conceals too much  
and soon will bring to light the vilest things,  
brought on by choice and not by accident. <sup>205</sup>

What we do to ourselves brings us most pain.

CHORUS LEADER

The calamities we knew about before  
were hard enough to bear. What can you say  
to make them worse?

SECOND MESSENGER

I'll waste no words—  
know this—noble Jocasta, our queen, is dead.

CHORUS LEADER

That poor unhappy lady! How did she die?

SECOND MESSENGER

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<sup>205</sup>This line refers, not the entire story, but to what Jocasta and Oedipus have just done to themselves.



She killed herself. You did not witness it,  
so you'll be spared the worst of what went on.  
But from what I recall of what I saw  
you'll learn how that poor woman suffered.  
She left here frantic and rushed inside,  
the fingers of both hands clenched in her hair.  
She ran through the hall straight to her marriage bed.  
She went in, slamming both doors shut behind her  
and crying out to Laius, who's been a corpse  
a long time now. She was remembering  
that child of theirs born many years ago—  
the one who killed his father, who left her  
to conceive cursed children with that son.  
She lay moaning beside the bed, where she,  
poor woman, had given birth twice over—  
a husband from a husband, children from a child.  
How she died after that I don't fully know.  
With a scream Oedipus came bursting in.  
He would not let us see her suffering,  
her final pain. We watched him charge around,  
back and forth. As he moved, he kept asking us  
to give him a sword, as he tried to find  
that wife who was no wife—whose mother's womb  
had given birth to him and to his children.  
As he raved, some immortal power led him on—  
no human in the room came close to him.  
With a dreadful howl, as if someone  
had pushed him, he leapt at the double doors,  
bent the bolts by force out of their sockets,  
and burst into the room. Then we saw her.  
She was hanging there, swaying, with twisted cords  
roped round her neck. When Oedipus saw her,  
with a dreadful groan he took her body  
from the noose in which she hung, and then,  
when the poor woman was lying on the ground—  
what happened next was a horrific sight—  
from her clothes he ripped the golden brooches  
she wore as ornaments, raised them high,  
and drove them deep into his eyeballs,  
crying as he did so: "You will no longer see  
all those atrocious things I suffered,  
the dreadful things I did! No. You have seen  
what you never should have looked upon,  
and what I wished to know you did not see.  
So now and for all future time be dark!"  
With these words he raised his hand and struck,

not once, but many times, right in the sockets.  
With every blow blood spurted from his eyes  
down on his beard, and not in single drops,  
but showers of dark blood spattering like hail.  
So what these two have done has overwhelmed  
not one alone—this disaster swallows up  
a man and wife together. That old happiness  
they had before in their rich ancestry  
was truly joy, but now lament and ruin,  
death and shame, and all calamities  
which men can name are theirs to keep.

CHORUS LEADER

And has that suffering man found some relief  
to ease his pain?

SECOND MESSENGER

He shouts at everyone  
to open up the gates and thus reveal  
to all Cadmeians his father's killer,  
his mother's . . . but I must not say those words.  
He wants them to cast him out of Thebes,  
so the curse he laid will not come on this house  
if he still lives inside. But he is weak  
and needs someone to lead him on his way.  
His agony is more than he can bear—  
as he will show you—for on the palace doors  
the bolts are being pulled back. Soon you will see  
a sight which even a man filled with disgust  
would have to pity.

[OEDIPUS enters through the palace doors]

CHORUS LEADER

An awful fate for human eyes to witness,  
an appalling sight—the worst I've ever seen.  
O you poor man, what madness came on you?  
What eternal force pounced on your life  
and, springing further than the longest leap,  
brought you this fearful doom? Alas! Alas!  
You unhappy man! I cannot look at you.  
I want to ask you many things—there's much  
I wish to learn. You fill me with such horror,  
yet there is so much I must see.

OEDIPUS

Aaaiiii, aaaiii . . . Alas! Alas!  
How miserable I am . . . such wretchedness . . .  
Where do I go? How can the wings of air  
sweep up my voice? O my destiny,  
how far you have sprung now!

CHORUS LEADER

To a fearful place from which men turn away,  
a place they hate to look upon.

OEDIPUS

O the dark horror engulfing me,  
this nameless visitor I can't resist  
swept here by fair and fatal winds.  
Alas for me! And yet again, alas for me!  
The pain of stabbing brooches pierces me!  
The memory of agonizing shame!

CHORUS LEADER

In your distress it's not astonishing  
you bear a double load of suffering,  
a double load of pain.

OEDIPUS

Ah, my friend,  
so you still care for me, as always,  
and with patience nurse me now I'm blind.  
Alas! Alas! You are not hidden from me—  
I recognize you all too clearly.  
Though I am blind, I know that voice so well.

CHORUS LEADER

You have carried out such dreadful things—  
how could you dare to blind yourself this way?  
What god drove you to it?

OEDIPUS

It was Apollo, friends.  
It was Apollo. He brought on these troubles—  
the awful things I suffer. But the hand  
which stabbed out my eyes was mine alone.  
In my wretched life, why should I have eyes  
when there was nothing sweet for me to see?

CHORUS LEADER

What you have said is true enough.

OEDIPUS

What is there for me to see, my friends?  
What can I love? Whose greeting can I hear  
and feel delight? Hurry now, my friends,  
lead me away from Thebes—take me somewhere,  
a man completely lost, utterly accursed,  
the mortal man the gods despise the most.

CHORUS LEADER

Unhappy in your fate and in your mind  
which now knows all. Would I had never known you!

OEDIPUS

Whoever the man is who freed my feet,

who released me from that cruel shackle  
and rescued me from death, may that man die!  
It was a thankless act. Had I perished then,  
I would not have brought such agony  
to myself or to my friends.

CHORUS LEADER

I agree—  
I, too, would have preferred if you had died.

OEDIPUS

I would not have come to kill my father,  
and men would not see in me the husband  
of the woman who gave birth to me.  
Now I am abandoned by the gods,  
the son of a corrupted mother,  
conceiving children with the woman  
who gave me my own miserable life.  
If there is some horrific suffering  
worse than all the rest, then it too belongs  
in the fate of Oedipus.

CHORUS LEADER

I do not believe  
what you did to yourself is for the best.  
Better to be dead than alive and blind.

OEDIPUS

Don't tell me what I've done is not the best.  
And from now on spare me your advice.  
If I could see, I don't know how my eyes  
could look at my own father when I come  
to Hades or at my wretched mother.  
Against those two I have committed acts  
so vile that even if I hanged myself  
that would not be sufficient punishment.  
Perhaps you think the sight of my own children  
might give me joy? No! Look how they were born!  
They could never bring delight to eyes of mine.  
Nor could the city or its massive walls,  
or the sacred images of its gods.  
I am the most abhorred of men, I,  
the finest man of all those bred in Thebes,  
I have condemned myself, telling everyone  
they had to banish for impiety  
the man the gods have now exposed  
as sacrilegious—a son of Laius, too.  
With such polluting stains upon me,  
could I set eyes on you and hold your gaze?  
No. And if I could somehow block my ears

and kill my hearing, I would not hold back.  
I'd make a dungeon of this wretched body,  
so I would never see or hear again.  
For there is joy in isolated thought,  
completely sealed off from a world of pain.  
O Cithaeron, why did you shelter me?  
Why, when I was handed over to you,  
did you not do away with me at once,  
so I would never then reveal to men  
the nature of my birth? Ah Polybus  
and Corinth, the place men called my home,  
my father's ancient house, you raised me well—  
so fine to look at, so corrupt inside!  
Now I've been exposed as something gross,  
contaminated in my origins.  
O you three roads and hidden forest grove,  
you thicket and defile where three paths meet,  
you who swallowed down my father's blood  
from my own hands, do you remember me,  
what I did there in front of you and then  
what else I did when I came here to Thebes?  
Ah, you marriage rites—you gave birth to me,  
and when I was born, you gave birth again,  
children from the child of that same womb,  
creating an incestuous blood family  
of fathers, brothers, children, brides,  
wives and mothers—the most atrocious act  
that human beings commit! But it is wrong  
to talk about what it is wrong to do,  
so in the name of all the gods, act quickly—  
hide me somewhere far from the land of Thebes,  
or slaughter me, or hurl me in the sea,  
where you will never gaze on me again.  
Come, allow yourself to touch a wretched man.  
Listen to me, and do not be afraid—  
for this disease infects no one but me.

CHORUS LEADER

Creon is coming. He is just in time  
to plan and carry out what you propose.  
With you gone he's the only one still left  
to act as guardian of Thebes.

OEDIPUS

Alas,  
how will I talk to him? How can I ask him  
to put his trust in me? Not long ago  
I showed I had no faith in him at all.

[Enter Creon]

CREON

Oedipus, I have not come here to mock  
or blame you for disasters in the past.  
But if you can no longer value human beings,  
at least respect our lord the Sun, whose light  
makes all things grow, and do not put on show  
pollution of this kind in such a public way,  
for neither earth nor light nor sacred rain  
can welcome such a sight.

[Creon speaks to the attending servants]

Take him inside the house  
as quickly as you can. The kindest thing  
would be for members of his family  
to be the only ones to see and hear him.

OEDIPUS

By all the gods, since you are acting now  
so differently from what I would expect  
and have come here to treat me graciously,  
the very worst of men, do what I ask.  
I will speak for your own benefit, not mine.

CREON

What are you so keen to get from me?

OEDIPUS

Cast me out as quickly as you can,  
away from Thebes, to a place where no one,  
no living human being, will cross my path.

CREON

That is something I could do, of course,  
but first I wish to know what the god says  
about what I should do.

OEDIPUS

But what he said  
was all so clear—the man who killed his father  
must be destroyed. And that corrupted man  
is me.

CREON

Yes, that is what was said. But now,  
with things the way they are, the wisest thing  
is to ascertain quite clearly what to do.

OEDIPUS

Will you then be making a request  
on my behalf when I am so depraved?

CREON

I will. For even you must now trust in the gods.

OEDIPUS

Yes, I do. And I have a task for you  
 as I make this plea—that woman in the house,  
 please bury her as you see fit. You are the one  
 to give your own the proper funeral rites.  
 But never let my father's city be condemned  
 to have me living here while I still live.  
 Let me make my home up in the mountains  
 by Cithaeron, whose fame is now my own.  
 When my father and mother were alive,  
 they chose it as my special burying place—  
 and thus, when I die, I shall be following  
 the orders of the ones who tried to kill me.  
 And yet I know this much—no disease  
 nor any other suffering can kill me—  
 for I would never have been saved from death  
 unless I was to suffer a strange destiny.  
 But wherever my fate leads, just let it go.  
 As for my two sons, Creon, there's no need  
 for you to care for them on my behalf.  
 They are men, and, no matter where they are,  
 they'll always have enough to live on.<sup>206</sup>  
 But my two poor daughters have never known  
 my dining table placed away from them  
 or lacked their father's presence. They shared  
 everything I touched—so it has always been.  
 So take care of them for me. But first let me  
 feel them with my hands and then I'll grieve.  
 O my lord, you noble heart, let me do that—  
 if my hands could touch them it would seem  
 as if I were with them when I still could see.

[Some SERVANTS lead ANTIGONE and ISMENE out of the palace]

What's this? By all the gods I hear something—  
 is it my two dear children crying . . . ?  
 Has Creon taken pity on me  
 and sent out the children, my dear treasures?  
 Is that what's happening?

CREON

Yes. I sent for them.  
 I know the joy they've always given you—  
 the joy which you feel now.

OEDIPUS

I wish you well.  
 And for this act, may the god watch over you

<sup>206</sup>Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, would probably be fifteen or sixteen years old at this time, not old enough to succeed Oedipus.

and treat you better than he treated me.  
Ah, my children, where are you? Come here,  
come into my arms—you are my sisters now—  
feel these hands which turned your father's eyes,  
once so bright, into what you see now,  
these empty sockets. He was a man who,  
seeing nothing, knowing nothing, fathered you  
with the woman who had given birth to him.  
I weep for you. Although I cannot see,  
I think about your life in days to come,  
the bitter life which men will force on you.  
What citizens will associate with you?  
What feasts will you attend and not come home  
in tears, with no share in the rejoicing?  
When you're mature enough for marriage,  
who will be there for you, my children,  
what husband ready to assume the shame  
tainting my children and their children, too?  
What perversion is not manifest in us?  
Your father killed his father, and then ploughed  
his mother's womb—where he himself was born—  
conceiving you where he, too, was conceived.  
Those are the insults they will hurl at you.  
Who, then, will marry you? No one, my children.  
You must wither, barren and unmarried.  
Son of Menoeceus, with both parents gone,  
you alone remain these children's father.  
Do not let them live as vagrant paupers,  
wandering around unmarried. You are  
a relative of theirs—don't let them sink  
to lives of desperation like my own.  
Have pity. You see them now at their young age  
deprived of everything except a share  
in what you are. Promise me, you noble soul,  
you will extend your hand to them. And you,  
my children, if your minds were now mature,  
there's so much I could say. But I urge you—  
pray that you may live as best you can  
and lead your destined life more happily  
than your own father.

CREON

You have grieved enough.  
Now go into the house.

OEDIPUS

I must obey,  
although that's not what I desire.



CREON

In due time  
all things will work out for the best.

OEDIPUS

I will go.  
But you know there are conditions.

CREON

Tell me.  
Once I hear them, I'll know what they are.

OEDIPUS

Send me away to live outside of Thebes.

CREON

Only the god can give you what you ask.

OEDIPUS

But I've become abhorrent to the gods.

CREON

Then you should quickly get what you desire.

OEDIPUS

So you agree?

CREON

I don't like to speak  
thoughtlessly and say what I don't mean.

OEDIPUS

Come then, lead me off.

CREON

All right,  
but let go of the children.

OEDIPUS

No, no!

Do not take them away from me.

CREON

Don't try to keep control of everything.  
You have lost the power your life once had.

[CREON, OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS all enter the palace]

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CHORUS

You residents of Thebes, our native land,  
look on this man, this Oedipus, the one  
who understood that celebrated riddle.

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<sup>207</sup>It is not entirely clear from these final lines whether Oedipus now leaves Thebes or not. According to Jebb's commentary (line 1519), in the traditional story on which Sophocles is relying, Oedipus was involuntarily held at Thebes for some time before the citizens and Creon expelled him from the city. Creon's lines suggest he is going to wait to hear from the oracle before deciding about Oedipus. However, there is a powerful dramatic logic in having Oedipus stumble off away from the palace. In Book 23 of the *Iliad*, Homer indicates that Oedipus died at Thebes, and there were funeral games held in his honour in that city.

He was the most powerful of men.  
All citizens who witnessed this man's wealth  
were envious. Now what a surging tide  
of terrible disaster sweeps around him.  
So while we wait to see that final day,  
we cannot call a mortal being happy  
before he's passed beyond life free from pain.

# (SOPHOCLES) Oedipus at Colonus

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>208</sup> translation by Ian Johnston

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After Oedipus, king of Thebes, overwhelmed with horror at the discovery that he had killed his father and married his mother, stabbed out his eyes, he eventually left Thebes as a blind wanderer, accompanied by his daughter Antigone (there are differing accounts of when and why he left the city). Since Oedipus' two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, were too young to take over, Creon, the brother of Oedipus' wife and mother (Jocasta, who had committed suicide), ruled Thebes as regent. Sophocles' play opens many years later. Oedipus' wanderings have brought him and Antigone to Colonus, a short distance from Athens, where there is a grove sacred to the Furies, the goddesses of blood revenge, also known as the Kindly Ones (the Eumenides).

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OEDIPUS: exiled king of Thebes, an old blind wanderer

ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus

ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus

THESEUS: king of Athens

CREON: regent at Thebes, brother of Oedipus' dead wife, Jocasta

POLYNEICES: elder son of Oedipus

STRANGER: a citizen of Colonus

MESSENGER: a servant of Theseus

CHORUS: elderly citizens of Colonus.

Note that the lines assigned to the CHORUS are those spoken by any member of the Chorus (i.e., the Chorus Leader, individual members of the Chorus, or the Chorus as a single or partial group).

*[The action takes place in front of a grove sacred to the Furies (the Eumenides) in Colonus, a short distance from Athens. Enter OEDIPUS, led on by ANTIGONE]*

OEDIPUS

Antigone, you child of an blind old man,  
what country have we reached? Whose city state?  
What man will welcome wandering Oedipus  
with meagre gifts today? I don't need much,  
and I get even less than that small pittance.  
But that's sufficient for me. My suffering,  
all the long years I have been living through,  
and my own noble origins have taught me  
to be content with that. So, my daughter,  
if you can see a place to rest somewhere  
on public land or by a sacred grove,

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<sup>208</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Sophocles/oedipusatcolonus.htm>

you must lead me there and let me sit,  
so we can find out where we are. We've come  
as foreigners to learn from people here  
and carry out whatever they may say.

ANTIGONE

O father, poor tormented Oedipus,  
my eyes can glimpse, off in the distance,  
walls around the city. This place, it seems,  
is sacred ground clustered thick with grapevines,  
with laurel and olive trees. Inside the grove  
many feathered nightingales are chanting  
their sweet songs. Sit down and rest your limbs  
on this rough stone. For a man advanced in years  
you have come a long, long way.

OEDIPUS

All right, set me there,  
A man who cannot see requires help.

ANTIGONE [helping Oedipus move]

That is a task I do not need to learn— not after all this time.

OEDIPUS [sitting down]

Where are we?

Can you tell me that?

ANTIGONE

I recognize Athens, but not this place.

OEDIPUS

Well, every traveller  
we met with on the road has told us that.

ANTIGONE

Shall I go and find out what this place is called?

OEDIPUS

Yes, my child—if there is anyone here.

ANTIGONE

Well, there are houses. But I don't need to leave.

I see someone nearby.

OEDIPUS

Is he coming here?

Approaching us?

ANTIGONE

He's already come. Ask him  
whatever seems appropriate. He's here.

[Enter the STRANGER, a citizen of Colonus]

OEDIPUS

O stranger, from this girl whose eyes must serve  
herself and me I learn that you have come  
as an auspicious messenger to us  
to tell us what we do not understand.

STRANGER

Before you question me at any length,  
move from where you sit—it's a sacrilege  
to walk upon that ground.

OEDIPUS

What is this place?  
To which of the gods is it held sacred?

STRANGER

It's a holy place, where no man may stay— a sanctuary of goddesses, daughters  
of Darkness and of Earth.

OEDIPUS

Tell me their revered names,  
so once I hear that I may pray to them.

STRANGER

The people here would call these goddesses  
the Eumenides, the all-seeing Kindly Ones. <sup>209</sup>  
But elsewhere other names serve just as well.

OEDIPUS

Then I pray they may receive their suppliant  
with kindness, for from this sacred refuge,  
here in this land, I never will depart.

STRANGER

What do you mean?

OEDIPUS

It has been prearranged— this is my destiny. <sup>210</sup>

STRANGER

I do not dare  
drive you away from here, until I tell  
the city what I'm doing and receive  
their sanction.

OEDIPUS

By the gods, stranger,  
do not dishonour me, a poor wanderer.  
I beg you—tell me what I wish to know.

STRANGER

Then speak up. I will not dishonour you.

OEDIPUS

This country we've just reached, what is it called?

STRANGER

Listen. I will tell you everything I know.  
This entire place is consecrated ground,

<sup>209</sup>. . . *Dardanus*: Ilion is an alternative name for Troy, and Dardanus is the name of a famous ancestor of Priam, king of Troy. Hence, the Trojans were often called Dardanians.

<sup>210</sup>. . . *ancient sceptre*: Tantalus was the legendary founder of the royal family of Argos, called the Pelopids after Tantalus' son Pelops. Tantalus was Agamemnon's and Menelaus' great-great-grandfather.

owned by divine Poseidon. In it, too,  
dwells the Titan god, the fire bearer, Prometheus.<sup>211</sup> That spot where you now sit  
is called this land's bronze threshold, a place  
that safeguards Athens.<sup>212</sup> The neighbouring lands  
claim horseman Colonus was their ruler  
in ancient times, and they all bear his name  
in common. That's what these holy places are, stranger. We do not honour them  
in story  
but rather by living here among them.

OEDIPUS

So this land truly has inhabitants.

STRANGER [pointing to a statue nearby]  
Indeed it does. And they derive their name  
from that hero over there, from Colonus.<sup>213</sup>

OEDIPUS

Who governs them? Do they have a king,  
or is there a popular assembly?

STRANGER

The king of Athens rules the people here.

OEDIPUS

What man now speaks and acts with royal power?

STRANGER

His name is Theseus, son of Aegeus,  
who was king before him.

OEDIPUS

Is it possible  
for one of you to reach him with a message?

STRANGER

With what in mind? To tell him something  
or encourage him to come in person?

OEDIPUS

To inform him that a trifling service  
will garner him great reward.

STRANGER

What assistance  
can a man who does not see provide?

OEDIPUS

The words I say have visionary power.

STRANGER

Be careful, stranger, not to come to grief.

<sup>211</sup> . . . *totally disgraced*: Clytaemnestra's excuse for killing Agamemnon is, of course, the fact that he sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia in order to enable the fleet to sail to Troy.

<sup>212</sup> . . . *still a virgin*: Cypris is a common name for Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love. The name comes from the goddess' frequent association with Cyprus.

<sup>213</sup> . . . *a water jug*: the shaven head may be a token of mourning or a sign of Electra's low status now or both.

For, quite apart from your unlucky fate,  
I see you have a true nobility.  
Wait where you are. I am going to go  
and tell the people what is happening— those in this district, not the city folk.  
They will determine whether you should stay  
or travel back again.

[The STRANGER leaves]

OEDIPUS

Tell me, my child,  
has that stranger left us?

ANTIGONE

He has, father.

You are free to say whatever you wish.

I am the only person close to you.

OEDIPUS

O you fierce-eyed, reverend divinities,  
since here at Athens it was at your shrine  
I first sought refuge, may you not be ungracious  
to Phoebus and to me. When he prophesied  
the many evils I would undergo,  
he said eventually I would find rest,  
once I reached my final goal in a place  
where I would find a sacred sanctuary  
of dreadful goddesses, shelter for strangers,  
and there my life of suffering would end.  
By remaining in that land I would bring  
advantages to those who welcomed me  
and ruin to the ones who drove me out,  
who exiled me from Thebes. Apollo said  
that signs of this would come to me—earthquakes  
and thunder or a lightning flash from Zeus.  
I now recognize it surely must have been  
some trusty omen sent from you that led me  
on my journey to this consecrated ground.  
How otherwise, in my wandering around,  
would I, a temperate man, first have met  
you austere goddesses, who touch no wine,  
or sat down on this sacred rough-hewn rock. <sup>214</sup>

O you deities, I pray you let me  
follow what Apollo's oracle decreed  
and end my life at last, unless perhaps  
I seem unworthy, enslaved to misery

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<sup>214</sup>. . . *couch of death*: Agamemnon was killed in his bath, trapped under his cloak, as if under a hunting net.

far worse than any other mortal man.<sup>215</sup>

Hear me, sweet daughters of eternal Darkness!

Hear me, city named for mighty Pallas,

O Athens, most honoured of all cities, pity the poor ghost of that man Oedipus, for now his old living body is no more.

ANTIGONE

You should stop talking. Some old men are coming to check out the place where you are sitting.

OEDIPUS

I will be quiet. Hide me in the grove some distance from the road, until I learn what these men are saying. That is something we must find out in order to act safely.

[ANTIGONE leads OEDIPUS to a hiding place. Enter the CHORUS, elderly citizens of Colonus]

CHORUS

Look around. Who was that man, that most presumptuous of mortals? Where did he go when he left here?

Keep a sharp look out. Search the place. Hunt everywhere. That old man must be a wandering vagabond, and not a local citizen, for otherwise he'd never dare to set foot in the sacred grove dedicated to those goddesses no one can resist—whose very names we cannot utter without trembling, and from whose gaze when we walk past we avert our eyes and look away, without a word, our voices mute, mouthing pious thoughts in silence. Now, so they say, someone has come, who has no reverence for these deities. We've searched this sacred shrine and caught no glimpse of him. I do not know where he is hiding.

[OEDIPUS and ANTIGONE leave their hiding place and move forward]

OEDIPUS

I am the one you seek. The sounds you make serve me instead of sight, as people say of men who cannot see.

CHORUS [horrified]

Aaaiii, Aaaiii!

What a horrific sight! And that fearful voice!

<sup>215</sup>. . . *your house, as well*: Helen and Clytaemnestra were twin sisters born to Leda, but with different fathers—Tyndareus, king of Sparta and Leda's husband, was Clytaemnestra's father, but Zeus, who in the form of a swan raped Leda, was Helen's.



OEDIPUS

Do not consider me outside the law— I'm begging you!

CHORUS

By our defender Zeus,  
who could this old man be?

OEDIPUS

You citizens,  
guardians of this land, I am a man whose fate  
no one could call happy. That much is clear,  
for otherwise I would not creep around  
requiring help from someone else's eyes,  
my great age propped up by this weak young girl.

CHORUS

Ah, have you been blind since you were born?  
It looks as if a long and wretched life  
has been your lot. But if I can stop you,  
in this place you will bring no more curses  
down on yourself. You go too far—too far! O you most wretched of all strangers,  
do not stumble into this grassy shrine  
where no one is allowed to speak,  
where honey offerings and sweet water  
pour from the mixing bowl. <sup>216</sup>  
I am giving you fair warning.  
Move back from there. Withdraw, and keep your distance. You hear me, you long-  
suffering wanderer?  
If you have anything to say to us,  
leave that forbidden ground.  
Talk where people are allowed to speak.  
Until that time, be silent.

OEDIPUS

Daughter, what course of action should we choose?

ANTIGONE

We must obey the customs here, father,  
act as the locals do. We must listen  
and where we have no choice do what they say.

OEDIPUS

Then take my hand.

ANTIGONE

I have it.

OEDIPUS

<sup>216</sup> . . . *Castor*: Castor and Polydeuces (also called Pollux), the Dioscuri, were twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra, all born at the same time to Leda, queen of Sparta (hence Castor is an uncle of Electra). Polydeuces and Helen were children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytaemnestra were children of Tyndareus. When Castor was killed (before the Trojan war), Polydeuces turned down immortality, but Zeus allowed them to alternate, living among the gods and men, changing each day.

Strangers, if I trust you and leave this sanctuary,  
do not harm me.

CHORUS

Old man, no one will ever  
take you from your refuge here against your will.

[OEDIPUS starts to move out of his hiding place]

OEDIPUS

Is this far enough?

CHORUS

Move on a little more.

OEDIPUS

Further still?

CHORUS

You know what me mean, young girl— lead him out this way.

[.....] <sup>217</sup>

ANTIGONE

Come, father, let your dark steps follow me.

I'll lead you out.

CHORUS

Stranger in a foreign land,  
you ill-fated man, you must have courage  
to hate what the city here has grown to hate  
and to love what it holds dear.

OEDIPUS

Lead me out,  
my child, to where we may speak and listen,  
treading a path of pious righteousness,  
not waging war against necessity.

CHORUS

There! Do not step beyond that rocky ledge!

OEDIPUS

Right here?

CHORUS

That's far enough. Are you listening?

OEDIPUS

Should I sit down?

CHORUS

Move sideways and crouch there— down on the edge of that low rock.

ANTIGONE

Father, let me do it. Gently now . . .

OEDIPUS

Alas for me!

<sup>217</sup> . . . *oracles of Loxias*: Loxias is another name for Apollo, the god whose shrine Orestes consults before coming to Argos (as he mentions at line 115 above). But we do not know the text of the oracle (although we later learn it encouraged him to commit the revenge murders), and Electra is, one assumes, ignorant of Orestes' visit to the shrine.

ANTIGONE [helping OEDIPUS sit down]  
... match me step for step. Lean your ancient frame  
here on my loving arm.

OEDIPUS

Ah, my dreadful fate!

CHORUS

Now you are seated, you unfortunate man,  
speak to us. From what line of mortal men  
do you descend? Who are you to be led like this  
in such distress? What land do you call home?

OEDIPUS

Strangers, I am a man who has been banished.  
I have no home. But do not ...

CHORUS

What is it, old man,  
you would not have us do?

OEDIPUS

You must not ask ... you must not ask me who I am.

CHORUS

Why not?

OEDIPUS

My origin is dreadful.

CHORUS

Tell us more.

OEDIPUS

Alas, my child! What do I say?

CHORUS

Stranger,  
tell us your lineage, your father's name.

OEDIPUS

Alas my child, what will become of me?

ANTIGONE

You've come as far as you can go. You must speak.

OEDIPUS

I will speak. I cannot conceal the truth.

CHORUS

You two have been delaying for some time.  
Get to the point.

OEDIPUS

Are you familiar with  
the son of Laius ...

CHORUS

O no!

OEDIPUS

... the race of Labdacus ...

CHORUS

O Zeus!

OEDIPUS

. . . and the pitiful Oedipus? <sup>218</sup>

CHORUS

That's who you are?

OEDIPUS

You must not be afraid  
of anything I say.

CHORUS

O no! No! No!

OEDIPUS

I am so wretched!

CHORUS

No! No!

OEDIPUS

My daughter,  
what will happen now?

CHORUS

You must leave this land.

Go away!

OEDIPUS

What about those words you swore? How will you keep your promises to me? <sup>219</sup>

CHORUS

A man incurs no punishment from Fate  
when he responds to evils done to him.

You deceived us—now we are doing the same. Such actions bring no gratifying  
reward

but merely pain. <sup>220</sup> So you must go away,  
leave where you are sitting, set off again,  
and hurry out of Athens without delay,  
in case you bring pollution to our state.

ANTIGONE

You reverend strangers, you do not accept  
my aged father. You have heard the stories  
and know what he did without intending to.  
But, strangers, at least pity me, a poor girl,

<sup>218</sup> . . . *Nereids*: These are sea goddesses, daughters of Nereus. Achilles' mother, Thetis, was one of them.

<sup>219</sup> . . . *sons of Atreus*: These lines refer to the centaur Chiron (or Cheiron), half man and half horse, who in the region described, educated Achilles and other heroes. Pelion and Ossa are two famous mountains. Hephaestus is the god who made Achilles' divine armour (at the request of Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis) after his own armour worn by Patroclus had been captured by Hector, the leader of the Trojan forces.

<sup>220</sup> . . . *Maia's country child*: Perseus was the hero who killed Medusa, the most ferocious of the Gorgons (her face turned men to stone). Hermes, divine son of Zeus, assisted Perseus in the exploit. He is called a "country child" because he is associated with farming and hunting.

I beg you, as I plead for him alone,  
 my father. I implore you with these eyes,  
 which can still gaze into your own, like one  
 who shares your blood, let this suffering man  
 win your compassion. In our wretched state  
 you are like gods—we are in your power.  
 Grant us this unexpected benefit!  
 I'm begging you by all the things you love,  
     your child, your wife, your property, your gods!  
 No matter where you search, you will not find  
 a mortal man who can escape the gods  
 when they lead him to disaster.

CHORUS

Know this,  
 child of Oedipus, we do have pity  
 for you and him alike in your ordeal.  
 But we fear what the gods may do to us  
 and lack the power to say anything  
 other than what we have said already.

OEDIPUS

What use is a fine reputation then  
 or glory, if what it turns out to be  
 is empty breath? People claim that Athens,  
     more than any other place, reveres the gods  
 and is the only city with the strength  
 to save a stranger in distress—it alone  
 can rescue him. Yet in my situation  
 where are these qualities? You have made me  
 rise from that rock ledge and will drive me out  
 only because my name makes you afraid.  
 For surely you cannot fear my presence  
 or my actions, because, if I must tell  
 the story of my father and my mother— which is why you fear me—then what  
 matters  
 is not what I did but what I suffered.  
 I know that well. So how am I by birth  
     an evil man, when I was reacting  
 to others who had harmed me? Even if  
 I had fully known what I was doing,  
 you would not allege that I was evil. <sup>221</sup>  
 But as it was, when I went where I did  
 I knew nothing, while those who injured me

<sup>221</sup> . . . *racine lioness*: This is a reference to the monster Chimaera, a fire-breathing lioness with a goat's body and head growing out of its back. The Chimaera was killed by the hero Bellerophon. The reference to Hector is a reminder that he had to face Achilles' shield in his final and fatal encounter with Achilles (described in Book 22 of the Iliad).

in full knowledge of what they were doing  
 sought my destruction.<sup>222</sup>  
 And therefore, strangers,  
 I'm begging you, in the name of the gods,  
 just as you made me leave my refuge,  
 rescue me. While you pay tribute to the gods,  
 do not, at any moment, act impiously.  
 Consider this: they watch those who believe  
 as well as those who show them no respect,  
     and never yet has any godless man  
 escaped them. Strangers, seek help from the gods,  
 and do not shame the good name of Athens  
 by lowering yourselves to profane deeds.  
 You have given this suppliant your pledge,  
 so take me in, protect me to the end. This face of mine is horrible to look at, but  
 when you do, do not dishonour me, for I have come, a pious, holy man,  
 bringing benefits to all the citizens.  
 Once your ruler comes, whoever he is  
 who is your leader, he will hear all things  
     and understand. Meanwhile, do not harm me.

CHORUS

The argument you have just made, old man,  
 in words that carry weight, we must respect.  
 In my view this issue must be resolved  
 by those who rule this land.

OEDIPUS

And where, strangers,  
 is the ruler of this state?

CHORUS

In the city  
 of his ancestors, here in this land. The scout  
 who sent us out has gone to summon him.

OEDIPUS

Do you think he will be concerned enough  
 about a blind man to come in person?

CHORUS

Of course he will, once he finds out your name.

OEDIPUS

Who will tell him that?

CHORUS

It's a long distance,

<sup>222</sup>. . . *slipped past the guard*: This line is corrupt and makes little sense in the Greek. The words "someone slipped past the guard" have been put in to make sense of Electra's words, turning the line into a suggestion that some citizen may have eluded Aegisthus' sentries and paid a tribute to Agamemnon. As Cropp points out, omitting the line makes it read as if the Old Man is interrupting Electra, a dramatically implausible action.

and many things that travellers report  
get passed around. There is no need to worry.  
Once he hears the news, he will come to us.  
We are all familiar with your name, old man,  
so even if the king is tired and resting,  
when he learns of you he'll soon be here.

OEDIPUS

May he get here quickly and bring good fortune  
to me and to his city. What decent man  
does not help himself by helping others?

ANTIGONE

O Zeus! What am I going to say, father?  
What should I think?

OEDIPUS

Antigone my child,  
what is it?

ANTIGONE

I see a woman coming here  
riding a pony—a young Sicilian horse. She's wearing a Thessalian cloth hat  
to keep her face protected from the sun.  
What am I to say? Is it her or not?  
My mind keeps changing! Should I say it's her  
or someone else? What a wretched business!  
Yes, it must be her. As she gets closer,  
the brightness in her eyes is welcoming me.  
She's giving me a signal! It's obvious—  
the rider has to be Ismene.

OEDIPUS

My child,  
what are you saying?

ANTIGONE

I see my sister,  
your daughter! You'll recognize her soon enough,  
once you hear her voice.

[Enter ISMENE] <sup>223</sup>

ISMENE

Ah, there you are, you two,  
my father and my sister, a double joy  
to utter those two words. How difficult  
it was to find you—and now how painful  
it is to look at you!

<sup>223</sup>. . . *Thyestes' son*: Aegisthus is the son of Thyestes (brother of Agamemnon's father, Atreus). Atreus and Thyestes quarreled, and Atreus killed Thyestes' sons and served to him at dinner. Aegisthus survived the slaughter or (in other accounts) was born after the notorious banquet. Euripides' play makes no direct mention of this important part of the traditional story.

OEDIPUS

Are you here, my child?

ISMENE

O father, your fate is sad to witness!

OEDIPUS

O Ismene, have you really come?

ISMENE

Yes I have.

But travelling here was not easy for me.

OEDIPUS

Touch me, my child.

ISMENE

I'll hold you both at once.

OEDIPUS

O children of my blood!

ISMENE

What wretched lives!

OEDIPUS

Antigone's and mine?

ISMENE

And mine as well.

I am the third whose life is miserable.

OEDIPUS

Child, why have you come?

ISMENE

I came for your sake— I'm concerned about you.

OEDIPUS

Did you miss me?

ISMENE

Yes . . . and I came in person to bring news  
with the only trusty servant I possess.

OEDIPUS

Where are your young brothers? They should help you.

ISMENE

They are where they are. Their situation  
at the present time is dreadful.

OEDIPUS

Those two!

In their style of life and dispositions,  
they always seem to like Egyptian ways,  
for in that land men sit around the house  
working the loom, while women leave the home  
all the time to bring back what they live on.

And in your case, my daughters, those two sons,  
who should be doing the work, remain at home,  
like girls, while you two assume the burden



of your poor father's pain, instead of them. This one here, since she stopped being a child  
 and had sufficient strength, has constantly  
 been an old man's guide on his harsh journeys,  
 often wandering barefoot and famished  
 through savage woods and often beaten down  
     by storms or the sun's unrelenting heat.  
 She resolutely sets aside the comforts  
 home provides, so her father can have food.  
 And you too, my child, in earlier days,  
 without the knowledge of those men in Thebes,  
 came to your father, bringing him reports  
 of all the oracles concerning Oedipus.  
 When I was exiled, driven from that land,  
 you became a faithful sentry for me.  
 And now here you are again, Ismene.  
 What recent news have you brought your father?  
 Why have you made this journey from your home?  
 You've not come empty handed—that I know— not without bringing me some new  
 concern.

## ISMENE

Father, I will not speak of what I suffered  
 in my attempts to find out where you live.  
 I do not wish to undergo that pain  
 a second time by telling you the story.  
 I came to talk about the fearful things  
 happening with your two ill-fated sons.  
 At first, being reasonable, they thought  
 about that old curse on the family,  
 how it has clung to your unlucky race,  
 and to make sure the city did not suffer  
 from pollution, they both wanted Creon  
     to be given the throne. <sup>224</sup>  
 But now, urged on  
 by some god or their own corrupted minds,  
 these triply-wretched men are now engaged  
 in vicious war, trying to seize the throne  
 and win a tyrant's power. The younger one  
 has stripped his older brother, Polyneices,  
 of power and expelled him from his home. <sup>225</sup>

<sup>224</sup>... *I'll accept those words*: Cropp suggests that Orestes' rather odd phraseology in this speech and the previous one stems from the fact that he is using the language of ritual, as if he were consulting an oracle, first hoping that he gets a good pronouncement which he can understand and then accepting the "utterance."

<sup>225</sup>... *some new birth*: the Nymphs, minor country goddesses, were associated with physical health, including childbirth and childhood.

So Polyneices, according to what people say  
 throughout the city, has fled for refuge  
 to the Argos valley and is taking  
 a new wife there, a foreigner.<sup>226</sup> His friends  
 are now comrades in arms, and they intend  
 that Argos will soon seize Cadmeanland  
 and win great honour or else sing their praise,  
 exalting them up to the heavens.<sup>227</sup> Father,  
 what I have said is not just idle chat!  
 No! These are desperate acts. At what point  
 the gods will pity you in your distress  
 I do not know.

OEDIPUS

Do you have some sudden hope  
 the gods will ever care enough about me  
 to grant me my salvation?

ISMENE

Yes, father,  
 that's what I think from recent oracles.

OEDIPUS

What are they? My child, what has been foretold?

ISMENE

The people of Thebes will soon seek you out,  
 alive or dead, for their own security.

OEDIPUS

Who might benefit from a man like me?

ISMENE

People say their power depends on you.

OEDIPUS

And so when I am no longer living,  
 at that point I truly become someone?

ISMENE

Yes. For the gods are now supporting you.  
 Earlier they were set on your destruction.

OEDIPUS

That is mean-spirited—to restore power  
 to an old man who in his youth was crushed.

ISMENE

Whatever the cause, you should think of this:  
 Creon will be coming here to deal with you— and soon. It will not take him long.

<sup>226</sup> . . . *ten days ago*: the "quarantine," Cropp notes, was a period immediately after childbirth in which the mother was kept in seclusion to avoid contamination.

<sup>227</sup> . . . *be a man*: There is some confusion and argument about the allocation and position of this line, which in the Greek comes after this speech of Electra's and is divided between Orestes and Electra. I have followed Cropp's suggestion and given the entire line to Electra at the beginning of her speech to Orestes.

OEDIPUS

What for?

Tell me why he would do that, my daughter.

ISMENE

To set you up near Theban territory,  
so they can use their power to control you,  
without you setting foot inside the state.

OEDIPUS

What help am I to them if I'm lying there  
outside their borders?

ISMENE

They face disaster  
should someone fail to pay your tomb due honours.

OEDIPUS

This I could assume without help from the gods.

ISMENE

That's why they want to keep you near their land,  
but not where you might live by your own rules.

OEDIPUS

Will they bury me in Theban soil?

ISMENE

No.

That's not allowed, father. You are guilty  
of killing one of your own blood.

OEDIPUS

In that case  
they will never get their hands on me!

ISMENE

At some point that will be calamitous  
for citizens of Thebes.

OEDIPUS

How will that happen,  
my child? Under what conditions?

ISMENE

From your anger,  
when they stand beside your tomb.

OEDIPUS

Tell me, Ismene,  
where did you hear these things you're saying?

ISMENE

From sacred messengers when they returned  
from the shrine at Delphi.

OEDIPUS

Has Phoebus uttered  
all these things about me?

ISMENE

So those men said  
when they came back to Thebes.

OEDIPUS

What about my sons— has either of them heard this prophecy?

ISMENE

Yes, both of them. They know all about it.

OEDIPUS

So those two sons, the very worst of men,  
heard of this, and instead of loving me,  
preferred to seek the throne. <sup>228</sup>

ISMENE

To listen to this

is difficult, but it's the painful truth.

OEDIPUS

Well then, I pray the gods will not prevent  
the predestined quarrel of these two sons.  
I wish I could be the final arbiter  
of this battle they are about to fight,  
levelling spears against each other. For then  
the one who holds the sceptre and the throne  
would not survive, and the one in exile  
would not be coming back. I am their father,  
but when the Thebans drove me from my home  
in great disgrace, they did not intervene.  
Nor did they defend me. Those two looked on,  
as I was exiled and the herald cried  
the edict of my banishment. You might say  
that that was what I wanted at the time  
and thus the city did the proper thing  
in granting me that gift. That is not true!  
For on the very day when my heart burned  
and my sweetest wish was death by stoning,  
no one appeared to grant what I desired.  
Later on, once all my anger ebbed away,  
I thought my passionate heart had sought  
a punishment too great for past mistakes,  
but then the city, after all that time,  
forced me out of Thebes and into exile. <sup>229</sup>

At that point those two sons could well have helped— two children taking care of  
their own father.

But they refused! They did not say a thing,

<sup>228</sup>... *fleece of gold*: Thyestes and Atreus were brothers who quarreled. Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife, Aerope, and, in revenge, Atreus killed Thyestes' sons and served them up to him for dinner. Aegisthus is Thyestes' surviving son. The golden lamb in question seems to be the symbol of the right to rule in Mycenae.

<sup>229</sup>... *Ammon's land*: This is a reference to North Africa, where Ammon's shrine was located.

not even one small word! By doing that,  
 those two abandoned me, let me wander  
 for all eternity an exiled beggar!  
 It is from these two here, these girls, I get  
 my daily food, a secure resting place,  
 and family care, as much as nature  
 enables them to give. But their brothers  
 betrayed their father for throne and sceptre  
 and power to rule the land. Those sons of mine  
 will never win me as an ally—never!

And they will derive no benefits at all  
 from ruling Thebes as king. All this I know  
 from listening to this girl's prophecies  
 and thinking about those I remember  
 from long ago, which Phoebus Apollo  
 is now at last bringing to fruition. <sup>230</sup>  
 So let them dispatch Creon to find me,  
 or anyone else with power in Thebes.  
 If you, strangers, are willing to protect me,  
 assisted by these revered goddesses  
 who guard your people, then you will receive  
 a powerful saviour for the city  
 and cause my enemies distress.

CHORUS

Oedipus,  
 you have earned our sympathy, you and these girls,  
 and since, in addition to your story,  
 you offer yourself as this land's saviour,  
 I would like now, for your own benefit,  
 to offer some advice.

OEDIPUS

My dearest friends,  
 give me your help, and I will carry out  
 everything you say.

CHORUS

You must cleanse yourself  
 before these goddesses you first approached  
 and on whose grounds you trampled.

OEDIPUS

Tell me how— instruct me, strangers, what I should perform.

<sup>230</sup>. . . *glorious brothers*: Clytaemnestra's brothers are Castor and Polydeuces, or Pollux, the Dioscuri, twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra, all born at the same time to Leda, queen of Sparta (hence Castor is an uncle of Electra). Polydeuces and Helen were children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytaemnestra were children of Tyndareus. When Castor was killed (before the Trojan war), Polydeuces turned down immortality, but Zeus allowed them to alternate, living among the gods and men, changing each day.

CHORUS

First of all, once you have purified your hands,  
bring sacred water from the ever-flowing spring.

OEDIPUS

When I bring this pure water back, what then?

CHORUS

There are bowls, the work of skilful craftsmen— cover the rims and handles on  
both sides.

OEDIPUS

Cover them with what? Wool or olive twigs?

CHORUS

Use wool freshly shorn from a female lamb.

OEDIPUS

All right. What next? How do I end the rite?

CHORUS

Pour your libations facing early dawn.

OEDIPUS

I pour them from the mixing bowls you mentioned?

CHORUS

Yes, from two bowls pour three separate streams,  
but with the last one pour it all at once.

OEDIPUS

Before I set the third bowl with the others,  
what do I fill it with? Tell me that.

CHORUS

With water and honey, but add no wine.

OEDIPUS

And when the dark leaf-covered earth has drunk,  
what then?

CHORUS

With both hands set down olive twigs— three sets of nine—while you recite this  
prayer . . .

OEDIPUS

I need to hear the prayer—that's most important.

CHORUS

Pray that, since we call them the Kindly Ones,  
they will graciously receive a suppliant  
and save him. You must make this prayer yourself  
or have someone recite it in your place.

Speak so no one hears you. Don't pray out loud.

Then leave the place, and do not turn around.

If you do this, then I will have the strength  
to stand beside you as your friend. If not,  
then, stranger, I would be afraid for you.

OEDIPUS

Children, did you hear what the strangers said?

They live here.

ANTIGONE

We heard. Tell us what we must do.

OEDIPUS

It is not possible for me to do it,  
since two afflictions render me unfit: I am not strong enough, and I am blind.  
One of you go in and perform this rite.  
For I believe one heart can intercede  
and atone in full for tens of thousands,  
if that heart is pure. But you must hurry.  
Do not leave me by myself—my body  
cannot shuffle along all on its own,  
not without somebody there to guide me.

ISMENE

I will go and carry out the ritual,  
but where is the place? I need to know that.

CHORUS

It's over there, stranger, beyond the grove.  
If you need anything, there's someone there.  
He will direct you.

ISMENE

I'll go and do it.  
Antigone, look after our father here.  
If helping out our parents requires work,  
we should not consider that a burden.

[Exit ISMENE]

CHORUS

Stranger, to stir up ancient suffering  
that for a long time has been lying dormant  
is a dreadful thing, but I would like to know . . .

OEDIPUS

What it is?

CHORUS

. . . about those torment you endured— the painful, inescapable regrets.

OEDIPUS

By all the laws of hospitality,  
do not bring up the shame I have been through.

CHORUS

But the story is well known, and people  
talk about it still. My friend, I'd like to hear  
the truth about what really happened.

OEDIPUS

No, no.

CHORUS

Please tell me. I am begging you.

OEDIPUS

Alas! Alas!

CHORUS

You should grant me this request.

I have done everything you asked of me.

OEDIPUS

O my friends, I have suffered agonies,  
the worst there are, but the things I did— and may the gods be witness to my  
words!— were unintentional. I did not choose  
to do any of them of my own free will.

CHORUS

How did that happen?

OEDIPUS

Without my knowledge,  
the city entangled me in ruin  
with a disastrous marriage.

CHORUS

Is it true  
you shamed the marriage bed by sharing it  
with your own mother? That's what people say.

OEDIPUS

Alas for me! Those are deadly words to hear!  
Friends, those two girls of mine . . .

CHORUS

What are you saying?

OEDIPUS

Those two daughters—they are abominations!

CHORUS

O Zeus!

OEDIPUS

Born from their mother's agony— the very mother who bore me as well!

CHORUS

So these young girls here are your daughters and . . .

OEDIPUS

Yes, and their father's sisters, too.

CHORUS

O god! <sup>231</sup>

OEDIPUS

Alas! Countless torments return once more,  
wheeling to attack me!

CHORUS

You have suffered . . .

OEDIPUS

What I have been through I cannot forget!

---

<sup>231</sup> . . . *Alpheus*: Cropp suggests that this is a reference to the Olympic games.



CHORUS

You have committed . . .

OEDIPUS

I have committed nothing!

CHORUS

What do you mean?

OEDIPUS

I received her as a gift.

How I wish, in my miserable state,  
I had not taken her as my reward  
for rescuing the city. <sup>232</sup>

CHORUS

You poor man!

What then? Did you murder . . .

OEDIPUS

What is it now?

What do you wish to know?

CHORUS

Did you kill your father?

OEDIPUS

O no, not that! You stab me once again,  
wound piled on wound!

CHORUS

So then you did kill him.

OEDIPUS

I killed him. But in my defence there is . . .

CHORUS

What?

OEDIPUS

. . . something to justify my action.

CHORUS

What is that?

OEDIPUS

I will tell you. I killed men  
who would have slaughtered me, and I did so  
in ignorance. By law I'm innocent,  
and yet I've come to this. <sup>233</sup>

CHORUS

Look over there!

Here comes Theseus, son of Aegeus,

<sup>232</sup>Phoebus is a common name for Apollo, the god whose oracle Orestes consulted before coming to Argos. The god advised him to carry out the revenge murders.

<sup>233</sup>. . . *noble twins*: This is another reference to Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux) twin brothers of Clytaemnestra. Strictly speaking only one of them was a child of Zeus (as was Helen, Clytaemnestra's sister). Clytaemnestra and Castor were children of Tyndareus. The twins occupied a position among the stars (we call them the Gemini), and hence were an aid to navigation.

our ruler, responding to your summons  
and prepared to help.

[Enter THESEUS and ATTENDANTS]

THESEUS

In the past many men  
have told me of the bloody mutilation  
of your eyes, son of Laius, and what I heard  
while on my way here makes me more certain  
I truly recognize just who you are.  
Your clothing and your ravaged features, too,  
both confirm your identity for us.  
I pity you, ill-fated Oedipus,  
and I would like to know what petition  
to me and to the city brings you here,  
you and that unlucky girl beside you.  
Let me hear it. You would have to mention  
something outrageous for me to stand aside.  
I know I myself was raised in exile,  
just as you were, and in foreign countries  
I struggled against many mortal dangers,  
more so than any other man.<sup>234</sup> And thus  
I would not turn away any stranger  
in your position or refuse to help.  
For I know well I am a mortal man,  
and thus my share of what tomorrow brings  
is no greater than your own.

OEDIPUS

Theseus,  
the nobleness in those few words you spoke  
is such that I require no long reply.

You mentioned who I am, who my father was,  
and the land I come from. So there remains  
nothing for me to say except to state  
what I would like, and then my speech is done.

THESEUS

Well, then, say what it is, so that I know.

OEDIPUS

I have come here to offer you a gift,  
this wretched body of mine. To look at,  
it has little value, but the benefits  
it confers surpass a pleasing shape.

THESEUS

You claim you bring us a great advantages.

---

<sup>234</sup>... *the child I lost*: This is a reference to Clytaemnestra's daughter Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed at the start of the Trojan expedition in order to persuade the gods to change the winds so that the fleet could sail. Clytaemnestra gives details of the story in her next long speech.

What are they?

OEDIPUS

You may find out later on,  
but not right now.

THESEUS

Well then, at what point  
will this gift of yours reveal itself to us?

OEDIPUS

When I am dead and you have buried me.

THESEUS

You ask for your life's final ritual  
but ignore what happens before you die,  
or else you do not care.

OEDIPUS

It does not matter.

All those other things are part of my request. <sup>235</sup>

THESEUS

The favour you request from me is small.

OEDIPUS

But take care. This is no trivial matter—the struggle over me will not be small.

THESEUS

Are you referring to your sons and me?

OEDIPUS

My lord, they will be seeking to force you  
to send me back to Thebes.

THESEUS

If that is what you wish,  
then your banishment is not appropriate.

OEDIPUS

No! When I wanted to remain in Thebes  
they would not agree!

THESEUS

You are foolish.

In times of trouble anger does not help.

OEDIPUS

Give me advice once you have heard my story.  
Until then, spare me.

THESEUS

Then tell it to me.

I should not speak until I know the facts.

OEDIPUS

I have suffered dreadfully, Theseus,  
evil after evil—horrific things!

---

<sup>235</sup> . . . *Aulis*: This was the agreed meeting point for the great naval expedition to Troy. Bad winds delayed the fleet for so long that the entire enterprise was jeopardized. The gods demanded a sacrifice from Agamemnon.

THESEUS

Do you mean that ancient family curse  
placed on your race?

OEDIPUS

No, not that at all.

That's something the whole of Greece talks about.

THESEUS

Then are you sick with more than mortal grief?  
What it is?

OEDIPUS

My situation is this.

I was driven away from my own land  
by my two sons, and I cannot return  
because I killed my father.

THESEUS

But why then,  
if you cannot live there, will they summon you?

OEDIPUS

The oracle of the god will force them to.

THESEUS

What evil has the oracle declared  
that makes them so afraid?

OEDIPUS

It prophesied  
that in your country they will be defeated.

THESEUS

And how will they become my enemies?

OEDIPUS

Dearest son of Aegeus, only gods  
are never troubled by old age and death.  
All other things are finally destroyed  
by all-conquering Time. The power of Earth  
passes away, the body's strength withers,  
loyalty perishes, distrust appears, and between one city and another,  
just as between good friends, relationships  
never remain the same. Sooner or later  
pleasant concord turns to bitter hatred  
and then hatred, once again, to friendship.  
So if today between yourself and Thebes  
the sun is shining bright and all is well,  
the endless passage of infinite Time  
engenders innumerable days and nights,  
and in that time some trivial reason  
will persuade them to shatter with their spears  
whatever treaties you now have between you.  
And then, if Zeus is, at that time, still Zeus

and if his son Apollo speaks the truth,  
my frigid, slumbering, and buried corpse  
will drink hot Theban blood. I will not speak  
of secrets that should remain unspoken,  
so let me end my speech where I began:  
if you will only do what you have pledged,  
and if the gods are not deceiving me,  
you will never say you sheltered Oedipus  
here in your land and reaped no benefits.

CHORUS

My lord, this man has, from the very start,  
made it clear to us he would accomplish  
these and similar good things for our state.

THESEUS

Who then would repudiate the friendship  
of a man like this, one for whom, first of all,  
an ally's hearth, by mutual agreement,  
is always welcoming? Then he has come  
as a suppliant to our gods and offers  
no small reward to this land and to me.  
I respect these things—I will never spurn  
the favours of this man. I will establish  
a place here he may live as a citizen.  
If the stranger wishes to remain here,  
I will appoint you his protectors. But if  
he would prefer to, he can come with me.  
Choose the option you think best, Oedipus.

Whatever choice you make will be my own.

OEDIPUS

O Zeus, be gracious to such men as these!

THESEUS

What would you like? To come back to my home?

OEDIPUS

I would, if that had been ordained for me.

But this is the place . . .

THESEUS

What will you do here?

Speak up. I will not countermand your choice.

OEDIPUS

. . . where I will conquer those who drove me out.

THESEUS

If so, your presence here would prove to be  
a major benefit for us.

OEDIPUS

It will, if you fulfil your promises to me.

THESEUS

Have faith in me. I will not let you down.

OEDIPUS

I will not ask you to confirm your pledge  
with an oath, as one does with wicked men.

THESEUS

An oath would be no more reliable  
than giving you my word.

OEDIPUS

What will you do?

THESEUS

What precisely do you fear?

OEDIPUS

Men will come . . .

THESEUS

But these people here will deal with them.

OEDIPUS

Be careful when you leave me.

THESEUS

There is no need  
to instruct me in what I have to do.

OEDIPUS

My fear drives me to do it.

THESEUS

But my heart  
has no fear.

OEDIPUS

You know nothing of their threats.

THESEUS

But I do know this: no one will carry you  
away from here without permission from me.  
Often men utter threats from angry hearts  
in loud and empty words, but when their minds  
regain control once more, their threats are gone.

And if those men are bold enough to act  
on threats they made to take you back by force,  
they will, I tell you, sail into rough seas  
on their harsh journey here. You must take heart.  
That's my advice—even without my pledge— if Phoebus was the one who led you  
here.

And though I am elsewhere, I know my name  
will nonetheless protect you from all harm.

[Exit THESEUS]

CHORUS

Stranger, in this land famed for horses  
you have reached bright Colonus,  
earth's finest home. Here the nightingale,

always chants her sweet, sharp melodies,  
 from deep within green forest groves,  
 living among the wine-dark ivy vines,  
 fruit-rich foliage of the god, a place  
 where no sun penetrates, no winds blow  
 in any storm, and no man ever treads.  
 Here Dionysus, the Bacchic reveller,  
 always roams with his companions,  
 the nymphs who nursed him as a child. <sup>236</sup>

And every day narcissus flowers bloom  
 in lovely clusters fed on heavenly dew,  
 the ancient crown of two great goddesses,  
 as does the glistening gold crocus, too. <sup>237</sup>  
 The sleepless fountains never fail to feed  
 the wandering waters of the Cephissus,  
 whose pure, clear stream flows every day  
 across the ample bosom of the land,  
 bringing rich nourishment to the plain.  
 Nor do the Muses' dancing choruses  
 or Aphrodite of the golden reins  
 fail to grant their favours to this land.

And here we have a certain kind of plant— I have not heard of it in Asian lands,  
 nor does it thrive in that great Dorian isle  
 of Pelops. It grows without man's help,  
 renews itself, and terrifies our foes.  
 This plant truly flourishes in our land,  
 the gray-leafed olive tree, nurturing  
 our country's youth. <sup>238</sup> No young person here  
 will lift a hand to damage or destroy it, nor any citizen living with old age,  
 for it guarded by the ever-watchful gaze  
 of grey-eyed Athena and protector Zeus. <sup>239</sup>

I have more praises for our mother state,  
 a tribute to those most glorious gifts

from a mighty god, our country's proudest boast— the great strength of our  
 colts and stallions  
 and the great power of the sea. For you,

<sup>236</sup>... *in the same house*: The young girl was Cassandra, daughter of Priam, king of Troy, given as a war prize to Agamemnon. She was a prophetess under a divine curse: she always spoke the truth, but no one ever believed her. She is an important character in Aeschylus' treatment of this story in his play Agamemnon.

<sup>237</sup>... *others badly*: These lines of pithy moralizing at the end of Electra's speech and in this speech by the Chorus Leader sound very out of place here. Some editors have removed them as a later addition to the text.

<sup>238</sup>... *given birth*: Some editors find these two and half lines a very odd change of subject for Clytaemnestra, who is now dwelling on her own sorrow. Cropp moves them to the opening of Clytaemnestra's speech at 1380 below, where they do seem more appropriate.

<sup>239</sup>... *harvest times*: At this point in the manuscript two lines appear to be missing.

my lord Poseidon, Cronos' son, placed her  
 on that proud throne and first introduced  
 into our roads the bridle and the bit  
 that curb the wildness in our horses. You trained our hands to ply the flashing oar  
 and race in wonder over open seas,  
 chasing sea nymphs dancing in the waves, the fifty daughters of Nereus. <sup>240</sup>

ANTIGONE

O Athens, land praised more than any other,  
 now is the time to show in how you act  
 just what such splendid commendations mean.

OEDIPUS

What's happening, my child?

ANTIGONE

It's Creon, father.

He's coming towards us—and with an escort.

OEDIPUS

O you old men, my dearest friends, may you now  
 make good that final pledge of yours and save me!

CHORUS

Take heart—our pledge still stands. We may have aged, but still our country's  
 strength has not grown old.

[Enter CREON with an escort]

CREON

You men, noble inhabitants of this land,  
 from your eyes I see that my arrival  
 has gripped you all with unexpected fear.

Do not shrink back or utter hostile words,  
 for I do not come intending to use force.

I am an old man, and I understand  
 that if any state in Greece is truly strong  
 it is the powerful city I have reached.

No. I have been sent here, old though I am,  
 to convince this man to return to Thebes. I was not dispatched by just one person,  
 but by the wish of all the citizens,  
 and more than any other man in Thebes  
 it falls on me to grieve for his misfortune,  
 because he is a relative of mine. <sup>241</sup>

O you, poor miserable Oedipus,

hear what I have to say and come back home!

Cadmeans are all summoning you back—and justly so—I more than all the rest.

<sup>240</sup> *DIOSCOURI*: It is not clear which of the twin brothers speaks to the human characters or whether they alternate or speak together.

<sup>241</sup> . . . *mad fit*. The Keres are the children of Night, death spirits who prey on living human beings. Although they are different from the Furies (who chase down those who have committed murder in the family), here their function seems quite similar.



242

I would be the very worst of all men born  
 if I did not find your suffering painful,  
 seeing you, old man, a wretched outcast,  
 an eternal wanderer and beggar,  
 stumbling around with one young girl for help.  
 Alas, I never thought that she would fall  
 into such degrading misery as this— the poor creature, living like a vagrant,  
 always nursing you in your condition.

She's of marriageable age, but unwed,  
 there for some passing man to violate.  
 In pointing out all these misfortunes,  
 am I not casting a disgraceful slur  
 on you and me and our whole family line?  
 But no one can conceal a public shame.  
 So, Oedipus, by our ancestral gods,  
 listen to what I say—hide our disgrace  
 by agreeing to return to Thebes, the home  
 of your own ancestors. Bid this place here  
 a fond farewell—these men have earned your thanks.  
 But your own homeland merits more respect,  
 because she nursed you all those years ago.

OEDIPUS

You are crass enough to try anything,  
 even to base your devious intent  
 on pleas for justice! Why are you doing this?  
 Why do you wish to catch me once again  
 in a snare that will bring me still more grief?  
 Back when I was suffering from the pain  
 I brought upon myself, I yearned to leave,  
 to be driven from Thebes, but you refused!  
 That favour you were not prepared to grant.  
 Later, once my anger had run its course  
 and I desired to live in my own home,  
 you cast me out, forced me into exile.

At that time you were not concerned at all  
 with those common kinship ties you mention.  
 Now here we are again. When you can see  
 how this city and its inhabitants  
 are all offering me their hospitality,  
 you try to snatch me back once more, voicing  
 your vicious wish in a sweet-sounding speech.  
 And yet what pleasure do you get from this,

<sup>242</sup>. . . of his daughter: Ares, son of Zeus and god of war, killed Poseidon's son, Halirrothius, over the attempted rape of Ares' daughter, Alcippe. Ares was put on trial on Olympus and acquitted by the gods.

welcoming me as a guest against my will?  
It's as if you kept pleading with someone  
to grant a favour but he was unwilling  
and refused to help, and then later on,  
once your spirit had everything you wished,  
he granted your request, when such kindness  
would not be kind at all. In such a case,

would not your joy be empty? Nonetheless,  
that is what you are offering me now— noble-sounding speeches and deceitful  
acts.

I will explain that to these people here  
to show what a dishonest man you are.  
You have not come to lead me to my home,  
but to take me into custody, to set me  
near your borders, so the city of Thebes  
may escape unharmed any future troubles  
coming from this land. But you will not succeed.  
Instead of that what you will get is this:  
my vengeful ghost haunting your land forever  
and for my sons this legacy from me,  
as much of my own land as they will need  
to lie on when they die, no more than that.

As far as Thebes' future is concerned,  
Creon, am I not a wiser man than you?  
Yes, much wiser—since those I listen to  
are the most knowledgeable ones of all, Phoebus Apollo and his father Zeus.  
You come here with that corrupt tongue of yours  
honed sharp as hardened steel, but what you say  
will bring you grief rather than salvation.  
I know these words of mine will not convince you,  
so you should leave. Let us keep living here.  
To exist like this would not be difficult,  
not if it brought enjoyment and content.

CREON

In this debate, which one of us do you think  
has more to lose by what you are doing,  
you or me?

OEDIPUS

For me the sweetest outcome  
will be when you fail to win me over  
or to convince the people standing here.

CREON

You poor man! Will you make a public show  
of how in all these years you have learned nothing?  
Will you keep on disgracing your old age?

OEDIPUS

You have a glib tongue, but I do not know  
any righteous man who can argue well  
and in support of every point of view.

CREON

One can say a lot and yet avoid the issue.

OEDIPUS

As if your speech was short and to the point!

CREON

That is not possible with minds like yours.

OEDIPUS

Go away! I speak for these men here, as well.  
And do not try to set up a blockade  
and spy on me where I am meant to live.

CREON

I call on these men—not on you—to witness  
the way you answer your own family friends.  
If I ever capture you . . . <sup>243</sup>

OEDIPUS

Who could seize me  
if these men, my allies, are unwilling?

CREON

Even without that you will still suffer!

OEDIPUS

You are threatening me? What will you do?

CREON

I have just seized one of your two daughters  
and sent her away. Soon I'll take the other.

OEDIPUS

No!

CREON

Before long you'll have more to cry about.

OEDIPUS

You have taken my daughter?

CREON

Yes I have.

And soon enough I'll have this other one.

OEDIPUS

Alas, strangers, what are you going to do?  
Will you abandon me? Will you not drive  
this sacrilegious man away from here?

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<sup>243</sup> . . . *off to Troy*: In Homer's account (in the *Odyssey*) Menelaus and Helen take a long time to get home from Troy, being blown off course and spending a few years in Egypt. Proteus is the Old Man of the Sea, who helps Menelaus in Egypt. The story of Helen's being detained in Egypt on her way to Troy and never going to the city at all is not in Homer's epic, but was known before Euripides makes use of it here and in his play *Helen*.

CHORUS [to Creon]

You must leave here, stranger—without delay!  
What you have just done and are doing now  
is not acceptable.

CREON [to his escort]

If this young girl  
does not wish to come with us, it's now time  
for you to take her into custody  
against her will.

ANTIGONE

This is insufferable!  
Where can I run to? Who will help me now,  
what gods or men?

CHORUS [to Creon]

Stranger, what are you doing?

CREON [to the Chorus Leader]

I will not lay a finger on this man here,  
but I will take her. She belongs to me.

[CREON and his ESCORT move to apprehend ANTIGONE]

OEDIPUS

O you who rule this land!

CHORUS

These acts of yours,  
stranger, are not just.

CREON

They are quite legal.

CHORUS

How are they legal?

CREON

I am taking what is mine.

OEDIPUS

Help us, Athens!

CHORUS

Stranger, what are you doing?  
Leave her alone—or else you'll quickly face  
a test where we resolve this in a fight.

CREON

Stay back!

CHORUS

Not if you keep acting in this way.

CREON

If you harm me, you'll be at war with Thebes.

OEDIPUS

Is that not just what I predicted?

[Members of CREON'S ESCORT seize ANTIGONE]

CHORUS

Let go!

Take your hands off that girl immediately!

CREON

Do not give orders to those you do not rule.

CHORUS

I'm telling you to let that young girl go.

CREON [to one of his soldiers holding Antigone]

And I am ordering you to take her off.

[The ESCORT starts to drag ANTIGONE away]

CHORUS

Come here, you citizens of Colonus!

Come here and help! The city—our city— is being violently attacked! Help us!

ANTIGONE

It's over for me—I'm being dragged away!

O you strangers, you are our hosts and friends . . .

OEDIPUS

Where are you, my child?

ANTIGONE

They're forcing me to go.

OEDIPUS

Give me your hand!

ANTIGONE

I can't—I haven't got the strength.

CREON

You men, take her away!

OEDIPUS

Alas, I'm finished!

[Creon's SOLDIERS take ANTIGONE away]

CREON

You will not be stumbling around again

using these two young girls as your support.

But since you wish to win a victory

over your native country and your friends,

on whose behalf I undertook these acts,

though I am their king, enjoy your triumph.

I know in time to come you'll recognize

how in all your actions, now and in the past,

you have not acted well by giving in,

despite your friends, to your own temper.

That has always led you to disaster. <sup>244</sup>

[The CHORUS moves to block CREON from leaving.]

<sup>244</sup>. . . *blessed hill of Cecrops*: The Isthmus is the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land joining the Peloponnese (where Argos is situated) with the main part of Greece. Cecrops is the mythical first king and founder of Athens. The Cecropian Hill is a reference to the Acropolis in Athens.

CHORUS

Stop there, stranger!

CREON

I warn you: do not touch me!

CHORUS

If those young girls are taken away from here,  
I will not let you leave.

CREON

If you do that,  
you'll soon be giving Thebes a greater prize—  
for I'll be taking more than these two girls.

CHORUS

What do you mean to do?

CREON [pointing to Oedipus]

I'll seize that man  
and carry him away.

CHORUS

That's a bold threat.

CREON

One that will be made good without delay,  
unless this country's ruler intervenes.

OEDIPUS

You glib talker! Would you lay hands on me?

CREON

Do as I tell you and keep quiet!

OEDIPUS

No!

May the spirits here permit me to call down  
one more curse against you, you worst of men,  
since you have hauled away that helpless girl  
and taken by force my one remaining eye.

May all-seeing Helios, god of the sun,  
grant you and your entire family  
a life like mine when you are growing old.

CREON

Do you see this, you men of Colonus?

OEDIPUS

They are observing you and me—they see  
that when hostile actions make me suffer,  
I defend myself with words.

CREON

I'll not check

the anger in my heart one moment more—  
though I'm alone and age has slowed me down, I'll seize this man and lead him off  
by force!

[CREON moves to take OEDIPUS away by himself.]

OEDIPUS [struggling with Creon]  
Help me! Help!

CHORUS  
How insolent you are, stranger,  
if you believe you can accomplish this!

CREON  
That is my intention.

CHORUS  
If you succeed,  
then I will say our city is no more.

CREON  
With justice on its side, weakness conquers might.

OEDIPUS [still struggling with Creon]  
You hear the sort of words he splutters?

CHORUS  
But great Zeus knows that he will not succeed  
in doing what he says.

CREON  
Zeus may well know,  
but you do not.

CHORUS  
Your actions are outrageous!

CREON  
An outrage? Yes, but one you must endure!

CHORUS  
All those of you who rule this land, help! Help!  
Come here on the run! Come on! These Thebans  
are on the move back across the border!

[THESEUS enters with a few ATTENDANTS]  
THESEUS

Why all this shouting? What's happening here?  
What are you afraid of? Why did you stop  
my sacrifice at the altar to Poseidon,  
god of the sea and lord of Colonus?  
Explain all this so that I understand  
why I had to hurry here more quickly  
than was convenient.

OEDIPUS  
I know that voice!  
My dearest friend, I have just been suffering  
dreadful things from this creature here.

THESEUS  
What things?  
Who has mistreated you? Tell me.

OEDIPUS  
Creon has—

the man you see here. He took my children,  
the only two I have.

THESEUS

What are you saying?

OEDIPUS

I've told you what I have had to suffer.

THESEUS [to his ATTENDANTS]

One of you men, go as fast as you can  
to those altars. Tell all the people there  
to leave the sacrifice and move full speed—  
both on foot and horseback—to that junction  
where two highroads meet, so those young girls  
do not pass by the place and I become  
an object to be laughed at by this stranger  
because his power got the better of me.  
Go now! Do as I say—and quickly!

[One of the attendants accompanying Theseus runs off. THESEUS turns his attention to CREON]

As for this man, if my anger judged him  
as he deserves, he would not escape my hand  
without some injury. But now those laws  
he himself brought with him when he came here  
will render judgment—we need no others.  
You will not leave this land until you bring  
those young girls back and set them in plain view  
right here in front of me. What you have done  
is a disgrace to me, to your parents,  
and to your native land. You marched in here,  
to a city state that honours justice  
and never condones acts outside the law,  
and brushed aside this land's authorities,  
bursting in like this and seizing prisoners,  
using force to take whatever you desired.  
You seem to think this city has no men  
or is full of slaves and I am nothing.  
It was not Thebes who taught you to be bad.  
That state does not like raising lawless men  
and would not praise your actions if it learned  
that you were stealing from me and the gods,  
forcefully abducting their poor suppliants.  
If I were to move into your country, even with the most righteous of all claims,  
I would not seize someone or lead them off  
without permission of the ruling power,  
whoever he might be. I would know how  
a stranger ought to act with citizens.  
But you are a disgrace to your own city.



Thebes does not deserve that. Advancing years  
 have made you old and robbed you of all sense.  
 So I tell you now what I said before—  
 have those girls brought here as quickly as you can,  
 unless you wish to be held here by force,  
 a resident of this land against your will.  
 What my tongue utters, I intend to do.

CHORUS [to Creon]

You see the situation you are in, stranger? From your origins you seem a righteous man,  
 but your actions show you are dishonest.

CREON

Son of Aegeus, I have not done these things  
 because I thought Athens was devoid of men,  
 as you have claimed. No. I had sound reasons. But I did not believe your citizens  
 would be so devoted to my relatives  
 that they would keep them here against my will.  
 And I was sure people would not welcome  
 a polluted man, who killed his father  
 and whose unholy marriage was exposed,  
 a mother wedded to her son. For I knew  
 such wise restrictions were traditional  
 with the Council on the Hill of Ares,  
 which never would permit such vagrant types  
 to settle in the Athenian state.<sup>245</sup>

Trusting that knowledge, I chased down my prey.

But I would not have acted in this fashion,  
 if he had not called down stinging curses  
 on my family and me. In my view,  
 what he made me suffer entitled me  
 to take revenge. Anger never grows old  
 until death comes, for dead men feel no pain.  
 You will deal with this however you wish.  
 What I say is right, but I am alone  
 and therefore feeble. Still, though I am old,  
 I will seek to pay you back for what you do.

OEDIPUS

What blatant arrogance! For whose old age  
 do you think this abuse is more degrading,  
 yours or mine? Against me that mouth of yours  
 spits out words like murder, incest, misery—  
 sufferings I, in my wretchedness, endured  
 through no fault of my own. All these events

<sup>245</sup>The Hill of Ares is a rocky outcrop near the entrance to the Acropolis in Athens. The Council there, the Areopagus, was a court dealing with criminal and civil cases and general moral censorship in the earlier days of Athenian democracy.

were pleasing to the gods—perhaps because my family long ago offended them. For looking at my life, you could not find a single reason to blame me for mistakes for which I needed to pay retribution with destructive acts injuring myself and my own kindred. Explain this to me: if some divine voice in an oracle told my father he was going to die at the hand of his own son, how can you justly blame me for it. I was not born. No father's seed had yet begotten me, nor had any mother's womb conceived me. I did not exist! And if I was born, as I was, to a life of wretchedness, had a lethal fight with my own father, and killed him, with no idea who he was or what I had done, are you justified in disparaging me for what I did without intending to? As for my mother, you disgraceful brute, are you not ashamed to force me to speak about her marriage, when she was your sister? Well then, I shall. I will not stay silent about the details, when you have gone to such great lengths to talk of sacrilegious things. She gave birth to me—yes, alas for me, she was my mother. But I did not know that, and nor did she. And she had children with the son she bore, to her great shame. But this one thing I know—you freely choose to heap insults on us, but I did not freely choose to marry her, nor do I ever choose to mention it. No, I will not be called an evil man because I married her and killed my father, that death you keep on hurling in my teeth, always abusing me with bitter insults.

Here is a question. How would you answer? If someone were to march in here right now and attempt to kill you, you righteous man, would your first response be to ask the killer, "Are you my father?" or to fight him back? It seems to me that, if you love your life, you would fight back against the murderer, not search for what was legally correct. That is how I was led on by the gods and embarked upon a life of evils.

I do not think my father's ghostly shade,  
if it came back to life, would contradict me.  
But because you are not a righteous man,  
you think you can say anything at all,  
without considering if what you speak  
is suitable or should not be mentioned. And so in front of all these people here  
you keep hurling accusations at me.  
You think it serves your purposes to flatter  
the great name of Theseus and Athens  
as a well-governed state. But when you praise,  
you forget that if there is one city  
that understands how to respect the gods  
that place is Athens—she excels in that.  
Yet it is from here you wished to steal me,  
an old man and a suppliant, as well.  
You laid hands on me, tried to drag me off,  
after having hauled away my daughters.  
So now I call upon these goddesses,  
I appeal to them, and with my prayers  
I beseech them to come to my aid here,  
to fight on my behalf, so you may learn  
the quality of those who guard this city.

CHORUS

My lord, this stranger is a worthy man.  
His misfortunes have been devastating,  
but he deserves our help.

THESEUS

We have talked enough!  
Those who took the girls are hurrying off,  
while we, the ones they robbed, are standing still.

CREON

I am a weak man. What would you have me do?

THESEUS

I want you to lead us on the pathway  
to those girls, while I serve as your escort,  
so if you are keeping those two children  
in this place, you will personally show me  
where they are. But if those who have seized them  
are on the run, there is nothing we need do,  
for other men are chasing after them,  
from whom they never will escape and leave  
this land to give thank offerings to the gods.  
Come, then, lead on. And you might ponder this—  
the hunter has been hunted down, and Fate  
has seized you while you were stalking others.  
What people gain unjustly with a trick

they do not keep, and no one else involved  
 will help you in this matter. For I know  
 you would not reach such heights of insolence  
 and act so recklessly as you do now  
     all on your own, without accomplices.  
 You were relying on someone else's help  
 when you resolved to carry out this act.<sup>246</sup>  
 I need to think further on this matter—  
 one man must not prove stronger than the state.  
 Do these words of warning make any sense,  
 or do they now seem as meaningless to you  
 as what you heard when you were planning this?

CREON

Here in Athens, you can say what you wish.  
 I will not object. But when I am home,  
 I, too, will realize what must be done.

THESEUS

Make your threats, but move. And you, Oedipus,  
 stay here, and do not worry. Trust this pledge—  
 unless I die beforehand, I will not rest  
     until I have restored your children to you.

[CREON, THESEUS, and the ATTENDANTS leave]

OEDIPUS [calling after Theseus]

Bless you, Theseus, for your noble heart  
 and for your righteous care on my behalf!

CHORUS

O how I wish I could be there,  
 where the enemy wheels to fight  
 and quickly joins the battle clash,  
 the clamour of Ares' brazen spears,  
 hard by the Pythian shore—  
 or else beside the torch-lit strand  
 where those two goddesses perform  
     their sacred rites for mortal men  
 whose tongues their holy ministers,  
 the Eumolpidae, have silenced  
 by placing there a seal of gold.<sup>247</sup>  
 There, I think, our warlike Theseus

<sup>246</sup>Theseus is apparently assuming that Creon has entered into a secret agreement with some unspecified Athenian conspirators before challenging Theseus' royal authority by entering his territory. There is no mention of that elsewhere in the play or in other versions of the story.

<sup>247</sup>The Chorus is here imagining the impending clash between Theseus and Creon, which, in their view, may take place either on the bay of Eleusis ("the Pythianshores") or else at Eleusis, the centre of a major religious festival dedicated to the goddess Demeter ("beside the torch-lit shore"). In the next section they consider a third possibility. Ares is the god of war, and the goddesses referred to are Demeter and her daughter Persephone. The Eumolpidae were the priests of the religious rituals, responsible for ensuring the secrets of the divine mysteries.

and those two unmarried girls  
will soon meet in this land of ours,  
amid the cries of our brave fighting men.

Or else they may be closing in  
on pastures west of Oea's snowy peak,  
racing ahead on youthful horses,  
their chariots careening at full speed.

Now Creon will be overthrown!

Our men are terrifying in war,  
and Theseus' troops are battle strong.

Every bit and bridle glitters,  
as all our horsemen charge the foe,  
in honour of equestrian Athena

and the god encircling the earth, lord of the sea, Rhea's beloved son. <sup>248</sup>

Have they already come to blows,  
or are our men about to fight?  
My mind is telling me to hope  
we soon will meet those two young girls,  
whose suffering has been intense,  
afflictions they have undergone  
at the blood-linked hands of their own kin.

Today Zeus brings some great event  
to its fulfilment, its final end.

I can foresee a glorious fight! O to be a dove on the wing,  
as strong and swift as a storming wind, to soar up high in the upper air  
and gaze from a cloud on the battle below!

O Zeus, who watches everything,  
almighty king of all the gods,  
grant to defenders of this land  
the strength to win a victory,  
to catch the enemy unaware  
and end the chase successfully!

And I pray that Pallas Athena

your revered daughter, grants that, too,

as well as Apollo, the hunter god, and with him his sister Artemis,  
who tracks swift-moving speckled deer—

O may they bring their two-fold help,  
assisting our citizens and Athens.

[Enter THESEUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and ATTENDANTS]

CHORUS [to OEDIPUS]

Well, my wandering friend, you cannot say  
those watching out for you are lying prophets—

<sup>248</sup>This tribute to the two main deities of Athens, Athena and Poseidon, identifies the former with the epithet *hippeia* ("of the horse," "equestrian"), an association linked to her as the inventor of the chariot, and the latter by a common epithet "encircling the earth" and by a reference to his mother, Rhea, also the mother of the gods Zeus and Hades.

I see your daughters being escorted back.

OEDIPUS

What? Where are they? What are you talking about?

ANTIGONE

O father, father, I wish one of the gods  
would let you see this very best of men,  
who brought us here and led us back to you.

OEDIPUS

My child, are you really here, both of you?

ANTIGONE

Yes—saved by the strong hands of Theseus  
and his most loyal comrades.

OEDIPUS

O children,  
come to your father and let me hold you.  
I was losing hope you would be coming back.

ANTIGONE

You will get your wish. That embrace you want  
is what we long for.

OEDIPUS

Where are the two of you?

ANTIGONE

We're coming—both of us together.

[ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and OEDIPUS embrace]

OEDIPUS

My dearest children!

ANTIGONE

To any father  
every child is dear.

OEDIPUS

An old man's support . . .

ANTIGONE

With a destiny as wretched as his own.

OEDIPUS

I am now holding those I love the most.

If I should die with you two beside me,

I could not be entirely unhappy.

O children, hold me close—one on each side—

cling to your father, help him recover

from his past days of lonely wandering,

a life of misery. And now tell us

what you went through, but keep the speeches short—

from girls like you a brief word is enough.

ANTIGONE

Father, the one who rescued us is here.

He is the one you should be listening to,

the man who did it. What I have to say  
will not be much.

OEDIPUS [to THESEUS]

You must not be amazed,  
my friend, that I keep talking for so long  
to these children, so suddenly restored. For I know that my present joy in them  
I owe entirely to you. You saved them— you and no one else. And may gods grant  
to you and to this land what I would wish,  
for among all those living on the earth  
only here with you have I encountered  
men of piety and just character  
who tell no lies. I know that about you,  
and I pay tribute to your qualities  
with these words of mine. Everything I have  
I have because of you and no one else.  
O royal king, hold your right hand out to me,  
so I can touch it. If it is lawful,  
let me be permitted to kiss your cheek.  
But what am I saying? A wretch like me,  
how could I want you to touch a man  
in whom every form of defiling stain  
has found a home? No, I will not touch you.  
That is an action I cannot permit,  
not even if you yourself were willing.  
Only those mortals who have been with me  
in my misfortunes can share my suffering. <sup>249</sup>  
So from where you stand accept my gratitude,  
and, as you have done up to this moment,  
deal with me justly in the days to come.

THESEUS

Given your delight in these two children,  
I am not surprised your conversation  
has taken some time or that you prefer  
to talk to them before you talk to me.  
I can find no offence to me in that.  
I do not wish to add lustre to my life  
through the words I speak, but by what I do.  
And I have demonstrated that to you,  
old man, for my word has not proven false  
in any of those promises I made.  
I am here, having brought back your daughters  
alive and unharmed by the threats they faced.

---

<sup>249</sup>These lines indicate that Oedipus still feels he is suffering from religious pollution. Hence, anyone who shows him affection (e.g., by touching) runs the risk of being contaminated. Those who have been with him throughout his suffering run no such risk, since they have long been in frequent physical contact with him.

As for how we triumphed in that struggle,  
why should I vainly boast about a fight  
whose details you will hear from these two girls  
when you get to spend some time together.

But a moment ago, on my way here,

I heard an odd report, and I would like  
to learn what you advise. It was quite short,  
but very strange and worth attending to,  
for men should never overlook anything  
that might be of concern.

OEDIPUS

What did it say,  
son of Aegeus? Describe it to me.  
Otherwise I have no idea at all  
what you wish to know.

THESEUS

People say a man,  
someone who is a relative of yours  
but not from Thebes, has somehow made his way  
to Poseidon's altar and is sitting there,  
where I was offering a sacrifice  
the first time I was summoned here.

OEDIPUS

Where is he from?

If he's a suppliant, what does he want?

THESEUS

From what people tell me, I only know  
he wishes to have a brief word with you  
about some minor matter.

OEDIPUS

What about?

If he's there sitting as a suppliant,  
the issue is not trivial.

THESEUS

They say  
he only wants to have a talk with you  
and then safe passage to return from here.

OEDIPUS

Who would sit there praying for such things?

THESEUS

Could it be a member of your family,  
someone from Argos, who might be asking  
a favour from you?

OEDIPUS

Stop there, my dear friend!

THESEUS



What's troubling you?

OEDIPUS

You must not ask me to . . .

THESEUS

Do what? Tell me.

OEDIPUS

From what you said just now,

I know the suppliant.

THESEUS

Who is he?

And why should I find him offensive?

OEDIPUS

My lord, he is a son of mine, a person

I detest. What he has to say would pain me

more than words from any other man.

THESEUS

What? Could you not just listen to him speak

and then not do what you don't wish to do?

Is there any harm in merely listening?

OEDIPUS

My lord, his voice has become abhorrent

to me, his father. Do not compel me

to yield to his request.

THESEUS

But consider this—

does not the fact that he's a suppliant

force your hand? What about the reverence

you owe the god?

ANTIGONE

Father, listen to me. Though I am young, I'll offer my advice. Permit the king to act as his own heart

and the god dictate and do what he desires. And for the sake of your two daughters, let our brother come here. You need not fear.

His words cannot force you to change your mind, if what he says is not for your own good.

What harm is there in listening to him?

As you know, a conversation can expose

malicious acts someone intends to do.

Besides, he is your son, and even if

he harmed you with the most immoral act,

for you to take revenge by hurting him, father, would not be right. So let him come.

Other men have evil sons who make them

intensely angry, but when they listen

to advice from friends, then, as if spellbound,

their mood softens and they are pacified.

Set aside the present—think of the past,

the sufferings your parents made you bear.  
If you consider that, then I am sure  
you'll recognize how an evil temper  
can lead to catastrophic consequences. This is a serious matter, and you  
have every reason to reflect on it—  
you have no eyes and can no longer see. <sup>250</sup>  
Do what we ask. For it is not proper  
that those pleading on behalf of justice  
should have to persist with their entreaties,  
nor is it appropriate that someone  
who has been treated kindly does not know  
how to show such kindness in return.

OEDIPUS

My child, what you desire is difficult for me.  
However, your speech has won me over.  
We will do as you wish. But still, my friend,  
if that man does come here, I only pray  
that no one will end up controlling me.

THESEUS

I do not need to hear you say that twice.  
Once is enough. I do not wish to boast,  
old man, but you should surely understand  
you are quite safe, if gods keep me alive.

[THESEUS and his ATTENDANTS leave]

CHORUS

A man desperate for many years of life,  
not content to live a moderate span,  
is, in my judgment, obviously a fool.  
For many feelings stored by lengthy years  
evoke more pain than joy, and when we live  
beyond those years that are appropriate,  
then our delights are nowhere to be found.  
The same Deliverer visits all of us,

and when our fate from Hades comes at last, there is no music, dance, or  
wedding song—  
no—only the finality of Death.

The finest of all possibilities  
is never to be born, but if a man  
sees the light of day, the next best thing by far  
is to return as quickly as he can,  
to go back to the place from which he came.  
For once the careless follies of his youth  
have passed, what harsh affliction is he spared,

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<sup>250</sup> Antigone's obvious point here is that in his past actions Oedipus has let his explosive temper take control of his actions, with disastrous effect. The most obvious evidence for that is his self-inflicted blindness.

what suffering does he not undergo?  
Envy and quarrels, murder, strife and war,  
until at last he reaches his old age,  
rejected and alone, unloved and weak, a state where every form of sadness dwells.

That is where I live, but not alone,  
for suffering Oedipus is there as well—  
like some north-facing cliff beside the sea

lashed on every side by winter blasts, beaten constantly by breaking waves  
of violent disaster, storms which come  
from western regions of the setting sun,  
or eastern countries where it rises,  
or southern realms of noontime heat,  
or northern mountains, dark as night.

ANTIGONE

Look there! It appears as if the stranger  
is coming here alone, without an escort.

Father, he has tears streaming from his eyes.

OEDIPUS

Who is he?

ANTIGONE

The one we talked about just now—  
it's Polyneices. He's coming closer!

[Enter POLYNEICES. He greets ANTIGONE and ISMENE first.]

POLYNEICES

Alas, my sisters, how should I begin?  
Should I lament my own misfortunes first  
or my father's troubles? I see him here,  
an old man, and I find him with you  
cast out in a foreign land, an exile,  
dressed in such disgusting clothes—so filthy  
the grime from years ago is now engrained  
in his old flesh, putrefying his skin.

Above those empty sockets in his face  
his wild dishevelled hair blows in the wind,  
and I suppose the food he has with him  
is just the same, scraps for his poor belly.  
I am a wretch to learn of this too late!

[POLYNEICES turns his attention to OEDIPUS.]

I admit that in the care I've shown for you  
I've proved myself the very worst of men—  
and I'm the one confessing this to you!  
But since in all he does Zeus shares his throne  
with divine Compassion, let that goddess  
inspire you, father. For the wrongs I did  
can be made good—I cannot make them worse.

Why are you silent? Say something, father.

Do not turn aside! Will you not answer me?  
Will you dishonour me—send me away  
without uttering a word or telling me  
why you are so angry?

[OEDIPUS refuses to acknowledge POLYNEICES]

Come, my sisters,  
you are this man's daughters. You, above all,  
should try to ease that stubborn tongue of his  
which makes him so difficult to talk to.  
Otherwise he will never speak to me  
and will dismiss me in disgrace from here,  
where I stand a suppliant to the gods.

ANTIGONE

You poor unfortunate, tell him yourself  
the reason you came here. A moving speech  
may well awaken pleasure, rage, or pity  
and rouse a silent listener to speak.

POLYNEICES

You have advised me well. I will speak out.  
And to begin with, I appeal for help  
to lord Poseidon, for at his altar  
the king of Athens told me to stand up  
and come here, giving me assurances  
I could listen and speak and leave unharmed. I trust these promises will be  
observed,

strangers, by you, by both my sisters here,  
and by my father, too. And now, father,

I want to tell you the reason I am here.  
I have been driven from my native land  
into exile because, as your elder son,  
I thought the right to sit upon your throne  
and wield your royal power belonged to me.  
But then Eteocles, my younger brother,  
forced me out of Thebes, not by prevailing  
with legal arguments or trial by combat,  
but by persuading Thebes to back his side.  
The most important cause of this, in my view,  
is that old curse placed on your family,  
an opinion I have heard from prophets, too.

And so I went to Dorian Argos,  
made king Adrastus my father-in-law,  
and bound to me as sworn companions  
all the most celebrated warriors  
in Apian lands, so that with these allies  
I might levy an armed force of spearmen  
in seven companies to march on Thebes

and die in a just cause or else drive out  
the people who had treated me this way.<sup>251</sup>  
What then do I now seek by coming here?  
Father, I have come to you in person  
pleading for your help—with prayers from me  
and from my comrades, those seven spearmen,  
who with their seven armies now surround  
the entire Theban plain. Of those leaders,  
one is spear-hurling Amphiaraus,  
an expert warrior and preeminent  
in reading omens in the flights of birds.  
The second chieftain there is Tydeus,  
from Aetolia, son of Oeneus.  
The third is Argive-born Eteoclus;  
the fourth is Hippomedon, sent to Thebes  
by Talaos, his father. The fifth of them,  
Capaneus, boasts he will burn Thebes  
and utterly obliterate the city.  
The sixth, Arcadian Parthenopaeus,  
is eager for the fight. He gets his name  
from Atalanta, who was his mother. She remained a virgin for many years  
before she married and gave birth to him.<sup>252</sup>  
I am the seventh of them, your own son,  
or if not yours, a child of evil fate,  
although I may be yours in name.<sup>253</sup> I've brought  
to Thebes a valiant force of Argives. Each and every one of us implores you,  
as you love your daughters and your life,  
pleading with you, father, to put aside  
that oppressive rage you feel against me,  
as I set out to pay my brother back.  
He forced me into exile and robbed me  
of my native land. For if we can trust  
in prophecy, then those allied with you,  
so say the oracles, will win the day.  
So by our fountains and our family gods,  
I'm begging you to listen and relent.  
For I am a stranger and a beggar  
on foreign soil, and so are you, as well.  
You and I both share a similar fate—

<sup>251</sup>The words Dorian and Apian in these lines both refer to the Peloponnese. The word Argos by itself can refer to a number of different places in ancient Hellas.

<sup>252</sup>Eteoclus, the Argive leader in the force Polyneices has assembled, should obviously not be confused with Eteocles, Polyneices' brother. The name Parthenopaeus means "child of the maiden" or "child of the virgin."

<sup>253</sup>Polyneices words mean, in effect, "I am your son, but if I am not (because you have disowned me), then I am the child of fate, even if among the general public I am still considered your child."

we get a place to live by flattery, paying court to others, while my brother, unhappily for me, lives in the palace, an arrogant tyrant mocking both of us. If you become our ally in this fight,

I'll scatter his armed forces to the winds—  
that won't be difficult or take much time—  
and then I'll bring you back and set you up  
in your own home and me in mine and drive  
Eteocles away by force. All this  
I promise to achieve with your support.  
Without you, I shall not return alive.

CHORUS

For the sake of the king who sent him here,  
Oedipus, make a suitable response  
before you send him on his way.

OEDIPUS [to the CHORUS]

You men,  
guardians of this land, if Theseus  
were not the one who sent this man to me,  
thinking it right that I should speak to him,  
then he would never hear me say a word.  
But since you all insist he ought to have  
an audience with me before he leaves,  
let him hear what I have to say—my words  
will never bring his life the slightest joy.

[OEDIPUS turns his attention to POLYNEICES]

You there, you most despicable of men,  
when you were on the throne and held the sceptre,  
the power your brother now wields in Thebes,  
you hounded me, your father, from the land,  
pushed me into exile, and made me wear  
these garments which, when you look at them now,  
bring tears into your eyes, because you find  
your life is just as miserable as mine! <sup>254</sup>  
For me there is no point in shedding tears—  
while I am still alive, I must endure it,  
remembering that you're my murderer.  
You forced me to live in this wretched state!  
You two banished me, and because of you,  
I am a vagrant, begging every day

<sup>254</sup>This detail seems to contradict the chronology of events concerning the governance of Thebes. According to lines ff. above, after Oedipus blinded himself, his sons deferred to the authority of Creon, who ruled as regent, and it seems they began their fight after Oedipus went into exile. Creon himself speaks as if he has sole regal authority in Thebes, but we are told (by Polyneices and Oedipus) that Eteocles is now the ruling king. There has been no suggestion up to this point that Polyneices was ever de facto king of Thebes, although, as he says, he is the elder son and therefore, in his eyes, the rightful heir.

for bread from strangers. If I had not fathered  
 these two daughters, who serve as my support,  
 I would have died for lack of help from you.  
 But now these girls are looking after me—  
 they provide for me and share my suffering.  
 They are like men, not women. But you two,  
 you are both bastards, born from someone else,  
 no sons of mine! And so the eye of god  
 is watching you—but not as it will soon,  
 if your armies mean to march on Thebes.  
 For you will never overwhelm that city.  
 Before that happens, you and your brother  
 will fall, polluted by each other's blood.  
 And now I summon those very curses  
 I called down earlier against you both.  
 I cry to them to come to my assistance,  
 so that the two of you will understand  
 those who bore you are worthy of respect. <sup>255</sup>  
 It is not right to treat them with contempt,  
 because a father who had sons like you  
 has lost his eyes. These girls did not do that. And so if Justice established long ago  
 and sanctioned by our ancient laws still sits  
 alongside Zeus, these curses I call down  
 will overpower your suppliant prayers  
 and all claims to the throne. <sup>256</sup> Get out of here!  
 I spit you out! You are no son of mine!  
 You most contemptible of evil men!  
 Take with you these prayers I make on your behalf—  
 may your armies never overwhelm that land  
 where you were born, may you never return  
 to the land of Argos, but rather die  
 at the hand of the one of your own kinsmen,  
 and kill the man who drove you out of Thebes!  
 That is what I pray for. And I call on  
 the dreadful paternal dark of Tartarus  
 to deliver you to your new dwelling place. <sup>257</sup>  
 I invoke the spirits here, the Furies,

<sup>255</sup>Jebb offers the useful note that curses, once uttered, become divine agents of vengeance. Oedipus is therefore calling for the agents created by his earlier curses against his two sons to come to his assistance now.

<sup>256</sup>Oedipus is claiming here that his curse on Polyneices will defeat any legal claims Polyneices may have to justify his attack on Thebes (both as a suppliant and as the elder son) because ancient natural Justice demands that children respect their parents, a law that is more powerful than any Polyneices can appeal to.

<sup>257</sup>Tartarus is a deep pit in Hades, usually associated with punishment and imprisonment. The word "paternal" may refer to the idea that darkness the father of everything or that Polyneices will be going to a place as dark as the world of his father, Oedipus.

and summon Ares, god of war, who set  
such lethal hatred in the two of you!  
You have heard what I have spoken. Now leave.  
Proclaim to all the citizens of Thebes  
and to your loyal confederates, as well,  
that Oedipus has handed out these gifts  
as royal bequests to his two sons.

CHORUS

Polyneices,  
the journey you have made brings me no joy—  
and now you must return without delay.

POLYNEICES

So much for my trip here—it's a disaster.  
Alas for my companions! This is the end  
of the road we marched when we left Argos—  
unhappily for me! I cannot speak of this  
to any of my friends or turn them back.  
I must stay silent and confront my fate.  
But you, my sisters, daughters of this man,  
you have heard our father's brutal curses.  
If what he is praying for is fulfilled  
and you get back to Thebes, then I beg you,  
by all the gods, do not leave my body  
to be dishonored. Set me in a tomb,  
and have me buried with full funeral rites.

If you do that, the praises you both earn  
from this man for the help you two provide  
will be increased by no less generous praise  
you will receive for looking after me.

ANTIGONE

Polyneices, listen to me, I beg you!

POLYNEICES

Dearest Antigone, what is it? Speak out.

ANTIGONE

Turn your forces back—and do it quickly.  
Return to Argos. Do not ravage Thebes  
and destroy yourself.

POLYNEICES

That is not possible.

Once I turn back because I am afraid,  
how could I ever lead that force again?

ANTIGONE

Again? Why, brother, would you ever again  
get so angry? How do you benefit  
from destroying the city of your birth?

POLYNEICES



It is dishonourable to live in exile  
and to be made a laughing stock like this,  
when I'm the elder son.

ANTIGONE

But don't you see  
you will be confirming the prophecies  
our father uttered? They are predicting  
you and Eteocles will kill each other.

POLYNEICES

That's what he wants. But I cannot give up.

ANTIGONE

Alas, that is insufferable for me!  
But who will follow you once he has heard  
what has been prophesied?

POLYNEICES

I will not tell them  
such a grim prediction. A proper leader  
conveys good things and hides unwelcome news.

ANTIGONE

Are you resolved to do this, my brother?

POLYNEICES

I am. Do not attempt to hold me back.  
This ill-fated, catastrophic path is now  
the one destined for me, thanks to my father  
and his avenging Furies. But for you two,  
my sisters, may Zeus provide rich favours,  
if you will carry out full burial rites  
for me when I am dead. There's nothing more  
you can perform for me while I still live.  
So let me set out on my way. Farewell.  
You will not see me in this life again.

ANTIGONE

I am so wretched!

POLYNEICES

Do not feel sad for me.

ANTIGONE

Who would not feel sad for you, my brother,  
when you are marching off to certain death?

POLYNEICES

If it is my fate, then I shall die.

ANTIGONE

No!

Listen to me instead!

POLYNEICES

Do not keep pleading  
for what will never happen.

ANTIGONE

If I lose you, my life will have no joy.

POLYNEICES

Fate will decide

one way or the other. As for you both,  
may gods grant you never meet disaster,  
for all men know you two do not deserve  
a life of suffering and misery.

[POLYNEICES leaves. There is a rumble of thunder in the distance.]

CHORUS

I sense the approach of fresh misfortune,  
a new load of grief from this blind stranger,  
unless Fate is now perhaps approaching  
its predestined end, for I cannot say  
decisions of the gods stay unfulfilled.  
Time keeps watch and always sees these things—  
one day it casts some down, and on the next  
it raises others up once more.

[There is another peal of thunder, this time much closer than before.]

O Zeus, your heavenly skies reverberate!

OEDIPUS

My children, if there is anyone here,  
tell him to summon Theseus back,  
that finest of all men.

ANTIGONE

Why, father? Why do you want us to send for Theseus?

OEDIPUS

Zeus' winged thunder will soon lead me  
on to Hades. Send someone now—and quickly!

[Thunder peals again, sounding very close, and lightning flashes.]

CHORUS

Listen! The crash of an immense thunderbolt  
hurled down by Zeus—my scalp bristles,  
overwhelmed with fear, my heart recoils!

Lightning blazes once more through the sky!

What final purposes are being revealed?

I am afraid. Such fire from Zeus  
never flashes down in vain, not without  
some great calamity.

[Another peal of thunder breaks above them.]

O mighty heavens! O Zeus!

OEDIPUS

My children, for me the destined end of life  
is drawing near. There is no turning back.

ANTIGONE

How do you know? What signs have you received?

OEDIPUS

I sense it clearly. Get someone to go  
and fetch the king as quickly as he can.

[More peals of thunder and flashes of lightning.]

CHORUS

Listen! Listen to that! The piercing noise  
is all around us once again!

O god,  
be gracious to us—show us your mercy,  
if you are bringing some catastrophe  
to Athens, our maternal home.

May I find you  
generous to us—if I have looked upon  
a man polluted by his acts, do not,  
I beg you, somehow let me share his curse  
or favours that bring no benefit to me! <sup>258</sup>  
O Zeus on high, I cry out to you!

OEDIPUS

My children, is lord Theseus nearby?  
When he gets here will I still be alive  
with my mind intact?

ANTIGONE

What trustworthy pledge  
do you wish to plant within his heart?

OEDIPUS

In return for the goodwill I received,  
I will do him a favour by fulfilling  
everything I promised earlier. <sup>259</sup>

CHORUS

Come, my son, come here to us!  
If you by chance are at the altar  
in the deepest corner of the grove  
offering an ox to god Poseidon,  
lord of the sea, then come to us.  
This stranger thinks it only just  
that you, your city, and your friends  
receive a favour for those benefits  
you have so graciously conferred on him. My lord, make haste! Come quickly!

[THESEUS enters.]

THESEUS

What is this noise? Why are you once again  
all making such a din—it's clearly coming

<sup>258</sup>These lines from the Chorus refer once again to the notion that contact with a polluted person (i.e., someone cursed by the gods) can bring the anger of the gods down on those who have had dealings with him.

<sup>259</sup>For details of what Oedipus has promised Theseus, see lines ff. above.

from you citizens and from the stranger, too.  
Were you frightened by a thunderbolt from Zeus  
or driving showers of hail? When a god  
unleashes a ferocious storm like this,  
it can presage all sorts of things to come.

OEDIPUS

My lord, I have been hoping you were here—  
some god has seen to it that you arrive  
at a propitious time.

THESEUS

Son of Laius,  
What is going on? Is it something new?

OEDIPUS

For me life moves beyond its tipping point.  
I do not wish to die without confirming  
the promises I made to you and Athens.

THESEUS

What omens tell you that your death is near?

OEDIPUS

The messengers who announced the news to me  
are the gods themselves. They have not proven false,  
for they have shown me the appointed signs.

THESEUS

What are these fatal signs, old man? Tell me.

OEDIPUS

All those frequent rolling peals of thunder  
and many lightning flashes hurtling down  
from an invincible hand.

THESEUS

You have convinced me.  
From your many prophecies I have learned  
you do not lie. Tell me what I must do.

OEDIPUS

Son of Aegeus, I will set out for you  
the glories that lie in store for Athens  
and that never will diminish with old age.  
In a moment I myself will lead the way  
to the place where I must die. I will need  
no hand to guide me. You must not ever  
divulge this place to any mortal man  
by revealing its concealed location  
or the general area where it lies,  
so that for all time it may protect you  
more effectively than shields and spears  
or many foreign allies. You yourself  
will learn, once you enter that place alone,

forbidden things of which no one may speak.  
 I would not talk of them to any citizen  
 or to my children, although I love them.  
 You must always keep these matters secret,  
     and when your life is coming to an end,  
 reveal them to your most important heir—  
 to him alone. He must always pass them on  
 to his successor. If you keep doing this,  
 then life in Athens will never be disrupted  
 by citizens born from the dragon's teeth.<sup>260</sup>  
 Even if in countless cities men live well,  
 they find it all too easy to commit  
 outrageous crimes, for gods are slow to act,  
 although they clearly intervene when men  
 abandon piety and turn to madness.<sup>261</sup>  
 Son of Aegeus, do not let that happen.  
 But I am stating what you know already.  
 But since what comes from god urges me on,  
 let us set off for the designated place  
 and hesitate no longer.

[OEDIPUS turns his attention to ANTIGONE and ISMENE.]

My children,  
 follow me, for though it seems new and strange,  
 I will once more show both of you the way, just as you two used to guide your  
 father.  
 So move on. Do not lay a hand on me.  
 Let me find the sacred burial ground myself,  
 where Fate has ordained I will lie hidden  
 here in Athens. This way—follow my lead.  
 Hermes the Guide and the goddess of the dead,  
 Persephone, are showing me the path.  
 O light, that is no light to me, though once,  
 in earlier days, my eyes could see you,  
 now for the last time you caress my body.  
 For already I am shuffling on my way  
 to hide the final portion of my life  
 in Hades.

[OEDIPUS stops to address THESEUS.]

But you, most cherished stranger,

<sup>260</sup>The founder of Thebes, Cadmus, killed a dragon living at the site of the future city. When he sowed the monster's teeth across the earth, armed men sprang up and began fighting and killing each other, until only a few were left. These men were the first Thebans. Oedipus is, in effect, promising that Athens will never suffer from civil disturbances, if Athenians remember his instructions.

<sup>261</sup>The point here is that even well-governed cities will suffer from the hubristic ambitions of some citizens because, although the gods will eventually punish evil citizens, such divine retribution is slow and therefore the troublemakers will have time to disrupt civic life.

may you, your followers, and your land  
fare well, and may you, in your prosperity,  
remember me, as I move to my death,  
and may you have good fortune evermore.

[OEDIPUS, ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and THESEUS move off together.]

CHORUS

If by our traditions it is right  
for me to worship with my prayers  
the unseen goddess, as well as you,  
lord of the dead, then Aidoneus,  
O Aidoneus, I entreat you—  
may the stranger move on free of pain  
or heavy grieving for his fate  
to the all-concealing fields of dead  
and the chamber of the Styx below.<sup>262</sup>  
Through no fault of his own he met  
great torments, but may a righteous god  
restore his splendour once again.

O goddesses of the lower world  
and you, the unconquerable beast,  
whose body lies, so people say,  
beside the gate of countless guests,  
snarling at the entry to your cave,  
invincible guardian of Hades,  
O child of Earth and Tartarus,  
I pray the path the stranger treads  
may be left clear, as he moves on  
to fields of the dead below.  
I cry to you, lord of eternal sleep.<sup>263</sup>

[A MESSENGER enters]

MESSENGER

Citizens, the news I will report is brief— Oedipus is dead. But I cannot provide  
details of his death in a short report,  
since what went on there lasted for some time.

CHORUS

Has the unlucky man died at last?

MESSENGER

You can rest assured—he has left this life.

<sup>262</sup>Aidoneus is another name for Hades, god of the underworld. The “unseen goddess” is Persephone, wife of Hades. The name “Styx” refers to the river separating the earth and the underworld. The word also often designates the underworld generally.

<sup>263</sup>The “goddesses in the lower world” are probably the Furies, the divine agents of blood revenge, and the “beast” is a reference to Cerberus, a dog with several heads (the number varies from one account to another) who is a resident of Hades, with a lair near the entrance to the underworld. It is not clear to whom the phrase “child of Earth and Tartarus” refers, since it does not describe the parentage of Cerberus (perhaps it is a general reference to Death, the “lord of eternal sleep”).

## CHORUS

How did the poor man die? Was his passing  
divinely ordered and free of pain?

## MESSENGER

To tell the truth,  
his death inspired wonder. How he left here  
you already know, since you were present.  
None of his loved ones led him on his way.  
Instead, he acted as a guide for all of us.  
When he came to the steep cleft that plunges  
down the bronze stairway rooted deep in earth,  
he stopped near one of the many pathways  
which converge by a hollow in the rock  
where Theseus and Peirithous set up  
the lasting pledge of their eternal bond.  
He stood halfway between the basin there  
and the Thorician rock, with the stone tomb  
and the hollow pear tree on either side. <sup>264</sup>  
There he sat down, took off his filthy clothes, and, after calling for his daughters,  
asked them  
to bring him water from a flowing stream,  
so he could wash and offer a libation.  
The two of them went up the rocky hill  
of fresh, green Demeter, which we could see,  
soon came back with what their father wanted, and then, following our usual  
customs,  
washed and dressed him. <sup>265</sup> When they were finished  
and had done all that Oedipus requested,  
without ignoring any of his wishes,  
at that moment Zeus of the Underworld  
produced a peal of thunder. <sup>266</sup> The young girls  
heard the noise and trembled. Then they collapsed,  
falling at their father's knees and weeping.  
They kept on striking their breasts and wailing,

<sup>264</sup>For an explanation of the "bronze stairway" as the threshold of the descent to Hades, see Endnote above. Peirithous was king of the Lapiths and a close friend of Theseus. In a famous heroic exploit, the two men together went down to Hades, were captured by Hades, and then rescued by Hercules. The "lasting pledge" is some sort of memorial to their friendship. Thoricus was a town in Attica. Jebb notes that in a legendary story Thoricus was a place where a mortal called Cephalus was taken up to the gods and that the "hollow pear tree" may mark the spot where Persephone was abducted by Hades and taken down to the underworld (i.e., they are references to places where the gods took some mortal being away).

<sup>265</sup>Demeter was a goddess protecting crops. She was worshipped in various manifestations (Black Demeter, Green Demeter, Yellow Demeter—symbolizing the different stages of the crop cycle—black earth, the first appearance of a young crop, and harvest time).

<sup>266</sup>Zeus is traditionally a god associated with the sky and heaven, but some Greek cities worshipped Zeus as a god of earth or of under the earth.

voicing their pain with loud and bitter cries. When he heard these sudden howls of sorrow,

Oedipus held them in his arms and said, "Children, today your father is no more. Everything I was has perished, and you two will no longer share the heavy burden of looking after me. Children, I know that task was difficult, but a single word makes up for all your labours, for never will you find anyone whose love for you is greater than the love you both received from the man who was your father. And now, for all the days remaining in your lives, you will not have him with you anymore."

They remained like this, holding one another,  
all of them distraught with grief and sobbing.  
Then they paused and stopped their mournful wailing.  
They made no sound, and everything was still.

Suddenly a voice called out to Oedipus.

It made the hairs on all our heads stand up—

we were so terrified! Again and again  
the god cried out to him in different ways,

"You there, you, Oedipus, why this delay  
in our departure? You have been lingering  
for far too long." Once he became aware

the god was summoning him, Oedipus  
asked lord Theseus to come up to him,

and when the king did so, Oedipus said,  
"My dear friend, give me the time-honoured pledge  
of your right hand for my children, and you,  
my daughters, give him your sworn pledge, as well.  
My lord, promise you will not betray them  
of your own free will but will always do  
whatever you believe is best for them."

Since Theseus is an honorable king,  
he showed no sign of sorrow and agreed  
to fulfil that promise for the stranger.

Once Theseus had sworn he would do this,  
Oedipus suddenly clutched his daughters  
with his blind hands and said to them, "Children,  
you must bear my death with a noble heart

and leave this place. For you cannot believe  
it is appropriate to view those acts  
which our traditions say should not be seen  
or listen to things said you should not hear.  
You must go now—and quickly. Let Theseus,  
the sovereign king, stay and learn what happens."



All of us heard him say these words and then,  
full of sorrow, with our eyes streaming tears,  
we followed the young girls and left the place.  
Once we moved off, after a few moments  
we looked back from a distance and noticed  
Oedipus was no longer to be seen.

Theseus was alone, holding his hands up  
right before his face to protect his eyes,  
as if he had just seen something fearful  
that no human being could bear to see.

And then, after that, a short time later,  
we saw Theseus offering a single prayer,  
worshipping divine Olympus and the Earth.  
How Oedipus met his fate and perished  
no mortal knows, other than Theseus.

It was no fiery lightning bolt from god  
that took him away, nor was he carried off  
by some momentary whirlwind rising

out at sea. No—some escort from the gods  
came for him or else, in an act of kindness,  
the rock-hard world of the dead split open  
so he would feel no pain. He passed away  
without a groan or symptom of disease.

If any mortal man has ever died  
in a miraculous way, then he did. If someone thinks I talk just like a fool,  
I will not try to teach him otherwise,  
since he believes my words do not make sense.

CHORUS

Where are the ones who went away with him—  
his daughters and their friends?

MESSENGER

Not far away. The sound of their laments  
is getting closer—they are almost here.

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE enter]

ANTIGONE

Alas! This is so sad! Now the two of us,  
both subject to an abject destiny, will spend every moment grieving  
the family curse we carry in our blood, inherited from our father. For him  
before today we laboured long and hard.  
Now he is dead, and we are left to speak  
of what we saw and went through at the end,  
events that baffle reason.

CHORUS

What happened?

ANTIGONE

One can only guess, my friends.

CHORUS

Has Oedipus truly gone?

ANTIGONE

He has gone

exactly as one might have wished— not seized by Ares, god of war,  
or by the sea, but snatched away

by unseen fate and carried off  
to the hidden fields of death. I feel so sad! A death-filled night  
now shrouds our eyes. How do we find  
daily nourishment in a harsh life  
of wandering some distant land  
or roaming waves of the sea?

ISMENE

I do not know.

Things are desperate! How I wish  
Hades the killer would seize me too  
and let me share death with my old father!  
For the life I face is not worth living.

CHORUS

You two most excellent of daughters  
must bear whatever gods provide.  
Do not let your hearts burn up  
in flames of excess passion—  
for what has happened to you here  
gives you no reason to complain.

ANTIGONE

One laments the loss of even painful things.  
That life for which I felt no love at all  
I did love when I held him in my arms.  
O my beloved father, now wrapped  
in the underworld's eternal darkness,  
even though you are no longer here,  
my sister and I will love you always.

CHORUS

He ended . . .

ANTIGONE

He had the end he wished for.

CHORUS

In what way?

ANTIGONE

He perished in a foreign land,  
as he desired, and is eternally at rest  
beneath the ground in a well-shaded place.  
He did not leave us without being mourned.  
With tear-filled eyes I still grieve for you,  
my father, and in my unhappy state

I do not know how I should relieve  
the grief I feel with such intensity.  
Alas! You wished to die in a strange land,  
but when you died I was not with you!

ISMENE

I feel so desperate! What fate awaits us,  
my dear sister, now we have no father? <sup>267</sup>

CHORUS

Friends, since the ending of his life was blessed,  
you should cease this grieving. No mortal  
has a life immune from great misfortune.

ANTIGONE

Dear sister, we must hurry back.

ISMENE

But why?

What do we have to do?

ANTIGONE

I need to see it!

ISMENE

See what?

ANTIGONE

That earthly resting place.

ISMENE

Whose resting place?

ANTIGONE

I cannot bear this grief—

I have to see our father's burial ground!

ISMENE

But how does such a wish not break our laws?

Don't you see that?

ANTIGONE

Why do you disapprove?

ISMENE

And then there is also this . . .

ANTIGONE

What other things

are you complaining of?

ISMENE

Our father perished

without a grave—and no one else was there.

ANTIGONE

Lead me there, and then slaughter me, as well. <sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup>Some lines have been apparently been lost from this speech.

<sup>268</sup>Ismene's objections to Antigone's desire to visit Oedipus' resting place are that it opposes Oedipus' express wishes (and is therefore not lawful) and that no one knows where the burial site is.

ISMENE

Alas for me, in my miserable state!  
Where am I now to spend this wretched life,  
with no support and totally abandoned!

CHORUS

Do not fear, my friends.

ANTIGONE

But where do I take refuge? <sup>269</sup>

CHORUS

You have already found a place for that.

ANTIGONE

What are you saying?

CHORUS

You two have reached  
a place where you are safe from harm.

ANTIGONE

Yes, I understand that.

CHORUS

What else is there?

What are you thinking?

ANTIGONE

I have no idea  
how we get home to Thebes.

CHORUS

Don't even think of that!

ANTIGONE

This present trouble has us in its grip!

CHORUS

The evils you faced before were harsh enough.

ANTIGONE

Back then we had no hope. Now things are worse.

CHORUS

You have been destined for a sea of troubles.

ANTIGONE

Yes, that is true.

CHORUS

That's what it seems to me.

ANTIGONE

Alas! Alas! O Zeus, where do we go?

<sup>269</sup>Jebb questions whether in this exchange (up to the arrival of Theseus) there might be some confusion in the way speeches have traditionally been assigned, since Antigone's sudden and urgent concern about where she is to go now does not seem to fit her obviously strong preoccupation with visiting her father's burial place as soon as possible. The speeches given to Antigone here seem much more appropriate coming from Ismene, who is clearly wondering about where she is to find a home now that Oedipus is dead. I have made no changes to the traditional arrangement, but I find Jebb's observations quite attractive (and I would probably try them out if I were mounting a production of the play).

Where is our destiny now driving us—  
towards what last remaining hope?

[Enter THESEUS]

THESEUS

Stop these laments, children! When gods below  
store up public favours for the dead,  
we must feel no sorrow—for if we do  
then retribution follows. <sup>270</sup>

ANTIGONE

Son of Aegeus,  
we beg one request from you.

THESEUS

What is it, my children. What do you desire?

ANTIGONE

We wish  
to see our father's grave with our own eyes.

THESEUS

To go there is forbidden by our laws.

ANTIGONE

O lord and ruler of Athenians,  
what do you mean?

THESEUS

Children, your father told me  
that no living person should come near the place  
or speak any words beside the sacred ground  
where he is buried. And he promised me,  
if I made sure of that, then I would keep  
the land of Athens free of pain forever.  
The god there heard me swear that I would do it,  
and so did Horkos, too, Zeus' servant, who witnesses all oaths and makes them  
strong. <sup>271</sup>

ANTIGONE

If this is what my father has in mind,  
then we must comply. Send us on our way  
to ancient Thebes, to see if we somehow  
can stop the coming slaughter of our brothers.

THESEUS

I will do that and perform whatever else  
may be a service to you and to the man

<sup>270</sup>Since with the death of Oedipus in Athens, the gods have seen to it that he gets what he most desires and that the Athenians obtain a guarantee of political security, there is no reason to feel sad. To do so would be to go against what the gods have established (and thus invite their angry punishment).

<sup>271</sup>The "god there" is (one assumes) the divine spirit who took Oedipus away. Horkos (meaning Oath) is a god who serves Zeus by witnessing oaths and punishing perjury. I have added a line in English to clarify his function.

who has just died and lies beneath the earth. On his behalf I must spare no effort,  
for Oedipus has earned my gratitude.

CHORUS

So let us cease with our laments,  
and chant our funeral songs no more.  
For these events have all been preordained.

# (SOPHOCLES) Antigone

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>272</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## BACKGROUND NOTE TO THE STORY

When Oedipus, King of Thebes, discovered through his own investigations that he had killed his father and married his mother, Jocasta, he put out his own eyes, and Jocasta killed herself. Once Oedipus ceased being king of Thebes, his two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, agreed to alternate as king. When Eteocles refused to give up power to Polyneices, the latter collected a foreign army of Argives and attacked the city. In the ensuing battle, the Thebans triumphed over the invading forces, and the two brothers killed each other, with Eteocles defending the city and Polyneices attacking it. The action of the play begins immediately after the battle. Note that Creon is a brother of Jocasta and thus an uncle of Antigone, Ismene, Eteocles, and Polyneices.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ANTIGONE: daughter of Oedipus

ISMENE: daughter of Oedipus, sister of Antigone

CREON: king of Thebes

EURYDICE: wife of Creon

HAEMON: son of Creon and Euridice, engaged to Antigone.

TEIRESIAS: an old blind prophet

BOY: a young lad guiding Teiresias

GUARD: a soldier serving Creon

MESSENGER

CHORUS: Theban Elders

ATTENDANTS.

[In Thebes, directly in front of the royal palace, which stands in the background, its main doors facing the audience. Enter Antigone leading Ismene away from the palace] ANTIGONE

Now, dear Ismene, my own blood sister,  
do you have any sense of all the troubles  
Zeus keeps bringing on the two of us,  
as long as we're alive? All that misery  
which stems from Oedipus? There's no suffering,  
no shame, no ruin—not one dishonour—  
which I have not seen in all the troubles  
you and I go through. What's this they're saying now,  
something our general has had proclaimed  
throughout the city? Do you know of it?  
Have you heard? Or have you just missed the news?

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<sup>272</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Sophocles/Antigone.htm>

Dishonours which better fit our enemies  
are now being piled up on the ones we love.

ISMENE

I've had no word at all, Antigone,  
nothing good or bad about our family,  
not since we two lost both our brothers,  
killed on the same day by a double blow.  
And since the Argive army, just last night,  
has gone away, I don't know any more  
if I've been lucky or face total ruin.

ANTIGONE

I know that. That's why I brought you here,  
outside the gates, so only you can hear.

ISMENE

What is it? The way you look makes it seem  
you're thinking of some dark and gloomy news.

ANTIGONE

Look—what's Creon doing with our two brothers?  
He's honouring one with a full funeral  
and treating the other one disgracefully!  
Eteocles, they say, has had his burial  
according to our customary rites,  
to win him honour with the dead below.  
But as for Polyneices, who perished  
so miserably, an order has gone out  
throughout the city—that's what people say.  
He's to have no funeral or lament,  
but to be left unburied and unwept,  
a sweet treasure for the birds to look at,  
for them to feed on to their heart's content.

That's what people say the noble Creon  
has announced to you and me—I mean to me—  
and now he's coming to proclaim the fact,  
to state it clearly to those who have not heard.  
For Creon this matter's really serious.  
Anyone who acts against the order  
will be stoned to death before the city.  
Now you know, and you'll quickly demonstrate  
whether you are nobly born, or else  
a girl unworthy of her splendid ancestors.

ISMENE

O my poor sister, if that's what's happening,  
what can I say that would be any help  
to ease the situation or resolve it?

ANTIGONE

Think whether you will work with me in this



and act together.

ISMENE

In what kind of work?

What do you mean?

ANTIGONE

Will you help these hands  
take up Polyneices' corpse and bury it?

ISMENE

What? You're going to bury Polyneices,  
when that's been made a crime for all in Thebes?

ANTIGONE

Yes. I'll do my duty to my brother—  
and yours as well, if you're not prepared to.  
I won't be caught betraying him.

ISMENE

You're too rash.

Has Creon not expressly banned that act?

ANTIGONE

Yes. But he's no right to keep me from what's mine.

ISMENE

O dear. Think, Antigone. Consider  
how our father died, hated and disgraced,  
when those mistakes which his own search revealed  
forced him to turn his hand against himself  
and stab out both his eyes. Then that woman,  
his mother and his wife—her double role—  
destroyed her own life in a twisted noose.  
Then there's our own two brothers, both butchered  
in a single day—that ill-fated pair  
with their own hands slaughtered one another  
and brought about their common doom.  
Now, the two of us are left here quite alone.  
Think how we'll die far worse than all the rest,  
if we defy the law and move against  
the king's decree, against his royal power.  
We must remember that by birth we're women,  
and, as such, we shouldn't fight with men.  
Since those who rule are much more powerful,  
we must obey in this and in events  
which bring us even harsher agonies.  
So I'll ask those underground for pardon—  
since I'm being compelled, I will obey  
those in control. That's what I'm forced to do.  
It makes no sense to try to do too much.

ANTIGONE

I wouldn't urge you to. No. Not even

if you were keen to act. Doing this with you would bring me no joy. So be what you want.

I'll still bury him. It would be fine to die while doing that. I'll lie there with him, with a man I love, pure and innocent, for all my crime. My honours for the dead must last much longer than for those up here. I'll lie down there forever. As for you, well, if you wish, you can show contempt for those laws the gods all hold in honour.

ISMENE

I'm not disrespecting them. But I can't act against the state. That's not in my nature.

ANTIGONE

Let that be your excuse. I'm going now to make a burial mound for my dear brother.

ISMENE

Oh poor Antigone, I'm so afraid for you.

ANTIGONE

Don't fear for me. Set your own fate in order.

ISMENE

Make sure you don't reveal to anyone what you intend. Keep it closely hidden. I'll do the same.

ANTIGONE

No, no. Announce the fact— if you don't let everybody know, I'll despise your silence even more.

ISMENE

Your heart is hot to do cold deeds.

ANTIGONE

But I know

I'll please the ones I'm duty bound to please.

ISMENE

Yes, if you can. But you're after something which you're incapable of carrying out.

ANTIGONE

Well, when my strength is gone, then I'll give up.

ISMENE

A vain attempt should not be made at all.

ANTIGONE

I'll hate you if you're going to talk that way. And you'll rightly earn the loathing of the dead. So leave me and my foolishness alone— we'll get through this fearful thing. I won't suffer anything as bad as a disgraceful death.

## ISMENE

All right then, go, if that's what you think right.  
But remember this—even though your mission  
makes no sense, your friends do truly love you.

[Exit Antigone away from the palace. Ismene watches her go and then turns slowly into the palace. Enter the Chorus of Theban elders]

## CHORUS

O ray of sunlight,  
most beautiful that ever shone  
on Thebes, city of the seven gates,  
you've appeared at last,  
you glowing eye of golden day,  
moving above the streams of Dirce,  
driving into headlong flight  
the white-shield warrior from Argos,  
who marched here fully armed,  
now forced back by your sharper power. <sup>273</sup>

## CHORUS LEADER

Against our land he marched,  
sent here by the warring claims  
of Polyneices, with piercing screams,  
an eagle flying above our land,  
covered wings as white as snow,  
and hordes of warriors in arms,  
helmets topped with horsehair crests.

## CHORUS

Standing above our homes,  
he ranged around our seven gates,  
with threats to swallow us  
and spears thirsting to kill.  
Before his jaws had had their fill  
and gorged themselves on Theban blood,  
before Hephaistos' pine-torch flames  
had seized our towers, our fortress crown,  
he went back, driven in retreat. <sup>274</sup>  
Behind him rings the din of war—  
his enemy, the Theban dragon-snake,  
too difficult for him to overcome.

## CHORUS LEADER

Zeus hates an arrogant boasting tongue.  
Seeing them march here in a mighty stream,  
in all their clanging golden pride,  
he hurled his fire and struck the man,

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<sup>273</sup>Dirce is one of the rivers beside Thebes.

<sup>274</sup>Hephaistos is god of fire.

up there, on our battlements, as he began  
to scream aloud his victory.

CHORUS

The man swung down, torch still in hand,  
and smashed into unyielding earth—  
the one who not so long ago attacked,  
who launched his furious, enraged assault,  
to blast us, breathing raging storms.  
But things turned out not as he'd hoped.  
Great war god Ares assisted us—  
he smashed them down and doomed them all  
to a very different fate.

CHORUS LEADER

Seven captains at seven gates  
matched against seven equal warriors  
paid Zeus their full bronze tribute,  
the god who turns the battle tide,  
all but that pair of wretched men,  
born of one father and one mother, too—  
who set their conquering spears against each other  
and then both shared a common death.

CHORUS

Now victory with her glorious name  
has come, bringing joy to well-armed Thebes.  
The battle's done—let's strive now to forget  
with songs and dancing all night long,  
with Bacchus leading us to make Thebes shake.

[The palace doors are thrown open and guards appear at the doors]

CHORUS LEADER

But here comes Creon, new king of our land,  
son of Menoikeos. Thanks to the gods,  
who've brought about our new good fortune.  
What plan of action does he have in mind?  
What's made him hold this special meeting,  
with elders summoned by a general call?

[Enter Creon from the palace. He addresses the assembled elders]

CREON

Men, after much tossing of our ship of state,  
the gods have safely set things right again.  
Of all the citizens I've summoned you,  
because I know how well you showed respect  
for the eternal power of the throne,  
first with Laius and again with Oedipus,

once he restored our city. <sup>275</sup> When he died, you stood by his children, firm in loyalty.

Now his sons have perished in a single day,  
killing each other with their own two hands,  
a double slaughter, stained with brother's blood.

And so I have the throne, all royal power,  
for I'm the one most closely linked by blood  
to those who have been killed. It's impossible  
to really know a man, to know his soul,  
his mind and will, before one witnesses  
his skill in governing and making laws.  
For me, a man who rules the entire state  
and does not take the best advice there is,  
but through fear keeps his mouth forever shut,

such a man is the very worst of men—  
and always will be. And a man who thinks  
more highly of a friend than of his country,  
well, he means nothing to me. Let Zeus know,  
the god who always watches everything,  
I would not stay silent if I saw disaster  
moving here against the citizens,  
a threat to their security. For anyone  
who acts against the state, its enemy,  
I'd never make my friend. For I know well  
our country is a ship which keeps us safe,  
and only when it sails its proper course

do we make friends. These are the principles  
I'll use in order to protect our state.

That's why I've announced to all citizens  
my orders for the sons of Oedipus—  
Eteocles, who perished in the fight  
to save our city, the best and bravest  
of our spearmen, will have his burial,  
with all those purifying rituals  
which accompany the noblest corpses,  
as they move below. As for his brother—  
that Polyneices, who returned from exile,  
eager to wipe out in all-consuming fire

his ancestral city and its native gods,  
keen to seize upon his family's blood  
and lead men into slavery—for him,  
the proclamation in the state declares  
he'll have no burial mound, no funeral rites,

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<sup>275</sup>Laius was king of Thebes and father of Oedipus. Oedipus killed him (not knowing who he was) and became the next king of Thebes by saving the city from the devastation of the Sphinx.

and no lament. He'll be left unburied,  
his body there for birds and dogs to eat,  
a clear reminder of his shameful fate.  
That's my decision. For I'll never act  
to respect an evil man with honours  
in preference to a man who's acted well.  
Anyone who's well disposed towards our state,  
alive or dead, that man I will respect.

CHORUS LEADER

Son of Menoikeos, if that's your will  
for this city's friends and enemies,  
it seems to me you now control all laws  
concerning those who've died and us as well—  
the ones who are still living.

CREON

See to it then,  
and act as guardians of what's been proclaimed.

CHORUS

Give that task to younger men to deal with.

CREON

There are men assigned to oversee the corpse.

CHORUS LEADER

Then what remains that you would have us do?

CREON

Don't yield to those who contravene my orders.

CHORUS LEADER

No one is such a fool that he loves death.

CREON

Yes, that will be his full reward, indeed.  
And yet men have often been destroyed  
because they hoped to profit in some way.

[Enter a guard, coming towards the palace]

GUARD

My lord, I can't say I've come out of breath  
by running here, making my feet move fast.  
Many times I stopped to think things over—  
and then I'd turn around, retrace my steps.  
My mind was saying many things to me,  
"You fool, why go to where you know for sure  
your punishment awaits?"—"And now, poor man,  
why are you hesitating yet again?  
If Creon finds this out from someone else,  
how will you escape being hurt?" Such matters  
kept my mind preoccupied. And so I went,  
slowly and reluctantly, and thus made  
a short road turn into a lengthy one.

But then the view that I should come to you  
won out. If what I have to say is nothing,  
I'll say it nonetheless. For I've come here  
clinging to the hope that I'll not suffer  
anything that's not part of my destiny.

CREON

What's happening that's made you so upset?

GUARD

I want to tell you first about myself.  
I did not do it. And I didn't see  
the one who did. So it would be unjust  
if I should come to grief.

CREON

You hedge so much.  
Clearly you have news of something ominous.

GUARD

Yes. Strange things that make me pause a lot.

CREON

Why not say it and then go—just leave.

GUARD

All right, I'll tell you. It's about the corpse.  
Someone has buried it and disappeared,  
after spreading thirsty dust onto the flesh  
and undertaking all appropriate rites.

CREON

What are you saying? What man would dare this?

GUARD

I don't know. There was no sign of digging,  
no marks of any pick axe or a mattock.

The ground was dry and hard and very smooth,  
without a wheel track. Whoever did it  
left no trace. When the first man on day watch  
revealed it to us, we were all amazed.

The corpse was hidden, but not in a tomb.

It was lightly covered up with dirt,  
as if someone wanted to avert a curse.

There was no trace of a wild animal  
or dogs who'd come to rip the corpse apart.

Then the words flew round among us all,  
with every guard accusing someone else.

We were about to fight, to come to blows—  
no one was there to put a stop to it.

Every one of us was responsible,  
but none of us was clearly in the wrong.

In our defence we pleaded ignorance.

Then we each stated we were quite prepared

to pick up red-hot iron, walk through flames,  
or swear by all the gods that we'd not done it,  
we'd no idea how the act was planned,  
or how it had been carried out. At last,  
when all our searching had proved useless,  
one man spoke up, and his words forced us all  
to drop our faces to the ground in fear.

We couldn't see things working out for us,  
whether we agreed or disagreed with him.  
He said we must report this act to you—  
we must not hide it. And his view prevailed.  
I was the unlucky man who won the prize,  
the luck of the draw. That's why I'm now here,  
not of my own free will or by your choice.  
I know that—for no one likes a messenger  
who comes bearing unwelcome news with him.

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, I've been wondering for some time now—  
could this act not be something from the gods?

CREON

Stop now—before what you're about to say  
enrages me completely and reveals  
that you're not only old but stupid, too.  
No one can tolerate what you've just said,  
when you claim gods might care about this corpse.  
Would they pay extraordinary honours  
and bury as a man who'd served them well  
someone who came to burn their offerings,  
their pillared temples, to torch their lands  
and scatter all its laws? Or do you see  
gods paying respect to evil men? No, no.  
For quite a while some people in the town  
have secretly been muttering against me.

They don't agree with what I have decreed.  
They shake their heads and have not kept their necks  
under my yoke, as they are duty bound to do  
if they were men who are content with me.  
I well know that these guards were led astray—  
such men urged them to carry out this act  
for money. To foster evil actions,  
to make them commonplace among all men,  
nothing is as powerful as money.  
It destroys cities, driving men from home.  
Money trains and twists the minds in worthy men,  
so they then undertake disgraceful acts.  
Money teaches men to live as scoundrels,



familiar with every profane enterprise.  
But those who carry out such acts for cash  
sooner or later see how for their crimes  
they pay the penalty. For if great Zeus  
still has my respect, then understand this—  
I swear to you on oath—unless you find  
the one whose hands really buried him,  
unless you bring him here before my eyes,  
then death for you will never be enough.  
No, not before you're hung up still alive  
and you confess to this gross, violent act.  
That way you'll understand in future days,  
    when there's a profit to be gained from theft,  
you'll learn that it's not good to be in love  
with every kind of monetary gain.  
You'll know more men are ruined than are saved  
when they earn profits from dishonest schemes.

GUARD

Do I have your permission to speak now,  
or do I just turn around and go away?

CREON

But I find your voice so irritating—  
don't you realize that?

GUARD

Where does it hurt?

Is it in your ears or in your mind?

CREON

Why try to question where I feel my pain?

GUARD

The man who did it—he upsets your mind.  
I offend your ears.

CREON

My, my, it's clear to see  
it's natural for you to chatter on.

GUARD

Perhaps. But I never did this.

CREON

This and more—  
you sold your life for silver.

GUARD

How strange and sad  
when the one who sorts this out gets it all wrong.

CREON

Well, enjoy your sophisticated views.  
But if you don't reveal to me who did this,  
you'll just confirm how much your treasonous gains

have made you suffer.

[Exit Creon back into the palace. The doors close behind him]

GUARD

Well, I hope he's found.

That would be best. But whether caught or not—  
and that's something sheer chance will bring about—  
you won't see me coming here again.

This time, against all hope and expectation,  
I'm still unhurt. I owe the gods great thanks.

[Exit the Guard away from the palace]

CHORUS

There are many strange and wonderful things,  
but nothing more strangely wonderful than man.  
He moves across the white-capped ocean seas  
blasted by winter storms, carving his way  
under the surging waves engulfing him.  
With his teams of horses he wears down  
the unwearied and immortal earth,  
the oldest of the gods, harassing her,  
as year by year his ploughs move back and forth.

He snares the light-winged flocks of birds,  
herds of wild beasts, creatures from deep seas,  
trapped in the fine mesh of his hunting nets.  
O resourceful man, whose skill can overcome  
ferocious beasts roaming mountain heights.

He curbs the rough-haired horses with his bit  
and tames the inexhaustible mountain bulls,  
setting their savage necks beneath his yoke.

He's taught himself speech and wind-swift thought,  
trained his feelings for communal civic life,  
learning to escape the icy shafts of frost,  
volleys of pelting rain in winter storms,  
the harsh life lived under the open sky.  
That's man—so resourceful in all he does.

There's no event his skill cannot confront—  
other than death—that alone he cannot shun,  
although for many baffling sicknesses  
he has discovered his own remedies.

The qualities of his inventive skills  
bring arts beyond his dreams and lead him on,  
sometimes to evil and sometimes to good.  
If he treats his country's laws with due respect  
and honours justice by swearing on the gods,  
he wins high honours in his city.  
But when he grows bold and turns to evil,  
then he has no city. A man like that—

let him not share my home or know my mind.

[Enter the Guard, bringing Antigone with him. She is not resisting]

CHORUS LEADER

What this? I fear some omen from the gods.

I can't deny what I see here so clearly—

that young girl there—it's Antigone.

O you poor girl, daughter of Oedipus,

child of a such a father, so unfortunate,

what's going on? Surely they've not brought you here

because you've disobeyed the royal laws,

because they've caught you acting foolishly?

GUARD

This here's the one who carried out the act.

We caught her as she was burying the corpse.

Where's Creon?

[The palace doors open. Enter Creon with attendants]

CHORUS LEADER

He's coming from the house—

and just in time.

CREON

Why have I come "just in time"?

What's happening? What is it?

GUARD

My lord,

human beings should never take an oath

there's something they'll not do—for later thoughts

contradict what they first meant. I'd have sworn

I'd not soon venture here again. Back then,  
the threats you made brought me a lot of grief.

But there's no joy as great as what we pray for

against all hope. And so I have come back,

breaking that oath I swore. I bring this girl,

captured while she was honouring the grave.

This time we did not draw lots. No. This time

I was the lucky man, not someone else.

And now, my lord, take her for questioning.

Convict her. Do as you wish. As for me,

by rights I'm free and clear of all this trouble.

CREON

This girl here—how did you catch her? And where?

GUARD

She was burying that man. Now you know

all there is to know.

CREON

Do you understand

just what you're saying? Are your words the truth?

GUARD

We saw this girl giving that dead man's corpse  
full burial rites—an act you'd made illegal.  
Is what I say simple and clear enough?

CREON

How did you see her, catch her in the act?

GUARD

It happened this way. When we got there,  
after hearing those awful threats from you,  
we swept off all the dust covering the corpse,  
so the damp body was completely bare.

Then we sat down on rising ground up wind,  
to escape the body's putrid rotting stench.  
We traded insults just to stay awake,  
in case someone was careless on the job.  
That's how we spent the time right up 'til noon,  
when the sun's bright circle in the sky  
had moved half way and it was burning hot.  
Then suddenly a swirling windstorm came,  
whipping clouds of dust up from the ground,  
filling the plain—some heaven-sent trouble.  
In that level place the dirt storm damaged  
all the forest growth, and the air around  
was filled with dust for miles. We shut our mouths  
and just endured this scourge sent from the gods.  
A long time passed. The storm came to an end.  
That's when we saw the girl. She was shrieking—  
a distressing painful cry, just like a bird  
who's seen an empty nest, its fledglings gone.  
That's how she was when she saw the naked corpse.  
She screamed out a lament, and then she swore,  
calling evil curses down upon the ones  
who'd done this. Then right away her hands  
threw on the thirsty dust. She lifted up  
a finely made bronze jug and then three times  
poured out her tributes to the dead.  
When we saw that, we rushed up right away  
and grabbed her. She was not afraid at all.  
We charged her with her previous offence  
as well as this one. She just kept standing there,  
denying nothing. That made me happy—  
though it was painful, too. For it's a joy  
escaping troubles which affect oneself,  
but painful to bring evil on one's friends.  
But all that is of less concern to me  
than my own safety.

CREON

You there—you with your face  
bent down towards the ground, what do you say?  
Do you deny you did this or admit it?

ANTIGONE

I admit I did it. I won't deny that.

CREON [to the Guard] You're dismissed—go where you want. You're free—  
no serious charges made against you.

[Exit the Guard. Creon turns to interrogate Antigone]

Tell me briefly—not in some lengthy speech—  
were you aware there was a proclamation  
forbidding what you did?

ANTIGONE

I'd heard of it.

How could I not? It was public knowledge.

CREON

And yet you dared to break those very laws?

ANTIGONE

Yes. Zeus did not announce those laws to me.

And Justice living with the gods below  
sent no such laws for men. I did not think  
anything which you proclaimed strong enough  
to let a mortal override the gods  
and their unwritten and unchanging laws.  
They're not just for today or yesterday,  
but exist forever, and no one knows  
where they first appeared. So I did not mean  
to let a fear of any human will  
lead to my punishment among the gods.  
I know all too well I'm going to die—

how could I not?—it makes no difference  
what you decree. And if I have to die  
before my time, well, I count that a gain.  
When someone has to live the way I do,  
surrounded by so many evil things,  
how can she fail to find a benefit  
in death? And so for me meeting this fate  
won't bring any pain. But if I'd allowed  
my own mother's dead son to just lie there,  
an unburied corpse, then I'd feel distress.  
What's going on here does not hurt me at all.  
If you think what I'm doing now is stupid,  
perhaps I'm being charged with foolishness  
by someone who's a fool.

CHORUS LEADER

It's clear enough

the spirit in this girl is passionate—  
her father was the same. She has no sense  
of compromise in times of trouble.

CREON [to the Chorus Leader] But you should know the most obdurate wills  
are those most prone to break. The strongest iron  
tempered in the fire to make it really hard—  
that's the kind you see most often shatter.  
I'm well aware the most tempestuous horses  
are tamed by one small bit. Pride has no place  
in anyone who is his neighbour's slave.

This girl here was already very insolent  
in contravening laws we had proclaimed.  
Here she again displays her proud contempt—  
having done the act, she now boasts of it.  
She laughs at what she's done. Well, in this case,  
if she gets her way and goes unpunished,  
then she's the man here, not me. No. She may be  
my sister's child, closer to me by blood  
than anyone belonging to my house  
who worships Zeus Herkeios in my home,  
but she'll not escape my harshest punishment—

her sister, too, whom I accuse as well. <sup>276</sup> She had an equal part in all their plans  
to do this burial. Go summon her here.  
I saw her just now inside the palace,  
her mind out of control, some kind of fit.

[Exit attendants into the palace to fetch Ismene]

When people hatch their mischief in the dark  
their minds often convict them in advance,  
betraying their treachery. How I despise  
a person caught committing evil acts  
who then desires to glorify the crime.

ANTIGONE

Take me and kill me—what more do you want?

CREON

Me? Nothing. With that I have everything.

ANTIGONE

Then why delay? There's nothing in your words  
that I enjoy—may that always be the case!

And what I say displeases you as much.

But where could I gain greater glory  
than setting my own brother in his grave?  
All those here would confirm this pleases them  
if their lips weren't sealed by fear—being king,  
which offers all sorts of various benefits,

<sup>276</sup> Zeus Herkeios refers to Zeus of the Courtyard, a patron god of worship within the home.

means you can talk and act just as you wish.

CREON

In all of Thebes, you're the only one  
who looks at things that way.

ANTIGONE

They share my views,  
but they keep their mouths shut just for you.

CREON

These views of yours—so different from the rest—  
don't they bring you any sense of shame?

ANTIGONE

No—there's nothing shameful in honouring  
my mother's children.

CREON

You had a brother  
killed fighting for the other side.

ANTIGONE

Yes—from the same mother and father, too.

CREON

Why then give tributes which insult his name?

ANTIGONE

But his dead corpse won't back up what you say.

CREON

Yes, he will, if you give equal honours  
to a wicked man.

ANTIGONE

But the one who died  
was not some slave—it was his own brother.

CREON

Who was destroying this country—the other one  
went to his death defending it.

ANTIGONE

That may be,  
but Hades still desires equal rites for both. <sup>277</sup>

CREON

A good man does not wish what we give him  
to be the same an evil man receives.

ANTIGONE

Who knows? In the world below perhaps  
such actions are no crime.

CREON

An enemy  
can never be a friend, not even in death.

---

<sup>277</sup>Hades, a brother of Zeus, is god of the underworld, lord of the dead.

ANTIGONE

But my nature is to love. I cannot hate.

CREON

Then go down to the dead. If you must love,  
love them. No woman's going to govern me—  
no, no—not while I'm still alive.

[Enter two attendants from the house bringing Ismene to Creon]

CHORUS LEADER

Ismene's coming. There—right by the door.  
She's crying. How she must love her sister!  
From her forehead a cloud casts its shadow  
down across her darkly flushing face—  
and drops its rain onto her lovely cheeks.

CREON

You there—you snake lurking in my house,  
sucking out my life's blood so secretly.  
I'd no idea I was nurturing two pests,  
who aimed to rise against my throne. Come here.  
Tell me this—do you admit you played your part  
in this burial, or will you swear an oath  
you had no knowledge of it?

ISMENE

I did it—  
I admit it, and she'll back me up.  
So I bear the guilt as well.

ANTIGONE

No, no—  
justice will not allow you to say that.  
You didn't want to. I didn't work with you.

ISMENE

But now you're in trouble, I'm not ashamed  
of suffering, too, as your companion.

ANTIGONE

Hades and the dead can say who did it—  
I don't love a friend whose love is only words.

ISMENE

You're my sister. Don't dishonour me.  
Let me respect the dead and die with you.

ANTIGONE

Don't try to share my death or make a claim  
to actions which you did not do. I'll die—  
and that will be enough.

ISMENE

But if you're gone,  
what is there in life for me to love?

ANTIGONE



Ask Creon. He's the one you care about.

ISMENE

Why hurt me like this? It doesn't help you.

ANTIGONE

If I am mocking you, it pains me, too.

ISMENE

Even now is there some way I can help?

ANTIGONE

Save yourself. I won't envy your escape.

ISMENE

I feel so wretched leaving you to die.

ANTIGONE

But you chose life—it was my choice to die.

ISMENE

But not before I'd said those words just now.

ANTIGONE

Some people may approve of how you think—  
others will believe my judgment's good.

ISMENE

But the mistake's the same for both of us.

ANTIGONE

Be brave. You're alive. But my spirit died  
some time ago so I might help the dead

CREON

I'd say one of these girls has just revealed  
how mad she is—the other's been that way  
since she was born.

ISMENE

My lord, whatever good sense  
people have by birth no longer stays with them  
once their lives go wrong—it abandons them.

CREON

In your case, that's true, once you made your choice  
to act in evil ways with wicked people.

ISMENE

How could I live alone, without her here?

CREON

Don't speak of her being here. Her life is over.

ISMENE

You're going to kill your own son's bride?

CREON

Why not? There are other fields for him to plough.

ISMENE

No one will make him a more loving wife  
than she will.

CREON

I have no desire my son  
should have an evil wife.

ANTIGONE

Dearest Haemon,  
how your father wrongs you.

CREON

I've had enough of this—  
you and your marriage.

ISMENE

You really want that?  
You're going to take her from him?

CREON

No, not me.  
Hades is the one who'll stop the marriage.

CHORUS LEADER

So she must die—that seems decided on.

CREON

Yes—for you and me the matter's closed.

[Creon turns to address his attendants]

No more delay. You slaves, take them inside.

From this point on they must act like women  
and have no liberty to wander off.

Even bold men run when they see Hades  
coming close to them to snatch their lives.

[The attendants take Antigone and Ismene into the palace, leaving Creon and  
the Chorus on stage]

CHORUS

Those who live without tasting evil  
have happy lives—for when the gods  
shake a house to its foundations,  
then inevitable disasters strike,  
falling upon whole families,  
just as a surging ocean swell  
running before cruel Thracian winds  
across the dark trench of the sea  
churns up the deep black sand  
and crashes headlong on the cliffs,  
which scream in pain against the wind.

I see this house's age-old sorrows,  
the house of Labdakos' children,  
sorrows falling on the sorrows of the dead,  
one generation bringing no relief  
to generations after it—some god  
strikes at them—on and on without an end.  
For now the light which has been shining

over the last roots of Oedipus' house  
 is being cut down with a bloody knife  
 belonging to the gods below—  
 for foolish talk and frenzy in the soul. <sup>278</sup>

O Zeus, what human trespasses  
 can check your power? Even Sleep,  
 who casts his nets on everything,  
 cannot master that—nor can the months,  
 the tireless months the gods control.  
 A sovereign who cannot grow old,  
 you hold Olympus as your own,  
 in all its glittering magnificence. <sup>279</sup>  
 From now on into all future time,  
 as in the past, your law holds firm.  
 It never enters lives of human beings  
 in its full force without disaster.

Hope ranging far and wide brings comfort  
 to many men—but then hope can deceive,  
 delusions born of volatile desire.  
 It comes upon the man who's ignorant  
 until his foot is seared in burning fire.  
 Someone's wisdom has revealed to us  
 this famous saying—sometimes the gods  
 lure a man's mind forward to disaster,  
 and he thinks evil's something good.  
 But then he lives only the briefest time  
 free of catastrophe.

[The palace doors open]

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes Haemon,  
 your only living son. Is he grieving  
 the fate of Antigone, his bride,  
 bitter that his marriage hopes are gone?

CREON

We'll soon find out—more accurately  
 than any prophet here could indicate.

[Enter Haemon from the palace]

My son, have you heard the sentence that's been passed  
 upon your bride? And have you now come here  
 angry at your father? Or are you loyal to me,  
 on my side no matter what I do?

HAEMON

Father, I'm yours. For me your judgments

<sup>278</sup>Labdakos is the father of Laius and hence grandfather of Oedipus and great-grandfather of Antigone and Ismene.

<sup>279</sup>Olympus is a mountain in northern Greece where, according to tradition, the major gods live.

and the ways you act on them are good—  
I shall follow them. I'll not consider  
any marriage a greater benefit  
than your fine leadership.

CREON

Indeed, my son,  
that's how your heart should always be resolved,  
to stand behind your father's judgment  
on every issue. That's what men pray for—  
obedient children growing up at home  
who will pay back their father's enemies,  
evil to them for evil done to him,  
while honouring his friends as much as he does.  
A man who fathers useless children—  
what can one say of him except he's bred  
troubles for himself, and much to laugh at  
for those who fight against him? So, my son,  
don't ever throw good sense aside for pleasure,  
for some woman's sake. You understand  
how such embraces can turn freezing cold  
when an evil woman shares your life at home.  
What greater wound is there than a false friend?  
So spit this girl out—she's your enemy.  
Let her marry someone else in Hades.  
Since I caught her clearly disobeying,  
the only culprit in the entire city,  
I won't perjure myself before the state.  
No—I'll kill her. And so let her appeal  
to Zeus, the god of blood relationships.  
If I foster any lack of full respect  
in my own family, I surely do the same  
with those who are not linked to me by blood.

The man who acts well with his household  
will be found a just man in the city.<sup>280</sup> I'd trust such a man to govern wisely  
or to be content with someone ruling him.  
And in the thick of battle at his post

he'll stand firm beside his fellow soldier,  
a loyal, brave man. But anyone who's proud  
and violates our laws or thinks he'll tell  
our leaders what to do, a man like that  
wins no praise from me. No. We must obey  
whatever man the city puts in charge,  
no matter what the issue—great or small,

<sup>280</sup> Following common editorial practice, the lines of the Greek have been rearranged here, so that 663-7 come after 671, hence the apparently odd numbering of the lines.

just or unjust. For there's no greater evil  
than a lack of leadership. That destroys  
whole cities, turns households into ruins,  
and in war makes soldiers break and run away.  
When men succeed, what keeps their lives secure  
in almost every case is their obedience.  
That's why they must support those in control,  
and never let some woman beat us down.  
If we must fall from power, let that come  
at some man's hand—at least, we won't be called  
inferior to any woman.

CHORUS LEADER

Unless we're being deceived by our old age,  
what you've just said seems reasonable to us.

HAEMON

Father, the gods instill good sense in men—  
the greatest of all the things which we possess.  
I could not find your words somehow not right—  
I hope that's something I never learn to do.  
But other words might be good, as well.  
Because of who you are, you can't perceive  
all the things men say or do—or their complaints.  
Your gaze makes citizens afraid—they can't  
say anything you would not like to hear.  
But in the darkness I can hear them talk—  
the city is upset about the girl.  
They say of all women here she's least deserves  
the worst of deaths for her most glorious act.  
When in the slaughter her own brother died,  
she did not just leave him there unburied,  
to be ripped apart by carrion dogs or birds.  
Surely she deserves some golden honour?  
That's the dark secret rumour people speak.

For me, father, nothing is more valuable  
than your well being. For any children,  
what could be a greater honour to them  
than their father's thriving reputation?  
A father feels the same about his sons.  
So don't let your mind dwell on just one thought,  
that what you say is right and nothing else.  
A man who thinks that only he is wise,  
that he can speak and think like no one else,  
when such men are exposed, then all can see  
their emptiness inside. For any man,  
even if he's wise, there's nothing shameful  
in learning many things, staying flexible.

You notice how in winter floods the trees  
which bend before the storm preserve their twigs.  
The ones who stand against it are destroyed,  
root and branch. In the same way, those sailors  
who keep their sails stretched tight, never easing off,  
make their ship capsize—and from that point on  
sail with their rowing benches all submerged.  
So end your anger. Permit yourself to change.  
For if I, as a younger man, may state  
my views, I'd say it would be for the best  
if men by nature understood all things—  
if not, and that is usually the case,  
when men speak well, it good to learn from them.

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, if what he's said is relevant,  
it seems appropriate to learn from him,  
and you too, Haemon, listen to the king.  
The things which you both said were excellent.

CREON

And men my age—are we then going to school  
to learn what's wise from men as young as him?

HAEMON

There's nothing wrong in that. And if I'm young,  
don't think about my age—look at what I do.

CREON

And what you do—does that include this,  
honouring those who act against our laws?

HAEMON

I would not encourage anyone  
to show respect to evil men.

CREON

And her—  
is she not suffering from the same disease?

HAEMON

The people here in Thebes all say the same—  
they deny she is.

CREON

So the city now  
will instruct me how I am to govern?

HAEMON

Now you're talking like someone far too young.  
Don't you see that?

CREON

Am I to rule this land  
at someone else's whim or by myself?

HAEMON

A city which belongs to just one man  
is no true city.

CREON

According to our laws,  
does not the ruler own the city?

HAEMON

By yourself you'd make an excellent king  
but in a desert.

CREON

It seems as if this boy  
is fighting on the woman's side.

HAEMON

That's true—  
if you're the woman. I'm concerned for you.

CREON

You're the worst there is—you set your judgment up  
against your father.

HAEMON

No, not when I see  
you making a mistake and being unjust.

CREON

Is it a mistake to honour my own rule?

HAEMON

You're not honouring that by trampling on  
the gods' prerogatives.

CREON

You foul creature—  
you're worse than any woman.

HAEMON

You'll not catch me  
giving way to some disgrace.

CREON

But your words  
all speak on her behalf.

HAEMON

And yours and mine—  
and for the gods below.

CREON

You woman's slave—  
don't try to win me over.

HAEMON

What do you want—  
to speak and never hear someone reply? <sup>281</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Following the suggestion of Andrew Brown and others, I have moved lines 756-7 in the Greek text so that they come right after line 750.

CREON

You'll never marry her while she's alive.

HAEMON

Then she'll die—and in her death kill someone else.

CREON

Are you so insolent you threaten me?

HAEMON

Where's the threat in challenging a bad decree?

CREON

You'll regret parading what you think like this—  
you—a person with an empty brain!

HAEMON

If you were not my father, I might say  
you were not thinking straight.

CREON

Would you, indeed?

Well, then, by Olympus, I'll have you know  
you'll be sorry for demeaning me  
with all these insults.

[Creon turns to his attendants]

Go bring her out—

that hateful creature, so she can die right here,  
with him present, before her bridegroom's eyes.

HAEMON

No. Don't ever hope for that. She'll not die  
with me just standing there. And as for you—  
your eyes will never see my face again.  
So let your rage charge on among your friends  
who want to stand by you in this.

[Exit Haemon, running back into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, Haemon left in such a hurry.  
He's angry—in a young man at his age  
the mind turns bitter when he's feeling hurt.

CREON

Let him dream up or carry out great deeds  
beyond the power of man, he'll not save these girls—  
their fate is sealed.

CHORUS LEADER

Are you going to kill them both?

CREON

No—not the one whose hands are clean. You're right.

CHORUS LEADER

How do you plan to kill Antigone?

CREON

I'll take her on a path no people use,



and hide her in a cavern in the rocks,  
 while still alive. I'll set out provisions,  
 as much as piety requires, to make sure  
 the city is not totally corrupted. <sup>282</sup> Then she can speak her prayers to Hades,  
 the only god she worships, for success  
 avoiding death—or else, at least, she'll learn,  
 although too late, how it's a waste of time  
 to work to honour those whom Hades holds.

CHORUS

O Eros, the conqueror in every fight,  
 Eros, who squanders all men's wealth,  
 who sleeps at night on girls' soft cheeks,  
 and roams across the ocean seas  
 and through the shepherd's hut—  
 no immortal god escapes from you,  
 nor any man, who lives but for a day. <sup>283</sup>  
 And the one whom you possess goes mad.

Even in good men you twist their minds,  
 perverting them to their own ruin.  
 You provoke these men to family strife.  
 The bride's desire seen glittering in her eyes—  
 that conquers everything, its power  
 enthroned beside eternal laws, for there  
 the goddess Aphrodite works her will,  
 whose ways are irresistible. <sup>284</sup>

[Antigone enters from the palace with attendants who are taking her away to  
 her execution]

CHORAL LEADER

When I look at her I forget my place.  
 I lose restraint and can't hold back my tears—  
 Antigone going to her bridal room  
 where all are laid to rest in death.

ANTIGONE

Look at me, my native citizens,  
 as I go on my final journey,  
 as I gaze upon the sunlight one last time,  
 which I'll never see again—for Hades,  
 who brings all people to their final sleep,  
 leads me on, while I'm still living,  
 down to the shores of Acheron. <sup>285</sup> I've not yet had my bridal chant,

<sup>282</sup>The killing of a family member could bring on divine punishment in the form of a pollution involving the entire city (as in the case of Oedipus). Creon is, one assumes, taking refuge in the notion that he will not be executing Antigone directly.

<sup>283</sup>Eros is the young god of erotic sexual passion.

<sup>284</sup>Aphrodite was the goddess of sexual desire.

<sup>285</sup>Acheron is one of the major rivers of the underworld.

nor has any wedding song been sung—  
for my marriage is to Acheron.

CHORUS

Surely you carry fame with you and praise,  
as you move to the deep home of the dead.  
You were not stricken by lethal disease  
or paid your wages with a sword.'

No. You were in charge of your own fate.  
So of all living human beings, you alone  
make your way down to Hades still alive.

ANTIGONE

I've heard about a guest of ours,  
daughter of Tantalus, from Phrygia—  
she went to an excruciating death  
in Sipylus, right on the mountain peak.  
The stone there, just like clinging ivy,  
wore her down, and now, so people say,  
the snow and rain never leave her there,  
as she laments. Below her weeping eyes  
her neck is wet with tears. God brings me  
to a final rest which most resembles hers.

CHORUS

But Niobe was a goddess, born divine—  
and we are human beings, a race which dies.  
But still, it's a fine thing for a woman,  
once she's dead, to have it said she shared,  
in life and death, the fate of demi-gods. <sup>286</sup>

ANTIGONE

Oh, you are mocking me! Why me—  
by our fathers' gods—why do you all,  
my own city and the richest men of Thebes,  
insult me now right to my face,  
without waiting for my death?  
Well at least I have Dirce's springs,  
the holy grounds of Thebes,  
a city full of splendid chariots,  
to witness how no friends lament for me  
as I move on—you see the laws  
which lead me to my rock-bound prison,  
a tomb made just for me. Alas!

<sup>286</sup>The last two speeches refer to Niobe, daughter of Tantalus (a son of Zeus). Niobe had seven sons and seven daughters and boasted that she had more children than the goddess Leto. As punishment Artemis and Apollo, Leto's two children, destroyed all Niobe's children. Niobe turned to stone in grief and was reportedly visible on Mount Sipylus (in Asia Minor). The Chorus' claim that Niobe was a goddess or semi-divine is odd here, since her story is almost always a tale of human presumption and divine punishment for human arrogance.

In my wretchedness I have no home,  
     not with human beings or corpses,  
 not with the living or the dead.

CHORUS

You pushed your daring to the limit, my child,  
 and tripped against Justice's high altar—  
 perhaps your agonies are paying back  
 some compensation for your father. <sup>287</sup>

ANTIGONE

Now there you touch on my most painful thought—  
 my father's destiny—always on my mind,  
 along with that whole fate which sticks to us,  
     the splendid house of Labdakos—the curse  
 arising from a mother's marriage bed,  
 when she had sex with her own son, my father.  
 From what kind of parents was I born,  
 their wretched daughter? I go to them,  
 unmarried and accursed, an outcast.  
 Alas, too, for my brother Polyneices,  
 who made a fatal marriage and then died—  
     and with that death killed me while still alive. <sup>288</sup>

CHORUS

To be piously devout shows reverence,  
 but powerful men, who in their persons  
 incorporate authority, cannot bear  
 anyone to break their rules. Hence, you die  
 because of your own selfish will.

ANTIGONE

Without lament, without a friend,  
 and with no marriage song, I'm being led  
 in this miserable state, along my final road.  
 So wretched that I no longer have the right  
     to look upon the sun, that sacred eye.  
 But my fate prompts no tears, and no friend mourns.

CREON

Don't you know that no one faced with death  
 would ever stop the singing and the groans,  
 if that would help? Take her and shut her up,  
 as I have ordered, in her tomb's embrace.  
 And get it done as quickly as you can.  
 Then leave her there alone, all by herself—  
 she can sort out whether she wants suicide

<sup>287</sup>The Chorus here is offering the traditional suggestion that present afflictions can arise from a family curse originating in previous generations.

<sup>288</sup>Polyneices married the daughter of Adrastus, an action which enabled him to acquire the army to attack Thebes.

or remains alive, buried in a place like that.  
 As far as she's concerned, we bear no guilt.  
 But she's lost her place living here with us. <sup>289</sup>

ANTIGONE

Oh my tomb and bridal chamber—  
 my eternal hollow dwelling place,  
 where I go to join my people. Most of them  
 have perished—Persephone has welcomed them  
 among the dead. <sup>290</sup> I'm the last one, dying here  
 the most evil death by far, as I move down  
 before the time allotted for my life is done.  
 But I go nourishing the vital hope  
 my father will be pleased to see me come,  
 and you, too, my mother, will welcome me,  
 as well as you, my own dear brother.  
 When you died, with my own hands I washed you.

I arranged your corpse and at the grave mound  
 poured out libations. But now, Polyneices,  
 this is my reward for covering your corpse. <sup>291</sup> However, for wise people I was right  
 to honour you. I'd never have done it  
 for children of my own, not as their mother,  
 nor for a dead husband lying in decay—  
 no, not in defiance of the citizens.  
 What law do I appeal to, claiming this?  
 If my husband died, there'd be another one,  
 and if I were to lose a child of mine  
 I'd have another with some other man.

But since my father and my mother, too,  
 are hidden away in Hades' house,  
 I'll never have another living brother.  
 That was the law I used to honour you.  
 But Creon thought that I was in the wrong  
 and acting recklessly for you, my brother.  
 Now he seizes me by force and leads me here—  
 no wedding and no bridal song, no share  
 in married life or raising children.

<sup>289</sup>Creon's logic seems to suggest that because he is not executing Antigone directly and is leaving her a choice between committing suicide and slowly starving to death in the cave, he has no moral responsibility for what happens.

<sup>290</sup>Persephone is the wife of Hades and thus goddess of the underworld.

<sup>291</sup>In these lines Antigone seems to be talking about both her brothers, first claiming she washed and dressed the body of Eteocles and then covered Polyneices. However, the pronoun references in the Greek are confusing. Lines 904 to 920 in the Greek text have prompted a great deal of critical debate, since they seem incompatible with Antigone's earlier motivation and do not make much sense in context (in addition most of them appear closely derived from Herodotus 3.119). Hence, some editors insist that the lines (or most of them) be removed. Brown provides a useful short summary of the arguments and some editorial options (199-200).

Instead I go in sorrow to my grave,  
without my friends, to die while still alive.

What holy justice have I violated?  
In my wretchedness, why should I still look  
up to the gods? Which one can I invoke  
to bring me help, when for my reverence  
they charge me with impiety? Well, then,  
if this is something fine among the gods,  
I'll come to recognize that I've done wrong.  
But if these people here are being unjust  
may they endure no greater punishment  
than the injustices they're doing to me.

CHORUS LEADER

The same storm blasts continue to attack  
the mind in this young girl.

CREON

Then those escorting her  
will be sorry they're so slow.

ANTIGONE

Alas, then,  
those words mean death is very near at hand.

CREON

I won't encourage you or cheer you up,  
by saying the sentence won't be carried out.

ANTIGONE

O city of my fathers  
in this land of Thebes—  
and my ancestral gods,  
I am being led away.  
No more delaying for me.  
Look on me, you lords of Thebes,  
the last survivor of your royal house,  
see what I have to undergo,  
the kind of men who do this to me,  
for paying reverence to true piety.

[Antigone is led away under escort]

CHORUS

In her brass-bound room fair Danaë as well  
endured her separation from the heaven's light,  
a prisoner hidden in a chamber like a tomb,  
although she, too, came from a noble line.<sup>292</sup> And she, my child, had in her care  
the liquid streaming golden seed of Zeus.

<sup>292</sup>Danaë was daughter of Acrisus, King of Argos. Because of a prophecy that he would be killed by a son born to Danaë, Acrisus imprisoned her. But Zeus made love to her in the form of a golden shower, and she gave birth to Perseus, who, once grown, killed Acrisus accidentally.

But the power of fate is full of mystery.  
There's no evading it, no, not with wealth,  
or war, or walls, or black sea-beaten ships.

And the hot-tempered child of Dryas,  
king of the Edonians, was put in prison,  
closed up in the rocks by Dionysus,  
for his angry mocking of the god. <sup>293</sup> There the dreadful flower of his rage  
slowly withered, and he came to know  
the god who in his frenzy he had mocked  
with his own tongue. For he had tried  
to hold in check women in that frenzy  
inspired by the god, the Bacchanalian fire.  
More than that—he'd made the Muses angry,  
challenging the gods who love the flute. <sup>294</sup>

Beside the black rocks where the twin seas meet,  
by Thracian Salmydessos at the Bosphorus,  
close to the place where Ares dwells,  
the war god witnessed the unholy wounds  
which blinded the two sons of Phineus,  
inflicted by his savage wife—the sightless holes  
cried out for someone to avenge those blows  
made with her sharpened comb in blood-stained hands. <sup>295</sup>

In their misery they wept, lamenting  
their wretched suffering, sons of a mother  
whose marriage had gone wrong. And yet,  
she was an offspring of an ancient family,  
the race of Erechtheus, raised far away,  
in caves surrounded by her father's winds,  
Boreas' child, a girl who raced with horses  
across steep hills—child of the gods.  
But she, too, my child, suffered much  
from the immortal Fates. <sup>296</sup>

[Enter Teiresias, led by a young boy]

TEIRESIAS

Lords of Thebes, we two have walked a common path,  
one person's vision serving both of us.  
The blind require a guide to find their way.

<sup>293</sup>These lines refer to Lycurgus son of Dryas, a Thracian king. He attacked the god Dionysus and was punished with blinding or with being torn apart.

<sup>294</sup>The anger of the Muses at a Thracian who boasted of his flute playing is not normally a part of the Lycurgus story but refers to another Thracian, Thamyras.

<sup>295</sup>The black rocks were a famous hazard to shipping. They moved together to smash any ship moving between them. The Bosphorus is the strait between the Black Sea and the Propontis (near the Hellespont). This verse and the next refer to the Thracian king Phineas, whose second wife blinded her two step sons (from Phineas' first wife Cleopatra) by stabbing out their eyes.

<sup>296</sup>Cleopatra was the grand-daughter of Erechtheus, king of Athens. Boreas, father of Erechtheus, was god of the North Wind.

CREON

What news do you have, old Teiresias?

TEIRESIAS

I'll tell you—and you obey the prophet.

CREON

I've not rejected your advice before.

TEIRESIAS

That's the reason why you've steered the city  
on its proper course.

CREON

From my experience  
I can confirm the help you give.

TEIRESIAS

Then know this—  
your luck is once more on Fate's razor edge.

CREON

What? What you've just said makes me nervous.

TEIRESIAS

You'll know—once you hear the tokens of my art.

As I was sitting in my ancient place  
receiving omens from the flights of birds  
who all come there where I can hear them,

I note among those birds an unknown cry—  
evil, unintelligible, angry screaming.

I knew that they were tearing at each other  
with murderous claws. The noisy wings  
revealed that all too well. I was afraid.

So right away up on the blazing altar  
I set up burnt offerings. But Hephaestus  
failed to shine out from the sacrifice—  
dark slime poured out onto the embers,  
oozing from the thighs, which smoked and spat,  
bile was sprayed high up into the air,

and the melting thighs lost all the fat  
which they'd been wrapped in. The rites had failed—  
there was no prophecy revealed in them.

I learned that from this boy, who is my guide,  
as I guide other men. <sup>297</sup> Our state is sick—  
your policies have done this. In the city  
our altars and our hearths have been defiled,  
all of them, with rotting flesh brought there  
by birds and dogs from Oedipus' son,  
who lies there miserably dead. The gods

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<sup>297</sup>Teiresias' offering failed to catch fire. His interpretation is that it has been rejected by the gods, a very unfavourable omen.

no longer will accept our sacrifice,  
our prayers, our thigh bones burned in fire.

No bird will shriek out a clear sign to us,  
for they have gorged themselves on fat and blood  
from a man who's dead. Consider this, my son.  
All men make mistakes—that's not uncommon.  
But when they do, they're no longer foolish  
or subject to bad luck if they try to fix  
the evil into which they've fallen,  
once they give up their intransigence.  
Men who put their stubbornness on show  
invite accusations of stupidity.  
Make concessions to the dead—don't ever stab  
a man who's just been killed. What's the glory  
in killing a dead person one more time?

I've been concerned for you. It's good advice.  
Learning can be pleasant when a man speaks well,  
especially when he seeks your benefit.

CREON

Old man, you're all like archers shooting at me—  
For you all I've now become your target—  
even prophets have been aiming at me.  
I've long been bought and sold as merchandise  
among that tribe. Well, go make your profits.  
If it's what you want, then trade with Sardis  
for their golden-silver alloy—or for gold  
from India, but you'll never hide that corpse  
in any grave. Even if Zeus' eagles

should choose to seize his festering body  
and take it up, right to the throne of Zeus,  
not even then would I, in trembling fear  
of some defilement, permit that corpse  
a burial. For I know well that no man  
has the power to pollute the gods.  
But, old Teiresias, among human beings  
the wisest suffer a disgraceful fall  
when, to promote themselves, they use fine words  
to spread around abusive insults.

TEIRESIAS

Alas, does any man know or think about . . .

CREON [interrupting] Think what? What sort of pithy common thought  
are you about to utter?

TEIRESIAS [ignoring the interruption] . . . how good advice  
is valuable—worth more than all possessions.

CREON

I think that's true, as much as foolishness



is what harms us most.

TEIRESIAS

Yet that's the sickness  
now infecting you.

CREON

I have no desire  
to denigrate a prophet when I speak.

TEIRESIAS

But that's what you are doing, when you claim  
my oracles are false.

CREON

The tribe of prophets—  
all of them—are fond of money

TEIRESIAS

And kings?  
Their tribe loves to benefit dishonestly.

CREON

You know you're speaking of the man who rules you.

TEIRESIAS

I know—thanks to me you saved the city  
and now are in control. <sup>298</sup>

CREON

You're a wise prophet,  
but you love doing wrong.

TEIRESIAS

You'll force me  
to speak of secrets locked inside my heart.

CREON

Do it—just don't speak to benefit yourself.

TEIRESIAS

I don't think that I'll be doing that—  
not as far as you're concerned.

CREON

You can be sure  
you won't change my mind to make yourself more rich.

TEIRESIAS

Then understand this well—you will not see  
the sun race through its cycle many times  
before you lose a child of your own loins,  
a corpse in payment for these corpses.  
You've thrown down to those below someone  
from up above—in your arrogance  
you've moved a living soul into a grave,

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<sup>298</sup>This is the second reference to the fact that at some point earlier Teiresias has given important political help to Creon. It is not at all clear what this refers to.

leaving here a body owned by gods below—  
 unburied, dispossessed, unsanctified.  
 That's no concern of yours or gods above.  
 In this you violate the ones below.  
 And so destroying avengers wait for you,  
 Furies of Hades and the gods, who'll see  
 you caught up in this very wickedness.  
 Now see if I speak as someone who's been bribed.  
 It won't be long before in your own house  
 the men and women all cry out in sorrow,  
 and cities rise in hate against you—all those  
 whose mangled soldiers have had burial rites  
 from dogs, wild animals, or flying birds  
 who carry the unholy stench back home,  
 to every city hearth.<sup>299</sup> Like an archer, I shoot these arrows now into your heart  
 because you have provoked me. I'm angry—  
 so my aim is good. You'll not escape their pain.  
 Boy, lead us home so he can vent his rage  
 on younger men and keep a quieter tongue  
 and a more temperate mind than he has now.

[Exit Teiresias, led by the young boy]

CHORUS LEADER

My lord, my lord, such dreadful prophecies—  
 and now he's gone. Since my hair changed colour  
 from black to white, I know here in the city  
 he's never uttered a false prophecy.

CREON

I know that, too—and it disturbs my mind.  
 It's dreadful to give way, but to resist  
 and let destruction hammer down my spirit—  
 that's a fearful option, too.

CHORUS LEADER

Son of Menoikeos,  
 you need to listen to some good advice.

CREON

Tell me what to do. Speak up. I'll do it.

CHORUS LEADER

Go and release the girl from her rock tomb.  
 Then prepare a grave for that unburied corpse.

CREON

This is your advice? You think I should concede?

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, my lord, as fast as possible.

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<sup>299</sup>Teiresias here is apparently accusing Creon of refusing burial to the dead allied soldiers Polynices brought with him from other cities. There is no mention of this anywhere else in the play, although the detail is present in other versions of the story.

Swift footed injuries sent from the gods  
hack down those who act imprudently.

CREON

Alas—it's difficult. But I'll give up.  
I'll not do what I'd set my heart upon.  
It's not right to fight against necessity.

CHORUS LEADER

Go now and get this done. Don't give the work  
to other men to do.

CREON

I'll go just as I am.  
Come, you servants, each and every one of you.  
Come on. Bring axes with you. Go there quickly—  
up to the higher ground. I've changed my mind.

Since I'm the one who tied her up, I'll go  
and set her free myself. Now I'm afraid.  
Until one dies the best thing well may be  
to follow our established laws.

[Creon and his attendants hurry off stage]

CHORUS

O you with many names,  
you glory of that Theban bride,  
and child of thundering Zeus,  
you who cherish famous Italy,  
and rule the welcoming valley lands  
of Eleusianian Deo—  
O Bacchus—you who dwell  
in the bacchants' mother city Thebes,  
beside Ismenus' flowing streams,  
on land sown with the teeth  
of that fierce dragon. <sup>300</sup>

Above the double mountain peaks,  
the torches flashing through the murky smoke  
have seen you where Corcyian nymphs  
move on as they worship you  
by the Kastalian stream.

And from the ivy-covered slopes  
of Nysa's hills, from the green shore  
so rich in vines, you come to us,  
visiting our Theban ways,  
while deathless voices all cry out

<sup>300</sup>In these lines the Chorus celebrates Dionysus, the god born in Thebes to Semele, daughter of King Cadmus. The bacchants are those who worship Dionysus. Eleusis, a region on the coast near Athens, was famous for the its Eleusinian Mysteries, a secret ritual of worship. Deo is a reference to the goddess Demeter, who was worshipped at Eleusis. The Theban race sprang up from dragon's teeth sown in a field by Cadmus, founder of the city.

in honour of your name, "Evoë." <sup>301</sup>

You honour Thebes, our city,  
above all others, you and your mother  
blasted by that lightning strike. <sup>302</sup> And now when all our people here  
are captive to a foul disease,  
on your healing feet you come  
across the moaning strait  
or over the Parnassian hill.

You who lead the dance,  
among the fire-breathing stars,  
who guard the voices in the night,  
child born of Zeus, oh my lord,  
appear with your attendant Thyiads,  
who dance in frenzy all night long,  
for you their patron, Iacchus. <sup>303</sup>

[Enter a Messenger]

MESSENGER

All you here who live beside the home  
of Amphion and Cadmus—in human life  
there's no set place which I would praise or blame. <sup>304</sup> The lucky and unlucky rise  
or fall  
by chance day after day—and how these things  
are fixed for men no one can prophesy.

For Creon, in my view, was once a man  
we all looked up to. For he saved the state,  
this land of Cadmus, from its enemies.  
He took control and reigned as its sole king—  
and prospered with the birth of noble children.  
Now all is gone. For when a man has lost  
what gives him pleasure, I don't include him  
among the living—he's a breathing corpse.  
Pile up a massive fortune in your home,  
if that's what you want—live like a king.  
If there's no pleasure in it, I'd not give  
to any man a vapour's shadow for it,  
not compared to human joy.

CHORUS LEADER

Have you come with news of some fresh trouble  
in our house of kings?

MESSENGER

They're dead—

<sup>301</sup> Evoë is a cry of celebration made by worshippers of Dionysus.

<sup>302</sup> Semele, Dionysus' human mother, was destroyed by Zeus lightning bolt, because of the jealousy of Hera, Zeus' wife.

<sup>303</sup> Thyiads were worshippers of Dionysus, and Iacchus was a divinity associated with Dionysus.

<sup>304</sup> Amphion was legendary king of Thebes, husband of Niobe.

and those alive bear the responsibility  
for those who've died.

CHORUS LEADER

Who did the killing?  
Who's lying dead? Tell us.

MESSENGER

Haemon has been killed.  
No stranger shed his blood.

CHORUS LEADER

At his father's hand?  
Or did he kill himself?

MESSENGER

By his own hand—  
angry at his father for the murder.

CHORUS LEADER

Teiresias, how your words have proven true!

MESSENGER

That's how things stand. Consider what comes next.

CHORUS LEADER

I see Creon's wife, poor Eurydice—

she's coming from the house—either by chance,  
or else she's heard there's news about her son.

[Enter Eurydice from the palace with some attendants]

EURYDICE

Citizens of Thebes, I heard you talking,  
as I was walking out, going off to pray,  
to ask for help from goddess Pallas.  
While I was unfastening the gate,  
I heard someone speaking of bad news  
about my family. I was terrified.  
I collapsed, fainting back into the arms  
of my attendants. So tell the news again—  
I'll listen. I'm no stranger to misfortune.

MESSENGER

Dear lady, I'll speak of what I saw,  
omitting not one detail of the truth.  
Why should I ease your mind with a report  
which turns out later to be incorrect?  
The truth is always best. I went to the plain,  
accompanying your husband as his guide.  
Polyneices' corpse, still unlamented,  
was lying there, the greatest distance off,  
torn apart by dogs. We prayed to Pluto  
and to Hecate, goddess of the road,  
for their good will and to restrain their rage.  
We gave the corpse a ritual wash, and burned

what was left of it on fresh-cut branches.  
We piled up a high tomb of his native earth.  
Then we moved to the young girl's rocky cave,  
the hollow cavern of that bride of death.  
From far away one man heard a voice  
coming from the chamber where we'd put her  
without a funeral—a piercing cry.  
He went to tell our master Creon,  
who, as he approached the place, heard the sound,  
an unintelligible scream of sorrow.  
He groaned and then spoke out these bitter words,  
    "Has misery made me a prophet now?  
And am I travelling along a road  
that takes me to the worst of all disasters?  
I've just heard the voice of my own son.  
You servants, go ahead—get up there fast.  
Remove the stones piled in the entrance way,  
then stand beside the tomb and look in there  
to see if that was Haemon's voice I heard,  
or if the gods have been deceiving me." Following what our desperate master  
asked,  
we looked. In the furthest corner of the tomb  
    we saw Antigone hanging by the neck,  
held up in a noose—fine woven linen.  
Haemon had his arms around her waist—  
he was embracing her and crying out  
in sorrow for the loss of his own bride,  
now among the dead, his father's work,  
and for his horrifying marriage bed.  
Creon saw him, let out a fearful groan,  
then went inside and called out anxiously,  
"You unhappy boy, what have you done?  
What are you thinking? Have you lost your mind?  
Come out, my child—I'm begging you—please come."  
    But the boy just stared at him with savage eyes,  
spat in his face and, without saying a word,  
drew his two-edged sword. Creon moved away,  
so the boy's blow failed to strike his father.  
Angry at himself, the ill-fated lad  
right then and there leaned into his own sword,  
driving half the blade between his ribs.  
While still conscious he embraced the girl  
in his weak arms, and, as he breathed his last,  
he coughed up streams of blood on her fair cheek.  
Now he lies there, corpse on corpse, his marriage  
    has been fulfilled in chambers of the dead.

The unfortunate boy has shown all men  
how, of all the evils which afflict mankind,  
the most disastrous one is thoughtlessness.

[Eurydice turns and slowly returns into the palace]

CHORUS LEADER

What do you make of that? The queen's gone back.  
She left without a word, good or bad.

MESSENGER

I'm surprised myself. It's about her son—  
she heard that terrible report. I hope  
she's gone because she doesn't think it right  
to mourn for him in public. In the home,  
surrounded by her servants, she'll arrange  
a period of mourning for the house.  
She's discreet and has experience—  
she won't make mistakes.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm not sure of that.  
to me her staying silent was extreme—  
it seems to point to something ominous,  
just like a vain excess of grief.

MESSENGER

I'll go in.  
We'll find out if she's hiding something secret,  
deep within her passionate heart. You're right—  
excessive silence can be dangerous.

[The Messenger goes up the stairs into the palace. Enter Creon from the side,  
with attendants. Creon is holding the body of Haemon]

CHORUS LEADER

Here comes the king in person—carrying  
in his arms, if it's right to speak of this,  
a clear reminder that this evil comes  
not from some stranger, but his own mistakes.

CREON Aaiii—mistakes made by a foolish mind,  
cruel mistakes that bring on death.  
You see us here, all in one family—  
the killer and the killed.  
Oh the profanity of what I planned.  
Alas, my son, you died so young—  
a death before your time.  
Aaiii . . . aaiii . . . you're dead . . . gone—  
not your own foolishness but mine.

CHORUS LEADER

Alas, it seems you've learned to see what's right—  
but far too late.

CREON

Aaiiii . . . I've learned it in my pain.  
Some god clutching a great weight struck my head,  
then hurled me onto paths in wilderness,  
throwing down and casting underfoot  
what brought me joy.  
So sad . . . so sad . . .  
the wretched agony of human life.

[The Messenger reappears from the palace]

MESSENGER

My lord, you come like one who stores up evil,  
what you hold in your arms and what you'll see  
before too long inside the house.

CREON

What's that?

Is there something still more evil than all this?

MESSENGER

Your wife is dead—blood mother of that corpse—  
slaughtered with a sword—her wounds are very new,  
poor lady.

CREON

Aaiiii . . . a gathering place for death . . .  
no sacrifice can bring this to an end.  
Why are you destroying me? You there—  
you bringer of this dreadful news, this agony,  
what are you saying now? Aaiii . . .  
You kill a man then kill him once again.  
What are you saying, boy? What news?  
A slaughter heaped on slaughter—  
my wife, alas . . . she's dead?

MESSENGER [opening the palace doors, revealing the body of Eurydice] Look  
here. No longer is she concealed inside.

CREON

Alas, how miserable I feel—to look upon  
this second horror. What remains for me,  
what's fate still got in store? I've just held  
my own son in my arms, and now I see  
right here in front of me another corpse.  
Alas for this suffering mother.

Alas, my son.

MESSENGER

Stabbed with a sharp sword at the altar,  
she let her darkening eyesight fail,  
once she had cried out in sorrow  
for the glorious fate of Megareos,  
who died some time ago, and then again  
for Haemon, and then, with her last breath,



she called out evil things against you,  
the killer of your sons.<sup>305</sup>

CREON

Aaaii . . . My fear now makes me tremble.  
Why won't someone now strike out at me,  
pierce my heart with a double bladed sword?  
How miserable I am . . . aaii . . .  
how full of misery and pain . . .

MESSENGER

By this woman who lies dead you stand charged  
with the deaths of both your sons.

CREON

What about her?  
How did she die so violently?

MESSENGER

She killed herself,  
with her own hands she stabbed her belly,  
once she heard her son's unhappy fate.

CREON

Alas for me . . . the guilt for all of this is mine—  
it can never be removed from me or passed  
to any other mortal man. I, and I alone . . .  
I murdered you . . . I speak the truth.  
Servants—hurry and lead me off,  
get me away from here, for now  
what I am in life is nothing.

CHORUS LEADER

What you advise is good—if good can come  
with all these evils. When we face such things  
the less we say the better.

CREON

Let that day come, O let it come,  
the fairest of all destinies for me,  
the one which brings on my last day.

Oh, let it come, so that I never see  
another dawn.

CHORUS LEADER

That's something for the times ahead.  
Now we need to deal with what confronts us here.  
What's yet to come is the concern of those  
whose task it is to deal with it.

CREON

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<sup>305</sup> Megareos was Haemon's brother, who, we are to understand on the basis of this reference, died nobly some time before the play begins. It is not clear how Creon might have been responsible for his death. In another version of the story, Creon has a son Menoeceos, who kills himself in order to save the city.

In that prayer  
I included everything I most desire.

CHORUS

Pray for nothing.  
There's no release for mortal human beings,  
not from events which destiny has set.

CREON

Then take this foolish man away from here.  
I killed you, my son, without intending to,  
and you, as well, my wife. How useless I am now.  
I don't know where to look or find support.  
Everything I touch goes wrong, and on my head  
fate climbs up with its overwhelming load.

[The Attendants help Creon move up the stairs into the palace, taking Haemon's  
body with them]

CHORUS

The most important part of true success  
is wisdom—not to act impiously  
towards the gods, for boasts of arrogant men  
bring on great blows of punishment—  
so in old age men can discover wisdom.

# (SOPHOCLES) Ajax

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/ajax.pdf)<sup>306</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

When Achilles, the finest of all the warriors in the Achaean army, was killed in the Trojan War, there was a dispute about which warrior should receive the high honour of getting Achilles' weapons. There were two main claimants, Odysseus and Ajax. The latter was, according to Homer, the best warrior after Achilles. However, as a result of voting among the leading warriors, the weapons were awarded to Odysseus. The action of Sophocles' play takes place the day after this decision.

Note that Sophocles calls the Greek forces the Argives, Achaeans, or Danaans, as in Homer, and occasionally the Hellenes (Greeks)

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ATHENA: goddess of war and wisdom

ODYSSEUS: king of Ithaca, a leader in the Argive forces at Troy

AJAX: king of Salamis

CHORUS: sailors from Salamis

TECMESSA: daughter of the king of Phrygia, concubine of Ajax

MESSENGER: a soldier

TEUCER: a Greek warrior, half brother of Ajax

MENELAUS: one of the commanders of the Argive forces at Troy

AGAMEMNON: brother of Menelaus, commander of the Greek army

EURYSACES: young son of Ajax and Tecmessa.

ATTENDANTS, SERVANTS, SOLDIERS.

[The action takes place during the last year of the Trojan War. The scene is one end of the

Argive camp beside the sea, outside Ajax's hut. The hut is a substantial building with main

doors facing the audience and some side doors. There are steps leading up to a platform

outside the main doors. It is early in the morning, without very much light yet.

ODYSSEUS

enters slowly, tracking footprints in the sand and trying to look through the partially open

door into the hut. The goddess ATHENA appears and speaks to ODYSSEUS.]

ATHENA

Odysseus, I keep seeing you prowl around,  
seeking by stealth to gain the upper hand  
against your enemies. And now, by these huts  
at one end of the army, where Ajax  
has his camp beside the ships, for some time

<sup>306</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/ajax.pdf>

I've been observing as you track him down,  
 keeping your eyes fixed on his fresh-made trail,  
 to find out whether he's inside or not. <sup>307</sup>

Like a keen-nosed Spartan hunting dog,  
 your path is taking you straight to your goal—  
 the man has just gone in, his head and arms  
 dripping with sweat after the butchery

    he's just carried out with his own sword.  
 So you don't need to peer inside the doors.  
 What are you so eager to discover here?  
 Why not tell me? You could learn the answer  
 from someone who knows.

    ODYSSEUS [looking up but he cannot see Athena]

Ah, Athena's voice, of the gods  
 the one I cherish most. How clear you sound.  
 I can't see you, but I do hear your words—  
 my mind can grasp their sense, like the bronze call  
 of an Etruscan trumpet. <sup>308</sup> And you are right.

You see me circling around, tracking down  
 that man who hates me, shield-bearing Ajax.  
 I've been following his trail a long time now—

    just him, no one else. During the night  
 he's done something inconceivable to us,  
 if he's the one who did it. We're not sure.

We don't know anything for certain.

So I volunteered to find out what's gone on.  
 We've just discovered all our livestock killed—  
 our plunder butchered by some human hand,  
 and with them the men who guard the herd.

Everyone blames Ajax for the slaughter.  
 What's more, an eyewitness who saw him  
 striding by himself across the plain, his sword  
 dripping with fresh blood, informed me of it

and told me what he saw. I ran off at once  
 to pick up his trail. I'm following the tracks.  
 But it's confusing—sometimes I don't know  
 whose prints they are. So you've come just in time,  
 for in the past and in the days to come  
 your hand has been and will remain my guide.

<sup>307</sup> . . . *his tongue*: Tantalus, a son of Zeus, offended the gods, who punished him by placing him in Hades where he is constantly tempted by food and drink which he cannot reach (Odysseus tells us of seeing the shade of Tantalus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*). His offense varies, depending on the story. In some accounts, he stole food from the gods and revealed their secrets to human beings. In others, he cut up his son Pelops and served him up as food for the gods.

<sup>308</sup> . . . *his brother, Thyestes*: The Fates set a man's destiny at birth by spinning yarn, measuring and cutting it. Traditionally there were three female fates.

ATHENA

I am aware of that, Odysseus, that's why  
for some time I've been keen to come to you  
as a watchman on your hunt.

ODYSSEUS

Well then, dear lady,  
will what I'm doing here have good results?

ATHENA

I'll tell you this: Ajax did those killings,  
as you suspected.

ODYSSEUS

Why would he do that?

Why turn his hands to such a senseless act?

ATHENA

The weapons—that armour from Achilles—  
it made him insanely angry. <sup>309</sup>

ODYSSEUS

But then  
why would he slaughter all the animals?

ATHENA

He thought he was staining both his hands  
with blood from you.

ODYSSEUS

You mean this was his plan  
against the Argives?

ATHENA

Yes—and it would have worked,  
if I had not been paying attention.

ODYSSEUS

How could he have done something so reckless?  
How could his mind have been so rash?

ATHENA

At night  
in secret he crept out alone after you.

ODYSSEUS

How close was he? Did he get to his target?

ATHENA

He reached the camp of both commanders—  
he made it right up to their double gates. <sup>310</sup>

ODYSSEUS

<sup>309</sup>... *all men's eyes*: Phoebus is the name of the god Apollo, whose oracle Orestes consulted before returning to murder his mother and Aegisthus in revenge for his father's death.

<sup>310</sup>... *terrible ordeals*: The Eumenides (literally the "Kindly Ones") are the Furies, goddesses of blood revenge within the family, who are tormenting Orestes because he killed his mother. Electra does not call them by their official name but uses a common euphemism, presumably because she does not want to risk offending them.

If he was so insanely keen for slaughter,  
     how could he prevent his hands from killing?

ATHENA

I stopped him. I threw down into his eyes  
 an overwhelming sense of murderous joy  
 and turned his rage against the sheep and cattle  
 and those protecting them—the common herd  
 which so far has not been divided up.<sup>311</sup>

He launched his attack against those animals  
 and kept on chopping down and slaughtering  
 the ones with horns by slicing through their spines,  
 until they made a circle all around him.

At one point he thought he was butchering  
 both sons of Atreus—he had them in his hands.<sup>312</sup>

Then he went at some other general  
 and then another. As he charged around  
 in his sick frenzy, I kept encouraging him,  
 kept pushing him into those fatal nets.  
 And then, when he took a rest from killing,  
 he tied up the sheep and cattle still alive  
 and led them home, as if he had captured  
 human prisoners and not just animals.  
 Now he keeps them tied up in his hut  
 and tortures them. I'll let you see his madness—  
 in plain view here—so you can witness it  
 and then report to all the Argives. Be brave.  
 Do not back off or look upon this man  
 as any threat to you. I will avert his eyes,  
 so he will never see your face.

[Calling to Ajax inside the hut]

You in there—

the one who's tying up his prisoner's arms—

    I'm calling you! I'm shouting now for Ajax!  
 Come on out here! Outside the hut! In front!

ODYSSEUS

Athena! What are you doing? Don't call him!  
 Don't bring him out here!

ATHENA

Just be patient.

Don't run the risk of being called a coward.

ODYSSEUS

For the gods' sake, don't do it! Leave him be!

<sup>311</sup> . . . *hair and libations*: Placing a lock of one's hair on a burial mound and pouring libations beside it are traditional marks of respect for the dead.

<sup>312</sup> . . . *in Mycenae*: The names Argos and Mycenae are often used interchangeably for the same city, although in some accounts they are two different communities.

Let him stay inside!

ATHENA

What's the matter with you?

He was just a man before this, wasn't he?

ODYSSEUS

Yes, and in the past unfriendly to me,  
and especially now.

ATHENA

But the sweetest laughter  
comes from mocking enemies. Is that not true?

ODYSSEUS

Still, I'd prefer he stayed inside his hut.

ATHENA

You hesitate to see before your eyes  
someone in a raving fit?

ODYSSEUS

Yes, I do—

if he were fully sane I'd not avoid him  
or hesitate . . .

ATHENA

But he won't see you now,  
not even if you stand beside him.

ODYSSEUS

How will that occur, if he still can see  
with his own eyes?

ATHENA

His eyes see very well,  
but I will make them dark.

ODYSSEUS

Well, it is true  
a god's work can make all things possible.

ATHENA

Stand here, then, and stay quiet.

ODYSSEUS

I'd better stay,  
although I'd have preferred to keep my distance.

ATHENA

You in there, Ajax! I'm calling you again!  
Why show your ally so much disrespect? <sup>313</sup>

[AJAX enters from the hut. He is carrying a bloody whip with which he has been  
lashing the  
cattle]

AJAX

---

<sup>313</sup> . . . *of my mother*: Loxias is a common name for Apollo, whose shrine Orestes consulted before killing Clytaemnestra. Themis, the goddess of righteousness, was the original god of the oracle.

Welcome Athena! Welcome child of Zeus!  
You have given me so much assistance!  
In gratitude for those I've captured  
I'll offer you a crown, presents of pure gold.

ATHENA

That's nobly spoken. But tell me this—  
did that sword of yours slake itself on blood  
when you attacked the Argive army?

AJAX

Yes.

That I can boast about. I don't deny it.

ATHENA

You went after the two sons of Atreus  
with that weapon in your fist?

AJAX

Indeed I did.

They'll not dishonour Ajax any more.

ATHENA

So, as I understand you, those men are dead.

AJAX

Yes, dead. Let them rob me of my weapons now!

ATHENA

I see. Well, what about Laertes' son?

As far as you're concerned, where does he stand?

Did he escape you?

AJAX

That damned slimy fox!

You ask me where he is?

ATHENA

Yes, I'm asking.

I mean that enemy of yours Odysseus.

AJAX

My favourite prisoner, lady, sits inside.

I don't want him to die just yet.

ATHENA

But when?

What further actions do you have to do?

Or what advantage will you gain by that?

AJAX

Not before he's tied up to a pillar,  
the main one holding up the roof in there.

ATHENA

What harm will you inflict on the poor man?

AJAX

I'll whip his back blood red. Then I'll kill him.

ATHENA



Don't abuse the poor man so viciously.

AJAX

You can follow your desires, Athena,  
in all other things. That I will concede.

But this is the penalty he's going to pay—  
not something else.

ATHENA

All right, since it pleases you,  
give that arm of yours some exercise. Don't stop.  
Do what you've planned.

AJAX

Then I'll get back to work.

And I'll leave you with this request from me—  
always stand beside me as my ally  
the way you did today.

[AJAX goes back into the hut]

ATHENA

Do you see,

Odysseus, how powerful the gods can be?

Could you find anyone more sensible  
than Ajax, a man with more ability

to carry out in every situation

the most appropriate action?

ODYSSEUS

No one I know.

All the same, although he despises me,  
I pity his misfortune under that yoke  
of catastrophic madness. It makes me think  
not just of his fate but my own as well.

I see that in our lives we are no more  
than phantoms, insubstantial shadows.

ATHENA

Well then, now you've seen his arrogance,  
make sure you never speak against the gods,  
or give yourself ideas of your own grandeur,  
if your strength of hand or heaped-up riches  
should outweigh some other man's. A single day  
pulls down any human's scale of fortune  
or raises it once more. But the gods love  
men who possess good sense and self-control  
and despise the ones who are unjust.

[ATHENA and ODYSSEUS leave. Enter the CHORUS, sailors from Salamis and  
followers of

Ajax]

CHORUS LEADER

Son of Telamon, who holds the throne

on wave-washed Salamis beside the sea,  
 I rejoice with you when things go well,  
 but when a blow from Zeus or angry words  
 from slanderous Danaans are aimed at you,  
 then I hold back in fear and shake with terror,  
 like the fluttering eye on a feathered dove.<sup>314</sup>  
 I'm like that now. In the night that's passing,  
 there were noisy rumours thrown against us,  
 against our honour, saying that you went off  
 into that meadow where our horses range  
 and massacred Danaan animals,  
 together with the spoils their spears had captured,  
 prizes which had not yet been allotted.  
 With that bright sword of yours you butchered them.  
 Such slanderous reports Odysseus shapes  
 and whispers into every soldier's ear.  
 Many men believe him. For he now speaks  
 persuasively about you, and everyone  
 who listens is filled with spite and pleased  
 that you have come to grief, even more  
 than is the man who told them. Throw a spear  
 at some great soul, and you will never miss,  
 but if someone said things like that of me,  
 he'd never be believed. Envy creeps up  
 against the man of wealth and power.  
 And yet without the great, we lesser men  
 are fragile ramparts in our own defence.

It's best for small men to ally themselves  
 with greatness, and for the powerful  
 to be supported by the lesser men.  
 But teaching foolish people such good sense  
 ahead of time is just not possible.  
 So men like this are now denouncing you,  
 and we do not possess sufficient power  
 to deflect these charges, not without you,  
 not without our king. With you out of their sight,  
 they keep on chattering like flocks of birds.  
 But if you unexpectedly appeared,  
 they would be terrified, as if they faced  
 a mighty eagle, and soon would cower there,  
 and hold their tongues in silence.

CHORUS

Was it that goddess Artemis,  
 bull-tending child of Zeus,

<sup>314</sup> . . . *from Erebus*: Erebus is the deepest and darkest region of Hades, the underworld.

who drove you on,  
 drove you at the common herd?  
 O mighty Rumour, mother of my shame!  
 Was it perhaps in retribution for a victory  
 where she received no tribute,  
 splendid weapons she was cheated of?  
 Or did some hunter kill a stag  
 and set no gifts aside for her?  
 Or has Enyalios, bronze-plated god of war,  
 with reason to complain about an armed alliance,  
 taken his revenge for such an insult  
 by a devious stratagem at night?  
 For with your own mind, O son of Telamon,  
 you'd never go so far along the path to ruin  
 as to attack the flocks. But nothing can prevent  
 a sickness which the gods implant.  
 I pray that Zeus, that Phoebus Apollo  
 will stave off this catastrophe,  
 this disastrous rumour of the Argives.  
 And if great kings are slandering you now  
 with stories full of lies, or if it is that man  
 born from the worthless line of Sisyphus,  
 do not, my lord, take on the grievous weight  
 of a dishonoured reputation by remaining here,  
 hiding your presence in this hut beside the sea. <sup>315</sup>  
 Up now, get up from where you sit,  
 wherever you've been settled for so long  
 in your pause from battle. You are fuelling  
 a fire of disaster blazing up to heaven.  
 Your enemies' insolence keeps charging on  
 quite fearlessly, whipped up by favouring winds  
 through forest thickets, while every soldier  
 wags his tongue and laughs and jeers.  
 They bring us grief and reinforce our sorrow.  
 [Enter TECMESSA]  
 TECMESSA  
 You men, shipmates of Ajax, sons of the race  
 of earth-born Erechtheus, all of us  
 who love the distant house of Telamon  
 are in despair. For now our master Ajax,  
 our great and terrifying and forceful king,  
 lies suffering from tempestuous disease. <sup>316</sup>

<sup>315</sup> . . . *navel of the earth*: The navel, or central point, of the earth was, according to tradition, located in Apollo's shrine in Delphi.

<sup>316</sup> . . . *from Tantalus*: Tantalus is the founder of the royal family of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Orestes, and Electra. He was a son of Zeus and a divine nymph.

## CHORUS LEADER

What heavy grief has come during the night  
to change the troubles we had yesterday?  
Daughter of the Phrygian Teleutas,  
speak to us—though bold Ajax won you  
fighting with his spear, he still maintains  
a strong affection for you, so you may know  
and offer us an answer.

## TECMESSA

How can I tell  
a story much too terrifying for words?  
You will hear of suffering as harsh as death.  
Last night madness seized our glorious Ajax,  
and now he has been totally disgraced.  
You can see everything inside his hut,  
the blood-soaked butchered victims who were killed  
as sacrifices at his very hands.

## CHORUS

The news you tell us of our fiery king  
we cannot bear, and yet there's no escape.  
It's what the powerful Danaans say,  
what their great story-telling spreads around.  
O, how I fear what's coming next. This man  
is going to die—and in full public view—  
with a black sword in those mad hands of his  
he massacred the herd and herdsman, too,  
the ones who ride to guard our animals.

## TECMESSA

Alas! From those fields he came to me  
right after that, leading his captive beasts.  
On the floor in there he slit some of their throats,  
struck others in the ribs, tore them apart.  
He grabbed two rams—the legs on both were white—  
cut off the head on one and sliced its tongue,  
right at the tip, then threw the parts away,  
and lashed the other upright on the pillar.  
He seized a thick strap from a horse's harness  
and flogged it with a whistling double lash.  
He was cursing with an awful violence,  
not human words—ones a god had taught him.

## CHORUS LEADER

The time has come for us to hide our heads  
and steal away on foot—or take our seats,  
each man at his swift oar, and let our ship  
sail out on her seaworthy way. Those threats  
our two commanders, sons of Atreus,

keep hurling at us are so serious,  
I am afraid of savage death by stoning,  
sharing the suffering of the man in there,  
struck down with him now in the grip of fate,  
his own inexorable doom.

TECMESSA

No, no.

He is no longer like that. He's grown calm.  
Like a sharp south wind that rushes past  
without a lightning flash, he's easing off.  
Now he's sane again, but in new agonies.  
To look at self-inflicted suffering  
when no one else played any part in it  
brings on great anguish.

CHORUS LEADER

If he's no longer mad,  
I'm confident that things may be all right.  
For when disaster has already passed  
it doesn't have as much significance.

TECMESSA

But if you had the choice of causing grief  
to your own friends while feeling good yourself  
or of grieving too, a suffering man  
among a common sorrow, which would you choose?

CHORUS LEADER

The double grieving, lady, is far worse.

TECMESSA

So at this moment we, although not sick,  
are facing disaster.

CHORUS LEADER

What does that mean?

I don't understand what you are saying.

TECMESSA

That man in there, when he was still so ill,  
enjoyed himself while savage fantasies  
held him in their grip, but we were sane,  
and, since he was one of us, we suffered.  
But now there is a pause in his disease,  
he can recuperate and understand  
the full extremity of bitter grief,  
yet everything for us remains the same—  
our anguish is no milder than before.

This is surely not a single sorrow,  
but a double grief?

CHORUS LEADER

I think that's true.

I fear a blow sent from a god has struck him.  
How else could this take place, if his spirit  
is no more hopeful now that he's been cured  
than when he was sick?

TECMESSA

That's how things stand.  
You must see that.

CHORUS LEADER

How did his illness start?  
How did this trouble first swoop down on him?  
Since we share your grief, tell us what happened.

TECMESSA

You are all involved in this, and so you'll hear  
the entire story. At some point in the night,  
when the evening torches had stopped burning,  
Ajax took up his two-edged sword, resolved  
to set off on a senseless expedition.  
I challenged him and said, "What are you doing?  
Ajax, why are you going out like this?  
There's been no summons, no messenger,  
nor any trumpet call. All the army  
is now sleeping." His reply to me was brief,  
that old refrain, "Woman, the finest thing  
that females do is hold their tongues." So I,  
taking my cue from that, did not respond,  
and he charged out alone. I cannot say  
what went on out there, but he came back  
and took his chained-up prisoners inside,  
all linked together—bulls and herding dogs  
and captured sheep. He cut the heads off some.  
He twisted back the skulls of other beasts  
and cut their throats or chopped their spines.  
Others, whom he kept tied up, he tortured,  
as if they were human beings, even though  
it was only beasts he was attacking.  
At last, he charged out through the doorway  
and forced out some words of conversation  
with a shadow. Sometimes he'd talk about  
the sons of Atreus, at other times  
about Odysseus, with manic laughter  
at how by going out he had avenged  
all their arrogance in full. After that,  
he rushed back in the hut again and there  
he gradually regained his sense somehow,  
though not without an effort. Once he saw  
his room filled up with that deluded slaughter,

he struck his head and howled. Then he collapsed,  
a ruined man among so many ruins,  
carcasses of butchered sheep. He sat there,  
fists gripping his hair with nails clenched tight.

For a long time he remained quite silent.  
Then he made some dreadful threats against me  
if I would not tell him every detail  
of what had taken place. He questioned me—  
What on earth had he become involved with?  
My friends, I was afraid. So I told him  
everything that had gone on, all the things  
I knew were true. He at once began to groan,  
doleful sounds I'd never heard from him before.  
He's always claimed that wailing cries like that  
were only fit for gloomy men and cowards.

He used to grieve, but never wail aloud—  
just a deep moan, like from a lowing bull.  
But now, overwhelmed by his misfortune,  
he takes no food, no drink, sprawled in silence  
where he fell down among dead animals  
his own sword killed. It seems clear enough  
he will do something bad. The words he speaks  
and his laments show that intent somehow.  
My friends, you should come in and help him,  
if that's possible. That's why I came out here.  
For words from friends can cure a man like him.

CHORUS LEADER

Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas,  
what you've described to us about the man  
being driven mad with sorrow—that's dreadful.  
AJAX [crying out from inside the hut]  
Aaaiiii . . . Alas for me!

TECMESSA

It looks as if his fit could soon be worse.  
Did you not hear that loud cry from Ajax?

AJAX

Aaaiiii! . . . Alas!

CHORUS LEADER

I think the man is sick or still suffering  
the effects of that disease he had before—  
they're all around him where he sits.

AJAX

My child! My son!

TECMESSA

How miserable I feel!

Eurysaces, he's calling you. But why?

What does he have in mind? Where are you?

I'm overwhelmed.

AJAX

I call on Teucer!

Where is Teucer? Will that fighting raid he's on  
keep going forever, with me dying here? <sup>317</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

I think the man may have his wits again.

Open the door. Perhaps when he sees me

he'll quickly feel a sense of self-respect.

TECMESSA [opening the door of the hut]

There. It's open. Now you can take a look  
at what he's done and see the state he's in.

[AJAX is revealed sitting among the dead animals]

Ah, my cherished sailors, of all my friends  
the only ones who still observe true loyalty.  
You see how great a wave has just rolled over me,  
a crashing surge lashed on by murderous winds.

CHORUS LEADER [to Tecmessa]

It looks as if what you told us is true—  
his condition clearly shows his madness.

AJAX

Ah, you race of master mariners,  
who crossed the sea and with your oars sped out  
across the salty ocean, I see in you,  
and in you alone, the one support  
in my despair. Come, help me kill myself.

CHORUS LEADER

No more of that! Speak words of hope.  
Don't seek to cure one bad thing with another  
or make this mad disaster any worse.

AJAX

Do you see how this bold and valiant heart,  
this warrior so fearless in those wars  
against his enemies, has turned his hands,  
these awesome hands, against tame animals?  
Ah, the mockery! How I have been abused!

TECMESSA

I beg you, my lord Ajax, don't say that.

AJAX

Just go away. Why not turn your feet around  
and wander off somewhere? Aaaaaiiii . . .

CHORUS LEADER

<sup>317</sup>. . . *Malea*: Menelaus' return from Troy (as he tells us in the *Odyssey*) was long delayed. He was blown off course to Egypt, where he stayed for a while. Malea is the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese.



By the gods, concede. Use your common sense.

AJAX

It's my bad luck I let slip from my grasp  
those criminals deserving punishment.  
Instead I went at bulls with twisted horns,  
fine herds of goats, and made their dark blood flow.

CHORUS LEADER

Why lament those deeds which have been done  
and cannot be recalled? Such final acts  
will never be anything but what they are.

AJAX

O you who keeps prying into everything,  
you nasty instrument for every crime, [[[[[ ]]]]380]  
Odysseus, the filthiest degenerate  
in all the army, you must be laughing now,  
taking great delight in this.

CHORUS LEADER

Divine will  
determines if each man laughs and cries.

AJAX

But still,  
I'd like to face him, though I'm injured. Ahhhh . . .

CHORUS LEADER

Don't make boasts like that. Do you not see  
the catastrophe you face?

AJAX

O Zeus,  
you ancestral father of my father,  
if only I could die after I had killed  
that wheedling scoundrel enemy of mine  
and those twin-reigning kings. <sup>318</sup>

TECMESSA

When you make that prayer,  
pray also that I die as well. With you gone,  
why should I continue living?

AJAX

O darkness, now my daylight,  
O gloom of Erebus, for me  
the brightest light there is,  
take me, take me now

---

<sup>318</sup>. . . *suppliant branch*: In a formal supplication the petitioner carries an olive branch. Orestes doesn't have one available.

to live with you. <sup>319</sup>

Take me,  
a man no longer worthy to seek help  
from families of gods or men,  
those creatures of a day.  
For Zeus' daughter, brave Athena,  
abuses and destroys me.  
Where can one escape?  
Where could I go and rest?  
If my past fame has been cut down,  
along with these dead beasts beside me,  
then, my friends, if I now seek  
a madman's triumphs, all the army,  
with repeated blows from their own swords  
will cut me down as well.

TECMESSA

How hard it is for me to hear this man,  
this worthy man, say things he'd never say  
before this happened!

AJAX

O you paths of the resounding sea!  
You tidal caves and coastal pastures,  
for a long time now, for far too long,  
you have detained me here in Troy.  
But that you will no longer do, no,  
not while I am breathing still.  
Let men of sense be sure of that.  
O you streams of the Scamander,  
my neighbour, so friendly to the Argives,  
you no longer will be seeing Ajax,  
a man whose equal as a warrior—  
and I can make this boast—  
Troy never saw arriving here from Greece.  
But now I lie among this heap, dishonoured. <sup>320</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

I don't have the strength to stop your words  
or to let you go on saying such things—  
you've fallen into such calamity.

AJAX

Alas! Who would ever think my name

<sup>319</sup> . . . *something horrific*: West makes the useful observation (p. 210) that the Greeks did not yet have a clear sense of a good or bad conscience. This line suggests something like a sense of guilt arising out of one's awareness of the moral qualities of an act. As West observes, Menelaus in his response seems confused by the idea.

<sup>320</sup> . . . *are his friends*: I have adopted West's suggestion that this line refers to the god (Apollo) rather than to Orestes himself: "I am not wise, but by nature I am true to my friends (see West 212).

would suit my troubles so poetically? <sup>321</sup>

For I could well cry out two or three times  
“Alas for Ajax!”—that shows the magnitude  
of the disaster I am going through.

I am the man whose father’s excellence  
won supreme respect from all the army.  
He took the fairest prize and carried home  
every glory from the land of Ida. <sup>322</sup>

I am his son, who journeyed after him  
to this same land of Troy. I’m just as strong,  
with the work of my own hands I have attained  
achievements just as great, but, as you see,  
these Argive insults have quite ruined me.

And yet I think I can affirm this much—  
had Achilles lived and been about to judge  
the man who should receive his weapons,  
the prize for being the finest man in war,  
no soldier would have put his hand on them  
before I did. But now the sons of Atreus  
have dealt them to a fellow whose spirit  
will stoop to anything, and pushed aside  
all those triumphant victories of Ajax.

If with my distorted mind and eyes,  
I had not abandoned what I planned,  
they would not have had what’s mine by right  
put to the vote against another man. <sup>323</sup>

But then that goddess with the glaring eyes,  
implacable Athena, Zeus’ daughter,  
threw me over at the very instant

I was steadying my hand against them.

She hurled in me a frenzied sickness,  
so blood from grazing beasts would stain my hands,  
and those men now can laugh at their escape,

<sup>321</sup> . . . *for Palamedes*: Oeax is the brother of Palamedes, an Achaean warrior at Troy. When Odysseus pretended to be mad so that he would not have to go on the expedition to Troy, Palamedes tricked him into revealing his sanity. Later, in Troy, Odysseus forced a Phrygian (Trojan) prisoner to write a treasonous letter apparently from Palamedes. Agamemnon found the letter and put Palamedes to death.

<sup>322</sup> . . . *twins from Zeus*: Tyndareus and Leda had four children at the same time: Helen, Clytaemnestra, Castor, and Pollux (also called Polydeuces). However, Tyndareus was the biological father of only two of them, Castor and Clytaemnestra. Helen and Pollux were conceived by Zeus (in the form of a swan) and Leda. In some accounts (as here) both Castor and Pollux are children of Zeus.

<sup>323</sup> . . . *of your wife*: The immediate cause of the Trojan War was Paris’ abduction of Helen, Menelaus’ wife, from Sparta (Helen went willingly enough). Agamemnon, the senior of the two brothers, took command of the Greek army which assembled at Aulis in response to a promise all the kings had made to Tyndareus, that they would help Helen’s husband, should he ever require their assistance. The goddess Artemis prevented the Greek fleet from sailing until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia, an action which Agamemnon carried out.

something I did not want. But when a god  
commits an injury, the unworthy man  
escapes someone more powerful. And now,  
what do I do, when I am obviously  
hated by the gods, when the Greek army  
despises me, and everyone in Troy  
and on the plain holds me an enemy?  
Should I give up my station in the fleet,  
leaving the sons of Atreus alone,  
and sail for home across the Aegean Sea?  
How could I face my father, Telamon,  
when I arrive back there? How could he bear  
to see me showing up with nothing,  
without the prize for highest excellence  
with which he won his own great crown of fame?  
That's not a thing I could endure to do.  
Well, then, should I charge out there on my own  
against the Trojan wall, a lone attack,  
fight single combats, do something valiant,  
and then at last be killed? But that would please  
the sons of Atreus. It must not happen.

I must seek out some act which will reveal  
to my old father how, at least by nature,  
his own son has not become a coward.  
It is dishonourable for any man  
to crave a lengthy life, once he discovers  
the troubles he is in will never change.  
What joy is there for him when every day  
just follows on another, pulling him away  
or pushing him toward death? I would not pay  
for any sort of mortal man who's warmed  
by futile hopes. A man of noble birth  
lives on with honour, or he dies in glory.  
Now you've heard everything I have to say.

CHORUS LEADER

No one will ever claim that you, Ajax,  
have said a word that's illegitimate,  
for what you say is born in your own heart.  
But you should stop. Get rid of thoughts like these.  
Let friends overrule what you're suggesting.

TECMESSA

O my lord Ajax, for human beings  
the worst of evils is what they endure  
when they're compelled to. Consider me.  
I was the daughter of a free-born father,  
a wealthy man, if anyone in Phrygia

could be accounted rich. Now I'm a slave,  
a circumstance the gods somehow made happen—  
yes, the gods and especially your strong limbs.

And thus, since I have come into your bed,  
I want the best for you. So I beg you,  
by Zeus who guards our home, by that bed  
where you had sex with me, do not leave me  
to the savage insults of your enemies.  
Do not abandon me to some strange hand.  
For if you die and leave me all alone,  
that day you may be sure the Argive men  
will take me by force, as well as your own son.  
We will then both lead the lives of slaves.  
One of our lords will speak these biting words,  
shooting insults at me, "Look here at this,  
a bed mate of Ajax, the strongest man  
in all our army. What menial chores she does!  
How she's changed from such an enviable state!" Men will talk that way, and then  
my fate  
will wear me down. Those shameful words will stain  
you and your family. Respect your father,  
whom you will leave a miserable old man.  
Respect your mother, too, who shares his years.  
She keeps begging the gods that you're alive,  
that you'll return back home. And, my lord,  
have pity for your son. For if you die,  
consider how, whenever that day comes,  
both he and I will face desolation.  
He will lack the nurturing a young lad needs  
if you leave and he becomes an orphan,  
in the care of people who are not friends  
or from his family. And I have nothing  
I can look to except you. It was you  
who killed my homeland for me with your spear.  
My mother and my father were destroyed  
by a different fate which led them down  
to make their home in Hades after death. <sup>324</sup>  
What country could I have except with you?  
What wealth? My safety, all security,  
that rests with you. So remember me as well.

A genuine man should cherish memory,

<sup>324</sup>. . . *double line of Atreus*: The "double line" is the families of Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus. The "golden ram" mentioned refers to an animal in Atreus' flocks, on the basis of which he claimed the throne over the objections of his brother Thyestes. The slaughter at the banquet is another reference to the dinner in which Atreus served up to his brother Thyestes the latter's sons as the main course.

if he gets pleasure still from anything.  
Kindness always engenders gratitude.  
A man who gives up his good memories  
will no longer be a noble, worthy man.

CHORUS LEADER

Ajax, I wish that pity touched your heart,  
as it does mine. Then you'd approve her words.

AJAX

So far as I'm concerned, she'll win approval  
only if she keeps being obedient  
and carries out my orders properly.

TECMESSA

Yes, beloved Ajax, I will obey  
in everything.

AJAX

Then bring me my son,  
so I may see him.

TECMESSA

I sent him away,  
out of my care. I was so terrified.

AJAX

Afraid because I was in trouble?  
What do you mean?

TECMESSA

Yes, that's it. I feared  
that the unlucky boy might bother you  
and then somehow get killed.

AJAX

Yes, such a thing  
the god who watches me would think fitting.

TECMESSA

At least I took a suitable precaution  
to stop that happening.

AJAX

I approve of that.  
The steps you took were quite correct.

TECMESSA

And so,  
as things are now, how can I best serve you?

AJAX

Let me talk to him, see him face to face.

TECMESSA

Yes. He's close by, with servants watching him.

AJAX

Why then this delay? Why is he not here?

TECMESSA [calling to the side]

My son, your father is calling for you.  
Whichever of you servants has his hand,  
bring the boy out here.

AJAX

Is he coming, the one you called?  
Or did he not hear?

TECMESSA

The servant's on his way.  
He's bringing Eurysaces with him.  
[Enter the SERVANT leading EURYSACES]

AJAX

Lift him up. Hand the boy to me up here.  
He'll have no fear of fresh-spilt blood, no,  
not if he's a true-bred son of mine  
who shares his father's nature. It is time  
he was broken in to that harsh code  
his father follows and his nature shaped  
to something like my own. O my boy,  
    may you have better fortunes than your father,  
although remain like him in other ways,  
for then you'll never be dishonoured.  
Now I envy you, and with good reason—  
    for you have no idea of any troubles.  
The sweetest life comes when one senses nothing—  
to lack all feeling is a painless evil—  
until you learn what joy and sorrow mean.  
Once you reach that stage, you must reveal  
the kind of man you are, your ancestry,  
to those who were your father's enemies.  
Meanwhile, you should feed on gentle breezes,  
fostering your young life so as to bring  
your mother joy. I know that no Achaean  
    will go at you with insults and contempt,  
even when I'm gone. For I am leaving Teucer  
here with you as guardian of your gates.  
He will not falter in his care for you,  
although he now is busy far away,  
chasing his enemies. But my warriors,  
my people of the sea, I charge you now  
with the same joyful duty I give Teucer.  
Report to him what I have ordered here—  
he is to take this boy back to my home,  
show him to Telamon and Eriboea,  
my mother, so he may always comfort them  
    in their old age, until the time they reach  
the yawning caverns of the gods below.

And none of those who judge our competitions  
 nor the man who ruined me will offer  
 my weapons as a prize for the Achaeans.  
 No, my son, for my sake you will have to take  
 that broad shield from which you get your name.<sup>325</sup>  
 Hold it up high. Shift it by its well-stitched grip,  
 my impenetrable seven-layered shield.  
 My other weapons you will bury with me.  
 Come, take the boy, and quickly. Close the hut.  
 And don't keep on weeping here in front.  
 How these women really love their wailing!

Quick now, close up the hut. A skilful healer  
 does not howl incantations when a wound  
 is crying for the knife.

CHORUS LEADER

When I hear

that you're in such a rush, I get afraid.  
 The sharp edge on your tongue brings me no joy.

TECMESSA

O lord Ajax, what are you going to do?

AJAX

Don't keep on asking me! No more questions!  
 The best thing now is self-restraint.

TECMESSA

But I'm desperate!

By the gods, by your own son, I beg you—  
 do not become a man who now betrays us!

AJAX

You pester me too much. Do you not see  
 that I no longer owe the gods my service?

TECMESSA

You must not utter such impieties.

AJAX

Speak to those who listen.

TECMESSA

You will not hear me?

AJAX

You have already chatted far too much.

TECMESSA

Yes, my lord, because I'm so afraid.

AJAX [to the servants]

Shut the doors. Do it now!

TECMESSA

---

<sup>325</sup> . . . *on this very day*: The word Pelasgian is frequently used to describe the Argives. The word hearkens back to the original inhabitants of the area.



By all the gods, concede!

AJAX

It looks as though you're thinking like a fool,  
if, at this late date, you still believe  
that what you teach will shape my character.

[The SERVANTS close the main door of the hut, leaving AJAX inside. TECMESSA, EURYSACES,  
and the SERVANTS go into the hut through the side door from which Eurysaces emerged earlier]

CHORUS

O splendid Salamis,  
you, I know, lie in the sea,  
whose waves beat on your happy shores,  
a famous place among all men forever.  
I have been held back a long time here

in misery, for countless months  
still camped out in the fields of Ida,  
consumed by time and my anxiety,  
expecting to complete my journey  
to implacably destructive Hades.  
And now my troubles multiply,  
a situation hard to remedy,  
for I must wrestle now with Ajax,  
share my life with that insanity  
sent from the gods. Alas for me!  
Once, long ago, you sent him out  
filled with the frenzied power of war.  
But now his spirit feeds in isolation,  
and his friends acquire from him  
a heavy sorrow. His earlier deeds,  
those acts of highest excellence,  
have fallen, fallen where he has no friends,  
among the wretched hostile sons of Atreus.

The years have changed his mother's hair to white,  
and given her old age for company.

When she learns of his disease,  
that maddening infection of his mind,  
she'll start to wail forth her laments.

She will not chant out melodies  
sung by the plaintive nightingale.

No. In her mood of desolation

the sharp-toned music of her grief  
will scream abroad her anguish.

Her beating hands will thud down on her breasts,  
and she'll keep tearing out her old gray hair.

A man brain sick with mad delusions

is better off concealed in Hades,  
 a man who by his ancestry  
 is ranked the best of the Achaeans,  
 who have endured so much. But now,  
 no longer following his inbred character,  
 he wanders far beyond himself.

O you unhappy father Telamon,  
 you have yet to hear the heavy curse  
 laid on your son, a curse which up to now  
 has never played a part in any life  
 nurtured by the sons of Aeacus.

[Enter AJAX through the main doors of the hut with a sword. TECMESSA enters after him.]

AJAX

The long succession of the countless years  
 reveals what's hidden, then hides it once again,  
 and there is nothing we should not anticipate.  
 The solemn oath and the most stubborn heart  
 are overcome. In this way, even I,

who used to be so marvellously strong,  
 like tempered iron, felt my sharp edge dissolve  
 at what this woman said. I now feel pity  
 leaving her a widow and my son an orphan  
 among my enemies. And so I'll go  
 to the bathing waters by the sea shore  
 and wash off my defilement. I will deflect  
 the weighty anger of the goddess there.  
 When I leave, I'll find some isolated place  
 and then inter my sword, of all my weapons  
 the one I most despise. I'll dig the earth  
 where no one else will see. Then let Night  
 and Hades keep it there below the ground.

For ever since I've held it in my grip,  
 this gift from Hector, my greatest enemy,  
 I've won no prizes from the Argives.<sup>326</sup>  
 That old human saying is true: gifts men get  
 from enemies—they are no gifts at all  
 and bring them no advantages. And so,  
 from this day forward I shall understand  
 how to revere the gods. And I will learn  
 how to respect the sons of Atreus.  
 They are our rulers, so we must obey.  
 Why not? Things of the greatest power and awe

<sup>326</sup> . . . by *Aegyptus*: The fifty daughters of Danaus married the fifty sons of Aegyptus and killed their husbands (all but one) on the wedding night. In some accounts Aegyptus prosecuted Danaus for the mass murder.

give way to privileged authorities.

Snow-footed Winter yields to fruitful Summer,  
and Night's dark vault withdraws the moment Day  
with her white-footed horses fires up the sky;  
the blasts of fearful Winds at last bring rest  
which calms the groaning seas. All-powerful Sleep  
lets go the one he holds tied up in chains;  
his grasp does not go on forever. As for us,  
how can we mortals not learn self-control?  
I, at least, am only now discovering  
that we should hate our enemies as much  
as suits a man who will become a friend.

And when I help a friend, then I will give  
only what is due a man who'll not remain  
a friend forever. For common mortals  
see that the shelter comradeship affords  
is treacherous. Thus, my situation  
will turn out for the best. And so, woman,  
go inside now. Keep praying to the gods  
my heart's desires will reach fulfilment  
and be carried out to their conclusion.

[TECMESSA return into the hut through the side door. AJAX turns to address the CHORUS]

AJAX

My comrades, you, too, honour this request.  
Tell Teucer, when he comes, to care for me  
and also to protect your interests.  
I am now going where I have to go.

As for you, carry out what I have said,  
and very soon, perhaps, you will find out  
that, though I'm suffering now, I am at peace.

[AJAX leaves, heading for the sea shore.]

CHORUS

I feel a sudden thrill of passionate delight,  
which makes me soar aloft with happiness  
and cry with joy to Pan—

O Pan, Pan—

appear to us, sea rover—  
come down from your stony ridge  
on snow-beat Mount Cyllene,  
you dancing master of the gods—  
come, O king,  
begin your self-taught dancing steps  
from Mysia and Cnossos,

for what I want now is to dance.  
And may Apollo, lord of Delos,

race across the Icarian Sea  
and manifest himself to me,  
show his benevolence in everything.  
From our eyes Ares has removed  
those terrifying agonies.

What joy! O joy!

For now, O Zeus, now  
the dazzling light of brighter days  
can come to our swift ships  
which speed across the seas,

for Ajax is free of pain once more  
and, in a transformed state of mind,  
has carried out appropriate sacrifice  
to all the gods in full, showing them  
due reverence and strictly following  
our most important laws.

The power of time extinguishes all things,  
so I can't say that anything  
lies beyond all expectation—  
since, in contrast to what we were waiting for,  
now Ajax's mind has changed again  
away from actions done in anger  
and his great fight with Atreus' sons.

[Enter a MESSENGER]

MESSENGER

Friends, the first thing I have to report is this—  
Teucer has just come from the Mysian heights.

He's now in the middle of our line of ships,  
in the generals' camp. All the Argives  
are shouting insults at him, all at once.  
They saw him coming and, as he approached,  
surrounded him, hurling accusations

from all directions—everyone joined in—  
calling him the brother of that maniac  
who had conspired against the army  
and saying he could not escape his death—  
their stones would cut him down completely.

Things reached the point where men had pulled their swords  
out of their scabbards and held them fully drawn.

Then, as the fight was getting out of hand,  
some elders intervened. Their words stopped it.  
But where can I find Ajax to tell him this?

I must provide our king a full report.

CHORUS LEADER

He's not inside. He has just gone away,  
with new intentions yoked to his changed mood.

MESSENGER

O no! No! Then the man who sent me here  
did so too late, or I have been too slow.

CHORUS LEADER

What's so urgent? What's been overlooked?

MESSENGER

Teucer said that Ajax had to stay inside  
and not leave his hut until he gets here.

CHORUS LEADER

Well, as I told you, Ajax has gone off.  
He intends to follow now what's best for him,  
to cleanse away his anger at the gods.

MESSENGER

Your words reveal your complete foolishness,  
if what Calchas prophesies has any merit.

CHORUS LEADER

What do you mean? What information  
do you have about what's happening here?

MESSENGER

Well I was there, so I know this much—  
I witnessed it. Calchas left the leaders  
sitting in their royal council circle,

moving off from the sons of Atreus.

In a friendly gesture he placed his right hand  
in Teucer's palm. Then he spoke to him,  
giving him strict orders to use every means  
to keep Ajax in his hut while this day lasts  
and to prevent him moving anywhere  
if he ever wished to see him still alive.

For divine Athena's rage would whip Ajax  
only for that day. That's what Calchas said.  
Then the prophet added, "Those living things  
which become too large and thus unwieldy  
fall into harsh disasters from the gods—  
the sort of man who, born from human stock,  
forgets and thinks beyond his mortal state.

Take Ajax. As soon as he set out from home,  
he revealed his folly, though his father  
had passed on good advice. For Telamon  
commanded him, 'My son, with that spear of yours  
you must seek victory, but always fight  
with some god at your side.' But then Ajax,  
in a lofty boast, thoughtlessly replied,  
'Father, with god's help even a worthless man  
can be victorious. But I believe

I'll win glory on my own without them.' Such was his arrogance. Another time,

with divine Athena, as she was rousing him  
and telling him to turn his deadly hands  
against the enemy, he answered her  
with a fearful and sacrilegious speech,  
'Lady, stand there with the other Argives.  
The fight will never break the line through Ajax.' It was with words like these that  
he provoked  
the unremitting anger of the goddess,  
because he does not think as humans should.  
But if he remains alive all day today,  
with god's help we might be his saviours." That's what Calchas said. From where  
he sat

Teucer sent me off at once with orders  
which you were meant to follow. If we fail,  
Ajax is done for—that is, if Calchas  
has any skill in prophecy.  
CHORUS LEADER [calling into the side door of the hut]  
Tecmessa,

unfortunate lady born for sorrow,  
come out and see this man. Hear his news.  
The razor's slicing closer. I feel its pain.  
[Enter TECMESSA through the side door of the hut]  
TECMESSA

Why are you making me come out once more  
and leave the chair where I was getting  
some relief from these unending troubles?

CHORUS LEADER  
Listen to this man—he's come with news  
about what's happening with Ajax,  
and it's disturbing.

TECMESSA  
O no! You there,  
tell me what you have to say. Does this mean  
we're finished?

MESSENGER  
I have no idea  
how things stand with you. As for Ajax,  
if he is not inside, then I've lost hope.

TECMESSA  
He's gone away. So I'm in agony  
about just what you mean.

MESSENGER  
Teucer gave orders  
that you keep Ajax safely in his hut  
and do not let him leave all by himself.  
TECMESSA

But where is Teucer? Why did he say that?

MESSENGER

He has only just returned. He suspects  
if Ajax goes somewhere he'll be destroyed.

TECMESSA

That's horrible! What man told him this?

MESSENGER

Thestor's son, the prophet, whose words proclaimed  
this very day would bring life or death for Ajax.

TECMESSA

O my friends, protect me from this destiny!  
Some of you, get Teucer here more quickly,  
while others go off to the western cove  
and to the east, as well, to investigate—  
find out where Ajax went, when he set off  
on that ill-fated path. For now I know  
I have, in fact, been totally deceived,  
and Ajax has finally cast away  
all that affection he once had for me.  
Alas, my son, what am I going to do?  
I can't stay idle. So I'll go out there,  
as far as I have strength to go. Let's leave—  
and hurry! This is no time to sit around,  
if we want to save a man who's eager  
for destruction.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm prepared to help,  
not just with words, as I will demonstrate.  
If we move fast, we can do this quickly.

[They all exit in various directions, leaving the stage empty. The scene now changes  
to a deserted

part of the seashore. AJAX enters, carrying his sword, which he sets upright in the  
sand, with the blade sticking upward.]

AJAX

The sacrificial killer is in place,  
so it will now cut most effectively.  
If a man had time, he might reflect on this.  
It is a gift from Hector, a warrior  
who was a friend most hateful to me,  
the one I looked on as my greatest foe.<sup>327</sup>  
Then, this sword is firmly set in Trojan soil,  
land of my enemy, freshly whetted  
on the iron-eating sharpening stone.

<sup>327</sup>. . . *those Phrygians*: Talthylus is a character in the Iliad, a herald in the Achaeon army who serves Agamemnon. Phrygians is a term commonly used to designate the Trojans or barbarian Asiatics.

And I have fixed it in the ground with care,  
so it will kill me quickly and be kind.  
Thus, we are well prepared. So, O Zeus,  
in this situation, be the first to help,  
as is appropriate. I'm not asking you  
to give me a grand prize, but for my sake  
send a messenger to carry this bad news  
to Teucer, so he may be the first  
to raise me, once I've fallen on the sword  
and covered it with fresh-spilt blood. Don't let  
the first to spot me be some enemy,  
who'll throw me out, exposed as carrion food  
for dogs and birds. I appeal to you, O Zeus.  
Grant me this much. I also call on Hermes,  
guide to the world below, to let me sleep  
without convulsions, when by one quick leap  
I break my bones apart on this sharp blade.  
And I summon those immortal maidens  
to my aid, those who always see all things  
of human suffering, the dread, far-striding Furies,  
to witness how, in my wretchedness,  
the sons of Atreus worked my destruction.  
May they seize on them and destroy them, too,  
with deaths as vile as their disgusting selves.

Just as they see me killed by my own hand,  
so let them perish, killed by their own kindred,  
the children they love most. Come, you Furies,  
you swift punishers, devour the army,  
all of them, sparing no one. And you, Helios,  
whose chariot wheels climb that steep path to heaven,  
when you look down over my father's land,  
pull back those reins of yours, which flash with gold,  
then tell the story of my miseries,  
my destiny, to my old father  
and to the unhappy one who nursed me.  
That poor lady, when she hears this news,  
will, I think, sing out a huge lamenting dirge  
throughout the city. But for me to weep  
is useless. It's time to start the final act.  
O Death, Death, come now and watch in person.  
Yet I'll be seeing you on the other side,  
and there we can converse. And so to you,  
the radiant light of this bright shining day,  
I make my final call, and to the Sun—

I'll never see that chariot any more.  
O light, O sacred land of Salamis,



my home, my father's sturdy hearth,  
 and glorious Athens, whose race was bred  
 related to my own—and you rivers,  
 you streams, you plains of Troy, I call on you.  
 Farewell, you who have nurtured me—to you  
 Ajax now speaks his final words. The rest  
 I'll say to those below in Hades.

[Ajax falls on his sword. Enter the CHORUS in two separate groups from two different directions.

Each has a separate leader. They do not see Ajax's body until Tecmessa finds it.]

328

CHORAL GROUP 1

We work and work,  
 and that brings on more work.  
 Where have I not walked? Where?  
 No place where I have searched  
 has revealed to me where Ajax is.  
 What's that? Listen! I heard a noise.

CHORAL GROUP 2 LEADER

It's us—the crew that shares the ships with you.

CHORAL GROUP 1 LEADER

What can you report?

CHORAL GROUP 2 LEADER: We've searched everywhere  
 on the west side of the ships.

CHORAL GROUP 1 LEADER

Did you come up with anything?

CHORAL GROUP 2 LEADER

Just lots of work. There's nothing there to see.

CHORAL GROUP 1 LEADER

Well, we haven't seen him either—  
 not on the path facing the rising sun.

CHORUS

Who then can lead me on,  
 what toiling sons of the sea,  
 sleepless in their shacks?  
 What nymph on high Olympus  
 or from the streams that flow  
 into the Bosphorus  
 could say if she has seen somewhere  
 fierce-hearted Ajax wandering around?  
 It is not fair that after a long search  
 and so much effort I can't find  
 the proper path to him. I cannot see

<sup>328</sup> . . . *shave it close*: The Cyclopan land is a reference to the city of Mycenae whose walls were so big that legend had it they had been built by the Cyclopes. Shaving the head is often an important element in a mourning ritual.

where that elusive man might be.

[Enter TECMESSA behind the Chorus. As she moves on, she stumbles across the corpse of

Ajax]

TECMESSA

Ahhh . . . .

CHORUS LEADER

Who cried out? It sounded close,  
from that group of trees.

TECMESSA

O how horrible . . . .

CHORUS LEADER

I see her, the unfortunate young bride,  
Tecmessa, a prize won with his spear—  
she's lying there, prostrate with grief, in pain . . .

TECMESSA

I'm lost . . . destroyed . . . my life is over.

O my friends. . . .

CHORUS LEADER

What's happened?

TECMESSA

It's our Ajax—

he's lying here . . . he's just been murdered,  
his body's wrapped around a buried sword.

CHORUS LEADER

O no! Our dreams of getting home are gone.

Alas, my king, you have destroyed me, too,  
the one who sailed across the seas with you . . . .  
you poor, unhappy man . . . heart-sick lady . . .

TECMESSA

With Ajax dead like this, we have good cause  
to wail out our grief.

CHORUS LEADER

Who did this?

With whose help could ill-fated Ajax  
have gone through with this?

TECMESSA

He did it by himself.

That's clear. This sword fixed upright in the ground  
indicates he fell down on top of it.

CHORUS LEADER

Alas, for my own foolishness!

You bled to death alone, with no friends there  
to keep an eye on you. I was so stupid,  
so blind to everything. I took no care.  
And now, now where does stubborn Ajax lie,

a man whose very name suggests misfortune. <sup>329</sup>

TECMESSA

He's not a spectacle to gaze upon!  
 With this cloak I will cover him completely,  
 tuck it all around him—for nobody,  
 at least no one who was a friend of his,  
 could bear to see him, as he spurts blood  
 up his nostrils and from that dark red wound,  
 his self-inflicted slaughter. Alas!  
 What shall I do? What friend of yours  
 will lift you up for burial? Where's Teucer?  
 How I wish that he would come right now,  
 when we need him—if he ever comes  
 to care for the body of his brother.  
 O ill-fated Ajax, how could a man like you  
 end up like this? Even your enemies  
 must find you worthy of a funeral song.

CHORUS

O you unhappy man, how you were doomed,  
 with that unbending heart of yours,  
 fated to live out an evil destiny  
 of endless suffering.  
 I know you groaned such hostile words  
 against the sons of Atreus  
 all night long and in the morning light,  
 the fatal passion of a stubborn heart.  
 It's obvious that when those weapons  
 were made the prizes in the competition  
 for the finest of our battle warriors,  
 that was a potent source of trouble.

TECMESSA

Alas! Alas for me!

CHORUS LEADER

Your heart, I know,  
 is truly filled with grief.

TECMESSA

Such misery for me!

CHORUS LEADER

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<sup>329</sup> . . . *along the shore*: These lines refer to the origin of the troubles in the House of Atreus. Pelops wanted Hippodamia as his bride. Her father, Oenomaus, demanded a chariot race to determine the outcome: if Pelops won he could wed the daughter, and if Pelops was not successful he would die. Pelops bribed Myrtilus to sabotage the king's chariot and, as a result, won the race. Then he killed his co-conspirator, Myrtilus, by throwing him into the sea. Myrtilus cursed Pelops' family as he was drowning. Myrtilus was a son of the god Hermes, son of Zeus and the nymph Maia (as is mentioned a couple of lines further on), and the god made sure the curse took effect by introducing a golden lamb into the flocks belonging to the sons of Pelops, thus inciting the brothers Atreus and Thyestes to quarrel.

It's no surprise to me, my lady,  
you wail and wail again, for you've just lost  
a man you loved so much.

TECMESSA

You only guess  
how it must feel, but I experience it,  
and to the limit.

CHORUS LEADER

That's true enough.

TECMESSA

Alas, my son, what kind of slavery  
will yoke us now as we move on from here,  
what sort of taskmasters stand over us?

CHORUS LEADER

Ah, now you've given voice to your concerns  
about unspeakable actions by those men,  
the two unfeeling sons of Atreus,  
in this our present grief. May god restrain them!

TECMESSA

But these events would not have taken place  
without the gods' consent.

CHORUS LEADER

Yes—they have set  
a burden too heavy for us to bear.

TECMESSA

It's Athena, Zeus' savage daughter.  
What miseries that goddess has produced,  
and for Odysseus' sake.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm sure that man,  
who has endured so much, in his black heart  
exults and laughs with lofty arrogance  
at these insane disasters. Such mockery!  
Such a disgrace! And when they hear of this,  
those two royal sons of Atreus  
will join his merriment.

TECMESSA

Then let them laugh!

Let them get their joy from this man's agony.  
Although they did not sense their need of him  
while he was living, perhaps they'll mourn his death  
when they need him in war. Men with brutal minds  
have no idea what fine things they possess  
until they throw them out. Ajax's death—  
to me so bitter and to them so sweet—  
at least has brought him joy, for he has got

what he desired, the death he yearned for.  
So why should these men make fun of him?  
His death is the gods' concern, not theirs. No!

So let Odysseus vaunt his empty jests.  
For them Ajax is dead—for me he's gone,  
abandoning me to grief and mourning.

TEUCER [heard offstage]

No, no . . . No!

CHORUS LEADER

Be quiet. I think I hear Teucer's voice.  
His shouts send out a tone which penetrates  
the heart of this disaster.

[Enter TEUCER]

TEUCER [moving up to Ajax's body]

O dearest Ajax,  
my bright source of joy, my brother,  
what's happened to you. Is the rumour true?

CHORUS LEADER

He's dead, Teucer. That's the truth.

TEUCER

Alas! Then I bear a heavy destiny!

CHORUS LEADER

Given how things stand . . . .

TEUCER

This is too sad.

CHORUS LEADER

. . . you have good cause to grieve.

TEUCER

This act of his,  
so rash and passionate . . . .

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, Teucer,  
passion in excess.

TEUCER

This is disastrous!

What about his son? Where on Trojan soil  
can I find him?

CHORUS LEADER

He's in the hut—all by himself.

TEUCER [To Tecmessa]

You—bring him here as soon as possible,  
in case he gets snatched by an enemy,  
the way a hunter grabs a lion cub  
and leaves its mother childless. Go quickly!  
We need your help. For it's a fact all men  
love to laugh in triumph above the dead,

when they're stretched out before them.

[Exit TECMESSA]

CHORUS LEADER

Teucer,

when Ajax was alive, he said that you

should look after his son, as you're now doing.

TEUCER

O this is surely the most painful sight

of anything my eyes have ever seen.

And, of all the roads I've travelled, the worst,

the one most deeply painful to my heart,

is that pathway I've just walked along,

while trying to track you down, dearest Ajax,

once I'd learned your fate. There was some gossip,

some tale to do with you. It spread quickly,

as if sent by a god, to all the Argives.

It said that you had wandered off and died.

I heard the details far away from here

and there I groaned with sorrow. Now I'm here,

I see it for myself. It breaks my heart.

It's dreadful. Come, take off this covering,

so I get a full view of this horror.

[Attendants remove the cloak covering Ajax's body]

O that face—it's so painful to see now,

so full of bitter daring. How many sorrows

you have sown for me by this destruction!

Where can I go? What sort of people

will take me in, when I was no use to you

in times of trouble? No doubt Telamon,

who fathered you and me, will welcome me,

perhaps with smiles and words of kindness,

when I reach home without you. Of course he will!

For he's the kind of man who never smiles,

not cheerfully, even when things go well.

A man like that—what will he not say?

What sort of insult will he not hurl at me—

a bastard spawned by some battle-prize of his,

who, because of his unmanly cowardice,

betrayed you, dearest Ajax, or by treachery

tried to seize your power and your home,

once you were dead. That's what Telamon will say.

He's a bad-tempered man, and his old age

has made him harsh—his anger likes to argue

over nothing. He'll end up banishing me,

throw me from the land. What he'll say of me

will make me seem a slave instead of free.

That's what will happen if I go back home.  
 Here in Troy I have many enemies,  
 and few ways of getting help. All this  
 has happened to me because you've been killed.  
 It's a disaster. What am I to do?  
 How do I raise you up, you sad corpse,  
 from the sharp bite of this glittering sword,  
 your murderer, on which you breathed your last?  
 You've come to sense how, in good time, Hector,  
 though dead, was going to slaughter you. Look here,  
 by the gods—see the fate of these two men.  
 First, Hector was lashed tight to that chariot rail  
     with the very belt Ajax had given him,  
 and underwent continual mutilation  
 until he gasped his life away.<sup>330</sup>

Then Ajax  
 took Hector's gift in hand and used it  
 to kill himself in that death-dealing fall.  
 Surely a vengeful Fury forged this blade,  
 and that harsh craftsman Hades made that belt?  
 For my part, I would assert that gods  
 have plotted these events—they always do  
 in everything that mortal men go through.  
 If someone finds this view objectionable,  
 let him love his own beliefs, as I do mine.

CHORUS LEADER

Don't stay too long. You need to think  
     how we can bury Ajax. And what to say.  
 It's urgent. For someone coming here,  
 a man who is our enemy. It could be  
 he comes to mock at our misfortunes, a man  
 who thrives on harm.

TEUCER

Who is it—the man you see?  
 What member of the army?

CHORUS LEADER

It's Menelaus,  
 the one for whom we launched this expedition.

TEUCER

I see him. He's not hard to recognize  
 when he's so close.

[Enter MENELAUS, with a small escort of soldiers]

MENELAUS

<sup>330</sup> . . . *the Pleiades*: The suggestion here seems to be that before this change, the sun did not move from east to west. I have adopted West's useful emendation of the text to read "white horses" rather than "single horse." The Pleiades is a constellation consisting of seven stars.

You there—I order you  
not to take up that corpse for burial.  
Leave it where it is.

TEUCER

Why waste your words  
with such an order?

MENELAUS

I think it's fitting,  
as does the commander of our army.

TEUCER

Then would it bother you to tell me why  
you issue this command?

MENELAUS

The reason's this: we hoped that we were leading Ajax here,  
away from home, so he'd be our ally,  
someone friendly to the Argives, but instead,  
when we saw him more closely, we found out  
he was more hostile than the Phrygians.<sup>331</sup>

He planned to destroy our entire army  
and set off at night to take us with his spear.  
If some god had not frustrated his attempt,  
we would have met the same fate he did—  
we'd be dead and lying there, struck down  
by shameful fate, and he'd be still alive.

But now, it's clear a god changed these events,  
and so the violence in his heart fell elsewhere,  
on sheep and cattle. And that's the reason  
there's no one powerful enough right now  
to take his corpse and set it in a grave.  
Instead it will be tossed away somewhere  
on the yellow sand, food for shore birds.  
Remember that. Curb the anger in your heart.  
If we could not control him when he lived,  
at least he will obey us now he's dead.  
Even if you don't agree, our forceful hands  
will take charge of him. When he was alive,  
Ajax never listened to a word I said.

And it's a fact that when a common man  
thinks it's appropriate to disobey  
those in command, he truly demonstrates  
his worthless character. Within the city  
the laws could never foster benefits  
if there was no established place for fear.

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<sup>331</sup> . . . *deceitful marriage*: Aerope was the wife of Atreus and the mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus. In some versions of the story, she had an adulterous affair with Thyestes and was executed.



Nor can one lead the troops with wise restraint  
where there is neither fear or reverence  
to act in their defence. So any man,  
no matter how powerful his body grows,  
must realize he'll fall, even when  
the harm to him seems trivial. A man  
who has in him a sense of fear and shame  
is quite secure—you can be sure of that—

but where there's room for hostile arrogance  
and men do what they want, consider how  
a state like that, though it has raced ahead  
with favouring winds, will, in the course of time,  
sink in the ocean depths eventually.

And so for me let fear be set in place  
where it's appropriate. Let's not believe  
we can just do whatever we desire  
and not pay the painful consequence.  
These matters fluctuate—Ajax was once  
a man of fiery insolence, but now  
it's time for me to manifest my power.  
And thus I warn you not to bury him.

If you do, you just might fall yourself  
into your grave.

CHORUS LEADER

Menelaus,  
after setting out such well-thought precepts,  
do not become too arrogant yourself  
in dealing with the dead.

TEUCER

Fellow soldiers,  
never again will I be much surprised  
if someone born a nobody goes wrong,  
since those apparently of noble birth  
can make so many errors when they speak.  
Come, tell me once more from the beginning—  
do you really think it was you personally  
who led Ajax here an Argive ally?  
Did he not sail to Troy all on his own,  
under his own command? In what respect  
are you this man's superior? On what ground  
do you have any right to rule those men  
whom he led here from home? You came to Troy  
as king of Sparta. You do not govern us.

Under no circumstance did some right to rule  
or give him orders lie within your power,  
just as he possessed no right to order you.

You sailed here a subordinate to others,  
 not as commander of the entire force  
 who could at any time tell Ajax what to do.  
 Go, be king of those you rule by right—  
 use those proud words of yours to punish them.  
 But I will set this body in a grave,  
 as justice says I should, even though you  
 or any other general forbids it.  
 I am not afraid of your pronouncements.  
 Ajax did not join the expedition  
 because that woman was a wife of yours,  
 as did those toiling Spartan drudges—no—  
 but because he'd sworn an oath to do it. <sup>332</sup>  
 You were no part of it. He never valued  
 men worth nothing. And so when you return,  
 come back here and bring more heralds with you,  
 as well as the commander. Your vain chat  
 is not something that really bothers me,  
 not while you stay the kind of man you are.

CHORUS LEADER

When things go badly, I don't like to hear  
 a tone like that. Even when it's justified,  
 harsh language stings.

MENELAUS

This mere archer  
 seems to entertain some big ideas. <sup>333</sup>

TEUCER

Indeed I do.

My skill is not something to underrate.

MENELAUS

My, my—if only you possessed a shield,  
 how grand your boasts would be.

TEUCER

Even with no shield,  
 I'd get the better of you fully armed.

MENELAUS

That tongue of yours, how it likes to feed  
 the savage spirit inside!

TEUCER

When a man is right,

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<sup>332</sup> . . . *Scamander*: The Scamander is a river near Troy, right in the middle of the areas where the battles between Greeks and Trojans took place.

<sup>333</sup> There is some dispute about how the Phrygian enters—does he come through the doors (as the Chorus Leader's line about the bolts suggests) or does he come down from the roof (as his opening lines suggest). West, who opts for an entry down from the roof, has a useful note on the point (p. 275-6).

he's entitled to make impressive claims.

MENELAUS

Do you mean to tell me it is just  
for someone to be treated generously  
when he's killed me?

TEUCER

Killed you? Your words sound odd,  
if, after being killed, you are now alive.

MENELAUS

Some god saved me. As far as Ajax knows,  
I'm dead and gone.

TEUCER

Since the gods rescued you,  
you should not dishonour them.

MENELAUS

You mean

I could be violating sacred laws?

TEUCER

Yes, if you personally intervened  
to prevent the burial of the dead.

MENELAUS

That's not so with a personal enemy.  
To bury him would not be right.

TEUCER

What's that?

Did Ajax ever march ahead in battle  
as your enemy?

MENELAUS

He hated me,  
and I hated him. But you knew that.

TEUCER

Yes, he did, because you were found out—  
you tampered with the vote which robbed him.

MENELAUS

The judges beat him in that competition,  
not me.

TEUCER

With your deceitful secrecy  
you can conceal so many crimes.

MENELAUS

Words like that  
could well prove painful to someone I know.

TEUCER

Well, I don't think they will bring more pain  
than we'll inflict.

MENELAUS

Once and for all, then,

I tell you this: that man will not be buried.

TEUCER

Then hear my answer: Ajax's corpse  
will have a burial.

MENELAUS

I have already seen a man  
with a bold tongue urging sailors on  
to launch a voyage during winter storms.

But you could hear no sound from him at all  
once the storm got nasty. He hid himself  
under a cloak and then let the sailors

step on him at will. You're just like him,  
you and your braggart mouth—a mighty squall,  
even from a tiny cloud, in no time  
will snuff out your constant shouting.

TEUCER

And I have seen a man stuffed with stupidity,  
whose pride delighted in his neighbours' grief.

Then someone like me, with my temperament,  
faced up to him and said something like this,

"Hey, you there, don't harm the dead. If you do,  
you can be sure you'll find yourself in trouble." So he warned the paltry fellow face  
to face.

I see him now, and it appears to me  
he is none other than yourself. I trust  
I haven't talked too much in riddles?

MENELAUS

I'm leaving. It would be a great disgrace  
if men found out I've started arguing  
when I could use my power.

TEUCER

Be off with you!

It would be a great disgrace to me  
to listen to such silly chattering  
from some fool.

[MENELAUS and his escort leave the way they came]

CHORUS LEADER

We're going to see  
a major altercation from this argument.  
As quickly as you can, Teucer, you should make  
a hollow grave for Ajax, where he'll rest  
in a dark tomb, and people for all time  
will keep him in their memory.

[Enter TECMESSA and EURYSACES]

TEUCER

Ah, just in time—  
 his woman and his son have now arrived  
 to perform a funeral for this sad corpse. AJAX  
 Come, lad, move over here. Stand there by him.  
 Set your hand in supplication on him,  
 on your father, from whom you were born.  
 Kneel down in prayer—hold firmly in your hand  
 locks of hair from me, from her, from you—  
 the three of us. These give the suppliant strength. <sup>334</sup>  
 If any member of the army tries  
 to remove you from this corpse by force,  
 then may that wicked man become an exile,  
 tossed out from his own land in misery,  
 and remain unburied, his roots severed  
 from his whole race, just as I cut this hair.  
 Take this, my boy, and guard it. And don't let  
 any man push you away. Stay kneeling here,  
 and hang on tight. You sailors over there,  
 don't stand around the place like women.  
 You're men. Stand on guard here, and protect him,  
 till I get back, once I've set up the grave.  
 I don't care who has forbidden it.

[Exit TEUCER]

CHORUS

When will our last year here arrive?  
 When will the number of those wandering years  
 come to an end—and my interminable fate  
 to go on carrying this toiling spear  
 across the wide expanse of Troy,  
 a sorrow and a shame for Greeks?  
 How I wish that man had been swept off  
 high into the great sky or into Hades,  
 the home that all men share,  
 before he'd introduced the Greeks  
 to that war mood which sucks up everyone,  
 those weapons of the god of war,  
 which every man detests.  
 O those toils which just produce more toil!  
 That man has wiped out our humanity.

<sup>334</sup> . . . *in his bed*: These lines are such a strained evocation of different myths that it's hard not to see them as either satirical or intentionally comical. The reference to the swan is a reminder of Helen's conception, when Zeus in the form of a swan had sex with Leda, wife of Tyndareus. Apollo's polished citadel is a reference to the high tower of Troy. And Ganymede, a prince of Troy, was so beautiful that he was taken up to Olympus as a young boy to be Zeus' cup bearer and sexual playmate. It's not clear what the mention of his "horsemanship" indicates, unless it's a sexual pun. Dardania is a reference to Troy, the land of Dardanus (the founder of the city).

He gave me as my portion no delight  
 in garlands or full cups of wine,  
     no sweet tunes from flutes around me,  
 that ill-fated wretch, or in the night  
 the joys of sleep. And as for love—alas!—  
 he has denied me love. I lie here  
 forgotten, my hair always drenched  
 from thickly falling dew, ah yes,  
 my memories from desolate Troy.

Bold Ajax used to be my rampart once,  
 my constant wall against night fears  
 and flying weapons aimed at me.  
 But he has now become a sacrifice  
 to some malevolent deity.  
 What pleasure, then, what joy  
 now lies in store for me?  
 O how I wish I were back there,  
 where the wooded wave-washed headland  
 juts out, our guard against the open sea,  
 below the high flat rock of Sunium,  
     and we could then greet sacred Athens. <sup>335</sup>

[Enter TEUCER, in a hurry]

TEUCER

I've just seen commander Agamemnon.  
 He coming here, and quickly. So I ran back.  
 He's clearly going to give his blundering mouth  
 some exercise.

[Enter AGAMEMNON with an armed escort]

AGAMEMNON

You there—I've been told  
 you've dared to mouth foul threats against us  
 with impunity. I'm talking about you,  
 the son of a mere slave, a battle trophy.  
 If some well-bred lady were your mother,  
 no doubt your boasts would soar high in the sky,  
     and you would strut around on tip toe.

You are a nobody, and here you act  
 the champion for this nonentity.  
 In all seriousness you made the claim  
 we voyaged here with no authority,  
 as commanders of the troops or of the fleet,  
 to give orders to Achaeans or to you,  
 since Ajax sailed under his own command.

<sup>335</sup> . . . *grabbed her*: The followers of Bacchus are the ecstatic worshippers who roam the mountains, often capturing wild animals and tearing them apart. The thyrsus is a plant stem, often with magical properties, which they carry as part of the ritual frenzy.

Is it not shameful that I have to hear  
such monstrous insults from the mouths of slaves?  
This man you shout about with so much pride,  
what sort of man was he? Where did he go  
or stand and fight, where I was not there, too?  
Do the Achaeans have no man but him?  
It seems it was a painful thing we did  
when we announced to all Achaeans  
that competition for Achilles' weapons,  
    if in every quarter we appear corrupt,  
thanks to Teucer, and if you people here  
never will be satisfied, not even  
after you have been put down, and yield  
to what most of the judges thought was fair.  
Instead you will no doubt keep hurling at us  
these constant gibes, or from your station in the rear  
treacherously lash out at us. In places  
where such conditions hold you'll never find  
a settled order based on rule of law,  
not if we discard the men who justly win  
and put in front the ones who lag behind.  
No. We must prevent such tendencies.

    It's not the big, broad-shouldered warriors  
who make the most reliable allies—  
it's men who think—they win out every time.  
One guides a broad-backed ox straight down the path  
with only a small whip. And I can see  
you'll soon receive some of that medicine,  
unless you get yourself some common sense.  
That man is no longer living—by this time  
he has become a shade, and here you are  
rashly insulting us, letting your mouth  
run on and on. You should control yourself.  
Do you not realize who you are by birth?  
Why not let another man step forward,  
    someone free born, to state your case to us  
instead of you? For when you're speaking,  
I'm not prepared to listen any more.

    To me your barbarian way of speaking  
is quite impossible to understand.

CHORUS LEADER

I wish you two were sensible enough  
to show some self-restraint. Nothing I say  
would be more useful to the both of you.  
TEUCER [addressing the corpse of Ajax]  
Well now, how quickly among mortal men

grateful thoughts about the dead are gone  
and turn into betrayal. This man here  
can't even manage a few words, Ajax,  
to celebrate your memory, and yet  
you often risked your life protecting him,  
hefting that spear of yours in battle.

But now, as you can see, all those great deeds  
are dead and gone, all thrown aside.

[Teucer turns to address Agamemnon]

And you,  
you talk a lot of a utter foolishness.  
Have you no longer any memory  
of the time when you were all bunched up  
inside the rampart, almost done for  
in that spear fight—then Ajax showed up,  
all on his own, and kept protecting you,  
with flames already blazing on your ships,  
spreading across the decks right at the stern,  
and Hector leaping high across the ditch,  
heading for our fleet? Who held him back?

Was Ajax not the one who managed that,  
the man you claim never went any place  
where you did not go, too? Do you concede  
his actions then, as far as you're concerned,  
set a high standard? And then another time,  
when he faced up to Hector by himself  
in single combat. No one ordered him.  
He was picked out by lot, and his marker,  
the one he threw in among the others,  
was not designed to help him not get picked.  
It was no lump of moistened clay, no,  
but a light one which would be the first  
out of the crested helmet. <sup>336</sup>

Yes, Ajax  
was the one who did these things, and I,  
the slave whose mother was a foreigner,  
was there beside him. You miserable man,  
where are your eyes when you go on like this?  
Do you not realize your father's father,  
ancient Pelops, was a barbarian,  
who came from Phrygia? And Atreus,  
the man who spawned you, wasn't he the one  
who prepared that sacrilegious dinner,

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<sup>336</sup> . . . *seen a Gorgon*: The Gorgons were three sisters whose looks could turn people into stone. One of them who was mortal (Medusa) was killed by Perseus.



and served up his own brother's children as a meal  
for him to eat? <sup>337</sup> And then, as for yourself,  
the mother who bore you came from Crete.  
And her own father caught her having sex,  
screwing some stranger. He abandoned her  
to be killed in silence by a bunch of fish. <sup>338</sup>

That's the kind of man you are. How can you  
insult a man like me about my origins?

I am a son of Telamon, who won  
my mother as his consort, his own prize  
for being the army's finest warrior.  
She was of royal blood, Laomedon's daughter,  
the most desirable of all the battle spoils.  
Alcmene's son gave her to Telamon. <sup>339</sup>

Since I am nobly born and my parents  
are both noble, too, how could I disgrace  
my own flesh and blood? Ajax is lying here,  
overcome by all his troubles, and you—  
aren't you ashamed to say you'll toss him out  
without a burial? Well, think of this—  
if you just throw him out, along with him  
you'll be casting off three more as well.  
It's a finer thing for men to see me die  
while labouring hard on his behalf  
than fighting for your woman—or should I say  
your brother's wife? Given what I've said,  
don't think about my safety; look to your own.  
For if you make things difficult for me,  
you're going to wish you had been more afraid  
and not quite so bold when you confronted me.  
[Enter ODYSSEUS alone]

CHORUS LEADER

Lord Odysseus, you've come just in time,  
if you're here to calm things, not make them worse.

ODYSSEUS

My friends, what's going on? From a long way off  
I heard the sons of Atreus shouting out  
over this brave man's body.

<sup>337</sup> . . . *from his chariot*: As noted before, Myrtilus conspired with Pelops to trick king Oenomaus in a chariot race, so that Pelops could win Hippodameia, the king's daughter. Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, sabotaged the royal chariot. Pelops then killed Myrtilus by throwing him out of his chariot into the sea. This event launches the disasters which befall the House of Atreus (Atreus is one of Pelops' sons).

<sup>338</sup> . . . *ritual washing*: One of the duties of a king was to lead important religious ceremonies. These could only be conducted by someone free of the pollution from any crime he had committed.

<sup>339</sup>\* . . . one entire year: Parrhasia is a region in Arcadia, an area in the central Peloponnese.

AGAMEMNON

Lord Odysseus,  
we have had to listen for far too long  
to the most shameful language from this man.  
Is that not reason enough?

ODYSSEUS

Well, let's see—  
I could forgive a man who had been listening  
to someone else who was abusing him  
and who then joined in a war of insults.

AGAMEMNON

I did insult him, because his actions  
were a direct affront to me.

ODYSSEUS

What did he do  
to injure you?

AGAMEMNON

He says he will not let  
this corpse remain without a burial.  
He'll set it in a grave, no matter what I do.

ODYSSEUS

Well, may someone who's a friend of yours  
speak his mind and still remain a colleague  
the way he was before?

AGAMEMNON

You should speak out.  
I would scarcely be thinking properly  
if I said no. Among the Argives  
I consider you my greatest friend.

ODYSSEUS

Then listen. In deference to the gods  
don't be so unyielding you throw Ajax out  
without a burial. You should not let  
that spirit of violence at any time  
seize control of you, not to the extent  
that you then trample justice underfoot.  
This man became my greatest enemy  
in all our army on that very day  
I beat him for the armour of Achilles.  
But for all the man's hostility to me,  
I would not disgrace him. Nor would I deny  
that in my view he was the finest warrior  
among the Argive men who came to Troy,  
after Achilles. So if you dishonour him,  
you would be unjust. It would not harm him,  
but you'd be contravening all those laws

the gods established. When a good man dies,  
it is not right to harm him, even though  
he may be someone you hate.

AGAMEMNON

Odysseus,  
you mean you're arguing against me,  
on his behalf?

ODYSSEUS

Yes, that's what I mean.  
I did hate him, when it was all right to hate.

AGAMEMNON

Why would you not walk all over him,  
now that he's dead?

ODYSSEUS

Son of Atreus,  
do not take pleasure in advantages  
which are dishonourable.

AGAMEMNON

An all-powerful king  
does not show reverence all that easily.

ODYSSEUS

But he can give out honourable rewards  
to friends when they advise him prudently.

AGAMEMNON

A good man should obey those in command.

ODYSSEUS

Why not concede? You'll still be in control,  
although you let your friends prevail against you.

AGAMEMNON

Just remember the kind of man he was,  
the one for whom you want to do this favour.

ODYSSEUS

The man was an enemy of mine, that's true.  
But he was once a noble warrior.

AGAMEMNON

Why are you doing this? Why such respect  
for the dead body of an enemy?

ODYSSEUS

His excellence moves me to do it,  
far more than his hostility to me.

AGAMEMNON

Men who act the way you're doing now  
are unreliable.

ODYSSEUS

Let me assure you,  
among human beings most are changeable,

sometimes friendly, then sometimes bitter.

AGAMEMNON

Are those the sort of men you'd recommend  
that we accept as friends?

ODYSSEUS

Well, I wouldn't recommend  
we choose someone inflexible.

AGAMEMNON

All right,  
but now you'll make us look like cowards.

ODYSSEUS

No. Every Greek will think we're being just.

AGAMEMNON

So you would urge me to give my permission,  
and let this corpse receive a burial?

ODYSSEUS

I would. For I myself will someday reach  
the state he's in, as well.

AGAMEMNON

There we have it.  
All men work to benefit themselves.

ODYSSEUS

For whom should I make such an effort  
if not for myself?

AGAMEMNON

We'll have to announce  
that you're the one responsible for this,  
not me.

ODYSSEUS

However you do it, it will serve  
to bring you all kinds of advantages.

AGAMEMNON

Well, in any case, you can rest assured  
I would grant you a greater favour  
than this burial. As for this man here,  
down in the underworld he is my enemy,  
just as he was on earth. But you can do  
whatever you think is appropriate.

[AGAMEMNON and his escort leave]

CHORUS LEADER

Given how you have acted here today,  
Odysseus, any man who now asserts  
that you are not by nature wise is stupid.

ODYSSEUS

I now proclaim that from this moment on  
I am Teucer's friend, as much as earlier

I was his enemy. And I am willing  
to join with him in burying the dead,  
working with you and omitting nothing  
human beings may need to honour and respect  
their finest warriors.

TEUCER

Noble Odysseus,  
I have nothing but praise for what you've said.  
You have done so much to disprove my fears.  
Of all the Argives, you were the one  
who was his greatest enemy, and yet  
you are the only one to stand by him,  
to lend a helping hand. For when he died  
and you were still alive, you could not bear  
to see such injuries inflicted on him,  
not like that frantic general who was here.  
He and his brother wanted their revenge  
by casting Ajax off without a grave.  
And so may our all-ruling father Zeus,  
high on Olympus, the unforgiving Furies,  
and Justice, too, who fulfils all things,  
destroy those evil men with evil deaths,  
just as they tried to rid themselves of Ajax,  
outrageous treatment he did not deserve.  
But you, child of venerable Laertes,

I hesitate to let you touch the corpse  
in these funeral rites, for that may well offend  
the man who died. But as for all the rest,  
join in with us. If you wish, bring someone,  
any soldier in the army will be welcome.  
I must get all things ready. Odysseus,  
you must know you've acted nobly for us.

ODYSSEUS

That's what I wished. But if you object  
to my participation here with you,  
I'll defer to what you want and leave.

[ODYSSEUS leaves]

TEUCER

Enough. Too much time has passed already.  
Hurry now. Some of you scoop out a hollow grave,  
others set the cauldron high up on the stand,  
with fire all around, so we can start  
the ritual cleansing promptly. One of you,  
bring from his hut the armour he would wear  
behind his shield. And you, too, my child,  
since he's your father, use those loving arms

with all the strength you have and help me lift him.  
His windpipe is still warm, and from it flows  
his own dark spirit. Come then, come all of you  
who say you are our friends, come quickly,  
move out, and with your efforts honour Ajax.  
There was no one to match his excellence.<sup>340</sup>  
No nobler man has received such honour.

CHORUS

I know of many things which mortal men  
can see and learn from. But until he meets it,  
no one sees what is to come or his own fate.

[They all leave, bearing the body of Ajax.]

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<sup>340</sup> . . . *his father, Achilles*: Achilles was killed at Troy. His son Neoptolemus came to Troy, joined the fighting, and killed Priam, king of Troy. He was later killed by a priest at Delphi, Apollo's shrine. There are other stories, however, which have Neoptolemus marrying Hermione.

# (SOPHOCLES) Philoctetes

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>341</sup> translation by Ian Johnston

## BACKGROUND NOTE

Philoctetes was one of the warrior leaders who set off with Agamemnon and Menelaus to attack Troy. On the way he was bitten by a snake, and the wound refused to heal. His cries of pain and the stench of his wound so upset the Greeks that the leaders decided to abandon him on the deserted island of Lemnos, where he remained all by himself. The action of the play takes place ten years after this event.

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ODYSSEUS: king of Ithaca, a leading warrior of the Greek army at Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS: young son of the great Greek hero Achilles.

PHILOCTETES: Greek warrior abandoned on Lemnos.

SAILOR: attendant on Neoptolemus.

CHORUS: sailors from Neoptolemus' ship. <sup>342</sup>

MERCHANT TRADER: a sailor spy, posing as a Merchant.

HERCULES: mortal son of Zeus, later made a god.

The Greek forces fighting at Troy are normally called the Argives or the Achaeans, as in Homer.

*[Scene: on the deserted island of Lemnos, just outside Philoctetes' cave. The opening to the cave is on stage, above the level of the orchestra. Enter into the orchestra ODYSSEUS and NEOPTOLEMUS with a SAILOR attending on Neoptolemus]*

ODYSSEUS

So here we are on the shores of Lemnos,  
a lonely place—well off the beaten track,  
surrounded by the sea. No one lives here.  
This was this place, Neoptolemus,  
son of Achilles, bravest and best  
of all the Greeks, where, many years ago,  
I left Philoctetes, son of Poeas,  
a man from Malis. I abandoned him,  
acting on orders from our two commanders. <sup>343</sup>  
His foot was dripping with infectious sores,  
painful ulcers. He kept screaming all the time.  
His strange, wild howling rang throughout the camp.

<sup>341</sup> <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/philoctetes.htm>

<sup>342</sup> In the text below the speaking label CHORUS designates all speeches spoken by the Chorus collectively, the Chorus Leader, individual member of the Chorus, and special sub-groups of the entire Chorus. In any production of the play, the director would have to determine the speaker(s) for each speech.

<sup>343</sup> The two commanders of the Argive expedition to Troy were the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus.

He cried so much we could not pray in peace  
or make libations and burnt sacrifice.  
But what's the point in talking of that now?  
This is no time to tell long stories,  
for if he learns I'm here, then my whole scheme,  
the one I think will catch him quickly, fails.  
Look, your job is to carry out the tasks  
we still have left to do—to find a rock  
somewhere round here which has two openings,  
so shaped that when it's cool there are two seats  
facing the sun, and when it's hot, the breeze  
wafts sleep in through the chamber tunnel.  
To the left below it you might glimpse  
a water spring, if it's still functioning.  
Climb up the rock. Keep quiet. Then signal me,  
if you see those features there or somewhere else.  
After that I'll tell you my entire plan.  
Then both of us will carry out my scheme.

[NEOPTOLEMUS sets out searching, moving up towards the opening of the cave]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Lord Odysseus, that task you mentioned—  
I think we're close. I see a cave up here  
quite like the one you mentioned.

ODYSSEUS

Above you?  
Or below? I don't see it.

NEOPTOLEMUS [approaching the mouth of the cave]

It's up here.  
High up. I can't hear a sound—no footsteps.

ODYSSEUS

Watch out. He may be there, in bed asleep.

NEOPTOLEMUS [peering into the cave]

The place is empty. I don't see anyone.

ODYSSEUS

Anything in there which might indicate  
some human lives inside?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes, there is—  
a bed of leaves pressed down. Someone lives here.

ODYSSEUS

Is it empty otherwise? Nothing else  
hidden in the cave?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's a wooden cup,  
crudely made, some wretched craftsman's work—



and kindling, too, set to light a fire.

ODYSSEUS

What you describe must be the things he owns.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Look here, there's something else. Rags left to dry—

[NEOPTOLEMUS inspects the rags]

Agh, they're full of pus! The stench!

ODYSSEUS

This is the spot.

Obviously our man lives here and is nearby.

His foot is crippled with that old disease.

He can't go far. He's gone to find some food

or a remedial herb he's seen somewhere.

Send that man of yours to be our lookout,

in case he stumbles on us unawares.

He'd rather catch me than any other Greek.

[NEOPTOLEMUS comes back down and whispers to his ATTENDANT, who then leaves]

NEOPTOLEMUS He's on his way. He'll be our sentry on the path.

If there's something else you need, just say so.

ODYSSEUS

Son of Achilles, to fulfill your mission,

you must be loyal to your ancestry.

That's more than something merely physical.

If you hear a plan you've not heard before

and it sounds strange, you must obey it—

you're with me here as my subordinate.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are your orders?

ODYSSEUS

With Philoctetes—

when you speak to him, tell him a story.

You have to trick him, lead his mind astray.

When he asks who you are and where you're from,

say you're Achilles' son—no deception there.

But tell him you intend to sail for home. You've left the Achaeans' naval forces because you truly hate them. And here's why—

in their prayers they summoned you from home

to Troy, since you're the only hope they've got

to take the city. But then they judged you

not good enough to have Achilles' arms,

although you came to claim them as your right.

Instead they gave them to Odysseus.

Say what you like of me—pile up the insults,

the worst there are. That won't injure me.

But if you don't go through with what I say,

you'll hurt the Argives, every one of them.  
 If we don't get our hands on that man's bow,  
 you'll never capture Troy successfully,  
 never destroy the realm of Dardanus.<sup>344</sup>  
 Let me tell you why you can talk to him  
     and safely win his trust, while I cannot.  
 You've joined the Trojan expedition freely—  
 you'd made no oath to anyone. In fact,  
 you weren't a member of that first contingent.<sup>345</sup>  
 But I was, and I can't deny the fact.  
 If he sees me while he still has his bow,  
 I'm lost, and you, as my companion,  
 will share my fate. That's why we need to plan—  
 we need some scheme so you can find a way  
 to steal his bow, which is invincible.  
 My boy, I know your nature is not fit  
 to make up lies or speak deceitful things.

    But winning victory's prize is sweet indeed,  
 so force yourself to do it. After this,  
 the justice of our actions will be clear.  
 So now, for one short day, follow my lead  
 without a sense of shame. In time to come  
 they will call you the finest man there is.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Son of Laertes, I hate to carry out  
 an order which it hurts to listen to.  
 It's not my nature to do anything  
 based on deceit. My father, so they say,  
 was just the same. But I am prepared  
     to take the man by force, no trickery.  
 He's just one man on foot. He'll never win  
 against so many of us in a fight.  
 Since I was ordered here to work with you,  
 I am not eager to be called disloyal.  
 Still, my lord, I would much prefer to fail  
 in something honorable, than to win out  
 with treachery.

ODYSSEUS

You noble father's son,  
 when I was young, I had a quiet tongue, as well.

<sup>344</sup>Dardanus, a son of Zeus, was the legendary founder of Troy.

<sup>345</sup>Many Greek warrior leaders had made an oath to assist whichever one of them was lucky enough to marry Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta, if he ever needed their help. When Paris of Troy abducted Helen, her husband, Menelaus, called upon the Achaean leaders to honour their promise by joining an expedition to attack Troy. Odysseus was very reluctant to join the expedition and had to be tricked into going.

I let my active hands speak up for me.  
But now I've gone out into adult life  
and faced its trials, I see with mortal men  
the tongue, not action, rules in everything.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are your orders, then, apart from lying?

ODYSSEUS

I'm ordering you to use deceitful means  
to seize Philoctetes.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But why deceit?

Why not persuade him?

ODYSSEUS

The man won't listen.

And he's not someone you can take by force.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Is he that confident, that powerful?

ODYSSEUS

Indeed, he is. His arrows never miss.

Every shot brings death.

NEOPTOLEMUS I have no chance at all  
if I move out to challenge him?

ODYSSEUS

None whatsoever, unless, as I've said,  
you use some trick to grab him.

NEOPTOLEMUS

So you don't think  
there's any shame in saying something false?

ODYSSEUS

No, I don't—not if the lies will save us.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But how can anyone control his face  
when he dares speak such lies?

ODYSSEUS

When what you do  
brings benefits, you should not hesitate.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If that man comes to Troy, how do I benefit?

ODYSSEUS

The only way the city can be captured  
is with his bow and arrows.

NEOPTOLEMUS

So I am not the one  
who'll take that city, as you told me?

ODYSSEUS

Yes, but you need them, and they need you. <sup>346</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

If that's true, we must track them down, it seems.

ODYSSEUS

By doing this work, you'll garner two rewards.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How? If I knew that, I'd not refuse it.

ODYSSEUS

In this one act, you'll get yourself a name  
for shrewdness and nobility.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right,

I'll do it. I'll set all shame aside.

ODYSSEUS

That story I sketched out for you just now—  
do you recall it?

NEOPTOLEMUS

You can be sure of that,  
since I've at last agreed to do it.

ODYSSEUS

All right. Now, you stay here and wait for him.

I'll move off, so I'm not seen around you.

And I'll return our lookout to his ship.

Now, if I think you're taking too much time,

I'll send that same sailor here again,

but I'll disguise his actions and his clothes,

to make him captain of some merchant ship,

beyond all recognition. Then, my boy,

when he tells you some fancy tale, you listen,  
taking from it anything that helps you.

Now I'm going to my ship. It's up to you.

May Hermes, who guides men through deceptions,

lead us through this, and with Athena, too,

goddess of victory, our city's patron,

and the one who always rescues me.

[Exit ODYSSEUS. Enter the CHORUS, members of Neoptolemus' crew]

CHORUS

My lord, tell me what I must conceal

and what to say to this Philoctetes.

He's bound to be full of suspicion.

For I'm a stranger in a foreign place.

The art and judgment of the man

who rules with Zeus' godlike sceptre

<sup>346</sup>The Achaean forces had learned by prophecy that they needed Neoptolemus and the bow of Philoctetes to capture Troy. [Back to Text]

exceed the skills of ordinary men.  
That age-old authority of kings  
has now come down to you, my son.  
So tell me what I need to do to serve you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Right now perhaps you're eager to inspect  
the place here on the shore in which he lives. You can look through it—there's no  
need to fear—  
that dangerous man has left his cave for now.  
When he gets back, stand ready to come out  
when I give you the sign. Try to help me.  
Provide whatever aid I may require.

CHORUS

My lord, this help you talk about  
has for a long time been my chief concern,  
always to keep my eyes alert  
above all to what's best for you.  
Tell me some details of this man,  
the kind of shelter where he lives,  
and where he might be now.  
There are things I ought to know,  
in case he comes at me somewhere  
when I'm not ready for him.  
Where has he disappeared?  
Is he at home in there,  
in that cave, or here outside?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Here's his dwelling with two entrances,  
a den carved in the rock.

CHORUS

The man who lives here—  
where's the poor wretch gone?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think that's clear.  
He's dragging his foot along some place nearby,  
looking for things to eat. I've heard it said  
that that's the way he usually lives,  
In his sad state it takes what strength he has  
to shoot his feathered arrows at his prey,  
and no one ever ventures close enough  
to help him cure his sick condition.

CHORUS

Well, I pity him for that—  
with no human to look after him,  
and no companion's face to see,  
he lives a miserable life,

alone, always alone,  
 infected with a cruel disease,  
 confused about what he should do  
 to cope with every pressing need.  
 How does he bear a fate so grim?  
 It is the workings of the gods.  
 What a wretched race of men they are  
 whose life exceeds due measure.

    This man Philoctetes,  
     for all we know, is just as good  
 as any member of the finest clan.  
 But here he lies all by himself,  
 apart from other human beings,  
 with shaggy goats and spotted deer,  
 suffering from hunger pangs  
 and from his painful wound.  
 It's pitiful—he has to bear  
 an agony that has no cure,  
 and, as he cries in bitter pain,  
 the only answer comes from Echo,  
 a distant, senseless babble.

    NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, nothing in all this surprises me.  
 Let me explain just how I understand it.  
 This man's sufferings come from the gods,  
 both those afflicting him from savage Chryse  
 and those he suffers now without a cure.<sup>347</sup>  
 The gods are planning that Philoctetes  
 will not aim his bow at Troy and shoot his shafts,  
 those all-conquering arrows from the gods,  
 until the time is right, when, people say,  
 those weapons take the city—that's Troy's fate.

    CHORUS

My lad, be quiet.

    NEOPTOLEMUS

Why, what's the matter?

    CHORUS

I heard a noise—a sound that may have come  
 from someone in distress. From over there,  
 I think, or maybe there. Yes, I hear it—  
 I hear the voice of someone hurt. That's it—  
 someone forced to crawl along the path.  
 That heavy groaning of a man in pain,

---

<sup>347</sup>Chryse refers to the nymph who punished Philoctetes with the snake bite for desecrating her shrine. It is also the name of a small island close to Troy.

even from far away, is hard to miss.  
The cries are just too clear. Now, my lad,  
you should listen . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

To what?

CHORUS

I've just been thinking.

This man's not far away—he's close to us,  
bringing music home, not like a shepherd  
piping his flocks back to some melody,  
but screaming as he stumbles.  
Perhaps his echoing howls  
come from his body's pain  
or else he's seen our ship  
at its unwelcoming anchorage.  
In either case, his cries are dreadful.

[Enter Philoctetes]

PHILOCTETES

You there, you strangers,  
what country are you from? Why land here,  
put into such a desolate location,  
without a decent harbour? If I guessed  
your homeland or your family, what answer  
would be right? You look as if you're Greeks,  
at least from how you're dressed, and that's a sight  
that pleases me. But I'd like to hear you speak.  
Please don't be afraid of me and run away,  
scared because I look like such a savage.  
Take pity on a wretched, lonely man,  
abandoned without friends, in misery.  
If you come as friends, speak up. Answer me.

It's only right we talk to one another.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, stranger, the first thing you should know  
is that we're Greeks. That's what you want to hear.

PHILOCTETES

Ah, that language gives me such delight—  
to hear such words spoken by a man like this,  
after so many years! Tell me, young man,  
what made you land here? Something you need?  
Some business? Or a friendly wind? Speak up—  
tell everything, so I know who you are.

NEOPTOLEMUS

My birthplace is the island Scyros. Right now,  
I'm sailing home. I'm Neoptolemus—

Achilles' son. Now you know everything.

PHILOCTETES

My lad, son of a man I truly loved,  
and from a land I cherish, you were raised  
by old Lycomedes, your mother's father.  
What business brings you to this island?  
Where are you sailing from?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, if you must know,  
I'm sailing now away from Troy.

PHILOCTETES

What's that you say?  
I'm sure you weren't one of those on board  
when our first expedition sailed for Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Did you take part in that great enterprise?

PHILOCTETES

My boy, you mean you don't know who I am,  
you have no clue who you are looking at?

NEOPTOLEMUS

How can I know a man I've never seen?

PHILOCTETES

You don't know my name? You've never even heard  
a rumour of my deadly suffering?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Let me assure you I know none of that—  
I've no idea what you're asking.

PHILOCTETES

O how truly miserable I must be,  
how bitter to the gods, if not a word,  
not even rumours of my living here,  
have reached my home or any part of Greece.  
Those men who broke god's laws to leave me here  
have hushed it up and laugh, while my disease  
keeps flourishing and getting worse. My boy,  
young lad whose father is Achilles,  
the man who stands here right in front of you  
is someone you perhaps have heard about  
as master of the arms of Hercules.  
Yes, I am Poeas' son, Philoctetes,  
the man those two commanders of the army  
and that Cephallenian king, Odysseus,  
so disgracefully threw out, deserted here,  
while I was suffering this cruel disease. <sup>348</sup>

<sup>348</sup>Cephallenia was an island in Odysseus' kingdom, but the name is often applied to his territory generally (and his soldiers are commonly called the Cephallenians).



I was bitten by a savage deadly snake.  
Our fleet had sailed from Chryse by the sea.  
It landed here. Then, my boy, they left me  
with this infection as my sole companion.  
Yes, they left me here alone. Once they saw  
my storms of pain had passed and I was sleeping,  
they were so happy to abandon me  
under an overhanging rock, here onshore,  
setting out some rags, some scraps of food,  
a pittance—enough to please a beggar.  
I hope they get the treatment they gave me!  
My boy, can you imagine how I felt  
after my sleep that day, when I awoke,  
when I got up to find they'd disappeared?  
How I wept, how I cried out in distress,  
when I saw the ships on which I'd sailed  
had all gone off, with no one else around,  
no one to help, no one to soothe the ache  
of my disease? I looked everywhere,  
but all I found around me was my pain.  
Of that, my lad, I had more than my share.  
Well, time went by for me, month after month,  
alone in this small shelter. I was forced  
to look to my own needs all by myself.  
This bow gave me the food my stomach craved,  
by shooting birds as they passed overhead.  
Each time an arrow flew out from this string  
and struck, I'd go crawling after it, in pain,  
dragging this wretched foot behind me.  
In winter, when I needed to fetch water,  
often there was frost—at that time of year  
it's not uncommon—and I'd have to break  
some firewood. I'd drag myself outside,  
in agony, and get it. Then, at times,  
I had no fire. But by rubbing stones  
I finally produced the hidden spark  
which keeps me going day by day. In fact,  
living here under this roof and with my fire  
I have all I need, except, of course,  
relief from my disease. You see, my lad,  
you should know some facts about this island.  
No sailor ever comes too near this place—  
not if he can help it. There's no moorage  
or any port where he can buy and sell  
to make a profit or find a welcome host.  
So men with any sense don't travel here.

If someone ever came unwillingly—  
 such things do happen often over time  
 in the full span of one's life—well then,  
 when they arrived, my boy, they'd talk to me,  
 speak a few sympathetic words, and then,  
 from pity, add some food or clothing.  
 But there's one thing no one would ever do,  
 once I suggested it—take me safely home.  
 This is the tenth year of my misery,  
 wasting away in hunger and distress,  
 eaten up by this gluttonous disease.  
 This is the work of those sons of Atreus  
 and Odysseus, that brutal man. They did this.  
 May the Olympian gods give them someday  
 full retribution for my agonies!

CHORUS

Son of Poeas, I pity you, as well—  
 just like those visitors you had before.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I, too, can testify to what you say.  
 You speak the truth. For I've experienced  
     how bad the sons of Atreus can be,  
 and Odysseus' brutality as well.

PHILOCTETES

What's that? You mean you, too, have complaints  
 against those cursed sons of Atreus—  
 something they did to you to make you angry?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I wish one day my hand could vent my rage,  
 so then they'd learn in Sparta and Mycenae,  
 that Scyros is the mother of brave men. <sup>349</sup>

PHILOCTETES

Good for you, my lad. But what's your reason?  
 Why are you so angry? What's the grudge  
 you have against them?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'll tell you, son of Poeas,  
 but it's hard to say what I went through  
     on their account when I arrived at Troy.  
 When fate declared Achilles had to die . . .

PHILOCTETES [interrupting]

What's that? Stop there. Answer this question first—  
 is Achilles, son of Peleus, dead?

<sup>349</sup>Menelaus is king of Sparta, and Agamemnon is king of Mycenae. Neoptolemus was born and raised on the island of Scyros.

## NEOPTOLEMUS

He is.

But no mortal killed him. It was a god.  
Phoebus Apollo brought him down, they say,  
with an arrow shot.

## PHILOCTETES

Both noble beings,  
the killer and the killed. Now I'm not sure,  
my boy, what I should do next—question you  
about your suffering or mourn Achilles.

## NEOPTOLEMUS

Your own afflictions are enough for you,  
I think. You unhappy man, you don't need  
to mourn the next man's troubles.

## PHILOCTETES

You're right.  
So tell me once again what you went through,  
how those men harmed you.

## NEOPTOLEMUS

They came to get me  
in a fancy, decorated ship—Phoenix,  
who raised my father, and lord Odysseus.  
They said—I don't know if it's true or not—  
that since my father had been killed,  
destiny decreed that no one except me  
could seize those towers in Troy. Well, my friend,  
once they'd said that, they gave me little time  
before we left. We sailed there at top speed,  
mainly because I had a great desire

to see my father's corpse before the burial,  
since I'd never seen him. In addition,  
what they said to me was truly wonderful—  
if I went back with them, I'd capture Troy.  
Well, we rowed and had a favorable wind,  
so on my voyage by the second day  
we had reached Sigeum, that bitter place. <sup>350</sup>

Then, when I disembarked, all the army  
at once came crowding round to welcome me,  
swearing they could see the dead Achilles  
alive again. But he just lay there dead.

In my grief I wept for him. Soon after that,

I went to Atreus' sons, as friends of mine,  
or so I thought, to claim my father's arms  
and all the rest of what belonged to him.

<sup>350</sup>Sigeum was a prominent coastal location northwest of Troy.

They gave me the most shameless of replies—

“Seed of Achilles, you may take away  
all your father’s things except his weapons.

Another man is master of them now,  
Laertes’ son, Odysseus.” I jumped up—  
my anger was immediate and intense—  
tears were in my eyes. Full of bitterness,  
I yelled at them, “You miserable men,  
have you two dared award my weapons  
to another man rather than to me

without even bothering to tell me?” Then Odysseus spoke up—it so happened  
he was there nearby—“Yes, boy, they did.

And rightly, too, because I rescued them.

I was there to save their master’s body.” In my rage I began to heap on him  
every insult I could think of, all at once.

If he meant to steal those weapons from me,  
then there was nothing I was holding back.

Hurt by my abuse, though not enraged,  
Odysseus said, “You’ve not been where we have—  
you weren’t around when we all needed you.

And now, since you cannot speak politely,

you’ll never sail to Scyros with those arms.” After hearing such rebukes and  
insults,

I’m sailing home without my property,  
thanks to that low-born criminal Odysseus.

But I don’t lay the blame so much on him  
as on those in command. For any city  
depends completely on those in control,  
and so must all the army. And when people  
grow unruly, it’s what their teachers say  
that makes them so corrupt. That’s my story,  
all I have to tell. If there’s anyone  
who hates those sons of Atreus, I hope  
the gods will cherish him the way I do.

#### CHORUS

All-nourishing mountain mother Earth,  
mother of Zeus himself,  
you who live and rule  
in great Pactolus, rich in gold, most dread and sacred mother,  
over there I called on you,  
in Troy, when sons of Atreus  
heaped all their insults on this man,  
while they were handing over  
his father’s armour to Odysseus,  
paying highest honours to that man—  
such awe-inspiring things.

Hail, blessed goddess, as you sit  
 on your splendid decorated throne,  
 where carved-out lions slaughter bulls. <sup>351</sup>

PHILOCTETES

You've sailed here carrying your grief,  
 pain like my own, a certain guarantee.  
 You and your story harmonize with mine,  
 so I can recognize how those men act,  
 the sons of Atreus and that Odysseus,  
 a man who, I know well, would set his tongue  
 to every evil lie or debased act  
 to get the unjust end he's looking for.  
 No, what you've said does not surprise me,  
 though I do wonder how great Ajax,  
 if he was there, could bear to witness it.

NEOPTOLEMUS

My friend, Ajax was no longer living—  
 had he been alive, they'd not have robbed me.

PHILOCTETES

What's that you say? Did death get Ajax, too?

NEOPTOLEMUS

He's dead and gone. Imagine Ajax  
 no longer standing in the sunlight.

PHILOCTETES

No, no. It's dreadful. But Diomedes,  
 son of Tydeus, and that Odysseus,  
 son of Sisyphus (so people say), sold  
 to Laertes still in his mother's womb,  
 they'll not die, for they don't deserve to live. <sup>352</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

No they won't. That's something you can count on.  
 In fact, right now within the Argive army  
 those two are really thriving.

PHILOCTETES

And Nestor?

What about that fine old friend of mine  
 from Pylos? Is he alive? He's the one  
 who with his prudent counsel often checked  
 the nasty things that those two men would do.

NEOPTOLEMUS

<sup>351</sup> Pactolus was a river in Asia Minor celebrated for its rich deposits of gold. The detail about lions slaughtering bulls seems to suggest (according to Jebb) that the goddess is riding on lions or that her throne is a chariot drawn by lions.

<sup>352</sup> Sisyphus, the founder of Corinth, was famous for his devious ways. According to one story very popular among Odysseus' enemies, he was the father of Odysseus and sold his mother to Laertes while Odysseus was still in the womb. Diomedes was a close comrade of Odysseus.

Right now he's not doing well. That son of his,  
Antilochus, who stood by him, is dead.

PHILOCTETES

That's more bad news. Those two men you mention—  
I really didn't want to hear they'd died.  
God knows what we should look for in this world,  
when such men perish and Odysseus lives,  
and at a time when we should hear the news  
that he was dead instead of those two men.

NEOPTOLEMUS

He's a slippery wrestler, Philoctetes,  
but even clever schemes are often checked.

PHILOCTETES

Now, for the gods' sake, what of Patroclus?  
On that occasion where was he? Tell me.  
Your father loved him more than anyone.

NEOPTOLEMUS

He was also dead. I can tell you why  
in one brief saying—given the choice,  
war takes no evil men. It always wants  
to seize the good ones.

PHILOCTETES

There I agree with you.  
With that in mind, let me ask you this—  
what about that worthless man who was so glib,  
so daring with his tongue and yet so smart?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Surely that can only mean Odysseus?

PHILOCTETES

No, I don't mean him. There was a man there  
called Thersites, who never was content  
to speak up only once, although no one  
ever granted him the right to speak at all. Do you know if that fellow's still alive? <sup>353</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

I haven't seen him. But from what I've heard  
the man still lives.

PHILOCTETES

Of course, he does.  
No evil people ever get destroyed.  
The gods are careful to look out for them.  
Somehow with all those stubborn criminals  
they like to turn them back from Hades,  
while always sending good and righteous men

<sup>353</sup>Thersites, the only common soldier described in detail in Homer's *Iliad*, was well known for his abuse of his superiors. He gives a lengthy speech insulting Agamemnon.

down to their deaths. How can I sort that out?  
How can I praise the gods? When I give thanks  
for how the world's divinely organized,  
I find the gods themselves disgraceful.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, Philoctetes, you son of Poeas  
from Oetea, in future I'll be careful—  
I'll keep watching what's going on at Troy  
but from a distance, and I'll do the same  
with those two sons of Atreus. Where I see  
lesser men in someone's camp prevail  
over their betters, so good men waste away,  
while cowards rule, among such groups as these  
I'll never make my friends. No, Scyros' rock  
will be enough for me from this day on.  
I'll be a happy man in my own home.

Now, I'll get back to my ship. Farewell,  
Philoctetes—as best you can fare well.  
I pray the gods will rid you of disease,  
in answer to your wishes. We must be off,  
ready to sail out when the god permits.

PHILOCTETES

My lad, are you setting off already?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes. Our opportunities are telling us  
to wait close to our ship for a good wind and not move far away.

PHILOCTETES

And now, my boy,  
by your father, by your mother, by all  
the things you love in your own home,  
I come to you a suppliant—don't leave me,  
not alone like this, living helplessly  
in such distress. You see what this is like.  
You've heard how much I suffer. Think of me  
as something incidental. Yes, I know  
you have a great disgust for such a load.  
But even so, bear with it. Noble minds  
find unkind deeds disgraceful and commend  
good acts, and so if you turn down this plea,  
what people say about you won't be good.  
But my boy, if you do help, you'll win  
the greatest tribute given to honour,  
if I can reach Oeta's land alive.  
Come, not even one full day of trouble.

Take the chance. Let me aboard, and set me  
any place you wish—in the hold, the bow,

the stern—wherever I will least offend  
the others in the ship. Give your consent,  
my boy! By Zeus himself, god of suppliants,  
let me convince you! I'm on my knees  
in front of you, although I'm weak and ill,  
a cripple. Don't leave me all alone like this,  
so far from any routes men travel on.  
No. Take me safely to your home, or else  
to Euboea, where Chalcodon lives.

From there it's no long trip for me to reach  
Oeta, the Trachianian heights,  
and the fair-flowing Spercheius river,  
so you can show me off to my dear father,  
although for some time now I've been afraid  
he's gone from me. I've often summoned him,  
sending urgent prayers with those who've come here,  
for him to send a ship to rescue me  
and take me home. But either he is dead,  
or, what I think more likely, those I asked,  
thinking my affairs a trivial thing,  
hurried to complete their voyage home.  
But now in you I've come across a man

who can carry me and be my messenger.  
Have mercy, and rescue me! Bear in mind  
how everything for human beings is strange  
and so precarious—things can go well,  
then change into their opposite. A man  
who stays away from harm has to watch out  
for dreadful things, and when a man succeeds,  
then he must really look at how he lives,  
in case he is destroyed without a warning.

CHORUS

O my king, have pity.  
He's spoken of his struggles,  
all that suffering and pain,  
ordeals I hope no friend of mine  
will ever have to undergo.  
And if, my lord, you hate  
those savage sons of Atreus,  
I'd transform their evil acts  
into some benefit for him  
and carry him, as he has asked,  
in your rapid well-stocked ship  
back to his home, and so avoid  
the righteous anger of the gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS



Take care—right now you're just a bystander.  
That's easy. But later, when you've had your fill  
of that disease of his by living with it,  
you may no longer stand by what you've said.

CHORUS

That will not happen. You'll never have just cause  
to make that charge against me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, I'd be shamed  
if this stranger found me less prepared than you  
to work on his behalf. So come on, then,  
if it seems right to you, let's put to sea.  
The man should start his trip without delay.  
Our ship will take him. We will not refuse.  
May the gods grant we safely leave this land and sail from here wherever we may  
choose.

PHILOCTETES What a glorious day! O you sweet man,  
and you dear sailors, I wish there was a way  
to show you how you've made me your true friend!  
Let's be gone, my lad, once we've kissed the ground  
in ritual farewell to my home in there,  
that was no home, so you can also learn  
how I sustained myself, how I was born  
with a determined heart. For I believe  
the very sight of it would have convinced  
anyone but me to give up this ordeal.  
But from necessity I've had to learn  
to bear such misery.

[Philoctetes starts to lead Neoptolemus up to his cave]

CHORUS

Wait a moment! Two men are coming. We should talk to them.  
One's a sailor from your ship, the other one  
a stranger. Let's hear what they may have to say.  
Then you can go inside.

[A sailor enters, leading a spy disguised as a Merchant]

MERCHANT

Son of Achilles,  
I asked my companion here, who was on watch,  
guarding your ship with two other sailors,  
to tell me where I might run into you.  
I did not intend to have this meeting,  
since I was driven to this very coast  
by chance. I've been sailing my own ship  
without much company on my way home,  
back from Troy to wine-rich Peparethus.  
But once I heard that all these sailors here

were from your crew, it seemed a good idea  
to say something, not to resume my trip,  
until I'd talked to you and then received  
a fair reward. You may not understand  
some matters which concern you—the Argives  
have new things in store for you, not just plans  
but actions they've already set in motion,  
no longer mere ideas.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If I'm a worthy man,  
stranger, this favour you are doing for me  
by your concern will make me your good friend. So tell me of these things you  
spoke about.

I need to understand just what you know  
about the latest schemes the Argives have.

MERCHANT

Old Phoenix and the sons of Theseus have set sail with a naval escort—  
they're coming after you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

To take me back by force,  
or to persuade me to return with them?

MERCHANT

I don't know. I'm here to tell you what I heard.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are Phoenix and his comrades on the ship  
so keen to do a favour for those men,  
the sons of Atreus?

MERCHANT

You can be sure  
they're doing it, not wasting any time.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How come Odysseus was not prepared  
to make this trip and bring the news himself?  
Did some fear hold him back?

MERCHANT

He was getting ready,  
along with Tydeus' son, to apprehend  
some other man, just as I was leaving. <sup>354</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

What kind of person was Odysseus chasing?

MERCHANT

He was a man. . .

[The Merchant pauses and nods towards Philoctetes]

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<sup>354</sup>Tydeus' son is a reference to the famous Greek warrior Diomedes, a frequent companion of Odysseus on various adventures.

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. . . but first of all tell me

who this man is. And keep your voice down  
when you speak.

NEOPTOLEMUS

This man here in front of you,  
stranger, is the famous Philoctetes.

MERCHANT

Then question me no more. Get out of here.  
Sail from this place as quickly as you can.

PHILOCTETES

What's he saying, my boy? Why is this sailor  
trying to haggle with you about me  
in the shadows?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I don't know what he means.

But what he says, he must speak openly,  
to me, to you, and to the crew, as well.

MERCHANT

Seed of Achilles, don't make the army  
angry at me for saying what I should not,  
since I get many benefits from them  
as payback for the services I give,  
the sorts of things a poor man carries out.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Those sons of Atreus are my enemies.  
This man hates them, too—that's the reason  
he's my greatest friend. You've come here  
out of a sense of comradeship with me,  
so when you speak, you must not hide from us  
anything you heard.

MERCHANT

Think of what you're doing.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I have been thinking of that for some time.

MERCHANT

I'll hold you responsible. . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right. Speak up.

MERCHANT

Then I'll explain it to you. That man there—  
he's the one the two of them are chasing,  
those men I spoke of, cruel Odysseus  
and Diomedes, son of Tydeus.  
They've sworn an oath to sail and bring him back,  
either by persuading him with reasons

or by overpowering force. All Achaeans  
clearly heard Odysseus when he said that.  
He was confident they'd be successful,  
much more than his comrade Diomedes.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why were the sons of Atreus so keen  
after all this time to redirect their thoughts  
onto this man, whom they'd kept in exile  
for so many years. What's got hold of them?  
What do they want? Or is it some power  
from the gods, a force of retribution,  
making them pay for evils they have done?

MERCHANT

That's something you have probably not heard,  
so I'll explain it all. There was a prophet—  
his name was Helenus—of noble birth,  
a son of Priam. One night Odysseus,  
who has a reputation for deceit  
and every kind of shame, went out alone  
and used his trickery to capture him.  
Odysseus tied him up and brought him back,  
then put him on display among the Argives,  
like a splendid captured beast. Well, Helenus  
foretold all sorts of thing to them and then,  
he made this prophecy concerning Troy—  
they'd never smash its mighty citadel  
unless they could persuade Philoctetes,  
reason with him, and lead him back to Troy  
from the island which he now inhabits.  
Once he'd heard this prophecy from Helenus,  
Odysseus quickly promised he'd get him  
and show him to the Argives. He believed  
he'd bring Philoctetes with his consent—  
that was the likeliest scenario—  
but if he was unwilling, he'd use force.  
And then he said if he did not succeed,  
anyone who wished should cut his head off.  
Now, boy, you've heard it all, and I'd advise  
that you and anyone you care about  
act now without delay.

PHILOCTETES

That's bad news for me.  
Has that man, that source of every injury,  
sworn that he'll convince me to return,  
go back to the Achaeans? If I do,  
once I'm dead I'll be persuaded to rise up

into the light from Hades, just the way  
his father did. <sup>355</sup>

MERCHANT

I don't know about all that.  
But I'm going back to my own ship. I pray  
that somehow god brings you the best of help.

[Exit Merchant]

PHILOCTETES

My boy, don't you think it is extremely odd  
Odysseus would ever entertain the hope  
his reassuring words could bring me back,  
lead me from his ship, and then show me off  
there in the middle of the Argives. No!

I'd rather listen to my greatest foe,  
the worst of all, the snake that crippled me  
and made me what I am. That Odysseus  
will say anything and attempt them all.  
So now I know he's sailing to this place.  
Come, my lad we should get going from here,  
so there's a wider stretch of sea between us  
and Odysseus' ship. Let's go. Well-timed haste  
brings sleep and rest after the work is done.

NEOPTOLEMUS

We'll set sail when the wind stops blowing in  
right at our bow. Its course is now against us.

PHILOCTETES

But the moment one is fleeing trouble  
is always the best time to put to sea.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. This wind is blowing in their faces, too.

PHILOCTETES

There's no wind can hold back any pirates  
when they're intent of plundering and theft  
and using force.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, if that's what you think,  
then let's be off, once you've taken from in there  
the things you need or really want to keep.

PHILOCTETES

Some things are necessary, but not much.

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<sup>355</sup>The reference here is to Sisyphus who ordered his wife not to bury him. When he came to Hades, he complained about his wife's conduct and was given permission to go back to punish her. Once out of Hades, Sisyphus stayed on earth. Calling Sisyphus the father of Odysseus here is the second reference to the insulting story that Sisyphus sold Odysseus while he was still in his mother's womb to Laertes (see line 501 above).

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's there that we won't have on board my ship?

PHILOCTETES

I have a certain herb I always use,  
the most effective treatment for this wound  
until it is completely cured.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Bring that.

Is there something else you want to get?

PHILOCTETES

Any of the arrows I've forgotten  
or overlooked, in case I leave them there  
for someone else to take.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What you're holding there—  
is that the famous bow?

PHILOCTETES

The very one.

This weapon in my hands is not a substitute.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Is there some way I could inspect the bow  
more closely, hold it, get a feel for it  
as something sacred?

PHILOCTETES

For you alone, my son,  
I'll grant this wish and whatever else I can  
that's in your interest.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'd love to hold it,  
but I want that only if it's lawful.  
If not, you should forget I ever asked.

PHILOCTETES

What you say, my boy, is just and pious.  
You're the only one who's offered me  
the light of life, the hope that I will see  
the land of Oeta, my aged father,  
and my friends. When I was lying there,  
at my enemies' feet, you raised me up  
beyond their reach. Take courage. This bow  
is yours to hold and then give back to me,  
the one who gave it to you. You can claim,  
thanks to your virtue, you're the only man  
who's touched it. That's the reason I myself  
acquired the bow—by acting virtuously. <sup>356</sup>

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<sup>356</sup>The virtuous act Philoctetes is referring to is lighting the funeral pyre for Hercules.

## NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm glad I found you and became your friend.  
A man who knows how to return a favour  
for a favour he's received has proved himself  
a friend more valuable than all possessions.  
Please go inside.

## PHILOCTETES

I'll go in there with you.  
My sick condition craves your company.  
[Philoctetes and Neoptolemus enter the cave together]

## CHORUS

Though I never saw it happen,  
I have heard the distant rumour  
how a man once stole into  
the marriage bed of Zeus—and then  
how the mighty son of Cronos  
lashed him to a whirling wheel.<sup>357</sup>  
But from all I've heard and seen

I know no other mortal man  
who's run into a fate as harsh  
as has Philoctetes, a man  
who did no wrong to anyone  
by thievery or violence,  
but acted fairly towards those  
who treated him respectfully,  
and then, without deserving it,  
he was abandoned here to die.  
Amazement seizes me to think  
how, as he listened by himself  
to breakers crashing on the shore,  
he somehow kept a hold on life,  
which brought him so much pain.

He had no neighbour but himself  
and lacked the power to walk. No one  
for a companion in the place  
throughout his illness, no one there  
to answer him with sympathy  
when he cried out against the plague  
that ate his flesh and made him bleed,  
no one to gather healing leaves  
when he succumbed to an attack,  
to take them from the fertile earth  
and staunch the burning streams of blood

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<sup>357</sup>The whirling wheel is a reference to Ixion, the first mortal charged with murder. Zeus pardoned his crime. But then Ixion attempted to seduce Zeus' wife Hera in her own bed. Zeus had Ixion tied onto a wheel of fire in Hades.

oozing from the ulcerous sores  
 on his wounded foot. No. He crept  
 back and forth, crawling like a child  
 with no dear nurse attending him,  
 to any place where he might find  
 relief to ease his pain, and then  
 his all-consuming agonies  
 eventually would subside.

And he could not collect his food  
 by taking what the earth provides  
 or any other nourishment  
 for those of us who feed ourselves  
 with our own work, except those times

he eased his hunger with a meal  
 he got himself with feathered arrows  
 from his swiftly striking bow.  
 He's lived a miserable life,  
 without the joy of succouring wine,  
 but always for the past ten years  
 he's had to look around and find whatever puddles he could reach.

But now, with all these troubles past,  
 he'll find success and happiness.

He's met a noble family's son  
 who'll take him, after all this time,  
 aboard his own seaworthy boat  
 and sail to his ancestral home,  
 the place where nymphs of Malis dwell,  
 along Spercheius river banks,  
 where, high up on Oeta's heights,  
 that bronze-shield warrior rose up,  
 and moved up to the gods, ablaze  
 in his own father's sacred fire. <sup>358</sup>

[NEOPTOLEMUS and PHILOCTETES come out from the cave. PHILOCTETES is  
 carrying his bow and is in obvious pain]

NEOPTOLEMUS

Let's move out of here, if that's what you desire.

Why are you so silent? There's no need for that.  
 Have you been paralyzed?

PHILOCTETES

Aaiiii . . . aaiii.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's wrong?

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<sup>358</sup>These lines are a reference to Hercules who was burned alive at his own request on top of Mount Oeta. Hercules was a mortal son of Zeus and, because of his amazing exploits, he was taken up into heaven as a god.



PHILOCTETES

It's nothing serious, my boy.

Just keep going.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Are you in agony  
from that disease which always bothers you?

PHILOCTETES

No, no. I think it's better now. O you gods!

NEOPTOLEMUS

Why scream like that and call out to the gods?

PHILOCTETES

For them to come to me in person . . . save me . . .

Aaaiiiiii! . . . Aaaaaaiiiiii!!! . . . Aaaaaiiiiii!!!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What's troubling you now? Why not speak up?

Why don't you tell me? It's obvious enough  
you're in some kind of pain.

PHILOCTETES

I'm done for, my boy.

I can't conceal this dreadful thing from you . . .

Aaiiii . . . It goes right through me . . . shooting pains.

It's horrible . . . I'm in such agony!

I'm being destroyed, my lad, eaten up . . .

O my god . . . my god . . . such awful pain!

O my boy, if you have got a sword at hand

by the gods, I beg you, slice my foot off, here, where my leg ends. Amputate it now!

Don't worry about my life. Do it, my boy!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What new pain makes you scream so suddenly?

Why groan and cry like this?

PHILOCTETES

You know, my son.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What is it?

PHILOCTETES

My boy, you know the reason.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, I don't. What's wrong with you?

PHILOCTETES

How could you not know? Aaaaaiiiiii!

NEOPTOLEMUS

It's the agonizing weight of your disease.

PHILOCTETES

That's right . . . the pain . . . it's indescribable.

Have pity on me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

What shall I do?

PHILOCTETES

Don't grow afraid and just give up on me.  
The disease attacks me only now and then,  
perhaps when it has finished roaming elsewhere.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Alas, you've had such a tormented life,  
poor man, it seems you've really suffered  
every kind of trouble. What do you want?  
Can I help you up? Do you need my hand?

PHILOCTETES

No. Don't do that. But take this bow for me—  
you just asked if I would let you hold it.  
Make sure you guard it well. Keep it safe,  
until this present fit from my disease  
gets less intense. Once the pain relents,  
I'll be overcome with sleep—it won't leave  
before that time, so let me rest in peace.  
If those two men get here while I'm asleep,  
don't give them the bow—no, by the gods,  
I tell you don't—not of your own free will,  
or without wanting to, or through a trick—  
you may get yourself destroyed and me,  
and I'm your suppliant.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't worry.  
I'll be careful. No one's hands will touch the bow  
but yours and mine. Let me take it from you,  
and may it bring good luck!

PHILOCTETES

Here, lad, take it.  
Give the gods' jealousy due reverence,  
in case this bow brings you much suffering,  
as it has me and the man who owned it  
before I did. <sup>359</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

Gods grant us both success—  
a prosperous quick trip to any place  
we come to on our trip which god thinks right.

PHILOCTETES [still in great pain]

My boy, I'm afraid your prayers are useless.  
Dark red blood is dripping down, oozing out

<sup>359</sup>This is a reference to Hercules, who also suffered a great deal in life and had an agonizing death. Philoctetes is reminding Neoptolemus that whoever owns the bow seems to get punished by the gods who are jealous of any man's possessing such a weapon.

from deep within my sore, and I expect  
there'll be new attack. Aiiiii . . . aaaiii . . . it's really bad . . . this accursed foot . . .  
it keeps tormenting me . . . creeping up my limb . . .  
it's almost here . . . aaaii, it hurts so much . . .

You know what's going on—don't abandon me,  
don't leave . . . aaaaiiii . . . Ah, Odysseus,  
you who were once my guest, how I now wish  
you were in such agony, with pains like this  
driving through your chest! It's hard for me . . .  
Aaaaiii . . . it strikes again! You two commanders—  
you, Agamemnon and Menelaus,  
may this disease feed on the pair of you  
instead of me and for as many years . . .  
It's too much for me . . . O death, death,  
here I keep calling for you all the time.  
Why can't you ever come? O noble boy,  
my child, my welcome friend, take me away,  
and burn me in that famous Lemnian fire.<sup>360</sup>

I thought it right to do that service once  
for Zeus' son—and in return I got  
those weapons you are holding for me now. What do you say, lad? What do you  
say?

Why so quiet? What's on your mind, my son?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I feel so sorry for you—what you're going through  
has for a long time now disturbed me.

PHILOCTETES

Don't worry about that, my lad. Cheer up.  
These fits are nasty but they pass off soon.  
So I beg you not to leave me here alone.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't be afraid. We'll stay.

PHILOCTETES

You will not leave?

NEOPTOLEMUS

You can be sure of it.

PHILOCTETES

Well, my lad, I don't think it's fair to make you swear to it.

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's no need. It would be against the law  
for me to go without you.

PHILOCTETES

<sup>360</sup>Lemnian fire, Jebb notes, seems to be a reference to a volcanic mountain called Mosuchlos on the east coast of Lemnos, near Philoctetes' cave. Hercules was taken up to the top of Mount Oeta by Hyllus, his son, who helped construct the pyre but would not set it alight. Philoctetes did so and, as a reward, got Hercules' bow.

Give me your hand—  
a pledge of trust.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I will stay. Here's my pledge.

[NEOPTOLEMUS and PHILOCTETES shake hands. Then a new fit attacks PHILOCTETES,  
and he falls to his knees]

PHILOCTETES

Take me back . . . in there.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Where do you mean?

PHILOCTETES [indicating the opening to the cave above them]

Up there . . . in there!

NEOPTOLEMUS [grabbing Philoctetes]

Is this another fit?

Why roll your eyes up at the sky?

PHILOCTETES

Let go!

Get your hands away from me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

If I do,

where will you go?

PHILOCTETES

Take your hands off me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

I won't do that, I tell you.

PHILOCTETES

You'll kill me

if you keep grabbing me!

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right, I'll let go,

if you really think that's better for you.

PHILOCTETES

I'm close to death—O Earth, embrace me now!—

these fits won't let me stand up any more.

[PHILOCTETES collapses prone on the ground]

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think sleep will overcome him soon.

His head is sinking back. His whole body  
is soaked in sweat, and a black flow of blood  
has burst through on his heel. Leave him alone,  
my friends, so he can fall asleep.

CHORUS

O Sleep who knows no pain,  
sweet Sleep so free of suffering,  
come to us with joy, my king,  
and bring him happiness.

Hold before his eyes that light  
 which shines around them now.  
 Come down, I pray, and heal him.

My son, think about where you are right now  
 and how you sort out where we go from here.  
 Do you not see him there? He's asleep. Let's act.  
 Why hesitate? For Opportunity,  
 which takes everything into account,  
 often wins decisively in one quick blow.

NEOPTOLEMUS [looking down at sleeping Philoctetes]  
 He cannot hear a thing. But even so, I know if we set off without this man,  
 we'll have hunted down this bow in vain.

The crown of victory belongs to him—  
 the god instructed us to lead him back.  
 We'll bring disgrace and shame upon ourselves,  
 boasting of what we did, when the result  
 was incomplete and when we lied, as well.

CHORUS

But the god will see to that, my boy.  
 And when you answer me again  
 you must whisper to me, lad,  
 speak softly when you talk.  
 In sickness all men's slumber  
 is not real sleep—it has keen eyes.  
 I think you should use the utmost care,  
 doing everything within your power,  
 and take that bow—a major prize.

Take it without alerting him.  
 If you hold to what you intend for him—  
 and you know clearly what I mean—  
 then there are surely going to be  
 some desperate problems facing us,  
 which a shrewd man could well foresee.<sup>361</sup>  
 Now, lad, a fair wind blows you on your course,  
 this man's eyes are closed, his weapon's gone,  
 and he's stretched out in a dark sleep—  
 and in this heat a man sleeps soundly.  
 He can't control his hands or feet,  
 like someone lying with Hades.  
 So think if what you've talked about  
 is practical. Consider that. My boy,  
 as far as I can grasp what's happening,

<sup>361</sup>The Chorus is advising Neoptolemus to take the bow and leave and thus abandon what he is presently intending (to take Philoctetes on board his ship). The trouble they are talking about is what might happen on board once Philoctetes learns that he is going to Troy rather than back home. For them the easiest course seems to be to take the bow and abandon Philoctetes.

the finest action is the one  
where there's nothing to fear.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Keep quiet, I tell you. Don't lose your wits.  
He's opening his eyes—raising his head.

[Philoctetes wakes up and struggles to stand and look around him]

PHILOCTETES

Ah, to sleep and then to see the daylight  
and friendly people watching out for me,  
a sight beyond my fondest hopes! My boy,  
I never would have thought you'd do this—  
remain here with such sympathy and wait  
to help me until my fit was over.

Those fine generals, the sons of Atreus,  
you can be sure, would not have done that,  
not so readily. But your nature, lad,  
is good—you've got a noble ancestry.  
So you bore all these troubles easily,  
the cries of pain and the appalling stench.  
And now it looks as if I can forget  
this illness and rest awhile. So, my boy,  
lift me up. Help me to my feet, lad.

When I recover from this dizziness,  
we'll go to the ship and sail without delay.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm glad to see you're still alive, breathing  
without that pain. What I was expecting  
was something else—in your endless suffering  
your symptoms made you look as if you'd died.  
Now you should get up. Or, if you prefer,  
these men will carry you. It's no trouble,  
since you and I agree what we're to do.

PHILOCTETES

Thanks, my lad. Why not help me up yourself,  
as you were going to? Leave the men alone,  
so they don't get upset by the foul smell  
before they have to. It will be hard enough  
for them to be on board the ship with me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right, then. I'll take hold of you. Stand up.

PHILOCTETES

Don't worry. I'll do what I always do  
to get up on my feet.

[PHILOCTETES struggles with great difficulty to stand up. NEOPTOLEMUS watches him]

NEOPTOLEMUS

This is dreadful—  
what am I supposed to do at this point?

PHILOCTETES

What is it, lad? Those words sound out of place.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I don't know how I need to frame my words . . .  
It's so confusing . . .

PHILOCTETES

You're confused? No, no, my boy, don't say such things.

NEOPTOLEMUS

The position I'm in . . . it makes me feel like that.

PHILOCTETES

The disgust you feel about my sickness—  
surely that feeling has not persuaded you  
not to take me on your ship?

NEOPTOLEMUS

When a man  
abandons his own nature and then acts  
against his character, all things are dreadful.

PHILOCTETES

But you, at least, by helping a good man  
have not been doing or saying anything  
your father wouldn't have done.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'll be dishonored—  
that's the thought that keeps tormenting me.

PHILOCTETES

No, not because of what you're doing now.  
But the way you're talking has me worried.

NEOPTOLEMUS

O Zeus, what do I do? Will I be disgraced  
twice over—hiding what I should not hide  
and forfeiting my honour with my words?

PHILOCTETES

Unless I've judged this situation badly,  
this man's intending to betray me—  
he'll leave me here and sail away.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No!  
I won't abandon you. I'll take you with me,  
but you'll really find the trip distressing.  
All this time that's what's been troubling me.

PHILOCTETES

What do you mean, my boy? I do not understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I won't conceal a thing. You must sail to Troy,

back to the Achaeans and the army  
led by those sons of Atreus.

PHILOCTETES

O no!

What are you saying?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't start wailing,  
not until you learn what it's about.

PHILOCTETES

What's there to learn? What are you doing with me?

NEOPTOLEMUS

First, I'm saving you from this awful place.  
And then I'm going with you to plunder Troy.

PHILOCTETES

And that is what you really mean to do?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's a powerful necessity at work  
controlling these events. Keep your temper  
when you hear the story.

PHILOCTETES

I'm done for . . . betrayed . . . this is appalling! You stranger,  
why have you done this to me? My bow—  
give it back to me right now!

NEOPTOLEMUS

I can't do that.

Both my duty and my own self-interest  
compel me to obey those in command.

PHILOCTETES

You destructive fire . . . you total monster . . . you hateful masterpiece of fearful  
treachery—

what you've done to me, how you've betrayed me!

Aren't you ashamed to look at me, a man  
who was your suppliant, who begged your mercy?

You wretch! When you deprive me of my bow,  
you take away my life. So hand it back.

I'm begging you. Please, my lad, return it.

By your fathers' gods, don't rob me of my life!

[NEOPTOLEMUS remains silent and cannot look at PHILOCTETES]

This is atrocious! He's not speaking to me.

He won't even look me in the eye,  
as if he'll never give me back my bow.

O you bays and headlands, you mountain beasts,  
who've been part of my life, you jagged rocks,  
to you I call—there's no one else to hear me.

So to you, my customary companions,  
I cry out what this boy has done to me,



Achilles' son, who made me a promise  
he'd take me home and who now leads me off  
to Troy. With his right hand he pledged his word,  
then took my bow and keeps it for himself,  
the sacred bow of Hercules, Zeus' son,  
which he desires to show off to the Argives.  
He's taking me by force, as if I were  
some mighty warrior—he doesn't realize  
he's destroying a corpse, a smoky shadow,  
no more than a mere ghost. If I were strong,  
he'd not have captured me—even as it is,  
with me in this condition, he'd not prevail  
except by trickery. It's my harsh fate.  
My hopes have been betrayed. What should I do?  
Give back the bow. Return to who you are,  
to your true character. What do you say?  
You're silent, and I'm a wretched nothing!  
I'll go back once again to you, my rock  
with your two entrances, but unarmed now,  
without a way to get my nourishment.  
And in this cave I'll waste away alone,  
unable to bring down with my arrows  
birds on the wing or beasts that roam the hills.  
Instead I'll die a miserable death.  
Now I'm a feast for those I used to feed on,  
the prey of those I hunted down before.  
I'll pay a full reprisal with my life,  
my dismal life, for those whose lives I took,  
thanks to a man who looked as if he had  
no sense of evil. May you perish, too!  
But no, not quite yet, not before I see  
if you will change your mind again. If not,  
I hope you die a truly wretched death!

## CHORUS

What shall we do? It's up to you, my king,  
whether we sail off now or else comply  
with what he's asking.

## NEOPTOLEMUS

Pity for this man,  
a dreadful pity, has come over me,  
and it's not something new. No. I've felt it  
for a long time now.

## PHILOCTETES

By the gods, my boy,  
have mercy on me. Don't give people cause  
to criticize you for deceiving me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, not that! What am I going to do?

I wish I'd never sailed away from Scyros!

What's going on here is just too painful.

PHILOCTETES

You're not an evil man, but it seems to me  
you came here after learning shameful things  
from wicked men. Leave bad deeds to others,  
those fit to act that way, and sail from here.

But first give me my weapon.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You men,  
what shall we do?

[Enter ODYSSEUS with a small escort of armed sailors. PHILOCTETES does see  
him immediately]

ODYSSEUS

What are you doing,  
you traitor? Come back here. Give me that bow.

PHILOCTETES

Who's that? Do I hear Odysseus' voice?

ODYSSEUS [stepping forward]

Yes, it is Odysseus. Now you can grasp  
the way things are. I'm here. See for yourself.

PHILOCTETES

Alas, I've been betrayed. I'm being destroyed.  
So he's the one who really caught me out  
and stole my weapons.

ODYSSEUS

That right. It's was me  
and no one else. I will acknowledge that.

PHILOCTETES

Give me the bow, boy. Hand it over.

ODYSSEUS

He won't do it, even if he wants to.

No. You've got to come along with me.

If not, these men will take you off by force.

PHILOCTETES

Of all evil men, you are the nastiest—  
and boldest, too. They'll take me in by force?

ODYSSEUS

Yes, unless you come of your own free will.

PHILOCTETES

O Lemnos and you all-powerful flames  
lit by Hephaestus, can you endure this—  
that this man will compel me now to leave?

ODYSSEUS

I tell you it's Zeus who rules this country.  
Yes, Zeus. And this has been ordained by Zeus.

I am his servant.

PHILOCTETES

You despicable man,  
you just invent the things you wish to say,  
and by making claims about the gods,  
you turn them into liars.

ODYSSEUS

No, I don't. They speak the truth. We have to go.

PHILOCTETES

I won't.

ODYSSEUS

But I say you will. You have to obey.

PHILOCTETES

This is all so shameful—it's clear enough  
my father conceived in me a slave  
and no free man.

ODYSSEUS

You're wrong. He made a man  
to be just like the finest warriors  
with whom you're going to capture Troy by force  
and then destroy it.

PHILOCTETES

I'll never do it,  
not even if I have to undergo  
every kind of torment, not while I stand  
with these steep island rocks below me.

ODYSSEUS

What will you do?

PHILOCTETES

I'll throw myself directly from this cliff  
and smash my head in on the stone down there.

ODYSSEUS [to his attendants]

Grab him, you two! Don't let him do that!

[The two sailors rush up and grab Philoctetes by his arms]

PHILOCTETES

O my arms, what suffering you must bear  
because you lack that bow you cherish so!  
Now you've become a tied-up captive beast,  
thanks to this man. And you, who cannot think  
a healthy thought that suits a man who's free,  
you've sneaked up and snagged me once again,  
using this young lad, whom I didn't know,  
to be your screen. Though he's too good for you,  
he's someone worthy of my company—

he only thought of following his orders,  
 and he's already showing his remorse  
 for mistakes he's made and what I've suffered.  
 Your vicious spirit, always peering out  
 from secret hiding places, trained him well  
 to be adept in acting with deceit,  
 though that was not his nature or his wish.  
 And now, you wretch, you mean to tie me up  
 and take me from the very shore where once  
 you left me by myself—without a friend,  
 without a city—for all living men  
 nothing but a corpse. Ah, I hope you die!  
 I've often prayed that death would come for you.  
 But gods have granted nothing sweet to me,  
 so you remain alive and keep on laughing,  
 while I am suffering pain and living on  
 with so much agony, a laughing stock  
 for you and those two sons of Atreus,  
 those generals you serve in doing this,  
 although you only sailed away with them  
 once you'd been forced under their yoke by tricks  
 and by compulsion. But I sailed with them  
 of my own free will, bringing seven ships. <sup>362</sup>  
 A complete disaster! They threw me out,  
 off the ship, like someone with no honour.  
 You say they did it. They say it was you.  
 So why are you now taking me away?  
 Why am I going with you? What's the reason?  
 I'm nothing, and, so far as you're concerned,  
 for a long time I've been dead. How is it,  
 you creature whom the gods despise, that now  
 you do not view me as a stinking cripple?  
 If I sail with you, how will you then  
 make holy sacrifices anymore?  
 Or pour libations? That was your excuse  
 for throwing me ashore back then. I hope  
 you die a disgusting death! And you will,  
 for the evil things you've done to hurt me,  
 if the gods have any sense of justice.  
 I know they are concerned about these things.  
 You never would have sailed on such a trip,

<sup>362</sup>Philoctetes is contrasting his willingness to go along on the expedition to Troy with Odysseus' reluctance to join in. When the messenger came to enlist his support, Odysseus pretended to be mad, ploughing with an ox and an ass yoked together. The messenger placed Odysseus' infant son in front of the plough. Odysseus stopped before he could injure his son, thus revealing that his madness was a pretense.

all for the sake of such a wretched man,  
 unless some god-sent spur was pricking you  
 to come and get me. O land of my fathers,  
     you gods who gaze on what we mortals do,  
 if you pity me, bring on your vengeance,  
 and, after these long years, pay them all back.  
 My life deserves your pity. If I could see  
 them killed, I'd think I was no longer sick.

CHORUS

What the stranger said was harsh, Odysseus—  
 his troubles have not eased his bitterness.

ODYSSEUS

I could go on and answer him at length,  
 if I had time. There's only one thing now  
 I'll say to him. I'm the kind of man  
 who adapts himself to each occasion.  
 So, faced with being judged by good, fair men,  
     you'd find no one more pious than myself.  
 By nature I'm a man who needs to win  
 in everything—however, not with you.  
 So now I'll happily defer to you.  
 Let him go. There's no longer any need  
 for you to hold him. Let him remain here.  
 We have Teucer with us, a skilled archer.<sup>363</sup>  
 So am I, and I believe it's possible  
 for me to use this bow no worse than you—  
 my hand can aim it just as well as yours.  
 So why do we need you? Enjoy yourself  
     strolling here on Lemnos. We'll be on our way.  
 Your prize may quickly bring me honours  
 which should belong to you.

PHILOCTETES

No, not that!  
 You are going to march among the Argives  
 equipped with weapons which belong to me?

ODYSSEUS

Don't argue with me anymore. I'm going.

PHILOCTETES

Son of Achilles, am I going to hear  
 your voice say anything to me? Are you  
 about to leave without another word?

ODYSSEUS [to Neoptolemus]

Move on. Don't look at him. You may well be

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<sup>363</sup>Teucer, a character in Homer's Iliad, is one of the finest archers in the Greek forces. Archery is not normally a skill associated with the most important warriors, other than Odysseus (in the Odyssey).

a noble man, but don't ruin our good luck.

PHILOCTETES [to the Chorus]

And you, my guests, will you leave me like this  
and not feel pity?

CHORUS

The boy commands our ship.

What he says to you—that's what we say, as well.

NEOPTOLEMUS [to the Chorus]

Odysseus will say I am too sensitive—  
but you stay here, if that's all right with him,  
until the sailors have prepared the ship  
and we have offered prayers up to the gods.  
Philoctetes may quickly change his mind  
and soon think better of us. But we two  
are leaving now. When we call for you,  
make sure you leave from here at once.

[Neoptolemus and Odysseus leave]

PHILOCTETES [addressing his cave]

You cavern in this hollow rock,  
always freezing cold or else too hot.  
In my illness, then, it does seem true,  
it's never been my fate to leave you,  
and so you'll also watch me die.  
Alas, for me! Yes, for me!

Sad cave so full of painful cries  
wrung from me in my agony,  
what will each day bring to me now?  
Where will I find my nourishment

or any hope of getting food?

Wild pigeons will cross overhead and fly on past through piercing winds—  
I can no longer shoot them down.

CHORUS

You've brought this on yourself,  
ill-fated man—your grievous luck  
arises from no other source,  
nor from a man with greater strength.  
You could have been more sensible.  
But no—you'd rather have a grimmer fate  
when you might have chosen better.

PHILOCTETES

Then I'm a miserable man,  
truly miserable, beaten down  
by hardships I've been through.  
So from now on I'll live and die,  
a suffering man, with no one else.  
Alas, for all my pain!

I can no longer bring my food  
to where I dwell, no longer  
can I hold my feathered weapons  
in my strong hands. A crafty mind  
has tricked me with deceiving lies.  
I wish that I might see the man  
who planned this scheme condemned  
to bear my pain for just as long!

## CHORUS

This is your fate set by the gods.  
You've not been tricked by hands of mine.  
So aim your dreadful fatal curse  
at other men. What most concerns me  
is if you now cease to be my friend.

## PHILOCTETES

Alas for me! I see him now—  
sitting beside the salt white ocean shore,  
laughing at me, as he waves the bow  
which fed me in my wretched life,  
which no one else had ever held.  
O my lovely bow, my friend,  
wrenched from these loving hands,  
if you had power to understand,  
you'd feel such pity as you looked on me,  
for Hercules' friend no more  
will from now on be using you.  
Another man will handle you,  
a man of much deceit. You'll see  
his shameless tricks, his hateful face,  
that enemy whom I despise,  
whose plans have injured me so much,  
the effects of his disgraceful skill.  
O Zeus!

## CHORUS

A man should say what's right and useful,  
and, as he does, his tongue should never speak  
malicious, hurtful slurs. Odysseus  
was made the single representative  
for many men, and, at their command,  
has brought his friends a common benefit.

## PHILOCTETES

You feathered birds, you flocks of bright-eyed beasts  
who graze up on the hillside slopes,  
no longer will you spring from me  
and run away from your own dens.  
My hands no longer grip those shafts

which gave me power before,  
and now my plight is desperate.  
You're free to roam around at will,  
with nothing more to make you fear.  
And now you should take blood for blood,  
yes, take your time and gorge yourself on my contaminated flesh.  
My life I'll give up soon enough.  
Where can I find my nourishment?  
For who can feed himself on winds,  
    once he no longer has those things  
which earth, who gives us life, provides?

CHORUS

If you feel you can respect  
a stranger who comes up to you  
with all good will, then, by the gods, approach the man more closely.  
But know this—and keep it well in mind—  
it's up to you to evade that fate.  
To nourish it with your own flesh  
is pitiful, and there's no way  
you can endure the countless pains  
that live within your body.

PHILOCTETES

You remind me one more time again  
of that old agonizing thought,  
    though you are nicer than those men  
who visited this place before.  
Why have you destroyed my life?  
What have you done to me?

CHORUS

What do you mean?

PHILOCTETES

You hoped to take me off to Troy,  
a land which I despise.

CHORUS

Yes.

I think that would be best.

PHILOCTETES

Then go away. Leave me at once.

CHORUS

Well, that's all right with me—in fact,  
I like the order you just gave.  
I'll do it willingly. Let's go.

Let's be off—and every sailor move  
to his own station onboard ship.

[The CHORUS turns and starts moving off]

PHILOCTETES



No, don't go. I'm begging you,  
in the name of Zeus, the god  
who hears men's curses.

CHORUS

Calm down.

PHILOCTETES

O strangers, by the gods, stay here.

CHORUS

Why are you calling?

PHILOCTETES

Aaaaiiii . . . aaaaiiii . . . That demon's killing me . . . savage god . . .  
my foot . . . this foot of mine . . .  
how shall I deal with you  
in what remains to me of life?  
O friends, return to me again.

Come back!

CHORUS

What should we do?

Do you have something else in mind  
that alters what you said before?

PHILOCTETES

You should not grow indignant  
when someone in a storm of pain  
says things that make no sense.

CHORUS

Then, you unhappy man, come with us,  
as we are asking you.

PHILOCTETES

Never! Never!

That you can be sure of! No, not even  
if the lord of blazing lightning comes  
ready to blast me with his fiery thunder.  
Damn Troy and all those warriors there,  
before the city, who dared throw away  
this poor lame foot of mine. But, friends,  
please grant me one request I have.

CHORUS

What request is that?

PHILOCTETES

Give me a sword,  
if you have one there, or else an axe—  
any weapon will do.

CHORUS

What is your plan? Some drastic act?

PHILOCTETES

Hack at my flesh

and cut these bones apart, all of them.  
To die, yes, my mind now thinks on death.

CHORUS

But why do that?

PHILOCTETES

To find my father.

CHORUS

Where does he live?

PHILOCTETES

He is in Hades.

He cannot still be living in the light.

O my city, city of my fathers,

how I wish that I could see you now—

I brought myself such misery

the day I left your sacred river, to help Danaans, my enemies.

I'm nothing anymore, nothing.

[PHILOCTETES exits into his cave, leaving the CHORUS alone on stage]

CHORUS

I'd have left you here some time ago

and gone back to my ship, if I'd not seen

Odysseus coming and bringing with him

Achilles' son. They're getting close to us.

[Enter NEOPTOLEMUS and ODYSSEUS. NEOPTOLEMUS is still carrying Philoctetes' bow and arrows]

ODYSSEUS

Why are you coming back along this path

at such a rapid pace?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I was wrong before.

I have to fix all those mistakes I made.

ODYSSEUS

You sound odd. What mistakes are those?

NEOPTOLEMUS

When I obeyed you and the entire army.

ODYSSEUS

What error did you make that shamed you so?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I used disgraceful lies and sly deceit  
to catch a man.

ODYSSEUS

What sort of man? Oh, oh.

Are you devising some foolhardy scheme?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, nothing rash. But with Poeas' son . . .

ODYSSEUS [interrupting]

What are you going to do? A certain fear

has just occurred to me . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

. . . whose bow I took . . .

return it.

ODYSSEUS

By Zeus, what are you saying?

You don't intend to hand it back to him?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes. I got it in a shameful manner,  
and it's not right for me to keep it.

ODYSSEUS

By the gods, are you saying this to mock me?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Only if it's mockery to speak the truth.

ODYSSEUS

Son of Achilles, what are you saying?

What do you mean?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Do I really need

to say the same thing two or three times over?

ODYSSEUS

I did not want to hear it even once.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Well, you must clearly understand it now—

for you've heard all I have to say.

ODYSSEUS

There are those

who will prevent you carrying that out.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are you saying? Who will try to stop me?

ODYSSEUS

The whole Achaean army—including me.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You were born wise, but there's no wisdom now  
in what you say.

ODYSSEUS

But these words of yours

and what you plan to do are most imprudent.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But if they're right, then they're more powerful  
than wisdom.

ODYSSEUS

How can it be right and just,

to give back what you won thanks to my plan?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I made a mistake and lost my honour—

I must try to get it back.

ODYSSEUS

If you do try,

aren't you afraid of the Achaean troops?

NEOPTOLEMUS

With justice at my side, I do not fear  
the danger you describe.

ODYSSEUS

[Your justice!

My hand will make that justice bend to me.] <sup>364</sup>

NEOPTOLEMUS

Even so, I won't obey those arms of yours.

I won't do what you ask.

ODYSSEUS

Well, then, our fight

is not against the Trojans but with you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If that's what it has to be, so be it.

ODYSSEUS

Do you see my right hand resting on my sword?

NEOPTOLEMUS

You'll see me doing the same. I won't hesitate.

ODYSSEUS

All right, for now I'll leave you. But I'll go  
and tell the army what is happening here.

And they will punish you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Now you're reasonable.

If you keep up this frame of mind in future,  
perhaps you will not wander into trouble.

[Odysseus moves away, as if leaving for the ship, but conceals himself and  
observes what now happens]

NEOPTOLEMUS [calling up to the cave]

You there, son of Poeas . . . I'm calling you.

Philoctetes . . . Come out. Leave that rock  
you call your home.

PHILOCTETES [from inside the cave]

Now who's standing there  
making an unruly noise outside the cave?

Why are you calling me? What do you want?

[PHILOCTETES partly emerges from the cave and sees Neoptolemus]

O no! This is a wretched business.

Are you here to bring me some new trouble

<sup>364</sup>This short speech of Odysseus is a conjecture based on Jebb's commentary to supply a line which is apparently missing from the manuscript.

on top of all the others?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't despair.

Listen to the news I bring.

PHILOCTETES

I'm afraid.

Fine words brought me disaster once before,  
when I trusted what you said.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But now

is there no way I can apologize?

PHILOCTETES

You used words like that and stole my bow.  
You won my confidence, but secretly  
you worked for my destruction.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But now I'm not like that. I wish to learn  
whether you want to stay on living here,  
enduring these conditions, or sail with us.

PHILOCTETES

Stop there. Do not speak any more. Your words  
will all be wasted.

NEOPTOLEMUS

You are quite sure of that.

PHILOCTETES

Yes, I am—more sure than any words can say.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I wish my words could have persuaded you.  
But if there's nothing I can say to help,  
then I will stop.

PHILOCTETES

Everything you say is useless.

You'll never win my confidence, not now  
you've taken away my livelihood, robbed me  
and with a trick. Then you come over here  
to give me your advice, you shameless son  
of such a noble father. May you all die—  
the sons of Atreus first, then Laertes' son,  
then you.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Stop making all those curses,  
and take these weapons from my hand.

PHILOCTETES

What do you mean? Am I being tricked again?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. I swear by the sacred majesty of Zeus.

PHILOCTETES

Such welcome words, if what you say is true.

NEOPTOLEMUS

My actions will show that. Put out your hand  
and take your weapons back.

[As Neoptolemus hands the bow to Philoctetes, Odysseus re-emerges from his  
hiding place and moves forward]

ODYSSEUS

No! In the name of the sons of Atreus  
and the whole army, I'm telling you no,  
as gods are witnesses for me!

PHILOCTETES

My lad,  
who was that speaking? Was it Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS [moving forward]

Yes. It is me. Now you can see up close  
the man who'll take you off to Troy by force,  
whether Achilles' son wants that or not.

PHILOCTETES [putting an arrow to his bow string]

That won't bring you any joy, if this arrow  
flies straight, directly to its mark.

[ODYSSEUS moves away to hide again. NEOPTOLEMUS grabs PHILOCTETES to  
stop him shooting his arrow]

NEOPTOLEMUS

By the gods, don't shoot that arrow off.

PHILOCTETES

In the name of the gods, dear lad, let go.

NEOPTOLEMUS [continuing to restrain Philoctetes]

No, I won't.

PHILOCTETES

Alas! Why did you spoil  
my chance to use this bow of mine to kill that enemy I hate?

NEOPTOLEMUS

That would mean disaster  
for both of us, for you and me.

PHILOCTETES

You should know  
the army's leaders, lying spokesmen for the Greeks,  
though bold in speech, are cowards in a fight.

NEOPTOLEMUS

That may be true. But now you have the bow,  
you have no reason to be angry with me  
or complain about my conduct.

PHILOCTETES

I agree.

My lad, you've shown the family lineage

you sprang from. Your father was not Sisyphus.  
No, you come from Achilles, who, in his life,  
had the finest reputation of them all,  
just as he now has among the dead.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I'm pleased to hear you praise my father  
and me, as well. But pay attention now  
to what I'd like from you. Men must endure  
those fortunes given to them by the gods.  
But when they insist on injuring themselves,  
the way you're doing now, then it's not right  
to pity or excuse them. You've become  
a savage man, rejecting all advice.  
If someone who's a friend of yours speaks up  
and says you're doing wrong, you hate the man.  
You call him your enemy, a traitor.  
But still, I'll speak to you, invoking Zeus,  
who punishes the men who break their oaths.  
Keep these words in mind. Write them on your heart.  
You've been suffering from this affliction  
as fate sent from the gods, because you went  
too close to Chryse's secret sentinel,  
the snake which keeps watch where she lives and guards  
her sacred precinct open to the sky.  
Know this, too—you will never find an end  
to this distressful agony of yours,  
not while the sun still rises in the east  
and then sets in the west, until you come,  
of your own free will, to the Trojan plain,  
and there, among us, meet Asclepius' sons,  
find relief from this disease, and with help  
from me and from that bow be known to all  
as the man who smashed the towers of Troy. <sup>365</sup>  
I'll tell you how I come to know these things.  
We took a Trojan man called Helenus,  
an excellent prophet, who clearly states  
these things must happen and, in addition ,  
predicts we will seize Troy this coming summer.  
If his words prove false, he'll offer himself,  
quite willingly, for slaughter. And so now  
you understand these things, you should be willing  
to concede. It's one more splendid honour.  
You'll be judged the most exceptional man among the Greeks—first, for coming

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<sup>365</sup> Asclepius was the Greek hero (or god) associated with medicine. In the Iliad, his sons are the most important healers in the Greek forces at Troy.

there  
to hands which healed you, then, more than that,  
for capturing Troy, the source of so much grief.  
You'll win the very highest fame there is.

PHILOCTETES

O hateful life, why keep me here above,  
gazing at the light? Why not release me,  
send me down to Hades? What shall I do?

Alas! How can I distrust what this man says?  
He's giving me advice as a good friend.  
So, then, do I relent? If I do yield,  
how can I, given my unhappy fate,  
appear in public view? Who do I talk to?  
You eyes of mine, who've witnessed everything  
I've had to go through, how could you bear it,  
to see me socializing with those men,  
the sons of Atreus, who ruined me?  
Or with Laertes' all-destroying son?

[Philoctetes addresses Neoptolemus directly]

It's not the pain of what I have endured  
that gnaws at me—I seem to see ahead  
all the things I'll have to suffer from them  
from now on. Once a man's mind has become  
the mother of evil acts, it trains him  
to deceive in everything that follows.  
And in this matter I'm surprised at you.  
You must never return to Troy yourself  
and should prevent me going there. Those men  
did you an injury by taking away  
your father's weapons, when, in that contest  
for his arms, they judged heart-broken Ajax  
inferior to Odysseus. After that,  
will you fight as their ally and force me  
to do so, too? Do not do it, my son,  
but take me home, as you have sworn to do.  
Then you should keep yourself on Scyros  
and leave those evil men to be destroyed  
in their own cruel way. If you do that,  
you'll get double gratitude from me  
and from my father, too. And you won't seem  
because of how you helped those wicked men  
to have an inbred nature just like theirs.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What you say makes good sense. But nonetheless,  
I'd like you to rely upon the gods  
and my own words and sail away from here



with me, your friend.

PHILOCTETES

You mean I should set off  
with this disgusting foot to the Trojan plain  
and that abominable son of Atreus?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No. You should go to those who'll end the pain  
in that pus-filled foot of yours. They'll save you  
from your sickness.

PHILOCTETES

The advice you're giving  
is frightening me. What are you saying?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I recognize what's best for you and me.

PHILOCTETES

When you say that, you don't feel any shame  
before the gods?

NEOPTOLEMUS

How can a man feel shame  
when he's helping out a friend of his?

PHILOCTETES

Are you talking about some benefit  
for me or for the sons of Atreus?

NEOPTOLEMUS

For you, of course. I'm your friend. What I say  
is spoken in friendship.

PHILOCTETES

How can that be true?  
You want to hand me to my enemies.

NEOPTOLEMUS

My dear man, in such troubles you must learn  
not to be so stubborn.

PHILOCTETES

You'll ruin me  
with these words of yours. I know that.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, I won't. But you don't understand—  
that's what I'm saying.

PHILOCTETES

Don't I understand  
how those sons of Atreus threw me aside?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes, they cast you off, but you should see  
if they will rescue you again.

PHILOCTETES

Never!

Not if I must agree to go to Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What can I do then, if what I say  
will not convince you? The easiest thing  
for me is to say no more, and then you  
can go on living as you're doing now,  
without being rescued.

PHILOCTETES

Let me keep suffering  
whatever I must suffer. But those things  
you swore to me, with your right hand in mine—  
to take me home—do that for me, my son,  
and don't hold back or keep reminding me  
about Troy any more. I've had enough  
of howling lamentations here.

NEOPTOLEMUS

All right,  
if that's what you truly want, let's leave.

PHILOCTETES

Ah, such noble words!

[PHILOCTETES starts to move down from his cave]

NEOPTOLEMUS Plant your feet firmly.

PHILOCTETES

I will—as firmly as my strength allows.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How will I escape being blamed for this  
by the Achaeans?

PHILOCTETES

Forget about those men.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What if they destroy my country?

PHILOCTETES

I'll be there . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS [interrupting]

What assistance will you give?

PHILOCTETES

. . . with these arrows  
which come from Hercules . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

What are you saying?

PHILOCTETES

I'll stop them coming in.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Then let's depart,  
once you have bid your island home farewell.

[HERCULES appears above the stage] <sup>366</sup>

HERCULES

Not yet, son of Poeas, not until you've heard  
the words that I shall utter. Know this—

you're listening to the voice of Hercules  
and you're gazing on his face. For your sake  
I have left the throne of heaven and come  
to announce to you the purposes of Zeus  
and to stop the journey you're proposing.  
So pay attention now to what I say.

First, I will inform you of my exploits, for by struggling with so many labours  
and by seeing my work through to the end,  
I won immortal glory for myself,

as you can see. As for you, you must know  
it is your destiny that, from these troubles,  
you make your life something men honour.  
With this man you will reach the Trojan city,  
where, first, your savage illness will be cured,  
then you'll be chosen as the finest man  
from all the warriors, and with my bow,  
will cut short the life of Paris, the man  
who is the cause of all this wickedness.  
You will ransack Troy and from the army  
carry off the prize for utmost bravery,  
and take it home with you to Oeta,  
in your native mountains, to the great joy  
of Poeas, your father. Whatever prizes  
you get from the army, select from them  
an offering for my bow and carry it  
to my funeral pyre. Son of Achilles,  
this advice I'm giving is for you, as well.

You are not strong enough to capture Troy  
without this man, and he's not strong enough  
without you there. Like a pair of lions  
stalking prey on common ground, the two of you  
must guard each other's life. To cure your illness,  
I'll send Asclepius to Troy, which is doomed  
to fall a second time thanks to my arrows. <sup>367</sup>

But remember this—when you lay waste that land,  
show reverence to the gods, for Father Zeus  
thinks of all other things as less than that.

<sup>366</sup>This sudden appearance of a divine figure near the end of the play (the *deus ex machina*) may have had Hercules lowered from above or he may have appeared on a platform above the stage. Hercules was a mortal son of Zeus, but after his death he was made a god.

<sup>367</sup>Hercules himself had in earlier times attacked the king of Troy, Laomedon, and captured the city.

And when men perish, piety does not—  
whether they're alive or dead, it does not die.

PHILOCTETES

O that voice I have longed to hear, my friend  
who stands revealed to me after so long!  
I will not disobey what you have said.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And I, too, will consent to this, as well.

HERCULES

Then do not spend a long time waiting here.  
A stern wind will blow to urge you onward.

The time is right to sail.

PHILOCTETES

All right, then,  
let me salute this land as I depart.  
Farewell, you cave that shared my vigil,  
and farewell, you nymphs of streams and meadows,  
you pounding headlands beaten by the sea,  
where in the inner spaces of my den  
the blasts from South Wind often soaked my head,  
where Mount Hermaea often echoed  
the cries I screamed out in my storms of pain.  
But now, you Lycian streams and waters,  
I am leaving you, going away at last,  
beyond all hopes I ever entertained.  
Farewell, you sea-encircled land of Lemnos,  
send me away content on a fair voyage,  
to the place ordained by mighty Fate,  
by opinions of my friends, and by the god  
who conquers all and has brought this about.

CHORUS

Let's all leave in a group, once we have prayed  
to the ocean nymphs, so they will come  
and guide us safely on our journey home.

[They all move off together]

# (SOPHOCLES) Women of Trachis (Trachiniae)

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>368</sup> translation by G. THEODORIDIS*

...

## **Dramatis Personae**

**DEIANEIRA** (*wife to Heracles*)

**NURSE**

**HYLLUS** (*son of Deianeira and Heracles*)

**Chorus of Women of Trachis**

**MESSENGER**

**LICHAS**

**ELDER**

**HERACLES**

**Friends of Hyllus**

...

*In front of Heracles' palace in Trachis, Greece*

*Enter Deianeira and the Nurse*

**DEIANEIRA:**

There's a saying that has been spinning around the world for many years now, which says that, no mortal can know his Fate – if it is good or bad- before he dies. Yet I know mine very well even before I go down to Hades. I know all about it, all about my Fate: My whole life, all of it, is nothing but an insufferable agony. This is because since the days when I was living in my father's palaces –my father being Oineas of Pleuron- I had to endure a torture so enormous that no other Aetolian woman has ever suffered; and all because of my marriage.

You see, my suitor was the river Aheloos and he came asking my father for my hand in marriage in three shapes: One of the shapes was a bull, another was a twirling and dashing huge snake and his third shape had a human body but a bull's head, his beard like a giant forest through which water sprung in torrents. The thought of having such a partner made me, poor wretch, pray that I'd die before I slept in his bed. But then, much to my relief and delight, came the giant son of Zeus and Alcmene, Heracles, fought with Ahelous, beat him and freed me.

I can't tell you what the battle was like because I just don't know; only those who were there and could cope with the sight could tell you. I couldn't. I stood there dumb struck with fear and praying that my beauty would not bring me some dire consequence. But Zeus had a hand in the outcome and that was a good outcome –or at least I say good because I can't be that certain. You see, ever since I was given to Heracles as his wife, I'm always in some trepidation or other, always worrying about him since his troubles don't stop from one night to the next.

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<sup>368</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/sophocles/women-of-trachis-aka-trachiniae/>

We have children but he barely spends any time with them –like a farmer who has taken up some distant field and so only sees it when he sows and when he harvests it. This is the sort of life that either brings my husband here or takes him away to serve his boss. But it is now, now that he has completed and surmounted these labours, it is now that I am worried the most. Because since the time he has killed the awesome Iphitus, we've been exiled from our own homeland and now live in a friend's house, here in Trachis.

But no one knows the whereabouts of my husband Heracles. His absence gives me bitter pain. It's been fifteen months now –that's not a mere blink of an eyelid– yet not a message from him. I feel certain that something awful has happened to him. Surely something dreadful must have happened to him. He's left me with such a strange tablet of writing that I am constantly praying that it is not ominous.

**NURSE:**

Deianeira, I've often seen you crying bitter tears due to Heracles' absence.

But now, if it's forgivable for slaves to counsel their masters, please let me speak my view which I hope will help you. You have so many sons, why have you not sent any of them to bring tidings about your husband? More so than the others, send Hyllus who, will look for him if he truly cares to know whether his father is alive and well, wherever he might be. But here is the man himself, approaching with a fast pace, so, if you think my words are beneficial, use them and use him as well.

*Enter Hyllus*

**DEIANEIRA:**

My son, my darling child! Even poor folk can utter wise words. Here's a woman who, even though a slave gave me a word befitting a free woman.

**HYLLUS:**

What did she say mother? Can you tell me?

**DEIANEIRA:**

She asked why is it that since your father is absent for so long you did not search for him? That is a shameful thing.

**HYLLUS:**

But I know already where he is, mother, if one can believe what people say.

**DEIANEIRA:**

So, where did you hear he is, my son?

**HYLLUS:**

They say that during the last year he was a slave to some Lydian woman.

**DEIANEIRA:**

If this is true then I'll believe anything!

**HYLLUS:**

But I've also heard that he's been released from that woman.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Where then do they say he is now and is he alive or dead?

**HYLLUS:**

He is gathering an army against Eurytus, a city in Euboea, or, at least he's about to do so, soon.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Do you know my child that he has left me dependable oracles about that land?

**HYLLUS:**

No, mother. I don't know about these oracles. Tell me.

**DEIANEIRA:**

They say that in that land he'll either meet his death or, if he survives this labour he will spend the rest of his days happy. Since he's in such a critical situation my son, wouldn't you like to go and help him? Our own survival hangs upon his own. If he survives, we survive and if he perishes we perish with him.

**HYLLUS:**

I will go mother. Had I known that these oracles existed and what they had foreseen I would have been there with him a long time ago, though the good fortune which always accompanies him does not ask us to be fearful of anything or to be unduly worried about father. Now though that I know the full matter I will do everything in my power to find out the whole truth about what you've told me.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Go my son because it is still better to learn good news even if belatedly.

*Exit Hyllus and Nurse*

**CHORUS:**

The Sun, the Sun, I beg you! Tell me where is Alcmene's beloved child. Search for him. Blazing Sun, born from your dying sparkling mother, Night. Tell me where he is. Is he perhaps between some ocean straits, or leaning against two continents? Tell me oh lord of the kingdom of sight.

**CHORUS:**

I'm told that Oeneas' daughter over whom such giants fought is constantly grieving like a sad bird and her tearful eyes and her distress won't let her sleep. Her husband's absence nurtures all sorts of fears in her chest and awful thoughts in her orphaned bed bring to her fears of more grief to come.

**CHORUS:**

Because just as one sees the countless waves of the ever-tossing, broad North or South seas come and go, as does the Cretan sea of life, one minute hinders him and the next helps him through the many troubles of life. But some god holds Heracles safe above the chambers of Hades.

**CHORUS:**

With great respect, my mistress, for all this I accuse you! I mean you shouldn't lose the hope that you hold now.

**CHORUS:**

Zeus has granted no one a life free of troubles but around everyone runs the path of joy and sadness just as the perennial path of the great Bear runs across the sky.

**CHORUS:**

Because neither the sparkling night, nor misery, nor wealth stay long but suddenly become no more than ashes and smoke and scatter away.

**CHORUS:**

Each of us has in turn joy then misery. That's why, my lady, I ask you to hold on to these hopes. Because what mortal has ever seen Zeus neglecting his children?

**DEIANEIRA:**

I can see that you're here because you've learnt of my suffering, yet I pray you never know yourself the suffering that torture my heart. You're ignorant of it now

because where youth lives and feeds nothing can torture it: neither the blaze of the sun, nor the rain, nor the countless breaths of the winds but its life rolls in joy's lap free of worry and woe, until the virgin is a woman. That's when she gets her share of torture, her share of agony, her share of nightly fear about her own children or husband.

It's only then when one can see clearly his own burdens that he can understand mine.

So I have cried because of much suffering but there is one suffering I knew nothing about before but do so now and I shall tell you.

When my husband left for his last expedition he left me some tablets with writing explaining what he was about to do. This he never did before, being certain of his victory and thus of his return even though he had gone out on many such labours. This time, however, as if feeling that he would not return he thought necessary to leave me directions as to what I should inherit as my dowry and how should his children divide his ancient land.

As well, he had fixed a time: If, he said he had not come back within fifteen months his Fate would have declared him dead; or if he had passed that critical moment then he would live happy the rest of his days.

This Fate was, he said, appointed to him by the Oracle at the Ancient Oak at Dodona through the two priestesses called The Doves.

The fifteen months have just come to their completion and so during the night while my sleep is sweet I suddenly jump with the fear that I will hence have to go on living having been robbed of the greatest man of all.

**CHORUS:**

Stop these ill thoughts now. I can see a man wearing a garland heading this way. He looks as if he has something to tell us.

*Enter Messenger*

**MESSENGER:**

My Queen Deianeira, let me be the first to rid you of your fear. Know that the son of Zeus and Alcmene is alive and he has come as a victor, bringing choice gifts from the battle for the gods of the city.

**DEIANEIRA:**

What was that? What do you mean my good man?

**MESSENGER:**

I mean that soon your most beloved husband will appear before your home, a victor in all his might!

**DEIANEIRA:**

From whom did you learn this good news, a citizen or a stranger?

**MESSENGER:**

I've heard it from the herald Lichas who is telling it to all and sundry at the fields where the cows graze during summer. I've rushed here hoping to be the first to tell you and so receive some reward and some good favour.

**DEIANEIRA:**

But if Fate does favour him, why isn't he himself here?

**MESSENGER:**

It's not easy for him, my Queen. Everyone in Trachis is there, all around him, asking



him question after question. He can't even make a single step to escape the crowd since every one of them wants to hear the happy story eagerly for himself. So he's forced to stay there but he'll be here soon enough.

**DEIANEIRA:**

O, Zeus who holds in his hands the holy meadows of Oeta! You are late but still you have delivered us our joy. Women, both inside the house and outside in the court, sing! Sing because now, with these news, we are enjoying the light which dawned for me so unexpectedly!

**CHORUS:**

Let there be songs of rejoicing by the maidens of the house, the future wives, let there be songs around the hearth; and let there also be loud songs by men in praise of the quiver-bearing Apollo, our protector.

**CHORUS:**

Raise up the song, Apollo's song young virgins! And praise and call upon his sister, Artemis from Ortygia hunter of deer who carries lit torches in both hands! Call also upon her friends and nymphs.

**CHORUS:**

I feel I'm floating on air, Lord of my soul and I can't escape your flute.

**CHORUS:**

Ah! Look there! Look how the ivy excites me! Ah! I'm whirling round in a Bacchic madness!

**CHORUS:**

Oh, oh! My dear Queen! Look! Look! You can see it as it is, with your own eyes!

*Enter Lichas with Iole and a group of other female captives*

**DEIANEIRA:**

I do see, dear friends, I do see it and my wakeful eyes have not failed to also see a procession.

I welcome the herald who has finally appeared. Welcome, that is if your news is to be welcome.

**LICHAS:**

Our return is joyful, my Queen and we are worthy of your welcome, considering what we've achieved. Because it is just that whosoever returns victorious should be met with heartfelt words.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Dearest of all men, first of all I'd like you to tell me if I shall receive Heracles alive.

**LICHAS:**

When I left him he was alive, strong, healthy and suffering from no ailment.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Where? In what land? His own or in some foreign land? Tell me!

**LICHAS:**

At one of the capes in Euboa where he's making sacrifices of first fruits to Zeus on Mount Cenaeum.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Is that because of a vow he had made or because of some prophecy?

**LICHAS:**

A vow, because he has conquered and destroyed utterly the country of these

women here.

**DEIANEIRA:**

And who are these women and to whom do they belong? They look, pitiful if their sadness doesn't deceive me.

**LICHAS:**

To Heracles. After he had destroyed their city, Eurytus' city, he had picked them out for himself and for the gods.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Is it around this city of Eurytus, that he had spent all these endless days? Was it to sack this city that he had gone for such a huge length of time?

**LICHAS:**

No, my Queen. He, himself, says he was captured by the Lydians and held there as a slave for the greater part of the time. And we shouldn't think of a story my lady which was Zeus' will. Heracles told me, my lady, that he was sold to the foreigner Omphale with whom he had served twelve of those months. He was so embittered by this shame that he swore a mighty oath that he would make the man who was responsible for his slavery, a slave himself, together with his wife and children.

And so he did. After he had himself purified he gathered a friendly army and attacked Eurytus' city because it was he, Heracles thought who was the man responsible for the torture he had to endure.

Now Heracles and Eurytus were old friends so, one day Heracles appeared at Eurytus' house as a guest but Eurytus began to insult Heracles most awfully and showed great malice towards him.

Eurytus told Heracles that even though Heracles possessed these unfailing arrows, he was no match to his sons in archery and insulted him further by reminding him that he had allowed himself to be a slave.

Moreover, once, during dinner, when Eurytus was very drunk, he threw Heracles out of his house.

This made Heracles very angry and so when Eurytus' son, Iphitus came out one day to search for his lost horses on the ridge of Tiryns at a moment when Iphitus' mind was wandering, Heracles grabbed him and threw him down onto the meadow below.

And this is why our lord, the Olympian Zeus, the father of all, had sent Heracles to be sold as a slave, not forgiving him because this was the first man Heracles had killed by deceit. Had Heracles fought Iphitus openly and beaten him in a just manner, Zeus would have forgiven him. Gods, just like mortals, will also not endure unjust crime.

This is why all those arrogant men with their insolent tongues end up in their places down in Hades and their city becomes a slave yard. So, these women here have come to you as slaves though once they were free and happy. It's your husband's orders I'm obeying but he, himself will be here soon after he makes purified offerings to our lord Zeus for the sacking of Eurytus' city.

Surely of all these words I've just uttered these must be the best you've heard.

**CHORUS:**

There, my Queen! You should delight in what you see before you and in his words!

**DEIANEIRA:**

But of course I am delighted to hear of my husband's just conquest! My joy should certainly equal his victory. Still, circumspect people are careful not to be overconfident for those who had some success lest their luck one day turns to grief.

I'm saddened, dear ladies, seeing these poor young women enslaved this way, orphaned, without a home and in a foreign land, girls who once could have been the daughters of free men.

O, Zeus, Lord, giver of victories, I hope I'll never see you direct your anger against my own children in this way but if you do, may I not be alive when you do so. So great is my fear when I look at these young girls.

*To one of the girls:*

Who are you, you poor child? Are you single or married, with a child, perhaps? By your looks I gather you know nothing of such matters but you must be some noble person.

\*To **LICHAS:** \*

Lichas, who is this stranger? Who are her parents? Tell me, Lichas because I felt more sorry for her when I first saw her. She seems to be the one most able to understand her plight.

**LICHAS:**

Why would I know, my Queen and why do you ask me? Perhaps she is from a good family. I don't know.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Would she be from the royal house? Had Eurytus any children?

**LICHAS:**

I don't know, my Queen. I didn't bother to ask too many questions.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Did you not ask any of her fellow travellers?

**LICHAS:**

No, my Queen. I didn't bother do anything else other than quietly do what was my duty.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Poor girl, tell me yourself. It would be a pity not to know your name.

**LICHAS:**

She won't be using her tongue my lady if one goes by how she behaved so far. She said neither much nor little but, the poor creature cried and cried ever since she left her windswept city. Her Fate is truly bad and so she deserves pity.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Well then, let her go into the palace if she likes. I have no wish to add to her woes which are more than enough already. Now let us all go inside so that I can make the appropriate preparations and you can be on your way.

*Enter Messenger*

*The captives, Lichas and Deianeira all move towards the house but the Messenger holds Deianeira back.*

**MESSENGER:**

Wait a short while, my Queen till after they all gone so that I can tell you something about your visitors. Something which you haven't been told about and about which

I know everything.

**DEIANEIRA:**

What is it, sir? Let me go!

**MESSENGER:**

Please listen a moment, my Queen. My first words to you were worth listening, so will these.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Shall I call the others back or is it to me and to my friends here you want to speak?

**MESSENGER:**

No, let the others stay inside. I want to speak to you and to your friends here.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Well then, they're gone inside, so tell us your story.

**MESSENGER:**

My Queen, none of what Lichas had just told you was the truth. Either he lied to you just now or he did so earlier when he had first arrived in Trachis.

**DEIANEIRA:**

What are you saying? Explain yourself clearly. Tell me everything that's in your mind. I'm finding hard to believe your words.

**MESSENGER:**

My Queen, I heard this man speak in front of a crowd and he said that it was because of this girl that your husband, Heracles had killed Eurytus and sacked the fortress Orchalis and that if there was any god who had inspired him to do that awful deed then that god was Eros. The stories about the Lydians, his slavery under Omphale or the one about hurling Iphitus over a ridge were all lies. So, here he is now, pushing the real story aside to tell us all this new stuff.

No, what happened was that Heracles had failed to persuade her father to give him his daughter to have as a secret love so he made up some ridiculous excuse to attack her city, whose King was her father Eurytus. Heracles, killed him and sacked the city. So, as Lichas told the story, Heracles has sent the girl first before him, not as a slave but with the best of ceremonies, since he's head over heels in love with him.

I thought I had better told you everything I've heard Lichas tell the folk back there, my lady. Many of Trachis' men also have heard him, my Queen, talking as he did in the centre of the market place. You can ask any of them if you like. If my story displeases you, my Queen then I can assure you I take no pleasure in it either but still, I tell the truth.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Ah, poor me! What am I to do now? What disaster have I invited into my house? Lichas swore she has no name; is that true? The one with the sparkling eyes and nature.

**MESSENGER:**

Her name is Iole, my Queen and she's Eurytus' daughter. Lichas didn't ask her about her origin and so he didn't know –or so he says!

**CHORUS:**

Curse them! Not all the evil doers but those who practice evil in the shadows.

**DEIANEIRA:**

What must I do now, my friends? I feel dumbstruck by all this!

**CHORUS:**

If you're willing to press him hard enough, go and question Lichas. Perhaps he will be forced to tell the truth.

**DEIANEIRA:**

I shall do that. Your advice is good.

**MESSENGER:**

What about us? Shall we wait here or go?

*Enter Lichas*

**DEIANEIRA:**

No, wait. Here he is now even though I haven't called him.

**LICHAS:**

Lady, as you can see, I'm about to leave. What would you like me to say to Heracles?

**DEIANEIRA:**

You're in such a dreadful hurry to leave yet we waited for you for such a long time to appear. Stay a while so we may resume our conversation.

**LICHAS:**

By all means. If you have any further questions, here I am.

**DEIANEIRA:**

And will you tell me the whole truth?

**LICHAS:**

Let Zeus be my witness, I shall certainly do so!

**DEIANEIRA:**

Who is that girl you brought me?

**LICHAS:**

She's from Euboa, my Lady. I don't know who her parents are.

**MESSENGER:**

Hey you! Look at me. This way! Who do you think you're talking to?

**LICHAS:**

And who are you to be asking me questions?

**MESSENGER:**

If you've got your wits about you you'll answer my question!

**LICHAS:**

Who am I talking to? I'm talking to my Queen, Lady Deianeira. Oeneas' daughter and Heracles' wife –that's if I can believe my eyes.

**MESSENGER:**

Ha! That's what I wanted to hear you say: She is your Lady, right?

**LICHAS:**

Of course she is.

**MESSENGER:**

Well, then what if you were caught lying to her, what penalty should you pay then?

**LICHAS:**

What do you mean "lying?" What is this trap you're setting up for me?

**MESSENGER:**

It's not me who's setting traps but it is you, that is for certain!

**LICHAS:**

I'll be off now. I truly didn't have my wits about me standing here listening to you for so long.

**MESSENGER:**

One more little question before you go.

**LICHAS:**

Go on then, you've got a tongue, speak.

**MESSENGER:**

That captive girl you've brought us here. You know who I mean.

**LICHAS:**

Of course I do. Why do you ask?

**MESSENGER:**

That girl who you pretended you knew nothing about her. Didn't you tell us she's Iole, Eurytus' daughter?

**LICHAS:**

Who did I say that to? Who can come up and testify that I said this in front of anyone?

**MESSENGER:**

You said this to many folk – a whole crowd of men in the middle of the market place in Trachis.

**LICHAS:**

Sure! But I said that I thought I had heard it being said but not that I knew it to be definitely true.

**MESSENGER:**

What do you mean that you "thought" you'd heard it? Didn't you swear that you had brought her as a wife to Heracles?

**LICHAS:**

As wife? My dear Lady, please tell me who is this man?

**MESSENGER:**

Me? I was one of the men there in the market and I heard you say that it was because Heracles fell desperately in love with this girl that he sacked her city and not because of the Lydian woman.

**LICHAS:**

My Lady, send this man away! He's a sick man and wise people don't waste words on them.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Lichas! You're not talking to some weak woman nor to some mindless woman who doesn't know that nature's creatures are all the same and seek the same ends.

By Zeus, the god whose lightning strikes the holy cliffs of Oeta, hide nothing from me! All mortals gain joy equally and whoever stands before Eros like a boxer does before his opponent is stupid! Eros rules all according to his whim –both, the gods as well as me, so why not another woman? Had I had some complaint about my husband for falling into this ailment I would be mad. The same as with this woman who did me no harm.

No ill thoughts have crossed my mind about her either but if he has instructed you to lie to me then this is an unwholesome lesson. If on the other hand, you're

lying of your own accord how could anyone believe you when you want to call yourself honest? They will regard you, instead, as a criminal.

Come, now, tell me the truth! Just think what an awful thing it is to call a free citizen a liar, because never believe that there's any way you can hide from the truth.

There were many folk who've heard you and they will bear witness to what you've said. As well, don't be afraid to tell me because it is not knowing the truth that most distresses me.

After all, has not this single man, Heracles, slept with many women? Not one of these women heard an evil word from me or has she been reproached. The same with Iole. Not even if Heracles melted by his desire for her because I pitied her the most. Her stunning beauty was the cause of her misfortune and the destruction of her life, as well as that of turning her city into a slave yard, without the poor wretch doing a thing.

But let all this flow down the river. Always speak to me the truth and leave to lies for others.

**CHORUS:**

My Queen is right. Listen to her and you won't go wrong; and both she and we will be grateful.

**LICHAS:**

Alright, my Lady. I can see now that you look at humans from a reasonable human's perspective so I will tell you all I know. I will keep nothing back and it will all be the truth.

It is true, my Lady. It is just like this man says. One day an overwhelming passion for Iole came over Heracles and that was why her city, Oechalia, was taken by the spear and destroyed.

And, to be really truthful, my Lady and give Heracles what he deserves, he didn't tell me to either reveal this secret to you or deny it but, being afraid that I might upset you by telling you this story, I held it back. If you count this act of mine to be wrong then it was I who is at fault.

But now that you've heard the whole story, my Lady Deianeira, for his sake and hers, show kindness to Iole and follow your own words regarding your attitude towards her. Heracles excelled in all matters to do with strength but he was totally conquered by his desire for this young girl.

**DEIANEIRA:**

But of course I shall. I have no notion of falling for this sickness of fighting pointlessly against the gods. It's alien to me and I shall not do it.

Now let us go into the house so that I can give you my message to Heracles and exchange gifts with those he has sent me. It wouldn't be right for you to leave empty handed after coming all the way with so many slaves.

*Exit Lichas and Deianeira*

**CHORUS:**

Aphrodite wins!

Aphrodite wins always!

I won't speak about the gods and how she tricked Zeus, or Hades, lord of darkness, or Poseidon the god who shakes the earth.

**CHORUS:**

What giants then entered the ring to fight for the hand of this Queen, Deianeira?  
Dust in clouds and fists in blood and hatred in their faces they met each other?  
One was the angry river in the guise of a bull –enormous horns, four legs- Achelous  
from Oenieadae.

**CHORUS:**

The other came from Bacchic Thebes, shaking the spear and his club, his unfailing  
bow and arrows, the son of Zeus.

**CHORUS:**

Both clashed mightily against each other, wounded by their unbearable desire for  
Deianeira's bed.

**CHORUS:**

And there she was, the beautiful Aphrodite, protectress of virginity, standing in the  
centre, an umpire of the mighty clash.

**CHORUS:**

Then the fists thumped and the arrows flew, the bull's horns joined the clatter.  
Legs tightly gripped bodies, head struck head fiercely and groan met groan but  
Deianeira, the girl with the gorgeous eyes –I tell the story as if I were there- stood  
by a hillock nearby waiting for her Heracles, her groom.

**CHORUS:**

Yet the face, the eyes, the reason for the thunderous clash, await there full of  
sadness.

Suddenly, like a wandering calf, she was taken away from her mother.

*A short pause.*

*Enter Deianeira holding a small, sealed casket.*

**DEIANEIRA:**

Dear friends, while Lichas is talking with the slaves I sneaked out to tell you about  
a scheme I have devised and to receive from you some comfort for what I am  
suffering.

Because just like a ship's captain takes on a load too large for his ship so did I take  
a burden too large for me. Heracles has brought into my house Iole who is no  
maiden but a grown woman! Not a worthy reward for my faithfulness to him. All  
these years, keeping his house and home for him!

So now, the two of us, Iole and I, await for his embrace beneath the same sheets.  
Is this the work of a true and noble husband?

But I can't get angry with a husband who is suffering so badly by this affliction of  
love. Still would there be a woman who'd be able to share her husband's bed and  
marriage with another? There's the youth of the one, ripening into its peak bloom  
and here's the bloom of the other withering away. The eyes pluck the first but the  
feet walk away from the other.

And so I worry lest Heracles calls me his wife but Iole calls him her man.  
Still, I have told you earlier that for a reasonable woman it is not honourable to be  
angry at someone who suffers from such an affliction.

Let me then tell you what remedy I've devised for my sad predicament.

Nessus, a shaggy haired centaur of the olden times, had once, when I was but a  
child, given me a precious gift. During the last moments of his life I gathered some  
of his blood into a cup and kept it as a cure-all. Nessus, you see, used to carry folk



across the torrents of Evenus for a fee. He used to carry these folk in his bare arms, using neither oar nor sail.

And so, the first day I went out of my father's house as a bride to Heracles, he also carried me. He carried me on his shoulders but as we were crossing the river, he handled me in a shameful manner and I screamed.

Heracles turned and shot a poison arrow at the beast piercing him through the chest and lungs. But the beast managed to tell me in time, "Deianeira, daughter of old Oeneus you are the last I've taken across this river; listen to what profit you can gain if you believe me.

Gather the blood that clots around the wound the arrow made. It is the poison of the black gall from the Lernean Hydra. Use this as a charm whenever you think Heracles shows an interest in other women. This charm will bind his love to you."

So, my friends, I've just remembered this gift which I have kept locked in safety and have dyed a fine garment with it just as Nessus told me. So that's now the end of that!

May the gods protect me from ever committing a sinful act nor learn of one and I hate women who commit them but I've done this in order to protect Heracles from this girl with spells and magic directed at him, my husband. If you think the deed is wrong then I shall abandon it.

**CHORUS:**

If you're certain that the magic will work then the act is not wrong.

**DEIANEIRA:**

I certainly believe in the magic but I've never tested it.

**CHORUS:**

Then you must test it. Believing in its power without having tested it is no certainty.

*Enter Lichas*

**DEIANEIRA:**

We'll test it soon enough. Here's Lichas, looking as if he's in a hurry. Please keep this a tight secret my friends because even a shameful deed, done in darkness is not shameful

**LICHAS:**

Well then, what do I have to do? Command, my Queen, daughter of Oeneus because I've been delayed here long enough.

**DEIANEIRA:** (*handing him the casket*)

Exactly what I was thinking, Lichas, while you were in the palace talking with the women. Now, give my husband this long piece of cloth which I have weaved with my own hands as a present to him.. Tell him at the same time, that no one else must put it on except himself. Let him hide it from the sun's fire and from the fire of the altar and the hearth until the day he must wear it so as offer a sacrifice of bulls. This was my promised oath: If ever I saw him return to my house alive and well, or if I had learnt of his return I would have dressed him up in this beautiful robe to appear before the gods, a brilliantly dressed man ready for a brilliant sacrifice.

And so as to make sure he believes you, take with you this seal ring. He will recognise it.

Go now, Lichas but above all think of this: a messenger must not be distracted from his message and that if the message is delivered you'll have the gratitude of

both, Heracles and me.

**LICHAS:**

I, the faithful follower of Herme's art, will never be seen failing towards you. I will certainly take this casket from your hands and deliver it to him, delivering also your words so that he may be persuaded.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Time then for you to leave since you know how things stand here.

**LICHAS:**

I shall go. I know how things stand and I shall explain that all is well here.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Well, your own eyes have seen how well I've received the new girl.

**LICHAS:**

So much so that my heart felt enormous joy.

**DEIANEIRA:**

I wonder... is there anything else you should tell him? Perhaps about my love but not until we're certain he needs it.

*Exit Lichas and Deianeira*

**CHORUS:**

You folk who live by the warm springs –springs that gush from the mountain rocks as well as from the rocks near the sea. Springs near the hills of Oeta; and you, folk who live in the gulf of Maliea, near the coast that belonged to Artemis, the maiden of the golden distaff, there where the hordes of the Greeks gather for their meetings, there at Thermopylae.

**CHORUS:**

Soon the sweet-voiced flute will echo sounds not sad but, like a lyre, it will sing divine hymns. Because any minute now Heracles, born of Zeus and Alkmene will arrive at the palaces carrying unmatched trophies of victories.

**CHORUS:**

Heracles for whom we have waited for twelve months while he was travelling beyond the distant seas, and about whom we knew nothing.

**CHORUS:**

His poor wife, Deianeira, crying all the while, sadness and worry breaking her heart. But now the war god has released him from his fury.

**CHORUS:**

Let him come! Let him come!

Let not the many oared ship stop before it arrives, let it not leave the island's sacrificial fire which he lit.

Let him come! Let him come today, saturated deeply with the potion as the Centaur said.

*Enter Deianeira*

**DEIANEIRA:**

I hope dear friends I have not gone too far with my actions.

**CHORUS:**

What's the matter Deianeira, Oeneus' child?

**DEIANEIRA:**

I don't know but something tightens my heart. I'm afraid that while I was hoping to

do a good deed I did a very bad one.

**CHORUS:**

You can't be worried about the gifts you've sent to your husband?

**DEIANEIRA:**

It is exactly what I'm worried about. I would never advise anyone to do so readily something about which he's not totally certain.

**CHORUS:**

Tell us, if you can what you are afraid of.

**DEIANEIRA:**

What happened, dear friends is such that once you hear it you'll think it is an astonishing wonder. You see, the white tuft of wool with which I daubed the potion onto the soft cloth before I shut into the casket, away from sun's light and the fire of the temple, completely vanished all by itself without anyone being involved. The wool became ash and blew with the wind from the stone where I had left it.

But listen now to the details of how it all happened.

I remember everything the Centaur has told me when the arrow pierced his side, as if it were deeply etched as on a bronze plate on my memory. I obeyed everyone of those instructions to the letter. I had to keep the potion hidden away from the sun's rays, from fire and from the sun's light and heat. There I should leave it sealed until it was time to use it as it was required. But now, when the need did arise for its use, I took a tuft of wool from our flock here, brought it into the house away from everyone's eyes and daubed Heracles' robe with it.

Then I folded the garment carefully and placed it in the casket which you saw. But when I returned back into the house I saw a sight unbelievable by humans. You see the tuft of wool I used to daub the potion of the Centaur's blood onto the robe I had accidentally thrown onto the ground where the sun rays hit it. When it became warm enough from that it had turned into something like the sawdust beneath the blades of a saw.

Then there was the other incredible thing: From where the tuft of wool was there appeared a thick, bubbling froth, like when the thick juice of Bacchus' fruit fall onto the ground.

What am I the poor wretch to think of this, other than I've done something terrible? After all, why should Nessus let me profit in any way since I was the cause of his death? It doesn't seem right.

What he obviously did was to trick me into killing his own murderer and, alas, I've realised this now, now, when it is too late!

If I am not wrong, I, single-handedly, will have been the cause of my husband's death.

I know that the Centaur's arrow destroyed Chiron even though he was immortal and it destroys whichever beast it touches. So then in the same way the black blood that came from his wound will also kill Heracles if it touches him.

This then is what I'm resolved to do: If my husband dies so shall I die in the same manner because it is insufferable for a woman of long-standing virtue to live with a stained reputation.

**CHORUS:**

Of course, it's impossible not to be in dire fear when one commits dangerous acts

but we also must not lose hope before the act had been committed.

**DEIANEIRA:**

When the idea was ill-advised then the situation is beyond hope.

**CHORUS:**

But for someone who has committed an error unwillingly, the anger is less. Feel comforted by this.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Such things may be said by someone who has not practiced the deed but not by him who carries the whole burden of it.

*Enter Hyllus*

**CHORUS:**

Say no more about it, Deianeira, unless you want your son Hyllus to hear it all. Here he is, the son who went looking for his father.

**HYLLUS:**

Mother! I wish one of three things for you: Either that you were dead... or if alive, then I would be someone else's son or if I were still to be your son then if only you had a better heart.

**DEIANEIRA:**

What have I done to you my son, that you hate me so much?

**HYLLUS:**

Why? Know this, mother: today you have killed my father – your husband – Heracles!

**DEIANEIRA:**

My God! What are you saying, my son?

**HYLLUS:**

An evil that can't be undone by anyone!

**DEIANEIRA:**

What are you saying son? Who told you that I've committed such a deed?

**HYLLUS:**

No other man's tongue told me. I saw my father's torture with my own eyes.

**DEIANEIRA:**

Where did you find him? Were you with him during his suffering?

**HYLLUS:**

If you must know the full story then let me tell it to you.

Once he had conquered the city of famous Eurytus he left there with all the trophies of his victory and with the first fruits, to bring them to Mount Ceneae which is a cape in Euboea, the one crushed endlessly by the waters of the ocean. There, he marked out a wooded precinct and within it he marked off altars. It's there where I first saw him, a thing which made me very happy because I had truly missed him. Just then, when he's ready to sacrifice the countless victims his house messenger, Lichas, arrived bearing your gift, your deadly robe.

He put it on just as you had instructed and then began the slaying of the bulls. The first were twelve unblemished bulls, these being the first fruits of the spoils but then he also brought many more bulls, all in all making the sum one hundred bulls.

The poor wretch first he prayed a joyful prayer, happy in his new robe but then,

suddenly the blood-dyed sacred flame burst forth and, fed by the resinous pine trees around him rose up and intensified. His body was covered in sweat and the robe clung to his sides and to his every joint, just like a carpenter's tunic.

An excruciating pain came upon him gnawing at his every bone. Finally a bloody poison as if from a hateful snake began to eat his flesh.

Now poor Lichas was not responsible for your crime but my father began shouting at him ordering him to explain what evil scheme did he use to bring him the robe. Lichas, of course told him that there was no such evil scheme and that it was your idea, mother, your idea, alone and he delivered the robe to him according to your own instructions.

As my father heard this the awful pain convulsed in his lungs again and so he angrily seized a hold of the messenger's foot, just where the joint plays and hurled him hard against a sea-swept rock. The poor man's brains oozed out of his hair and his head was shattered. The silence then was broken by the cry given out by all the people, horrified at the sight of the death of one man and the sickness of the other. No one, though had the courage to approach my father. One minute he would fall to the ground and the next he would jump in spasms high up in the air screaming so much with pain that the rocks echoed with it all around the promontories of Locris and the peaks of Euboa with it.

Finally, when all his strength was spent with all the falling onto the ground and the shouting, he shouted curses to his marriage that united you, you, wretched woman with him and with the family of Oeneus because it had ruined his life.

Then he turned his wild eye from the altar's fire and he saw me. Choked with tears he turned and called me to approach him. "Come near, my son; don't leave me in the throes of my calamity. Stay with me even if it means your life.

Take me far from here and hide me where no man's eye can see me. If you feel any sorrow for me then take me far from this place. Don't let me die here," he said. These were his commands so, obediently, we put him in a boat and with great difficulty and while my father was screaming as the spasms gripped him, we brought him here, to this land. You'll see him soon –either still alive or just recently dead.

This is what you've done to my father deliberately mother! Let justice be known, let the avenging Justice and the furies punish you. If it is just for me to utter it then I utter a curse to you. And of course it is just since you've made it just for me to murder the greatest man on earth, so great that you'll never see another like him!

*Exit Deianeira solemnly*

Chorus: (To Deianeira) Why leave without replying? Don't you know, your silence shows agreement with your accuser?

**HYLLUS:**

Let her leave. I wish the winds would take her completely away from my sight. How could she gain the grand name of mother, she who's so unworthy of it? She does nothing to match that word. Mother! Let her leave and let her enjoy the happiness she gave my father!

*Exit Hyllus*

**CHORUS:**

You see, friends how quickly the old oracle proved itself: Heracles' last labour

would be on the twelfth month on the twelfth year. And so, Zeus' will has been accomplished for how could a dead man who sees the sun no more, continue with his servitude?

**CHORUS:**

The deadly Centaur's sly snare, gnaws at his sides while the spinning snake's child – the poison- soaks them. The snake was the begetter of the poison and Death was its begetter.

**CHORUS:**

Heracles' eyes, glued upon a ghost, more deadly than that of the Lernean, how could he look upon tomorrow's sun?

**CHORUS:**

Nessus' deadly sting, the sting of this shaggy-haired beast, digs into his sides and from there the blood –the blood boils!

**CHORUS:**

Poor wretch, Deianeira!  
She knew nothing of the tragedy to come.

**CHORUS:**

A new marriage entered fast into her house and there she saw the coming disaster. For some of this disaster was she to blame but for another part it was someone else's mind, during that fatal meeting much of which, ruined now, she surely laments. Surely she shed her tears like the sky sheds the rain.

**CHORUS:**

But Fate continues her path approaching a treacherous and great calamity.

**CHORUS:**

The fountain of tears burst!  
The evil spread!  
The ever-famed Heracles has never felt such pain from his enemies  
Such pain that's moved by the mortal wound of the spear.

**CHORUS:**

And all this because you brought us here, to our land this girl from the peaks of Oechalia.

**CHORUS:**

And who's to blame for these things? Aphrodite, the Cyprian goddess!

**NURSE:** (*within*)

Ah me!

**CHORUS:**

Do my ears deceive me or have I heard someone crying in the palace?

**NURSE:** (*within*)

Ah me!

**CHORUS:**

No, it is true, and these are no soft tears but loud crying. That much is obvious. It's full of sorrow. Some new calamity has hit the palace.

*Enter the Nurse crying*

**CHORUS:**

Look! Here's the Nurse. How cloudy her eyes, how sad she looks! She has something to tell us.

**NURSE:**

Dear children! How evil was the gift sent to Heracles!

**CHORUS:**

What new thing do you have to tell us, old lady?

**NURSE:**

Deianeira! Without moving a foot she has gone to the last of her journeys!

**CHORUS:**

She died?

**NURSE:**

Yes, she has!

**CHORUS:**

So the poor woman is dead!

**NURSE:**

Dead!

**CHORUS:**

Poor creature. How did she die?

**NURSE:**

My lady has died a gruesome death. Gruesome!

**CHORUS:**

Tell us woman. How? How did she meet her end?

**NURSE:**

Took her own life using a double-edged sword!

**CHORUS:**

Why? What madness, what sickness killed her with this sharp and cruel steel? How did she think of such a thing all alone –one death after another using the point of a sharp sword? Did you see the deed? Oh what a waste!

**NURSE:**

Indeed, I saw it. I was standing next to her.

**CHORUS:**

Tell us, who actually did the deed?

**NURSE:**

She did it herself –struck her own body with her own hand!

**CHORUS:**

But what are you saying old woman?

**NURSE:**

I'm saying nothing else but the truth.

**CHORUS:**

The truth? Is this really the truth?

**NURSE:**

It is the truth!

**CHORUS:**

The child, the child of the bride in the palace is Vengeance. Mighty Vengeance!

**NURSE:**

Vengeance indeed. Had you been nearby to see her action, you would have cause to pity her, poor wretch!

**CHORUS:**

And it was truly with her own hand Deianeira killed herself? But how could a woman's hand do such a horrible thing?

**NURSE:**

With a frightening manner. Listen and you can be my witness.

She entered the palace alone and saw her son preparing a soft bier for his father to whom he was returning and she hid herself so well that no one could find her. Then she began crying in front of the altars, crying that she was left an orphan and crying also for all the things she touched and always loved to use.

She ran up and down the palace and if she saw any of her slaves she wept because she loved them all dearly. She cried for herself and for her barren existence.

When she had ended all this she rushed into Heracles' marriage chamber and, hiding myself, I saw her spreading sheets on my master's bed. Then she jumped onto it and lay in the middle of the bed.

Hot tears streaming from her eyes, she said, "goodbye my happy marriage bed, goodbye for ever since you'll never have me sleep here again." Then with a slashing hand she undoes the buckle that held her robe on her left breast side, revealing her left arm and side. I immediately rushed as fast as I could to find Hyllus and tell him what his mother was preparing to do and as we ran back we saw her -alas!- to plunge the two-sided sword into her liver below her heart.

As soon as Hyllus saw her he screamed with sorrow because he felt he was the cause of her death. He became aware of the events too late -that his mother had caused his father's death because she was tricked by the Centaur.

Then her lamenting son, began to cover her with kisses falling beside her crying out that it was his wicked slander that had killed her and weeping and groaning because now he was bereft of both his parents.

So that's how matters stand here. What fool would count on the future? One day, two days or more to come? Nothing can be certain until today has safely ended.

**CHORUS:**

Which of the two deaths is the saddest? Which should I lament the most? I, poor wretch, find it hard to decide.

**CHORUS:**

Here, in the palace lies one, the other we await to come.

The one we see is as sad a sight as the one we're waiting to see.

**CHORUS:**

Come wind, come cleansing gust and take me away from here!

**CHORUS:**

Save me from death at once received when I shall see our mighty Zeus born Heracles.

**CHORUS:**

He's coming now, they say, tortured by a torture incurable, a sight incomprehensible, unspeakable.

*Enter men carrying Heracles on a stretcher. Hyllus and an elder in attendance.*

**CHORUS:**

And so the unbearable sight is near now and we cry like the shrill voiced nightin-



gale. Here now they are, a party of strangers carrying him, bringing him home, hushed voices and slow feet, as if they're carrying one of their own.

**CHORUS:**

And he is silent. Is he dead or is he asleep.

**HYLLUS:**

Alas, my father! Alas, alas! Alone, without you, my father, I shall be lost.

**ELDER:**

Hush, my son, don't yell and wake your dear father's dreadful pain! He's alive though only just. He's asleep right now so control your lips.

**HYLLUS:**

What was that old sir? Did you say he's alive?

**ELDER:**

Yes, my son, but don't wake him up from the sleep that controls him and his pain, nor wake up the awful torture that comes and goes.

**HYLLUS:**

Yet a dreadful weight of sadness tortures my heart and I am going insane.

**HERACLES:**

O Zeus! Zeus where in the world am I? What men surround my bed, this bed of horrible torture, of endless agony? Oh, what misery! Ah! Again this cursed potion tears into my body!

**ELDER:**

Was I not right to ask for quietness and for not sending sleep away from his head and eyes?

**HYLLUS:**

Yes but how could I bear to look upon such a sight?

**HERACLES:**

Cenaean altars that I've built, is this the reward I get for sacrificing to Zeus? O Zeus! Torture upon torture ever-growing whose end I cannot see. Madness upon madness ever growing madness that cannot be calmed.

Which is the charm and which the practitioner who'll sent this torture to its final bed, if not my father, Zeus? A miracle I'll never see.

*The elder tries to comfort Heracles.*

Oh! Leave me! Leave this unlucky creature to rest for the last time. Let me, poor wretch, sleep. Where are you touching me? Why lay me that way? You want to kill me!

Ah! You've waken a sleeping evil!

Ah! The pain has returned! It's fully awake! Ah! I'm in its grip.

What manner of mortals are you, Greeks? Where are you from, you evil men for whom I've fought all manner of beasts –in the oceans and in the forests? I'm now dying because of you yet none of you will bring me fire or a sword to help me against my torture.

Ah! Come someone! Come and cut off my head, end this misery, end this life! Ah! Ah!

**ELDER:** *(to Hyllus)*

Come, my son, come Heracles' son and help me ease his agony. All this – all this is too much for me!

**HYLLUS:** (*puts his arms around Heracles*)

I have my arms around him but this god-delivered torment is not relieved. I cannot help -neither from inside nor outside can I minister any help that would cause his pain to leave him.

Cures such as this can only be administered by Zeus.

**HERACLES:**

Ah, my son, where are you? Here. Hold me from here and lift me... Oh, God! The shocking dread returns! This evil, unbeatable torments will consume me!

O, Pallas Athena! Pallas, the pain still gnaws at my body.

Come my son, have pity on your father. Draw out your sword and with no fear cut me across the neck, cure the pains that are eating my flesh.

Ah! Such are the pains I wish for your god-hated mother! God-hated, evil woman who has destroyed me in this way.

Oh, sweet Hades! Hades, Zeus' brother, put me to sleep and take me quickly.

Put an end to my torture!

**CHORUS:**

Friends! What shocking Fate tortures our Lord and hero! What ill luck! I shudder at the sight.

**HERACLES:**

Too many the hard labours that my arms and shoulders had endured -too many to mention them all yet neither Hera nor Eurystheus made me endure a thing so dreadful as that which Oeneus' daughter, beautiful and evil both at once, Deianeira, has made me endure.

A robe covered with the blood of the evil centaur -a robe woven you could say by the spirits of Vengeance- a robe that's killing me!

It has stuck upon the sides of my body and, having gone through my flesh is now eating at my entrails -my veins, my lungs. It had sucked out of my heart all of its fresh blood.

Here, in this net of death I am captured though no enemy spears, nor the children of earth-born giants, nor the madness of wild beasts, nor Greeks nor barbarians, nor foreign lands which I cleansed did this to me. Only a woman, a woman! A woman alone, weak, unmanly and without the help of a sword has vanquished me!

Come, my son. Show that you are my own true son and disown your mother now. From now on do not call her your mother. Go and take her and bring her here to me. Put her into my hands so that I can be certain that your suffering is greater when you see my body writhe with pain than when you see hers, suffering justly from the same torture.

Come, my son, have courage and feel pity for your father just as other do. See? I am crying like a little girl and groan, a thing that no one can say has ever seen me do. I have always -without the slightest sigh- followed all of my Fate's labours yet now, here I am, sighing and groaning and crying, behaving like a little girl.

Come, stand by your father. Think! What was the evil that brought me to this?

*Pulls away the sheet which covered him*

I pull away whatever hides my body so that you can see with your own eyes.

Look at me all of you!

Look at my outraged body! All of you! Look at my pitiful state!

Ah, unhappy Heracles! Ah! Again the evil torture burns me through and through! Again the spasm of the all-consuming pain rushed through my sides leaving me not a moment's rest!

Lord Hades, receive me!

Zeus' lightning rod strike me!

Zeus, my father, hurl upon me your thunderbolt! Hurl it now because again it's eating me, because it's burgeoning because it's torturing me!

Oh my hands, my back and shoulders! My arms whose strength once killed the beast of Nemea a beast that sent a chill of fear through the shepherds' bones; arms whose strength has tamed the Hydra of Lerna, the awful army of monstrous Centaurs, mighty in their strength and arrogance, horses feet. Arms that killed Eurymanthus' beast and the three-headed dog of Hades who lived below the earth, Echidna's scion and the snake that guarded the golden apples in the remotest lands.

And I have tasted many thousands of other labours and no one has managed to defeat me and stand a trophy of victory over me.

But now, with nerves shattered and flesh torn to shreds, I am beaten by one hidden enemy. I! I whom they call "son of the most glorious mothers" and say that my father is Zeus who lives in the stars!

But you should know this well: Even though my strength is gone and I can barely move, still I shall punish the woman who brought this about.

Let her come here!

Let her tell all that, alive or dead, Heracles always punished the evil doers!

**CHORUS:**

Unhappy Greece! What tears will follow this man's loss!

**HYLLUS:**

Father, since you give me leave to speak, listen to me in silence. I know you are in agony. I need to ask of you only what is just. Trust me and let the anger that consumes your entrails be measured, otherwise you won't be able to understand how mistaken your joy will be and how equally mistaken is the bitterness that consumes you.

**HERACLES:**

Quickly say what you want and be done with it because the way I feel now I can understand nothing of your twisting words.

**HYLLUS:**

I want to speak about my mother. About her present situation and about the evil deed she committed without knowing it.

**HERACLES:**

You evil man! You dare mention your mother's name to me? Your mother who has killed your father?

**HYLLUS:**

Yes, father because such is the situation with her that I cannot be silent.

**HERACLES:**

Oh, no! Of course not, if you consider what she has dared already!

**HYLLUS:**

Or what she has done this very day!

**HERACLES:**

Speak then but beware you don't make a man unworthy to be my son out of yourself!

**HYLLUS:**

Here it is. My mother is no longer alive – she is dead! Killed!

**HERACLES:**

Killed? By whom? What sudden dreadful news is this I hear from you?

**HYLLUS:**

She was not killed by another's hand but by her own. She's gone.

**HERACLES:**

Ah! She should have died before this by my own hand. It would have been just.

**HYLLUS:**

Your heart, too, would change course if you knew the whole truth.

**HERACLES:**

You began your speech with strange words but go on, speak what's in your mind.

**HYLLUS:**

She erred while she was trying to do good.

**HERACLES:**

She killed your father. You call that "good?"

**HYLLUS:**

She erred by sending you what she thought was a lover's potion. She became afraid when she saw all these new wives filling her house.

**HERACLES:**

So who is this great magician we have here in Trachinae?

**HYLLUS:**

Nessus the Centaur. A long time ago he persuaded her that he could inflame your passion towards her with his magic.

**HERACLES:**

Oh, unhappy man! I am lost. Gone! The day's light has gone from me now! Now I know the true weight of my misery! I am lost! I am lost!

Go on my son, go and gather all your siblings and my luckless mother, Alkmene who needlessly became Zeus' wife, bring her to listen to the last words of the oracle I know.

**HYLLUS:**

Your mother is not here. She has gone to live by the shore of Tiryns. As of your children, she has taken some with her and some live in the city of Thebes. Still, the rest of us live here so tell us what you need father and we will obey you.

**HERACLES:**

Now, then is the time for you to show me if you are truly worthy of being called my son. Listen to what you must do.

My father has left me a long time ago, with this prediction, that I shall be killed not by a living man but by someone dead, living in Hades' world. And so it happened. This Centaur has killed me, he, in the underworld, me alive on Earth. And there are more predictions that are also accomplished like all the old ones and agree with them, ones which I've received from the oak of the many voices at

Zeus' Dodonae, that time when I went to the sacred grove of the mountain folk the Selli. I keep these oracles in a safe place.

One such prophecy said that at this time I should have all my labours completed and that I should then be happy. What was meant by "happy" though was that I would be dead –the dead don't have to worry about doing any labours.

Well now, my son, since these prophecies have come to be true you must stand by me and not against me. Do not sharpen my tongue but give me your aid willingly to show that for you, the best law is for the children to obey their parents.

**HYLLUS:**

Father you're frightening me with your talk but yes, I shall obey you.

**HERACLES:**

Well then, first things first: give me your hand.

**HYLLUS:**

What is the reason you need such assurances, father?

**HERACLES:**

Why are you hesitating? Forget your suspicions.

**HYLLUS:**

Here is my hand, father. I will not argue.

**HERACLES:**

Now swear by the head of Zeus my father.

**HYLLUS:**

What? What should I swear by? Will you not explain, father?

**HERACLES:**

You will swear that you will do as I say.

**HYLLUS:**

I swear and let Zeus be my witness!

**HERACLES:**

And if you break this oath you will suffer great tribulations.

**HYLLUS:**

I will suffer no tribulations because I will not break my oath; but I swear to it.

**HERACLES:**

Well then, do you know the highest peak of Oetis, Zeus' peak?

**HYLLUS:**

I know it because I went there many time to make sacrifices.

**HERACLES:**

Lift me up with your own hands and taking as many of your friends, as you want take me there. There, once you've cut enough wood from the deep-rooted oak and the hard-wooded wild olive trees, make a pile of them and place my body upon it. Then light a torch of pine and light the pyre without crying, without losing a tear, without a sigh, holding your tears, a true son of mine. Do as I say or else even in the underworld my curses will lay heavy on you for ever.

**HYLLUS:**

No father! What is this you've made me do? What did you say?

**HERACLES:**

I've told you what you must do. Otherwise call anyone else you want, father and let no one call you my son any more.

**HYLLUS:**

Father, think again! What are you asking me to do? Do you want me to be your god-cursed murderer?

**HERACLES:**

No. Rather to be my healer and my only doctor, the only one who can save me from my torture.

**HYLLUS:**

But would I be healing you by setting your body alight?

**HERACLES:**

Well, if you're afraid of lighting the pyre at least do the rest.

**HYLLUS:**

I shall not refuse the task of taking you there.

**HERACLES:**

And what of the laying of the wood?

**HYLLUS:**

So long as I don't apply my own hand to the fire. I shall do all the rest and you shall have no reason to complain.

**HERACLES:**

That would be more than enough, though I have one more little request above and beyond the other big ones.

**HYLLUS:**

Whatever it is, even a greater one, it shall be done.

**HERACLES:**

You of know Eurytus' daughter.

**HYLLUS:**

I suspect you mean Iole.

**HERACLES:**

The same. This then is what I would like you to do, my son.

If you want to respect the oath you gave me, once I die, take this woman as your wife. See that you don't disobey me on this. No other mortal must take this woman as a wife –she has shared my bed. You must be the only one she marries. Don't refuse this request because even though you've agreed to all my other bigger requests, if you disagree with the smaller then my gratitude would be cancelled out and lost.

**HYLLUS:**

Who can argue with a man as sick as you are, father but to obey such thinking is intolerable.

**HERACLES:**

Your words make me think you have no intentions of doing anything I've asked of you.

**HYLLUS:**

But Iole is the sole reason for your situation as well as mother's death! Who then – other than a man made sick by the Furies- would want to make her his wife? Father, I'd rather die also than to live with my enemy.

**HERACLES:**

Ah! It looks like this man will not give a dying man his due. The curses of the gods

await you if you disobey me!

**HYLLUS:**

Ah! I fear your words stem from the painful sickness that grips you.

**HERACLES:**

Because you have awoken the sickness yourself.

**HYLLUS:**

Oh, poor wretch. What am I to do?

**HERACLES:**

Why do you see it unjust to obey your father?

**HYLLUS:**

But must I learn to behave like an impious man, father?

**HERACLES:**

There's nothing impious in pleasing my heart.

**HYLLUS:**

Then do you truly command me to do this?

**HERACLES:**

Yes, and let all the gods be my witness!

**HYLLUS:**

Well then, I will not disobey you and agree to do it, accepting the gods as my witness that this act is yours. I shall therefore not fear that I will be accused of being a traitor and your disobedient son.

**HERACLES:**

That was well said – at last! But come now, my son. Quick now hurry and put me on the pyre before a new spasm tears at my body. Hurry, lift me, take me to my final rest, to the end of my agony, to the end of Heracles.

**HYLLUS:**

Nothing can now stop us from obeying your every command, father.

*Hyllus and his companions lift Heracles onto a stretcher.*

**HERACLES:**

Come then lest this wild torture wakes again! O, my hard soul, make my lips two huge stones and fasten them with iron, let no cry escape them. Let this awful work be done as if it were a pleasure for all.

**HYLLUS:**

Come friends, take a hold of the stretcher. Let all men witness the cruelty of the gods, unjustly causing all of what you see. Because even though he is their son they disregard his torture.

What will happen from now on no one knows but as for this it is great sadness for us and a great shame for them. Hardest of all was my father's fate, who suffers this torment.

You, women of Trachis, do not stay here, here in the palaces where you saw these horrible deaths and many great sufferings. All these are the works of Zeus.

*Exit all*

# An Introductory Note to Euripides' Bacchae

*This section is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>369</sup> lecture by Ian Johnston*

*This introductory note has been prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, British Columbia (now Vancouver Island University), for students in search of a brief general interpretative introduction to The Bacchae.*

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<sup>369</sup>[http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/bacchae\\_introduction.htm](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/bacchae_introduction.htm)



## Introduction

Euripides' *Bacchae*, the last extant classical Greek tragedy, has for a long time been the focus of an intense interpretative argument, probably more so than any other Greek tragedy (especially in the wide range of very different interpretations the play). In this necessarily brief introduction, I wish to sketch out some details of the source of this disagreement and review some of the more common interpretative possibilities. In the course of this discussion, my own preferences will be clear enough, but I hope to do justice to some viewpoints with which I disagree.

## Some Obvious Initial Points

To start with, let me review some of the more obvious and important facts of the play, things about which we are unlikely to disagree and which any interpretation is going to have to take into account. After this quick and brief review of the salient points, I'll address some of the ways people have sought to interpret them.

First, the central dramatic action of the *Bacchae*—the play's most obvious and important feature—is an invasion of Greece by an Asian religion (something which may well have a historical basis from a time well before Euripides, but that is not our concern here). The opening scenes of the play repeatedly stress the non-Greek qualities and origins of the followers of Dionysus, tell us that they have been involved in a sweep through Asia Minor, converting cities as they go, and indicate clearly that Thebes is the first entirely Greek city subject to this new force, the first stop in what is to be a continuing campaign of forceful conversion of Greek city-states. Dionysus may have been born in Thebes (more about that later), but he and his followers identify themselves and their cause repeatedly as an invasion of Greece by Asian (non-Greek) ways—and what he brings with him is also seen by the Greeks (at least by Pentheus) as something non-Greek, something new and threatening (the difference is, of course, emphatically brought out by the clothing and movements of the chorus in contrast to the clothing and movements of the citizens of Thebes).

It's also clear enough what this religion involves, a rapturous group experience featuring dancing, costumes, music, wine, and ecstatic release out in nature away from the city (in the wild, potentially dangerous nature of the mountains, not in the safer cultivated areas). It is presented to us as a primarily (but not exclusively) female experience, one which takes women of all ages away from their homes and their responsibilities in the polis and confers on them amazingly irrational powers, beyond the traditional controls exercised by the male rulers of the city, and brings them into harmony with wild nature (most obviously symbolized by the dancing in bare feet). In the Bacchic celebrations the traditional lines of division between human beings and animals and between different groups of human beings (social and gender differences) break down and disappear or are transformed. The play stresses the beauty, energy, creativity, and communal joy of this Bacchic ritual, while at the same time repeatedly informing us of the destructive potential latent in it.

The central conflict in the play focuses on the clash between this new religion and the traditional Greek way of life—both the customary political authority (embodied in Pentheus) and the long-standing religious and social attitudes (manifested most clearly by Tiresias and Cadmus, two figures of major symbolic importance in traditional Greek literature and myth). These characters are faced with the issue of how they should respond to something very foreign to what they are used to. They discuss the matter, argue amongst themselves, and make different decisions. The play thus forces us to examine a range of options and to confront the question about how one should deal with Dionysus and what he represents in the light of traditional Greek ways of running the human community.

The most significant of these responses is that of Pentheus, the king. On the

surface, he is acting like a traditional tragic hero, accepting responsibility for protecting the city in the face of an obvious political crisis (all the women out of town raising havoc among the local villages, tearing cattle apart, and so on) and acting decisively to restore order. But we quickly sense that Pentheus, unlike, say, Oedipus or Achilles (or even Creon in *Antigone*, for that matter), has complex inner problems (especially concerning sexuality), so that his responses to the crisis (all that talk of prisons, soldiers, massacres, and so forth, along with his constant military escort, his fascination with Dionysus' appearance, especially the obsession with his hair) come across more as a psychological response to certain personal inadequacies or inner pressures (things he'd sooner not think about or is even unaware of in himself) than a genuine desire to do the right thing for the city or to assert a self-confident sense of his own greatness based upon a past record of achievement. This aspect of the play makes it the most psychologically compelling of all the Greek tragedies, and dealing with this psychological dimension is obviously essential in any coherent evaluation of the play.

Finally (to conclude this short list of obvious features), the actions of this play are brutally destructive: the palace is destroyed, the major characters are all punished horribly by an omnipotent god who is supremely confident about his powers and (much of the time) superbly contemptuous of the human beings he is dealing with (the references to the enigmatic smile of Dionysus are important here). In his distribution of punishments, Dionysus seems to refuse to consider that some of those he is punishing so dreadfully made some attempt to accept his worship and to persuade others to do the same. At the end of the play Thebes (the oldest city in Greek mythology, the place where the Greek race originated, as the play reminds us) is in ruins, its ruling family (the origin of the people of Thebes) is finished, as Dionysus and his followers sweep off to the next Greek city (presumably to re-enact what we have just seen). The final image we are left with is the scattered parts of Pentheus' body (the only unburied corpse in Greek tragedy, as Jan Kott reminds us), and the memory of the fact that, under the god's forceful control, his mother ripped him apart and (perhaps) ate some of him. The only one left unshocked by what happens in Dionysus' version of a deserved "punishment" is Dionysus himself, who throughout the play seems to be enjoying himself immensely (the marked silence of the Chorus near the end suggests that even they may be wondering just what their leader has done in the service of the religion they celebrate in his name, although the significant gap in the manuscript near the end may include something to meet this point). Dionysus' statements justifying his treatment of Cadmus, Pentheus, and Agave are brutally curt and impossible to accept as a satisfactory justification for what has happened.

What makes this brutality all the worse is that Dionysus' treatment of human beings robs them of their dignity. Greek tragedy is, of course, no stranger to excessively harsh treatment of human beings by malevolent gods (Oedipus being the supreme example), but such treatment does not usually remove from the main characters a sense of their own heroic worth as they try to cope—in fact, confronting that heroic magnificence in the face of a hostile or unpredictable or unknown (but ultimately destructive) divine presence is the most important part of the imaginative wonder we experience in reading a great deal of Greek literature,

from the *Iliad* onwards.

But in *The Bacchae* such heroic worth is hard to find, simply because so many major characters are either merely silly (like Tiresias and Cadmus) or have no control over what they are doing (like Pentheus or Agave)—lacking power over themselves, they are not free to make the decisions through which the values of heroic self-assertiveness manifest themselves. In that sense, they are very different from earlier heroic figures, who may well live in a fatalistic universe ruled by mysterious and hostile irrational powers but who never abandon the essence of their individual greatness: the freedom to assert their value in the face of such a fate. For such self-assertion (no matter how personally disastrous) to have value (that is, to manifest some human qualities worthy of our admiration and respect), we must see it as something freely willed, something undertaken deliberately in the face of other options. Such freedom Pentheus does not have, because he is in the grip of inner compulsions which do not enable him to make independent choices. If there is a necessary connection between his actions and his fate, that connection stems from his unconscious psychological weakness rather than from his conscious heroic assertiveness, public-spiritedness, or courage. This, it strikes me, is a crucial point (to which I shall return later on).

Let us now turn to some of the ways interpreters have encouraged us to understand these (and other) matters.

## ***The Bacchae* as a Punishment for Impiety**

One easy way to shape the events of the play is to see it as a relatively unproblematic morality story whose main thrust is divine punishment against Pentheus and Thebes for their refusal to accept the godhead of Dionysus (this, of course, is Dionysus' view). Taken at the most simplistic level, the brutality in the play might thus be seen as justification for evil behaviour or heresy: Pentheus and Agave act badly, they should have known better than to disrespect the divine (as the chorus repeatedly points out), and they earn their punishment, since people ought to respect and obey and worship the gods (or God).

Such a response is, of course, drastically oversimple, but it is also very reassuring, since it enables us to place any potential difficulties we might have in exploring some disturbing complexities (like the astonishingly brutal and irrational ending—so disproportionately savage) into a comfortably familiar moral rubric. In fact, such easy moralizing is a common feature of many interpretations of Greek works (especially tragedies) offered by those who do not wish to face up to some unsettling possibilities (so Oedipus deservedly suffers because he commits sin or has too quick a temper, the destruction of Troy—as presented in the *Iliad*—is just, because Paris shouldn't have run off with Helen, and so on). This tendency, it strikes me, though very common, is essentially a reflex response of, among others, modern liberal rationalists who don't want to face up to the full ironic complexity of tragic fatalism (but that's a subject for another lecture).

The notion that we are witnessing some acceptable form of divine justice here is surely stained once we consider the horrific and all-encompassing nature of that punishment—the destruction of an ancient centre of civilization, the degradation, self-abasement, and horrific death of the hero, the killing of a son by his mother, and extreme punishments handed out to all, no matter how they respond to the arrival of the god, combined with the pleasure the god takes in inflicting such destruction on human civilization and the inadequacy of his explanation. All these bring out strongly the irrationality, even the insanity, of Dionysus' "justice." So it becomes difficult, I think, to force the play into a comfortably rational shape, if by that we mean that it endorses some easy moral belief that evil is, more or less, punishment for sin.

A more sophisticated (and certainly more interesting) version of this approach to the play looks at Dionysus, not simply as a foreign god, but as the embodiment of certain aspects of human experience, as a symbol for the irrational, communal excitement, bonding, power, joy, intoxication, and excess which all too often get lost in the careful life of the city, governed by habit, rules, laws, and responsibilities. This approach to the play stresses the fact that Thebes has lost touch with those irrational energizing unconscious powers of life and, in Agave's and Pentheus' refusal to acknowledge the divinity of Dionysus, created a situation where these powers (which cannot be forever denied) simply break out with disastrous consequences. If that doesn't carry an explicit moral, at least it serves as a cautionary tale.

This view has a good deal to recommend it, particularly in the figure of Pentheus, who is clearly striving throughout much of the play to repress hidden

irrational desires and to deal with a fascination with and horror of those desires. He seeks to cope by encasing everything, including himself, inside metal (chains or armour) and by lashing out with male force (soldiers and commands), trying to impose a sense of external order on something which repels and attracts him, something which is obviously connected to his buried feelings about sexuality, an issue to which he keeps returning obsessively (whether in connection with Dionysus or the Bacchic women). However else we see Pentheus, it is not difficult to observe in him a person who is incapable of uniting his conscious sense of who he is as a king (political leader) with his unconscious repressed awareness of himself as an emotional (and especially a sexual) being with hidden and unfulfilled desires (a point brought out emphatically by the male-female polarity in the conflict).

This aspect of the play is also strongly brought out by the obvious similarities between Pentheus and Dionysus—both young men from the same family. It's not difficult to make the case that, in a sense, in those central confrontations between the two characters, Pentheus is having to deal with a part of himself, a part that he doesn't recognize as his (or doesn't want to). The fact that Dionysus was born in Thebes underscores this point—he may have been long absent, but he is by birth as much a part of Thebes as Pentheus (both are grandsons of Cadmus). So Pentheus' rejection of Dionysus is a rejection of him as a close family member (part of himself), as well as a rejection of his divinity. And Dionysus' confident manipulation of Pentheus evokes a strong sense that he is very much at home in Pentheus' psyche and understands well just how ineffectual all those external controls Pentheus is relying on are going to be once he (Dionysus) starts playing to those repressed desires Pentheus harbours.

The play also links the music central to Dionysian ritual with the very earliest development of the Olympian gods (Zeus' birth), so there's a sense here that what Dionysus celebrates is a fixed and divinely ordained part of the scheme of things, no matter how much some people may have forgotten or never known that.

It's possible, on this view, to argue that Dionysus is initially seeking some synthesis in Thebes, some reinvigoration of the city by the introduction and acceptance of his rituals (hence to restore life to a more appropriate balance), with initially no particularly destructive intent, but that he changes his mind in the face of Pentheus' intransigence. Dionysus, after all, volunteers to bring the women back into the city, without violence, an offer which suggests that some compromise may be possible. Only after Pentheus typically rejects the offer (or ignores it), does Dionysus then tempt Pentheus out into the mountains to his death. This moment when Dionysus makes his offer and Pentheus rejects it is a particularly interesting one, suggesting as it does that Pentheus may be unwilling to compromise because he wants to see something illegal, sexual, naughty—he doesn't want to accommodate himself to it (by having the women back in the city), but to enjoy it all the more because it offends him—the urge to enjoy the frisson of a voyeur overcomes any desire to understand and adjust—there would be no delight in seeing the women dance if that was legal, part of everyday life (given this point, just what he might be doing sitting under the trees in silence as he watches the Bacchic women invites some imaginative exploration). So we might see the destruction of Pentheus as the self-immolation of a man too afraid of his inner

self to address it maturely and too fascinated with it to repress it successfully.

However, there are some difficulties with this line of interpretation. Apart from the fact that Dionysus gives very little indication of a genuine intent to harmonize his religion with Greek political life (given how well he understands Pentheus, that offer mentioned above may be just one more psychological deception, a preparation for what he has had in mind all along, the total humiliation and meaningless destruction of Pentheus), the play offers us no sense that a harmonious synthesis with what Thebes has become and the new religion of Dionysus is possible. If it offered us that, then it might be easier to see Pentheus' destruction as a particular instance of one badly fractured personality. But instead the play holds up for ridicule those Thebans who do seek to worship Dionysus (Tiresias and Cadmus) and subjects the women who have gone up into the mountains to the most horrific punishments.

In addition, the play stresses the uncivil and anti-civil actions required and encouraged by Dionysian rituals (especially the abandoning and kidnapping of children, the destruction of domestic animals, and so on—culminating in the most anti-civil action of all, the mother's destruction of her child, an act which, more than any other, violates the basic reason for the community's existence). Given what this play shows us, it is difficult to believe that a reconciliation between Dionysian religion and civil life is possible. And if that is not available, then what sort of cautionary tale are we being offered here? What exactly are we, as spectators, supposed to take away from this in the way of closure?

## ***The Bacchae* as an Indictment of Dionysian Religion**

Given this last point, it is not difficult to see why some interpreters have viewed this play as an indictment of religion because of its hostility to the survival of the community, on the ground that religion (as depicted by Dionysus and his followers) is the basis for the irrational destructiveness which threatens and ultimately overthrows the well-ordered city in an orgy of cruel excess. On this view, the play is a cautionary tale about the dangers of religious superstitions.

This approach naturally makes a good deal of the way in which the play always links the benefits of Dionysian religion, its value as a beautiful, creative celebration, with destructiveness, with anti-political or extra-political activities, and, from time to time, with a sense of passive resignation: human life is really not worth much, but at least, thanks to Dionysus, we have wine, which enables us to forget our troubles, so we should worship the god who makes it possible for us to get drunk and not strive to be anything better than we are. And in the Dionysian celebrations we can forget our individual cares, responsibilities, and laws and give free rein to our inhibitions—a sure way to undermine the things most essential to human well being and happiness, namely, the security of a well-governed city and the rational powers of the human mind to make things better (or at least stop them from getting worse).

If we focus exclusively upon these features of the play, then it's not difficult to sense how many might see it as a scathing attack on popular superstitions, particularly those which generate enthusiasm through mass hysteria and crowd violence in the face of calmer, more traditional controls (and self-control). But there are difficulties in pushing this interpretative possibility too far.

The major obstacle here, of course, is the figure of Pentheus himself. As the political ruler of Thebes, he embodies the nature and value of the civic authority threatened by Dionysian excess. And whatever we might like to say about Pentheus, he is hardly someone in whom we might celebrate the enduring values of civilized and just political life (for reasons mentioned above in the previous section). Quite the reverse—he seems as much a threat to what is valuable in civic life as Dionysus (although, of course, he is unaware of that).

In addition, the traditional values of Thebes are, in the figures of Tiresias and especially Cadmus, exposed as silly, grotesque, and self-serving. They want to dance to the music but travel there in a chariot. Cadmus seems particularly keen that his family's status will be improved if people think his daughter has given birth to a god (whether it's true or not). Their combined physical decrepitude (the blind leading the lame) is an eloquent physical symbol of the extent to which the long traditions they represent have become enfeebled (and, as I mentioned earlier, no two mythological characters in Greek literature carry more solemn weight, from the *Odyssey* onward, than these two, so treating them this way is a bit like making, say, George Washington an anxious, neurotic, and selfish coward in a retelling of Valley Forge).

One would think that, if the main point of the play is to expose the savagery of religious superstition as a danger to civic order or peaceful political life, then the political order would be presented as something more valuable, more worth



preserving than it is here. After all, whatever feelings of horror and sympathetic pathos we may feel at Pentheus' destruction, there is no sense that he carries an inherent dignity and redeeming value which is sacrificed with him (other than his presence as a confused, suffering, inadequate human being). The same applies to Tiresias and Cadmus and Agave.

## ***The Bacchae* as a Choice of Nightmares**

A more persuasive and inclusive approach to the play, it strikes me, builds on the strengths of the previously mentioned alternatives, refusing to see it as endorsing one side of the dichotomy against the other (Pentheus and Thebes or Dionysus and the Bacchantes) and instead exploring the play as a particularly despairing vision of the destructiveness inherent in the ambiguities of human existence, contradictions which simply cannot be reconciled into some harmonious creative whole. Rather than being a cautionary tale, the play is a passionate vision of total despair.

This approach would stress that, indeed, the vision of political and traditional life of Thebes sees it as hopeless silly, insecure, and shallow, built on no confident sense of justice—something that has run out of a creative energizing faith in itself (hence the reflex reliance on power). Those who embody ancient traditions (Cadmus and Tiresias) have become self-serving caricatures of what they used to be. The traditional source of political leadership and justice (the king, Pentheus) is radically uncertain of his identity, wracked with inner complexities which control his actions, and thus without any confident self-assertiveness or sense of responsibility for the sake of the community. The considerable power he exercises hence comes to be used primarily to protect himself against his own inner insecurities. No wonder he is much more concerned with confinement and slaughter than he is with justice—he's fighting against his own inner desires which (as mentioned above) attract and repel him.

At the same time, his polar opposite, Dionysus, for all the supreme self-confidence he displays, is a malevolent destroyer. The gifts he brings are considerable, but they are not compatible with civilized human achievement (at least not as this play presents them)—they not merely challenge existing traditions; they also completely obliterate those who stand in their way. And they do this, not in the name of some workable political or communal alternative, but for the sake of mass ecstatic frenzy outside the traditional community and drunken oblivion within it.

If we remember that the central concern of the human community in Greek literature is justice—the best arrangement whereby human beings can live and prosper together as citizens of a political unit, then Pentheus and Dionysus both bring out the extent to which justice has disappeared. Pentheus is concerned only with power in the shoring up of his own inadequate personality; Dionysus is concerned only with ecstatic release in a mass frenzy and the total destruction of those who do not immediately comply—all in order to convert civic life into an irrational manifestation of belief in what he represents.

Incidentally, in considering the importance of this idea of justice, we should not be too quick to accept the Chorus' frequent invocations of what they call justice as the "message" of the play or as the point of view the author is hoping we'll accept. It's true the Chorus frequently sings of justice, but a close view of what they mean by the term stresses their irrational sense of the term: for them justice is a god-given right to oppress one's enemies or a willed refusal to do anything more than passively accept the given conditions of life. These two options, I would suggest, remove from the term justice any central concern with the difficult struggle to establish fairness in the community and repetitively insist upon the extent to

which the worship of Dionysus, as defined here, runs directly counter to the major concern of Greek political life.

The play offers no suggestion that a reconciliation between these two cousins is possible. Human experience is radically split into two diametrically opposed and inherently incomplete possibilities. When they come together, destruction of civilization results—a horror in which there is no room for human beings to manifest the slightest individual dignity and hence assert some human values in their suffering (in fact, their individuality is taken away from them before they die, so that they become objects of mockery or pathos). So it doesn't matter which side one chooses to align oneself with, Dionysus or Pentheus, the end result is the same. There is no moral lesson to be learned—that's simply the way the world works.

Jan Kott in a remarkably interesting essay drew a fruitful parallel between *The Bacchae* and Conrad's famous story *Heart of Darkness*, in which (to simplify a very complex fiction and Kott's remarks on it) human experience is presented to us as offering two irreconcilable possibilities—the European life on the surface (with its stress on political power, suppression of nature, urban bureaucratic rationality, and ignorance of the inner life) and African life lived from the heart (with its stress on passion, dancing, mass movement, and cannibalism, in the prehistoric wilderness of the jungle). Conrad's tale explores (among other things) the mutual destruction which occurs when these two ways of life (or aspects of life) collide, and it offers us no hope for some harmonious reconciliation (either politically or psychologically). The experience of these possibilities leaves Marlowe with the cryptic final comment that life is, in effect, a "choice of nightmares"—one can stay on the surface or move into the darkness, but either way life is inherently unfulfilled. Someone who, like Kurtz, tries to experience both as fully as possible is left in self-destructive despair ("The horror! The horror!").

Kott's parallel, it strikes me, is very illuminating, because it does justice to the full power of Euripides' play—especially the savage vision of despair at the end, which we might like to mute by imposing on it some more comfortable moral "lesson," but which is much too powerful to be contained by such a confining and neat interpretative scheme.

Thinking about the parallels between these two stories, I am struck by how much more despairing Euripides' tale is than Conrad's. For in Conrad's story, the two ways of life are widely separated geographically, and there's a sense that so long as that separation remains, the European civilization will continue, content on the surface and economically prosperous in its ignorant idealism (although Marlowe senses it is slowly dying). And in that story we also have the figure of Marlowe as someone who, if he has not reconciled the white and the black, has adopted a meditative stance towards the paradoxes of his experience and finds some purpose in sailing back and forth between them and in telling his story. But in Euripides' play there is no similar sense—the worlds of Dionysus and Pentheus are inevitably colliding, with more examples to follow, and we have no final consolation in a Marlowe-like figure. Instead we have the scattered bits of Pentheus, all that remains of Thebes and its royal family.

## A Note on the Historical Context

Those who like to anchor their interpretations on details of historical context (not a procedure I personally recommend for reasons there is not time to go into here, but a popular method of proceeding nonetheless) will find plenty of potentially useful supporting detail for the final suggestions given above. Let me briefly mention a few.

*The Bacchae* is one of Euripides' very last works (unperformed in his life, with the manuscript discovered at his death), written when the aging writer had turned his back on Greece and moved to Macedon (around 408 BC) shortly before his death, perhaps bitter because he had never achieved the highest success as a tragedian in Athens or in his frustration at Athenian political life. At this time the long drawn-out insanity of the Peloponnesian War was in its final stages, and its destructive effects on the highest Greek (especially Athenian) achievements were plain for all to see, as the possibilities for a just communal political life among the Greek city-states and within particular states had foundered on greed, self-interest, mass killings, Persian money, the corruption or abandonment of traditional ways, and political incompetence (in short, on the disappearance of justice).

The sense that in this war the Greeks were in the grip of some mass self-destructive insanity which weak traditional political structures and shallow personalities were inadequate to deal with was by no means confined to Euripides (if that is how we read his play)—there is strong corroboration in, among other texts, the apocalyptic ending of the *Clouds* and, of course, throughout Thucydides.

## The Mythological Framework: Some Comments

The above interpretative suggestions are underscored by the remarkably rich treatment of a number of important Greek myths throughout the play. These highlight the tensions between the eastern (barbarian) and Greek responses to life and to the divine and suggest by the end that the Greek way has been overcome and banished. There may well be a sense that whatever it was which made Greece special (in contrast to the barbarians), the Greek "experiment," if you will, has ended. Without going into great detail, let me suggest some of the ways in which the mythic content of the play and the discussion of how one understands myth help to illuminate this play's despairing vision.

Central to *The Bacchae* is the family of Cadmus. The play reminds us early on that Cadmus came from Asia (from Sidon) and created the Greek race by sowing the dragon's teeth which produced the first Greeks (the Cadmeians)—an event which is referred to more than once. Cadmus also married Harmonia, an immortal, in a celebration which (like the similar union of Achilles' parents, Peleus and Thetis) symbolizes the possibility of a harmonious relationship between the human and the divine as the creative basis for the just community (of the sort we see dramatically symbolized at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*).

The play forces us to examine the destruction of this earlier harmony between gods and men and hence of the political and communal ideal which it endorses. Dionysus, an eastern god (or a god bringing with him a different relationship to the divine) is interested in submission, ecstatic revelry, and drink. Those who do not at once celebrate this vision of divinity are subjected to harsh, instant, irrational punishment for disobedience. And the penalty he inflicts here—the killing of a child by his mother and the banishment of the royal family into barbarian lands (a significant contrast to the *Oresteia*, where the killing of a mother by the son helps to establish human justice under divine auspices in the polis)—marks an end to whatever Greek Thebes was all about to begin with. The barbarian East, where Cadmus originally came from, has triumphed.

There may even be a sense here in the *Bacchae* that the experiment was doomed from the start. That, at any rate, is one construction one can put on the strong emphasis given in this play to an eastern vision of Zeus, a Zeus who, as E. R. Dodds points out (84), seems far more like Dionysus than the traditional Greek notion of Zeus (especially in all those details linking Zeus' birth to the irrationality of Dionysian revels and in Dionysus' repeated insistence that he is the son of Zeus). The emphasis on the overwhelming destructiveness of the gods (from Zeus' lightning bolt which kills Semele to the tearing apart of Actaeon, as well as Dionysus' conduct in the play) tends constantly to undercut any sense that some sort of harmonious cooperation between humans and the divine, some arrangement which gives human beings a chance to manifest their worth in a traditionally Greek way, is possible.

But if this play is exploring such a despairing vision, it offers us the sense that part of the problem is the loss of human participation in the original arrangement. In the *Bacchae*, we witness the deterioration of the human capacity to accept the mystery of divine mythology as a vitalizing and creative political presence—and the

enduring value of the link between the human and the divine celebrated in the marriage of Cadmus and Harmonia depends upon that more than anything else.

Here, however, Cadmus' children refuse to enter the world of religious myth. Semele's sisters see her story as a convenient lie to excuse her sexual promiscuity with some man, and Pentheus is far too concerned with secular power and his own inadequacies to entertain a truly religious thought. Cadmus sees religion primarily as a way of making his family more important (and thus protecting himself). None of them displays any true reverence for the mysteries of life passed down to them (in this respect, one might note the significant differences between them and, say, Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*).

The most interesting figure in connection with this attitude to mythology is Tiresias, traditionally a mediator between divine wisdom and limited human understanding. Here he seems more concerned to rationalize Dionysus away, rather than to accept him as a particular, immediate, and mysterious religious experience. Hence, he can subject the myth of Dionysus' birth from the thigh of Zeus to rational analysis (Dodds has some excellent comments on this point on 91). There may well be some satiric intent in this presentation of Tiresias (maybe), but, beyond the most immediate satire, there may also be a sense that this most venerable of religious sensibilities has degenerated (or, if that is too strong, changed) into a new form of thinking which makes religious belief at least difficult and at most ridiculous.

Depending on the construction one puts upon the attitude to mythology in the *Bacchae*, one might offer a variety of interpretative possibilities concerning Euripides' final word on Greek traditions, from lament to satire. My own view is that the play is not taking sides, but rather, as I have mentioned, exploring a passionate sense of despair at what has happened and what the future holds. With one eye on the philosophical revolution which, in the figures of Socrates and Plato, is going to attempt to redefine the basis of the good life, we can understand why Nietzsche (in *The Birth of Tragedy*) sees Euripides and Socrates as soul mates, but we do not have to go that far. The play evokes a terrible sense of something coming to an end (the exile of Cadmus and Harmonia and the end of Greek Thebes)—and it invites speculation about what now happens to the human community in the face of the triumph of Dionysian irrationality and destruction.

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# Brief Note on the Mythological Background to Euripides' *Medea*

*This section is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>370</sup> lecture by Ian Johnston*

*[The notes have been prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, Canada (now Vancouver Island University). This text is in the public realm and may be used by anyone, in whole or in part, without permission and without charge, provided the source is acknowledged. Last revised June 2002]*

These paragraphs are intended to provide a minimum amount of information to assist those who are reading Euripides' *Medea*. They are not meant to offer a detailed account of the various stories associated with Jason and Medea.

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Jason was born the son of Aeson, in Iolcus. When his father lost the kingship, Jason was secretly given the famous centaur Chiron, who raised him. As a young man Jason returned to Iolcus. The king, Pelias (the man who had deprived Aeson of the kingship) was afraid that Jason would usurp him, so he persuaded Jason to set off on an expedition to capture the Golden Fleece, the pure gold skin of a ram which was in a sacred grove in Colchis (a barbarian region to the east of the Euxine Sea, the Greek name for the Black Sea), where it was guarded by a dragon.

Jason put together a band of adventurers called the Argonauts, among whom were some major figures of Greek mythology (e.g., Hercules, Orpheus). They took their name from the ship they sailed in, the Argo. The heroes had a number of adventures on the way to Colchis, including passing through the legendary Clashing Rocks (the Symplegades). Upon arrival in Colchis, King Aeetes set them a number of tasks, including yoking two fire-breathing bulls, ploughing a field with them, sowing the field with teeth from the dragon of Cadmus, and then fighting against the warriors who arose from the sown teeth.

To complete these tasks Jason enlisted the help of Medea, daughter of King Aeetes. She fell in love with Jason and helped him with her magic to complete the tasks set by Aeetes and to steal the Golden Fleece. She then escaped with Jason, killing her brother in order to scatter his body on the sea so that Aeetes would have to hold up his pursuit of Jason and Medea. In order to understand Euripides' play, it is essential to recognize that Medea, in addition to being a female with magical powers, is also a barbarian (i.e., non-Greek).

Jason and Medea returned to Iolcus, where Medea's magic restored Jason's father, Aeson, to youthful health. Medea also persuaded the daughters of King Pelias to kill their father by giving them ineffective medications and persuading them to try a course of treatment which was fatal.

When Jason and Medea moved to Corinth, Jason abandoned her in order to marry Glauce, daughter of the king, Creon. Medea's revenge is the subject of

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<sup>370</sup>[http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/medea\\_note.htm](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/medea_note.htm)

Euripides' play. In order to protect herself, Medea arranged a secure haven for herself with Aegeus, king of Athens. Medea then killed Glauce and Creon and her own two children (who are not named in the play).

Subsequently, Medea moved to Athens and married Aegeus, the king. But she became jealous of Aegeus' son Theseus. She then returned to Colchis. Jason's life ended when he was hit by part of the stern of the Argo as he lay asleep under it.

The adventures of the Argonauts formed a fecund source for Greek storytellers, poets, dramatists, and painters. Jason's various love affairs have also made their way into many fictions. And Medea has always been a popular figure in fiction and drama.



# A Note on the Mythological Background to 'the House of Atreus'

*This section is based on the [publicly available](http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/HouseofAtreus.htm)<sup>371</sup> notes by Ian Johnston*

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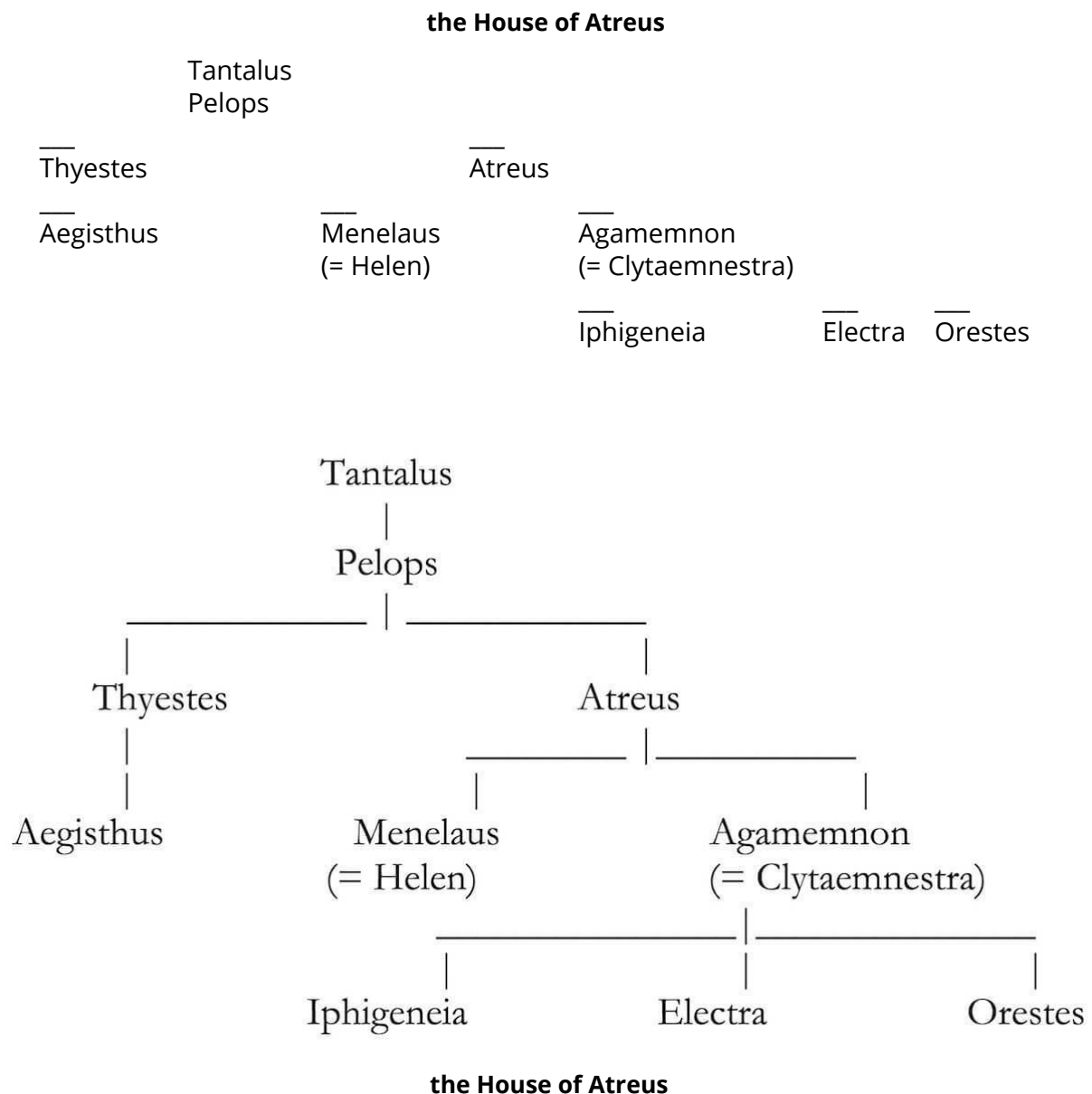
The following paragraphs provide a brief summary of the major events in the long history of the House of Atreus, one of the most fecund and long-lasting of all the Greek legends. Like so many other stories, the legend of the House of Atreus varies a good deal from one author to the next and there is no single authoritative version. The account given below tries to include as many of the major details as possible. At the end there is a short section reviewing Aeschylus' treatment of the story in the *Oresteia*.

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<sup>371</sup> <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/HouseofAtreus.htm>

## Family Tree (Simplified)



1) The family of Atreus (father of Agamemnon and Menelaus) traces its origins back to Tantalus, king of Sipylon, a son of Zeus (famous for his eternal punishment in Hades, as described in the *Odyssey*, where he is always thirsty but can never drink, hence the origin of the word *tantalizing*). Tantalus had a son called Pelops, whom Poseidon loved.

2) Pelops wished to marry Hippodameia, daughter of king Oenomaus. Oenomaus set up a contest (a chariot race against the king) for all those who wished to woo his daughter. If the suitor lost, he was killed. A number of men had died in such a race before Pelops made his attempt. Pelops bribed the king's charioteer (Myrtilus) to disable the king's chariot. In the race, Oenomaus' chariot broke down (the wheels

came off), and the king was killed. Pelops then carried off Hippodameia as his bride. Pelops also killed his co-conspirator Myrtilus by throwing him into the sea. Before he drowned Myrtilus (in some versions Oenomaus) cursed Pelops and his family. This act is the origin of the famous curse on the House of Atreus.

3) Pelops does not seem to have been affected by the curse. He had a number of children, the most important of whom were his two sons, the brothers Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus married Aerope, and they had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. And Thyestes had two sons and a daughter Pelopia.

4) Atreus and Thyestes quarrelled (in some versions at the instigation of the god Hermes, father of Myrtilus, the charioteer killed by Pelops). Thyestes had an affair with Atreus' wife, Aerope, and was banished from Argos by Atreus. However, Thyestes petitioned to be allowed to return, and Atreus, apparently wishing a reconciliation, agreed to allow Thyestes to come back and prepared a huge banquet to celebrate the end of their differences.

5) At the banquet, however, Atreus served Thyestes the cooked flesh of Thyestes' two slaughtered sons. Thyestes ate the food, and then was informed of what he had done. This horrific event is the origin of the term *Thyestean Banquet*. Overcome with horror, Thyestes cursed the family of Atreus and left Argos with his one remaining child, his daughter Pelopia.

6) Some versions of the story include the name Pleisthenes, a son of Atreus who was raised by Thyestes. To become king, Thyestes sent Pleisthenes to kill Atreus, but Atreus killed him, not realizing he was killing his son. This, then, becomes another cause of the quarrel. In yet other accounts, someone called Pleisthenes is the first husband of Aerope and the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus. When he died, so this version goes, Atreus married Aerope and adopted her two sons. In Aeschylus' play there is one reference to Pleisthenes; otherwise, this ambiguous figure is absent from the story.

7) In some versions, including Aeschylus' account, Thyestes had one small infant son who survived the banquet, Aegisthus. In other accounts, however, Aegisthus was the product of Thyestes' incestuous relationship with his daughter Pelopia after the murder of the two older sons, conceived especially to be the avenger of the notorious banquet.

8) Agamemnon and Menelaus, the two sons of Atreus, married Clytemnestra and Helen respectively, two twin sisters, but not identical twins (Clytemnestra had a human father; whereas, Helen was a daughter of Zeus). Helen was so famous for her beauty that a number of men wished to marry her. The suitors all agreed that they would act to support the man she eventually married in the event of any need for mutual assistance. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra had three children, Iphigeneia, Orestes, and Electra.

9) When Helen (Menelaus' wife) ran off to Troy with Paris, Agamemnon and Menelaus organized and led the Greek forces against the Trojans. The army assembled at Aulis, but the fleet could not sail because of contrary winds sent by Artemis. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to placate Artemis.

10) With Agamemnon and Menelaus off in Troy, Aegisthus (son of Thyestes) returned to Argos, where he became the lover of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's

wife. They sent Orestes into exile, to live with an ally, Strophius in Phocis, and humiliated Electra, Agamemnon's surviving daughter (either treating her as a servant or marrying her off to a common farmer). When Agamemnon returned, the two conspirators successfully killed him and assumed royal control of Argos.

11) Orestes returned from exile and, in collaboration with his sister Electra, avenged his father by killing Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. In many versions this act makes him lose his self-control and he becomes temporarily deranged. He then underwent ritual purification by Apollo and sought refuge in the temple of Athena in Athens. There he was tried and acquitted. This action put the curses placed on the House of Atreus to rest.

## Some Comments

The story of the House of Atreus, and particularly Orestes' and Electra's revenge for their father's murder, is one of the most popular and enduring of all Greek legends, a favourite among the classical tragedians and still very popular with modern playwrights (e.g., T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Jean Paul Sartre). However, different writers tell the story in very different ways.

Homer, for example (in the *Odyssey*) sets up Orestes' killing of Aegisthus as an entirely justified way to proceed (Homer ascribes the main motivation and planning to Aegisthus, who has to persuade Clytaemnestra to agree and who, it seems, does the actual killing). In fact, the action is repeatedly mentioned as a clear indication of divinely supported justice (there is no direct mention of the killing of Clytaemnestra, although there is a passing reference to Orestes' celebrations over his "hateful" mother after the killing of Aegisthus). Sophocles and Euripides tell basically the same story but with enormously different depictions of the main characters (in Euripides' version Orestes and Electra are hateful; whereas, in Sophocles' *Electra* they are much more conventionally righteous).

Aeschylus confines his attention to Atreus' crime against his brother (the Thyestean banquet) and what followed from it. There is no direct reference to Thyestes' adultery with Atreus' wife (although Cassandra makes a reference to a man sleeping with his brother's wife) or to any events from earlier parts of the story (unless the images of chariot racing are meant to carry an echo of Pelops' actions). This has the effect of making Atreus' crime against his brother the origin of the family curse (rather than the actions of Pelops or Tantalus) and tends to give the reader more sympathy for Aegisthus than some other versions do.

Curiously enough, Orestes' story has many close parallels with the Norse legend on which the story of Hamlet is based (son in exile is called upon to avenge a father killed by the man who has seduced his mother, perhaps with the mother's consent; the son carries out the act of killing his mother and her lover with great difficulty, undergoing fits of madness, and so on). Given that there is no suggestion of any possible literary-historical link between the origin of these two stories, the similarity of these plots offers a number of significant problems for psychologists and mythologists to explore. This puzzle is especially intriguing because the Hamlet-Orestes narrative is by far the most popular story in the history of English dramatic tragedy.

# (EURIPIDES) Medea

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>372</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

*For a brief introductory note to the mythological background of the story of Medea and Jason, see [this section](#)*

...

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**Nurse:** a servant of Medea.

**Tutor:** a servant assigned to Jason's children.

**Medea:** wife of Jason.

**Chorus:** a group of Corinthian women.

**Creon:** king of Corinth.

**Jason:** husband of Medea.

**Aegeus:** king of Athens.

**Messenger:** a servant of Jason's.

**Children:** Medea's and Jason's two young sons.

**Attendants on Creon and Jason.**

[Outside the home of Jason and Medea in Corinth. The Nurse, a slave who serves Medea, is standing by herself]

NURSE

Oh how I wish that ship the Argo  
had never sailed off to the land of Colchis,  
past the Symplegades, those dark dancing rocks  
which smash boats sailing through the Hellespont.  
I wish they'd never chopped the pine trees down  
in those mountain forests up on Pelion,  
to make oars for the hands of those great men  
who set off, on Pelias' orders,  
to fetch the golden fleece. Then my mistress,  
Medea, never would've sailed away to the towers in the land of Iolcus,  
her heart passionately in love with Jason.  
She'd never have convinced those women,  
Pelias' daughters, to kill their father.  
She'd not have come to live in Corinth here,  
with her husband and her children—well loved  
in exile by those whose land she'd moved to.  
She gave all sorts of help to Jason.  
That's when life is most secure and safe,  
when woman and her husband stand as one. But that marriage changed. Now  
they're enemies.  
Their fine love's grown sick, diseased, for Jason,

<sup>372</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/euripides/medea.htm>

leaving his own children and my mistress,  
is lying on a royal wedding bed.  
He's married the daughter of king Creon,  
who rules this country. As for Medea,  
that poor lady, in her disgrace, cries out,  
repeating his oaths, recalling the great trust  
in that right hand with which he pledged his love.  
She calls out to the gods to witness how Jason is repaying her favours.  
She just lies there. She won't eat—her body  
she surrenders to the pain, wasting away,  
always in tears, ever since she found out  
how her husband has dishonoured her.  
She's not lifted her eyes up from the ground,  
or raised her head. She listens to advice,  
even from friends, as if she were a stone,  
or the ocean swell, except now and then  
she twists that white neck of hers and weeps,  
crying to herself for her dear father, her home,  
her own land, all those things she left behind,  
to come here with the man who now discards her.  
Her suffering has taught her the advantages  
of not being cut off from one's own homeland.  
Now she hates her children. When she sees them,  
there is no joy in her. And I'm afraid  
she may be up to some new mischief.  
Her mind thinks in extremes. I know her well.  
She'll not put up with being treated badly. I worry she may pick up a sharp sword  
and stab her stomach, or else she'll go  
into the house, in silence, to that bed,  
and kill the king and bridegroom Jason.  
Then she'll face an even worse disaster.  
She's a dangerous woman. It won't be easy  
for any man who picks a fight with her  
to think she's beaten and he's triumphed.  
[Enter Medea's and Jason's children with their Tutor]  
Here come her children. They've finished playing.  
They've no notion of their mother's troubles. Young minds don't like to dwell on  
pain.  
TUTOR  
Old slave from my mistress' household,  
why are you here, standing by the gate,  
all alone, complaining to yourself  
about what's wrong? How come Medea  
is willing to stay inside without you?  
NURSE  
Old servant of Jason's children,

when a master's lot falls out badly,  
that's bad for faithful servants, too—  
it touches their hearts also. My sorrow was so great, I wanted to come here,  
to speak to earth and heaven, to tell them  
about the wrongs inflicted on my mistress.

TUTOR

Unhappy lady! Has she stopped weeping yet?

NURSE

Stopped crying? I envy your ignorance.  
Her suffering has only just begun—  
she's not even half way through it.

TUTOR

Poor fool—

if I can speak that way about my masters—  
she knows nothing of her latest troubles.

NURSE

What's that, old man? Don't spare me the news.

TUTOR

Nothing. I'm sorry I said anything.

NURSE

Come on, don't hide it from a fellow slave.  
I can keep quiet if I have to.

TUTOR

Well, I was passing by those benches  
where the old men gamble by Peirene,  
at the holy spring, and I heard someone say  
(I was pretending I wasn't listening)  
that Creon, king of this country, intends  
to ship the children away from Corinth,  
with their mother, too. I've no idea if the story's true or not. I hope it's not.

NURSE

But surely Jason wouldn't let his children  
go into exile, even if he's squabbling  
with their mother?

TUTOR

Old devotions fade,  
pushed aside by new relationships.  
Jason is no friend of people in this house.

NURSE

If we must add these brand-new troubles  
to our old ones, before we've dealt with them,  
then we're finished.

TUTOR

But listen—the time's not right  
to let your mistress know about these things.  
So keep quiet. Don't mention anything.



NURSE

Children, do you hear what sort of man  
your father is to you? My curse on him!  
No. He is my master—but a bad man  
to his own family. Of that he's guilty.

TUTOR

What mortal man is not? Don't you know yet  
all men love themselves more than their neighbours.  
And some are right to do that—while others  
just want some benefit. But this father, with his new wife, has no love for his  
children.

NURSE

Come on, children, get inside the house.  
Things will be fine. [To the Tutor] You must keep them away—  
as far as possible—and don't bring them  
near their mother when she's in this state.  
I've seen her look at them with savage eyes,  
as if she means to injure them somehow. I know this anger of hers will not end,  
not before she turns it loose on someone. I hope it falls on enemies, not on friends!

MEDEA [crying from inside the house]

I can't stand this pain, this misery.  
What do I do? I wish I could die!

NURSE

My dear children, you hear your mother's cry.  
Her heart's upset. Her anger's growing, too.  
So quickly now, run off inside the house.  
Stay out of sight. Don't try to go and see her.  
She's fierce, headstrong by nature. Take care.  
So go now—inside as quickly as you can.  
[The Tutor and children enter the house]  
It's obvious the cloud of bitter grief  
rising inside her is only just the start. As her temper grows even more intense,  
it will soon catch fire. She's a passionate soul,  
hard to restrain. What will she do next,  
now her heart's been bitten by these injuries?

MEDEA [from inside the house]

The pain of this suffering—this intense pain.  
Am I not right to weep? Oh my children,  
cursed children of a hateful mother—  
may you die with your father, all his house,  
may it all perish, crash down in ruins.

NURSE

Oh the sorrow of it all. Poor woman! Why link your children with the nasty things  
their father's done? Why do you hate them so?  
I'm terrified the children will be hurt.  
The pride of rulers is something to fear—

they often order men, but seldom listen.  
And when their tempers change it's hard to bear.  
It's better to get used to living life  
as an equal common person. Anyway,  
I don't want a grand life for myself—  
just to grow old with some security. They say a moderate life's the best of all,  
a far better choice for mortal men.  
Going for too much brings no benefits.  
And when gods get angry with some home,  
the more wealth it has, the more it is destroyed.

[Enter the Chorus of Corinthian women]

CHORUS LEADER

I heard her voice, I heard the cries  
of that sad lady here from Colchis.  
Has she not calmed down yet? Old nurse, tell me.  
I heard from some household servant in there  
that she's been screaming. I find no pleasure in this house's suffering. We've been  
friends.

NURSE

This house is finished—already done for.  
For Jason's bound by his new marriage tie  
to the king's daughter. As for my mistress,  
her tears are washing away her life in there,  
inside the house. She finds no consolation  
in the words of any of her friends.

MEDEA [still from inside the house]

Oh why can't a bolt of lightning strike me?  
What point is there in living any more?  
I want death to come and sweep me off— let me escape this life of suffering!

CHORUS

Oh Zeus and Earth and Sun—  
do you hear how this young wife  
sings out her misery?  
Thoughtless lady,  
why long for death's marriage bed  
which human beings all shun?  
Death comes soon enough  
and brings an end to everything.  
You should not pray for it. And if your husband  
devotes himself to some new bed,  
why get angry over that?  
Zeus will plead for you in this.  
Don't waste your life away,  
with too much wailing for your husband.

MEDEA [within] O great Themis and noble Artemis,  
do you see what I am having to endure,

when I'm the one who bound that cursed man,  
my husband, with strong promises to me? Oh, how I want to see him and his bride  
beaten down, destroyed—their whole house as well—  
for these wrongs they dare inflict on me,  
when I've done nothing to provoke them!  
O father and city, I left you behind  
in my disgrace when I killed my brother.

NURSE

Do you hear what's she's saying, how she calls  
to Themis, who hears our prayers, and Zeus,  
who guards, they say, the promises men swear.  
She's bound to do something quite serious before this rage of hers comes to an  
end.

CHORUS LEADER

I wish she'd let us see her face to face  
and listen to what we have to tell her.  
That might calm down her savage temper,  
the fury in her heart. I'd like the chance  
to show good will to a lady whom I like.  
Go now—bring her here outside the house.  
Tell her she'll be among some friends of hers.  
And hurry, before she harms someone in there—  
that power in her grief will make her act. NURSE  
All right, though I'm afraid I won't persuade  
my mistress. Still, as a favour to you,  
I'll see what I can do. Right now she glares  
at servants when they come close to her  
to tell her something. She's like a bull,  
or lioness with cubs—that's how she looks.  
Those men from long ago—you'd not be wrong  
to call them fools without much wisdom.  
They thought up songs for celebrations,  
feasts and banquets, bringing to human life delightful music. But they found  
nothing  
in music or the lyre's many strings  
to end the bitterness of human life,  
the pain in living, sorrows bringing on  
the deaths and horrifying disasters  
which destroy whole families. What a blessing  
it would be for human beings if music  
could cure these sorrows. When people feast,  
why should people sing? It's a waste of time.  
People who eat well are happy anyway— they've enjoyed the pleasure of the meal.

[Nurse exits into the house]

CHORUS

I have heard Medea's crying,

full of sorrow, full of tears,  
her shrill accusations against Jason,  
the husband who's betrayed her.  
Suffering such injustice, she cries out,  
calling the gods—calling Themis,  
Zeus' daughter, goddess of those promises  
which carried her across the ocean  
to Hellas, through the black salt seas,  
through the place which few men penetrate,  
the strait which guards the Pontic Sea.

[Enter Medea with the Nurse]

MEDEA

Women of Corinth, I'm coming here,  
outside the house, so you won't think ill of me.  
Many men, I know, become too arrogant,  
both in the public eye and in their homes.  
Others get a reputation for indifference,  
because they stay at ease within the house.  
There's no justice in the eyes of mortal men.  
Before they know someone's deep character,  
they hate her on sight, though she's not hurt them.  
A guest of the city must comply, of course,  
act as the city wants. I don't commend  
a stubborn man, not even a citizen,  
who thanks to his stupidity annoys  
his fellow townsmen. But in my case,  
this unexpected blow that's hit me,  
well, it's destroyed my heart. My life is gone,  
dear friends. I've lost all joy. I want to die.  
The man who was everything to me, my own husband, has turned out to be  
the worst of men. This I know is true.  
Of all things with life and understanding,  
we women are the most unfortunate.  
First, we need a husband, someone we get  
for an excessive price. He then becomes  
the ruler of our bodies. And this misfortune  
adds still more troubles to the grief we have.  
Then comes the crucial struggle: this husband  
we've selected, is he good or bad? For a divorce loses women all respect,  
yet we can't refuse to take a husband.  
Then, when she goes into her husband's home,  
with its new rules and different customs,  
she needs a prophet's skill to sort out the man  
whose bed she shares. She can't learn that at home.  
Once we've worked hard at this, and with success,  
our husband accepts the marriage yoke

and lives in peace—an enviable life.  
But if the marriage doesn't work, then death is much to be preferred. When the man tires  
of the company he keeps at home, he leaves,  
seeking relief for his distress elsewhere,  
outside the home. He gets his satisfaction  
with some male friend or someone his own age.  
We women have to look at just one man.  
Men tell us we live safe and secure at home,  
while they must go to battle with their spears.  
How stupid they are! I'd rather stand there  
three times in battle holding up my shield  
than give birth once. But your story and mine  
are not the same. For you have a city,  
you have your father's house, enjoy your life  
with friends for company. But I'm alone.  
I have no city, and I'm being abused  
by my own husband. I was carried off,  
a trophy from a barbarian country.  
I have no mother, brother, or relation,  
to shelter with in this extremity.  
And so I want to ask something from you. If I find some way to punish Jason  
for these injustices, and his bride, as well,  
and father, too, say nothing. In other things  
a woman may be timid—in watching battles  
or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,  
her marriage violated, there's no heart  
more desperate for blood than hers.

CHORUS LEADER

I'll do what you request. For you are right  
to pay back your husband. And, Medea,  
I'm not surprised you grieve at these events.  
[Enter Creon, with armed attendants]  
I see Creon, king of Corinth, coming.  
He'll be bringing news, announcing  
some new decision that's been made.

CREON

You there, Medea, scowling in anger  
against your husband. I'm ordering you  
out of Corinth. You must go into exile,  
and take those two children of yours with you.  
Go quickly. I'm here to make quite sure  
that this decree is put into effect.  
I'll not go back to my own palace until I've cast you out, beyond our borders.

MEDEA

Oh, now my sufferings will kill me. It's over.

My enemies have set full sail against me,  
and there's no way I can avert disaster.  
But, Creon, let me ask you something—  
I'm the one abused, so why banish me?  
What have I done?

CREON

I'm afraid of you.

I won't conceal the truth. There's a good chance  
you might well instigate some fatal harm  
against my daughter. Many things lead me to this conclusion: you're a clever  
woman,  
very experienced in evil ways; you're grieving the loss of your husband's bed; and  
from reports I hear you're making threats  
to take revenge on Jason, on his bride,  
and on her father. Before that happens,  
I'm taking some precautions. Woman,  
it's better that you hate me, than for me  
to grow soft now and then regret it later.

MEDEA

Alas, this is not the first time, Creon, my reputation has badly damaged me.  
It's happened often. No man with any sense  
should ever educate his children  
to know anything beyond what's normal.  
Quite apart from charges of idleness  
which other people bring against them,  
they stir up in their fellow citizens  
a hostile envy. If you offer fools  
some brand new wisdom, they'll consider you  
quite useless, not someone wise. And if,  
within the city, people think of you  
as greater than those men who seem quite wise,  
you'll appear a nuisance. So it is with me.  
For I'm a knowledgeable woman. I make  
some people envious. Others say I'm shy.  
Some the opposite. Some say I'm hostile.  
I'm not that clever, but still you fear me.  
Have I hurt you at all, made you suffer?  
Don't fear me, Creon. It's not in me  
to commit crimes against the men in charge. Besides, in what way have you injured  
me?

You've married your daughter to a man,  
one your heart selected. My husband's  
the one I hate. In my view, you've acted  
with good sense in this business. So now,  
I'll not begrudge you your prosperity.  
Have your marriage, and good luck to you.

But let me remain here, in this country.  
Although I've suffered an injustice,  
I'll obey the rulers and stay silent. CREON  
What you say sounds comforting enough,  
but I'm still afraid that heart of yours  
is planning something evil. At this point,  
I trust you even less than previously.  
Passionate people, women as well as men,  
are easier to protect oneself against,  
than someone clever who keeps silent.  
No. You must leave—and right away.  
No more speeches. I've made up my mind.  
It's not possible for you to stay here, not with us, given your hostility to me.  
MEDEA [kneeling in front of Creon]  
No, don't send me away. I'm begging you,  
at your knee, in your daughter's name.  
CREON  
Your words are useless. You won't persuade me.  
MEDEA  
You'll send me into exile without hearing  
my supplication?  
CREON  
Indeed I will.  
I don't love you more than my own family.  
MEDEA  
O my homeland! How I'm thinking of you now.  
CREON  
Except for my own children, my country  
is what I cherish most by far.  
MEDEA  
Alas, love's a miserable thing for mortal men.  
CREON  
I think events determine if that's true.  
MEDEA  
O Zeus, don't overlook who bears the blame  
for all this evil.  
CREON  
It's time to leave,  
you foolish woman. Time to rid myself  
of all this trouble.  
MEDEA  
We have trouble enough—  
There's no need for any more.  
CREON  
Come on—  
or my servants will throw you into exile.

MEDEA

No, don't do that. I beg you, Creon . . .

[Medea seizes Creon's hand]

CREON

Woman, it seems you're trying to provoke me.

MEDEA

All right then. I will go into exile.

I wasn't begging to escape from that.

CREON

Then why squeeze my hand so hard and not let go?

MEDEA

Let me remain here one day to prepare,  
to get ready for my exile, to provide  
something for my children, since their father,  
as one more insult, does nothing for them.

Have pity on them. You're a parent, too.

You should treat them kindly—that's what's right.

If I go into exile, I don't care, but I weep for them in their misfortune.

CREON

For a tyrant my will is by nature tender,  
and by feeling pity I've been hurt before,  
more than once. And now, woman, I see  
I'm making a mistake, for you can have  
your extra day. But let me warn you—  
if the sun catches you tomorrow  
within the borders of this country,  
you or your children, you'll be put to death.

Don't think I'm not telling you the truth. So, if you must remain, stay one more day.

In that time you can't do the harm I fear.

[Exit Creon with his attendants]

CHORUS LEADER

Alas for you, unfortunate woman—

how wretched your distress. Where will you turn? Where will you find someone to  
take you in? What country, what home will you find yourself  
to save you from misfortunes?

MEDEA

Things have worked out badly in every way.

Who can deny the fact? But nonetheless,

you should not assume that's how things will stay. The newly wedded pair still face  
some struggles,

and the man who made this marriage happen  
might have serious problems yet. Do you think

I'd prostrate myself before a man like that,

if there was no advantage to be gained?

If I didn't have some plan in mind,

I'd not have talked to him or grabbed his hand.



But the man's become completely foolish—  
when he had the power to prevent me  
from planning anything, by sending me out of his land, he let me stay one day,  
a day when I'll turn three of my enemies  
to corpses—father, daughter, and my husband.  
Now, I can slaughter them in many ways.  
I'm not sure which one to try out first.  
Perhaps I should set the bridal suite on fire,  
or sneak into the house in silence,  
right up to their marriage bed, and plunge  
some sharpened steel right through their guts.  
There's just one problem. If I get caught going in their house, meaning to destroy  
it,  
I'll be killed, and my enemies will laugh.  
No. The best method is the most direct,  
the one at which I have a special skill—  
I'll murder them with poison. Yes, that's it.  
But once they're dead, what city will receive me?  
Who'll give me safe shelter as a guest,  
and offer me physical protection?  
There's no one. Still, I'll wait a little while.  
If someone shows up who can shield me,  
I'll set my scheme in motion and kill them  
without saying a word. But if events  
force me to act openly, I'll use a sword.  
Even though it will bring about my death,  
I'll push my daring to the very limit  
and slaughter them. By Hecate, the goddess  
I worship more than all the others,  
the one I choose to help me in this work,  
who lives with me deep inside my home,  
these people won't bring pain into my heart and laugh about it. This wedding of  
theirs,  
I'll make it hateful for them, a disaster—  
Creon's marriage ties, my exile from here,  
he'll find those bitter. So come, Medea,  
call on all those things you know so well,  
as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,  
this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.  
You see what you have to put up with.  
You must not let Jason's marriage make you  
a laughing stock among Corinthians, compatriots of Sisyphus, for you  
trace your family from a noble father  
and from Helios, the sun. So get to work.  
Besides, we have a woman's nature—  
powerless to perform fine noble deeds,

but very skilled in all the forms of evil.

CHORUS [chanting]

The waters in the sacred rivers  
are flowing in reverse.

And all well-ordered things

are once more turning on themselves. Men's plans are now deceitful,  
their firm trust in the gods is gone.

My life is changing—common talk  
is giving me a better reputation.

Honour's coming to the female sex.

Slander will no longer injure women.

Those songs by ancient poets  
will stop chanting of our faithlessness.

Phoebus, god of song and singing,  
never put into our minds the gift of making sacred music with the lyre,  
or else I would have sung a song  
in response to what the male sex sings.

For our lengthy past has much to say  
about men's lives as well as ours

You sailed here from your father's house,  
your heart on fire, past those two rocks  
that stand guard to the Euxine Sea.

You live now in a foreign land.

You've lost your marriage bed, your husband, too, poor woman.

And now you're driven out,  
hounded into exile in disgrace.

The honour in an oath has gone.

And all throughout wide Hellas  
there's no shame any more.

Shame has flown away to heaven.

So to you, unhappy lady,

no father's house is open,

no haven on your painful voyage. For now a stronger woman

rules in your household,

queen of his marriage bed.

[Enter Jason]

JASON

Right now is not the first time I've observed  
how a harsh temper makes all things worse—  
impossibly so. It's happened often.

You could've stayed here in this land and house,  
if only you'd agreed to the arrangements,  
showed some patience with those in command.

Now you're exiled for your stupid chatter.

Not that I care. You don't have to stop  
calling Jason the worst man in the world.

But when you speak against the ruler here,  
consider yourself very fortunate  
that exile is your only punishment.  
I've always tried to mollify the king—  
he has a vicious temper—and have you stay.  
But you just wouldn't stop this silly rage,  
always slandering the royal house.  
That's why you've got to leave the country. Anyway, I won't neglect my family.  
I've come here, woman, looking out for you,  
so you won't be thrown out with the children  
in total need and lacking everything.  
Exile brings with it all sorts of hardships.  
Although you may well despise me now,  
I could never have bad feelings for you.

MEDEA

As a man you're the worst there is—that's all  
I'll say about you, no trace of manhood.  
You come to me now, you come at this point, when you've turned into the worst  
enemy  
of the gods and me and the whole human race?  
It isn't courage or firm resolution  
to hurt your family and then confront them,  
face to face, but a total lack of shame,  
the greatest of all human sicknesses.  
But you did well to come, for I will speak.  
I'll unload my heart, describe your evil.  
You listen. I hope you're hurt by what I say.  
I'll begin my story at the very start. I saved your life—every Greek who sailed with  
you  
on board that ship the Argo can confirm it—  
when you'd been sent to bring under the yoke  
the fire-breathing bulls, and then to sow  
the fields of death. And I killed the dragon  
guarding the Golden Fleece, coiled up there,  
staying on watch and never going to sleep.  
For you I raised the light which rescued you  
from death. I left my father and my home,  
on my own, and came with you to Iolcus, beneath Mount Pelion. My love for you  
was greater than my wisdom. Then I killed  
Pelias in the most agonizing way,  
at the hands of his own daughters,  
and then destroyed his household, all of it.  
Now, after I've done all this to help you,  
you brute, you betray me and help yourself  
to some new wife. And we have children!  
If you'd had no children, I'd understand

why you're so keen on marrying this girl. And what about the promises you made?  
I don't know if you think the ancient gods  
still govern, or if new regulations  
have recently been put in place for men,  
but you must know you've broken faith with me.  
By this right hand, which you have often held,  
and by my knees, at which you've often begged,  
it was all for nothing to be touched like that,  
by such a worthless man. I've lost all hope.  
But come now. I'll sort things out with you, as if you were a friend. I've no idea  
what sort of kindness to expect from you.  
But let's see. The things I'll ask about  
will make you look even more disgraceful.  
Where do I now turn? To my father's house?  
For your sake I betrayed my country,  
to come here with you. Then should I go  
to Pelias' daughters in their misery?  
They'd surely welcome me with open arms,  
since I killed their father. That's how things stand. To my family I'm now an enemy,  
and by assisting you I declared war  
on those whom I had no need to injure.  
For all the ways I've helped you, you made me,  
in the eyes of many wives in Greece,  
a lucky woman, blessed in many things.  
But what a wonderful and trusting husband  
I have in you now, in my misfortune,  
if I go into exile, leave this land,  
with no friends, all alone, abandoned, with my abandoned children. And for you,  
what a fine report for a new bridegroom,  
his children wandering round like vagabonds  
with the very woman who saved his life.  
O Zeus, why did you give men certain ways  
to recognize false gold, when there's no mark,  
no token on the human body,  
to indicate which men are worthless.

CHORUS

When members of a family fight like this,  
rage pushes them beyond all compromise.

JASON

Woman, it seems I'll need to give good reasons,  
and, like a skilled helmsman on a ship,  
haul in my sails and run before that storm  
blowing from your raving tongue. In my view,  
you overestimate your favours to me.  
I consider goddess Aphrodite  
the only one of gods or mortal men

who saved my expedition. As for you,  
well, you've a subtle mind. But if I told  
how Eros with his unerring arrows  
forced you to save me, I could injure you.  
So I won't press the matter very far.  
However you helped me, you did it well.  
But by saving me you got in return  
more than you gave, as I will demonstrate.  
First of all, you now live among the Greeks,  
not in a country of barbarians.  
You're familiar with justice and the laws,  
rather than brute force. Besides, all the Greeks  
know that you're clever, so you've earned yourself a fine reputation. If you still lived  
out there at the boundary of the world,  
no one would talk about you. And great fame  
I'd sooner have than houses filled with gold,  
or the power to sing sweet melodies,  
sweeter than all the songs of Orpheus.  
That's my response to you about my labours.  
Remember you started this war of words.  
As for your complaints about this marriage,  
I'll show you that in this I'm being wise, and moderate, and very friendly to you,  
and to my children. You must have patience.  
When I came here from the land of Iolcus,  
I brought with me many troubles, hard ones,  
things impossible for me to deal with.  
What greater good fortune could I have found  
than marrying the daughter of the king,  
me—an exile? On the point that irks you,  
it's not the case I hate our marriage bed,  
overcome with lust for some new bride, nor am I keen to rival other men  
in the number of my many children.  
We have enough. I'm not complaining.  
The most important thing for us to do  
is to live well and not in poverty,  
knowing that everyone avoids a friend  
once he's a pauper. As for my children,  
I want to raise them in the proper way,  
one worthy of my house, to have brothers  
for the children born from you, and make them all the same. Thus, with a united  
family  
I might prosper. Do you need more children?  
In my case, there's some benefit to have  
new children to help those already born.  
Was this a bad scheme? You'd agree with me,  
if you weren't so upset about the sex.

But you women are so idiotic—  
you think if everything is fine in bed,  
you have all you need, but if the sex is bad,  
then all the very best and finest things you make your enemies. What mortals need  
is some other way to get our children.

There should be no female sex. With that,  
men would be rid of all their troubles.

CHORUS LEADER

Jason, your reasons here seem logical,  
but it strikes me, if I may presume,  
you're in the wrong abandoning your wife.

MEDEA

I'm very different from many others,  
in all sorts of ways—in my opinion,  
the unjust man who speaks so plausibly  
brings on himself the harshest punishment.  
Since he's sure his tongue can hide injustice,  
he dares anything. But he's not that clever.

So you should not parade before me now  
your clever words and specious reasoning.

One word demolishes your argument: if you were not corrupt, you'd ask me first,  
get my consent to undertake this marriage,  
but you didn't even tell your family.

JASON

Oh yes, if I'd told you of the wedding, I'm sure you would have lent me fine support.  
Even now you can't stand to set aside  
that huge rage in your heart.

MEDEA

You're lying.

You thought as you grew old a barbarian wife  
would bring you disrespect.

JASON

Get this straight—  
this royal bride I have, I didn't marry her  
because of any woman. As I told you,  
I wanted to save you and have children,  
royal princes, with the same blood as my sons.  
That way my house has more security.

MEDEA

May I never want a merely prosperous life,  
accepting pain or great wealth at the expense  
of happiness here in my heart.

JASON

Do you think  
you can change that prayer and sound more sensible?  
You should not consider this advantage

painful, or pretend to be so wretched  
when things are going well for you.

MEDEA

Keep up the insults. You have your refuge.  
I'm alone and banished from this country.

JASON

That's what you've chosen. The blame rests with you.

MEDEA

What did I do? Marry and desert you?

JASON

You kept making all those bitter curses  
against the ruling family here.

MEDEA

And I'm a curse against your family, too.

JASON

I'm not arguing with you any more  
about all this. But if you want me  
to provide some money, some assistance  
for you and the children in your exile,  
just ask. I'm prepared to give you some,  
and with a generous hand. I'll send my friends introductory tokens, so they'll treat  
you well.

You'd be mad not to accept this offer.

Woman, stop being so angry. If you do,  
things will turn out so much better for you.

MEDEA

I'll accept no assistance from your friends,  
nor anything from you. Don't make the offer.  
Gifts from a worthless man are without value.

JASON

All right, but I call the gods to witness

I'm willing to help you and the children.

But you reject my goods and stubbornly push away your friends, and that the  
reason

you suffer still more pain.

MEDEA

Get out of here.

For someone so in love with his new bride  
you're spending far too long outside her home.

Go act married. The gods will see to it  
your marriage will change into one of those  
which makes you wish you'd turned it down.

[Exit Jason]

CHORUS

Love with too much passion  
brings with it no fine reputation,

brings nothing virtuous to men. But if Aphrodite comes in smaller doses,  
no other god is so desirable.

Goddess, I pray you never strike me  
with one of those poisoned arrows  
shot from that golden bow of yours.

I pray that moderation,  
the gods' most beautiful gift,  
will always guide me.

I pray that Aphrodite  
never packs my heart with jealousy or angry quarreling.

May she never fill me with desire  
for sex in other people's beds.

May she bless peaceful unions,  
using her wisdom to select  
a woman's marriage bed.

O my country and my home,

I pray I never lack a city,  
never face a hopeless life,

one filled with misery and pain. Before that comes, let death,  
my death, deliver me,

bring my days to their fatal end.

For there's no affliction worse  
than losing one's own country.

I say on this based on what I've seen,  
not on what other people say.

For you are here without a city—

you have no friends to pity you,

as you suffer in this misery, suffer in the harshest way.

The man who shames his family,

who doesn't open up his heart

and treat them in all honesty—

may he perish unlamented.

With him I never could be friends.

[Enter Aegeus, King of Athens]

AEGEUS

I wish you all happiness, Medea.

There's no better way to greet one's friends.

MEDEA

All happiness to you, too, Aegeus,

wise Pandion's son. Where are you coming from?

AEGEUS

I've just left Apollo's ancient oracle.

MEDEA

The prophetic centre of the earth?

What business took you there?

AEGEUS



To ask a question.

I want to know how I can have some children.

MEDEA

In the gods' name, have you lived so long  
without ever having any children?

AEGEUS

Not one. Some god is doing this to me.

MEDEA

Do you have a wife? Or have you stayed unmarried?

AEGEUS

No, I'm married. My wife shares my bed.

MEDEA

So what did Apollo say about it? AEGEUS

Words too wise for human understanding.

MEDEA

It is appropriate for me to learn them?

AEGEUS

Of course. They need a clever mind like yours.

MEDEA

What was the prophecy? Tell it to me—  
if it's all right for me to hear.

AEGEUS

He told me this: "Don't untie the wineskin's foot. . ."

MEDEA

Until when?

Until you do what or reach what country?

AEGEUS

". . . until you come back to your hearth and home."

MEDEA

What were you looking for when you sailed here?

AEGEUS

A man called Pittheus, king of Troezen.

MEDEA

He's Pelops' son. They say he's a very holy man.

AEGEUS

I want to share the god's prophecy with him.

MEDEA

He's a wise man and skilled in things like that.

AEGEUS

And the friendliest of all my allies.

MEDEA

Well, good luck. I hope you find what you desire.

AEGEUS

Why are your eyes so sad, your cheeks so pale?

MEDEA

O Aegeus, my husband has been cruel—

of all men he's treated me the worst.

AEGEUS

What are you saying? Tell me truly—  
what things have made you so unhappy?

MEDEA

Jason's abusing me. I've done him no harm.

AEGEUS

What has he done? Give me more details.

MEDEA

He's taken a new wife. She now rules his home,  
instead of me.

AEGEUS

That's completely shameful.

He hasn't dared something like that, has he?

MEDEA

Indeed, he has. He's dishonored me, the wife  
he used to love.

AEGEUS

Is this a new love affair,  
or did he get fed up with you in bed?

MEDEA

A new love match—he's betrayed his family.

AEGEUS

Leave him, then, since, as you say, he's worthless.

MEDEA

His passion is to marry royalty.

AEGEUS

Who's giving her to him? Tell me the rest.

MEDEA

Creon, who rules this land of Corinth.

AEGEUS

Then, lady, it's quite understandable  
why you're in such distress.

MEDEA

I'm done for, finished.

I'm being banished from this country.

AEGEUS

By whom? You're speaking now of some new trouble.

MEDEA

Creon is driving me out into exile,  
shipping me off, away from Corinth.

AEGEUS

With Jason's full consent? I find that disgraceful.

MEDEA

He says not. Still, he's planning to accept it.  
But, Aegeus, I beg you by your beard,

and at your knees implore you—have pity.  
Take pity on me in my misfortune.  
Don't let me be exiled without a friend.  
Accept me as a suppliant in your home,  
your native land. If you will take me in,  
may the gods then answer your desire  
to have children. May you die a happy man.  
You don't know what a lucky one you are to find me here. I'll end your childlessness.  
I know the sorts of medicines to use,  
and I can help you have many children.

AEGEUS

Lady, I'd like to grant this favour to you,  
for many reasons. First, there's the gods.  
Then, for the children you say I'll produce.  
For there I've lost all sense of what to try.  
Here's what I'll do. If you get to my country,  
I'll strive to treat you as a foreign guest—  
that's the proper thing for me to do. But, Medea, I'll give you fair warning: I won't  
plot to get you out of Corinth.  
If you can reach my household on your own,  
you may stay there in safety. Rest assured—  
I won't surrender you to anyone.  
But you must make your own escape from here.  
I don't want my hosts finding fault with me.

MEDEA

That's fine with me. If you could promise this,  
you'd have done me all the good you can.

AEGEUS

Don't you trust me? What in this still bothers you? MEDEA

I do trust you. But the house of Pelias  
dislikes me, and so does Creon's, too.  
If you bind yourself to a promise now,  
you'll not hand me over when they come,  
seeking to remove me from your country.  
If you use words, and don't swear by the gods,  
you may become their friend and then comply  
with their political demands. I'm weak,  
and they have wealth, a king's resources.

AEGEUS

What you've just said is very shrewd. All right, if it's what you want, I'm not unwilling  
to do what you require. Your proposal  
gives me some security. I can show  
those hostile to you I've a good excuse.  
And it makes your position safer.  
Tell me the gods that I should swear by.

MEDEA

Swear by the plain of Earth, by Helios,  
my father's father, by the family of gods,  
by all of them collectively.

AEGEUS

Tell me  
what I must swear to do and not to do.

MEDEA

Never to cast me out from your own country.  
And if some enemy of mine asks you  
if he can take me off, you'll not agree,  
not while you're still alive.

AEGEUS

I swear—  
by the Earth, by Helios' sacred light,  
by all the gods—I'll do what I've just heard.

MEDEA

That's good. And if you betray this promise,  
what happens to you then?

AEGEUS

May I then suffer  
the punishment that falls on profane men.

MEDEA

All is well. Now, go your way in peace. I'll come to your city as quickly as I can,  
once I've completed what I mean to do,  
and my plans here have been successful.

[Exit Aegeus]

CHORUS LEADER

May Hermes, noble son of Maia,  
go with you on your return, Aegeus.  
I hope you'll get what your heart's so set on,  
for in my eyes you're a worthy man.

MEDEA

Oh Zeus, and Justice, child of Zeus,  
and flaming Helios—now, my friends,  
we'll triumph over all my enemies. The plans I've made have been set in motion.  
I'm confident my enemies will pay,  
they'll get their punishment. For at the point  
when I was most in trouble, this man came  
and helped me plan safe harbour for myself.  
I'll lash my ship's cable to Aegeus,  
once I've made it to Athena's city.  
Now I'll tell you all the things I'm planning—  
though you'll get little pleasure from my words.  
I'm going to send one of my household slaves to ask Jason to come and visit me.  
Once he's here, my words will reassure him.  
I'll tell him I agree with what he's doing,

that leaving me for this royal alliance  
is a fine idea—he's acted properly  
and made the right decisions. Then I'll ask  
if my children can remain. My purpose  
is not to leave them in a hostile land  
surrounded by insulting enemies,  
but a trick to kill the daughter of the king. For I'll send the children to her with gifts.  
They'll carry presents for the bride, as if  
requesting to be spared their banishment—  
a finely woven robe and a tiara  
of twisted gold. If she accepts those presents  
and puts them on, she'll die—and painfully.  
And so will anyone touching the girl.  
I've smeared strong poisons on those gifts.  
So much for that. I'll say no more about her.  
But the next thing I'll do fills me with pain— I'm going to kill my children.  
There's no one  
can save them now. And when I've done this,  
wiped out Jason's house completely, I'll leave,  
evading the punishment I'd receive  
for murdering my darling children,  
a sacrilegious crime. You see, my friends,  
I won't accept my enemies' contempt.  
So be it. What good does life hold for me now?  
I have no father, no home, no refuge.  
I was wrong to leave my father's house,  
won over by the words of that Greek man,  
who now, with the gods' help, will pay the price.  
He'll never see his children alive again,  
the ones I bore him, nor have more children  
with his new bride, for she's been marked to die  
an agonizing death, poisoned by my drugs.  
Let no one think that I'm a trivial woman,  
a feeble one who sits there passively.  
No, I'm a different sort—dangerous  
to enemies, but well disposed to friends. Lives like mine achieve the greatest glory.

CHORUS LEADER

Since you've shared your plans with me, I urge you  
not to do this. I want to help you,  
holding to the standards of human law.

MEDEA

In this matter there's no choice. I forgive  
what you just said, because, unlike me,  
you don't have to bear this suffering.

CHORUS LEADER

But, lady, can you stand to kill your children?

MEDEA

Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason.

CHORUS LEADER

But as a woman it will devastate you.

MEDEA

That's beside the point. Until that time  
it's useless to continue talking.

[Medea goes to door of the house and calls inside]

You in there . . .

[Enter Nurse from the house]

. . . go now and fetch Jason here.

When I need to trust someone, I choose you.

Tell him nothing of what I mean to do,  
if you like your mistress and are a woman.

[Exit Medea into the house and the Nurse off stage]

CHORUS [chanting]

Since ancient times, Erechtheus' sons  
have been especially blessed,  
children of the sacred gods,  
from a holy country never conquered, never ransacked by its enemies.

Fed on glorious fruits of wisdom,  
they stride lithely through the sunlit air,  
where, so the story goes, the Muses,  
nine maidens of Pieria, gave birth  
to golden-haired Hermione.

And people celebrate how Aphrodite,  
while drawing water from the stream,  
the flowing river of the lovely Cephissus,  
breathes down upon the land sweet, temperate winds,  
while she binds within her hair  
garlands of sweet-smelling roses,  
sending Love to sit at Wisdom's side,  
to foster all fine things.

How will this city of sacred streams,  
this land of strolling lovers,  
welcome you—a killer,  
who slaughtered her own children,  
an unholy woman—among its people?  
Consider this—the killing of your children.  
Consider the murder you are going to do.

By your knees we beg you,  
in every way we know,  
do not slaughter your own children.  
Where will your hands and heart  
find the strength, the courage  
to dare this dreadful action?

How will you look at them,  
your children, and not weep for their murderous fate?  
When they kneel before you,  
and implore your mercy,  
you'll find it impossible  
to steel your heart, then soak your hands  
in your own children's blood.

[Enter Medea from the house and, from the side, Jason with the Nurse]

JASON

I've come, as you requested. You hate me,  
but I'm here, and I'm prepared to listen.  
Woman, what is it you now want from me?

MEDEA

Jason, I ask you to forgive me  
for what I said before. My anger  
you should be able to put up with,  
since we two have shared many acts of love.  
I've been debating with myself. I realize  
I've been in the wrong. I tell myself,  
"I'm a fool. Why am I in such a rage,  
resenting those who offer good advice?  
Why fight against the rulers of this land,  
or against my husband, whose actions serve my own best interests with this royal  
marriage,  
producing brothers for my children?  
Why can't I stop being angry? What's wrong with me,  
when gods are being so kind? Don't I have children?  
Don't I know we're going into exile,  
where friends are hard to find?"  
With thoughts like these,  
I recognized how foolish I had been,  
how senseless it was to be so annoyed.  
So now I agree with you. It strikes me  
you've been acting prudently, by forging this marriage link on our behalf. I was  
mad.  
I should have worked with you in this design,  
helped you with your plans, stood there beside you  
in this marriage, rejoiced along with you  
for this union with your bride. But women are,  
well, I won't say bad—we are what we are.  
You shouldn't copy the bad things we do,  
repaying foolishness with foolishness.  
So I give in. I admit that I was wrong.  
But now I see things in a better light.  
[Medea goes to the door of the house and calls inside]  
Children, come out here—leave the house.

[Enter the children with the Tutor]

Come on out. Welcome your father here—  
talk to him with me. You and your mother  
will end the bad blood we've had in this family.  
We've patched things up, and no one's angry now.  
Take his right hand. Oh, it's harsh to think  
of what the future hides.

[Medea hugs her children]

Oh my children,  
will you keep holding your dear arms out like this  
through all the many years you have to live?  
Oh dear, I'm just too tearful, too afraid! My delicate eyes keep filling up with tears,  
now I've stopped this quarrel with your father.

CHORUS LEADER

My eyes, too, begin to weep pale tears.  
May this bad luck proceed no further.

JASON

Lady, I approve of what you're saying now.  
Not that I blame you for what went on before.  
For it's quite natural in the female sex  
to get angry when their husbands set up  
secret schemes to plan another secret marriage.  
But your heart has changed now for the better. Although it took a while, you  
understand  
the wiser course of action. In doing so,  
you're acting like a woman of good sense.  
Now, as for you, my children, your father  
has not been neglectful. With the gods' help,  
I've made secure provision for you.  
At some future date, you'll be leaders here,  
in Corinth, alongside your new brothers.  
But first you must grow up. As for the rest,  
your father and the god who smiles on him will take care of that. I pray I see you  
mature into fine young men, victorious  
over all my enemies.

[Medea starts to weep]

Medea,  
why turn away? Why weep and fill your eyes  
with these pale tears? What I have said,  
does that not make you happy?

MEDEA

It's nothing.  
I was thinking of the children.

JASON

Cheer up.  
I will see that they are well looked after.



MEDEA

I will cheer up. I trust what you have said.  
But it's a woman's nature to shed tears. JASON  
But why be so tearful with the boys?

MEDEA

I gave birth to them. When you made that prayer  
about them growing up, I felt pity,  
wondering how things would turn out for them.  
But let's discuss the reasons for your visit.  
I've mentioned some. Now I'll let you know the rest.  
Since the rulers here are keen to banish me,  
I recognize the best thing I can do  
is try not to stand in their way or yours,  
by staying here. This royal house thinks me their enemy. So I've made up my mind  
to leave this country and go into exile.  
But you should beg Creon to spare our boys,  
not banish them, so they can grow up here,  
under your direction.

JASON

Well, I don't know  
if I can convince him. But I should try.

MEDEA

You could tell your wife to ask her father  
not to send the children into exile.

JASON

A good idea. I think I can persuade her.

MEDEA

You will, if she's a woman like the rest. And I'll give you some help. I'll send her gifts,  
by far the finest human gifts I know,  
a finely woven gown, a diadem  
of twisted gold. The boys will take them.

One of my servants must fetch them here—

[Medea gestures to a servant]

You—bring me those presents right away.

[Servant goes into the house]

She's got more than one reason to be happy,  
that wife of yours. She's blessed in countless ways.

In you she's found a very worthy man  
to share her bed—and now she gets these gifts, which my grandfather Helios once  
gave  
to his descendants.

[The servant returns with the gifts. Medea takes them and hands them over to her  
children]

Come, children,  
take up these wedding gifts and carry them  
as offerings to the happy royal bride.

What she's getting will be worthy of her.

JASON

What are you doing, you foolish woman,  
disposing of these things of yours? Do you think  
the royal house lacks clothes or gold? Keep them.  
Don't give them away. If my wife values me,  
she'll set more store on what I want to do than on rich possessions. I'm sure of  
that.

MEDEA

Don't say that. Even the gods, they claim,  
are won by gifts. And among mortal men,  
gold works more wonders than a thousand words.  
Her fortune's on the rise. Gods favour her.  
She's young, with royal power to command.  
But to spare my children banishment,  
I'd trade more than gold. I'd give my life.  
Now, children, when you get inside the palace,  
you must beg this new wife of your father's,  
my mistress, not to send you into exile.  
When you present these gifts, you must make sure  
she takes them from you herself, in her own hands.  
Now go and be quick about it. Good luck!  
Bring your mother back news of your success,  
the happy news she so desires to hear.  
[Exit Jason and the children, with the Nurse and Tutor]

CHORUS

I've no longer any hope  
that these children stay alive,  
as they stroll to their own slaughter.  
The bride will take her diadem, she'll take her golden ruin.  
With her own hand she'll fix  
across her lovely yellow hair  
the jewelry of death.  
The unearthly gleam, the charm  
will tempt her to put on the robe  
and ornament of twisted gold.  
Her marriage bed will lie among the dead.  
That's the trap she'll fall in.  
That's how she'll die. She can't escape destruction.  
And you, unlucky man,  
married to the daughter of a king—  
how ignorant you are right now,  
bringing death to both your sons,  
to your bride an agonizing end.  
You most unfortunate man,  
how wrong you were about your destiny.

Next, I mourn your sorrows,  
unhappy mother of these children, intent on slaughtering your sons,  
because your lawless husband  
left you and your marriage bed  
and now lives with another wife.

[Enter the Tutor with the children]

TUTOR

My lady, your children won't be exiled.  
The royal bride was happy to accept,  
with own hands, the gifts you sent her.  
Now the boys have made their peace with her.

[Medea starts to weep]

What's wrong? Why do you stand there in distress?

Things have worked out well. Why turn away again? Aren't you happy to hear my splendid news?

MEDEA

Alas . . .

TUTOR

An odd response to the news I bring.

MEDEA

All I can say is I'm so sad . . . .

TUTOR

Have I mistakenly said something bad?  
Am I wrong to think my news is good?

MEDEA

You've reported what you had to tell me.  
I'm not blaming you.

TUTOR

Then why avert your eyes?  
Why are you crying?

MEDEA

Old man, I have my reasons.  
The gods and I, with my worst intentions,  
have brought about this situation.

TUTOR

Be happy. Your children will one day  
bring you back home again.

MEDEA

But before that,  
I shall bring others to their homes—alas,  
how miserable I feel.

TUTOR

You're not the only mother whose children  
have been separated from her. We mortals  
must bear our bad times patiently.

MEDEA

I'll do so.

But now go in the house. And carry on.

Give the children their usual routine.

[Tutor exits into the house. The children remain with Medea]

Oh children, my children, you still have a city and a home, where you can live, once you've left me in wretched suffering.

You can live on here without your mother.

But I'll go to some other country,

an exile, before I've had my joy in you,

before I've seen you happy, or helped

to decorate your marriage beds, your brides,

your bridal chambers, or lifted high

your wedding torches. How miserable

my self-will has made me. I raised you—and all for nothing. The work I did for you, the cruel hardships, pains of childbirth—

all for nothing. Once, in my foolishness,

I had many hopes in you—it's true—

that you'd look after me in my old age,

that you'd prepare my corpse with your own hands,

in the proper way, as all people wish.

But now my tender dreams have been destroyed.

For I'll live my life without you both,

in sorrow. And those loving eyes of yours will never see your mother any more.

Your life is changing. Oh, my children,

why are you looking at me in that way?

Why smile at me—that last smile of yours?

Alas, what shall I do? You women here,

my heart gives way when I see those eyes,

my children's smiling eyes. I cannot do it.

Good bye to those previous plans of mine.

I'll take my children from this country.

Why harm them as a way to hurt their father and have to suffer twice his pain myself?

No, I won't do that. And so farewell

to what I planned before. But what's going on?

What's wrong with me? Do I really want

my enemies escaping punishment,

while I become someone they ridicule?

I will go through with this. What a coward

I am even to let my heart admit

such sentimental reasons. Children,

you must go into the house.

[The children move toward the house but remain at the door, looking at Medea]

Anyone forbidden to attend my sacrifice, let such a man

concern himself about these children.

My hand will never lack the strength for this.

And yet . . . My heart, don't do this murder.  
You're made of stone, but leave the boys alone.  
Spare my children. If they remain alive,  
with me in Athens, they'll make you happy.  
No! By those avengers in lower Hell,  
I'll never deliver up my children,  
hand them over to their enemies, to be humiliated. They must die—  
that's unavoidable, no matter what.  
Since that must happen, then their mother,  
the one who gave them life, will kill them.  
At all events it's settled. There's no way out.  
On her head the royal bride already wears  
the poisoned crown. That dress is killing her.  
But I'm treading an agonizing path,  
and send my children on one even worse.  
What I want to do now is say farewell.  
[Medea moves to the children near the door, kneels down and hugs them]  
Give me your right hands, children. Come on.  
Let your mother kiss them. Oh, these hands—  
how I love them—and how I love these mouths,  
faces—the bearing of such noble boys.  
I wish you happiness—but somewhere else.  
Where you live now your father takes away.  
Oh this soft embrace! Their skin's so tender.  
My boys' breathing smells so sweet to me.  
But you must go inside. Go. I can't stand  
to look at you any more like this. The evil done to me has won the day.  
I understand too well the dreadful act  
I'm going to commit, but my judgment  
can't check my anger, and that incites  
the greatest evils human beings do.  
[Medea shepherds the children into the house, leaving the Chorus alone on stage]  
CHORUS  
Often, before this present time,  
I've gone into more complex arguments,  
I've struggled with more serious issues,  
than my female sex should try to probe.  
But we, too, have an artistic Muse. She lives with us to teach us wisdom.  
But not with all of us—the group of women  
able to profit from our Muse is small—  
in a crowd of women you might find one.  
And I claim that with human beings  
those with no experience of children,  
those who have never given birth,  
such people have far more happiness  
than those who have been parents.

With those who have no children, because they never come to see  
whether their children grow up  
to be a blessing or a curse to men,  
their failure to have offspring  
keeps many troubles from them.  
But those who in their own homes  
have a sweet race of children growing,  
I see them worn down with cares  
their whole life long. First,  
how they can raise their children well. Next, how they can leave their sons  
a means of livelihood. And then,  
it's by no means clear that all the work  
produces good or useless children.  
There's one final problem,  
the worst for any mortal human—  
I'll tell you: suppose those parents  
have found a sufficient way of life,  
and seen their children grow  
into strong, young, virtuous men, if Fate so wills it, Death comes,  
carries off the children's bodies,  
away to Hades. What profit, then,  
is there for us and our love of sons,  
if the gods inflict on mortal men,  
in addition to their other troubles,  
this most painful extra grief.

[Enter Medea from the house]

MEDEA

My friends, I've long been waiting in suspense  
to see what's happening in the royal house.  
Now I see one of Jason's servants coming. His hard rapid breathing indicates to me  
he's bringing news of some fresh disaster.

[Enter the Messenger, coming from the royal palace]

MESSENGER

Medea, you must escape—leave this place.  
You've done an awful deed, broken every law.  
Take ship and go by sea—or go overland  
by chariot. But you must go from here.

MEDEA

What's happened that I have to run away?

MESSENGER

The king's daughter has just been destroyed,  
her father, too—Creon. You poisoned them.

MEDEA

What really splendid news you bring. From now on, I'll consider you a friend,  
one of my benefactors.

MESSENGER

What's that?

Are you in your right mind, lady, or insane?  
To commit this crime against the royal house,  
and then be happy when you hear the news,  
without being afraid?

MEDEA

I have some remarks to offer in reply.  
But, my friend, don't be in such a hurry.  
Tell me of their deaths. If you report  
they died in pain, you'll double my rejoicing.

MESSENGER

When your two children came with their father  
and went in the bride's home, we servants,  
who had shared in your misfortune, were glad,  
for a rumour spread at once from ear to ear  
that you and your husband's previous quarrel  
was now over. Someone kissed the boys' hands,  
someone else their golden hair. In my joy,  
I went with the children right inside,  
into the women's quarters. Our mistress,  
whom we now look up to instead of you, before she caught sight of your two  
children,  
wanted to fix her eyes on Jason only.  
But then she veiled her eyes and turned away  
her white cheek, disgusted that they'd come.  
Your husband tried to change the young bride's mood,  
to soften her anger, with these words,  
"Don't be so hard-hearted with your family.  
Check your anger, and turn your face this way,  
look at us again, and count as friends of yours  
those your husband thinks are friends of his. Now, receive these gifts, and then,  
for my sake,  
beg your father not to exile these two boys."  
Once she saw the gifts, she did not hold out,  
but agreed in everything with Jason.  
And before your children and their father  
had gone any distance from the palace,  
she took the richly embroidered gown  
and put it on, then arranged the golden crown,  
fixing it in her hair at a bright mirror,  
smiling at her body's lifeless image there. Then she stood up from her seat and  
strolled  
across the room, moving delicately  
on her pale feet, delighted with the gifts,  
with a great many glances to inspect  
the straightness of the dress against her legs.

But then it happened—a horrific sight.  
She changed colour, staggered back and sideways,  
trembling, then fell into her chair again,  
almost collapsing on the floor. An old woman,  
one of her servants, thinking it was a fit inspired by Pan or by some other god,  
shouted in festive joy, until she saw  
the white spit foaming in her mouth, her eyes  
bulging from their sockets, and her pale skin  
quite drained of blood. The servant screamed again—  
this time, to make up for her former shout,  
she cried out in distress. Another slave  
ran off at once towards her father's palace,  
and another to the girl's new husband  
to tell him the grim fate his bride had met. The whole house rang with people's  
footsteps,  
as they hurried back and forth. By the time  
it would take a fast runner to complete  
two hundred yards and reach the finish line,  
her eyes opened—the poor girl woke up,  
breaking her silent fit with a dreadful scream.  
She was suffering a double agony—  
around her head the golden diadem  
shot out amazing molten streams of fire  
burning everything, and the fine woven robe, your children's gift, consumed the  
poor girl's flesh.  
She jumped up from the chair and ran away,  
all of her on fire, tossing her head, her hair,  
this way and that, trying to shake off  
her golden crown—but it was fixed in place,  
and when she shook her hair, the fire blazed  
twice as high. Then she fell down on the ground,  
overcome by the disaster. No one  
could recognize her, except her father.  
Her eyes had lost their clear expression, her face had changed. And there was  
blood  
on top her head, dripping down, mixed with fire.  
The flesh was peeling from her bones, chewed off  
by the poison's secret jaws, just like resin  
oozing from a pine tree. An appalling sight!  
Everyone was too afraid to touch the corpse—  
what we'd seen had warned us. But her father,  
poor wretch, didn't know what she's been through.  
He came unexpectedly into the house  
and stumbled on the corpse. He cried aloud, embraced his daughter, and kissed  
her, saying,  
"My poor child, what god has been so cruel



to destroy you in this way? Who's taken you  
away from me, an old man near my death?  
Oh my child, I wish I could die with you."

He ended his lamenting cries. But then,  
when he tried to raise his old body up,  
he was entangled in that woven dress,  
like ivy wrapped around a laurel branch.  
He struggled dreadfully, trying to get up onto his knees, but she held him down.  
If he used force, he tore his ancient flesh  
clear off his bones. The poor man at last gave up.  
His breathing stopped, for he couldn't stand the pain  
a moment longer. So the two of them lie dead—  
the daughter, her old father, side by side.  
It's horrible, something to make one weep.  
Concerning you there's nothing I will say.  
For you'll know well enough the punishment  
that's coming to you. As for human life, it seems to me, and not for the first time,  
nothing but shadows. And I might say,  
without feeling any fear, those mortals  
who seem wise, who prepare their words with care,  
are guilty of the greatest foolishness.  
Among human beings no one is happy.  
Wealth may flow in to produce a man  
more lucky than another, but no man,  
is ever happy, no one.

[Exit Messenger]

CHORUS LEADER

This is the day, it seems, the god tightens trouble around Jason,  
and justly so. Oh poor Creon's daughter,  
how we pity your misfortune. You're gone,  
down in Hades' home—the price you pay  
for marrying Jason.

MEDEA

I've made up my mind, my friends.  
I'll do it—kill my children now, without delay,  
and flee this land. I must not hesitate.  
That will hand them over to someone else,  
to be slaughtered by a hand less loving. No matter what, the children have to die.  
Since that's the case, then I, who gave them life,  
will kill them. Arm yourself for this, my heart.  
Why do I put off doing this dreadful act,  
since it must be done? Come, pick up the sword,  
wretched hand of mine. Pick up the sword,  
move to where your life of misery begins.  
Don't play the coward. Don't remember now  
how much you love them, how you gave them life.

For this short day forget they are your children— and mourn them later. Although you kill them,  
still you loved them. As a woman, I'm so sad.

[Exit Medea into the house]

CHORUS

Hail to Earth,  
Hail to the Sun,  
whose rays illuminate all things.  
Turn your eyes, look down,  
see this destroying woman,  
before she sets her bloody hands,  
her instruments of murder,  
onto her own children, those offshoots of your golden race.  
It's a fearful thing for men  
to spill the blood of gods.  
O light which comes from Zeus,  
stop her, take from the house  
this blood-thirsty savage Fury  
gripped by the spirit of revenge.  
The pain you felt in giving birth  
was useless, wasted.

Those children you so love, you bore them all in vain.  
You who left behind you  
the inhospitable passage  
where the Symplegades dance,  
those deadly, dark-blue rocks,  
you unhappy woman,  
why does your anger  
fall so heavily upon your heart,  
and one harsh murder  
follow so quickly on another? The polluting moral stain  
that taints all mortal men  
who shed their family blood  
upon the earth—that's hard to bear.

For the gods send down  
onto the houses of the ones who kill  
sorrows to match their crimes.

CHILD [from inside the house]

Help me . . . help . . .

CHORUS

Did you hear that?  
Did you hear the children cry?  
That wretched, evil woman!

CHILD [from within]

What do I do? How can I escape  
my mother's hands?

## SECOND CHILD

I don't know, dear brother.

It's over for us . . .

CHORUS [shouting in response]

Should I go in the house?

I'm sure I must prevent this murder.

CHILD

Yes—for the love of gods, stop this! And hurry!

SECOND CHILD

The sword has almost got us—like a snare!

CHORUS

You hard and wretched woman,

just like stone or iron—

to kill your children,

ones you bore yourself, sealing their fate with your own hands.

Of all women that ever lived before

I know of one, of only one,

who laid hands on her dear children—

and that was Ino,

driven to madness by the gods,

when Hera, Zeus' wife,

sent her wandering in a fit

away from home,

that sad lady leapt into the sea, because she'd killed her sons

a most unholy murder.

She walked into the surf

at the sea's edge, perishing

so she could join in death

her own two children.

But what horror still remains

after what's happened here?

A woman's marriage bed—

so full of pain—how many evils, has it brought on humankind?

[Enter Jason with attendants]

JASON

You women standing there beside the house,

where's Medea, who's done these awful things?

Is she still inside? Or has she left here?

She'll have to hide herself under the earth,

or else fly up to heaven's overarching vault,

if she's going to avoid her punishment

from the royal house. Did she really think

she could kill the rulers of this country

and get away unharmed? But at this point

she's no concern of mine. I'm worried

for my children. Those whom she has wronged

will take care of her. I've come for the boys,  
to save their lives, in case the next of kin  
try to harm me and mine, retribution  
for their mother's profane murders.

CHORUS

Unhappy man, you don't know the full extent  
of your misfortune, or you would not say this.

JASON

What is it? Does she plan to kill me, too?

CHORUS

Your boys are dead, killed by their mother's hand.

JASON

No. What are you saying? Woman,  
you have destroyed me.

CHORUS

The boys are dead.

You must fix your mind on that. They're gone.

JASON

Where did she do this? Inside or outside?

CHORUS

Open the doors and you will see them,  
your slaughtered children.

JASON [shouting into the house, as he shakes the doors]

You slaves in there,  
remove the bar from this door at once,  
withdraw the bolts, so I may see two things—  
my dead sons and their murderer, that woman  
on whom I shall exact revenge.

[Jason shakes the doors of the house, which remain closed. Medea appears in a winged chariot, rising above the house. The bodies of the two children are visible in the chariot]

MEDEA

Why are you rattling the doors like that,  
trying to unbar them so you can find  
their bodies and me, the one who killed them?  
Stop trying. If you want something from me,  
then say so, if you want to. But you'll never  
have me in your grasp, not in this chariot,  
a gift to me from my grandfather Helios,  
to protect me from all hostile hands.

JASON

You accursed woman, most hateful  
to the gods and me and all mankind.  
You dared to take the sword to your own boys, you—the one who bore them—and  
to leave me  
destroyed and childless. Having done this,

after committing this atrocious crime,  
can you still look upon the earth and sun?  
May you be destroyed! Now I understand—  
I must have lost my mind to bring you here,  
from that savage country, to a Greek home.  
You were truly evil then—you betrayed  
your father and the land that raised you.  
But the avenging fury meant for you the gods have sent to me. You slaughtered  
your brother in your home, then came aboard  
our fine ship, the Argo. That's how you began.  
When you married me and bore my children,  
in your lust for sex and our marriage bed,  
you killed them. No woman from Greece would dare  
to do this, but I chose you as my wife  
above them all, and that has proved to be  
a hateful marriage—it has destroyed me.  
You're not a woman. You're a she-lion. Your nature is more bestial than Scylla,  
the Tuscan monster. But my insults,  
multiplied a thousand fold, don't hurt you.  
Your heart's too hard for that. So be off,  
you shameful murderer of your children.  
Let me lament my fate. I'll get no delight  
from my new bride, nor will I ever speak  
to my own living children, the two boys  
I bred and raised. They're lost to me.

MEDEA

I would reply to your words at length, if father Zeus did not already know  
what I did for you and what you did to me.  
You weren't going to shame my marriage bed  
and have a pleasant life ridiculing me.  
Nor was that royal bride or Creon,  
who gave her to you, going to banish me,  
throw me from here with impunity.  
So if you want, call me a lioness  
or Scylla, who lives on Tuscan shores.  
For I've made contact with your heart at last.

JASON

You have your own share of pain and sorrow.

MEDEA

That's true. But there's relief in knowing  
you cannot laugh at me.

JASON

O my children,  
you had such an evil mother!

MEDEA

O my children,

victims of your father's evil actions!

JASON

At least it was not my hand that killed them.

MEDEA

No. It was an insult—your new marriage.

JASON

Was it right to murder them for that?

MEDEA

Do you think that insult to a woman  
is something insignificant?

JASON

Yes, I do, to a woman with good sense. But to you  
it's completely evil.

MEDEA

Well, your sons are gone.

That should cause you pain.

JASON

I think their spirits live  
to take out their revenge on you.

MEDEA

The gods are aware who began this fight.

JASON

Yes, they well know your detested heart.

MEDEA

Keep up your hate. How I loathe your voice.

JASON

And I hate yours. It won't be difficult  
for the two of us to part.

MEDEA

Tell me how.

What shall I do? For that's what I want, too.

JASON

Let me bury these dead boys and mourn them.

MEDEA

Never. My own hands will bury them.

I'll take them to Hera's sacred lands  
in Acraia, so no enemy of mine  
will commit sacrilege against them  
by tearing up their graves. And in this place,  
this land of Sisyphus, I'll initiate  
a solemn celebration, with mystic rites,  
future atonement for this wicked murder.

I'll now go to the land of Erechtheus, to live with Aegeus, son of Pandion.  
As for you, you'll have a miserable death,  
as is fitting for a coward. Now you've seen  
the bitter ending of your marriage to me,

your head will be smashed in, when you're hit  
by a moldy relic of your ship the Argo.

JASON

May the avenging Fury of our children  
destroy you—may you find blood justice.

MEDEA

What god or spirit listens to you,  
a man who doesn't keep his promises, a man who deceives and lies to strangers?

JASON

You polluted wretch! Child killer!

MEDEA

Go home.

Bury that wife of yours.

JASON

I'll go.

I've lost both my sons.

MEDEA

Your grief's not yet begun.

Wait until you're old.

JASON

Oh such loving children!

MEDEA

Their mother loved them. You did not.

JASON

And yet you killed them?

MEDEA

Yes, to injure you.

JASON

Alas, how I long to see my dear boys' faces,  
to hold them in my arms.

MEDEA

So now, at this point,  
you'll talk to them, you'll give them an embrace. Before this, you shoved them from  
you.

JASON

By the gods,

I beg you, let me feel their tender skin.

MEDEA

No. Your words are wasted.

JASON

O Zeus,

do you hear how I'm being driven off,  
what I must endure from this child killer,  
this she lion, this abomination?

But I'll use the strength I have for grieving  
and praying to the gods to bear witness

how you have killed my children and refuse  
to let me hold their bodies or bury them. How I wish I'd never been a father  
and had to see you kill my children.

[Medea's chariot takes her and the children up and away from the scene. Exit Jason]

CHORUS

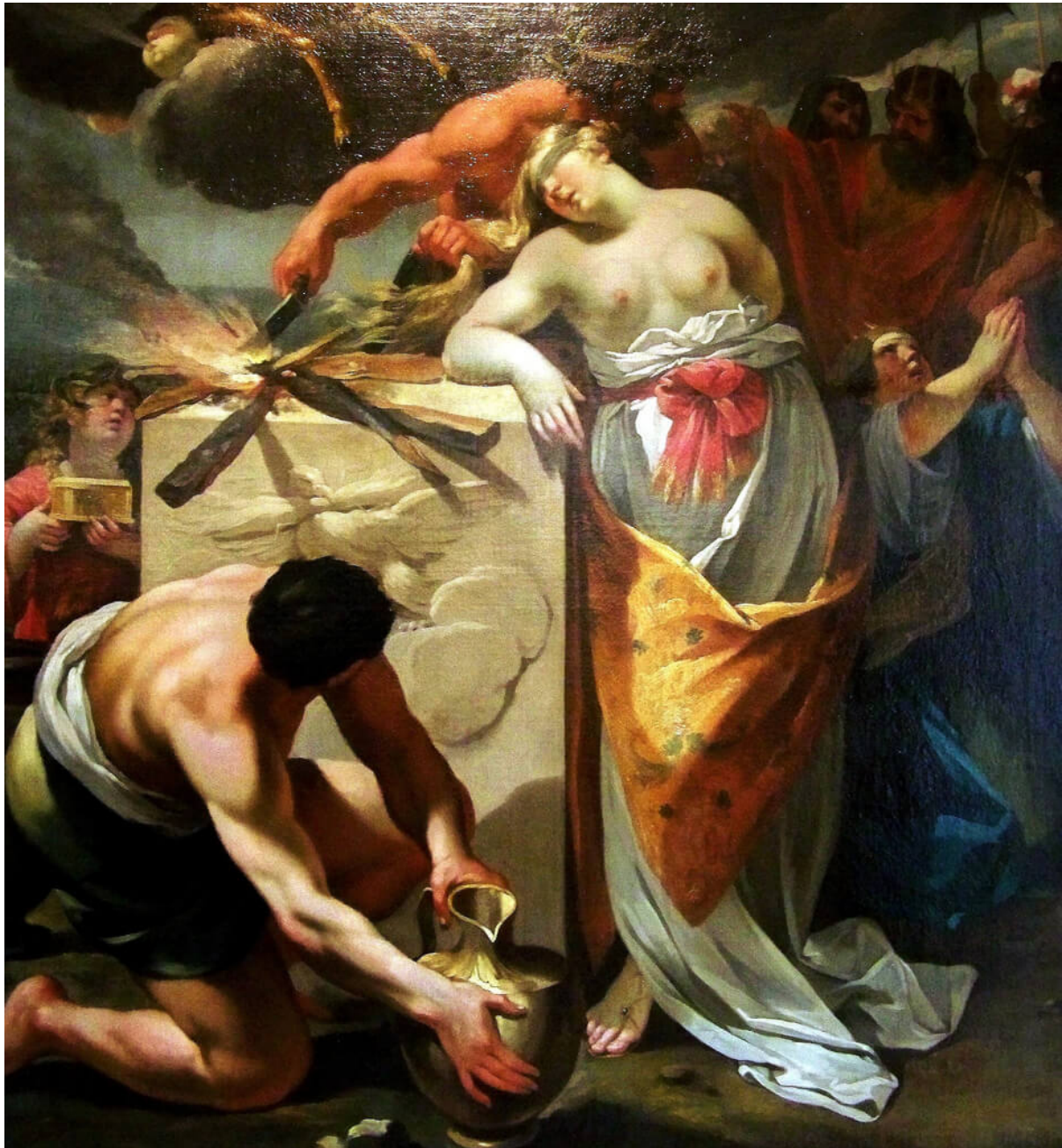
Zeus on Olympus,  
dispenses many things.  
Gods often contradict  
our fondest expectations.  
What we anticipate  
does not come to pass.  
What we don't expect  
some god finds a way to make it happen.  
So with this story.  
[Exit Chorus]



# (EURIPIDES) Iphigenia in Aulis

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/iphigeneia-in-aulis/)<sup>373</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

...



**The Sacrifice of Iphigenia - François Perrier**

<sup>373</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/iphigeneia-in-aulis/>

**DRAMATIS PERSONAE****AGAMEMNON** (*King of Argos*)**OLD MAN** (*Servant to Agamemnon*)**MENELOS** (*Agamemnon's brother, King of Sparta*)**KLYTAIMESTRA** (*Agamemnon's wife*)**IPHIGENIA** (*Daughter of Agamemnon and Klytaimestra*)**ACHILLES** (*Chief of the Myrmidons, an army*)**FIRST MESSENGER****SECOND MESSENGER****FIRST CHORUS** (*Of women from Chalkis*)**SECOND CHORUS** (*Men and women of Argos, attendants to Klytaimestra and Iphigeneia*)**THE BABY ORESTES** (*Silent*)**GUARDS** (*Silent*)**VARIOUS OTHER ATTENDANTS** (*Silent*)

...

*At the camp of the Greek army.**We are in front of Agamemnon's lavish tent which has two entrances, one of which is the larger and used only by Agamemnon and his family. His servants use the other.**In front of the tent is a small table at which sits Agamemnon. There is a small oil lamp on the table as well as various writing implements.**He is writing a letter, an exercise which, it seems, is excruciatingly difficult for him. He writes a few words, then scratches them out and begins again. At one point he is satisfied with what he's written, seals it with his ring but then, a moment later, he scratches away the seal and re-reads the letter. Later, he becomes so angry that he picks up the wooden frame upon which the scroll rests and throws it violently to the ground. His head falls heavily into his hands and he begins sobbing. Finally, he picks up the scroll, gets up and moves away from the table. He walks slowly about the stage, anxiously searching the starry sky.**Dawn is about to break. The sun should rise slowly until full daylight is reached just before line 164.***Agamemnon:** *Shouts towards the tent.*

Hey, old man!

*No answer. Louder.*

Old man, come out here! Out here, in front of the tent!

**Old Man:** *From within the tent.*

I'm coming, my lord... I'm coming! What's in your mind, this time, my lord Agamemnon?

*Pause. Old man is being too slow for Agamemnon***Agamemnon:**

Come on, hurry up!

**Old Man:** *From within*

I am hurrying, my lord, I'm hurrying!

*Enter the old man from Agamemnon's tent.***Old Man:**

Ah, old age! It has burdened me with lack of sleep and with overactive eyes, my

lord!

**Agamemnon:** *Pointing at the sky*

Come, look up there! Tell me, what star would that be, that one, gliding across the sky... up there?

**Old Man:**

That? That's Sirius, my lord. It's going past those seven stars, the Pleiades, my lord... straight through the very centre of the heavens.

**Agamemnon:** *Nods, then looks around him. Pensively, anxiously.*

Not a sound to be heard anywhere, old man!

Not from any birds, not from the sea and not from any of the winds that rule over the waters between us and Epirus... Total silence!

**Old Man:**

So, my lord, why on earth are you wandering about out here, then? The whole city of Aulis is quiet and the guard on the walls has yet to change. Come, my lord, let's go back inside!

**Agamemnon:**

I envy you, old man! I envy the man with the quiet life, the safe life. I envy the man who knows no fame; and I don't envy the man whose life is heavy with the trappings of office.

**Old Man:**

But, surely, my lord, surely it is there, in the trappings of office and power, that we find pleasure!

**Agamemnon:**

Pleasure! Pleasure, my old friend, is a dubious thing, an unstable thing; and as for all the trappings of office, all the power that goes with it, sure they might look sweet from the distance but once you get them, they become unbearable pains!

There are times when the gods shun you, reject you, thwart your every effort and there are times, too, when the whining and the moaning of your men crush you!

**Old Man:**

I... I don't approve of words like these coming out of the mouths of leaders.

Your father, my lord, Atreas, didn't bring you into this world so that you may taste only its pleasures, my lord. No, he gave you life so that you may understand pain, as well as pleasure.

You, too, my lord are a mortal and, whether you like it or not, this is how the gods want it: mortals must taste the good along with the bad.

But I see a letter in your hand, my lord. I saw you trying to write it by the light of that lamp there. You write down some words, then you scratch them out and write other words in their place. Then you seal the letter. Then you scratch away the seal and then you throw its pine frame onto the ground and then you begin to cry profusely!

This is the behaviour of a man in the grips of despair, my lord and it leaves no doubt in the mind of anyone who sees you, my lord, that you... that you've gone mad, my lord!

What has brought on all this anxiety? Come, tell me, share your story with me. You will be doing so to a man who's loyal and faithful to you. Your old father-in-law, Tyndareus, gave me to your wife, Klytaimestra, as part of her dowry, to be her loyal

servant.

**Agamemnon:**

My old friend, Thestius' daughter, Leda, had three daughters: Phoebe, Klytaimestra (my wife) and Helen. This last one, Helen, had received the most famous, the greatest sons of the whole of Hellas as her suitors... ferocious threats of murder were uttered by those who had missed out on her. Tyndareus, her father was in a dreadful dilemma: should he allow her daughter to marry or not? What would be the best action for him to take?

Finally, my old friend, he came upon the answer.

The suitors should all swear a solemn oath, by giving their right hand and by making sacred sacrifices, that each and every one of them would defend the man who won Helen's hand in marriage, no matter who that would be and to come to his aid in case someone stole her from their home and thus deprived that man of his legal conjugal bed. And, they should also swear that they would attack and destroy the land of the wrongdoer by the force of arms, whether his land is Greek or foreign.

Once the wise old Tyndareus had convinced them all to take these oaths, he allowed his daughter to choose the suitor she liked and Helen allowed herself to be guided by the sweet, lusty sighs of Aphrodite in her heart.

Well, Helen, unfortunately, old man, chose Menelaos!

After that, Paris, the man who, according to the legend, judged the three goddesses, Hera, Aphrodite and Athena, for their beauty, arrived at Sparta.

He came all the way from Troy, dressed in all his colourful garb, and, typical of the barbarians' love for splendour, his whole body was sparkling with gold jewels!

Helen fell in love with him and he fell in love with Helen. The opportunity was made for him to elope with her, since Menelaos was absent at the time. Paris took it and carried her off back to his own home, in Ida, a place where the cows graze in luxurious pastures.

Well, old man, Menelaos was outraged by this! In his frenzy, he rushed about the whole of Greece, calling upon everyone to remember Tyndareus' solemn oath and to help him, since he was the wronged husband.

And that's why the whole of Greece rose up in arms with great fervour. They picked up their spears, strapped on their armour, and rushed over here, in Aulis, with ships, troops, and a huge number of horses and chariots.

I, being Menelaos' brother and for his own good, was chosen by them to be their leader... How I wish this honour were given to someone else, my old friend!

So, we have all gathered here and here we are still, tied down by the weather!

After a while, Calchas, our prophet, came up to us and suggested -much to our dismay- that we should sacrifice my own daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess Artemis, whose shrine is in these parts!

He announced that if we did make that offering to the goddess, we would be able to sail away and we would succeed in sacking the Phrygian capital, Troy; otherwise we would fail.

This got me so angry that the very next moment I ordered Talthibius to use his powerful voice and call the army to disband. I was not going to slaughter my own daughter, old man! That I could never do! But my brother, using all sorts of

arguments, finally persuaded me to commit this dreadful deed!

I... wrote a letter to my wife, Klytaimestra.

I told her to bring our daughter here so that she may marry Achilles. It was a lie.

In it I spoke of Achilles' high rank, his bravery, his honour... and told her that the man refused to sail with us unless one of our daughters became his wife and went to live at his house, in Phthia. And it was with this lie, about the girl's mock-marriage, that I tried to persuade my wife to bring her here. The only other Greeks who know about this are Calchas, Odysseus and Menelaos.

Well, old man, I've reconsidered all those dreadful decisions I've made back then and wrote another letter in which I am correcting them. This is the letter which you saw me writing in the dark, opening it and shutting it, labouring over it.

Here, take it now and carry it over to Argos. Now, I'll tell you everything I've written in this folded scroll because you are a true and loyal servant to my house and to my wife.

**Old Man:**

Yes, tell me so that what I say to your wife agrees with what you've written in there.

**Agamemnon:**

The words I have written here, old man, are these:

"Leda's daughter, Klytaimestra, I'm sending you a second letter to replace the first. Do not send our daughter here, in Aulis, the place whose harbours are well protected from the harsh seas and which juts out towards Colchis. We shall make the wedding celebrations another time."

**Old Man:**

But how will Achilles take this? Will he not get furious with you and with your wife if you deprive him of his bride? This is very dangerous indeed, my lord!

Please tell me what to say to your wife.

**Agamemnon:**

Achilles is acting in name only and not in deed. He knows nothing of my scheme, nothing of the marriage and nothing of my supposed wish to give my daughter to him, to have him take her into his arms and into his marital bed.

**Old Man:**

You have dared to do a most frightening thing, my lord, Agamemnon! You have declared the girl to be the bride of a goddess' son, yet you bring her here to be a sacrificial offering for the benefit of the Greeks!

**Agamemnon:**

I was out of my wits, old man! Out of my senses!

But go! Go, now! Run! Forget your old age and run!

**Old Man:**

Yes, my King! I shall run!

**Agamemnon:**

And don't waste any time hanging about some watering hole in the woods... and don't fall victim to the magic of sleep!

**Old Man:**

How can you say such a thing, my lord?

**Agamemnon:**

And... when you come across some fork in the road, check it carefully. See that there are no wheel marks on the road. They might be from the wagon that is bringing the girl here, to the Greek ships.

**Old Man:**

I'll do that, my lord.

**Agamemnon:**

And... if she has already left the safety of her home and if you chance to meet her retinue on the road, send them back again... take the reins from their hands and hasten the horses towards the shrines of the Cyclopes.

**Old Man:**

And, my lord, if I say all these things you've just told me, will your daughter and your wife believe me?

**Agamemnon:**

Make sure you don't break the seal of the scroll!

Now go! Look! Dawn's light is already being taken over by the fire of the Sun's brilliant chariot! Go! Accomplish your tasks, old man!

*Exit Old Man.*

No man is blessed or happy for ever. No one was ever born to a life free of misery.

*Exit Agamemnon into his tent.*

*Pause. Daylight.*

*Enter First Chorus of women*

**First Chorus:**

We have left behind our land, Chalkis, a land washed by the salty waters of glorious Arethousa and we've travelled through the narrow straights of Euripus to come here, to Aulis, to this sandy peninsula.

**First Chorus:**

We have come to watch the army of the divine Greeks and their thousand ships.

**First Chorus:**

Our husbands told us they are all gathered here, under the helm of Agamemnon and his fair haired brother, Menelaos, noblemen both, preparing to launch an expedition against Troy.

**First Chorus:**

They're off to bring back Helen, Menelaos' wife, whom Paris, the Trojan cowherd, abducted from her home in Sparta, a city built by the reed-covered banks of the river, Eurotas.

**First Chorus:**

Helen was given as a gift to Paris, by Aphrodite, one day when, near the cool springs, she won the beauty contest from her rivals, Hera and Palas Athena.

**First Chorus:**

I sped through Artemis' woods, a place rich with sacrifices, my youthful shyness blushing my cheeks, anxious to see the army's might, the tents of the Greeks and their countless horses.

**First Chorus:**

And there I saw the two Ajaxes sitting together: Oeleus' son and the son of Telemon, the crown of Salamis and Protisilaos and Palamides, whose father is

Poseidon's son. They were sitting together on stools, joyfully immersed in a game of draughts, a game full of complex moves.

**First Chorus:**

Diomedes, too, was there amusing himself, throwing a discus. Next to him was Myriones, son of Ares, a marvel to all men and Odysseus, Laertes' son, who came from the hills of his island, Ithaca. Next to him was Nireas, first among the Greeks in beauty.

**First Chorus:**

And fast-footed Achilles, too, whose feet fly faster than the wind. He is the son of the goddess Thetis, and his tutor was Cheiron, the most honourable of all the centaurs.

**First Chorus:**

We saw him, racing in full armour upon the shells of the shore, in a contest against a chariot pulled by a team of four horses, a contest out of which he came victorious. Eumelus, Pheres' grandson was the driver of the chariot who, with a goad in his hand, he urged on and shouted at his beautiful steeds whose reins were a work of wondrous design, wrought in lustrous gold.

**First Chorus:**

The two horses in the centre, those that took the weight of the yoke, were dappled with spots of white; the two on the outside carried the traces and they had to negotiate the turns on the track. Those two had hair the colour of fire and were spotted from below the ankles of their great hooves. There, alongside of them, ran Achilles, Peleas' son, in his full armour. He kept pace with the rail and with the wheels of the chariot.

**First Chorus:**

I came to take a look at the great number of ships, a sight most pleasant and most able to satisfy my girlish eyes. What a sweet joy!

**First Chorus:**

The right wing of this naval force was taken up by the fifty swift ships of the war-loving Myrmidons from Phthia. At the tip of their sterns stood the golden statues of Nereids, the emblem of Achilles' army.

**First Chorus:**

Moored next to them was an equal number of Argive ships, headed by two chiefs, Euryalus, the son of Mecisteus, who was raised by his grandfather, Talaus and Sthenelus, Capaneus' son. Next to these were the Athenian ships -sixty of them, and these were captained by Theseus' son.

**First Chorus:**

Their emblem was the goddess, Palas Athena, standing on a chariot pulled by winged horses, an emblem that pleased and encouraged the sailors.

I also saw the Boetian fleet, fifty in number, led by Leitus, a mortal, born of the Earth. These ships, too, were adorned with emblems at their high sterns, this time of Cadmus, holding a golden serpent in his hands.

**First Chorus:**

Ships from Phocis and Locris were also there in similar numbers and their captain was Oileus whose city is the famous Thronium.

**First Chorus:**

Atreas' son, Menelaos, brought with him from Mycenae, the city built by the Cyclopes, one hundred ships and all the sailors to man them. With him also was his close friend, Adrastus, their commander, ready to exact vengeance for Hellas' sake, against the woman who fled her husband's halls so as to marry a barbarian.

**First Chorus:**

And I saw Gerenian Nestor who came from Pylos. On the stern of his ships was an emblem portraying the river Alpheus, his neighbour, who, on that emblem was given four feet and made to look like a bull.

The Aenians brought twelve ships, captained by their king, Gouneus; and beside them were moored the lords of Elis whom everyone called Epeians.

**First Chorus:**

Their captain was Eurytus.

The fleet of the war-loving Taphians, with its foaming oars, was commanded by their king, Phyleus' son, Meges who had left the Echinae, islands that are far too unwelcoming for sailors.

**First Chorus:**

The left flank of the Greek armada ended with the twelve trim and fast ships, led by Ajax whose birthplace is Salamis.

**First Chorus:**

This is the naval force I saw with my own eyes and about which I had heard earlier. If any barbarian dared to bring his ships against these he'd never see his home again.

So this is the armada I saw here and about which I had heard back home earlier.

*Enter Menelaos and the Old Man. Menelaos is carrying a staff and has nearly finished reading Agamemnon's letter which he has torn from the Old Man's hands.*

*The Old Man is angry and tries to take the letter back from him.*

**Old Man:**

Menelaos! Oh, this is a terrible thing you're doing! How dare you!

*Menelaos ignores him.*

No, you shouldn't do that! Don't...

**Menelaos:**

Leave! Go away old man! You're overdoing your loyalty to your master!

**Old Man:**

Your very reprimand shows the extent of my virtue!

**Menelaos:**

Act according to your position, or you'll be very sorry, old man!

**Old Man:**

You should not have opened this letter!

**Menelaos:**

And you should not be bringing so much trouble to the Greeks!

**Old Man:** *Tries to take the letter from Menelaos.*

Argue with others about that. Now let go of my letter!

**Menelaos:**

No, I will not!

**Old Man:**

Nor will I!



**Menelaos:**

If you don't let go of it I shall crack your skull open with this staff!

**Old Man:**

Dying for my master will be a glorious thing.

**Menelaos:**

Let go! *He gains control of the scroll.* For a slave you have just too much to say!

**Old Man:** *Shouts into Agamemnon's tent.*

Agamemnon! Master! Come out! We've been robbed! My lord!

*Enter Agamemnon from his tent.*

This man has forcefully and unjustly ripped your letter from my hands, my lord!

**Agamemnon:**

What? What is all this loud brawling in front of my tent?

**Menelaos:**

Listen to me, Agamemnon! I have a greater right to speak than he does!

**Agamemnon:**

Menelaos! Why are you arguing with this man? Why all this violence?

**Menelaos:**

First, look at me in the eye and then I'll tell you!

**Agamemnon:**

Look at you? Why? Do you think that I, son of Atreas the fearless, will be afraid to raise my eyes and look at you in the eye?

**Menelaos:**

See this? See this letter, this... contemptible letter with the contemptible message inside it?

**Agamemnon:**

Yes, I see it and, before you start you'd better hand it back to me!

**Menelaos:**

No! Not before I tell all the Greeks what it says!

**Agamemnon:**

So you broke its seal and read its contents? These are things you should know nothing about!

**Menelaos:**

Yes, you may well suffer now because I did break your seal and yes, I do know the secret trickery you were concocting!

**Agamemnon:**

By the gods! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Where did you catch him?

**Menelaos:**

I was waiting to see if your daughter would leave Argos to come to the army camp.

**Agamemnon:**

What? Who gave you the right to spy upon my affairs? What a disgraceful behaviour!

**Menelaos:**

Who gave me the right? My curiosity. Do you think I'm some slave of yours?

**Agamemnon:**

This is scandalous! Am I not allowed to manage the affairs of my own home, in my own way, now?

**Menelaos:**

No, you're not! Because the workings of your mind always have been, are now and always will be, deceitful.

**Agamemnon:**

An eloquent covering of a shameful act! Eloquence, brother, begets hatred!

**Menelaos:**

Yes, but an unstable mind is an evil thing, something which befuddles the minds of one's friends.

Let me tell you of your faults, Agamemnon! And I'll list them all, if you don't start getting angry or begin to deny them. Believe me, I won't be exaggerating.

You know very well how humble you were during the days you wanted to be the leader of the Trojan expedition. Well, you pretended you didn't want the job but you did.

During those days you shook the hand of everyone you came across and, whether they wanted it or not, your doors were always wide open and ready to receive everyone. You'd greet anyone and everyone, hoping with this behaviour to gain their approval and thus become their leader. Then, the moment you became one, all this nice behaviour changed and you had turned your back on all your friends. You locked yourself up indoors and became totally unapproachable to everyone.

A good man, my brother, must not change his manner just because his life is going well. It is, in fact, at that time when his friends should be able to rely on him because it is at that time, the time when things are going well with him, that he can help them the most.

Now, that was the first of my complaints against your character.

Then, you arrived here, in Aulis, with the whole of the Greek army and immediately you lost every virtue you had. You became a nobody. The gods deserted you and they wouldn't give you a favourable wind for our sails. You were totally bewildered by the change of your luck! And so, the Greeks ordered you to let them board their ships and go back home and to stop wasting their efforts here.

Well! The look your face took up at that suggestion! The thought that you would no longer lead our thousand ships against Priam, that you would no longer conquer his city with our soldiers – all that filled you with utter distress and dismay!

"What shall I do now?" you asked me. "Tell me what plan I should adopt! Who can help me here?" You were terrified of losing face and authority!

Calchas gave you the answer and you jumped with joy when he told you that the Greeks would be able to sail for Troy only after you had sacrificed your daughter to Artemis. You were only too glad to take up that offer! Too glad to commit the girl to the goddess.

Then, without anyone forcing you, totally of your accord –and don't claim it wasn't- you had sent a letter to your wife to bring Iphigenia here, in the pretence that she'd be marrying Achilles. Indicating the sky Look up there! This is the very same sky that heard your words then and the words you chose to write afterwards, reversing your message to your wife, telling her this time, in words to the effect that "I'll no longer be my daughter's murderer!" Isn't it so? Of course it is!

You, Agamemnon, are doing what countless others have also done in public life:

While they're in power they put up enormous efforts to keep it but then, when the public makes a stupid decision –sometimes understandably so because the leader is too weak to lead the State- these public figures fall all in a heap and they disgrace themselves!

My own heart aches more for poor Hellas than for you because Hellas was about to achieve something great against the barbarians when you and your daughter stopped her; and now these insignificant barbarians will be allowed to go free! Free to mock her!

The true leader of a city and of an army is not merely brave but intelligent. Intelligence, brother, can turn any man into a head of State.

**First Chorus:**

What an awful thing it is for brothers whose views differ to come to insults!

**Agamemnon:**

And now it's my turn to criticise you but, no, I won't do so in some arrogant, contemptuous way, with my eyes looking down on you but I shall do so in a conciliatory, brotherly way.

A sensible man usually speaks to others with respect.

So, tell me, my brother: What is all this violent fury? What's with this flushed face of yours? Who's done you wrong and what is it that you want? Is it a good wife you're after? Don't look at me for that, I can't give you one! You already had one and you couldn't control her. It's not my fault she left you for another man, so why should I pay for your mistakes?

You talk about my ambition. No, it's not my ambition that's bothering you, my brother! Rather, it's the fact that you need a good woman... one to fill your arms with – and, in order to get her, you've lost your wits and your manners!

These are wicked pleasures for a wicked man!

And then am I mad if I had changed my mind about something which I later realised I was wrong? No, it's not me who's gone mad, brother but you. You're the one, after all, who, even though the gods have helped you rid yourself of a bad wife, there you are, still intent on getting her back!

Dying for a marriage about which her lunatic suitors swore Tyndareus' oaths.

Give thanks to the goddess Hope! Be thankful to her because it is she who was looking after you and brought about all this for you, because, the truth is, neither you nor all of your power had anything to do with it.

So now, go on, take them all, take all these lunatics, all these soldiers and lead them on to the expedition. They'd love to go precisely because they are mad.

The gods are no fools and they know when oaths are falsely pledged or forced upon people.

And, no, I will not murder my children and certainly won't do it so that you can wrongfully enjoy some sort of vengeance exacted from a disgraceful wife, while I waste away in tears day and night because I had committed such a godless crime against them, against my own flesh and blood.

My words were brief, blunt and clear. If you're wise you'll heed them; if not then, have no fear, I know how to settle my own affairs well.

**First Chorus:**

Different words now but better. It's good that the children will be spared.

**Menelaos:**

Gods! Have I no friends then?

**Agamemnon:**

Of course you do – so long as you don't try to ruin them!

**Menelaos:**

How else, then, can you, Agamemnon, prove that we are brothers? How can you prove that you and I have the same father?

**Agamemnon:**

We are brothers when we are doing what is reasonable, not when we do what is madness.

**Menelaos:**

Brothers must share each other's pain.

**Agamemnon:**

Call on me when you want me to do something reasonable, not when you want to ruin me.

**Menelaos:**

And what about Greece? Do you not want to fight for her?

**Agamemnon:**

I would, but some god has made both you and Greece insane!

**Menelaos:**

Enjoy the glory of your sceptre then! You have betrayed your own brother! I shall look elsewhere for friends and help...

*Enter Messenger excited with joy.*

**Messenger:**

Agamemnon, leader of all the Greeks! I have brought with me your daughter, Iphigeneia and her mother -your wife- Klytaimestra, as well as your young son, Orestes. They should bring you great joy after such a long absence from your home.

But, alas, the road was long, my lord and so the women are now having a rest by the refreshing waters of a spring. We also let the horses loose to drink and to graze at a meadow nearby. I've rushed here before them so that you can be ready to receive them. The news spread quickly and so the whole army already knows that your daughter has arrived. They've all rushed over there to see her. The whole world loves to talk about the famous and to see them in their flesh.

The soldiers talk and they ask questions. "What's going on?" some of them ask. And others, "is there going to be a wedding?" Yet others again, "did the king call his daughter here because he's missed her?" Then there were others who said, "the girl will be presented to the goddess Artemis, protector of Aulis, before the wedding. I wonder who her groom is." Come, then, Lord Agamemnon, make a start on the celebrations. Gather the baskets for the sacrifices, place wreaths on your head. You, too, Menelaos, get everything ready for this joyous occasion and let's hear the flutes sing and the dancers pound the earth with their feet. This is a happy day for Iphigeneia!

**Agamemnon:**

Thank you, friend. Now go inside, my good man and everything will happen according to the will of Fate.

*Exit Messenger into Agamemnon's tent.*

Horrible Fate, what a dreadful yoke you've locked me into!

Where shall I begin? What can I possibly say now? Your wit is truly far greater than mine.

Ah, but the common folk have it easy. They cry when they wish and speak their mind freely, something which a leader cannot do: it's undignified, it's an insult to the splendour of his position and his whole life is controlled by it.

Leaders are but slaves to the common folk.

Here, then, I have suffered the greatest misfortune yet I am ashamed to cry just as I am also ashamed to hold back my tears.

What shall I say to my wife, then? With what face shall I receive hers? Her unexpected arrival has added to my ruin. New troubles are now added upon those I'm already suffering. Yet it is right that she should come with her sweet daughter to give her away as a bride...

Ah! And that's when she'll discover my treachery!

Poor, sweet young girl!

But why "girl?" Why do I not call her a "woman?" Will she not be made Hades' bride soon?

Oh, my girl! How I pity you! How I cry for you!

She will be begging me, my sweet young girl!

"Daddy, do you want to kill me? Well, then, may you and your friends also enjoy a marriage such as mine!" She will say to me!

My baby boy, Orestes, will also be there and he, too, will cry. His baby sounds will make no sense but they'll be full of meaning.

Paris! You are the cause of it! You, Paris, you son of Priam! What ruin, what catastrophe you've brought upon me by running off with Helen!

**First Chorus:**

I, too, feel pity for you – if it is at all proper for a foreigner to feel pity for the plight of kings.

**Menelaos:**

Brother, give me your right arm!

*Agamemnon does so.*

**Agamemnon:**

Here, Menelaos. You win, I cry.

**Menelaos:**

I swear, Agamemnon, by our father, Atreas and by our grandfather Pelops that I will tell you the truth plainly and clearly, just as I feel it in my heart and as I know it in my mind.

Tears of pity came into my eyes just now, when I saw your own tears roll from yours. I've changed my mind, brother. I no longer want to be your enemy.

I'll now stand by you and so I advise you not to kill your daughter or put my own interests before yours. It is unjust that you should be mourning while I'm living a life full of joy. It is unjust that your children should die while mine still enjoy the sunlight. After all, what is it exactly that I want? Is it marriage? Surely I could find another wife elsewhere! Gods forbid that I should choose to lose a brother to win a Helen! Should I exchange the good for bad?

I acted like a stupid child before but now I thought more deeply about what it's really like to kill your own children.

And then I also realised that we're brothers and my heart went out for the poor girl who would be sacrificed for the sake of my own marriage.

What does your Iphigeneia have to do with my Helen?

Come, disband the army and leave Aulis my brother and stop your tears and mine! If the oracle has given me some say into your daughter's fate then I pass that say over to you. I'll have none of it!

I've changed, you'll say! Gone are the harsh words, suddenly!

That's true, I've changed and I've changed because I love you, brother. I've changed because of my love for my mother's son. It's a natural thing for men with decent hearts to do the decent thing.

**First Chorus:**

Honourable words, Menelaos!

**First Chorus:**

Words worthy of Tantalus, Zeus' son.

**First Chorus:**

Words that will not shame your ancestors.

**Agamemnon:**

I praise you, Menelaos for these unexpected words, proper words, words truly worthy of you. Brothers fight because of lust and because of greed in their inheritance.

I hate such relationships; they bring bitter pain to all. But, my brother, we can do nothing now but go on with the bloody murder of my darling daughter.

**Menelaos:**

Why is that? Who on earth could force you to murder your own child?

**Agamemnon:**

The entire Greek army, Menelaos! All of them, here in Aulis.

**Menelaos:**

No, they can do nothing if you secretly send her back to Argos.

**Agamemnon:**

Sure, that I can certainly do secretly but there's something else, brother; something I cannot hide...

**Menelaos:**

And what would that be? Don't be so afraid of the masses!

**Agamemnon:**

Calchas will reveal his oracles to the men.

**Menelaos:**

Not if he dies first. That will be very easy to accomplish.

**Agamemnon:**

Curse Calchas and his whole horde of glory-loving prophets!

**Menelaos:**

Useless when you need them and a curse when you don't.

**Agamemnon:**

A thought just occurred to me, a thought which might frighten you, Menelaos!

**Menelaos:**

Tell it and I'll see.

**Agamemnon:**

Sisyphus' son, Odysseus, knows our whole story.

**Menelaos:**

Odysseus will give us no trouble.

**Agamemnon:**

Odysseus has a shifty mind and he's a rabble-rouser.

**Menelaos:**

True. He, too, loves glory. A dreadful sickness!

**Agamemnon:**

Can you not see him standing in the midst of all the Greeks, telling them all about Calchas' prophesies and all about how I've promised to sacrifice my daughter to Artemis but then went back on my word?

He'll have the whole army eating out of his hand and then make them kill us and sacrifice the girl anyway! And if I tried to run off to Argos, the whole lot of them will come over and destroy the place, raze the whole city to the ground, Cyclopean walls and all! That's what I'm afraid of! See what troubles the gods have thrown at me, the poor wretch?

Be careful of one thing, Menelaos: Be careful when you're walking among the men not to let Klytaimestra find out anything about the sacrifice; at least not until after I've sent my daughter to Hades. This way, I hope, my pain will be lessened a little.

*Turning to the chorus*

And you, foreign ladies, say nothing about this.

*Exit Agamemnon and Menelaos*

**First Chorus:**

Joy will come to those who share their marriage bed with the calm of Aphrodite's love and not with the frenzy of Eros' stinging arrows!

**First Chorus:**

This god, this god with the golden hair, lifts his bow and shoots two arrows of passion, one to bring us life's greatest joy, the other to send us into a whirlwind of confusion.

**First Chorus:**

Oh, Lady, goddess of love, Aphrodite!

Make sure this golden hair god stays far away from my bed chamber! I want my love for others to be moderate and my desires to be pure. I ask only for a modest share of Aphrodite's love; let it be not excessive!

**First Chorus:**

Mortals vary in body as well as in mind but true virtue, which comes from a good upbringing and a good education, always stands out.

**First Chorus:**

It is wise to be modest because modesty gives you the rare gift of circumspection, the ability to judge what is right, what is your duty; an ability that will give you respect and will remain with you for ever.

**First Chorus:**

And it is a great thing to follow the footprints of virtue like a hunter follows the

footprints of his prey.

**First Chorus:**

Women protect it well by avoiding immoderate love and men by bringing civil order in their city, thus making it great.

**First Chorus:**

There you were, Paris: a man brought up to be a cowherd, looking after the grazing, white cows of Ida with their heavy udders, playing Asian tunes in your reedy pipes, airs much like those Trojan songs from Mount Olympus when, suddenly, you had to judge between three goddesses; and it was this judging that has sent you to Helen's ivory palace in Hellas.

**First Chorus:**

Once there, a maddened gaze of love from each of you had sent you both into Eros' confusion and sent Greece to Troy with strife-searching ships and spears.

*Happy noises of incoming royal procession, including horses and chariot are heard within, Stage Left.*

*Enter Second Chorus of men and women, Attendants of Klytaimestra*

**Second Chorus:** *Indicating behind the curtains (Stage Left)*

Great is the joy of the great!

**Second Chorus:**

Look there: our Lord's daughter, Iphigeneia, our princess; and there, his wife and Tyndareus' daughter, our Lady, Klytaimestra!

**Second Chorus:**

They are the offspring of a great and most fortunate family.

To the lowly and weak mortals, the fortunate always appear like gods.

**First Chorus:**

Come, children of Chalkis, let us go and give the Argive Queen our gentle and firm hand to help her step down safely from her carriage and let us look welcoming towards Agamemnon's glorious daughter lest she be afraid of having arrived here at this place and at this time; and let us also make sure that the Argive women feel no distress or concern for being strangers in a strange place.

*Exit Stage Left.*

**Klytaimestra:** *(Within)*

I take your kind welcome and gracious words as signs of a good omen. I have brought this bride here with strong hopes for a wonderful marriage.

Come, folks come and take down from the carriage the wedding gifts I've brought and carefully carry them into the tent.

Come, darling Iphigeneia, come down from the carriage now. Step gently down, onto the earth. Women, help her. Give her your arms and bring her down safely. And help me, too. Please lend me your arms, so that I may get down from the seat of this carriage modestly.

Some of you stand by at the front of the horses to quieten them.

Horses can panic if there's no one to soothe them.

*Enter from Stage Left Klytaimestra and Iphigeneia, accompanied by an entourage of men and women, some of whom are carrying gifts into Agamemnon's tent.*

*A nanny is holding the baby Orestes in her arms.*

Here, friends, take this baby to his father, Agamemnon. It's young Orestes, a baby



still. Looking over the baby. Are you still sleeping my baby? Has the carriage lulled you to sleep? Ah, yes! Soon you'll wake up a happy young man, my son. Happy to be at your sister's wedding. I can see you there now: a nobleman becoming a brother-in-law to a nobleman, to the divine Achilles, the son of Thetis the Nereid.

*Turning to Iphigeneia*

Come, my darling daughter, come, Iphigeneia, come and stand near me. Let our friends here see how happy you make me.

*As Iphigeneia approaches her, Agamemnon enters.*

Ah, here's your father, go to him, darling!

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, mother, please let me run to him before you do. Please don't be offended now! Let me hug him tightly against my breast before you do!

*Iphigeneia rushes and embraces Agamemnon.*

**Klytaimnestra:**

My dear Lord, Agamemnon! Here we are, eagerly obedient to your wish!

**Iphigeneia:**

Father! Give me a big hug! It's been such a long time! I've missed you so much. Please don't get angry with me...

**Klytaimnestra:**

Yes, quite right, too! Of all of my children, you, Iphigeneia, have always loved your father the most!

**Iphigeneia:**

How wonderful it is to see you again, daddy!

**Agamemnon:** *Awkwardly*

And I'm very pleased to see you, too! I've also missed you!

You speak for both of us, darling.

**Iphigeneia:**

Oh, I'm so happy you've brought me here to see you.

**Agamemnon:**

Are you, darling? I... I'm not so sure.

**Iphigeneia:**

What's wrong, daddy? You say you're happy to see me but your face looks worried!

**Agamemnon:**

A king, darling, a General is always worried.

**Iphigeneia:**

Make your worries go away, daddy. From now on, think only of me.

**Agamemnon:**

Yes, my darling. I shall think of nothing else but you from now on.

**Iphigeneia:**

Well then, get rid of this ugly frown from the face that I love so much!

**Agamemnon:**

There! Oh, what a joy it is to see you, Iphigeneia!

**Iphigeneia:**

But... but look at you, father! Full of joy and yet tears flow from your eyes...

**Agamemnon:**

Yes, dear... because our separation will be a long one.

**Iphigeneia:**

Separation? I don't understand, father. Whatever do you mean? Why – where do they say the Phrygians live, father?

**Agamemnon:**

Where, darling? They live at a place, darling, where I wish Paris, Priam's son, never lived!

**Iphigeneia:**

You're going off on a long journey daddy and you're leaving me behind!

**Agamemnon:**

My thoughts exactly, my darling. For such a young girl you are so intelligent! I feel so sad...

**Iphigeneia:**

Then I shall be stupid and make you laugh!

**Agamemnon:** *He laughs*

Thank you, my sweet daughter! *Sadly, softly so that she won't hear him.* How could I ever speak the truth now?

**Iphigeneia:**

Don't leave home, daddy. Stay here with us, with all your children!

**Agamemnon:**

I wish I could, my child! If only I could!  
This makes me so sad!

**Iphigeneia:**

Damn all these spears of Menelaos! All these troubles he has caused!

**Agamemnon:**

Damn them, indeed... as I am damned, Iphigeneia, I and many others!

**Iphigeneia:**

You've been so long here in the harbours of Aulis!

**Agamemnon:**

And still something is holding back the expedition.

**Iphigeneia:**

If only it were possible to take me with you, father.

**Agamemnon:**

You, too, Iphigeneia, you also have a journey to make.  
You'll go to a place where you'll forget about your father.

**Iphigeneia:**

Will I go on my own or with mother?

**Agamemnon:**

Alone, darling. No mother, no father.

**Iphigeneia:**

Are you sending me to live with another family, daddy?

**Agamemnon:**

Little girls should not be bothered with such things. Enough!

**Iphigeneia:**

You'll come right back after you're done with Troy, won't you?

**Agamemnon:**

Yes but first I must make a sacrifice here, in Aulis.

**Iphigeneia:**

Of course. We must do what we must do, to please the gods.

**Agamemnon:**

You'll be able to see the sacrifice. You'll be standing right there at the altar.

**Iphigeneia:**

Shall we set up choruses around it, daddy?

**Agamemnon:**

You are much happier than me for knowing less than I do.

Come, go into my tent now. It's not proper for young girls to be in the public eye for too long.

*Iphigeneia begins towards the tent but is stopped by her father.*

Hold on! First, come, give your father a kiss. Give me your hand, my dear child.

You will be away from me for a very long time.

*He embraces and then steps back to look at her sadly.*

Oh, your poor cheeks, your poor beautiful, golden hair, your youthful breasts! What an awful burden Helen and Troy have become for us!

Ah! I can talk no more. The more I hold you in my arms the more the tears rush to my eyes. Go! Go inside now!

Iphigeneia obeys.

And you, dear wife, daughter of Leda, I ask forgiveness from you, too, for all my tears. Tears that come about from making our daughter a bride to Achilles.

Weddings are blessed things but still very tough on the hearts of the bride's parents.

It is a bitter thing for a father to take, a father who has worked hard but who must send his daughters away –away to another household.

**Klytaimestra:**

I am not so insensitive, Agamemnon.

I, too feel the same pain so I won't be angry with you. I shall be accompanying our girl with the wedding song.

Have no fear, the pain will soften with custom and with the passage of time.

Husband, I know the prospective groom's name but I know little about his family or his country.

**Agamemnon:**

Asopus, the river god, had a daughter, Aegina...

**Klytaimestra:**

...who was married to whom? A god or a mortal?

**Agamemnon:**

Zeus. He married her and they had a son, Aeacus who became King of the island Oenone.

**Klytaimestra:**

Who then was the heir to the House of Aeacus?

**Agamemnon:**

The heir was Peleas. He married Thetis, Nereus' daughter.

**Klytaimestra:**

With Zeus' will or against it? With blessings or with force?

**Agamemnon:**

Zeus himself gave her to him. He was her lord.

**Klytaimestra:**

And were they married in the sea?

**Agamemnon:**

No, the wedding was held in the sacred valleys of Pelion, where Cheiron lives.

**Klytaimestra:**

That's where they say the centaurs live.

**Agamemnon:**

Yes. That's where all the gods held the wedding feast.

**Klytaimestra:**

So, who raised the young Achilles, Thetis or his father?

**Agamemnon:**

Neither. Cheiron, the centaur did, so that the child might be brought up not knowing the behaviour of evil men.

**Klytaimestra:**

Ah! Chiron, the wise teacher, was entrusted by a wiser parent!

**Agamemnon:**

Yes, so you see what sort of a man your future son-in-law is!

**Klytaimestra:**

Sounds ideal to me. Where in Greece does he live?

**Agamemnon:**

He lives in Phthia, by the river Apidanus.

**Klytaimestra:**

And is that where he'll take our daughter?

**Agamemnon:**

That will be his decision. She'll be his wife.

**Klytaimestra:**

May they be happy there! When is the wedding?

**Agamemnon:**

It will take place at the most propitious time: When the moon completes its cycle again.

**Klytaimestra:**

Have you made the pre-natal offerings to the goddess yet?

**Agamemnon:**

Very soon. We're working on it right now.

**Klytaimestra:**

What about the wedding feast after the ceremony?

**Agamemnon:**

It will take place after I make the sacrifice.

**Klytaimestra:**

And the feast for us women? Where are we going to set it up?

**Agamemnon:**

Here, at the harbour, near our beautiful Greek ships.

**Klytaimestra:** *displeased*

The girl deserves better... still, may the gods be with us!

**Agamemnon:** *suddenly angry*

Wife, do as I say! Listen to me!

**Klytaimestra:**

... What's wrong? I always have!

**Agamemnon:** *Looking around him*

And I shall... here where the groom is, I shall...

**Klytaimestra:**

You? What, you'll be performing a mother's duties now?

**Agamemnon:**

... I, with all the Greeks as witnesses shall give Iphigeneia away...

**Klytaimestra:**

Really? And where will I be at the time?

**Agamemnon:**

You? You'll be back in Argos, taking care of our other daughters.

**Klytaimestra:**

And leave my darling behind? But... who'll carry the bridal torch?

**Agamemnon:**

I'll carry bridal torch.

**Klytaimestra:**

That's not what the laws of the custom say. You shouldn't go against them!

**Agamemnon:**

And you shouldn't be hanging around here, among all the soldiers!

**Klytaimestra:**

What I should be doing –as a mother- is to be the one who gives Iphigeneia, my daughter, away to her groom. It is what a mother must do!

**Agamemnon:**

What you must do is not leave your other daughters alone, back at the house.

**Klytaimestra:**

Our other daughters are looked after well and they are safe in their quarters.

**Agamemnon:**

Listen to me!

**Klytaimestra:**

Never!

By the goddess Hera, protector of Argos and of marriage, I shall not do so!

No, you look after everything outside the household and I shall take care of things within it! Our daughter's marriage is my concern!

*Klytaimestra turns away angrily and enters the tent.*

**Agamemnon:**

I have failed miserably! I have tried desperately to send Klytaimestra away from here but I've failed. I've tried all manner of subtle tricks to get my closest friends to agree with me and there, too, I've failed.

Failed utterly at every turn...

I shall go to the priest. Calchas will find out for me what it is the goddess will be satisfied with... though, I know, it will be something which will bring me misery and a great deal of hard suffering for the rest of Greece...

Ah, Menelaos! A wise man must keep in his house a good and faithful woman, or else he should never marry!

*Exit Agamemnon. Only the two choruses are now present. They fuse into one.*

**Chorus:**

And so the Greek ships will sail. Stuffed full with men and spears. They will reach the silvery eddies of the Simois river that runs through Apollo's stronghold, the rocky plains of Troy.

**Chorus:**

They tell me that Cassandra, Apollo's priestess is there. Cassandra who shakes loose her golden hair beneath the green garland of laurel whenever the god grips her with his prophetic gasp.

**Chorus:**

There, upon the city's towers and round about its high walls, the Trojan folk will stand when the warriors with their bronze shields bring their ships closer, over the river's waters, after their long journey over the ocean.

**Chorus:**

There they will arrive with their war-whetted spears and shields to wrest Helen from Priam's city and bring her back to Greece. Helen, the sister of the Heaven-dwelling twins, the Dioscuri.

**Chorus:**

And they will surround the city Pergamum, all about its stone towers with murderous war-men who'll smash the heads of the Trojans, cut through their necks and tear their city down to its foundations.

**Chorus:**

And the weeping and wailing of Priam's daughters and of his wife will be bitter and piercing. And Helen, Zeus' daughter, will shed bitter tears, too, for betraying her husband.

**Chorus:**

Oh, I hope I'll never see the day, nor should my children nor my grand children, should see the day when I suffer the torture that the golden Lydian women will suffer, the wives of those Trojan men, who will be suffering when, years later, working at their looms they'd be talking of this!

**Chorus:**

Do you hear them, Helen? Listen! Listen to their words:

"Who will it be, I wonder, who will bring tears to my eyes, drag me by my beautiful hair and pluck me from my ruined land?"

Do you hear them, Helen? That's what they'll be saying; and all this because of you, Helen! Yes, you, daughter of the long-necked swan!

**Chorus:**

That is, if what they say about you being Leda's daughter is true.

They say that Zeus had transformed himself into a bird and then slept with your mother. Is this true or is it yet another one of these tales conjured up by the poets and then spread idly about the world through the ages?

*Enter Achilles, angry.*

**Achilles:** *to the chorus*

Where is the leader of the Greek army? I know he's around here somewhere. One of his servants go and tell him that Achilles, Peleas' son is here, waiting for him, at the entrance of his tent!

*A member of the chorus rushes into the tent.*

Are we not all wasting our time here, by the banks of Epirus? All of us? Married and single alike? The single men have left their houses empty and uncared for and the married ones have left their wives and children behind. They're all just sitting idly around by the shore. What a lusty fervour the whole of Greece has stirred up for this expedition! Aided and abetted by the gods! The whole thing is a game played by the heavens!

Let me tell you why I am angry. Other men may have different views but let me give you my own. I have left Pharsalia and Peleas, my father, to come here. I have my army, the famous Myrmidons, wasting their time hanging about the quiet waters of Epirus, getting angrier and more impatient by the minute. Anger and impatience which I must control.

They yell at me!

"Achilles," they say. "Why are we wasting our time around here? How much more time do we need to waste on this expedition to Troy? Be a leader! If you really want to do something against Troy then do it, or else just take us all back home. Stop waiting for those indecisive sons of Atreas to tell you what to do..."

*He is interrupted by Klytaimestra's entrance.*

**Klytaimestra:**

Achilles, son of the Nereid! I just heard your voice from inside and came out to greet you.

**Achilles:**

By the goddess Modesty! Who is this exquisite looking woman I see here?

**Klytaimestra:**

I'm not surprised you don't recognise me. We've never met before. I'm very pleased that you, too, honour the goddess Modesty, Achilles!

**Achilles:**

But who are you, madam? And how is it that you, a woman, is here, where the whole army of the Greek men and their shields is gathered?

**Klytaimestra:**

I am Klytaimestra, Leda's daughter and Agamemnon's wife.

**Achilles:**

A brief but adequate answer!

Still, it's not proper for me to be talking with a woman.

*Begins to walk away.*

**Klytaimestra:** *She stretches her right hand*

Achilles, stay! Why are you leaving? Come, give me your right hand and let's make this the beginning of a blessed marriage!

**Achilles:**

What do you mean, madam? Give you my right hand? It would be shameful if Agamemnon saw me touching what's not rightfully mine!

**Klytaimestra:**

But it is rightfully yours, Achilles! Son of the Nereid, you are marrying my daughter...

**Achilles:**

What? What marriage are you talking about, madam? I... I am shocked, my lady! Words escape me!

*Directing his question to the chorus.* Are these amazing words the words of a delirious woman?

**Klytaimestra:** *Chuckles*

Ha, ha, ha! It's a common thing for a man to be shy when he meets his relatives for the first time and they're talking about marriage!

**Achilles:**

My lady, I have never proposed to your daughter... Atreas' sons have never talked to me about a marriage!

**Klytaimestra:**

But... Achilles, think again! You find my words strange but I find yours equally odd!

**Achilles:**

This is preposterous!

Let's think through this together, my lady. Perhaps we're both being deceived.

**Klytaimestra:**

Could this be right?

What a disaster! What a dreadful shame!

It seems I'm eagerly preparing for an imaginary wedding! What a terrible shame!

**Achilles:**

Ah! Someone must be playing games with both of us for some reason! Forget it, madam! Think nothing of it!

**Klytaimestra:** *She turns from him.*

Leave now, Achilles. Leave! Good bye. I feel too humiliated to face you after the lies I've uttered, after the dreadful way I've been treated!

**Achilles:**

Me, too! I also feel ashamed... I... turns towards the tent. I am going to go and speak with your husband...

*The Old Man fearfully pokes his head through the flaps of the tent. He is barely visible.*

**Old Man:**

Psssst! Achilles! Stay! You, grandchild of Aeacus... you, too Leda's daughter, stay!

**Achilles:**

Who's that? Who's calling through that half-opened door? He sounds frightened.

**Old Man:**

A slave. Fate gave me nothing to be proud of.

**Achilles:**

Slave to whom? Not mine, that's for sure. Agamemnon and I have separate properties.

**Old Man:**

That woman's there. I was given as a gift to her father, Tyndareus.

**Achilles:** *Turns back*

All right, you've stopped me... I'm waiting. Tell me what it is you want, now.



**Old Man:** *anxiously looking all around him*

Are you two alone out there?

**Achilles:**

Yes. Rest assured, we are alone. Now come out of Agamemnon's tent.

*The Old Man exits the tent*

**Old Man:**

Dear Fortune, help my brain to save those I love.

**Achilles:**

Weighty words, old man! They're bound to serve someone well, sometime.

*Old Man anxiously takes Klytaimestra's hand and kisses it.*

**Klytaimestra:**

Come, come, old man! Don't waste time kissing my hand. Tell us what's wrong!

**Old Man:**

My lady, you know who I am and just how loyal I've been to you and your children.

**Klytaimestra:**

I know well that you are an old servant of my house.

**Old Man:**

And you know, too that I was part of your dowry when you married King Agamemnon.

**Klytaimestra:**

Yes. You had come with me to Argos and stayed with me as my servant.

**Old Man:**

Yes, my lady and so, I am more loyal to you than I am to your husband.

**Klytaimestra:**

Well? Tell me what is this secret that's worrying you so much.

**Old Man:** *Apprehensive*

My lady... your daughter... her father... he is about to kill her!

**Klytaimestra:**

What? What did you say? No! This surely is nothing more than drivel spat out of the mouth of a mad old man!

**Old Man:**

No, madam! With his own sword, madam... he will make bloody the young girl's white neck... bloody it with her own blood!

**Klytaimestra:**

Ahhh! What shocking news of disaster is this? Has my husband gone insane?

**Old Man:**

In all other things, no, my lady. He's gone mad only so far as your daughter and you are concerned.

**Klytaimestra:**

But why? What demon has taken possession of his mind?

**Old Man:**

The priest, my lady. Calchas. He said that it must be done if the expedition is ever to make it to...

**Klytaimestra:**

Expedition? Where is the army going? Oh! Poor, poor child! Poor, poor girl! She's about to be slaughtered by the hand of her own father!

**Old Man:**

The army is heading to Troy, my lady. To Dardanos' house, in Troy, to bring back Menelaos' wife, Helen.

**Klytaimestra:**

So, my sweet darling must face this horrible fate because of the need to bring Helen back?

**Old Man:**

Yes, my lady. Now you know the whole thing. Agamemnon, her father will sacrifice her to the goddess Artemis.

**Klytaimestra:**

But what about the marriage? What was the point of bringing us up here for a marriage that...

**Old Man:**

He tricked you about the marriage with Achilles, my lady, so that you'd be willing to come here.

**Klytaimestra:**

O, my darling daughter! You've come to your death –you and me also!

**Old Man:**

Both of you have pitiable fates, my lady! Agamemnon dares to commit a most dreadful deed!

*Klytaimestra In tears*

Oh! What destruction! What horror! I... cannot stop crying!

**Old Man:**

Yes, dear lady! Cry! It is a horrible thing for one to lose a child!

**Klytaimestra:**

But... tell me, good servant, where did you hear all this?

**Old Man:**

He had sent me off to bring you a letter, madam... about the first message...

**Klytaimestra:**

What was the second message? To stop me from coming here or to urge me to do so?

**Old Man:**

To stop you... By then he had come back to his senses.

**Klytaimestra:**

But why didn't you deliver that message to me, if it was in your hand?

**Old Man:**

Because Menelaos took it away from me, my lady. He, madam, he's the cause of all your torment, madam.

**Klytaimestra:**

Achilles, do you hear this?

**Achilles:**

I do, my lady and I can see it's a horrible thing for you to endure. And I also hear what they've done to me!

**Klytaimestra:**

They've tricked my daughter to her death by promising her to you in marriage.

**Achilles:**

Yes, madam and I too, am furious at your husband. This is something I won't tolerate.

**Klytaimestra:** *Falls down and clasps Achilles' knees.*

Oh, Achilles! I clasp your knees without shame!

You're the son of a god and I am a mere mortal! I'm not too proud to do so. There is nothing that I would not do for my darling Iphigeneia.

Come, son of a goddess! Protect us in our terrible misfortune. Help my girl. She was falsely called your future wife. I had put a wedding wreath on her head and brought her here to be your wife. But, no, instead of that, I have brought her to her slaughter!

They will speak badly of you if you do not help her.

They will say that even though you weren't wedded to her, you were still the poor virgin's promised husband. You were still the man she loved.

I'm on my knees, begging you, Achilles!

*She runs her hand over his chin, over his right hand*

By your chin, Achilles, by your right hand and by your mother, stand by us! Help us!

It was your name, Achilles that has brought us to this misfortune, so protect it now. Protect your name. I have no one else to turn to, no other friend, no other altar to pray upon. Only your knees.

You know the dread that Agamemnon has brought upon us. You can see it!

It's an unbearable, harsh dread. And you can see how I, a woman, have come here to the camp of soldiers, tough men, brave and ready for war and violence.

*She places his right hand over her head.*

Come, son of the goddess, lend us a hand, help us, or else we are doomed!

**Chorus:**

Awesome is the power of giving birth! It makes the mother love her child most deeply and she will defend it with her life.

**Achilles:**

I know, I have a bloated pride, madam but I can assure you, I feel the pain of misfortune and the joy of success with a wise temper, a moderate temper; because I also know that those with a moderate temper lead a wiser life.

It's true, my lady that there are times when it is more pleasant to avoid excessive wisdom and there are times when wisdom is helpful but I, madam, I was raised in the house of Chiron, a centaur who respected the simple ways, the honest ways.

If the sons of Atreus practice honesty then I shall obey them but if they don't, rest assured, madam that I'll defy them.

I am here, madam, as I will be in Troy also, to defend – with my shield and with my spear – my honour as a man and to do my best to glorify the god of war, Ares.

You have been wronged, madam. Most treacherously wronged by your closest friends. Let my pity be a protective blanket over you; it is the pity of a young man but it is a sincere pity, nevertheless and one brought about by the fact that I have been the one named as your daughter's husband. Believe me, madam: Agamemnon will not slaughter her! I will never permit your husband to perform such treacherous deeds!

It is my name that he will be using as his sword to slaughter Iphigeneia and this awful man will disgrace my body if I let your daughter, who was about to marry me and who has suffered this insufferable fete die because of me.

To let this man succeed in this deed, to let him use my name as his bloody sword, would be to make me the worst of all the Greeks – a worthless man, one more cowardly than Menelaos, as if I were not the son of Peleas but that of some evil demon. By my grand-father, my mother's father, Nereus, who was nurtured by the ocean waves!

Agamemnon shall never lay a finger on your daughter –not even to touch her robes! Or else, we might as well call Mount Sipylus, the Asian city where his barbarous ancestors came from a "great city" and wipe out of our mind the name of Phthia!

When our esteemed prophet, Calchas, conducts his next sacrifice, when he will mingle his barley and his holy water upon the altar, he will pay bitterly for it!

A prophet? Ha! What is a prophet? A teller of truth one time and a teller of lies one thousand times... if he's lucky! And then, if his prophecies are found to be false, he vanishes!

*Turning to the chorus*

I'm not talking like this because I'm missing out on this wedding. No, there are hundreds of women who want my wedding bed! I'm angry because King Agamemnon has insulted me so gravely. He has used my name without my permission! He has used it to lure and snare his daughter and to convince Klytaimestra to bring her here, to me, to be presented as my wife!

In fact, had he asked me for my permission to use my name for this, I would have given it. I would have given it if the Greeks couldn't get to Troy without my doing so.

I would have given it to serve the greater good of our soldiers. I would have given it for the sake of my fellow soldiers. But now? Now that Agamemnon has insulted me, dishonoured me so badly, I feel like a... like a nobody.

It seems that the generals do as they please with me. Whether they treat me well or appallingly makes no difference to them.

*He turns back to Klytaimestra*

Madam, let this sword of mine bear witness to what I'm about to say!

This sword will have blood on it even before I leave for Troy! The barbarian blood of the sons of Atreas, of your husband, madam and that of his brother, if either of them snatches your daughter from my hands!

So, calm yourself now, Klytaimestra. I know, I'm behaving as if I were some god towards you though I'm a mere mortal.

**Chorus:**

Your words are worthy of you, Achilles and of your mother who is a splendid goddess.

**Klytaimestra:**

Dear Achilles! How could I possibly express my gratitude to you in a modest way? I want neither to overwhelm you by its excess nor insult you by its timidity. Those worthy of praise find it a hateful thing when they are praised too profusely.

I am too ashamed to tell you this pitiful story of mine. I know too well that this

awful plight is mine and mine alone – you have nothing to do with it...

But I will talk: the strong ought to help the weak where they can, even if they have little to do with their plight. Help us, Achilles! Help us because our plight needs your help.

When I first thought you were going to be my son-in-law, I had high hopes –vain hopes as it turned out but hopes nevertheless. Help us for that reason and help us, too, because if my daughter is killed on the altar that would be a bad omen for your future marital prospects, an omen you should try and avoid.

You began and ended your speech with fine sentiments.

My daughter's life hangs on your will. She will be saved if you will it. Would you like her to plead at your knees? Because, even though it would be improper for a little girl to plead at a man's knees, she will put aside her sense of modesty and do it, if you wish.

But let me try and persuade you and let her stay inside the tent. Let her keep her dignity intact. Those with dignity are respected, those without are shamed, though defending one's dignity is not always possible.

**Achilles:**

No, my lady, don't call your daughter out to see me. Let's not have the common tongues wag against us.

Soldiers who have been gathered together, away from the chores of their homes and are idle have malice and gossip ready at their tongue.

No, it will not be necessary. Pleas or no pleas the result will be the same with me because I have only one thing in mind, now: to save you both from this disaster! And this, my lady, this is no lie, believe me! If I'm lying to you, madam, then let death come upon me.

I shall save your daughter!

**Klytaimestra:**

May joy be with you for ever, Achilles. May it be with you always, for helping the unfortunate!

**Achilles:**

Then listen to me carefully, madam so that we'll achieve our aim.

**Klytaimestra:**

What would you like me to do? I'll obey your every command.

**Achilles:**

First, let us try and bring her father back to his senses.

**Klytaimestra:**

He's an evil man, my husband. A coward. He is afraid of his own soldiers.

**Achilles:**

Words, logic, can fight off fear.

**Klytaimestra:**

A cold hope, that one, Achilles. But tell me what I must do.

**Achilles:**

First, plead with him. Tell him not to kill his daughter. If you cannot persuade him then come back to me. If your pleas work and they save the girl's life, then my intervention will not be necessary.

That way, not only will I not lose a friend but the army will also not be angry

with me when it sees that I've used my brains rather than my brawn.  
If this works out well, then the result will be good for you and your family without my getting mixed up in the affair.

**Klytaimestra:**

Good idea. I shall do as you say.

Still, if I fail? Where will I find you? Where shall I go to find your hand, to ask you to help me in my hour of despair?

**Achilles:**

I'll be watching out for you. Checking out the situation carefully. What you mustn't do is run around wildly about the camp among the soldiers. Be careful not to disgrace your ancestors' house.

The name of Tyndareus stands high among the Greeks and one shouldn't demean it.

**Klytaimestra:**

No, I won't. I shall obey your directions. If the gods are just, then they should reward just men like you. Otherwise why should we bother being just?

*Exit Achilles. Klytaimestra goes into the tent.*

**Chorus:**

What a delightful wedding song was sung while the Lybian flute played on the day that Thetis and Peleas married!

**Chorus:**

How the dance-loving lyre and the enchanting notes of the reedy flute brought the fair haired Muses up from their home, the Pierian Springs, to the top of Mount Pelios!

**Chorus:**

With what joy the Muses pounded the earth with their gold-sandaled feet as they climbed the mountain side to get to the wedding!

**Chorus:**

Joyous notes were sung to the glory of Peleas, son of Aeacus and Thetis, there, upon Mount Pelion, the woody realm of the Centaurs.

**Chorus:**

And there it was that Dardanos poured the heavenly nectar into the deep golden cups of the gods.

**Chorus:**

He is the Trojan Ganymede, the loving delight of Zeus' bed!

And there, along the white sands below, Nereus' fifty daughters whirled and weaved their dance circles and made splendid the wedding of the Nereid.

**Chorus:**

And to the feast of the gods and to Bacchus' wine-mixing bowl came, too, with spears of fir and with wreaths of green leaves, the troupe of horse-mounted centaurs.

**Chorus:**

And their call to the Nereid was loud and clear:

"Chiron," they cried out, "Chiron who knows well the meaning of Apollo's words, foretells that you'll give Thessaly a son, a boy who'll be its brightest light. He'll be the man who'll take his army of spear-loving Myrmidons and turn Priam's city into

rubble.

**Chorus:**

A man whose body will be clothed in golden armour, fashioned by Hephaistos himself and given as a gift to him by his divine mother."

**Chorus:**

And so, the blessed couple were wed by the gods: The nobly born oldest daughter of Nereas and Peleas.

*Iphigeneia's scream of grief is suddenly heard from within the tent. The Chorus turns in the direction of the scream and responds!*

**Chorus:**

Ah! But as for you, daughter of Agamemnon!

**Chorus:**

Even though you were not raised among the sounds of the shepherd's flute, even though you were raised, instead, by your mother's side, raised to be adorned one day as a bride to one of Iachus' descendants, you, my young girl, will be dragged down like a spotted deer, or like a young heifer is dragged down from some rocky mountain's cave, dragged down there to the goddess' altar.

**Chorus:**

Then the Greeks shall tie a garland around your fair hair and stain your human throat with your own blood.

**Chorus:**

Where has the strength of your face gone? Where has the strength of the face of Modesty or of Virtue gone?

**Chorus:**

Alas! Now the strength rests with Irreverence and Virtue is now scorned by the mortals.

**Chorus:**

Gods' laws are ruled by lawlessness and mortals don't unite to stand against the wrath of Heaven.

*Enter Klytaimestra. She looks around the stage anxiously for a minute.*

**Klytaimestra:**

I've come out here looking for my husband. He's gone out a while ago and Iphigeneia, in the meantime, has heard how her father is planning to kill her.

She is in there, crying and falling from one abyss of misery into another.

*Suddenly she sees Agamemnon approaching.*

Ah, there he is! He's coming this way now. We will soon reveal Agamemnon's sacrilegious schemes against his very own children!

*Enter Agamemnon*

**Agamemnon:**

Thank goodness you're out here, Leda's daughter. I need to tell you things that our daughter should not hear. Things that should best be kept away from a bride's ear.

**Klytaimestra:**

What is it? What is it that I need to hear alone, out here?

**Agamemnon:**

Look, the sacrificial ceremony is ready. The lustral water, the barley, everything is ready for the holy flame. The young heifers that will be sacrificed and that will

deliver their abundant dark blood to the goddess Artemis are ready.  
Now call her out here so she can follow me to the altar.

**Klytaimestra:**

These are lovely words, Agamemnon... but what of your deeds? What should I call them? What should I call your deeds to make them also sound lovely?

*Turns towards the tent*

Iphigeneia! Come out here, darling!

You already know your father's intentions, poor love. Come out here and bring your little brother, Orestes with you. Cover the baby with one of your cloaks.

*Enter Iphigeneia holding the baby in her arms. It's covered with a cloak. Iphigeneia is crying.*

Obedient child. Here she is but I'll do the talking for both of us.

*Agamemnon approaches Iphigeneia and tries to console her.*

**Agamemnon:**

My child, why are you crying? Lift your head up for me, darling, smile for me.

No, don't bury your face inside your cloak!

**Klytaimestra:**

Oh, Gods! How should I start? What pain should I mention first –or second, or last? Every one of them is just as unbearable!

**Agamemnon:**

What's wrong with you two?

You're both in such a state of distress and confusion!

**Klytaimestra:**

Answer me honestly, my husband!

**Agamemnon:**

No need to tell me to answer you honestly. Ask me, what is it?

**Klytaimestra:**

Is it your wish to kill our child?

**Agamemnon:** *loud outrage*

What? What a dreadful thing to say! What a dreadful thought to have in your mind!

**Klytaimestra:**

Stop your shouting. Just answer my question!

**Agamemnon:**

Then make it a reasonable one!

**Klytaimestra:**

My question is nothing but reasonable. Now make your answer reasonable also!

**Agamemnon:**

Holy Fate and Fortune! Holy Spirit of mine!

**Klytaimestra:**

Yes! Your Fate and mine – and hers, too! A black Fate for all three of us!

Agamemnon!

You? Why, what have they done to you?

**Klytaimestra:**

You have the impudence to ask me that? You ask me what they've done to me? Ah, but this impudence of yours will miss its mark!



**Agamemnon:** *He covers his face with his hands in shame and groans.*

Ah! I'm lost! Someone has exposed my plans!

**Klytaimestra:**

Yes!

I know everything! I know about your plans. I know what you want to do to me...

Go on! You groan but you say nothing. That in itself is your admission...

Don't bother making a long speech about it, husband! There is no need!

**Agamemnon:**

Yes, I shall say nothing in my defence. How could I? I'd only be speaking lies and I'd be adding disgrace to my miserable Fate!

**Klytaimestra:**

Listen then and listen to me well! I shall speak clearly for you. No fancy, confusing words for you. The plain truth.

Hear my first attack on you: You've married me by brutal force and by murder. You've murdered Tantalus, my first husband and with even more brutal violence, you've torn my baby from my breast and dashed it hard against the ground!

So angry were my twin brothers, the Dioscuri, that they came charging down from Zeus' side on their glistening horses to fight you but you went begging to my old father, Tyndareus and he, not only saved you but made me your wife!

I accepted my fortune and you'll admit that I have always been a good wife to you. Faithful, devoted, temperate in nuptial duties, a good keeper of your house.

I was a very good house keeper for you. You felt a great deal of joy when you came in that house, and when you went out of it you felt a wealthy man.

Such good wives are rare, Agamemnon! As for the other sort, the bad ones, they are everywhere!

Look there! I bore you this son... a son and three daughters and now you tear one of them from my hands so violently! You're drowning me in misery.

Tell me, Agamemnon: Tell me what will you say to someone who asks you why you've killed your daughter? Tell me the reason you will give... no let me speak on your behalf, because I know what you will say. You will say that you've killed our daughter so that Menelaos, your brother, can get back his Helen!

What a wonderful excuse! What a price to pay for the sake of saving a slut! Your own baby! You will kill the one who's loved by all so as to save the one who's hated by all!

Tell me Agamemnon! After you have gone... gone away on your expedition and you have left me here, alone in the house -and alone for a long time, our darling daughter's chair empty... her bedroom empty -what sort of heart do you think will be beating in my breast?

I would be there, alone, Agamemnon, wailing, crying bitter tears, yelling, "Darling Iphigeneia! Your own father has slaughtered you with his own hand! He alone did it, he, alone, with his very own hand! He and no one else!" What sort of a welcome do you think you'll receive on your return? What do you think I and the rest of your family will feel towards you?

We -your children and I- will give you the return that an evil man deserves. By the gods, Agamemnon! Don't force me to become evil! Don't become an evil man!

*Despondently*

I see. So you will sacrifice your daughter!

Well then, tell me: what will your prayer, your plea to the gods be? What will you ask the gods to grant you as your knife cuts through your daughter's throat? A safe return? No!

Should you not be expecting a poisonous welcome since you're departing like a snake?

And, do I not also have the right to make my own prayer to the gods about you? Don't suppose for one minute that I'll be asking them to treat you well. We would be treating gods as fools if we thought that they would act kindly towards murderers.

And tell me another thing, Agamemnon: when you return home, when you come back to Argos, will you have the gall to put your arms around any of your children? What a shocking thing that would be! Which one will it be? Which of your children will dare even look at you? Which one will not wonder if it will be the next one you take to the slaughter?

Have you thought of any of this, or do you just go wandering about the army camp proudly waving about the sceptre of a General? Is being a General the only thing in your head?

Think about your daughter for once, Agamemnon and make a fair proposal to your army: Ask them all if they really want to go to Troy and if they do, well then, let them draw lots that will include their own children also! Let them all see which one should be sacrificed. Why should you be the only one to offer our child as a victim to the altar?

Or else let Menelaos kill Hermione, his own daughter. All this is his own doing. His wife's doing, so, let him kill his wife's daughter. Why should I, a faithful wife, endure the misery of having my daughter killed while she, a slut, gets to rejoice by having her daughter kept safely at home, in Sparta?

If I'm right, do the sensible thing and don't kill our darling.

**Chorus:**

Listen to her, Agamemnon! Save your child! No one in the world can deny that the act of saving a child is a blessed act.

*Iphigeneia hands baby Orestes to her mother*

**Iphigeneia:**

If only I could sing like Orpheus, father!

Orpheus, who could charm even the heartless rocks into following him!

If I could use such a voice and have everyone charmed, have them convinced to agree with me and follow me, then I would use that voice.

But I have no such skill. The only voice I have, father, my only skill, is in my tears and, here, father, I'm giving them to you! I'm giving you my tears!

I'm giving you all I have!

*She leans before him and embraces his knees*

Here, father, here is the body of a suppliant! Here is the body that your wife has given birth to. I wrap its limbs around your knees and beg you: Please father, do not cut off my life short. Let me enjoy the sweet light of day and do not force me to enter the world beneath the earth.

I'm your first one, father!

The first one to call you father, the first one you called daughter. Me, father! I was

the first to play on your knees, the first one of your children to enjoy your love and the first one to give you a child's love.

Remember, father? You used to ask me, "I wonder, my darling, will I get to see you married one day, married and settled happily in your husband's home, your life ever blossoming, making me proud of you?" And I'd touch your chin, my father, hang from your beard, father, like I'm doing now and say, "and what about you, father, will I get to see you, father, an old man, visiting me at my house, ready for me to repay you for your hard work in raising me?"

No, you don't remember these words, father. I do but you don't! You've forgotten them and so, now, you want to kill me.

Please, father! Please, in the name of Pelops and of Atreas, who is your father, I beg you! Please don't do it!

And I beg you also for my mother's sake, the woman who laboured to bring me to life, the woman who is being tortured even now. I beg you, father!

What does my life have to do with the marriage of Paris and Helen father? Why has their marriage brought about my death, father?

*Agamemnon turns away.*

*She continues despondently.*

Come, then, father, turn to me and give me a final kiss. A kiss to remember you by in the underworld, since my words have not convinced you.

*Agamemnon does not move.*

*She goes over to her mother and takes baby Orestes in her arms. She swings him, sadly, gently back and forth and leans over him as she speaks to him*

What a weak little helper you are, my tiny brother! Won't you cry with me, Orestes? Come on, won't you beg your father not to kill your big sister? Come on, Orestes, even babies know when there's trouble around!

Ha! See, father? Orestes is begging you, too! Begging you by his silence.

Do you not care about me any more? Spare my young life, father. Spare me! Here! Look here, father! Here are the two of us, one's a baby, the other a grown up girl, a brother and a sister, both your children, begging you, by your beard, pleading with you...

*She turns and looks sadly around her, then up at the sun.*

That! Up there is my final argument.

That light, this light all around us, will cut all other arguments to pieces.

This light is the sweetest thing that can fill the eyes!

The world beneath the earth is a world of nothing. Only fools would pray to go down there.

I'd rather live a life full of misery than die a hero's death!

**Chorus:** *Shouts angrily*

Helen!

**Chorus:**

All this is your doing, Helen!

**Chorus:**

You, evil Helen! You are the cause of this miserable conflict between the sons of Atreas and their children!

**Agamemnon:**

I know well about pity –I know well who deserves it and who does not and I -I love my children!

No, I have not lost my senses.

This is a dreadful thing for me to do but it is just as dreadful not to do it.

Whether I do it or I don't, the consequences for me will be the same.

You both know the size of the army gathered here. You saw the endless ships. The whole place glitters with the bronze armour of the warriors. The whole of Greece is gathered here and they all want one thing: to go to the famous city of Troy and tear down her towers.

*Turns towards Iphigeneia*

*Pleading*

But they can't, my darling daughter. Not unless I obey the priest's demand, not unless I sacrifice you.

Some madness has overtaken their hearts and they want to sail immediately over to Troy –to the land of those barbarians and to put an end to this raping and stealing of our women, to tearing them away from their marital beds.

*To Klytaimestra*

It is a madness I cannot control. If I try to stop them they will kill us all. They will sail over to our home, to Argos and kill our children and the two of us as well!

*Back to Iphigeneia*

I cannot defy the goddess' demands, my darling.

It's not Menelaos who's in control here, Iphigeneia. I don't have to do anything he says and I didn't.

The one in control here is Hellas. The whole of Greece.

It is for Hellas that I am forced to sacrifice you. Whether I want to do so or not, I must obey Hellas. I am forced to do it! It is Hellas I must obey, darling, not Menelaos.

Both of us, darling! Both you and I, whether we want to or not, must help Hellas stand free –Hellas' men cannot have their wives stolen from their beds.

*Agamemnon turns and exits.*

**Klytaimestra:**

Ah, my darling!

Oh, dear ladies!

Oh, my sweet daughter! How can I endure your death?

Your father has gone, my darling and abandoned you to Hades!

*She takes the baby Orestes from Iphigeneia's hands.*

**Iphigeneia:**

The same song, mother, the same words tell both our fates, dear mother and I... I've lost the day's sweet light, the sweet light of the sun's rays!

It was upon the forests of Trojan Ida, its woods covered thickly by the shroud of snow where King Priam once abandoned his child boy, Paris. The King feared the prophet's words that the boy would grow up to destroy him –him and his city and so he tore the baby away from its mother's arms and cast him on the mountainside, hoping that he would die.

That child was Paris. Everyone called "Idean" because of the Trojan city Idean. How I wish this herdsman, this boy who was brought up to care for cows, had never lived! How I wish he never lived near the gurgling white waters of those springs, the

springs where nymphs gathered. How I wish he never lived at that meadow where all the flowers bloomed: roses and hyacinths, all those flowers that the goddesses plucked.

It was there, at that meadow that Pallas Athena and Aphrodite, whose heart was full of cunning, came with Hera and Hermes, Zeus' messenger.

One goddess, Aphrodite, was proud of her insatiable love.

Another, Pallas, was proud of her war spear and the third, Hera, proud of the fact that she shared her bed with Lord Zeus. She was the Queen of the gods.

It was there, at that meadow, that these three women came before Paris to put an end to their dire contest about which of them was the most beautiful.

Dire to me because it brought about my death.

*Speaking to the chorus*

Dear women of Argos, this death, my death, this sacrifice to Artemis, will speed the Greeks to Troy and bring honour to the Greeks.

*Back to her mother*

Mummy!

Mummy!

My father, my own father has left me! He has abandoned me to deal with this dreadful calamity all on my own!

What a hateful, bitter sight is Helen! Abominable creature! Godless!

And I? I will be led to a godless slaughter by a godless father!

If only this town, if only Aulis, had refused to let all these Troy-destined ships enter her harbour! Them and their pine sterns and their shiny bronze prows!

And if only Zeus had not breathed his contrary wind upon Euripus, this wind that stopped this expedition from leaving for Troy! This breath that quieted the breezes in the Greek sails!

He sends all sorts of winds to sailors: winds to make them happy to lift their sails and plunge into the sea, winds to make them sad because they must furl their sails; and winds that make other sailors crazy because they're forced to move too slowly.

How harsh is the life of mortals!

How full of torment is life for us ephemeral creatures!

Our Fate dictates misery for us all!

How much suffering, how much pain has Helen, Tyndareus' daughter, brought upon us, upon the children of Danaus!

**Chorus:**

What an awful, pitiful fate you must endure, child! I wish you could avert it somehow.

*For a moment a great deal of shouting by men is heard behind the curtains.*

*All the women are frightened and turn towards it. Iphigeneia hugs her mother.*

**Iphigeneia:** *Looking into the distance behind curtains.*

Mother, I see a group of men coming towards us!

**Klytaimestra:** *Peers into the distance anxiously for a moment but is finally relieved.*

Ah! That's Achilles, my darling. The goddess' son. He is the very reason you are here!

**Iphigeneia:**

Servants, quickly, open the doors of the tent so that I may hide!

**Klytaimestra:**

Oh, no, child! Why run away?

**Iphigeneia:**

Mother, I'm too ashamed to face Achilles.

**Klytaimestra:**

But why, child?

**Iphigeneia:**

I am ashamed because my marriage has turned out to be such a dismal failure.

**Klytaimestra:**

Darling, no! The circumstances are too dire now for modesty and for polite coyness! Stay here. This might turn out to be a blessing for us –

*She hands Orestes to her*

*Enter Achilles with fellow soldiers in full armour.*

**Achilles:**

Dear, unfortunate Klytaimestra...

**Klytaimestra:**

"Unfortunate," Achilles, yes, that is true!

**Achilles:**

The whole army is calling out for...

**Klytaimestra:**

What, Achilles? What does the army want? Tell me!

**Achilles:**

The whole army wants her –your daughter- killed!

**Klytaimestra:**

The whole army? Does no one speak against it?

**Achilles:**

I did but they're shouting at me, too! They want me to...

**Klytaimestra:**

You? What do they want to do with you?

**Achilles:**

They want to stone me to death, Klytaimestra!

**Klytaimestra:**

Why? Because you're trying to save my girl?

**Achilles:**

That's right.

**Klytaimestra:**

But who on earth would dare touch you, Achilles?

**Achilles:**

Who? The whole Greek army, Klytaimestra, that's who!

**Klytaimestra:**

The whole of the Greek army? What about your own soldiers, Achilles, what about your Myrmidons? Did they not side with you?

**Achilles:**

They were the worst of them all! They hate me the most!

**Klytaimestra:** *Turning to Iphigeneia*

Then that's the end, my sweetheart! We are doomed now!

**Achilles:**

They jeered at me! Called me slave to a wedding bed!

**Klytaimestra:**

Did they? And how did you respond to that?

**Achilles:**

I told them that if that's what they thought, then they should not kill my intended wife.

**Klytaimestra:**

Of course!

**Achilles:**

Her father had promised her to me!

**Klytaimestra:**

And kept his promise by bringing her here, to you, all the way from Argos!

**Achilles:**

But all that shouting!

I just couldn't get through to them! I was beaten by all the noise.

**Klytaimestra:**

That's what a mob is like! Awful!

**Achilles:**

Still, I'll help you anyway.

**Klytaimestra:**

You, alone? You'll fight them all?

**Achilles:**

Alone? Can you not see these men in full armour?

**Klytaimestra:**

May the gods give your heart strength!

**Achilles:**

I hope so!

**Klytaimestra:**

So, my darling will not be put to the sword?

**Achilles:**

Not if I'll have anything to say about it!

**Klytaimestra:**

Will anyone come to take her away?

**Achilles:**

Yes, many and they'll be lead by Odysseus!

**Klytaimestra:**

Odysseus? You mean, the son of Sisyphus?

**Achilles:**

Yes, that's the one!

**Klytaimestra:**

Was he picked by the army to do this or is this his own private doing?

**Achilles:**

He was elected, all right, but he didn't say "no"!

**Klytaimestra:**

Elected to commit a murder! How dreadful!

**Achilles:**

But, don't worry, I'll certainly make it hard for him!

**Klytaimestra:**

Will he try and come here and drag my darling away, just like that, against her will?

**Achilles:**

Yes. He'll grab her by her blond hair, if he has to and...

**Klytaimestra:**

So what should I do?

**Achilles:**

You must grab her and not let go of her.

**Klytaimestra:**

I'll certainly try that –if that's the last thing I do!

**Achilles:**

Yes, it might be just that. The very last thing you do.

**Iphigeneia:**

Mummy please listen!

I can see that you're angry at your husband but I think you're wrong about that.

There is no point. We can't go on fighting against Necessity!

*Indicating Achilles*

Our friend here should certainly be thanked for his efforts but we should be careful not to put his life in jeopardy against the army with no advance in our predicament.

Let me tell you my thoughts, mother.

It's obvious that there's no escaping my death; so now, I want to die nobly. I don't want anyone to think despicable things about me.

Let me die in clear, unblemished glory.

*Klytaimestra shakes her head.*

No, listen to me, mummy!

*She hands Orestes to her.*

Listen, mummy and see if I'm not right.

All the eyes of Greece are upon me.

Her strength depends upon me.

Her expedition to Troy and its destruction depends upon me.

The future of our Greek women rests upon my actions. The barbarians will no longer abduct them and carry them off from our wealthy shores, once Helen's abduction by Paris has been avenged.

My death will bring about all this liberation and my good name will live into eternity. People will talk about how I've saved Greece.

And then... there's also this: what right do I have to love my life so much?

You haven't given birth to me simply for your own sake! No, you've brought me to life so that the whole of Greece may rejoice!

How can I insult all those countless brave warriors and their shields, all those myriads of men, clasp hard at the oars –men with courage enough to attack our enemy and die for our country, to clear her name?

How can I insult them all –insult their efforts, by trying to save myself –I, one, single life?

Would that be just?



What would my excuse be, mother?  
And then there's yet this:  
We are asking this good friend of ours here to fight with the whole Greek army and be killed –for what? For a mere woman? No, mother!  
No, I'd rather see the death of a thousand women than that of a single man!  
A goddess, mother, the goddess Artemis has called for my body.  
How could I, a mortal, go against that? I could not. I shall give it to her for the sake of Greece.  
Come! All of you! Prepare my sacrifice. Soldiers, go and tear down Troy!  
Let that act be what I'll be remembered by. Let that stand for me in place of the children and the marriage I could have had.  
Let that be my fame!  
Let the Greeks win, mother, not the barbarians.  
We are a free people, whereas they are slaves.

**Chorus:**

You're a brave girl, Iphigeneia. What an awful Fate the gods have delivered to you!

**Achilles:**

Yes, it would have been some god's blessing had I married you, daughter of Agamemnon!  
Greece is lucky to have you as one of her daughters –I envy her and I envy you because you are lucky to have Greece as your mother.  
Your words are good, worthy of our country. You have chosen logic and good intentions to that of continuing a war against Fate and against Necessity.  
You are indeed a brave, noble person, Iphigeneia and for that reason I want you to be my wife.

I want to marry you, to take you to my home and to protect you. I swear by my mother, the goddess Thetis, that I shall fight the Greeks to save you!  
Think again, Iphigeneia! Death is a dreadful thing!

**Iphigeneia:**

I'm not afraid to say this in front of everyone: Helen, Tyndareus' daughter, has caused wars and the endless spilling of blood because of her body. Let hers be the last one to do so!  
My friend, neither kill nor be killed because of me. Let me, instead, save Greece, if I can.

**Achilles:**

No, Iphigeneia! You are, indeed, a noble soul and you leave me speechless and unable to argue against your views. The decision is yours and it is a brave one, I admit that.  
But listen to me, Iphigeneia. You might still change your mind. Once you see the knife approaching your neck you might well call for my help.  
I shall be there, very near the altar.  
My armed comrades will be there with me to save your life, to stop your execution. I won't let anyone take your life even though it would be against your wish.

*Exit Achilles. Klytaimestra bursts into tears.*

**Iphigeneia:**

Mother, you're crying!

But why?

Come, say something!

**Klytaimestra:**

Yes... I am crying!

There is a great reason to cry...

My misery is too great...

**Iphigeneia:**

Come, now, mother, don't make me lose heart! Shhhh... listen to me!

**Klytaimestra:**

All right...

Speak.

I...

Speak and I will listen!

**Iphigeneia:** *She runs her fingers gently through her mother's hair.*

Promise me, mummy! Promise me that you won't cut even a strand of your hair in mourning... nor wear black!

**Klytaimestra:**

What? Can I not mourn my daughter's loss?

**Iphigeneia:**

But there is no loss, mummy!

My life, mummy, my life has been saved! And you, you will carry the honour of my deed wherever you go!

**Klytaimestra:**

But you're saying that I can not mourn your death, my darling! How...

**Iphigeneia:**

No, mother. I want no one to lose tears over my grave. There will be no grave. No tomb, no tombstone!

**Klytaimestra:**

How can there be a death and not a grave? It is our custom to bury sacrificial offerings.

**Iphigeneia:**

Artemis' altar will be my grave. The altar of Zeus' daughter.

**Klytaimestra:**

All right!

You've persuaded me with wise words. I shall do as you say.

**Iphigeneia:**

I am a fortunate girl, mother. I shall serve Greece!

**Klytaimestra:**

What shall I tell your little sisters?

**Iphigeneia:**

Don't let them wear black either!

**Klytaimestra:**

A sweet word of love from you?

**Iphigeneia:**

Wish them joy for me... and take good care of my little brother, Orestes for me. Bring him up to be a man.

**Klytaimestra:** *Hands her the baby.*

Here, take him into your arms for the last time. Look at him for the last time.

**Iphigeneia:** *Cuddles Orestes tightly.*

Darling, darling little brother! You've done all you could to help your big sister, haven't you?

**Klytaimestra:**

What shall I do for you in Argos?

**Iphigeneia:**

Do not hate daddy – my daddy, your husband.

**Klytaimestra:**

No, what he's done to you will cost him a great deal of trouble!

**Iphigeneia:**

Mother, he will sacrifice me for the sake of our country, for Hellas, against his will.

**Klytaimestra:**

And he will achieve this by trickery. Vile trickery, unworthy of his father, Atreas!

**Iphigeneia:** *Hands Orestes back to her mother. Rolls her hand gently through her own hair. Thoughtfully.*

My hair! Mother, who'll come with me when they'll come and drag me by my hair?

**Klytaimestra:**

I'll come with you. I'll...

**Iphigeneia:**

...No, mother! No, that's not a good idea...

**Klytaimestra:**

I'll hold you tight, by your clothes...

**Iphigeneia:**

No, mother. Listen to me! That would be bad for both of us.

*She goes to the door of the tent and opens it so that the servant may hear her.*

No, mother, let one of daddy's servants accompany me to Artemis' woods, the place where I shall be sacrificed.

*A female servant enters from the tent.*

**Klytaimestra:**

Darling! You're going?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, mother. Going forever!

**Klytaimestra:**

And you will abandon your mother like this?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, mother. I must go. Unjustly but I must!

**Klytaimestra:** *Grabs her by her arm*

No! No! Stop! Don't go! Don't leave me!

**Iphigeneia:**

Stop! Mother, no! I will not have you crying!

*She leads her mother into the tent and returns to centre stage*

*To the chorus:*

You, girls! Raise a hymn now to the goddess Artemis, Zeus' daughter, for the sad

honour she has asked me to endure and let the women of Argos, the daughters of Danaus, hold a silence of reverence.

Let someone go and prepare the sacrificial basket and may the blessed fire burn high with the purifying barley.

And may my father work well his right hand upon me at the altar!

My sacrifice will bring about a victory for the Greeks and secure their safety.

Now, come, take me away to the altar! I, the destroyer of Priam's city and its people!

A garland for my head... a garland for my hair... some holy water from the sacred basins!

*Some members of the chorus rush about her, placing garlands on her hair and sprinkling water upon her head.*

Dance, girls, dance around Artemis' altar!

Dance around the temple of the blessed goddess! If I must then I shall wash away her oracle with my blood, with my sacrifice upon her altar.

No, holy mother!

No, I will not shed any tears now. It is improper for tears to be shed during holy rites.

Come, friends, sing with me in praise of the goddess whose temple faces Chalkis, the place where the spears of war are waiting for me in anger!

There, in the narrow harbour of Aulis.

My country! My Pelasgia! My Mycenae! My home! My mother!

**Chorus:**

That is the city of Perseus, you're calling to! A city built by the Cyclopes!

**Iphigeneia:**

Pelasgia! You've raised me to be the shining light of Greece.

I do not fear my death!

**Chorus:**

No, your name will never die!

**Iphigeneia:**

Glorious day!

Glorious sun! Zeus' own light!

I'm leaving for another world! From now on I will live there in that other world.

Goodbye, sweet light!

*Exit Iphigeneia*

**Chorus:**

And there goes the girl!

**Chorus:**

There goes the destroyer of Troy and her people!

**Chorus:**

There goes the girl with garlands on her hair and holy water upon her head!

**Chorus:**

There goes the girl who'll soon stain the altar of the murderous goddess with the gushing blood of her beautiful throat!

**Chorus:**

Go, young girl! The sparkling water of your ancestral streams is waiting for you!

**Chorus:**

Go, young girl! Your father's holy water is waiting for you!

**Chorus:**

Go, young girl! The Greek warriors are waiting for you, anxious to start off for Troy!

**Chorus:**

Friends, let us sing our prayer to Artemis! Let us pray for a good fortune!

**Chorus:**

O, dear goddess! Blessed Artemis!

**Chorus:**

Enjoy now the sacrifice of blood and then help the Greek army launch its expedition to the land of the Phrygians, Troy the treacherous!

**Chorus:**

Let Agamemnon's spear see victory!

**Chorus:**

Let Agamemnon place a crown upon the head of Greece and let him be crowned in turn!

**Chorus:**

Let Agamemnon's name live for ever in glory!

*Enter Second Messenger running excitedly.*

*He goes to the tent and shouts through its door.*

Second **Messenger:**

Klytaimestra! Klytaimestra! Daughter of Tyndareus! Come out here immediately! Come and hear my news!

*Enter Klytaimestra.*

**Klytaimestra:**

I hear you, I hear you! Here I am.

Your voice has horrified me! I'm shaking with fear.

Are you here to add to the mountain of dread I have to endure already?

**Messenger:**

No, my lady! Indeed no! Rather, I have an amazing story to tell you about your daughter. A real miracle!

**Klytaimestra:**

Go ahead then, speak. Don't waste any time!

**Messenger:**

My dear lady I shall. You'll soon hear it all. That is, if my brain doesn't falter and make my tongue trip over its words!

We took Iphigeneia to the forest of Zeus' daughter, Artemis. It's a meadow full of bright and beautiful flowers.

The moment we got there with your daughter all the Greek soldiers gathered around us. Agamemnon saw his child on her way to her slaughter and immediately groaned with horrible pain. He lifted his cloak up and dug his face deep into it, trying to hide the tears that flooded his eyes.

Still, the girl came up close to him and said, "Daddy, here I am, ready to do as you say. I offer my body to my country and to the rest of Greece, willingly. Come, take me to the altar of the goddess. Sacrifice me. It is the wish of the Heavens. On my part, I wish you all happiness and may you return to the land of your fathers victorious. Let no Greek touch my body with his hand. I offer my neck quietly and

with no fear for the knife."

That's what she said and every man there was amazed at the bravery and the virtue of the young girl.

Then Talthybius stood up amongst them all and told them to be silent. He was the one responsible for that job.

Then Calchas, the priest, took out a sharp sword out of its sheath and placed it in a basket made of gold. Then he placed a garland upon the girl's head and sprinkled holy water on her hair.

Then Achilles, Peleas' son, took the golden basket and the holy water in his hands and ran around the goddess' altar, chanting:

"Oh, Artemis!

Oh daughter of Zeus!

Oh, killer of wild beasts!

Oh, goddess who lets her brilliant light roll along through the gloomy darkness of the night!

Accept this sacrifice which we, the Greek army and Agamemnon, offer to you!

Accept the pure blood from this girl's lovely neck!

Accept it and grant us a safe journey!

Accept it and let our spears sack the tall towers of Troy!"

The whole army and both the sons of Atreas stood there in silence, their eyes downcast.

Then the priest took hold of the sword and, after a few words of prayer, began searching the girl's neck looking for the best place to strike.

I... I felt a sharp pain cutting into my heart, my lady and I looked down onto the earth.

But then, suddenly a miracle happened, my lady!

All of us –we all heard the awful thud of the striking sword but when we looked up, we could not see the girl anywhere! She had vanished, my lady! Gone!

Then the priest lets out a huge roar and the whole army roared with him as they saw the most unbelievable sight, a sight that must have been sent by Heaven, a sight that made them question their very eyes.

There, my lady, there, upon the ground, lay a large animal, a beautiful stag, letting out its last breaths. Its blood spattered about, saturating the goddess' altar!

You just can't imagine Calchas' joy, madam!

He spoke and he said,

"Chiefs of the Greek army, can you see this offering? Can you see what the goddess has placed upon her altar? Can you see this stag, this animal that walks about in the mountains? The goddess would much rather have this animal offered to her than the girl so that her altar would not be defiled by shedding the blood of a human. She has accepted this offering gladly and has granted us a safe journey for our expedition against Troy. And so, soldiers, take heart and head for your

ships because today we must leave behind the deep harbours of Aulis  
and cross our way through the vast Aegean sea!"

And when the animal was thoroughly burned in the flames of the god of fire, Hephaistus, and when the holy rites were completed, Calchas prayed for our safe return.

Then Agamemnon came to me and ordered me to come here and tell you what Fate the gods have granted to your daughter. It is a glory that will never wither in the minds of the Greeks.

Let me make it absolutely clear, my lady: I was there and I saw it with my own eyes! The girl is with the gods! She has flown away to the Heavens!

Be sad no more!

Be angry with your husband no more!

The gods do strange things, madam, things that baffle us mortals but they save those they love.

Your daughter, my lady, has today seen both death and life!

*Exit Second Messenger*

**Chorus:**

What joyful news that messenger has brought you, my lady!

**Chorus:**

He said your daughter is still alive, my lady!

**Chorus:**

...and living with the gods!

**Klytaimestra:**

Darling Iphigeneia!

Sweet daughter! Which of the gods has stolen you?

How should I address you from now on?

And how can I be certain that this isn't just an idle little story to cheer me up, to ease my dreadful grief for you?

**Chorus:** *Indicating within*

Ah! Here comes the king himself, my lady. Here comes Agamemnon!

**Chorus:**

He'll be able to confirm the messenger's words.

*Enter Agamemnon, excited.*

**Agamemnon:**

Wife, we should consider ourselves very much blessed. Our daughter now lives among the gods. Now, you must take with you our newborn son from here and go back home. The Greek army is getting ready to sail.

Good bye, then!

It will be a long time before I return from Troy, a long time before I greet you again. May all things turn out well for you!

**Chorus:**

Agamemnon, son of Atreas, begin now your journey to Troy and may it be a happy one!

**Chorus:**

Come back to us once you've taken from that city her fairest spoils!

*Exit all*



# (EURIPIDES) Iphigenia in Tauris

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/iphigeneia-in-tauris/)<sup>374</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE:**

**Iphigeneia** (*Sister of Orestes*)

**Orestes** (*Brother of Iphigeneia*)

**Pylades** (*Friend of Orestes*)

**Herdsmen**

**Thoas** (*King of Tauris*)

**Servant and Messenger** (*Of Thoas*)

**The Goddess Athena** (*Appears through a *deus ex machina**)

**Chorus** (*of Greek women, Iphigeneia's servants*)

**Two maids to Iphigeneia** (*silent*)

**Various Guards** (*silent*)

...

*As Dawn slowly breaks we discern more and more clearly the eerie setting of the play.*

*It is the Temple of Artemis in Tauris (modern day Crimea)*

*In front and almost centre stage, an altar, heavily stained by the blood of sacrifices.*

*From the eaves of the Temple hang human bones, skulls, pieces of armour.*

*Stains of spattered blood can also be seen on the columns and walls of the temple.*

*It will be disclosed that the victims sacrificed on that altar are humans.*

*The temple has two doors. Iphigeneia and the temple wardens use the central door.*

*Others the side door.*

*SR leads to the seashore.*

*SL leads to Thoas' palace.*

*FX: The gentle sounds of the sea in the distance.*

*Enter Iphigeneia from the centre door of the temple.*

*She is the priestess of Artemis.*

*FX: Cut sounds of the sea*

## **Iphigeneia:**

The moment Pelops, Tantalus' son, arrived in Pisa on his swift horses, he married the daughter of Oenomaus and with her fathered Atreus who, in turn, fathered Menelaos and Agamemnon. I am Agamemnon's daughter. Iphigeneia. My mother is Klytaimnestra, Tyndareus' daughter.

My father sacrificed me to Artemis, for Helen's sake. At least that's what he thought. The slaughter took place in the famous meadows of Aulis, by the tumbling salty tides of the dark sea that Euripus often whirls with his breezes.

There it was that my father, King Agamemnon, had gathered a fleet of a thousand Greek ships intending to win the crown of a glorious victory for the Greeks over

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<sup>374</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/iphigeneia-in-tauris/>

the Trojans and, at the same time, appease his brother, Menelaos, by undoing the insult Paris had brought upon his marriage with Helen.

But the winds that bloat the sails of ships did not come and so Agamemnon checked the entrails of the burnt offerings. The priest, Calchas, examined them and declared thus: "Agamemnon, leader of all of Hellas, your ships will not leave this harbour unless you sacrifice to Artemis your daughter, Iphigeneia. You have sworn an oath to Artemis, the goddess who carries a torch on her nocturnal hunts, that you would slaughter for her the most beautiful thing born that year. Your wife, Klytaimnestra, had given birth to a daughter that very year."

Then the priest said that I, Iphigeneia, Klytaimnestra's daughter, was the most beautiful thing born that year and so, my father had to sacrifice me.

Then they took me from my mother and brought me to their camp at Aulis, under the pretext of marrying me to Achilles. That was one of Odysseus' usual sly tricks. When I got there, they lifted me up above the altar and slaughtered me with a sword.

But Artemis snatched me away the very last minute and in my place, on the altar, she put a deer. She picked me up and sped me through the bright air to have me land here, in Tauris, to live among the Taurians.

King Thoas rules this place. A barbarian, ruling barbarians. They call him Thoas because his feet are as swift as wings.

She made me her priestess in this temple and, ever since, I have done as custom dictates: I have conducted the sacrifices according to the rites of the Festival which the goddess Artemis loves so much.

Festival in name only, though I'm just too afraid of the goddess to talk about what really does go on during it. Not a word!

There is a law here. A law that says that if a Greek man sets foot on this land, he will be sacrificed to the goddess. My duty is to purify him and to prepare him for the slaughter. The rest of the work -work that can not be talked about- is done inside. Inside the temple.

Now I'll tell you about the disturbing visions this past night has brought to me. I want to utter them to the light of the Day. Perhaps this will bring me some sort of remedy.

In that dream, I had escaped from this land and was back in Argos.

It was night and I was asleep in my own old quarters. The quarters assigned for little girls.

Then the earth shook terribly and, afraid, I went outside.

Then I saw the eaves, the roof, the whole palace tumbling down.

I think that I saw only one, a single column left standing.

Then... then the dream showed the column sprouting blond hair from its top. Then this column began uttering words, with a human voice.

Then I did what I do here. I wailed and sprinkled holy water on the column as if I were preparing it for sacrifice, as if it were a man.

I believe the meaning of this dream is this:

My brother, Orestes, is dead and I believe the dream is telling me that it was him I was sprinkling holy water on, preparing him for the altar!

Now, two things must be considered: First, boys are the columns of a house and

second, anyone my holy water touches dies.

I cannot think of anyone else that the dream could be referring to. My uncle Strophios had no sons at the time when my death was supposed to have taken place.

But now, now, I am waiting for the Greek maids the king has given me, to come and help me pour libations to my missing brother. It's the only thing I can do for him from here.

But why are they so late?

I think I'll go inside the temple of the goddess and wait for them there. This temple is also my home.

*Iphigeneia enters the temple.*

*A few seconds later Orestes and Pylades appear (SR). They examine the place cautiously.*

**Orestes:**

Be careful, Pylades! Look all around you. Is there anyone on the road?

**Pylades:**

I am being careful! I'm looking all around us.

**Orestes:**

Pylades, do you think this temple looks like that of the goddess we're looking for? Do you think it's the one we've sailed from Argos for?

**Pylades:**

Yes, this is the one, Orestes. This must be it. Don't you think so?

**Orestes:**

Look, here is the altar, drenched in Greek blood.

**Pylades:**

The whole of its top is painted red with the blood.

**Orestes:**

Look up there! Look at all the prizes hanging up there, under the eaves!

**Pylades:**

Human skulls! Skulls of men who were sacrificed! Watch out, Orestes!

Examine the place very carefully.

**Orestes:** *Addressing the Heavens*

O, Phoebus Apollo! What kind of trap have you set up for me with your oracles this time? They have sent me to murder my mother and avenge my father's murder; and after that, they had me hunted down by the Furies whichever way I ran.

Because of your oracles I had become a wandering exile until I went to your temple and asked you for a way to escape their frenzied anger and that's when you told me to come here. Here, in Tauris where your sister, the goddess Artemis, has her temple and her statue, a statue they say which has fallen here from the sky and which have you ordered me to take away from here, any way I can, including by use of trickery.

Then, once I completed this dangerous task, you've told me to take the statue to Athens and dedicate it to her people.

That's all you said I should do, Apollo and then, you promised, I would be released from my torment. So here I am, Apollo. In a foreign and inhospitable land.

*Turning to Pylades*

Pylades, my poor companion in this labour, what do you think we should do now?

The walls of the temple, as you can see are very tall. Do you think we can enter it through the roof? Surely, they'll see us if we tried.

Do you think we should try to break the bronze padlocks with crow bars? We know nothing about padlocks.

They'll catch us trying to break them and then they'll kill us.

No Pylades, rather than die, let's get back to the ship with which we came here and let's...

**Pylades:**

...run away? Unbearable stuff!

Cowardice is a shameful thing, Orestes. It's not in our nature. We can't betray Apollo's command. Let's just move away from the temple, go into one of those caves, one that's been battered by the black waves, away from the ship, in case someone sees it and tells their king. They'll search the place and catch us.

Then, when the eye of the gloomy night comes, then, Orestes, we must pluck up our courage and steal the statue the best way we can!

Look there, see? We can climb down through those triglyphs there! There's enough space for us.

Brave deeds, Orestes are accomplished by brave men. The cowards accomplish nothing.

**Orestes:**

You're right, Pylades. We have not crossed all these oceans so as to turn back just before we accomplish our deed.

You're quite right. I must listen to you. Let us go and hide in some place where they can not find us.

I won't be the one who has caused the fall of Apollo's command.

Come then, Pylades, courage! Danger does not make young men hesitate.

*Exit Orestes and Pylades, SR.*

*Enter the chorus.*

**Chorus:** *To the audience*

To all of you whose homes are here, by the twin rocks that clash against each other, in this inhospitable sea, keep reverent silence!

**Chorus:**

O, Artemis! Dictynna, daughter of Leto!

**Chorus:**

Goddess of the mountains! Huntress!

**Chorus:**

I set my foot upon the court of your temple whose columns are splendid and from whose rafters hang the glittering spoils!

**Chorus:**

Revered virgin!

**Chorus:**

We, maids to the holy virgin who holds the keys of your temple, have come, in answer to her call.

**Chorus:**

We have left the tall towers and the high walls of Greece, a horse-loving land, a land of Europe, a land of marvellous trees, the land of my home.

*Enter Iphigeneia from the temple. She is accompanied by two maids, one carrying a golden cup the other an urn.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, Iphigeneia, daughter of Agamemnon! Daughter of Atreus' son who took the glorious fleet of one thousand Greek ships to the Trojan towers.

We are here. What news? What troubles you? Why call us here to the temple?

**Iphigeneia:**

O, dear, dear friends!

Misery of miseries! Unbearable pain! Lament most hurtful!

No lyre accompanies these wails, my dear friends!

Wails of grief! Wails of death!

I cry, dear friends, in grief of my brother's death!

I saw a dreadful dream last night. A vision that showed the total destruction of my race.

I am lost! I am destroyed!

My father's race, dear friends, that noble race of the Atreides, is no more!

O, the misery in Argos! How that city suffers!

O, Fate! Fate most bitter!

You've snatched the only brother I had and took him down to the halls of Hades!

I have brought these libations for him which I will pour upon Earth's broad shoulders:

Milk from the mountain herds...

Wine, Bacchus' blessed offering...

Honey, the work of the golden bees.

Such things soften the pains of the dead.

*To one of her attendants*

Come, give me the golden bowl.

*The attendant obeys and Iphigeneia takes the bowl. Then, to the other attendant:*

And the offerings for Hades.

The attendant obeys.

*Iphigeneia holds the urn and the bowl up high as she intones.*

O, child of Agamemnon!

Orestes, who's now in Earth's dark embrace, down below!

I have brought you these offerings, offerings for the dead.

Receive them!

I cannot bring a lock of my blond hair to your grave, my brother, or let a tear fall upon it from my eyes. Because now, now I am far from the land that nourished us both. Far from that land where the people think of me, poor woman, as having been slaughtered and dead.

**Chorus:**

And we, my lady, we shall sing with you, wild sounds, laments usually heard in the East. We'll sing laments and odes that please the dead, songs sung by Hades himself.

**Chorus:**

Sounds that bring dread to the living.

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

The glorious light of the royal palace has died!

**Chorus:**

The house of the Atreides is destroyed!

**Chorus:**

Gone is the spark of the royal line!

**Chorus:**

Gone is the wealth of the kings of Argos!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ruin! Destruction!

**Chorus:**

Misery upon misery since the brilliant winged chariot of the Sun God turned from its path to avert its holy sight from the treachery of the golden sheep.

**Chorus:**

Sorrow upon sorrow! Pain upon pain! Murder upon murder!

**Chorus:**

And so, the vengeance of all the murdered sons of Tantalus visits all its new sons!

**Chorus:**

But as for you, dear girl! As for you, Fate works upon you unjustly!

**Iphigeneia:**

My Fate was black from birth, dear friends.

Black from the very moment my mother undid her girdle, from that very night I was conceived. Since then the Fates, the goddesses who preside over births, have fastened a hard grip upon my life!

Ah!

I was the first blossom of the house!

Wooed by all the nobles of Greece!

Slaughtered on the altar by my own father's arrogance!

It was for him and for that very slaughter that my poor mother, Leda's daughter, gave birth to me!

She had raised a miserable victim for that unholy sacrifice!

They had carried me down to the sandy shores of Aulis on a bitter horse-drawn carriage, to be a bride, a sad bride, to Achilles, son of Thetis the daughter of Nereus.

Ah!

But now, here I am, a stranger, living in a house surrounded by a hostile sea, with no husband, with no children, with no city and with no friends!

Exiled from Greece. Forgotten by Greece.

I sing no songs for Hera at Argos.

I weave no more. My shuttle does not sing upon the loom! It does not weave in many colours the pictures of Pallas Athena and the Titans.

Ah!

These days, I bless the rites of the dreadful sacrifices of strangers whose blood colours this altar, the blood of men who wail with despair, who cry with despair, sounds unaccompanied by the flute.

Ah!

But now I will not think of those men but of another.

Now I will weep for one who died in Argos. Orestes, my own brother whom I left behind, a tiny sapling, a baby at my mother's breast, deep inside her arms.

My brother, Orestes, bearer of the scepter of the royal house of Argos.

**Chorus:** *Indicating behind the wings*

My lady, a herdsman! He's left the seashore to bring you some news.

*Enter Herdsman from SR.*

*They look excited.*

**Herdsman:**

Iphigeneia, daughter of Agamemnon and Klytaimnestra, I have some surprising news for you!

**Iphigeneia:**

Surprising? What could be so surprising about your news?

**Herdsman:**

Iphigeneia, two young men! They've managed to escape the Clashing Rocks and they've landed here, in our country. They would certainly make a pleasant offering, Iphigeneia, a sacrifice to our goddess, Artemis! Come, Iphigeneia, quickly, prepare the rites for the blessing and their purification!

**Iphigeneia:**

Can you tell from their appearance which country they are from?

**Herdsman:**

I can only tell that they are from Greece, nothing more.

**Iphigeneia:**

What about their names? Did you hear them? Do you know what they're called?

**Herdsman:**

I heard the name of one of them. One of them had called the other, Pylades.

**Iphigeneia:**

What about the other one? Did you hear what his friend was called?

**Herdsman:**

No, Iphigeneia. We didn't hear his name, so none of us knows.

**Iphigeneia:**

So, tell me how you came across them, tell me how you caught them.

**Herdsman:**

We were down at the shore, where the surf of the hostile sea crashes.

**Iphigeneia:**

The shore? Why would herdsmen go to the sea shore?

**Herdsman:**

We took our cattle down there, Iphigeneia. We usually wash them with salt water.

**Iphigeneia:**

I see. Good. Begin your story again, then. I want to know exactly how you've caught them, so tell me that. It's been a long time since Greeks landed here and Artemis' altar is not yet had its fill of Greek blood.

**Herdsmen:**

Our cattle graze up in the pastures of the forest but we take them down to that part of the shore, where the ocean waters flow through the clashing rocks. Just there, where there is a cave hollowed out by the constant crashing of the great waves. The porphyry fishers use it as a shelter. One of our drovers was down there and he saw these two young men, so he carefully snuck away and rushed to tell us about them.

"Look there," he said. "See those two sitting over there? They are gods!"

Then, one of us, a devout man, turned in their direction and, raising his hands in prayer, said, "O Lord Palaemon, son of Leukothea, goddess of the sea! You, the protector of ships, or if you are the Dioscouri, or some boys loved by Nereus, the father of the bright chorus of Nereids, be merciful to us!"

But then, another one of our companions, a crude man, a fool with no manners or faith, laughed at the first man and his prayers and said that those men there, who were sitting in that cave, were nothing but shipwrecked sailors, hiding in there because they must have heard that we sacrifice strangers on this island.

Most of us agreed with him and so we decided to obey our laws and catch them so as to have them sacrificed to our goddess.

However, one of the foreigners got out from behind the rock, got up, shook his head about and began screaming and groaning and shaking his hands like a madman! Then, he called out to his friend:

"You see this one too, Pylades? This one here? And there? You see this beast, this Fury from Hades? See how she wants to kill me? To strangle me with her dreadful vipers? Look at them! They've turned towards me! And that other one there! And there, another one! Fire and blood drip from her clothes as she flaps her wings. Look! She has my mother in her arms, a huge stone to hurl at me! She will kill me, Pylades? Where can I escape?"

But we couldn't see any of what he saw. He must have confused the noises of the cattle-bellows and the barks of the dogs with what the Furies are supposed to sound like.

We thought he was going to die so we sat there holding our breath. Then he pulled out his sword out and, like a lion, charged at our cattle, jabbing them at the ribs and at the sides, as if he thought he was defending himself against the Furies.

Buds and blossoms of red blood covered the sea.

Seeing what he was doing to our cattle, cutting them down, killing them, we all took some weapon or other and also blew the warning conch to summon what people were nearby. We thought that herdsmen like us could never win in a fight against such strong young strangers. Pretty soon a fair crowd of us gathered around but by then, the foreigner had stopped his fit of madness and fell to the ground, his beard drenched with foam. This gave us an advantage and we all rushed to throw stones at him and to beat him up as hard as we could.

But the other foreigner, the one he called Pylades, came over to him, wiped the



froth from his beard and spread his heavy cloak over him to shield and protect his body. Pylades warded off our stones and blows with his garment and also tried to comfort his friend. And then the stranger on the ground regained his senses and jumped to his feet but he saw how close to them all their enemies were and also sensed that Fate was about to make her move upon them. He groaned at the prospect but we did not stop. We kept hurling stones at them and hitting them as hard as we could.

That's when we heard this desperate shout: "Pylades, we will die, so let's die honorably! Come, draw your sword and follow me!"

At the sight of the two swords drawn against us we ran. We scattered all around and into the woods of the valley. Some of us, though stayed and continued hurling stones at the strangers and when that lot was pushed back by the strangers, the first lot that had fled came rushing back and went on with the pelting.

But something incredible was happening: Of all the stones that were hurled at the strangers, none hit them! None touched our goddess' victims!

Finally we caught them! Not because of our courage and ability but because we fought hard.

First we surrounded them and then we knocked the swords out of their hands with our stones. Then they became really exhausted and just sank to their knees. After that, we took them to our king who, the moment he saw them, sent them over to you, to purify them and prepare them for the sacrifice.

Young lady, these are the sort of victims you should always pray for!

It's only by sacrificing such strangers that Greece will pay for your murder, for your sacrifice at Aulis.

**Chorus:**

What a strange tale you tell of this madman, whoever he is!

**Chorus:**

A Greek that came here, to this hostile sea!

**Iphigeneia:**

Right then. You go and bring the foreigners and I'll see to the holy preparations here.

*Exit the Herdsman*

O, my long-suffering heart!

You were always compassionate and sympathetic, soft towards the fate of strangers and you shed a tear when those strangers who were brought to you for the sacrifice were fellow Greeks.

But this time, this dream I had last night, turned me into a wild beast because now I believe that my Orestes no longer sees the light of the sun.

Whoever you are, you men who have come here, will find me a hard-hearted woman.

What they say is true, my dear friends. I know it, I feel it in my soul:

Those whose Fate is miserable feel no pity for those whose Fate is even worse!

But Zeus has not yet sent a breeze strong enough for a ship carrying Helen herself to sail through the Clashing Rocks. Helen and Menelaos, the two who brought about my death! These two have not come for me to take my vengeance upon them, to make this place an Aulis like that in Greece, where the Greeks grabbed

me like some calf and slit my throat upon an altar. The priest who had performed that sacrifice was none other than my own father!

Ah!

Ah!

How can I forget? How can I forget that despair?

How can I forget how many times I had stretched my arm out to him, to try and touch his chin, or kneel down and hang from his knees calling out to him, "Father, what a shameful marriage you're sending me off to! Father! Father, at this very moment, this moment that you're killing me, my mother, back home, is singing my wedding songs along with other Argive women. This very moment the whole house is echoing with the sounds of flutes, yet at this very moment, from you, I receive death! While I was on that cart with which you brought me here, you had betrayed me! You had promised me a marriage with Achilles, Peleus' son but, instead, you're now sending me to a blood-stained marriage with Hades!"

I hid my eyes behind my wedding dress and did not lift my little brother up into my arms and now he's dead. Nor did I kiss my sister in the mouth, obeying the custom of a virgin going off to her wedding. I thought then that I was only going to the house of Peleus.

So many farewells I had put off then because I thought that I'd soon return home. Orestes! Orestes, my unfortunate brother!

O, the wealth and the grandeur of the house you've left behind! Your father's house!

But I hate the sly cleverness of this goddess!

She deems unclean anyone who has touched with his hands the blood of someone murdered or a corpse, or a woman who is in labour and forbids them from approaching her altars, yet, she, herself rejoices in the sacrifices of mortals!

How could anyone believe that Leto, Zeus bride, could have given birth to such a foolish creature?

And I don't believe the story about that feast that Tantalus gave to the gods, where, supposedly, the gods had enjoyed eating the flesh of his own son.

No, I think these people here, the Taurians are a murderous lot and they use the goddess as an excuse for their bloody deeds.

I don't believe at all that any of the gods is evil.

*Exit Iphigeneia and her maids into the temple.*

**Chorus:**

Dark, most dark the wild union of seas traversed by the winged frenzy...

**Chorus:**

Through the hostile ocean the waves carried the cow, Io, from Argos...

**Chorus:**

Leaving Europe behind and adopting Asia as her new home.

**Chorus:**

Who are they, then? Who is it who has left the lush, cool springs of reedy Eurotas?

**Chorus:**

Who are they who have left Dirke's wild streams, to come to this untamed land? To come here, where Zeus' daughter, Artemis, steeps the altars and the temples with their rich colonnades, in the blood of mortals?

**Chorus:**

Was it insatiable greed for wealth to clog their houses with, that brought these sea farers here?

**Chorus:**

They've cut across the ocean's waves with their ships, two banks of oars made of pine on them and linen sails, bloated by the wind.

**Chorus:**

They've come because the hope for riches always warms the heart and is unquenchable.

**Chorus:**

A gushing stream of curses for all mortals!

**Chorus:**

They travel to foreign lands, all with a single purpose in mind.

**Chorus:**

Some miss the moment, others are lucky.

**Chorus:**

But how did they manage to pass through the Clashing Rocks?

**Chorus:**

And what of the restless shores of Phineus?

**Chorus:**

Shore by shore they reached the surging waves of Amfitrite.

**Chorus:**

At those shores, when the wind billows the sails, the fifty daughters of Nereus dance and sing in circles.

**Chorus:**

And Zephyr's breezes or the southern gales whistle through the oars resting at the stern.

**Chorus:**

And so, they've come here, to the shore of the white sand and of the great flocks of birds and where Achilles has built his racing track, here, by this sea, the sea that hates foreigners.

**Chorus:**

How I wish that the prayers of my mistress, Artemis were answered and Helen, Leda's darling daughter somehow left Troy and suddenly appeared here!

**Chorus:**

Here, she would know the feel of the sacrificial water, sprinkled all around her hair...

**Chorus:**

Sprinkled by the hand of my mistress herself, a sprinkling that brings forth blood and slaughter and justice for all she's done throughout her life.

**Chorus:**

But the best news to receive would be that someone from Greece has sailed here to rescue me, poor soul from the torment of slavery.

**Chorus:**

How I wish, even in a dream, to have visited my parents' home, in my own city! What joy do dreams bring!

**Chorus:**

Dreams are a common delight to us all.

**Chorus:** *Indicating within, SR*

Ah! Look! The two young men! Here they are, their hands tied fast, coming for the sacrifice.

**Chorus:**

Fresh blood!

**Chorus:**

New blood for the goddess!

*Enter the herdsman with two armed guards leading Orestes and Pylades, their hands in chains. Whispers of surprise and awe from the chorus.*

**Chorus:** *Loudly so that she may be heard by Iphigeneia in the temple*

Silence, my friends! The herdsman was right. The two most precious buds of Greece are approaching the altar.

*Enter Iphigeneia from the temple.*

**Chorus:** *Praying*

O, revered Artemis!

If these rituals, performed by this city for you, give you any pleasure, then accept these sacrifices!

**Chorus:**

They are against the holy laws of our own land and deemed abhorrent by all the Greeks.

**Iphigeneia:** *To the chorus*

Enough, friends!

Let me tend to my first duty which is to make sure that the rites of our goddess are properly observed.

Untie the hands of the foreigners. Foreigners are sacred. It is not proper that they are bound.

*The guards obey.*

*To the Herdsman and the guards:*

Now you go into the temple and prepare all that is necessary for the sacrifice.

*The Herdsman and the guards obey, entering the temple by the side door.*

*To Orestes and Pylades:*

Ah!

Poor men! I wonder who your mother is and your father.

I wonder who is your sister – if you do have a sister. How could she lose brothers like you two, fine young men and not sink into utter despair?

Ah!

Fate! Who knows what sort of Fate might befall anyone?

All things that come to us from the gods, come to us slithering, like invisible snakes. When they will come to us and where from, no one knows. Disaster strikes in a most mystifying, unexpected way.

Ah!

Unfortunate strangers, where are you from?

It must have taken you a long time to sail all the way to this land but now, now you'll stay away from your home for ever. Your new home will be below the earth.

**Orestes:**

Why grieve like this about such things and add more grief upon the grief that we must suffer?

Who are you, woman?

I think it's improper for people who are about to slaughter someone, to try and sweeten that slaughter with pity.

And it's not wise for the one who's about to die and there is no hope of escape, to cry about his imminent death. To do that, would be to turn one pain into two: He'll be thought of as a fool and he'll die anyway!

Such things are best left to Fate.

As for you, don't cry for us. We know very well what sort of sacrifices take place here.

**Iphigeneia:**

Which one of you was called by the other, Pylades?

Let me find that out first.

**Orestes:** *Indicating Pylades*

If this knowledge pleases you, then let me tell you it's this man.

**Iphigeneia:**

Which Greek city is he from?

**Orestes:**

What will you gain by knowing that?

**Iphigeneia:**

Are you from the same mother? Are you brothers?

**Orestes:**

We are brothers by friendship, not by birth.

**Iphigeneia:**

And you? What name has your father given you?

**Orestes:**

Better if he had given me the name "Unfortunate."

**Iphigeneia:**

I'm not asking you about that. That is Fate's business

**Orestes:**

Better die without a name. That way I'll escape ridicule.

**Iphigeneia:**

Why don't you want to tell me your name? Are you that proud?

**Orestes:**

Because you'll only be sacrificing my body then and not my name.

**Iphigeneia:**

Will you also not tell me your city?

**Orestes:**

I'm about to die. What good will it do you to know such things?

**Iphigeneia:**

But what stops you from granting me this favour?

**Orestes:**

Then, I am proud to say that my city is famous Argo.

**Iphigeneia:**

O, gods! Is that true, stranger? Are you truly from Argos?

**Orestes:**

From prosperous Mycenae, in fact.

**Iphigeneia:**

But what made you leave that place? Or, did you fall upon some misfortune?

**Orestes:**

I am an exile, yes. Of my own will... and yet not.

**Iphigeneia:**

Will you tell me something I want to know, I wonder.

**Orestes:**

So far as my misfortune will allow me to do so.

**Iphigeneia:**

And yet, your arrival here from Argos has made me very happy.

**Orestes:**

It might have you made happy but it did no such thing to me.

**Iphigeneia:**

Tell me then. Everyone knows about Troy, do you?

**Orestes:**

I wish I didn't. Not even from my dreams.

**Iphigeneia:**

They say that city was destroyed by the war.

**Orestes:**

They have informed you well. That's how it is.

**Iphigeneia:**

Then, has Helen returned to Menelaos' palace?

**Orestes:**

She has and by doing so she brought disaster to some one I know.

**Iphigeneia:**

So, where is she now? And as for disasters, she has caused me one, as well.

**Orestes:**

She lives in Sparta, with her first husband.

**Iphigeneia:**

O, hateful woman! Hated not only by me but by all the Greeks!

**Orestes:**

I, too have enjoyed something out of her marriage.

**Iphigeneia:**

They say all the Greeks have returned home. Is that true?

**Orestes:**

Heavens! Bit by bit you are telling me the whole story!

**Iphigeneia:**

I want to know that whole story before you die.

**Orestes:**

Well then, if you want to know it so badly, go ahead: ask me your questions and I'll answer them.

**Iphigeneia:**

There was a seer. His name was Calchas. Has he returned from Troy?

**Orestes:**

No. The Myceneans were saying that he died there.

**Iphigeneia:**

O, Artemis, my goddess! Thank you. What of Laertes' son, Odysseus?

**Orestes:**

They say he's still alive but he hasn't reached home yet.

**Iphigeneia:**

I hope he, too, dies and never makes it home!

**Orestes:**

You shouldn't curse the man. Nothing is going well for him.

**Iphigeneia:**

What of the Nereid's son, Achilles? Is he still alive?

**Orestes:**

No. He's dead, so that marriage of his, at Aulis, came to nothing.

**Iphigeneia:**

Those who know him, know very well just how treacherous the man was.

**Orestes:**

Who are you? How pertinent are your questions!

**Iphigeneia:**

I am from those parts and in those parts I died when I was but a child.

**Orestes:**

You're quite right, then, lady, to long for news from there.

**Iphigeneia:**

What of the General? That great General who, they all say, is doing very well for himself.

**Orestes:**

Which General do you mean? Because the General I know is not among the prosperous.

**Iphigeneia:**

I mean that man who was a king. Agamemnon, son of Atreus.

Orestes: shocked, turns away.

I... I know nothing about him. Change the subject.

**Iphigeneia:**

O, no! In Heaven's name! Tell me, friend. Please tell me about him! It will give me joy!

**Orestes:**

The poor man...died. And with his death he took someone else's life.

**Iphigeneia:**

Ah!

He died? But how?

Ah!

What dreadful misery for me!

**Orestes:**

Why are you grieving like this? Was he a relative of yours?

**Iphigeneia:**

I grieve for the happiness he once enjoyed!

**Orestes:**

His death was horrible. He was slaughtered by his wife.

**Iphigeneia:**

Endless the tears for the murderess, endless the tears for the murdered.

**Orestes:**

Enough! Stop! Ask me no more questions!

**Iphigeneia:**

One last question: His wife, is she still alive?

**Orestes:**

No. She is not. Her own son killed her with his own hands!

**Iphigeneia:**

Ah!

What a troubled house! But why did he do this?

**Orestes:**

As punishment for his father's murder.

**Iphigeneia:**

An evil, justly done!

**Orestes:**

True, "justly done" but the gods will not allow him to rejoice in it.

**Iphigeneia:**

Any other of Agamemnon's children still living?

**Orestes:**

He has only one daughter left, Elektra.

**Iphigeneia:**

What of that daughter of his that was slaughtered? Are they saying anything about her?

**Orestes:**

No, no one speaks of her. Only that she was sacrificed.

**Iphigeneia:**

Unfortunate the girl and unfortunate her father who had to kill her.

**Orestes:**

An unjust death. She was killed for the sake of a horrible woman.

**Iphigeneia:**

What of the son of this murdered king? Is he still alive?

**Orestes:**

Yes, he is still alive but he has a wretched life. He is nowhere, yet he is everywhere!

**Iphigeneia:**

Oh, dreams! What nonsense you were! You were false. Meaningless, worthless!

**Orestes:**

The gods, too, whom the prophets call wise, are like those fleeting dreams: False! Both worlds, the divine as well as the mortal, are equally chaotic.

And this is the thing that saddens this man: Even though he's a wise man, he still believed in the prophecies and so, he was destroyed.

Those who know him, know how that happened.



**Chorus:**

And what about us?

**Chorus:**

Are our parents alive or dead?

**Chorus:**

Who can tell us?

**Iphigeneia:**

Hear me friends.

A thought have just entered my mind.

And you, too, strangers. This will profit you as well as me, which is the best way to go about such things, by pleasing everyone involved with the one action.

Tell me: If I were to spare your life, would you undertake to deliver news, as well as a letter to my friends in Argos?

The letter has been written by a prisoner who felt sorry for me and who didn't believe that my hand is a murderous hand and that it is the law of the goddess that does the murdering, because she thinks murder is justice.

So far, there's been no one who could take the letter back to Argos, no one who has overcome all the difficulties of getting there and deliver the letter to someone in my family.

But you, you seem to have come from a noble family and you also know all those in Mycenae I love. Well then, save your life! Your reward for the small deed of delivering a letter will not be small, it will be your life!

As for your friend though, since the city requires it, let him remain here and be sacrificed to the goddess.

**Orestes:**

You speak well, my friend but you're wrong about one thing: This man's sacrifice would be too heavy a burden for me to bear.

In this journey, it is I who has loaded the ship with all the misfortunes.

This man has sailed with me to share the pain of my ordeals, so it isn't right that I should escape those ordeals by bringing about his destruction.

Rather, let us do it this way: Give him your letter. He'll go back to Argos and do as you wish. If there's any need for anyone to kill someone, then let that someone be me. It's a shameful thing for a man to save his life by throwing his friends into destruction. This man is so dear a friend to me that I wish him to look upon the sun's light for no less a time than me.

**Iphigeneia:**

O, what a noble heart! You must obviously come from a noble family indeed, to be so loyal a friend to your friends! How I wish that my one remaining brother were like you!

Because, strangers, I, too have a brother –a brother that I have but cannot see! So be it then. If that's what you want, then let him go and you stay and be sacrificed. It seems that you have some strong reason why you wish this.

**Orestes:**

Who'll perform the dreadful deed of sacrificing me?

**Iphigeneia:**

Me. That's the service I perform for the goddess.

**Orestes:**

Unenviable stuff this, young lady. Horrible.

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, but it's a service forced upon me and I must perform it.

**Orestes:**

You, a woman? Will you use a sword on a man, yourself? Kill him and sacrifice him?

**Iphigeneia:**

No, I will only wet your hair with the purifying water.

**Orestes:**

Am I allowed to know who will be my slayer?

**Iphigeneia:**

There are people inside the temple who take care of such things.

**Orestes:**

And when I die, what sort of tomb will receive me?

**Iphigeneia:**

First you will be received by the sacred flame and then by the wide hollow of the rock.

**Orestes:**

How I wish my sister could drape the funeral cape around my corpse!

**Iphigeneia:**

A futile hope, poor man, whoever you might be.

Your sister is far from this barbaric land.

But since you happened to be an Argive, I will perform for you as many of the things you ask for, as I can. I will pile a great many rich gifts upon your tomb, sprinkle golden oil upon your body to quell the fire and, over your pyre, I will pour the golden flower nectar gathered by the mountain bees.

But let me now go and bring you the letter and don't think that I am responsible for all the things that you are about to suffer.

*Enter the guards from the temple.*

You, guards, guard them but do not tie their hands.

*To herself:*

Perhaps this letter will reach someone in Argos, to the dearest man I know. A hope beyond all hope! It will inform the man that the person he thought is dead, still lives. It will be news that he will delight in.

*Exit Iphigeneia into the temple.*

**Chorus:**

We mourn for you, stranger!

**Chorus:**

The purifying water will soon be sprinkled in your hair, claiming your blood!

**Orestes:**

Such things are not to mourn for, ladies but I bid you farewell.

**Chorus:** *To Pylades*

But as for you, young man. Fate favours you. We rejoice with you, since you will soon step upon your own land.

**Pylades:**

Rejoice? How can a man rejoice when he loses his friend?

**Chorus:** *To Pylades*

Ah! What a grim journey awaits you!

**Chorus:** *To Orestes*

Ah! What a grim death awaits you!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Which of you has the grimmest Fate?

**Chorus:**

My mind is torn between you. For whom should my heart cry more?

**Orestes:** *An idea strikes him suddenly.*

Great Heavens, Pylades! Are you thinking what I am thinking?

**Pylades:**

I... I don't know. What do you mean?

**Orestes:**

Who is that young woman?

She knows so much about Greece! Her questions about our pains in Troy, about the return of the Achaeans, about Calchas the seer who examines birds, and about Achilles' fame! And did you notice how hurt she was when she heard about poor Agamemnon and his wife... all those questions about his children!

I think this woman is from there. She's an Argive by birth. A foreigner here, herself! Why else would she send a letter there?

Her questions, too, Pylades. The way she asked them, in such detail, as if her fate depended upon that of Argos. If Argos goes well, she's happy.

**Pylades:**

You took the words right out of my mouth, Orestes but, still, everyone knows the story of those two suffering kings, at least, everyone who travels.

But there's something else I just thought of. Something that's bothering me.

**Orestes:**

Yes? What is it? Tell me and we might be able to sort it out together.

**Pylades:**

The shame, Orestes! The shame of me being alive after you've been killed! That shame would be unbearable for me.

We have sailed here together. Let us die together, or else, I can see quite clearly just how I will be received back, in Argos and in the valleys of the Phockians: a coward and a disgrace! Those with evil souls abound, Orestes. They will be saying that I have abandoned you here and sailed home safely, alone.

Worse still, they will say that I had taken advantage of the dire fortune your family is in and, being married to your sister, Elektra, who would inherit your fortune, plotted your murder so that I could steal the kingdom's throne.

These thoughts worry me a great deal, Orestes.

I am worried and I feel ashamed.

Orestes, I will not be convinced otherwise: I should die with you, be sacrificed with you and have my corpse burned on the same pyre with you! We've been friends for a very long time.

I hate slanderous tongues!

**Orestes:**

Talk sense, my friend!

My own misery is for me to endure. I can bear that one but I can't bear another on top of it as well.

What you have just called shame and dishonour will also apply to me if I cause your death, the death of a close friend who has helped me with my troubles. In any case, since the gods have decided to deliver me such unbearable misfortune, leaving this earth wouldn't be such a bad thing for me.

You, however, you are blessed with a pure family, one that is not cursed, or polluted, like mine. As well, if you escape this death and do marry Elektra, my sister, whom I offered you as a wife, you will have children with her and so my name will live on and so, my father's house will not be left bereft of descendants and become extinct.

So, Pylades, save your life and go and look after my father's kingdom!

But once you arrive in Greece, in horse-loving Argos, I ask you that you swear that you will do this for me: make a small tomb and put upon it my name and tell my sister to make offerings to that tomb: of her tears and of a lock of her hair.

Also, announce to the Argives that I was sacrificed by an Argive woman. Tell them it was an Argive woman who first sprinkled the purifying water on my head.

And one more thing I ask of you, Pylades: Don't desert my sister when you see that her home, my home, too, has been abandoned and her family gone.

Now, farewell to you, the most loved of all my friends. As children, we played together and then, later, we went hunting together. You have shouldered much of the pain of my miserable life.

I was Apollo's plaything. The god is a prophet but he's also a liar. With lies and deceit, he dragged me as far away from Greece as it's possible, so as to hide his shame over that old prophesy of his and I, I foolishly trusted his word and went and murdered my own mother, so now, poor wretch, now I too am about to die!

**Pylades:**

My poor friend, you will have your tomb and I will never desert your sister. If it so happens that you will die, then I will love you even more.

Still, even though you are close to death, the god's oracle has not yet been realized. You are still alive and it is possible, very possible that utter despair can bring about great changes.

*Enter Iphigeneia from the temple, carrying a letter*

**Orestes:**

Enough, Pylades. Apollo's words are of no help to me.

Here comes the woman from the temple.

**Iphigeneia:** *To the guards*

Guards, go now inside and help those who take care of the sacrifice.

*The guards enter the temple through the side door*

*To Orestes and Pylades*

My friends, here's my letter. It is written in many folds but I need to add yet one more thing. No man stays the same once he has escaped danger and finds himself on solid and safe ground.

That's why my heart trembles at the thought that this man, who is about to go to Argos, once he has left this place and is far from here, will forget all about my letter.

**Orestes:**

Well, then, what would you like us to do about that? What's making you hesitate like this?

**Iphigeneia:**

I need him to swear to me that he will take this letter to Argos and hand it to the friends I want it delivered.

**Orestes:**

What about you? Will you swear an oath in exchange?

**Iphigeneia:**

Swear an oath? What would you like me to do, or to avoid doing? Tell me.

**Orestes:**

Swear that you will help him escape the barbarians alive.

**Iphigeneia:**

Quite right. How else will he be able to deliver the letter?

**Orestes:**

But will the King agree to these things?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, I will convince him to do so. Then, I, personally will see him aboard his ship.

**Orestes:** *To Pylades*

Go ahead, my friend, swear the oath.

*To Iphigeneia*

Dictate to him the words of the most austere oath.

**Iphigeneia:**

You must say, "I will deliver this letter to your people."

**Pylades:**

I will deliver this letter to your people.

**Iphigeneia:**

And I will see you safely beyond the Black Rocks.

**Pylades:**

Which of the gods do you invoke?

**Iphigeneia:**

Artemis. She it is I serve in this temple.

**Pylades:**

And I invoke the Lord of the Heavens, almighty Zeus.

**Iphigeneia:**

What if you break your oath and betray me?

**Pylades:**

Then may I never make it back to my country. What about you? What should happen to you if you don't save me?

**Iphigeneia:**

May I never step foot on Argos alive.

**Pylades:**

Now listen to something we have left out so far.

**Iphigeneia:**

There is always time to correct things.

**Pylades:**

I will need you to allow me this exception in my oath: If something happens to my ship and along with other things, this letter is also lost but I manage to escape alive, then, in that case, the oath should not hold.

**Iphigeneia:**

Well, know this, then. One can escape many disasters if one is prepared, so what I'll do is to tell you all that is written in that letter so that you can repeat them to my friends. That will secure its delivery.

If you save the letter, then it will speak for itself, if however it's lost in the sea but you survive, then your own survival guarantees the survival of its message.

**Pylades:**

Your ideas about the oath as well as about me are sound. Now tell me the person you want me to deliver this letter to in Argos and what else should I tell him.

**Iphigeneia:**

Tell Orestes, Agamemnon's son this: "The girl Iphigeneia whom they slaughtered in Aulis and who they think is dead, is alive and says the following..."

**Orestes:**

What? Where is she? Has she died and come back from the dead?

**Iphigeneia:**

She is the one before you. Now don't interrupt me. "Come, brother and take me back to Argos lest I die in a country of barbarians. Come and rescue me from the human sacrifices performed for the goddess during which I must sprinkle sacred water upon the heads of strangers..."

**Orestes:**

Pylades, my friend, what can I say? Where are we?

**Iphigeneia:**

"... or else this shall become a curse upon your house, Orestes!"

Now let me repeat the name so that you won't mistake it –

**Orestes:**

O, gods!

**Iphigeneia:**

Why call upon the gods while I'm talking?

**Orestes:**

Oh, nothing. Please continue. My mind went elsewhere for a minute.

*To Pylades*

Even if I ask no questions, I will hear incredible things.

**Iphigeneia:** *Continues with the dictation of the letter*

Tell him also that Artemis saved me by replacing me with a stag, which my father slaughtered, thinking that his sword stabbed me. Then the goddess brought me here, in this land.

These are the things I want him to know. They're in the letter as well.

**Pylades:** *Takes the letter for Iphigeneia*

Lady, you have bound me in easy oaths and because you have also sworn a great oath, yourself, I shall not waste any time in delivering your letter.

*To Orestes, handing him the letter*

Here you are, Orestes. This letter is from your sister, this lady here.

**Orestes:** *Takes the letter*

I accept this letter but I shall leave the written words for later so that I may enjoy this moment fully.

O, my beloved sister! I am stunned. These hands! These hands are yet to believe this but I will embrace you with them! Let me feel the full joy of these unbelievable words I've just heard!

**Chorus:**

Stranger stop! Don't touch the sacred robes of the priestess! Do not pollute the servant of the goddess!

**Orestes:**

My sister!

Child of Agamemnon, just like me! Don't turn your head away from me. I am the brother you could never have hoped to see again.

**Iphigeneia:**

Me? Your sister?

Enough of this! My brother is famous throughout Argos, as well as Nauplia!

**Orestes:**

My darling sister! Your brother is not in Argos now!

**Iphigeneia:**

Are you, like me, the child of the Spartan daughter of Tyndareus?

**Orestes:**

Yes. I am the son of Pelops' grandchild of Agamemnon!

**Iphigeneia:**

But – the things you say!

Can you give me any proof at all?

**Orestes:**

But of course! Ask me any questions you like about our family.

**Iphigeneia:**

No, you talk and I will listen.

**Orestes:**

Well, let me begin by telling you all that I've heard from Elektra.

Have you heard of the great quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes?

**Iphigeneia:**

About the golden lamb? Yes, I've heard about it.

**Orestes:**

And do you remember how you weaved all these stories on those fine cloths?

**Iphigeneia:**

O, my dear friend! How closely you approached my heart!

**Orestes:**

And do you remember weaving the story about the sun and how he changes his path?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, I weaved that on a very fine piece of tapestry.

**Orestes:**

And what about when mother bathed you in preparation of your marriage in Aulis?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, I remember that bath. The marriage itself has not brought enough good memories to overpower that one.

**Orestes:**

Now then, what else? Ah! Do you remember when you had sent your mother a lock of your hair?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes. I did that when I found out I was going to die in Aulis and I wouldn't be going back to Argos to be buried. I sent it for my tomb; to be placed there instead of my body. In remembrance.

**Orestes:**

And now, as further proof, let me tell you what I saw with my own eyes. Sister, do you remember Pelops' ancient spear, the one hidden in the girls' quarters? The spear with which he won as his bride, the virgin Hippodamia from Pisa by killing her father, Oenomaus?

**Iphigeneia:** *Rushes to embrace him*

My dear brother! The dearest man in my life!  
You have sailed here, so far from your land, Argos!  
Let me hold you!

**Orestes:**

And let me hold you, too, my dear sister. You, who people say are dead!  
Tears stream down my face! I grieve and I rejoice, just like you!

**Iphigeneia:**

Oh! You were a tiny baby, a tiny, tiny baby when I left you in the arms of your nurse.  
The tiniest little being in the palace!  
Oh! My heart! You are more joyful than words can express!  
What can my lips say?  
All this was beyond hope. Beyond miracles, beyond words!

**Orestes:**

May this joy of ours be everlasting!

**Iphigeneia:** *To the Chorus*

O, what an unbelievable joy I've just received, my dear friends!  
Now, I'm afraid that he will suddenly take wings and escape from my hands to fly to Heaven!

*To Orestes*

O, hearth of my home! A home built by the Cyclopes!  
My dear home, Mycenae!  
I owe you thanks for giving life to this man. For raising him, for resurrecting him!  
This man, my brother, the saving light of my house.

**Orestes:**

Fate has given us a great family, my sister but a life full of misery.

**Iphigeneia:**

And I, poor creature, know it well! I felt that dreadful misery when our father, with a dark heart, put a sword to my throat.

**Orestes:**

I wasn't there then, my sister but it's as if I am there now.

**Iphigeneia:**



No wedding song accompanied me to Achilles' wedding bed, my brother! That wedding has never happened and by my altar were only tears and groans of pain! Ah! Those horrible purifying waters!

**Orestes:**

I, too cried bitter tears when I found out that our father had the heart to do such a thing.

**Iphigeneia:**

My fate had declared that I'd be an orphan and from then on, one disaster followed another, as if some god pursued us.

**Orestes:**

Imagine, Iphigeneia! You could have sacrificed your own brother!

**Iphigeneia:**

Ah, my brother!

What a dreadful, dreadful thing I was about to do! Shocking! Horrible!

You own sister almost slaughtered you!

You were saved only by a short moment!

But now? What will we do now? How will all this end?

O, what Fate will come to help me here?

How can I send you away from here, far away from this land of death, to Argos, our country?

How can I do this before the sword spills your blood?

*To herself*

Come, my heart! Come, this is your task. It is up to you to find a way.

*To Orestes*

Should I send you off by ship through the sea or by foot, over land?

No, by land you'll be in grave danger from all the barbarian tribes and the unknown roads. But then again, by ship, the path through the Clashing Rocks is narrow and the journey long.

Ah, poor heart! Poor soul!

What god, what mortal or what anything between the two will come to show us the way out of this dreadful, impassable dilemma? Who'll release us from these horrors? Us two, the remnants of the house of Atreus?

**Chorus:**

Now I have seen a wonder beyond words!

**Chorus:**

I will be telling this story as one who has seen it with his own eyes and not heard about it with his ears!

**Pylades:**

Orestes, it's human nature for people who love each other and meet after a long time to embrace but, my friend, we should now control all this emotion and think of how we can see our way out of this barbarian land. We need to find a way to save ourselves and see the brilliant face of escape!

Let's act wisely. Let's not miss the opportunity to escape by getting distracted by other joys from the path that Fate has shown us.

**Orestes:**

Sound advice, my friend. Fortune, I believe is on our side in this because the gods

give aid more readily to those willing to act.

**Iphigeneia:**

Let no one stop me nor distract me from what I want to find out now.  
The question about Elektra concerns me deeply. How is life treating her?  
I love you two more than anything else in my life.

**Orestes:**

Elektra is married to this man and is enjoying a happy life.

**Iphigeneia:**

But... where does he come from? Who is his father?

**Orestes:**

Strophius, the Phockian.

**Iphigeneia:**

Then, is not also Anaxibia's son, Atreus' grandson, a relative of ours?

**Orestes:**

Yes, Iphigeneia, he is our cousin and my most trusted friend.

**Iphigeneia:**

He had not been born yet when my father sacrificed me.

**Orestes:**

That's right, Strophius didn't have any children until later.

**Iphigeneia:**

Greetings, dear husband of my sister.

**Orestes:**

And not only a relative but my saviour, as well!

**Iphigeneia:**

But, my brother, how could you do such a horrible thing to our mother?

**Orestes:**

Let's not talk about that. I did it to avenge our father's death.

**Iphigeneia:**

But why did she kill our father?

**Orestes:**

Don't think about your mother's deeds. It will do you no good hearing about them.

**Iphigeneia:**

All right. I'll be silent about it. Now, do the people of Argos think of you as their ruler?

**Orestes:**

The ruler is Menelaos, our uncle. I am in exile.

**Iphigeneia:**

But I can't believe that our uncle would usurp an ailing palace by sending you into exile!

**Orestes:**

No, it wasn't him.

No, it was my fear for the Furies that has turned me into an exile.

**Iphigeneia:**

I understand. The goddesses drove you away because of what you did to our mother.

**Orestes:**

That's right. They had forced their blood-dripping bridle into my mouth.

**Iphigeneia:**

So that is the frenzied fit the guards were talking about. That's what you went through down at the shore.

**Orestes:**

This was not the first time people saw me in this miserable condition.

**Iphigeneia:**

But what made you come here, in the first place?

**Orestes:**

Apollo's orders brought me here.

**Iphigeneia:**

Orders? What sort of orders? Can they be uttered aloud or must we be silent about them?

**Orestes:**

I will tell you. That's where all my troubles began.

When mother's unutterable story had ended with my hands in blood, the Furies pursued me everywhere. I rushed here and there, in utter frenzy, until Apollo sent me to Athens where I was tried in a court overseen by these goddesses who have no name.

Zeus had a court established there, due to a murder committed by Ares and the need to have the pollution removed from his hands. When I first got to Athens I could find no host willing to help me. Everyone was afraid thinking that I was cursed by the gods. Eventually though, out of pity, some people softened their hearts and offered me a roof but, even though I was in the same house with them, I had to eat at a separate table and they'd never respond to my words.

Each one of them had his own separate jug and drank his wine but I had nothing.

Still, I didn't argue with them. I simply suffered my pains silently, pretending not to notice anything. I sighed deeply with the regret of killing my own mother.

Now I've discovered that my pains have become a customary ritual in Athens. It's called "The celebration of the jugs" and they hold it during the Flower Festival.

At my trial on the hill of Ares, I was made to stand on one platform and the eldest of the Furies stood on another platform and she accused me of murdering my mother. But then Apollo gave evidence and that evidence saved me. Then the goddess Athena raised her hand and counted the votes. These came to an equal number of guilty and innocent which meant I won and so I got up and left the murder trial.

Those of the Furies who accepted the trial's outcome, were allowed to mark out a spot for their temple, there, near the court itself.

The others, though, the ones who didn't accept the court's decision, continued to chase me relentlessly until, once again I came to the sacred grounds of Apollo. I lay flat onto the ground, in front of his temple and, ate nothing, and I swore to Apollo there and then that unless he saved my life, the life he had destroyed, I would end it at that very moment!

Apollo answered me then by making a speech from his golden tripod. He told me

to come here, take the statue that has fallen from the sky and set it up in Athens. So, Iphigeneia, I need you to help me save myself, as Apollo has ordered.

If we take this statue of the goddess, I will be rid of these fits of madness and also take you with me on my ship with its many oars and bring you once again to Mycenae where you can settle down.

Come, my dearest sister, my loving sister, save your father's house and save me! Unless I get that statue of the goddess I will be destroyed and with me the house of Pelops.

**Chorus:**

A huge and dreadful anger from the gods has scorched the seed of Tantalus and drags his family through misery!

**Iphigeneia:**

I have always longed to return to Argos and see you again, my brother. Even before you arrived here. Now I want what you want: to help you escape your pains and to raise, once again, our ailing house. I hold no anger at the man who has killed me. I want these things and it is possible to achieve them.

If I rescue you, then my hands will not be polluted by the shedding of your blood and, at the same time, I will have also rescued our house.

But I am afraid, Orestes. Afraid that the goddess and the king will discover that the statue is missing from its pedestal. They will kill me then. There will be no escaping that. What excuse could I give them?

But, if both of these things happen at the same time, if you take me, as well as the statue with you to your great ship, this adventure will come to a good end. Otherwise, you might be able to end your troubles and get home all right but I will certainly be murdered. Still, I will not hesitate to save your life even if it means I will lose mine.

A house suffers much more by the loss of a male than by that of a female.

**Orestes:**

Iphigeneia, I will not become the murderer of both, our mother and of you. The spilling of mother's blood is enough. We both have a single aim and we will share it equally, in life as well as in death.

Either I will take you home with me when I manage to escape or I will stay here and die with you.

But listen to what I just thought: Why would Apollo ask me to take the statue back to Athens if that was against Artemis' will? And why would he want to send me here to see you but then be sacrificed by you?

None of this makes sense to me, so I'm now convinced that we will make it safely home.

**Iphigeneia:**

Well then, how will we achieve our goal and escape death?

That's where we stumble upon in this matter. We certainly don't lack the will.

**Orestes:**

Can we kill the king?

**Iphigeneia:**

Us? Foreigners kill the local king? An impossible thought!

**Orestes:**

Still, if it means our escape, it'll be worth the effort.

**Iphigeneia:**

I admire your courage, brother but I could do no such thing.

**Orestes:**

What if you hid me in this temple?

**Iphigeneia:**

Do you think our escape can be better achieve in the dark?

**Orestes:**

Yes, sister. Thieves need the dark. Honest folk need the light.

**Iphigeneia:**

The temple's guards are in there. They will notice us.

**Orestes:**

Damn! So we are lost then! How can we possibly escape?

**Iphigeneia:**

I think I've just come up with an idea!

**Orestes:**

What sort of an idea? Tell me.

**Iphigeneia:**

I will turn your woes into a clever trick.

**Orestes:**

Women are unbeatable when it comes to clever tricks!

**Iphigeneia:**

I will tell them that you have come here, from Argos, after you have murdered of your mother...

**Orestes:**

Yes, yes, use my woes if they will help.

**Iphigeneia:**

...and then I will tell them that it is against the sacred laws to sacrifice a murderer...

**Orestes:**

But why? What reason will you give against sacrificing me? Though I think I know.

**Iphigeneia:**

A murderer is impure, unclean. I can only sacrifice pure victims.

**Orestes:**

And how will this help with the stealing of the statue?

**Iphigeneia:**

I shall ask for permission to purify you first. With sea water.

**Orestes:**

But the statue is still in the temple.

**Iphigeneia:**

I will tell them that you've touched it and so I'll need to wash that, too.

**Orestes:**

Where will we go? To which part of the shore?

**Iphigeneia:**

We'll go to where your ship is anchored with the flaxen ropes.

**Orestes:**

Are you going to carry the statue in your arms or will someone else do it?

**Iphigeneia:**

I will carry it myself. No one else is allowed to touch it.

**Orestes:**

But how will you bring Pylades into this?

**Iphigeneia:**

I will tell them he too, is polluted and for the same reason as you.

**Orestes:**

Will you let the king know what you're doing?

**Iphigeneia:**

I will talk with him. Inform him and convince him. This can not be done without his knowledge, so you two take care that all else goes smoothly.

**Orestes:**

In that case, my ship with its well-built oars, is ready for us...

There is just one more thing, though. You must make sure these women keep our plan a secret. Talk to them, convince them of that. You're a woman and women can touch hearts. After that, all the rest might go well for us.

**Iphigeneia:** *To the chorus*

My dear friends, I turn my eyes towards you.

My hopes and my Fate rest with you. Whether I succeed in this effort or I die by it; whether or not I lose my country, my beloved brother and my beloved sister, it all rests with you.

Let the first words of my plea be these:

We, women, are wise, we support and trust each other and we defend our common interests with all our might. Keep these events a secret and help us with our escape. A disciplined tongue is a noble thing.

You see before you three close friends united with one Fate: Either to return home or to die. If I succeed, then I will make sure you get your share of my luck. You, too will return home, back to Greece.

So, my dear friends, I beg you. I swear by your right hand –

And yours, and yours, too!

And by your sweet cheeks!

By your knees!

By whatever you hold dear, back home: a mother, a father, children, those of you who have them.

What do you all say, then? Speak! Who among you says, yes, who says, no?

If you do not agree with us then I am lost. As well as my poor brother.

**Chorus:**

Courage my Lady! Think only about saving yourself. As Zeus is my witness, we will stay silent.

**Iphigeneia:**

For your good words, dear friends, I wish you all the best and may you always have joy in your life.

*Turning to Pylades and Orestes*

You two must now go into the temple.

Soon the country's king will come to see if the sacrifices have been performed.

*The two men obey while she prays to Artemis. They enter through the main door.*

O, reverent goddess!

In the meadows of Aulis you have saved my life from my father's murderous hand. Now I beg you to also save the lives of these two men, or else it will be your fault that the mortals will no longer trust Apollo's prophesies.

So, then, I ask you kindly to leave this land of the barbarians and go to Athens. It is not proper for you to have your temple here when you could have it built in a city blessed by the gods.

*Exit Iphigeneia into the temple.*

**Chorus:**

O, Halcyon, my sad bird!

You sing a moving melody by the crags of the shore, A melody of your black fate. A voice easy to understand for those who know your grief, The grief you endure for the loss of your lover.

I, alone, a bird with no wings, can match your grief and your sad melody.

**Chorus:**

I long for the Greek festivals!

**Chorus:**

I long for Artemis, protector of birth, who dwells on the hill of Kythos!

**Chorus:**

I long for Kythos, where the date trees with their gentle tresses grow!

**Chorus:**

And where the lush laurel, the sacred child of the green olive, sweet companions of Leto during the hour of her birth flourish.

**Chorus:**

I long for the lake whose waters swirl gently and where a melodious swan waits upon the muses.

**Chorus:**

And I remember the tears! The rivers of tears that drenched my cheeks when the towers of my city were taken and I was brought here on a ship with oars and spears!

**Chorus:**

Gold changed hands for me and I was brought to this barbaric land to serve Agamemnon's daughter, the priestess of Artemis, the deer-slaying goddess.

**Chorus:**

And to care for the altars upon which no sheep is ever sacrificed.

**Chorus:**

I envy the man who's never tasted good fortune! He can endure misery if he's had it as a constant companion throughout his life but changes in fortune beget despair.

**Chorus:**

A ship with fifty oars, my reverent lady, will take you back home to Argos!

**Chorus:**

Pan's pipe of reeds, bound by wax, will give the rhythm to the ship's oars. Pan the god of the mountains.

**Chorus:**

And Apollo, with his loud lyre, his lyre of seven strings will sing along and guide the ship into the safety of glittering Athens. Apollo, the god of prophesy.

**Chorus:**

And the oars of the sea-cutting ship will turn wave into white foam and the sail cloth will spread across the wind, over the bows and onto the peak of the prow.

**Chorus:**

But you will abandon me here, my lady!

**Chorus:**

How I wish I could fly!

**Chorus:**

Follow the paths of the Heavens above where the sun spreads his sweet light...

**Chorus:**

Where he urges the fleetfooted steeds of his chariot.

**Chorus:**

Then, by beating the wings on my back, I could go and stop above our own home.

**Chorus:**

If I could only stop high above the place where the chorus dances...

**Chorus:**

...there where, as a young girl, worthy of a handsome groom, I would dance with my girlfriends, all of the same age, my mother swelling with pride nearby.

**Chorus:**

And whenever I got up to compete in beauty, in luxury, in the softness of hair, I'd hide my cheeks with my plaits and with my fine veil.

*Enter King Thoas with attendants*

**Thoas:**

Where is the Greek priestess of this temple?

Has she performed the purifications for the sacrifice of the strangers yet?

Has the holy fire in the inner chamber consumed their body yet?

*Enter Iphigeneia carrying the statue of Artemis.*

**Chorus:**

Here she is, my king. She can answer all your questions herself.

**Thoas:**

Iphigeneia, daughter of Agamemnon, what on earth are you doing? Why are you carrying the statue of the goddess in your arms? Why did you remove it from its sacred spot?

**Iphigeneia:**

Stop where you are, my Lord. Don't step too close to the temple!

**Thoas:**

Why, Iphigeneia? What's happened in the temple?

**Iphigeneia:** *She spits as if to avert evil spirits*

There, I spat to satisfy the holy orders.

**Thoas:**

Iphigeneia, you are preparing me for something nasty. Tell me clearly, what is it?

**Iphigeneia:**

King Thoas, the victims you've brought to me were unclean.

**Thoas:**

Is that something you, yourself understood or did someone who knows about such matters told you so?



**Iphigeneia:**

The statue of the goddess had turned its back to us.

**Thoas:**

What? Of its own accord or did some earthquake move it?

**Iphigeneia:**

Of its own accord... and it also shut its eyes.

**Thoas:**

But why? Was it the fact that the victims were unclean?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, that's it absolutely. They have committed unspeakable evil.

**Thoas:**

Have they killed one of our barbarians in the beach? Is that it?

**Iphigeneia:**

They have arrived here after having spilled the blood of their own folk.

**Thoas:**

Is that so? Tell me about it! Whose blood is it they spilled?

**Iphigeneia:**

They've conspired and then, with their own swords killed their mother.

**Thoas:**

O, dear Apollo! This is something that even we, barbarians would never do!

**Iphigeneia:**

They've been exiled from the whole of Greece.

**Thoas:**

So, is this why you're taking the statue outside?

**Iphigeneia:**

I'm taking it outside beneath the pure sky so as to reverse the pollution caused by the unholy murder.

**Thoas:**

How did you learn about the murder that the foreigners had committed?

**Iphigeneia:**

When the statue turned I questioned them.

**Thoas:**

Greece has raised you well, Iphigeneia. You are indeed a wise woman! You've done well!

**Iphigeneia:**

They've thrown a sweet lure into my heart.

**Thoas:**

Did they give you some good news from your people in Argos?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, in fact they've told me that my only brother, Orestes, is doing well.

**Thoas:**

No doubt they've told you that to make you happy so you could spare their lives.

**Iphigeneia:**

They've also told me that my father is alive and is also doing well.

**Thoas:**

But you, of course, followed the will of the goddess.

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes. Hellas has destroyed me. I hate that country.

**Thoas:**

Well, then, Iphigeneia, what are we to do about the foreigners?

**Iphigeneia:**

What we must do is to pay due respect to our own customs.

**Thoas:**

Well then, where are your sword and your purifying water?

**Iphigeneia:**

No, first I must wash them and purify them in clear water.

**Thoas:**

You mean pure water from a spring, or from the sea?

**Iphigeneia:**

The sea. It washes all mortal evil.

**Thoas:**

Yes, that way the goddess will enjoy the sacrifice all the more.

**Iphigeneia:**

For me, too, it will be better.

**Thoas:**

But the waves wash right up against the temple. Will not that do?

**Iphigeneia:**

No. I need a deserted place. I need to do other things as well.

**Thoas:**

Go ahead. Go where you need to go. I'd hate to witness secret mysteries.

**Iphigeneia:**

I need to also purify the statue of the goddess.

**Thoas:**

Of course, if it's been defiled by the hand of murderers...

**Iphigeneia:**

I wouldn't have taken it down from its pedestal if it hadn't.

**Thoas:**

Your piety and thoughtfulness, Iphigeneia, is most honourable and that's why the whole city admires you.

**Iphigeneia:**

Well then, listen to what I need done.

**Thoas:**

Just name it.

**Iphigeneia:**

Firstly, tie up the strangers.

**Thoas:**

But where could they possibly go to escape your hand?

**Iphigeneia:**

Consider no Greek trustworthy!

**Thoas:** *To his attendants*

Servants, go and tie the strangers up!

**Iphigeneia:**

Then bring them here.

**Thoas:**

It shall be done.

**Iphigeneia:**

Cover their heads with capes.

**Thoas:**

You mean, so that they won't pollute the air and the sun's rays?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, and my lord, send some of your servants with me.

**Thoas:**

These men will follow you.

**Iphigeneia:**

And send someone to the city to tell them that...

**Thoas:**

Tell them what, Iphigeneia?

**Iphigeneia:**

Tell everyone to stay indoors.

**Thoas:**

You means, so as not to meet with the tainted murderers?

**Iphigeneia:**

Yes, because the tainted must be avoided.

**Thoas:** *To an attendant*

You! Go and make that announcement through the city.

*Exit attendant*

**Iphigeneia:**

Tell them that no one should come out to see us.

**Thoas:**

You care so well for our city, Iphigeneia!

**Iphigeneia:**

For the city and for all of the people I love the most.

**Thoas:**

You mean me?

**Iphigeneia:**

But you stay here, by the temple of the goddess.

**Thoas:**

And do what?

**Iphigeneia:**

Make the temple pure with the torch.

**Thoas:**

And have it ready for you when you come back?

**Iphigeneia:**

When the foreigners come out...

**Thoas:**

What do I have to do then?

**Iphigeneia:**

You must cover your eyes with your cape.

**Thoas:**

Cover them so that I won't see the tainted men.

**Iphigeneia:**

But if it looks like I'm late coming back...

**Thoas:**

How will I know that?

**Iphigeneia:**

... don't be too surprised.

**Thoas:**

By all means, take your time and perform well everything the goddess needs.

**Iphigeneia:**

May this purification be accomplished as I wish it.

**Thoas:**

Indeed!

*From the Temple enter Orestes and Pylades, their heads covered and pushed along by guards. Other attendants follow bringing young lambs for sacrifice, torches, ropes and other sacrificial implements and utensils.*

*Thoas steps back and hides his face.*

**Iphigeneia:**

Ah! Here they are! The foreigners have come out of the temple and I can see the servants, carrying the goddess' adornments.

And the newborn lambs are here. I shall wash away the taint of the blood committed by the murder with their blood.

Ah, and the torches, too and everything else I've asked for; everything I need in order to perform the purification of the foreigners and of the statue of our goddess.

Let all the citizens of Tauris stay away from this impurity!

Whether you are a guardian of the temple, keeping your hands pure for the gods, or if you are betrothed, or yet if you are a woman weighed down with pregnancy, I say, run away now! All of you!

Run away, lest the pollution fall upon you!

*Praying*

Daughter of Zeus and Leto, virgin goddess!

Let me wash away the impurity of the murder done by these two men!

Let me perform the sacrifice there where it is proper!

Then you will dwell in a pure temple and we, too, will enjoy good fortune.

I will not utter my other thoughts, reverent goddess but you and the other gods, who are wise, will read them.

*Exit Iphigeneia, Orestes, Pylades and the attendants, SR; Thoas goes into the temple.*

**Chorus:**

On the fertile plains of Delos, Leto gave birth to two great children: Apollo with the golden tresses and with his skill with the lyre and proud Artemis, who delighted in her unerring bow and arrows.

**Chorus:**

Leto wasted no time to leave her birthing place, there on the cliff by the sea, and brought her son to the peak of Parnassus with its rushing brooks and its frenzied celebrations of Dionysus.

**Chorus:**

There, in the shade of the broad-leafed laurel, lay a monstrous snake with gleaming dark skin, with eyes the colour of wine and with scales of every colour, guarding Earth's ancient temple.

**Chorus:**

And though you were still a baby, Apollo and though you were still bouncing about in your mother's lap, you still managed to kill that monster and become the new keeper of the sacred temple.

**Chorus:**

And so, your throne now is the golden tripod, a throne that knows no lies! From the depths of the sacred sanctuary, you send the prophetic words of the gods to all the mortals.

**Chorus:**

You are the neighbour to the Castalian waters.

**Chorus:**

Your temple is the centre of the earth.

**Chorus:**

But then, when Apollo had driven Earth's daughter, Themis, away from of this most sacred Pythian throne, at Delphi, Earth brought forth ghostly dreams that came out in the dark night.

**Chorus:**

Dreams that revealed to many mortals in their sleep, things that have happened and things that Fate decreed would happen.

**Chorus:**

And so it was that Earth, angered on behalf of her daughter, took away Apollo's prophetic honours.

**Chorus:**

And so it was that Lord Apollo sped away on his quick feet to Olympus to wrap his young arms around Zeus' throne and beg him to restore his Pythian temple to him, take it back from the anger of the goddess Earth.

**Chorus:**

Zeus laughed when he saw how his young child had already wanted to rule the realm of worship and of its endless stream of gold. With a shake of his long locks, Zeus put an end to all the ghostly dreams and tore out the shadowy faith the mortals had in them.

**Chorus:**

Apollo is given back the office of prophecy and the people thronged around his throne, with their faith in his oracles restored.

*Enter Messenger SL.*

*He is heavily bruised about the face, bleeding from small wounds about his arms and legs and his clothes are torn. He ignores the chorus and rushes up to the door of the temple which he pounds hard with his fists.*

**Messenger:**

Guards! Guards of the temple! Attendants of the altar! Open these locked doors!  
Where can I find King Thoas? Tell the king to come out!

**Chorus:**

If I may speak without being spoken to, may I ask what is wrong?

**Messenger:**

Those two young men! They've escaped! Helped by Agamemnon's daughter!  
They've left the country and they took with them the holy statue of our goddess.  
They've taken it down into the hold of their ship!

**Chorus:**

Incredible!

**Chorus:**

Incredible!

**Chorus:**

But, if you're after the king –

**Chorus:**

He's gone. He's not here!

**Chorus:**

He left the temple in some hurry.

**Messenger:**

Gone? Gone where? I must find him and tell him what's happened.

**Chorus:**

I don't know where he's gone!

**Chorus:**

Go and look for him!

**Chorus:**

Go! Find him and tell him the news!

**Messenger:** *Suspects a plot.*

Ha! I can see just how treacherous women are!

You lot! You too, are in on this conspiracy!

**Chorus:**

You must be mad!

**Chorus:**

How could we possibly be involved in the escape of those strangers?

**Chorus:**

Why don't you run over to the Palace?

**Chorus:**

Run! As fast as you can!

**Messenger:** *He takes hold of the big door knocker and bangs it violently.*

Not until this door knocker responds.

*Bangs hard at the door even more violently.*

Ey, you, inside this temple! I'm calling you!

Undo the bars of this door and open it now!

Call out the king! I'm just outside the door and I'm carrying a huge load of dreadful news!

**Thoas:** *(Within)*

Who's making all this awful noise here, banging at the door like this? This is the

temple of the goddess!

*The door opens and Thoas and his retinue come out.*

**Messenger:**

Ah! My lord, you're in there!

Proof that these women just lied to me. They told me you had left and they wanted me to go away as well.

**Thoas:**

Why would they say that? What could they gain by telling you a lie like that?

**Messenger:**

My lord, I'll talk to you about them later but first you must hear what urgent matters concern you. Iphigeneia, my lord, the young woman who presides over these altars, has left the country! She has left with those young men carrying the statue of our goddess in her arms. All this talk about purification was a trick!

**Thoas:**

What are you saying, man? What wind blew her in that direction?

**Messenger:**

It will shock you to know this my lord: She wanted to save Orestes!

**Thoas:**

Orestes? Tyndareus' grandson?

**Messenger:**

The very man. The man our goddess wanted to sacrifice upon these very altars!

**Thoas:**

That's awful! There's no other word for it, is there?

**Messenger:**

Don't get distracted by such things now, my lord.

Listen to me carefully and then figure out a way of catching these foreigners.

**Thoas:**

Quite right, yes, go on, then. They have a long journey ahead of them if they are to escape. My army won't let them do that.

**Messenger:**

When we, the guards you've sent with the ropes for the foreigners, got to the seashore, near where Orestes had hidden his ship, Iphigeneia, with a silent motion, ordered us to stand quite a distance back.

She said she was about to light the sacred flame for the sacrifice and for the sacred purification ceremony. She took the ropes herself and walked behind the strangers, something which looked suspicious to us, my lord but then again we, your servants, did not want to disobey your orders either, so we stayed behind.

Anyhow, after a while, to make us think that she was actually performing the rites, she gave out a loud scream and began singing barbarian religious hymns, as if she was a priestess in the process of purifying tainted blood.

Then, after we sat quietly there for quite a while, we began to suspect that perhaps the strangers had managed to escape from their shackles, perhaps they had killed the girl and then perhaps they ran away but, we were still afraid of seeing anything that might be forbidden so we did nothing. Just sat there silently until, finally we all decided to go where they were, in spite of the fact that we were forbidden to do so.

Suddenly we saw before us a Greek ship, ready to sail off, its oars raised up at the tholepins and worked hard by fifty sailors. Those oars, my lord, looked like giant wings!

The two young men who had escaped were now standing, free of any bonds, near the stern of the ship.

Some of the sailors were holding steady the prow with poles, while others were securing the anchor onto the bulwarks. Some others were rushing about trying to lower a ladder into the sea, to help the foreign girl climb aboard.

At the sight of this treachery, we all lost our fears about the holy rituals and rushed down at them. We grabbed the girl, seized the hawsers and began to dismantle all the steering oars from the handsome craft.

Then we started shouting at them: "What gives you the right to come here and steal our statues and our priestesses? Who are you? Whose son are you that would give you the right to steal this woman away from us?"

To this the man answered, "You better know this: I am her brother, Orestes, Agamemnon's son and now I am taking my long-lost sister back home."

But still, we held firm onto the girl, trying to force her to come back with us, back to you, my lord.

That's how I got these bruises on my face. Neither we nor they had any swords so we fought with our fists. The two young strangers beat us hard with their fists and kicked us about our bodies, our ribs our kidneys – they beat us hard, my lord, until our bodies became paralyzed with pain.

We all ran away to the cliffs, some of us bleeding from the head and others from the eyes. From up there, we fought them much more cautiously, by throwing stones at them but then archers on the ship made us retreat even further back.

Then, suddenly, a huge wave washed the ship further onto the beach and the woman was too afraid to step into the water. Orestes then came down to her, lifted her onto his left shoulder and walked into the water himself, all the way to the ladder, climbed it and placed upon the handsome ship's deck both, his sister as well as the statue that fell from the sky, the statue of Zeus' daughter, Artemis. Then we heard a voice calling out aboard the **ship**:

"Sailors of Greece! Take up your oars and turn the sea's waves into white froth! We have it all now. Everything we came for, everything we were looking for when we sailed our way through the Clashing Rocks and into these hostile waters!"

At that, the men let out a huge roar of relief and hit the salty waters with their oars.

And while the ship was inside the harbour it sailed well, towards the wide open ocean but the moment it got outside the harbour, a huge tempest crashed upon it, shaking it about. Then a sudden wind rose up and pushed the sails back against the stern. The men battled furiously against the wave but the tempest brought the ship back onto the shore.

At this, Iphigeneia stood up and began **praying**:

"Oh Leto's daughter! Goddess!

I am your priestess. Forgive my theft and please take me away from this barbarian land and bring me safely back to Hellas! You, too have a brother whom you love, so you must know that I also love mine!"



In answer to Iphigeneia's prayers, all the men sang a hymn to Apollo and then bared their arms and at the command of the boatswain beat the water in perfect rhythm. Still, the ship came further and further back, towards us, onto the rocks. Seeing this, one of our men jumped into the water and another tried to get a hawser looped onto the ship. I was told to rush back here and tell you, my lord, what is happening down there.

So, come on, take shackles and ropes and go down there. If the tempest doesn't subside the Greeks will have no hope of saving their lives!

The lord of the sea, the revered Poseidon himself will help you. He watches over Troy and hates all of Pelops' descendants so he'll make sure that Agamemnon's son and daughter will fall into your hands. Iphigeneia has obviously forgotten how Artemis had saved her life from the sacrifice at Aulis and she has now betrayed her.

**Chorus:**

How unfortunate you are, Iphigeneia!

You and your brother will be destroyed if you fall into the hands of your masters!

**Thoas:** *To the audience*

Come! All you citizens of this barbarian land! All of you!

Go quickly, harness your horses and gallop down to the shore! Go and pick up the wreckage of the Greek ship!

Go! Let the goddess help you hunt down and capture those impious strangers!

Some of you drag down to the sea some swift ships. We'll surround them by sea and by land, catch them and hurl them down the rocky cliffs. Impale their bodies on stakes.

*To the chorus*

As for you! You were part of this conspiracy!

I will address the matter of your punishment later. I cannot stop now because I have more pressing business to attend to.

*He begins to leave but the goddess Athena stops him as she comes onto the stage by a deus ex machina.*

**Athena:**

Such haste, King Thoas! Where are you off too in such a rush?

Listen to the words of the goddess **Athena:**

Stop this hunt! Stop this invasion of your army!

Orestes has come here under Apollo's prophetic instructions, so as to escape the wrath of the Furies and to take back to Argos his sister and to bring the holy statue to my own home and thus bring some relief from the dreadful misery he's been suffering.

And let me add these words to **you:**

You think you will capture and kill Orestes with the help of the tempest but Poseidon has already answered my call and has calmed the sea's waters so that Orestes' ship might sail through.

And to you, now **Orestes:**

Hear me Orestes and hear my commands. You might be far from here but you can hear well the voice of a goddess.

Take the homeward path with your sister and with the statue.

When you reach Athens, the city built by gods, look for a place near its border with Attica, next to the cliff of Karystus, a sacred place which my people call Halae.

You must build a temple there and inside that temple you must place the god-sent statue. You must name this temple the Taurian Temple and it will stand as a reminder of this land and of the troubles you have suffered, being pursued all over Greece by the Furies. In that temple, mortals will go to sing hymns in honour of the goddess Artemis from Tauris.

And you must establish this custom:

At the time of the feast, let the priest hold a sword at the neck of a man and draw blood. This will atone for your sacrifice, the rites of piety will be done and, as well, the goddess will receive her due honour.

As for you, Iphigeneia:

You must serve this goddess as her temple warden in the sacred valleys of Brauron. There, you will be buried when you die and people will, in your honour, place upon your tomb the finely woven garments that women who have died at childbirth leave behind.

*Turning to the chorus*

And now, about these Greek women:

Their hearts are pure and so I order that they be escorted from this country and on to theirs.

As well, since I have saved Orestes in the court on the Hill of Ares by bringing the vote to a tie, I want the following to be the custom here, also: He who receives an equal number of votes, wins his case at court.

And now, Orestes, son of Agamemnon, take your sister, Iphigeneia with you and leave this land.

You, Thoas, end your anger!

**Thoas:**

My Lady, Athena! Only a fool would hear the words of a god and not obey them! I have no anger for Orestes, nor for his sister who left here with the statue. How can a mortal come to a good end by going against the will of the almighty gods?

No, let them go to your land with the statue of the goddess and may they be established there with all happiness.

As for these women, here, I will do as you have commanded me. I will send them back to their blessed land, Greece.

I shall withdraw all the preparations I've made against the foreigners; stop the spears and the oars from attacking them, since this is your will.

**Athena:**

I commend you for your wisdom!

Both gods and mortals must obey Necessity.

Winds! Blow hard now and take Agamemnon's son to Athens. I will go with him to make sure that my sister's holy statue is safe.

*To the chorus*

Blessed people, go and find your happiness! You will arrive home safely!

*Exit Athena*

**Chorus:**

Reverend goddess Athena!

**Chorus:**

Revered by gods and mortals alike, we will obey your words.

**Chorus:**

Sweet and unexpected are the words that have reached our ears!

**Chorus:**

O great and reverend lady, Victory!

**Chorus:**

Always be my guide!

**Chorus:**

And never cease to crown my head with garlands!

*Exit all*

# (EURIPIDES) Electra

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>375</sup> translation by Ian Johnston

For some background information on the House of Atreus, see [this section](#)

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**PEASANT:** a poor farmer in the countryside

**ELECTRA:** daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, married to the Peasant

**ORESTES:** son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra

**PYLADES:** a friend of Orestes

**CHORUS:** Argive country women

**OLD MAN:** an old servant of Agamemnon's who rescued Orestes

**MESSENGER:** one of Orestes' servants

**CLYTAEMNESTRA:** mother of Orestes and Electra.

**DIOSCOURI** (Castor and Polydeuces): divine twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra

**SERVANTS:** attendants for Orestes, Pylades, and Clytaemnestra

*[The scene is set in the countryside of Argos, in front of the Peasant's hut. It is just before dawn.]*

PEASANT

O this old land, these streams of Inachus,  
the place from where king Agamemnon once  
set out with a thousand ships on his campaign  
and sailed off over to the land of Troy.

He killed Priam, who ruled in Ilion  
and took the famous town of Dardanus.<sup>376</sup>

Then he returned home, back here to Argos,  
and set up in high temples piles of loot  
from those barbarians. Yes, over there

things went well for him. But then he was killed in his own home, thanks to the  
treachery

of his wife, Clytaemnestra, at the hand  
of Thyestes' son Aegisthus. So he died,  
leaving behind Tantalus' ancient sceptre.<sup>377</sup>

Aegisthus rules this country now. He wed  
Tyndareus' daughter, the dead king's wife.

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<sup>375</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~Johnstoi/euripides/electra.htm>

<sup>376</sup>. . . *Dardanus*: Ilion is an alternative name for Troy, and Dardanus is the name of a famous ancestor of Priam, king of Troy. Hence, the Trojans were often called Dardanians.

<sup>377</sup>. . . *ancient sceptre*: Tantalus was the legendary founder of the royal family of Argos, called the Pelopids after Tantalus' son Pelops. Tantalus was Agamemnon's and Menelaus' great-great-grandfather.

As for those he left at home behind him  
 when he sailed to Troy, his son Orestes  
 and his daughter, too, Electra—well, now,  
 Aegisthus was about to kill Orestes, but an old servant of his father's took him  
 and handed him to Strophius to bring up  
 in the land of Phocis. But Electra  
 stayed on in her father's house. When she reached  
 her young maturity, the suitors came,  
 the foremost ones throughout the land of Greece,  
 seeking marriage. Aegisthus was afraid  
 she'd bear a child to some important man,  
 who'd then seek revenge for Agamemnon.  
 So he wouldn't give her to a bridegroom, but kept her in his home. Even this choice  
 filled him with fear, in case she'd give birth  
 to a noble child in secret. So he planned  
 to kill her. But though her heart is savage,  
 her mother saved her from Aegisthus' hands.  
 She'd an excuse for murdering her husband,  
 but she feared that if she killed her children  
 she'd be totally disgraced.<sup>378</sup> And that's why  
 Aegisthus came up with the following scheme—  
 he offered gold to anyone who'd kill Agamemnon's son, who'd left the country  
 as an exile, and he gave Electra  
 to me to be my wife. My ancestors  
 were from Mycenae, so in this matter  
 at least I don't bear any of the blame.  
 My family was a good one but not rich,  
 and that destroys one's noble ancestry.  
 He gave her to a man who had no power.  
 In that way his fear could be diminished.  
 If some important fellow married her,  
 he might have woken up the sleeping blood  
 of Agamemnon, and then at some point  
 justice would have come here for Aegisthus.  
 But I've never had sex with her in bed—  
 and Cypris knows I'm right in this—and so  
 Electra's still a virgin.<sup>379</sup>  
 I'd be ashamed  
 to take the daughter of a wealthy man  
 and violate the girl, when I'm not born  
 her equal. As for unfortunate Orestes,  
 who's now, according to what people say, a relative of mine, I'm sorry for him,

<sup>378</sup>. . . *totally disgraced*: Clytaemnestra's excuse for killing Agamemnon is, of course, the fact that he sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia in order to enable the fleet to sail to Troy.

<sup>379</sup>. . . *still a virgin*: Cypris is a common name for Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love. The name comes from the goddess' frequent association with Cyprus.

if he should ever come back to Argos  
and see his sister's wretched marriage.  
Any man who says I'm just an idiot  
to bring a young girl here into my home  
and then not touch her should know he's a fool,  
measuring wisdom with a useless standard.

[Electra enters from the hut. She is carrying a water jug]

ELECTRA

O pitch black night, nurse of golden stars,  
Through you I walk towards the river streams,  
holding up this jar I carry on my head. This is not a task I am compelled to do,  
but I will manifest to all the gods  
Aegisthus' insolence, and I will send  
into this great sky my sorrowing cries  
out to my father. For my own mother,  
that murderous daughter of Tyndareus,  
in her desire to please her husband,  
has cast me from my home. With Aegisthus  
she's given birth to other children and thinks  
Orestes and myself of no account inside her house.

PEASANT

You unfortunate girl,  
why do you work like this to give me help,  
carrying out these chores? In earlier days,  
you were nobly raised. Why don't you stop,  
especially when I mention this to you?

ELECTRA

You're kind to me, and I consider you  
the equal of the gods in that. For now,  
when I'm in trouble, you don't demean me.  
When human beings discover someone there  
to soothe their miseries, as I have you,  
then fate is doing something great for them.  
So I should help you carry out the work  
and give you some relief, to the extent  
my strength permits, without you asking me,  
so you can bear the load more easily.  
There's work enough for you to do outside.  
I should take care of things within the house.  
It's nice when someone working out of doors  
comes back in and finds things neat and tidy.

PEASANT

Well, if you think you should do it, then go. The springs are no great distance from  
the house.

Once daylight comes, I'll drive the oxen out,  
go to the farmlands, and then sow the fields.

No matter how much his mouth talks of gods,  
a lazy man can never gather up  
the stuff he needs to live without hard work.

[Electra leaves for the spring, and the Peasant goes back to the house. Enter Orestes and Pylades, with two servants]

ORESTES

Pylades, among men I think of you  
as a loving host, foremost in my trust.  
For you're the only one of all my friends  
who has dealt honourably with Orestes, as I've been coping with these dreadful things  
I've had to put up with from Aegisthus,  
who killed my father . . . he and my mother,  
that destructive woman. I've come here,  
from god's mysterious shrine to Argive lands,  
to avenge the killing of my father,  
by murdering the ones who butchered him.  
Last night I visited my father's tomb.  
where I wept and started sacrificing  
by cutting off a lock of hair. And then, on the altar I made an offering of blood  
from a sheep I slaughtered. But the tyrants  
who control this land don't know I'm here.  
I've not set foot within the city walls.  
No. I've come out to these border regions  
for two reasons which act on me as one—  
so I may run off to another land  
if someone sees me and knows who I am  
and to find my sister, who's living here,  
so they say, joined in marriage to a man, no virgin any more. I could meet her,  
make her my accomplice in the murder,  
and in this way get clear information  
about what's happening inside the walls.  
But now that Dawn is raising her bright eyes,  
let's move aside to some place off the path.  
We'll see a ploughman or a servant woman,  
then ask them if my sister lives near here.  
In fact, I can see a household servant—  
her shaven head holds up a water jug.<sup>380</sup>  
Let sit and ask this female slave some questions,  
Pylades—see if we can get some word  
about the business which has brought us here.

[Orestes and Pylades move back. Electra enters, on her way back from the spring. She does not see them at first.]

<sup>380</sup> . . . *a water jug*: the shaven head may be a token of mourning or a sign of Electra's low status now or both.

She starts to go through her ritual of mourning]

ELECTRA

You must step quickly now—

it's time to move—

keep going, lamenting as you go.

Alas for me! Yes, for me!

I am Agamemnon's child.

I was born from Clytaemnestra,

Tyndareus' detested daughter. Miserable Electra—that's the name  
the citizens have given me.

Alas, alas! My wretched work

and this detested way of life!

O father, you now lie in Hades,

Agamemnon, thanks to that murder  
committed by Aegisthus and your wife.

Come now, raise the same lament,  
seize the joy of prolonged weeping.

You must step quickly now— it's time to move—

keep going, lamenting as you go.

Alas for me! Yes, for me!

O my poor brother, in what town,

in what household are you roaming,

abandoning your abject sister

to such painful circumstance

in her ancestral home? Come to me,

in my unhappy wretchedness.

Be my deliverer from pain— ah Zeus, Zeus—

be an avenger for my father,

the hateful shedding of his blood,

once the wanderer sets foot in Argos.

Take this water pitcher from my head

and set it down, so I may wail

my night laments, cries for my father,

wild shrieks, a song of death,

your death, my father. For you

beneath the earth, I cry out chants of sorrow—day after day

I keep up this constant grieving,

ripping my dear skin with my fingernails,

while my hand beats my shaven head—

all this because you're dead.

Ah yes, mutilate your face,

and, just as a swan sings out

beside the streaming river,

crying to its beloved father

who died ensnared within the web of a deceitful net, so I cry out

for you, unhappy father,



your body bathing in that final bath,  
your most pitiable couch of death.<sup>381</sup>

Ah me . . . ah me!

that bitter axe that hacked you,  
father, the bitter scheme  
of your return from Troy!  
Your wife failed to welcome you  
with victor's wreath and ribbons. No. Instead she gave you up  
to that disgraceful mutilation  
by Aegisthus' two-edged sword  
and got herself a treacherous mate.

[Enter the Chorus of Argive women]

CHORUS

O Electra, daughter of Agamemnon,  
I've come here to your rural dwelling place.  
A man's arrived, a milk-drinking man—  
he's come here from Mycenae,  
a man who walks the mountains.  
He says the Argives have proclaimed a sacrifice two days from now,  
and every young bride has to go  
to Hera's shrine in the procession.

ELECTRA

My sad heart is beating fast, my friends,  
but not for festive ornaments  
or necklaces made out of gold.  
I won't stand with the Argive girls  
in choruses or beat my foot  
as I whirl in the dance.  
I pass my days in tears— in my unhappiness my care  
day after day is with my tears.  
See if this filthy hair and tattered clothes  
suit Agamemnon's royal child  
or Troy, which bears the memory  
of how my father seized the place.

CHORUS

The goddess is great. So come,  
borrow thick woven clothes from me  
and put them on, with gold as well,  
graceful ornaments—to favour me. Do you think that with your tears  
you can control your enemies  
if you have no respect for gods?  
My child, you'll find yourself a gentler life  
by honouring the gods with prayers,

<sup>381</sup> . . . *couch of death*: Agamemnon was killed in his bath, trapped under his cloak, as if under a hunting net.

and not with sorrowful laments.

ELECTRA

No god is listening to the cries  
of this ill-fated girl or to the murder  
of my father all that time ago.  
Alas for that slaughtered man and for the wanderer still alive  
dwelling somewhere in a foreign land,  
a wretched vagabond at a slave's hearth,  
son of such a famous father.  
And I am living in a peasant's house,  
wasting my soul up on the mountain tops  
in exile from my father's house.  
My mother, married to another man,  
lives in a bed all stained with blood.

CHORUS LEADER

Your mother's sister, Helen, brought the Greeks so many troubles and your house,  
as well. <sup>382</sup>

[Orestes and Pylades begin to move forward. Electra catches sight of them]

ELECTRA

Alas, women, I'll end my lamentation.  
Some strangers hiding there beside the house,  
at the altar, are rising up from ambush.  
Let's run off—escape these trouble makers.  
You run along the path. I'll go in the house.

ORESTES

Stay here, poor girl. Don't fear my hand.

ELECTRA

O Phoebus Apollo, I beseech you—  
don't let me die!

ORESTES

And let me cut down  
others I hate much more than you.

ELECTRA

Leave now! Don't put your hands on those you should not touch.

ORESTES

There's no one I have more right to touch.

ELECTRA

Then why wait beside my house in ambush,  
with your sword drawn?

ORESTES

Stay here and listen.  
Soon you'll be agreeing with me.

<sup>382</sup>. . . *your house, as well*: Helen and Clytaemnestra were twin sisters born to Leda, but with different fathers—Tyndareus, king of Sparta and Leda's husband, was Clytaemnestra's father, but Zeus, who in the form of a swan raped Leda, was Helen's.

ELECTRA

I'll stand here.

I'm yours, anyway, since you're the stronger.

ORESTES

I've come to bring you news about your brother.

ELECTRA

Dearest of friends—is he alive or dead?

ORESTES

Alive. I'd like you to have good news first.

ELECTRA

My you find happiness as your reward for those most welcome words.

ORESTES

That's a blessing

I'd like to give to both of us together.

ELECTRA

My unhappy brother—in what country  
does he live in wretched exile?

ORESTES

He drifts around,  
not settling for a single city's customs.

ELECTRA

He's not lacking daily necessities?

ORESTES

No, those he has. But a man in exile  
is truly powerless.

ELECTRA

What's the message  
you've come here to bring from him?

ORESTES

I'm here  
to see if you're alive and, if you are, what your life is like.

ELECTRA

Surely you can see,  
first of all, how my body's shrivelled?

ORESTES

So worn with pain it makes me pity you.

ELECTRA

And my hair cut off, shorn with a razor?

ORESTES

Perhaps your dead father and your brother  
are tearing at you.

ELECTRA

Alas! Who is there  
whom I love more than those two men?

ORESTES

Ah yes, and what do you think you are

to your own brother?

ELECTRA

He's not here,  
and so no present friend to me.

ORESTES

Why live here, so distant from the city?

ELECTRA

I'm married—  
it's a deadly state.

ORESTES

I pity your brother.  
Did you marry someone from Mycenae?

ELECTRA

No one my father ever hoped to give me.

ORESTES

Tell me. I'll listen and inform your brother.

ELECTRA

I live in his house, far from the city.

ORESTES

This is a house fit for a ditch digger  
or for a herdsman.

ELECTRA

He's poor but decent,  
and he respects me.

ORESTES

Your husband's respect—  
what does that mean?

ELECTRA

Never once has he dared to fondle me in bed.

ORESTES

Does he hold back  
from some religious scruple, or does he think  
you're unworthy of him?

ELECTRA

No. He believes  
it's not right to insult my ancestors.

ORESTES

But how could he not be overjoyed  
at making such a marriage?

ELECTRA

Well, stranger,  
he thinks the person who gave me away  
had no right to do it.

ORESTES

I understand.  
He fears that someday he'll be punished

by Orestes.

ELECTRA

He is afraid of that, but he's a virtuous man, as well.

ORESTES

Ah yes,

you've been talking of a noble man  
who must be treated well.

ELECTRA

Yes, if the man  
who's far away from here right now comes back.

ORESTES

And your mother, the one who bore you,  
how did she take this?

ELECTRA

Women give their love  
to their husbands, stranger, not their children.

ORESTES

Why did Aegisthus shame you in this way?

ELECTRA

By giving me to such a man, he planned  
the children I produced would not be strong.

ORESTES

Clearly so that you would not bear children  
who could take revenge?

ELECTRA

Yes, that's his plan.

I hope he'll have to make that up to me!

ORESTES

You're a virgin—does your mother's husband know?

ELECTRA

No. We hide that from him with our silence.

ORESTES

These women listening to what we're saying  
are friends of yours?

ELECTRA

Yes. They'll keep well concealed  
my words and yours.

ORESTES

If he came to Argos  
what could Orestes do in all of this?

ELECTRA

You have to ask? What a shameful question! Isn't now a crucial time?

ORESTES

When he comes,  
how should he kill his father's murderers?

ELECTRA

By daring what my father's enemies  
dared to do to him.

ORESTES

And would you dare  
to help him kill your mother?

ELECTRA

Yes, I would—  
with the very axe that killed our father!

ORESTES

Shall I tell him this? Are you quite certain?

ELECTRA

Once I've shed my mother's blood, let me die!

ORESTES

Ah, if only Orestes were close by  
and could hear this!

ELECTRA

Stranger, if I saw him, I would not know him.

ORESTES

That's not surprising.  
You were youngsters when you separated.

ELECTRA

Only one of my friends would recognize him.

ORESTES

The man who they say saved him from murder  
by stealing him away?

ELECTRA

Yes. An old man—  
my father's servant long ago.

ORESTES

Your father—  
when he died, did he get a burial tomb?

ELECTRA

Once he'd been thrown out of the house,  
he found what he could find.

ORESTES

Alas! Those words of yours . . .

Awareness even of a stranger's pains gnaws away at mortal men. Tell me this—  
once I know, I can carry to your brother  
the joyless story which he has to hear.

Pity does not exist with ignorance,  
only with those who know. Too much knowledge  
is not without its dangers for wise men.

CHORUS LEADER

My heart's desires are the same as his.  
Out here, far from the city, I don't know  
the troubles there. Now I want to hear them.

## ELECTRA

I will speak out, if that's acceptable—  
 and it is appropriate to talk with friends  
 about the burden of my situation  
 and my father's. And I beg you, stranger,  
 since you've the one who prompted me to speak,  
 tell Orestes of our troubles, mine and his.  
 First of all, there's the sort of clothes I wear,  
 kept here in a stall, weighed down with filth.  
 Then there's the style of house I'm living in,  
 now I've been thrown out of my royal home.  
 I have to work hard at the loom myself to make my clothes or else I'd have to go  
 with my body naked—just do without,  
 bringing water from the springs all by myself,  
 with no share in the ritual festivals,  
 no place in the dance. Since I'm a virgin,  
 I keep married women at a distance  
 and felt shamed by Castor, who courted me,  
 his relative, before he joined the gods. <sup>383</sup>  
 Meanwhile my mother sits there on her throne,  
 with loot from Phrygia and Asian slaves, my father's plunder, standing by her chair,  
 their Trojan dresses pinned with golden brooches.  
 My father's blood still stains the palace walls—  
 it's rotted black—while the man who killed him  
 climbs in my father's chariot and drives out,  
 proud to brandish in his blood-stained hands  
 the very sceptre which my father used  
 to rule the Greeks. Agamemnon's grave  
 has not been honoured. It's had no libations,  
 no myrtle branch, its altar unadorned. But this splendid husband of my mother,  
 so they say, when he's soaking wet with drink,  
 jumps on the grave and starts pelting pebbles  
 at the stone memorial to my father,  
 and dares to cry out these words against us: "Where's your son Orestes? Is he  
 present  
 to fight well for you and defend this tomb?"  
 And so absent Orestes is insulted.  
 But I beg you, stranger, take back this news.  
 Many are summoning him—I speak for them— my hands and tongue, my grief-  
 stricken heart,

<sup>383</sup>. . . *Castor*: Castor and Polydeuces (also called Pollux), the Dioscuri, were twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra, all born at the same time to Leda, queen of Sparta (hence Castor is an uncle of Electra). Polydeuces and Helen were children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytaemnestra were children of Tyndareus. When Castor was killed (before the Trojan war), Polydeuces turned down immortality, but Zeus allowed them to alternate, living among the gods and men, changing each day.

my shaven head, and Agamemnon, too.  
It would be disgraceful if his father  
could destroy the Phrygians and yet he,  
one against one, could not destroy a man,  
when he's young and from a nobler father.

[Enter the Peasant, returning from the fields]

CHORUS LEADER

Look! I see a man—I mean your husband—  
he's left his work. He's coming to the house.

PEASANT

Hold on. Who are these strangers I see there,  
at the door? And why have they come here, to a farmer's gate? What do they want  
from me?

It's shameful for a woman to be standing  
with young men.

ELECTRA

My dear friend, don't suspect me.  
You'll hear what's going on. These strangers  
have come here from Orestes—they're messengers  
with news for me. But forgive him, strangers,  
for those words he said.

PEASANT

What are they saying?  
Is the man still gazing at the daylight?

ELECTRA

That's what they say, and I believe their news.

PEASANT

Does he still recall your father's troubles and your own?

ELECTRA

We can hope about those things,  
but a man in exile has no power.

PEASANT

What message from Orestes did they bring  
when they came here?

ELECTRA

He sent them out as spies  
to look into my troubles.

PEASANT

They're seeing some,  
and I suppose you're telling them the rest.

ELECTRA

They know—there's no shortage of them.

PEASANT

Surely we should have opened up our doors  
long before this point. Go inside the house.  
In exchange for your good news, you'll find the hospitality my house affords.



You servants, take the stuff inside the house.  
Do not refuse me—you are friends of ours  
and you've come from someone who's a friend.  
Even if I'm poor, I will not behave  
like someone with an ill-bred character.

ORESTES

By the gods, is this the man pretending  
you and he are married, who does not wish  
to bring dishonour to Orestes?

ELECTRA

He is—  
he's the one who in my miserable state they call my husband.

ORESTES

Well, nothing is precise  
when it comes to how a man is valued—  
men's natures are confusing. Before this,  
I've seen a man worth nothing, yet he had  
a noble father, and evil parents  
with outstanding children. I've seen famine  
in a rich man's thinking and great spirit  
in a poor man's body. So how can we  
sort out these things and judge correctly?  
By riches? That would be a wretched test. By those who have nothing? But poverty  
is a disease. Through need it teaches men  
to act in evil ways. So should I turn  
to warfare? But when facing hostile spears,  
who can testify which men are virtuous?  
Best to dismiss such things, leave them to chance.  
This man is not great among the Argives,  
nor puffed up by his family's reputation.  
He's one of the crowd, yet has proved himself  
an excellent man. So stop your foolishness, those of you who keep wandering  
around  
full of misguided ways of measuring worth.  
Why not judge how valuable men are  
by their behaviour and their company?  
Men like this one govern homes and cities well,  
while those with muscles and with vacant minds  
are mere decorations in the market place.  
In fights with spears the strong arm holds its ground  
no better than the weak one does—such things  
depend on a man's nature and his courage.  
But because the man who is both absent  
and yet present here is worthy of it—  
I mean Agamemnon's son, for whose sake  
we've come here—let's accept the lodging

in this home. You slaves, go inside the house.  
 May a poor but willing man be my host  
 rather than a man with wealth. I applaud  
 how this man has received me in his home,  
 although I could have hoped your brother,  
 enjoying prosperity, might lead me in to a successful house. Perhaps he'll come.  
 The oracles of Loxias are strong.  
 But I dismiss mere human prophecy. <sup>384</sup>

[Pylades, Orestes, and their servants go into the house]

CHORUS LEADER

Now, Electra, our hearts are warm with joy—  
 more than they were before. Your fortunes  
 may perhaps advance, although that's difficult,  
 and end up standing in a better place.

ELECTRA

Reckless man, you know how poor your house is—  
 why did you offer your hospitality  
 to people so much greater than yourself?

PEASANT

What's wrong? If they're as well bred as they seem,  
 won't they be just as happy with small men  
 as with the great?

ELECTRA

Well, you're one of the small—  
 and since you've now committed this mistake,  
 go to that dear old servant of my father's.  
 He's been expelled from town and tends his flocks  
 by the Tanaus river, which cuts a line  
 between lands of Argos and of Sparta.  
 Tell him this—now these people have arrived,  
 he must come and provide our guests some food. He'll be happy to do that and  
 offer prayers up to the gods, after he finds out  
 the child he rescued once is still alive.  
 From my mother and my ancestral home  
 we'd get nothing—we'd bring them bitter news  
 if that cruel-hearted woman were to learn  
 Orestes is still living.

PEASANT

All right then,  
 I'll take that message to the old man,  
 if that's what you think. But you should go  
 inside the house as soon as possible to get things ready there. If she want to,

<sup>384</sup> . . . *oracles of Loxias*: Loxias is another name for Apollo, the god whose shrine Orestes consults before coming to Argos (as he mentions at line 115 above). But we do not know the text of the oracle (although we later learn it encouraged him to commit the revenge murders), and Electra is, one assumes, ignorant of Orestes' visit to the shrine.

surely a woman can find many things  
 to make into a meal. Within the house  
 there's still enough to fill them up with food  
 for one day at least. It's at times like this  
 when my thoughts can't sort out how to manage,  
 I think of the great power money has  
 for giving things to strangers and paying  
 to save a body whenever it falls sick.  
 The food we need each day doesn't come to much, and, rich or poor, all men eat  
 their fill  
 with the same amount of food.

[The Peasant and Electra move into the house, leaving the Chorus alone on stage]

CHORUS

You famous ships which once sailed off to Troy  
 to the beat of countless oars,  
 leading the Nereids in their dance,  
 while the flute-loving dolphin leapt  
 and rolled around your dark-nosed prows,  
 conveying Achilles, Thetis's son,  
 whose feet had such a nimble spring,  
 and Agamemnon, too, off to Troy,  
 to the river banks of the Simois. <sup>385</sup>

Leaving Euboea's headland points,  
 Nereids carried from Hephaestus' forge his labours on the golden shield and  
 armour,  
 up to Pelion, along the wooded slopes  
 of sacred Ossa, where the nymphs keep watch,  
 and searched those maidens out,  
 in places the old horseman trained sea-dwelling Thetis' son  
 to be a shining light for Hellas, swift runner for the sons of Atreus. <sup>386</sup>

I heard from a man who'd come from Troy  
 and reached the harbour in Nauplia  
 that on the circle of your splendid shield,  
 O son of Thetis, were these images,  
 a terror to the Phrygians—  
 on the rim around the edge  
 was Perseus in his flying sandals  
 holding up above the sea

<sup>385</sup> . . . *Nereids*: These are sea goddesses, daughters of Nereus. Achilles' mother, Thetis, was one of them.

<sup>386</sup> . . . *sons of Atreus*: These lines refer to the centaur Chiron (or Cheiron), half man and half horse, who in the region described, educated Achilles and other heroes. Pelion and Ossa are two famous mountains. Hephaestus is the god who made Achilles' divine armour (at the request of Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis) after his own armour worn by Patroclus had been captured by Hector, the leader of the Trojan forces.

the Gorgon's head and severed throat, accompanied by Zeus' messenger Hermes, Maia's country child.<sup>387</sup>

In the centre of the shield the circle of the sun shone out with his team of winged horses.

In the heavens stars were dancing,  
the Pleides and Hyades,  
a dreadful sight for Hector's eyes.

On his helmet made of hammered gold  
in their talons sphinxes clutched their prey seduced by song.

And on the breastplate breathing fire  
a lioness with claws raced at top speed  
eying a young horse of Pirene.<sup>388</sup>

And on his murderous sword four horses galloped—above their backs clouds of black dust billowed.

Evil-minded daughter of Tyndareus,  
your bed mate killed the king  
of spear-bearing warriors like these. And for that death the heavenly gods will one day pay you back with death.

Yes, one day I will see your blood,  
a lethal flow beneath your throat,  
sliced through with sword of iron.

[Enter the Old Man. Electra comes out of the house during his speech]

OLD MAN

So where is she? Where is my young lady,  
my mistress—the child of Agamemnon,  
whom I once raised? How steep this path is  
up to her place for a withered old man  
going uphill on foot! Still, they are my friends, so I must drag my doubled-over spine

and tottering legs up here. O my daughter—  
now I can see you there before the house—

I've come bringing here from my own livestock  
this newborn lamb taken from its mother, garlands, cheeses I got from the barrel,  
and this ancient treasure from Dionysus—  
it smells so rich! There's not much of it, but still it's sweet to add a tankard of it  
to a weaker drink. Go now. Let someone take these things for guests inside the house.

I want to use a rag, a piece of clothing,  
to wipe my eyes. I've drenched them with weeping.

<sup>387</sup> . . . *Maia's country child*: Perseus was the hero who killed Medusa, the most ferocious of the Gorgons (her face turned men to stone). Hermes, divine son of Zeus, assisted Perseus in the exploit. He is called a "country child" because he is associated with farming and hunting.

<sup>388</sup> . . . *racing lioness*: This is a reference to the monster Chimaera, a fire-breathing lioness with a goat's body and head growing out of its back. The Chimaera was killed by the hero Bellerophon. The reference to Hector is a reminder that he had to face Achilles' shield in his final and fatal encounter with Achilles (described in Book 22 of the Iliad).

ELECTRA

Why are your eyes so soaking wet, old man?  
I'm not reminding you about our troubles  
after all this time? Or are you moaning  
about Orestes in his wretched exile  
and about my father, whom you once held  
in your arms and raised, though your friends and you  
derived no benefits from it?

OLD MAN

That's right— it didn't help us. But still, there's one thing  
I could not endure. So I went to his tomb,  
a detour on the road. I was alone,  
so I fell down and wept, then opened up  
the bag of wine I'm bringing for the guests,  
poured a libation, and spread out there  
some myrtle sprigs around the monument.  
But then I saw an offering on the altar,  
a black-fleeced sheep—there was blood as well,  
shed not long before, and some sliced off curls, locks of yellow hair. My child, I  
wondered  
what man would ever dare approach that tomb.  
It surely wasn't any man from Argos.  
Perhaps your brother has come back somehow,  
in secret, and as he came, paid tribute  
to his father's tomb. You should go inspect  
the lock of hair, set it against your own—  
see if the colour of the severed hair  
matches yours. Those sharing common blood  
from the same father will by nature have many features which are very similar.

ELECTRA

What you've just said, old man, is not worth much.  
You've no sense at all, if you think my brother,  
a brave man, would sneak into this country  
in secret, because he fears Aegisthus.  
And how can two locks of hair look alike,  
when one comes from a well-bred man and grew  
in wrestling schools, whereas the other one  
was shaped by woman's combing? That's useless.  
Old man, with many people you could find  
hair which looked alike, although by birth  
they're not the same.

OLD MAN

Then stand in the footprint,  
my child, and see if the impression there  
is the same size as your foot.

ELECTRA

How could a foot  
make any imprint on such stony ground?  
And even if it could, a brother's print  
would not match his sister's foot in size.  
The man's is bigger.

OLD MAN

If your brother's come,  
isn't there a piece of weaving from your loom  
by which you might know his identity? What about the weaving he was wrapped in  
when I rescued him from death?

ELECTRA

Don't you know  
at the time Orestes left this country  
I was still young? And if I'd made his clothes  
when he was just a child, how could he have  
the same ones now, unless the robes he wore  
increased in size as his body grew? No.  
Either some stranger, pitying the grave,  
cut his hair, or someone slipped past the guard. <sup>389</sup>

OLD MAN

Where are your guests? I'd like to see them and ask about your brother.

[Orestes and Pylades come out of the house]

ELECTRA

Here they are—  
coming outside in a hurry.

OLD MAN

They're well born,  
but that may be misleading. Many men  
of noble parentage are a bad lot.  
But still I'll say welcome to these strangers.

ORESTES Welcome to you, old man. So, Electra,  
this ancient remnant of a man—to whom  
among your friends does he belong?

ELECTRA

Stranger,  
this man is the one who raised my father.

ORESTES

What are you saying? Is this the man who stole away your brother?

ELECTRA

He's the one  
who rescued him, if he's still alive.

<sup>389</sup> . . . *slipped past the guard*: This line is corrupt and makes little sense in the Greek. The words "someone slipped past the guard" have been put in to make sense of Electra's words, turning the line into a suggestion that some citizen may have eluded Aegisthus' sentries and paid a tribute to Agamemnon. As Cropp points out, omitting the line makes it read as if the Old Man is interrupting Electra, a dramatically implausible action.

ORESTES

Wait!

Why's he inspecting me, as if checking  
some clear mark stamped on a piece of silver?  
Is he comparing me with someone?

ELECTRA

It could be he's happy looking at you  
as someone who's a comrade of Orestes.

ORESTES

Well, yes, Orestes is a friend of mine,  
but why's he going in circles round me?

ELECTRA

Stranger, as I watch him, I'm surprised as well.

OLD MAN

O my daughter Electra, my lady—  
pray to the gods.

ELECTRA

What should I pray for,  
something here or something far away?

OLD MAN

To get yourself a treasure which you love,  
something the god is making manifest.

ELECTRA

Watch this then. I'm summoning the gods.  
Is that what you mean, old man?

OLD MAN

Now, my child,  
look at this man, the one you love the most.

ELECTRA

I've been observing for a long time now  
to see if your mind is working as it should.

OLD MAN

I'm not thinking straight if I see your brother?

ELECTRA

What are you talking about, old man,  
making such an unexpected claim?

OLD MAN

I'm looking at Orestes, Agamemnon's son.

ELECTRA

What mark do you see which will convince me?

OLD MAN

A scar along his eyebrow. He fell one day  
and drew blood. He was in his father's house  
chasing down a fawn with you.

ELECTRA

What are you saying?

I do see the mark of that fall. . . .

OLD MAN

Then why delay  
embracing the one you love the most?

ELECTRA

No. I'll no longer hesitate—my heart  
has been won over by that sign of yours.

[Electra moves over to Orestes and they embrace]

ELECTRA

You've appeared at last. I'm holding you . . . beyond my hopes.

ORESTES

After all this time,  
I'm embracing you.

ELECTRA

I never expected this.

ORESTES

This was something I, too, could not hope for.

ELECTRA

Are you really him?

ORESTES

Yes. Your sole ally.

If in my net I can catch the prey I'm after . . . But I'm confident. For if wrongful acts  
overpower justice, then no longer should we put any faith in gods.

CHORUS

You've come, ah, you've come,  
this day we've waited for so long.  
You've shone out and lit a beacon  
for the city, the man who long ago  
went out in exile from his father's house  
to roam around in misery.

Now a god, my friend, some god  
brings victory. Lift up your hands,  
lift up your words, send prayers up to the gods for your success,  
good fortune for your brother  
as he goes in the city.

ORESTES

Well, I've had the loving joys of welcome.  
In time I'll give them back to you again.  
You, old man, you've come at a good time.  
Tell me this—what should I do to repay  
my father's murderer and my mother,  
his partner in this sacrilegious marriage?  
Do I have any friends who'll help in Argos?  
Or are they all gone, just like my fortune?  
Who can I make my ally? Do we meet  
during the day or at night? What pathway



do I turn towards to fight my enemies?

OLD MAN

My child, in your bad times you've got no friends.

It's a great benefit to find someone

who'll share with you the good times and the bad.

But since, as far as your friends can see,

you and the foundations of your house have been wiped out completely and you've left

no hope for them, then pay attention to me.

Know this—the only things which you possess

to win back your father's home and city

are your own hands and your good fortune.

ORESTES

What then should I do to succeed in this?

OLD MAN

Kill Thyestes' son and your own mother. <sup>390</sup>

ORESTES

That's the crown of victory I'm after.

But how do I get my hands on it?

OLD MAN

Well, even if you want to try it, don't go inside the walls.

ORESTES

Is he well supplied

with garrison troops and bodyguards?

OLD MAN

Yes, he is.

He's afraid of you and does not sleep well.

ORESTES

Well, old man, you must give me some advice

about what happens next.

OLD MAN

Then listen to me. A thought has just occurred to me.

ORESTES

I hope you come up with something good

which I can understand.

OLD MAN

While coming here,

I saw Aegisthus.

ORESTES

I'll accept those words.

---

<sup>390</sup> . . . *Thyestes' son*: Aegisthus is the son of Thyestes (brother of Agamemnon's father, Atreus). Atreus and Thyestes quarreled, and Atreus killed Thyestes' sons and served to him at dinner. Aegisthus survived the slaughter or (in other accounts) was born after the notorious banquet. Euripides' play makes no direct mention of this important part of the traditional story.

Where was he? <sup>391</sup>

OLD MAN

In the fields close to his stables.

ORESTES

What was he doing? I can see some hope  
emerging from our desperate circumstances.

OLD MAN

He was setting up a banquet for the Nymphs—  
that's what it seemed to me.

ORESTES

But was it for  
a child that's now being raised or some new birth? <sup>392</sup>

OLD MAN

I only know one thing—there was an ox.  
He was preparing it for sacrifice.

ORESTES

How many men did he have there with him?  
Or was he by himself with his attendants?

OLD MAN

No Argives, only a group of servants.

ORESTES

Old man, there isn't anybody there  
who'll know me if he sees me, is there?

OLD MAN

They're slaves who have never set eyes on you.

ORESTES

If we prevail, will they be on our side?

OLD MAN

Yes. That's what slaves are like. You're lucky.

ORESTES

How do I get close to him?

OLD MAN

You should walk  
where he can see you as he sacrifices.

ORESTES

So apparently his fields are by the road?

OLD MAN

Yes. When he catches sight of you from there,  
he'll summon you to join the feast.

<sup>391</sup> . . . *I'll accept those words*: Cropp suggests that Orestes' rather odd phraseology in this speech and the previous one stems from the fact that he is using the language of ritual, as if he were consulting an oracle, first hoping that he gets a good pronouncement which he can understand and then accepting the "utterance."

<sup>392</sup> . . . *some new birth*: the Nymphs, minor country goddesses, were associated with physical health, including childbirth and childhood.

ORESTES

With god's will, I'll make a bitter fellow banqueter.

OLD MAN

From there on you must sort things out yourself,  
whatever happens.

ORESTES

A shrewd observation.

What about my mother? Where is she?

OLD MAN

In Argos. She'll join her husband at the feast.

ORESTES

Why did my mother not leave with her husband?

OLD MAN

She stayed behind because she was afraid  
the citizens would criticize her.

ORESTES

I see.

She knows the city is suspicious of her.

OLD MAN

That's right. People hate a profane woman.

ORESTES

How do I kill them both at the same time?

ELECTRA

I'll set up mother's murder on my own.

ORESTES

Good fortune will bring us success in this.

ELECTRA

Let the old man give both of us some help.

ORESTES All right. But how will you devise a way  
to kill our mother?

ELECTRA

Old man, you must go  
and report this news to Clytaemnestra—  
say I have given birth, and to a son.

OLD MAN

Born some time ago or quite recently?

ELECTRA

Before my quarantine, ten days ago. <sup>393</sup>

OLD MAN

How does this advance your mother's murder?

ELECTRA

When she learns I've been through birthing pains,  
she'll come here.

---

<sup>393</sup>. . . *ten days ago*: the "quarantine," Cropp notes, was a period immediately after childbirth in which the mother was kept in seclusion to avoid contamination.

OLD MAN

Why would she do that? My child,  
do you think she cares for you?

ELECTRA

Yes. And she'll weep  
because my child is born so common.

OLD MAN

Perhaps.  
But come back to the point of what you're saying.

ELECTRA

If she comes, then clearly she'll be killed.

OLD MAN

Well, she'll come to your house, right to the door.

ELECTRA

So it won't take much for her to turn aside  
and go to Hades, will it?

OLD MAN

Once I see that, then let me die!

ELECTRA

But first of all, old man, you must lead my brother . . . .

OLD MAN

To where Aegisthus is now offering gods his sacrifice.

ELECTRA

. . . then go to my mother. Tell her my news.

OLD MAN

I'll do it so the very words will seem as if they came from your own mouth.

ELECTRA [to Orestes]

Now it's up to you. You've drawn first lot  
in this murder sweepstakes.

ORESTES

Then I'll be off, if someone will lead me to the road.

OLD MAN

I'm quite willing to take you there myself.

ORESTES

O Father Zeus, scatter my enemies . . . .

ELECTRA

Pity us—we've suffered pitifully.

OLD MAN

Yes, have pity on them, your descendants.

ELECTRA

And Hera, who rules Mycenae's altars . . .

ORESTES

Give us victory, if what we seek is just.

OLD MAN

Yes, give them justice to avenge their father.

ORESTES

You, too, father, living beneath the earth  
through an unholy slaughter.

ELECTRA

And lady Earth,  
whom I strike with my hands.

OLD MAN

Defend these two.  
Defend these children whom you love the most.

ORESTES

Come now, with all the dead as allies.

ELECTRA

Those who in that war and by your side  
destroyed the Phrygians.

OLD MAN

And all those  
who hate the sacrilegious and profane.

ELECTRA

Are you listening, those of you who suffered  
such terrors at the hand of my own mother?

OLD MAN

Your father hears it all, I know. Time to go.

ELECTRA [to Orestes]

He knows everything. You must be a man. <sup>394</sup>

And I'll tell you this—Aegisthus has to die.

If in the struggle with him you fall dead, then I die as well. Do not think of me  
as still alive. I'll take my two-edged sword  
and slice into my heart. I'll go inside  
and get things ready. If you send good news  
the whole house will ring with cries of triumph.  
But if you die, things will be different.

These are my words to you.

[Orestes, Pylades, the Old Man, and the attendants leave. Electra turns to face  
the Chorus]

ELECTRA

And you women,  
give a good shout to signal this encounter.

I'll be ready waiting, gripping a sword.

If I'm defeated, I'll never submit, surrendering to my enemies the right to violate  
my body.

[Electra goes back into the house]

CHORUS

<sup>394</sup> . . . *be a man*: There is some confusion and argument about the allocation and position of this line, which in the Greek comes after this speech of Electra's and is divided between Orestes and Electra. I have followed Cropp's suggestion and given the entire line to Electra at the beginning of her speech to Orestes.

Among our ancient stories,  
 there remains a tale how Pan,  
 keeper of the country side,  
 breathing sweet-toned music  
 on his harmonious flute,  
 once led a golden lamb  
 with the fairest fleece of all  
 from its tender mother in the hills of Argos.  
 Standing on the platform stone  
 a herald with a loud voice cried,  
 "Assemble now, you Mycenaeans,  
 move into assembly, and see there  
 the terrifying and marvelous things  
 belonging to your blessed kings."  
 So choruses gave out their tributes  
 to the House of Atreus.

Altars of hammered gold were dressed, while in the city fires blazed  
 with Argive sacrifice—a flute,  
 the Muses' servant, piped graceful notes,  
 and seductive melodies arose  
 in honour of the golden lamb,  
 which now belonged to Thyestes.  
 He'd secretly talked into bed  
 the well-loved wife of Atreus.  
 then carries home the marvellous prize,  
 and, going to the assembly, says he now possesses in his house  
 the horned sheep with its fleece of gold. <sup>395</sup>

But then, at that very moment,  
 Zeus changed the paths  
 of all the shining stars,  
 the radiant glory of the sun,  
 and dawn's bright shining face.  
 Across the western reaches of the sky  
 he drove hot flames from heaven.  
 Rain clouds moved up to the north, so Ammon's lands were dry—  
 all withered up, deprived by Zeus  
 of his most lovely showers of rain. <sup>396</sup>

People speak about these tales,  
 but in such things my faith is small—  
 that the sun's hot throne of gold  
 turned round, to punish human beings,

<sup>395</sup> . . . *fleece of gold*: Thyestes and Atreus were brothers who quarreled. Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife, Aerope, and, in revenge, Atreus killed Thyestes' sons and served them up to him for dinner. Aegisthus is Thyestes' surviving son. The golden lamb in question seems to be the symbol of the right to rule in Mycenae.

<sup>396</sup> . . . *Ammon's land*: This is a reference to North Africa, where Ammon's shrine was located.

in a cause involving mortal men.  
 But tales which terrify mankind  
 are profitable and serve the gods.  
 When you destroyed your husband  
 your mind was unconcerned with them,  
 you sister of such glorious brothers.<sup>397</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

Wait! Hold on! Did you hear a shout, my friends?  
 Or has some vain notion overtaken me,  
 like Zeus' rumbling underneath the ground?  
 Look, breezes are coming up—that's a sign.  
 My lady, come out of the house! Electra!

[Electra comes out of the house]

ELECTRA

What is it, my friends? How are we faring  
 in the struggle?

CHORUS LEADER

There's only one thing I know— I heard the scream of murder.

ELECTRA

I heard it, too.

It came from far away, but I could hear it.

CHORUS LEADER

Yes, a long way off, but it was clear.

ELECTRA

Was it someone from Argos moaning,  
 or some of my friends?

CHORUS LEADER

I've no idea.

People are shouting. Things are all confused.

ELECTRA

What you say means my death. Why do I delay?

CHORUS LEADER

Hold on until you clearly know your fate.

ELECTRA

No. We're beaten. Where are the messengers?

CHORUS LEADER

They'll be here. It's no trivial matter  
 to assassinate a king.

[Enter a Messenger on the run]

MESSENGER

<sup>397</sup>. . . *glorious brothers*: Clytaemnestra's brothers are Castor and Polydeuces, or Pollux, the Dioscuri, twin brothers of Helen and Clytaemnestra, all born at the same time to Leda, queen of Sparta (hence Castor is an uncle of Electra). Polydeuces and Helen were children of Zeus, while Castor and Clytaemnestra were children of Tyndareus. When Castor was killed (before the Trojan war), Polydeuces turned down immortality, but Zeus allowed them to alternate, living among the gods and men, changing each day.

O you victorious daughters of Mycenae, I can report to all Orestes' friends  
that he has triumphed, and now Aegisthus,  
Agamemnon's murderer, has fallen.  
But we must offer prayers up to the gods.

ELECTRA

Who are you? How can I trust what you've just said?

MESSENGER

Don't you know me on sight—your brother's servant.

ELECTRA

You best of friends! I was too full of fear  
to recognize your face. But now I know you. What are you saying? Has that hateful  
man,  
my father's murderer, been killed?

MESSENGER

He's dead.

I've given you the same report twice now.

Obviously you like the sound of it.

ELECTRA

O you gods, and all-seeing Justice,  
you've come at last. How did Orestes kill  
Thyestes' son? What was the murder like?  
I want to know.

MESSENGER

After we'd left this house,  
we walked along the two-tracked wagon path  
to where Mycenae's famous king might be. He happened to be walking in his  
garden,  
a well-watered place, cutting soft myrtle shoots  
to place in his own hair. When he saw us,  
he called out,  
"Greetings, strangers. Who are you?  
Where are you from? What country is your home?" Orestes said, "We are from  
Thessaly,  
on our way to the Alpheus river,  
to offer sacrifice to Olympian Zeus."  
After hearing that, Aegisthus answered,  
"You must be my guests, share this feast with us. It so happens I'm now offering  
an ox,  
sacrificing to the Nymphs. If you get up  
out of bed at dawn, you'll be no worse off.  
So come, let's go inside the house."  
Saying this,  
he grabbed our arms and led us off the road,  
insisting that we must not turn him down.  
Once we were inside the house, he said,  
"Let someone bring in water right away,



so these guests can stand around the altar  
by the basin where they purify their hands.”  
But Orestes said, “We’ve just cleansed ourselves  
in pure water from a flowing river.  
If strangers must join with the citizens  
in making sacrifice, then, Aegisthus,  
we are ready and will not refuse, my lord.”  
Those were the words they spoke in public.  
The slaves guarding my master with their spears  
set them aside, and they all lent a hand  
to do the work, some bringing in the bowl  
to catch the blood, others fetching baskets, still others kindling fire and setting  
basins  
around the hearth. The whole house echoed.  
Then your mother’s consort took barley grain,  
sprinkled it across the altar, and said,  
“Nymphs of the rocks, may I and my wife,  
Tyndareus’ daughter, in our home  
offer frequent sacrifice, enjoying success,  
as we do now, and may my enemies  
do badly”—he meant you and Orestes.  
My master prayed for quite the opposite, not saying the words aloud, so he might  
win  
his ancestral home. Then from a basket  
Aegisthus took a sacrificial knife,  
sliced off some of the calf’s hair, and set it  
with his right hand on the sacred fire.  
His servants raised the calf onto their shoulders,  
he cut its throat and spoke out to your brother,  
“People claim this about men from Thessaly—  
they’re exceptional at butchering bulls  
as well as taming horses. So, stranger, take this knife and demonstrate to us  
if that report about Thessalians is true.”  
Orestes gripped the well-made Dorian knife,  
tossed from his shoulders his fine-looking cloak,  
and chose Pylades to help him in the work.  
Pushing slaves aside, he took the calf’s hoof,  
and, stretching out his arms, cut open  
the beast’s white flesh and then stripped off the hide  
faster than any runner could complete  
two circuits on a track for racing horses. He opened up the flanks, and Aegisthus  
picked up the sacred entrails in his hands  
to have a look at them. But on the liver  
the lobe was missing. There were signs of damage  
which the man inspecting them could see close to the gall bladder and the portal  
vein. Aegisthus was upset. My master asked,

"Why are you upset?" "Stranger," he replied,  
 "what I'm afraid of is foreign treachery.  
 Most of all I hate Agamemnon's son, an enemy of my house."  
 My master said,  
 "Do you really fear an exile's trickery,  
 you, lord of the city? Let someone bring me,  
 a Phthian axe to replace this Doric knife  
 and let me split apart the breast bone,  
 so we can feast upon the inner organs."  
 He took the axe and struck. Then Aegisthus  
 picked up and separated out the innards  
 and peered at them. As he was bending down,  
 your brother, standing on tip toe, hit him  
 on the spine and cut through his vertebrae.  
 His whole body went into convulsions,  
 shaking up and down, and he kept screaming,  
 he was dying in his own blood, a brutal death.  
 The servants saw and rushed to get their spears  
 for a fight of many men against just two.  
 But Pylades and Orestes stood there,  
 brandishing their weapons with great courage.  
 Then my master said,  
 "I have not come here  
 as an enemy, not to the city or my servants, but to avenge myself  
 on the man who murdered my own father.  
 I am unfortunate Orestes. You men,  
 old servants of my father, don't kill me."  
 After the servants heard Orestes' words,  
 they pulled back their spears. Then an old man  
 who'd been a long time in the household  
 recognized him. At once they placed a wreath  
 on your brother's head, shouting and rejoicing,  
 and he's coming here carrying a head to show it to you—not the Gorgon's head,  
 but from the person you so hate, Aegisthus.  
 So the bitter debt of murderous bloodshed  
 is paid by the man who's just been slaughtered.  
 [The Messenger leaves]  
 CHORUS  
 O my friend, set your feet to dancing,  
 leaping nimbly up to heaven with joy.  
 Your brother has emerged victorious  
 and now he's won himself a crown,  
 in a competition surpassing those  
 which happen by Alpheus' streams. <sup>398</sup>

<sup>398</sup> . . . *Alpheus*: Cropp suggests that this is a reference to the Olympic games.

Come, as I perform my dance  
sing out a song of glorious victory.

ELECTRA

O light! O blazing chariot of the sun!  
O earth and night whom I gazed at before!  
I've freedom now to open up my eyes—  
Aegisthus, the man who killed my father,  
is fallen. Come, my friends, let's bring out  
whatever I keep stored up in the house  
as decorations for my brother's hair.  
I'll make a crown for his triumphant head.

CHORUS

Bring on your decorations for his head.  
and we'll keep up the dance the Muses love.  
Now those dear kings we had before  
will rule this land of ours with justice.  
They've cast down those who broke our laws.  
So let's sing out in joyful harmony.

[Orestes and Pylades enter with their attendants, who are carrying the body of Aegisthus]

ELECTRA

O Orestes, you glorious conqueror,  
born from a father who was victorious  
in the war at Troy. Take these ribbons  
for your locks of hair. You've come back home, and your run around the stadium  
racetrack  
has not been in vain. You've killed Aegisthus,  
the man who killed our father, yours and mine,  
our enemy. And you, who stood by him,  
Pylades, reared by a pious father,  
receive from my own hand this wreath. Your share  
in this competition matched Orestes.  
I hope I see you always prospering.

ORESTES

First of all, Electra, you must believe  
the gods were leaders in what's happened here. Then praise me as a servant of  
the gods  
and circumstance. I have returned back home  
and killed Aegisthus, not in word but deed.  
To underscore the truth of what I've said,  
I've carried out the dead man's corpse for you.  
If it's what you want, lay him out as prey  
for wild beasts or impale him on a stake,  
a prize for birds, those children of the sky.  
In earlier days he was called your master,  
and now he is your slave.

ELECTRA

I feel ashamed,  
but nonetheless I wish to speak.

ORESTES

What is it?  
Speak up. There's nothing you need to fear.

ELECTRA

To insult the dead—in case someone  
might heap reproaches on me.

ORESTES

But no one  
would blame you in the slightest.

ELECTRA

But the city  
is hard to please and loves to criticize.

ORESTES

Speak, sister, if you want to say something.  
We are his enemies—there are no rules  
in our relationship with him.

ELECTRA [to the corpse of Aegisthus]

Well, then,  
how shall I first begin to speak about the evil you have done? Where do I end?  
What words shall I use for the central part?  
It's true that in the dawn I never stopped  
rehearsing what I wished to say to you,  
right to your face, if I were ever free  
from my old fears. Well, now I am free.  
So I will pay you back, abusing you  
the way I wanted to when you were living.  
You ruined me, taking away from me  
and from this man here our dear father, although we hadn't done you any wrong.  
You made a shameful marriage with my mother,  
then killed her husband, who was the general  
who led the Greeks. You never went to Troy.  
And you were so idiotic you believed  
that with my mother you would get a wife  
who was not evil, though she was betraying  
my father's bed. But you must know this—  
when any man corrupts another's wife,  
having sex with her in secret, and then is compelled to take her as his wife,  
such a man is foolish if he believes  
that, though she was not virtuous before,  
she will be now with him. You were living  
an agonizing life, although it seemed  
as if the way you lived was not so bad.  
You knew well you'd made a profane marriage.

My mother realized she had in you  
a sacrilegious man. You are both evil,  
and so you both acquired each other's traits. She shares your wickedness, and you  
share hers.

You heard these words from all the Argives—  
"That woman's husband," not "that man's wife."

And this is truly shameful—when the wife  
controls the home rather than the husband.

I hate those offspring whom the city calls  
children of their mother instead of saying  
sons of their father. Still, when any man  
makes a distinguished marriage well above  
his station, no one talks of him, but only of his wife. But most of all,  
you were so ignorant you were deceived  
in claiming to be someone because your strength  
was in your wealth. But that's not worth a thing—  
its presence is short lived. What stays secure  
is nature, not possessions. It stands there,  
beside you, and takes away your troubles.  
But when riches live with fools unjustly,  
they bloom a little while, then flee the house.

As for your women, I will say nothing— it's not good a virgin speak about such  
things.

But I'll provide a hint, a simple riddle.

You were abusive, with your royal home,  
your seductive looks. May I never have  
a husband with the face of a young girl,  
but one who has the look of a real man.

His children hold onto a life of war.

The pretty ones are only ornaments  
to decorate the dancing choruses. So get out of here, and stay ignorant how you  
were found in time and punished.

And let no man committing wicked acts  
believe that, if he runs the first lap well,  
he is defeating justice, not before he get to the finish, when he completes  
the last turn in his life.

CHORUS LEADER

What this man's done  
is dreadful, and he's paid a dreadful price  
to you and to Orestes. For Justice  
has a power that's enormous.

ELECTRA

Well, you servants must take up the body  
and hide it inside, somewhere in the dark,  
so when my mother comes over here  
she won't see his corpse before she's killed.

[Pylades and the attendants take Aegisthus' body into the house]

ORESTES [looking off stage]

Wait a moment. Here's another thing  
we need to deal with.

ELECTRA

What? Are those men I see  
reinforcements coming from Mycenae?

ORESTES

No. That's the mother who gave birth to me.

ELECTRA

She's moving neatly right into our net.  
How splendid she looks in that carriage,  
such fine clothes.

ORESTES

What are we going to do?

Kill our mother?

ELECTRA

You're not overcome with pity now you've seen our mother in the flesh?

ORESTES

Ah, how can I kill her? She gave birth to me.  
She raised me.

ELECTRA

Just as she killed our father,  
yours and mine.

ORESTES

O Phoebus Apollo, that prophecy of yours was so foolish. <sup>399</sup>

ELECTRA

Where Apollo is a fool, what men are wise?

ORESTES

You instructed me to kill my mother,  
but killing her is wrong.

ELECTRA

On the other hand,  
if you're avenging your own father  
how can you be harmed?

ORESTES

I'll be prosecuted for slaughtering my mother. Before now  
I've been free of all impiety.

ELECTRA

But if you don't defend your father,  
you're a guilty man.

ORESTES

But my mother?

---

<sup>399</sup>Phoebus is a common name for Apollo, the god whose oracle Orestes consulted before coming to Argos. The god advised him to carry out the revenge murders.

If I kill her, how will I be punished?

ELECTRA

What will happen to you if you give up  
avenging your own father?

ORESTES

Could it have been  
a demon in the likeness of a god  
who spoke?

ELECTRA

Sitting on the sacred tripod?  
I don't think so.

ORESTES

I cannot believe this prophecy was good.

ELECTRA

You must be a man.  
Don't give way to cowardice. Set for her  
the same trap you used to kill her husband,  
when you destroyed Aegisthus.

ORESTES

I'll go in.  
I'm about to launch a terrible act  
and do dreadful things. Well, so be it,  
if the gods approve of this. But to me  
this contest is a bitter one, not sweet.

[Orestes goes into the house. Clytaemnestra arrives in a chariot with attendants]

CHORUS

Greetings lady, child of Tyndareus,  
queen of this country of the Argives, sister of those noble twins,  
Zeus' sons, who live in heaven  
among the fiery constellations  
and have the honourable task  
of saving mortals in the roaring waves. <sup>400</sup>

Welcome! I worship you no less than I revere the gods  
for your great wealth and happiness.

My queen, it's now appropriate that we attend to your good fortunes.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Get down from the carriage, women of Troy,  
and take my hand, so I, too, may step down  
out of this wagon. The houses of the gods  
may be adorned with Phrygian trophies,  
but I obtained these female slaves from Troy,

<sup>400</sup> . . . *noble twins*: This is another reference to Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux) twin brothers of Clytaemnestra. Strictly speaking only one of them was a child of Zeus (as was Helen, Clytaemnestra's sister). Clytaemnestra and Castor were children of Tyndareus. The twins occupied a position among the stars (we call them the Gemini), and hence were an aid to navigation.

the finest in the land, as ornaments within my household, small compensation for the child I lost.<sup>401</sup>

ELECTRA

Mother, is it all right  
for me to take that blessed hand of yours,  
given I live in this decrepit house, just like a slave, now I've been cast out  
of my ancestral home?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

The slaves are here.  
Don't exert yourself on my behalf.

ELECTRA

Why not? After all, I'm a captive, too,  
you sent away from home. Like these women,  
I was taken when my house was seized  
and left without a father.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Well, your father  
brought that about with plots against the ones  
he should have loved the most, his own family.  
I'll describe it to you, though when a woman gets an evil name, her tongue grows  
bitter,  
and that, it seems to me, is no bad thing.  
But you should learn the facts of what's gone on  
and then despise it, if it's worth your hate.  
If not, why hate at all? Tyndareus  
gave me to your father, not intending  
that I or any children I might bear  
should die. But that man, when he left his home,  
convinced my daughter to accompany him,  
by promising a marriage with Achilles, and took her to the anchored fleet at Aulis.

<sup>402</sup>

There he had Iphigeneia stretched out  
and slit her pale white throat above the fire.  
If he'd killed one girl for the sake of many,  
to protect the city from being taken,  
or to help his house or save his family,  
I'd have pardoned him. But he killed my child  
because of Helen's lust, because the man  
who'd taken her as wife had no idea  
how to keep his treacherous mate controlled. For all of that, although I had been

<sup>401</sup> . . . *the child I lost*: This is a reference to Clytaemnestra's daughter Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed at the start of the Trojan expedition in order to persuade the gods to change the winds so that the fleet could sail. Clytaemnestra gives details of the story in her next long speech.

<sup>402</sup> . . . *Aulis*: This was the agreed meeting point for the great naval expedition to Troy. Bad winds delayed the fleet for so long that the entire enterprise was jeopardized. The gods demanded a sacrifice from Agamemnon.



wronged,  
 I'd not have grown enraged or killed my husband.  
 But he came back to me with some mad girl—  
 possessed by gods—and put her in his bed, so he could have two brides in the  
 same house.<sup>403</sup>

Women are foolish. I'll concede the point.  
 But given that, when a husband goes astray,  
 rejecting his domestic bed, his wife  
 may well wish to follow his example  
 and find another man to love. And then the blame makes us notorious—the men  
 who caused it all are never criticized.

If someone had carried Menelaus  
 away from home in secret, should I then  
 have killed Orestes to save Menelaus,  
 my sister's husband? How would your father  
 have put up with that? So is it not right  
 for him to die? He slaughtered my own child.  
 I would've kept on suffering at his hands.  
 I killed him. The road lay open to me, and so I turned towards his enemies.

After all, which one of your father's friends  
 would have joined me to commit the murder?  
 Speak up, if you wish, and answer frankly.  
 In what way was your father's death unjust?

CHORUS LEADER

There's justice in your words, but that justice  
 is disgraceful. If she has any sense,  
 a woman should give way in everything  
 to her own husband. Those who disagree  
 I don't take into account in things I say.

ELECTRA

Bear in mind, mother, the last thing you said,  
 offering me a chance to be frank with you.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Yes, my child. And I won't take that back.  
 I'll repeat it now.

ELECTRA

You'll hear me out, mother,  
 and won't punish me?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

No, I won't,  
 not if I'm giving pleasure to your heart.

ELECTRA

<sup>403</sup> . . . *in the same house*: The young girl was Cassandra, daughter of Priam, king of Troy, given as a war prize to Agamemnon. She was a prophetess under a divine curse: she always spoke the truth, but no one ever believed her. She is an important character in Aeschylus' treatment of this story in his play *Agamemnon*.

Then I'll speak, starting with an opening comment.  
O mother, I do wish you had more sense.  
Your beauty brings you praise that's well deserved—  
the same is true for Helen—but you two were born twin sisters, both very silly,  
quite unworthy of your brother Castor.  
She was willing to be carried off and ruined,  
and you destroyed the finest man in Greece,  
using the excuse you killed your husband  
for your child, since people do not know you  
the way I do. But before it was decided  
that your daughter would be sacrificed,  
no sooner had your husband left his home,  
than you were fixing your fine locks of hair seated at your mirror, and any wife  
who primps her beauty when her husband's gone,  
you can scratch her off the list as worthless.  
There's no call for her to show her pretty face  
outside the home, unless she's seeking mischief.  
Of all the women in Greece, I believe  
you were the only one who was happy  
whenever Trojan fortunes were successful  
and whose eyes would frown when they got worse,  
because it was your hope that Agamemnon would not get back from Troy. But  
nonetheless,  
you could have stayed a truly virtuous woman.  
The husband you had was in no way worse  
than that Aegisthus, and he'd been chosen  
by the Greeks themselves to lead the army.  
When your sister Helen did what she did,  
you had an opportunity to gain  
great glory for yourself, since bad conduct  
sets a standard for our noble actions  
and makes them something everyone can see. But if, as you are claiming, our  
father  
killed your daughter, how have you been wronged  
by me and by my brother? Why is it,  
once you'd killed your husband, you didn't give  
our father's home to us, but filled your bed  
with someone else's goods and for a price  
bought yourself a marriage? And why is it  
this husband has not been made an exile  
for banishing your son? Why is he not dead  
instead of me? The way I'm living now has killed me twice as often as my sister.  
If justice says that murder pays for murder,  
your son Orestes and myself must kill you  
to avenge our father. If your act was just,  
then this one must be, too. Any man

watching out for wealth and noble birth  
 who gets married to a vicious woman  
 is a fool. A virtuous, humble marriage  
 is better for the home than something grand.

CHORUS LEADER

Marrying women is a matter of chance.  
 Some, I notice, work out well, others badly. <sup>404</sup>

CLYTAEMNESTRA

My child, it was always in your nature  
 to love your father. That's how things turn out.  
 Some are their fathers' children, while others  
 love their mothers rather than their fathers.  
 I'll forgive you. I don't get much delight,  
 my child, from what I've done. But why are you  
 so filthy, your body dressed in such poor clothes?  
 You've just been confined and given birth. <sup>405</sup>

Alas, my schemes have made me miserable! I urged my anger on against my  
 husband  
 more than I should have.

ELECTRA

Well, it's too late now  
 to moan about it. There's no remedy.  
 My father's dead. But why don't you bring back  
 that exile from this land, your wandering son?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

I'm too afraid. I'm looking after me,  
 not him. And he's angry, so people say,  
 about the murder of his father.

ELECTRA

Why let your husband be so cruel to me?

CLYTAEMNESTRA

That's how he is. You've a stubborn nature.

ELECTRA

Because I'm suffering. But I'll stop being angry.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Then he'll no longer behave harshly to you.

ELECTRA

He's got ideas of grandeur, living there  
 inside my home.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

<sup>404</sup> . . . *others badly*: These lines of pithy moralizing at the end of Electra's speech and in this speech by the Chorus Leader sound very out of place here. Some editors have removed them as a later addition to the text.

<sup>405</sup> . . . *given birth*: Some editors find these two and half lines a very odd change of subject for Clytaemnestra, who is now dwelling on her own sorrow. Cropp moves them to the opening of Clytaemnestra's speech at 1380 below, where they do seem more appropriate.

You see? Once again  
you're kindling a new quarrel.

ELECTRA

I'll be silent,  
my fear of him being what it is.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Stop this talk.

Why have you sent for me, my child?

ELECTRA

You've heard, I think, that I have given birth.

Please offer up a sacrifice for me—

I don't know how to do that—on the tenth day, as is our custom with an infant child.

I've had no children before this, and so  
I lack experience.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

That task belongs  
to the person who delivered the child.

ELECTRA

I was by myself in labour, so I bore  
the child all on my own.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Is this house here  
so remote there are no friendly neighbours?

ELECTRA

No one wants poor people as their friends.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Well, I'll go and make the gods a sacrifice  
for the full term of the child. When I'm done carrying out this favour for you, I'll  
leave,

off to the field where my husband's offering  
sacrifices to the Nymphs. You servants,  
take this team away. Put them in the pens.

When you think I've finished sacrificing  
to the gods, stand ready. I must satisfy  
my husband's wishes, too.

ELECTRA

Enter this poor home.

For my sake take care the soot-stained walls  
don't stain your clothes. You'll give the gods  
the sacrifice you ought to make.

[Clytaemnestra goes into the house]

And now the basket's ready and the knife is keen,  
the one which killed the bull you'll lie beside  
when you're struck down. In Hades' home  
you'll be wedded to the man you slept with

while you were alive. I'll be offering you  
this favour, and you'll be giving me  
retribution for my father.

[Electra goes into the house]

CHORUS

Evils are repaid. Winds of fortune  
for this house are veering round.  
Back then my leader, my very own, fell murdered in his bath.  
Roof and stone walls of the house  
resounded, echoing his cries—  
"You vicious woman, why kill me  
now I've come to my dear land  
after ten harvest seasons?" <sup>406</sup>

The flow of justice has reversed itself  
and brings to judgment for adultery  
the killer of her unhappy husband  
when he finally returned back home, to the towering Cyclopean walls.  
With her own hand she murdered him,  
the sharpened edge of a keen axe  
gripped in her fists. Poor sad husband!  
What evils overtook this wretched woman?  
She did it like a mountain lion  
prowling through a wooded meadow.

CLYTAEMNESTRA [from inside the house]  
By the gods, children, don't kill your mother.

CHORUS

Do you hear that cry from inside the house?

CLYTAEMNESTRA [screaming from inside]  
Ah . . . my god . . . ah . . . not me . . .

CHORUS

I moan, too, as her children beat her down.  
The god indeed dispenses justice,  
whenever it may come.  
You've suffered horribly, sad lady,  
but you carried out unholy acts  
against your husband.

[Orestes, Pylades, and Electra and Attendants emerge slowly from the house  
with the bodies of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra]

CHORUS LEADER

But here they come, moving from the house,  
stained with fresh-spilt blood from their own mother,  
a trophy, proof of their harsh sacrifice.  
There is no house, not now or in the past, more pitiable than the race of Tantalus.

ORESTES

<sup>406</sup> . . . *harvest times*: At this point in the manuscript two lines appear to be missing.

O Earth and Zeus, who sees all mortal men,  
look on these abominable and bloody acts,  
these two corpses lying on the ground  
struck down by my hand, repayment  
for everything I've suffered.

ELECTRA

Too much cause to weep, my brother,  
and I have made this happen.  
In my wretchedness my fiery rage  
burned on against my mother who gave birth to me, her daughter.

CHORUS

Alas for fortune, for your fortune,  
a mother who has given birth  
to pain beyond enduring,  
bearing wretched misery and more  
from your own children, and yet it's just—  
you've paid for murdering their father.

ORESTES

Alas, Phoebus, that justice you sang of  
had an obscure tone, but the pain you caused  
was clear enough—you've given me an exile's fate, far from these Greek lands.  
To what other city can I go?  
What host, what man with reverence  
will look at me, who killed my mother?

ELECTRA

Alas, alas for me! Where do I go?  
To what wedding or what choral dance?  
What husband will take me to a bridal bed?

CHORUS

Your spirit is shifting back once more  
changing with the breeze. Your thoughts are pious now, although profane before.  
You've done dreadful things, my friend,  
to your own reluctant brother.

ORESTES

Did you see that desperate woman,  
how she threw her robe aside  
and bared her breasts for slaughter?  
Alas for me! The limbs which gave me birth  
collapsing down onto the ground.  
And her hair, I . . .

CHORUS

I understand.  
You had to go through torments,  
hearing your mother's screaming, the one who bore you.

ORESTES

She stretched her hand toward my chin

and cried, "My son, I beg you."  
 She clung onto my cheeks—  
 the sword dropped from my hands.

CHORUS

Poor lady! How could you dare  
 to watch your murdered mother  
 breathe her last before your eyes.

ORESTES

I threw my cloak over my eyes,  
 then sacrificed her with the sword. I shoved it in my mother's neck.

ELECTRA

I was encouraging you—  
 my hand was on the sword, as well.

CHORUS

You have inflicted suffering  
 of the most dreadful kind.

ORESTES

Take this robe, hide our mother's limbs.  
 Close up her wounds. You gave birth  
 to your own murderers.

ELECTRA [covering Clytaemnestra's corpse]

There, with this cloak I'm covering up  
 one who was loved and yet not loved.

CHORUS

A end of the great troubles for this house.

[Castor and Polydeuces, the Dioscouri, appear above the building on the stage]

CHORUS LEADER

But there above the roof beams of the house  
 something's coming. Spirits or gods from heaven?  
 That path does not belong to mortal men.  
 Why are they coming into human view?

DIOSCOURI: [from the top of the house] <sup>407</sup>

Son of Agamemnon, you must listen.  
 The twin sons of Zeus are calling you,  
 Castor and his brother Polydeuces,  
 your mother's brothers. We've just reached Argos,  
 after calming down a roaring storm at sea, a dreadful threat to ships, after we had  
 seen  
 the murder of our sister and your mother.  
 She's had justice, but you've not acted justly.  
 As for Phoebus, Phoebus, I'll say nothing.  
 He is my master. Although he's wise,  
 the prophecy he made to you was not.

<sup>407</sup> *DIOSCOURI*: It is not clear which of the twin brothers speaks to the human characters or whether they alternate or speak together.

You must accept these things and later on  
 act on what Fate and Zeus have set for you.  
 Give Electra to Pylades as his wife,  
 to take back home. And you must leave Argos.  
 It's not right for you, who killed your mother,  
 to set foot in the city. The Keres,  
 those fearful dog-faced goddesses of death,  
 will hound you everywhere, a wanderer  
 in a mad fit. <sup>408</sup> You must go to Athens  
 and embrace Athena's sacred image.  
 She'll guard you from their dreadful writhing snakes  
 and stop them touching you, by holding out  
 her shield with the Gorgon's face above your head.  
 And there's the hill of Ares, where the gods first sat down to cast their votes on  
 bloodshed,  
 when savage Ares slaughtered Halirrothius,  
 son of the god who rules the sea, enraged  
 at the unholy raping of his daughter. <sup>409</sup>  
 That place is where decisions made by vote  
 are most secure and sacred to the gods.  
 Here you must go on trial for murder.  
 The process will result in equal votes  
 so you'll be saved from death, for Apollo  
 will take responsibility himself. His oracle advised your mother's murder.  
 This law will be established from then on—  
 those accused will always be acquitted  
 with equal votes. Struck by the pain of this,  
 those fearful goddesses will then sink down into a chasm right beside the hill,  
 a reverent and holy shrine for men.  
 You must settle an Arcadian city  
 by Alpheus' streams, near the sacred shrine  
 of Lycaean Apollo, and that city will get its name from you. I'll tell you more.  
 As for Aegisthus' corpse, the citizens  
 in Argos here will place it in a grave.  
 But in your mother's case, Menelaus,  
 who's just arrived at Nauplia, so long  
 after he seized the territory of Troy,  
 will bury her, with Helen's help. She's come  
 from Proteus' home, leaving Egypt.  
 She never went to Troy. It was Zeus' wish

<sup>408</sup> . . . *mad fit*. The Keres are the children of Night, death spirits who prey on living human beings. Although they are different from the Furies (who chase down those who have committed murder in the family), here their function seems quite similar.

<sup>409</sup> . . . *of his daughter*: Ares, son of Zeus and god of war, killed Poseidon's son, Halirrothius, over the attempted rape of Ares' daughter, Alcippe. Ares was put on trial on Olympus and acquitted by the gods.



to stir up war and bloodshed among men. So he sent Helen's image off to Troy.<sup>410</sup>  
 Since Pylades now has got a virgin wife,  
 let him go home and leave Achaean land,  
 with the man they call your brother-in-law  
 to the land of Phocis. He must give him  
 a great weight of riches. But as for you,  
 you must leave along the narrow Isthmus  
 and go to the blessed hill of Cecrops.<sup>411</sup>  
 Once you're completed your appointed fate  
 for doing the murder, you'll find happiness and be released from troubles.

CHORUS

O sons of Zeus, are we permitted  
 to come near and speak to you.

DIOSCOURI

That is allowed—you're not defiled  
 by this murder here.

ELECTRA

And me, sons of Tyndareus,  
 may I join in what's said?

DIOSCOURI

You may. It's to Apollo  
 I ascribe this bloody act.

CHORUS

How is that you two gods, brothers of this murdered woman,  
 did not keep death's goddesses  
 far from her home?

DIOSCOURI

Destiny and Fate brought what must be—  
 and Apollo's unwise utterance.

ELECTRA

What Apollo and what prophecies  
 ordained that I must be my mother's murderer?

DIOSCOURI

You worked together  
 and shared a single fate. One ancestral curse  
 has crushed you both.

ORESTES

After such a lengthy time  
 I've seen you, my sister,

<sup>410</sup>. . . *off to Troy*: In Homer's account (in the *Odyssey*) Menelaus and Helen take a long time to get home from Troy, being blown off course and spending a few years in Egypt. Proteus is the Old Man of the Sea, who helps Menelaus in Egypt. The story of Helen's being detained in Egypt on her way to Troy and never going to the city at all is not in Homer's epic, but was known before Euripides makes use of it here and in his play *Helen*.

<sup>411</sup>. . . *blessed hill of Cecrops*: The Isthmus is the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land joining the Peloponnese (where Argos is situated) with the main part of Greece. Cecrops is the mythical first king and founder of Athens. The Cecropian Hill is a reference to the Acropolis in Athens.

and immediately must lose  
your love, abandoning you,  
as you abandon me.

DIOSCOURI

She has a home and husband,  
and will not suffer piteously,  
except she leaves the Argives' city.

ELECTRA

What else brings one more grief  
than moving out beyond the limits  
of one's native land?

ORESTES

But I'll go from my father's house,  
then undergo a trial by strangers  
for murdering my mother.

DIOSCOURI

Be brave. You'll reach  
Athena's sacred city.  
Just keep enduring all.

ELECTRA

Hold me, my dearest brother, your breast against my breast.  
The curses of a slaughtered mother  
divide us from our father's home.

ORESTES

Throw your arms around me.  
Give me a close embrace.  
Then mourn for me as if I'd died,  
and you were at my burial mound.

DIOSCOURI

Alas, alas! You've said things  
dreadful even for the gods to hear.  
I and those in heaven have pity  
for mortals who endure so much.

ORESTES

I'll not see you anymore.

ELECTRA

I'll not come into your sight.

ORESTES

These are the final words  
I'll ever say to you.

ELECTRA

Farewell, my city! A long farewell  
to you my fellow countrywomen!

ORESTES

Are you going already,  
my most faithful sister?

ELECTRA

Yes, I'm leaving now my soft eyes wet with tears.

ORESTES

Farewell, Pylades. Be happy.

Go and get married to Electra

DIOSCOURI

The marriage will be their concern.

You leave for Athens to escape these hounds,  
with their dark skins and hands made up of snakes.

They're on a dreadful hunt to chase you down  
and bring you harvests of horrific pain.

We two are off to the Sicilian sea.

We'll hurry there to rescue ships at sea. As we pass through the flat expanse of air,  
we bring no help to those who've been defiled.

We do protect the men who way of their life  
reveres what's just and holy, releasing them  
from overbearing hardships. Let no one  
wish to act unjustly or to get on board  
with men who break their oaths. It's as a god  
that I address these words to mortal men.

[Castor and Polydeuces disappear. Orestes leaves the stage. Electra and Pylades move off in a different direction. The attendants go with them]

CHORUS

Farewell. Any mortal who can indeed fare well  
without being ground down by misfortune, that man will find his happiness.

[The Chorus carries the bodies back into the house]

# (EURIPIDES) Orestes

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>412</sup> translation by Ian Johnston*

*For some background information on the House of Atreus, see [this section](#)*

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**ELECTRA:** daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, sister of Orestes.

**HELEN:** wife of Menelaus, sister of Clytaemnestra.

**HERMIONE:** daughter of Menelaus and Helen.

**CHORUS:** young women of Argos.

**ORESTES:** son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, brother of Electra.

**MENELAUS:** king of Sparta, brother of Agamemnon, uncle of Orestes and Electra.

**TYNDAREUS:** father of Helen and Clytaemnestra, an old man.

**PYLADES:** prince of Phocis, a friend of Orestes.

**MESSENGER:** an old man.

**PHRYGIAN:** one of Helen's Trojan slaves, a eunuch.

**APOLLO:** divine son of Zeus and Leto, god of prophecy.

[Scene: The action of the play takes place in Argos just outside the royal palace a few days after Orestes has avenged the murder of his father by killing his mother, Clytaemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. At the opening, Orestes is lying ill on a bed near the doors. Electra is sitting close to him]

ELECTRA

There's nothing terrible one can describe,  
no suffering or event brought on by god,  
whose weight humans may not have to bear.  
The blessed Tantalus—and I don't mock him  
for his misfortunes—who was, so they say,  
born from Zeus, flutters in the air, terrified  
of a rock hanging right above his head.  
People claim he's paying the penalty,  
because, although he was a mortal man  
who was considered equal to the gods in the feasts they shared together, he had  
a shameful illness—he could not control  
his tongue.<sup>413</sup> Well, Tantalus fathered Pelops,  
and then from that man Atreus was born,  
the one for whom the goddess combing yarn  
spun out strife, making him the enemy

<sup>412</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/orestes.htm>

<sup>413</sup>... *his tongue*: Tantalus, a son of Zeus, offended the gods, who punished him by placing him in Hades where he is constantly tempted by food and drink which he cannot reach (Odysseus tells us of seeing the shade of Tantalus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*). His offense varies, depending on the story. In some accounts, he stole food from the gods and revealed their secrets to human beings. In others, he cut up his son Pelops and served him up as food for the gods.

of his own brother, Thyestes.<sup>414</sup> But why should I describe these horrors once again? Then Atreus killed Thyestes' children and fed them to him. Then, there's Atreus— I won't mention what happened in between.

With Aerope, who came from Crete, as mother, Atreus fathered glorious Agamemnon, if, indeed, he was a glorious man, and Menelaus, too. Menelaus then wed Helen, a woman gods despise, while lord Agamemnon, in a wedding notorious in Greece, took Clytaemnestra as his wife. To him from that one woman were born three daughters—Chrysothemis, Iphigeneia, and me, Electra, and a son, as well, Orestes, all of us from an abominable mother who snared her husband in a robe he could not escape and slaughtered him. It's not appropriate for a young girl to talk of why she did it, and so I leave the matter indistinct for people to consider. Why should one accuse Phoebus of injustice, even though he did persuade Orestes to strike down the mother who had given birth to him, an act which did not earn him a good name in all men's eyes?<sup>415</sup> Still, he obeyed the god and killed her. I helped with the murder, too, doing as much as any woman could, and Pylades assisted us as well. After that poor Orestes grew so ill. Infected with a savage wasting sickness, he's collapsed in bed and lies there, driven into fits of madness by his mother's blood. I am ashamed to name those goddesses, the Eumenides, who keep driving him through terrible ordeals.<sup>416</sup> It's the sixth day since our mother perished in that slaughter and her body was purified in fire—in that time he's not swallowed any food

<sup>414</sup>... *his brother, Thyestes*: The Fates set a man's destiny at birth by spinning yarn, measuring and cutting it. Traditionally there were three female fates.

<sup>415</sup>... *all men's eyes*: Phoebus is the name of the god Apollo, whose oracle Orestes consulted before returning to murder his mother and Aegisthus in revenge for his father's death.

<sup>416</sup>... *terrible ordeals*: The Eumenides (literally the "Kindly Ones") are the Furies, goddesses of blood revenge within the family, who are tormenting Orestes because he killed his mother. Electra does not call them by their official name but uses a common euphemism, presumably because she does not want to risk offending them.

or washed his skin. He stays wrapped in a cloak.  
And when his body does find some relief  
and his mind clears from the disease, he weeps.  
At other times he leaps up out of bed and bolts like a colt released from harness.  
Argos has proclaimed no one should shelter us,  
receive us by their hearths, or speak to us,  
since we killed our mother. This very day  
will be decisive—the Argive city  
will cast its vote whether the two of us  
must be stoned to death or have our throats cut  
with a sharpened sword. We do have one hope  
we won't die—the fact that Menelaus  
has reached this land from Troy—his flotilla now fills up the harbour at Nauplia,  
where he rides at anchor by the headlands,  
after wandering for so long at random.  
But as for Helen, who caused such grieving,  
he sent her on ahead to our own house,  
waiting until night, in case anyone  
whose children died at Troy might see her,  
if she went strolling there during the day,  
and injured her by starting to throw stones.  
She's inside now, weeping for her sister and the troubles which have struck her  
family.  
Though she suffers, she has some consolation—  
Hermione, the daughter she left at home  
when she sailed off to Troy, who Menelaus  
brought from Sparta and gave to my mother  
to bring up, brings her great joy and helps her  
forget her troubles. I keep on watching  
all the roads for the moment I can see  
Menelaus coming. Unless he saves us,  
we don't have much strength to ride this out. A house plagued with bad luck has  
no defence.

[Helen enters from the place]

HELEN

Child of Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon,  
poor Electra, you've remained unmarried  
such a long time now. How are things with you  
and your unlucky brother Orestes,  
who killed his mother? That was a mistake.  
But I ascribe it to Apollo, and so  
I don't risk pollution talking to you.  
And yet I do lament my sister's death,  
Clytaemnestra, whom I never saw after I sailed off to Troy, driven there by that  
fated madness from the gods.  
Now I've lost her, I weep for our misfortune.

ELECTRA

Helen, why should I now describe for you  
what your eyes can see—Agamemnon's home  
facing disaster? I sit here sleepless  
beside this wretched corpse—his faint breathing  
makes the man a corpse. Not that I blame him  
for his suffering. You're the one who's lucky.  
Your husband's fortunate as well. You've come when what's going on with us is  
miserable.

HELEN

How long has he lying like this in bed?

ELECTRA

Ever since he shed his mother's blood.

HELEN

Poor wretch!

And his mother, too, given how she died.

ELECTRA

That's how it is. He's broken by his troubles.

HELEN

Girl, would you do something for me please,  
in the name of the gods?

ELECTRA

I'm busy here,  
sitting with my brother.

HELEN

Would you be willing  
to come with me to my sister's tomb?

ELECTRA

To my own mother? Is that what you want? But why?

HELEN

So I can take an offering from me,  
hair and libations.<sup>417</sup>

ELECTRA

Is it somehow wrong  
for you to visit a family burial mound?

HELEN

I'm ashamed to show myself in public  
among the Argives.

ELECTRA

After all this time  
you're thinking wisely. Back when you left home  
that was disgraceful.

HELEN

---

<sup>417</sup> . . . *hair and libations*: Placing a lock of one's hair on a burial mound and pouring libations beside it are traditional marks of respect for the dead.

What you say is right.  
But you're not talking to me as a friend.

ELECTRA

What makes you feel shame among the people  
in Mycenae? <sup>418</sup>

HELEN

I fear the fathers of those men who died at Troy.

ELECTRA

That's a real fear. In Argos  
it's on people's lips.

HELEN

So relieve my fears.

Do me that favour.

ELECTRA

I couldn't do it—  
look at my mother's grave.

HELEN

But for servants  
to take these offerings would be disgraceful.

ELECTRA

Why not send Hermione, your daughter?

HELEN

It's not good for an unmarried girl  
to walk around in public.

ELECTRA

She'd be repaying  
the dead woman for looking after her.

HELEN

What you say is right, girl. You've convinced me.

I'll send my daughter. Your advice is good.

[Helen calls in through the palace doors]

Hermione! Come on out, my child,  
out here in front.

[Hermione enters from the palace]

Take the libation

in your hands and this hair of mine, and go  
to Clytaemnestra's burial site. Pour out  
the stirred-up honey, milk, and frothing wine.  
Then stand on top the mound and say these words,  
"Helen, your sister, offers these libations,  
fearing to come to your tomb in person,  
afraid of the Argive mob." And ask her to look with kindness on you and me  
and my husband, and on this wretched pair

---

<sup>418</sup> . . . in *Mycenae*: The names Argos and Mycenae are often used interchangeably for the same city, although in some accounts they are two different communities.



some god has ruined. Promise funeral gifts,  
all the things I should give to my sister.  
You must leave now, my child, and go quickly.  
When you've offered libations at the tomb,  
return back here as quickly as you can.

[Hermione takes the offerings and leaves, going away from the palace. Helen  
exits  
into the palace]

ELECTRA

O nature, how vicious you are in men,  
a saviour, too, for those who do possess  
what works to their advantage. Did you see how she's trimmed her hair only at the  
ends  
to preserve her beauty? She's the woman  
she has always been. May the gods hate you  
for ruining me and him and all of Greece!  
I'm so unhappy!

[The Chorus enters]

Here they are again,  
my friends who sing with me in my laments.  
They'll soon end my brother's peaceful sleep  
and melt my eyes with tears once I see him  
in his mad fit. You women, dearest friends,  
move with a quiet step and make no noise, no unexpected sound. Your kindness  
here  
is dear to me, but if you wake him up,  
what happens will be difficult for me.

CHORUS

Keep quiet! Silence! let your steps be light.  
Make no sound at all.

ELECTRA

Keep away from him— further from his bed, I'm begging you!

CHORUS

There, I've done as you request.

ELECTRA

Ah yes, but speak to me, dear friend,  
like the breathing of a tiny reed  
on a shepherd's pipe.

CHORUS There, you see. I'm keeping my voice pitched soft and low.

ELECTRA

Yes, that's fine. Come over. Come on.  
Move gently. Keep moving quietly.  
Tell me the reason why you had to come.  
He hasn't fallen asleep like this for ages.

CHORUS

How is he? Give us a report, dear friend.

What shall I say has happened to him?  
What's ailing him?

ELECTRA

He's still breathing—  
feeble groans.

CHORUS

What are you saying? The poor man!

ELECTRA

You'll kill him if you distract his eyes while he's enjoying sweet gifts of sleep.

CHORUS

Pitiful man, suffering for those hateful acts  
inspired by a god.

ELECTRA

Yes, it's pitiful.

An unjust god uttered unjust things  
in what he decreed, when Loxias  
from Themis' tripod passed his sentence,  
the unnatural murder of my mother. <sup>419</sup>

CHORUS

Do you see? His body's moving in his robes.

ELECTRA

You wretch, you've forced him to wake up  
with your chatter.

CHORUS

No, I think he's sleeping.

ELECTRA

Won't you just go away? Leave the house.  
Retrace your steps, and stop the shuffling.

CHORUS

He's asleep.

ELECTRA

You're right. O sacred lady Night,  
who gives sleep to toiling mortal men,  
come from Erebus, come, wing your way here  
to Agamemnon's home. <sup>420</sup> In misery  
and suffering we've gone astray. We're lost.  
You're making noise again. O my dear friend,  
won't you keep quiet, stay silent, and take care  
to keep your voice some distance from his bed? Let him enjoy the peaceful gift of  
sleep.

CHORUS

Tell us what's in store to end his troubles.

<sup>419</sup>... *of my mother*: Loxias is a common name for Apollo, whose shrine Orestes consulted before killing Clytaemnestra. Themis, the goddess of righteousness, was the original god of the oracle.

<sup>420</sup>... *from Erebus*: Erebus is the deepest and darkest region of Hades, the underworld.

ELECTRA

Death. What else? He's lost desire for food.

CHORUS

Then this is obviously his fate.

ELECTRA

Phoebus made us his sacrificial offering  
with his pitiful unnatural proposal  
to kill our mother, who killed our father.

CHORUS

But it was just.

ELECTRA

Yes, but not good.

You killed, mother who bore me,  
and were killed. You wiped out a father and children of your blood.  
We're done for, good as dead, destroyed.  
You're with the dead, and my own life  
is gone—the greater part of it now spent  
with groans, laments, and tears each night,  
unmarried, childless—so pitiful—  
I drag out my life on and on forever.

CHORUS LEADER

Electra, you're right beside your brother.  
Check if hasn't died without your knowing.  
I'm worried—he's looking too relaxed.

ORESTES [waking up]

O lovely charms of sleep which bring such help  
against disease, how sweetly you came over me  
when I was in such need. Sacred Oblivion,  
who removes all troubles, how wise you are,  
for those who suffer from misfortune,  
a goddess worth invoking in their prayers.  
But where did I come from to get here? How did I reach this place? I can't recall.  
I've lost all my earlier recollections.

ELECTRA

Dearest one, how happy it made me feel when you fell into that sleep. Do you want  
me  
to hold you and to prop your body up?

ORESTES

Yes, hold me. Give me some support. And wipe  
the dried up foam from my sore mouth and eyes.

ELECTRA

There. It's sweet to be able to help out.  
I won't refuse to nurse my brother's limbs  
with a sister's hand.

ORESTES

Support my side with yours,

and push the matted hair out of my face.  
My eyes aren't seeing very well.

ELECTRA

O this filthy hair, your poor suffering head— so much time has passed since it's been washed,  
you look just like a savage.

ORESTES

Put me back,  
on the bed again. Once the madness leaves,  
I'm exhausted . . . no strength in my limbs.

ELECTRA

There you are.  
The sick man loves his bed, a painful place,  
but still it's necessary.

ORESTES

Set me up again.  
Turn my body round. The sick are helpless—  
that's why they're hard to please.

ELECTRA

Would you like  
to have me put your feet down on the ground?  
You haven't tried to walk for some time now. A change is always pleasant.

ORESTES

Yes, do that.  
It's better if I look as if I'm well, even though that's far from being true.

ELECTRA

Now, my dear brother, listen to me,  
while the Erinyes let your mind stay clear.

ORESTES

You've got some news. If it's good, you'll help me—  
if harmful, I've had enough misfortune.

ELECTRA

Menelaus has come, your father's brother.  
His ships are anchored at Nauplia.

ORESTES

What are you saying? Has he just arrived to be a light to save us from these troubles,  
yours and mine, a man of our own family,  
with a sense of gratitude to father?

ELECTRA

He's come—you can trust what I'm telling you—  
and he's brought Helen from the walls of Troy.

ORESTES

He'd be someone to envy even more  
if he'd managed to survive all by himself.  
By bringing back his wife, he's coming here

with all kinds of trouble.

ELECTRA

Yes, Tyndareus fathered a race of notorious daughters, dishonoured throughout Greece.

ORESTES

Make sure you're different,  
not like those evil women. You can be.  
But don't just say it. You have to feel it.

ELECTRA

Alas, brother, your eyes are growing wild.  
In an instant you've again gone mad,  
and just now you were thinking clearly.

ORESTES [in a fit]

Mother, I'm begging you, don't threaten me,  
not those young snake girls with their bloodshot eyes.  
They're here! They're closing in to jump on me!

ELECTRA

Poor suffering wretch, stay still there on your couch. You think you see them clearly, but it's nothing— there's nothing there for you to see.

ORESTES

O Phoebus,  
they're killing me, those dreadful goddesses,  
the fierce-eyed, bitch-faced priestesses of hell.

ELECTRA [holding Orestes]

I'll not let go. I'll keep my arms around  
and stop you writhing in this painful fit.

ORESTES

Let go! You're one of those Furies of mine,  
grabbing me around the waist to throw me  
down into Tartarus!

ELECTRA

I feel so wretched.

What help can I get when divine power is ranged against us?

ORESTES

Give me my horn-tipped bow,  
Apollo's gift—he said I should use it  
to defend myself against these goddesses  
if they frightened me with bouts of madness.  
One of those divine women will get hurt  
by a human hand if she doesn't move  
out of my sight. Aren't you paying attention?  
Don't you see the feathered arrows speeding  
from my far-shooting bow? Ah . . . ah . . .

Why are you waiting then? Use your wings and soar into the upper air, and blame  
Apollo's oracles. But wait a moment!  
Why am I raving and gasping for air?

Where . . . where have I jumped? Out of bed?  
After the storm I see calm water once again.  
Sister, why wrap your head in your dress and cry?  
I'm ashamed to make you share my suffering,  
to bring distress to an unmarried girl  
with this sickness of mine. Don't pine away because of my misfortunes. Yes, it's true  
you agreed to do it, but I'm the one  
who shed our mother's blood. I blame Apollo,  
who set me up to carry out the act,  
which was profane. His words encouraged me,  
but not his actions. And I think my father,  
if I'd looked him in the eye and asked him  
if I should kill my mother, would've made  
many appeals to me, reaching for my chin,  
not to shove my sword into the neck of the woman who'd given birth to me, since  
he would not return into the light  
and I'd be wretched, suffering ills like these.  
So now, sister, take that veil off your head.  
And stop your crying, even though our plight  
is desperate. When you see me in a fit,  
you must reduce the harsh destructive parts  
inside my mind and soothe me. When you groan,  
I must be beside you and comfort you  
with my advice. When people are close friends  
it's a noble thing to offer help like that. But now, you poor girl, go inside the house.  
Lie down and let your sleepless eyelids rest.  
Have some food to eat and wash your body.  
For if you leave me or catch some illness  
by sitting here with me, then I'm done for.  
You're the only help I've got. As you see,  
all the others have abandoned me.

ELECTRA

I won't leave. I choose to live here with you,  
even to die. The choice remains the same.  
If you die, what will I, a woman, do? How will I be saved all on my own,  
without a brother, father, or my friends?  
Still, I must do it, if you think it's right.  
But set your body back down on the bed,  
and don't fret too much about the terror,  
the agony that drives you from your bed.  
Lie still here on the couch. For even if  
you're not really sick but think you're ill,  
that still makes people tired and confused.

[Electra goes into the house]

CHORUS

Aaaiiii . . . you winged goddesses roaming in that manic frenzy,

your god-appointed privilege,  
 not some Bacchic ritual  
 but one with tears, cries of grief—  
 you dark skinned kindly ones,  
 racing through the wide expanse of air  
 demanding justice for blood,  
 a penalty for murder,  
 how I beseech you, beg you,  
 let the son of Agamemnon lose all memory of furious madness.  
 Alas! What harsh work you strove for,  
 you poor man, when you received,  
 from Phoebus' tripod, the oracle  
 which he delivered in his shrine,  
 that cavern where, so people say,  
 one finds the navel of the earth. <sup>421</sup>

O Zeus, what pitiful event,  
 what bloody struggle is now here,  
 goading you in your misfortune— an avenging spirit bringing tears  
 to add to all your tears, sending  
 your mother's blood into your home  
 and driving you to raving madness?  
 I grieve for you—how I grieve for you.  
 Among mortal men great prosperity  
 never lasts. No. Some higher spirit  
 shatters it like the sail on a fast ship  
 and hurls it into waves of dreadful sorrow,  
 as deadly as storm waves out at sea. What other house should I still honour  
 as issuing from marriage with the gods  
 apart from those who come from Tantalus? <sup>422</sup>

[Menelaus enters, with an escort]

CHORUS

But look, the king is now approaching—  
 lord Menelaus. His magnificence  
 makes it plain to see that by his blood  
 he comes from the sons of Tantalus.  
 Hail to you, who with a thousand ships  
 set off in force for Asian land, and find  
 good fortune now among your company. With god's help you've managed to  
 achieve  
 all those things you prayed for.

MENELAUS

O my home—

<sup>421</sup> . . . *navel of the earth*: The navel, or central point, of the earth was, according to tradition, located in Apollo's shrine in Delphi.

<sup>422</sup> . . . *from Tantalus*: Tantalus is the founder of the royal family of Agamemnon, Menelaus, Orestes, and Electra. He was a son of Zeus and a divine nymph.

I look on you with joy, now I've come back  
 from Troy, but I'm also full of sorrow  
 at the sight, for never have I seen  
 another home surrounded in this way  
 with such harsh disaster. For I learned  
 of Agamemnon's fate, the death he suffered  
 at his wife's hand, as I steered my ship towards Malea.<sup>423</sup> The sailors' prophet,  
 truthful Glaucus, Nereus' seer, told me from the waves. He placed himself  
 in open view and then said this to me: "Menelaus, your brother's lying dead—  
 collapsed inside his bath, the final one  
 his wife will give him."

His words made us,  
 me and my sailors, weep many tears.  
 When I touched land at Nauplia, with my wife  
 already coming here, I was expecting  
 to give a loving greeting to Orestes, Agamemnon's son, and to his mother.  
 I assumed that they were doing well.  
 But then I heard from some fisherman  
 about the profane murder of the child  
 of Tyndareus. Tell me now, you girls,  
 where he may be, Agamemnon's son,  
 who dared this horrible atrocity.  
 For back then, when I left home for Troy,  
 he was a babe in Clytaemnestra's arms.  
 So I wouldn't know him if I saw him.

[Orestes moves over unsteadily from his bed and crouches down in front of  
 Menelaus]

ORESTES

Menelaus, I am Orestes—the man  
 you asked about. I'm willing to reveal  
 all the suffering I've been through. But first,  
 I clasp your knees in supplication,  
 and offer prayers from the mouth of a man  
 who holds no suppliant branch.<sup>424</sup> Rescue me.  
 It's the crucial moment of my suffering,  
 and you've arrived in person.

MENELAUS

O gods,  
 what's this I see? Which of the dead  
 am I now looking at?

ORESTES

<sup>423</sup> . . . *Malea*: Menelaus' return from Troy (as he tells us in the *Odyssey*) was long delayed. He was blown off course to Egypt, where he stayed for a while. Malea is the southernmost tip of the Peloponnese.

<sup>424</sup> . . . *suppliant branch*: In a formal supplication the petitioner carries an olive branch. Orestes doesn't have one available.



What you say is true. With the agony I'm in, I'm not alive,  
though I see daylight.

MENELAUS

You're like a savage,  
you poor man, with that tangled hair.

ORESTES

It's not my looks  
which cause me grief. It's what I've done.

MENELAUS

Your ravaged eyes—  
that look of yours is dreadful.

ORESTES

My body's gone.  
But my name has not abandoned me.

MENELAUS

You're an unsightly mess—not what I expected.

ORESTES

Here I am, my wretched mother's killer.

MENELAUS

So I've heard. Don't talk about it—such evils  
should be mentioned only sparingly.

ORESTES

I'll not say much. But the divine spirit  
fills me with afflictions.

MENELAUS

What's wrong with you?  
What's the sickness that's destroying you?

ORESTES

It's here—in my mind—because I'm aware  
I've done something horrific.<sup>425</sup>

MENELAUS

What do you mean?  
Wisdom comes from clarity. It's not obscure.

ORESTES

It's the pain that's truly destroying me.

MENELAUS

She's a fearful goddess, but there are cures.

ORESTES

Mad fits—retribution for my mother's blood.

MENELAUS

When did this frenzy start? What day was it?

ORESTES

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<sup>425</sup> . . . *something horrific*: West makes the useful observation (p. 210) that the Greeks did not yet have a clear sense of a good or bad conscience. This line suggests something like a sense of guilt arising out of one's awareness of the moral qualities of an act. As West observes, Menelaus in his response seems confused by the idea.

On the day I was raising up the mound  
on my miserable mother's grave.

MENELAUS

Were you in the house or sitting down  
keeping watch beside her fire?

ORESTES

It was at night,  
while I was waiting to collect the bones.

MENELAUS

Was someone there as your support?

ORESTES

Yes.

Pylades was there—he acted with me  
in shedding blood, my mother's murder.

MENELAUS

You're sick from phantom apparitions.  
What are they like?

ORESTES

I thought I saw three girls— they looked like Night.

MENELAUS

I know the ones you mean.  
But I have no wish to speak their names.

ORESTES

No. They incite awe. You acted properly  
in not mentioning them.

MENELAUS

Are they the ones  
driving you insane family murder?

ORESTES

How miserably I suffer their attacks

MENELAUS

But harsh suffering is not unusual  
for those who carry out such dreadful acts.

ORESTES

But we do have a way out of our troubles.

MENELAUS

Don't talk of death—that's not wise.

ORESTES

It was Phoebus who ordered me to carry out the act,  
my mother's murder.

MENELAUS

Showing his ignorance  
of what's good and right.

ORESTES

We are mere slaves  
to the gods, whatever the gods are.

MENELAUS

In this suffering of yours does Loxias  
offer some relief?

ORESTES

He's planning to.  
That's the nature of the gods.

MENELAUS

And your mother—  
how long is it since she stopped breathing?

ORESTES

This is the sixth day. Her burial fires  
are still warm.

MENELAUS

How quickly the goddesses came for you because of your mother's blood.

ORESTES

God is not wise, but by nature he is true  
to those who are his friends. <sup>426</sup>

MENELAUS

And your father—  
does he help you out for avenging him?

ORESTES

Not yet. And if he's still intending to,  
I call that the same as doing nothing.

MENELAUS

After what you've done how do you stand  
with the city?

ORESTES

I am so despised  
that people will not talk to me.

MENELAUS

Have you cleansed  
your hands of blood in the appropriate way?

ORESTES

No. Wherever I go, doors are shut to me.

MENELAUS

Which citizens are forcing you to leave?

ORESTES

Oeax, who holds my father responsible  
for that hateful war at Troy.

MENELAUS

I see.

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<sup>426</sup> . . . *are his friends*: I have adopted West's suggestion that this line refers to the god (Apollo) rather than to Orestes himself: "I am not wise, but by nature I am true to my friends (see West 212).

He seeks revenge for Palamedes' murder. <sup>427</sup>

ORESTES

I had no part of that—I'm being killed,  
but that death is two removes from me.

MENELAUS

Who else?

Some of Aegisthus' friends, I imagine?

ORESTES

They slander me. Now the city listens.

MENELAUS

Agamemnon's sceptre—does the city let you keep it?

ORESTES

How could they do that?

They won't let me stay alive.

MENELAUS

What will they do?

Can you give me a definite idea?

ORESTES

Today there'll be a vote against us.

MENELAUS

For you to leave the city? Or a vote  
to kill or spare you?

ORESTES

For death by stoning  
by all the citizens.

MENELAUS

Why not escape—  
flee across the border?

ORESTES

We're surrounded  
by soldiers, fully armed.

MENELAUS

Private enemies  
or by a force of Argives?

ORESTES

The whole city— to make sure I die. There's no more to say.

MENELAUS

Poor wretch. You're facing total disaster.

ORESTES

My hope to get out of this emergency  
rests on you. You've come loaded with success.

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<sup>427</sup>. . . *for Palamedes*: Oeax is the brother of Palamedes, an Achaean warrior at Troy. When Odysseus pretended to be mad so that he would not have to go on the expedition to Troy, Palamedes tricked him into revealing his sanity. Later, in Troy, Odysseus forced a Phrygian (Trojan) prisoner to write a treasonous letter apparently from Palamedes. Agamemnon found the letter and put Palamedes to death.

So share your prosperity with your friends  
in desperate straits. Don't accept the benefits  
and keep them for yourself alone. Take on,  
in your turn, a portion of these troubles,  
paying back my father's kindnesses for those  
to whom you have an obligation. Those friends who, when misfortune comes,  
aren't there to help  
are friends in name but not in deed.

[Enter Tyndareus with attendants]

CHORUS LEADER

Look—  
the Spartan Tyndareus is coming here,  
shuffling on his old legs, wearing black robes,  
with short hair, in mourning for his daughter.

ORESTES

I'm done for, Menelaus. Look at this—  
Tyndareus is coming up to us.  
I feel particularly ashamed to come  
into his sight because of what I've done.  
For he raised me when I was still a child. He filled my life with love and carried me,  
the child of Agamemnon, in his arms.  
And Leda did the same. They honoured me  
no less than they did those twins from Zeus. <sup>428</sup>  
O my miserable heart and spirit!  
I have not paid them back a good return.  
What darkness can I find to hide my face?  
What sort of cloud can I set in front of me  
to escape the eyes of that old man?

[Tyndareus and his attendants move up to the palace]

TYNDAREUS

Where can I catch a glimpse of Menelaus,  
my daughter's husband? Where? I was pouring  
libations on the grave of Clytaemnestra  
when I heard he'd arrived at Nauplia  
with his wife, home safe after all these years.  
Take me to him. I want to stand beside him,  
on his right hand, and greet him as a friend  
whom I'm seeing again after all these years.

MENELAUS

Welcome, old man whose head shared the same bed  
as Zeus himself.

TYNDAREUS Welcome to you, too,

<sup>428</sup> . . . *twins from Zeus*: Tyndareus and Leda had four children at the same time: Helen, Clytaemnestra, Castor, and Pollux (also called Polydeuces). However, Tyndareus was the biological father of only two of them, Castor and Clytaemnestra. Helen and Pollux were conceived by Zeus (in the form of a swan) and Leda. In some accounts (as here) both Castor and Pollux are children of Zeus.

Menelaus, my kinsman. Ah, it's bad we don't know what it is the future brings. Here's that dragon snake who killed his mother, right outside the house, with his eyes flashing that sick glitter—an abomination to me.

Menelaus, you're not talking to him, not to that impious wretch?

MENELAUS

Why would I not?

He's the son of a father whom I loved.

TYNDAREUS

His natural son? And he turned out like this?

MENELAUS

Yes, he's his son by birth. If he's in trouble, I must respect him.

TYNDAREUS

You're a barbarian—you've been so long among the savages.

MENELAUS

In Greece we always honour relatives.

TYNDAREUS

And we don't wish to be above the law.

MENELAUS

But among those with some intelligence anything that's forced is something slavish.

TYNDAREUS

You hold to that. I'll not subscribe to it.

MENELAUS

Your anger and old age are not being wise.

TYNDAREUS

What's a dispute about such foolishness have to do with him? If what's good or bad is plain to all, who has been more stupid than this fellow? He didn't figure out what justice required. Nor did he turn to the common practices among the Greeks.

When Agamemnon took his final breath, after my daughter struck him on his head—a shameful act, which I never will defend—he should have gone after just punishment for bloodshed and followed what's appropriate in our religion, throwing his mother

out of the house. He would've won himself, instead of this disaster, some credit for moderation. And he'd have followed the law and been a righteous man. But now, he's come to the same fate as his mother. He was right to think that she was wicked, but he's made himself more evil killing her. I'll ask you this question, Menelaus.

If a man's wedded wife should murder him  
and the son, in his turn, killed his mother,  
and after that the son pay for the murder with his death, where will these disasters  
end?

Our ancestors dealt with these issues well.  
They did not let a man with bloody hands  
come in their sight or cross their path. Instead,  
they purified him, not by killing him  
as a punishment, no, they banished him.  
Otherwise, the man who has pollution  
on his hands last is always going to face  
his own murder. I hate an evil woman,  
especially my daughter who slaughtered  
her own husband. And I'll never approve  
of Helen, your wife, or even speak to her.  
I don't think much of your voyage to Troy  
for the sake of that worthless woman.  
But with all my power I'll defend the law  
to put an end to this bestial killing,  
which always destroys the land and city.

[Tyndareus moves up to Orestes]

You miserable creature, what was in your mind  
when your mother exposed her breasts to you  
and begged? I did not see that dreadful sight, but still my ancient eyes dissolve in  
tears.

And there's one thing which supports my case—  
the gods do hate you, and you're being punished  
for your mother with roaming fits of fear  
and madness. Why do I need to attend to  
other witnesses, when I can see it  
for myself? So you should keep this in mind,  
Menelaus—don't act against the gods  
by wanting to assist this man. Let him be stoned to death by the citizens, or else  
don't set foot on Spartan land.

My daughter's dead. And that deed was just.  
But she should not have died at that man's hand.  
I was born a fortunate man in all things  
except my daughters. There I've been unlucky.

CHORUS LEADER

The man who's fortunate in his children,  
who does not get ones which bring on him  
notorious trouble—that's a man to envy.

ORESTES

I'm afraid to talk to you, old man,  
at a time when I'm bound to pain your heart. Let your age, which hinders me from  
speaking,

be set aside, and I'll proceed. But now,  
your gray hair makes me too hesitant.  
I know my mother's murder has made me  
unholy, and yet, in another sense,  
a pious man who avenged his father.  
What should I have done? Set these two things  
against each other. My father planted me,  
your daughter bore me—she was the plough land who received the seed from  
someone else. Without a father there would never be  
a child. I reasoned that I ought to take  
the side of the one who gave me being,  
rather than the woman who undertook  
to raise me. Now your daughter—I'm ashamed  
to call her mother—went to a man's bed  
in a private and an unwise marriage.  
When I say bad things against her, I speak  
against myself, but nonetheless I will.  
At home Aegisthus was her secret husband. I killed the man, and then I sacrificed  
my mother. I did an unholy act,  
but I did get vengeance for my father.  
As for the reasons you now threaten me  
with death by stoning, you should listen to  
how I am benefiting all of Greece.  
If women grow so bold they start to kill  
their husbands and then seek to find safety  
with their children, fishing for sympathy  
with their breasts, they'd start killing husbands for any reason and would pay no  
price.  
You claim I committed a dreadful crime,  
but I've put an end to practices like that.  
I hated my mother and killed her justly.  
She betrayed her husband, who was away  
with the army, commander of all Greeks,  
and didn't keep his bed free of dishonour.  
When she understood the mistake she'd made  
she didn't face up to the penalty.  
No. In order to escape being punished, she murdered my father. By the gods!  
It's not a good thing to recall the gods  
in a defence against a charge of murder,  
but if by saying nothing I endorsed  
my mother's act, what would the murdered man  
have done to me? Would he now hate me  
and terrify me with his band of Furies?  
Or does my mother have those goddesses  
as her allies, but he does not, although  
he's the one who's been more greatly wronged. You've destroyed me, old man—



yes, you have—  
you're the father of a wicked daughter.  
Thanks to her outrageous act, I have lost  
a father and become my mother's killer.  
You notice Telemachus did not kill  
Odysseus' wife, for she did not marry  
husband after husband, and in their home  
their bedroom remained quite unpolluted.  
Do you see Apollo, who makes his home  
at earth's navel stone and gives mortal men the clearest spoken words, whom we  
obey  
in all he says—I was obeying him  
when I killed my mother. Call him impious,  
and kill him. It was his mistake, not mine.  
What should I have done? Or is the god  
not good enough to cleanse me of my crime  
when I turn to him? Where else can one flee,  
if he who commanded me to do it  
cannot rescue me from death? So don't say this action was not done appropriately,  
but rather that it didn't work out well  
for those who did it. Among mortal men,  
when marriages are properly set up,  
their life is blessed. But those whose marriages  
fall out badly have no luck, indoors and out.

CHORUS LEADER

Women by nature always interfere  
in the affairs of men, with bad results.

TYNDAREUS

Since you speak so boldly and hide nothing,  
but give me answers which will pain my heart,  
you'll spur me on to bring about your death. I'll count that as an extra benefit  
in the work for which I came here, to dress  
my daughter's grave. I'll go to the Argives,  
to their assembly, set them against you  
and your sister, against their will or not—  
you'll pay the penalty, death by stoning.  
She deserves to die even more than you.  
She incited you against your mother,  
always carrying stories for your ears to make you hate her more, reporting dreams  
of Agamemnon and her sexual life  
with Aegisthus—may gods below the earth  
despise it—it was bitter up here, too,  
until she set the house ablaze with flames  
not kindled by Hephaestus. I tell you this,  
Menelaus, and I will do it, too.  
So if you give my hatred any weight

and my relationship to you through marriage,  
don't act in opposition to the gods—  
do not protect this man from death. Leave him for the citizens to kill by stoning,  
or don't set foot on Spartan land. Listen,  
and understand this well. You must not choose  
ungodly men as friends, pushing aside  
the ones who act more righteously. You men,  
lead me away. Take me from this house.

[Tyndareus and his attendants leave]

ORESTES

Well, be off with you, so that what I say  
may reach this man without interruption,  
quite free from your old age. Menelaus,  
why are you walking around, lost in thought, going back and forth, as if quite  
divided  
in what you're thinking?

MENELAUS

Leave me alone.

I'm debating with myself. I'm not sure  
which course of action I should follow.

ORESTES

Don't decide on what seems to be the case.  
First listen to the things I have to say  
and then make up your mind.

MENELAUS

You're right. Speak up.

There are times when silence may be better, but there are also times when  
speaking  
is preferable to silence.

ORESTES

Then I'll speak. A long speech is better than a short one  
and it's much clearer for the listener, too.

You don't have to give me anything of yours,

Menelaus, just pay back what you took, what you got from my father—not  
property,

that's not what I mean. If you save my life,

that's the dearest thing I own. I've done wrong.

To counter this bad act, I have to get

an unjust deed from you, for my father,

Agamemnon, did wrong when he gathered those Greeks to go to Troy, and not  
because

he made mistakes himself, no, but to heal

the error and injustice of your wife. <sup>429</sup>

And for this one act you should pay me back.

For he willingly sacrificed his life,

as family members should for those they love,

toiling hard in battle right beside you,

so you could have your wife back. Pay me back

in the same way for what you received there,

working hard for just one day, not ten years. Stand up, and save me. As for what Aulis took

with my sister slaughtered as a sacrifice,

I'll let you have that. You don't have to kill

Hermione. For in my present plight,

you must have the upper hand. That I grant.

But offer my poor father my own life

and my sister's. For a long time now

she's been unmarried, and if I die,

I'll leave my father's house without an heir.

You'll say it can't be done. But that's the point. Kinsmen must help their friends when things are bad.

When fortune gives success, what need of friends?

When god is keen to help, then his assistance

is quite sufficient. All of Greece believes

you love your wife—and I'm not saying this

to win your favour with mere flattery—

but I am appealing to you in her name.

O this wretched situation I am in!

How did I get into something like this?

What then? Well, I have to go through with it. I'm making this appeal for my whole house.

O uncle, you're brother to my father.

Imagine if, from his grave, the dead man

is listening to this and if his spirit

is hovering above you and saying

what I say with these laments and tears

in this misfortune. I've given my speech

and pleaded to be saved, chasing after

what all men seek, not just myself alone.

CHORUS LEADER

Although I'm just a woman, I too beg you

to help these people when they're in such need.

<sup>429</sup> . . . *of your wife*: The immediate cause of the Trojan War was Paris' abduction of Helen, Menelaus' wife, from Sparta (Helen went willingly enough). Agamemnon, the senior of the two brothers, took command of the Greek army which assembled at Aulis in response to a promise all the kings had made to Tyndareus, that they would help Helen's husband, should he ever require their assistance. The goddess Artemis prevented the Greek fleet from sailing until Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia, an action which Agamemnon carried out.

You have the power to do that.

MENELAUS

Orestes,

I do respect you, and I want to share  
these troubles with you. Besides, it's right  
to help one's family members in bad times,  
if god gives one the power, by killing  
their enemies and even dying oneself.

I need to get that power from the gods.

I'm here without a group of fighting spearmen,  
after roaming through thousands of troubles with the small help of my surviving  
friends.

In any fight we could not overcome  
Pelagian Argos. If we could prevail  
with reassuring words, then that's where  
I'd place my hopes. For how can any man  
achieve great things with small resources?  
It's foolishness to even wish for that.

For when people fall into a frenzy  
it's like a blazing fire, hard to put out.

If one, in responding to the tension, gently eases off one's grip, backs away,  
and times things right, it may blow itself out.

If the winds die down, you could easily get  
whatever you want from them. For people  
do have pity, as well as their great passion,  
a quality of utmost value to the man  
who looks for it. And so on your behalf

I'll go and try to convince Tyndareus  
and the city to act on their passions  
wisely. For a ship can take on water if the sheet is pulled too tight, but if one eases  
off the rope, then that ship  
will once more right itself. The god does hate  
excessive zeal, as do the citizens.

I must save you—I don't deny the fact—  
but by using cleverness, not by force  
against a stronger group. I'd not save you  
with power alone, as you perhaps may think.

It's not easy to take a stand and win with a single spear against the troubles which  
afflict you. It never was my style  
to try to soften up the Argive state,  
but now it must be done—the wise man  
is a slave to circumstance.

[Menelaus and his attendants leave]

ORESTES

You're useless,  
except to head up an expedition

for a woman's sake, the worst of men  
in helping out your friends. Are you turning  
your back on me and running off,  
so Agamemnon's cause has disappeared?  
O father, once things have turned out badly you have no friends. Alas, I've been  
betrayed,  
and there's no longer any hope for me  
of turning somewhere and escaping death  
at Argive hands. For that Menelaus  
was my refuge, my way of being saved.

[Pylades enters]

But I see Pylades, my greatest friend,  
rushing here from Phocis. A welcome sight!  
A man who can be trusted in hard times  
is finer to behold than tranquil waters  
for men at sea.

PYLADES

I've come through the city, and I had to move quickly once I heard  
and clearly witnessed for myself the crowds  
of citizens gathering there against you  
and your sister so they can kill you both  
without delay. What's going on? How are you?  
What are you doing? Of people my own age,  
friends and relatives, you are my favourite.  
You're all those things to me.

ORESTES

I am done for—  
those few words make clear to you my troubles.

PYLADES

Then you must do away with me as well. Friends share things in common.

ORESTES

Menelaus  
is the worst of men to me and to my sister.

PYLADES

It's natural enough that any man  
with a bad wife should grow bad himself.

ORESTES

His coming here was as much help to me  
as if he hadn't come.

PYLADES

So it's true then  
that he's arrived and landed here?

ORESTES

He took a while, but in no time at all  
showed he was an enemy to his friends.

PYLADES

That wife of his—the nastiest of women— did he bring her on his ship?

ORESTES

No, not him.

She's the one who brought him here.

PYLADES

Where is she, that one woman who destroyed  
all those Achaeans?

ORESTES

She's in my home—  
if it's all right to call it mine.

PYLADES What did you say  
to your father's brother?

ORESTES

Not to just look on  
while the townsfolk killed me and my sister.

PYLADES

By the gods, how did he respond to you?  
That I'd like to know.

ORESTES

He was cautious—  
the way false friends act with their families.

PYLADES

What sort of excuses did he offer?  
Once I know that, I'll understand it all.

ORESTES

That man arrived—the one who has produced  
those splendid daughters.

PYLADES

Ah, you mean Tyndareus.  
I suppose he was all worked up at you  
for his daughter's sake?

ORESTES

Yes, you have that right.  
And Menelaus preferred family ties  
with him instead of with my father.

PYLADES

So when he was here he lacked the courage  
to share your troubles.

ORESTES

No. He wasn't born a warrior. He's brave among the women.

PYLADES

So you're in the gravest danger and must die?

ORESTES

The citizens must cast their votes on us  
about the murder.

PYLADES

What must the vote decide?

Tell me. I'm growing fearful.

ORESTES

For life or death—

it's not something that takes much time to say  
though it involves something that lasts forever.

PYLADES

Leave the palace now, flee with your sister.

ORESTES

Do you not see how we are both being watched,  
with armed guards on every side?

PYLADES

I noticed streets in town blocked off by men with weapons.

ORESTES

We're physically hemmed in, like a city by its enemies.

PYLADES

You must ask me now how I am doing, for I, too am quite destroyed.

ORESTES

By whom? This would add further disasters  
to the ones I face.

PYLADES

Strophius, my father, has banished me—he was so furious  
he sent me from the house.

ORESTES

What's the charge he's leveling against you, something private or is it one the  
townsfolk share?

PYLADES

He claims it's an unholy sacrilege to help you  
in murdering your own mother.

ORESTES

That's bad news.

It seems what's hurting me is harming you, as well.

PYLADES

It's something I have to bear. I'll not act like Menelaus.

ORESTES

But are you not afraid

Argos will want to kill you, just like me?

PYLADES

I'm not theirs to punish. I'm from Phocis.

ORESTES

The mob is nasty, when it has leaders  
bent on doing wrong.

PYLADES

But when it's controlled

by decent men, the decisions they make are always good.

ORESTES

All right. We must think this through,  
working together.

PYLADES

What must we do?

ORESTES

What if I went and told the citizens . . .

PYLADES [interrupting]

. . . that what you did was just?

ORESTES

I sought revenge  
for my father's sake?

PYLADES

They might be happy  
to grab hold of you.

ORESTES

Am I to cower down  
and die without a word?

PYLADES

That's cowardly.

ORESTES

Then what should I do?

PYLADES

If you stayed here,  
would you have a way of being rescued?

ORESTES

No. I don't have anything.

PYLADES

And if you left, is there some hope you might be saved?

ORESTES

Perhaps—  
there might be.

PYLADES

That's better than staying here, then.

ORESTES

All right, I'll go.

PYLADES

At least that way, if you die,  
you'll die more nobly.

ORESTES

You're right—this way  
I won't be a coward.

PYLADES

More than staying here.

ORESTES

And my action was right.



PYLADES

Just make a prayer  
that's how it looks to them.

ORESTES

And someone there  
might pity me . . .

PYLADES [interrupting]

Yes, your noble birth  
is a great asset.

ORESTES

. . . being so upset  
at my father's death.

PYLADES

All that's easy to see.

ORESTES

I have to go. It's not a manly thing  
to die a shameful death.

PYLADES

I agree with you.

ORESTES

Should we tell my sister?

PYLADES

By the gods, no.

ORESTES

There'd certainly be tears.

PYLADES

That'd be a serious omen.

ORESTES

It's clear it's better to say nothing.

PYLADES

And you'll save time.

ORESTES

There's just one problem for me.

PYLADES

What now? Are you talking of something new?

ORESTES

I'm worried the goddesses will stop me  
with this madness.

PYLADES

But I'll take care of you.

ORESTES

It's unpleasant looking after someone sick.

PYLADES

Not to me. Not when I'm looking after you.

ORESTES

Be careful you don't start my madness.

PYLADES

Don't worry over that.

ORESTES

You won't hold back?

PYLADES

It's a great evil to hold back with friends.

ORESTES

Then, you pilot of my steps, let's go now.

PYLADES

That's a service I'm glad to undertake.

ORESTES

And lead me to my father's tomb.

PYLADES

Why there?

ORESTES

So I may appeal to him to save me.

PYLADES

That's the righteous thing to do.

ORESTES

May I not glimpse the memorial to my mother!

PYLADES

No, not that. She was your enemy. But you must hurry—  
the vote the Argives cast may catch you first.

Lean your side that's weakened by disease  
against my side, so I can carry you through town. I won't be worrying about  
the crowds or feeling any sense of shame.

For how can I show I'm a friend of yours  
if I don't help when you're in serious trouble?

ORESTES

That's the point. Make sure you get good comrades  
and not just relatives. A man may be from somewhere else, but if he bonds with  
you

in how you act, then he's a better friend,  
than a thousand members of one's family.

[Pylades and Orestes leave]

CHORUS

That great prosperity and lofty name  
so proudly celebrated throughout Greece  
and there beside the waters of the Simois  
has declined once more from the success  
of Atreus' sons so many years ago—  
from an old misfortune in their house,  
when strife came to the sons of Tantalus about a golden ram, the saddest feasts  
and slaughter of children nobly born,  
that's why murder moves on to murder  
through blood and does not leave alone

the double line of Atreus. <sup>430</sup>

What's good is not good, to slice up  
a parent's flesh with metal forged in fire  
and to display in the sun's light a sword  
stained black with murdered blood. To commit  
a virtuous crime is sheer profanity, the mad delusion of wrong-thinking men.  
The wretched daughter of Tyndareus,  
terrified of death, screamed at him, "My child,  
don't you dare carry out such sacrilege  
and slaughter your own mother—in honouring  
your father, don't tie yourself to such disgrace,  
such shame which lasts for an eternity."

What affliction or distress, what agony  
in all the earth surpasses this, to have on one's own hands a mother's murdered  
blood? For undertaking such a act, the man  
has been driven into fits of madness,  
prey hunted by the Kindly Ones, his eyes  
rolling in her whirling blood, the son  
of Agamemnon. The miserable wretch,  
when he saw his mother's breast appear  
above her dress, a robe of woven gold,  
he made his own mother a sacrifice  
to avenge the sufferings of his father.

[Enter Electra from the house]

ELECTRA

You women, has poor Orestes left the house, overcome by that madness from the  
gods?

CHORUS LEADER

No. He's gone to the people in Argos,  
to give himself up for the vote they've set,  
in which you two must live or die.

ELECTRA

Alas! Why did he do that? Who convinced him?

[A Messenger appears, coming toward the house]

CHORUS LEADER

Pylades did. But this messenger, it seems,  
will soon tell us news about your brother,  
what happened to him there.

MESSENGER

You poor girl,  
unhappy daughter of Agamemnon,

<sup>430</sup> . . . *double line of Atreus*: The "double line" is the families of Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus. The "golden ram" mentioned refers to an animal in Atreus' flocks, on the basis of which he claimed the throne over the objections of his brother Thyestes. The slaughter at the banquet is another reference to the dinner in which Atreus served up to his brother Thyestes the latter's sons as the main course.

our army's leader, lady Electra, hear the disastrous news I bring you.

ELECTRA

Alas! We're finished! Your words are clear enough—you've come, it seems, with disastrous news.

MESSENGER

Pelasgians have, in their vote, decreed that you, unhappy lady, are to die, you and your brother on this very day. <sup>431</sup>

ELECTRA

Alas! What I been expecting has arrived—I've been afraid of it a long time now, dissolved in sorrow for what might come true. How was the trial? What did the Argives say to convict us and ratify our deaths? Tell me, old man, whether my life will end by stoning or a sword—for I do share in those misfortunes of my brother?

MESSENGER

I happened to be coming from the country and was coming through the gates—I wanted to find out about you and Orestes. I always liked your father, and your house gave me food. I was poor but honourable in helping out my friends. I saw a crowd going up and sitting on the higher ground where, they say, Danaus first gathered up his people and they sat down together to judge the charge against him by Aegyptus. <sup>432</sup> Seeing the crowd, I asked a citizen, What's new in Argos? Has some news report about an enemy caused a great stir in this city of Danaus' descendants? He said, "Don't you see Orestes coming, rushing to a trial where his life's at stake." Then I saw something I did not expect—how I wish I'd never seen it!—Pylades and your brother moving there together, one with his head down and doubled over by his infirmity and the other, like a brother, sharing his friend's troubles, caring for his sickness as if he were schooling a young boy. Once the Argives had gathered in a crowd, a herald stood and cried, "Who desires to make a speech whether Orestes should be killed or not

<sup>431</sup> . . . *on this very day*: The word Pelasgian is frequently used to describe the Argives. The word hearkens back to the original inhabitants of the area.

<sup>432</sup> . . . *by Aegyptus*: The fifty daughters of Danaus married the fifty sons of Aegyptus and killed their husbands (all but one) on the wedding night. In some accounts Aegyptus prosecuted Danaus for the mass murder.

for his mother's murder?" Talthybius stood,  
 the man who helped your father demolish  
 those Phrygians.<sup>433</sup> He spoke ambiguously—  
 well, he's always been a subordinate  
 of those in power—praising your father  
 but saying nothing good about your brother,  
 weaving good and misleading words together,  
 claiming it would be setting up bad laws  
 concerning parents, and all the time he kept looking at Aegisthus' friends  
 with those bright eyes of his. The herald tribe  
 is like that—they're always jumping over  
 to the side of the successful. Any man  
 who has ruling power in the city is a friend of theirs. After he'd finished,  
 lord Diomedes spoke. He was against  
 killing you or your brother but proposed  
 they act with reverence and as punishment  
 use exile. Some of the people there roared out that what he'd said was good, but  
 then others  
 didn't favour the idea. But after that,  
 a man stood up who can't keep his mouth shut,  
 whose strength comes from his boldness—an Argive,  
 but not from Argos—and forced himself on us  
 relying on bluster, ignorant free speech,  
 persuasive enough to get them involved  
 in some bad scheme or other. When a man  
 with bad intentions but a pleasing style  
 persuades a mob, that's a great disaster for the city, but those who always give  
 useful, sound advice, even if their words  
 are not immediately appropriate,  
 are beneficial later to the state.  
 That's how one should view a party leader—  
 what happens with a man who gives a speech  
 is much the same as with a man in office.  
 Well, this man said that you and Orestes  
 should be stoned to death. But Tyndareus  
 was the one who laid down the arguments the speaker used to urge you both be  
 killed.  
 Another man stood up opposing him.  
 He wasn't much to look at physically,  
 but the man had courage. He rarely came  
 into the city and the market place.  
 He was a farmer—they're the only ones  
 who keep our country going—but clever

<sup>433</sup> . . . *those Phrygians*: Talthybius is a character in the Iliad, a herald in the Achaeen army who serves Agamemnon. Phrygians is a term commonly used to designate the Trojans or barbarian Asiatics.

and keen to wrestle with the argument,  
someone with integrity, who lived a life  
beyond reproach. He said they should crown Orestes, Agamemnon's son, who  
wished  
to avenge his father, who'd been murdered  
by an abominable, godless woman—  
she'd stop men taking up their weapons  
and fighting foreign wars, if those people  
who stayed behind corrupted things at home  
by abusing the men's wives. What he said  
appeared convincing, at least to decent folk.  
There were no other speakers. Your brother then came up and said, "You who are  
the heirs of Inachus, who were Pelasgians  
so long ago, then sons of Danaus,  
I was fighting on your behalf, no less  
than for my father, when I killed my mother.  
For if the fact that women murder men  
is permitted, you'll be dead in no time,  
or else we'll have to be the women's slaves—  
and you'll be doing the very opposite  
of what you should be doing. As it is,  
the woman who betrayed my father's bed is dead, but if you execute me now,  
the law would be relaxed, and men will die  
as fast as possible—there'll be no lack  
of such audacity." His speech was good,  
but he could not convince the crowd. Instead,  
the verdict of the entire group was for  
the nasty rogue who spoke out in favour  
of executing you and your brother.  
Poor Orestes just managed to persuade them  
not to stone him to death, by promising to end his life, to die by his own hand,  
along with you, as well, this very day.  
Pylades, in tears, is bringing him here  
from the assembly. His friends are coming,  
weeping and lamenting. This spectacle,  
so painful for you, is heading this way,  
a distressing sight. Get your swords ready  
or a noose around your neck—you must leave  
the light. Your noble birth has been no help.  
Nor has Phoebus in Delphi, seated there on his tripod. Instead he has destroyed  
you.

[The Messenger leaves]

CHORUS LEADER

O you unfortunate girl, you're speechless,  
with your clouded face bent toward the ground, as if you'll rush to cry and make  
laments.

## ELECTRA

O Pelasgia, now I start to weep,  
 pushing white nails through my cheeks,  
 blood lacerations, and striking my head,  
 actions appropriate to Persephone,  
 lovely child goddess of the world below.  
 Let the Cyclopan land now wail aloud the sorrows of this house, setting iron  
 against its head to shave it close. <sup>434</sup>  
 Pity, yes, pity now comes forward  
 for those who are about to die,  
 once war leaders of the Greeks.

It's gone—the entire race of Pelops,  
 passed away and gone, all the glory  
 that once made it a blessed house.  
 Envy from the gods seized them— and that hateful vote for blood among the  
 citizens. Alas, alas,  
 you tribes of men bowed down with work,  
 who live a brief life full of tears,  
 see how Fate moves to thwart your hopes.  
 As time run on at length, different men  
 take turns with different troubles,  
 and all of human life remains uncertain.

If only I could reach that boulder  
 hanging in the winds on chains of gold  
 mid way between the earth and heaven, that fragment carried from Olympus,  
 so I could shout out my laments  
 to old father Tantalus, who sired  
 and made my house's ancestors.  
 the ones who witnessed such disasters—  
 the race of flying horses, when Pelops  
 in a four-horse chariot raced to the sea  
 and murdered Myrtilus by hurling him  
 into the ocean swell, driving his chariot  
 near Geraestus, where the surging sea foams white along the shore. <sup>435</sup>  
 From that there came upon my house

<sup>434</sup> . . . *shave it close*: The Cyclopan land is a reference to the city of Mycenae whose walls were so big that legend had it they had been built by the Cyclopes. Shaving the head is often an important element in a mourning ritual.

<sup>435</sup> . . . *along the shore*: These lines refer to the origin of the troubles in the House of Atreus. Pelops wanted Hippodamia as his bride. Her father, Oenomaus, demanded a chariot race to determine the outcome: if Pelops won he could wed the daughter, and if Pelops was not successful he would die. Pelops bribed Myrtilus to sabotage the king's chariot and, as a result, won the race. Then he killed his co-conspirator, Myrtilus, by throwing him into the sea. Myrtilus cursed Pelops' family as he was drowning. Myrtilus was a son of the god Hermes, son of Zeus and the nymph Maia (as is mentioned a couple of lines further on), and the god made sure the curse took effect by introducing a golden lamb into the flocks belonging to the sons of Pelops, thus inciting the brothers Atreus and Thyestes to quarrel.

a dreadful curse, when Maia's son  
arranged a birth within the flocks,  
the lamb with a fleece of gold,  
ominous portent of the ruin  
of horse-breeding Atreus.

Because of that, Strife then reversed  
Sun's winged chariot to a western path  
across the sky by placing under yoke the snow-white horses of the Dawn  
and Zeus changed onto another path  
the moving seven-tracked Pleiades. <sup>436</sup>

Death followed death at that banquet  
to which Thyestes gave his name  
and the bed of Aerope from Crete,  
a traitor in her deceitful marriage. <sup>437</sup>

The final chapter comes with me  
and with my father in these troubles,  
all these afflictions laid on our house.  
[Pylades and Orestes enter]

CHORUS LEADER

Look, here comes your brother, condemned to die  
by general vote, and with him Pylades,  
the truest of all men, like a brother,  
guiding his sick limbs, treading carefully  
like a pace horse giving its support.

ELECTRA

Alas! My brother, I'm seeing you here  
before your tomb, confronting face to face  
the gates of those below, and I weep.  
Alas, once more! This last sight of you  
before my eyes will make me lose my mind.

ORESTES

Why can't you just be quiet and finish off  
these womanish laments for what's been done?  
It's pitiful, but still you must endure  
the circumstances we now face.

ELECTRA

But how  
can I stay silent? We poor sufferers  
will no longer see the sun god's light.

ORESTES

<sup>436</sup> . . . *the Pleiades*: The suggestion here seems to be that before this change, the sun did not move from east to west. I have adopted West's useful emendation of the text to read "white horses" rather than "single horse." The Pleiades is a constellation consisting of seven stars.

<sup>437</sup> . . . *deceitful marriage*: Aerope was the wife of Atreus and the mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus. In some versions of the story, she had an adulterous affair with Thyestes and was executed.



Don't be so tedious. It's quite enough  
that I'll be suffering a wretched death  
at Argive hands. So just set aside  
your present sorrow.

ELECTRA

Alas for your sad youth, Orestes, and for your early death.  
You should live on, but now you'll be no more.

ORESTES

By the gods, you'll strip me of my manhood—  
by bringing our calamities to mind  
you'll have me crying.

ELECTRA

We're going to die.  
It's impossible not to grieve for that.  
It's pitiful. To all men life is sweet.

ORESTES

This is our appointed day. So we must  
sharpen a sword or fix a hanging noose.

ELECTRA

Then you kill me, my brother, so no Argive executes me and starts hurling insults  
at Agamemnon's children.

ORESTES

I won't kill you.  
It's enough to have my mother's blood on me.  
No. You must die by your own hand somehow—  
in whatever way you wish.

ELECTRA

All right, then.  
I won't lag behind you with my sword.  
But I want to hug you around your neck

ORESTES

Enjoy that empty pleasure, if embraces  
bring any joy to those about to die.

ELECTRA [embracing Orestes]

O my dearest one! O that longed-for name, so very sweet to your own sister—  
whose spirit is one with yours.

ORESTES

You'll melt my heart.  
I want to respond to you with loving arms.  
And why should a wretch like me still feel shame?

[Orestes embraces Electra]

Ah, my sister's heart, how I love holding you!  
For us in our misery these pleasures  
replace our children and a marriage bed.

ELECTRA

If only the same sword could kill us both,

if that's permitted, and one burial chamber  
made of cedar wood receive us both.

ORESTES

That would be very sweet. But you do see  
we're short of friends who'd let us share a tomb.

ELECTRA

Did that coward Menelaus, the one  
who betrayed my father, not speak out  
on your behalf, making some attempt  
to stop you being killed?

ORESTES

Not at all—

he didn't even show his face. His hopes  
were on the sceptre, so he was careful  
not to save the members of his family.  
But come now, as we move to our deaths  
let's act bravely, in a way that's worthy  
of Agamemnon. So I, for my part,  
will show the city I am nobly born,  
when I push the sword into my liver.  
You, in turn, must match my courage.  
Pylades, you must supervise our deaths—  
when we're dead, dress our bodies properly.  
Carry them to our father's burial mound  
and bury us together. So farewell.  
I'm on my way to do it, as you see.

[Orestes starts to move into the house]

PYLADES

Hold on! There's first something I blame you for—  
if you believed I'd want to go on living  
after you were dead.

ORESTES

Why is it right  
that you should die with me?

PYLADES

You're asking that?  
How can I live without you as my friend?

ORESTES

You didn't kill your mother, as I did,  
to my misfortune.

PYLADES

I acted with you.  
For that I should have to suffer something.

ORESTES

Surrender your body to your father.  
Don't die with me. You still have a city. I do not. You have your father's house

and the safety of great wealth. You failed to marry my poor sister, as I promised out of a sense of our companionship. But you must take another marriage bed and have children. The family bonds we had no longer hold with you and me. Be happy, beloved face of my great friend. For us that is impossible, but you can be—we dead lack any sources of delight.

PYLADES

How far you are from understanding what my intentions are. May fruitful earth refuse to take my blood and the bright sky my spirit, if ever I betray you, if I let myself go free and leave you. I did the murder, too. I don't deny it. And I planned all those things for which you now are paying the penalty. And so I must go to my death along with you and her. Since I consented to the marriage, I consider her my wife. What would I say if I ever came to the land of Delphi, and reached the high citadel of Phocis, if I'd been your friend before your troubles but was no longer any friend of yours now you're in this distress? I can't do that. I'm involved in this, as well. Since we'll die let's see if we can find a way together to make Menelaus miserable as well.

ORESTES

My dearest friend, if only I could see something like that before I die.

PYLADES

Then listen.

You must postpone this sword blow.

ORESTES

I will, if I can get even with my enemy.

PYLADES [indicating the Chorus]

Be quiet. I don't have much confidence in these women.

ORESTES

Don't worry about them.

These women here are friends of ours.

PYLADES

Let's murder Helen—for Menelaus that would be a bitter pain.

ORESTES

But how?

I'm prepared to do it, if there's a chance  
we'd pull it off.

PYLADES

By hacking her to death. She's hiding in your house.

ORESTES

That's true enough.

In fact, she's stamping her seal on everything.

PYLADES

Not any more. She's engaged to Hades.

ORESTES

How do we do it? She has attendants—  
those barbarians.

PYLADES

What do they matter?

I'm not afraid of any Phrygians.

ORESTES

The kind of men who take care of mirrors  
and look after perfumes!

PYLADES

Did she come here  
bringing the luxuries of Troy with her?

ORESTES

Oh yes. For her Greece is too small a space to live in.

PYLADES

The race of slaves is nothing  
compared to those who're free.

ORESTES

If I do this,

I'm not afraid of dying twice.

PYLADES

Nor am I,

if I'm getting my revenge for you.

ORESTES

Explain the plan—keep on describing  
what you were talking about.

PYLADES

We'll go in,  
inside the house, as if we're on our way  
to kill ourselves.

ORESTES

I understand that part.

But I don't get the rest.

PYLADES

We'll parade our grief

for what we're suffering in front of her.

ORESTES

So she'll begin to weep, though on the inside she'll be overjoyed.

PYLADES

Then the state she's in  
will match our own.

ORESTES

After that, what do we do  
according to our plan?

PYLADES

We'll have swords  
hidden in our clothes.

ORESTES

And her attendants—  
do we kill them first?

PYLADES

We'll lock them up  
in different places in the house

ORESTES

And anyone  
who won't keep quiet we'll have to kill.

PYLADES Once that's done, the job itself will tell us  
where we direct our efforts.

ORESTES

Helen's murder.

I know what that means.

PYLADES

That's right.

Now listen to how well I've planned this out.

If we drew our swords against a woman  
with greater moderation, the killing

would be notorious, but as it is,

she'll pay the penalty to all of Greece—

she killed their fathers, destroyed their children,

and robbed married women of their husbands—

there'll be shouts of joy, people lighting fires

to the gods and calling many blessings down on you and me for carrying out the  
murder

of such an evil woman. With her death

you won't be called "killer of your mother"—

you'll move past that and find a better name.

They'll call you killer of Helen, the one

who slaughtered thousands. It can't be right,

it never would be right for Menelaus

to keep being successful while your father,

your sister, and yourself go to their deaths,

and your mother . . . but I'll avoid that subject as something indelicate to mention, or for him to have your house—after all, it was thanks to Agamemnon's spear he got his wife back. May I stop living if we don't pull out our swords against her! If we don't succeed in killing Helen, before we die we'll set the house on fire. We won't fail to win at least one glory—a noble death or a fine salvation.

CHORUS LEADER

Tyndareus' daughter disgraced her sex and justly earned the hatred of all women.

ORESTES

Ah me, a true friend—there's nothing better, not wealth or sovereignty. One cannot count what one would exchange for a noble friend. You're the one who devised those nasty things against Aegisthus, then stayed at my side when danger threatened. And now once again you're offering me a way of punishing my enemies and are not running off. But I'll stop praising you—excessive praise can prove a burden. Now, in any case, since my spirit is going to breathe its last, I want to do something to my enemies before I die, so I can demolish, in their turn, those who were traitors to me and make those who made me suffer grieve. Yes, I was born son of Agamemnon, who was considered worthy to rule Greece. He was no tyrant yet had god-like strength. I will not disgrace him, going to my death as if I were a slave. No. My life force I shall release quite freely. And I'll take revenge on Menelaus. If we could get just one thing, we could get lucky—some way to save ourselves despite all expectations might fall our way from somewhere, so we'd kill and not get killed ourselves. I pray for that. It's sweet to talk about what I desire in words with wings which cheer my spirit and don't cost anything.

ELECTRA

Brother, I think I've got the very thing you're praying for, a way of rescuing the three of us, you, him, and me.

ORESTES

You mean divine good will?  
That can't be it, because I know your mind

is too intelligent for that.

ELECTRA

Just listen—

and you, Pylades, pay attention, too.

ORESTES

All right, talk. The idea that there's good news makes me feel good.

ELECTRA

You know Helen's daughter?

Of course, you do.

ORESTES

Yes, I know Hermione.

My mother raised her.

ELECTRA

Well, she's gone off to Clytaemnestra's grave.

ORESTES

What's she doing there?

What hope are you suggesting?

ELECTRA

She's gone to pour libations on our mother's burial mound.

ORESTES

How does what you've said help us to safety?

ELECTRA

Seize her on her way back. Make her a hostage.

ORESTES

We three here are friends—so what remedy are you suggesting for us?

ELECTRA

Once Helen's dead,  
if Menelaus tries to do something  
to you or him or me—for this friendship  
unites us all as one—tell him you'll kill Hermione. You must pull out your sword  
and hold it here, across the young girl's throat.  
Once Menelaus sees Helen collapsed  
in her own blood, if he tries to save you,  
because he doesn't want the girl to die,  
then let her father have Hermione back,  
but if his passions get the best of him  
and he seeks your death, cut the young girl's neck.  
I think he'll put on quite a show at first,  
but soon enough his temper will calm down. He's not a bold courageous man by  
nature.

That's the defence I have to rescue us.

That's it. I'm finished.

ORESTES

You've got a man's heart,  
though your body shows that you're a woman.  
How much more you deserve to stay alive  
than die. Pylades, it would be bad luck  
if you were to lose a woman like this,  
but if you live, you'll be a happy man  
to share her marriage bed.

PYLADES

I hope that happens.  
May she come to the city of Phocis full honoured with fine wedding songs!

ORESTES

How long before Hermione gets home?  
All the things you said were really good,  
provided we succeed in seizing her,  
that whelp of a sacrilegious father.

ELECTRA

I expect she's already near the house,  
judging from the length of time she's taken.

ORESTES

Good. Now, Electra, you remain right here.  
Wait in front of the house for her return.  
And keep an eye out, in case anyone— my uncle or one of his associates—  
comes too near the house before the murder.  
If so, make a signal to those inside,  
by knocking on the door or sending word.  
Pylades, we'll go in and arm ourselves,  
get swords in hand to finish this last fight—  
you'll help me in carrying out the work.  
O father living at home in murky night,  
your son Orestes is summoning you  
to come and stand by those who need your help. In this distress I'm suffering  
injustice  
for your sake. I've acted righteously,  
but I've been betrayed by your own brother  
Now I wish to take his wife and kill her—  
be our accomplice in this act.

ELECTRA

O father,  
do come, if from there beneath the earth  
you hear the calls of your own children  
who are dying for your sake.

PYLADES

O Agamemnon,  
my father's kinsman, hear my prayers as well—  
save your children.

ORESTES



I murdered by mother . . .

ELECTRA

I handed him the sword . . .

PYLADES

I urged him on  
and overcame his hesitation.

ORESTES

I was defending you, father.

ELECTRA

And I  
did not betray you.

PYLADES

Surely you'll listen  
to these reproaches and save your children.

ORESTES

I'm pouring a libation to you in my tears.

ELECTRA

And I with my laments.

PYLADES

Stop this now.

Let's get to work. If it's true that prayers  
do pierce the ground, then he is listening.

O ancestral Zeus and holy Justice, grant success to him, to her, to me,  
to three friends facing a single struggle,  
a single punishment—we all will live,  
or pay the price and die.

[Orestes and Pylades enter the house. Electra turns to face the Chorus]

ELECTRA

O you women of Mycenae, my friends,  
among the first ranks of those who live  
in the Argives' Pelasgian home.

CHORUS LEADER

What is it you want to say, my lady? You still retain this title in the city  
where the sons of Danaus live.

ELECTRA

Place yourselves where you can watch the house—  
some of you there on the chariot roadway,  
some of you here along the other path.

CHORUS LEADER

Why are you calling me to do these tasks?  
Tell me, dear girl.

ELECTRA

I'm afraid someone  
may come across the murderous bloodshed  
in the house and witness new disasters  
to add to old calamities.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Let's hurry on our way.  
Let's go. I'll stand guard on this pathway,  
the one towards the east.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

And I'll guard this road,  
the one towards the west.

ELECTRA

Keep your eyes moving  
back and forth, checking on both sides.

CHORUS

Back and forth, then once more back again—  
I'm following what you said.

ELECTRA

Keep your eyes alert.  
Let them see everything through that hair of yours.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Who's that man approaching down the road?  
What country fellow's wandering round your home?

ELECTRA

We're lost, my friends! He'll tell our enemies about those predators with swords in  
there—  
and do so right away.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Calm your fears, my dear. It's not what you think—the path is empty.

ELECTRA

What's going on? Is your side still clear for me?  
Give me a report if it's all right, if there's no one there by the front courtyard.

FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

It's fine here. Just keep watching on your side.  
None of Danaus' sons is moving toward us.

SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Same thing over here. And there's no noise.

ELECTRA

All right. I'll try listening at the doorway.  
It's so quiet. You there inside the house,  
why the delay in bloodying your victim? They can't hear. Alas, this looks bad for  
me!

Has her loveliness made their swords grow blunt?  
Soon some armed man will be rushing here,  
coming from the Argives to rescue her  
and attack the house. Keep better guard.  
This is not a contest in sitting still.  
You women circle around over there,  
you others over there.

CHORUS

I shift around—

I'm looking everywhere along the road.

[Helen screams from inside the house]

HELEN [within]

O Pelasgian Argos! I'm being butchered!

CHORUS [speaking as separate individuals]

—Did you hear that? The men have set their hands to killing.

—That's Helen screaming. That's my guess.

ELECTRA

O Zeus, O eternal power of Zeus—  
just come and help my friends.

HELEN [within]

Menelaus, I'm dying—you're close by  
but you won't help me!

ELECTRA

Slaughter her, finish her off!

Destroy her! Let your two swords  
slash her with their double blades,  
the one who left her father, left her husband, and butchered  
so many Greeks, killed by spears  
beside the river bank, where tears  
and then more tears were shed,  
with iron weapons all around  
the whirling waters of Scamander. <sup>438</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

Be quiet! Don't say a thing! I hear the sound  
of someone coming along the pathway,  
near the house.

ELECTRA

You women, dearest friends,

Hermione's coming, while the murder's still going on. We must stop shouting. She'll  
walk

headlong into the meshes of our net.

Our catch will be a fine one, if she's caught.

Go back to your positions once again.

Keep your looks serene. Don't let your colour  
reveal what's happened. I'll keep my eyes  
looking sad, as if I had no knowledge  
of what's been done.

[Hermione enters, coming towards the house]

ELECTRA

Ah my girl, have you come from placing wreaths on Clytaemnestra's grave

<sup>438</sup> . . . *Scamander*: The Scamander is a river near Troy, right in the middle of the areas where the battles between Greeks and Trojans took place.

and pouring out libations to the dead?

HERMIONE

Once I obtained her favour, I returned.

But a certain fear has come over me—  
when I was still some distance from the house  
I heard some screaming coming from inside.

ELECTRA

Is that so strange? What's happening to us  
deserves such cries of sorrow.

HERMIONE

Don't say bad things.

What news have you to speak of?

ELECTRA

The state  
decrees Orestes and myself must die.

HERMIONE

No, no! You're my blood relatives!

ELECTRA

It's done.

We're strapped under necessity's harsh yoke.

HERMIONE

Was that why someone screamed inside the house?

ELECTRA

A suppliant cried out as he fell down  
at Helen's knees.

HERMIONE

Who was it? Tell me—

if you don't, I won't know any details.

ELECTRA

It was poor Orestes. He was begging  
not to die—and for me, as well.

HERMIONE

The house  
has a good reason then to cry aloud.

ELECTRA

What other better reason could there be  
for someone to scream about? But come now,  
join your relatives in their entreaties, prostrating yourself before your mother,  
now she enjoys such great prosperity,  
so Menelaus will not see us die.  
You who were nursed in my own mother's arms,  
have pity on us and assist us now  
in our distress. Enter the struggle here.  
I'll lead you in myself, for you alone  
are our last hope of rescue.

HERMIONE

Watch me—  
 my feet are hurrying towards the house.  
 As far as it lies within my power, may you be safe.

[Hermione enters the palace]

ELECTRA

You friends inside the house—  
 why not take your swords and seize your prey?

HERMIONE [from within the house]

O no! Who are these men I see?

ORESTES [from within]

Silence!

You've come to save us, not yourself.

ELECTRA [at the doorway, looking in]

Grab her!

Hold her down! Put your sword across her throat—  
 and keep quiet, so Menelaus will know  
 he's met some men, not Phrygian cowards,  
 and has been dealt with as bad men deserve.

[Electra enters the house]

CHORUS

O friends, begin the rhythmic beat,  
 the noise and shouts, before the house, so that this murder, once complete,  
 may not inspire a dreadful fear  
 among the Argives and they run here  
 to help the royal house, not before  
 I see for certain Helen's dead  
 and lying in blood there in the house  
 or hear the news from her attendant.  
 I know a part of what's gone on,  
 but there are things I do not know.  
 Justice from the gods has rightly come with retribution now to Helen—  
 because she filled all Greece with tears  
 thanks to that accursed destroyer,  
 Paris from Ida, who led Greeks to Troy.

CHORUS LEADER

The bolts on the palace doors are creaking.  
 Be quiet. One of the Phrygians  
 is coming out. We'll find out from him  
 how things are going inside.

[A Phrygian enters, quite terrified. He chants or sings his first speeches] <sup>439</sup>

PHRYGIAN

I've fled death from an Argive sword

<sup>439</sup>There is some dispute about how the Phrygian enters—does he come through the doors (as the Chorus Leader's line about the bolts suggests) or does he come down from the roof (as his opening lines suggest). West, who opts for an entry down from the roof, has a useful note on the point (p. 275-6).

by scrambling in my Asian slippers  
 over bedroom cedar ceiling beams  
 and the Doric carvings on the frieze  
 Ruined! Gone! O earth, earth,  
 in my barbarian flight! Alas for me!  
 You strange ladies, how can I flee—  
 by flying up through the shining sky  
 or out to sea, which bull-headed Ocean,  
 as he rolls in circles round the earth,  
 holds in his arms' embrace?

CHORUS LEADER

What's going on,  
 you slave of Helen, creature from Ida?

PHRYGIAN

Ilion, O Ilion! O woe is me  
 city of Phrygia, Ida' sacred hill  
 with its rich earth, how I lament  
 with my barbarian cries your ruin,  
 funereal melodies and dirges,  
 because the vision of loveliness  
 born from a swan-feathered bird,  
 Leda's lion cub, that hellish Helen,  
 that evil Helen, avenging fury  
 for Apollo's polished citadel. Alas! Alas, for these laments,  
 these dirges for Dardania,  
 for the horsemanship of Ganymede  
 Zeus' sexual partner in his bed. <sup>440</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

Tell us what's happening inside the house,  
 clearly and in detail. Your words so far  
 are difficult for me to understand.

PHRYGIAN

O Linus, Linus—as barbarians say  
 in their Asian tongue, once death begins,  
 whenever royal blood spills on the earth from iron swords of Hades. They came  
 there,  
 inside the house—I'm giving you each detail—  
 twin lions of Greece, one who was called  
 the commander's son, the other one

<sup>440</sup> . . . *in his bed*: These lines are such a strained evocation of different myths that it's hard not to see them as either satirical or intentionally comical. The reference to the swan is a reminder of Helen's conception, when Zeus in the form of a swan had sex with Leda, wife of Tyndareus. Apollo's polished citadel is a reference to the high tower of Troy. And Ganymede, a prince of Troy, was so beautiful that he was taken up to Olympus as a young boy to be Zeus' cup bearer and sexual playmate. It's not clear what the mention of his "horsemanship" indicates, unless it's a sexual pun. Dardania is a reference to Troy, the land of Dardanus (the founder of the city).

the son of Stophius, with a wicked mind,  
just like Odysseus, a silent traitor,  
but faithful to his friends, bold in a fight,  
clever in war, a deadly serpent. Damn him  
for his quiet deviousness, the scoundrel!  
They came in, up to where she was sitting, the woman archer Paris married, faces  
wet with tears, and humbly crouched down there,  
one on either side, keeping her hemmed in.  
They threw their suppliant arms around her knees—  
both laid hands on Helen. Then on the run  
her Phrygian servants came rushing up,  
each calling to the others in their fear  
that it might be a trick. To some of them  
it looked all right, but it seemed to others  
that the snake who murdered his own mother was entangling the child of Tyn-  
dareus  
in a devious plot to snare her.

CHORUS LEADER

Where were you?  
Had you run off in terror long before that?

PHRYGIAN

It so chanced that I, as a Phrygian,  
was following Phrygian fashions  
and with a circular feathered fan  
was wafting breezes, breezes by the curls  
of Helen, on Helen's cheeks—a habit  
we barbarians have. She was twisting yarn  
wrapping her fingers round the spindle. The thread was falling down onto the floor.  
With those Phrygian spoils she wished to make  
some purple clothes, a gift for Clytaemnestra,  
to adorn her tomb. Orestes then spoke up  
and called out to the Spartan girl, "Child of Zeus,  
leave your chair and stand up over here,  
by the ancient hearth of Pelops, our ancestor,  
so you can hear the words I have to say." He led her, yes led her, and she followed—  
she had no idea what he was planning. His partner, that evil man from Phocis,  
moved off, going about some other business.

"You Phrygian cowards, leave—go somewhere else!" Then he locked them up in  
different places

all through the house—some in the stables,  
some in the porticoes—some here, some there,  
leaving them in various locations  
some distance from their mistress.

CHORUS LEADER

Then what happened?

PHRYGIAN

Mother of Ida! O sacred mother, holy one! O the murderous suffering, the lawless evil I saw there, I witnessed in the royal palace. Their hands pulled swords out from the darkness of their purple robes, rolling their eyes back and forth, here and there, to check that no one else was there. They stood, like mountain boars, facing the woman there, and said, "You'll die. You'll die. Your evil mate is the one who's killing you—he betrayed his brother's family to die in Argos." She screamed, she howled, "Alas for me!" and beat her white forearm against her breast and struck her fist against her wretched head. Then she ran off—on golden-sandaled feet she rushed off, she fled. But then Orestes, jumping ahead in his Mycenaean boots, shoved his fingers in her hair, bent her neck on his left shoulder, and was quite prepared to drive his black sword right into her throat.

CHORUS LEADER

Where were you Phrygian household servants to defend her?

PHRYGIAN

We yelled—then with crowbars battered the doors and door posts in the rooms where we'd been held and ran from every spot to her assistance. One man carried stones, one had spears, and one held a drawn sword. But Pylades came at us without fear, just like Trojan Hector or like Ajax, with his triple plumes, whom I saw once—I saw him at Priam's gate. So we met at sword point. And then the Phrygians showed in their full glory how for warlike spirit they were born inferior in fighting strength compared to Greeks. One man ran away, one man was killed, another wounded, another pleaded to protect his life. We ran off, into the shadows, while men were falling dead. Some would soon collapse, and some were killed already. At that point, poor Hermione came in the palace, just as her mother, the unlucky one who'd given birth to her, had fallen down, sprawling on the ground about to die. The two men, like followers of Bacchus chasing a mountain cub without a thyrsus,



ran up and grabbed her. <sup>441</sup> Then they turned again  
to slaughter Zeus' daughter. But Helen  
had vanished from the room—right through the house—  
O Zeus, and earth, and light, and darkness—  
either by magic spells or wizard's skill  
or god's deceit! What happened after that  
I've no idea. Just like a fugitive, my legs crept from the house. So Menelaus,  
after going through such painful, painful toil,  
got his wife Helen out of Troy in vain.

[Orestes enters from the house]

CHORUS LEADER

Look how one strange sight succeeds another!  
I see Orestes, sword in hand, coming here,  
before the palace—his pace is jumpy.

ORESTES

Where's that man who ran out of the house,  
to escape my sword?

PHRYGIAN [throwing himself on the ground]

I bow to you, my lord,  
making obeisance, as is the habit  
of we barbarians.

ORESTES

We're not in Troy. We're in the land of Argos.

PHRYGIAN

But everywhere  
life is more welcome to wise men than death.

ORESTES

Those shouts you made—you weren't calling out  
for Menelaus to bring up help, were you?

PHRYGIAN

No, no. I was helping you, the worthier man.

ORESTES

So it was just for Tyndareus' daughter  
to be put to death?

PHRYGIAN

It was most just,  
even if she had three throats to slit.

ORESTES

Your cowardice makes your tongue delightful—  
that's not what you think inside.

PHRYGIAN

That's not true. Was she not the one who wiped out Greece  
and Phrygians, too?

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<sup>441</sup> ... *grabbed her*: The followers of Bacchus are the ecstatic worshippers who roam the mountains, often capturing wild animals and tearing them apart. The thyrsus is a plant stem, often with magical properties, which they carry as part of the ritual frenzy.

ORESTES

Swear you're not just saying this  
to humour me—or else I'll kill you.

PHRYGIAN

I swear it on my life—an oath I'll keep.

ORESTES [holding up his sword]  
Were all the Phrygians at Troy afraid  
of iron, the way you are?

PHRYGIAN

That sword of yours,  
put it away. When it's so close to me  
it has a dreadful glint of murder.

ORESTES

Are you afraid you'll turn to stone, as if  
you'd seen a Gorgon? <sup>442</sup>

PHRYGIAN

No, not to a stone, but to a corpse. I don't know anything  
about the Gorgon's head.

ORESTES

You're just a slave.  
Do you fear Hades, which will release you  
from your troubles?

PHRYGIAN

Every man, slave or not,  
is glad to look upon the light of day.

ORESTES

Well said. Your shrewd mind is your salvation.  
Go inside the house.

PHRYGIAN

You won't kill me?

ORESTES

You're free to go.

PHRYGIAN

That's beautiful, what you just said.

ORESTES

But I'm about to reconsider.

PHRYGIAN

Now your words are not so nice.

ORESTES

You fool! Do you think I could stand to stain your neck,  
make it bloody? You weren't born a woman  
and don't belong with men. I left the house  
to stop you making such a noise. Argos

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<sup>442</sup> . . . *seen a Gorgon*: The Gorgons were three sisters whose looks could turn people into stone. One of them who was mortal (Medusa) was killed by Perseus.

is quick to move once it hears the call.  
 But still I'm not afraid of matching swords  
 with Menelaus. Let him come—the man  
 who's so proud of that golden hair of his  
 reaching to his shoulders. If he gathers  
 Argives up and leads them to the palace, seeking to avenge the death of Helen,  
 and will not rescue me and my sister  
 and Pylades, who worked with me in this,  
 he'll see two dead, his daughter and his wife.

[Orestes enters the palace. The Phrygian leaves]

CHORUS [different parts speak different sections]

Alas, alas, how things fall out!  
 Another struggle—once more the house  
 is plunged into another fearful round  
 afflicting the family of Atreus!

What do we do? Tell the news in town?  
 Or stay quiet? That's the safer course, my friends.

Look there, in front of the palace. Look! That smoke rushing up to heaven  
 is telling its own public story.

They're lighting torches—they're going to fire  
 the house of Tantalus! They won't stop killing!

God determines how things end for mortal men,  
 whatever end he wishes.

Those demons of revenge have mighty power.  
 The house has fallen—fallen through blood,  
 thanks to Myrtilus tumbling from his chariot. <sup>443</sup>

CHORUS LEADER

But look! I see Menelaus coming—  
 he's near the house and moving quickly.  
 He must have heard what's happening here.  
 You descendants of Atreus in there,  
 hurry now to close and bolt the doors.  
 A man who's had success is dangerous  
 for those whose situation is not good—  
 that means men like you, Orestes.

[Menelaus enters with an armed escort]

MENELAUS

I came because I heard of dreadful acts,  
 violent deeds committed by two lions. I don't call them men. I was told my wife  
 did not die but has gone and disappeared,  
 an idle rumour which some fool deluded

<sup>443</sup> . . . *from his chariot*: As noted before, Myrtilus conspired with Pelops to trick king Oenomaus in a chariot race, so that Pelops could win Hippodameia, the king's daughter. Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, sabotaged the royal chariot. Pelops then killed Myrtilus by throwing him out of his chariot into the sea. This event launches the disasters which befall the House of Atreus (Atreus is one of Pelops' sons).

by his fear reported to me. It's a trick  
made up by that man who killed his mother.  
Ridiculous! Someone open up the house.  
I'm telling my escort to break in the doors,  
so I may rescue my own child at least  
from the hands of those bloodstained murderers,  
and take back my poor unfortunate wife. Those who killed my consort must die  
with her—  
my own hands will kill them.

[As the escort moves towards the doors of the palace, Orestes appears on the  
roof with Pylades. Orestes is holding Hermione with a sword at her throat, and  
Pylades is holding burning torches]

ORESTES [from the roof]

You down there!

Keep your hands off those door bolts. I mean you,  
Menelaus, you who exalt yourself  
with impudence. I'll break this parapet—  
the wall was made by masons long ago—  
and smash your head in with a coping stone.  
The bolts are fastened down with metal rods.  
They'll check your eagerness to bring help fast  
and stop you gaining access to the house.

MENELAUS

Hold on. What's happening? I see torches blazing,  
men cornered up there on the palace roof, a sword ready to cut my daughter's  
throat.

ORESTES

You want to question me or hear me talk?

MENELAUS

Neither. But it seems I'll have to hear you out.

ORESTES

I'm going to kill you daughter—if you want to know.

MENELAUS

After killing Helen, you're going to pile  
one murder on another?

ORESTES

I wish I'd done it,  
instead of having the gods trick me.

MENELAUS

You deny you killed her just to mock me?

ORESTES

Yes. It hurts to say I didn't do it.

If only I had . . .

MENELAUS

If only you'd done what?  
You're trying to frighten me.

ORESTES

. . . thrown the woman  
who pollutes all Greece down into hell.

MENELAUS

Give me my wife's corpse, so I can bury her.

ORESTES

Ask the gods for her. But your daughter here  
I will kill.

MENELAUS

The man who killed his mother  
compounds that murder with another.

ORESTES

The man who stands up for his father—  
the man you betrayed and left to die.

MENELAUS

Isn't your mother's blood now on your hands  
enough for you?

ORESTES

No. I'd never get tired  
if I had to keep killing evil woman  
for an eternity.

MENELAUS

And you, Pylades,  
are you his partner in this murder?

ORESTES

His silence speaks for him. It's quite enough  
if I say he is.

MENELAUS

Well, you'll regret it,  
unless you sprout wings and fly away.

ORESTES

We're not going to run. We'll burn the palace.

MENELAUS

What? You're intending to destroy this house, your own ancestral home?

ORESTES

So you won't have it.  
And in the flames I'll sacrifice this girl.

MENELAUS

Kill her, then. After the slaughter, you'll pay.  
I'll punish you.

ORESTES

All right, I will.

[Orestes moves as if he is going to kill Hermione]

MENELAUS

No, no!  
Don't do it!

ORESTES

Silence! You must endure this,  
justice for the evils you have done.

MENELAUS

It is just that you should live?

ORESTES

Yes, it is—  
and rule a country.

MENELAUS

A country? Where?

ORESTES

Right here. In Pelasgian Argos.

MENELAUS

O yes,  
you'd be so good at handling those vessels we use for ritual washing. <sup>444</sup>

ORESTES

Why not?

MENELAUS

And killing animals for sacrifice  
before a battle.

ORESTES

Would you be suitable?

MENELAUS

Yes, my hands are pure.

ORESTES

But your heart is not.

MENELAUS

What man would speak to you?

ORESTES

Any man  
who loved his father.

MENELAUS

What about the one  
who respects his mother?

ORESTES

A man like that  
is born lucky.

MENELAUS

You're not like that.

ORESTES

No, I'm not.  
Bad women are not something I enjoy.

MENELAUS

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<sup>444</sup> . . . *ritual washing*: One of the duties of a king was to lead important religious ceremonies. These could only be conducted by someone free of the pollution from any crime he had committed.

Take your sword away from my daughter.

ORESTES

You're a born liar.

MENELAUS

You'll kill my daughter?

ORESTES

Yes. Now you're not spreading lies

MENELAUS

That's dreadful.

What should I do?

ORESTES

You should go to the Argives

and win them over . . .

MENELAUS

What should I tell them?

ORESTES Tell them not to kill us. Beg the city.

MENELAUS

Or else you'll kill my child?

ORESTES

That how it stands.

MENELAUS

O poor Helen . . .

ORESTES [interrupting]

What about my troubles?

MENELAUS

. . . I brought you back from Phrygia to be killed.

ORESTES

If only she had been!

MENELAUS

After I went through

all that effort.

ORESTES

Except on my behalf.

MENELAUS

I've had to endure such awful suffering!

ORESTES

Because you were no help at all back then.

MENELAUS

You've caught me out.

ORESTES

No. You caught yourself

by being such a coward.

[Orestes calls down to Electra who comes out in front of the palace doors in response to his call]

ORESTES

Electra, set fire to the house from underneath.

And you, Pylades, my most trusty friend,  
burn down the parapets of these walls here.

MENELAUS

O land of the Danaans and you who live  
in horse-rich Argos, take up your weapons  
and bring help on the run. To save his life this man here is using force against you,  
against the entire city, though he carries  
the pollution of his mother's murdered blood.

[Menelaus' escort starts moving en masse toward the palace doors. Meanwhile  
fire breaks out on the roof and inside the palace. Then Apollo and Helen suddenly  
appear descending from on high]

APOLLO

Menelaus, you must blunt the sharp edge  
of your temper. I am Phoebus, Leto's son,  
calling you from close at hand—and that man  
holding a sword and standing by that girl,  
Orestes, so you know the news I bring.  
As for Helen whom you were so eager  
to destroy in your rage at Menelaus, you failed to kill her, and she's here with me  
in the surrounding air. I rescued her  
and she wasn't murdered. Yes, I saved her.  
I snatched her away from that sword of yours,  
at my father Zeus' bidding, for Helen,  
a child of Zeus, is to live forever.  
She'll sit with Castor and Polydeuces,  
held up in the upper air, a saviour  
for sailing men. So choose another wife,  
Menelaus, and take her home. The gods used this one's outstanding loveliness  
to bring Greeks and Phrygians together  
and cause a slaughter, so they might stop  
the overwhelming crowds of mortal men  
destroying the earth. So much for Helen.  
And as for you, Orestes, you must cross  
the borders of this country and then live  
on Parrhasian soil for one entire year.<sup>445</sup>  
Because you'll be an exile there, that land  
will be called the country of Orestes by people in Azania and Arcadia.  
From there you'll go to the Athenians' city  
and must stand trial for murdering your mother  
against the three Eumenides. The gods  
who on the Hill of Ares judge your case  
will act righteously—they'll divide their votes,  
and from that it's certain you will triumph.  
And then, Orestes, it is foreordained

<sup>445</sup>\* . . . one entire year: Parrhasia is a region in Arcadia, an area in the central Peloponnese.



that you will wed Hermione, the girl  
 whose throat you're threatening with that sword. The man who thinks he's going  
 to marry her,  
 Neoptolemus, will never wed her.  
 He's fated to die by a sword in Delphi,  
 when he demands satisfaction from me  
 for the killing of his father, Achilles.<sup>446</sup>  
 Give your sister in marriage to Pylades,  
 as you once promised. His future life  
 will be a happy one. As for Argos,  
 Menelaus, you must leave Orestes  
 to rule the state. Go and govern Sparta. Keep that as a dowry from your wife.  
 The countless troubles she has always brought  
 up to this point will end. I'll set things right  
 between Orestes and the city, for I  
 was the one who made him kill his mother.

ORESTES

O prophetic Loxias—in your oracles  
 you prophesy the truth, there's nothing false.  
 And yet fear gripped me that I might have heard  
 some demon when I listened to your voice.  
 But all has ended well. I will obey  
 what you have said. See here—I now release  
 Hermione from death, and I agree  
 to take her as my wife, just as soon as  
 her father gives her to me.

MENELAUS

All hail, Helen,  
 daughter of Zeus. I wish you happiness  
 in the gods' sacred home. Orestes,  
 following what Phoebus said, I here pledge  
 my daughter to you. You're a noble man. May you prosper in a noble marriage,  
 and may I as well, who give her to you.

APOLLO

Then each of you set out to the place  
 I have arranged, and end your quarreling.

MENELAUS

I must obey.

ORESTES

So must I. I'll make peace  
 with you, Menelaus, in this matter, and, Loxias, with what your oracle has said.

APOLLO

Go on your way now, and honour Peace,

<sup>446</sup> . . . *his father, Achilles*: Achilles was killed at Troy. His son Neoptolemus came to Troy, joined the fighting, and killed Priam, king of Troy. He was later killed by a priest at Delphi, Apollo's shrine. There are other stories, however, which have Neoptolemus marrying Hermione.

the fairest of the gods. I'll bring Helen  
to the halls of Zeus, once I've moved across  
the star-bright sky. There she will be seated  
by Hera and Hebe, wife of Hercules, and men will forever pay her honour  
as a goddess, making their libations.  
With those two Zeus-born sons of Tyndareus,  
she'll be a guardian for sailors out at sea.

[Apollo and Helen leave. Orestes, Hermione and Pylades move  
down into the house. Menelaus and his escort depart]

CHORUS

O great and holy Victory, may you take possession of my life,  
and never cease to crown me with your garlands.

# (EURIPIDES) Bacchae

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>447</sup> translation by Ian Johnston

For a brief interpretative introduction to *The Bacchae*, see [this section](#)

...

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

**DIONYSUS:** divine son of Zeus and Semele, also called Bromius or Bacchus.

**TIRESIAS:** an old blind prophet

**CADMUS:** grandfather of both Dionysus and Pentheus, an old man

**PENTHEUS:** young king of Thebes, grandson of Cadmus, cousin of Dionysus

**AGAVE:** mother of Pentheus, daughter of Cadmus, sister of Semele

**FIRST MESSENGER:** a cattle herder

**SECOND MESSENGER:** an attendant on Pentheus

**CHORUS OF BACCHAE:** worshippers of Dionysus who have followed him from Asia.

**SOLDIERS** and **ATTENDANTS** around Pentheus

*[Scene: The Greek city of Thebes, outside the royal palace. Dionysus, appearing as young man, is alone, with the palace behind him, its main doors facing the audience. He speaks directly to the audience]*

DIONYSUS

I've arrived here in the land of Thebes,

I, Dionysus, son of Zeus, born to him

from Semele, Cadmus' daughter, delivered  
by a fiery midwife—Zeus' lightning flash. <sup>448</sup>

Yes, I've changed my form from god to human,  
appearing here at these streams of Dirce,  
the waters of Ismarus. I see my mother's tomb—  
for she was wiped out by that lightning bolt.

It's there, by the palace, with that rubble,  
the remnants of her house, still smoldering from Zeus' living fire—Hera's undying  
outrage

against my mother. But I praise Cadmus.

He's made his daughter's shrine a sacred place.

I have myself completely covered it  
with leafy shoots of grape-bearing vines.

I've left the fabulously wealthy East,  
lands of Lydians and Phrygians,

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<sup>447</sup><http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/euripides.htm>

<sup>448</sup>Semele, Cadmus' daughter and Dionysus' mother, had an affair with Zeus. Hera, Zeus' wife, tricked Zeus into destroying Semele with a lightning bolt. Zeus took the infant Dionysus from his mother's womb as she was dying and sewed him into his thigh, where Dionysus continued to grow until he was delivered as a new-born infant.

Persia's sun-drenched plains, walled towns in Bactria.  
 I've moved across the bleak lands of the Medes, through rich Arabia, all Asian lands,  
 along the salt-sea coast, through those towns  
 with their beautifully constructed towers,  
 full of barbarians and Greeks all intermingled.  
 Now I've come to Thebes, city of Greeks,  
 only after I've set those eastern lands  
 dancing in the mysteries I established,  
 making known to men my own divinity.  
 Thebes is the first city of the Greeks  
 where I've roused people to shout out my cries,  
 with this deerskin draped around my body,  
 this ivy spear, a thyrsus, in my hand. <sup>449</sup>  
 For my mother's sisters have acted badly,  
 something they, of all people, should avoid.  
 They boasted aloud that I, Dionysus, was no child of Zeus, claiming Semele,  
 once she was pregnant by some mortal man,  
 attributed her bad luck in bed to Zeus, a story made up (they said) to trick Cadmus.  
 Those sisters state that's why Zeus killed her,  
 because she lied about the man she'd slept with. So I've driven those women from  
 their homes  
 in a frenzy—they now live in the mountains,  
 out of their minds. I've made them put on costumes,  
 outfits appropriate for my mysteries.  
 All Theban offspring—or, at least, all women—  
 I've driven in a crazed fit from their homes. Now they sit out there among the  
 rocks, underneath green pine trees, no roof overhead, Cadmus' daughters in their  
 company as well.  
 For this city has to learn, though against its will,  
 that it has yet to be initiated  
 into my Dionysian rites. Here I plead  
 the cause of my own mother, Semele, appearing as a god to mortal men,  
 the one she bore to Zeus. Now Cadmus,  
 the old king, has just transferred his power,  
 his royal authority, to Pentheus,  
 his daughter's son, who, in my case at least,  
 fights against the gods, prohibiting me  
 all sacrificial offerings. When he prays, he chooses to ignore me. For this neglect  
 I'll demonstrate to him, to all in Thebes,  
 that I was born a god. Once these things here  
 have been made right, I'll move on somewhere else,  
 to some other land, revealing who I am.  
 But if Thebans in this city, in their anger,

<sup>449</sup>A thyrsus (pl. thyrsos) is a hollow plant stalk, usually decorated with ivy, and carried as a symbol of Dionysus in the dancing celebrations (where it can acquire magical powers).

try to make those Bacchic women leave,  
to drive them from the mountains forcibly,  
then I, commander of these Maenads,  
will fight them. <sup>450</sup> That's why I've transformed myself,  
assumed a mortal shape, altered my looks,  
so I resemble any human being.

[Enter the Chorus of Bacchae, dressed in ritual deerskin, carrying small drums like tambourines]

But you there, you women who've left Tmolus,  
backbone of Lydia, my band of worshippers,  
whom I've led here from barbarian lands,  
my comrades on the road and when we rest,  
take up your drums, those instruments of yours  
from Phrygian cities, first invented  
by mother Rhea and myself. Move round here,  
beat those drums by Pentheus' palace, <sup>80</sup>  
let Cadmus' city see you, while I go,  
in person, to the clefts of Mount Cithaeron,  
to my Bacchae, to join their dancing. <sup>451</sup>

[Exit Dionysus]

CHORUS [singing and dancing]

FIRST VOICE

From Asia, from sacred Tmolus  
I've come to dance,  
to move swiftly in my dance—  
for Bromius—  
sweet and easy task,  
to cry out in celebration,  
hailing great god Bacchus. <sup>452</sup>

SECOND VOICE

Who's in the street? Who's there? Who?  
Let him stay inside  
out of our way.  
Let every mouth be pure,  
completely holy,  
speak no profanities.  
In my hymn I celebrate  
our old eternal custom,  
hailing Dionysus.

THIRD VOICE

O blessed is the man, the fortunate man who knows

<sup>450</sup>The Maenads, who make up the Chorus of the play, are the female followers of Dionysus, who have followed him from Phrygia in Asia Minor to Thebes.

<sup>451</sup>Rhea is Zeus' mother. The drums are tambourines. Tmolus is a mountain in Asia Minor. Mount Cithaeron is a sacred mountain near Thebes.

<sup>452</sup>Bromius and Bacchus are alternate names for Dionysus.

the rituals of the gods,  
who leads a pious life,  
whose spirit merges  
with these Bacchic celebrations,  
frenzied dancing in the mountains,  
our purifying rites—  
one who reveres these mysteries  
from Cybele, our great mother,  
who, waving the thyrsus, 110  
forehead crowned with ivy,  
serves Dionysus.

## FOURTH VOICE

On Bacchae! Bacchae, move!  
Bring home Bromius, our god,  
son of god, great Dionysus,  
from Phrygian mountains  
to spacious roads of Greece—  
Hail Bromius!

## FIFTH VOICE

His mother dropped him early,  
as her womb, in forceful birth pangs, was struck by Zeus' flying lightning bolt,  
a blast which took her life.  
Then Zeus, son of Cronos,  
at once hid him away  
in a secret birthing chamber,  
buried in his thigh,  
shut in with golden clasps,  
concealed from Hera.

## SIXTH VOICE

Fates made him perfect.  
Then Zeus gave birth to him,  
the god with ox's horns,  
crowned with wreaths of snakes—  
that's why the Maenads  
twist in their hair  
wild snakes they capture.

## SEVENTH VOICE

O Thebes, nursemaid of Semele,  
put on your ivy crown,  
flaunt your green yew,  
flaunt its sweet fruit!  
Consecrate yourselves to Bacchus, with stems of oak or fir,  
Dress yourselves in spotted fawn skins,  
trimmed with white sheep's wool.  
As you wave your thyrsus,  
revere the violence it contains.

All the earth will dance at once.  
 Whoever leads our dancing—  
 that one is Bromius!  
 To the mountain, to the mountain,  
 where the pack of women waits, all stung to frenzied madness  
 to leave their weaving shuttles,  
 goaded on by Dionysus.

## EIGHTH VOICE

O you dark chambers of the Curetes,  
 you sacred caves in Crete,  
 birthplace of Zeus,  
 where the Corybantes in their caves,  
 men with triple helmets, made for me  
 this circle of stretched hide. <sup>453</sup>  
 In their wild ecstatic dancing, they mixed this drum beat  
 with the sweet seductive tones  
 of flutes from Phrygia,  
 then gave it to mother Rhea  
 to beat time for the Bacchae,  
 when they sang in ecstasy.  
 Nearby, orgiastic satyrs,  
 in ritual worship of the mother goddess,  
 took that drum, then brought it  
 into their biennial dance, bringing joy to Dionysus.

## NINTH VOICE

He's welcome in the mountains,  
 when he sinks down to the ground,  
 after the running dance,  
 wrapped in holy deerskin,  
 hunting the goat's blood,  
 blood of the slain beast,  
 devouring its raw flesh with joy,  
 rushing off into the mountains,  
 in Phrygia, in Lydia,  
 leading the dance—  
 Bromius—Evoë! <sup>454</sup>

## ALL

The land flows with milk,  
 the land flows with wine,  
 the land flows with honey from the bees.  
 He holds the torch high,  
 our leader, the Bacchic One,

<sup>453</sup>Cybele is an eastern mother goddess. The Curetes and Corybantes are attendants on the goddess Cybele. They banged their drums to drown out the cries of the infant Zeus, whose mother, Rhea, was trying to protect him from his father, Cronos.

<sup>454</sup>Evoë is a cry of celebration in the Dionysian rituals.

blazing flame of pine,  
 sweet smoke like Syrian incense,  
 trailing from his thyrsus. As he dances, he runs,  
 here and there,  
 rousing the stragglers,  
 stirring them with his cries,  
 thick hair rippling in the breeze.  
 Among the Maenads' shouts  
 his voice reverberates:  
 "On Bacchants, on!  
 With the glitter of Tmolus,  
 which flows with gold, chant songs to Dionysus,  
 to the loud beat of our drums.  
 Celebrate the god of joy  
 with your own joy,  
 with Phrygian cries and shouts!  
 When sweet sacred pipes  
 play out their rhythmic holy song,  
 in time to the dancing wanderers,  
 then to the mountains,  
 on, on to the mountains."  
 Then the bacchanalian woman  
 is filled with total joy—  
 like a foal in pasture  
 right beside her mother—  
 her swift feet skip in playful dance.

[Enter Tiresias, a very old blind man, dressed in clothing appropriate for the Dionysian ritual. He goes up to the palace door and knocks very aggressively]

TIRESIAS [*shouting*] Where's the servant on the door? You in there,  
 tell Cadmus to get himself out of the house,  
 Agenor's lad, who came here from Sidon,  
 then put up the towers of this Theban town. <sup>455</sup>  
 Go tell him Tiresias is waiting for him. He knows well enough why I've come for him.

I'm an old man, and he's even older,  
 but we've agreed make ourselves a thyrsus,  
 to put on fawn skins and crown our heads  
 with garlands of these ivy branches.

[Enter Cadmus from the palace, a very old man, also dressed in clothing appropriate for the Dionysian ritual]

CADMUS  
 My dearest friend,  
 I was inside the house. I heard your voice.

<sup>455</sup> Sidon, in Asia Minor, as these lines inform was, was the place where the royal family of Thebes originated. Cadmus had come from Asia Minor, sent out from home by his father, and founded Thebes.



I recognized it—the voice of a man truly wise.  
So I've come equipped with all this god stuff.  
We must sing his praise, as much as we can,  
for this Dionysus, well, he's my daughter's child.  
Now he's revealed himself a god to men.  
Where must I go and dance? Where do I get  
to move my feet and shake my old gray head?  
You must guide me, Tiresias, one old man  
leading another, for you're the expert here.  
O I'll never tire of waving this thyrsus,  
day and night, striking the ground. What rapture!  
Now we can forget that we're old men.

TIRESIAS

You feel the same way I do, then.  
For I'm young and going to try the dancing.

CADMUS

Shall we go up the mountain in a chariot?

TIRESIAS

The god would not then get complete respect.

CADMUS

So I'll be your nursemaid—one old man  
will take charge of another one?

TIRESIAS

The god himself  
will get us to the place without our efforts.

CADMUS

Of all the city are we the only ones  
who'll dance to honour Bacchus?

TIRESIAS

Yes, indeed,  
for we're the only ones whose minds are clear.  
As for the others, well, their thinking's wrong.

CADMUS

There'll be a long wait. Take my hand.

TIRESIAS [holding out his hand] Here. Take it—make a pair of it and yours.

CADMUS

I'm a mortal, so I don't mock the gods.

TIRESIAS

To the gods we mortals are all ignorant.  
Those old traditions from our ancestors,  
the ones we've had as long as time itself,  
no argument will ever overthrow,  
in spite of subtleties sharp minds invent.  
Will someone say I disrespect old age,  
if I intend to dance with ivy on my head?  
Not so, for the god makes no distinctions— whether the dancing is for young or

old.

He wants to gather honours from us all,  
to be praised communally, without division.

CADMUS

Since you're blind to daylight, Tiresias,  
I'll be your seer, tell you what's going on—  
Pentheus, that child of Echion, the one  
to whom I handed over power in this land,  
he's coming here, to the house. He's in a rush.  
He looks so flustered. What news will he bring?

[Enter Pentheus, with some armed attendants. At first he does not notice Cadmus and Tiresias, not until he calls attention to them]

PENTHEUS

It so happens I've been away from Thebes, but I hear about disgusting things going on,

here in the city—women leaving home  
to go to silly Bacchic rituals,  
cavorting there in mountain shadows,  
with dances honouring some upstart god,  
this Dionysus, whoever he may be. Mixing bowls  
in the middle of their meetings are filled with wine.

They creep off one by one to lonely spots  
to have sex with men, claiming they're Maenads  
busy worshipping. But they rank Aphrodite, goddess of sexual desire, ahead of Bacchus.

All the ones I've caught, my servants guard  
in our public prison, their hands chained up.  
All those who're still away, I'll chase down,  
hunt them from the mountains—that includes  
Agave, who bore me to Echion, Ino,  
and Autonoe, Actaeon's mother. <sup>456</sup>

Once I've clamped them all in iron fetters, I'll quickly end this perverse nastiness,  
this Bacchic celebration. People say some stranger has arrived, some wizard,  
a conjurer from the land of Lydia—

with sweet-smelling hair in golden ringlets  
and Aphrodite's charms in wine-dark eyes.  
He hangs around the young girls day and night,  
dangling in front of them his joyful mysteries.

If I catch him in this city, I'll stop him.

He'll make no more clatter with his thyrsus,  
or wave his hair around. I'll chop off his head,  
slice it right from his body. This man claims that Dionysus is a god, alleging  
that once upon a time he was sewn up,

<sup>456</sup>Agave (Pentheus' mother), Ino, and Autonoe were sisters, all daughters of Cadmus. Actaeon, son of Autonoe, offended the goddess Artemis, who turned him into a stag and had him torn apart by his own hunting dogs (see line 429 below).

stitched inside Zeus' thigh—but Dionysus  
was burned to death, along with Semele,  
in that lightning strike, because she'd lied.  
She maintained that she'd had sex with Zeus.  
All this surely merits harsh punishment, death by hanging. Whoever this stranger  
is,  
his insolence is an insult to me.

[noticing Cadmus and Tiresias for the first time]

Well, here's something totally astounding! I see Tiresias, our soothsayer, all  
dressed up  
in dappled fawn skins—my mother's father, too!  
This is ridiculous. To take a thyrsus  
and jump around like this.

[to Cadmus]

You sir,  
I don't like to see such arrant foolishness  
from your old age. Why not throw out that ivy?  
And, grandfather, why not let that thyrsus go?

[turning to address Tiresias]

Tiresias, you're the one who's put him up to this.  
You want to bring in some new god for men,  
so you'll be able to inspect more birds,  
and from his sacrifices make more money.  
If your gray old age did not protect you,  
you'd sit in chains with all the Bacchae  
for such a ceremonial perversion.  
Whenever women at some banquet  
start to take pleasure in the gleaming wine,  
I say there's nothing healthy in their worshipping.

CHORUS LEADER

That's impiety! O stranger,  
have you no reverence for the gods, for Cadmus,  
who sowed that crop of men born from the earth? You're a child of Echion—do  
you wish  
to bring your own family into disrepute?

TIRESIAS

When a man of wisdom has good occasion  
to speak out, and takes the opportunity,  
it's not that hard to give an excellent speech.  
You've got a quick tongue and seem intelligent,  
but your words don't make any sense at all.  
A fluent orator whose power comes  
from self-assurance and from nothing else  
makes a bad citizen, for he lacks sense.  
This man, this new god, whom you ridicule—  
it's impossible for me to tell you

just how great he'll be in all of Greece.  
Young man, among human beings two things  
stand out preeminent, of highest rank.  
Goddess Demeter is one—she's the earth  
(though you can call her any name you wish),  
and she feeds mortal people cereal grains.  
The other one came later, born of Semele—  
he brought with him liquor from the grape, something to match the bread from  
Demeter.  
He introduced it among mortal men.  
When they can drink up what streams off the vine,  
unhappy mortals are released from pain.  
It grants them sleep, allows them to forget  
their daily troubles. Apart from wine,  
there is no cure for human hardship.  
He, being a god, is poured out to the gods,  
so human beings receive fine benefits  
as gifts from him. And yet you mock him. Why? Because he was sewn into Zeus  
thigh?  
Well, I'll show you how this all makes sense.  
When Zeus grabbed him from the lightning flame,  
he brought him to Olympus as a god.  
But Hera wished to throw him out of heaven.  
So Zeus, in a manner worthy of a god,  
came up with a cunning counter plan.  
From the sky which flows around the earth,  
Zeus broke off a piece, shaped it like Dionysus,  
then gave that to Hera, as a hostage. The real child he sent to nymphs to raise,  
thus saving him from Hera's jealousy. Over time people mixed up "sky" and "thigh,"  
saying he'd come from Zeus's thigh, changing words,  
because he, a god, had once been hostage  
to goddess Hera. So they made up the tale.  
This god's a prophet, too, for in his rites—  
the Bacchic celebrations and the madness—  
a huge prophetic power is unleashed.  
When the god fully enters human bodies, 380  
he makes those possessed by frenzy prophets.  
They speak of what will come in future days  
He also shares the work of war god Ares.  
For there are times an army all drawn up,  
its weapons ready, can shake with terror,  
before any man has set hand to his spear.  
Such madness comes from Dionysus.  
Some day you'll see him on those rocks at Delphi,  
leaping with torches on the higher slopes,  
way up there between two mountain peaks, waving and shaking his Bacchic wand,

a great power in Greece. Trust me, Pentheus.  
Don't be too confident a sovereign's force  
controls men. If something seems right to you,  
but your mind's diseased, don't think that's wisdom.  
So welcome this god into your country.  
Pour libations to him, then celebrate  
these Bacchic rites with garlands on your head.  
On women, where Aphrodite is concerned,  
Dionysus will not enforce restraint— such modesty you must seek in nature,  
where it already dwells. For any woman  
whose character is chaste won't be defiled  
by Bacchic revelry. Don't you see that?  
When there are many people at your gates,  
you're happy. The city shouts your praise.  
It celebrates the name of Pentheus.  
The god, too, I think, derives great pleasure  
from being honoured. And so Cadmus,  
whom you mock, and I will crown our heads with ivy and will join the ritual,  
an old gray team, but still we have to dance.  
Your words will not turn me against the god,  
for you are mad—under a cruel delusion.  
No drug can heal that ailment—in fact,  
some drug has caused it.

CHORUS LEADER

Old man,  
you've not disgraced Apollo with your words,  
and by honouring this Dionysus,  
a great god, you show your moderation.

CADMUS

My child, Tiresias has given you  
some good advice. You should live among us,  
not outside traditions. At this point,  
you're flying around—thinking, but not clearly.  
For if, as you claim, this man is not a god,  
why not call him one? Why not tell a lie,  
a really good one? Then it will seem  
that some god has been born to Semele.  
We—and all our family—will win honour.  
Remember the dismal fate of Actaeon—  
torn to pieces in some mountain forest by blood-thirsty dogs he'd raised himself.  
He'd boasted he was better in the hunt  
than Artemis. Don't suffer the same fate.  
Come here. Let me crown your head with ivy.  
Join us in giving honour to this god.

PENTHEUS

Keep your hands off me! Be off with you—

go to these Bacchic rituals of yours.  
But don't infect me with your madness.  
As for the one who in this foolishness  
has been your teacher, I'll bring him to justice.  
[to his attendants]

One of you, go quickly to where this man,  
Tiresias, has that seat of his, the place  
where he inspects his birds. Take some levers,  
knock it down. Demolish it completely.  
Turn the whole place upside down—all of it.  
Let his holy ribbons fly off in the winds.  
That way I'll really do him damage.  
You others—go to the city, scour it  
to capture this effeminate stranger,  
who corrupts our women with a new disease, and thus infects our beds. If you get  
him,  
tie him up and bring him here for judgment,  
a death by stoning. That way he'll see  
his rites in Thebes come to a bitter end.

[Exit Pentheus into the palace]

TIRESIAS

You unhappy man, you've no idea  
just what it is you're saying. You've gone mad!  
Even before now you weren't in your right mind.  
Let's be off, Cadmus. We'll pray to the god  
on Pentheus' behalf, though he's a savage,  
and for the city, too, so he won't harm it. Come with me—bring the ivy-covered  
staff.  
See if you can help support my body.  
I'll do the same for you. It would be shameful  
if two old men collapsed. No matter—  
for we must serve Bacchus, son of Zeus.  
But you, Cadmus, you should be more careful,  
or Pentheus will bring trouble in your home.  
I'm not saying this as a prophecy,  
but on the basis of what's going on.  
A man who's mad tends to utter madness.  
[Exit Tiresias and Cadmus together on their way to the mountains]

CHORUS

Holiness, queen of the gods,  
Holiness, sweeping over earth  
on wings of gold,  
do you hear what Pentheus says?  
Do you hear the profanities he utters,  
the insults against Bromius,  
child of Semele, chief god

among all blessed gods,  
for those who wear their lovely garlands  
in a spirit of harmonious joy? This is his special office,  
to lead men together in the dance,  
to make them laugh as the flute plays,  
to bring all sorrows to an end,  
at the god's sacrificial feast,  
when the gleaming liquid grapes arrive,  
when the wine bowl casts its sleep  
on ivy-covered feasting men.

Unbridled tongues and lawless folly  
come to an end only in disaster. A peaceful life of wisdom  
maintains tranquillity.  
It keeps the home united.  
Though gods live in the sky,  
from far away in heaven  
they gaze upon the deeds of men.  
But being clever isn't wisdom.  
And thinking deeply about things  
isn't suitable for mortal men.  
Our life is brief—that's why  
the man who chases greatness  
fails to grasp what's near at hand.  
That's what madmen do,  
men who've lost their wits.  
That's what I believe.

Would I might go to Cyprus,  
island of Aphrodite,  
where the Erotes,  
bewitching goddesses of love, soothe the hearts of humankind, or to Paphos, rich  
and fertile,  
not with rain, but with the waters  
of a hundred flowing mouths  
of a strange and foreign river.  
O Bromius, Bromius,  
inspired god who leads the Bacchae,  
lead me away to lovely Peira,  
where Muses dwell,  
or to Olympus' sacred slopes,  
where Graces live, Desire, too, where it's lawful and appropriate  
to celebrate our rites with Bacchus.

This god, son of Zeus,  
rejoices in our banquets.  
He adores the goddess Peace,  
and she brings riches with her  
and nourishes the young.

The god gives his wine equally,  
sharing with rich and poor alike.  
It takes away all sorrow. But he hates the man who doesn't care  
to live his life in happiness,  
by day and through the friendly nights.  
From those who deny such common things  
he removes intelligence,  
their knowledge of true wisdom.  
So I take this as my rule—  
follow what common people think—  
do what most men do.

[Enter a group of soldiers, bringing Dionysus with his arms tied up. Pentheus enters from the palace]

SOLDIER

Pentheus, we're here because we've caught the prey you sent us out to catch. Yes, our attempts have proved successful. The beast you see here was tame with us. He didn't try to run. No, he surrendered willingly enough, without turning pale or changing colour on those wine dark cheeks. He even laughed at us, inviting us to tie him up and lead him off. He stood still, making it easier for me to take him in. It was awkward, so I said, "Stranger, I don't want to lead you off, but I'm under orders here from Pentheus, who sent me."

And there's something else—those Bacchic women you locked up, the ones you took in chains into the public prison—they've all escaped. They're gone—playing around in some meadow, calling out to Bromius, summoning their god. Chains fell off their feet, just dropping on their own. Keys opened doors not turned by human hands. This man here has come to Thebes full of amazing tricks. But now the rest of this affair is up to you.

[Soldier hands chained Dionysus over to Pentheus]

PENTHEUS [Moving up close to Dionysus, inspecting him carefully]  
Untie his hands. I've got him in my nets.  
He's not fast enough to get away from me.

[Soldiers remove the chains from Dionysus' hands. Pentheus moves in closer]

Well, stranger, I see this body of yours is not unsuitable for women's pleasure—that's why you've come to Thebes. As for your hair, it's long, which suggests that you're no wrestler. It flows across your cheeks That's most seductive.



You've a white skin, too. You've looked after it,  
avoiding the sun's rays by staying in the shade, while with your beauty you chase  
Aphrodite.

But first tell me something of your family.

DIONYSUS

That's easy enough, though I'm not boasting.  
You've heard of Tmolus, where flowers grow.

PENTHEUS

I know it. It's around the town of Sardis.

DIONYSUS

I'm from there. My home land is Lydia.

PENTHEUS

Why do you bring these rituals to Greece?

DIONYSUS

Dionysus sent me—the son of Zeus.

PENTHEUS

Is there some Zeus there who creates new gods?

DIONYSUS

No. It's the same Zeus who wed Semele right here.

PENTHEUS

Did this Zeus overpower you at night,  
in your dreams? Or were your eyes wide open?

DIONYSUS

I saw him—he saw me. He gave me  
the sacred rituals.

PENTHEUS

Tell me what they're like,  
those rituals of yours.

DIONYSUS

That information  
cannot be passed on to men like you,  
those uninitiated in the rites of Bacchus.

PENTHEUS

Do they benefit those who sacrifice?

DIONYSUS

They're worth knowing, but you're not allowed to hear.

PENTHEUS

You've avoided that question skilfully, making me want to hear an answer.

DIONYSUS

The rituals are no friend of any man  
who's hostile to the gods.

PENTHEUS

This god of yours,  
since you saw him clearly, what's he like?

DIONYSUS

He was what he wished to be, not made to order.

PENTHEUS

Again you fluently evade my question,  
saying nothing whatsoever.

DIONYSUS

Yes, but then  
a man can seem totally ignorant  
when speaking to a fool.

PENTHEUS

Is Thebes the first place you've come to with your god?

DIONYSUS

All the barbarians are dancing in these rites. <sup>457</sup>

PENTHEUS

I'm not surprised. They're stupider than Greeks.

DIONYSUS

In this they are much wiser. But their laws  
are very different, too.

PENTHEUS

When you dance these rites,  
is it at night or during daylight?

DIONYSUS

Mainly at night. Shadows confer solemnity.

PENTHEUS

And deceive the women. It's all corrupt!

DIONYSUS

One can do shameful things in daylight, too.

PENTHEUS

You must be punished for these evil games.

DIONYSUS

You, too—for foolishness, impiety towards the god.

PENTHEUS

How brash this Bacchant is!  
How well prepared in using language!

DIONYSUS

What punishment am I to suffer?  
What harsh penalties will you inflict?

PENTHEUS

First, I'll cut off this delicate hair of yours.

DIONYSUS

My hair is sacred. I grow it for the god.

PENTHEUS

And give me that thyrsus in your hand.

DIONYSUS

This wand I carry is the god's, not mine.  
You'll have to seize it from me for yourself.

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<sup>457</sup>The term barbarian refers to non-Greek-speaking people.

PENTHEUS

We'll lock your body up inside, in prison.

DIONYSUS

The god will personally set me free,  
whenever I so choose.

PENTHEUS

That only works  
if you call him while among the Bacchae.

DIONYSUS

He sees my suffering now—and from near by.

PENTHEUS: Where is he then? My eyes don't see him.

DIONYSUS

He's where I am. You can't see him,  
because you don't believe.

PENTHEUS [to his attendants]

Seize him!

He's insulting Thebes and me.

DIONYSUS

I warn you—you shouldn't tie me up.  
I've got my wits about me. You've lost yours.

PENTHEUS

But I'm more powerful than you,  
so I'll have you put in chains.

DIONYSUS

You're quite ignorant  
of why you live, what you do, and who you are.

PENTHEUS

I am Pentheus, son of Agave and Echion.

DIONYSUS

A suitable name. It suggests misfortune.

PENTHEUS [to his soldiers]

Go now.

Lock him up—in the adjoining stables.

That way he'll see nothing but the darkness

There you can dance. As for all those women, those partners in crime you brought  
along with you,

well sell them off or keep them here as slaves, working our looms, once we've  
stopped their hands

beating those drum skins, making all that noise.

[Exit Pentheus into the palace, leaving Dionysus with the soldiers]

DIONYSUS

I'll go, then. For I won't have to suffer  
what won't occur. But you can be sure of this—  
Dionysus, whom you claim does not exist,  
will go after you for retribution  
after all your insolence. He's the one

you put in chains when you treat me unjustly.

[The soldiers lead Dionysus away to an area beside the palace]

CHORUS O Sacred Dirce, blessed maiden,  
 daughter of Achelous,  
 your streams once received  
 the new-born child of Zeus,  
 when his father snatched him  
 from those immortal fires,  
 then hid him in his thigh, crying out these words,  
 "Go, Dithyrambus,  
 enter my male womb.  
 I'll make you known as Bacchus  
 to all those in Thebes, who'll invoke you with that name."  
 But you, O sacred Dirce,  
 why do you resist me,  
 my garland-bearing company,  
 along your river banks?  
 Why push me away?  
 Why seek to flee from me?  
 I tell you, you'll find joy  
 in grape-filled vines from Dionysus.  
 They'll make you love him.  
 What rage, what rage  
 shows up in that earth-bound race  
 of Pentheus, born to Echion,  
 an earth-bound mortal.  
 He's descended from a snake,  
 that Pentheus, a savage beast,  
 not a normal mortal man, but some bloody monster  
 who fights against the gods.<sup>458</sup>  
 He'll soon bind me in chains,  
 as a worshipper of Bacchus. Already he holds in his house  
 my fellow Bacchic revelers,  
 hidden there in some dark cell.  
 Do you see, Dionysus,  
 child of Zeus, your followers  
 fighting their oppression?  
 Come down, my lord,  
 down from Olympus,  
 wave your golden thyrsus, to cut short the profanities  
 of this blood-thirsty man.  
 Where on Mount Nysa,  
 which nourishes wild beasts,

<sup>458</sup>Pentheus' father Echion was one of the warriors born when Cadmus, on instructions from the gods, killed a serpent-dragon and sowed its teeth in the earth. The teeth germinated as warriors rising from the ground.

where on the Corcyrean heights,  
 where do you wave your thyrsus  
 over your worshippers,  
 O Dionysus?  
 Perhaps in those thick woods  
 of Mount Olympus, where Orpheus once played his lyre,  
 brought trees together with his songs,  
 collecting wild beasts round him.  
 O blessed Peiria,  
 whom Dionysus loves—  
 he'll come to set you dancing  
 in the Bacchic celebrations.  
 He'll cross the foaming Axius,  
 lead his whirling Maenads on,  
 leaving behind the river Lydias which enriches mortal men,  
 and which, they say, acts as a father,  
 nourishing with many lovely streams  
 a land where horses flourish.

[The soldiers move in to round up the chorus of Bacchae. As they do so, the ground begins to shake, thunder sounds, lightning flashes, and the entire palace starts to break apart]

DIONYSUS [shouting from within the palace]

Io! Hear me, hear me as I call you.

Io! Bacchae! Io Bacchae!

CHORUS [a confusion of different voices in the following speeches]

Who's that? Who is it? It's Dionysus' voice!

It's calling me. But from what direction?

DIONYSUS [from inside the palace] Io! Io! I'm calling out again—  
 the son of Semele, a child of Zeus!

CHORUS

Io! Io! Lord and master!

Come join our company,

Bromius, oh Bromius!

DIONYSUS [from inside] Sacred lord of earthquakes, shake this ground.

[The earthquake tremors resume]

CHORUS VOICE 1

Ai! Soon Pentheus' palace  
 will be shaken into rubble.

CHORUS VOICE 2

Dionysus is in the house—revere him.

CHORUS VOICE 3

We revere him, we revere him.

CHORUS VOICE 4

You see those stone lintels on the pillars—  
 they're splitting up. It's Bromius calling, shouting to us from inside the walls.

DIONYSUS [from inside the palace]

Let fiery lightning strike right now—  
burn Pentheus' palace—consume it all!

CHORUS VOICE 5

Look! Don't you see the fire—  
there by the sacred tomb of Semele!  
The flame left by that thunderbolt from Zeus,  
when the lightning flash destroyed her,  
all that time ago. Oh Maenads—  
throw your bodies on the ground, down, down,  
for our master, Zeus' son, moves now  
against the palace—to demolish it.

[Enter Dionysus, bursting through the palace front doors, free of all chains,  
smiling and supremely confident.]

DIONYSUS

Ah, my barbarian Asian women, Do you lie there on the ground prostrate with fear?  
It seems you feel Dionysus' power,  
as he rattles Pentheus' palace.  
Get up now. Be brave. And stop your trembling.

CHORUS LEADER

How happy I am to see you—  
Our greatest light in all the joyful dancing.  
We felt alone and totally abandoned.

DIONYSUS

Did you feel despair when I was sent away, 750  
cast down in Pentheus' gloomy dungeon?

CHORUS LEADER

How could I not? Who'll protect me  
if you run into trouble? But tell me,  
how did you escape that ungodly man?

DIONYSUS

No trouble. I saved myself with ease.

CHORUS LEADER

But didn't he bind up your hands up in chains?

DIONYSUS

In this business I was playing with him—  
he thought he was tying me up, the fool!  
He didn't even touch or handle me,  
he was so busy feeding his desires. In that stable where he went to tie me up,  
he found a bull. He threw the iron fetters  
around its knees and hooves. As he did so,  
he kept panting in his rage, dripping sweat  
from his whole body—his teeth gnawed his lip.  
I watched him, sitting quietly nearby.  
After a while, Bacchus came and shook the place,  
setting his mother Semele's tomb on fire.  
Seeing that, Pentheus thought his palace

was burning down. He ran round, here and there, yelling to his slaves to bring more water.

His servants set to work—and all for nothing!

Once I'd escaped, he ended all that work.

Seizing a dark sword, he rushed inside the house.

Then, it seems to me, but I'm guessing now,

Bromius set up out there in the courtyard

some phantom image. Pentheus charged it,

slashing away at nothing but bright air,

thinking he was butchering me. There's more— Bacchus kept hurting him in still

more ways. He knocked his house down, right to the ground,

all shattered, so Pentheus has witnessed

a bitter end to my imprisonment.

He's dropped his sword, worn out, exhausted,

a mere mortal daring to fight a god.

So now I've strolled out calmly to you,

leaving the house, ignoring Pentheus.

Wait! It seems to me I hear marching feet—

no doubt he'll come out front here soon enough. What will he say, I wonder, after

this? Well, I'll deal with him quite gently,

even if he comes out breathing up a storm.

After all, a wise man ought to keep his temper.

[Pentheus comes hurriedly out of the palace, accompanied by armed soldiers]

PENTHEUS

What's happening to me—total disaster!

The stranger's escaped, and we'd just chained him up.

[seeing Dionysus]

Ah ha! Here is the man—right here.

What's going on? How did you get out?

How come you're here, outside my palace?

DIONYSUS

Hold on. Calm down. Don't be so angry.

PENTHEUS

How did you escape your chains and get here?

DIONYSUS

Didn't I say someone would release me—

or did you miss that part?

PENTHEUS

Who was it?

You're always explaining things in riddles.

DIONYSUS

It was the one who cultivates for men

the richly clustering vine.

PENTHEUS

Ah, this Dionysus.

Your words are a lovely insult to your god.

DIONYSUS

He came to Thebes with nothing but good things.

PENTHEUS [to soldiers] Seal off all the towers on my orders—  
all of them around the city.

DIONYSUS

What for?

Surely a god can make it over any wall?

PENTHEUS

You're so wise, except in all those things  
in which you should be wise.

DIONYSUS

I was born wise,

especially in matters where I need to be.

[Enter the Messenger, a cattle herder from the hills]

DIONYSUS

But first you'd better listen to this man,  
hear what he has to say, for he's come here  
from the mountains to report to you.  
I'll still be here for you. I won't run off.

MESSENGER

Pentheus, ruler of this land of Thebes,  
I've just left Cithaeron, that mountain  
where the sparkling snow never melts away.

PENTHEUS

What this important news you've come with?

MESSENGER

I saw those women in their Bacchic revels,  
those sacred screamers, all driven crazy,  
the ones who run barefoot from their homes.  
I came, my lord, to tell you and the city  
the dreadful things they're doing, their actions  
are beyond all wonder. But, my lord,  
first I wish to know if I should tell you,  
openly report what's going on up there,  
or whether I should hold my tongue. Your mood changes so fast I get afraid—  
your sharp spirit, your all-too-royal temper.

PENTHEUS

Speak on. Whatever you have to report,  
you'll get no punishment at all from me.  
It's not right to vent one's anger on the just.  
The more terrible the things you tell me  
about those Bacchic women, the worse  
I'll move against the one who taught them  
all their devious tricks.

MESSENGER

The grazing cattle



were just moving into upland pastures, at the hour the sun sends out its beams to warm the earth. Right then I saw them—three groups of dancing women. One of them Autonoe led. Your mother, Agave, led the second group, and Ino led the third. They were all asleep, bodies quite relaxed, some leaning back on leafy boughs of pine, others cradling heads on oak-leaf pillows, resting on the ground—in all modesty. They weren't as you described—all drunk on wine or on the music of their flutes, hunting for Aphrodite in the woods alone. Once she heard my horned cattle lowing, your mother stood up amid those Bacchae, then called them to stir their limbs from sleep. They rubbed refreshing sleep out of their eyes, and stood up straight there—a marvelous sight, to see such an orderly arrangement, women young and old and still unmarried girls. First, they let their hair loose down their shoulders, tied up the fawn skins (some had untied the knots to loosen up the chords). Then around those skins they looped some snakes, who licked the women's cheeks. Some held young gazelles or wild wolf cubs and fed them on their own white milk, the ones who'd left behind at home a new-born child whose breasts were still swollen full of milk. They draped themselves with garlands from oak trees, ivy and flowering yew. Then one of them, taking a thyrsus, struck a rock with it, and water gushed out, fresh as dew. Another, using her thyrsus, scraped the ground. At once, the god sent fountains of wine up from the spot. All those who craved white milk to drink just scratched the earth with their fingertips—it came out in streams. From their ivy wands thick sweet honey dripped. Oh, if you'd been there, if you'd seen this, you'd come with reverence to that god whom you criticize so much. Well, we cattle herders and shepherds met to discuss and argue with each other about the astonishing things we'd seen. And then a man who'd been in town a bit and had a way with words said to us all, "You men who live in the holy regions of these mountains, how'd you like to hunt down Pentheus' mother, Agave—take her away from these Bacchic celebrations, do the king a favour?"

To all of us  
he seemed to make good sense. So we set up  
an ambush, hiding in the bushes,  
lying down there. At the appointed time,  
the women started their Bacchic ritual,  
brandishing the thyrsus and calling out  
to the god they cry to, Bromius, Zeus' son.  
The entire mountain and its wild animals  
were, like them, in one Bacchic ecstasy.  
As these women moved, they made all things dance.  
Agave, by chance, was dancing close to me. Leaving the ambush where I'd been  
concealed, I jumped out, hoping to grab hold of her.  
But she screamed out, "Oh, my quick hounds,  
men are hunting us. Come, follow me.  
Come on, armed with that thyrsus in your hand." We ran off, and so escaped being  
torn apart.  
But then those Bacchic women, all unarmed,  
went at the heifers browsing on the turf, using their bare hands. You should have  
seen one  
ripping a fat, young, lowing calf apart—  
others tearing cows in pieces with their hands. You could've seen ribs and cloven  
hooves  
tossed everywhere—some hung up in branches  
dripping blood and gore. And bulls, proud beasts till then,  
with angry horns, collapsed there on the ground,  
dragged down by the hands of a thousand girls.  
Hides covering their bodies were stripped off  
faster than you could wink your royal eye.  
Then, like birds carried up by their own speed,  
they rushed along the lower level ground,  
beside Asopus' streams, that fertile land which yields its crops to Thebes. Like  
fighting troops,  
they raided Hysiae and Erythrae,  
below rocky Cithaeron, smashing  
everything, snatching children from their homes.  
Whatever they carried their shoulders,  
even bronze or iron, never tumbled off  
onto the dark earth, though nothing was tied down.  
They carried fire in their hair, but those flames  
never singed them. Some of the villagers,  
enraged at being plundered by the Bacchae, seized weapons. The sight of what  
happened next,  
my lord, was dreadful. For their pointed spears  
did not draw blood. But when those women  
threw the thyrsos in their hands, they wounded them  
and drove them back in flight. The women did this

to men, but not without some god's assistance.  
Then they went back to where they'd started from,  
those fountains which the god had made for them.  
They washed off the blood. Snakes licked their cheeks,  
cleansing their skin of every drop. My lord,  
you must welcome this god into our city,  
whoever he is. He's a mighty god  
in many other ways. The people say,  
so I've heard, he gives to mortal human beings  
that vine which puts an end to human grief.  
Without wine, there's no more Aphrodite—  
or any other pleasure left for men.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm afraid to talk freely before the king,  
but nonetheless I'll speak—this Dionysus  
is not inferior to any god.

PENTHEUS

This Dionysian arrogance, like fire,  
keeps flaring up close by—a great insult  
to all the Greeks. We must not hesitate.

[To one of his armed attendants]

Go to the Electra Gates. Call out the troops,  
the heavy infantry, all fast cavalry.  
Tell them to muster, along with all those  
who carry shields—all the archers, too,  
the men who pull the bowstring back by hand.  
We'll march out against these Bacchae.  
In this whole business we will lose control, if we have to put up with what we've  
suffered  
from these women.

DIONYSUS

You've heard what I had to say,  
Pentheus, but still you're not convinced.  
Though I'm suffering badly at your hands,  
I say you shouldn't go to war against a god.  
You should stay calm. Bromius will not let you  
move his Bacchae from their mountains.

PENTHEUS

Don't preach to me! You've got out of prison—  
enjoy that fact. Or shall I punish you some more?

DIONYSUS

I'd sooner make an offering to that god  
than in some angry fit kick at his whip—  
a mortal going to battle with a god.

PENTHEUS

I'll sacrifice all right—with a slaughter

of those women, just as they deserve—  
in the forests on Cithaeron.

DIONYSUS

You'll all run. What a disgrace! To turn your bronze shields round,  
fleeing the thyrsos of those Bacchic women!

PENTHEUS [turning to one of his armed attendants, as if to go]  
It's useless trying to argue with this stranger—  
whatever he does or suffers, he won't shut up.

DIONYSUS [calling Pentheus back]

My lord! There's still a chance to end this calmly.

PENTHEUS

By doing what? Should I become a slave  
to my own slaves?

DIONYSUS

I'll bring the women here—  
without the use of any weapons.

PENTHEUS

I don't think so.  
You're setting me up for your tricks again.

DIONYSUS

What sort of trick, if I want to save you  
in my own way?

PENTHEUS

You've made some arrangement,  
you and your god, so you can always dance  
your Bacchanalian orgies.

DIONYSUS

Yes, that's true.  
I have made some arrangement with the god.

PENTHEUS [to one of his armed servants]

You there, bring me my weapons.

[to Dionysus]

And you— No more talk! Keep quiet!

DIONYSUS

Just a minute!

[moving up to Pentheus]

How'd you like to gaze upon those women out there,  
sitting together in the mountains?

PENTHEUS

I'd like that.

Yes, for that I'd pay in gold—and pay a lot.

DIONYSUS

Why is that? Why do you desire it so much?

PENTHEUS

I'd be sorry to see the women drunk.

DIONYSUS

Would you derive pleasure from looking on,  
viewing something you find painful?

PENTHEUS

Yes, I would—  
if I were sitting in the trees in silence.

DIONYSUS

But even if you go there secretly, they'll track you down.

PENTHEUS

You're right.  
I'll go there openly.

DIONYSUS

So you're prepared,  
are you, to make the trip? Shall I lead you there?

PENTHEUS

Let's go, and with all speed. I've got time.

DIONYSUS

In that case, you must clothe your body  
in a dress—one made of eastern linen.

PENTHEUS

What! I'm not going up there as a man?  
I've got to change myself into a woman?

DIONYSUS

If they see you as a man, they'll kill you.

PENTHEUS

Right again. You always have the answer.

DIONYSUS

Dionysus taught me all these things.

PENTHEUS

How can I best follow your suggestion?

DIONYSUS

I'll go inside your house and dress you up.

PENTHEUS

What? Dress up in a female outfit?

I can't do that—I'd be ashamed to.

DIONYSUS

You're still keen to see the Maenads, aren't you?

PENTHEUS

What sort of clothing do you recommend? How should I cover up my body?

DIONYSUS

I'll fix up a long hair piece for your head.

PENTHEUS: All right.

What's the next piece of my outfit?

DIONYSUS

A dress down to your feet—then a headband,  
to fit just here, around your forehead.

PENTHEUS

What else? What other things will you provide?

DIONYSUS

A thyrsus to hold and a dappled fawn skin.

PENTHEUS

No. I can't dress up in women's clothes!

DIONYSUS

But if you go fighting with these Bacchae,  
you'll cause bloodshed.

PENTHEUS

Yes, that's true.

So first, we must go up and spy on them.

DIONYSUS

Hunt down evil by committing evil—  
that sounds like a wise way to proceed.

PENTHEUS

But how will I make it through the city  
without the Thebans noticing me?

DIONYSUS

We go by deserted streets. I'll take you.

PENTHEUS

Well, anything is easier to accept  
than being made a fool by Bacchic women.  
Let's go into the house. I'll think about what's best.

DIONYSUS

As you wish. Whatever you do, I'm ready.

PENTHEUS

I think I'll go in now. It's a choice  
of going with weapons or taking your advice.

[Exit Pentheus into the palace. Dionysus turns to face the chorus]

DIONYSUS

My women! that man's now entangled in our net. He'll go to those Bacchae, and  
there he'll die.

That will be his punishment. Dionysus,  
you're not far away. Now it's up to you.  
Punish him. First, make sure he goes insane  
with some crazed fantasy. If his mind is strong,  
he'll not agree to put on women's clothes.  
But he'll do it, if you make him mad.

I want him made the laughing stock of Thebes,  
while I lead him through the city, mincing  
as he moves along in women's clothing, after he made himself so terrifying  
with all those earlier threats. Now I'll be off,  
to fit Pentheus into the costume  
he'll wear when he goes down to Hades,  
once he's butchered by his mother's hands.

He'll come to acknowledge Dionysus,  
son of Zeus, born in full divinity,  
most fearful and yet most kind to men.

[Exit Dionysus]

CHORUS: O when will I be dancing,  
leaping barefoot through the night, flinging back my head in ecstasy,  
in the clear, cold, dew-fresh air—  
like a playful fawn  
celebrating its green joy  
across the meadows—  
joy that it's escaped the fearful hunt—  
as she runs beyond the hunters,  
leaping past their woven nets—  
they call out to their hounds  
to chase her with still more speed, but she strains every limb,  
racing like a wind storm,  
rejoicing by the river plain,  
in places where no hunters lurk,  
in the green living world  
beneath the shady branches,  
the foliage of the trees.

What is wisdom? What is finer  
than the rights men get from gods—  
to hold their powerful hands over the heads of their enemies?  
Ah yes, what's good is always loved.

The power of the gods  
is difficult to stir—  
but it's a power we can count on.  
It punishes all mortal men  
who honour their own ruthless wills,  
who, in their fits of madness,  
fail to reverence the gods.  
Gods track down every man who scorns their worship,  
using their cunning to conceal  
the enduring steady pace of time.  
For there's no righteousness  
in those who recognize or practice  
what's beyond our customary laws.  
The truth is easy to acknowledge: whatever is divine is mighty,  
whatever has been long-established law  
is an eternal natural truth.

What is wisdom? What is finer  
than the rights men get from gods—  
to hold their powerful hands  
over the heads of their enemies?  
Ah yes, what's good is always loved.

Whoever has escaped a storm at sea  
is a happy man in harbour,  
whoever overcomes great hardship  
is likewise another happy man.  
Various men out-do each other in wealth, in power,  
in all sorts of ways.  
The hopes of countless men  
are infinite in number.  
Some make men rich; some come to nothing.  
So I consider that man blessed  
who lives a happy life  
existing day by day.

[Enter Dionysus from the palace. He calls back through the open doors]  
DIONYSUS

You who are so desperately eager to see those things you should not look upon,  
so keen to chase what you should not pursue—  
I mean you, Pentheus, come out here now,  
outside the palace, where I can see you  
dressed up as a raving Bacchic female,  
to spy upon your mother's company.

[Enter Pentheus dressed in women's clothing. He moves in a deliberately overstated female way, enjoying the role]

DIONYSUS [admiringly, as he escorts Pentheus from the doors] You look just like one of Cadmus' daughters.

PENTHEUS

Fancy that! I seem to see two suns,  
two images of seven-gated Thebes.  
And you look like a bull leading me out here,  
with those horns growing from your head.  
Were you once upon a time a beast?  
It's certain now you've changed into a bull.

DIONYSUS

The god walks here. He's made a pact with us.  
Before his attitude was not so kind.  
Now you're seeing just what you ought to see.

PENTHEUS

How do I look? Am I holding myself  
just like Ino or my mother, Agave?

DIONYSUS

When I look at you, I think I see them.  
But here, this strand of hair is out of place. It's not under the headband where I fixed it.

PENTHEUS [demonstrating his dancing steps]  
I must have worked it loose inside the house,  
shaking my head when I moved here and there,  
practising my Bacchanalian dance.



DIONYSUS

I'll rearrange it for you. It's only right  
that I should serve you. Straighten up your head.

[Dionysus begins adjusting Pentheus' hair and clothing]

PENTHEUS

All right then. You can be my dresser,  
now that I've transformed myself for you.

DIONYSUS

Your girdle's loose. And these pleats in your dress  
are crooked, too, down at your ankle here.

PENTHEUS [examining the back of his legs]

Yes, that seems to be true for my right leg,  
but on this side the dress hangs perfectly,  
down the full length of my limb.

DIONYSUS

Once you see  
those Bacchic women acting modestly,  
once you confront something you don't expect,  
you'll consider me your dearest friend.

PENTHEUS

This thyrsus—should I hold it in my right hand,  
or in my left? Which is more suitable  
in Bacchic celebrations?

DIONYSUS

In your right.

You must lift your right foot in time with it.

[Dionysus observes Pentheus trying out the dance step]

DIONYSUS

Your mind has changed. I applaud you for it.

PENTHEUS

Will I be powerful enough to carry  
the forests of Cithaeron on my shoulders,  
along with all those Bacchic females?

DIONYSUS

If you have desire, you'll have the power.  
Before this your mind was not well adjusted.  
But now it's working in you as it should.

PENTHEUS

Are we going to take some levers with us?  
Or shall I rip the forests up by hand,  
putting arm and shoulder under mountain peaks?

DIONYSUS

As long as you don't do away with  
those places where the nymphs all congregate,  
where Pan plays his music on his pipes.

PENTHEUS

You mention a good point. I'll use no force  
to get the better of these women. I'll conceal myself there in the pine trees.

DIONYSUS

You'll find just the sort of hiding place  
a spy should find who wants to hide himself,  
so he can gaze upon the Maenads.

PENTHEUS

That's good. I can picture them right now, in the woods, going at it like rutting birds,  
clutching each other as they make sweet love.

DIONYSUS

Perhaps. That's why you're going—as a guard  
to stop all that. Maybe you'll capture them,  
unless you're captured first.

PENTHEUS

Lead on—  
through the centre of our land of Thebes.  
I'm the only man in all the city  
who dares to undertake this enterprise.

DIONYSUS

You bear the city's burden by yourself,  
all by yourself. So your work is waiting there, the tasks that have been specially set  
for you.

Follow me. I'm the guide who'll rescue you.  
When you return someone else will bring you back.

PENTHEUS

That will be my mother.

DIONYSUS

For everyone  
you'll have become someone to celebrate.

PENTHEUS

That's why I'm going.

DIONYSUS

You'll be carried back . . .

PENTHEUS: *[interrupting]* You're pampering me!

DIONYSUS *[continuing]*

. . . in your mothers arms.

PENTHEUS

You've really made up your mind to spoil me.

DIONYSUS

To spoil you? That's true, but in my own way.

PENTHEUS

Then I'll be off to get what I deserve.

*[Exit Pentheus]*

DIONYSUS *[speaking in the direction Pentheus has gone, but not speaking to him]*

You fearful, terrifying man—on your way

to horrific suffering. Well, you'll win  
a towering fame, as high as heaven.  
Hold out your hand to him, Agave,  
you, too, her sisters, Cadmus' daughters.  
I'm leading this young man in your direction,  
for the great confrontation, where I'll triumph—  
I and Bromius. What else will happen  
events will show, as they occur.

[Exit Dionysus]

CHORUS Up now, you hounds of madness, go up now into the mountains,  
go where Cadmus' daughters  
keep their company of worshippers,  
goad them into furious revenge  
against that man, that raving spy,  
all dressed up in his women's clothes,  
so keen to glimpse the Maenads.  
His mother will see him first,  
as he spies on them in secret  
from some level rock or crag. She'll scream out to her Maenads,  
"Who's the man who's come here,  
to the mountains, to these mountains,  
tracking Cadmean mountain dancers?  
O my Bacchae, who has come?  
From whom was this man born?  
He's not born of woman's blood—  
he must be some lioness' whelp  
or spawned from Libyan gorgons."

CHORUS

Let justice manifest itself— let justice march, sword in hand,  
to stab him in the throat,  
that godless, lawless man,  
unjust earthborn seed of Echion.

CHORUS 2

Any man intent on wickedness,  
turning his unlawful rage  
against your rites, O Bacchus,  
against the worship of your mother,  
a man who sets out with an insane mind,  
his courage founded on a falsehood, who seeks to overcome by force  
what simply can't be overcome—  
let death set his intentions straight.  
For a life devoid of grief is one  
which receives without complaint  
whatever comes down from the gods—  
that's how mortals ought to live.  
Wisdom is something I don't envy.

My joy comes hunting other things  
 lofty and plain to everyone. They lead man's life to good  
 in purity and reverence,  
 honouring gods day and night,  
 eradicating from our lives  
 customs lying beyond what's right.

CHORUS

Let justice manifest itself—  
 Let justice march, sword in hand,  
 to stab him in the throat,  
 that godless, lawless man,  
 unjust earthborn seed of Echion.

CHORUS 3

Appear now to our sight, O Bacchus—  
 come as a bull or many-headed serpent  
 or else some fire-breathing lion.  
 Go now, Bacchus, with your smiling face  
 cast your deadly noose upon  
 that hunter of the Bacchae,  
 as the group of Maenads brings him down.

[Enter Second Messenger, one of Pentheus' attendants]

SECOND MESSENGER

How I grieve for this house, in earlier days  
 so happy throughout Greece, home of that old man,  
 Cadmus from Sidon, who sowed the fields to harvest the earth-born crop produced  
 from serpent Ophis. How I now lament—  
 I know I'm just a slave, but nonetheless . . .

CHORUS Do you bring us news?

Has something happened,  
 something about the Bacchae?

SECOND MESSENGER

Pentheus, child of Echion, is dead.

CHORUS

O my lord Bromius,  
 Now your divine greatness  
 is here made manifest!

SECOND MESSENGER

What are you saying? Why that song?  
 Women, how can you now rejoice like this  
 for the death of one who was my master?

CHORUS LEADER

We're strangers here in Thebes,  
 so we sing out our joy  
 in chants from foreign lands.  
 No longer need we cower here  
 in fear of prisoner's chains.

## SECOND MESSENGER

Do you think Thebes lacks sufficient men  
to take care of your punishment?

## CHORUS

Dionysus, oh Dionysus,  
he's the one with power over me—  
not Thebes.

## SECOND MESSENGER

That you may be forgiven, but to cry  
aloud with joy when such disasters come,  
women, that's not something you should so.

## CHORUS

Speak to me, tell all—  
How did death strike him down,  
that unrighteous man,  
that man who acted so unjustly?  
SECOND MESSENGER Once we'd left the settlements of Thebes,  
we went across the river Asopus,  
then started the climb up Mount Cithaeron—  
Pentheus and myself, I following the king.  
The stranger was our guide, scouting the way.  
First, we sat down in a grassy meadow,  
keeping our feet and tongues quite silent,  
so we could see without being noticed.  
There was a valley there shut in by cliffs.  
Through it refreshing waters flowed, with pines providing shade. The Maenads sat  
there,  
their hands all busy with delightful work—  
some of them with ivy strands repairing  
damaged thyrsos, while others sang,  
chanting Bacchic songs to one another,  
carefree as fillies freed from harness.  
Then Pentheus, that unhappy man,  
not seeing the crowd of women, spoke up,  
"Stranger, I can't see from where we're standing.  
My eyes can't glimpse those crafty Maenads.  
But up there, on that hill, a pine tree stands.  
If I climbed that, I might see those women,  
and witness the disgraceful things they do."  
Then I saw that stranger work a marvel.  
He seized that pine tree's topmost branch—  
it stretched up to heaven—and brought it down,  
pulling it to the dark earth, bending it  
as if it were a bow or some curved wheel  
forced into a circle while staked out with pegs—  
that's how the stranger made that tree bend down, forcing the mountain pine to

earth by hand,  
something no mortal man could ever do.  
He set Pentheus in that pine tree's branches.  
Then his hands released the tree, but slowly,  
so it stood up straight, being very careful  
not to shake Pentheus loose. So that pine  
towered straight up to heaven, with my king  
perched on its back. Maenads could see him there  
more easily than he could spy on them.  
As he was just becoming visible— the stranger had completely disappeared—  
some voice—I guess it was Dionysus—  
cried out from the sky, "Young women,  
I've brought you the man who laughed at you,  
who ridiculed my rites. Now punish him!" As he shouted this, a dreadful fire arose,  
blazing between the earth and heaven.  
The air was still. In the wooded valley  
no sound came from the leaves, and all the beasts  
were silent, too. The women stood up at once. They'd heard the voice, but not  
distinctly.  
They gazed around them. Then again the voice  
shouted his commands. When Cadmus' daughters  
clearly heard what Dionysus ordered,  
they rushed out, running as fast as doves,  
moving their feet at an amazing speed.  
His mother Agave with both her sisters  
and all the Bacchae charged straight through  
the valley, the torrents, the mountain cliffs,  
pushed to a god-inspired frenzy.  
They saw the king there sitting in that pine.  
First, they scaled a cliff face looming up  
opposite the tree and started throwing rocks,  
trying to hurt him. Others threw branches,  
or hurled their thyrsos through the air at him,  
sad, miserable Pentheus, their target.  
But they didn't hit him. The poor man  
sat high beyond their frenzied cruelty,  
trapped up there, no way to save his skin.  
Then, like lightning, they struck oak branches down, trying them as levers to uproot  
the tree.  
When these attempts all failed, Agave said,  
"Come now, make a circle round the tree.  
Then, Maenads, each of you must seize a branch,  
so we can catch the climbing beast up there,  
stop him making our god's secret dances known."  
Thousands of hands grabbed the tree and pulled.  
They yanked it from the ground. Pentheus fell,

crashing to earth down from his lofty perch,  
screaming in distress. He knew well enough something dreadful was about to happen.

His priestess mother first began the slaughter.  
She hurled herself at him. Pentheus tore off  
his headband, untying it from his head,  
so wretched Agave would recognize him,  
so she wouldn't kill him. Touching her cheek,  
he cried out, "It's me, mother, Pentheus,  
your child. You gave birth to me at home,  
in Echion's house. Pity me, mother—  
don't kill your child because I've made mistakes." But Agave was foaming at the mouth,

eyes rolling in their sockets, her mind not set  
on what she ought to think—she didn't listen—  
she was possessed, in a Bacchic frenzy.

She seized his left arm, below the elbow,  
pushed her foot against the poor man's ribs,  
then tore his shoulder out. The strength she had—  
it was not her own. The god put power  
into those hands of hers. Meanwhile Ino,  
her sister, went at the other side, ripping off chunks of Pentheus' flesh,  
while Autonoe and all the Bacchae,  
the whole crowd of them, attacked as well,  
all of them howling out together.

As long as Pentheus was still alive,  
he kept on screaming. The women cried in triumph—  
one brandished an arm, another held a foot—  
complete with hunting boot—the women's nails  
tore his ribs apart. Their hands grew bloody,  
tossing bits of his flesh back and forth, for fun. His body parts lie scattered everywhere—

some under rough rocks, some in the forest,  
deep in the trees. They're difficult to find.

As for the poor victim's head, his mother  
stumbled on it. Her hands picked it up,  
then stuck it on a thyrsus, at the tip.

Now she carries it around Cithaeron,  
as though it were some wild lion's head.

She's left her sisters dancing with the Maenads.

She's coming here, inside these very walls, showing off with pride her ill-fated prey,  
calling out to her fellow hunter, Bacchus, her companion in the chase, the winner,  
the glorious victor. By serving him,  
in her great triumph she wins only tears.

As for me, I'm leaving this disaster,  
before Agave gets back home again.

The best thing is to keep one's mind controlled,  
and worship all that comes down from the gods.  
That, in my view, is the wisest custom, for those who can conduct their lives that way.

[Exit Messenger]

CHORUS

Let's dance to honour Bacchus,  
Let's shout to celebrate what's happened here,  
happened to Pentheus,  
child of the serpent,  
who put on women's clothes,  
who took up the beautiful and blessed thyrsus—  
his certain death,  
disaster brought on by the bull.  
You Bacchic women 1440  
descended from old Cadmus,  
you've won glorious victory,  
one which ends in tears,  
which ends in lamentation.  
A noble undertaking this,  
to drench one's hands in blood,  
life blood dripping from one's only son.

CHORUS LEADER

Wait! I see Agave, Pentheus' mother,  
on her way home, her eyes transfixed. Let's now welcome her, the happy revels of  
our god of joy!

[Enter Agave, cradling the head of Pentheus]

AGAVE

Asian Bacchae . . .

CHORUS

Why do you appeal to me?

AGAVE [displaying the head]

From the mountains I've brought home  
this ivy tendril freshly cut.  
We've had a blessed hunt.

CHORUS

I see it.

As your fellow dancer, I'll accept it.

AGAVE

I caught this young lion without a trap,  
as you can see.

CHORUS

What desert was he in?

AGAVE

Cithaeron.

CHORUS



On Cithaeron?

AGAVE

Cithaeron killed him.

CHORUS

Who struck him down?

AGAVE

The honour of the first blow goes to me.

In the dancing I'm called blessed Agave.

CHORUS

Who else?

AGAVE

Well, from Cadmus . . .

CHORUS

From Cadmus what?

AGAVE

His other children laid hands on the beast,

but after me—only after I did first.

We've had good hunting. So come, share our feast.

CHORUS

What? You want me to eat that with you?

Oh you unhappy woman.

AGAVE

This is a young bull. Look at this cheek

It's just growing downy under the crop of his soft hair.

CHORUS

His hair makes him resemble

some wild beast.

AGAVE

Bacchus is a clever huntsman—

he wisely set his Maenads on this beast.

CHORUS

Yes, our master is indeed a hunter.

AGAVE

Have you any praise for me?

CHORUS

I praise you.

AGAVE

Soon all Cadmus' people. . .

CHORUS

. . . and Pentheus, your son, as well.

AGAVE

. . . will celebrate his mother, who caught the beast,  
just like a lion.

CHORUS

It's a strange trophy.

AGAVE

And strangely captured, too.

CHORUS

You're proud of what you've done?

AGAVE

Yes, I'm delighted. Great things I've done— great things on this hunt, clear for all to see.

CHORUS

Well then, you most unfortunate woman,  
show off your hunting prize, your sign of victory,  
to all the citizens.

AGAVE [addressing everyone]

All of you here,  
all you living in the land of Thebes,  
in this city with its splendid walls,  
come see this wild beast we hunted down—  
daughters of Cadmus—not with thonged spears,  
Thessalian javelins, or by using nets,  
but with our own white hands, our finger tips. After this, why should huntsmen  
boast aloud,  
when no one needs the implements they use?  
We caught this beast by hand, tore it apart—  
with our own hands. But where's my father?  
He should come here. And where's Pentheus?  
Where is my son? He should take a ladder,  
set it against the house, fix this lion's head  
way up there, high on the palace front.  
I've captured it and brought it home with me.

[Enter Cadmus and attendants, carrying parts of Pentheus' body]

CADMUS

Follow me, all those of you who carry some part of wretched Pentheus. You slaves,  
come here, right by the house.

[They place the bits of Pentheus' body together in a chest front of the palace]

I'm worn out.

So many searches—but I picked up the body.  
I came across it in the rocky clefts  
on Mount Cithaeron, ripped to pieces,  
no parts lying together in one place.  
It was in the woods—difficult to search.  
Someone told me what my daughter'd done,  
those horrific acts, once I'd come back,  
returning here with old Tiresias, inside the city walls, back from the Bacchae.  
So I climbed the mountains once again.  
Now I bring home this child the Maenads killed.  
I saw Autonoe, who once bore  
Actaeon to Aristaeus—and Ino,

she was with her there, in the forest, both still possessed, quite mad, poor creatures. Someone said Agave was coming here, still doing her Bacchic dance. He spoke the truth, for I see her there—what a wretched sight!

AGAVE

Father, now you can be truly proud.  
Among all living men you've produced  
by far the finest daughters. I'm talking of all of us, but especially of myself.  
I've left behind my shuttle and my loom,  
and risen to great things, catching wild beasts  
with my bare hands. Now I've captured him,  
I'm holding in my arms the finest trophy,  
as you can see, bringing it back home to you,  
so it may hang here.

[offering him Pentheus' head]

Take this, father

let your hands welcome it. Be proud of it,  
of what I've caught. Summon all your friends—  
have a banquet, for you are blessed indeed,  
blessed your daughters have achieved these things.

CADMUS

This grief's beyond measure, beyond endurance.  
With these hands of yours you've murdered him.  
You strike down this sacrificial victim,  
this offering to the gods, then invite me,  
and all of Thebes, to share a banquet.  
Alas—first for your sorrow, then my own. Lord god Bromius, born into this family,  
has destroyed us, acting out his justice,  
but too much so.

AGAVE

Why such scowling eyes?  
How sorrowful and solemn old men become.  
As for my son, I hope he's a fine hunter,  
who copies his mother's hunting style,  
when he rides out with young men of Thebes  
chasing after creatures in the wild.  
The only thing he seems capable of doing  
is fighting with the gods. It's up to you, father, to reprimand him for it.  
Who'll call him here into my sight,  
so he can see my good luck for himself?

CADMUS

Alas! Alas! What dreadful pain you'll feel  
when you recognize what you've just done.  
If you stay forever in your present state,  
you'll be unfortunate, but you won't feel  
as if you're suffering unhappiness.

AGAVE

But what in all this is wrong or painful?

CADMUS

First, raise your eyes. Look up into the sky.

AGAVE

All right. But why tell me to look up there?

CADMUS

Does the sky still seem the same to you,  
or has it changed?

AGAVE

It seems, well, brighter . . .  
more translucent than it was before.

CADMUS

And your inner spirit—is it still shaking?

AGAVE

I don't understand what it is you're asking.  
But my mind is starting to clear somehow.  
It's changing . . . it's not what it was before.

CADMUS

Can you hear me? Can you answer clearly?

AGAVE

Yes. But, father, what we discussed before, I've quite forgotten.

CADMUS

Then tell me this—  
to whose house did you come when you got married?

AGAVE

You gave me to Echion, who, men say,  
was one of those who grew from seeds you cast.

CADMUS

In that house you bore your husband a child.  
What was his name?

AGAVE

His name was Pentheus.  
I conceived him with his father.

CADMUS

Well then,  
this head your hands are holding—whose is it?

AGAVE

It's a lion's. That's what the hunters said.

CADMUS

Inspect it carefully. You can do that without much effort.

AGAVE [inspecting the head]

What is this?

What am I looking at? What am I holding?

CADMUS

Look at it. You'll understand more clearly.

AGAVE

What I see fills me with horrific pain . . .  
such agony . . .

CADMUS

Does it still seem to you  
to be a lion's head?

AGAVE

No. It's appalling—  
this head I'm holding belongs to Pentheus.

CADMUS

Yes, that's right. I was lamenting his fate  
before you recognized him.

AGAVE

Who killed him?  
How did he come into my hands?

CADMUS

Harsh truth— how you come to light at the wrong moment.

AGAVE

Tell me. My heart is pounding in me  
to hear what you're about to say.

CADMUS

You killed him—  
you and your sisters.

AGAVE

Where was he killed?  
At home? In what sort of place?

CADMUS

He was killed  
where dogs once made a common meal of Actaeon.

AGAVE

Why did this poor man go to Cithaeron?

CADMUS

He went there to ridicule the god  
and you for celebrating Dionysus.

AGAVE

But how did we happen to be up there?

CADMUS

You were insane—the entire city was in a Bacchic madness.

AGAVE

Now I see.  
Dionysus has destroyed us all.

CADMUS

He took offense at being insulted.  
You did not consider him a god.

AGAVE

Father, where's the body of my dearest son?

CADMUS

I had trouble tracking the body down.  
I brought back what I found.

AGAVE

Are all his limbs laid out  
just as they should be? And Pentheus,  
what part did he play in my madness?

CADMUS

Like you, he was irreverent to the god. That's why the god linked you and him  
together

in the same disaster—thus destroying the house and me, for I've no children left,  
now I see this offspring of your womb,  
you unhappy woman, cruelly butchered  
in the most shameful way. He was the one  
who brought new vision to our family.

[addressing the remains of Pentheus]

My child, you upheld the honour of our house,  
my daughter's son. You were feared in Thebes.  
No one who saw you ever would insult me, though I was old, for you would then  
inflict

fit punishment. Now the mighty Cadmus,  
the man who sowed and later harvested  
the most splendid crop—the Theban people—  
will be an exile, banished from his home,  
a dishonoured man. Dearest of men,  
even though, my child, you're alive no more,  
I count you among those closest to me.

You won't be touching my cheek any more,  
holding me in your arms, and calling me "grandfather," as you ask me,  
"Old man,

who's injuring or dishonouring you?

Who upsets your heart with any pain?

Tell me, father, so I can punish him—  
anyone who treats you in an unjust way."

Now you're in this horrifying state,

I'm in misery, your mother's pitiful,

and all your relatives are in despair.

If there's a man who disrespects the gods,

let him think about how this man perished— then he should develop faith in them.

CHORUS LEADER

I'm sorry for you Cadmus—you're in pain.

But your grandson deserved his punishment.

AGAVE

Father, you see how all has changed for me. <sup>459</sup>

[From being your royal and honoured daughter,  
the mother of a king, I'm now transformed—  
an abomination, something to fill  
all people's hearts with horror, with disgust—  
the mother who slaughtered her only son,  
who tore him apart, ripping out the heart from the child who filled her own heart  
with joy—

all to honour this god Dionysus.

But, father, give me your permission now  
to lay out here the body of my son,  
prepare his corpse for proper burial.

CADMUS

That's no easy task to undertake.

His body, all the parts I could collect,  
lies here, in this chest, not a pretty sight.

My own eyes can hardly bear to see him.

But if you think you can endure the work, then, my child, begin the appropriate  
rites.

AGAVE [removing Pentheus' limbs and placing them on the ground in front of  
her]

Alas, for my poor son, my only child,

destroyed by his mother's Bacchic madness.

How could these hands of mine, which loved him so,  
have torn these limbs apart, ripped out his flesh.

Here's an arm which has held me all these years,

growing stronger as he grew into a man,

his feet . . . O how he used to run to me,

seeking assurance of his mother's love.

His face was handsome, on the verge of manhood. See the soft down still resting  
on these lips,

which have kissed me thousands of times or more.

All this, and all the rest, set here before us.

Oh Zeus and all you Olympian gods . . . .

[She cannot complete the ritual and collapses in grief]

It makes no sense—it's unendurable.

How could the god have wished such things on me?

CHORUS LEADER [helping Agave get up]

Lady, you must bear what cannot be borne.

Your suffering is intense, but the god is just.

You insulted him in Thebes, showed no respect—  
you've brought the punishment upon yourself.

CHORUS

<sup>459</sup>At this point, there is a major gap in the manuscript. The text here is reconstructed from what we know about the content of the missing portion.

What is wisdom? What is finer  
 than the rights men get from gods—  
 to hold their powerful hands  
 over the heads of their enemies?  
 Ah yes, what's good is always loved.  
 So all praise Dionysus,  
 praise the dancing god,  
 god of our revelry,  
 god whose justice is divine, whose justice now reveals itself.  
 [Enter Dionysus]

DIONYSUS

Yes, I am Dionysus, son of Zeus.  
 You see me now before you as a god.  
 You Thebans learned about my powers too late.  
 Dishonouring me, you earn the penalty.  
 You refused my rites. Now you must leave—  
 abandon your city for barbarian lands.  
 Agave, too, that polluted creature,  
 must go into perpetual banishment.  
 And Cadmus, you too must endure your lot.] <sup>460</sup>  
 Your form will change, so you become a dragon.  
 Your wife, Harmonia, Ares' daughter,  
 whom you, though mortal, took in marriage,  
 will be transformed, changing to a snake.  
 As Zeus' oracle declares, you and she  
 will drive a chariot drawn by heifers.  
 You'll rule barbarians. With your armies,  
 too large to count, you'll raze many cities.  
 Once they despoil Apollo's oracle,  
 they'll have a painful journey back again.  
 But Ares will guard you and Harmonia. In lands of the blessed he'll transform your  
 lives.  
 That's what I proclaim—I, Dionysus,  
 born from no mortal father, but from Zeus.  
 If you had understood how to behave  
 as you should have when you were unwilling,  
 you'd now be fortunate, with Zeus' child  
 among your allies.

CADMUS

O Dionysus,  
 we implore you—we've not acted justly.

DIONYSUS

You learn too late. You were ignorant  
 when you should have known.

<sup>460</sup>The Greek text resumes here at the end of the gap in the manuscript.



CADMUS

Now we understand.  
Your actions against us are too severe.

DIONYSUS

I was born a god, and you insulted me.

CADMUS

Angry gods should not act just like humans.

DIONYSUS

My father Zeus willed all this long ago.

AGAVE

Alas, old man, then this must be our fate,  
a miserable exile.

DIONYSUS

Why then delay?

Why postpone what necessity requires?

CADMUS

Child, we've stumbled into this disaster,  
this terrible calamity—you and me,  
both in agony—your sisters, too. So I'll go out to the barbarians,  
a foreign resident in my old age.  
And then for me there's that oracle  
which says I'll lead a mixed barbarian force  
back into Greece. And I'll bring here with me  
Harmonia, Ares' daughter, my wife.  
I'll have the savage nature of a snake,  
as I lead my soldiers to the altars,  
to the tombs, in Greece. But even then, there'll be no end to my wretched sorrows.  
1740

I'll never sail the downward plunging Acheron  
and reach some final peace.

AGAVE [embracing Cadmus] Father, I must be exiled without you.

CADMUS

Why do you throw your arms about me,  
my unhappy child, just like some young swan  
protecting an old one—gray and helpless.

AGAVE

Because I've no idea where to go,  
once I'm banished from my father's land.

CADMUS

Child, I don't know. Your father's not much help.

AGAVE

Farewell, then, to my home. Farewell to my native city.  
In my misfortune I abandon you,  
an exile from spaces once my own.

CADMUS

Go now to Aristeus' house, my child. <sup>461</sup>

AGAVE

How I grieve for you, my father.

CADMUS

And I grieve for you, my child,  
as I weep for your sisters.

AGAVE

Lord Dionysus has inflicted  
such brutal terror on your house.

DIONYSUS: Yes. For at your hands I suffered, too—  
and dreadfully. For here in Thebes  
my name received no recognition.

AGAVE: Farewell, father.

CADMUS: My most unhappy daughter,  
may you fare well. That will be hard for you.

AGAVE: Lead on, friends, so I may take my sisters,  
those pitiful women, into exile with me.  
May I go somewhere where cursed Cithaeron  
will never see me, nor my eyes glimpse  
that dreadful mountain, a place far away  
from any sacred thyrsus. Let others  
make Bacchic celebrations their concern.

[Exit Agave]

CHORUS: The gods appear in many forms,  
carrying with them unwelcome things.  
What people thought would happen never did.  
What they did not expect, the gods made happen.  
That's what this story has revealed.

[Exeunt Chorus and Cadmus, leaving on stage the remains of Pentheus' body]

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<sup>461</sup> Aristeus is the husband of Autonoe and father of Actaeon.

# (EURIPIDES) Alcestis

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>462</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae**

**Admetus** (*King of Pherae*)

**Alcestis** (*Wife to Admetus*)

**Pheres** (*Admetus' father*)

**Apollo** (*the god*)

**Thanatos** (*Priest of the dead*)

**Maid**

**Man Servant**

**Eumelus** (*Young son of the royals*)

**Girl** (*Young daughter of the royals -silent*)

**Herakles**

**Chorus** (*Men of Pherae*)

**Various court attendants** (*Silent*)

...

*Before the main gates of Admetus' palace at Pherae, in Thessaly.*

*There are three gates, the central one used only by the main occupants and Herakles, the other two by the slaves.*

*The gates open and Apollo emerges. He is a tall god, with long blond curls draping his shoulders. He is wearing a laurel garland on his head and a bow and a quiver hang across his chest.*

*Clean shaven. Short tunic. Bare chest.*

*He speaks to the audience.*

**Apollo:** *Indicating the palace*

This is Admetus' palace and here it was where I, a god, was forced to share a table with a slave. Father Zeus' idea, of course! He shot one of his thunder bolts right into my son Asclepius' chest and killed him, so, I got angry and killed all the Cyclopes, the beasts who do all of his fire work. Father got angrier still so he punished me by putting me into the service of a mortal. Admetus. I protected his household and looked after his herds of cows.

He is a good, god fearing man, Admetus, son of old Pheres, and I, of course am a god, so, I saved his life. I did this by playing a trick on the Fates.

I made these goddesses promise me that they'd let Admetus live if he could exchange his corpse for someone else's. Some corpse or other had to be delivered to the underworld, you see and so, all Admetus had to do was to find a replacement and he could escape his own immediate death.

Well, the king went all around the palace and asked everyone, his father, his mother, the very people who gave birth him – everyone, near and dear to him-

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<sup>462</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/alcestis/>

to see if anyone was willing to die in his stead. He found only one person willing to do that, to die for him and to never see the light of day for him and that was his wife, Alcestis.

She's in there, now, in his arms, breathing her last because Fate has decreed that this is the very day she must die.

Of course, I being a god, must not be polluted by anything that's going on in the chambers of that friendly palace and so I must now leave it.

*He looks into the distance of SR.*

Ah! He's here already! Thanatos himself! The Priest of the dead! He'll be taking the queen to the halls of Hades, soon! Punctual god, this one. He must have been waiting anxiously for this moment.

*Enter Thanatos. Total contrast to Apollo. Tall, wild looking man. Long black, unkempt hair. Black cape with extended shoulder pads, wielding a menacing sword.*

**Thanatos:**

What are you doing here, Apollo? Why are you hanging around the palace this time, ey, Apollo? Up to your old tricks again? Depriving the gods below of their rightful honours, cutting away at their rights, ey? Isn't it enough that you prevented Admetus' death by fooling the Fates into letting Admetus live with such a sly, dirty, cunning trick? And now, now I can see you all armed to the teeth with bows and arrows, no doubt trying to prevent the death of his replacement, Pelias' daughter, Alcestis!

**Apollo:**

Fear not, Thanatos. My reasons for being here are good and honourable.

**Thanatos:**

If that is so then why the bows and arrows?

**Apollo:**

Force of habit. I always carry them with me.

**Thanatos:**

And to give unreasonable protection to this household, right?

**Apollo:**

I am here because the suffering of friends weighs heavily on me.

**Thanatos:**

So are you trying to deprive me of a second death?

**Apollo:**

Listen, Thanatos! I didn't use force even with the first one!

**Thanatos:**

So, why is he still up here, above the soil and not below it, down, in the underworld?

**Apollo:**

Because his spot has been changed with that of his wife. That's what you're here for, isn't it? To take her away?

**Thanatos:**

That's right. And I'll be taking her down to Hades with me.

**Apollo:**

Well, I doubt very much that I can persuade you to change your mind, so, take her and go. She's all yours.

**Thanatos:**

You? Persuade me? About who I can or can't, kill? Ha! Choosing the dead is my job! I'm under orders to perform that very job!

**Apollo:**

No, I don't want to persuade you about who you can or can't kill. Just to try and... postpone their death a bit.

**Thanatos:**

O, I see! Now I see what you're up to!

**Apollo:**

So, tell me, then, Thanatos: is there no way Alcestis can reach old age?

**Thanatos:**

No way! None whatsoever! If you must know, I, too, enjoy the dignity of my office.

**Apollo:**

Yeah, but one way or another, you'll still get your single life. Whether it's now or later, it will still be the one life!

**Thanatos:**

The younger they are the bigger the glory!

**Apollo:**

Still, the older she dies the more wealth she'll take down there with her on her burial day.

**Thanatos:**

Apollo, you're trying to set an unfair precedent here! It's a law that will favour the rich!

**Apollo:**

O, I can see you're a deep thinker, Thanatos! A true philosopher.

**Thanatos:**

Can't you see? Anyone with money would try and buy long life! All the poor would die young.

**Apollo:**

So, you won't grant me that little favour then?

**Thanatos:**

Absolutely not. You know what I'm like!

**Apollo:**

Yes, I do. I know what you're like all right. The mortals hate you and the gods spit in your eye!

**Thanatos:**

Apollo, you can't always have more than you deserve!

**Apollo:**

Now you listen to me, Thanatos! No matter how rude and crude and raw you are, one way or another, you'll be made to do the right thing. There's a man coming here, to Pheres' palace, today. Someone, a man, who king Eurystheus has sent to Thrace to get him back his horses and chariot, away from the heavy winters of that place; well, this man will change your ways. This man will stay here, in this palace as a guest and he will take the queen away from you whether you like it or not. That way, Thanatos, not only will I not owe you any favours but I will also be able to continue to hate you.

**Thanatos:**

What a lot of nonsense! Nonsense will get you nowhere, Apollo! The Queen will be heading down to the underworld –whether you like it or not! Down into Hades' chambers, Apollo! I'm going to see her right now; chop off some of her hair with this sword, here. And that little chop will mean she'll become a holy offering to all the gods below this earth.

*Exit Apollo through SR and Thanatos through the middle gate of the palace  
Enter the Chorus of Pherean men. They look around the palace and are surprised.*

**Chorus:**

How quiet it is around Admetus' palace!

**Chorus:**

I wonder what it all means.

**Chorus:**

There's no one around from her family to tell us if we should be mourning the Queen's death or celebrating the fact that she can still see the light of day.

**Chorus:**

The way I and everyone else see it, Pelias' daughter, Alcestis, has no equal on this Earth, in her loyalty to her husband.

*They listen intently for a few seconds but hear nothing.*

**Chorus:**

Can anyone hear any sounds of grief in there? The sound of someone sighing or that of hands beating hard at the breast, in despair, as if it's all over?

*They listen again*

**Chorus:**

No, nothing!

**Chorus:**

There's no servant out here to tell us what's going on, either.

God of healing, Apollo! If only you could come and avert the crushing waves of this terrible Fate!

**Chorus:**

Listen, if the Queen has died the place wouldn't be so quiet.

**Chorus:**

I fear she's dead!

**Chorus:**

But you can see, she hasn't been taken out of the house yet!

**Chorus:**

See what? I'm not so sure. What makes you so certain she hasn't already been taken out to be buried?

**Chorus:**

Because surely Admetus would have mourners accompanying her body to the burial ground.

**Chorus:**

I can't see the libation basin that people place outside their house when they're mourning the death of a loved one.

**Chorus:**

Nor can I see the lock of hair cut from the dead person's head next to the door.

**Chorus:**

And I can't hear the loud sound of women's hands beating their chest in grief.

**Chorus:**

Still, today is the day she's supposed to die.

**Chorus:**

What do you mean?

**Chorus:**

This is the day that Fate has declared she must go to the underworld.

**Chorus:**

O, your words have crushed my heart! They have crushed my soul!

**Chorus:**

Life-long loyal friends should mourn the death of the virtuous.

**Chorus:**

Ah! There is no shrine upon this earth where one can send her soul, even by ship, no shrine that can save our unfortunate Queen. There is no shrine on earth that can release her soul from this fateful burden. Not Lycia nor Ammon's dry seat.

**Chorus:**

Her merciless Fate of death approaches.

**Chorus:**

And I know of no other altar, no altar where they sacrifice sheep that I may turn to, no altar where I can pray for her life.

**Chorus:**

Only Apollo's son, Asclepius, only he, if here alive and living among those who see the light of the Sun, only he could let our Queen leave behind Hades' dismal chambers and come back to us, up here, above the soil. Only he could raise the dead. Only he could resurrect them. But then, Zeus hurled a lightning bolt at him and killed him.

Now, I cannot see anywhere the slightest hope that she will live.

*All the chorus search the sides of the stage for a few seconds, looking far into the distance within.*

**Chorus:**

The altar of every god is dripping with the blood of sacrifices that the king has performed to try and save her but there is no escaping Fate.

*A side door of the palace opens and a tearful Maid appears*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look! One of the maids has come out of the palace. She's in tears. I wonder what it is she'll tell us about the Queen's fate.

**Chorus: To the Maid**

Old lady, it is certainly proper for a servant to grieve for her master's misfortune but could you tell us what we're all anxious to know: is our Queen alive and breathing, or has she passed away?

**Maid:**

Both. You can say she's both, alive and dead.

**Chorus:**

What are you saying, old maid? How can a person be alive and dead both at the same time?

**Maid:**

She's in bed breathing her last. She's dying!

**Chorus:**

Is there no hope at all then, to save her life?

**Maid:**

No, none. The moment of her death is fast approaching.

**Chorus:**

Have all the preparations for the funeral been made?

**Maid:**

Yes. The fine clothes in which her husband will bury her are ready.

**Chorus:**

Poor king! Such a good husband to lose such a good wife!

**Maid:**

My king will not feel the true extent of his loss until after it happens.

**Chorus:**

Then let your mistress know, old maid, that she will die a most virtuous woman, the most noble of all the women under the sun, for a very long time.

**Maid:**

Most noble and most virtuous indeed. And why not? Who can say otherwise? What could a woman do to be more so? How could a woman show her devotion to her husband better than how she did it? She has sacrificed her life in order to save his. Everyone in the city knows this, of course but you'd be amazed to hear how she behaved inside the palace.

The moment she heard that the fatal hour has arrived for her, she went to the river and there she washed her fair body.

Then she came home and from her cedar wardrobes she took out her finest clothes and dressed herself in a very dignified way. Then she went and stood in front of the hearth and prayed to the goddess.

"Goddess, Lady Hestia," she prayed. "Protector of the hearth, I am now going to the world below the Earth so I beg of you to grant me this last request: Take care of my orphaned children. Give my son a woman who will make a loving partner for him and, for my daughter, give her a virtuous husband. Let not their life be cut short as mine has been and let them live long and happy lives, here in the land of their ancestors."

That was her prayer. Then, she went to all the altars in Admetus' palace and prayed again at each one and put garlands of myrtle around them.

Not a sigh, not a groan out of her! The disaster that was about to befall her had not touched the beauty of her face.

Only when she returned to her bedroom did her tears fall. She fell upon it and in a flood of tears she spoke to it. "O, marriage bed," she said, to it. "Here, on this bed, I have given my virginity to my husband for whom now I must also give my life. Farewell, my marriage bed! Because I did not want to betray you or to betray my husband, I must now die. A new woman will now take you, a woman perhaps luckier than me but certainly not more virtuous."

Then she kissed it and the flood of tears that poured from her eyes soaked all the sheets. Then, when she was exhausted from her crying, she got up from



the bed, wondered around the palace aimlessly for a while, going in and out of all the rooms with her head down, until, finally, she went back into her bedroom and again, fell upon the bed. Her children were holding tightly at their mother's gown, now, crying. Like a woman who knew she was about to die, their mother picked them up, hugged them close to her chest and kissed them, first the one and then the other.

All the palace servants were also crying pitifully because of the terrible Fate that befell their mistress. She stretched her right hand out to them all -each and every one of them!- respecting even the most humble of them and said 'good bye' to them and they, in turned bid her farewell.

Such are the dire troubles in Admetus' palace! Whether he died or not, the pains he is suffering are so great that he will never forget them.

**Chorus:**

Weighty troubles, indeed! Admetus must feel absolutely horrible, losing such a wonderful wife!

**Maid:**

He's holding his poor wife in his arms and mourns her loss. He begs her not to leave him. But he's trying to do the impossible because the poor woman is now in the grips of her illness and is fast losing strength, withering like a flower, her body nothing more than a sick and a meagre weight for his arms.

A body barely breathing, barely able to raise itself from the bed a body desperately searching for some of the Sun's rays.

She wants to take one last look at the Sun's bright circle of rays.

But let me go and announce your visit. Not everyone wishes their ill masters well or give them any support in their hour of need but you are their old and true friends.

*Exit Maid into the Palace through the side entrance*

**Chorus:**

O, Zeus! Where can one find a means by which our king and queen can escape their terrible Fate? Show us the way out of this dreadful catastrophe!

*A short but anxious wait for the palace door to open*

**Chorus:**

Ah! Will anyone come out of the palace? Should I cut my hair and wear black robes in mourning?

**Chorus:**

It is clear my friends! Alcestis' Fate is very clear! Still, let us pray to the gods! Let us pray to them because their power is most great.

**Chorus:**

O, Paean! O Lord of Healing! Find some means by which Admetus can escape his misfortune!

**Chorus:**

Yes, Lord Paean! Help! Come and help poor Admetus just as you have helped him before! Come! Stop Hades from performing his murderous work! Save Admetus!

**Chorus:**

Poor, poor Admetus! Poor son of Pheres! What a ghastly misfortune this is you are suffering, to have such a wife as Alcestis, taken away from you!

**Chorus:**

A misfortune that makes one want to say, "I'd rather use my sword against me! I'd rather kill myself than suffer this."

**Chorus:**

I'd rather put a noose around my neck and hang myself, dangling high, between the Heavens and the Earth than suffer such a loss!

**Chorus:**

Because, Admetus, your wife is not simply a wife to you but she is the dearest woman in your life and today, Admetus, today, you will see her dead.

*Enter Alcestis from the palace. She is very weak and is helped to walk by Admetus. Their two children (a boy and a girl) follow, holding their mother's gown.*

*A number of servants carry out a couch which they place in front of the Palace. (Down Stage)*

**Chorus:**

Look! Look there! She and her husband are coming out of the palace!

**Chorus:** *To the audience. Wailing.*

O, cry! All of you cry! Groan, all you people of the land of Pheres! Sigh for the most excellent of all wives! Sigh for her who is withering under an illness that will take her to Hades' world below!

**Chorus:**

I will never again say that marriage brings more joy than misery. I saw this many times before and I see it now with this king who must live an unbearable life now that he will lose his wonderful wife.

**Alcestis:** *Looking up, weakly.*

The Sun! The light of day! The clouds that whirl about across the sky!

**Admetus:**

He sees us, from up there. Apollo, the bright Sun-god sees these two unfortunate people who've committed no sin but who must still suffer your death.

**Alcestis:**

The Earth! The Palace roof! The marriage bed of my ancestral land, of Iolcus!

**Admetus:**

Come, wife, have courage! Don't leave me! Come, pray to the almighty gods who have your life in their hands. Ask them to be merciful.

**Alcestis:**

Ah! I can see the small boat on the lake. The boat with the two oars; and Charon, the ferryman of the dead, holding onto the barge pole. His hand is stretched out towards me and he's calling out to me, "Hurry up! Stop wasting time! You're holding me back!" Ah! He's calling for me, he wants me to rush.

**Admetus:**

Ah, how bitter is the journey you speak of, Alcestis! Unfortunate wife! What suffering we must endure!

**Alcestis:** *Grabs at Admetus' shoulders and shouts desperately.*

Ah! He's taking me, Admetus! He's taking me away. Can you not see him? He wants to take me down, down to the court of the dead!

Look there! There he is! Winged Hades is near us... His eyes are spitting angry fire beneath his brows!

*Addressing Hades*

What? What do you want? No! No, let me go!

O, I am such an unfortunate woman! What a dreadful journey I am forced to make!

**Admetus:**

A dreadful journey, indeed, wife! A journey that makes us all, especially me and the children weep! Your pain is our pain, too!

**Alcestis:** *still addressing Hades*

Leave me! Let me go!

*To the servants.*

Come, servants, help me lie down. My knees are weak. Hades is near now. Darkness has flooded my eyes.

My darling children! You have no mother now. Farewell, my darlings. Live, my children! Live and enjoy the light of the sun!

**Admetus:**

How sad these words sound to my ear! There's more pity in them than there is in death itself!

By the gods, wife! By the gods, I beg you! Don't leave me! In the name of the children whom you leave behind as orphans, be strong, wife! Be strong and have courage. If you leave me I, too, will be lost. Whether we live or die is in your hands, dear wife, because we hold your love sacred.

**Alcestis:** *Recovering a little and answers Admetus more directly.*

Admetus, you can see for yourself how close to death I am so listen to my final wish.

I have given your life priority over mine and for that, you will be able to look upon the sun and I, in your stead, will die. I could have avoided this and, instead, after your death, I could have married anyone I wished in Thessaly and lived in the wealth of another noble house. But my heart could not endure being left here with my orphaned children without you and so I put aside the gifts that come with youth, great and sweet though they might be.

Your own parents have abandoned you, though, at their age, if they had died in your stead, they could have achieved a double glory, that of saving your life and that of leaving this world honourably. You are their only son and there is no hope for them to have another child. You and I would still live out our lives to their full and you wouldn't now be lamenting the loss of your wife. Nor would you need to raise orphaned children.

But this has been brought about by some god or other. So, let it be.

Admetus, I want you to be grateful for what has happened and to give something back in gratitude.

No, I won't ask you to pay a price equal to the one I'm paying. No, life is more precious than everything else. But I do want you to do what is proper. Surely you'll agree to do that because, unless you've lost your wits, you love these two children as much as I do. Keep our children as lords of our house. Don't marry another woman who'll be less virtuous than me. Don't let a stepmother rule them, a stepmother who, because of envy, will handle them –your children and mine – harshly.

I beg you, Admetus, don't do that because, to a stepmother, Admetus, the children of his former wife are an enemy, a more hateful enemy than a snake.

*She strokes the head of her son*

A boy always has a strong ally in his father.

*Turns to the daughter*

But you, my darling daughter, how will you manage to grow up honourably, through the years of your childhood? What sort of a woman will you see living with your father? I hope that she won't disgrace your name with hateful smears in the prime of your life, my darling and destroy your marriage prospects.

Poor girl! Your mother won't be there at your wedding, she won't be there, with you, my sweet, helping you with your own labour at childbirth, a time when a mother's presence is most comforting.

No, darling, I can't do any of this because I must die. Not tomorrow, not the day after but right now, my darling, right now. This very minute I shall suffer this awful disaster. This very minute I shall add to the numbers of the dead.

*To all of them*

Good bye to you all!

And you, my husband, Admetus, you can rightly boast of having had the best of wives and you, my children that the best mother in the world has given birth to you.

**Chorus:**

Courage, my queen!

**Chorus:**

I can speak on Admetus' behalf without hesitation and say that he'll definitely act according to your wishes. That is if he hasn't lost his mind.

**Admetus:**

Have no fear, Alcestis. Have no fear. I shall do as you say.

I called you "wife" while you were alive and you will still be called my wife after you die. In the whole of Thessaly there will never be another woman who will talk with me in the same way that you did, as a wife.

There is no woman in the world who is born from as noble a family as you, nor one who is as beautiful as you. As for the children, Alcestis. I am content. I only wish the gods grant me the full joy of them, joy that they have deprived me by your death.

My mourning for your loss, Alcestis, will last not a year but my whole life and I shall hate my parents, despise my mother and father who loved me only with words but not with deeds.

But you, wife, so as to save my own life you gave me what is the dearest thing in the world, you gave me your own life. How can I not mourn the loss of such a wife?

I will stop now all the banquets and the garlands, all the joyous parties and the visitors, all that music that echoed throughout our palace. I'll never touch a lyre again nor lift my spirits with the Lydian flute because your loss, wife, takes with it all the joy of living.

I shall call a skilled craftsman to make an image of you, which I will put in our bed and embrace it lovingly, calling out your name, my beloved, believing that it is you that I am embracing. It will be a cold joy, my love but one that I think might lighten the weight of the loss just a little. And if you visit me in my dreams my joy

will be even greater. It is a sweet thing to see one's loved ones in dreams, even though it is for a short time.

I wish I had the voice and music of Orpheus! Nothing could stop me from bringing you back from Hades.

I would have enchanted Demeter's daughter and her husband with songs and neither Plouto's dog nor Charon, that old ferryman of souls, could have stopped me from rushing down there and returning you up here in the light of the sun.

But wait for me, Alcestis, wait for me and make a place for me next to you so that I can stay with you always when I, too, die.

I'll tell our children to bury me in the same cedar coffin as you, so that we can be side-by-side, always. I don't want to be separated from you even in death, my one and only true and faithful wife.

**Chorus:** *To Admetus*

I, too, Admetus, will share in your grief and mourn with you, a friend losing a friend. She deserves it.

**Alcestis:** *To the children*

You heard your father, my loves. He will not betray me and nor will he place another woman over you.

**Admetus:**

I repeat my promise. I will do just as I said.

*Alcestis guides the children towards Admetus*

**Alcestis:**

Then abide by your word and accept these children from me.

*Admetus receives them in his arms.*

**Admetus:**

I accept them. A dear gift from the hands I love.

**Alcestis:**

And so, you now must become their mother also, just as I have been.

**Admetus:**

It is necessary for me to do so, since they'll be orphaned of their real mother.

**Alcestis:**

I'm leaving you, my darlings. I'm going down to the underworld when I should be up here, alive, with you!

**Admetus:**

O, Alcestis! How can I live alone, without you?

**Alcestis:**

Time heals the living but the dead are nothing.

**Admetus:**

Take me with you, wife! Please!

**Alcestis:**

No. It is enough that I die for you.

**Admetus:**

O, Hades! Hades, what a precious wife you steal from me!

**Alcestis:**

Ah! My vision darkens and my eyes are growing heavy already.

**Admetus:**

If you go I, too, will be lost!

**Alcestis:**

I am finished. I exist no more. Declare me dead now!

**Admetus:**

Courage, my darling! Lift up your face! Do not abandon your children!

**Alcestis:** *Gently turning her head away from the children*

Darlings, I'm leaving you against my wish! Farewell to you both.

**Admetus:**

Wife! Look at your children! Look at them!

**Alcestis:**

I am gone! I am dead!

**Admetus:**

What are you doing, wife? Are you really leaving me?

**Alcestis:**

Farewell, husband!

*Alcestis falls dead onto the couch. The chorus runs to her and examines her.*

**Admetus:**

O, I am lost!

**Chorus:**

She's gone! Admetus' wife is dead!

**Eumelus:**

Ah! What a horrible Fate!

My mother has gone down to the Underworld!

She's gone, father! The sun can no longer see her!

She's gone and left our life motherless.

Ah! Her eyes are closed and her hands are motionless.

*He bends down and kisses her*

Mother! Mother! Hear me! Hear me, mother, I'm calling you, I'm begging you, mother!

Mother, it is me! Me, your darling son! Mother, I am kissing you and I'm talking to you.

Mother!

**Admetus:**

She cannot see, my son. She cannot hear!

What a dreadful disaster has fallen upon all of us!

**Eumelus:**

I'm still a child, father! Still young yet I'm torn from my dear mother's arm!

I'm left to wonder through life all alone.

Disasters are falling upon me and upon you, too, my dear, little sister!

And you, my father! What a bitter end to your marriage! What a terrible waste!

Fate has not let you enjoy old age with your wife. She is dead now!

Mother! Your death has killed our household!

**Chorus:**

Courage Admetus. Courage. You must try and endure this disaster. You're neither the first nor will you be the last who has lost a noble wife.

You must accept the fact that we are all fated to die.

**Admetus:**

I know this. This misfortune has not just arrived suddenly and it was not unexpected. I expected it and agonised over it for a long time now.

Stay with me now and help me bury my wife. Sing the sad dirge appropriate to the pitiless god of the underworld.

*A public proclamation*

I hereby command all the people of Thessaly, whom I rule, to join me in my mourning by wearing black and by cutting their hair.

And all you folk who have horses for harnessing or steeds for riding, shear their manes with iron blades.

Let no sounds of the lyre or the flute be heard in the city for twelve full moons.

I bury someone most dear to me, one who will never be surpassed in her loyalty to me. She deserves all honours for sacrificing her life for me.

*The servants pick up Alcestis' body and exit into the palace, followed by Admetus and the children.*

**Chorus:**

Oh, Alcestis, Pelias' daughter!

**Chorus 2:**

Goodbye! I hope joy is not too far away from you, down there, in Hades' sunless chambers.

**Chorus:**

Let the god with the black hair, Hades and that old man who sits at the tiller and works the oar, that ferryman of souls, Charon, let those two be certain that never has a woman more virtuous than Alcestis been carried across the lake Acheron.

**Chorus:**

The poets, Alcestis! The poets will sing of you often! And often they'll play the seven-stringed lyre, the mountain lyre the one made of tortoise shell.

**Chorus:**

And they'll cry also even without the lyre, in Sparta, when the seasons in their turning bring round the month of Carnies and its Festival, the night when the moon hangs high and full for the whole night.

**Chorus:**

And they'll sing your praise in Athens also, Alcestis. In that city, Athens, my queen! A city radiant in its wealth. The grief of your death will inspire all the poets in the world.

**Chorus:**

Oh, how I wish! O, my queen how I wish that it was within my power to bring you back into the sunlight, to pull you out of Hades' deep rooms, to work the oar above the streams of Kokytus.

**Chorus:**

Because you, my dear queen, you alone, had the courage to give your life to Hades in exchange for the life of your husband. May the soil fall lightly upon your body, my queen!

**Chorus:**

And if your husband calls for another woman to come to his bed, he'll be despised

not only by your children but by me also.

**Chorus:**

No one else dared to die for your husband!

**Chorus:**

Neither his mother nor his father, both of whom have already lived long enough, whose hair is fully white, neither of them wanted to go down to the underworld to save your husband's life.

**Chorus:**

Their own child! Neither of them had the courage to save their child from this harsh fate and that's why it fell upon you, such a young woman, to die for him.

**Chorus:**

How I wish I could have such a wife! They are very rare, indeed, in this world.

*Enter Herakles. He is wearing his characteristic lion skin and carrying a wooden club.*

**Herakles:**

Friends! You, men who live here, in the land of Pherae, tell me, is Admetus home?

**Chorus:**

Yes, Herakles, Phere's son is here. He's inside but what brings you here, in this Thessalian city of Pherae?

**Herakles:**

I've got to perform a task for Eurystheus, king of Tiryns.

**Chorus:**

And where is this task taking you? What sort of a task is it?

**Herakles:**

I have to go and get that four-horse chariot from Diomedes, the king of Thrace.

**Chorus:**

How are you going to do that? Do you have any idea what sort of a man that foreigner is?

**Herakles:**

No idea. I've never been to the land of the Bistonians.

**Chorus:**

They'll give you a strong battle for those horses, that's for sure.

**Herakles:**

Still, I can't avoid the task.

**Chorus:**

Kill or be killed, Herakles. Either you'll return alive or leave your bones there.

**Herakles:**

This isn't the first time I've had to go through such a test.

**Chorus:**

And will there be some other, extra reward for you if you defeat the owner of those horses?

**Herakles:**

Well, I'll be taking the horses to Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns.

**Chorus:**

Putting the bit between the jaws of those horses won't be easy.

**Herakles:**

Sure it will, unless, of course, their nostrils breathe out fire.



**Chorus:**

No they don't but those fast jaws of theirs, chop men up into little bits.

**Herakles:**

Human flesh is the food of mountain beasts not horses.

**Chorus:**

Go check out their stalls, Herakles. The walls are soaked in blood.

**Herakles:**

Who's the father of this man who boasts to have raised these horses?

**Chorus:**

Ares. He's the son of Ares. Keeper of the golden shield of Thrace.

**Herakles:**

All you're telling me is that this task, too, is as difficult as all those other tasks that Fate had me perform. My Destiny is harsh and steep.

I've always had to do battle with the sons of Ares. First it was Lykaon, then came Kyknus and now this! This third one, I see, will have me fighting wild horses as well as their master! Still, let it be known that no one will see me, Herakles, Alkmene's son, cowering before an enemy's hand.

*The Palace gates open and Admetus enters. He is dressed in black and his hair is cut short, as a sign of mourning. He is followed by three servants.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look, Herakles. Here is Admetus, the king himself, coming out of his Palace halls!

**Admetus:** *To Herakles*

Herakles, son of Zeus, Perseas' blood-child. I wish you joy!

**Herakles:**

Joy to you, too, Admetus, king of Thessaly!

**Admetus:**

Ah, joy! How I wish I had some of it, Herakles but, I know your heart is in the right place.

**Herakles:**

Admetus, what is this? You've cut your hair short. Are you in mourning?

**Admetus:**

Yes, Herakles. I must bury someone today.

**Herakles:**

May the gods keep such misfortune away from your children!

**Admetus:**

My children are alive, Herakles. They're inside.

**Herakles:**

But, Admetus, if it's your father who died, well, he has lived a long life...

**Admetus:**

No, Herakles, my father is alive and so is my mother.

**Herakles:**

But then... surely it's not your wife, is it? Not Alcestis?

**Admetus:**

Ah, Alcestis! Here I can use both words: "yes" and "no!"

**Herakles:**

Are you saying that she has died or that she's still alive?

**Admetus:**

She exists and she does not! Oh, I am so sick with grief!

**Herakles:**

Admetus, you're not making sense. I can't understand you.

**Admetus:**

Surely you know of the Fate she must endure?

**Herakles:**

I know it. I know that she has offered to die in your stead.

**Admetus:**

Well then, how can we now say she exists?

**Herakles:**

Admetus, don't mourn prematurely.

**Admetus:**

Since she must die, she will die. The dead don't exist.

**Herakles:**

Think of them as two different things, Admetus. To exist and to be dead are of a different nature.

**Admetus:**

We think differently on this, Herakles.

**Herakles:**

But who is it you've lost? For whom are you mourning?

**Admetus:**

I am mourning the loss of a woman. The one we are talking about.

**Herakles:**

A woman? A friend or a relative?

**Admetus:**

A friend but one who was a vital part of this household.

**Herakles:**

And how is it she died here, in your own house?

**Admetus:**

Her father had died when she was young and we had brought her here, as an orphan.

**Herakles:**

A terrible thing for you, Admetus. I wish I hadn't come in such an awful hour for you.

*He turns to leave but Admetus takes him by the hand*

**Admetus:**

Why do you say that? Where are you going now?

**Herakles:**

I think I had better leave you in peace and visit another friend of mine.

**Admetus:**

Good Lord, no, Herakles! That would be dreadful! Stay here!

**Herakles:**

A stranger's visit is a burden to the grief stricken.

**Admetus:**

The dead are dead, Herakles. Come. Come into the house!

**Herakles:**

No, Admetus. It's shameful to be feasting in a house of mourning.

**Admetus:**

We have separate rooms for the guests, Herakles. We'll put you up in one of those.

**Herakles:**

Let me go, Admetus. I will still be enormously grateful to you for your offer, just the same.

**Admetus:**

No, Herakles. I can't let you go and stay at someone else's house.

*To one of his servants*

Take him inside. Take him to the visitors' quarters, at the far end of the palace and organise the others to set up a big table for him.

*Herakles follows the servant into the palace.*

*Admetus speaks to the other servants*

Now you go and shut all the other doors so that the visitors may enjoy their meal and not feel sad by hearing all the crying of the mourners.

**Chorus:**

My king, what are you doing? This is madness! Your house has suffered such a great loss yet you let strangers feast in your halls?

**Admetus:**

Would you have me add to my misfortune? Should I act inhospitably to a friend? Should I have sent him away from my house and from my city? Would that be better? Should I also add to my calamity the ill repute that this house treats strangers as enemies?

Herakles treats me most hospitably whenever I visit his parched land, Argos.

**Chorus:**

But then, why did you hide the true nature of your misfortune, if you say he's such a good friend?

**Admetus:**

Because if he knew of it he'd never enter my house. Others might think me callous but my house does not know how to insult visitors by sending them away.

*Exit Admetus into the palace.*

**Chorus:**

This house is truly a welcoming house!

**Chorus:**

It is the house of a very generous man!

**Chorus:**

This is the house that Pythian Apollo, god of the delightful lyre, found worthy enough to stay in, to serve in...

**Chorus:**

...as a kindly shepherd, playing mating songs to its herds...

**Chorus:**

With his flute...

**Chorus:**

...on the undulating hills surrounding it.

**Chorus:**

And as Apollo played his enchanting music for Admetus' flocks, the spotted lynxes came out of the Othrys valley to join them...

**Chorus:**

...and so did a pride of fiery-blond lions...

**Chorus:**

...and the dappled fawn, moved by the charming music of your lyre, Apollo...

**Chorus:**

... they had stepped out from behind the fir trees and with their airy feet, rejoiced in a dance.

**Chorus:**

And that's because Admetus' flocks are countless and his land is spread around the clear waters of Lake Boebia.

**Chorus:**

The boundaries of his paddocks and of all his grazing lands reach out far into the brilliant East, where Apollo, the Sun god, houses his steeds...

**Chorus:**

...and far, on the other side, it reaches deep into the shadowy West, far beyond the Molossian mountain ranges.

**Chorus:**

As for his kingdom, it stretches as far as the Aegean promontory of rocky Pelion.

**Chorus:**

And now, just now, you saw how he opened wide the doors of his house to a visitor...

**Chorus:**

...even though his eyes were full of tears, grieving the loss of his dear wife who only just now gave out her last breath, here in this house.

**Chorus:**

The noble soul honours respect profusely. All wisdom is owned by the good.

**Chorus:**

Such a marvellous thing!

**Chorus:**

And I am certain of this: that the man who respects the gods will enjoy prosperity!

*The doors of the palace open slowly and a retinue of mourners emerges.*

*Among them is Admetus.*

*The body of Alcestis is carried on a bier, on the shoulders of the servants.*

**Admetus: To the Chorus**

Men of Pherae, you have stood by me in my hour of grief.

My servants have prepared my wife's body for its burial pyre and are now carrying it on their shoulders.

Come now and as our custom dictates, farewell the dead woman on her final journey.

*Enter Pheres with his slaves from another Palace Gate. He is walking slowly, solemnly, with the help of a walking stick.*

*His slaves are carrying robes, small ornamental statues and jewellery for the grave.*

**Chorus:**

Ah! I can see your father, Admetus. His steps are the steps of an old man. His servants are carrying fine gifts and ornaments for your lady's grave.

**Pheres:**

I've come out, my son, to share in your pain.

No one can deny, my son that you have lost a most worthy, a most wise wife.

These are unavoidable blows, blows that we must all endure even though they are insufferable.

Take these gifts, my son and let her wear them in the underworld.

We must pay our due respect to the corpse of this woman, a woman who has died to save your life a woman who did not leave me childless and alone in my harsh old age.

Because of this noble deed, her name will be the most famous among all women.

*To the corpse of Alcestis*

Alcestis! You have saved my son's life and you have put us back onto our feet.

Farewell, Alcestis and may your stay in Hades be joyous.

This is the sort of marriage that all mortals should go through. Otherwise let no one be married.

**Admetus:**

Pheres, I have neither invited you to this funeral, nor do I regard you as one of my friends.

Alcestis will not wear any of your gifts –she needs none of it for her burial. She needs nothing of yours. You should have shown your sympathies when I was about to die. Instead, you just stood by, allowing a young person to die instead of you, you, who are an old man. And now you've come to mourn for her?

Neither you nor that woman who claims to have given birth to me can claim to be my true parent. You were never my father and she was never my mother.

Was I born by some slave or other and then secretly put to your wife's breast? You have shown who you really are with this test.

Yes, you've shown us all that I am not a son of yours.

What a champion coward you are Pheres! There's no one more cowardly than you. Despite the fact that you're old and despite the fact that you've come to the end of your life, you've refused – you did not have the courage- to die in place of your young son! Your only son! Instead, you and your wife made Alcestis, a woman who was not even a blood relative of ours, give her own life.

It is her that I now rightly call, both, my father and mother!

Yet what a wonderful test you could have undertaken! Imagine: to die for your own son! Your life, in any case was at its end.

Alcestis and I would be allowed to live out our full life together, without my grieving about my ill fortune.

Look at you! Everything a man would wish for, everything that could make a man happy, came to you! For the best part of your life you were a King!

You had me as son and heir to your kingdom so that you wouldn't die childless or without an heir to look after your fortune and keep it from plundering hands.

And can you say that you've let me go to my own death because I've been

disrespectful to you and your old age?

No you can't because more than anything else, I have shown you total respect. But look at how I'm repaid by you for my kindness! Look how I'm repaid by my own father and by her who claims to be my own mother!

You better hurry up, then, old man. Time is running out for you. Hurry up and have another child to take care of you in your old age. A child who'll get you prepared for your burial, a child to roll the shroud over you, bury you in your grave – because it won't be me. It won't be my hands who'll be doing the burying of your corpse! Never! So far as you're concerned, old man, I am dead!

If I am alive because someone else has saved my life and if today I can see the light of the sun, it is to that someone else that I belong. It is that someone else who is my true parent and it is that someone else for whom I'll care in his old age.

Old men! They moan and groan about old age and they pray for death to come. They lie! Their prayers are lies! Lies because the moment they see death approaching them, suddenly they have no problem with their old age and with their lengthy life! Suddenly none of them want to die! They moan and groan no more!

**Chorus:**

Stop, Admetus, stop! You have enough grief to endure already! Don't make it any worse for you by hurting your father's feelings!

**Pheres:**

My son, do I look like one of those Lydian or Trojan slaves of yours that you've gone and bought with money? Is that why you insult me like this? You know full well that I am a Thessalian, a man who is born free and who is the legitimate son of a Thessalian man. You throw your childish and brash insults at me far too readily, my son and I'm not going to let you get away with it so easily.

It is true, you are my son and, as such, I have brought you up to be the master of this house but I do not owe you my life. There is no such law handed to us by our ancestors. No law that says that fathers must die for their sons; nor is it a law among the rest of the Greeks. Your life is yours and yours only and it is yours whether it is a fortunate one or one bereft of fortune.

You have received from me all that you may justly ask for. You are now the ruler of many people and, as well, I will leave you much land –all the land that was left to me by my father so, what is it that you think I owe you? How have I wronged you? What have I taken away from you? Life? No! I won't ask you to die on my behalf and you should not ask me to die on yours.

You love the light of the day. Do you think your old father doesn't? I have no doubt at all that life in the underworld will be very long and that life here is very short. Short, yes, but sweet, nevertheless! Sweet, indeed and that's why you fought without the slightest bit of shame, to stay alive long past your fated hour. You have avoided death because you have killed her! And you have the audacity to say that I have no courage? No, you're the coward, here! You're the one who lacks courage! You're the one who is beaten in courage by a woman! A wife, who died to save her husband! And what a husband, ey? Such a... such a fine young, brave husband!

What a clever man you are, my son! Clever enough to have found the secret of immortality! Now all you have to do is to keep exchanging your life for the life of

a wife. Every new wife gets persuaded to give her life for you. Brave stuff, my son!  
And then you dare call your own parents cowards, for refusing to do this!

The evil in you, my son, is astounding!

*Admetus tries to speak but Pheres stops him*

Silence! Not another word from you!

Know this much, Admetus: Every man loves his life as much as you do!

And if you dare continue with these insufferable insults then you're going to receive some insufferable insults yourself –and they will all be true!

**Chorus:** *To Pheres*

Too much blame and rebuke has already been cast.

**Chorus:**

Let it stop now.

**Chorus:**

Come, old man, stop insulting your son!

**Admetus:** *To Pheres*

Go on! Insult me all you want! I shall disprove everything you say. If the truth hurts your ears then stop behaving so badly!

**Pheres:**

I would be behaving worse if I had died for your sake!

**Admetus:**

Worse? Is the death of a young man the same as that of an old one?

**Pheres:**

Our living must be done within a single lifetime, not two!

**Admetus:**

Well then, I hope yours goes on for longer than that of Zeus himself!

**Pheres:**

You dare curse your father even though he's done you no wrong?

**Admetus:**

Yes, I curse you because I can see your unfathomable lust for a long life.

**Pheres:**

Me? Is it me who is burying this corpse here, in my stead?

**Admetus:**

This burial is proof of your despicable cowardice!

**Pheres:**

But you cannot not say that this woman has died because of me!

**Admetus:**

Gods! How I hope you come asking for my help one day!

**Pheres:**

And you! You, go on courting women! The more of them you marry the more you'll have to die for you!

**Admetus:**

The shame falls upon you! They die because you did not want to die yourself!

**Pheres:** *Admires the sun light*

This light! Apollo's light is splendid! Splendid, indeed!

**Admetus:**

Your spirit is that of a coward and not of a true man. It is a shameful spirit.

**Pheres:**

It's certainly not the spirit of some old fool you can trick into carrying off to the grave!

**Admetus:**

But when you do die, you will die a discredited man.

**Pheres:**

I care little for what people say about me, once I'm dead.

**Admetus:**

Appalling! Old age makes such cowards out of people! Takes away their courage!

**Pheres:** *Indicating Alcestis*

Courage? Well, you've certainly found courage in that one there. What you didn't find is wits!

**Admetus:**

Leave! Leave now and let me bury her corpse.

**Pheres:**

I shall leave but you should be burying her as a murderer buries his victim and, like all murderers you shall pay the price to her family. Her brother Acastus will not be able to call himself a man if he won't extract justice from you for spilling his sister's blood!

**Admetus:**

Go now! Go on to that woman who lives with you!

Go and live your childless lives. Childless though your son is still alive!

That's the sort of Fate you two deserve! Go ahead and live your old lives to the full. You'll never set foot beneath the same roof as me.

Had I been able to denounce my house with heralds and town criers, I would have done so.

*To the mourners*

Come, friends, let us go! This is the dreadful misfortune we must attend to now. Let us carry this body to the pyre. Come!

*The entourage obeys and, carrying Alcestis' body, they exit.*

**Chorus:** *To Alcestis as she's taken away.*

O, Alcestis! O poor, brave, noble woman! Most admirable soul!

Farewell!

**Chorus:**

May Hermes of the Underworld and Hades welcome you kindly and if virtue receives any rewards down there, may you share in them

**Chorus:**

May you sit by the throne of Persephone, Hades' consort and serve her as her attendant.

*Chorus follows the entourage*

*Short pause before a male servant appears through the palace gate.*

**Servant:**

O, Lord! I have met many visitors to Admetus' palace and I have taken good care of them all. Visitors from all over the world. I have spread a full good table for them; but this one! This last visitor was like none of the others. I have never come across anyone like him. Not one of them was worse than him!



First of all, he saw that the master is grieving but he still went right in, right through the threshold of the house! No manners at all! Then, second of all, there we were, totally in the grips of our misfortune, serving him as best as we could but no, that wasn't good enough for him. Instead of accepting with grace whatever we served him, he'd go on demanding for more. Whatever his heart desired, if it wasn't on the table, he'd shout for it!

Then, third of all, he takes a huge cup, one of those made from ivy wood, fills it up to the very top with undiluted wine -that stuff that's made from the fruit of the vine- and drinks it all up! Well, that sent the fire of the wine off to flood his skull completely! After that, he... makes garlands out of myrtle and he goes and crowns himself with them.!

Then, (counts in his fingers) fifth of all, he begins howling drunken songs, loud and way out of tune! Two tunes, really, all jumbled up together.

There he was, singing away at the top of his voice, not caring a bit about Admetus' misfortune while we were all mourning the death of our mistress.

Still, we tried not to show our tears to him because that's what Admetus had demanded of us.

So, there I was, making a feast for a stranger, a thief, I reckon, or a crook of some sort, when the mistress left without my giving her my last farewell, without being able to mourn the woman that was like a mother to me -to me and to the rest of the servants.

Just like the mother Alcestis was to us.

Protected us from a million tragedies by softening the blows of her husband's anger.

So, would you blame me if I hated this stranger who has suddenly descended upon us in the middle of all our troubles?

*Enter Herakles from the same door of the palace, drunk, wearing a garland on his head and wielding a large cup. He notices the servant and walks towards to him.*

**Herakles:**

Oi, you there! What's with the frowny face? What are you so... solemn about? Not a proper look to greet your visitors with. You've got have a happy face, laugh a bit, when you're taking care of u strangers. Look at you! Here you are, you have before you one of your master's best friends and what do you do? You greet him with frowns and misery! Not a chuckle to be seen or heard anywhere!

You're mourning the death of a stranger! So?

Here! Come here and let me teach you a thing or two. Let me make you a bit wiser.

Tell me, do you know what the real situation is with the mortals?

No, of course you don't. How would you?

Well, come, come here! Listen to me and I'll tell you.

Waving his hand across the audience

The situation of all mortals -every one of them, every single one of them- is the same: They'll all die! They must! And none of them know if they'll still be around tomorrow. Fate's feet walk on uncharted paths. No one can tell us where they're walking. No philosopher can make it clear for us.

Take this lesson from me, my friend: Enjoy life! Drink and call each day your own. The rest is Fate's business.

Oh, and don't forget Aphrodite. The sweetest god of them all! The sweetest and the kindest. Forget about all this sad stuff and do as I say, boy! You know I'm right, don't you? Sure you do!

Listen! Forget all this excessive grief! Go and put a garland on your head and raise a glass with me. Forget this horrible disaster that happened here.

Take a drink boy, because a drink, splashing about in a full cup, will navigate those gathered brows of yours and those dark shadows on your face into a safe harbour. Mortals like us ought to be thinking of mortal things.

*Indicating the audience again*

If I'm any judge at all of such things, I reckon that those men whose faces are always full of worry aren't living a life, they're living a disaster.

**Servant:**

I know all that but this is not the right time for parties and laughter.

**Herakles:**

The dead person is a stranger. The masters of the house are still living. Why drag yourself into such sorrow?

**Servant:**

Living? What do you mean living? Don't you know what disaster has visited this place?

**Herakles:**

Sure I do...unless your master has been lying to me.

**Servant:**

My master is a very kind host. Too kind!

**Herakles:**

A stranger has died! Should that stop me from being happy?

**Servant:**

The dead person is not a stranger. She is very, very close to the family.

**Herakles:**

Has Admetus kept this misfortune from me?

**Servant:**

Go, now Herakles! Go and leave us to our sorrows.

**Herakles:**

Ah, now, these are words that truly reveal the loss of someone close and not that of a stranger!

**Servant:**

Had it been a stranger, your feasting wouldn't worry me in the slightest.

**Herakles:**

Has my host treated me improperly?

**Servant:**

You've come to us at an improper time. We are grieving. You can see our black clothes and our cut hair.

**Herakles:**

But who died? Was it one of his children? Or was it his old father?

**Servant:**

No, his wife died. It is Admetus' wife.

**Herakles:**

What? His wife? And still he let me stay and be entertained?

**Servant:**

He was too ashamed to send you away from his house.

**Herakles:**

O, the poor man! He lost a wife!

**Servant:**

And we are lost along with her!

**Herakles:**

I thought as much when I saw his teary eyes, his short hair and his sad face but he told me that he was taking the corpse of a foreigner to the grave and I believed him. That's why I was reluctant to go through that gate. I didn't want to go inside. I didn't want to feast in the house of a kind host who had suffered such a loss.

And here I am, drinking and eating and putting garlands on my head!

*He tears the garland off his head and throws it and the cup on the ground, angry at himself.*

But it's your fault! You should have told me the house is in such a terrible state. Tell me, where is the grave? Where can I find Admetus?

**Servant:**

Not far from the city. On the side of the road that takes you to Larissa. You'll see an engraved tomb stone.

*Exit servant into the palace*

*Short pause while Herakles becomes reflective*

**Herakles:**

Dear heart of mine! And you, too, my right hand! Both of you have experienced many tests! Come now, Herakles, show me what sort of a son you made for your mother, Alcmene, daughter of Electrion, from Tirynth and for your father, the great Zeus himself!

Now I must repay Admetus my debt for his generous hospitality! I must bring back to him, to this palace, his dead wife, Alcestis.

I shall go to her grave and wait for Thanatos, the black-caped chief of the dead. I am sure I'll find him there, by the tomb, feasting on the blood of the sacrificial offerings. I'll jump on him from behind and grab him tightly with my two arms. Hold him here, within the tight grip of these arms. I have a grip so tight that no one can tear him out of it without crushing his ribs. And there I'll hold him until he brings me back Alcestis.

But if this fails, if he doesn't turn up to feast on the blood of the offerings, I'll go down to the sunless palaces of Persephone and her Master, Plouto and I'll ask them to hand me over the woman. I'm certain they'll agree and I'll bring her back up here, into Admetus' arms.

He is such a good friend that man! Poor man, though he was struck by such a terrible misfortune, out of respect he said nothing to me and, instead of sending me away, he received me as his guest. What other man in the whole of Thessaly -the whole of Greece!- is so hospitable? No one!

Let him not then say that his act of generosity went to someone unworthy of it.

*Exit Herakles.*

*A short pause before Admetus enters solemnly followed by his entourage of servants, children and the chorus. They are returning from the funeral of Alcestis.*

**Admetus:**

O, what misery! How dismal the road that leads to this widowed house, this house of bitter melancholy!

O, what misery! What sorrow! O, the grief!

Where can I go now? Where can I stay now? What words can I now utter and what words must I hold unsaid?

How can I die?

What cursed Fate gave birth to me?

O, how I envy the dead! I can't wait to be among them, to live in their halls!

This light, the light of the sun gives me no joy!

Walking upon this earth gives me no joy!

O, what a dear hostage Death has dragged away from me and has surrendered to Hades!

**Chorus:**

Walk on, walk on, Admetus! Enter your house.

**Admetus:**

I can't take it!

**Chorus:**

Yes, Admetus, your grief calls for many tears.

**Admetus:**

Ah, the grief, the grief!

**Chorus:**

I know the depth of that grief, Admetus.

**Admetus:**

Let me die!

**Chorus:**

That will not help your dead wife, Admetus.

**Admetus:**

Alcestis!

**Chorus:**

It is a bitter thing to have lost the face of your beloved wife for ever.

**Admetus:**

O, you've dug into the deepest wound of my heart with those words.

Is there a worse thing for a man to suffer than to lose his one and only, his faithful wife? I should have never married! I should have never lived with her in the same house.

I envy the unmarried. I envy the childless. They have only one life to think about and the troubles that come with it are only small. To pain of seeing the children getting ill or the wife being torn from your marriage bed and sent to Hades, is impossible to endure. So why endure it? Why endure such pain, if you can live without marriages and children?

**Chorus:**

Dreadful disaster! Too dreadful to fight against.

**Admetus:**

O, Gods!

**Chorus:**

Such an awful agony, Admetus, I know, but try to cope with it.

**Admetus:**

No, I can't cope!

**Chorus:**

Yes, I know Admetus, it's a heavy disaster. Still...

**Admetus:**

I cannot cope!

**Chorus:**

Yes, you can, Admetus. You're not the first man to suffer the loss...

**Admetus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

...of his wife. Misfortunes of all sorts can fall upon all of us mortals, men and women the same.

**Admetus:**

O, such a deep, unbearable pain to have your loved one taken down to the underworld.

*To Chorus*

Why did you stop me? Why did you hold me back from throwing myself into the grave? I wanted to lie beside her, beside this woman that has no equal! I wanted to lie there, with her, beneath the soil. Hades would then have taken with him, to the other side of the lake, two souls instead of one. Two faithful souls.

**Chorus:**

Admetus, once I had a relative whose house was emptied by the loss of his one and only son. Now, that's a sorrow worthy of a thousand tears of grief but still, that man survived that sorrow. And even though he was left childless and without an heir, just an old man with grey hair, nearing the end of his life, still, he endured and survived that enormous sorrow.

**Admetus:**

Look at my house! How could I possibly enter it? How could I possibly live within its walls now, now that my Fate has changed so much? So much!

How dreadfully my Fate has changed!

I remember... I remember the day when I entered this palace, holding the hand of my beloved!

Lighted torches from the pine trees of Mount Pelion, beautiful wedding songs and a huge, noisy wedding procession accompanied us. Blessing were showered upon my dear dead wife and upon me, both of us, the offspring of great houses, becoming one in marriage.

But now!

Now, the songs of joy have become a heavy dirge and the white cloaks have turned black!

This now is the sad procession that leads me to these desolate chambers!

**Chorus:**

This misfortune, Admetus, caught you in the middle of a happy life, a life that had

experienced no suffering.

**Chorus:**

Still, you have saved your life and soul, Admetus. Think of that. You have lost your wife and her love, that is true but you're not the only man who have suffered such a loss.

**Chorus:**

Death has separated many men from their wives.

**Admetus:**

My friends, though others might think the opposite, I believe that my wife's Fate was better than mine. Not only will she now be free of pain but she has escaped much anguish, with glory!

I, on the other hand, I, whose lot was to die, will now go on living a life of misery. I certainly know that now.

I don't have the courage to enter this palace any more. Whom will I greet with joy when I enter it and who will greet me with joy in return?

Where do I turn?

The emptiness in that house will send me away. The moment I see the bed my wife slept in, the chair she sat in, both empty, the moment I see the floors unswept, the children grabbing at my knees, crying for their mother, the moment I see the servants mourning the loss of such a great mistress, all this will send me away!

And then, while all this is going on inside the house, outside it, the people will go on having weddings and the women will go on gathering together, all things that will be driving back indoors!

How could I even look at women my wife's age again?

And then, all my enemies will point their finger at me and say, "look there! Look at this shameful man. He lives on because he is a coward! He didn't have the courage to die when his Fate dictated he should but he escaped his death by making his wife die in his place. Can we call him a man? And he also hates his parents because they wouldn't die for him!" That's the sort of gossip I'll have to add on top of my misery!

So, my friends, I ask you all, what's the point of going on living when such awful words and awful deeds are told about you?

*Admetus, now a broken man, pulls his cloak over his head and withdraws to the side of the palace door.*

**Chorus:**

I have walked where the muses walk and studied the highest of all the countless minds, yet I have found nothing in the world more powerful than Fate. Fate is unconquerable, unbeatable!

**Chorus:**

Not even Orpheus' enchanting voice, the voice that's engraved in the Thracian wooden slates...

**Chorus:**

...nor all the magic herbs that Apollo has given to the generations of the Asclepian physicians...

**Chorus 3:**

...not even they can cure the multitude of pains suffered by the poor mortals.

**Chorus 4:**

Merciless Fate! You are the only goddess who has neither shrine nor statue where I can go and pray or give sacrifice. You are the only goddess who rejects all pleas.

**Chorus 1:**

Most revered goddess! Don't enter into my life now more heavily than you ever did before! Whatever Zeus decides he will accomplish with your help.

**Chorus:**

And with your strength, Fate, you can tame even the iron of the Chalybes, its inventors.

**Chorus:**

Pitiless and shameless might is behind your every will.

**Chorus:**

And so, Admetus, you, too, are chained in this goddess' mighty arms. But courage! Tears won't raise the dead and even the sons of gods vanish into the shadowy halls of Hades below.

**Chorus:**

Alcestis was loved when she was here, amongst us and she will be loved still, while she's dead.

**Chorus:**

You had brought to your house the most virtuous of all women, Admetus.

**Chorus:**

Don't let your wife's tomb stand merely as a monument of a dead person but let it be a shrine for the traveller, a shrine on the roadside like those people build for gods.

**Chorus:**

And so, when that traveller goes past that shrine, he will say, "This woman, this woman buried here, had once given her own life for the sake of her husband so now she is a blessed divinity..."

**Chorus:**

...and then he would address her with these words, "greetings, revered goddess, I pray for your blessing."

*Enter Herakles leading a woman whose face is fully hidden behind a veil.*

**Chorus:**

Look, Admetus, I see Alcmene's son, Herakles coming to your house.

**Herakles: Reproaching Admetus**

Admetus! Friends should speak openly to each other and not hold their pain deep inside their soul.

I thought I was worthy enough of your friendship, enough to be able to stand by you during your misfortune and to be able to give you proof of my deep affection for you. But you, instead of telling me about your wife's death, you allowed me to feast in your house, as if the death was that of a foreigner. So there I was, inside a house full of sorrow, with garlands around my head and pouring libations to the gods!

I'm angry at you about that, Admetus; angry, yes but never mind, I don't want to add to your sadness now. But let me tell why I've come back.

See this woman, here? Look after her for me until I return, Admetus.

I need to go and kill the king of the Bistonians and return with the Thracian horses. But if somehow, I get killed in the process –may the gods forbid that because I do want to return- then, please keep her for yourself. I give her to you! Keep her as one of the servants in your house. I... I've worked very hard to win her.

You see, I came across a public contest that some people had set up, a contest really worthy of real athletes and so I joined it... She was the winner's prize.

The prizes awarded for the light games were horses but for the harder games like boxing and wrestling there was cattle... with a woman thrown in!

Well, I thought, since Fate had brought me there, to that spot, it would be a pity not to take part in the games and to miss out on such a good prize and such a big glory.

So, like I said, take her. I didn't steal her from anyone, I've earned her with hard work! I'm sure that one day you'll thank me for her.

**Admetus:**

Herakles, I didn't reveal my wife's awful Fate to you, not because I had any ill feelings towards you or because I thought of you as unworthy but because by allowing you to go and stay at another man's house, I'd be adding sorrow upon sorrow to my life.

My grief over the loss of my wife was bad enough.

As for this woman, Herakles, my lord, I beg you, if there's any way at all, find some other Thessalian man to take care of her. Someone who is not suffering in the same way as I am. You have many friends here in Pherae. Don't leave me with a reminder of my terrible loss. I'd never be able to control my tears, watching her go about our house.

Don't add another torment upon the one I already have, a torment which is unbearable enough as it is.

And then, where will she sleep? From her fine clothes and her jewellery, it appears she's a young woman, so in what part of the house will she live?

In the men's quarters? Would she stay a virgin for you, among all these men? No, it's not easy to hold back youth, Herakles. So you see, I'm also thinking about what's best for you; or should I put her up in the bedroom of my dead wife? How could I let her sleep in her bed? There will be an outcry of condemnation from her, as well as from the people who'll be saying that I've betrayed the woman who saved my life by lying in the bed of another woman.

I owe Alcestis my respect and I must think of that always.

*Addressing the woman*

And you, young lady, you look very much like my Alcestis, both, in body and in demeanour.

*In tears, he begs Herakles*

O, gods! Herakles, please take this woman away! Take her far from my eyes, Herakles! Have pity on me!

When I look at her, I see my own wife! My heart is torn apart and the fountains of my eyes burst open!

O, unfortunate Admetus! You are now beginning to taste the bitterness of your sorrow!

**Chorus:**



I agree, Admetus, your luck is bad, indeed. Nevertheless, we must endure whatever the gods give us.

**Herakles:**

If only I had the strength to take your wife from the dark halls of Hades, Admetus! Take her and bring her back up here, in the Sun's light! I would have loved to be able to do that for you.

**Admetus:**

I know, Herakles. I know you'd love to do that for me but how? The dead can never return.

**Herakles:**

Well then, Admetus. Don't make your suffering any worse than it is. Have courage!

**Admetus:**

It's easy to give advice about suffering, Herakles. It's much harder to endure it.

**Herakles:**

But do you want to go on sighing for ever? What's the good of that?

**Admetus:**

I know that, Herakles but my love for her brings out these sighs.

**Herakles:**

The love for the dead is a full of tears.

**Admetus:**

I am lost! More lost than I can put into words.

**Herakles:**

No one can deny it, Admetus: you have lost a rare woman.

**Admetus:**

Such a loss that this man will see no more joy in life.

**Herakles:**

Time will soften the blow. The pain is still fresh.

**Admetus:**

Time, you say? If by time you mean the time after I die!

**Herakles:**

Another woman and new marriages will put an end to your suffering.

**Admetus:**

Stop it, Herakles! What are you saying? I could never think of such a thing!

**Herakles:**

What? Will you not marry? Will you stay in a widowed bed for ever?

**Admetus:**

No other woman will lie next to me.

**Herakles:**

Do you think your dead wife will gain anything by that?

**Admetus:**

I owe her my respect, wherever she is.

**Herakles:**

I admire you for it, I do but it's still a foolish thing you're doing.

**Admetus:**

That may be so but you'll never see this man in a new marriage.

**Herakles:**

Such loyalty! Praiseworthy, indeed!

**Admetus:**

May I die if ever I betray my dead Alcestis!

*Herakles takes the woman's hand and offers to join it with that of Admetus.*

**Herakles:**

Come, now! Receive this woman into your palace.

**Admetus:**

No, Herakles! Don't! I beg you, in the name of your father, Zeus!

**Herakles:**

Admetus, if you don't accept her, you will be doing the wrong thing.

**Admetus:**

Yet if I do accept her, I shall be shattering my heart with sadness!

**Herakles:**

Come, Admetus. Do as I say! Perhaps this will give you the joy you need right now!

**Admetus:**

O, how I wish you had never won her in those games!

**Herakles:**

Still, Admetus, my win is also your win!

**Admetus:**

True but tell the woman to leave us.

**Herakles:**

I will, if she must but first carefully consider the word "must."

**Admetus:**

She must, yes, unless you're going to get angry at me.

**Herakles:**

I insist, Admetus and if I insist, it means I know something you don't.

**Admetus:**

Well then, you win but let me assure you this deed of yours does not please me at all!

**Herakles:**

Yet the time will come when you will thank me for it. Now do as I say!

**Admetus:** *To the servants*

Go ahead, take her inside, since we... must!

**Herakles:**

No, I wouldn't leave it to the servants to do that.

**Admetus:**

Well, then you do it yourself... if you must!

**Herakles:**

No, I must put her only into your very own hands.

**Admetus:**

No, not me. I won't be touching her. She's free to enter, if she... must.

**Herakles:**

I only have faith in your right hand.

**Admetus:**

My lord, Herakles, you are forcing me to do something I do not wish to do!

**Herakles:**

Come, come! Be brave now. Stretch out your right hand and touch hers with it!

*Admetus turns his head away as he stretches his hand*

**Admetus:**

There! I am stretching out my right hand.

*The woman stretches out her own hand until it touches that of Admetus.*

**Herakles:** *Laughing*

You're behaving like you're about to cut Medussa's head.

Have you got her?

**Admetus:**

Yes, I've got her.

**Herakles:**

Good, then look after her and one day you'll say that the son of Zeus is a true friend of yours.

*Herakles suddenly pulls the veil back, to reveal the woman's face. It is Alcestis.*

Take a good look at her, Admetus. See if she looks at all like your wife!

*Admetus shakes his head*

Come now, Admetus! Leave sorrow behind and enjoy your good luck!

**Admetus:** *Turns and is shocked at the sight of his wife*

O, gods! O, gods, what can I say? A wonder beyond one's wishes!

Do I really see my Alcestis or is this some delusional joy that some god has sent to befuddle my wits?

**Herakles:**

No, no, Admetus. No delusional joy. The woman you see is truly your wife!

**Admetus:**

Look... perhaps she's some ghost from Hades...

**Herakles:**

No, Admetus, I, your guest, am not one of those people who resurrect souls.

**Admetus:**

But... this is the very woman I have buried!

**Herakles:**

Very true and that's why I can understand why it is so difficult for you to believe your good luck!

**Admetus:**

Can I... touch her? Speak with her as if she were alive?

**Herakles:**

Go ahead, speak with her. Your wish has been granted in full.

**Admetus:** *Embracing Alcestis*

O, eyes and body of my beloved wife! Holding you was beyond my wildest hopes. I never believed I would ever see you again.

**Herakles:**

She is yours, Admetus. And I hope the gods keep their curses away from you.

**Admetus:** *To Herakles*

Brave son of the mighty god Zeus! I hope you enjoy every happiness and that your father protects you from every evil. Because you, Herakles, you, alone, have raised

my house up again.

But tell me, how did you bring her back up into the sunlight?

**Herakles:**

I fought with her master. Thanatos himself.

**Admetus:**

But where did you find him? Where did you fight him?

**Herakles:**

I ambushed him. Hid myself near the tomb and when he arrived, I jumped on him!

**Admetus:**

Why isn't she talking?

**Herakles:**

You mustn't hear her voice yet. Not until the sun raises for the third time. She has been promised to the gods of the underworld so she must be purified from that promise.

Now take her into your home Admetus and, as always, remain honest and pious with all your guests!

And now, my friends, farewell! I must now go and perform a task for the son of my lord Sthenalos.

**Admetus:**

Stay, Herakles. Stay with us. Share our house.

**Herakles:**

Another time, Admetus. I must rush now.

**Admetus:**

Good luck then, Herakles and I hope you choose our path again soon.

*To the chorus*

I give this command to all my people in all the four precincts that make up my **kingdom:**

Let there be dancing to celebrate the happy reversal of this misfortune and let all the altars be covered by the clouds of smoke from the burning of the sacrificed bulls.

A new, better life is now beginning for us and, I must admit, I am delighted.

*Admetus and Alcestis exit into the palace*

**Chorus:**

The deeds of the gods appear in many forms...

**Chorus:**

And gods often perform deeds even beyond our hopes.

**Chorus:**

Our wishes may not be granted but the gods will find ways of achieving what we never thought achievable.

**Chorus:**

And this was the path of our story.

*Exit all*

# (EURIPIDES) Helen

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>463</sup> translation by George Theodoridis

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## **Dramatis Personae**

**Helen** (*Daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of Menelaos*)

**Teukros** (*aka Teucer. A Greek warrior who fought at Troy*)

**Menelaos** (*Helen's husband*)

**Old Woman** (*Servant to Theoclymenos*)

**Theonoe** (*Sister of Theoclymenos*)

**Theoclymenos** (*King of Egypt*)

**Castor and Polydeuces** (*The Dioscourai. Helen's twin brothers.*)

**Messenger** (*of Theoclymenos*)

**Second Servant** (*To Menelaos*)

**Third Servant** (*To Theonoe*)

**Chorus** (*Of captive Greek women*)

**Other male Servants to the Palace**

...

*Pharos, Egypt. In the distance may be seen the waters of the Nile.*

*The palace of Theoclymenos.*

*To the side (SL) the tomb of Proteas, father of Theoclymenos, in front of which is a makeshift bed of straw. Helen is kneeling upon it as a suppliant.*

*She rises slowly and moves to centre stage to address the audience.*

## **Helen:**

This is where the beautiful virgin streams of the Nile flow and nourish Egypt's fields. Their waters are not delivered by Zeus as rain but by the melting white snow. Proteas ruled this land while he was alive. He had his throne on the isle of Pharos. He took as wife one of the sea nymphs, Psamathe, after she had left Aeacus' bed. Psamathe then bore in his palace two children, a boy whom they called Theoclymenos because he revered the gods all his life and a beautiful girl, whom they called Eido.

Eido was an absolute delight for her mother while she was a baby but then, when she grew up and was old enough for marriage, they called her Theonoe, a name that reveals that she had a mind that was divinely inspired. She could read all the divine signs, both present and future, a skill handed down to her by her grandfather, Nereas.

As for **me**:

My land is the famous Sparta and my father is Tyndareas, though there's a story that says that one day Zeus disguised himself as a swan that was supposed to be fleeing the clutches of an eagle and, if one is to believe that story, he flew to my mother's bed and, by deception, he made love to her. Leda is my mother's name

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<sup>463</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/helen/>

and mine is Helen.

And now let me tell you the dreadful pains I have suffered.

Three goddesses went to a valley in Ida, to a man called Alexandros -Paris Alexandros- for him to judge which of them was the most beautiful. These three were, Hera, Aphrodite and Zeus' virgin daughter, Pallas Athena.

Aphrodite bribed Alexandros with marriage. A marriage to the most beautiful mortal. Me. Though, I don't know if such ill fortune can be called "beautiful." And so, Aphrodite won and Alexandros, Paris by another name, left his herds in Ida and went down to Sparta to take me as his promised wife.

Hera, however, was very angry that she had lost that contest, that she had not defeated the other two goddesses and so she made our marriage void by handing over to Paris, king Priam's son, not me in person but a breathing ghost that looked exactly like me, a phantom she shaped out of ether.

So, Paris thought he had me in his arms but all he had was his imagination.

And then Zeus added to all these problems something of his own making.

A plan to lessen Earth's burden of too many mortals and, at the same time, to make known to everyone, once and for all who was the bravest man in the whole of Greece.

So, he concocted a war between the Greeks and the poor Trojans!

My name and not my body was placed as a trophy between the spear of the Greeks and the bravery of the Trojans.

Zeus had not abandoned me and so, Hermes took me and hid me within the folds of a cloud in the sky and brought me here, in the house of Proteas. Zeus had me brought to this house because he considered Proteas to be a man of honour and so my husband's bed would remain undefiled.

But, here I am, safe and sound whereas my poor husband, Menelaos has gathered an army and went off to the high towers of Troy to hunt for me and take me back to Sparta.

I am the cause for the many deaths of men around the streams of the river Skamander and though I have suffered so much, men curse me, thinking that I have betrayed my husband and it was I who had brought this dreadful war upon Greece.

Well then, why am I still alive?

Once Hermes told me that I will eventually live with my husband again, in the fair plains of Sparta and he will learn that the reason I had gone to Troy was so that I would not be forced to spread a bed of love for another man.

Of that, I was safe while Proteas was still alive, while he could still see the light of the sun. Safe from another marriage. However, now that he is buried in the darkness below the earth, his son is pursuing me, trying to catch me and make me his wife.

But I love my first husband and wish to honour him, so I threw myself at this tomb, Proteas' tomb, as a suppliant, praying that the old king will keep me pure for Menelaos.

My name might be disgraced in Greece but my body shall keep its honour here!

*Enter Teukros. He carries a bow and arrows. He admires the palace before he speaks.*

**Teukros:**

Who rules over these fortified halls? Equal in grandeur to those of Plutos, the god of wealth, himself! Such tall towers, such a grand courtyard!

*Suddenly notices Helen and is appalled.*

Great gods! What do I see here? This is the murderous form of a most hateful woman, a woman who has ruined me and who has ruined all the Greeks!

Ah! The gods themselves should hate you, woman, for looking so much like Helen! If I wasn't a foreigner to these parts, I would have shot you dead with one of these sharp arrows for resembling Zeus' own daughter so much!

**Helen:**

Whoever you are, poor man, why are you so appalled by what you see?

Why loathe me for the things done to you by that woman?

**80 Teukros:**

My mistake, lady. Please forgive me for what I said. I was too much in the grips of anger. The whole of Greece hates Helen, the daughter of Zeus!

**Helen:**

Tell me then, who are you and what has brought you here, to this land?

**Teukros:**

Lady, I am one of the poor, unfortunate Greeks...

**Helen:**

Oh, well then, it's no wonder that you hate Helen. But what is your name and what is your country? Whose son shall I call you?

**Teukros:**

My name is Teukros and I am Telamon's son. Brought up in the land of Salamis.

**Helen:**

So why turn to this land of the Nile?

**Teukros:**

I have been exiled from my own land.

**Helen:**

How dreadful. Who exiled you?

**Teukros:**

The closest relative a man could have: my own father!

**Helen:**

Such sadness in this story. Why has he done this?

**Teukros:**

I was destroyed by my brother's death, the death of Ajax at Troy.

**Helen:**

But how so? He didn't die by your own sword, did he?

**Teukros:**

No, he died by falling onto his own sword.

**Helen:**

But was he mad? Surely no sane man falls onto his own sword.

**Teukros:**

Do you know of a man called Achilles? Peleus' son?

**Helen:**

Yes, I do.

They say he was one of Helen's suitors.

**Teukros:**

When he died his mates fought over his armour.

**Helen:**

And how did this cause Ajax's death?

**Teukros:**

He killed himself because another man got Achilles' armour.

**Helen:**

And so, Ajax's death is causing you this grief?

**Teukros:**

Yes, lady, because I should have died with him.

**Helen:**

So, friend, were you one of those who went to that famous city, Troy?

**Teukros:**

Yes, I helped bring it down but I have also come to grief, myself.

**Helen:**

Destroyed already? Burnt to the ground, you say?

**Teukros:**

Not a trace of its walls left.

**Helen:**

Oh, poor Helen!

For your sake all the Trojans died!

**Teukros:**

And the Greeks! They, too have suffered enormously!

**Helen:**

How long ago did Troy fall?

**Teukros:**

Some seven seasons of seed and harvest.

**Helen:**

And how long were you in Troy before her fall?

**Teukros:**

Many moons. Ten full years of them!

**Helen:**

But did you capture that Spartan woman, Helen?

**Teukros:**

Yes. Menelaos took her. Grabbed her by the hair and took her away.

**Helen:**

Did you see this happen to the poor woman, yourself or did you just hear about it?

**Teukros:**

I saw her with my own eyes, just I see you now.

**Helen:**

But, could you have all been under some divine spell at the time?

**Teukros:**

Enough about her. Change the subject now!

**Helen:**

So you are absolutely certain of what you saw?



**Teukros:**

I have eyes and I have a mind. Both saw her!

**Helen:**

So, is Menelaos back home with her now?

**Teukros:**

No. He's not in Argos, nor on the banks of Eurotas.

**Helen:**

What you say is bad news for them.

**Teukros:**

They say that they have both vanished!

**Helen:**

But didn't all the Greeks sail off for home together?

**Teukros:**

Yes but a storm scattered them all into different directions.

**Helen:**

Where were they when the storm hit them?

**Teukros:**

They were sailing through the middle of the Aegean sea.

**Helen:**

Has no one seen Menelaos landing anywhere?

**Teukros:**

No one. In Greece they say he's dead.

**Helen:**

Oh, no! I am finished! Is Thestias' daughter alive?

**Teukros:**

You mean Leda? No. She's dead.

**Helen:**

Oh, no! Don't tell me Helen's shameful fame has claimed the life of this Princess, as well?

**Teukros:**

Yes, so they say. She has put a noose about her noble neck.

**Helen:**

And what of Tyndareus' sons? Are they still alive?

**Teukros:**

There are two stories being told about them. That they are dead and that they are not.

**Helen:**

But which one is the more credible? What miserable news you bring me!

**Teukros:**

The more credible story is the one that says they've been turned into gods and are now stars in the heavens.

**Helen:**

That is happy news but what is the other story?

**Teukros:**

That story says that because of their sister's shame, they've killed themselves. But no more stories! I've no wish to heap one pain upon another.

The reason I came here, to these royal halls is so as to see the famous Theonoe, who reveals the will of the gods.

Make this possible for me so that I may obtain an oracle which will show me how to steer my ship safely to the shores of the island of Cyprus. Apollo prophesied that I must go there to make my new home. Call that island Salamis, in honour of my far-off fatherland.

**Helen:**

The path you seek will be revealed to you by its journey, stranger but you must leave this land quickly now, before Proteus' son, King Theoclymenos, returns and sees you. He is away right now, hunting wild beasts with his trusty hounds and he kills every stranger from Greece he comes across. Don't ask me why. I won't tell you and even if I did it would not help you.

**Teukros:**

Kind words, from you, lady and may the gods reward you well for them.

You look very like Helen in form, dear lady but you are certainly far different to her in heart. May she die a painful death and never reach her home by the streams of Eurotas!

Good fortune be with you always, lady!

*Exit Teukros*

**Helen:**

Ah! Such misery! With what sad song, with what groans of despair can I express this? What Muse shall I beg to help me sing it? What tears of grief must I shed?

Ah! Come, then, you winged virgins, daughters of the black Earth!

Come, you Sirens! Bring here your Libyan lyre, your shepherd's flute and help me with my mournful song. Give harmony to my dirge. Sing grief to match my own grief, sing groans to match my own groans, sounds that may reach Persephone's gloomy chambers of the night.

Help me sing the pitiful strains of my tearful lament. A lament bereft of joy for the joyless dead!

*Enter the Chorus of female Greek slaves*

**Chorus:**

I was spreading my purple robes upon the reeds and upon the dense grasses...

**Chorus:**

...near the deep-blue waters of the spring, to dry under the golden rays of the sun...

**Chorus:**

...when, suddenly I heard the pitiful sound of my lady's voice.

**Chorus:**

A song for tears!

**Chorus:**

A voice alone!

**Chorus:**

No lyre kept it company!

**Chorus:**

A sound of despair, of pain, of anguish.

**Chorus:**

A wail that some nymph might let out from deep inside the forest.

**Chorus:**

A cry of loss echoing through the rocky lovers' caves of Pan!

**Helen:**

Dear, dear friends!

Young women of Greece, spoils of some barbarian sailors!

Listen: A young Greek sailor has arrived, baring a message from Troy, a message that has brought yet more tears to my eyes. Troy has fallen to the Greeks, my friends!

Yes, thanks to me, thanks to my name, the name that is the spring of countless sorrows, murderous flames have taken the city! Yes me, my friends, me the murderer of many!

Shame has brought my mother, Leda, pains so unbearable that she tied a noose around her neck and hanged herself.

My husband is lost wandering on the ocean's waves and my brother Castor, along with his twin brother Polydeuces, pride and glory of their country have vanished! Vanished from the plains where the horse roam and from the wrestling grounds by the reedy river Eurotas where the young men train their bodies.

**Chorus:**

Ah, poor, poor woman!

**Chorus:**

How terrible your Fate, my lady!

**Chorus:**

How miserable your luck!

**Chorus:**

Destiny delivered you a life of misery my lady, when brilliant Zeus, with the snowy wings of a swan, flew down through the ether and came to your mother's bed!

**Chorus:**

What sorrow has not visited your life? What pain is there that have you not felt?

**Chorus:**

Your mother is dead, your beloved brothers, Zeus' twin sons, see no great fortune and your eyes cannot see your own dear land!

**Chorus:**

And – o, dear lady!- a rumour passes through all the cities of Greece that says that you sleep in the bed of a barbarian!

**Chorus:**

Your husband has perished in the deep ocean, Helen. He shall never again grace the halls of his ancestral Sparta, the home of the bronze goddess, Athena.

**Helen:**

Oh, gods!

Which Greek, which Trojan cut down the pine that drenched Troy with tears?

The tree from which Priam's son built his cursed ship and with barbarian oars sailed it to my palace. There he came, wanting to take me and my murderous beauty to his bed. And with him came Aphrodite, the goddess of love, the goddess of treachery, the goddess who murdered countless sons of Greece and of Priam's Troy.

Ah, what misery I must endure!

But then, one day, Hera of the golden throne, Hera, Zeus' revered consort, sent Hermes, Maia's swift-footed son to me. I was gathering dew-fresh rose buds into the folds of my robe, at the time, to take as an offering to Athena of the Bronze House. Hermes snatched me and carried up through the heavens to bring me here, to this cursed land and made me the cause of the dreadful conflict between the sons of Greece and those of Troy.

So now my name is falsely slandered around the streams of the Trojan river Simois.

**Chorus:**

I know, Helen, I know. Your pain is deep but it is best for you to cope with life's pains as gently as you can.

**Helen:**

Dear friends! Look at the Fate to which I am yoked: My mother has brought me to this world to be nothing more than a monstrous freak! No woman –neither Greek nor barbarian- has given birth to the egg of a white bird, yet, they say, that this is what my mother has done. Leda, they say, delivered me inside the shell of a bird's egg. Zeus is my father.

And then, my life has become a horrible monstrous curiosity, thanks partly to Hera and partly to my beauty.

If only! If only I could scratch this beauty out, like painters do to their pictures and paint another picture of me, this time an ugly one! If only! If only the Greeks forgot the miserable Fate that pursues me now and, if only, they remembered only the good deeds I've done, instead of the shameful deeds that they remember now!

When a man has a plan in mind but is hindered by the will of the gods, well, that's a hard thing to cope with but it can be endured but I – I have fallen victim to many misfortunes.

To begin with, my good reputation has been destroyed though I have done nothing wrong, and there's nothing worse than to be burdened by the shame which one has not earned.

Then, the gods of my land have exiled me to this land of barbarians. I am here, away from my own people and though I am the child of free-born, here I am a slave! Yes, a slave, because in the lands of barbarians, everyone is a slave. Everyone that is, except one man, their ruler!

There was only one anchor to hold me steady in the tempest of my misfortunes: the hope that my husband, Menelaos, would one day come to rescue me from all this. But this hope too, has vanished. But Menelaos is dead. Perished in the ocean.

And so is my mother. Dead. Murdered, they say, by me. And they are wrong but still, I must bear that condemnation.

As for the pride and joy of my home, my darling daughter, Hermione, she is an ageing, unmarried virgin.

Dead too are my two brothers, the Dioscuri, who people say are the sons of Zeus. So much misery! I am breathing but I am dead.

And still one more piece of misery: If I ever manage to return to my land, to Sparta, the gates of my home will be locked against me because people will think that I, Helen, wife of Menelaos, has died at Troy with her husband.

If Menelaos were alive, he'd be able to recognise me by some secret signs that only we two know. But he is dead!

He could not possibly have escaped death.

Why go on living then? What does Fate have in store for me now?

Should I try and escape my pains by marrying a barbarian? Always sit by his side at his rich tables? Never! When a woman marries a man she hates, she will also get to hate her own self. Never! It would be better for her to choose death! Why not? Why would it be a bad thing for me to die?

But how to die nobly?

To die by the rope would be unseemly. Even the slaves consider it shameful. The sword would bring about a more glorious, a more noble death. Body and breath part company quickly.

Ah! Such is the depth of misery into which my beauty has brought me. While beauty makes other women happy, mine is the very implement of my destruction!

**Chorus:**

Helen, no matter who this stranger is, don't believe everything that he has told you!

**Helen:**

His message was quite clear: My husband is dead.

**Chorus:**

Many messages, clearly said are lies.

**Helen:**

And yet, the opposite is also true.

**Chorus:**

You rush for the bad news, Helen, instead of the good! Destruction rather than joy!

**Helen:**

Fear grips me, my friends. Terror makes me rush towards destruction.

**Chorus:**

Helen, do you have any friends inside the palace?

**Helen:**

Everyone in the palace is my friend. Everyone, that is except the man who hunts me for his wife.

**Chorus:**

Well then, this is what I think you should do Helen. Leave your seat here at this tomb...

**Helen:**

What do you mean? What are you telling me?

**Chorus:**

Go inside and look for Theonoe, the Nereid's daughter. She knows everything.

**Chorus:**

Ask her about your husband. Ask her if he's alive or dead. Then, when you know the truth about him and about your fate you can be sad or happy.

**Chorus:**

What's the point of feeling miserable before you know the truth of the matter?

**Chorus:**

Listen to me, Helen. Leave this tomb and go ask Theonoe. She'll tell you everything!

**Chorus:**

Why bother listening to anyone else when you have her in the house?

**Chorus:**

I want to come in with you and listen to the girl's oracles. We women must help one another.

**Helen:**

Dear friends, I agree. Come. Come, with me! Let's all go inside so that you too can hear what trials are in store for me.

**Chorus:**

We're coming, Helen!

**Helen:**

Ah, poor soul! What words of pain will I hear now? How miserable is my day?

**Chorus:**

Why prophesy grief, Helen?

**Chorus:**

Why cry before you have to?

**Helen:**

What has happened to my poor husband? Is he still alive? Does he still see the sun's chariot, the passage of the stars? Or will he suffer the eternal fate of the dead beneath the dark earth?

**Chorus:**

Look more brightly to the future, Helen, whatever it might be.

**Helen:**

Ah, Eurotas! To you, river, whose moist banks are green with the lush reeds, to you I swear and you I ask if this rumour of my husband's death is true.

**Chorus:**

What?

**Chorus:**

What nonsense is this?

**Helen:**

And if it's true, Eurotas, if my husband is dead, then I shall place a deadly noose around my neck –

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Helen:**

-Or I shall plunge into my flesh the cold steel of a bloody sword with force enough to kill me-

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Helen:**

-To cut my throat and let the blood stream out, a sacrifice to the three goddesses, Aphrodite, Athena and Hera and to Paris himself, Priam's son, who long ago would sit by the caves near where his cattle grazed.

**Chorus:**

Let your misfortune turn away from you Helen and let it go elsewhere!

**Helen:**

Poor Troy! You have been ruined and you have suffered incurable suffering for a crime you have never committed. The gifts which the goddess Aphrodite has given me have caused the spilling of much blood, of many tears. My beauty has brought

you one misery after another, one lot of tears after another.

Mothers have lost their sons and by the waters of the Phrygian river Scamander, the virgin sisters of the slain men have shorn their tresses in mourning.

And great shouts of grief were raised throughout Greece where the women beat hard at their heads with their hands and with their nails slashed open bloody gashes on their tender cheeks.

And you, Callisto, blessed maid from Arcadia!

A long time ago, you have entered Zeus' bed as a four-legged animal! How much better your fate was to that of my mother's! Because, with the shape of a shaggy beast –a lioness!- and a savage eye, you have shrugged off the unbearable weight of your pain!

And you, too, daughter of Merops, a Titan! You too, are blessed because of your beauty but my own has brought ruin upon Troy's Dardanian walls and death upon the Greeks!

*Exit Helen and the chorus into the palace, leaving the stage empty.*

*Enter Menelaos alone, dishevelled and clad in torn clothes.*

**Menelaos:**

O, grandfather Pelops!

You won a chariot race once, against Oenomaos, in Pisa. How I wish, grandfather, that on that day, on that fateful day when the gods had a feast and they had cooked you and offered your body as their meal, you had died. Died and never married and never had brought to life Atreus, my father!

Atreus then married Aerope and from that union sprung I, Menelaos and my brother Agamemnon. How I wish you had died before this glorious pair of brothers was born!

A glorious pair, indeed, I say not by way of vain boasting but because I led the youth of Greece on a mighty expedition to Troy, not by forcing them but with their own consent.

I can call out the list of those who have perished and of those who have survived the labours on the seas and made their way home bearing the names of their comrades thought to have perished.

But I! I, the poor miserable soul, from the day we've captured Troy's tall towers, still I am tossed about in the gray waters of the sea! The more I want to get home the more the gods deprive me of this joy!

I have wandered into every deserted and inhospitable shore of Libya but the winds will not let me approach my own country. My sails are filled with winds that blow me back and away from there, from my own home.

And so, I am now hurled here, onto this land! Shipwrecked and bereft of almost all of my mates, who are lost at sea. My ship is now no more! A million smashed fragments floating about the ocean.

Of all its well crafted fittings though, by some un hoped for luck, only its keel was left for me to cling on to. I and Helen, my wife whom I have rescued from Troy. I have no idea what this land is called and what sort of people live here. I felt too ashamed of my shabby clothes to mingle among them and to ask any questions about them or answer any about my own troubles.

The man who once knew good fortune finds it much more difficult than those who

have never known such good fortune to accept misery.

My needs are urgent. I have neither food for my mouth nor clothes for my body.

*Indicating his clothes*

Look at them! It's easy to see what they are: the shredded remnants disgorged by a shipwreck!

The gorgeous clothes and jewels I once wore have been swallowed up by the ocean! I have hidden Helen, my wife, who has caused me all this misery, inside a cave and have forced the last of my surviving mates to watch her. I came here, on my own, looking for provisions for them.

Then I saw this enormous house with its huge walls all around it and these... look at these amazing gates! Obviously it belongs to some man of considerable prosperity! And so, I came here because, well, obviously, it's the men who live in such houses who can give me something for my sailors. No point in going to the poor. The poor, even if they wanted to give us something, they couldn't.

*Approaches the gates, bangs at it and shouts*

Oi, there!

Can the gatekeeper come out? Come and listen to my needs and then tell the folks inside!

**Old Woman:** *From within*

Who's banging at this gate? Go away!

*The gate opens and through it appears the old female servant.*

Don't stand around the front gate of this house! You're bothering my master!

Now, either leave or die! You are a Greek and my master will have nothing to do with Greeks!

**Menelaos:**

That's fine, old lady. Your words make sense but do calm down a little. I'll do as you say.

**Old Woman:** *Pushes him away threateningly*

Stranger, I said go away! My job here is to see that no Greek comes near this house!

**Menelaos:**

All right, all right! Keep your hands to yourself, old woman! Stop pushing me!

**Old Woman:**

It's your fault. Do as you're told and you won't be pushed!

**Menelaos:**

Go tell your master please...

**Old Woman:**

If I do that, my guess is that you'll be sorry!

**Menelaos:**

Go tell your master that there's a foreigner here, shipwrecked and under the protection of the gods.

**Old Woman:**

There are other houses around. Go to one of them!

**Menelaos:**

Now you listen to me: I'm going in there!

**Old Woman:**

No, you listen to me! You are being a pain and you'll get yourself thrown out of



here!

**Menelaos:**

Zeus! What of my glorious campaigns?

**Old Woman:**

Glorious? You're not glorious here! You and your armies must have been glorious at some other place, some other time!

**Menelaos:** (*In tears*)

Oh, Zeus! What undeserved disdain I must suffer!

**Old Woman:**

What's with all the tears, what's with all the grief?

**Menelaos:**

I'm grieving for my former glory!

**Old Woman:**

Well, then, go to those former friends of yours. Show them your tears!

**Menelaos:**

What is this land? To whom does this palace belong?

**Old Woman:**

The land is called Egypt and this is Proteas' palace.

**Menelaos:**

Egypt! What miserable fate drove me here?

**Old Woman:**

Why? What's wrong with Egypt? What do you have against the glittering waters of the Nile?

**Menelaos:**

I have nothing at all against the waters of the Nile. It is my own dreadful luck I'm lamenting.

**Old Woman:**

Ha! You're not the only one there. There are plenty of people lamenting their bad luck.

**Menelaos:** (*Indicating the temple*)

Is this man you call King, inside?

**Old Woman:**

No, that there is his burial shrine. His son, Theoclymenos, rules Egypt now.

**Menelaos:**

So, where's he, then? Is he inside or has he gone out?

**Old Woman:**

He's not inside. And he hates Greeks!

**Menelaos:**

He hates the Greeks? I am a Greek! Why does he hate the Greeks?

**Old Woman:**

Because in this house lives Helen, Zeus' daughter!

**Menelaos:**

What? What did you just say?

**Old Woman:**

Helen, Tyndareus' daughter. The one who used to live in Sparta a while back.

**Menelaos:**

What? But how did she get here? What is the meaning of this?

**Old Woman:**

She's here. Came here from Sparta.

**Menelaos:**

But when? Do you think someone has stolen her from the cave back there?

**Old Woman:**

Stranger, Helen came here before the Greeks have left for Troy.

But leave now! Get away from this house because, at the moment it's going through some turmoil. Something has just happened in there.

This is not the right time for such things and if my master catches you, his gift of hospitality will be your death. Personally, I love the Greeks and the reason I've said all this terrible stuff against them is because I'm afraid of the master...

*Exit the Old Woman*

**Menelaos:**

Now what do I make of this? What can I say, here?

Of all the horrible troubles I have already suffered, here's another! A huge one, if indeed, the woman I brought with me from Troy, my wife and whom I've got hidden in a cave and guarded by my men... well, now I find out that some other woman with the same name lives in this house here!

*(Indicating the old woman)*

She said the woman inside is Zeus' daughter!

Zeus' daughter? Would there be, perhaps, another man around here, around Nile's banks, called Zeus?

No! There's only one Zeus and he lives up there, in the sky!

And Sparta. Where else would there be another Sparta? There's only the one where the clear waters of the Eurotas flow. Through the lovely reeds. Or Tyndareus. There's only one of them as well!

What other lands are there that can be called Sparta, or Troy?

Really, I have no idea!

Well, it's obvious then. There must be many women around the world with the same name. Many women and many cities. No need to wonder about that.

And those terrible thing the servant told me. They won't frighten me away. No mortal has such barbarous heart that he'll refuse me food, once he hears my name. Troy's fate is known by the whole world. How it was I, Menelaos who set it ablaze. I shall stay here and wait for the man who rules this palace.

I have two options to save my life: If he shows himself to be brutal, I shall run off and hide where my ship awaits me. If, however, he shows himself to be gentle and welcoming, I shall ask him to help me with my needs.

Of all the miserable pains I had to endure, this is the worst: To be a king yourself and to be begging for your food from other kings!

Still, I must bow to necessity. A wise man, not I, once said that there's no mightier force than dire necessity.

*Menelaos moves to the side of the tomb and turns his back to the audience*

*Enter the Chorus. They don't notice Menelaos*

**Chorus:**

I have heard the clear prophesy uttered by our young prophetess, in the palace.

**Chorus:**

She said that Menelaos has not yet passed through the shining darkness of death and down into the gloomy world below the soil. He is still blown about the world by the ocean's waves, unsettled yet in any familiar harbour.

**Chorus:**

He is still wandering about the oceans on his way from Troy, alone, miserable and tormented, his ship touching on every land except his own.

*Enter Helen from the Palace. She is wearing a white robe.*

*She has yet to see Menelaos*

**Helen:**

I have listened to the pleasant utterances of our omniscient Theone and once again, I have come to take my place by this tomb!

She has told me that my husband is still alive. The light of day is still shining upon him and now, after endless suffering over that ocean's waves, is wandering aimlessly and exhausted around our shores. She also said that as soon as his tormenting journey ends he will arrive here but she didn't say if he will make it here alive and I, I was so excited about the fact that he was still alive, I didn't ask her about that.

But she also said that he is already somewhere nearby, cast up, a shipwreck with a few of his mates.

Ah, Menelaos! When will you come?

How I have missed you, my husband

*Menelaos slowly turns and Helen notices him*

Ah! Who's this?

Is this one of the tricks that Proteas' impious son has woven for me?

I shall run behind the tomb for protection as fast as a mare on the race track, or one of Bacchus' followers. This man looks like a savage and he's after me!

*She runs towards the tomb but Menelaos blocks her path.*

**Menelaos:**

Hold on, there, woman!

Such a rush to get to the steps and to the tall columns of this tomb where the offerings are burning! What for?

Ah!

The sight of you has taken my breath away!

The shock has made me speechless!

**Helen:** *To the chorus*

Women, help! He wants to do me harm! He has blocked my path to the tomb. He wants to catch me and deliver me to the king!

**Menelaos:**

I am neither an abductor nor a servant of evil men!

**Helen:** *Still trying to run away*

Your clothes! Your whole body is covered in ugly rags!

**Menelaos:**

Stop! Stop running around! Don't be afraid.

**Helen:** *Reaches one of the steps of the tomb*

I have stopped. Now that I can touch the tomb.

**Menelaos:**

Who are you? What woman's face do my eyes see?

**Helen:**

No! Who are YOU? I am puzzled by the same question.

**Menelaos:**

I... I have never seen a body that looks so similar... so similar...

**Helen:**

Oh, gods!

Yes! It is through divine will that we recognise our own...

**Menelaos:**

Are you a Greek or are you from these parts?

**Helen:**

I am a Greek.

But I want to know who you are as well. Tell me!

**Menelaos:**

You are identical in looks to Helen!

**Helen:**

And you! You are in looks, identical to Menelaos! What can I say to this?

**Menelaos:**

Ah! You have indeed recognised the man most steeped in misery!

**Helen:** *She tries to embrace him*

It's you! After so many years! After so many years you have returned to your wife's embrace!

**Menelaos:** *Withdraws repulsed*

Wife? Whose wife? Don't touch my clothes!

**Helen:**

You wife! The wife which my father, Tyndareus, has given you!

**Menelaos:**

Oh, goddess Hekate! Bearer of torches! Make your nightly ghosts clearer!

**Helen:**

No! I am no mere apparition of the night. I have not been sent by the Enodian goddess!

**Menelaos:**

But I am one man. I cannot be the husband of two wives!

**Helen:**

But to what other woman are you a husband?

**Menelaos:**

The woman I've got hidden back in the cave. The one I've brought back from Troy.

**Helen:**

You only have one wife: me!

**Menelaos:**

But – could it be that it's only my eyes that deceive me and not my mind?

**Helen:**

Look at me carefully! Do you not see your wife?

**Menelaos:**

It's true, your form is hers but reality tells me otherwise.

**Helen:**

Look at me closely. What more proof do you need. Who better than you could judge?

**Menelaos:**

Yes, I can't deny that you look exactly like her.

**Helen:**

There's no better instructor than your own eyes.

**Menelaos:**

But the thing still baffles me. I have another wife!

**Helen:**

That wife was an apparition, a ghost. I have never gone to Troy.

**Menelaos:**

An ghost? Who can create living ghosts?

**Helen:**

Ether. The air. It is from that which a god has created for you a wife.

**Menelaos:**

A god? Which god did this? All these things you're saying, they are unbelievable!

**Helen:**

Hera has created that ghost. She did it so that Paris would not take me to be his wife.

**Menelaos:**

So... how could you be in two places at the same time? Here as well as Troy?

**Helen:**

A name can be in many places but a body cannot.

*Menelaos turns away dismissively*

**Menelaos:**

Look, leave me alone. I have enough troubles as it is.

**Helen:**

Are you really going to abandon me here and go away to live with a ghost as a wife?

**Menelaos:**

My blessings to you, woman, because you look so alike Helen, but good bye!

**Helen:**

Ah! I am destroyed! Husband, I have just found you, only to lose you again!

**Menelaos:**

It is the endless troubles I've suffered at Troy that convince me, not your tale.

**Helen:**

Ah! What woman is more unfortunate than me?

The man I love the most is leaving me and I will never again return to my land in Greece!

*Enter a Messenger*

**Messenger:**

Ah, Menelaos! Finally, I have found you! I've been looking for you all over this land of barbarians. Your friends have sent me to find you, those you've left behind at the cave.

**Menelaos:**

Why, what's wrong? Have these barbarians robbed you?

**Messenger:**

Something unbelievable! And no words can do justice to the reality of it!

**Menelaos:**

Speak! It must be important news if you had to rush so much!

**Messenger:**

The news is... the news is that all your troubles, all your suffering have come to nothing!

**Menelaos:**

You're grieving about old troubles. Tell me, what is this news?

**Messenger:**

Your wife, Menelaos! She has vanished! Rose up into the folds of thin air and disappeared!

She has left the sacred cave where we were guarding her and soared into the heavens. And as she was flying she said to us, "Oh, you poor Trojans and all of you, poor men of Greece! You died on the banks of the river Scamander for my sake, a trick devised by Hera.

You thought wrongly that Helen was abducted by Paris! But I, I have completed the task set for me and stayed with you while you needed me but now, now I am leaving for the sky, my paternal home. Poor Helen! Poor daughter of Tyndareus! How unjustly she was maligned!!

*Messenger notices Helen and is shocked*

Helen! Leda's daughter!

You are here!

But – I was just saying how you disappeared into the folds of the starry sky. I had no idea that your body had wings!

Ha! I won't let you play such tricks on us again!

What your husband and his friends have suffered back at Troy is more than enough!

**Menelaos:** *To the messenger*

So, what she said was true, then!

All her words make sense and are proven to be true!

Oh, joyful day! How I longed for the day that would bring you back into my arms!

**Helen:**

Oh, my darling Menelaos! I have waited for you for such a long time!

Ah, but now, now our day of joy has come!

*To the Chorus*

Ladies, I have found my husband! Here! Once again I open my arms to embrace him.

Once again, after so many endless journeys that the bright sun has made!

**Menelaos:**

And I, I too, found you, Helen!

And I have so much to tell you! So much that I don't know where to start!

**Helen:**

Oh, such happiness!

A happiness that makes the hair on my head stand on end, the tears stream down from my eyes!

Husband! Let me throw my arms around you, to hold you tight, once more!

**Menelaos:**

Do so, my wife! Do so, sweet, sweet sight for my eyes, I will not object!

Here, I hold my wife! I hold you, Helen, you the daughter of Zeus and Leda, you, the woman whose brothers brought to me with blazing bridal torches, as a blessed bride, on snow-white steeds.

But then, the gods had taken you away from my home!

Ah, but now! Now the gods are taking us into a new life, a life much happier than the last! This new life unites us both, a long-lost husband to his wife!

Oh, gods! May this new fate be a blessing!

**Helen:**

Blessing, indeed! I make the same wish!

**Menelaos:**

When two are dear to each other, the one can't suffer alone!

**Helen:** *To the Chorus*

Dear friends!

I need no longer weep for the suffering I endured in the past. I feel its pain no more.

In my arms now I hold my husband. A husband for whom I have waited for many years to return from Troy.

**Menelaos:**

Your arms hold me and mine hold you, dear wife.

Now, now after so many days, I can see the tricks that the goddess has played on us.

My tears are tears of joy, a joy more immense than the grief I felt in the past.

**Helen:**

Words fail me! Who, among the mortals could have ever hoped for such joy? How could I have ever hoped to hold you so close to my heart?

**Menelaos:**

And !! How could I have ever hoped to hold you in my arms when all along I thought you had gone to Ida and the unfortunate towers of Troy!

But, by the gods, Helen, tell me how it was that they took you from my home!

**Helen:**

Ah! How bitter the journey you want me to take, husband! How bitter the words you want to hear!

**Menelaos:**

Speak, Helen! Speak, so that we can hear all that the gods can deliver to mortals!

**Helen:**

The tale appals me! The words for it are hideous!

**Menelaos:**

Speak them, Helen. Say them. It is good for one to hear of the pains that are no more.

**Helen:**

It was not oars nor wings of love that carried me to the unholy bed of the young

barbarian.

**Menelaos:**

Which god then, or which Fate took you from your country?

**Helen:**

It was the son of Zeus, husband. Hermes himself, who brought me to the banks of the Nile.

**Menelaos:**

What a strange thing! Who ordered him to do that? How terrible!

**Helen:**

The tears have never stopped flowing from my eyes, husband. It was Zeus' wife who has destroyed me!

**Menelaos:**

Hera? But why would she want to torment us like this?

**Helen:**

Ah! Those torments! Those spring! The springs, the baths, where the goddesses went to make themselves more beautiful and ready for their beauty contests!

**Menelaos:**

And so... why did Hera go there and why was her judging the cause of your misery?

**Helen:**

So as to take me away from Paris.

**Menelaos:**

What? How? I don't understand.

**Helen:**

It was because Aphrodite had promised me to Paris.

**Menelaos:**

Oh, my poor wife! How terrible for you!

**Helen:**

Yes, terrible. That's why she brought me here, to Egypt.

**Menelaos:**

And then, you say, Hera gave Paris a ghost to take with him to Troy.

**Helen:**

And terrible, too, for my mother back home!

**Menelaos:**

What? What do you mean?

**Helen:**

She is no more! The shame of my foul marriage was far too much for her so she hanged herself.

**Menelaos:**

Oh, no! And our daughter, Hermione? Is she still alive?

**Helen:**

Bereft of husband and bereft of children, she grieves for my own failed marriage.

**Menelaos:**

Curse you Paris! You have destroyed every corner of my house! And the lives of countless Greeks, all with their bronze armour!

**Helen:**

And I? The gods have exiled me far from my home, from my city, from you!



I was cursed by all for leaving your home even though I did not.  
Cursed with a terrible fate.

**Chorus:**

If Fate brings you joy in the future, it will erase all this when you look back at it.

*Enter Messenger*

**Messenger:**

Helen, Menelaos! Share with me your joy. I can see it but I cannot understand it.

**Menelaos:**

Yes, old friend. Come and join our talk.

**Messenger:** *Indicating Helen*

But, is she not the cause of all our suffering at Troy?

**Menelaos:**

No, old friend, it was not her. The gods have deceived us. It was an image, a dismal phantom, made of cloud.

**Messenger:**

What? You mean, we were fighting in vain? All that for a mere cloud?

**Menelaos:**

This was all the work of three goddesses, Hera being one of them.

**Messenger:**

So, this woman I see next to you, is this your real wife?

**Menelaos:**

You may believe my words: it is she. Helen, my wife.

**Messenger:**

Ah, my daughter! How variable is the nature of gods, ey? How inscrutable! They change the fate of mortals from good to bad, from one minute to the next! No man's fate is certain.

One man suffers during his life. Another does not until the end of it, when utter ruin befalls him.

Both, you and your husband had to endure great suffering; you, because people have spread evil stories about you and he, because of his eagerness to go to war; and, despite all of his efforts there, all of his efforts to bring you back, he achieved nothing. Yet, here he is now, with not even the slightest effort on his part, Fate has brought him the best of blessings.

And so, you have brought shame to no one. Not to your old father, nor to your twin brothers, the Dioscuroi. You have committed none of those awful deeds they accuse you of.

Ah! Now I'm reminded of the day of your wedding!

I remember the torches I held as I was running beside your wedding chariot. Drawn by a team of four horses. There you were, a beautiful bride, sitting on that chariot, next to this man, leaving your own, blessed home behind!

Ah! It's a bad slave who doesn't respect his master, who feels neither his master's sorrows nor his joys!

I might be born a slave and bear no free man's name, indeed, but I can claim the respect an honest slave deserves. If not my name, then my heart is free! Better that than to be the bearer of twin burdens: that of being a slave to others and a slave to dishonest heart.

**Menelaos:**

Come, old friend! I know full well what hardship you have suffered, fighting beside my shield.

Now that you know of our joy, go and inform the others we left behind at the cave. Tell them that you have found us and tell them of our newfound luck!

Tell them to wait at the beach and to be ready for the battles which I know will come our way.

Tell them that, if I manage to get this woman out of here, to be ready and waiting for us and to join us against the barbarians so that, together, we may all escape from this land.

**Messenger:**

My King, all this shall be done! But how full of lies, how worthless are the tricks of the prophets, my Lord! How useless are prophesies that emerge out of the flames of sacrificial offerings, or of the chirpings of birds! How stupid it is to believe that birds can help humans!

The seer Calchas uttered nothing as he saw our armies dying for the sake of a mere shadow! Nor did the Trojan seer, Helenus and so, Troy was destroyed for nothing!

Well, one might say that it was the will of the gods that these two should say nothing. So why then should we bother running off to them, to these seers? Sacrifices should be done so as to pray to the gods, to beg them for their blessings and we should forget about prophesies. They're traps, foolish inventions! What idle man ever becomes rich by reading the flames of a sacrifice?

Prophecy comes from a wise and prudent mind! These are the best prophets!

**Chorus:**

I agree with this old friend about seers and prophesies: When mortals have gods on their side, then they have the best seer they can get for their house.

**Helen:**

Well then! So far so good! But tell me, my poor, dear husband, tell me please - though it'll add nothing to the abundance of my joy- tell me how you got here from Troy. Tell me how you have managed to come all the way here, safe and sound. People always want to hear what troubles their friends have suffered.

**Menelaos:**

Ah, my dear! This one word of yours has asked so many questions!

What is the point of telling you, my dear, about the countless shipwrecks in the Aegean? Or why Nauplios lit the torches at Euboa, to trick us and wreck our fleet, as revenge for the wrongful execution of his son, Palamedes? Why would you need to know about all the places I visited - Crete, for example and all those cities in Libya, or the lookout spots of Perseus?

Telling you my tale in full might satisfy you, wife but it would give me pain to remember the torment I have experienced. That torment would return and, with its telling, we would be both suffering together.

**Helen:**

Your answer was far better than my question, husband. But put aside all things except this one: tell me how long have you been tossed about aimlessly in the seas?

**Menelaos:**

Seven years. For seven years I've done the rounds of the oceans. But don't forget the ten years we've spent in Troy!

**Helen:**

Oh! Such a long time, my husband! Such a long time; and yet you've escaped all that only so as to be slaughtered here!

**Menelaos:**

What? What do you mean? What are you trying to tell me, wife? This has ruined me!

**Helen:**

You must leave immediately, Menelaos! Leave this country now. Get yourself as far away as you can. The master of this house will kill you.

**Menelaos:**

But what have I done to deserve such treatment?

**Helen:**

You arrived here unexpectedly and you will hamper my wedding.

**Menelaos:**

Is this true? Is there someone who wants to marry my own wife?

**Helen:**

Yes! I have had to endure these insults of his, time and again!

**Menelaos:**

Is he some wealthy man, a citizen, or is he the King of this land?

**Helen:**

It is Theoclymenos, Proteas' son and Egypt's King.

**Menelaos:**

So, this is the meaning of the riddle that the gatekeeper had told me!

**Helen:**

Which was the barbarian door that you stood in front of?

**Menelaos:**

That one, there. They sent me off as if I were a beggar.

**Helen:**

Oh, no! You did not beg for food, did you? Oh, no! That's horrible!

**Menelaos:**

No, not begging, as such...

**Helen:**

Well, you know about my impending marriage, don't you?

**Menelaos:**

Yes but I don't know if you've managed to get out of it.

**Helen:**

Know this then: Our marital bed has not been violated.

**Menelaos:**

If that is true, then I'm certainly overjoyed. How can I be sure though?

**Helen:**

Look there, at the tomb. Do you see that awful place?

**Menelaos:**

I see a miserable bed, made of straw, my poor darling but what has that got to do with you?

**Helen:**

That's the bed I escaped to. As a suppliant.

**Menelaos:**

But why here? Is there no altar in this city? Or is this some barbarian custom?

**Helen:**

It saved my life. It worked just as well as an altar.

**Menelaos:**

Well then, in that case, I can just take you home now, can't I?

**Helen:**

Alas, my husband, it's not a home that's waiting for you but a sword!

**Menelaos:**

That would make me the most unfortunate of all mortals.

**Helen:**

That's why, you shouldn't feel ashamed by running away.

**Menelaos:**

And leave you behind? After destroying Troy for your sake?

**Helen:**

Better that, Menelaos, than being killed because I'm your wife.

**Menelaos:**

Such words are unworthy of a man and even more so of one who was victorious against Troy.

**Helen:**

If you are thinking of murdering the Theoclymenos, the king of Egypt, husband, forget it. That is something you will not be able to do!

**Menelaos:**

Why not? Cannot his flesh be pierced by an iron sword?

**Helen:**

That you will find out soon enough but the wise man does not take on impossible fetes.

**Menelaos:**

Well then, shall I just quietly stretch out my hands for him to tie up?

**Helen:**

You have arrived at a difficult predicament. Yet we must find some way out of it.

**Menelaos:**

Then if I am to die let it be that I die fighting.

**Helen:**

I see only one hope left for us. Only one thing will save us.

**Menelaos:**

Is it by bribery, spear or words?

**Helen:**

No. The way out of this is that the King does not find out that you are here.

**Menelaos:**

But who will tell him about me? He will not know me or anything about me.

**Helen:**

The king has an ally inside those halls, whose power is equal to that of the gods.

**Menelaos:**

You mean there is some voice hiding in some secret place in the palace?

**Helen:**

No, not a voice but his sister. Called Theonoe.

**Menelaos:**

The name seems to be associated to prophesy. What does she really do?

**Helen:**

She knows all. And she will tell her brother about you.

**Menelaos:**

Well then I'm dead. If I can't escape her finding out about me, I'm dead!

**Helen:**

Perhaps we might be able to persuade her not to tell her brother. Beg her not to do so.

**Menelaos:**

What do I need to do, wife? What sort of hope have you brought me to?

**Helen:**

You must ask her not to tell her brother that you are here.

**Menelaos:**

But even if we succeed in this, will we still be able to get out of Egypt?

**Helen:**

In secret, no but with her help, yes.

**Menelaos:**

Then that would be your job, Helen. A woman can deal better with a woman.

**Helen:**

Of course. You can be sure, husband, that I shall clasp her very knees in supplication!

**Menelaos:**

But, what if she will not be persuaded by words?

**Helen:**

Then it will be death for poor you and a forced marriage for poor me.

**Menelaos:**

So! You will betray me! That word of yours, "forced" is nothing but a pretext.

**Helen:**

No, Menelaos! I swear, husband! By your life...

**Menelaos:**

And what oath will you take, that you will die rather than marry another man?

**Helen:**

Yes! I shall die by the very same sword they will kill you with. I shall fall by your side!

**Menelaos:**

Swear then: Touch my right hand!

**Helen:** *She does so*

Here! I swear that your death will take from me the light of my life.

**Menelaos:**

Me, too. If I lose you, I will also lose the light of my life.

**Helen:**

How could we die nobly, though?

**Menelaos:**

On the tomb! I shall kill you first and then kill myself!

But before that, I shall fight an earnest fight to defend you. Let he who dares come at me! I will not turn to shame the glory I have gained at Troy, nor will I allow myself to be ridiculed by the crowd when I return to Greece. I, Menelaos, who has robbed Thetis of her son Achilles! I, Menelaos, who has seen the body of Telamon's son, Ajax, killed by his own hand! I, who has seen the son of Neleus, Nestor, deprived of his own son! Would I, then, not see my own death as being worthy of saving my wife?

Of course I would!

The gods, who are wise, will see that a soldier who has died bravely on the battlefield, is buried under soft soil whereas they will cast the coward upon the harshest ground.

**Chorus:**

Oh, Gods! Grant that the house of Tantalus is one day released from its misery and allowed to feel joy!

**Helen:** *We hear the noise of the gate's bolts pulled.*

Oh, no! Poor me! Me and my bad luck!

We are lost, Menelaos, we are lost! It is Theonoe coming out from the palace. The whole palace echoes with the noise made by the gate's bolts as they are drawn asunder.

Leave, husband, leave now!

But, then, what for? She already knows you're here. Present or absent the prophetess knows about your arrival. Oh, this is the end for me! And you, my husband, you have escaped death by the barbarians of Troy but now, once again you must try to escape the swords of barbarians!

*Enter Theonoe with two attendants carrying lit torches*

**Theonoe:** *To one of her servants*

Walk in front me and with the light of the torches and with the burning incense, do as the holy laws decree: Purify the air all around us, that I may receive the pure breath of the heavens untainted.

To the other servant

And, you, cleanse my path by waving the purifying flame of the torch over it, in case some unholy foot polluted it by walking upon it.

And when you have done as I have asked and paid the due respects to the gods, carry the hearth's flame back into the palace.

*While the servants do as she asks, Theonoe turns to Helen*

How are my prophesies coming along, Helen?

There's your husband, Menelaos, standing in front of you!

He has come! His ships and your ghost have disappeared. Lost!

*To Menelaos*

Poor man! How you have suffered! What troubles you have escaped to get here, yet you still don't know if you'll ever reach your home or be stuck here for ever!

This very day, all the gods will gather around Zeus and raise a battle for your sake.

Hera, Zeus' wife, who once was your enemy, is now your ally and wants you and your wife, Helen to return to Greece safely so that the whole of Greece will learn

that Aphrodite's wedding gift to Paris Alexandros was not real.

However, Aphrodite, herself is preventing your return so that the truth will not see the light of day and that the world will not know that she bought her beauty prize with a phantom wedding for Helen!

So, now it is I who must decide. Should I please Aphrodite by telling my brother that you are here, which means you die, or should I please Hera by disobeying my brother who has ordered me to tell him if you ever get here and thus save you? Now, who will go and inform my brother that Menelaos is here? I'm afraid I'll jeopardise my safety if I go and tell him myself.

**Helen:** *Falls to her knees before Theonoe in supplication.*

Dear, Virgin!

I fall before your knees and take on this posture as one who is in deepest supplication!

I beg you, dear Virgin, grant me my safety and the safety of this man. He is my husband whom I've only just seen only to see his life in danger.

I beg you, dear Virgin, do not inform your brother that my husband has come here, into the loving arms of his wife.

I beg you, dear Virgin, save us! Save these two lives before you!

Do not betray your divine gifts for your brother's sake! Do not betray for the sake of sinful and unjust tokens of gratitude!

The heavens abhor violence and they demand of mortals to obtain their wealth not by stealing but by just means. Stolen wealth, wealth obtained unjustly, must be treated with disdain.

The heavens are available to all mortals. So is the earth, where mortals can fill their houses with wealth earned not by stealth nor violence but by honest labour.

It was good timing that Hermes grabbed me and brought me here, to your father, to keep me safe until my husband would come to take me back. Timely true, but, for me, taken from my home was wrought with misery.

And my husband is here now but how could he take me home if he will be killed? How can one hand the living to the dead?

Think of what the heavens want and think, too, of what your father would want. Would either of them not return goods to their rightful owner? I daresay they would.

So it would not be right, then for you, dear Virgin, to respect your disrespectful brother, over and above your respectable father.

You are a prophetess, dear Virgin and a believer in the will of the gods. How could you corrupt your father's just wishes so as to please the unjust wishes of your brother. It would be unjust for one like you, who has full knowledge of the will of the gods, of things of the present and of things of the future and yet you don't know what things are just.

I am in agony, dear Virgin! Rescue me from this misery! Rescue me and add it to the list of your just deeds.

Every single man hates me! They all hate Helen because they believe the rumour, one that is spread throughout Greece that I have betrayed my husband to live in the golden chambers of the Trojan palace!

If I get back to Greece, however and set foot on Sparta's soil, people will come

to me and ask me questions and when they will hear the true story, how their suffering was the work of the gods and how I have not deceived my loved ones, they will reinstate my good name and my virtue and then I will be able to marry off my poor daughter, Hermione, who, to this day, nobody wants to marry. I shall leave the bitter ways of a vagrant back here in Egypt and enjoy the wealth of my own home.

Had my husband got killed at Troy and his body burnt in the flames of a pyre I would have honoured him with my tears, a man who has died far away. But he's here now and he's alive! He has returned to me. Should I now lose him once more? Dear Virgin, I beg you, say no to this thought. I beg you, dear Virgin, grant me this request.

Follow the ways of your father who was just because this is the greatest glory one may possess: to be born of a good father and to follow his ways.

**Chorus:**

Words that call for pity from someone who deserves it.

But I would also like to hear how Menelaos will word his plea for his life.

**Menelaos:**

I will neither bend my knees to you nor fill my eyes with tears; and though they say that it is fitting and proper for a noble soul to weep in time of disaster, for me, it would turn the glory I received at Troy into shame. Noble or not, I will choose bravery over tears.

But if you think it is the proper thing to do, to save a stranger who, quite justly, wants to take back his wife, then allow him to do that: let her go with the stranger and let him be saved at the same time. But if however, you think it's not the proper thing to do well then, for me, this will not be the first time that I've ever tasted misery whereas for you, you will be shown to be a nasty woman.

Everything that I am justly proud of, things that will most certainly touch your heart, I will tell your father, here, at his tomb.

*He approaches the tomb and speaks to it*

O, old man! Old man whose home is now this stony tomb!

Give me back my wife, the woman whom Zeus has brought here for you to keep safe.

Give her back to me! I know that you, since you are dead, can't do this yourself but it is in the power of this woman here, your daughter, Theonoe, and she will not deem it proper that her father, whom I now call through the grave, to have his once glorious name tarnished.

And you, Hades, Lord of those beneath the earth! You, too, I invoke. Come, help me now. For what I have to ask you, I have paid you already, in full! I have given you many, many dead; slain by my own sword for the sake of Helen. So, now, I ask you to either send all those men back to life or let me have my Helen back! Force this woman, here, Theonoe, to be worthy of her father's virtue. Force her to let me take my wife back.

*He turns back to Theonoe*

Now, if you are going to steal my wife from me then, Theonoe, you hear from me all those things that Helen has left out when she spoke.

Let me inform you that she and I bound ourselves to an oath. An oath which calls



upon me first, to fight your brother to death. Let that be fully understood!

And if he refuses to meet me, face-to-face, sword-to-sword and decides, instead, to let us two suppliants to this tomb, to die of starvation, then let him know that I am resolved to first kill my wife and then plunge this double-edged sword into my heart, on top of this grave and covered it with my blood. There, upon this finely carved tombstone our two dead bodies will lie, the one beside the other, an endless grief to you and a stern accusation to your father.

Because no other man, not your brother nor anyone else will marry this woman. She will come with me, either back home or to the grave.

And why all this? Because I am not going to behave pitifully, like a crying woman but like a man of action.

Well, then, kill, if you so wish, you will not be killing a coward! But it would be best that you showed yourself to be just and do as I say: let me take my wife back!

**Chorus:**

Come now, dear Virgin! You must make a judgement upon all that you have heard. Judgeso as to please everyone.

**Theonoe:**

I was born to be respectful to the gods and this, too is my wish.

And I have respect for myself, too and do not wish to besmirch my father's good reputation by obeying my brother's wishes, something which would also stain my own good name.

My father, Nereus, has built a great temple of the goddess Justice, deep into the heart of my Nature. And so, I will try to save Menelaos, since it is also Hera's wish and she is on your side. It is she who receives my vote and hope that Aphrodite will agree, even though Aphrodite plays no part in my life. I will endeavour to remain a virgin always.

As for all those accusations you've made to my father, Menelaos, I too, am talking to this grave!

I would, indeed be acting unjustly if I did not let you take back your wife because I know that if that man *indicating the tomb* were alive he would reunite you two. Both, the living and the dead make their payments for the things they've done here, on earth.

It is true, mind of the dead lives no more but their consciousness is immortal, since it is mingled with the immortal ether.

But let me bring my advice to its end. I will do as you have asked of me, Menelaos. I will stay silent and not take part in my brother's reckless whim.

It will be for his own good, though he will not agree, of course, if I could have him turn to the ways of the gods, instead of working against their wishes.

Now, you two, find a way to leave this place and escape. I shall stand quietly stand out of your way.

But first, Helen, pray to the two goddesses. To Aphrodite, to let you get back to your country and to Hera not to change her mind about saving you and your husband.

*Turning to the tomb*

And you, my dear father! No one will ever say that you are disrespectful to the gods, if I have anything to do with it!

*Exit Theonoe into the palace.*

**Chorus:**

The unjust never prosper. Hope is with those who behave justly.

**Helen:**

Husband, so far as the holy Virgin is concerned we are safe. Now you must tell me your plan for our escape.

**Menelaos:**

Well, listen, then Helen: You've been living in the palace for a long time now and you have shared many meals with the servants...

**Helen:**

Yes, so? Husband, you are making me think that you have a plan that will save us both.

**Menelaos:**

Would you be able to convince one of those servants in charge of the chariots to let us have one?

**Helen:**

Yes, I could but what would be the point of us running off into a strange, foreign country that we are not well acquainted with?

**Menelaos:**

Yes, quite right. That would be impossible.

What if, though, what if I hid myself somewhere in the place and used this double edged sword of mine?

**Helen:**

His sister wouldn't tolerate that and she's know that you're thinking about it and so she'd tell her brother.

**Menelaos:**

Not even a boat! We don't even have a boat. The sea has taken mine.

**Helen:**

My husband, if you can believe that even a woman can give wise advice, then listen: Would you allow it to be known that you are dead, even though you are alive?

**Menelaos:**

It is a bad omen, that one but if some good will come of it, then I have no objection to have people saying that I am dead when I am not.

**Helen:**

I will be among the mourners who will mourn you in the presence of this godless man. I shall cut my hair short and wail along with all the other women.

**Menelaos:**

How is that going to help us escape? It's rather an old trick, that one, Helen.

**Helen:**

I will ask this country's king that you be buried in an empty grave, since you are lost at sea.

**Menelaos:**

All right, let us assume he agrees on the empty grave. How are we then going to make our escape without a ship?

**Helen:**

I shall ask him to give us a ship so that we may go and cast funereal adornments into the arms of the ocean.

**Menelaos:**

That would be a good idea, except, what if he asks you to do the burial ceremony on land? Your plan won't work then.

**Helen:**

I will tell him that it is not a Greek custom to bury someone who is lost at sea, in graves on land.

**Menelaos:**

That too sounds good. Well then, I'll be on that ship to help you with the casting of the adornments.

**Helen:**

Yes, you and all those sailors who have escaped the shipwreck. You should all be on that ship.

**Menelaos:**

If I can get my hands on a ship, my men will all stand beside me with swords drawn.

**Helen:**

Well, you organise all that.

I just hope that the winds will be favourable enough to set the ship sailing swiftly!

**Menelaos:**

Yes, I shall do that. The gods will finally put an end to my troubles.

But how will you say you have learnt that I am dead?

**Helen:**

From you! You will tell him that you, alone escaped the shipwreck, when you were sailing back home with Atreus' son. You will say that you saw him die.

**Menelaos:**

These rags covering my body will testify to the shipwreck.

**Helen:**

These rags have come in handy, though it wasn't such a handy thing for you when they became rags! Perhaps this misfortune will turn to fortune.

**Menelaos:**

Should I come into the palace with you, or should I just wait out here, by the tomb?

**Helen:**

No, you stay here because your sword and this tomb will protect you if the King decides to attack you.

I will go inside and cut my hair short, change my white robe for a black one and with my nails, scratch my cheeks until they bleed.

The battle will be long and I see two possible consequences: Either they will catch me in my efforts and kill me or I will have saved you and we have returned home.

*Praying*

Oh, reverend Hera, Zeus' partner in bed!

Bring relief to these two tortured souls! With our hands raised up towards the heavens where you live, in the majesty of the stars, we pray to you!

And you too, Aphrodite, daughter of Dione! You have won the prize of beauty by bribing the judge with my marriage to him, I beg you, dear goddess, do not destroy me! You have caused me enough hurt already by delivering my name, though not my body, to the barbarians.

If you do want to kill me, then kill me in my own land.  
Why are you cause evil so greedily? All this lust and betrayal, you create, all these tricks of treachery and all the magic spells that flood families with blood!  
If the truth were told, reverend goddess, if you acted with some moderation, you would be the best of all the gods!

*Helen exits into the palace*

**Chorus:**

I call on you, sad little bird, hiding deep in the leafy hollows, hollows full of your song, a singer among the best!

I call on you, nightingale, singer of sad songs!

Come, help me grieve Helen's bitter fortunes! Accompany me in my dirge with the sad trills that you can compose with your tawny throat.

**Chorus:**

And help me grieve also for the tearful pains suffered by the daughters of Troy, pains inflicted by the spears of the Greeks, pains suffered when, over the frothing plains of the sea, with a barbarous ship, the sad groom, Paris, brought you, Helen of Sparta, into Priam's race, as the goddess Aphrodite decreed.

**Chorus:**

Many were the Greeks who fell under the hail of spears and stones and breathed their last breath and joined black Hades. Their poor grieving wives cut off their long tresses and their chambers were left bereft of the joys of love.

**Chorus:**

But one Greek, acting alone, a certain Nauplius, with his single ship, lit a bogus beacon, on the shores of sea-circled Euboa, his kingdom and that blazing trap sent many homeward bound Greeks crashing onto the rocks of Capheria and the headlands of the Aegean Sea, sore about the murder of his son, Palamedes.

**Chorus:**

And the slopes of Maleas were inhospitable to Menelaos, who lead the Greeks and so, by the fierce power of a tempest, he drifted far from his homeland, clutching the prize which was no prize but the cause of a war with barbarians, Hera's phantom of Helen.

**Chorus:**

What mortal can possibly claim what is god, what isn't what's in between?

The most a mortal can do is to understand that whatever the gods deliver will turn this way one minute, the other a minute later, only to turn back this way again, with unfathomable consequences.

**Chorus:**

Helen, you are Zeus' daughter. He had flown with wings into your mother's, Leda's, folds and sired you.

**Chorus:**

And yet, Helen, throughout Greece you've been called a traitor, a wife who betrayed her husband, a godless woman! How can I tell which of the mortals' words are true, when they speak of the gods?

**Chorus:**

Men! What fools they are when they look for glory with spears on the harsh battlefield!

How foolish your efforts to end men's pains through slaughter!

**Chorus:**

If it is blood you wish to be the judge of right or wrong in the arguments between men, then war will never leave the cities.

**Chorus:**

War, Helen, brought them their death on Priam's land, when they argued about you, yet they could have resolved their differences about you with words alone.

**Chorus:**

Now they are in the hands of Hades!

**Chorus:**

Flames, shot like arrows from Zeus have spread across their towers and upon you, poor Helen, the sorrows fall the one after the other and grief follows more grief!

*Enter Theoclymenos with servants carrying hunting implements.*

**Theoclymenos:**

Ah! My father's tomb! Greetings Proteus!

I have buried you here, just outside the palace so that I can greet you and have a word with you every time I step out of the palace and then again when I return.

You, servants! Take my hunting dogs and the nets into the palace!

*Exit the servants*

I've chastised myself all too often for not putting criminals to death and now look what is going on: I have just learned that some Greek has landed on our shores, slipped past the guards and is now lurking somewhere around here. He's either a spy or he has come here to kidnap Helen!

If I ever catch him, he will certainly be put to death!

*He looks around the tomb.*

But – Ah! I am too late, I see! It looks like their scheme has already been achieved. Tyndareus' daughter is missing! She has gone from her place at this tomb and has been taken away from our land!

Servants!

Open these gates! Pull back their bars! Let the horses out of their stables and bring me my chariots! I won't let the woman I want to make my wife escape unnoticed without a mighty struggle!

*The gates open and Helen appears, dressed in clothes of mourning, eyes wet with tears and her hair cut short.*

Ha! Servants, hold on! I can see our prey is still here!

*He examines Helen*

You! Why have you changed your clothes? Why the black instead of the white?

And your hair? Why take the knife to it? Why cut it so short on your noble head?

And your eyes! Your cheeks are drenched with tears!

What is all this? Have you seen some troublesome dream or have you heard some news from home that made you grieve so deeply?

**Helen:**

My Lord –there, you see? I am ready to call you "my Lord" from now on.

My Lord, I am lost! All my hopes, my Lord, all my hopes are lost!

**Theoclymenos:**

Why, what happened to you?

**Helen:**

My Lord, he died! Gods, how can I utter this? Menelaos is dead!

**Theoclymenos:**

Your words don't bring me joy but my luck fortune is changing for the better! How do you know this, Helen? Has Theonoe told you?

**Helen:**

Yes, from her and from someone who was there when he died.

**Theoclymenos:**

What? Who is that? Has someone come here? Someone who can tell me clearly the whole truth of what has happened?

**Helen:**

Has, someone has come here to tell me –and how I wish he would go where I would wish him to go!

**Theoclymenos:**

Where is this man? Who is it? I want to hear the whole story clearly!

**Helen:**

There he is! That man there, cowering by the side of the tomb!

**Theoclymenos:**

Great god Apollo! What dreadful rags he's wearing!

**Helen:**

Ah, poor Menelaos! I fear he, too would be wearing such rags!

**Theoclymenos:**

Where did he come from? Which country is he from?

**Helen:**

He is a Greek. One who sailed with my husband.

**Theoclymenos:**

And how does he say, Menelaos died?

**Helen:**

Most terribly! By the huge waves of the ocean.

**Theoclymenos:**

On which savage part of the ocean was he sailing at the time?

**Helen:**

He was shipwrecked on the hostile rocks of Libya!

**Theoclymenos:**

So how did this man manage to save himself from the same wreck?

**Helen:**

Sometimes the meek have better luck than the noble.

**Theoclymenos:**

So, where has he left the ship's wreckage?

**Helen:**

The place where I wish he'd be taken. Him, not Menelaos!

**Theoclymenos:**

Menelaos is dead but which ship brought this man here?

**Helen:**

He says some sailors found him and rescued him.

**Theoclymenos:**

And so, what's happened to that cursed phantom that went to Troy in your place?

**Helen:**

You mean that image of me that was made out of cloud? It disappeared into the ether.

**Theoclymenos:**

Poor Priam and poor Troy! How pointless was your destruction!

**Helen:**

I too, share in the misfortunes of those Trojans!

**Theoclymenos:**

Did this man bury your husband or has he left him there unburied?

**Helen:**

Unburied! Oh, how miserable is my fate!

**Theoclymenos:**

So, that's why you've cut so short your beautiful blond hair?

**Helen:**

A loved one always stays loved! They live on in here, in the heart!

**Theoclymenos:**

You are right then to grieve for his loss.

**Helen:**

Oh, gods! I am lost! I am destroyed!

**Theoclymenos:**

But then, the story about his death might not be true.

**Helen:**

Is it that easy for your sister to make such mistakes?

**Theoclymenos:**

Of course not, no. So, will you make this tomb your home now?

**Helen:**

Why mock me like this? Leave the dead man alone!

**Theoclymenos:**

You are running away from me to be faithful to your husband?

**Helen:**

No, I will no longer do that. Make our wedding preparations!

**Theoclymenos:**

I have waited for this for a long time and now I welcome it, indeed!

**Helen:**

You know what we must do? We must forget the past!

**Theoclymenos:**

On what terms? One good deed must be repaid by another.

**Helen:**

Let us declare peace. Let us be friends.

**Theoclymenos:**

Fine! I withdraw my anger! Let it take wings and fly away!

**Helen:** *Kneeling before Theoclymenos and clasping his knees*

Theoclymenos, now that you have withdrawn your anger, I fall at your knees...

**Theoclymenos:**

What is it? What are you begging me to do for you?

**Helen:**

I want to bury my dead husband.

**Theoclymenos:**

But how? Is there such a thing as a grave for those who have died abroad? Will you be burying a shade?

**Helen:**

There is a Greek custom about people who have died at sea.

**Theoclymenos:**

And what is this custom? It's true the race of Pelops are very knowledgeable in such matters.

**Helen:**

We bury them by burying an empty shroud!

**Theoclymenos:**

By all means, then. Perform the ceremony. Raise the tomb wherever you like on our land.

**Helen:**

No, that's not how we bury those who died at sea.

**Theoclymenos:**

How then do you bury them? I don't understand the Greek customs on this at all.

**Helen:**

We cast into the ocean all those things that are important to the dead.

**Theoclymenos:**

So, what would you like me to give you for your dead husband?

**Helen:** *Indicating Menelaos*

This man knows. My previous life was a happy one and so I have no experience in such things.

**Theoclymenos:** To Menelaos

Stranger, you have brought me good news.

**Menelaos:**

Not for me nor for the dead man.

**Theoclymenos:**

How do you bury those drowned at sea?

**Menelaos:**

Each, according to his wealth.

**Theoclymenos:**

So far as wealth goes, I have no concern. Tell me what you need for this woman's sake.

**Menelaos:**

The first thing the dead need is a blood offering.

**Theoclymenos:**

What sort of animal. Tell me and it's yours.

**Menelaos:**

That's for you to decide. Whatever you offer will be adequate.



**Theoclymenos:**

Our barbarian customs ask for a horse or a bull.

**Menelaos:**

Just beware that whatever the animal you offer it must be of the best breed.

**Theoclymenos:**

We have many such animals in our abundant herds.

**Menelaos:**

An empty bier is also carried.

**Theoclymenos:**

You will have that as well. What else?

**Menelaos:**

A bronze armour. Menelaos loved the war spear.

**Theoclymenos:**

We shall provide the descendant of Pelops offerings worthy of them.

**Menelaos:**

And the best of your land's fruits.

**Theoclymenos:**

And what then? And how do you present these offerings to the waves?

**Menelaos:**

We will need skilled oarsmen and ships.

**Theoclymenos:**

What distance from the land must the ship be?

**Menelaos:**

Far enough that from the ship you can barely see the waves hitting the shore.

**Theoclymenos:**

Why this far? Why do the Greeks care so much about this custom?

**Menelaos:**

So as not to let the waves carry the pollution all the way back to the shore.

**Theoclymenos:**

I shall give you a fast Phoenician ship for that.

**Menelaos:**

That would be good.

A great honour for Menelaos.

**Theoclymenos:**

Is it not possible for you do this work alone, without Helen?

**Menelaos:**

This is work is done by the mother or the wife or the children.

**Theoclymenos:**

You're right. It's her duty to bury her husband.

**Menelaos:**

Respect to the gods demands that we do not take away anything of what is owed to the dead.

**Theoclymenos:**

Fine. She may go then. It is important that I encourage my wife to be respectful of the gods. You may go into the palace and take what offerings for the gods you need.

Then, when you have finished helping Helen with this service, you will not leave our land empty handed.

And for the good news you have brought me, I will replace these rags of yours with good clothes and give you enough provisions to help you until you get home. I can see that you are in a bad state at the moment.

And you, poor woman, don't torture yourself with things that are hopeless. Menelaos has met his Fate and weeping over him will not bring him back to life.

**Menelaos:**

Your duty, woman, is to love your present husband and to forget the one who is no longer alive. This is the best option for you, in the present circumstances.

If I reach Greece safely, I will stop all these slanderous rumours about you, so long as you prove that you are a good wife to your husband.

**Helen:**

I promise you, I shall be. My husband will never need to chastise me about anything. You can bear witness to this promise since you are here.

Now go inside, you poor man and have a bath and a change of clothes. I will waste no time to show you my appreciation. You will be more generous with your service to my dear husband, Menelaos, if I reward you with equal generosity for your troubles.

*Menelaos, Helen and Theoclymenos exit into the palace.*

**Chorus:**

The mountain goddess, the mother of the gods, once rushed frantically through the wooded meadows, through the rushing rivers and through the roaring waves of the ocean, madly trying to find her lost daughter, the girl whose name no man dares utter.

**Chorus:**

And when the goddess yoked her team of beasts to her chariot in a frenzied search for her stolen daughter, the clashing cymbals rose shrill cries! A daughter, stolen from the ring of dancing virgins.

**Chorus:**

Two other goddesses rushed alongside with her: Artemis, with her faultless arrows and the Grim-eyed one, in her full armour.

**Chorus:**

But Zeus looked down from his heavenly throne and had a different outcome in mind.

**Chorus:**

The mother ended her frenzied and agonizing wanderings, her search for her stolen daughter, a stealth so deviously executed that it baffled everyone, after she had crossed the snow-fed peaks of Ida, where the nymphs keep watch.

**Chorus:**

From there, in unbearable grief for her loss, the wretched mother threw herself down onto the snow-covered stony forests below, rendering the land all around there, grassless and infertile for the mortals whose race thus was destroyed.

**Chorus:**

The fields will grow no fodder for the herds, no flowers will blossom, no leafs will curl lushly and life left the cities. The sacrifices to the gods had stopped and the

smoke of burnt offerings had abandoned the altars.

**Chorus:**

And in her wild grief for her child her need for vengeance made her stop the dew-fed springs of crystal clear water.

**Chorus:**

But then the tables of gods and men were left bereft of feasts, Zeus, wanting to quell the Mother's rage, made this order:

**Chorus:**

"Go," he said, "go, you noble Graces! Go and, with your loud cries, drive the raging grief from Demeter's heart, that rage, born from the loss of her virgin daughter. And you, too Muses do the same with your songs and your dances!"

**Chorus:**

Then, most beautiful of all the blessed goddesses, Aphrodite, picked up her bronze instrument with its crashing sounds and her drum with its tightly-stretched skin.

**Chorus:**

The Mother laughed at this and she picked up her pipe and delighted in its deep and loud sound.

**Chorus:** *Referring to Helen*

Oh, my child!

**Chorus:**

You have burnt wedding offerings in the temples of the gods that neither the laws of the gods nor those of men permit!

**Chorus:**

And so you have earned the raging wrath of the Great Mother because you have not respected the sacrifices she decrees!

**Chorus:**

The power of the magnificent adorned cape made of deerskin is mighty!

**Chorus:**

So is the green ivy that winds itself around the sacred thyrsus!

**Chorus:**

So is the din of the bull-roarer that spins about the air!

**Chorus:**

So is that of the Mother's tresses as the wind takes them when she's dancing the all night vigils of Bacchus. All through the night, beneath the radiance of the moon.

**Chorus:**

You prided yourself only in your own beauty.

*Enter Helen from the palace*

**Helen:**

Friends, all is well within the palace.

Theoclymenos spoke to his sister, Theonoe, who is secretly helping us escape but she revealed nothing to him about Menelaos and added, to make things more certain for us, that those dead, beneath the earth see no light.

My husband during a most fantastic bit of good luck, managed to grab all the armour he was supposed to throw into the sea as funereal offerings and he's now wearing it. His mighty left arm is holding tightly onto the shield's straps and with his right he is carrying a spear, all under the pretext that he's doing all this to join

the ceremony to my dead husband.

He is now fully ready for the battle against thousands of barbarians if they come while we are aboard the ship. I got rid of his old shipwreck rags and gave him bright new clothes to wear after I gave him a bath with water from the streams, a bath which I have not given him for so many years now.

Ah, I see Theoclymenos is coming out. He thinks he has our marriage all under control and that I will be his wife. I must be silent now and I hope you, too, friends will side with me and say nothing also so that we two may escape; then, perhaps we may be able to come back and rescue you also.

*Theoclymenos and Menelaos enter from the palace, followed by servants of the palace who carry the various offerings.*

*Menelaos is dressed in fine clothes and complete armour.*

**Theoclymenos:**

Servants, go with Menelaos and do as he instructs you. Take those gifts to the ship for the funeral.

Helen, I think you should do as I say and stay here. You will honour your husband just the same, whether you're present at the funeral or remain here.

I am afraid for you Helen. I am afraid that you will be overcome by emotion at the loss of your husband, whom you loved so much and throw yourself into the waves. I am afraid because, you mourn too much for someone who is longer alive.

**Helen:**

Theoclymenos, you are my new lord but it is proper that I honour my old husband, with whom I first shared the joys of the marriage bed.

I would die for the husband that I loved but what good would that do him if I did that?

Let me go and give the dead man the proper burial honours, in person.

May the gods grant you all the blessings I wish you and may they do the same to this man who is helping us in all this.

You will have in your palace the wife you deserve since you are helping both, me and Menelaos. All this is heading towards some good fortune.

Please tell someone to bring us a ship to carry these offerings out to sea and your good deed will be complete.

**Theoclymenos:** *To one of the servants*

You go. Bring them a Sidonian ship, one with fifty oars and the oarsmen that come with it.

*Exit Servant*

**Helen:**

Will the captain of the ship also conduct the ceremony?

**Theoclymenos:**

Of course. The sailors will obey his every order.

**Helen:**

Repeat this order then, so that they will hear it clearly.

**Theoclymenos:**

I do so, yes. I will even repeat it three times if you wish.

**Helen:**

Bless you, my Lord and may my own wishes be fulfilled!

**Theoclymenos:**

Let not your excessive crying spoil your fine complexion, Helen!

**Helen:**

Husband, this day will show you just how grateful I am to you.

**Theoclymenos:**

The dead are of no consequence. We labour over them in vain!

**Helen:**

Whatever I say about this dead man applies to him whether he is in the world below or here.

**Theoclymenos:**

And I shall be equal to Menelaos as a husband.

**Helen:**

I know, my Lord. I find no fault in you whatsoever. I just need some good luck now.

**Theoclymenos:**

The good luck depends upon you, Helen. Simply be a good wife to me.

**Helen:**

I need no lessons on how to love those who love me, right now.

**Theoclymenos:**

Would you like me to be on that ship with you, to help you with everything?

**Helen:**

No, husband. You would not want to be a servant to your servants.

**Theoclymenos:**

Very well, then, Helen. I have no interest at all in the funeral customs of Pelops' descendants. In any case, since Menelaos did not leave his last breath here, my house is free of any religious pollution.

Now someone go and tell my servants to decorate the house for the wedding... and make the whole country happy with joyful singing and dancing so that all men might envy me, my marriage to Helen!

*A servant bows at Menelaos and exits*

*To Menelaos:*

Now, you, stranger, deliver these gifts to Menelaos, her previous husband, by casting them into the wide arms of the ocean and then hurry back home with Helen for the wedding ceremony. You will be my personal guest at the feast and then, afterwards, you may either go back to your home or stay and enjoy your life here.

*Menelaos bows in thanks and Theoclymenos exits into the palace*

**Menelaos:**

Dear Zeus! They call you Father of All and God of Wisdom!

Cast your eye upon us two and rescue us from our misery!

Help us Zeus as we drag our troubles up this steep precipice!

Let but the tip of your finger touch us and we shall achieve all our goals.

The past has delivered us enough suffering!

I know gods, that in the past I have often called on you to share my joys as well as my sorrows but don't let me suffer for ever. Let me now walk free and straight.

Grant me this one prayer, gods and I shall be blessed for the rest of my life!

*All but the chorus exits*

**Chorus:**

Welcome, swift Phoenician ship of Sidon!

Mother of the ocean foam!

You lead the dolphins in their joyful dance when the sea is calm and still and when Galineia, grey-eyed daughter of the sea, says, "Sailors, spread your sails and surrender them to the sea's breaths, take up your oars of pine and bring Helen to Perseus' welcoming shores.

**Chorus:**

There you will find Leukippou's daughters, either by the streams of Eurotas or before the temple of Pallas Athena. They will be gathered in a dance, at long last, or in games, or in all night feasts, in honour of Hyacinth, whom Phoebos Apollo killed during a discus throwing contest.

And after that contest, Zeus' son ordered that there, the day be made sacred in the land of the Lacedaemonians and that they should slaughter bulls in his honour.

**Chorus:**

And, you, Helen, will find the daughter you have abandoned, Hermione, for whom the wedding torches have not yet been lit.

**Chorus:**

How I wish!

How I wish I were a bird to fly across the sky to where the birds of Libya gather in their ranks, far from the rains of winter! They obey the loudly whistled commands of the oldest bird among them, the leader of their squadron as they fly over plains that know no rain but bear food in abundance.

**Chorus:**

With your outstretched necks and your feathered wings, you, companions of speeding clouds fly on! Fly on until you come to the Pleiads, in the centre of the sky and on to Orion, throned in the night.

**Chorus:**

And, as you stop by the banks of the Eurotas, call out the news that Menelaos has sacked Dardanos' citadel and is now on his way home.

**Chorus:**

And you two, sons of Tyndareus, Helen's brother and protector, you whose home is the heavens above the dazzling whirling stars, speed up your winged steeds and rush through the wide firmament's paths to help Helen!

**Chorus:**

Help her cross safely the wild, foaming waves that bloat over the deep grey sea! Bring Zeus' fair winds to her sailors.

**Chorus:**

And from your sister's name, erase the ugly rumours that she had slept in a barbarian's bed –a punishment incurred by that contest of beauty between the goddesses, on Mount Ida- since she has never gone to Troy, Apollo's tall castles.

*Enter a Messenger from the wings at the same time that Theoclymenos enters from the Palace.*

**Messenger:**

My Lord, my Lord!

**Theoclymenos:**

What is it, man?

**Servant:**

My Lord, shocking news! I have just come from the seashore and –

**Theoclymenos:**

Speak, man, speak! What is it?

**Servant:**

I will! Helen, my Lord!

You must look for another wife now. She has gone! She has left Egypt!

**Theoclymenos:**

With wings or by land?

**Servant:**

Menelaos, the man who came here to announce his death, he ran off with her, taken her out of our land!

**Theoclymenos:**

This is indeed dreadful news! Unbelievable news! What ship took her away from our shores?

**Servant:**

The very same one you gave to the stranger, my Lord! My Lord, to put it in few words, he has taken your sailors captive and sailed off with them.

**Theoclymenos:**

But how did this happen? How could a single man overcome all these sailors? Tell me, you were with them.

**Servant:**

After she left this palace, Zeus daughter headed for the sea, in dainty steps and acting as if she was truly mourning her dead husband, though, her dead husband was not dead but walking right next to her!

And when we got to the walls of your dock, my Lord, we launched a virgin, Sidonian ship, fully fitted with benches for fifty rowers.

Then the work aboard her began and one task quickly followed another. Some of us set up her mast, others again arranged the oars -the blades ready to be plunged- others folded the white sails and put them away in the hold, the rudders were dropped into the water and secured onto the cross bars.

But, all along, while we were all working hard at these chores, some Greeks, who had come here with Menelaos, were watching us –watching out for just this moment- came rushing out to the beach.

Well built men, though their clothes were the rags of shipwrecked sailors. Unfortunate wretches, to look at.

When Menelaos, Atreas' son saw them, gave us a deceptive act of sympathy for them and said to them, "poor men! I wonder what Greek wreckage brought you to these shores?" And then he asked them, "Would you like to join us in the burial ceremony of Atreas' son, who was lost at sea? Tyndareas' daughter, Helen, is conducting his cenotaph." They began shedding pretend tears and boarded the ship carrying their own offerings, supposedly for Menelaos.

Us, sailors. sensed that there was something suspicious about all of this and spoke to each other. We were worried that we've taken aboard too many passengers but, we didn't say anything to Menelaos because you said that we had to obey him, no matter what. That was a bad command that one, my Lord because

it brought about this sorry outcome.

Now all of the other animals for the sacrifice gave us no trouble getting them aboard the ship but the bull simply refused to move along up the plank. He wouldn't let anyone go near him. He kept rolling his eyes around, arching his back, staring viciously through his horns and bellowing most fiercely.

Then, Helen's husband lifted his sword high and yelled, "Come on, you men! You have sacked Troy, so, pick the bull up the way the Greeks do it! By your mighty, young shoulders! Come on, pick him up and put him down here, on the prow! He'll be sacrificed for the dead man!" Those men then did as he said: picked up the bull and brought him down among the rowing benches. As for the horse, Menelaos simply stroke its neck and brow and calmly persuaded it to get on board.

Then, when all the offerings were aboard, Helen, with her graceful feet, climbed the ladder and went and sat among the rowers' benches. Menelaos who everyone said was dead, went and sat right next to her.

His men, though, spread themselves evenly across the left and the right of the ship, hiding their swords under their clothes and the moment the crier made his call, our shouts overwhelmed the noise of the surging waves.

Then, when we got to a distance, not too far from the shore but also not too close, the helmsman asked Menelaos, "stranger, is this far enough or should we sail on a bit further? It's up to you, you are in charge of this ship."

Menelaos answered, "this is far enough for me" and with his sword in his right hand, he goes and stands at the prow. He stands above the bull's head and, without another word, cuts the beast's throat.

Then he preys to Poseidon: "Poseidon," he says, "Poseidon whose abode is the ocean and you, too, Nereas' immaculate daughters save us! Let me and my wife escape from this land and arrive safely home at Nauplia's shores!" The huge gush of the animal's blood sprouted forth and mingled with the waves. A fair omen for Menelaos.

Then someone shouted, "this voyage is a treacherous trick, take me back! You, helmsman, give the order to the oarsmen on the right and you there, turn that rudder!" But Atreas' son, raises his head from the killing and yells at his comrades. "You, men, flower of Greece! What's holding you back? Kill these barbarians and toss them overboard into the ocean!

But the helmsman gave the opposite command to your sailors. He yelled, "men, quick, you lot take up spars, you, smash up all the benches and the rest of you pull up all the oars from their thole! Smash the heads of these foreign enemies!"

Then all the men aboard the ship jumped up, one lot holding oars the other swords and soon the ship was covered in blood.

Helen cheered them on from her seat. "Come on men, show these barbarians why you won glory at Troy!" The hard battle brought many men down and some managed to get up again but those who staid down, you could see were dead. Menelaos, sword in hand, watched eagerly the ways of the battle and rushed to wherever he thought his men were in danger. We had to jump overboard and swim and so he cleared the benches of oarsmen.

Then he goes up to the steersman and orders him to turn the ship towards Greece.



Then his men raised the mast and the breezes came in their favour.  
I managed to escape the slaughter by jumping into the sea near where the ship's anchor was. Finally, some fisherman saw me at my life's edge and lifted me out of the water and brought me to land so that I could come and tell you the news.  
Nothing is more useful than a prudent doubt.

*Exit Messenger*

**Chorus:**

My Lord, I could have never imagined that Menelaos would come here, my Lord without our knowing about it!

**Theoclymenos:**

Poor man! I was deceived by a woman's tricks!  
My bride has gone! I would do anything to catch that ship and those foreigners, if it were possible. Instead I must now avenge myself upon this treacherous sister of mine who neglected to tell me that she had seen Menelaos. That will stop her from deceiving others through her gift of prophesy!

*Enter a servant from the palace and comes to stand in Theoclymenos' way.*

**Servant:**

Master, where are you going? What murder are you planning?

**Theoclymenos:**

I am going where Justice has ordered me to go.

*The servant grabs Theoclymenos' cloak*

Out of my way, servant!

**Servant:**

No, I won't! I won't let go of your cloak! You're rushing off to commit a dreadful deed!

**Theoclymenos:**

Are you, a slave, trying to rule your master?

**Servant:**

Yes, because I have some sense!

**Theoclymenos:**

I don't think you do. Not if you're going to try and stop me...

**Servant:**

No, I won't!

**Theoclymenos:**

...from killing my vile sister!

**Servant:**

Your sister is a most pious, god-loving woman!

**Theoclymenos:**

She has betrayed me!

**Servant:**

Her betrayal was proper because it was just.

**Theoclymenos:**

Just! She has given my bride to someone else!

**Servant:**

To someone who had a great claim to her.

**Theoclymenos:**

Who had a greater claim on her than me?

**Servant:**

He who had received her as a bride from her own father.

**Theoclymenos:**

Fate gave her to me.

**Servant:**

And Justice has taken her back.

**Theoclymenos:**

You do not have the right to judge my affairs.

**Servant:**

I do, if what I say is right.

**Theoclymenos:**

Well then! I am not the master but the servant!

**Servant:**

Yes, you are the master but only when you do what is just, what is according to the laws of the gods.

**Theoclymenos:**

I see that you are eager to die!

**Servant:**

So be it! Kill me but I will never let you to kill your sister!

It is an honour for a noble slave to die in the hands of his masters.

*Theoclymenos raises his sword to strike the servant but Castor's voice stops him.  
The two brothers appear (Director-permitting) on a deus ex machina.*

**Castor:** *From deus ex machina.*

Halt! Restrain this anger of yours, Theoclymenos, King of this land! It drives you from Justice!

It is we, the Dioskouroi, the twin sons of Zeus and Leda, brothers of Helen, the woman who has abandoned your halls, who have called your name.

Your rage is for a marriage that was not destined to be.

Nor has your sister, Theonoe, daughter of the goddess Nereid has done you any wrong. She respects and heeds the just words of the gods and that of her father.

It was destined that Helen stayed here, in your palace only until now and no longer. She has lent her name to the gods until such time when Troy is destroyed. This has now been done and so she must not live with you any longer but restore her original marriage and return to her home to live with Menelaos, her husband. Now, you must realise that your sister has acted wisely in all things so, keep your black-hearted sword away from her!

We could have saved our sister a long time ago, since Zeus has made us gods but we were prohibited by Fate and the other gods who are stronger and who made the decisions as to how these things should develop.

These, then are my words to you.

Now let me turn to our sister, Helen

Continue on your homeward bound journey with your husband. We, your twin brothers, shall be your guides and bring you favourable weather. We shall gallop along beside your ship until you reach your land. Finally, when you come to the

last part of your life and die, you will be named a goddess and you will share with us the libations men pour for us and share also the gifts they offer us. This is the wish of Zeus, our father.

Mortals will call Helen that place where Maia's son first took you from Sparta, after he stole an image of you from the halls of Heaven so as to prevent Paris from marrying you; that island that lies like a guard, a rock before Attica. They will name that place after you because it has received you when you were stolen from your home.

As for that wanderer, Menelaos, it is decreed by the gods that he shall make his home on the island of the blessed. The gods do not hate the nobly born because they suffer more pain than do the common men.

**Theoclymenos:**

Sons of Leda and Zeus, I will abandoned my previous malice against my sister. I will not kill her and, if it is the will of the gods, let Helen return to her home. You should know that you are of the same blood as your sister, who is most virtuous and wise.

Be pleased that you are the brothers of such a woman. There are not many women with a soul like hers.

**Chorus:**

The deeds of the gods take many forms.

**Chorus:**

And gods often perform deeds even beyond our hopes.

**Chorus:**

Our wishes might not be granted but the gods will find ways of achieving what we never thought achievable.

**Chorus:**

Such was the path of our story.

*Exit All*

# (EURIPIDES) Herakles

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>464</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Herakles** (*Hero, son of Zeus*)

**Amphitryon** (*Alcmena's husband, Herakles' mortal father*)

**Megara** (*Herakles' wife*)

**Lykos** (*'Wolf' in Greek*) (*Usurper of the throne of Thebes*)

**Theseus** (*King of Athens*)

**Iris** (*Hera's servant*)

**Lyssa** (*Goddess of Madness*)

**Chorus** (*Of older men of Thebes*)

**Two armed guards** (*to Lykos – silent*)

**Messenger**

**Herakles' three young sons** (*Silent*)

...

*Before Herakles' palace at Thebes*

*To its left stands the altar of Zeus.*

*At its steps are seated as suppliants, Megara, Amphitryon and Herakles' three sons.*

*Amphitryon stands and addresses the audience*

## **Amphitryon:**

What mortal has not heard of Amphitryon, the man who has shared his wife with Zeus? Amphitryon of Argos. Son of Alcaeus, grandson of Perseus, father of Herakles!

I am that man, Amphitryon!

This place here, Thebes, is my new home.

This is the place where Ares sowed the dragon's teeth from which sprung up a crop of earth-born giants. Of them all, Ares spared only a few but these few spawned the people who made up Cadmus' city. And it was from that lot that Creon, son of Menoekeos, had sprung. Creon then became this lady's father. Megara.

Megara was escorted to my palace by all the people of Thebes, singing her wedding song and playing the lutes. It was Herakles, that glorious hero, my son, who had led her to my house as his bride.

Now Herakles has left my Thebes, left his wife and all his family behind and rushed off to make his new home in Argos, that city that was built by the Cyclopes, that city from which I was exiled because I had killed my uncle Electryon.

Now, Herakles, wanting to ease my misery and take us back to our home, in Argos, offered King Eurystheus a huge deal: in exchange for our return back there, he, Herakles, would tame the earth. Perhaps this was Hera's idea or it might have been Herakles' own Fate.

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<sup>464</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/1129-2/>

After he had completed all his other labours, Herakles has begun his last one by going, through the mouth of Taenarum, down to Hades, so as to bring back up here, to the earth's light, that three-bodied monster, the dog called Cerberus.

He has yet to return from that labour.

Now, there's an old story told among the Cadmians of Thebes that, in the olden days, this seven gated city, here, was ruled by a certain Lykos, Dirce's husband.

This is before Amphion and Zethus, Zeus' sons, and lords of the white horses, ruled the city.

Lykos' son, then, who was also called Lykos, and who was not a Theban himself but a mere foreigner, a Euboean, in fact, murdered Creon and, when the city was going through a civil strife, took the opportunity to seize its throne and rule it. So now, this connection we have with Creon has proven to be a curse because, while Herakles is away, down deep below in the bowels of the underworld, this new king, this Lykos, is intent upon quenching one murder with another and killing all of us: Herakles' wife here and his sons and me, too, if you can count me, a useless, old man as a living being. He's afraid, you see that these boys will one day grow up and seek to avenge the murder of their uncle's family members.

So here I am now, left behind by my son to look after his sons while he's below, in the gloomy darkness of the world below. I've asked them all, mother and sons, to stand here, by this altar of Zeus the Saviour, as the god's suppliants.

Herakles himself, my own brave son, set up this monument to commemorate his great victory over the Minyans.

And while we stand here, we have nothing: no food nor drink, no clothes nor anything but the bare earth to sit on. We are locked out of the house and there's no one who can save us.

And friends? Some of them, I now find, are not the true friends I once thought they were, while others, though true, are powerless to help us.

Such are the burdens misfortune brings to the mortals!

May the gods not deliver them to anyone who has the slightest goodwill towards us, as the most unfailing test of friendship!

**Megara:**

Old man, it was you who once led the Cadmeian troops into glory against the Taphians and took their city. What's there for the mortals to remember now about what the gods had granted you then?

And I was not forsaken by Fortune, so far as my father was concerned. He was rich and he was a king and, for that, people called him blessed but because of this blessedness, his wealth and his throne, long spears were hurled against him. That is what men jealous of prosperity do to those who are blessed with it.

And he was blessed with children, too. Me, for example, who he had given to your son, Herakles, as a lawful and happy bride.

All that good fortune, though, is now gone. Flew away!

And you and I, will also be killed. These children here, too, Herakles' sons! Look at them! They are huddled under my wings, like chicks protected by their mother! These children too, will be killed!

Poor things!

They keep asking me, "mummy, where has daddy gone?" or "what's he doing?" or

"when is he coming back?" They are so young and so confused and so they ask for their father... and so I tell them all sorts of stories! They are stories but the slightest creak of the door and they all jump to their feet! They think it is him and so they rush about hoping to grab at their beloved father's knees.

So, what now, old man? What hope can you give us? What solution can you think of, old man? You're my only hope now.

Soldiers, too powerful and too many for us, are guarding every path out of this city, so we can't even run away from here! And we have no friends who can save us from all this.

Tell me your thoughts clearly. Straight out. We might as well be prepared for our imminent death!

**Amphitryon:**

It's not easy, my daughter!

One needs time to examine such questions thoroughly before giving any advice on them.

**Megara:**

Are you after more misery, or do you love life that much?

**Amphitryon:**

Yes, I love life... and I love hope!

**Megara:**

I love hope too but one should not hope for things that are hopeless!

**Amphitryon:**

Yet, there's some remedy in postponing misery!

**Megara:**

But the time before its arrival bites fiercely!

**Amphitryon:**

Time! In time, my daughter, good pathways might emerge which might lead us away from our misery. My son, your husband, Herakles, might return, in time!

So keep calm and use your sweet words to stop the tears flowing from your sons' eyes. It might be a pitiful trick, daughter, weaving tales for them but it is a trick you must nevertheless, carry through.

Winds vary in force from moment to moment and so do the winds of human misery. Eventually their force, too, subsides. Things separate. They change from one extreme to the other, so the brave trust hope. The cowards despair.

**Chorus:**

I have come!

I have come to this high-roofed palace...

**Chorus:**

...and to its ancient beds, hanging onto this walking stick...

**Chorus:**

A singer!

A singer of sad dirges and laments...

**Chorus:**

...like some grey old bird!

**Chorus:**

I am nothing but a voice!

**Chorus:**

Nothing but a ghost, a dark ghost in the darkness of dark dreams!

**Chorus:**

Aged dreams, aged words, aged legs but eager to help, nonetheless!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Poor, poor boys!

Fatherless boys!

**Chorus:**

And you, you poor, poor, old man!

**Chorus:**

And you, poor, poor, mother who weeps for her husband who is in the halls of Hades!

**Chorus:**

Don't let your feet, nor thighs tire, like an overburdened horse, climbing a rocky hill...

**Chorus:**

...trying to pull along some heavy cart.

**Chorus:**

If any of you feels his feet faltering, grab the hand, or the cloak of the man next to you!

**Chorus:**

Let the old, though old, help the old!

**Chorus:**

Once you were young and carried spears and arms next to each other!

**Chorus:**

Fought and won wars together, for your glorious country.

**Chorus:**

Look, look! His eyes!

**Chorus:**

Same flashing eyes like his father's!

**Chorus:**

Poor boys! You can see their father's misfortunes in them!

**Chorus:**

His greatness is not missing either.

**Chorus:**

Oh, my Greece!

What allies you will lose if you lose these boys!

**Chorus:**

Look there, king Lykos is coming this way.

*Enter Lykos with his two armed guards*

**Lykos:**

I have but a single question for you two, if I may!

Father and wife of Herakles, I am your king and so I may ask you whatever question I wish so here it is:

How much longer do you want to prolong your lives?

What hope do you see? What do you think will save you from your death? Is these

kids' father? He's dead! He lies dead in the halls of Hades. Dead. Do you think he'll come back to you from down there?

All this moaning and groaning about your death!

*Indicating Amphitryon* One of you going about the whole of Greece telling everyone that you shared your wife with Zeus and that your son is his son as well!

And the other, *Indicating Megara* calling herself the wife of the greatest hero on earth!

Why is that? What was the big deal about killing some snake in the marshes? Or that other one, that lion creature, from Nemea. Your hero son caught it in a snare and then claimed he killed it with his bare hands! Is this it? Is this what you hope will save you from your death? Is it these little deeds that you will use as excuses to keep your sons from being put to death?

Sure, Herakles killed beasts! That took some courage, I grant him that much but in all other things, he's a coward. Has he ever strapped a shield to his arm? Has he ever seen eye-to-eye with a spear?

No! He just had a bow! A coward's weapon and even then, he took to his feet at the slightest danger! A bow! What courage does one need when he has a bow in his hands? A man shows his courage by standing his ground and dealing with the vast gap his enemy's spears have cut into his own ranks. That's courage! That's bravery!

My intention, old man, is not cruel. It's wise. I am fully aware that I am in possession of a throne because I have killed Creon, this woman's *Indicating Megara* father, so I am not going to allow these boys to grow up and punish me for it!

**Amphitryon:** *Lifting his eyes to the heavens*

Herakles, Zeus can mount his own defense for the part he took in your birth.

I shall mount my own, myself and I shall show, by careful argument, just how ignorant this man is about you. I won't allow anyone to throw insults at you, my son!

First, my son, let me clear your name from the most despicable slander that has been made about you: Cowardice! Is there a better description for such an accusation than "despicable slander?" And let the gods be my witness as I speak against this accusation.

My appeal is to Zeus' thunder and to the chariot he was riding from which he shot the faultless arrows that killed the earth-sprouted giants; and then rejoiced in his victory with the rest of the gods.

Then, go and ask Pholoe, you, Lykos, the most cowardly of all kings, ask Pholoe and ask also the Centaurs, those wild four-legged creatures! Ask them who they think is the bravest of all men. Would they talk about anyone other than my son? My son whom you call "a pretend hero?" Then go and ask your lot: Go to Diphrys, in Euboa, your country and ask there about you. Ask them to sing your praises. What will they find to praise, I wonder? What brave deed have you ever executed in your own country?

Then you go on insulting the cleverest of inventions, the bow and arrow, the archer's weapon! Come closer then and listen carefully. Come and listen to my words and learn!

A soldier on the battlefield is nothing more than a slave to the heavy weight of



his weapons and to the soldier fighting next to him because if that other soldier lacks courage, then he dies there and then, on the battlefield, not because he himself lacks courage but because his battle mates do.

And what if his spear breaks? He has no other weapon with which to fend off his death. The man with a bow and arrows, however, a man who knows how to use them well, has this one great advantage over all the other soldiers, which is that even after having shot countless arrows at his enemy, he still has plenty more of them to help him avert death!

He stands back from them and, whereas they can't see him, he can see them and can shoot at them arrows that they can't see. Wound them, kill them, keep them back with no danger to himself, since he is hidden from their view.

By far, the wisest tactic in a battle is to kill the enemy but not allow him to kill you. Quite the opposite view to your old fashioned one!

Now tell me, why is it you want to kill these boys? What have they ever done to you?

What logic is there for that? I'll tell you: it is one single thing: that you are too frightened to face a hero's children!

Logic which will put us to death because you are coward! Very hard to accept this logic and if Zeus were to be fair towards us, we, who are by far your betters, should have delivered this fate to you instead!

But still, if you are determined to take over the throne of this land, then let us go away. Send us into exile! Avoid violence, lest the winds of fortune veer round and send the same violence in your direction.

Oh, you land of Cadmus!

I'm accusing you, as well! Is this how you take care of Herakles' children? Herakles, the man who, all by himself, faced the whole Minyan army saved Thebes from destruction and allowed her people to see the light of freedom?

And how can I praise Hellas, or stay silent any more about the fact that Greece has betrayed my son. Look at these boys, there! The whole of Greece should have provided them with the protection of fire and spears and shields, as recompense for their father's hard toil in cleaning up of this country's land and ocean! That's the protection that neither Thebes nor Greece is willing to afford you.

Poor boys!

You can only see me as a weak old man. A friend, yes, one who loves you but, one who is nothing more than a noisy tongue!

What vigour I once had, I no longer have! What strength my knees once had, they no longer have. Age has made them quake. What strength I once had, is barely noticeable now.

O, how I wish I were a young man again, with the strong body of a young man! I would have grabbed a spear and soaked this man's golden curls with his own red blood! His cowardice would make him flee beyond the pillars of Atlas!

**Chorus:**

Is it not possible for good mortals to find good things to say, even if tardily said?

**Lykos:**

Go ahead! Speak your towering words! Insult me all you like!

I, however, will repay those harsh words of yours with harsh deeds of my own!

*To his guards*

You, go over to Helicon and you, go to the valleys of Parnassus and get people to cut down some logs of oak! Then bring them all here, to this altar right here. Put them all around it and set fire to them. And burn these people! Burn them all alive! That should teach them that it is not the dead who rule this kingdom but I, who is alive!

*The two men obey and exit.*

*Lykos turns to Amphitryon*

And you old man! You want to go against my decision? Fine! Then you'll not only grieve for Herakles' sons but for your whole palace when it gets hit by one disaster after another!

And that will remind you that you lot are the slaves and that I am the king!

**Chorus:** *To the audience, as if it consists of Thebans*

You, men! Children of the earth upon which Ares, the god of War, has sown teeth that he had drawn out of the jaws of a ferocious dragon!

**Chorus:**

Why don't you use your walking sticks that hold you up and beat this man's godless skull to a bloody pulp?

**Chorus:**

He's not a Theban!

**Chorus:**

He's a foreigner!

**Chorus:**

And a foreigner who rules our citizens most brutally, at that!

**Chorus:** *To Lykos defiantly*

But not me!

You're not going to order me around! Take everything I've worked for from my hands!

**Chorus:**

Get out of here!

Go back to wherever you came from! Order them around, if you want!

**Chorus:**

And you're not going to murder Herakles' boys either! Not while I'm alive!

**Chorus:**

Herakles is not buried that deep under the ground that he'll leave his children behind!

**Chorus:**

You have destroyed this land and became its king, yet the man who has saved it has missed out on his reward!

**Chorus:**

And no, I'm not a meddler! I am doing something to help those I love, even though they are dead because that's the time when they most need a friend up here!

**Chorus:**

Ah, this right hand of mine! How it longs to clasp a spear once again!

It longs but it can't. Too weak now. Too old!

Otherwise, it would stop you from calling me your slave!

**Chorus:**

And I would have done a glorious deed for Thebes, where you puff yourself up!

**Chorus:**

Thebes is sick with civil strife.

**Chorus:**

Makes bad decisions!

**Chorus:**

It can't think straight or else she wouldn't have you as her king!

**Megara:**

Thank you, old gentlemen and my praises to you!

It is important that close friends show their anger against injustices done to their friends but do be careful you don't get into trouble by showing your anger against this tyrant, for our sakes.

And you, Amphytrion, listen to my words and see if I am not talking sense.

I love my children!

Of course I do! I have given birth to them and I have worked hard for them.

To see them put to death is something too horrible for me. Yet, it is also foolish to fight against one's Fate. And since we have to die, then we should not allow our enemies to torture us with fire and laugh at us as we burn! That would be worse than death!

We owe much more virtue to this palace!

You, Amphytrion, have gained much glory in the battlefield. You cannot possibly a coward's death now!

And everyone knows my husband's reputation as a brave and virtuous man. He would not want to save his children's lives if it meant that they'll get a coward's reputation! Noble parents suffer if their children are disgraced in any way and so I, too, must act in the same way that my husband would have acted.

And so, Amphytrion, let me tell you what I think about these hopes of yours.

Do you really think that your son will ever come back from the world of the dead below? Who has ever come back from Hades' halls?

And do you also believe that we can placate this tyrant here with mere words?

Not in the least!

One must turn away from an enemy who is too stupid and he must make concessions only to the wise and the noble because, it is from them that you might be able to get what you want by appealing to their sense of decency.

I had thought to ask for the children to be exiled but what would be the point of saving their lives so that they may live in abject poverty? It's a fate just as miserable as death. They say that to the exiled, the faces of hosts smile but for a single day!

Come then, Amphytrion!

Come, be brave and prepare yourself for the death that, whether we like it or not, is our lot. Bravery is in your blood, old man.

To struggle against the will of the gods is to show a keen spirit but it is a foolish keenness.

No one can undo what Fate have done.

**Chorus:**

Had someone injured you, Amphytrion, back in the days when my arm still had its

strength, I would have stopped him without delay. But no! Now, I am useless.

**Chorus:**

From now on, Amphytrion, it's up to you to think through what Fate delivers you.

**Amphytrion:**

No, it's neither cowardice nor love for life that stops me from dying but my wish to save my grand children, even though this might well be a vain hope.

*Approaches Lykos defiantly*

Here! Here's my neck and there's the unfortunate mother of these children. You can do what you like with us: Use your sword on us. Cut us up into pieces. Murder us, throw us off a high cliff!

But, Lord, Lord, grant us this one single favour!

Kill us, her and me, before you kill the children!

Save us from witnessing the appalling sight of these children gasping out their lives and calling for their mother and their grandfather!

Other than that, you can do whatever else you want with us. We have no defence against our death.

**Megara:**

And I beg you for a second favour, my Lord! You are one man but you can do us both a double kindness: Let us go inside.

Unlock those doors for us so that I can go and dress these children in funeral robes. It's the least they should be able to get from their own father's house.

**Lykos:**

Fine, that much I shall allow you.

*One of the members of the chorus opens the door*

By all means, go inside and put on your funeral robes. I won't begrudge funeral robes but when you are dressed I shall return to send you to the world below.

*Exit Lykos*

**Megara:**

Come, children, follow your poor mother's footsteps into your father's house.

Others now own his goods but we still own his name.

*Megara and the children enter the palace*

**Amphytrion:**

What was the point, Zeus?

What was the point of letting you share my wife? What was the point of telling the world that you are my son's half father? I thought you'd turn out to be a better friend than this!

There you are, a great god and here I am, a mere mortal yet, it seems, I am more virtuous than you. I have not betrayed my son's children but you! You, though! You're an expert at secretly sliding uninvited into other men's bed and taking their wives but you're totally ignorant about how to save the lives of your dearest friends! Zeus, either you are a mindless god or you have no sense of justice!

*Amphytrion goes into the palace*

Chorus: <sup>465</sup>

Now Apollo plucks his sweet-voiced lyre with a golden plectrum and a sad song follows his song of joy.

**Chorus:**

And I will do the same for that man who's gone to the gloom of the earth—

**Chorus:**

Should I call him the son of Amphitryon or that of Zeus?

**Chorus:**

I wish to praise Herakles, to sing a song that crowns all his labours.

**Chorus:**

It is a glory for the dead to praise their noble deeds!

**Chorus:**

His first noble deed was to rid the grove of Zeus of the fierce lion!

**Chorus:**

And threw the beast's fiery skin, ferocious, gaping jaws over his auburn head.

**Chorus:**

Then he laid low the mountain race of wild Centaurs with his murderous arrows.

**Chorus:**

The river Peneus, Peneus of the lovely eddies, can vouch for this and so can all the distant barren lands and all the farms of Mount Pelion and all deep glens of Homole next to it.

**Chorus:**

That's where the Centaurs used to live.

**Chorus:**

They used to arm themselves with the trunks of pine trees and rule over the whole of Thessaly with their horsemanship!

**Chorus:**

Then he killed that dappled hind with the golden horns that pillaged the farms and brought joy to Artemis, the huntress, goddess of Oenoe.

**Chorus:**

And then he climbed upon his four-horse chariot and with the bit Diomedes' horses.

**Chorus:**

These were the gruesome horses that with unbridled appetite plunged their maws into the gory troughs and fed voraciously on human flesh. Savage beasts dining savagely.

**Chorus:**

Then he crossed the silver waters of the Hebrus river and performed his labour for the king of Mycenae.

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<sup>465</sup>This is an ode in praise of Herakles' labours. It is the earliest list and it mentions twelve of them and, whilst this number has taken the currency of a cannon, the labours themselves vary from author to author. Here, Euripides mentions the following: The Lion of Nemea (359-363); The Battle of the Centaurs (364-374); The Hind of Artemis (375-379); The Mares of Diomedes (380-388); Cycnos (389-393); The Apples of the Hesperides (394-400); The Clearing of the Sea (400-402); Atlas (403-407); The Girdle of the Amazon, Hippolyta (408-418); The Lenean Hydra (419-422); The Cattle of Geryon (423-424); The bringing back to earth of Cerberus

**Chorus:**

Then it was the turn of Cycnos, who lived on the shore next to Mount Pelion, near the waters of Anaurus and who, wanting to build a temple made of human skulls, he used to kill all the travelers that went by.

**Chorus:**

Herakles killed this wild dweller of Amphanae, with his unerring arrows and immediately his father, Ares had turned him into a swan.

**Chorus:**

Then to the garden of the sweet-voiced divine women of the Hesperides he went and from the leafy branches of the apple trees that grew there, he plucked the golden fruit, killing the murderous dragon-guard with its coils twisted all around it and whose back was the colour of flames.

**Chorus:**

Then, passing through the straits of Gadir, he entered the watery caves of the far flung ocean and made it calm for the mortal sailors.

**Chorus:**

Then he went to Atlas' house and lend his mighty hand to him, stretching it up to hold the heavens high, the star-filled home of all the gods.

**Chorus:**

Then he gathered friends from all over Greece and fought the mounted army of the Amazons who lived round the lake Maeotis, a lake fed by many rivers, beyond the Euxine Sea.

**Chorus:**

They took from their barbarian queen, Hippolyta, the golden girdle –a deadly labour!- and this glorious spoil of war they brought back to Greece, where it is safe in Mycenae.

**Chorus:**

Then, with fire he killed the murderous hound of Lerna, the Hydra, with its myriad heads and smeared its poison on his arrows and it was with these arrows that he had killed Geryon, a monster with three bodies and the shepherd on the island of Erytheia.

**Chorus:**

Then he brought to a happy conclusion many other travels before he sailed to Hades, the tear soaked land, for the last of his labours and the last of his life, and from there the poor man has not returned yet.

**Chorus:**

His house is now bereft of friends and the oar of Charon the underworld's ferryman waits to take his children on a journey away from life, a journey of no return, a journey against the laws' of god and of man's justice.

**Chorus:**

Your house, Herakles, looks to your strong arms for protection but you are not here!

**Chorus:**

If only!

If only I still had the youth, and had I all those Theban friends of mine –we of the same age- had I the strength to raise a war spear, I stand by your sons, Herakles, I

would have shielded them.

**Chorus:**

But now, now, Herakles my blessed youth is gone.

*Megara, Amphitryon and the three boys enter from the palace, dressed for their burials which include wreaths on their heads.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look there!

**Chorus:**

The sons of once mighty Herakles, dressed in the clothes of the dead!

**Chorus:**

And his dear wife! Look how her children are clinging onto her legs!

**Chorus:**

She's pulling them along beside her!

**Chorus:**

And his old father!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

How can I hold back the tears flowing from these old eyes!

**Megara:**

Come then, where is the priest?

Where is the man who'll sacrifice these unfortunate children?

Where is the murderer of my wretched life?

Come, these sacrificial victims are now ready to be led to Hades' halls!

Poor, poor children!

What an odd parade of living dead we are made to join! Old men, young children, mothers! All of us, together!

A shocking fate for me and just as shocking a fate for you, my darlings! This is the last time, my darlings! The last time my eyes can fall upon you.

I gave birth to you, my darlings. I gave you life but only so that others, my enemies, can insult you and torment you – kill you, all for their own enjoyment!

All those hopes that your father has given me! All those words of hope he has told me! How they have betrayed me!

*Addressing each of her sons individually*

You my son! To you, your dead father used to grand you the throne of Argos! You would be living in the halls of king Eurystheus, ruling over the great fertile land of the Pelasgians. He'd throw his great lion skin over your head. That lion skin was his armour, darling!

And you, my son, he'd make you the ruler of Thebes, where the men love their chariots and you'd persuade him to also grand you all of my own lands! Then he'd put into your right hand that finely carved wooden club of his, a strong defence against all evil. A hoax gift that Zeus once gave Hera.

And to you, my son, he would promise to hand you Oechalia, a country he had conquered with his far-shooting arrows.

And so, your father, so proud of your manliness, buttressed you with the thrones of three countries!

And I, too, have done my part, by choosing the best of brides for you, brides that

would make you allies of Athens, of Sparta and of Thebes, anchoring your life's cables, fast onto a happy voyage.

But all these hopes are now gone, my sons. The winds of your fortune have turned and now, for brides, they have brought you the spirits of Death and me... to me, the unfortunate wretch, they have taken away my rights to give you your bridal bath and replaced them with tears. Your grandfather now must celebrate being Hades' father-in-law. Such a dreadful marriage!

Ah, poor mother! Which one of you should I hug first, which one last? Which one should I kiss, which one should I cling to?

Ah, how I wish I were a bee with its golden wings! I'd fly about and gather all your sighs and squeezing them all together, release them in one big tear!

Oh, my darling Herakles! If words of mortals can be heard in the halls of Hades, then hear what I am saying now. Your father, your children and are being killed! I, who once was called "blessed" because I was married to you! Come, Herakles, come and save us! Come to me even as a mere shadow because your very presence would be enough for these child-killing cowards!

**Amphitryon:**

Daughter, you go on with the funeral rites while I...

Zeus, I raise my hands to the heavens, to you, in prayer!

Zeus, if you have any intentions in helping these children at all, then do so now because soon, your help will be of no use. We have prayed to you often, Zeus, all to no avail and it seems death will be forced upon us.

*Turning to the chorus*

Well, old friends, life is far too short, try and live it as best you can. Keep your days and nights free of sadness.

Time, old friends, does not care about saving any of our hopes. It concerns itself only about its own affairs and then, it quickly passes on.

Take me, for example. A man who once achieved had achieved great fame among the mortals for doing great deeds! Look how fortune has now robbed me of all of this fame.

Just like a feather, in one single day, fortune has lifted me up into the wind! I know of no one who can be certain that his wealth or his fame will stay with him always.

Farewell, my friends! Friends of my own age. This is the last time you look upon your friend!

*Megara sees Herakles approaching*

**Megara:**

What?

Old sir, am I seeing my beloved husband or... What am I to say about this?

**Amphitryon:**

Daughter, I don't know! I too am struck speechless!

**Megara:**

Is that the man we were told was beneath the earth?

**Amphitryon:**

Unless we are mocked by some dream in the middle of the day!

**Megara:**



But... what am I saying? What dreams are that these confounded eyes seeing?  
Sir, this is none other than your son!

Children come, look, quickly! Go and grab your father's robe! Hurry! Go and grab his robe and don't let go! This is the man who will save you, as certainly as Zeus, the god of this altar here!

*The children obey*

*Enter Herakles with the children tightly holding onto his robe.*

**Herakles:**

Ah!

Hello my home! Hello my doors! Hello my hearth!

What joy it is to come back to the light and see you!

Ah!

What is this I see? My sons, in front of my house, with the garlands of death on their heads! My wife, standing deep in a crowd of men, my father in tears! What misfortune has struck him?

I better go closer and ask them what new misfortune has hit my house!

**Amphitryon:**

Oh, the dearest man on earth! Light of rescue for your father!

Is it really you? Have you really come here, alive and well?

You have come just in time to save your family, my son!

**Herakles:**

What do you mean, father? What is all this confusion here?

**Megara:**

They are about to kill us, Herakles!

*To Amphitryon*

Oh, forgive me, old friend! I have snatched the words out of your mouth! Words that you have more right to say to him than I did but, we, women, are more prone to anguish than men are and they want to kill my children as well me!

**Herakles:**

Oh, Apollo! What a sad beginning to your tale!

**Megara:**

My brothers, Herakles and my old father, Creon, are all dead!

**Herakles:**

What? Who killed him? What did he do?

**Megara:**

Lykos killed him. The new ruler here!

**Herakles:**

But how? Was it in some battle or other? Was the country suffering from some affliction?

**Megara:**

Civil war. Now he's the ruler of Thebes, Cadmus' city of seven gates.

**Herakles:**

But what was it that terrified you?

**Megara:**

Herakles, he was going to kill your father, me and our sons!

**Herakles:**

But why? What made him so afraid of orphaned kids?

**Megara:**

He was afraid that when they grow up they would make him pay for killing Creon.

**Herakles:**

Why are they dressed as if they're heading for their own funeral?

**Megara:**

They're the clothes of the dead. We've prepared them for their funeral.

**Herakles:**

And were you going to die like this, violently? How terrible!

**Megara:**

We have no friends, Herakles and we were old you were dead!

**Herakles:**

What put that bleak thought about me in your heads?

**Megara:**

Eurystheus' messengers told us this.

**Herakles:**

And then you've abandoned my home and hearth, why?

**Megara:**

We were forced to do so, husband. Your father was tossed out of his bed!

**Herakles:**

Has he no shame? How could he treat an old man like this?

**Megara:**

Shame? No, Lykos keeps himself well away from that goddess!

**Herakles:**

But what about my friends? Were they so rare in my absence?

**Megara:**

What man has any friends when misfortune hits him?

**Herakles:**

Have they completely forgotten my battles with the Minyans?

**Megara:**

Husband, let me tell you again: Misfortune does not have many friends.

**Herakles:**

Now get these horrible wreaths of death off your heads and throw them away!  
Look upon the sun's light once more and forget the gloom of the underworld!

In the meantime, I shall let my hand will do its work. First I shall go and tear down the palace of these new upstart kings! Then I shall cut off their shameless heads and throw them to the dogs to gnaw at. Then I shall seek out all those Thebans who think little of the good that I've done to them and give them a taste of this glorious club of mine.

As for the rest, their mangled corpses will fill the river Ismenus and make red the Spring of Dirce with their blood, once my flying arrows get them!

Who else, if not my wife, my children and my old father, should I defend? After all, what was the point of all my labours? Far better to have attended to the needs here. I should die defending these boys since they were about to die for their father.

How virtuous a deed is it to obey Eurystheus and kill the hydra, compared with that of protecting my children from slaughter?

Why then go on being called "Herakles of the Virtuous Victory?"

**Chorus:**

Yes, it is only proper that fathers should help their children and their own fathers; their wives.

**Amphitryon:**

My son, it is in your nature to love your friends and hate your enemies but don't be so hasty!

**Herakles:**

What do you mean, father? Where am I being too hasty?

**Amphitryon:**

The new king has many friends, my son. Men who are in fact poor but who go around boasting about their wealth.

They have formed a group and together they've broken up the city so that they can steal everyone else's possessions because they've wasted those of the palace through sheer laziness.

They saw you when you've entered the city and so, since they know you are here, take care, son that you don't unite them against you and have them kill you when you're least expecting it.

**Herakles:**

Father, I don't care in the slightest if everyone in the city saw me!

However, just before I entered it, I saw a bird, perched on a branch of ill omen and so I realised that my house was in some sort of trouble. That's why I made my way here secretly.

**Amphitryon:**

Ah, good! Well then, go inside and give thanks to the goddess of your hearth. Let your house see you. Go now, because the king will be here soon to drag us all away and slaughter us, your children, your wife and me with them.

But for now, stay here where it's safe and you will achieve all you wish. Don't go into the city and get it all stirred up, my son, until you have everything well prepared!

**Herakles:**

Yes, your advice is good, father so I shall do as you say. I'll go into the house and since I have finally come back up here from the sunless caves of Hades and Persephone, I will be happy to give my respects and greetings to the gods beneath its roofs.

**Amphitryon:**

Is it true, my son that you actually went down to the house of Hades?

**Herakles:**

I did, yes, and I brought Cerberus, the three-headed beast, up here, to the light of the sun.

**Amphitryon:**

Did you catch it by fighting it or did the goddess present it to you?

**Herakles:**

No, I beat it in a fair fight. I was blessed because I was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries before I went down to Hades.

**Amphitryon:**

So, is this beast now kept in the halls of Eurystheus?

**Herakles:**

He is kept at the grove of Demeter, the goddess of the Underworld and at the city of Hermione.

**Amphitryon:**

Does Eurystheus know you've returned to the world of the light?

**Herakles:**

No, not yet. I've made my way here first to see how things were with you.

**Amphitryon:**

What kept you in the underworld for so long?

**Herakles:**

Theseus. I had to bring him back up here and that's what's taken me such a long time.

**Amphitryon:**

So, where is Theseus now? Gone to his homeland?

**Herakles:**

Yes, poor man. Went back to Athens. He was certainly glad he escaped from under there.

Right, now, boys, come with me! Let's go into the house together!

Better going into it then coming out of it, right, boys?

Come, come, courage now! Dry your tears, my sons.

And you, wife! Come now, pull yourself together and stop trembling like this.

Let go of my cape, boys. I'm no feathered bird to go flying off from my family!

Ha! These kids... they won't let go of my clothes! They're pulling harder at them! Where you all in such a great danger, really?

Right, well, I'll be the big ship and you'll be the little boats and I'll tow you inside the harbour after me. I won't neglect my children.

That's what the whole of mankind is like: rich or poor, they all love their children. Wealth and poverty might be two different things but the love of children is the same throughout the race of mortals.

*All but the chorus exit into the house.*

**Chorus:**

I love youth!

Old age is an interminable burden! Heavy. Heavier than the boulders on Mt Aetna!

**Chorus:**

It's a pall of gloom, all over my head, my eyes!

Give me youth and you can keep all the wealth of Asia's kings, houses full of gold!

Compare youth with wealth or poverty, and youth is the better by far.

**Chorus:**

Old age, though! I hate old age! Gloomy thing! Deadly thing! Let it sink and vanish beneath the ocean's waves!

**Chorus:**

How I wish old age never managed to find its way into the homes and cities of mortals!

**Chorus:**

It should have stayed up there! Drifting about through the winds of the upper air.

**Chorus:**

If the gods understood mortals at all, they'd grant them youth twice – as a sign that these mortals were virtuous.

**Chorus:**

The good mortals would die, but then they'd straight away, race back, into the light of day, to start their life again.

**Chorus:**

But those of ill birth would have only one, single run at life, which means that people could tell who among them is virtuous and who is not, just like the sailor can discern the number of stars through the clouds.

**Chorus:**

But now, the way things are, the gods have placed no boundary between the good and the bad and the only thing that happens as the years go by, is that the wealth of each increases.

**Chorus:**

The Graces and the Muses! The sweetest union! They will always be one, in my mind!

**Chorus:**

I hope I'll never be without songs, without garlands!

**Chorus:**

I am an old singer and so, I sing to praise Mnemosyne, the mother of all the Muses!

**Chorus:**

And, whether I am drunk on Bacchus' wine, or accompanied by the seven-stringed lyre and the Libyan flute, I sing to praise the glorious victories of Herakles!

**Chorus:**

I shall never stop loving the Muses who have brought me to the dance.

**Chorus:**

The nymphs of Delos, sing a song of joy around the temple's gates, in honour of Apollo, Leto's beautiful son, the graceful dancer.

**Chorus:**

And so will I, too, like an aged swan about to die, will sing with my aged lips, songs of glory around your palace doors.

**Chorus:**

And there's plenty to sing about!

**Chorus:**

Herakles is son of Zeus but more than that, more than his high birth, stand his deeds of bravery, deeds of labour which have made man's lives peaceful by killing all the gruesome beasts.

*Amphitryon comes out from the palace just as Lykos and his attendants from the opposite direction.*

**Lykos:**

About time you came out of the house, Amphitryon! You've spent far too much time putting on your funereal clothes! Now, do as you've promised and tell the boys and Herakles' wife to come out here and prepare to die.

**Amphitryon:**

My lord, you persecute me too much for my misery and you insult me too much for my grieving of my dead son. Lord, or not, sir, you should temper your zeal somewhat!

But, yes, since you press us to the needs of death, we must put up with your wishes.

**Lykos:**

Where the is Megara and where are the sons of Herakles, Alcmene's son?

**Amphitryon:** *Walks over to the gate and looks through*

Well, so far as I can make out looking through this gate...

**Lykos:**

Yes, what is it? What is she doing? What's going on? What do you see?

**Amphitryon:**

I see that she is sitting by the steps of Hestia's altar as a suppliant.

**Lykos:**

Yes. Obviously praying her useless prayers to save her life!

**Amphitryon:**

Yes and to pray in vain for her husband to come back to life!

**Lykos:**

A husband who is nowhere to be seen and will certainly never be seen!

**Amphitryon:**

Not unless some god or other resurrect him!

**Lykos:**

Go inside and bring her out here!

**Amphitryon:**

But, if I do that, I'll become complicit in her murder!

**Lykos:**

Well, if you're bothered by such a thing, I'll bring mother and children out here myself. I'm not afraid!

Men, come with me and let's put a painless ending to this troublesome affair!

*Lykos and his men enter the house.*

**Amphitryon:**

Well, go then! Go and meet your own Fate! Let others take care of the rest and expect to pay the just price for your evil deeds.

Old friends, Lykos is going inside at precisely the right time. This murderer is going in there hoping to kill but a snare of swords is waiting for him.

I am going inside to watch him die!

It is a pleasant thing to watch one's enemy being killed and pay the full price for his evil deeds.

*Exit Amphitryon into the palace*

**Chorus:**

The evil fortunes have turned and gone!

Our once great leader has returned from Hades alive!

**Chorus:**

Justice! Justice, and the ever-turning will of the gods floods down from the Heavens!

**Chorus:**

Amphitryon!

You have come late but you have come!

**Chorus:**

Amphitryon! You have come to the place of your death; a punishment for the insolence you have shown against your betters!

**Chorus:**

Joy, joy floods my eyes!

**Chorus:**

He has returned!

**Chorus:**

The true king of this land has returned!

**Chorus:**

A thing beyond my hopes!

A thing beyond my expectations!

**Chorus:** *Moves towards the partly open gate*

Come, friends. Let's see what's happening inside the palace.

**Chorus:**

Yes, let's see if a certain man is doing what I'm hoping he's doing.

**Lykos:** *Within*

Ah! Help!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

I can hear them!

**Chorus:**

I can hear from in there, the first notes of the sweet song of his looming death!

**Lykos:** *Within*

Ah! Help me!

**Chorus:**

Not long now!

**Chorus:**

The sweet groans of a tyrant's death!

**Lykos:** *Within*

Thebans! Sons of Cadmus!

I'm being murdered!

Treachery!

**Chorus:**

Yes! Treachery for treachery, Lykos!

**Chorus:**

Prepare yourself for the penalty of your own deeds!

**Chorus:**

Who was it, Lykos, who was the weak mortal who said that the gods in the Heavens are nothing but weaklings?

**Chorus:**

Such a stupid thing to say!

**Chorus:**

Such blasphemy!

**Chorus:** *Listening at the gate*

Old friends, not a sound!

The blasphemer is no more!

**Chorus:**

Begin the dancing! Our friends are rejoicing!

**Chorus:**

Dancing and feasting, my friends!

The holy city of Thebes shall celebrate!

**Chorus:**

The tears have changed paths!

The fortunes have changed paths!

**Chorus:**

And the changes gave birth to new songs!

**Chorus:**

The new King has gone and the old one reigns again!

**Chorus:**

Lykos has already left behind him the banks of Acheron!

**Chorus:**

A hope beyond hope has happened!

**Chorus:**

The gods!

The gods take note of evil and of the good!

**Chorus:**

Gold and good fortune drag the minds of mortals away from logic and into the realms of unjust power.

**Chorus:**

Because while they're committing their criminal deeds and rejoicing in their disdain for the law, they cannot think just how much Time can reverse fortunes!

**Chorus:**

And so, he smashes wealth's dark chariot.

**Chorus:**

Put garlands on your head, River Ismenos!

**Chorus:**

Dance, you foot-smoothed streets of the seven-gated city, Thebes!

**Chorus:**

And you, too Dirce, river of the lovely waters, dance!

**Chorus:**

Daughters of Asopos, nymphs, come, leave your father's waters and sing with me this victory of Herakles!

**Chorus:**

You, too Parnassus, of the many woods! Apollo's holy cliff and home of Helicon's Muses! Come and with voices of joy, crowd out my city and my city's walls, the city where a generation of men were sown and sprung forth, a Company, with war-shields of bronze.



**Chorus:**

A sacred light to Thebes, that is passed from their children to the children of their children.

**Chorus:**

And you, Alcmene's marriage bed!

You were shared by a mortal and by Zeus himself, a god who had come to you to join with Perseus' granddaughter!

**Chorus:**

This ancient tale was once hard to believe, Zeus but now its truth was made clear to me, a hope beyond all hope!

**Chorus:**

Time has shown me your might most brightly, Herakles, when you left behind you Pluto's home and sprung up from the caverns of the earth below!

**Chorus:**

So much more the king is Herakles than is that crass tyrant, Lykos whose Fate will be made clear by the clashing of your swords. Now we will see if the gods still love the just deed!

*Lyssa, the goddess of Madness and Iris the messenger of the gods appear through the heavens and land onto the roof of the palace. The chorus panics.*

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look up there, old friends!

**Chorus:**

What an ominous apparition!

**Chorus:**

Have we come back to the same old fear and panic?

**Chorus:**

Run!

Run away friends!

**Chorus:**

Rush your feet and run!

**Chorus:**

Hide, men, hide!

**Chorus:**

Lord Apollo!

Lord, save us from this terror!

*The chorus rushes about as if to flee or hide until Iris addresses them*

**Iris:**

Come, come old gentlemen! Don't be afraid!

This here is Lyssa, daughter of Night and I am Iris, messenger of the gods. We have not come to harm this city but are marshalling against one single house, one single man, that man who has been called the son of Zeus and Alcmene.

Until Herakles had finished all his bitter labours, neither Fate nor Zeus himself would allow us or Hera to cause him any harm.

However, he has now completed all those chores that Eurystheus has ordered him to do and so Hera wants to stain him with the guilt of blood spilling, the blood

of his very own children.

And I am with her on that!

So, come now, unmarried virgin, daughter of black Night, use your ruthless heart and send your child-murdering frenzy upon Herakles. Stir up his mind, make his feet twitch and shudder, wind him up, set up his sails to their full and, when his murderous hand has sent his own precious sons to Acheron's ferry in the world below, he will understand the raging anger that Hera and I hold against him!

Or else, if this man is not punished, the gods will amount to nothing and the mortals to everything!

**Lyssa:**

My birth is noble. The very blood of Night and Ouranos and it is they who have granted me these honours, honours which I don't enjoy and nor do I enjoy visiting the homes of mortal friends.

So I wish to give Hera some advice before she makes a grave error and to you, too, Iris, if you will accept it.

You are sending me to the house of a man who is held in high regard among both, mortals as well as gods.

He has tamed the impassable land and the wild seas and all on his own he has restored the honour due to the gods at the time when godless men were destroying it.

I, personally would rather be his friend than his enemy and I advise you not to plot evil against him.

**Iris:**

Neither Hera nor I need your advice!

**Lyssa:**

I am trying to make you see the right way, not the wrong way.

**Iris:**

Zeus' wife did not send you here to talk wisdom.

**Lyssa:**

I call the sun-god to witness the fact that I am acting against my will!

I shall perform yours and Hera's wishes and follow you, running, like a hunting dog follows the hunter because I am forced to do so.

Neither the ocean with its groaning waves, nor the earth's quaking, nor the pain the air feels by the jab of lightning, will be as furious as my rush into Herakles' breast!

I shall crash the roof and all the rooms of his house by killing his children first; and the killer himself will not know that he has killed his own sons until I have released him from my madness.

*Pause as she turns down towards the inside of the palace to symbolically perform her task. Indicating inside the palace.*

Look!

Can you see him?

See how he's tossing his head about wildly, not a word out of his mouth, his frenzied eyes are rolling about, his breathing is fast, like the panting of a bull about to charge.

Hear how fearfully he bellows!

Look! He is now calling on the death spirits of Tartarus!

Ah, Herakles!

Soon I will have you dancing an even wilder dance!

Soon I will have your ears hear the notes from the flute of terror!

*Turning to Iris*

Well now, Iris! Pick up your noble feet and fly back to Mount Olympus. I'll sneak down there, into the halls of Herakles' palace!

*Iris "flies off" and Lyssa goes down into the palace*

**Chorus:**

Thebans cry!

Groan and sigh at the loss of the city's flower!

Zeus' son!

**Chorus:**

Greece, you are doomed!

You will lose your great benefactor!

**Chorus:**

You will destroy him with wild dance!

With the frenzied sounds of a flute!

**Chorus:**

Lyssa, the Gorgon of the Night, the goddess of the many sighs, has already mounted her chariot and prods her horses to destruction!

**Chorus:**

One hundred heads of snakes hiss about her stony eyes!

**Chorus:**

Quickly Fate has turned against the fortunate!

Soon the sons will be murdered by their father!

**Amphitryon:** *Within*

Ah!

Misery!

**Chorus:**

Zeus!

Oh, Zeus!

Soon, your only son will be destroyed by the bloodthirsty spirits of vengeance!

**Chorus:**

A punishment most unjust!

**Amphitryon:** *Within*

Ah, roofs of my poor house!

**Chorus:**

And so the dance begins!

No drums!

Nor the pleasant wave of Bacchus' thyrsus!

**Amphitryon:** *Within*

Ah, halls of my house!

**Chorus:**

It is a dance that ends in the spilling of blood not in the pouring of libations made by Bacchus' grapes!

**Amphitryon:** *Within*

Run, children, run! Run away quick!

**Chorus:**

Listen!

*FX: Sounds of the flute*

**Chorus:**

The flute of death!

**Chorus:**

She's playing the music of murder!

**Chorus:**

Herakles is chasing his sons!

**Chorus:**

He's hunting them down!

**Chorus:**

It's not for nothing that Lyssa's frenzy rages in the palace!

**Amphitryon:** *Within*

Ah! The worst of all miseries!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

Groan for his old father, friends!

**Chorus:**

Groan, too for the mother who bore and raised in vain!

*FX: A tempest is bringing the roof of the house down*

**Chorus:**

Look, look! Look there!

A tempest is quaking the building!

**Chorus:**

The roof is crashing down!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Ah!

Herakles, what are you doing?

**Chorus:**

What are you doing, in there, son of Zeus?

**Chorus:**

Herakles! You are sending a hellish confusion upon your house!

**Chorus:**

Just like the one the goddess Athena had once sent upon the giant Enceladus!

*Enter a messenger from the palace*

**Messenger:** *Shouting*

Old men!

**Chorus:**

What is it?

**Chorus:**

Why the shouting?

**Messenger:**

Old men, there's disaster in the palace!

**Chorus:**

I need no prophet to tell me this!

**Messenger:**

The children are dead!

**Chorus:**

Ah! What a miserable thing!

**Messenger:**

This terror calls for loud weeping!

**Chorus:**

Murder!

**Chorus:**

Murder of the children!

**Chorus:**

Murderous hands the hands of their father!

**Messenger:**

No words can describe our suffering!

**Chorus:**

Yet you must use them to tell us clearly the path of Herakles' destruction!

**Chorus:**

A destruction that raises our loudest sighs!

**Chorus:**

Tell us how this destruction came crashing down from the Heavens, upon this house and upon the poor lives of his sons!

**Messenger:**

Around Zeus' altar stood the sacrificial victims for the purification of the palace after Herakles had killed the new king and threw his corpse outside. His children, his wife Megara and his old father, Amphitryon stood around the altar like a lovely chorus and the sacred basket of offerings was given its holy course of a circle around the altar.

All of us were keeping the silence of reverence.

But then, when it was time for Herakles to dip the torch he was holding in his right hand, into the holy water, he stopped and just stood there in dumb founded silence.

His sons turned their faces towards him wondering why their father was taking so long.

Herakles' face had completely changed. He looked distressed. His eyes were bloodshot and they rolled wildly about inside their sockets and his beard was covered by a rolling foam.

Eventually he spoke and, at the same time, laughed in a frenzied way.

"Father," he said, "No, I shouldn't perform this sacrifice until I have also killed Eurystheus. Why perform this purification twice? Why kindle this flame twice? Why do this work twice? Why not fix both problems with a single move?

I will kill Eurystheus, bring his head here and then purify my hands for all those I've killed. Throw the water away and get rid of the basket. Somebody pass me my bow and arrows and my club!

I shall take some crow bars and some pick axes and head off to the famous

Mycenae where I will tear down from their iron foundations those walls which the Cyclopes had built so neatly with mason's hammers and Phoenician plumb-lines!" Then, in his mind he headed off to a chariot that didn't exist, sat on a seat that didn't exist and struck at the horses with a whip that didn't exist.

The others around the altar didn't know whether to laugh or cry and they asked themselves if their master had gone mad or if he was joking with them all. Then Herakles ran around from one room to the other throughout the palace until finally he stopped in the centre of the men's quarters and announced that he had arrived at Megara, Nisus' city. Then he fell on the floor, just as he was and began to prepare a feast. Then he started marching around the house once again and this time he said he had arrived near the wooded valleys of the Isthmus.

Then, thinking he was taking part in the Isthmian games, he stripped himself naked and began wrestling with an opponent who didn't exist. Finally, taking the role of a herald, proclaimed himself the winner of the bout and asked the throng of spectators, which didn't exist, to be silent.

Then his sick mind made him think he was in Mycenae itself and so he began shouting terrible threats against Eurystheus but then his father grabbed him by his sturdy arm and said to him, "son, what is wrong with you? What strange behaviour is this? Your mind hasn't been affected by the blood you've spilled just now?"

But Herakles thought that his father's hand was that of Eurystheus' father begging him not to kill Eurystheus and his own children to be Eurystheus' children so he pushed him away and brought arrows to his bow to kill them.

Frightened, the poor boys rushed about, one scuttling to his poor mother's garments, the other behind a column and the third, cowered like a little bird at the altar.

Megara, their mother screamed at Herakles. "What are you doing, Herakles? You are their father, do you want to kill your own children?" Old Amphitryon and all the servants also yelled at him but he made a dismal circle around the column and, when he stood face to face with his son, he shot him through the heart.

The poor boy fell on his back and splashed his blood upon the stone column as he breathed out the last breath of his life.

But Herakles gave out a loud shout of triumph and boasted, "Ha! Here's one of Eurystheus' sons, dead at my feet, paying for his father's hatred towards me!" Then Herakles turned towards his second son, the one who was crouched at the altar's base, hoping to escape the slaughter. Herakles aimed his arrow at the boy but before he let go, the boy threw himself at his father's knees and stretched out his hands to reach his father's beard and neck, pleading with him. "Dear father," he said, "please do not kill me. I am your own son! Your son, father, not the son of Eurystheus! It is not his son are going to kill!"

But, Herakles merely turned his wild, monstrous gaze at him and, since the boy was too close for him to use the bow and arrow, he raised his huge club above his head and, like a blacksmith hammers his hot iron, brought the club down hard upon the boy's blond head and smashed his skull.

And so, after he killed his second boy, he went hunting for his third victim but the boy's mother quickly grabbed him and ran off inside the rooms and shut all the doors behind her.

Herakles though, thinking that he was in front of the Cyclopean walls, dug under the door and with crow bars, removes the doors and the door posts and then with a single arrow kills both, his wife and his son.

Then he races off looking for his old father but this time the goddess, Pallas Athena, brandishing a sharp spear in her hand, and wearing a plumed helmet, appears as a phantom. She grabs a huge stone and hurls it at Herakles' chest, which got him out of his madness and sent him to sleep. He fell down on the ground and hit his back on one of the pillars that had fallen on the ground and smashed in two when the roof had fallen in.

This gave us cause to regain our courage and we all helped his father to grab some thick ropes and tie him to that pillar so he won't do any more harm when he wakes up.

So, that's where he is now, poor man. Sleeping on that spot, not the most blest of sleeping, the murderer of his own children and wife.

I know no mortal more unfortunate than that man in there, Herakles.

*Exit the messenger into the palace*

**Chorus:**

The most unbelievable and most famous murder ever committed in Greece was that which was committed by Danaus' fifty daughters, upon the rocks of Argos but these horrors that this day, fell upon Herakles, the son of Zeus, surpass even those!

**Chorus:**

And I could mention the murder of Itys, also the son of Zeus.

Procne, the boy's mother had murdered him, her only son as a blood sacrifice for the Muses.

**Chorus:**

But you, Herakles!

You, killer!

You've murdered all of your three sons! Killed them all in a frenzy sent to you by Fate.

**Chorus:**

What sighs, what groans, what wails and dirges, what songs of Hades shall I now raise?

*The doors of the palace are swung wide open and a rolling platform brings the bodies of Megara and her three sons out onto the stage.*

*Herakles is asleep and tied to the pillar.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look!

**Chorus:**

Look there!

**Chorus:**

The gates of this mighty palace are swung open!

*A rolling platform brings the bodies of Megara and her three sons out onto the stage. Next to them lies Herakles, asleep and tied to the two broken pillars.*

**Chorus:**

Look there!

Look how the poor children are lying there dead!

**Chorus:**

Murdered by their own unfortunate father!

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look how he lies there, asleep!

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look, what dreadful sleep after this dreadful murder!

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look at all the ropes that he's tied with!

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look at the thick ropes!

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look at how fast Herakles is tied to those stone pillars of his house!

*Enter Amphytryon from the palace.*

**Chorus:**

And look there now!

**Chorus:**

Our old friend!

**Chorus:**

Amphytryon!

**Chorus:**

He wails!

He wails like a mother bird grieving for the featherless chicks she has just given birth to.

**Chorus:**

Look how bitter his steps are!

**Chorus:**

How slowly his feet move towards us!

**Amphytryon:**

Quiet, old Theban friends!

By quiet and let him go on sleeping. Let him forget his misery!

**Chorus:**

I cry for you, old friend!

**Chorus:**

For you and for the children and for the man, your son, glorious in victory!

**Amphytryon:**

Go back, friends, go back and don't make any noise! Speak quietly!

Don't wake the poor man from his peaceful sleep.

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look at all that slaughter!



**Amphitryon:**

Ah! Stop! Quiet!

You will be my ruin!

**Chorus:**

Look!

Look how the slaughter is rising up!

**Amphitryon:**

Cry softly, old friends, quietly!

Or else he'll wake up, break his bonds and destroy the city!

He'll kill his father and then smash down the whole palace!

**Chorus:**

I can not! I can not!

Ah!

**Amphitryon:**

Hush, old friend!

Let me see if he's breathing.

Let me listen.

**Chorus:**

Is he asleep?

**Amphitryon:**

Yes, he's sleeping now.

Ah, what a sleep he is having! After murdering his wife and children with that twanging bow of his!

**Chorus:**

Grieve, then, Amphitryon!

**Amphitryon:**

I am grieving!

**Chorus:**

Grieve, old man, the death of the poor children!

**Amphitryon:**

Ah! My grandchildren!

**Chorus:**

Grieve also for your son, old friend!

**Amphitryon:**

Ah, My son!

**Chorus:**

Ah, my poor, old friend!

**Amphitryon:**

Hush!

Hush!

He is turning! He is waking up!

I better go and hide inside!

**Chorus:**

Courage, old friend. Night still holds your son's eyes shut!

**Amphitryon:**

No, no, look!

It's not dying that I am afraid of. It's not leaving the light of day that worries me but that, if he wakes up and kills me, his own father, adding one evil upon another, then the Furies will add the spilling of kindred blood to their curse!

**Chorus:**

You should have died back then, when you had returned triumphant from the city of the Taphians, circled by the sea!

**Chorus:**

After you had sacked that city to avenge the murder of your wife's brothers.

**Amphitryon:**

Ah!

Run, old friends! Run away from here!

This maddened man is waking up! Escape his fury!

Escape, or else he'll add more murders to his old and send the whole city of Cadmus into a frenzy!

**Chorus:**

Zeus!

Zeus, why do you hate your own son so much?

**Chorus:**

Zeus, why have you plunged him into such a huge sea of troubles?

**Herakles:** *Waking up*

Ah!

I am breathing, yes and I can see everything that I should be seeing: the sky, the earth and the sun's brilliant shafts. But it's as if I have fallen into a tempest and my mind is in a dreadful turbulence.

Ha! My breath is hot and flows out of my lungs in spasms!

What?

What am I doing here? What are all these ropes around me? Why am I lying here like this?

My youthful arms and chest tied like this, like a ship, to this half smashed stone?

Why these corpses around me?

And look there! My bow and arrows!

Ah, my poor arrows! Worthy companions to these arms of mine!

These arrows have protected my flanks and I have protected them! Look how they are scattered everywhere!

Have I gone back down to Hades again? Have I made the journey to Eurystheus twice?

No. I cannot see the rock of Sisyphos... or Pluto... or even the scepter of Demeter's child, queen Persephone.

I am confused. I cannot remember where I am.

You there!

Can one you, friends over there, help me understand?

I can't understand a thing of what is going on.

**Amphitryon:**

What do you say, old friends, should I approach my own destruction?

**Chorus:**

Yes, do and I'll come with you! I won't abandon you in your hour of trouble.

**Herakles:**

Father, what's wrong? Why the tears? Why hide your eyes from me?  
Why stand so far from me? I am your son! The son you love so dearly!

**Amphitryon:**

My son, indeed!

Yes, you are my son, even after causing us such a disaster!

**Herakles:**

Calamity?

What disaster have I caused, father, to make you cry?

**Amphitryon:**

A disaster, my son which would make even a god cry, if he found out about it.

**Herakles:**

Father!

That is a terrible thing to say but you still haven't told me what disaster I have caused you.

**Amphitryon:**

No, my son, because you see it for yourself, if you've recovered your senses.

**Herakles:**

Father, don't give me yet another riddle!

**Amphitryon:**

I'm trying to make sure that your mind has fully recovered.

**Herakles:**

If you're suggesting that I'm to face some new disaster in my life, then just tell me!

**Amphitryon:**

I will but only if you are no longer in the grips of Hades' madness!

**Herakles:**

I don't remember ever being mad!

**Amphitryon:**

Friends, shall I undo my son's ropes?

Tell me, what should I do?

**Herakles:**

Yes, undo them and tell me who tied me up with them.

This is shameful!

**Amphitryon:**

This is as much as you should know about your troubles. Forget the rest.

**Herakles:**

Will my silence alone give me the answer?

Tell me what happened to me!

**Amphitryon:**

Zeus!

Can you see all this from your throne up there, next to Hera?

**Herakles:**

Is that where I was attacked from? Is it Hera?

**Amphitryon:**

Come now, leave the goddess alone and take care of your own troubles!

**Herakles:**

Ah! So I am destroyed!

You're about to tell me about some disaster I must endure.

**Amphitryon:**

Look there, Herakles, look there and see the bodies of those children!

**Herakles:**

Ah!

What hideous sight is this?

What sorrow is this?

**Amphitryon:**

You have waged a war that was no war against your own sons!

**Herakles:**

What war are you talking about? Who killed these children?

**Amphitryon:**

You and your arrows, my son, along with whatever god it was who brought it all about.

**Herakles:**

But what are you saying, father? What have I done?

You're a messenger of evil news, father!

**Amphitryon:**

I am saying, my son, that you have killed your sons in a fit of madness.

Your questions are full of sad answers.

**Herakles:**

And my wife? Have I also murdered her?

**Amphitryon:**

Yes. All this, Herakles, is the work of your own hand.

**Herakles:**

Ah!

A cloud of sighs, of groans surrounds me!

**Amphitryon:**

And I, too, groan for your suffering, my son!

**Herakles:**

And my house? Was it me who smashed it to pieces?

**Amphitryon:**

I know nothing else other than your life is ruined!

**Herakles:**

How? Where did this madness hit me?

How? Where was I when it came and destroyed my life?

**Amphitryon:**

You were standing by the altar, purifying your hands with the fire when it seized you.

**Herakles:**

Ah!

Why then did I not murder myself as well? Why murder my darling sons and spare my own life? Should I not go and hurl myself off a huge cliff or dig my sword into my entrails, to bring justice to them for murdering them?

Should I not throw this flesh of mine onto a pyre and burn it to escape the hatred that awaits me now?

*In the distance he sees Theseus coming towards him*

Ah but here's a hurdle I must jump before I put to practice my plans to die.

I see my friend and relative, Theseus coming this way.

He will see me and the sight of a murderer, one who has murdered his own children will pollute his eyes. The eyes of my dearest friend!

What must I do now? Where can I go to escape this grief? Should I soar to the heavens or sink down, beneath the earth?

I'll bury my head in the darkness of my cloak.

The shame of the evil I have done to my children is too great and I don't want to harm an innocent man by letting his eyes fall upon a man who has committed the sin of spilling blood.

*Herakles covers his face with his cloak*

*Enter Theseus with armed men*

**Theseus:** *To Amphitryon*

I have come, old friend, with many young Athenian men, armed and waiting by the banks of Asopos to help Herakles, your son.

We have received a report from Erecheis that Lykos has taken over this city and has waged war against you. I have come to see if Herakles needs any help and to repay the kind deed he did for me when he saved me from the underworld.

*Suddenly sees the bodies of the dead children and their mother*

But – oh!

What is all this?

The ground is covered in corpses!

Am I too late? Have I come too late to stop these new disasters?

Who murdered these children? Whose wife is this here?

No... boys are not sent to war... this must be some other type of disaster I am seeing here!

**Amphitryon:**

Lord Theseus, who lives on the land of olive trees!

**Theseus:**

Such a sad greeting Amphitryon!

**Amphitryon:**

The heavens have delivered us great suffering, lord!

**Theseus:**

Whose children are these that you are grieving?

**Amphitryon:**

Their father, Theseus was my unfortunate son. He was their father and their murderer. He it was who had spilled the blood of murder.

**Theseus:**

What? What are you saying, Amphitryon? How did this happen?

**Amphitryon:**

In a fit of madness, Theseus. He shot arrows dipped in the hundred-headed Hydra's blood.

**Theseus:**

Stop, Amphytryon! Use propitious words only!

**Amphytryon:**

Oh, how I wish I could do that, Theseus!

**Theseus:**

What dreadful things you say!

**Amphytryon:**

We are gone!

We are now ruined!

This is our end!

**Theseus:**

This is Hera's carnage.

Who is this man here among the corpses, old friend?

**Amphytryon:**

My son!

My warrior son!

A son of many miseries!

A son, who on the plains of Phlegra, fought on the side of the gods against the giants and killed them.

**Theseus:**

Ah!

What mortal was ever born to suffer so much?

**Amphytryon:**

You'll never find another mortal who has suffered so much, who was tortured so much as he has!

**Theseus:**

But why has he covered his head with his cloak?

**Amphytryon:**

The shame of murdering his sons and of facing you, a dear relative, is too great!

**Theseus:**

But I have come here to share in his grief, old friend!

Uncover his head!

**Amphytryon:** *To Herakles*

Son, pull away that cover from your eyes.

Let the sun see your face. It is a hard task to stand up against one's tears.

*He kneels beside Herakles*

I beg you, my son!

By your beard and by your knees and by your hands!

My aged eyes shed tears, as I beg you, my son.

Control this wild lion's temper of yours! It is taking you through a path of unholy bloodshed, my child, adding one evil deed upon another!

*Herakles does not stir*

**Theseus:** *To Herakles*

You down there! Lying there, in the depths of misery!

Come, show your face to your friends. There is no darkness that is so dark to hide the pains of this catastrophe!

*Herakles motions him to look at the corpses and to go away*

What? What are you trying to tell me with your hands?

Are you afraid that if you utter words to me, I will become polluted by your sins?

No, Herakles. It does not matter to me if I suffer the same ill fate as you do now. No, what good fortune I ever had goes back to the day when you have taken me from the underworld and brought me up here, to the light of day!

There's nothing so terrible as when a friend's gratitude grows old; nothing so terrible as a man who shares in a friend's happy moments but will not share the ship of troubles with him.

Come, come, Herakles! Uncover your poor face and look at me!

The noble man accepts the deaths sent to him by the gods!

*He uncovers Herakles' face.*

*Herakles stands up.*

**Herakles:**

Theseus, can you see the torture my children have suffered?

**Theseus:**

Yes, I have heard of them and now see the sight.

**Herakles:**

Why then did you let the sun see my face?

**Theseus:**

Why?

Because you, Herakles, are a mortal and mortals cannot pollute things that belong to the gods.

**Herakles:**

Leave, my poor friend! Leave this place! I have blemished it with my sins!

**Theseus:**

No, Herakles. The spirit of Vengeance does not travel from friend to friend.

**Herakles:**

That's true, Theseus. And I have no regret for having done you a good deed.

**Theseus:**

And, in thanks, I give you my sympathy.

**Herakles:**

Sympathy? Do I deserve sympathy for having killed my sons?

**Theseus:**

Yes, Herakles. I weep for your new misfortunes.

**Herakles:**

Could you find anyone else who has suffered greater misfortunes than mine?

**Theseus:**

Your misfortunes, Herakles stretch out from the earth all the way to the sky!

**Herakles:**

And that's way I've prepared myself to die.

**Theseus:**

How would that help you? Do you think the gods care about such things?

**Herakles:**

The gods are arrogant and so I shall be arrogant back to them.

**Theseus:**

Hold your tongue, Herakles!

Such big words could bring you even worse pains!

**Herakles:**

I am bloated with pains. I have no more space for them!

**Theseus:**

So what are you going to do?

How far will this anger of yours take you, Herakles?

**Herakles:**

I will die again and go back to where I have come from: the Underworld!

**Theseus:**

Herakles, you're talking like some common, everyday person!

**Herakles:**

Ah! You speak without knowing my grief, Theseus!

**Theseus:**

Are these the words of mighty Herakles? The man who has endured so much?

**Herakles:**

I have endured much, yes but this! This is too much!

Endurance, too, must come in moderation!

**Theseus:**

And is this the mighty benefactor and ally of mortals?

**Herakles:**

The mortals are of no help here. Hera controls all this.

**Theseus:**

Greece will never allow you to die such a mindless death, Herakles.

**Herakles:**

Well then, listen to my reasoning. Listen to why my death will not be mindless.

Listen to the reasons why I think my life, now and in the past, was an impossible one!

Let me start with my birth.

My father had killed his old father-in-law. My mother's father and so by the time my father married my mother, Alcmene, he had already stained himself with the guilt of bloodshed. Well, then, when the very foundations of a race are not laid properly all its descendants will be fated to live a miserable life.

Then Zeus –whoever this Zeus might be– begot me so that I would be the focus of Hera's hatred. *Theseus visibly objects to this.* No, no, don't let this upset you, old friend because I regard you as my true father and not Zeus.

Then, when I was still a baby, still breastfeeding, Hera sent fierce snakes into my cradle to kill me.

Now, once the firm flesh had covered my young body, I had to perform a whole lot of labours; but what is the point of talking about them all now? Why talk about the lions or the three-bodied Typhons, or the giants that I killed? Or about the battle I fought and won against an army of four legged Centaurs? Or about how I killed the hydra, that beast with the many heads that kept growing back again the moment I cut them off?

And then, I performed countless other tasks before I ended up in the Underworld where, obeying Eurystheus' command, I brought up to the light of the sun, the three-headed dog, Hades' gate keeper.



*Indicating the corpses*

And this –ah, this! This here is my last labour! This bloody deed I performed and crowned the miseries of my house with the death of my own sons!

And so, here I am! I have now arrived at this sorry state!

Piety forbids me from living here, in Thebes, the city I love because if I do stay here, to which temple or to what friends could I turn? The horror of my curse will not allow for friendly greetings.

So, shall I go to Argos then?

How can I? I'm an exile from my own country!

Another city, perhaps? Which one? And even if there were some city I could flee to, how could I endure all the sneers thrown at men with a bad name? How could I put up with the painful jabs of their bitter tongues?

1290 I can hear them all say, "Oh, look, that man is Zeus' son, isn't he? The one who killed his wife and sons? Why doesn't he get the hell out of our land?" For a man like me, Theseus, one who was always known for being blessed, such change is unbearable. The man, though who had to always endure a miserable life, such a change would not bother him because misery has always been a part of him.

I think, Theseus that there will come a time when my misfortune will deliver me to the point where the very earth will roar out to me not to touch her soil; and the sea and the streams of all the rivers will forbid me from crossing them and I shall become like Ixion, the first of men who shed kin blood: chained to a spinning wheel in the Underworld for all eternity!

It would be best then that I never again be seen by the Greeks with whom I once shared a joyful fortune.

So, why should I go on living?

What is the good of living such a useless, such a damned life?

No! Let gorgeous Hera dance in bliss! Let Zeus' wife strike the sparkling floors of Olympus with her divine slipper! She has achieved her goal! She has toppled the best of mortals right down to his foundations.

What man would offer prayers to such a goddess?

Her jealousy over her husband's visit to the bed of a mortal woman, drives her to destroy a man who has done good to all humanity; a totally innocent man!

**Theseus:**

All this is the work of no other god than Hera, Zeus' wife. In that you are certainly correct but you must think carefully if this should cause you to die.

Now if it was the case that the gods have given everyone else a life free of troubles but you a cursed one, then, yes, rather than go on suffering, I would advise you to go ahead and die immediately.

But then, there's no mortal who hasn't been touched by misery; no god, either, if what the poets say is true. Because, have these gods not gone to each other's bed, committing sinful unions? Have they not fettered their fathers with shameful chains, just to become king? Yet there they are, still continue to accept their sinful life, on Mount Olympus!

What will your excuse be then? You're a mortal who thinks so harshly of his own sins while the gods themselves see no wrong in their sin at all!

Well, obey the law, Herakles and leave Thebes. Come with me to the city of Pallas

Athena! Come and I will cleanse your hands of all blemishes and give you a home and a portion of my wealth.

And I will give you all those gifts the citizens of Athens have given me when I saved their children, seven boys and seven girls, by killing the Minotaur of Knossos.

They have given me plots of land all over the countryside and while you live, people will know them as being yours. Then, when you die and go to the Underworld, the whole of Athens will worship you as their hero with sacrifices and huge monuments.

It will be nothing short of a garland of achievement for them, in the eyes of all the Greeks, to be spoken well of for performing a good deed to a noble hero such as Herakles.

This will also be my repayment for saving my life because now I see that you are in need of friends.

When the gods honour us with good fortune, Herakles, we do not need friends. A god's help, if and when he chooses to give it, is enough.

**Herakles:**

Dear friend, all these things you said are side issues. Nothing to do with my present troubles. In any case, I don't believe any of it. I don't believe that the gods engage in such unholy relationships, nor have I ever believed this story about gods tying up their parents in chains and I won't believe it now.

Nor can I ever believe that one god is the lord of another.

A god, if he is a real god, is in need of nothing. These are just miserable tales made up by poets.

Still, though I'm in this point of misery, I have just had the thought that perhaps, if I die of my own accord, people might think I am a coward. Because the man who cannot stand against misfortune will not be able to stand against an enemy's arrow either.

So, I'll hold on to life and come with you to your city and will thank you profusely.

*Herakles wipes a tear from his eye*

I have tasted pain many times and have rejected none of them. I have shed no tears over any of them or even thought that I would ever come to the point where I would do so. But now, now it seems that I must be Fate's slave.

So be it.

*To Amphytrion*

Old father, I am now an exile as well as the murderer of my own children.

Give them a proper burial, father, put their burial clothes back on and shed a tear in their honour. The law forbids me to do this. Then let lie against their mother's breast, in her arms, a communion of misery! Poor woman! Poor mother which I have killed unwittingly.

Poor man!

After the burial, stay here, father. Stay in this city. It will not be easy for you but strengthen your heart to share in my misery.

*Turning to the children*

Ah, my sons!

Your very own father has murdered you!

You have been deprived of the great fame, a father's honourable inheritance, that

my glorious labour would have bestowed upon you had you lived!

And you, my poor wife! I have killed you too, most unjustly!

And how unjustly I have repaid you for the loyalty you have shown to our marriage bed and for watching over our household during my long absence!

Ah, my poor wife! My poor sons!

And poor me and my misery! My miserable separation from my wife, from my boys!

*He bends over the bodies and kisses their foreheads*

Sweet kisses! Pitiful kisses!

Pitiful my company with these weapons!

Should I keep them or should I throw them away?

They will be dangling about my sides, calling out at me, "It is with us that you have killed your wife and children. We are their murderers and you are still holding on to us!" Should I carry them about on my arms? How could I justify that?

Should I strip myself of these weapons which helped me perform the glorious deeds throughout Greece and leave myself vulnerable to my enemies to die a death of shame? No, I must keep them. Keep them and keep the misery that comes with them.

Theseus, do me this favour. Come with me to Argos to help me collect the reward I earned for bringing back that savage dog, Cerberus, or else, who knows, if I am on my own, my sadness for my sons might cause me to do some harm to myself. Thebes! Land of Cadmus and you, all of you Thebans!

Cut off your hair and join me in my mourning! Attend the burial of my sons and shed tears for all of us, for the dead and for me because we have all been destroyed by a single cruel blow from Hera!

**Theseus:**

Come, you poor man! You have shed enough tears!

**Herakles:**

I can't! My limbs are frozen. I cannot leave this place.

**Theseus:**

Yes, Herakles. Misfortune overpowers even the mighty.

**Herakles:**

How I wish I could turn into a rock upon this very spot right now, with no memory of all my troubles.

**Theseus:**

Come, enough!

Give your hand to a helping friend!

**Herakles:**

But take care! I mustn't let any of this murder blood touch your clothes.

**Theseus:**

Let it, Herakles! Don't worry, I am not concerned.

**Herakles:**

Now that I have lost my sons, I shall regard you as a son!

**Theseus:**

Come, put your arm around my neck and I'll lead the way.

**Herakles:** *Does as Theseus said*

A pair of friends, one of which is wretched in his misery.

*To Amphitryon*

This is the sort of friend one ought to make, old father!

**Amphitryon:**

The land that gave birth to him is a land that gives birth to good children!

**Herakles:**

Theseus, turn me around again. I want to see my sons once more.

**Theseus:**

Why, do you think it will work like some soothing drug?

**Herakles:**

I need to see them again!

And I need to put my arms around my father!

**Amphitryon:** *Embracing Herakles*

Here you are, son! We both wish the same thing.

**Theseus:** *Impatient with the emotion shown by Herakles*

Herakles? Are you the same man who has performed all those glorious deeds?

Or have you forgotten them now?

**Herakles:**

Those deeds caused me less grief than do all these!

**Theseus:**

Such womanish behaviour! You won't be praised by anyone who sees you act like this.

**Herakles:**

Does my life look to you so lacking in nobility, now?

I daresay, it wasn't so before.

**Theseus:**

Of course!

Where is that glorious Herakles of the olden days now?

**Herakles:**

Ah, yes! And your behaviour when you were in the Underworld? What was it like then?

**Theseus:**

Even worse! Worse than all men so far as courage was concerned.

**Herakles:**

How can you say then that my misfortune has taken away my nobility?

**Theseus:**

Go on! Let's go!

**Herakles:** *To Amphitryon*

Farewell, old father!

**Amphitryon:**

And to you too, my son!

**Herakles:**

Bury my sons as I asked, father.

**Amphitryon:**

And me? Who will bury me, my son?

**Herakles:**

I will, father.

**Amphitryon:**

When will you come back?

**Herakles:**

After your death, father.

**Amphitryon:**

But how?

**Herakles:**

I will bring you to Athens.

But now carry my sons inside, father. A sad burden to carry, I know.

And I, I the shameful destroyer of my own house, shall follow Theseus, like a boat in tow.

People who think wealth or power is better good friends think wrong.

*All except the Chorus leave*

**Chorus:**

Let us go then, full of tears and sadness, since we have lost our best friends!

*Exit all*

# (EURIPIDES) Herakleidae

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/heracleidae/)<sup>466</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Iolaos** (*Nephew and close companion of Herakles. An aged man*)

**Demophon** (*King of Athens, Theseus' son*)

**Alcmene** (*Mother of Herakles*)

**Makaria** (*Daughter of Herakles. Note: Euripides gives her no name and simply uses the title, Parthenos, ie "Maiden"*)

**Eurystheus** (*King of Argos: Mycenae and Tirynth*)

**Servant** (*Of Hyllus, Herakles' son*)

**Messenger** (*Alcmene's servant*)

**Kopreas** (*Herald of Eurystheus*)

**Chorus** (*Of 15 old men of Marathon*)

**Various Attendants** (*Akamas, Children of Herakles, servants, Athenian soldiers, silent*)

...

*In the distance, the temple of Zeus Agoraios (Zeus, defender of the market place), at Marathon, near Athens.*

*Nearer, his altar around which lay prostrate, in supplication, Iolaos and the young children of Herakles. They are all wearing garlands, signifying they are suppliants.*

*The altar is covered in olive branches.*

*A few seconds after the curtains are raised, Iolaos stands and addresses the audience.*

## **Iolaos:**

This I have known for a long time now: The man who is born just is born for the good of his neighbours but the man whose heart charges full speed towards personal profit is useless for his city, difficult to deal with and good only to himself. This much I have learnt not only by words but by personal experience.

Yes, personal experience.

You see, out of a sense of honour and respect for family ties, instead of having an easy life, sitting by in Argos, I –more than anyone else- have helped Herakles, while he was among us, with his many labours.

And now, now that Herakles has gone to live among the rest of the gods, I take care of all of his children. I have taken them all under my wings and protect them, though, now, I, too, am in need of protection. Because, when Herakles was taken to the heavens, Eurystheus, the king of Argos tried to kill us all but we ran away. We ran away and saved our lives but not our country.

We ran off, in exile, always moving from one country to the next because, on top of all the other insults that Eurystheus has delivered upon us he has decide to cast yet one more. He has sent heralds to whatever place he hears we have settled and

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<sup>466</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/heracleidae/>

he would demand from the ruler of that place that he surrendered us to him and drive us of that land.

He would threaten that ruler by saying that Argos was too a powerful city not to make friends with or to make an enemy of and that he, Eurystheus, was enjoying a prosperous fate. The leaders then, seeing how weak I am and how young these children are, preferred to listen to the powerful and so they have always banished us from their land.

So, here I am and here the children are, all of us sharing the same miserable fate. How could I leave them? People will then say, look at that, now that these poor children are left fatherless, Iolaos, their relative, won't take care of them!

And so, being banished from the rest of Greece, we have come here, to Marathon and its precincts, to sit by the altars of the gods, as their suppliants, praying that they help us all. We have come here, to the borders of glorious Athens because, it is said, that this land is ruled by the two sons of Theseus, who are related to these children. The two sons received the honour of ruling this land, when lots were drawn among all of Pandion's descendants.

Two old people are leading this flight of ours: I, the first, frightened for the safety of these here boys and the young girls, Herakles' daughters, are cared for by Alcmene, his mother. She is in the temple, there, holding them all tightly in her arms because it would be shameful for young girls to be seen by the crowds, standing by altars.

Hyllus and his older brothers have gone to look for another place where we can go and settle, in case we are banished from here as well.

*He notices the approaching Kopreas, the herald, in the distance and is alarmed.*

*He sits down closer to the altar and gathers the children around him for protection.*

Children, children!

Come close. Quick, take a hold of my cloak!

I can see Eurystheus' herald coming. He is the man who has been pursuing us wherever we wandered in exile.

*Enter Kopreas with two attendants*

Curse you, curse you, you appalling creature!

Curse you and curse the man who has sent you here! Curse you for all the evil rumours your tongue has uttered against the brave father of these children!

**Kopreas:**

I suppose you feel this to be a comfortable place for you to be standing around; and I suppose you think you've come to a friendly land. You're a fool, Iolaos, a fool! Who would rather side with a worthless weakling like you than a powerful man like Eurystheus?

Move on, old man! Get out of here. Why do you even bother? Get up and get out of here! Go to Argos where your punishment awaits you. Stoning, I believe.

**Iolaos:**

No, I won't. The god's altar will protect me and so will this land we're in, because it's free.

*Kopreas and his attendants begin to brush away the branches of supplication from the altar and the garlands from the heads of the children.*

**Kopreas:** *Raises his right fist threateningly.*

Do you want to make more work for this hand?

**Iolaos:**

You will use no force upon me, nor upon these children!

**Kopreas:** *Grabs one of the children*

See for yourself. You're not much of a prophet when it comes to such matters!

**Iolaos:** *Jumps to ward off Kopreas*

No, you won't! Not while I'm alive, you won't!

*They fight, Iolaos falls to the ground*

**Kopreas:**

Get away! Leave, I tell you! And these boys, here, I'm taking them all to Eurystheus because, like it or not, they're his property!

**Iolaos:** *Shouts in all directions*

Men, citizens of ancient Athens, protect us!

We are here, citizens, sitting by the altar of Zeus, protector of the market place, as suppliants to him, yet we are being treated most violently.

Help us, men of Athens!

Our garlands of supplication have been defiled, citizens!

This is a disgrace to the city!

An insult to the gods

*Kopreas angrily pushes Iolaos to the ground*

*The chorus of elders (men who had fought at Marathon), rush in from all directions, in answer to Iolaos' cry for help.*

**Chorus:**

Hey! What's going on?

**Chorus:**

What screams are these, coming so close from the altar?

**Chorus:**

What do they mean?

**Chorus:**

Some horror is about to happen!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Look there! That poor, frail old man has fallen on the ground!

Chorus: Who did this to you, you poor old creature?

**Iolaos:** *Indicating Kopreas*

That man there, friends! He has dishonoured your gods!

He wants to drag me away from the steps of Zeus' altar by force!

**Chorus:**

But, you, old man, from which land have you come to this country of four cities?

**Chorus:**

Did you come by ship from the island of Euboa?

**Iolaos:**

No, I'm not an islander. I have come here from Mycenae.

**Chorus:**

By what name do the people of Mycenae address you?

**Iolaos:**

I am Iolaos. You must have heard of the man who has stood by Herakles' side. I'm



not bereft of fame.

**Chorus:**

Yes, I have heard of you.

**Chorus:**

But, tell me, whose children are these in your arms?

**Iolaos:**

These are sons of Herakles, friends. They have come to you and to your city as suppliants.

**Chorus:**

Tell me then, old man, why are you here,?

**Chorus:**

Do they want to speak to the people of this city?

**Iolaos:**

What they want is not to be dragged away from the altars of the gods and, by force, taken back to Argos!

**Kopreas:**

Not good enough! The men who rule you and found you here will not be satisfied by this.

**Chorus:** *To Kopreas*

Stranger, we must respect those who seek refuge in the gods.

**Chorus:**

These people should not be forced to leave their sanctuary!

**Chorus:**

We will not allow you to treat the goddess Justice with such disrespect!

**Kopreas:**

They belong to Eurystheus! Send them off from this land now and I will not lay a hand on them!

**Chorus:**

It is a godless act to banish strangers who have come here as suppliants.

**Kopreas:**

But it is a far better thing for someone to keep his foot outside of a place of trouble. Much better to use wisdom.

**Chorus:**

And what about you?

Shouldn't you have talked with the ruler of this land before you started dragging these poor people away from the sanctuary of the gods?

**Chorus:**

You should show more respect towards a free land.

**Kopreas:**

So who then, is the ruler of this land here?

**Chorus:**

Demophon, the son of noble Theseus.

**Kopreas:**

So, I must take this war of words with him then. Everything else I've said with you, has been a wasted effort.

*The Chorus sees Demophon and Akamas in the distance*

**Chorus:**

Ah! Here's the man himself with his brother, Akamas, hurrying here to hear what you have to say.

*Enter Demophon and Akamas.*

*Behind them follows an armed body guard*

**Demophon:** *To the chorus*

Ah! An old man, yet you have managed to outpace the young in getting here, to the altar of Zeus!

So tell us then, what has brought these people here?

**Chorus:**

These are the sons of Herakles, my lord. Suppliants. Their wreaths of supplication, as you can see, my lord, are placed on the altar of the god. This man is their father, Iolaos.

**Demophon:**

So why did this event call for cries of help?

**Chorus:** *Indicating Kopreias*

This man, here, my lord, tried to drag them away from the altar by force. That's why they cried out for help.

**Chorus:**

He knocked this poor man down to the ground.

**Chorus:**

I was moved to tears with pity for the old man, my lord!

**Demophon:** *Examining Kopreias*

The way he's dressed tells me he is a Greek but his manner tells me he's a barbarian.

*To Kopreias*

Explain yourself then and do it without wasting my time. What land are you from?

**Kopreias:**

Argos. I am an Argive, if that's what you want to know but let me let you why I have come here and under whose orders. I have been sent here by my king, Eurystheus, the king of Mycenae and under orders to take these children back to him. My mission is just, my friend. The deeds I must do and the things I must say are all just.

I am an Argive, sir, and I am taking back Argives who have run away, trying to escape their punishment of death, as sentenced by the laws of my country, Argos. All Argives have the right to fix and manage the laws of their own city and apply them upon each other.

We have approached the homes of many other citizens and declared our stand to these principles to them. No one has dared to bring trouble upon himself.

Still, these people had obviously come to your land either because they thought that you are a fool or, in utter desperation, they took their chances with you.

Because, surely they did not expect that if you had your wits about you, if you were not a fool, you, of all the other rulers of all the many countries they've passed through, you would sympathise with their foolish misfortunes.

Choose then from these two options: either you accept these people into your land

or you let us take them away.

The benefits of the second option are these: Your city will become the ally of powerful Argos and that of mighty Eurystheus.

If you chose the first option, however and you let your spirits soften by their pitiful tears and begging, then the matter will need to be resolved with spears because don't ever think that we will let it rest without contesting it with steel.

And what reason will you give for engaging in a war with us, then?

What land or what prize will you claim that you were robbed off, that has caused you to go to war against Argos?

Or, when you're burying your fallen soldiers, which allies will you say they were defending?

The condemnations from your citizens will be severe indeed, if you were to let your foot step into such a quagmire for the sake of a group of children and an old man, a totally insignificant man, a man with one foot in the grave, as they say.

What will you say then?

The best you could say to plead your case for war would be that you can rest your hopes upon these boys. But, look at them! That hope is far too short from being realistic. Even when they are fully grown up and fully armed they would be no match for the Argives. If that is where you rest your hope, then forget it because there's also the matter of time. The time between now and when these boys will become men is long. Long enough for you to be totally destroyed.

No, sir. You need to give me nothing but what is my own and you will gain mighty Mycenae as your ally.

And don't fall for your usual mistake, that of choosing the weak over the powerful.

**Chorus:**

Who can judge or choose the merits of a case before one hears clearly both sides of it?

**Iolaos:** *standing up*

My lord, Demophon. What exists here, in your land but not in any other land, is the fact that, just as I have listened, I am also, in turn, able to speak, without being sent away before I have finished saying what I have to say.

*Indicating Kopreas*

This man, my lord, he and us, we have nothing in common. The laws of his city have banished us. We are exiled from Mycenae, from our native land. Banished from it! So how can he justly call us Myceneans and then take us away, back to that land? So far as they are concerned, we are now foreigners.

*To Kopreas*

Or do you think that banishing someone from Mycenae means that they are also banished from the rest of Greece?

At least, not so from Athens and the Athenians will not send the children of Herakles away from their land because they are afraid of the Argives!

No! This is not Trachis, nor some town in Achaia from which you dragged away these children, even though they were suppliants seeking refuge at the altar of gods.

And you didn't achieve that by pleading a just cause but by bragging about Argos –just like you're doing now! If this happens here, too and they fall for your words,

then I will not be able to think of Athens as a free country any more.

No, they won't because I know the mind and nature of these people very well.

They would rather die because men of virtue, would much rather die than feel shame.

*To Demophon*

But enough praise about the city. Too much praise can bore people. I know because I, personally have felt bored when people have praised me too much.

But to you, as the ruler of this land, it is your duty to save these children.

You see, your father is Theseus, who was the son of Aethra, who was the daughter of Pittheus, who, in turn was the son of Pelops.

As for these children, let me tell you of their lineage.

Herakles was the son of the god Zeus and Alcmene, who was Pelops' daughter and so, you see, your father and their father are the sons of first cousins.

Therefore, Demophon, you are related to these children but beyond this tie of blood, let me tell you what your obligations are towards them.

Let me tell you, Demophon, that as your father's shield bearer, I once crossed the oceans with Theseus to go and fetch that most murderous girdle that belonged to the queen of the amazons, Hippolyta. After that, Herakles went on to rescue your father from the dark dungeons of Hades. The whole of Greece can attest to that event.

And it is by way of recompense for that event that these children now ask from you this one, single thing, which is that you don't hand them over to their enemy. Don't let their enemy use force against them and drag them away from the altars of your gods and away from your land.

*He falls to his knees before Demophon and wraps his hands around the king's legs*

I beg you, Demophon! I wrap my hands around your knees and touch your beard in supplication!

These children of Herakles have fallen into your care. Do not betray that care and be their true relative.

Be their friend, their father, their brother, their master. All things are preferable to be handed over to the Argives!

**Chorus:**

My lord, I have heard their plight and I feel deep pity for them.

**Chorus:**

This is a true example of how nobility can be toppled by fate.

**Chorus:**

These children my lord! Though they have been born into a noble home they are now suffering an undeserved misfortune.

**Demophon:** *Raising Iolaos from his knees*

Iolaos, there are three thoughts that force me not to reject your words.

The first and most important thought is Zeus at whose altar you and this group of children stand as suppliants.

The second is the fact that I am related to them and so I am obliged by that fact to make sure that, for their father's sake, they should be treated well by us.

Finally, it is the fear of shame, a fear that concerns me more than everything else. Because if I were to allow the violent pollution of this altar by a foreigner, people

will think that I no longer rule a land that is free and that I have betrayed its suppliants because I was afraid of the Argives. That would be a crime almost serious enough for me hang myself.

Of course, I would have much preferred it if a much happier circumstance had brought you here but, nevertheless, have no fear that you and these children will be forcefully removed by anyone from this altar.

*To Kopreas*

Now, you go to Argos and tell your king, Eurystheus what's happened here. Tell him also that, if he has a lawful charge against these people then he'll be treated lawfully but you won't be dragging these children away from here.

**Kopreas:**

But what if my cause were just and my words victorious?

**Demophon:**

What justice is there in abducting suppliants?

**Kopreas:**

This is easy for you to say. No harm will come to you but I will be disgraced.

**Demophon:**

I would be disgraced were I to let you drag these children away.

**Kopreas:**

Well, then, just take them outside the borders of your city and we'll take them away from there.

**Demophon:**

Only fools think they can outwit the gods!

**Kopreas:**

It seems to me that this is a place where criminals can find refuge.

**Demophon:**

The precincts of the gods are common refuge for everyone.

**Kopreas:**

This might not be the view of the Myceneans.

**Demophon:**

The Myceneans are not in charge here. I am.

**Kopreas:**

Only if you behave wisely and not offend them.

**Demophon:** *Angrily*

Be offended all you want! I shall not sin against the gods!

**Kopreas:**

No, I'd rather you don't go to war against Argos!

**Demophon:**

Nor would I but I am not going to let these children be taken away!

**Kopreas:**

Just the same, since they are mine I will take them!

**Demophon:**

In that case, you shall find your path back to Argos to be very difficult.

**Kopreas:** *Moves to take the children*

Well, we'll soon see about that.

*Demophon and Akamas close in on Kopreas*

**Demophon:**

The moment you touch these children will be the moment you'll groan with pain!

**Chorus:**

No, my lord!

**Chorus:**

In heaven's name don't strike a messenger!

**Demophon:**

I shall certainly strike this messenger, if he doesn't learn some sense!

**Chorus:** *To Kopreas*

You! Go away!

**Chorus:** *To Demophon*

And you, my lord. Come, don't touch him!

**Kopreas:**

All right. I will leave.

A single man is weak in a fight but I shall return with a big, fully armed force of Argive soldiers. There are thousands of fully armed men with Eurystheus as their general, waiting for my report about this! They're just outside the southern borders of your city, at Megara.

The moment Eurystheus hears of your insolence, he will pounce with rage upon you and upon your city, your people and your crops.

This is precisely why we have such a large army of young men: to punish people like you!

**Demophon:**

Go hang yourself, you vulgar creature!

I'm not afraid of you or your Argos! I'm not going to let you abduct this city's suppliants and, in the process, put me to shame!

This is Athens, a city that is free. A city that is ruled by me, not by your Argos!

*Exit Kopreas and his guard.*

**Chorus:**

Now, my lord, we must think about our tactics before the Argives come anywhere near our city because those men fight with dreadful fury.

**Chorus:**

And they will fight even more furiously once they've found out what just happened here.

**Chorus:**

That's how heralds work. They exaggerate their story to double the size of its truth.

**Chorus:**

The stories he'll tell his masters!

**Chorus:**

He'll tell them that he suffered horribly and that he just barely managed to save his life and escape!

**Iolaos:**

What honour is greater for children than to have a father who is brave and noble and then to marry into a noble family? However, I will not praise a man who, overcome by lust, mingles his blood with that of the ignoble and leaves an inheritance of shame to his children.

The nobly born can deal with misfortune far better than those born in a humble family.

Look at us, for example. Look how badly we have fallen, look to what depths of utter misery we have fallen! Yet, here, we have found friends, relatives and men who, they alone, in the whole of Greece have come to the defence of these children! Come now children. Give your right hand to these men and you men, give yours to the children!

*Children and chorus obey*

So, my children! Now we have experienced the friendship of these men.

When you return to your country one day, to live back in your father's homes and there regain your ancestral rights, always remember the rulers of this land. Remember them as your friends and saviours. Never forget this time and never raise a military force against this land. Always think of Athens as your greatest ally. And the men of Athens, my boys, deserve your greatest respect. They have rescued us from the army of mighty Pelasgian Argos. They have stood bravely against their enemy for our sake, even though we are nothing more than wandering beggars. They did not hand us over to the Argives and they did not banish us from their land.

*To Demophon*

Demophon, while I'm alive I shall speak of your virtues to everyone and when the time comes for me to die, I shall stand before Theseus and praise you highly and cheer his heart with this story. I will tell him how you, in your kindness, took Herakles' children under your care and protected them and I will tell him how you enjoy a good reputation throughout the whole of Hellas and how kept your father's reputation also in good stead. Though being of noble birth you, yourself, are no less noble than your father.

*To the chorus*

Only one man, perhaps, among a great many is not inferior to his father.

**Chorus:**

It has always been the aim of this land to side with justice and to help the weak.

**Chorus:**

This country has endured countless troubles on behalf of friends.

**Chorus:**

And now, I can see yet another battle coming soon upon us.

**Demophon:**

Your words are well said, old friend and I'm certain that they will be reflected in the deeds of these young boys. I am certain that they will remember this kindness. Now, I shall go and gather my people together and discuss tactics about how to meet the Argives with a large force.

I shall send scouts around to spy on them first, in case they suddenly rush us without our knowledge. They're fast footed those Argives, every one of them!

Then, I'll get the prophets together and perform sacrifices.

But, you, old friend, you and the children, leave this altar and go into the palace. There are men, there who'll take good care of you all while I'm away.

Go then, old man. Go to the palace.

**Iolaos:**

No, my lord! We won't leave the altar. We will stay here and, as suppliants, pray for the city's success. Then, when it has come out of this battle victorious, we will join you at the palace.

The gods on our side are no worse than the gods allied to the Argives.

Their protector is Zeus' wife, Hera and ours is Athena and that's why, I believe we will succeed. Athena will accept no defeat!

*Exit Demophon and Akamas with retinue*

**Chorus:** Addressed to Kopreas who has left

Listen, Kopreas!

You are the messenger from Eurystheus! You have come and you have boasted!

**Chorus:**

You gloated with mighty words about your Argos, stranger! But you shall not frighten our hearts!

**Chorus:**

We care not! Not now and I pray nor for a long time to come. Not in these great and fair dancing grounds of Athens!

**Chorus:**

You and your king are both fools!

**Chorus:**

The king of Argos, the son of Sthenelaus, Eurystheus, is a fool!

**Chorus:**

You have come as a stranger to a city as great as your Argos and yet you wanted to drag away from the altars of her gods by force, her suppliants, mere wanderers, without first approaching her kings to plead the justice of your case.

**Chorus:**

How can wise men consider such things as honourable?

**Chorus:**

Of course, I love peace myself but you king, let me tell you, you foolish man, Eurystheus, if you come to this city, what you expect will not be what you will find.

**Chorus:**

You're not the only one who has swords and brass-plated shields!

**Chorus:**

Keep your war-loving hands to yourself and don't disturb the peace of our graceful city!

*Enter Demophon*

**Iolaos:**

My son! You have returned to us with a worried face. Why is that, my son?

Some news about the enemy? Are they being slow or are they here already? What have you learnt? Surely the herald couldn't have been lying.

I'm certain that their General, after all the good luck he's had so far in previous battles, I'm sure he'll come charging at Athens with pride bloating his chest; but when he gets here, he will have to face Zeus, Zeus, the god who punishes severely those whose chests are overly bloated with pride!

**Demophon:**

Yes, Eurystheus and his army of Argives are here.

I was there and saw him with my own eyes. I was there personally because I believe



that if someone wants to claim that he's the true leader of an army, he shouldn't examine his enemy by means of heralds.

Eurystheus has not yet let his army run onto Attican soil. He's still out there, sitting upon the brow of a crag checking out, I reckon, the best and safest route by which to send his huge forces to our borders.

As for me, I have everything prepared. The whole city is armed and ready, the sacrificial offerings are at the altars of the gods for whom they are to be slaughtered and the seers are making offerings throughout the city.

As well, I've gathered together all the chanters who announce the meanings of oracles and I have examined their utterances -both those that are hidden and those that are made clear- to see how the city may be saved.

These utterances varied greatly on many things but on this one thing they were of one opinion: that, in order to destroy the enemy and save the city, they command me to sacrifice to Demeter's daughter, a virgin who is the daughter of a noble father.

Now, you know very well that I am most eager to help you but I will not kill my own daughter and I will not impose such a thing upon any one of my citizens. Not against their will and, in any case, what father would be insane enough to give away his own, most precious, children?

The city now is divided. You will see two angry crowds gathering. One lot says that I was right to protect suppliant strangers while the other lot say that I was mad to do so.

If I go ahead with this action, the city will break out in a civil war.

Come then, let us think about all this and see how we can help you and save the city as well, without my losing my credibility with the people. This is not some barbaric dictatorship I have here and the people will treat me as fairly as I treat them.

**Chorus:**

But how can it be that, while the city is all too willing to protect strangers, some divine power prohibits it from doing so?

**Iolaos:**

Ah, my children!

We're like the sailors, my children, the sailors who've just escaped the beatings of wild tempests, who have managed to almost touch safe dry land but then are spun away from it and back into the deep ocean again by the same wild winds.

This is how it is with us here, on this land. We have managed to come to its shores safely but then we're now cast away from it again.

Ah, my children!

Ah, cruel Hope!

You gave me all this joy, only to take it away again! A promise which you've left unfulfilled! I can understand this man's position fully. He is unwilling to kill any of his own children nor force any of his people to sacrifice one of their own. And I am even thankful to him for our present situation. It is not your fault, Demophon, if it is the will of the gods that we should suffer this way.

My children, how can I help you now? Where shall we turn for help? What god's altar have we not graced with garlands? In what country have we not tried to take

shelter?

Ah, my darlings! We are doomed! We shall be delivered to our enemies!

I care not for my own life and I would give it up if only it didn't give pleasure to our enemies but I do care for you, my children. It is for you and for Alcmene, your aged grandmother, that I shed tears of pity.

Poor Alcmene! A long life full of misery!

And poor me! A long life of ill fortune and pain, all for nothing!

This is our Fate, my children!

This is our Fate!

To fall into the hands of our enemy. To die in shame and agony!

*Turning to Demophon*

But I have not lost all hope to save these children yet, Demophon, so here's how I think you can help me: My lord, I want you to hand me over to the Argives. Me, in place of the children. Let these children of mine stay safe and you stay safe as well.

Forget about saving my life. It's improper for me to love my life so much and Eurystheus would be very happy to take me and to throw insults at Herakles' old comrade.

Eurystheus is a vulgar man. Men who are well-bred pray that their enemies are also well-bred, not men totally bereft of any civility. It's only then that men would receive due pity and justice in the hands of their enemy.

**Chorus:**

No, old friend.

You can't lay the blame onto this city, Iolaos!

It would be insulted by the false accusation that it has betrayed strangers.

**Demophon:**

You've made a noble suggestion, Iolaos but one that's impossible to accomplish. King Eurystheus has not marched his forces here, simply to capture you but to take away and slaughter these children. Of what use would the death of an old man like you be to him? No it's these children he's after because he knows that the children of nobles will make terrifying enemies when they grow up, still carrying the memory of the outrages committed against their father; and it is this that is uppermost in the mind of Eurystheus.

But do let me know if you have any other, more suitable suggestions because what I have heard from the oracles leave me dumbfounded and full of fear.

*Enter Makaria, one of the daughters of Herakles, from the temple.*

**Makaria:**

Dear strangers, please do not consider my coming out here as an act of impudence. Let that be my first request.

I am well aware that, for a woman, it is best that she is silent, modest and remains quietly inside her house.

But then, Iolaos, I have heard your anxious words and, though I was not given the charge by my family to do so, I, nevertheless, feel that I am fit to do this and, since I am very concerned about my brothers and about my own self, I have come out to ask you, Iolaos, if there is some new misfortune, on top of all the others, that has come to trouble your mind.

**Iolaos:**

Dear girl, I have always thought of you as one of the best children that Herakles ever had. And justly so, it seems.

Well, child, we thought that we were on the right track up until now but, here we are, we find that, once more, that we are heading in the wrong direction with no prospects of escape. Because the chanters tell us that, according to the oracles, if we and the city are to survive this, then it's not a bull or a calf that we must sacrifice to Demeter's daughter but the daughter of a noble.

And that's where we stuck now. The King, here, says that he will neither sacrifice his own daughter nor force any of his citizens to do so. As well, he also told me, in subtle but clear words that, since he wants to save Athens, we must find some other way out of this difficulty, or else leave here and find some other land to go to.

**Makaria:**

So it is this prophesy that stops us from being saved?

**Iolaos:**

Yes, my child, just this prophesy. In all other matters we are fortunate.

**Makaria:**

Then, Iolaos, fear the enemy spear of the Argives no longer!

I am ready, old sir, ready and willing to volunteer to be sacrificed, to die, for this cause.

What reason could we possibly give for trying to save our lives, instead of saving a city that has accepted our call for help and has suffered such pain and danger on our behalf?

No, we can't do that. We would be ridiculed by people if we sit by the altars of gods as suppliants and wail like cowards when we are, in fact, the children of such a great man.

What honourable men would see this as proper?

No, far rather the city fell –though may the gods forbid it- and I fell to the enemy with it, then I, the daughter of a splendid man, have to suffer dishonour and then die just the same.

But then, how could I cope with the fate of a wandering exile? Would I not feel shame when people ask me, "Do you love your life so much that you have come here, to our land, bearing the bows of a suppliant? Leave this land. We give no aid to cowards!"

As well, I know, many have betrayed their loved ones before me, but not even if my brothers here had died and I had survived, not even then could I ever hope to live a happy life because who would want to marry a single woman like me, one who has no family and to have children with me?

Well then, is it not better for me to die than to endure the terrors of a Fate I do not deserve? No, that Fate is more appropriate for someone who is not born from a family as noble as mine.

Come now, take me to where this body must be slain. Place the garlands on me and, if this is your wish, begin the rites of sacrifice.

Defeat the enemy!

I give my life, of my own accord and under no one's compulsion! And I am willing to

die not only for the sake of my brothers but also for my own sake because I have discovered this splendid thing: that by not loving my life so much I can die a most glorious death!

**Chorus:**

Ah! How can one respond to this girl's lofty speech?

**Chorus:**

She is willing to give her life to save that of her brothers.

**Chorus:**

What mortal could utter words loftier than those?

**Iolaos:**

O, my child! You are truly of the seed of divine Herakles!

You are truly no one else's daughter but that of that brave hero!

And your words, dear girl, make me feel proud but I also feel sad for your fate.

But let us do this more justly, Makaria. Let us bring out here all of your sisters and let us decide this by lot. Let her who draws the lot die for the family.

It is not right that you die without having drawn lots.

**Makaria:**

No, old man. Do not even consider such a thing. I will not die by drawing lots!

What value does such a death have?

I will not die by compulsion but, if you approve of me and if you wish to make use of my willingness to die for my brothers, then I will do so.

**Iolaos:**

O, my child!

A speech even more noble than the last, a noble speech itself!

Your new deeds and words become more noble than your last!

I won't force you nor forbid you to die, Makaria but by dying you do your brothers good.

**Makaria:**

Wise words, old man.

Come with me, old man because I want to die by your own hands though you must not fear that my blood will cause you religious pollution. I am dying of my own free will. And when I am dead cover my dead body with my garments.

If I am truly the daughter of the man I'm boasting to be, then I fear not the terror of this sacrifice.

**Iolaos:**

No, my child. I can't. I do not have the strength to stand there and watch you die.

**Makaria:** *Indicating Demophon*

Well then, ask this man if I may be allowed to breathe my last in the hands of women, instead of men.

**Demophon:**

Your wishes, poor girl, will be granted.

It would indeed be shameful of me not to grant you your rightful funeral wishes and that, for many reasons. You are a very brave young woman and it is also just and proper that I grant it. You are indeed the bravest women I have ever seen. The bravest of them all.

Well, then, if you wish, say your words of farewell to your brothers here and to this

old man before you go.

**Makaria:**

Farewell, old friend, farewell and teach these boys how to be just like you. Wise in all things, just like you, that would make them adequately wise.

Try your best to save them from death.

We are all your own children, raised by your own hands. and you can see that I, myself am sacrificing my own wedding day for them

And you my brothers who are gathered here, all around me, I hope you find happiness in life and gain all the things that my heart will not. Respect and honour this old friend and the old woman inside the temple, Alcmene, my grandmother, as well as these people here who are your hosts. And if you are ever free of all your troubles and the gods let you return home, think of the woman who has saved your lives and consider what burial rites you owe her. Surely they should be the best possible because I did not neglect my family in its hour of need but gave my life for it.

And if there is anything beneath the earth then I go there with these thoughts as my dowry and not as a mother or as a woman who gave her virginity. But I hope there's nothing there because if we mortals must deal with cares even after we die, then where can we go to be free of them? Do not people consider death to be the cure of all care?

**Iolaos:**

But know this, Makaria!

Both here, on earth and in Hades below, you will be honoured by us as the one with the bravest heart of all the women.

Farewell!

Out of reverence, I won't speak ill of Demeter's daughter, the goddess to whom your body will be delivered.

*Exit Makaria and Demophon.*

My children, we are finished! Grief has undone my limbs!

Help me. Help me go to that seat by the altar and then cover my face with my cloak.

None of this gives me any pleasure and the pain would be all the greater if the oracle is not fulfilled. My life would be unliveable.

What misery all this is!

**Chorus:**

No mortal is either blessed or cursed unless the gods will it and no house stands always on the foundations of prosperity but is pursued by one fate after another.

**Chorus:**

Fate will take a man away from his lofty spot and cast him down low, make a nothing out of him.

**Chorus:**

Or turn a beggar into a mortal blest.

**Chorus:**

There is no way a man can escape his fate. No wisdom can ward it off and he who tries, tries in vain, no matter how eagerly he tries.

**Chorus:**

And so, Iolaos, don't lie there with a tortured heart, in prayer, in tears about the poor girl's fate.

**Chorus:**

Accept the will of the gods!

**Chorus:**

The gods have given this poor girl a death of glory!  
A death that saved the life of her brothers and of her land!  
A death that will put her name in the lips of men!

**Chorus:**

Glory marches through toil, Iolaos!

**Chorus:**

Makaria by her deeds did Herakles, her father, and her noble family proud.  
She was truly worthy of them.

**Chorus:**

If you truly respect the death of the virtuous then so do I.

*Enter Servant*

**Servant:**

Children greetings.  
Where is the old fellow, Iolaos and your grandmother? They are not here at the altar.

**Iolaos:**

If my presence is worth anything at all, then I am here!

**Servant:**

Why are you lying down, old man? And why the sad look on your face?

**Iolaos:**

A great worry has befallen our house. It has made me very sad.

**Servant:**

Then come, old man! Get up. Raise your head high!

**Iolaos:**

I am an old man. I do not have the strength to do so.

**Servant:**

But I have here with great news, old man!

*Iolaos rises and examines the servant*

**Iolaos:**

Who are you? I have met you somewhere before but I have forgotten where exactly.

**Servant:**

I am Hyllus' servant old man. Do you not recognise me?

**Iolaos:**

Ah, my dear man! So you have all arrived here safely then?

**Servant:**

Yes and not only that but we are also in great luck!

**Iolaos:** *Turns towards the temple and shouts*

Alcmene! Alcmene, mother of noble Herakles, come out here and listen to the words of our friend!

You've been suffering for a long time, Alcmene. Worrying to death about whether your grandchildren here would ever return home.

*Enter Alcmene from the temple*

**Alcmene:**

What is it, Iolaos? The whole temple is full with your shouting!

Has another herald come from Argos to hurt you again?

*To the Servant*

I might be an old and weak woman, stranger but you better realise that while I'm still alive you won't be taking away these children or else I'm not the mother of Herakles!

You touch these children and you'll be having a shameful battle with a pair of old folks!

**Iolaos:**

Courage, old woman and don't be afraid! No, this is no herald from Argos baring angry words!

**Alcmene:**

Shouts are heralds of fear, Iolaos. Why did raise it if there's nothing to fear?

**Iolaos:**

Only so that you could come out here and meet this man.

**Alcmene:**

Yes? I don't understand. Who is this man?

**Iolaos:**

He has come to let you know that your grandson has returned.

**Alcmene:**

Ah! Then joy to you, friend for the good news you've brought us but – if he's here, then where is he? Does he not want to see his grandmother?

What's happened to him? Why hasn't he come along with you to gladden my heart?

**Servant:**

He has come with an army and he's placing it in position.

**Alcmene:** *Turns to leave*

Ah, this last piece of information does not concern us old folks.

**Iolaos:**

But it does, old woman! It is my duty to learn more about it.

**Servant:**

What in particular do you want to know about?

**Iolaos:**

How large is the force of his allies?

**Servant:**

Quite large. I can't be more specific than that.

**Iolaos:**

And I suppose the Athenian leaders know this?

**Servant:**

Yes they do. In fact, his forces are positioned at their left wing.

**Iolaos:**

And so the army is all ready for the battle, then, is it?

**Servant:**

Yes, they are. The sacrificial offerings are also ready at the lines.

**Iolaos:**

How far away from the Argive forces are they?

**Servant:**

They're close enough to see their General clearly.

**Iolaos:**

And what is he doing? Getting his enemy ranks in place, I suppose.

**Servant:**

We couldn't hear him very clearly but that's what we suspected he was doing. But I better go back now. I'd hate to think that my master charges at the enemy without me.

**Iolaos:**

I'll come with you.

It seems we think the same way. It's only proper that we should stand by our friends and help them.

**Servant:**

Ah! Never a foolish word from you, old man but this time-

**Iolaos:**

And nor will I ever shirk from joining friends in battle!

**Servant:**

Ah, but, my old master, you no longer have the strength you once had!

**Iolaos:**

So you think that I couldn't pierce my spear through their shield?

**Servant:**

You could, old man, but first you'd fall over!

**Iolaos:**

Ha! No enemy would dare stand before me and face me!

**Servant:**

It's not the face, dear friend that frightens the enemy but the fierce hand!

**Iolaos:**

Still, I'll take on as many of them as I ever did!

**Servant:**

But the help you'd be to your friends would be slight.

**Iolaos:**

You're trying to stop me, servant but I'm fully prepared for battle!

**Servant:**

You only think you are prepared but you are not!

**Iolaos:**

Talk all you want but I'm not staying here!

**Servant:**

But look at you!

How will you present yourself to the army with no weapons?

**Iolaos:**

The temple is full of captured weapons. We'll make use of some of them. Then, if I survive the battle, I'll bring them back and if I don't, the god won't ask me to return



them.

Quickly, go in there now and take down from the hooks a suit of armour for me. Hurry. Waiting back here, at home like a coward, while others are fighting battles is utterly shameful!

*The Servant exits into the temple.*

**Chorus:**

Age has not wearied your soul, Iolaos!

Your body is worn out but your spirit is certainly not. That is still in the blush of youth!

**Chorus:**

Why take on such painful struggles, Iolaos?

Struggles that will cause you much harm yet be of little help to our city?

**Chorus:**

You're old enough to be able to control such desires, Iolaos!

Stay out of such impossible struggles.

**Chorus:**

Iolaos, you'll never be young again!

**Alcmene:**

Are you out of your mind, Iolaos?

Do you want to leave me all alone with the children?

**Iolaos:**

Yes, Alcmene.

Men must fight. Women must look after children!

**Alcmene:**

But who will save me, if you die?

**Iolaos:**

Those of your son's sons who will survive, will take care of you?

**Alcmene:**

But what if something happens to them –heaven forbid?

**Iolaos:**

Don't be afraid, woman. Our friends here will not give you up to the enemy.

**Alcmene:**

And they're my only hope!

**Iolaos:**

Zeus, too, Alcmene, cares for you and your many pains. I know that.

**Alcmene:**

Ah! Well, yes, Zeus!

He won't hear me speak ill of his behaviour towards me but he knows himself if that behaviour was appropriate for a god.

*Enter Servant from the temple with a full suit of armour.*

**Servant:** To Iolaos

Here you are. The full works! Now put it on quickly because the battle is fast approaching and Ares, its god, just hates the dawdlers.

*Iolaos is struggling with the weight of the armour*

Now, look, if you're worried it's heavy, then let's just go there like that and when we get there, at the front line, you can wrap yourself up in it. I'll carry it over there

for you.

**Iolaos:**

Good idea.

You carry the armour, yourself, since you're already carrying it... Now... hand me a spear and... hold onto my left elbow and... just guide my steps...

**Servant:**

Ah! The soldier needs a nurse!

**Iolaos:**

I just don't want my foot to slip. It's a bad omen if it does!

**Servant:**

Ha, ha! If only your ability matched your enthusiasm!

*They begin to walk but Iolaos is struggling.*

**Iolaos:**

Well, come on then, hurry! I'd hate to miss the battle!

**Servant:**

It's not me who's slow, old man. It's you. You think you're going but you're not moving!

**Iolaos:**

Can't you see how fast I'm moving my feet?

**Servant:**

You think you're moving them, old man but you're not. That's what I can see.

**Iolaos:**

You won't be talking like that when you see me there!

**Servant:**

And doing what? I wish you all the joy when you get there!

**Iolaos:**

You'll see! I'll kill one of the enemy! Kill him by piercing this spear through his shield!

**Servant:**

That's if we ever get there. That's what I'm worried about!

**Iolaos:** *Talking to his right arm*

Work with me, arm, work with me, damn you!

Work like you worked in the days of our youth, when you and Herakles sacked Sparta!

Oh, you and I could make Eurystheas himself run! Too coward a man to face a spear, that one!

Ha! And then there is this wrong thinking going on about fortune. Fortune and bravery. We think that just because a man is fortunate he's capable of doing whatever he wants!

*Exit Servant and Iolaos*

**Chorus:**

O, Earth!

**Chorus:**

O, Moon of the full night!

**Chorus:**

And you, too, bright rays of the god who brings light to us mortals!

**Chorus:**

Deliver this message for us!

**Chorus:**

Deliver it loudly through the heavens to the throne of Zeus...

**Chorus:**

...and to the chambers of the grey-eyes Athena!

**Chorus:**

We have taken suppliants into our land, the land of our ancestors, the land of our homes and so we must cut through danger with our gleaming steel.

**Chorus:**

It is a hard thing to bear, that a fortunate city like Mycenae, famous for its military might hold such a deep anger for our land.

**Chorus:**

But, my dear city, it would be an evil deed if we were to hand over suppliant strangers obeying the commands of Argos.

**Chorus:** *Indicating the temple*

Zeus is with me.

**Chorus:**

I am not afraid.

**Chorus:**

His love for me is justified.

**Chorus:**

I will never hold men greater than gods.

**Chorus:**

But it is you, Athena that I call upon!

**Chorus:**

To you, goddess, belongs the soil of this city!

You, goddess, are this city's mother!

You, goddess, are its mistress!

You, goddess, are its protector!

**Chorus:**

Send this man to some other land, goddess!

This man who has marched his spear loving army from Argos against us!

**Chorus:**

Our virtue demands that we are not driven from our homes.

**Chorus:**

We have always honoured you dear goddess, with rich sacrifices...

**Chorus:**

...and we never forget the waning day of the month...

**Chorus:**

...nor the songs of our youth, nor the sounds of their dances...

**Chorus:**

...but up there! The wind swept high hills echo with shouts of joy and with the beating of the feet of virgins, as they dance the whole night long.

*Enter the Messenger*

**Messenger:**

My lady!

The news I bring you is both, short and sweet for you to hear.

We have beaten your enemies and we have raised their armour as trophies of victory!

**Alcmene:**

O, my dear friend!

This day and this great message sets you free!

But you have still to free my mind from one more concern: are those I love still alive?

**Messenger:**

They are alive, my lady and they are enjoying great glory in the army.

**Alcmene:**

So, is old Iolaos still alive?

**Messenger:**

Yes, my lady, he is and the gods have granted him great fortune.

**Alcmene:**

What do you mean? Did he perform some great deed of heroism?

**Messenger:**

Ha! He might be old but he behaved like a young man at the battle!

**Alcmene:**

What a wondrous tale!

But first, tell me how our soldiers managed to win.

**Messenger:**

This single report of mine will tell you all you need to know, my lady!

Well then. We set up our line of soldiers directly in front of theirs. One long line facing the other.

Then Hyllus, jumps down off his four-horse chariot and stands between the two armies, turns towards the Argives and calls out:

“General of the Argives, why do we not leave Mycenae alone? In peace? Let Mycenae suffer no pain but the loss of a single man only. Let us two, alone, fight and if you win and kill me, then you can take Herakles’ children and leave. If, however, I kill you, then let me regain my ancestral rights and palaces.”

Those words of his were received with gratitude by the army, not only because it would be freed from the pains of the battle but also because they were the words of a brave man.

But Eurystheas showed just what a shameful coward he was. He just didn’t have the courage to face the spear of Hyllus, so he ignored the wishes of the army.

This is the sort of man who has come to make slaves of Herakles’ children!

And so, Hyllus, withdrew back into our lines.

Then, all the priests, seeing that peace would not come by a single combat, quickly began to slaughter all the sacrificial sheep and let all the propitious blood gush out through their necks.

Then some jumped onto their chariots while others protected their flanks with the

sides of their shields.

Then the Athenian General addressed his men with words that only a brave man could utter:

"My fellow citizens, now is the time for each of you to show your gratitude to the country of your birth, to the land that has nurtured you. Protect her!"

The General of the enemy, pleaded to his allies not to bring disgrace upon Argos and Mycenae.

Then the Tuscan trumpet sent out its shrill signal for the battle to start and the two armies clashed into an unimaginable roar of shields and groans and loud cries of agony.

At first, the Argive spears broke through our lines with one mighty clash but then, almost immediately, they turned and retreated. Then, after that, foot linked with foot and man faced man and the battle raged fiercely all around.

Men fell dead in great numbers and all around you heard two shouts: "Sons of Athens" and "men who sow the land of Argos, will you let our city suffer disgrace?" And so, working as hard as we could and with great difficulty, we finally made the Argives turn and flee.

Then, old Iolaos saw Hyllus rushing off on his chariot, so he stretched out his arm and begged the young man to take him with him. Hyllus lets him onto his chariot and immediately the old man takes the reins and begins to chase Eurystheas' chariot.

So far, what I've said is what I've seen with my own eyes but from here on I'll tell you what I've heard from others.

So, as he was chasing Eurystheas, he drove through the sacred precincts of Athena the Pallene. There he prayed to Hebe, the goddess of youth and to Zeus, asking them to make him young again for just one day so that he could exact vengeance from his enemies.

And now listen to this and marvel!

Suddenly two stars came and stood right above the yoke of his chariot and covered the whole chariot with a dark cloud. The men who are wise in such matters said that those two stars were your son, Herakles and Hebe. And there! Through that deep darkness, your Iolaos showed the youthfulness of his arms.

Then, near the Skironian cliffs, our glorious Iolaos captured Eurystheas' four horse chariot.

Iolaos tied Eurystheas' hands and returned to us with the glorious first fruits of the battle, that very General who once fortune favoured so much! Fortune! That fortune of Eurystheas tells us that no one should envy those whose fortune favours them, until they see how they die because Fortune's favours last but a moment.

**Chorus:**

Oh, Zeus! God who makes enemies turn and flee!

Now, Zeus! Now I can see the day when I will be free of the dread of fear!

**Alcmene:**

Oh, Zeus!

You came late in my sufferings but I am grateful for what you've done; and though I once thought that my son did not live with the gods, now I am certain that he does so.

*Turning to the children*

So now, my children! Now you'll be free from pain and from that miserable Eurystheas!

Now you'll be able to see you father's land and walk upon the soil you've inherited! Now you'll be able to sacrifice to the gods of your ancestors, something you couldn't do before since you've lived the life of wandering exiles.

*Turning back to the servant*

But, tell me, friend, what clever thing did Iolaos have in mind when he spared Eurystheas' life? In our view, it doesn't sound very wise not to exact vengeance from your enemies once you've captured them.

**Messenger:**

He did this for your sake, my lady. So that you can see him with your own eyes and treat him with your own hands. Eurystheas wanted none of this. He didn't want to be brought to you alive and be punished by you but Iolaos forced him into the yoke.

But now farewell, dear lady and remember the words you uttered when I first began my speech. You have promised to set me free and, in such matters, promises made by nobles ought to be kept.

*Exit Messenger*

**Chorus:**

I love the dance and the sweet-voiced song of the flute at the feast...

**Chorus:**

...and I love the sweet and charming goddess, Aphrodite...

**Chorus:**

...and to see friends suddenly be granted some unexpected good fortune.

**Chorus:**

Fate, who brings the end to all things and Age, Time's child, grants us many things.

**Chorus:**

Dear Athens, your path is just. Keep steady upon it. Never leave this course and revere the gods.

**Chorus:**

Those who say different are in danger of losing their mind. You have made clear the proof of this.

God makes his message clearly: He crushes the schemes of the unjust.

**Chorus:**

Your son has been raised up to the heavens, my lady and it is a lie to say that he has died and after being destroyed by the mighty flame of fire, he descended to the halls of Hades.

**Chorus:**

He sleeps in Hebe's sweet bed, in the golden palace on Mount Olympus.

**Chorus:**

Oh, Hymeneas! you have honoured two of Zeus' children!

**Chorus:**

Many of these things are brought together here.

They say that Pallas Athena has helped the father of these here children and now, these children are saved by Athena's city and people.

**Chorus:**

And she has cut down the arrogance of Eurystheas, a man who preferred violence to justice!

**Chorus:**

I hope my soul and my mind never become so insatiable!

*Enter the Servant with Eurystheas in fetters and two guards*

**Servant:**

My lady, I know you can see this yourself but I will tell you about it just the same. This is Eurystheas and we've brought him to you.

It's an unexpected sight for you and an unexpected stroke of bad luck for him. When he set out from Mycenae with his well trained soldiers, his chest bloated with excessive pride, to sack Athens, he had never expected that he'd fall into your hands, my Lady. The god, though has cast his vote against him and so altered his fate.

Hyllus and glorious Iolaos have erected a statue in honour of Zeus, the god of victory and they have asked me to bring this man here, before you, to give pleasure to your heart. There is no greater pleasure than that of seeing one's enemy fall from success into misery.

**Alcmene:**

You hateful creature, you! So you have come, have you? Has Justice finally caught up with you? Look at me!

Turn your head this way and have the courage to face me! Turn and face your enemy!

You are not the master now but the servant.

Tell me you miserable creature, tell me because I really want to know: are you the man who dared to heap so many insults upon my son?

I don't know where Herakles is right now but was it you who has sent him off alive, to the dark halls of Hades, to kill hydras and lions? Are you the beast who had made him perform all sorts of other insulting labours, too many of them for me to mention now?

Was there any other insult you dared throw at him?

But all that was not enough for you but your arrogance has driven me and these children, sitting here, as suppliants to the gods, from every corner of Greece, elderly and babies alike.

But, here you are, now you've come across men and a free city who are not afraid of you.

Now, you must die a miserable death but even that will be too good for you because after all the dreadful deeds you have performed, you ought not to die only a single death –

**Chorus:**

No, you cannot kill this man!

**Servant:**

What? What then was the point of taking him prisoner?

**Alcmene:**

What law protects him from being put to death?

**Chorus:**

The city's leaders don't wish it.

**Alcmene:**

What? Don't they want to kill their enemies?

**Chorus:**

Not those captured alive in battle.

**Alcmene:**

But did Hyllus know this? Does he approve?

**Chorus:**

Should Hyllus disobey the laws of the city?

**Alcmene:** *Indicating Eurystheas*

Well then, this man ought not to live. He ought not see the light of another day!

**Chorus:**

That is his punishment: not to die.

**Alcmene:**

But shouldn't he die now?

**Chorus:**

There's no one who can kill him.

**Alcmene:**

I can! I am one who can kill him!

**Chorus:**

If you do you will be receive much condemnation!

**Alcmene:**

I cannot deny it: I love this city!

But this man, here, this man has been delivered into my hands and there's no one who will take him away from me. Let them call me reckless or overly proud for a woman but I will, nevertheless, accomplish this one deed. I shall kill him!

**Chorus:**

Your anger towards this man, old woman, is mighty but just. I understand that well.

**Eurystheas:**

Woman! Understand this well! I will neither try and flatter you, nor say any words about my life from which people will draw the conclusion that I am a coward.

This hateful affair was not of my own making or will. I know well I am your cousin and a relative of your son, Herakles.

Hera sent me ... this illness and, like it or not, I had to go through with it. This was the work of a goddess.

And so I had taken up this battle and from the moment I did, I began to contrive all sorts of terrible deeds against him. I stayed up nights thinking of ways of killing my enemies, of sending them off so that I would not have to spend the rest of my life pursued by fear.

I knew well, woman, that your son was not merely a hollow name but a true man. An enemy, yes, but a famous one, one with an honourable name, a noble man.

And when he died, since his children had inherited his hatred towards me, what was I supposed to do? Should I not try me best, should I not leave no stone



untuned to try and kill them or banish them so as to keep myself and my affairs safe from them?

If you were in my place, if you had such a lion for an enemy, would you let its cubs run around free? Would you not pursue them frantically till the end? Would you be wise, letting them live in Argos?

No one would believe that!

Well, now that they have not killed me back there, on the battlefield where I was eager to die, the person who will kill me will be polluted.

The city, being far wiser than you, has a greater regard for the god than it has for the hatred towards me, has let me live.

There!

You have spoken and you have heard my response.

From now on, let them call me by two names: Let them say I am both, an avenging spirit, as well as a noble one!

That's how it is with me now: I do not want to die but I will not bemoan abandoning life.

**Chorus:**

Alcmene, my advice to you is to do as the city decided. Let this man go.

**Alcmene:**

What if, however, I were to kill him and to obey the city's wishes at the same time?

**Chorus:**

That would be ideal but how could you achieve that?

**Alcmene:**

Simply by killing him and handing his corpse over to those of his family who want to come and claim it. Then, so far as his body is concerned, I will be doing as the city wishes and his death will satisfy my own need for justice.

**Eurystheas:**

Do so! Kill me. I am not going to beg you for my life!

But, since this city has refused to kill me, I will grant it this ancient oracle of Phoebus Apollo.

It would benefit it more than it could ever imagine.

*To the chorus*

When I die you must bury me where my Fate has declared: In front of the shrine of the virgin goddess, Pallene Athena. Then, I will be a friend and protector to both, the city, as well as to you, its citizens.

I will protect you from the hostile descendants of these children, the children of Herakles, who, in the future, will come here with a great army against you, traitors to the kindness you have shown them today. That's the sort of guests you are defending here.

Knowing all this, then, you may ask, how is it that I was not afraid of the god's words and have come here? The answer is that I thought that Hera was far greater than any oracle and that she would not betray me. But don't let them pour any libations or the blood of sacrificed victims onto my tomb and I shall give them a horrible journey back to their home.

And that will benefit you doubly because with my death I shall harm them and save you.

**Alcmene:** *To the chorus*

Why wait, men? You have heard what he said! Kill him! It will save both, my children as well as the city.

He is showing us the safest course. He is our enemy now and his death will be our gain.

Go on, take him away! Kill him! Kill him and then throw him to the dogs!

*To Eurystheas*

And so you won't think that you will live and cast us out of our land again!

**Chorus:**

Yes, this seems to me to be a better way.

Take him away, servants and so far as our leaders are concerned, they remain free of pollution.

*Exit All*

# (EURIPIDES) Hippolytus

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>467</sup> translation by George Theodoridis



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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Aphrodite** (*also known as Aphrodite*)

**Hippolytus**

**Theseus** (*King of Athens*)

**Phaedra** (*Wife of Theseus*)

**Artemis**

**Nurse** (*To Phaedra*)

**Chorus 1** (*Of Women of Troezen*)

**Chorus 2** (*Slaves to Hippolytus*)

**Messenger** (*And slave to Hippolytus*)

**Various Attendants** (*silent*)

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<sup>467</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/hippolytus/>

...

*Before Theseus' palace in Troezen (Northern Peloponnese).*

*The statues of two goddesses, Aphrodite and Artemis, flank the door of the palace. The statue of Artemis holds a bow and a quiver of arrows.*

*SL is a couch.*

*Enter Aphrodite from the side of her statue.*

**Aphrodite:**

I am Aphrodite.

A goddess!

Also called Cypris.

A great goddess among the mortals, as well as throughout the heavens.

Of those mortals who look upon the light of the sun and who live between the very edges of the East, the Black Sea and the farthest ends of the West, the great Pillars of Atlas, of all those of them who respect my power, I, respect them, also.

But those of them who treat me with disrespect, them, I crush and destroy!

It's part of being a god. We, gods, all of us, enjoy being revered by the mortals.

So I say and so I shall prove very shortly!

You see, Hippolytus, that child of the Amazon Hippolyta, by the seed of Theseus, who was raised by that pure man, Pittheus, is the only one -the only one in the whole of Troezen, who hates me. He says that I am the worst of all the gods!

Hippolytus, says this! He is the only mortal, the only man, who says this!

The boy will neither marry anyone nor go anywhere near the bed of love!

Instead, he reveres that Artemis, Zeus' daughter, Apollo's sister!

*Nods towards the statue of Artemis*

He thinks she's by far the greater of all the goddesses and so, the two of them, he and his little virgin deity there, take their great hunting dogs and go roaming about the plush forest together all day, sending all the wild beasts away!

A mortal has no business being in such a close relationship with an immortal!

Far too inappropriate a behaviour for a mortal, I say!

But the fact is, the relationship itself doesn't bother me, really. I'm not the jealous type. Why should I be bothered about those two?

But the disrespect he shows for me -a goddess! For that I will punish him severely! Today!

Today Hippolytus will pay for all the sins he has ever committed against me and, since I've been preparing this plan for a long time now, it will only take a tiny bit more effort on my part to see it through to its execution.

A while ago, Hippolytus had travelled all the way from Pittheus' house to the precincts of Pandion, to watch, as well as to take part in the celebrations of the great mysteries of the goddesses Demeter and Kore.

Well, his father's noble wife, Phaedra - that is, Hippolytus' step mother- saw him there and, at that very moment, the moment her eyes fell on that boy, her heart missed a beat! She fell in love with Hippolytus, her step son!

Now, you see, that little heart flutter of hers was my own doing!

And then, before Phaedra came here, to Troezen, I mean, she had built a temple, next to the rock of Pallas Athena, as a monument to her love, you see, a monument dedicated to me; and because her lover was away, the temple was built so it looked

over towards this way, that is, our way. Then she let it known to everyone that she had built that temple in honour of Hippolytus.

Then, Theseus, her husband, that is Hippolytus' father, left Athens to escape the blood guilt he had brought about for treacherously murdering his cousins, the sons of Pallas, that is Aegeas' brother...

So, Theseus then takes his wife Phaedra and sails off from Athens to end up here, in Troezen, for a one-year long exile from his home.

Poor Phaedra!

*Indicating inside the palace*

So, she is here now, in there, moaning and groaning from the pain inflicted by the pointy pricks of love! She's dying in silence, the poor dear because she won't tell anyone what she is suffering from.

But this is not the way this love sickness of hers is going to end.

No. I shall tell Theseus all about it and then the secret will be out.

As for the young man, my enemy, his father, Theseus, will have him killed by using one of the three wishes –they're curses, really- which his own father, the Lord of the sea, Poseidon, had granted him, granted Theseus, I mean, as a gift. Theseus is allowed to ask his father, Poseidon to grant him three wishes and all three will be delivered.

Still, Phaedra will die! Yes, she will die, alright but with her honour, still intact!

I'm not at all interested in her misfortune. No, what I am far more interested in is to see that those who treat me with disrespect get adequately punished.

*Noise from within (SL) from a group of men who are singing, as they are approaching.*

Ah! I can see Hippolytus coming this way. End of his hunting venture for the day, it seems. I'd better be off!

A whole hoard of his servants are with him singing songs about his lovely Artemis! If only he knew how wide the gates of the Underworld are opened and ready for him! If only he knew that today's light is the last light his eyes will enjoy!

*Exit Aphrodite.*

*Enter Hippolytus, carrying a garland, followed by a throng of servants.*

*He walks over to the statue of Artemis.*

**Hippolytus:**

Come, men, sing with me!

Let's sing about Zeus' daughter, the divine Artemis, the one who cares for us!

**Servant 1:**

Most reverend lady, most gracious lady!

Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto!

**Servant 2:**

The fairest virgin of them all.

You live in a house of gold!

Your father's house in heaven!

**Servant 3:**

Greetings, Artemis, Greetings, gracious lady, The fairest of all the virgins who live on Mount Olympus!

**Hippolytus:** *offering the garland*

This is for you, dear lady!

I've plaited this garland for you, gracious goddess.

I've gathered its flowers from a virgin meadow, gracious lady.

A meadow where no shepherd thinks it proper to bring his flocks to graze, A meadow never yet touched by the blade of the iron scythe.

A truly virgin meadow, gracious lady!

A meadow where even the bee makes its way through it in Spring with utmost care!

A meadow which Holy Reverence nourishes its ground with the cool water of the river streams!

A meadow which only those who are chaste, not simply by schooling but by their very nature, may harvest its blooms. For all others, for those who are impure, it is forbidden to pluck its flowers.

*Enter Slave from the palace who stands quietly and watches his master and the group of friends.*

And so gracious lady, from the hands of one who worships you, take this garland for your golden hair.

*He places the garland on the statue's head.*

Of all the mortals alive, only I am allowed this honour because only I spend my days with you and speak with you. Only I, gracious lady, hear your voice, though never see your face.

How I wish, dear lady that my life will end in the purity that it has begun.

**Slave:**

My Prince –I'll call you Prince, my Prince because we should really only call the gods "masters" isn't that right, my Prince?

*Hippolytus nods in agreement*

Well, my Prince, would you, my Prince, listen to a word of good advice from me, my Prince?

**Hippolytus:**

Of course I would, slave. Not to do so would be the deed of a fool.

**Slave:**

My Prince, you do know the rule that all mortals should follow, don't you, my Prince?

**Hippolytus:**

No, which rule are you referring to, slave?

**Slave:**

My Prince, I'm referring to the rule that says that all mortals detest the proud.

**Hippolytus:**

Ah, of course, I do. All proud mortals are a pain to us all.

**Slave:**

And, of course, those who are humble are charming, yes, my Prince?

**Hippolytus:**

They certainly are. And they are quick to help and serve.

**Slave:**

Do you think, my Prince, that this is also true with the gods?

**Hippolytus:**

Of course, I do. That is, if we, mortals abide by the laws of the immortals.

**Slave:**

But then, my Prince, why is it you do not show any reverence to a venerable goddess?

**Hippolytus:**

Which goddess are you talking about?

Watch your mouth now, slave! Careful that your mouth does not utter the wrong words to me!

**Slave:** *Indicating the statue of Aphrodite*

This goddess, there, my Prince. The one right next to your gate, my Prince! Aphrodite, sir!

**Hippolytus:** *Dismissively*

Ah, that one!

Being a pure man, I greet her only from a distance.

**Slave:**

But, my Prince, this goddess is revered by many mortals. She's very famous among us all, my Prince!

**Hippolytus:**

Different mortals revere different gods, slave, just as different gods respect different mortals.

**Slave:**

My Prince, I wish you good fortune and to gain all the wisdom you need.

**Hippolytus:**

I honour no god who is honoured only at night!

**Slave:**

Ah, my son! We must honour all the gods!

**Hippolytus:** *Turning his back to the slave*

My friends, go inside and prepare the meal!

A full table after a good hunting session is an absolute joy!

And rub down my horses, as well, so that after the meal I can harness them to the cart and give them a proper exercise.

*Turning to the slave again*

As for your Aphrodite, well, tell her that I bid her a long farewell!

*Friends and Hippolytus exit into the palace.*

**Slave:** *Shakes his head with disbelief at the words and attitude of his master*

No, we old folks should not act like the young folks do. At least not when they have thoughts like that!

*Turning to the statue of Aphrodite*

No, my gracious lady, Aphrodite, I shall pray to you, to your statue, with words that are appropriate for a slave, a slave, just like me.

And, gracious lady, do please forgive the young whose excessive pride make them say silly things. Pretend, my lady, not to hear their foolish words! I'm sure that gods are much wiser than mortals!

*Exit slave into the palace.*

*Enter the chorus of Troezen women.*

**Chorus:**

There is a rock, at the very edge of the earth, they say, out of which the clear waters of the river Oceanus flow and fall from all around its precipices to form lots of

fountains. People dip their urns into those fountains. That's where my friend was the other day. She washes her brightly coloured clothes in the waters of that river and then she spreads them over the warm backs of the rocks, under the sun. It was there that I first heard the news about our queen.

**Chorus:**

Ah, our queen!

They say, she just lies sick in bed, indoors, all day, her beautiful head of blond hair, covered by finely woven veils.

**Chorus:**

I heard that for three days now her divine lips haven't touched even one of the holy and life-nourishing fruit of the goddess Demeter.

**Chorus:**

It's her wish to put an end to some secret thing she's suffering from, by cutting short her life.

**Chorus:**

Poor girl!

Has some god or other took possession of your mind, dear girl?

Pan, or Hekate, perhaps?

**Chorus:**

Perhaps the reverend Chorybantes?

**Chorus:**

Or Cybele, the mountain mother?

**Chorus:**

Could it be that you're being tormented by guilt for sinning against Dictyna, the goddess of the wild beasts? Maybe you have forgotten to offer her the sacrificial bread. Because, she, too wanders about near those salt-water eddies that swirl about on the dry land, down by the shore.

**Chorus:**

Perhaps it's your Lord and husband, my dear lady, the King of the Athenians!

**Chorus:**

Perhaps some other woman has turned his mind, dear lady.

**Chorus:**

Perhaps she took him into her house and turned him against your embraces!

**Chorus:**

Maybe some sailor from Crete, sailed into our welcoming harbour and brought some dreadful news to our queen –

**Chorus:**

So dreadful that her soul, weighed heavily with grief drove her to her bed!

**Chorus:**

No friends!

No! This is the very nature of women!

It is unbalanced.

There's the awful pain of childbirth and then the pain of dizzy spells in the brain – and there is no harmony between these two.

**Chorus:**

Ha!



I had that scream of terror dart through my womb once!

But then I prayed to Artemis, the goddess who averts that pain, the goddess of the bow and arrow and she came! Praise be to the heavens, this, most welcome visitor came to me!

*From the palace enter the nurse and Phaedra, who is supported by her servants. They help her walk over to the couch where she lies down.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look! Her old nurse is bringing our queen outside!

**Chorus:**

Look how sad and heavy her face looks!

**Chorus:**

It's getting worse!

**Chorus:**

I wish I knew what it is that's hurting her so much!

**Chorus:**

Look how withered her body looks!

**Chorus:**

Look how pale her face looks!

**Nurse:**

Oh, the horrible things, the shocking diseases that mortals can suffer from!

Tell me what I should do for you, my dear lady and tell what I should I not!

Here we are then.

The daylight, my lady. The clear sky. Your couch is here, too, outside the house.

All day, you talked about coming out here but I know, in no time at all, you'll be sick of all this and you'll want to go back inside again. Nothing can give you any pleasure, my lady. Nothing. Nothing you have pleases you, only what you have not. Ah!

It's better to be sick yourself than to be looking after someone else who's sick. The first is a single task but the second, the second makes for double work. The work of the hand follows the work of the heart.

But then again, the whole of a mortal is nothing but trouble. Trouble and work and no rest from either!

But then again, whatever else there is, whatever good there is outside of life, it's all covered by a great cloud of darkness. And so we cling onto this one. Onto this life. We stick to this life because it's this life that shines on this earth. What experience do we have of the other? What do we know of the things that are beneath it?

We listen to too many stories! Blindly get carried away with them!

Fables of fancy!

**Phaedra:**

Help me, friends! Help me stay upright. Help me keep my head up.

Come, come! Hold my hands, friends!

Ah!

This scarf is heavy on my head, take it off, please! Let my hair fall loose on my shoulders!

**Nurse:**

Come, my child! Courage!  
Stop shifting your body about like that!  
You could cope with your pain much easier, my child if you behaved like the noble lady you are. With silence and with a strong heart.  
Mortals must endure pain.

**Phaedra:**

Oh, how I wish!  
How I wish I could drink some pure water from the cool springs!  
How I wish I could lie and rest under the poplar trees of a lush meadow!

**Nurse:**

Dear child!  
What are you saying?  
Stop talking like this in front of all these people. What silly things your tongue rattles off!

**Phaedra:** *Tries to get up*

Come, take me to the mountains!  
I want to go to the mountains! To the woods. The pine forests.  
Take me to where the hunting dogs chase the spotted deer!  
Gods!  
Oh, Gods!  
I want to watch the dogs hunt the deer.  
I want to cheer them on!  
And I want to hold a Thessalian spear in my hand, up here, next to my golden hair and hold it high and then hurl it at them!

**Nurse:**

Heavens, my child!  
Why in heavens' name would you want to do such things?  
What is this sudden love for hunting? And mountain springs?  
Goodness! We have a lovely cool spring right here, just around the walls of the palace. You can take all the water you want from there!

**Phaedra:**

Oh, dear Artemis!  
My goddess!  
Goddess of the salty lakes!  
Goddess of the race tracks that echo with the hooves of horses!  
How I wish I were there now, on your plains, breaking Eneians colts!

**Nurse:**

Again!  
Again these mad words, my child!  
Such madness, child!  
One minute you want to race off to the mountains to go hunting and the next you want to run off to the sandy racetracks chasing after horses!  
We need a mighty seer to work out what god pulls at the reins of your mind, my child, what god has driven your senses away from their right track!

**Phaedra:**

Ah!

Such misery!  
What have I done? What could it be that I have done?  
Where has my mind gone?  
I have gone mad!  
Some god has taken my mind away.

Ah!

Such misery!  
Nurse, put the scarf over my head again! I am so ashamed of the things I've said.  
Quick, nurse, cover my head. My face is flooded with tears!  
Oh, I am so ashamed!  
Sanity is a source of pain but madness is a sickness!  
Best die sensing nothing!

**Nurse:** *Rolls the scarf back over Phaedra's face and head.*

Here you are, child. I cover your head!

Now when will death cover my body?

This long life of mine has taught me many things. One is that when friends fill each other's cup with love, they should do so carefully. Moderately.  
Give love, by all means but not drain the very marrow of your soul of it.  
The ribbons of love in your heart should be loosely bound so that you can either undo them completely or tighten them at will. To suffer the pain of two loves in the one soul, like I am doing now, is heavy suffering, indeed. I fear I suffer too much for this child.

They say a life that's lived too sternly is a life that brought more distress than joy, worse to your health. That's why I'd rather praise moderation than extreme austerity.

The wise folks will agree with me there.

**Chorus:**

Old lady, faithful nurse to our Queen, what is it that's brought our dear Phaedra into such a dreadful state?

**Chorus:**

Please tell us, dear nurse, what's wrong with the poor girl?

**Nurse:**

I don't know. She won't tell me what's wrong with her.

**Chorus:**

Not even how this illness started?

**Nurse:**

No, she won't answer that question or any other question I ask her.

**Chorus:**

Ah, but look at her!

Look how weak her body looks!

**Nurse:**

Of course her body is weak! She hasn't touch any food for three days now!

**Chorus:**

Why has she done that? Has she gone mad or is she trying to kill herself?

**Nurse:**

Kill herself. She wants to die –by starving herself!

**Chorus:**

But does her husband know what she's up to? Does he agree with it?

**Nurse:**

No, he knows nothing. She says nothing to him. Denies she's ill.

**Chorus:**

But can he not work it out?

**Chorus:**

All he's got to do is look at her face!

**Nurse:**

How could he do that? He's always running off abroad!

**Chorus:**

Why don't you force her to tell you what's wrong with her?

**Chorus:**

Force her to tell you what's driven her out of her senses.

**Nurse:**

Ladies, I've tried everything and got nowhere with her.

But I won't stop trying. And now that you're all here, you can see for yourselves how I behave towards my lady in her hour of pain.

Come dear girl!

Come, let's forget all the things we said to each other before!

Now, dear child, let's make a deal.

You try and loosen that painful look of your face –there, undo those wrinkles of pain from your forehead and I, this time, I will try and behave better; listen much more sympathetically to everything you want to tell me and... and I'll use more soothing words to you.

And then, if you're suffering from those... those unmentionable ills we, women suffer from, well, there are women here who can comfort you. But if it can be uttered in the presence of men, then tell us so we can bring in a physician.

Speak, darling, speak!

Come on, don't stay silent. Speak, my child!

Come, child, either argue with me or agree with me but don't just stay silent.

Say something, child!

*Turning to the chorus*

You see, girls?

I can make no progress at all with her. None! I am wasting my time!

Ah! I can't get anywhere with the girl!

She was not moved by gentle words before and she is not moved now.

*Back to Phaedra*

But you can be certain of this, child: Be as stubborn as the ocean, if you want but by being so stubborn, you will die and by dying, you will be betraying your sons! Yes, my queen, your sons because they will no longer have any claim to your father's inheritance! To his palace, my queen! They will have no claim to it at all!

By the Amazonian goddess, my lady! By the horse-loving Artemis, who bore the master of your own sons, my lady. A bastard son, child, a bastard who thinks himself a noble. You know very well who I mean, my child. You know I mean Hippolytus!

**Phaedra:**

Oh!

**Nurse:**

What, does that thought bother you?

**Phaedra:**

Nurse, you are killing me!

I beg you, Nurse! I beg you, in Heaven's name, never speak of him again, Nurse!

**Nurse:**

Ah, ha! You are, after all, sane!

But sane or not, you're still not willing to help your own sons, my child!

Save your sons by staying alive, my Queen!

**Phaedra:**

My sons!

I love my sons. It is not my sons who torture me!

**Nurse:**

What then?

*Suddenly a horrible thought crosses her mind*

Your hands, my Queen. Your hands are clean of blood?

**Phaedra:**

Yes, Nurse. My hands are clean of blood!

But my mind, my mind, Nurse, is unclean!

**Nurse:**

Your mind, child?

How so? Can some enemy have hurled some calamitous curse at you?

**Phaedra:**

No, Nurse. Not an enemy but a friend, Nurse.

A friend is destroying me. Against his wishes, against mine.

**Nurse:**

What? A friend?

Has Theseus committed a grave sin against you, my lady?

**Phaedra:**

Ah no!

May I never sin against that man!

**Nurse:**

Not Theseus?

But then, child, what is this terror that overwhelms you so much that you want to die?

**Phaedra:**

Oh, dear Nurse!

Nurse, do let me sin! It is not against you, I sin my Nurse!

**Nurse:**

No, you're not sinning against me, willingly, child but you'll still be the end of me!

*In a sudden move, the Nurse kneels beside Phaedra and grasps her hand and knee.*

**Phaedra:**

What are you doing, Nurse? Ah, my arm!

**Nurse:**

Your arm and your knees, child! And I'll never let go of them!

**Phaedra:**

Ah, poor woman! You want to know the truth but the truth will be the end of you!

**Nurse:**

It would be worse for me to lose you, child!

**Phaedra:**

Lose me?

My death, dear Nurse, will bring death to you but honour to me!

**Nurse:**

Honour? Well then, why hide it from me, child? Have I not the right to know this.... this truth?

**Phaedra:**

No, because I'm trying to turn shame into honour.

**Nurse:**

But then, will this honour not be greater if it were revealed?

**Phaedra:**

Oh, Nurse!

Please! By the gods, I ask you to leave me be! Let me go of my hand!

**Nurse:**

I shall not! Not until you give me what is mine!

**Phaedra:**

Ah, nurse!

I have too much respect for your suppliant hand not to give it you, so I shall!

**Nurse:**

Good. Then I'll say no more.

From now it is your turn to speak.

*The Nurse lets go of Phaedra's hand and knee.*

*Phaedra sits up on the couch.*

**Phaedra:**

Oh, mother! Oh, Pasiphae! King Minos' bride!

Oh, my poor mother! What a love you had endured!

**Nurse:**

Are you talking about the bull from Crete, my child?

Is that what you mean?

**Phaedra:**

And, you, poor darling sister, Ariadne, Dionysus' bride!

**Nurse:**

What's wrong, my child? Are you speaking ill of your parents?

**Phaedra:**

Yes, those two and me, a third! How miserably I die!

**Nurse:**

Child you're baffling me! Where do all these words take us?

**Phaedra:**

They take us back. Back to that time... This misery of mine is old. It comes from long ago.

**Nurse:**

That does not make things any clearer for me, child...

**Phaedra:**

Oh, nurse! If only you could utter my words instead of me!

**Nurse:**

Phaedra, I am not a seer to uncover what is hidden in your mind.

**Phaedra:**

Nurse, tell me, please: What do people mean when they say, they're in love?

**Nurse:**

Ah, love! They mean to say, my girl that they feel great pleasure and great pain all the very same time!

Phaedra: Well then, it would be the second that I feel.

**Nurse:**

What are you saying, my child? That you are in love? But who is the man?

**Phaedra:**

His name?

I wonder what it is.

*Turning towards the statue of Artemis.*

He is the son of the Amazon goddess.

**Nurse:**

Hippolytus? Do you mean Hippolytus, child?

**Phaedra:**

You uttered the words, not me!

**Nurse:**

Oh, no! My child, what could you mean by this? You have destroyed me with this!

*Turning to the chorus*

Ladies, no! No, this is unbearable! I cannot bear to live any longer!

No! I hate the light of this day! I hate this day!

I shall throw myself over a cliff and die! Hades will save me from this life!

Farewell, ladies! I am leaving you! I am no longer alive!

Even the virtuous desire the evil! They might not wish it but they do, just the same.

*Indicating the statue of Aphrodite*

Aphrodite!

Now I see!

Now I see that she is not just a mere god but some force far mightier than that!

She has destroyed Phaedra!

She has destroyed me!

She has destroyed the Palace!

*The chorus rushes about in alarm and confusion.*

**Chorus:**

Ah! Did you hear that? Did you hear what our queen just said between her sighs of pain?

**Chorus:**

Misery that the ears can't bear to hear!

**Chorus:**

How I wish! How I wish I was not alive to hear the pain in your heart, my queen!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Oh, how you must suffer from this agony, my queen!

**Chorus:**

Ah, what pains we mortals feed on!

**Chorus:**

Oh, my Queen!

You have brought evil –evil and death!- out into the sunlight!

**Chorus:**

What else awaits you this endless day?

**Chorus:**

Some unexpected horror will happen to the palace!

**Chorus:**

There is no doubt about what the Cretan goddess has in store for us.

**Chorus:**

Oh, you poor Cretan girl!

**Phaedra:**

Ladies!

You, women who live in this, the uttermost corner of Pelops' land!

I have often wondered, just wondered, during some long nights, what it is that brought about the downfall of the lives of mortals and I came to the opinion that this is not due to the nature of their minds because, many of them do possess much wisdom.

Rather, I think, we ought to look at the question in this manner:

We know and understand very well what is virtue and what is evil but, unfortunately, we fail to act virtuously. Some of us do so because we are lazy, others again because we give priority to pleasure rather than virtue.

And life has many pleasures. Lengthy and idle chats, for example, and indolence –a pleasant wrong, and shame; which has a double face, one of which, to be sure, is not an evil thing to possess but then there is yet the other face of it, the one whose weight crushes whole households, and if which was the good face of it and which was the bad was easy to discern, then the word describing them would not be the same.

This, as it happens, is my opinion on the matter and no drug, no magic potion that would make me contradict it and then believe its opposite.

Let me tell you the path my mind took to arrive at this conclusion.

Once the darts of love had caused their wounds, I wondered how best to treat them.

First, I thought I'd say nothing about them. The tongue can never be trusted, I thought. It can give grand advice to others but it can also get you into a great deal of trouble, all by itself!

Then, I thought that I could behave like the noble woman I am and tolerate this madness nobly. Use self discipline, I thought. That would heal it.

But then, when neither of these two plans managed to beat Aphrodite's attack, a third plan came to my mind.



It's the best plan and I am certain you'll agree.

It is to die.

Death will not only hide what good deeds I have committed but it will also spare me from a throng of witnesses to those deeds I am ashamed of.

I knew only too well that this madness I suffered and the deed that brought it about was shameful. Not only that but I am also a woman, something that men detest! Curse the woman who first began to pollute her marriage bed by sleeping with another one! Let her die a most miserable death!

And this thing... this evil.... it begins with the women in the families of the nobles. Where else? Because when the common folks see the nobles behaving in such a shameful manner, they'll think that it's acceptable and so they, too, will behave just as shamefully!

And then there's the other lot! The lot that are full of virtue with words but their thoughts are full of mischief. I hate that sort of woman, as well!

*Turning to the statue of Aphrodite*

Tell me Aphrodite! Tell me Lady of the sea!

Tell me how these women can dare look at their husbands in the eye? How can they be so certain that their accomplices, the Night and the walls of their house won't suddenly start screaming? How can they not be afraid of that?

And that's what brought me to my conclusion, dear friends. To my death.

I don't want to be found shaming my husband or the sons I bore. I want my sons to live as free men in this glorious city. In Athens. Free to speak their mind, free to flourish, free to enjoy a good name, a name untarnished by me, their own mother. Even the bravest of men falls if he finds out that his mother or father have committed deeds of shame.

They say there's only one thing that rivals the worth of a life: to have an untarnished, a virtuous heart! The others, the mortals whose hearts are bad, will be exposed sooner or later, according to their Fate, by Time who will raise a mirror of their deeds to their face, as if to a little girl. I hope I will not be among them.

**Chorus:**

Yes, yes! What a wondrous thing virtue is everywhere!

**Chorus:**

How great its fruits of glory and honour they are among all mortals!

**Nurse:**

My lady, I admit that what you have told me earlier had given me a sudden and dreadful shock but then I thought again and realised that I was quite wrong.

Second thoughts can often be much wiser with us mortals.

What you're suffering from, dear girl is nothing unusual nor beyond comprehension.

*Indicating the statue of Aphrodite*

No, dear child, what has happened to you is that you are the victim of the goddess' anger.

So you're in love! Well, what is strange about that? You're in love just like many others. Do you want to die because of that? Because of love?

What would then be the point of people falling in love with their neighbours, if they must then die for it? Where's the benefit in that?

When Aphrodite charges at us in full flight, she is unstoppable! No point in trying to resist her because whilst she treats gently those who accept her and obey her, she is ruthless to those who are too proud for her. Those who think they are stronger than her. She grabs that lot and what do you think she does with them? She is merciless with them!

Our goddess is everywhere. In the air, in every wave of the sea. She sows and she harvests everything! She plants love and from love all we mortals are born.

All those people who read the old books, those who love the Muses, they all know that Zeus once lusted madly after Semele and they also know that Dawn, goddess of that delightful light, loved Cephalus so much that she grabbed him and took him up to the heavens with her! But do these gods commit suicide like you want to do by exiling themselves from the heavens and coming to live down here, among us mortals? No, they go on living up there, with each other. They simply shrug the whole thing off as a bit of bad luck!

And you can't cope with all that?

Well then, my child, if you don't want to live under these rules, then perhaps your father should have made a deal with the gods before he did his sowing, or perhaps he should have given you a different lot of gods to be your masters!

Think, child!

How many men do you think there are –men full of sense- who see their marriage beds betrayed but pretend to see nothing?

How many fathers do you think there are who have helped their sons deal their way out of entanglements with Aphrodite?

Here's the rule mortals follow: The wise thing to do with shameful deeds is to hide them! Out of everyone's eye!

No point in mortals killing themselves trying to make their lives all perfect! Nobody can build a perfect roof over their house, now, can they? Same thing.

A horrible misfortune like the one that has crashed upon you – how could you hope to escape it? No, my child! In the full reckoning of things, being a mortal, if your good deeds outweigh the bad ones, then consider yourself lucky, indeed. So, dear girl, forget all these ugly thoughts. Swallow your pride. What, after all, is pride? It is thinking that you're better than the immortals!

Accept, it, girl! You're in love! You're in love because a god ordered it that you'd fall in love; and if being in love is making you ill, then try a good remedy to ease its effect, not all this horrible stuff you've got in your head!

There are all sorts of charms and chants and potions that we can find to cure you of it.

And it has to be us, us, women, to go looking for these devices because men, well, men are just too slow when it comes to conjuring them up for us.

**Chorus:**

Phaedra, I think the advice your nurse is giving you to overcome your great misfortune, is admirable, though I prefer your way of thinking.

But I do know, my lady, that my words are more hurtful to your ears than hers.

**Phaedra:**

And that's exactly what destroys good cities and homes: fine speeches!

No, our words shouldn't just try to please our ears but, rather, to build us a good

reputation!

**Nurse:** *Angry*

Oh! What huge words! What piousness!

Forget the big words, dear girl! We must think of this man of yours! Find him immediately and tell him with straight talk what's really going on here.

Now listen, my girl!

If you hadn't strayed and fallen into such a great mountain of troubles, I wouldn't have talked to you the way I did about love and lust and all that!

But trying to save your life, my dear girl, requires lots of hard work and so, who would argue with my method?

**Phaedra:** *Outraged at the Nurse*

Shame! Shame on you for uttering such disgraceful words! Keep your mouth shut and never talk like that again!

**Nurse:**

Shameful they might be but they speak of the better course for you!

The deed that saves your life is better than the fine words that may save your reputation but send you to the world below!

**Phaedra:**

By the gods!

I beg you, go no further! Speak no more!

You utter pretty words that say shameful things.

My soul has been worked upon by love so much that if you use these pretty words to say such shameful things then, I'm afraid, I shall be undone by the very thing I'm trying to escape!

**Nurse:**

As you wish.

Still, since you've made the mistake then take my advice and do as I tell you now: I just remembered that I have some love medicine at home which, if you're brave enough to take it, will get you out of this trouble of yours without shame to your reputation nor harm to your mind.

First, though I must get some little token from your lover. A lock of hair, or a small piece of his clothing and then mingle the two into one, single charm.

**Phaedra:**

What sort of medicine is it, something you drink or do you apply it on your skin?

**Nurse:**

I don't know, child. Seek the cure, not the knowledge!

**Phaedra:**

I'm afraid you're getting too clever for me!

**Nurse:**

Afraid of what child? There's nothing to be afraid of.

**Phaedra:**

I'm afraid you might say something to Theseus' son.

**Nurse:**

Oh, don't worry about that, my child!

I'll organize everything perfectly.

Turning to the statue of Aphrodite

I only pray that you, my lady, goddess of the sea, help in all this.  
As to the rest of my plans, I've got enough friends inside the palace to talk them over with.

*Exit Nurse*

*Phaedra retreats to the couch and lies down, covering her face with her scarf.*

**Chorus:**

Oh, god of lust!

**Chorus:**

Eros!

**Chorus:**

You make eyes drip with desire!

**Chorus:**

You infuse sweet pleasure into the souls you hunt!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Eros! Never hunt me in anger! Never be violent towards me!

**Chorus:**

Neither the arrows of fire or that of the stars are as powerful as those of Aphrodite which Eros, the son of Zeus, flings at us by his own hand!

**Chorus:**

It's pointless for the Greeks to slaughter even more bulls on the shrines of the Pythian Apollo, and by the banks of the Alpheus river, if we neglect to honour Eros!

**Chorus:**

Eros! Lord and master of all mortals!

**Chorus:**

Eros, who holds the keys to Aphrodite's sweet chambers!

**Chorus:**

Eros, whose visits bring ruin and devastation to mortals!

**Chorus:**

And then there was princess Iole of Oechalia!

Right up until the moment that Aphrodite delivered that girl to Herakles, Alcmene's son, she knew nothing of men, of marriage beds or love.

**Chorus:**

Like a Water nymph!

A Maenad!

A carefree filly!

**Chorus:**

Aphrodite tore that poor girl from her father's house.

The house of Eurytus.

**Chorus:**

What blood was shed for the sake of that union!

What smoke was raised for the sake of that wedlock!

What a murderous wedding!

**Chorus:**

A whole city was sacked for the sake of that marriage!

Poor girl!

What misery that yoke had brought you!

**Chorus:**

Oh, sacred walls of Thebes!

And you, springs of Dirce, witness my account of how Aphrodite comes to us.

**Chorus:**

Even Semele, mother of twice-born Dionysius, she yoked with the fiery thunder!

**Chorus:**

A wedding bed of death for the poor girl!

**Chorus:**

Aphrodite is dreadful!

Her breath kills all!

She hovers above us all like a bee.

*Suddenly Phaedra hears a noise from the palace and bolts upright with fright.*

**Phaedra:**

Quiet, women!

*She moves closer to the wall and listens.*

Oh, no! I hear my undoing!

**Chorus:**

What is it, Phaedra?

**Chorus:**

What did you hear in the house that made you so afraid?

**Phaedra:**

Wait! Be quiet! Let me work out what they're saying in there!

**Chorus:**

I'll be quiet but this looks like trouble.

**Phaedra:**

Oh!

Misery!

Oh!

Pain!

**Chorus:**

What is it, my lady?

**Chorus:**

What are you saying?

**Chorus:**

What did you hear, my lady?

**Chorus:**

What is that shook your heart so much?

**Phaedra:**

I am dead, ladies! I am dead! Come and listen! Listen through this door. Listen to what havoc the house is in!

**Chorus:** *Refusing to approach the door*

No, my lady! You listen through the door.

What goes on in your house is for you to find out...

**Chorus:**

...and then for you to tell us!

**Phaedra:**

It's Hippolytus, the son of that amazon woman who loves horses!  
He is shouting horrible things at my servant!

**Chorus:**

Ah! I can hear his voice but I can work out what he's saying!

**Chorus:**

Tell us what he's shouting about!

**Phaedra:**

I can work it out very clearly! He's just called her a dirty bawd and told her that she has betrayed her master's marriage bed!

**Chorus:**

Ah! How terrible!

**Chorus:**

Dear friend, you've been betrayed!

**Chorus:**

How can I help you, my dear girl?

**Chorus:**

Your secret is out!

**Chorus:**

You are destroyed!

**Phaedra:**

Ah!

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Betrayed by your own friends!

**Phaedra:**

She has destroyed me!

Out of love and out of a desire to cure this illness of mine, she has told him of my concerns! Love but betrayal also.

**Chorus:**

So, what will you do then?

**Chorus:**

Oh, you have suffered something that no one can cope with!

**Phaedra:**

I know only of one thing that I can do.

To die as quickly as possible! It's the only cure of these troubles of mine.

*Exit Phaedra into the palace.*

*A minute later an outraged Hippolytus, enter through the same door, followed by the Nurse*

**Hippolytus:** *Shouts*

Oh, mother Earth!

Oh, broad sunlight!

The things I hear! Unspeakable stuff!

**Nurse:**

Hush, my boy!

Quiet!

Someone will hear you, shouting like that!

**Hippolytus:**

Quiet?

How can I be quiet after the words I've heard?

**Nurse:** *Takes his right hand and raises it to her heart*

My, son, I beg you!

Please, by your beautiful, right hand, I beg you!

**Hippolytus:**

Keep your distance! Don't touch my clothes, woman!

**Nurse:** *She falls to her knees and touches his*

By your knees, my son!

I beg you, my son! You will ruin me!

**Hippolytus:**

Ruin you? How would I ruin you?

Didn't you just tell me that there was nothing wrong with your little tale?

**Nurse:**

My son, what I've told you was not for everyone else to hear.

**Hippolytus:**

It is best that good tales are heard by many.

**Nurse:**

Your oath, my child! I beg you, don't break it!

**Hippolytus:**

That oath was sworn by my tongue, not by my heart!

**Nurse:** *Rises from her knees*

But what is it you want to do, my son, destroy all your friends?

**Hippolytus:** *Spits*

Ha! Friends! I spit the word! Criminals are not friends!

**Nurse:**

Then forgive them!

All mortals make mistakes, my son. It is in our nature.

**Hippolytus:**

Zeus!

Oh, Zeus! Why did you bring woman into the light of the sun?

Woman, this impure, this evil destroyer of mortals!

If you wanted to sow the seeds for the mortal race you should not have done it through women but a price.

Men should be able to just go to some temple or other, put there some piece of bronze or iron, or even some gold -whatever their means would allow- and with that price paid, pick themselves the son they want. Take him home with him and there, the two men could live out their lives, in their house without a woman to be seen anywhere!

As it is now, even before we want to bring this... this curse, into our house, we must squander away our whole estate!

And here's what I mean by this. Here's the clear proof of it: The woman's father, the man who had begotten that beast and who had raised her -that poor man, not

only has to lay a dowry out for her but he must also send her away, so he can shed from himself this unbearable burden!

And then, her husband, the other poor creature, the one who has brought this... fake statue, into his house, this ruinous beast, her husband, the moment he gets her into his house, he begins to happily decorate her!

He begins the little game of cajoling her with pretty clothes! Fancy clothes for a worthless, vile statue! And there, you see, there goes, bit by little bit, all the wealth of his estate!

And then come the unavoidable choices of his constraints. Either his in-laws are so good that he accepts the burden of having to endure a rotten and painful marriage, or it's the other way around: he gets a great wife but rotten and painful in-laws, in which case, he'll need to content himself with the thought that, the good part of this marriage cancels out the rotten part.

But the man who gets it the easiest is the one who brings into his house a woman who is totally useless. A nothing. A zero. A simple, simple-minded woman. A useless woman.

But I hate the smart ones! I simply loathe that sort!

Oh, Zeus, spare me!

I hope I'll never end up with a woman in my house who's cleverer than women should be! Aphrodite plants a lot more evil schemes in the minds of those clever ones! The dumb ones are kept on the straight and narrow because of their... rather diminutive wit.

And, if you do get a wife, give her no slave. Instead, give her animals. Give her dumb brutes for companions. Wild beasts that you can't talk to and they can't talk back. Give a bitch of a wife a servant and what have you got? The two talk together inside, hatch up all sorts of evil plans and then the servant goes off and carry those plans outside the house!

*Turning to the Nurse*

And that's how you did this, you vile creature!

That's how you came to me, to fill my ears with abhorrent stories about my father's sacred marriage bed.

Stories that I will flush out with running water. How could I ever be such traitor, the very thought of it makes me feel disgusting?

And let me tell you straight, woman! What saves your life after this, is my own piety because, had not my hands been tied by that oath, I'd never have kept this whole story from my father! But since he's out of the country, I'll leave the house and keep silent about it.

But we'll both be back and then I'll see how you treat him. You and your mistress. I've had a taste of your arrogance, now, so I'll see how you behave in his presence.

*Turns to leave in disgust*

Curse you woman and curse all of you, women!

No matter how often I'm told that I am constantly saying this, my hatred to you all will never be quenched. I say it again and again because again and again you prove yourselves to be hateful and if they want me to stop saying it then let a man teach them how not to be hateful Otherwise let me disparage them for ever!



*Exit Hippolytus SL*

**Nurse:**

How miserable is the fate of women! How unfortunate their lives!

**Chorus:**

What then?

**Chorus:**

What's left for us now?

**Chorus:**

What words are left for us?

**Chorus:**

What tricks can we devise to undo this miserable knot of accusations?

**Nurse:**

We have failed.

*Enter Phaedra from the palace*

**Phaedra:**

We have received justice!

Oh, mother Earth!

Oh, Sun!

How can I escape what Fate has in store for me, my friends?

What god, my friends, what mortal will come to help me now?

Who will appear at my side to help me, my friends, help someone to commit unjust deeds?

This pain, this torture I'm suffering now will be hard to endure in life.

Oh! What woman is more unfortunate than me?

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Dear lady, it's all over!

**Chorus:**

Your servant's schemes have not worked!

**Chorus:**

It's all bad, my lady!

**Phaedra:** *To Nurse*

Vile monster!

Monster who destroys friends! See now what you have done to me!

I hope Zeus, who is the father of my race destroys you now! I hope he destroys you with his blazing thunderbolt! Destroys you root and branch!

Have I not told you to be silent about these things? Not to reveal any of these things and that to do so would cause me this horrible shame?

But you couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you? How can I now die with my honor unblemished?

Ah! Now I must work out new plans because now, with a mind whetted with rage, he'll run off to his father and tell him that it was all my fault – blame me for all the wrong things you've done.

He will tell the old man Pitheus about my troubles and then he will have the whole world echoing with tales of shame about me!

Curses to you!

Curses to you and to anyone else who thinks of helping their friends against their will and by shameful means!

**Nurse:**

My lady, you are right in blaming me for the trouble I have caused you but, my lady, what hurts sharply stops good judgment.

But, my child, listen to me and you will hear that I do have a reason for what I've done. I brought you up, my child and so I love you.

I looked around for the medicine to cure your illness, my child but I could not find it but rest assured, if I had found it, I would have been considered as one of the wisest mortals alive. Wisdom is measured by success, my child.

**Phaedra:**

What? What manners are these?

First you cause me all this shame and then you argue with me?

**Nurse:**

We are chatting idly now, my lady. I admit, I made a mistake but even from this point you can still save your life, child!

**Phaedra:**

Enough of your talk!

Your first advice was shameful and what you did was wrong.

Now leave me and you look after your own affairs. I shall look after mine – honourably!

*Exit Nurse*

As for you dear noble ladies of Troezen, grant me, please this one request: Say nothing of what you've just heard here.

**Chorus:**

I swear, my lady!

**Chorus:**

By holy Artemis!

**Chorus:**

Zeus' own daughter!

**Chorus:**

I will reveal none of your troubles to the daylight!

**Phaedra:**

These are good words to hear, my ladies!

I have found a means by which I can remedy my situation in such a way that my sons can live with an honourable reputation and for me to get some benefit out of my present troubles.

I will never disgrace the homes of Crete, nor will I appear before Theseus after having committed shameful deeds, just so I can save my one life!

**Chorus:**

What horrible, incurable deed are you thinking of performing, my lady?

**Phaedra:**

The deed is death. But its performance will be directed by me.

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Such shocking words, my lady!

**Chorus:**

Utter good words only, my lady!

**Phaedra:**

And you, dear friends, only give me good advice.

This day, I shall please Cypris, the goddess who so wants to destroy me, by shedding my life. I am weaker than this bitter passion.

My death though will hurt someone else. A man who shall learn not to rejoice over my ill fate. This man will take his share of my misfortune and doing so will learn about humility.

*Exit Phaedra into the palace.*

**Chorus:**

Oh, how I wish!

**Chorus:**

How I wish I lived in hidden caves...

**Chorus:**

... far away on some steep crags.

**Chorus:**

... mountains and rocks.

**Chorus:**

And a god turned me into a bird with wings...

**Chorus:**

A bird flying in huge flocks.

**Chorus:**

Soaring high above the swelling ocean...

**Chorus:**

...all the way to the shores around the Adriatic...

**Chorus:**

...above the waters of Eridanus

**Chorus:**

The waters of Eridanus where the tears of grief from the unlucky virgins fall...

**Chorus:**

Drip by drip the gleaming amber of their tears...

**Chorus:**

Tears of grief over their brother's fall...

**Chorus:**

...son of Helios, the sun god...

**Chorus:**

They fall and fall into the deep blue waves.

**Chorus:**

How I wish!

**Chorus:**

How I wish I could fly to that shore where the apple trees grow.

**Chorus:**

The trees of the harmony lovers, the Hesperides!

**Chorus:**

There, where Poseidon, the Lord of the sea, forbids the mariners from passing through into the turbulent waters and where he marks the boundary in the sky which Atlas holds.

**Chorus:**

There in Zeus' halls, where fountains gush out ambrosia, beside his every couch.

**Chorus:**

There where the sacred earth gives rich fruit to the gods, gracing them with even greater bliss.

**Chorus:**

Oh, you great white-winged ship from Crete!

You have carried my queen through the salty waves of the thunderous ocean!

**Chorus:**

And from a blessed home you carried here, to a miserable marriage!

**Chorus:**

A joyless joy!

**Chorus:**

An evil omen sent her off from Crete, her land, her home and an evil omen brought her here, to glorious Athens.

**Chorus:**

Here, her ship tied their platted ropes on the moorings of the shores at the port Munichus. Here it was where she first stepped on our land.

**Chorus:**

And so the omens were correct.

**Chorus:**

Our lady was smitten by a gruesome illness.

**Chorus:**

An unholy passion sent by the goddess Aphrodite.

**Chorus:**

An incestuous love that spun her heart into madness.

**Chorus:**

Now, crushed by her bitter luck, our lady will tie a noose around her white neck and hang herself from the beams in her bridal chamber.

**Chorus:**

Shame and a hatred for life, drove her to leave it for the glory of a clear reputation and for the ridding from her heart the pain of a shameful desire.

**Nurse:** *within*

Ah!

Ah!

Help! Anyone who's near the palace, come! Help!

Oh, my lady!

Phaedra, Theseus' wife has hanged herself!

Help!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

It's all over!

**Chorus:**

The queen is dead!

**Chorus:**

Snared in the noose!

**Chorus:**

She has hanged herself!

**Nurse:** *within*

Hurry!

Please someone hurry!

Bring a knife someone to cut the noose!

Won't someone please bring a knife?

**Chorus:**

Ladies, what do we do now?

**Chorus:**

Should we rush into the house and cut our lady free from the noose?

**Chorus:** *Shouting through the door*

Are there no young slaves about the place?

It's not wise for us to meddle!

**Nurse:** *Within*

Come, lay her neatly on the stretcher.

Straighten out her poor corpse.

What bitter house work I must perform for my master!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

Then the poor girl must be dead now!

**Chorus:**

They are laying out her corpse.

*Enter Theseus SR.*

*He is wearing a garland of green leaves.*

*He walks over to the palace door and bangs on it but the door is not opened for him.*

*Loud noises of people moving about, of tears, of wails come from within the palace*

*Theseus turns to the chorus:*

**Theseus:**

Ladies, do you know what those noises in the palace are about?

I hear such loud screams from the servants!

No one in palace is seeing fit to open the door for me and, as usual, receive me with joy and with due respect.

Could it be that something has happened to old Pittheus?

He is far into his years but losing the man would still grieve me greatly.

**Chorus:**

No, Theseus!

It is not the old folk who is hi by ill fortune!

**Chorus:**

It is the young, Theseus!

It is the young who have died!

**Chorus:**

Grieve for the young, Theseus, the young!

**Theseus:**

Oh, no!

No!

No, it isn't my sons, surely!

Have I been robbed of the lives of my sons, ladies?

**Chorus:**

No, Theseus. Your sons live.

**Chorus:**

It is their mother who is dead!

Grieve for their mother, Theseus!

**Theseus:**

What? What are saying?

Is my wife dead? How did she die?

**Chorus:**

Theseus, she has hanged herself.

**Chorus:**

She tied a long rope to the rafters of her ceiling and made a noose.

**Theseus:**

Did some great sorrow stirred her mind? Or was it some other misfortune?

**Chorus:**

I know no more than that.

**Chorus:**

We've only just arrived to the palace, ourselves, Theseus. We came to grieve at your misfortune.

**Theseus:**

Oh!

Oh!

*Tears the garland from his head and throws it to the ground in disgust*

And here I am with a crown of plaited leaves on my head!

Oh, such a foul oracle!

*Shouts through the door*

Servants!

Servants unlock this door! Pull back the heavy bars! Loosen its bolts!

I want to see the bitter sight of my dear wife!

A sight of death that has destroyed me!

*The door opens and through it, the body of Phaedra is carried on a bier by servants. Her hands are crossed over her body and a wrapped and sealed tablet lies over them.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Poor woman!

**Chorus:**

Unfortunate girl!

**Chorus:**

What things you've done, my girl!

**Chorus:**

Things that have destroyed this house!

**Chorus:**

What courage, my child!

**Chorus:**

How horrible the death you've died!

**Chorus:**

Unholy death!

**Chorus:**

A death by your own hand, Phaedra!

**Chorus:**

What was it, Phaedra?

What was it that took your life down to Hades' darkness?

**Theseus:**

Ah!

What pains I feel!

What misery I am suffering!

How horrible my Fate!

Oh, my city! Oh, Athens!

How heavy this Fate has fallen upon my house! Upon my head!

Some invisible stain, sent here by some invisible spirit!

It has crushed my life! It has made my life unlivable!

Dear woman!

Oh, the endless ocean of sorrow I can see before me!

I cannot swim through it! I cannot cross its span.

What word would be proper for me to utter, dear woman? What word would match your grave misfortune?

You flew away from within my hands and with force and violence you jumped into the hands of Hades.

Ah!

Ah!

How can I bear the horror of this Fate?

This is the doing of some ancestor!

The evil deeds of long ago.

The gods are punishing me for those ancient deeds.

**Chorus:**

My King!

The pain falls not only upon you but upon many others!

**Theseus:**

I want to go to the gloomy darkness of the world below the earth, Phaedra, wife, since I've been robbed of your sweet company!

Ah!

Phaedra!

You have killed me more than you have killed yourself, wife!

Who can tell me, dear wife, where this deadly arrow came from, this arrow that pierced your heart?

Will not someone tell me?

Or does this royal house gives shelter to all these servants for no reason at all?

Ah!

Ah, my wife!

What pain comes with your death!

What grief do I see here, my wife? What grief sees my palace!

Unbearable grief, unutterable pain, my queen!

Oh, this is death! This is my death and the death of my house!

You have left our sons, dear girl! Made them orphans!

Ah, the most beautiful of all the women under the bright sun and under the sparkling light of the night's stars!

**Chorus:**

Poor man!

**Chorus:**

What miserable grief has come down upon your house!

**Chorus:**

Tears have flooded my eyes!

**Chorus:**

Your pains have melted my heart, my lord!

**Chorus:**

I shudder at the thought of what's to come yet!

**Theseus:**

What's this here?

This tablet. It's hanging from her hand. Is there some message on it, something I don't know? Perhaps she's left me some instructions about our children, our marriage....

Oh, my poor girl, fear not! Our bridal bed and my house will be possessed by no other woman!

*Takes the tablet out of her hand*

Ah! Look! Her golden seal on the message! How enchanting it is to my eyes!

Let me see what the tablet says.

*He unwraps the tablet and begins to read it silently*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

A fresh catastrophe from the gods!



**Chorus:**

Another to follow the old one!

**Chorus:**

Why live any longer now?

**Chorus:**

This is the end of my King's house!

**Chorus:**

Of Fate!

I pray to you, if prayers you accept!

**Chorus:**

Fate do not destroy this house!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

I see evil signs heading this way!

Prophetic signs!

**Theseus:**

Ah!

What is this?

A new grief!

Ah! A grief upon a grief, this one even more unbearable, even more unutterable!

Ah! What a dismal creature I am!

**Chorus:**

What is it, my lord?

Tell us that we may know!

**Theseus:**

This tablet shouts its words!

It shouts the horror!

Ah! How can my ears endure the burden of this heavy song?

I cannot! I cannot!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

What ominous words!

**Theseus:**

I cannot!

I cannot hold the words locked behind my lips!

I cannot!

Destructive words! Unutterable words that must be uttered!

*Shouts as if to the whole city*

Citizens!

*Various citizens stream in from the sides of the stage*

Come, hear my words!

My son, Hippolytus!

He dared assault my bridal bed!

Hippolytus has shamed the holy eye of Zeus!

Well then, my father Poseidon, I call upon you!

You have promised me three curses, once! Grant me one of them now!

Strike dead my son and let him not live beyond the end of this day!  
Show me, father, that your gift is true!

Chorus: *Shocked*

Ah!

My lord, no!

**Chorus:**

No, my lord!

In heavens' name, I beg you!

Call back that prayer!

**Chorus:**

Soon, you'll learn my lord...

**Chorus:**

...You've made a mistake, my lord!

**Chorus:**

Listen to me, my lord!

**Theseus:**

No, no it's not a mistake!

And, to be certain, I shall also banish him from this land!

One of the two punishments will strike him. Either Poseidon will hear my prayer and send him off down to the house of Hades, or else, he'll go off wondering as an exile, his miserable life draining away over foreign soils.

**Chorus:** *Indicating within, SL*

My lord, look!

It is your son, Hippolytus.

**Chorus:**

Just in time!

**Chorus:**

Soften your anger, my lord, Theseus!

Think carefully about what's best, for you and for your house!

*Hippolytus rushes in.*

**Hippolytus:**

Father, what is it?

I've just heard your shout of distress and came straight here.

Tell me what's troubling you so much?

*He sees Phaedra's corpse.*

Ah!

What? What is this here? Father, this is your wife. She's dead!

Oh, what painful shock, is this!

But I have only just left her, father. She was alive only a short time ago. What's happened to her? How did she die?

Father tell me. I want to hear about this only from your own lips.

*Theseus lowers his head but says nothing*

Why the silence, father?

It is no use being silent during misfortunes, father because the heart, the heart, father, is even more greedy to hear things when it comes to misfortune.

It is not right to keep things from friends, father, and we are more than friends!

**Theseus:**

To hell with all you, mortals!

So much, you are so wrong!

Why teach a thousand crafts and skills, a thousand tricks, a thousand inventions!

Why teach all that, when you can't even teach –not even seek to teach- how to give wisdom to the fool?

**Hippolytus:**

Father, you ask for much: A teacher wise enough to make a fool think!

But what may these words of yours mean here and now, father?

I'm afraid, father, your grief has made your tongue wander about of its own accord.

**Theseus:** *His tone implies that he blames Hippolytus of being an untrue friend.*

There should be some way of knowing, of proving, which man is true and which is false. To show clearly the true friend from the false one.

And each man should own two voices, one of them to be true and the other as it will; and then the voice of truth would convict the other of its falsehood and so we would never be deceived!

**Hippolytus:**

Father!

Has someone in our family whispered in your ear some accusation against me?

Am I to suffer for something I have not done?

Your words are baffling, father! They are too hard for my mind to understand.

**Theseus:**

The boldness of the mortal mind! How far does it extend? Where does its arrogance, its shame end?

Because if it burgeons on endlessly with every new generation, if each successive man surpasses his predecessor in evil, then the gods must build yet another earth upon this earth to fit all those who are born bereft of virtue.

Ha! Look at this man here!

My son! The product of my own loins! And yet he has disgraced my bridal bed.

This dead woman here has convicted him completely! He is a man of shame. The accusation is clearly made.

*Hippolytus turns to walk away*

Come now, turn and face your father! Give me your eye!

No, don't worry about polluting me now. I am already polluted by your presence, the presence of one who has shed blood. My pollution is beyond redemption.

So, come, turn and face me!

*Hippolytus turns towards his father*

Well then, are you the man who goes about in the company of gods, away from us, mere mortals? Are you such a rare mortal? Full of virtue and chastity and free of sin?

Oh, I'm not in the slightest way convinced by all of this boasting of yours and the gods are not such fools as not to be able to see what you're truly like.

Go on, then, by all means, spout out all you want about your vegetarian diet like a quack. By all means, let Orpheus be your master! Enjoy, no, revere, if you so wish, all his idle musings, all of his many books.

Hypocrite!

You have been caught out red handed!

Citizens, I warn you all!

Have nothing to do with such men! They will trick you with their holy-sounding words, only so that they can conjure up against you, deeds of shame!

Look there!

Yes, she is dead!

Do you think this fact will save you?

No, murderer! It will not! Because this fact is the very fact that will convict you!

*Waves the tablet angrily at Hippolytus*

What oaths, what arguments could there be, you evil man, what could you possibly say that could yield more power than this tablet? Where is there more powerful proof than this? Where is there proof enough to save you from the charge of murder?

Will your argument be that she hated you? Will I be that a bastard son is always regarded as the enemy of the pure-bred? Will that be your defence?

Do you think of her such a poor merchant, then, as to trade her own life, the thing she values the most, with something as worthless as mere hatred, the hatred of you?

Or will you argue that evil resides only in women but never in men?

Ha! I know of men who, once Aphrodite takes a hold of their minds and shakes them about for a bit, they are far less stable than women. Their heads spin into utter befuddlement. And their maleness, in fact, gives them an advantage over women.

Bah!

Why waste my breath arguing with you when the body of this dead woman, the very proof of your evil deed, is right here?

Leave this land immediately!

Go off into exile and never return to this land, this land which was founded by the divine Athena herself! Go and never approach any other land ruled by the might of my spear either!

Let it not be said by anyone that in this affair I am proven to be weaker than you, or else the Isthmian Sinis will also say that I have never killed him and that I have merely boasted that I have, and so too, with the rocks of Skiron by the sea. They, too will say the same.

**Chorus:**

When things can change so quickly, from excellent to dreadful, how can any mortal say he's ever truly happy?

**Hippolytus:**

Father!

This intense anger in your heart is dreadful!

If you had examined the issue more thoroughly, father, you would have seen that though your words were good, your facts were lacking.

Father, I am more skilled in making speeches to small crowds of my own age group than to the general public. It's only natural.

And then, those who are found by the wise folks to be fools, are seen by the mob as persuasive orators.

But I am forced by this disaster that has fell upon me, to loosen my tongue and speak! But let me begin with your first attack against me.

You said you would crush me, crush me, even before I had a chance to speak even a word in my defence!

Here is the light of the sun and here is the earth and upon this sun lit earth there is no man -deny it all you wish- there is not a single man, who is more moral than I am!

To begin with, I know the importance of showing reverence to the gods. Then I also know how to make friends only with those who will do no evil whatsoever, who would feel great shame in even suggesting to others to commit evil or to do evil themselves.

And, father, I don't pretend to be one thing to those of my friends who are present and yet another to those who are absent.

The very thing which causes you enough anger that you want to destroy me, the very thing that you think you've caught me at red handed, I am innocent. To this day, my body is unstained by sex. I know nothing about this act except for what I have heard in talk or seen in paintings, paintings that I care not to look at either, because I have a virgin soul.

But perhaps you are indeed not convinced that I am pure. Well then, show me the proof you have that I am not so. What is it that you think has corrupted me?

Her body? Do you think hers was more beautiful than that of all the rest of the women in the world, or do you think I wanted to marry her so as to rule your kingdom and inherit your estate? What a fool such thinking would have made of me! Totally without a wit!

To be pure and to be a king at the same time? Do you think that would be such a pleasant thing? Not in the slightest! The crowns of tyranny corrupt the minds of those who love to wear them. I prefer the crowns of victory in the sporting events of Greece but as a citizen, I am quite content to be a runner up and enjoy the blessings that come with the company of my noble friends. That would give me enough freedom to do as I please, free of danger, something that I consider to be far more enjoyable than the crown of a king.

There is only one more thing left for me to mention. You've heard all the rest. Had there been a trial and had I a witness to speak on my character and had this woman been alive at this trial and had there been a careful examination of the facts, then you would surely learn who the real guilty person is.

But all I can do as things are now, is to swear by Zeus, god of all oaths and by the earth beneath my feet, that I have never touched your wife, that I have never ever wished to do so and that the thought had never crossed my mind.

And if I am lying then let me die in dishonour, without a name, without a city, without a shelter, an exile ever-wandering all over the earth!

And, if I am guilty, let no sea, nor soil receive my flesh once I am dead!

Perhaps she has taken her own life out of some fear she had. That, I don't know.

Beyond this, it is improper for me to speak.

She behaved virtuously, though she could not have been virtuous, whereas I who am virtuous have used my virtue to my disadvantage.

**Chorus:**

The oaths you have made to the gods are adequate enough to guarantee your innocence.

**Chorus:**

More than adequate!

**Theseus:**

Well then!

Is this man not a weaver of charms and spells? Is he not a trickster?

Such confidence! Such an even disposition!

He thinks he will seduce my soul, the soul of the father he has dishonoured!

**Hippolytus:**

I agree with your anger, father because were I your father and you my son, and had you dared defile my wife, I wouldn't have just send you into exile but I would have killed you!

**Theseus:**

How fitting these words are, coming from you!

But no, you will not die like this. This is the law you've declared for yourself, so, no, you will not die like this. A quick death is a merciful death for a miserable wretch like you.

No, your death will come as an exile, sent away from your ancestral land. You will go off wondering as an exile, your miserable life draining away over foreign soils. That is the punishment of a disrespectful man.

**Hippolytus:**

What? Will you not at least wait long enough for some evidence of my innocence appear? Will you banish me from this land immediately?

**Theseus:**

Yes!

And if I could, I would banish you to the furthest reaches of the world.

That's how much I detest you!

**Hippolytus:**

But, will you not examine any evidence? Will you not check my oaths, ask any seers? Will you send away without a trial?

**Theseus:** *Shaking the tablet at Hippolytus*

This tablet needs no seers.

It has made a very convincing trial of your guilt.

And I don't care at all about what the birds of omen, that fly about over my head say!

**Hippolytus:**

Oh, gods!

Since you, whom I worship will destroy me, why then do I not open my mouth?

But no! It'll serve no purpose. I shall not persuade those who should be persuaded and I would have also broken the oaths I've sworn!

**Theseus:**

Oh!

All this piety of yours is unbearable!

Leave now!

Leave your father's land immediately!

**Hippolytus:**

But where can I go, father?

Oh, how sad this is!

How will anyone ever offer me a shelter when I'm exiled under this charge?

**Theseus:**

You will find shelter in the house of people who love defilers of bridal beds, people who stay at home all day planning deeds of evil.

**Hippolytus:**

Your insults father have stabbed deep into my heart!

To know that you think of me as evil makes me want to shed tears!

**Theseus:**

You should have shed these tears and thought more carefully before you had planned to perform this outrage against your father's wife.

**Hippolytus:**

Oh, Palace!

If only your walls could speak and reveal my innocence!

**Theseus:**

Now that's a clever tactic! Ask the dumb walls to stand up for you when all along, the truth, though also silent, lies right here! *Indicating Phaedra.*

Here is the proof of your evil deeds!

**Hippolytus:**

Ah!

Ah!

Gods, split me in two so that I can stand across from myself and weep at my own misery!

**Theseus:**

How fitting!

You'd much rather stand and worship your own self than show respect towards your father!

**Hippolytus:**

Oh, poor mother!

Oh, what a miserable existence I live!

May none of my friends ever suffer the existence of a bastard son!

**Theseus:**

Servants!

Why haven't you thrown this man out yet?

Have you not heard me telling you for such a long time now, that this man is no son of mine. He is a stranger.

**Hippolytus:**

If any of you lay a hand on me you'll regret it!

Here's your chance father. Show me that you have the heart to throw me out of this land with your own hands!

**Theseus:**

I'll be doing just that if you don't do as you're told. My heart will not feel sorry by your banishment!

**Hippolytus:**

So, this is the end then. Miserable Fate!  
Impossible Fate! I have the truth yet I can not reveal it!  
Well then, Artemis, Leto's own daughter.  
You are the god, most dear to my heart!  
You are the god I have hunted with and whose company I have enjoyed.  
Now, Artemis, I must leave this glorious Athens and become an exile!  
Oh, Athens! City and soil of Erechtheus, farewell!  
Soil of Troezen! What countless blessing you provide to a young man as he grows up!  
Let me take one last look at you before I bid you farewell!  
Come, friends! Escort me out of this land and bid me farewell!  
Come, say good bye to the most virtuous man you'll ever see, even though my father does not seem to think so!

*Exit Hippolytus and friends SL,  
Exit Theseus into the palace*

**Chorus:**

The thought that the gods care for us mortals sends away all my sadness but if I look for it, if I look for evidence of this care in the deeds and fortunes of mortals, I find none. One minute you see one thing and the next a thing that's totally its opposite. A man's life changes constantly.

**Chorus:**

Oh, how I wish that the gods would answer my prayer and grant me a Fate that is replete with prosperity and a soul free of sadness.  
Let me not be stubborn in my views nor also be ever-shifting.  
And let not my mood be stiff and unreceptive to the new things that each dawn brings. Let it be willing to receive each dawn's new blessing.

**Chorus:**

But my mind is now thoroughly confused.  
What I have just seen is not what I have expected.

**Chorus:**

The brightest star of Greece- we all saw this, we saw it with our own eyes!  
The brightest star of Greece was banished from his own land by his own father!  
His own father's anger!

**Chorus:**

Oh, you golden sands of our city's shores!

**Chorus:**

And you, dense woods where, with his swift hounds and the goddess Artemis, he hunted and slew wild beasts.

**Chorus:**

Poor boy!  
The horses, Hippolytus!  
You'll never train your team of Venetian steeds for the chariot races again!  
There you were, thundering along the racecourse around Limna, jumping from the back one onto the back of the other, tightening your legs hard around their bare flanks!

**Chorus:**



And the music, Hippolytus!  
The music that never slumbered, ever-singing beneath those lyre strings of yours!  
That music will now fall silent in your father's palace!

**Chorus:**

And the garlands, Hippolytus!  
The fallen logs and the rocks, those resting spots in the green precincts of Artemis,  
Leto's daughter, will miss your garlands.

**Chorus:**

And the girls, Hippolytus!  
The girls who fought over your love will stop their rivalry, now that you're an exile!

**Chorus:**

And I, Hippolytus!  
I shall live out the rest of my life in tears!  
I, who have become unfortunate because of your misfortune.

**Chorus:**

Oh, mother of the boy!  
Why ever did you give birth to him?

**Chorus:**

Gods!  
I am so angry with you!

**Chorus:**

And you, Graces of marriage!  
Why do you send the poor boy away from his land for no reason at all?  
He has committed no wrong!

**Chorus:** *Indicating behind the wings of SL*

Ah!  
Look there!  
I see one of the boy's servants rushing towards the palace.

**Chorus:**

His face looks very sad!  
*Enter Messenger*

**Messenger:**

Women, where is the king? Where do I go to find Theseus?  
Is he in the Palace? Tell me!

*Enter Theseus from the palace*

**Chorus:**

Here he is now.

**Messenger:**

Theseus!  
I have brought you news that will cause you and the rest of the people of Athens  
and the rest of Troezen, great concern!

**Theseus:**

What sort of news? Has something dreadful happened our two neighbouring  
cities?

**Messenger:**

My lord, Hippolytus is dead –or, rather, at the very edge of the sun's light.

**Theseus:**

Oh, yes? And who killed him? No doubt some poor husband whose wife he defiled and turned against him!

**Messenger:**

No, my lord.

His own chariot has killed him. That, with the help of your curse. The one you uttered in your prayer to your father, Poseidon, god of the sea.

**Theseus:**

Oh, yes!

Thank you gods!

Thank you, Poseidon! You have heard my prayer because you are truly my father! Tell me, man, how did he die? How did the sword of Justice strike this man, this man who has dishonored his own father?

**Messenger:**

We were near the wave-torn shore, grooming our horses, brushing their manes, when a messenger came and told us that Hippolytus was no longer allowed to walk upon this land because you've had the poor man banished. This news made us shed many tears. Then Hippolytus himself appeared at the shore, followed by a whole lot of his friends and joined us in our groans of pain.

Eventually, he stopped crying and said, "why am I so distressed over this? It is my duty to obey my father's words. Come, friends, yoke the horses to my chariot. This city is no longer mine." At that, we all jumped and, in no time at all, we had the horses readied and brought the chariot around beside our master. He took the reins from the rails and planted his sandaled feet onto the chariot's boards.

Then he first spread his hands wide, palms upward in prayer and said, "Oh, Zeus, may I die, if I am evil but, whether I die or live to see the light of day, let it be known by my father that he has treated me unfairly." And with those words, he picked up the whip and cracked it at the four horses.

We, his servants, followed close by, on foot, along the roads that lead directly to Argos and Epidaurus.

Eventually we arrived at some deserted spot, outside our territory, near the shores of a headland that's jutting out into the Saronic Sea. Just there we heard a tremendous, horrible groan, roaring up through the earth, a groan that made us shudder, a groan that sounded like Zeus' thunderbolts! It got the horses shooting their heads and ears up towards the heavens and us servants terrified. We couldn't work out where that horrible noise came from; that is, until we looked towards the wave-beaten shore. That's when we saw a huge wave, reaching up high and deep into the sky. So high was this wave that I couldn't look past it to see the shores of Skiron, nor the Isthmus and not even the rock of Asclepius!

And then this wave just surged up and swelled and splashed about and spewed out a whole lot of foam which came out onto the shore where we and the chariot with the four horses were. And then this huge wave, suddenly swelled up even more and became a ghastly bull. A vicious bull whose ferocious bellow filled the whole land. The roar echoed everywhere around us.

It terrified us all.

Our eyes couldn't bear to look at it. It was a dreadful sight to behold.

The horses panicked immediately but my master, who knew everything there is to know about horses, tugged at the reins tightly and pulled them towards him like a sailor pulls his oars, dropping the weight of his body back against the pull of the straps.

The steeds, though, took the iron-forged bit between their jaws and charged violently away, as if their master's hand or the reins or the beautiful chariot did not exist!

Then, whenever he tried to steer the four horses towards a softer ground, the huge bull would appear right in front of them and frighten them towards the opposite direction.

Or, if the horses, in their frenzy, turned towards the rocks, the bull came right up close to them and guided them towards those rocks. It did this until the chariot was toppled and thrown up against those rocks, the rims of its wheels smashing against them.

It was a horrible mess. Every bit of the chariot spun wildly into the air. Wheel naves and axle rods, every part of it flew up in all directions and the poor man got himself all tangled up with the mess of straps and dragged along until he fell against a rock, smashing his head and his flesh torn to bits.

Ah, the things the poor man yelled to those horses! Things that were painful to hear.

"Stop," he called out to them. "Stop, don't kill me! You were raised in my stables!" And then he yelled, "Father, what a miserable curse you've made against me!" And then, in utter desperation, he called out, "Will no one come to rescue the most virtuous of men?" Of course, many of us wanted to do that but we couldn't. Our feet weren't fast enough.

And then, I don't know how, but he was cut loose from the straps and fell on the ground, barely enough breath in him to stay alive.

Then all the horses as well as that monstrous bull somehow vanished! I don't know where they disappeared in that mountainous country.

My lord, I know I am only a slave in your house and I shouldn't speak out of turn but, my lord, I can never believe that your son is guilty of committing any evil deeds. I wouldn't believe that even if the whole female race hanged itself and if they had covered all the wood of Mount Ida with writing, accusing him!

I know for certain, that Hippolytus is a virtuous man!

**Chorus:**

Ah! New misfortunes have come!

**Chorus:**

What must happen will happen. There is no escape from Fate.

**Theseus:**

At first, your words have pleased me because I hate the man but now, because he is my son and because I have respect for the gods, now, hearing about these misfortunes of his, gives me neither pleasure nor concern.

**Messenger:**

Well, then, my lord, what would you have us do to please you? Should we bring the poor boy here? Tell me what you think but I suggest that you should not act too harshly towards your unfortunate son.

**Theseus:**

Bring him here.

I want him here, to look at him in the face and see him try to deny that he has polluted my wedding bed, eye-to-eye!

I shall give him proof of his guilt with my words and with the deeds of the gods!

*Exit Messenger*

*The chorus gathers around the statue of Aphrodite*

**Chorus:**

Oh, Aphrodite!

You can lead the direction of the unbending minds of both gods and mortals!

**Chorus:**

And Eros, is with you, Aphrodite.

All around you, goddess, darting about with his swift wings and his plumes, rich in colour!

**Chorus:**

He flies over the brine of the roaring seas and over the earth and enchants those whose love-frenzied hearts burn with desire.

**Chorus:**

The god with the golden wings enchants the very hearts of all the wild beasts that live in the mountains and in the oceans and all those that the earth nurtures and the sun's rays burn!

**Chorus:**

Beasts and men!

But you, Aphrodite, you alone, rule!

You alone are their Queen!

*Enter Artemis dressed as a huntress, with a bow and a quiver of arrows.*

**Artemis:**

Theseus! Son of king Aegeas!

I command you to listen!

I am Artemis, Leto's daughter.

Miserable man! How is it you enjoy such things? You have killed your own son in a most sinful way!

You have heeded your wife's false words about things that you have not seen with your own eyes. But your sin is obvious.

How is it that you have not yet hidden yourself with the deepest shame, in the darkest recesses of the earth?

Or you could turn into a flying beast and fly far away from this crime.

There is no place for you in a life lived by good men.

Listen to the nature of your misfortunes, Theseus! They will cause you great pain to hear but will give me no pleasure to tell them.

I have come here to tell you in clear terms, Theseus, that your son's heart is free of any guilt and that you must bury him with his reputation intact; and to tell you of your wife's madness –or, perhaps, nobleness.

*Indicating the statue of Aphrodite*

She was stung by this goddesses' prick, a thing most hated by us who delight in virginity, and so she fell in love with your son, Hippolytus.

Then, when with her own will, the poor woman tried to conquer Aphrodite, she was destroyed quite by accident, by her nurse's plan who revealed the truth about her illness to your son, after she had made him swear an oath to secrecy.

Hippolytus, however, quite rightly did not heed the nurse's words but nor, being a virtuous man, did he break his oath to her, though he had to endure your anger against him.

Your wife, however, afraid that she'd be questioned on the matter, wrote that letter of lies and so, by that deceit, destroyed your son by convincing you with her lies.

**Theseus:**

Oh, no!

**Artemis:**

Do the facts hurt you, Theseus?

Wait then and here the rest of them. They will hurt you even more.

Your father has given you a gift of three curses, Theseus. Curses whose results are guaranteed. You do know that, don't you?

Well, being the evil man that you are, Theseus, you've decided to use one of these curses against your own son, instead of some enemy of yours. Your father, then, Poseidon, the god of the sea, has done what he had to do, since he loves you and since has made the promise.

But, to his view and mine, you acted badly. You've not examined the matter at all, nor asked for the opinion of the prophets, not even let time judge it but rushed quickly to apply the deadly curses upon your son.

**Theseus:**

Oh, goddess! May I be destroyed also!

**Artemis:**

Theseus, though you've committed dreadful sins, there's still hope for you to gain pardon.

It was Aphrodite who, wanting to vend her rage, has caused all this to happen.

Now, the rule among us gods is this: None of us will go against the will of another. Instead, we will stand aside.

And understand this well, Theseus: Had I not been afraid of Zeus, I would have never fallen to the shame of allowing the mortal I loved the most to die.

You are acquitted of the charge of being evil because you were ignorant and because, by her death, your wife has erased all hope for you of testing the truth of her words and so she has convinced you.

Well, then. These sorrows fall mainly upon you, Theseus but I, too, feel the grief because we, gods, find no joy in the death of the pious. But as for the sinners, we destroy them, along with their offspring and their houses.

*Enter Hippolytus, gravely hurt and supported by his servants.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

Here's the poor boy!

**Chorus:**

Look how bruised and beaten his young flesh is!

**Chorus:**

And his blond head!

**Chorus:**

Oh, the mountain of sorrows that have fallen upon these houses!

**Chorus:**

The heavens have sent a double misery upon these palaces!

**Hippolytus:**

Ah! Miserable Fate!

Unjust curses delivered unjustly by an unjust father! I am utterly destroyed!

Oh, how my smashed body aches!

Pains spin through my head! Shudders dash across my brain!

Stop, friends!

Let me rest my body! I am exhausted!

Ah! What wretched pain is this!

Ah those horrible horses! Horrible chariot beasts! I have fed them with my own hands! They have destroyed me! They have killed me!

Ah! Ah!

Gently, friends, gently! By the gods, I beg you, friends, careful of my wounds!

Who's here? Who's by my right side? Slowly, gently, men. Lift me gently. Evenly across my whole mangled body, friends!

Ah!

Miserable man! A man mistakenly cursed by his own father.

Oh, Zeus!

Do you see all this, Zeus? Do you this man, Zeus? Do you see how this god-fearing man, this most chaste of men is dying?

I am destroyed!

In vain, I have spent my whole life working hard at respecting all men.

Ah! What pain is this! It spreads throughout my whole body!

Ah! Miserable man!

Pain leave this miserable man and let Death come to heal him!

Kill me!

Kill this miserable man!

How I wish a sharp sword would cut me asunder and put my life to an endless rest!

Oh, miserable curse! My father's curse!

The curse and some blood-spilling evil, committed by my ancestors, long dead, family, could wait no longer and has erupted upon me!

But why Zeus?

Why upon me? Why upon an innocent man?

Ah!

What is there for me to say to free my life from this pain, this gruesome disaster?

Oh, how I wish!

How I wish that Hades' dark night, Death's Fate, came to take me. To put this miserable wretch to sleep!

**Artemis:**

You poor man!

How dire the disaster to which you are yoked!

But it was the nobility of your mind that has brought this destruction upon you!

**Hippolytus:** *Suddenly noticing Artemis*

Ah! A heavenly fragrance!

My goddess!

Though my misery is great, I feel your presence, goddess and the pain of my body has softened.

The goddess Artemis is here!

**Artemis:**

Yes, my poor man. The goddess dearest to your heart is here!

**Hippolytus:**

Oh, my lady!

Do you see the wretched state I am in?

**Artemis:**

I do, Hippolytus but divine law forbids me to shed tears.

**Hippolytus:**

Ah, my goddess!

You no longer have your fellow huntsman and servant.

**Artemis:**

No, Hippolytus but even though you will die, you will still have my love.

**Hippolytus:**

There is no one to care for your horses and your statue, my lady!

**Artemis:**

No, Hippolytus because this was the will of Aphrodite.

**Hippolytus:**

Ah!

Now I know what power has killed me!

**Artemis:**

Her honour was attacked and she hated your chastity, Hippolytus.

**Hippolytus:**

I can understand it now. One power has destroyed all three of us!

**Artemis:**

Yes, you, your father and then your father's wife, was the third.

**Hippolytus:**

And so I moan for my father's fate as well!

**Artemis:**

Theseus was deceived by a god.

**Hippolytus:**

Poor father!

How terrible is your misfortune!

**Theseus:**

This is the end for me, my son!

I have no joy left in life.

**Hippolytus:**

You have made a mistake father and I grieve more for you than I do for me.

**Theseus:**

If only I could die in your place my son!

**Hippolytus:**

Oh, what bitterness your father's gifts have brought upon us!

**Theseus:**

If only they had never reached my lips!

**Hippolytus:**

But what then? Your anger was so great father, that you would have still killed me.

**Theseus:**

Yes, son. The gods have twisted my reason.

**Hippolytus:**

Ah!

If only mortals could curse the gods –

**Artemis:** *Interrupts Hippolytus*

Leave it at that, Hippolytus. Because even in the darkness of the earth where you are buried, Aphrodite's anger which has broken over you, your chastity and virtue will be rewarded by many and great honours.

I, personally, will see that justice will be granted to you with these unerring arrows of mine, by shooting them at another mortal, whoever is the dearest to her.

And to you, you poor, suffering man, for these pains you have endured, I shall grant you the highest honours in the city of Troezen.

Unmarried girls will cut their hair before their wedding and through the passage of many years, you will harvest an abundance of tears of their grief, for you.

Virgins will cherish you for ever and they will sing about you and keep the memory of Phaedra's love for you alive.

*Turning to Theseus*

But you, son of old Aegeas, take now your son, Hippolytus, in your arms and hold him close to you. You were not responsible for his death because it is only to be expected that men will make dire mistakes when the gods declare it so.

*Back to Hippolytus*

And you, Hippolytus. I urge you not to hate your father because you know well Fate by which you were destroyed.

And now I must leave because it is unlawful for me to look upon the dead, or to pollute my sights with the final breaths of the dying and I can see, poor man, you are already near that calamity.

Farewell, Hippolytus!

*Exit Artemis*

**Hippolytus:**

Farewell to you, too, blessed virgin! May you quickly forget our days together and, since you ask this of me, I shall hold no animosity towards my father. I have always done as you have asked of me.

Ah!

Ah!

Father, take my body and lay it straight. The darkness is coming over my eyes!

**Theseus:**

My, son, my poor son! What are you doing to me?

**Hippolytus:**

Father, I am gone. I see the gates of Hades!

**Theseus:**



Will you leave me like this, my son, with my soul polluted after spilling your blood?

**Hippolytus:**

No, father. I set you free of any guilt for this murder.

**Theseus:**

What did you say son? Do you set me free of murder?

**Hippolytus:**

Let the huntress Artemis be my witness!

**Theseus:**

Oh, my darling son! How magnanimous you are to your father!

**Hippolytus:**

Father, farewell to you, too and may your life be filled with joy!

**Theseus:**

Oh, what a virtuous and brave soul!

**Hippolytus:**

Then pray father that you have legitimate sons like me.

**Theseus:**

Courage, my son. Don't abandon me!

**Hippolytus:**

My courage has left me, father. I am finished.

Quickly, now, cover my face with my cloak!

*Hippolytus dies.*

*Theseus covers his son's face and after a few moments of contemplation rises and addresses the chorus*

**Theseus:**

Glorious land of Erechtheus and Pallas Athena!

You have lost a great man!

*Turning to the statue of Aphrodite*

And I, Aphrodite! In my misery, I shall remember well all the pains you have delivered us!

*Exit Theseus*

**Chorus:**

This unexpected grief has fallen upon all the citizens.

The tears will fall in floods for a long time because the grief of the famous is mightier.

*Exit All*

# (EURIPIDES) Cyclops

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>468</sup> translation by George Theodoridis

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## **Dramatis Personae**

**SILENUS** (*Father of the Satyrs*)

**ODYSSEUS**

**POLYPHEMUS** (*One of the Cyclopes*)

**CHORUS OF SATYRS** (*Silenus' sons*)

**ODYSSEUS' MATES** (*Silent*)

...

*At the front of a huge cave situated at the foot of Mount Aetna, in Sicily.*

*The sea might be visible in the distance. We can also hear the sounds of a river and of sheep grazing.*

*The land is green with Spring vegetation. There are trees and rocks around the stage which will become useful props when the blinded Cyclops bumps into them and hurts himself. (He will crack his skull from l. 670 onwards).*

*A hot day.*

*Enter Silenus from the cave. He is an old man with a bent frame, holding an iron rake. All satyrs wear sheep skins, have a tail, a red leather-phallus (hanging down in the case of Silenus but proud in the case of his sons) and two small horns on their forehead. (Satyrs are half-goat, half-human.)*

*Note: All players wear the red leather phallus.*

...

## **Silenus:**

Oh, Bacchus, Bacchus! Bacchus, Dionysos! My master!

The pains I've suffered because of you during the days of my virile youth! Countless pains! I'm still suffering them now! The first one came when Hera, who, demented by a rage of jealousy, turned you, my god and master, into a possessed and frenzied maniac and you ran off, leaving behind you all your lovely nurses – all those delightful mountain nymphs! Then, the next suffering I had to endure was when I fought beside you, in the war against Earth's children, all those huge Giants. There I was, standing beside you with my shield, on your right side and, for your sake, I had killed Enceladus. Speared him right through the guts... To the audience hang on... is this true or am I dreaming now? No, no, no! I remember now, I remember proudly exhibiting all the spoils of the war to Bacchus! By Zeus! I sure did!

And now, Bacchus, here I am again, having to suffer another ordeal, an even greater one than all the others! Suffering it because, once again, I had tried to save you! That was the time when my sons and I rushed to my ship and began searching for you.

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<sup>468</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/cyclops/>

Hera had stirred up all those Tuscan pirates and got them to kidnap you and sell you as a slave in some distant country or other! There I was, my Lord, at the stern of the ship, at the wheel, my sons turning the grey sea waves white, working hard at the oars, scanning the horizon, looking for you!

But then, just as we were about to take the Headland around Malea, a terrible easterly blew hard upon us and sped our ship away from there. We landed near this rock here, this rock called Aetna. Here, in Aetna, where Poseidon's murderous children, the one-eyed Cyclopes live in their bleak caves.

One of them, Polyphemus, caught us and he won't let us go now. He has made us the slaves of his house. So now, instead of enjoying your joyful Bacchic celebrations we have to look after this godless beast's flock of sheep! No more wine for us, no more dancing, no more merry singing!

My young boys are right now tending to the sheep, out there somewhere, behind those distant hills. I, being old, have to stay behind and tend to the chores of the monster's cave. Fill all his water troughs, sweep his cave, serve him his unholy meals at night.

Unholy meals, ungodly Cyclops and poor me, Silenus! These are my orders and orders must always be obeyed! Now I must work this iron rake so that I may welcome Cyclops, my absent master and his flock of sheep, into a clean cave.

*Silenus begins sweeping when suddenly he hears noises in the distance. His sons, the satyrs are herding the sheep within (SL). Noises of bells, bleating, etc. A lyre accompanies the satyrs who are singing and dancing happily. Silenus looks up and searches the distance with his eyes.*

Ah! I can see my sons bringing the sheep around. Shouts How are you boys? Hahaha! You look very happy. Dancing to the same rhythm we did in the old days, I see! The days when you'd be accompanying Bacchus himself to Althaia's house. Oh, the dancing we did back then ey? And the happy songs we sang! The lyre music!

*Enter the chorus of satyrs, singing and dancing, led by the lyre player.*

*Slaves accompany them*

**Chorus:**

Oh, ho! Look at that ram, boys! The wayward ram!

**Chorus:**

Oh, noble ram, child of a noble family, don't run off that way!

That's the way to the rough crags!

No sweet breezes that way for you, no luscious grass!

Come turn this way, the way to the watering troughs.

Here, near Cyclops' cave, just there where your young lambs are bleating.

**Chorus:**

Come this way, where the troughs are full, darlings.

Full with the water from the swirling eddies of the river!

You, too, hey you, yes you! Come this way!

This way to the cool, grassy slope! Come here to graze!

**Chorus:**

Turn back, you! Or else I'll throw a stone your way!

Turn back you high-horned ram!

**Chorus:**

Turn back and head for Cyclops' water troughs!  
 Cyclops, who walks upon the wild fields.  
 And you there, noble lady, let loose your swollen udders  
 And let your young ones come to your teats  
 They've been here, sleeping in the cave all day and they miss you.

**Chorus:**

Come, come!  
 Won't you leave the grassy dales on Aetna's crags  
 And come into your vast pen?

**Chorus:**

Alas, there's no Bacchus here!  
 No dancing, no worshipers, waving their fennel wands, No ecstatic drum beats  
 near the gurgling springs, Not a drop of wine here!

**Chorus:**

And now I'm forbidden from the happy company of the singing Nymphs, On Mount  
 Nysa with the Iacchus song:

**Chorus:**

"Oh, Iacchus! Oh, Iacchus!" No longer can I sing this song to Aphrodite, The goddess  
 of Love, while I  
 And the white-footed Bacchantes pursue her!

**Chorus:**

O Bacchus! O Dionysus! O dearest Lord!  
 Lord who shakes the waves of his golden locks  
 Where do you go to now, all alone?

**Chorus:**

Now, your servant is the servant of the one-eyed Cyclops  
 And now, far from my own home and dressed in this rough cloak of  
 Goat skin, I suffer without your dear friendship.

**Silenus:** *Disturbed by what he suddenly sees in the distance*

Shhh! Quiet, my sons! Quickly tell your slaves to go and guide the sheep into the  
 rocky cave!

**Chorus:** *To the slaves*

Go, on, men! Do as he says!

*Exit slaves*

Father, what is it?

**Silenus:**

There, on the beach, I can see a Greek ship coming in. Its oarsmen and their chief  
 are heading this way, to this cave. They're carrying empty baskets on their heads.  
 They're after food, by the looks of it; food and pails of water.

O, poor unlucky strangers! They have no idea what our master, Polyphemus is  
 like! No idea that the ground they're walking on is hostile to foreigners. No idea that  
 their dreadful luck has guided them right into the jaws of the man-eater Cyclops!  
 But, don't say a word before we find out where they're from and how they came  
 to be here, on this awful crag of Sicilian Aetna.

*Enter Odysseus and his men. From Odysseus' shoulder hangs a wine skin. The men  
 carry empty baskets and water pails. Only Odysseus is wearing a sword.*

**Odysseus:**

Friends, greetings! Can someone tell us where there's a river that can quench the thirst of travellers, and, is there anyone who can sell food for this lot of starving sailors?

*Suddenly he realises where he is.*

Oh, I see we're in Bacchus' land, lads! There's a group of satyrs in front of that cave.

*Indicating Silenus.*

I think I'll talk to the older gentleman first. Greetings to you, old man.

**Silenus:**

Greetings, friend. Who are you and where are you from?

**Odysseus:**

I am Odysseus, from the island of Ithaca, king of the Cephallenians.

**Silenus:**

I know this man! He's that clever chattering son of Sisyphus!

**Odysseus:**

That's me, all right, without the insults!

**Silenus:**

How did you get yourself here, in Sicily?

**Odysseus:**

On my way from Ilium, fighting the war in Troy.

**Silenus:**

From Troy? Don't you know your way home?

**Odysseus:**

Not my choice, my friend. Fierce winds and storms drove my ships here.

**Silenus:**

Poor man! Your Fate is identical to my Fate. We have suffered from the work of the same god.

**Odysseus:**

Were you driven here against your will, as well?

**Silenus:**

Yes, we were chasing the pirates that had kidnapped Dionysus at the time.

**Odysseus:** *Examines the place*

Where am I? What is this place called and who lives here?

**Silenus:**

This place is called Mount Aetna the highest mountain on Sicily.

**Odysseus:**

Where are its walls, its battlements?

**Silenus:**

Don't look for such things here, friend. It's not humans who occupy this land.

**Odysseus:**

Not humans? Who lives here then, beasts?

**Silenus:**

Cyclopes live here, my friend and they live in caves, not houses.

**Odysseus:**

And their king? Or do they have none?

**Silenus:**

Yes, they have none. They all live on their own, obeying no one.

**Odysseus:**

Are they farmers? Do they live by the grain of the goddess Demeter?

**Silenus:**

No, they eat cheese, drink milk, feed on the flesh of sheep.

**Odysseus:**

And do they have any wine? Dionysus' drink? The stuff that flows from the grape vine?

**Silenus:**

No, none at all. That's why this land, the land they live on, knows nothing about dancing.

**Odysseus:**

And how do they treat strangers? Do they welcome them? Are the Cyclopes god-fearing?

**Silenus:**

Strangers? Well, they say that the most delicious flesh is that of strangers!

**Odysseus:**

What? Do these beasts enjoy human flesh?

**Silenus:**

Every stranger who landed here was butchered.

**Odysseus:** *Indicating the cave*

Is Cyclops in there now?

**Silenus:**

Took his dogs and went off to the mountain, hunting.

**Odysseus:**

Do you know of a way we can get out of here?

**Silenus:**

No, Odysseus, I don't but I'll help you any way I can.

**Odysseus:**

You could sell us some bread, friend. That's one thing we don't have.

**Silenus:**

I can't. I told you, we only have meat on this island.

**Odysseus:**

That, too, would be a sweet way of stopping the hunger.

**Silenus:**

There's also cheese and cow's milk.

**Odysseus:**

Bring them all out. Business must be done outside, in the daylight.

**Silenus:**

How much gold are you prepared to give for it?

**Odysseus:**

I've not brought any gold with me, friend but I've got Dionysus' drink.

**Silenus:**

Oh, what sweet words you utter! It's been a very long time since we drank any of it.

**Odysseus:**

Maron, Dionysus' own son gave it to me.

**Silenus:**

Maron, the child that I raised in my own arms?

**Odysseus:**

Yes, I'll say it again so we don't make any mistakes: Maron, Dionysus' own boy!

**Silenus:**

Have you've got it here with you or have you left it behind, aboard your ship?

**Odysseus:** *Shows Silenus the wine skin*

Here, let me show you, old man. It's in here. In this wine skin.

**Silenus:**

That little thing? That's won't even be a mouthful!

**Odysseus:**

That's what you think, old man. No, you wouldn't be able to empty this skin if you tried.

**Silenus:**

What? Does the wineskin replenish itself... by itself?

**Odysseus:**

It doubles itself!

**Silenus:**

O, what a wondrous fountain this wineskin is! What a joyful spring it is!

**Odysseus:**

Would you like to try a bit? Neat, with no water added?

**Silenus:**

Good idea: A taste often dictates the purchase.

**Odysseus:** *Hands Silenus a cup*

See, not only have I brought the wine but I've also brought a cup!

**Silenus:**

Well, fill it up, man and let me drink so that I can remind myself of what it tastes like.

**Odysseus:** *Fills the cup with wine*

Here you are!

**Silenus:**

Oooo, look! The aroma! Mmmm! Oooo!

**Odysseus:**

See it?

**Silenus:**

No, but I'm smelling it! By Zeus, what an aroma!

**Odysseus:** *Hands him the cup*

Taste it old man, taste it so that your praises are not just hollow words.

**Silenus:** *Gulps it down and begins dancing and singing with joy*

O, what a lovely drop! Look, folks! Bacchus is calling on me to dance! Tra la lalala!

O! Tra lala lala!

**Odysseus:**

Doesn't it just slide down your throat nice and gentle?

**Silenus:**

Sure does! Down my throat and all the way down to my toenails!

**Odysseus:**

Hang on, I've also got some money for you...

**Silenus:**

Forget the money, just keep feeling this cup up!

**Odysseus:**

And you just bring out the cheese!

**Silenus:**

All right. I'll do that, even if it means I disobey my master!

Just a cup of this stuff and I'll give you all of his sheep and all of the sheep of all the other Cyclopes; and then I'll go jump off the Leucadian cliff, right into the salty sea below, thoroughly sloshed to the eyeballs and to my eyebrows which, by then, will have lost their frown! The man who doesn't drink is mad!

*Indicates his phallus*

Hahaha! One drink and a man can make this thing stand upright! Straight up! Upright and uptight! Hahahaha! One drink and a man can grab a woman's breast, enjoy a woman's shrub! And then, there's all the lovely dancing and all the forgetting of worries...

*Takes another gulp*

So, why shouldn't I drink such a drink? To Hades with that idiot, Cyclops and his single eye!

*Silenus exits into the cave*

**Chorus:**

Psst, Odysseus. A word in your ear.

**Odysseus:**

Of course. From one friend to another.

**Chorus:**

That city, Troy and that woman, Helen, did you... capture them? Both of them?

**Odysseus:**

We've destroyed the whole of Priam's household.

**Chorus:**

And, of course, once you've got hold of young Helen, each and every one of your boys fucked her, right? I mean, since she obviously loves to fuck one man after another, right? The bitch! Took one look at the fancy pants of the barbarian, one look at his golden chain dangling from his neck and off she went! Right out of her skull! Ran off with him, leaving that poor, nice little guy, Menelaos behind!

Damn all women! I wish they never existed! Destroy them all... every one of them... just leave one on my lap!

*Enter Silenus and a couple of his sons from the cave carrying sacks of cheese and pails of milk. The noise of sheep bleating is heard within. (SL)*

**Silenus:**

Here you are, king Odysseus! Cheese, butter and milk.

*Indicating within*

And there, the flocks of bleating lambs. Take them, Odysseus! Take them and leave this cave. But give me Bacchus' wine first.



*Odysseus and his mates take the sacks of cheese and hang them over their shoulders. They pick up the pails of milk but are stopped suddenly by the noises of a loud fart, snorts and heavy footsteps etc, made by Cyclops as he's approaching them.*

O, no! Here comes Cyclops! What are we going to do now?

**Odysseus:**

O, no! We're stuffed, old man! We're dead! Where can we go?

**Silenus:**

Go inside the cave, quickly. It's dark in there. He won't be able to see you.

**Odysseus:**

Bad idea, old man! You want us to jump into his own nets?

**Silenus:**

No, it's not such a bad idea. There are lots of places to hide in there.

**Odysseus:**

No way! I won't do it! The whole of Troy would groan with dreadful anger to see me run away from one man after they saw me standing up with my shield and sword against a countless hoard of her soldiers!

No, if I'm going to die, then I will do so as a noble but then, if he doesn't manage to kill me, then my fame will continue to live on.

*Enter Cyclops. He is carrying a huge roughly carved wooden club.*

*At first he doesn't notice Odysseus and his men who have cowered behind a stone near the cave's entrance and yells at the satyrs who are joyfully and carelessly hopping about.*

**Cyclops:**

Oi! What's all this? What's going on? What's with all this dancing about? Have we got a Bacchic holiday or something? There's no Dionysus on this island! There are no castanets, no beating drums around here!

Now, how are my little newborn lambs going in the cave? Are they well? Are they suckling well? Are they running around next to their mothers?

Have you done the milking yet? Are the baskets filled with cheese?

Speak! Speak or else someone will be crying bitter tears after they feel the weight of this club!

Go on, speak! You, there! Don't look down, look up at me!

**Chorus:**

Here you are! My eyes are raised. High. Up towards Zeus himself and the heavens! Pointing skywards Look! I can see the stars! I can see the great hunter Orion, Poseidon's son, Orion, your brother, Polyphemus!

**Cyclops:**

Have you prepared my dinner well?

**Chorus:**

Of course we did! Of course we did. It's all ready for you!

Only thing missing there, is your guts!

**Cyclops:**

You filled all the bowls with milk?

**Chorus:**

There's so much milk there, boss, you could drink a whole urn of it, if you want!

**Cyclops:**

What is it? Cow's milk? Sheep's milk or a mixture of both?

**Chorus:**

Whichever takes your fancy, boss, so long as it's not me!

**Cyclops:**

You! Eat you? Ha! All that hopping about and dancing inside my guts! It'd kill me!

*He suddenly turns and notices Odysseus and his men.*

What? Who are these men near my cave there? Are they pirates or thieves? Has the island been invaded by them?

*Peering into the distance*

Well now! Look there! I can see lambs there –all tied up with twisted cane... and all this cheese... *looks all around him in amazement* all my cheese baskets are tossed around everywhere... and *Indicating Silenus* this old man, this bald old man... ha! His face tells me he got a belting from someone!

*Silenus approaches Cyclops, whimpering.*

**Silenus:**

O, poor, poor me! My whole body is burning from all that beating!

**Cyclops:**

Beating? Who beat you? Who's been clobbering you over the head, old man?

**Silenus:** *Indicating Odysseus and his men*

They have, Cyclops! They beat me all up because I wouldn't let them run away with your possessions.

**Cyclops:**

What? Don't they know that I'm a god and a god's son as well?

**Silenus:**

I did tell them but they took no notice, boss. Just kept grabbing all your stuff and taking them out and then, then they started on the cheese. I told them to stop again and again but they still wouldn't listen. Tried to stop them but they wouldn't stop. Then they started on your sheep, boss. Again I tried to stop them but they said that what they were gonna do to you was to tie you up with a triple rope, rip all your guts out, beat the crap out of your backside with a huge whipping stick, tie you up hand and foot, toss you onto the rowing benches of their boat and sell you off to whoever wants someone to turn a mill or move big, heavy rocks around.

**Cyclops:**

Oh ho! Is that right? *To one of the satyrs:* You! Run quickly into the cave, get out my best carving knife and sharpen it well! Then build a big, blazing fire in the hearth with a huge pile of wood. These men will be slaughtered, roasted on the coals and then fill my guts with a juicy meal. I, their host, will eat some of them straight from the hot coals, roasted and some of them I'll just have them boiled tender in the huge cauldron.

*The satyr runs off into the cave*

I'm sick and tired of all that wild mountain meat. I'm fed up with lion flesh and deer flesh. It's been far too long since I've tasted man's flesh!

**Silenus:**

A change in the menu is always a very pleasant thing, boss. No good having the same old boring stuff over and over again. Come to think of it, it's been a very long time since we had any human visitors to your cave.

**Odysseus:**

Visitors! Ah yes! Now, Cyclops, listen! Listen to your visitors as well now. The only reason we came down from our ship and visited your cave was so that we could buy some food from you but this man here, after we gave him a drink, he sold us your sheep for a skinful of wine. He took the wine, drank it and handed us the sheep –willingly, to willing customers. No one was forced to do anything. He's a liar, this man, simple as that. He was sprung selling your stuff behind your back and, now he's lying through his teeth.

**Silenus:**

Who's lying, me? Damn you...

**Odysseus:**

Sure, damn me -if I'm lying, that is!

**Silenus:**

O boss! No! I swear, Cyclops! I swear by your father, Poseidon, boss! And I swear by Great Triton and by Nereus and by the daughters of Nereus and Calypso and by the holy waters of the great Ocean and by all the fishes inside it, boss! I swear... my big, handsome boy, Cyclops, my dear, dear Cyclops, my sweet, sweet bossyboots, Cyclops! I swear that I was not at any time ever trying to sell your possessions to these foreigners. I swear that if I'm lying... well, if I'm lying, may Hades take my darling, darling children here, all these children that I love so much!

**Chorus:** *To Silenus*

Hold the crap, Silenus! I saw you with my own eyes, selling Cyclops' stuff to the strangers and if I'm lying, well, if I'm lying let Hades take my own father but don't blame the strangers for something that they didn't do!

**Cyclops:** *To Chorus*

It's you who's lying! I've got more faith in this bald man, here, than I have in the great Judge of the underworld, Rhadymanthys himself!

*Turning to Odysseus*

But let me ask you, strangers, where are you from? Which is your country? In what city were you raised?

**Odysseus:**

Ithaca is where we were born, Cyclops and after we sacked the great city of Troy, the winds swept us all over the place until they finally brought us here, to your island.

**Cyclops:**

Oho! Are you the lot that went to punish Troy, that city by the river Scamander, for having stolen that nasty bitch Helen?

**Odysseus:**

Yes, that was us. We were the ones who had to take on that terrible ordeal!

**Cyclops:**

Shameful expedition that one! All that fuss, going all the way to Phrygia for the sake of one woman! Shameful stuff that!

**Odysseus:**

It was the will of a god, Cyclops. No mortal should be blamed for that.

But now, noble son of Poseidon, the god of the sea, we beg you and speak to you not as slaves but as free men: Don't let your heart endure the awful consequences of you having killed us -us, who came here, to your house, as friendly visitors; and

of you having made a sacrilegious meal out of us for the benefit of your jaws.

Us, Lord Polyphemos, who have kept all of your father's temples safe, in every corner of Hellas.

His temple at Tainarum remains untouched and pure to this day and so are the deepest sacred hollows of Malea. So is the silver-rich rock at Sunium, beloved by your father and by the goddess Athena together. So are all of Gerastus' havens as well. We've given the Phrygians nothing belonging to Greece. We could not endure such an awful shame. In all this, you too can take credit, because you, too, live in Greece, though at its most distant reaches, here, under the flame-dripping rock of Mount Aetna.

*Cyclops yawns. He is not impressed by Odysseus' pleas.*

But, listen, Lord, if you will pay no heed to these words then you must remember that there's a law among mortals, a law that a host must obey and it says that:

"Lost and shipwrecked visitors who come to you as suppliants must be received with all due hospitality and given gifts and clothes, if necessary and not have their bodies perforated with spits that are usually used to roast bulls with, and they definitely should not be made food for your jaws and guts." The soil of Priam's country has delivered enough misery to Greece, Polyphemos. It has drunk the blood of enough Greek corpses, many of us were killed by the spear during that war. Enough women are now left without their men, enough old women and old men will now die without sons. And so, if you, Cyclops, cook and make a dismal meal of the few Greek men that are left alive, where could anyone turn to for protection?

*Cyclops yawns again*

Cyclops, hear my words! Put aside the fury of your jaws! Choose reverence rather than irreverence. Evil deeds have brought awful sufferings to many.

**Silenus:** *To Cyclops*

Boss, I want to give you a piece of advice. Cyclops, mate, leave not a speck of this man's flesh untouched, not a bite of it, boss; and if your teeth will get to his tongue and you eat it, if you eat his tongue, boss, then I guarantee, you, too, will become clever and eloquent like him.

**Cyclops:** *To Odysseus*

Ey, little man! Wise men believe in one god and one god only: Wealth! Everything else is just words; fat words, lovely words but that's all. All these shrines and temples of my father, built on every shore in Greece mean nothing to me. What's the point of telling me all about them?

You can mention Zeus' thunderbolt, too, if you like and it would mean nothing to me. Not afraid of it, not one bit! I don't know and I don't even care if Zeus is a more powerful god than me. Nothing else matters either, see, and I'll tell you why. See, let's say Zeus decides to rain upon us. Well, all I have to do is to just go inside that cave, underneath that dry roof there, lie down on my backside and rip into a roasted calf or into some wild beast or other, then guzzle down a whole vat of milk, deliver a huge feast into my belly and then, and then I do battle with Zeus' thunderbolts: His bolts come from up above and mine come from down below!

*Farts loudly*

Hahahaha!

Then, when the terrible snows come down upon us all the way from Thrace, I just cover myself up all snugly with the hides of wild animals, light up a blazing fire in there and to Hades with the snow! Won't affect me in the slightest!

As for Earth, whether she wants to or not, she'll still bring up the grass which will feed all my animals which I, in turn, will feed to the most important divinity in the world, my own belly. No sacrifices, nothing for anyone else, just my own lovely guts! Yum, yum!

Drink, eat and worry about nothing! That's what smart people like me think about Zeus! As for all those fools who made all these laws for the humans and make their lives miserable, well they ought to be hanged! Every one of them!

I'll never stop gratifying my soul and I'll even eat you to do it.

You were talking about gifts that hosts give to their guests. Well, you're going to get your gifts all right. I won't have you blaming me for neglecting my duties, little man, so I'll give you gifts: You will be given the fire to cook you with and you will even be given salt, fresh salt that came right from the waters of my father's kingdom. Then you'll get a bronze cauldron, a huge cauldron which when it gets to be boiling, it will cover your badly dressed little body beautifully!

Now, all of you, little men, go inside the cave and pay homage to its god! Prepare yourselves to be my feast!

Hahaha! Go on, in you go!

*Cyclops prods them towards the cave.*

**Odysseus:**

What dreadful luck! I have survived the toils of Troy and the torment tossed at me by all the oceans, only to end up in the heartless harbour of this horrible, godless beast!

O, Athena! My goddess, Pallas Athena! Heavenly daughter of Zeus, come to me! Come to me now and help me. Come straight away because I'm in deeper danger now than I was in on the battleground of Troy! You, too, Zeus! Divine protector of all guests! God whose abode is the brilliant stars, look upon this! See what's going on here because if you can't, if can't see this injustice, then they're wrong to believe you're a real god... you would be a false and worthless god!

*Odysseus and his men enter the cave. Silenus follows them. Cyclops enters last having let off a loud fart.*

**Chorus:**

Come then Cyclops! Open your gaping gullet wide! Your meal is now ready. Go on, lie down on your soft fleece-covered couch and eat the flesh of your guests: Straight out of the cauldron, or from the oven or from the burning coals.

**Chorus:**

Tear them up into little bits, gnaw at their bones, enjoy, Cyclops, enjoy your meal, enjoy the flesh of strangers!

*Screams of pain and anger are heard from within the cave.*

**Chorus:** *moving away from the cave, in fear and disgust*

No, no! Give me no share of it! Give us none of your ship's cargo. Keep it all down, in your own cargo hold!

No, don't let me look into the dreadful cave! I don't want to see the sacrilegious sacrifices that this Cyclops from Aetna is making!

*More screams for a few seconds, then a short pause before Cyclops is heard belching, laughing heartily... and farting.*

**Chorus:**

In there! In there this beast has killed the visitors and he's now eating their flesh! Cyclops is feasting on human flesh!

**Chorus:**

Heartless! Heartless is the beast who murders those who approach his shores, looking for some refuge by his hearth. Heartless he is if he kills and cooks the strangers, then grinds their bodies between his teeth, straight after he's roasted them on the burning coals.

**Chorus:** *Repeats as a refrain*

No, no! Give me no share of it! Give us none of your ship's cargo. Keep it all down, in your own cargo hold!

No, don't let me look into the dreadful cave! I don't want to see the sacrilegious sacrifices that this Cyclops from Aetna is making!

*Short pause before Odysseus comes out of the cave, carrying the wine skin. He is in a state of utter despair.*

**Odysseus:**

O, Zeus! Zeus, how can I ever speak now? How can I utter anything, now that I've seen things that are incredible, things done only in myths, dire deeds, deeds not performed by mortals!

**Chorus:**

What is it, Odysseus? Has Cyclops killed your mates and ate them?

**Odysseus:**

Two of them! The fattest ones. Lifted them up into his hands, weighed them up for size and ate them!

**Chorus:**

Poor, poor men! Tell us the whole story. What happened in there?

**Odysseus:**

The moment we walked into his rocky cave, Cyclops lit up a blazing fire which he fed with three truckloads of huge oak branches and then put a giant cauldron on top of it.

Next, he chopped up a whole lot of small branches from a fur tree and made a bed near the fire. Then he took an enormous urn –one that could hold some ten jugs of milk- and filled it up to the brim with the frothy white milk he drew from the cows' teats.

Next to that urn, he placed a tall, wide cup, made of ivy wood. I'd say it was about four feet wide and about six or seven feet high.

Then, with a sharp knife, he went about trimming lengths of buckthorn wood into long spits, the ends of which he poked into the fire to make hard. And when he had everything ready, this appalling, god-hated Cook from Hades, picked up two of my mates, lifted one over the huge, bronze cauldron and there cut his throat with a swift expert motion.

As for my other mate, the beast lifts him up by the ankle and crashes him upon a huge jutting rock, splattering his brains everywhere.

Then, he picked up his sharp knife and butchered the men's bodies to bits. Some

bits he threw into the fire while others, their arms and legs, he tossed into the boiling cauldron.

In utter despair and with tears streaming from my eyes, I was running around Cyclops obeying his orders. All my other mates, crowded themselves behind rocks, trembling like a swarm of frightened birds, their faces white and drained of any blood.

But then, when Cyclops had enough to eat, gorging himself on my unfortunate friends, he fell flat on his back and, from his dreadful mouth, he belched out a foul smell. Just then, a divine thought filled my head. I picked up a cup, filled it with this Maronian wine and brought it up to Cyclops' face. "Look," I said, "Look here, son of a god, Cyclops. Look at the divine drink the Greeks make out of their vines. Dionysus' very joy! Here, taste it!" The savage beast, his stomach stuffed full of the ungodly meal he had just eaten, raised his hand, took the cup to his lips and swallowed the whole lot in one gulp! Then, he raised his hands in the air and praised me. "O what a wonderful friend you are, stranger," he said. "First you give me a splendid meal and then you give me a splendid drink!"

Now, seeing that this had pleased the monster, I gave him another cup of it, knowing full well that this drink would bring about his destruction and his just punishment.

And true enough, after a few cups, he began to sing and so I kept stoking the fire in his heart by serving him one cup after another of this lovely wine. He sang his miserable songs next to my crying friends so loudly that the whole cave was echoing with the giant's frightful voice.

But just now, I slid quietly out of the cave and I am ready to save myself, my friends and you, if you want. It's up to you, so tell me if you would like to escape this unholy monster and live inside Bacchus' palaces, along with all the Nymphs there.

Because that's what Silenus, your father, really wants, too but he's an old drunk, I'm afraid. He's still in there, in the cave and his love for the wine has made him weak and thoughtless. He's stuck in that cup, just like a little bird is stuck, caught in a bird trap, flapping his hands about frantically, trying to escape.

But you! You're young! Come with me. Get back to your old friend, Dionysus. He's a very different sort of creature to Cyclops, that's for sure!

**Chorus:**

If only, my dear, darling friend! If only the day would come that we could escape from the clutches of that Beast! *Raising his fallen phallus* This little siphon of mine is getting desperately lonely! There's no sex to be had in that cave, that's for sure!

**Odysseus:**

Well then, let me tell you my plan for punishing that savage and for letting you escape this slavery.

**Chorus:**

Tell me! Hearing about Cyclops' death would be sweeter than the sweetest sounds made by an Asian lyre!

**Odysseus:**

He is so drunk and so happy now, that he wants to go to all his brothers, all the other Cyclopes and have a jolly party with them all!

**Chorus:**

O, I get you! You want us to ambush him all alone in some forest and murder him, or throw him off a steep cliff...

**Odysseus:**

o, no, no! Nothing like that at all. I've got a different plan in my head for him.

**Chorus:**

Yeah? What is it then? We've heard a lot about how cunning you are!

**Odysseus:**

First thing I'll do is to tell him to forget about the party. I'll tell him to keep the wine all to himself and enjoy it for the rest of his life and not to share it with the rest of his brothers. Then, after he succumbs to Dionysus' drink and falls dead asleep, I'll pull out this huge olive tree log from a corner in there, make it pointy at one end with my sharp sword here and put it into the fire. Then, when I see it getting all red and hot, I'll lift it up and shove it hard, deep into Cyclops' eye. The fire will melt his eyeball and make him totally blind!

See, just like the boat builder twists and turns the drill into a whole in the wood with his two straps, that's what I'll do with the burning log, drilling it deep right into his eye socket. Burn out his eyeball!

**Chorus:** *Excited with joy*

Yes! Woohoo! This scheme of yours is a real beauty! Insane!

**Odysseus:**

After that, it will only be a matter of putting you guys and your old man aboard my black ship and, working both rows of its oars, we'll speed you away from this place!

**Chorus:**

Can I help with the log, too? At least touch it while you're poking it into his eyes? Sort of the way people touch the libation cups during a ceremony. I want to take part in this blood libation.

**Odysseus:**

That's a must because this log is huge! Very heavy to lift so we'll need your help.

**Chorus:**

Heavy? What's heavy? I could lift the weight of a hundred carts to get the chance to scorch out that beast's eye! Scorch it out like a wasps' nest!

**Odysseus:**

All right, then, but for now, hold your tongue. You know my plan. Sit tight and wait for my signal. Wait for the master's command!

There's no way I'm going to leave my mates behind, inside that cave. True, I've found a way to get out and I could escape if I wanted to but I've come here with my mates and I'll leave here with my mates. It'd be a terrible sacrilege to escape alone.

*Odysseus enters the cave*

**Chorus:**

Right! Now who's going to be the first at the pole and who'll be next after him? Who'll hold the burning log and who'll turn it and twist it inside Cyclops' eye, melt down that bright sight of his?

*Cyclops sings drunkenly within.*

**Chorus:**

Listen! He's drunk now... awful voice! Awful tune! Shhh! *More singing within.* Knows



nothing about singing...

*Cyclops, Silenus and Odysseus appear at the entrance of the cave. Cyclops and Silenus are drunk and Cyclops is leaning on Silenus' shoulder one moment and on Odysseus' the next. Odysseus has the wine skin and Silenus the cup.*

**Chorus:**

Here he is! He's coming out of his rocky cave now.

**Chorus:**

Come boys, let's teach this uncouth fellow something about singing. In any case, one way or another he won't be able to escape his fate. Cyclops will be blinded!

**Chorus:**

What a happy chappy is the man who's sings the Bacchic song! How happy he must be as he heads off to the party, his sails filled with the delicious juice of the grape vine!

Chorus

There he is, leaning on his best friend's shoulder, on his way to his bed, a bed where the scrumptious, lusty body of his mistress is waiting for him. And when he gets to the door of his choice -he and his plush long hair, all washed in scented myrrh- he'll sing out, "Hellooooo? Who can open the door for me, please?"

**Cyclops:**

Hahaha! Tralala la la! Ohhhh, I'm... I'm... well, I'm totally pissed! Hahahahaha! Loaded! Clogged with wine! *Farts* Hahahaha! Oh, what joy! What joy! My heart is dancing about inside me! *Belches* Hahaha! I'm loaded to the brim. Like a ship is loaded to the brim! To the brim of the ship! I'm fully loaded!

*Pats his stomach fondly*

Ohohoho! What a delightful cargo this ship's belly is carrying! Full of cheer! Party time! Party time in Spring, with my brother Cyclopes!

*To Odysseus*

Come, my deary, deary friend! Pass me that wine skin!

**Chorus:**

Cyclops! What a sight for sore eyes you are as you step forth, out of your chambers! Someone loves you, Cyclops! Some enchanting nymph is waiting for your beautiful body to enter the cool chambers of your den. Torches are lit brightly and the lovely bride will grace your brow with a garland of lovely flowers.

**Odysseus:**

Cyclops listen to me. Listen! I need to tell you something. Listen because I know this god Bacchus, whose drink I've given you.

**Cyclops:**

Bacchus who? Don't tell me he's a god, too! Is he?

**Odysseus:**

O, yes, Cyclops! Mortals think he is the biggest source of good cheer!

**Cyclops:**

Well then, in good cheer I shall belch for him! *He belches loudly.* Hahaha!

**Odysseus:** *Waving the wine skin at him*

That's the sort of god he is, you see. He harms no one!

**Cyclops:**

A god living in a wine skin! How can he do that?

**Odysseus:**

He's happy no matter where you put him!

**Cyclops:**

It's not right for gods to wear skins, though!

**Odysseus:**

Why should you be worried about what he wears? Or, has the hide made him taste bitter?

**Cyclops:**

I can't stand that hide... *takes another drink* but this drink is delicious! I love it!

**Odysseus:**

Well, stay here and drink, then, Cyclops! Enjoy it!

**Cyclops:**

But don't you think I should give some of it to my brothers?

**Odysseus:**

Well, they'd respect you more if you keep it all to yourself!

**Cyclops:**

Yeah but by giving them some, I'll be helping them, helping my own folk, wouldn't I?

**Odysseus:**

Listen, too much partying can often end up in too much violence.

**Cyclops:**

Violence? I might be pissed but there's no way anyone could take me on!

**Odysseus:**

Mate, trust me! It's best if the drunks stay at home.

**Cyclops:**

It's stupid to be drunk and not have a party!

**Odysseus:**

The wise drunk stays at home.

**Cyclops:** *To Silenus*

What do you say, Silenus? Should we stay home?

**Silenus:**

Yes, that's what I reckon. What do we need other drunks around for?

**Cyclops:** *Looks around him and enjoys the sunshine and the ground*

Hmm! I agree. Beautiful, warm sun, beautiful green grass. The ground here is nice and soft with all the grass and flowers.

**Silenus:**

Yes, boss. Drinking in the hot sun is great. Now, lie down here, boss.

*Cyclops lies down and stretches his body all the more to enjoy the sun. Silenus places the cup behind Cyclops, out of his reach.*

**Cyclops:**

Oi! What are you doing? Why are you hiding that cup behind me?

**Silenus:**

I don't want anyone kicking it and smashing it as they walk by.

**Cyclops:**

Yeah, right! You mean you want to pinch it and drink it all yourself! Put it here, between us.

*Silenus obeys. To Odysseus*

Now, you, stranger! Tell me, I want to know what your name is.

**Odysseus:**

My name? My name is Nobody... Now you tell me, how will you repay my kindness?

**Cyclops:**

I will repay you by eating you last!

*Silenus pours a drink in the cup and begins to drink it.*

**Silenus:**

A fine reward you've given our little visitor, boss!

**Cyclops:**

Oi! What do you think you're doing? Drinking my wine behind my back?

**Silenus:**

Oh, no, boss. The wine just... up and kissed me because I'm so handsome!

Cyclops: You'll pay for this, you'll pay for loving the wine that does not love you back!

**Silenus:** *Raises the cup to his ear and pretends to listen to what it's saying to him.*

Oh, no, Cyclops! It says –the wine says– that it loves me very, very much!

**Cyclops:** *Impatiently*

Come on, come on! Pour some into the cup for me... let me have it here!

*Silenus pours some wine into the cup and examines it.*

**Silenus:**

Now let me see... how much water should we mix with it?

**Cyclops:**

No, no water, you'll ruin it. Just give it to me like that!

**Silenus:** *Offers the cup with one hand and a garland with the other.*

Here! Put this garland on first. I'll just take a little sip.

**Cyclops:** *Exasperated*

This barman is a crook!

**Silenus:**

Zeus, no! Smacks his lips Yummm! This wine is so sweet! Now wipe your face, boss.

Your drink is coming! *Fills the cup again. Cyclops wipes his mouth and his beard.*

**Cyclops:**

There! Wiped my mouth and my beard. Now hand it over!

**Silenus:**

Right. Now, boss, first lean gently on your shoulder and then, and then you raise the cup – all the way up – and drink it... like this... see? *Silenus drains the cup so quickly that Cyclops hardly saw the act ... or, maybe, you didn't see... Hahaha!*

**Cyclops:**

Oi! Oi! What do you think you're doing?

**Silenus:**

I'm drinking to your health, Cyclops, sir!

*Cyclops snatches the cup and the wine skin from Silenus' hand and gives them to Odysseus.*

**Cyclops:**

Here, Nobody, you do the pouring from now on.

**Odysseus:** *Fondles the cup and the wine skin*

Oh yes! This is familiar territory for my hand this one.

**Cyclops:**

Go on, then. Pour the bloody thing!

**Odysseus:** *Insisting on reverence for the drink*

Shhh! Be quiet! I'm pouring it, I'm pouring it!

**Cyclops:**

Hard thing to do for a man who's already pissed!

**Odysseus:** *Hands him the cup*

Here you are. Now drink the lot of it in one go. Go on! Bottoms up! A man drinks till a man dies. Till death do you part!

**Cyclops:** *Guzzles the wine up fast.*

Oh, Zeusy, Zeusy, Zeusy! What a wise bit of wood is that of the grape vine!

**Odysseus:**

Yeap, but you've got to finish the lot because, after having this great meal you just had you'd better quench the thirst in your stomach. If you do that, if you quench the thirst that's in your guts, you'll fall into a sweet sleep but if you don't drink it all and leave some behind, Bacchus will dry your gullet out!

*Cyclops takes another long drink.*

**Cyclops:**

Ahhh! Deeeelicious stuff! Wow! I can't get my breath back! Pure joy this stuff! Oh, look! Whaaaaat? Is the sky spinning about? I think it's all dancing around with the earth... Hey, that's Zeus' throne up there and there's Zeus and all the other holly divinities.

Do you think I should go and kiss them all? Hahaha! Here come all the pretty Graces. I think they want to... excite me... get my candle burning... Forget it, girls! Putting an amorous arm around Silenus' shoulder. I'm off with this Ganymede boy here. Much better way to relax than with all you ladies! I always did love the boys more than the girls!

**Silenus:** *Frightened*

Boss, boss! It's me, Silenus! I'm not Zeus' son, Ganymede! I'm Silenus!

*Cyclops lifts Silenus up in his arms*

**Cyclops:**

O, yes you are! You are Ganymede and I'm snatching you away from Dardanus' house! Let's go little boy!

**Silenus:** *To his sons*

O, no! My darling sons! I'm heading off to suffer unimaginable sufferings!

**Cyclops:**

What is it, boy? You're not in love with your lover? Are you making fun of me because I'm drunk?

**Silenus:**

O, no, it's not that! It's just that this little sip of wine I had... it's turned sour on me!  
*Farting, Cyclops takes Silenus into the cave. Odysseus follows him but a short while later Odysseus comes out again.*

**Odysseus:** *To the satyrs*

Come, boys! Come noble sons of Bacchus! Let's go. Cyclops is fast asleep in the cave. We'll make that beast belch out of his disgraceful mouth all the human flesh he's eaten. The huge log is in the fireplace now, burning and smoking. There's only

one thing left for us to do: go and burn his eye out! Come on, time for you boys to show that you're men!

**Chorus:**

Our heart will be as strong as steel and rock. Let's go in now before our father is screwed. And don't you worry about us. You can rely on us.

**Odysseus:** *Prays to the Heavens*

O, Hephaestus! O, Lord of Mount Aetna, god of fire! Save us from this dreadful neighbour, in this cave here! Save us once and for all! Burn that bright candle of that single eye of his!

And you, child of the black night, you dear Sleep! Come, Sleep, come and fall upon this beast –this god-hated beast! Fall upon him with all of your might and take him away! Odysseus and his brave men have glorified you on the battlefields of Troy. Don't let them now be destroyed in the hands of this terrible beast, this beast that cares not for gods or men... Because if you don't, if you don't come to our aid, we'll start honouring Chance as a god! We'll start thinking that Chance is mightier than all the other gods!

*Odysseus enters the cave*

*Chorus rushes to the entrance of the cave, takes a quick look inside and comes out again.*

**Chorus:**

O, ho, ho! And now, like a tight pair of pliers, the pain will grip the horrible eater of human guests by the throat and the fire will extinguish the glow of that eye of his. The log's sharp point, well hidden in the hot ashes, has now turned into charcoal. It's an awesome branch of a great oak tree.

**Chorus:**

Let the wine, Maron's wine, do its work, now! Let it swirl the beast's brains about, let it spin him into a frenzy of pain and let it spit out his eye. Let the drinking of wine be the beast's demise.

**Chorus:**

Once all that happens, I'd very much like Bacchus, the love of my life, to appear, wearing his lovely ivy garland and we can go with him, away from here, away from this desolate cave of Cyclops.

**Chorus:**

O, I wish! I wonder if I will ever get that pleasure!

*Odysseus emerges from the cave, angry at the satyrs.*

**Odysseus:**

Will you, wild animals, shut up? For god's sake, you lot, be silent! Shut and seal your big mouths! Don't even breathe! Or blink an eyelid! Don't cough!

You're going to wake that beast up before his eye gets to do its battle with the flaming log!

**Chorus:**

Right! We'll shut up!

**Chorus:**

And we'll choke our breath inside our cheeks!

**Odysseus:**

Come then. Let's go inside and grab a hold of that log. It's ready. Its point is red

hot.

**Chorus:**

First tell us who'll be at the head of the line. Who's going to be the first to lift the log to burn Cyclops' eye? Tell us so that we can get properly organised beforehand.

**Chorus:**

We lot out here, by the cave's entrance are far too far away to be able to reach the log from here and poke it in his eye!

**Chorus:** *Pretending to be limping*

And us lot are lame... all of a sudden!

Chorus: Bowing his legs

Same with me! There I was standing properly one minute and the very next, my legs went all wobbly!

**Odysseus:**

Just like that? One minute standing straight and the next you're wobbling?

**Chorus:** *Rubbing his eyes*

And my eyes! My eyes are suddenly full of dust and ashes!

**Odysseus:**

What a lot of cowards! What a useless lot!

**Chorus:**

What? Who are you calling "cowards?" We're not cowards! We're just... trying to save our bums, our spines, our teeth! We hate punchups, that's all. We're not cowards!

**Chorus:**

Hey listen! I've got a special Orphean spell I can recite, one that will make that log walk right up to Cyclops' skull all by itself and set that one-eyed sucker of Earth's son, all up in flames!

**Odysseus:** *Disgusted*

I knew all along that you were like this. Cowards! This just proves it!

O, well, I must make do with just my own mates! But if you're useless with your hands at least be useful with your mouths and cheer us on. Give us courage. Lift our spirits a bit!

*Odysseus shakes his head in dismay and walks into the cave*

**Chorus:** *At Odysseus' back*

No worries, Odysseus! We'll do that! Hehehe! Let the Carians take the risk, as they say in the classics! If cheering can do it boys, then let the boss burn!

All **Chorus:** *Singing and dancing as a cheer squad*

Go, boys, go! Stick it up him, poke it into him!

Be brave boys and burn that sucker out!

Burn that eyeball of his! Burn it good and proper!

Cyclops is a horrible beast!

Fill his skull with fire!

Kill the shepherd of Mount Aetna!

Twist and turn that log, boys!

Twist it!

Turn it!

And move away from him now!

Move away from him.

The pain will make him wild, So wild, he might hurt you!

*Wild sound of pain from Cyclops within.*

**Cyclops:** *Within*

Oh, my eye! My eye! They've made charcoal out of my eye!

**Chorus:**

Oh, what a lovely tune, Cyclops! Sing it again, please!

*Cyclops: within*

Ahhhh! Oh, the shame! They've ruined me! Ahhhh! They've destroyed me! I am lost!

*Cyclops appears at the cave's entrance, his back to the audience, his arms extended as a barrier to anyone wanting to escape from it. Shouts at the men inside.*

But you won't escape this rocky cave, you... you nobodies! You won't find any pleasure in your deed, I'll tell you that right now! I've got my arms covering the whole entrance. They're tight up against the cave's walls! You won't escape punishment!

*The Satyrs are spinning about him, teasing him.*

**Chorus:**

What's up, Cyclops? What are you screaming like that for?

**Cyclops:** *Turns his head towards them*

They've destroyed me! Look!

**Chorus:**

Ahhh! How ugly you look, boss! Simply frightful!

**Cyclops:**

Ohhh! Ugly and wretched!

**Chorus:**

Did you get pissed and fall into the fire?

**Cyclops:**

No, no! It was Nobody! Nobody has blinded me!

**Chorus:**

Yeahhhh? Nobody has blinded you? So... so that means nobody has caused you any harm, then, ey?

**Cyclops:**

No, no, no! Nobody plucked my eyeball out! It was Nobody!

**Chorus:**

Yeah, you said that: Nobody blinded you, sooo, you're not blind, then, Cyclops, are you?

**Cyclops:**

Ahhh! The pain! The horrible pain! I hope you get to feel this pain!

**Chorus:**

But, boss, tell us, how is it that you're blind if, as you say, nobody has blinded you?

**Cyclops:**

Stop making fun of me! Tell me where this Nobody is!

**Chorus:**

Who? Nobody? Nobody is nowhere, Cyclops. Anywhere. Nowhere! Puff! Nowhere!

**Cyclops:**

Listen you! It was my visitor who did this to me. That horrible visitor who got me so drunk with that wine of his!

**Chorus:**

Oh yes! The wine! Wine is a very dangerous thing, boss. Bloody difficult to wrestle with!

**Cyclops:**

By the gods, tell me! Have they escaped or are they still in there?

**Chorus:**

They're right there, boss! Near the cliff's edge! Standing very quietly.

**Cyclops:**

Where? Which way?

**Chorus:**

To your right, boss.

*Cyclops moves away from the cave's entrance and tripping and stumbling and farting, spins about this way and that, confused by the misleading directions of the Chorus*

**Cyclops:**

Where, where?

**Chorus:**

On this rock here? Caught them yet?

*Cyclops runs that way but falls and bumps his head*

**Cyclops:**

Ouch! One pain after another! Ahhh! I've broken my skull!

**Chorus:**

Quick, Cyclops. This way! They're running away!

**Cyclops:**

But you said they were here a minute ago! Aren't they here?

**Chorus:**

No, boss, I said here! This way!

**Cyclops:**

Damn it, where?

**Chorus:**

Turn that way. To your left!

**Cyclops:**

My left? Where? Oh, my poor head! You're laughing at me! You're making fun of my misfortune!

**Chorus:**

No we're not, Cyclops. The man is right in front of you!

**Cyclops: Shouts**

Where are you, you most vile creature?

*Odysseus and his men walk softly behind Cyclops and get to the other side of the stage.*

**Odysseus:**

I'm right here, Cyclops! Right here, keeping Odysseus safe and sound!

**Cyclops:**

Odysseus? What's that you're saying? Have you changed your name now?

**Odysseus:**

No, this is the name given to me by my father and it's time now for me to pay you



for that unholy lunch you had. What would be the point, otherwise, I ask you, of setting Troy in flames if I don't punish you for murdering my own war mates?

**Cyclops:**

O, no! The old prophesy has come to pass! It said that I'd be blinded by you after the fall of Troy... but the prophesy also said that you, too, must pay the penalty of your own deeds. Your journey back home will be long and stuffed full with terrible sufferings on the ocean.

**Odysseus:**

Cry, Cyclops, cry! Cry all you want. I've done what I promised I would do. Now I'm off! I'm going down to the shore to get into my ship and set sail away from here, over the Sicilian sea and head for my sweet home. Ithaca.

*Exit Odysseus and his men*

**Cyclops:** *Heading towards the cave.*

Not so fast you don't! I'm going up to that hill and, blind as I am, I'll rip one of the great stones up there and hurl it over to your ship, crushing it and your friends to smithereens. I'm going up there through the back entrance.

*Farting, Cyclops goes into the cave*

**Chorus:** *Hurrying after Odysseus*

We too are off. We're Odysseus' shipmates now and from now on we'll be serving our beloved god, Bacchus.

*Exit all.*

# (EURIPIDES) Ion

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>469</sup> translation by George Theodoridis

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Ion**

**Servants to Apollo's temple and to Ion** (*silent*)

**Hermes**

**Queen Kreusa of Athens**

**King Xuthus of Athens** (*Husband of Kreusa*)

**Old Man** (*Servant of Kreusa*)

**Slave of Kreusa**

**Priestess of Apollo**

**Goddess Athena**

**Chorus of Kreusa's maids**

**Servants of Xuthus** (*silent*)

...

*Before Apollo's temple.*

*Stage Left, rocky caves above which one sees a dense bush of daphne. To the Right and deep into the distance, the mountain Parnassos. Lower to the front, a row of statues of swans, leading to the temple's entrance.*

*Early morning.*

*Enter Hermes holding a staff with two snakes entwined at its uppermost tip. Wings on his head and feet.*

## **Hermes:**

The great bronze shoulders of Atlas hold strong the huge vault above, the old home of the old gods.

Atlas once consorted with one of the many, many goddesses and, from that union, Maia was born. Maia, in turn, turned to mighty Zeus and so, I was born.

Hermes, the servant to the immortals!

I have come here, to the land of Delphi, where Phoebos Apollo sits upon the world's navel and declares to the mortals their present and their future. He's always been doing that.

Now, there's a town in Greece –not the worst of them– that took its name from a goddess, the goddess Pallas Athena, she who holds a golden spear. And it was in that town, Athens, where Apollo forced himself upon Kreusa, Erechtheus' daughter.

This happened there (*points at the mountain behind him*), at the place called The Rock of Pallas Athena at the Northern foot of it, at the very edge of the city. The Lords call that place "Long Rocks." Kreusa's father, of course, knew none of this because that's how Apollo wanted it, so the poor woman kept her heavy womb a

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<sup>469</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/ion/>

secret, that is until the time of the birth arrived. Kreusa gave birth in the house but then, she took the baby, placed it in a small, deep and cute cradle and took it to the cave in which Apollo had raped her and there she left the baby to die.

As well, she kept Erechthonius' tradition and that of her own ancestors because Athena gave earth-born Erechthonius two snakes when she handed him to the daughters of Aglauros to look after. As for the snakes, it's an old custom of the house of Erechtheus to raise their children in cribs adorned with platted golden snakes.

And so, Kreusa placed around the neck of the child an ornament just like this one (*indicates the tip of his staff*) and whatever else she had, certain that it would die. Then she went away.

Now, my brother, Phoebos Apollo here, (*indicates the temple*) has given me the following order: "My brother, go to the people of the famous city, Athens –you know, the one protected by Athena, Zeus' daughter – go to the cave where Kreusa left the newborn baby pick it up, swaddles and all and bring it here, to Delphi, my seat of oracles. It's my baby, as you well know, so bring it here and put it by the temple's entrance. Then leave the rest to me." That I did. Apollo is my brother after all! I took the child and its basket and placed it where he said, at the temple's entrance. Oh, I first opened the blankets a bit and left them open, so that it would be obvious to anyone who came across the basket, that there was a child in there. Now, just as the sun was climbing onto his chariot for his daily journey the prophetess arrived at the temple. She took one look at the baby and wondered just how arrogant humans had become, abandoning an illegitimate child at the god's house. First she thought of taking the child further away from the altars and leaving it on the road but the hard feeling in her heart soon softened (aided of course, in no small measure by Phoebos) and so the child was not thrown on the road. She took it herself and raised it without knowing it was the god's child. Nor did she know who the mother was.

Not even the child knew who his parents were and so, while he was young he just played joyfully around the altars.

When he became a man, however, all the gods decided to make him the guard of all of Apollo's gold and the trusted treasurer of everything. Still, the young man, even in these palaces of the gods he lives a humble and honourable life.

As for Kreusa who bore the child in secrecy, she married Xuthus for this reason: The Athenians and the Chalcodontides, who live in Euboa began a fierce war against each other. Xuthus fought on the side of the Athenians and, at the end of the war, they gave him Kreusa to be his wife, in gratitude, even though he was a foreigner. Xuthus, in fact, was an Achaian –Aeolos' son and grandson to Zeus.

Now, the couple being married for many years but still without a child, came here, to Apollo's temple with one strong wish: to have children. And it doesn't look as if Apollo has forgotten his son and so he's helping them to achieve this strong wish of theirs which will happen like this: When Xuthus will enter the temple Apollo will give him his own son but convince him the boy is his... i.e., Xuthus' and that it was he, Xuthus, who had fathered him.

And so, when the young man goes to his mother's home, he'll be recognised by Kreusa and he'll receive the security that comes with a parental home and Apollo's

rape will soon be forgotten. The boy will be called Ion by all the Greeks and his name will be given to many countries throughout Asia.

But now let me disappear into these daphne-covered caves to find out what has been ordained for the boy. I can see Apollo's son coming out to adorn the temple's columns with splendid branches of daphne. Oh, and let me be the first to announce that the gods will name him Ion.

*Exit Hermes.*

*Enter Ion from among the bushes. He carries a bow and arrow and a quiver with arrows, and branches of daphne tied with ribbons to make a broom. On his head he wears a garland of daphne with ribbons again.*

*With him come some of the temple's servants, one of whom carries a golden water urn which he leaves behind for Ion who will later need it to sprinkle water onto the floor.*

**Ion:** *(Declaiming seriously)*

The four-horse radiant chariot and the sun that lights the earth and scatters the stars into the sacred darkness are here and there *(indicating the mountain)* through Parnassos' pristine peaks he shines his brilliant light of yet another day's cycle for all the mortals to enjoy.

And from dry Smyrna, too, the smoke rises to the roofs of the temples of Apollo. And on the holy tripod sits Pythia, the priestess, and gives her prophecies to the Greeks as these prophecies are sung into her ear by Apollo, the god of prophecies. *(indicating his servants)* And you, priests of Apollo, go to the Castalian streams and there, in its clear freshness, wash yourselves, before you return here at the temple. And in your mouth let there be only words of virtue.

And when you utter your prophecies, you make sure that the words you address to those who have come to receive them, are exactly those very words which the god has put into your mind.

*Exit attendants.*

And we, *(indicating himself and his servants)* since we have known how to care for this temple ever since we were very young, we will clean it with these beautifully bound holy branches.

And we shall clean the sacred floor with sprinklings of holy water.

And we shall use our bow and arrow to send away the birds that foul the sacred offerings.

We have no father nor mother and so, we serve Apollo's temple because he it is who has given us nurture.

*He begins to sweep the floor around the temple's door, at times sprinkling it with water from the "golden" water urn.*

You too, fresh branch of mountain daphne are the god's servant.

Come and sweep the entrance of his temple.

Come from the immortal gardens where the fresh waters of the holy springs ever moisten the god's ground, ever rushing, never ending, ever refreshing.

We sweep the holy ground all day long with adoration, all day long every day from the moment the un begins to emerge with his fast wings.

Come, come, come, bless you son of Leto!

Apollo, my Phoebos! It's a grand pleasure for me to serve you here at your palace where your every prophecy comes true.

My work is glorious because my hands work for gods and not for mere mortals. Nor do I get tired, nor do I get exhausted since Phoebos is my parent and my father. I bless him that he nurtures me and I call him father, Phoebos my father, Phoebos my benefactor here in his temple.

Glory, O glory, Joy and Glory To you eternally o son of Leto!  
It's time now to finish with this daphne broom and to use the golden urn and sprinkle Castalia's crystalline water. Me whose bed is free from sin.

May I continue to serve Phoebos Apollo like this for ever but if I don't, may I be taken by a good-hearted Fate.

*Bird noises above distract his attention. Angrily:*

Look, look there!

Here they are, the birds from Parnassos. They've left their nests and they're here!

*He takes up his bow and an arrow and prepares to shoot.*

No, don't come here! I told you not to come near the gates nor at the golden temples.

You! Eagle! Zeus' herald, whose beak is stronger than all the other birds! I'll get you with my arrow!

Ha! And here's another one. A swan is approaching the temple this time. Hey, Swan! Why don't you take your red feet and go elsewhere because, even though your song is as sweet as Apollo's lyre, my arrow won't miss you! Go! Fly off to the lake of Delos! Believe me or else your songs will turn bloody.

Ah! Look! What is this other bird?

Have you come to build a nest under the temple's gable?

Shoo! Shoo! Or else the song you'll hear will be from my bow and arrow.

Go on! Can you not hear me? Go off to the streams of Alfeios to deliver your eggs or by the sides of the Isthmus.

I don't want to see the golden gifts in the temple be messed up nor do I want to see Apollo's altars fouled.

Still, I'm reluctant to kill you because you deliver to the humans the messages of the gods.

But I better finish up here all the tasks I owe Phoebos. May I never cease working for him.

*While Ion goes about "finishing up," the chorus enters.*

*They are Kreusa's servants. They are either separated into two groups where the leader of each speaks, or all speak alternately.*

**Chorus:**

No, sacred Athens is not the only city where the streets and our gods' temples are graced with columns! Look here! See? Here too is this temple of Loxias Apollo, son of Leto where the sun shines the brilliant brow of his twin face.

*(Indicating the pediment high on the temple)*

Look! Look up there, dear! See the Lernaian Hydra killed by Hercules, the son of Zeus with his golden sickle?

**Chorus:**

I see; and I can also see near him yet another man who holds the blazing torch, Is he the shield-lover, Iolaos, the man who shares the same burdens as Hercules, the man who's being talked about on our weaves and tapestries?

**Chorus:**

And look there! That hero upon the flying horse who cuts off three-bodied Chimera's life, the bitch whose every breath was a flame.

**Chorus:** (*She spins about for a moment*)

I let my gaze fall where it may –everywhere- Ah! Look there the great battle of the Giants drawn on the stone walls.

**Chorus:**

Yes, and oh, girls, look this way!

**Chorus:**

Yes, There's Pallas Athena shaking her Gorgon-painted shield at Encelaus?

**Chorus:**

Yes. I see her. She is indeed Pallas Athena, my goddess.

**Chorus:**

And there, look the thunderbolt, a flame on either end and Zeus' fearsome hand casting it from the sky!

**Chorus:**

I see him yes and with his fire he burns Mimantas.

And Bachus too, with his peace-making staff, weaved with ivy, strikes dead another Giant.

**Chorus:** (*To Ion*)

Hey you there! Can we, pale-footed women, cross over into the holy temple?

**Ion:**

No! No stranger may do so!

**Chorus:**

Well can you give me some information?

**Ion:**

Ask, what is it you want to know?

**Chorus:**

Is it true that the Earth's navel is in there, inside Apollo's temple?

**Ion:**

It's all covered with ribbons and a whole lot of Gorgons all around it.

**Chorus:**

Yes, so I heard...

**Ion:**

If you burned the honey bread and have some question to ask of Apollo you may enter but you'd need to sacrifice sheep if you want to go deeper into the temple.

**Chorus:**

I understand. I won't trample on the god's laws. I'll just stand out here and watch the goings on from here.

**Ion:**

May your eyes see what is proper.

**Chorus:**

Our mistress gave us permission to look around here, in the god's precincts.

**Ion:**

Whose house do you serve?

**Chorus:**

My masters' roofs are in Athens. That's where they have their palaces. Ah, but here's my mistress.

*Enter Kreusa, royally dressed, heading for the temple. Ion watches her with interest. She shows dignity and demeanour, though her eyes are lowered and with tears.*

**Ion:**

Lady, from your dignified manners and dignified air I can easily sense who you are. One can work out a great deal about a mortal simply by appearance and you are a well-born woman.

Your lowered eyes and your gentle cheeks, covered with tears, though, make me wonder. What thoughts bring you to this temple, lady? This is a place where others come with joy to see the precincts of the god, why spill tears here?

**Kreusa:**

Friend, your observation about my tears does not declare you an ill-mannered man. They have covered my cheeks because when I saw this house of Apollo, my mind stirred up old memories.

It wondered back to my country, even though I am right here.

*(To the chorus)* Dearest friends, how wretched we women are! What sins the gods commit! But what can we do? To whom can we turn for justice once the gods declared our mortal fate?

*She sighs*

**Ion:**

What secret sigh pains you, lady?

**Kreusa:**

Nothing... I've calmed down now. I've shot my arrow too rashly. Let none of this concern you, my boy.

**Ion:**

Who are you? Where are you from? Who is your father? By what name should we call you?

**Kreusa:**

My name is Kreusa. I am Erechtheus' daughter and my country is Athens.

**Ion:**

Oh! You are from a glorious country and from great parents. I respect you enormously my lady.

**Kreusa:**

That's how far runs my good fortune, friend. That far and no further.

**Ion:**

Lady, is it true what they say...

**Kreusa:**

Yes? What would you like to ask me?

**Ion:**

I mean, is it true that your father's grandfather has sprung from the Earth?

**Kreusa:**

Yes, but of what help is my ancestry to me now?

**Ion:**

And is it true that the goddess Athena grabbed him and brought him up from

beneath the earth?

**Kreusa:**

That's true but with a virgin's hands. She was not his mother.

**Ion:**

And then, as the paintings show, she gave him to...

**Kreusa:**

...to the Cecropides, to raise him up secretly.

**Ion:**

They say that the goddess' girls opened his coffin.

**Kreusa:**

And that's why they were thrown off the great rock. That's how they met their gory death.

**Ion:**

Amen to that. And what about... what they say about... or are these just hollow words?

**Kreusa:**

What do you mean? Ask me, I've got plenty of time to spare.

**Ion:**

I want to know if your father has sacrificed your sisters.

**Kreusa:**

They were children and he managed to get the courage to sacrifice them for his country.

**Ion:**

How then did you alone manage to escape?

**Kreusa:**

I was still at my mother's breast. A newborn.

**Ion:**

And then did the earth really open up and swallowed him?

**Kreusa:**

Poseidon's trident killed him.

**Ion:**

And that's the place they call The Big Rocks?

**Kreusa:**

Why ask that? What memories you stirred up!

**Ion:**

Apollo's lightning and thunder, too, pays homage to them.

**Kreusa:**

Unjustly so. I wish I had never seen them.

**Ion:**

What? Do you dislike the things that Apollo likes?

**Kreusa:**

No, but the caves and I know his disgraceful acts.

**Ion:** *(after a moment of shock at Kreusa's words)*

And so... which Athenian has made you his wife?

**Kreusa:**

Not an Athenian. Not a local, no. He comes from another land, a stranger.



**Ion:**

Who? He must be of high birth though, surely.

**Kreusa:**

His name is Xuthus. He's Zeus' grandson and son of Aeolos.

**Ion:**

And how did that happen? A stranger marrying you, you, a local woman?

**Kreusa:**

There's a country near Athens called Euboa...

**Ion:**

With watery borders, they say.

**Kreusa:**

Yes. Xuthus helped the Cecropids to conquer it.

**Ion:**

Helped them and then married you?

**Kreusa:**

I was given as a war prize to him. Gift for his spear's work.

**Ion:**

So, are you here with him or have you come alone?

**Kreusa:**

Together but he's gone to the caves of Trophonios.

**Ion:**

Has he? Just as a visitor or is he after a prophecy?

**Kreusa:**

He wants to hear the same thing from both, Apollo as well as Trophonios.

**Ion:**

Have you come for matters regarding land or children?

**Kreusa:**

Even though we have been married for many years we are still barren!

**Ion:**

Have you not given birth yet? Are you still without a child?

**Kreusa:**

Phoebos knows well my lack of children.

**Ion:**

Poor woman! So lucky in all the other things, so unlucky in this.

**Kreusa:**

And you, young man? Who are you? How I envy your mother!

**Ion:**

I call myself Apollo's servant – and this is what I am, my Lady.

**Kreusa:**

Are you a gift by some city or have you been sold to the god?

**Ion:**

I don't know anything except the fact that they call me Apollo's son.

**Kreusa:**

Now it's my turn to feel sorry for you, my friend.

**Ion:**

I don't know who gave birth to me nor who my father is.

**Kreusa:**

Do you live here by the altars or elsewhere in a house?

**Ion:**

Here, at the god's house and wherever sleep takes me.

**Kreusa:**

Did you come to this temple young or as a grown man?

**Ion:**

Those who say they know tell me I came here as a baby.

**Kreusa:**

So the Delphic priestesses nurtured you with their milk?

**Ion:**

I have never known the breast. The woman who brought me up...

**Kreusa:**

Who is she you poor child? Ah, here, I've found troubles to add upon mine!

**Ion:**

She's the god's prophetess. She's like a mother to me.

**Kreusa:**

And yet here you are, a fully grown man. Who fed you?

**Ion:**

I ate from the scraps on the altars and whatever the strangers brought me.

**Kreusa:**

Poor mother whoever she was!

**Ion:**

Perhaps I was the product of some woman's sin.

**Kreusa:**

Still, you are well bred and you're so well dressed, too.

**Ion:**

These are gifts from the god for the work I do here.

**Kreusa:**

Have you never wished to search for your family?

**Ion:**

Never, dear Lady. I have no proof of it.

**Kreusa:**

How dreadful! Another woman has suffered the same fate as your mother.

**Ion:**

Which other woman? If only she shared my pain we'd be both very happy.

**Kreusa:**

It's for her I came here before my husband beats me to it.

**Ion:**

Looking for what? If I can dear lady, I'll help you.

**Kreusa:**

I want to hear a secret oracle from Phoebos Apollo.

**Ion:**

Tell me. I'll do the rest.

**Kreusa:**

Listen then and I will tell you, though... the goddess Shame prevents me.

**Ion:**

Then you'll achieve nothing because the goddess Shame is a lazy one.

**Kreusa:**

A friend of mine told me that she slept with Phoebus Apollo –

**Ion:**

A mortal lay with Phoebos? Don't say that, my dear friend!

**Kreusa:**

And she gave him a boy, keeping it a secret from her father.

**Ion:**

Never! Some man dishonoured her. That's why she's ashamed.

**Kreusa:**

Still, that's what she says and she's suffered from this secret most awfully.

**Ion:**

And what became of her if she had really coupled with the god?

**Kreusa:**

She took the child away from her house and she exposed it to the elements.

**Ion:**

And what of the child then? Is he alive? Where is he?

**Kreusa:**

That's what I came here to ask Apollo. No one else knows.

**Ion:**

Did he die? How?

**Kreusa:**

The woman believes that wild animals killed the child.

**Ion:**

What signs are there to prove that?

**Kreusa:**

When she went back to the place she had left it, the child was no longer there.

**Ion:**

Did she find any drops of blood there or on the road?

**Kreusa:**

She says she didn't though she had a good look everywhere.

**Ion:**

Has it been a long time since the boy was lost?

**Kreusa:**

If he were alive now he'd be about your height.

**Ion:**

The god has been unjust to him and to the mother a poor, miserable woman.

**Kreusa:**

True about the god. She had never had another child.

**Ion:**

But what if Apollo took it and raised it in secret?

**Kreusa:**

Still it wouldn't be fair to enjoy for himself what belongs to many.

**Ion:**

How shocking this is that my fate is so similar to this boy's!

**Kreusa:**

You, too, friend. I'm sure you feel for the poor mother.

**Ion:**

Don't drag me, dear lady, into a pain I have forgotten.

**Kreusa:**

I shall be quiet. Simply answer the questions I've asked you.

**Ion:**

Do you know what is the most difficult thing of all you ask?

**Kreusa:**

Poor woman. Every part of her life is in misery!

**Ion:**

But can the god pronounce an oracle if he wants to keep it a secret?

**Kreusa:**

He sits on a tripod for the whole nation.

**Ion:**

Yes, as for that, he does feel the shame. Don't embarrass him any further.

**Kreusa:**

The poor woman is shattered by her awful fate.

**Ion:**

You won't be able to find any god to prophesy about these things because if he is found to be bad in his own house, Phoebos quite rightly would do your prophet some harm. Leave it woman, because prophecies that hurt Apollo will not be made. It would be stupid for us to demand that gods made the prophecies they didn't like, by sacrificing sheep on the altars or by studying the flight of the birds. This is how it is. If we force the gods to prophesy for us against their will, there would be no gain for us and we would benefit only if the prophecies come from them willingly.

**Chorus:**

There are as many calamities as there are mortals, only their shapes differ. As for eternal joy, you'll never find it.

**Kreusa:** (*Speaking towards the temple*)

O Phoebos Apollo! You are being just neither here, now, nor back there, then, to my friend whose words came to you through me; and you have saved neither your own child nor the mother to whom you owe a debt and who asks you – you, a prophet! Tell her so that she knows. Then if the child has died let her honour it with a tomb but if he's alive let him come before his mother's eyes.

But if the god desires me to forego this hope and not let me know the things I want, I shall do so.

*She sees Xuthus in the distance. Noises of a number of men behind the scene*

But I can see my noble husband, Xuthus, approaching. He's coming back from Trophonios' caves. Say nothing, my friend, of the things we spoke to my husband, in case he makes me feel ashamed for trying to find out things secretly.

Word should not reach the road to where we rule.

Men are very difficult to women and disaster will strike if the good and the bad of them get together.

We live such joyless lives.

*Enter Xuthus and his servants.*

**Xuthus:**

My first words are to you Apollo. Greetings! And greetings to you, too, dear wife. Have I made you concerned by being so late?

**Kreusa:**

No, not at all. You came just as I begun to do so. Tell me though what words do you have from Trophonios? How will the seed of children live in our marriage?

**Xuthus:**

He did not feel it was right that he should speak on this before Apollo but he did say that neither you nor I will be leaving the temple for home without a child.

**Kreusa:**

Glorious mother of Apollo! How happy we would be if that were so! And do let our previous words with your son turn for the better!

**Xuthus:**

Amen to that. Who speaks the god's words?

**Ion:** *(with the royal plural again)*

That is our role, friend, that is so far as those words that are uttered outside. Others take care of the words uttered inside and they are the best of Delphi, chosen by lot. They stand near the tripod.

**Xuthus:**

Very well. I have everything we need so I'll go into the temple. I've heard that a sacrifice has been already made on the altar on behalf of all the visitors.

I want to receive this propitious day, a prophecy from the god. And you, wife, adorn the altars with daphne branches and pray to the gods that I'll come back from the god's palace with good prophecies about a child.

*Exit Xuthus*

**Kreusa:**

I shall, I shall! Still, if Apollo wishes to correct some previous sins of ours and he does not wish to be wholly our friend, that too I will understand. He is a god and I will accept it.

*Exit Kreusa*

**Ion:**

I wonder why this woman denounced the god with so many shadowy words and innuendos? Is she really after a prophesy for a friend or is she hiding something from us which she must keep a secret? Still, she's Erechtheus' daughter. What do I care? What does all this have to do with me? Let me take the golden urn and go and bring some holy water to purify the temple. And to reproach Apollo. What is wrong with him? He rapes virgins and then abandons them. Begets children and then abandons them too – to die? No, Apollo. Do not abuse your great power. Seek only virtue.

If you have it that the mortal who sins gets punished by the gods, well then, how can you commit sins and not be punished yourselves?

And if you don't want to do this –for argument's sake- then make it legal for the mortals also to have illegal unions. Then you will see Poseidon and you, too, Zeus how your temples will empty as punishment for your crimes. You go off pursuing your own pleasure without a care for the consequences.

Why should people say that men are wicked for imitating acts the gods consider

acceptable? No, it is the men's teachers one must blame!

*Exit Ion with the urn*

**Chorus:**

To you, goddess Athena I send this prayer. You have never felt the painful jolts of birth. You were born from Zeus' head with the help of the Titan Prometheus.

**Chorus:**

Virgin maid, Athena!

**Chorus:**

Come, fly here with a speedy wing, here to the temple of the Prophetess Pythia, blessed Athena, blessed goddess of victory, come down from the golden palaces of Olympus.

**Chorus:**

Fly through the byways and through the roads to where the navel of the earth is and where the prophetess stands by the tripod and utters her secret oracles.

**Chorus:**

You, daughter of Leto, two most virtuous virgins, sisters of Apollo.

Plead with your brother, goddess, that the ancient house of Erechtheus regains its old gift of fertility. It's the greatest of good fates to have young children who'll in turn have theirs so that all their father's wealth is passed on to them.

**Chorus:**

Children are strength to the weak, a fountain to joy, and with weapons, saviours of their city.

I prefer to raise children than to have wealth, or a king's palace. I'd never want to live without children and those who prefer it that way, I despise. Wealth is meaningless to me without children.

**Chorus:**

O caves and throne of Pan!

O stone near the Long Rocks full of caves!

There where the triplet sisters Aglaurides stamp their feet in dance before the temples of Pallas Athena. There, Pan, at the crags, in your caves, you play your hymns with your flute's most agile melody just before the sun lights up the sky.

**Chorus:**

In there it was, where a young virgin who gave birth to Apollo's child and she, poor woman, threw it to the birds of prey, a bloody meal for the wild beasts, a shame for the raped girl.

**Chorus:**

This story was never told on the woven cloth, nor words were ever said of any child begotten by a god and who had a good life.

*Enter Ion with the urn.*

**Ion:**

Women, servants, you who are guarding the steps of this scented temple and are waiting for your master, Xuthus. Has he left the tripod of the oracles or is he still inside asking about his childlessness?

**Chorus:**

He's still in the temple, friend. We haven't seen him at the steps.

*(noise from within the temple)*

Ah, but he'll soon be here. I can hear the doors creaking.

*Enter Xuthus from the temple*

**Xuthus:** *(To Ion)*

Joy to you, my son! This is a matching word for what I have to say.

**Ion:**

I am overjoyed and you are wise, so we'll get along just fine.

**Xuthus:**

Give me your hand that I may kiss it and your body that I may hug it.

**Ion:**

Are you all right or has the god sent you out of your mind?

**Xuthus:**

Out of my mind? Could I be out of my mind if I want to kiss the most precious thing in my life?

*(Xuthus tries to hug Ion but Ion pulls back)*

**Ion:**

Careful you'll break the sacred garland!

**Xuthus:** *(Insisting)*

I just want to hug you not to seize you. Oh, I have found the one I love!

**Ion:**

Get back or I'll shoot you through your chest.

**Xuthus:**

Why repel me if you, too, found the one you love?

**Ion:**

It looks like I have to educate all the ignorant foreigners and madmen!

**Xuthus:**

Slaughter me and burn me. Then you'd be your father's murderer.

**Ion:** *(laughs)*

And which parent of mine are you? How can I not laugh when I hear such things?

**Xuthus:**

Don't do so. Let me explain.

**Ion:**

Explain what?

**Xuthus:**

That I am your father and you are my son.

**Ion:**

Who said?

**Xuthus:**

Apollo himself. He raised you while all along I was your father.

**Ion:**

No other witnesses?

**Xuthus:**

Apollo's word.

**Ion:**

You've got it wrong!

**Xuthus:**

I have no hearing problems.

**Ion:**

What did Phoebos say, exactly?

**Xuthus:**

What? Oh! He said that whoever meets me...

**Ion:**

Meet you where? How?

**Xuthus:**

Meet me as I go out of the temple...

**Ion:**

What will happen to the one you meet?

**Xuthus:**

He'll be my son.

**Ion:**

Your own son or a gift from someone else?

**Xuthus:**

A gift yes, but by my own seed.

**Ion:**

And so, was I the first you met as you were coming out?

**Xuthus:**

You and no one else, my boy!

**Ion:**

Wow, what luck!

**Xuthus:**

Same luck for both of us!

**Ion:**

Yes but hold on, by which mother am I your son?

**Xuthus:**

I've no idea!

**Ion:**

Didn't Phoebos tell you?

**Xuthus:**

I was so happy I forgot to ask.

**Ion:**

So then... Earth was my mother!

**Xuthus:**

The ground bears no children.

**Ion:**

Well then, how did I become your son?

**Xuthus:**

I don't know... I'll leave that to the god.

**Ion:**

Come let's touch on other things now.

**Xuthus:**

Yes, that would be best my boy.

**Ion:**

Right! You've had a... sinful union, right?



**Xuthus:**

Yes, with the stupidity of youth.

**Ion:**

Before you married Kreusa?

**Xuthus:**

No, much later.

**Ion:**

So, that's when you... begot me?

**Xuthus:**

The years seem to be about right.

**Ion:**

But how did I get here afterwards?

**Xuthus:**

I wish I knew to tell you.

**Ion:**

Such a long distance! How could I have made it?

**Xuthus:**

I can't fathom it either.

**Ion:**

Did you go to Pythia's Rock, earlier?

**Xuthus:**

Yes, at the Bacchanals.

**Ion:**

At whose house did you stay?

**Xuthus:**

Someone who... with the girl servants of the Delphic oracle

**Ion:**

You mean they had sex with you while dancing?

**Xuthus:**

They were Maenads!

**Ion:**

Were you sober or drunk?

**Xuthus:**

I was deep in Bacchic joy.

**Ion:**

So that's how I was planted!

**Xuthus:**

Fate, too, wanted it, my son.

**Ion:**

So, how did I end up here at the temple?

**Xuthus:**

The girl must have left you here.

**Ion:**

I'm not a slave's child, thank god!

**Xuthus:**

And so, my child, accept your father now!

**Ion:**

How can I not believe the god?

**Xuthus:**

You're absolutely right.

**Ion:**

What more could I ask for?

**Xuthus:**

Now you're seeing things as they truly are.

**Ion:**

Nothing more than to be the son of the son of Zeus!

**Xuthus:**

That's how it was meant to be for you.

**Ion:** (*Hugging Xuthus*)

Is this my father I'm truly hugging?

**Xuthus:**

Yes, if you truly believe in god.

**Ion:**

Greetings, my father!

**Xuthus:**

Oh, what joyous words you're giving me!

**Ion:**

What a holy day it is today!

**Xuthus:**

Holy indeed! A day that has blessed me!

**Ion:**

O, dear mother! When will I see you before me?

Now more than ever –whoever you are I want to know you.

But perhaps you're dead and we can't even hope to see you.

**Chorus:**

The joy of the palace is our joy too but how I wish that our mistress were also happy with children in the house of Erechtheus.

**Xuthus:**

My boy, the god acted wisely to have us find each other; me to find a son and you to find the father whom you never knew before.

I seek the same thing you do: to find your mother, the woman who gave you to me. But let us put our trust to Time and perhaps we shall find her. Now, leave the temple and your duties here and do as your father wishes: come with me to Athens because there awaits you great joy, much wealth and on top of all that, the mighty sceptre of your parents.

And no one will be able to say that you are poor or illegitimate...

**Ion:** *does not respond*

**Xuthus:**

You are quiet my son. Why lower your eyes to the ground like that? Why look so worried? Why turn your father's newly found joy into sadness?

**Ion:**

Things have a different appearance when one looks at them from near and then

from afar. I, too feel great joy for having found you, father but you must learn what I have in my heart. They say that the famous people of Athens are Athens-born and not immigrants

I'll be going there with two burdens on my back: my father is a foreigner and I am a bastard and with these two shameful burdens and no strength with which to carry them, the Athenians will think of me as being worse than insignificant. And if I ever want to try and climb onto the tallest political throne of the city one day and try to become someone significant I will be despised by those who tried and failed because that's how it is: the man with less ability hates the man who has more.

And as for those who are intelligent and are able to succeed but do not try to get into politics, they'll be laughing at me for being the fool who doesn't take it easy in such a busy country. Then there are the politicians who have made a success of it. They will be using their intelligence and their voting power viciously against me to frustrate my wishes.

That's how it is, father. Those in power and leadership, will fight fearsomely all their competitors.

And then, father, I'll be entering your house and not mine, and be near a childless woman, a woman with whom you used to share her pain.

Now, however, she will be totally alone to carry that burden, so she, too, of course, will hate me and rightly so. She will be bitter for seeing me next to you full of joy, while she, childless looks on.

So what do you do then? You must either abandon me to make her happy or you'll keep me and throw the whole house into turmoil. What murders, what murderous poisons don't the women find for the men in such circumstances! And then, I also feel very sad for your wife, father. There will be no children for her in her old age and this she certainly does not deserve, a woman from such noble parents, to be without children.

Besides, kingship is overrated. It is unjustly glorified. It has a sweet face but a dark and turbulent heart because how can one be happy, or blessed if he must always be afraid of murderers or people he can never trust?

Rather a happy commoner than a king who must humour the sly and hate the good, lest they slaughter him.

You may tell me that all these concerns are conquered by gold and that it is a wonderful thing to be wealthy but I don't like to have my ears filled with condemnations while I'm holding onto wealth, nor do I want any troubles.

I prefer by far the measured life, measured and with no concerns.

Father, listen to the joys that I have here: Firstly, I have my peace –something which everyone loves. Few concerns and no one bad comes to bother me. Also, I never have to worry about this awful thing of having to hold my step and move across the road when confronted by lowlifes.

Then, praying to the gods and talking to the mortals I serve the happy folk and not the sad ones and make friends with them easily; and when one lot leaves, another comes and so I'm constantly talking with people and I'm always happy. As well, people should pray to be in my place, even if they have to do so reluctantly; I follow the law, I do my duty to the gods and this because this fits with my nature. So father, let me tell you that I consider this life to be far better for me than the

one you offer me.

Let me live alone. Living a humble life is as delightful as living a grand life.

**Chorus:**

You spoke wisely and it would be the best way for my beloved mistress also.

**Xuthus:**

Stop all this nonsense and learn how to enjoy happiness. Now that I found you, my son, I want to share a table with you and to make all the sacrifices I've neglected to make when you were born. I will invite you to my home, in Athens, as a friend and an observer, to a friendly feast and not as my son because I don't want to make my childless wife sad while I'm happy. When the time comes for me to hand you my city's sceptre, then I'll introduce you to her as my son.

I shall call you Ion because it is proper according to your Fate, since you were the first I met when I came out of the temple. Now call all your friends and invite them to the sacrifice before you leave Delphi.

And you, servants, keep silent and say nothing to my wife or else you'll die!

**Ion:**

I'm going but there's still something lacking from what Fate has declared for me: If I don't find the woman who gave birth to me father, my life will be unhappy and if there's one prayer that I can make it is that my mother is from Athens so that I will have the validity of the Athenian citizenship.

Whoever is in a foreign city will always remain a foreigner even if he becomes a legal citizen by word he will still lack the freedom of speech.

*Exit Xuthus, Ion and Xuthus' attendants.*

**Chorus:**

I can see my mistress crying and bitterly sighing when she sees her husband with a son and she without and alone.

**Chorus:**

Son of Leto, Phoebos Apollo, prophet! What song did your mouth sing in prophecy about this?

Who was the child raised in your temple and who was his mother? This oracle of yours does not please me one bit, there's a trap hidden within it. I'm afraid that some day we'll come upon some great misfortune.

**Chorus:**

God's words are odd and odd the thoughts they give me: This boy is without doubt from a foreign land.

Friends, how can we not yell this out most clearly to our mistress? She was Xuthus' friend in everything and had her hopes pinned on him but he betrayed her and gave her despair? Now she's in utter misery while he's rejoicing in good fortune.

**Chorus:**

Here she's is, falling into grey age but he doesn't care at all even about his friends. He came to our palace as a foreigner and cared only about building his own wealth, neglecting our mistress.

**Chorus:**

He neglected her totally, the wretch, the miserable wretch, the traitor! May the gods neglect him also and reject his holy sacrifices, for this whole century.

**Chorus:**

And no matter how many sacrifices he burns at the altars I shall show him who it is I love in our palace. Here they are now, the father and the new son at the altar at preparing for a feast.

**Chorus:**

There at the Parnassian great rocks whose peaks rip into the heavens, where Bacchus, holding the twin torches, dances lightly in the night with his nocturnal Maenads.

**Chorus:**

May he never enter the city and rather die in his youth because when a stranger enters our city he will cause us much grief.

**Chorus:**

Best that Erechtheus remains since he was our king first.

*Enter Kreusa with the Old Man, who is almost blind, has a walking stick and is guided by Kreusa.*

**Kreusa:**

Old man, you were my father's tutor when he was alive. Erechtheus himself. Go inside the temple and ask Lord Apollo on my behalf please if he has uttered a word about my hopes for children, a thing which will please both of us. Joy is sweet when it's shared by friends.

And if perhaps –god forbid- some terrible thing comes our way, I'll still find comfort in your understanding eyes. Even though I am your mistress, I respect you just as you used to respect my father when he was enjoying the sunlight.

**Old Man:**

Daughter, you're worthy of your worthy parents. You respect the customs and ethics of our city's ancient ancestors and you have never shamed them. Come, help me climb the steps to the temple. They are difficult for me so you'll have to be my support.

**Kreusa:**

Come, old man and watch your step.

**Old Man:**

Here we are. The foot is slow but the mind is nimble

**Kreusa:**

Hold onto the walking stick and come around this way.

**Old Man:**

Both, the stick and I are half blind.

**Kreusa:**

That's true, all right but careful you don't get exhausted by this walk.

**Old Man:**

Do you think I want to? Damned legs!

*They've reached the temple's steps. Now Kreusa turns to the chorus.*

**Kreusa:**

Dear women who work with me at my loom and with its shuttle; trusty servants one and all: What did Apollo say to my husband about our children? Speak because we deserve some happy news.

**Chorus:**

Dreadful, dreadful Fate!

**Kreusa:**

A bad beginning this!

**Chorus:**

Dreadful, dreadful Fate!

**Old Man:**

Will the oracles be bitter for my masters?

**Chorus:**

Ladies what should we do? What should we do? One dies for such things.

**Kreusa:**

Tell me, friends. What is this fear of yours?

**Chorus:**

Shall we speak? Shall we be silent? What can we do?

**Kreusa:**

Tell me! What is this disaster you have to tell me?

**Chorus:**

I must tell you my Lady even if death takes me twice over. It is not ordained for you to hold children into your arms nor hug them tightly against your breast.

**Kreusa:**

Oh! I wish I were dead!

**Old Man:**

Daughter!

**Kreusa:**

Ah, my friends! That's the end of my life! What a terrible Fate I have!

**Old Man:**

Yes, my daughter, we are done for.

**Kreusa:**

Ah! Wretched Fate! Wretched woman! What awful sadness pierces my heart!

**Old Man:**

Be strong, my girl!

**Kreusa:**

How can I not feel the sadness?

**Old Man:**

Wait until we learn...

**Kreusa:**

What more news can there be for me?

**Old Man:**

Let's wait and see if your husband suffered the same ill luck or is it just you it fell upon?

**Chorus:**

Old man, to him Apollo gave a son and now he's rejoicing away from our mistress.

**Kreusa:**

You give me one disaster upon another! Oh how can I endure this?

Old Man: (to the chorus)

The son you talked about, from what woman will he be born? Or is he born already?

**Chorus:**

He's born and fully grown already. Apollo gave the boy to Xuthus here in front of us.

**Kreusa:**

What did you say? Unspeakable! The unbelievable things you say!

**Old Man:**

For me, too!

**Kreusa:**

But how does the oracle go? Explain to me more clearly. Who is this young man?

**Chorus:**

Apollo gave Xuthus as his son the first person he met once he came out of the temple. That young man was he.

**Kreusa:**

Misery! Misery is ahead of me. I shall remain childless, in a deserted house my whole life. And what of the oracle?

Who was the young man who appeared before my husband? How and where did he first see him?

**Chorus:**

Did you not see the young man who was sweeping around here at the temple? That was the boy who became Xuthus' son.

**Kreusa:**

Ah, what pain! If only I could fly through the moist air and far into the stars, away from this land, Greece!

**Old Man:**

What name did his father give him? Do you know it or is it a secret and unknown?

**Chorus:**

Ion, he called him because he was the first to see when he came out of the temple.

**Old Man:**

And his mother? Who is it?

**Chorus:**

I don't know but let me tell you, old man, everything I do know: Xuthus has gone off without our mistress, to the holy tents to make sacrifices for the sake of the boy's birth and their friendship.

**Chorus:**

They will be sitting at the same table and rejoicing without her.

**Old Man:**

We've been betrayed, my Lady and I, too, feel your pain. Your husband has insulted us and, by deceit, he will try to throw us out of the halls of Erechtheus!

I'm not saying this because I hate your husband but because I love you more than him. He came to our city as a stranger, marry you and received your wealth while all the time, secretly he was begetting children with another woman. I say secretly and I'll show you how: he saw that you were without a child so he didn't want to live with you and suffer the same fate. So he took to his bed some slave and had a child with her which he sent away to the oracle here.

The boy was left here at the doorsteps of the god's temple to be raised as an abandoned child. When Xuthus finally learnt that the boy was fully grown he came

to take him back, telling you that you came here supposedly because you were after a child. The story about the god telling Xuthus that he's met his son outside the temple is a lie. This is a story put out by Xuthus and not by Apollo. He had the child brought up in secret. If Xuthus was caught, he'd blame the god, if he was not he had a mind to make the boy king of Athens.

Even his name, Ion, he had it given to him long ago, not just today as if he had just shouted the happy syllables of surprise: Iiii On!

**Chorus:**

Oh, how I hate the sly men who commit an injustice and then they cover it up prettily with lies. I prefer a friend who is dull and honest rather than a clever crook.

**Old Man:**

And there's yet another thing you'll suffer and it is the worst. You'll be bringing into your house as a ruler a man without a mother, the son of some slave and a foreigner. It would have been an easier burden to carry if the boy was born of a noble woman and Xuthus had persuaded you that he had that child with her because you were barren.

Then you'd agree with him and even if that was unbearable for you he could have searched in the house of Aeolos for another woman to marry.

Come, my daughter, for all this you must do something. Some deed that befits your womanly nature. Either with a sword, or a plot or poisons, you must kill your husband and his son. Do that before they kill you. No, don't hesitate on this because by doing so you'll lose your own life. That's what happens when two enemies live in the same house: one or the other will die. I'll help you with this deed. I'll come and stab the boy while they're having their meal.

This way, if I die, I'll be paying back my debt to my masters who fed me all these years. Either that or I'll be sharing in their joy. Because only one thing brings shame to the slaves, a bad name but if the slave is good then he's no worse a man than the free ones.

**Chorus:**

Me, too, my lady. I want to have the same fate as him. Either die or live with honour.

**Kreusa:**

O soul of mine! How can I remain silent and how can I dismiss the shame! How can I bring to light the secret rape? What stops me? Who is my opponent in this contest of virtue? Is it not my husband who did the betraying here? I have no home nor any children and what hopes I had to bring the two together are now lost for ever. No matter how long I have kept the rape and the lamentable birth a secret I still did not manage to achieve it.

But no! I swear by the starry throne of Zeus and even by the goddess Athena, goddess of my High Rocks and by the shore of the holy lake, Triton. I will not keep my rape a secret. I will announce it and bring great relief to my breast.

Tears roll from my eyes and my soul aches by the evil doings of both men and immortals. What heartless betrayers they are I shall prove as I speak of my rape.

*(Shouts at Apollo)*

Apollo!

You and your seven-stringed lyre, made of lifeless horn!

You, the god who sings the lovely songs of the Muses!



You, son of Leto!

You I accuse before all!

You I accuse in the light of day!

You came to me with your shiny golden hair while I was gathering saffron flowers to adorn my breasts, a match for my golden gowns.

You grabbed my white arms and dragged me into the depths of the cave, to your bed and while I was crying for my mother, you raped me shamelessly, doing things that make Aphrodite's heart rejoice.

Then I, poor wretch bore you a boy which, being afraid of my mother, I left there on that same spot you raped me. Upon your own bed where you made me yours by stealth!

Luckless me!

O, yes!

It's you, Leto's son!

It's you I am addressing!

You who sings oracles by the side of your golden thrones and by the earth's centre, I will shout a groan in your ear!

Evil lover!

Our own son –yes, yours and mine! Our own son was taken by the vultures and I am left a deserted mother holding his swaddling clothes.

Look there, Apollo!

Look!

See? The whole of Delos hates you!

The daphne between the gentle shoots of the palm tree hates you!

There, look there, where, in a holy bed of matrimony, Leto lay with Zeus and gave birth to you.

**Chorus:**

What a huge chest of misery is opening wide! Big enough to make everyone weep bitter tears.

**Old Man:** *shocked at what he heard*

My daughter I see your face and I am filled with dire pity. Your story sends me hither and thither and I'm losing my wits. One minute I'm trying to empty our ship from all the evil and the next you send me a new wave of calamities from the stern. With all this suffering you're shouting, it seems to me you're heading on the wrong path, entering a new lot of disasters.

What are you saying? Of what are you accusing Phoebos Apollo? What child did you say you gave birth to and where in the city did you abandon it to have the vultures slaughter it? Tell me again from the start.

**Kreusa:**

Old friend, I am ashamed to tell you but I will speak.

**Old Man:**

If you do I will be able to understand better and share your pain.

**Kreusa:**

Well then, my old friend, listen. You know the cave at Kekrops' Rock, at the northern side? We call it the Long Rocks.

**Old Man:**

Yes, I know. Pan's cave where there are altars near by.

**Kreusa:**

Yes, there. What a dreadful fight I fought in there!

**Old Man:**

Dreadful fight? What do you mean? Your words bring tears to my eyes.

**Kreusa:**

In there, old friend I have suffered a humiliating rape, an unwanted marriage with Phoebos.

**Old Man:**

Oh, my daughter! Is that what I had noticed back then?

**Kreusa:**

I don't know but if you want the truth let me tell it.

**Old Man:**

That time when you were suffering the pangs of birth secretly?

**Kreusa:**

Yes. I was suffering then what I have revealed just now.

**Old Man:**

How did you manage to keep Apollo's rape a secret?

**Kreusa:**

I gave birth. Wait old friend and I'll tell you.

**Old Man:**

But where? Who was your midwife or did you give birth all on your own?

**Kreusa:**

Alone, yes. Inside the cave where he raped me.

**Old Man:**

But where is the child? So we can say that you, too, have a child.

**Kreusa:**

It is dead, old man. I left it alone with the beasts.

**Old Man:**

It died? But why didn't Apollo come to your aid?

**Kreusa:**

He didn't and so the poor boy is growing up in the underworld.

**Old Man:**

But who left the child there? Surely not you!

**Kreusa:**

Yes, it was me. In the dark I had covered it with my gown.

**Old Man:**

Has no one found out that you left the child there?

**Kreusa:**

Secrecy and Disaster are the only two who knew.

**Old Man:**

But with what courage did you leave your son in the cave?

**Kreusa:**

What courage, old man? I had cried and lamented a great deal.

**Old Man:**

Ah, poor wretch! What a mean soul you had but Apollo has an even meaner!

**Kreusa:**

If only you could see how the child stretched its little arms to me!

**Old Man:**

Looking for milk or your embrace?

**Kreusa:**

My embrace. Yet I torture it unjustly.

**Old Man:**

But what came over you to have it thrown out?

**Kreusa:**

I thought the god will come down to save it.

**Old Man:** *(covering his head with his garment in shame. Tearfully)*

O, what a disastrous gale has hit at the joy of your home!

**Kreusa:**

Old man, why have you covered your head and why are you sobbing?

**Old Man:**

Because I see both you and your husband in misery.

**Kreusa:**

That's the way of the world. Nothing stays the same

**Old Man:**

But so much grief, Kreusa, don't let it takeover our emotions.

**Kreusa:**

Yes, old friend, but what can I do? The luckless always hesitate.

**Old Man:**

First exact justice from the god who did injustice to you.

**Kreusa:**

How can I, merely a mortal, argue with the great immortals?

**Old Man:**

Set fire to Apollo's holy temple!

**Kreusa:**

No, no, I'm too afraid to do this. I have enough problems already.

**Old Man:**

Try as much as you can. Put the knife to your husband!

**Kreusa:**

He has always been good to me. I don't have the heart.

**Old Man:**

Well then do it to the boy who cane between you.

**Kreusa:**

How? If it were possible I'd do it. I'd prefer that.

**Old Man:**

Arm your servants with swords.

**Kreusa:**

Yes! I'm on my way but where can this happen?

**Old Man:**

In the holy tents where he's being host to his friend.

**Kreusa:**

The murder will be obvious there and the slaves are faint-hearted.

**Old Man:**

What you mean is that you're afraid! Well then, you think of something!

**Kreusa:**

Certainly. I have something which is both, clever as well as drastic.

**Old Man:**

I'm ready to work with you on both.

**Kreusa:**

Well then, listen. You know the old battle of the giants?

**Old Man:**

Yes, the one in Phlegra, where the Giants fought the gods.

**Kreusa:**

Precisely! That's where Earth gave birth to frightful Gorgon.

**Old Man:**

So that she would help her children fight the gods.

**Kreusa:**

And then Zeus' daughter, Athena killed her.

**Old Man:**

That's what I've been hearing for years now.

**Kreusa:**

Now Athena wears the gorgon's skin on her breast.

**Old Man:**

They call it the "Aegis of Pallas Athena"

**Kreusa:**

It got its name when she rushed into the war of the gods.

**Old Man:**

What fearful drawing did Athena's shield have on it?

**Kreusa:**

It's a breastplate defended by lots of snakes all around it.

**Old Man:**

And is this, my daughter harmful to your enemies?

**Kreusa:**

You must know Erichthonios, old man, or don't you? Of course you do.

**Old Man:**

The man whom Earth produced as your forefather?

**Kreusa:**

When he was born, Pallas Athena gave him...

**Old Man:**

What? It seems there's something more you want me to hear.

**Kreusa:**

Well, she gave give him two drops of the Gorgon's blood.

**Old Man:**

And what effect will they have upon humans?

**Kreusa:**

The first drop is for killing, the second for healing.

**Old Man:**

And how did Athena attach these to baby Erichthonios' body?

**Kreusa:**

With a golden chain. Then, later, he gave it to my father.

**Old Man:**

And when your father died was the chain passed on to you?

**Kreusa:**

Yes, I wear it around my wrist.

**Old Man:**

How does this double gift from the goddess work?

**Kreusa:**

The blood that dripped from the hollow vein...

**Old Man:**

Of what use is it? What are its powers?

**Kreusa:**

It prevents disease and nourishes life.

**Old Man:**

And what of the second drop? What does that do?

**Kreusa:**

It kills! It's the venom from the Gorgon's snakes.

**Old Man:**

Do you carry them mixed together or separately?

**Kreusa:**

Separately. Good and evil can't mingle.

**Old Man:**

Well, then my dear girl. You have all you need!

**Kreusa:**

With this, the boy will die and you will be his killer!

**Old Man:**

Where? How? Tell me and I'll try and do whatever you say.

**Kreusa:**

In Athens, when he'll come to my house.

**Old Man:**

That's wouldn't be right... and you didn't like my suggestion either.

**Kreusa:**

What do you mean? Do you think that I'm afraid?

**Old Man:**

No, but they'll call you his murderer even if you didn't do it.

**Kreusa:**

You're right. They say that stepmothers hate their stepsons.

**Old Man:**

Let me kill him here where you can deny the murder.

**Kreusa:**

Ah! How happy I feel, even before the event!

**Old Man:**

Yes. You'll trick your husband by doing to him what he wants to do to you.

**Kreusa:**

Do you know what to do now? You take this golden vial –it's an old work of the

goddess-, you put it under your cape and go to where Xuthus is secretly performing the sacrifices. Once they've eaten and they're about to pour the libations to the gods, take it out and empty it into the young man's cup so that only he alone, drinks it. No one else except he who wants to rule my house drinks it. Once he does that, he'll never step foot in Athens. He'll stay there dead.

*She gives him the vial.*

**Old Man:**

Now you go to the house of the consuls where you will be looked after and I'll go and do as you've told me.

Come now, old legs, come! Become young and active again! Defy your many years! Go to your mistress' enemy and kill him! Kill him and drive him out of the house. It's a good thing to honour the honourable if good fortune is with you but if you want to hurt your enemies, there's no law that will stand in your way.

*Exit Kreusa and Old Man*

**Chorus:**

Oh, Enodia, protector and guide of the traveller, Demeter's daughter, ruler of the ghosts of the day and night.

**Chorus:**

Guide now the killing vial sent by my beloved mistress, full with the drops of blood, spilled from the once severed neck of the mortal Gorgon. Guide it, Enodia into the cup of him who wants to enter our house and let no stranger rule our city.

**Chorus:**

Let its rulers be only the noble Erichthonians.

But if my lady's purpose and hope and daring are denied their success by Time then, she will either die with a sharp sword or a knot wound around her neck – sending away one pain with another. Thus she will descend to another type of world.

**Chorus:**

Because a noble woman cannot endure to see her towers being ruled by strangers –not as long as she lives, nor as long as she can see the light of day.

**Chorus:**

I feel a great shame before the often sung Bacchus, if near the dancing springs of Kallihorisi the young man lying awake sees Iacchus at night holding the festival's torch, when the star-lit nations of the sky are dancing and the moon and the fifty daughters of Nereas strike up a dance in the sea and the endless streams of the rivers –they dance for the Kore of the golden wreath and for her glorious mother. So Phoebos' beggar hopes to stomp rudely upon the labour of others and rule there.

**Chorus:**

Look you who sing to every illicit love of ours all your cacophonous songs for our beds –

**Chorus:**

Look how I endure with respect the unjust loves of men and now let fall upon them every song of disdain and let the muses cast their evil tongues upon their beds

**Chorus:**

If he who is of Zeus' stock revealed a great disrespect and with my mistress at

home he didn't sire children to share but rather gave the joy to another Aphrodite

**Chorus:**

And gave us a bastard child.

*Enter Kreusa's Slave*

**Slave:**

Women, where may I find Erectheus' daughter, Kreusa, my mistress? I've searched for her all over this town with no luck

**Chorus:**

Why, what's up fellow slave? What need speeds your foot and what news do you bring us?

**Slave:**

We are being pursued. The authorities are searching for her to stone her to death!

**Chorus:**

What? What did you say? Have they caught us trying to kill Ion?

**Slave:**

Yes, that's right and now you'll be one of the first to be punished.

**Chorus:**

But how have they uncovered our secret plan?

**Slave:**

It's because the god did not want Justice to be polluted and so he made the impossible possible.

**Chorus:**

But... how did he do this? I beg you, come, tell us because if you tell us that we must die then we shall happily do so –either that or we can still see the light of another day.

**Slave:**

After Xuthus and his new son, Ion left the shrine and went to the dinner and to the preparation of the sacrifices, Xuthus went alone to the place where a bacchic flame of the god leaps over the twin rocks of Dionysus. He wanted to sprinkle blood as birth offerings for Ion. Before he left, he told his son, "you stay here, my son and get the carpenters to make a tall tent all around this space.

If I'm late returning from the sacrifices, let those of your friends who are here begin the feast without me." Xuthus then took the bulls and left.

Young Ion began to raise the elegant tents with no walls but with strong uprights. He took great care to keep the blazing sun away both at noon and in the final flames of the evening. He measured out a square of a hundred feet each way so that he could invite all of the people of Delphi.

Then Ion, took from the temple's storehouse the sacred, beautiful tapestries, stretched them over the uprights and made a huge shady awning out of them for everyone to see and marvel at.

Of these tapestries Ion placed first the garments which Herakles, son of Zeus had dedicated to the temple. These were spoils that Herakles had gained from his war with the Amazons and on these garments were woven the following pictures: Heaven was gathering the stars into a circle in the sky and Helios was driving his horses towards the final blaze, dragging behind him the bright light of Esperos, the Evening star.

Night, in her black robe was racing a chariot with two horses at the yoke and alongside of her ran the stars. The Pleiads were flying through the centre of Heaven and the swordsman, Orion, with the Bear above was turning her tail round the golden Pole. And the brilliant circle shone, cutting the month into two. The Hyades, a clear sign to the seafarers and the light carrier Dawn were sending away the stars. Then Ion ordered more tapestries to be spread, this time work by barbarians, upon which were painted, agile, speedy ships, enemies to our own Greek ships and animals mixed of nature, half horse, half centaurs, horsemen chasing stags or hunting wild lions.

Also, near the entrance of the tent was painted a picture of Kekrops, snakes twirled all round him and his daughters next to him. This was a picture that someone from Athens had dedicated to the temple of Apollo.

Then Ion brought out great golden wine mixing bowls. A crier then, standing on his toes called out that all the people around the temple come and join in the feast with Ion. The tent was immediately and noisily filled with people who began putting garlands on their heads and eating from the lavish banquet, eating to their heart's delight.

When the joy of eating had passed, our old man stood up in the centre of the banquet and with his antics raised much laughter from the banqueters. With great enthusiasm he began bringing water by the joyful to wash their hands. Then he burned myrrh incense and filled the golden cups, a chore he took upon himself alone.

Then came the time for singing and for the drinking from the mixing bowl. That's when the old man called out, "take away these small cups and bring here the large ones so that our guests might get to the happy mood more quickly." The slaves obeyed, bringing in the silver and golden cups. The old man chose one as if for the sake of raising a toast of honour to the young man but into it he dropped the lethal poison from our mistresses' vial before handing it to Ion, hoping to kill the newfound son. No one had noticed this but just as Ion took the cup into his hand, one of the slaves uttered some sacrilegious words.

The boy, being well educated in religious matters by the temple's seers, took these words to be an ill omen and so he emptied the contents of his cup onto the ground. Then he asked that a new cup be filled for him and told the others to do the same. There was silence throughout the tent. Then they all filled their cups with water and mixed it with the strong wine from Byblos. As this was taking place, a great band of noisy doves came flying into the tent. They live happily and undisturbed around Apollo's temple. Seeing that the cups were full, they dipped their feathery beaks into them and drank thirstily.

For most of them, god's libation had no ill effect but one of them went and rested next to where Ion had spilled his poisoned wine. The poor bird dipped its beak into that wine and immediately it made an incomprehensible noise and its body shook violently like that of a wild Bacchant. All the banqueters were shocked at the bird's suffering and they watched it as it slowly died in agony with its taloned red legs becoming limp.

Then Ion, now called Xuthus' son by Apollo, jumped onto the table and, shooting his hands beyond his sleeves in anger, shouted:



"Who among you tried to kill me? Tell me, old man because yours was the eagerness to serve the wine and from your hand it was I've received it!"

Immediately he seized the old man by his aged arm and searched him so as to catch him in the act. Then, when the old man was forced to do so, he confessed the daring plan of Kreusa's murderous drink. Apollo's child then called the banqueters outside and, going before the rulers of the temple, he said,

"Reverend Earth, daughter of Erechtheus, some stranger is trying to kill me with her poisons." The rulers then immediately voted overwhelmingly that Kreusa should die by stoning, since she tried not only to kill a man who was dedicated to the god but because by doing so, she desecrated the temple's precincts. Now, the whole of Delphi is looking for our mistress, a woman who had decided to take such a vile path in such a vile way. She came to Apollo seeking children but now she has lost both, the children as well as her life.

*Exit the Slave.*

**Chorus:**

There is no escaping death for unlucky me now! All this is now uncovered for all to see! The libations, made from Bacchus' vines mingled in common murderous purpose with the drops of the sliding serpent.

**Chorus:**

Uncovered for all to see –the victims go to Hades: me my life's misfortunes and my mistress' death will come by stoning.  
How shall I run to escape?

**Chorus:**

Or how shall I hide in Earth's dark caves so that I won't fall dead with the stones?

**Chorus:**

Shall I climb upon a four-horse chariot...

**Chorus:**

Or the stern of a ship?

If the god doesn't want to hide you there is no escape!

What more is there my lady for your heart to suffer?

**Chorus:**

And so, then, because we wanted to cause harm to others does not Justice now dictate we should suffer ourselves?

*Enter Kreusa in extreme fear and out of breath*

**Kreusa:**

My dear servants, we are being pursued! We shall be killed! The Delphic oracle has condemned me and they will hand me to my death!

**Chorus:**

We are aware, poor woman the extent of your suffering.

**Kreusa:**

Where shall I escape? I only just now escaped from my house and ran here in secret to save myself from my enemies.

**Chorus:**

Where else? To the altar

**Kreusa:**

What would be the purpose of that?

**Chorus:**

Suppliants are not killed.

**Kreusa:**

But the law has condemned me to death!

**Chorus:**

Only if they can put their hands on you.

*Disturbance of angry men within*

**Kreusa:** *Looking in their direction*

There! Look! Hard-hearted men are running this way with swords at the ready!

**Chorus:**

Quickly, go sit upon the altar and if they kill you there the stain of your death will fall upon the head of the killer.

**Chorus:**

Go, on, girl! Courage. It is your Fate!

*Kreusa runs and stands at the steps of the temple. Her servants form a protective circle around her.*

*Enter Ion at the head of a number of armed and angry men. He charges towards the temple without noticing Kreusa.*

**Ion:**

O, Kephisos! You bull-faced god and father! You who gave birth to a viper, to a dragon whose glance is a spitting blaze. A dragon who dares all. This woman is more dangerous than the gorgon's blood with which she tried to kill me. *He notices Kreusa.*

Ha! There she is! Seize her! Seize her and throw her from the peaks of Parnassus and let its rough crags comp her smooth, immaculate tresses!

I had the good fortune not to be murdered by a step-mother before I got to Athens.

Here, among my friends, I got the measure of your soul –just how evil you are, just how much hatred you have for me! I know that if you had trapped me in your nets and shut me into your house, you'd waste no time in sending me to the halls of Hades. But now, neither Apollo's temple nor his altar will save you; and as for pity! Ha! Pity best belongs to me and to my mother who may not be here in body but she is in spirit.

*He separates the chorus so that Kreusa is exposed*

Look here! Look at this evil woman! Here she is, weaving one scheme upon another. She will kneel at the god's altar to avoid the payment due to her for the evil deeds she concocted for us.

**Kreusa:**

Don't you dare kill me here! Get back! In the name of the god who sees us and in my own name, get back!

**Ion:**

In your name? What thing in common could you possibly have with Phoebus Apollo?

**Kreusa:**

I give him my sacred body to guard.

**Ion:**

You were trying to poison to death the son of god!

**Kreusa:**

You are your father's son now, not Apollo's.

**Ion:**

But Apollo was my father when Xuthus was not.

**Kreusa:**

Yes, he was your father but now Apollo is my father.

**Ion:**

But you do not revere him whereas I do.

**Kreusa:**

I wanted to kill the enemy of my house.

**Ion:**

But I have not come to your city with weapons.

**Kreusa:**

Yes you did. And you were trying to set fire to Erechtheus' halls

**Ion:**

What do you mean? With what torches, with what flames?

**Kreusa:**

You wanted to come into my house and take it by force.

**Ion:**

This is land which my father owns and which he'll give me.

**Kreusa:**

How could it possibly be that the son of Aiolos owns land in Athens?

**Ion:**

Xuthus won that land with weapons, not words.

**Kreusa:**

Our allies do not rule our land. No ally does.

**Ion:**

So you would kill me because you are afraid of what might happen tomorrow!

**Kreusa:**

Yes, in case you get in first and kill me beforehand.

**Ion:**

You are envious of my father because you are without a child.

**Kreusa:**

And you? You would seize the house of a childless woman?

**Ion:**

Have I not a share of my father's land?

**Kreusa:**

Your share is a shield and a spear –that's all!

**Ion:**

Get away from the altar and the thrones of the god!

**Kreusa:**

Go and give orders to your mother, wherever she is, not to me!

**Ion:**

You were going to kill me and you still think the god will save you?

**Kreusa:**

If you dare kill me here, yes!

**Ion:**

What? Are you happy to die upon god's wreaths?

**Kreusa:**

Yes, because I will cause misery to him who has caused misery to me.

**Ion:**

How dreadful it is that the god has given such awful laws to the mortals. Totally unwise. He should never accept evil people at his altar! He should rather drive them away. Nor should an evil hand touch the gods. Only the just. Those who have suffered injustice should be able to sit at the altar. How could it be right that both, the just and the unjust stand equal before god?

*Ion tries to strike Kreusa but just then the Priestess appears from the temple. She is holding a cradle, tied with woollen ribbons.*

**Priestess:**

Hold on, my son! I have been chosen by all the priestesses to come out of the god's temple and save the laws of the oracular tripod.

**Ion:**

Greetings, my dear mother, who has not given birth to me.

**Priestess:**

Still, do call me "mother." I like that word.

**Ion:** *Indicating Kreusa*

She wanted to kill me! Did you know that? With poison!

**Priestess:**

I knew that but you, too, are excessively harsh. It is a sin.

**Ion:**

Have I no right to kill those who want to kill me?

**Priestess:**

Wives are always against children born before their marriage.

**Ion:**

Yes, and we, too, feel the same way towards step mothers when they try to do us harm.

**Priestess:**

Don't be. When you leave this temple to go to your homeland...

**Ion:**

What do you advise me to do?

**Priestess:**

I advise you to go to Athens with a good Fate and a clean soul.

**Ion:**

A man has a clean soul when he has killed all his enemies.

**Priestess:**

Not you. Accept some of our words.

**Ion:**

Tell me. Your words have always been good to me.

**Priestess:**

See this here basket in my arms?

**Ion:**

Yes, I see an old basket tied with ribbons of wool.

**Priestess:**

I found you in this basket. You were a new born baby.

**Ion:**

What? You've never told me this before!

**Priestess:**

I kept it a secret until now.

**Ion:**

How could you keep the fact that you found me a secret for so long?

**Priestess:**

The god wanted you to serve him at the temple.

**Ion:**

Does he not want me any more? How can I be sure of this?

**Priestess:**

Now that he has shown you who your father is he is sending you away.

**Ion:**

Did you keep this a secret because he had commanded you to do so or what?

**Priestess:**

From the earliest moment Apollo put it into my head...

**Ion:**

To do what? Come on, end this story!

**Priestess:**

To keep my findings to myself

**Ion:**

What good or ill will this secret bring about for me?

**Priestess:**

In here I've hidden the infant clothes you were wearing when I've found you.

**Ion:**

Will I be able to find my mother with these clothes?

**Priestess:**

God wants it to happen now so you will. Of course, you couldn't before.

**Ion:**

Oh, what wonderful signs I am seeing today!

**Priestess:**

Take these now and look for your mother

*She hands him the cradle*

**Ion:**

Yes, I shall search the whole of Europe and Asia, from one end to the other.

**Priestess:**

That's for you to decide. It was I who has nurtured you, my son, by Apollo's will Now I return to you these things. The god allowed me to take them and hide them.

Why did he want it that way? I have no idea, nor does any other mortal know that I had them or where I had hidden them.

So now, let me kiss you like a true mother kisses her son. Now begin looking for your real mother wherever you think she might be. First of all see if it was not one

of the Delphic maidens who gave birth to you and then abandoned you here at our temple. Or perhaps some Greek woman.

Now you know everything that we and the god who cared for you know.

*She walks towards the temple's entrance and stands there.*

**Ion:**

Tears fill my eyes as I think of the poor woman who gave birth to me in secret love. She secretly cast me aside and never held me to her breast and so I lived nameless, like a slave in god's house. The god is beneficent but my Fate is heavy. I lacked my mother's arms the milk of her breast and the joy of youth. Poor mother also for she suffered the same hard Fate because she lacked her child's joy.

Now, I shall offer this cradle to the god and ask him not to let me find things I don't want, because if my mother is a slave it would be better to be silent about it than to find her.

*Turns to go towards the temple*

O, Apollo, I bring to your temple... *Suddenly he stops.*

What am I doing? Am I going against god's wise wishes? He has saved all these good signs of my mother's existence and I'm dedicating them back to him?

No, I must dare undo these ribbons and see what my inescapable Fate is.

You, holy ribbons and covers, what have you hidden for me?

*He searches into the cradle*

Look at this! The cover of the cradle is still new by some miracle. For all its years mould has not touched the weave at all.

*He is about to bring its contents out*

**Kreusa:** *shocked at what she sees.*

What vision is this I see before me?

**Ion:**

You be quiet! I've suffered enough from you already!

**Kreusa:**

Me? Be quiet? How can I? You can't get angry at me because I can see there the very cradle in which I had you exposed as a newborn baby my son. In the caves of Kekrops, at the Long Rocks. Here! I'm leaving the altar even if it means my death!

*She rushes to hug Ion and rest the cradle from him. She succeeds in both.*

**Ion:**

Seize this mad woman! She jumped away from the altar and the statue. Tie her hands up!

*Some of Ion's men seize her but she tightens her grip on both.*

**Kreusa:**

Kill me if you wish but you'll achieve nothing by it. I have the cradle and I have what's in it.

**Ion:**

What dreadful trickery is this? She thinks she owns me!

**Kreusa:**

No, I have found my dearest friend.

**Ion:**

Me? Your dearest friend? You wanted to secretly murder me!

**Kreusa:**

Yes, the dearest friend my son, since a son is the dearest friend to a mother,

**Ion:**

Enough of your schemes. Now I have caught you for certain.

**Kreusa:**

This is exactly what I wish, my son, to be caught by you, that's what I'm after.

**Ion:**

I wonder if that cradle is empty or if it really has anything.

**Kreusa:**

It has the clothes you were wearing when I had abandoned you that day.

**Ion:**

So, then, without looking, can you tell me what they are, one by one?

**Kreusa:**

Of course I can and if I can't, may I die!

**Ion:**

Speak then! There's truly something odd in your courage.

**Kreusa:**

There is the cloth which I weaved when I was a young girl.

**Ion:** *looks inside the cradle*

What does it look like? Young girls weave many cloths.

**Kreusa:**

Let's say, it's an unfinished effort of my shuttle.

*He reveals the cloth*

**Ion:**

What is its design? You can't trick me with just that description.

**Kreusa:**

In the centre of the cloth there is a picture of a gorgon.

**Ion:** *shocked at the accuracy of the description*

Zeus! What angry Fate is pursuing me now?

**Kreusa:**

...and round the edge of the shield are snakes.

**Ion:**

Zeus! Here it is! This is the very cloth! I've found my baby clothes!

**Kreusa:**

Ah, the cloth I weaved when I was a young girl.

**Ion:**

Does it have another picture on it or is this as far as you can go with this?

**Kreusa:**

Something ancient. Two dragons with golden teeth. Athena's gift to my family. She asked us to raise our children in these clothes just as ancient Erechtheus did.

*He takes out a small necklace.*

**Ion:**

And this golden ornament? What is that for?

**Kreusa:**

If it is that garland then it is the one I made for you that day. I've made it from an

olive tree that the goddess Athena brought to the rock, a tree which is ever green and ever growing.

*Certain now in the knowledge that Kreusa is his mother, Ion now embraces her. He strokes her cheeks affectionately.*

**Ion:**

My dearest mother! What a joy it is to see you and to caress your cheeks!

**Kreusa:**

My son! You're a brighter light than the sun Indicating the temple: I'm sure the god will forgive me for saying this.

Finally I hold you in my arms. This is a hope I always had but never thought it would be realised. I thought you were dead, in the halls beneath the earth with the goddess Persephone.

**Ion:**

I'm in your arms now mother. A dead man now alive.

**Kreusa:**

O, brilliant, expanding Ether! What should I cry out to you? Where does this joy come from? This is a joy I could have never hope for. Which god gives me this overwhelming happiness?

**Ion:**

Mother, I could have thought that everything is possible, everything but that I am your son!

**Kreusa:**

I am still shaking with fear!

**Ion:**

Fear that though I'm in your arms, I'm not your son?

**Kreusa:**

So many years have passed without hope!

*Directing the following to the priestess*

Who brought this child into your arms?

Whose hands brought him to Apollo's temple?

**Ion:**

It was god's work but from now on we'll enjoy our good fortune just as we previously endured our misery.

**Kreusa:**

My son, your birth was not without tears.

You were separated from me with much pain but now that my breath touches your sweet cheeks I enjoy the blessed good fortune.

**Ion:**

Mother, though you speak about yourself, you're using my words.

**Kreusa:**

I am no longer without child nor am I barren. Our house is widening, our land now has a king and Erechtheus is young again!

**Ion:**

Mother, my father should share in this joy I gave you.

**Kreusa:**

What are you saying child? O, no! I am now going to be exposed and disgraced!



**Ion:**

What was that? Why?

**Kreusa:**

Your father is not who you think it is.

**Ion:**

O, no! Am I a bastard? Did you give birth to me when you were a young unmarried girl?

**Kreusa:**

My son, no torches nor dances accompanied the bed that brought you to your birth.

**Ion:**

So... I am from a humble family? Which one, mother?

**Kreusa:**

The slayer of the Gorgon, the goddess Athena knows!

**Ion:**

What? What do you mean by that, mother?

**Kreusa:**

The goddess who lives in the olive groves of the Rock...

**Ion:**

Mother, your words are not clear. They're rather puzzling.

**Kreusa:**

Apollo... in the cave... in the cave where the nightingales sing...

**Ion:**

Apollo? Apollo? Why mention him?

**Kreusa:**

I mention him because he lay with me... in secret...

**Ion:**

Go on, mother. What you're saying brings joy to my heart.

**Kreusa:**

...and when the ninth month ended, I've given birth to you, Apollo's boy... in secret...

**Ion:**

Oh, what sweet words, if they are true!

**Kreusa:**

...and, like a mother, I clothed you in these baby clothes, a young girl's work, the faults of a shuttle that I used to have... and I didn't put you to my breast to suckle nor bathe you with my own hands but I've left you in a cave to die by the talons of birds of prey, to feast on you.

**Ion:**

Mother! What a dreadful thing you've done!

**Kreusa:**

My fear and not my will made me do it!

**Ion:**

Ah, but I too! Did I not want to kill you also?

**Kreusa:**

Yes, harsh was our Fate then and harsh it is now. We roll constantly from joy to

misery and the winds forever change. But enough of the past travails! They all end here! Now, my son, I sense a helpful wind has come and lifted us out of disaster!

**Chorus:**

Let no one think that Fortune will not change direction when the right time comes!

**Ion:** *praying*

O, Fate! You who constantly change the luck of mortals! You give us misery one minute and joy the next. What extremity of fortune have I reached to try and kill my mother and so suffer unjustly? Are such events possible for a mortal to see within the span of just one day?

*Prayer ended*

Mother, in finding you I've found the sweetest finding; and your lineage gives me no shame.

*He leads her a little away from the rest of the crowd*

Come with me, mother. I need to tell you many things, secret things, for your ears only. To have them covered by the darkness of silence.

Look here, mother! Could it be that you have suffered the error of those young virgins who do illicit love and then weigh the god with the blame? Is that because you're trying to escape that shame that you tell me I'm Apollo's son but in reality my father is just another mortal?

**Kreusa:**

I swear by Athena, goddess of victory, who once helped Zeus with her chariot in the battle against the Giants. Your father is no mortal my son. It is Lord Apollo, the one who nurtured you all these years.

**Ion:**

Why then did he give his son away to another man? Why did he say I was Xuthus' son?

**Kreusa:**

He didn't say that. He only gave you to Xuthus just like any man would give his son to another as an heir to his property.

**Ion:**

Did the god speak the truth or were his prophesies all lies? This question alone bothers me, mother.

**Kreusa:**

Listen to what I just thought my son: The god is doing you an enormous favour by placing you in a noble house.

If you were discovered to be the son of a god you'd never inherit our towers and our family's name. How could you, since I had not only kept the illicit sex a secret but I also tried to kill you? So for your own good he gave you to another father.

**Ion:** *aside*

I'm not accepting all this so easily. I'll go inside the temple and ask the god himself. Is he or is he not my father and is my father a mortal?

*He heads towards the temple but is stopped by the goddess Athena (or her vision), at the highest point of the stage (the theologeion).*

Ah! Look up there! Which goddess is that? Her face is like a blaze up against the sun.

Mother, let us leave! We shouldn't look upon the gods unless the time is proper.

**Athena:**

Don't leave! I have not come to you as an enemy. I am your protector here and shall be in Athens. I have come from a land that carries my name. I am Pallas Athena and I am sent here by Apollo. He did not think it proper to come and stand before your eyes in case some reproach should stand between you.

So he sent me to utter his own words: It was she who gave birth to you and Apollo is your father.

He has given you to Xuthus not to be his son but so that you would go into a king's house. But when all of this was revealed and afraid that you would be killed by your mother and she by you, he protected you by other means. The god intended to keep all this a secret and to announce it in Athens that Kreusa is your mother and Apollo is your father.

And now, closing my speech I wish you to listen to the oracles you came here to receive and the reason why I've yoked my chariot.

Kreusa, take your son now and go to Kekrop's land, Athens and set him upon the throne. Since he is of the house of Erechtheus he has the right to rule in his own land and to win glory throughout Greece.

He will have four sons, born of a single stock who will give their names to the four tribes who live on my Rock.

The first son will be called Geleon. The second and third will give their names to the Hopletes, the Argades and the Aigores. In years to come, their children will build cities in the Cyclades islands and around the shores of the mainland and so give much power to my city. They will build colonies on the land opposite Europe and Asia. Those in Ionia will be called Ionians, taking the boy's name and they will earn great glory.

From you and Xuthus, Kreusa will be born a son by the name of Doros and from him will emerge the glorious city, Doris.

Your second son, Achaïos, will be king of Pelops, near the shores of Rhium and the people there will be called by his name.

Apollo acted well in all of this.

Firstly he gave you a painless birth and one you could keep silent from everyone. Then, after you put the newborn into its baby clothes, he sent Hermes to rush it here and to raise him so that the baby would not die.

And now, tell no one that he is your son, so that Xuthus might enjoy him as his own. As for you, Kreusa, take the blessings that belong to you and farewell. I promise you an end to your sorrows and joy from now on.

**Ion:**

O, daughter of Lord Zeus, Pallas Athena! I believe your words and now I know that I am the son of Apollo and of this lady here, something which I also believed earlier.

**Kreusa:**

And now do listen to me also:

I now praise Apollo whom I reproached before because I thought he had forgotten the child he gave me. I now embrace sweetly and bless the gates and shrine I once hated.

**Athena:**

And bless you for changing your mind about the god. Gods are always late but in

the end they are just.

**Kreusa:**

My son, let us go home.

**Athena:**

Yes, do so and I will follow.

**Ion:**

Yes, goddess, you shall be a great protector.

**Kreusa:**

And a protector of my land.

**Chorus:**

Farewell, Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto.

**Chorus:**

Those who have a troubled house should show respect to the gods and they should have confidence in them because, in the end, they shall be rewarded, each according to his own worth.

**Chorus:**

As for those who are born evil, they'll never find happiness.

*Exit All*

# (EURIPIDES) Rhesus

This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>470</sup> translation by George Theodoridis

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Hektor** (*A Prince of Troy*)

**Paris** (*aka Alexandros, a Prince of Troy*)

**Aeneas** (*Trojan Noble*)

**Dolon** (*Trojan soldier*)

**Rhesus** (*Chief of Thracian army*)

**Muse** (*Rhesus' mother*)

**Chariot Driver** (*To Rhesus*)

**Athena** (*A goddess*)

**Odysseus** (*One of the chiefs of the Greek army*)

**Diomedes** (*Another of the chiefs of the Greek army*)

**Chorus of Trojan Guards**

**Herald** (*Trojan shepherd*)

...

## **SCENE ONE**

*Night.*

*Hektor's tent outside the walls of Troy.*

*The guards outside the tent are asleep. A little further the next shift of guards is also sleeping. They are all fully armed.*

*SL leads to the seashore where the Greeks are camped.*

*SR leads to Troy and the Trojan camps.*

*Fire can be discerned from the Greek camp.*

*The whole play takes place during the night and the stage should be filled with shadows created by the fires in the Greek camps. The Trojan camps (SR) have no fire.*

*The silence is suddenly broken by the agitated entry of the Chorus of Soldiers.*

### **Chorus:**

You lot there! Wake up!

Get me one of Hektor's guards or any one of his soldiers.

*The guards wake up in fright and stand to attention.*

Go inside and tell Hektor there's news he must hear!

### **Chorus:**

We're the fourth watch who patrol our front line.

*Some of the chorus gather around the entrance of the tent and shout through its flaps.*

### **Chorus:**

Hektor!

Hektor, wake up! Either sit up and listen or just lean on your elbow.

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<sup>470</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/rhesus/>

**Chorus:**

Come on, Hektor! Open those fearsome eyes of yours and come out!

**Chorus:**

Get off your bed of leaves, Hektor. You must hear our news immediately!

**Hektor:** *From within the tent*

Who is it? Friend or foe? What is the watchword? Speak quickly, now!

What men come to my sleeping quarters in the middle of the night? Speak!

**Chorus:**

This is the army's guards, Hektor!

*Enter Hektor with a couple of his men. They are all fully armed and ready for battle.*

**Hektor:**

What's all this rushing about? What's all this noise?

**Chorus:**

Fear not Hektor –

*Hektor Insulted*

Me? Fear? I fear nothing!

What is it, a night raid?

**Chorus:**

No, not a raid but –

**Hektor:**

Well then, what?

Why did you leave your post unattended, soldier?

Why rush over here with so much noise and wake up the whole camp if you have nothing to report?

Don't you know that the Greeks are camped just out there? Can't you see we're sleeping in full armour, to be ready for them?

**Chorus:**

Arm yourself, indeed, Hektor!

Arm yourself and go over to where our allies are sleeping.

Go and wake them up!

**Chorus:**

Order them to get themselves armed, Hektor. All of them!

**Chorus:**

Send some of your close mates to our soldiers and get them to get their horses reined and ready !

**Chorus:**

Who's going to Panthus' son?

**Chorus:**

What about Sarpedon, Europa's son, the leader of the Lycians?

**Chorus:**

Where are the men in charge of the sacrifices?

**Chorus:**

Where are the leaders of the light armed forces?

**Chorus:**

And our archers? Where are the Phrygian archers?

**Chorus:**

Come, hurry up and put strings to your horned bows!

**Hektor:**

What? What are you saying?

One lot of your words send out fear yet another lot give one courage.

There's nothing clear in them.

You haven't been stung by Pan's prick, have you? Cronus' son? Is that what made you so frightened? You get up and leave your post unattended, rush over here and send the army into disarray with silly stories!

What on earth are you telling us?

What am I to make of this odd report?

So many words and none of them say anything I can understand!

**Chorus:**

Hektor, listen!

The Greeks have fires lit up everywhere, right through the whole night. You can see the moorings of all their ships from here and everyone is milling around Agamemnon's tent. There's noisy business taking place in there. It sounds like they're waiting for some important news. I've never seen this fleet get into such turmoil of panic.

I have come to you because I'm afraid of what they might have in store for us, not because I need to be told off by you!

**Hektor:**

Ah! A rather frightening report! Still, you have come just at the right time.

It seems the Argives want to escape from me, run off, even while my eyes are watching them. They want to get away from our land in those ships of theirs under the wide cover of darkness. Now I know what all these fires are about!

Oh, gods! You have robbed me of my feast as you would rob a lion of its kill. A feast out of the whole Argive army – with this spear!

Had the rays of the Sun not vanished, I would have continued until my glorious spear had set fire to all their ships, destroyed all their tents and, with this murderous hand, slaughtered a horde of them!

My heart was urging me on, that's for certain! I wanted to keep up the pace the gods have given me and to go on killing through the night but the seers, our wise men who know the ways of the gods, convinced me to wait until the new light and then leave no Achaian alive.

But the Achaians! The Achaians don't listen to the words of my prophets.

Cowards feel mighty in the night!

Well then! We must rush! Wake up the army and get it armed, hurry!

Spear those cowards in their backs as they try to climb onto their ships!

Paint their ladder-bridges red with their own blood and if any of them survive, rope them all and teach them how to till our Phrygian fields!

**Chorus:**

Hold it, Hektor, don't be in such a rush!

We are not yet certain about what they are actually doing.

We don't know if they are really trying to escape.

**Hektor:**

What else would they be doing with all these fires?

**Chorus:**

I don't know, Hektor but I am a little afraid...

**Hektor:**

Afraid?

If you're afraid of a little thing like this then you'd be terrified of everything!

**Chorus:**

The Argives have never lit fires like that before.

**Hektor:**

Nor have they ever suffered such a devastating defeat as the one they suffered yesterday, either!

**Chorus:**

All thanks to you, Hektor, yes but now think of what we should do next.

**Hektor:**

What we should do next is simple. With enemies, my command is always, "grab a spear!"

**Chorus:** *Indicating within, SR*

Ah, here's Aeneas rushing towards us. Obviously he's got some news for us!

*Enter Aeneas accompanied by his guard. SR*

**Aeneas:**

Hektor, what is going on? Why have the night guards come here, to your camp, in such a panic?

What are you all talking about? The whole army is thrown into confusion!

**Hektor:**

Aeneas, get yourself fully armed and ready for an attack!

**Aeneas:**

Why? What's going on? Have you seen reports that the enemy is planning something secret during the night?

**Hektor:**

Yes, the Greeks are boarding their ships. They're getting away.

**Aeneas:**

What makes you say that? What have you seen, tell me!

**Hektor:**

They've been burning huge fires all night, Aeneas, so I don't think they'll still be here in the morning. Once they burn all their torches they'll jump aboard their well-benched ships and sail away for home.

**Aeneas:**

And you? What will you do? Why the spear in your hand?

**Hektor:**

I'll be using it against them while they're trying to jump aboard their ship.

Spear them hard, in the back. That should stop them. It'd be a great shame for us, a cowardly thing to do, to reject the good will of the gods who have handed to us these enemies. It'd be a shame to let them all go without a fight after they have caused us so much grief!

**Aeneas:**

Hektor, if only your eagerness to fight was combined with a wisdom to make good



plans! But, I suppose, men can't be perfect at everything. Each of us has his own talent. Your talent is fighting, thinking is a talent that others have.

You saw the fires burning and you immediately thought that the enemy is leaving, so you now want to take your army there, trying to get through the deep moats in the middle of the night. Impossible! But, still, let us say you do manage to cross those moats. What if when you do that you are faced with the fact that the enemy is not sailing off but it is right there, in front you, all ready and fully prepared for your spears?

Hektor, if you lose that battle, you'll never make it back here again!

They've got pikes all around their camps. How would your defeated army get back through them again when they're retreating? And tell me also, how will your charioteers run over all those embankments they've got there, without getting their axles broken?

And even still, let us say you did win that battle. There would still be an Achilles there, Peleas' son, waiting just for you. And he's not going to let you set fire to the ships and he's not going to let you kill the Achaians the way you think you will.

That man is a raging fireball in battle! Towering courage!

Better still, I say, let our men rest quietly by their shields. They're exhausted from the battle. Let's just send a spy over there, to the enemy lines, some volunteer to check on them, see if they are really trying to escape and if we find that they are, well then we can charge at them. But if the Argives are using these fires to trick us, then we'll learn even more about our enemy's tactics and then respond appropriately.

That's what I think, my lord.

**Chorus:** *To Hektor*

I think he's right. Best if you do as he says rather than what you think.

I hate it when the leadership of generals stands on unsafe ground.

**Chorus:**

It would be far safer if some fast-footed spy of ours rushes over to their ships and quickly see what our enemy is up to with all those fires in their camps.

*Other members of the chorus nod their heads in agreement.*

**Hektor:**

All, right, Aeneas, you win! The majority agrees with you.

Now, Aeneas, go and pacify our allies because the army might feel a bit uneasy if they hear we are having meetings like this in the night.

I'll send a spy myself, to check out what the Greeks are up to. Your camp is nearby, so if we hear anything, you'll know about it quickly. But if we see that they're jumping aboard their ships, you'll know about it through a trumpet call. I won't be coming around to you. I'll be rushing over there this very night.

I'll be fighting the Greeks among their own ships.

**Aeneas:**

Right. Yes, now you're being sensible. Do send someone over there immediately. As for me, when the time comes, you'll see me acting as bravely as you.

*Exit Aeneas SR*

*A few seconds later:*

*Enter Dolon SR without Hektor noticing him.*

**Hektor:**

Well then, men! You've heard what we need. Who among us Trojans will go to the Greek ships to spy on them?

Who will do this great service to our nation?

Who will agree to do this? I can't serve everyone all the time, both, Trojans and allies!

**Dolon:**

I will! I am willing to do it.

I'll take this risk for the sake of our country.

I will go to the ships of the Achaians, find out what they're planning to do and then come back here and tell you all about it. I promise you that I shall undertake this task.

**Hektor:**

Ah, our very own Dolon! Your name does justice to your nature, my wily friend. And a man who loves his country, too!

And a man who'll double the glory of his father's race!

**Dolon:**

Yes, Hektor but do let me ask you, shouldn't a man's work be rewarded in some way? I will certainly work for my country and perform this task but a task is twice as sweetly done if there's a reward attached to it.

**Hektor:**

Quite right, quite right. I do not say otherwise. Name your reward, Dolon. Ask for anything except my throne.

**Dolon:**

Your throne? No, keep your throne, Hektor. I have no wish at all to be a king and protector of a city!

**Hektor:**

Ah! I know! Join our household. Marry one of Priam's daughters.

**Dolon:**

No, no marriage above my station, Hektor!

**Hektor:**

Gold then, Dolon. We have an abundance of that!

**Dolon:**

So do we, Hektor. We lack no wealth either.

**Hektor:**

What then, Dolon? What else can Troy offer you?

**Dolon:**

The reward will be given after we destroy the Greeks. I want a reward that can come only after we destroy them.

**Hektor:**

Name it. Anything except their chiefs.

**Dolon:**

They're all yours to slaughter Hektor! I won't be begging you for Menelaus' head!

**Hektor:**

Not Ajax, Oileus' son? You don't want him for a slave do you?

**Dolon:**

No, Hektor. The hands of nobles like Ajax are no good in the farms.

**Hektor:**

Do you want ransom? Which of the Greeks do you want for that?

**Dolon:**

No, no ransom either. I've told you already. We have enough gold.

**Hektor:**

We'll put you among the first to choose from the spoils. You can come and pick whatever you like.

**Dolon:**

Spoils?

No, you can hang those on the columns of the temples. Dedicate them to the gods.

**Hektor:**

Well, what's better than all these things I've offered you, Dolon? What more do you want from me?

**Dolon:**

Achilles' horses, Hektor. When one lets his life ride on the dice thrown by the gods, then the prize should be worthy of the effort.

**Hektor:**

Oh, no! Those horses, Dolon! You and I both love them!

Immortal beasts sired by immortals and ridden by the fast-footed Achilles, son of Peleus. They say that Poseidon himself, that god who's the lord of all horses and lord of all the sea – they say it was Poseidon who had given them to Peleus as a wedding gift.

But, I won't start reneging on my promise now. I will give you Achilles' horses as well as his chariot.

It will be a truly magnificent adornment to your house!

**Dolon:**

Not only that but, if I do get these horses, I'll also be able to say that the Trojans have shown their appreciation of my bravery by rewarding me with this splendid gift.

And, of course, you should not be jealous of me, Hektor because, as the first hero of our nation, you will be able to get myriads of other things that will make you happy.

**Chorus:**

The task is huge, Dolon but so are the rewards.

**Chorus:**

If you succeed, Dolon, you'll be among the blessed!

**Chorus:**

Glory only comes with the pain of hard work.

**Chorus:**

Still, it wouldn't be a small prize, to be married into royalty, either.

**Chorus:**

So far as the gods are concerned, Justice herself will decide this but so far as mortals are concerned –well, you've got it all, Dolon!

**Dolon:**

Yes, well, I'll be off now. I'll go home first and change into clothes that are more appropriate for the task before I go down to the Argive ships.

**Chorus:**

Change into what sort of clothes, Dolon?

**Dolon:**

Clothes fit for a covert operation.

**Chorus:**

A wise man should teach others wise things. Tell us what you'll wear, Dolon.

**Dolon:**

Wolf skin on my back, with its gaping jaws over the top of my head, its forelegs over my shoulders and its hind legs around my feet.

And, while I'm approaching the moat and the walls around their ships, I'll walk on all fours, to make it hard for the Greeks to detect me but when I'll get out into the open land, I'll stand up and walk on my two feet.

That's the trick I'll employ.

**Chorus:**

I hope Hermes, the god of thieves, Maia's son, will help you get there and back.

**Chorus:**

You've got your plan, Dolon, now all you need to do is to see it through!

**Dolon:**

I will get there safely, kill Odysseus and bring you his head as proof that I, Dolon have got to the Greek ships... Or... perhaps, I'll kill Diomedes, Tydeus' son.

In any case, I'll be back before the break of dawn with my hands dripping blood!

*Exit Dolon SR*

*Exit Hektor to his tent.*

**Chorus:**

Apollo!

God of Thymbra!

**Chorus:**

God of Delos!

**Chorus:**

Divine head!

**Chorus:**

You walk in the precincts of Lycia's shrine!

**Chorus:**

Son of Zeus!

**Chorus:**

Apollo, come now!

Come to us with your bow and arrows!

Now, this very night!

**Chorus:**

Come and protect that man! Dolon, who has started on a journey to save the sons of Dardanus!

**Chorus:**

Apollo!

Mighty ruler!

**Chorus:**

Apollo!

You have built this city's walls!

**Chorus:**

Troy's ancient walls!

**Chorus:**

Help Dolon get to the gathered ships of our enemy, those Greeks, Apollo, those Greeks!

Help him spy upon the army of the Greeks and then let him return here safely.

**Chorus:**

Help him return to Troy! To the altars of his father's house!

**Chorus:**

And help him also defeat the Achaian army!

**Chorus:**

Help him ride triumphantly the chariot drawn by Achilles' horses! The horses of Phthia!

**Chorus:**

The horses that Poseidon himself, Lord of the sea, gave to Peleus, the son of Aeacus.

**Chorus:**

Grand Dolon success in his mission, Apollo for it is he, alone, who dared to go to the Greek ships and spy upon them on our behalf, for the sake of our country and his home.

**Chorus:**

Such courage!

**Chorus:**

When the wild and dark seas batter a country it is always hard to find such brave men.

**Chorus:**

Yet we have brave men amongst us! Brave Phrygian men, their heart bold and full of courage.

**Chorus:**

There is no Mysian, bravest of our allies, who'd scorn my company in battle!

**Chorus:**

Ha!

I wonder who'll be the Greek that our Dolon will kill, as he crawls about their camp, like a four-footed beast, sniffing at their tents!

*Enter Hektor from his tent*

**Chorus:**

He should kill Menelaus!

**Chorus:**

Agamemnon! Kill him, cut off his head and drop it in Helen's lap!

**Chorus:**

Let her mourn her beastly brother-in-law!

**Chorus:**

Agamemnon! The man who dared to come here, to the land of Troy, with his huge

army and his thousand ships!

*Enter a messenger SR. He is a shepherd.*

**Messenger:** *To Hektor, happily excited*

My lord! If only I could always bring my lords such good news as those I have for you to hear now!

**Hektor:**

Ha! Stupid peasants and their stupid ways!

Look around you, peasant! Your masters are in full armour, ready for battle and you decided to come here, at this hour to give us news about your flocks of sheep!

Don't you know where my house is? Where my father's throne is located?

It's there you should go and talk of the welfare of your herds, not here!

This is the wrong place for such concerns.

**Messenger:**

It's true, my Lord! We, peasants are stupid, one can't argue about that, my Lord but, nevertheless, I am bringing you good news!

**Hektor:**

Enough with the tales of peasants and the fortunes of their sheep!

Can you not see? We have spears in our hands and battles to fight!

**Messenger:**

Yes, my Lord but this is exactly what my news is about. Armies and suchlike.

There's a man, my Lord, a man, at the head of a huge army, an ally of ours, coming our way.

**Hektor:**

A man? From which country?

**Messenger:**

From Thrace, my Lord. His father's name is Strymon.

**Hektor:**

Rhesus? Are you telling me that Rhesus has come to Troy?

**Messenger:**

Yes, my Lord. That's what I mean. Thank you for making my message half as long and arduous!

**Hektor:**

But – Why would he not come through the wide highways of our valleys and, instead come down through the gullies and the deep gorges of Ida to where you are?

**Messenger:**

I don't know for certain about that, my Lord, but I suppose I can guess, though.

I guess it would be a difficult job to drive an army into a country through the night if you know that the open meadows are swarming with enemy soldiers.

It was a frightening thing for us shepherds, who live on those rocks, high up on Mount Ida, to see that army, my Lord, that huge Thracian army, rolling in like a huge river, making so much noise, rolling and rolling all through the woods, woods swarming with wild beasts.

We were so frightened, we moved our sheep to the higher crags. At first we thought they were Greeks and we were afraid that they would rush out and pillage your herds, my Lord. We thought they'd run off with your sheep, as spoils of war,

I mean. But then we heard voices. And the voices weren't in the Greek tongue, so we relaxed.

I walked right up to the scouts at the head of their army and spoke to them in their own tongue, in Thracian.

"Who's your General?" I asked them, "What's his father's name? Who is this man who's bringing this army of allies to Troy?"

And when I heard all I wanted to hear, I got up. That's when I saw Rhesus. There he was, up on his chariot, looking like a god behind his Thracian horses.

The yoke that held the horses in place by the neck was made of gleaming gold. Horses whiter than snow!

From his shoulder hung a light shield with shining plates of gold embossed on it. On the cheek-pieces of the horses there was embossed a glaring Gorgon –just like that on Athena's Aegis. Bells hung from them and they made such a frightening noise!

And there are more men in this army than there are pebbles on Earth. Countless men!

A countless cavalry, countless the shields, hordes and hordes of bowmen and light-armed troops, all in their Thracian battle gear!

That's the army of our allies that has come to the aid of Troy, my Lord Hektor.

Achilles will not be able to escape them. Not by running away nor by fighting them with his spear!

**Chorus:**

When the gods want to help the people, they can turn even a disaster into a joyful event!

**Hektor:**

Ha!

Now!

It's now that my spear has done its work and Zeus sides with me, it's now that I'm finding friends everywhere!

No, now I have no need of them! I have no need of those who were not my friends from the beginning of all this, from when belligerent Ares was blasting his winds of war against the sails of this ship, ripping them to shreds!

Rhesus has shown us just what sort of friend he is to our city!

When the hunters were hunting the beast, he and his spear were nowhere to be seen! Now, now that we've killed it, here he is, present at the feast!

**Chorus:**

Hektor! Of course, you have every right to protest and censure your friends but do let people come and help save our city, if they wish!

**Hektor:**

There's enough of our own people to save it and we've been doing that well enough now for many years.

**Chorus:**

Are you that certain that you have totally destroyed our enemy, Hektor?

**Hektor:**

I am certain and it will be made clear when the gods bring us the new morning!

**Chorus:**

Look to the future, Hektor! The gods can topple everything!

**Hektor:**

Ah, how I despise people who arrive too late to help their friends!

Well then, since he is here, let him be received as a guest at my table but not as an ally to the war.

The sons of Priam owe him no gratitude.

**Chorus:**

Still, my lord, disdain towards allies, leads to all sorts of animosity.

**Messenger:**

My Lord if the enemy but just takes a glimpse of the man, they'll get frightened!

**Hektor:** *Ponders over the situation for a minute and then decides.* *To the Chorus:*

Your advice is good.

*To the Messenger:*

And you've delivered me a timely report.

Well then! All right! Let Rhesus in his golden armour, as the report goes, enter our city as an ally!

*Exit Messenger SR*

*Exit Hektor into his tent*

**Chorus:**

Let Zeus' daughter,Adrasteia, who punishes the conceited, keep my words safe from divine anger! I will utter only such things as are anxiously waiting in my heart to be uttered.

Son of our river, Rhesus, you have arrived!

**Chorus:**

You have come near the palace that prays to Zeus, the god of Friendship and the palace welcomes you.

**Chorus:**

It has taken too long for your mother, the Muse, Pieria and for your father, Strymon, the river of many splendid bridges, to send you here.

**Chorus:**

It was this beautiful river, Strymon, himself, who wound his waters through the pure gulfs of your mother, the Muse, the melodious singer and with his seed she gave birth to you, a glorious youth.

**Chorus:**

I see you as if you were Zeus, giver of light, entering our city on a chariot behind your spotted mares.

**Chorus:**

Now, Phrygia, now Troy, my fatherland, now, with the help of the god, you may sing to Zeus, the god victory.

**Chorus:**

Will the day come, I wonder, when the old Troy will re-emerge?

The Troy with her lovers' secret hideaways, her joyful singing, her drinking parties where the wine was passed from hand to hand, drinking parties that lasted all day long?

**Chorus:**

Will the day come when the Atreus brothers leave our shores, leave us and head



back for their own homes, in Sparta, after sailing through the wide ocean?

**Chorus:**

Ah, Rhesus, my friend! How I wish you could accomplish this dream of mine!

**Chorus:**

Accomplish it with your hand and with your spear, my friend, before you return home to Thrace!

**Chorus:**

Come, my friend! Appear before Achilles' face and raise your golden shield to him!

**Chorus:**

Swing it to the right across the opening of your chariot's rails!

**Chorus:**

Flash it at his eyes!

**Chorus:**

Urge fast your horses!

**Chorus:**

Shake your two-pronged spear at him!

**Chorus:**

No enemy shall escape you!

**Chorus:**

No enemy shall ever see the day when he can dance at the plains of the temple of Hera the Argive!

**Chorus:**

No, he shall die a death by a Thracian spear and this soil shall welcome the weight of his corpse and will take it with delight.

*Enter Rhesus. An imposing figure with his full armour and glittering shield*

**Chorus:**

Oh, Great King!

**Chorus:**

Great King!

**Chorus:**

Splendid King!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Thrace! What a magnificent man you have raised!

A truly glorious Prince!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Admire the golden armour that covers his body!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Listen to the boisterous clang of the bells that hang from the rims of his shield!

**Chorus:**

A god!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Troy, here's a god!

**Chorus:**

Ares himself, the god of war!

**Chorus:**

The son of our river, Strymon and a Muse!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Troy, this god has come to breath courage into your soul!

*Enter Hektor from his tent.*

**Rhesus:**

Noble Hektor!

Noble son of a noble father! King of this land!

This is a belated greeting I am addressing to you, I know but... but I am pleased that you are winning this war and your men are now very close to the enemy gates.

I am here to help you tear down their walls and set fire to their ships.

**Hektor:**

Rhesus!

Noble son of the Muse of melody and of the Thracian river Strymon!

My way is to always to tell the truth. I am not a two-faced man.

Your duty was to come here a long time ago and fight with all your might for Troy. Stop the Argive spears from destroying her.

And, no, you can't use the excuse that you were not invited and that's why you didn't come to see your friends any earlier, to help them in their hour of need!

We have sent to you numerous envoys and embassies of elders to try and persuade you to come and protect our city. We have even sent you rich gifts of honour!

But you! Even though you are of the same race as us, a barbarian from barbarian stock, you have betrayed us!

Yes, you have betrayed us to the Greeks by your delays!

Was it not this very hand of mine that has made you the great king of Thrace that you are now?

Had I not thrown myself against the shields of the bravest of men of Thrace and had I not smashed their lines around Pangaeum, in the land of the Paionians, you would still be one of their petty chieftains!

It was I who has made you the leader of those people and it was I who has delivered them to you to be your subjects.

And you? How did you repay me for that deed?

You have brushed it aside and, instead of showing us gratitude, you have left the task of coming to help your friends until it's too late, until their difficult days have passed.

There are men here, who are total foreigners, totally unrelated to us, men who've been here for a long time; some of them have even died here and their bodies lie in graves on our own soil –now that's real proof of their loyalty to us, to our Troy!

And there are others, too, brave men, in full armour and on battle chariots, who stand watch and endure the chilly winds or the unquenchable heat of Ares, the god of war. Men who are not idly resting in warm and comfortable couches, passing each other deep cups of draught, like you've been doing all this time.

There! I, Hektor speak like a free man and I speak only the truth.

I have made my complaints to you, personally and openly.

**Rhesus:**

Hektor, I am the same.

My words are straight, no double meaning in them. You'll find no forked paths in

my speech.

My heart, Hektor, suffered even more than yours because I wasn't here. I grieved more painfully than you. But, as I was preparing to come over here, the Scythians, my neighbours, decided to attack me.

I was about to cross the hostile Black Sea with my men when, there, at the shore, the spear of war soaked the soil with much of our Thracian blood as well as that of the Skythians.

That's what had stopped me from crossing over and heading for the plains of Troy, to come here and help you.

I won that war and then, afterwards, I took their children as hostages and set an annual tax for them to pay me. It was after I've completed those tasks, that I started off again for here. First I took to the sea with a ship, crossed over and then walked through all the other lands. I've neither slept in golden palaces nor drank those deep draughts you're prattling on about.

Instead, I had to put up with the icy blasts that hit the frozen sea across Thrace and Paeonia with only these clothes here for a blanket. Not a wink of sleep!

I know, I am late but there is still time!

You've been playing the dice of war against the Argives for the last ten years and you still have not won the war. All I ask you for is to give me the sunlight of a single day and I'll have those towers of theirs torn down, attack their dockyards and kill all the Greeks! All of them! And with that, I will have saved you a lot of pain, so, then, the next day, I'll leave Troy and head back home.

None of you will need to raise a shield, because, even though I'm a late arrival, with this spear I will kill all those Argives, all those Greeks who've been boasting so loudly about their bravery.

**Chorus:**

Yes!

**Chorus:**

Yes, Rhesus!

**Chorus:**

What a joy, your words give us, Rhesus! Obviously you were sent here by Zeus himself, to give us all this joy!

**Chorus:**

I hope Zeus will protect us from the anger of any of the other gods who may feel offended by your words, Rhesus.

**Chorus:**

A man like you, Rhesus! No war ship, no Greek ship of war, has ever brought a man better than you! Not ever before and not now!

**Chorus:**

I don't know how Achilles, or even Ajax, will be able to cope with your spear, my Lord!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Lord! If only I could be there to see it!

If only I could be there on the day when your killing hand and your bloody spear exact the righteous punishment!

**Rhesus:**

And, as a recompense for my long delay coming here, which has caused you such great offence, I'll give you another gift, provided, of course, the goddess Adrasteia approves of what I am about to say.

When we have freed Troy from the attacks of the Greeks and after you have made offerings to the gods from the best of the spoils, I want you, Hektor, you and I, together, to go to Greece and, with this spear, punish them, punish the whole country. Teach them all what it is to suffer!

**Hektor:**

I will be very thankful to the gods if I just get out of this disaster alive and well and get to rule beautiful Troy in safety again, as I did before. As for destroying Argos and the rest of Greece with your spear, well, I don't think that would be such an easy task.

**Rhesus:**

Don't people say that these men who came here are the finest Greece has to offer?

**Hektor:**

I see nothing wrong with them. It's been tough work fighting them.

**Rhesus:**

Well then, if we kill them all, all of this lot, won't that be the end of Greece?

**Hektor:**

Rhesus, forget about what's in the distance, focus of what's near!

**Rhesus:**

Hektor, I think you're happy to go on suffering like this, instead of doing something about it.

**Hektor:** *Dismissing the discussion.*

Listen, Rhesus. My power is large enough as it is here.

Now! You can camp whichever side of the field you want. Left, right, or in the middle of our other allies, if you like. Rest your shield and your men wherever you like.

**Rhesus:**

No, Hektor. I want to fight the Greeks all on my own.

However, if you think it a great embarrassment to have their ships suddenly, after ten years of hard fighting, burnt to cinders, if that is too embarrassing for you, then simply set me up to fight against Achilles and his army.

**Hektor:**

Not possible. You can't fight against him and his frenzied spear.

**Rhesus:**

Why not, he's here, isn't he? They say he has come to Troy as well.

**Hektor:**

He is but he had an argument with the generals and he has shut himself in his tent. He's not fighting.

**Rhesus:**

Well, who's the next best among them?

**Hektor:**

To my mind, Ajax is no lesser than Achilles, nor is the son of Tydeus; and Odysseus is a sly and bold rascal who's caused more pain to this city than any of the others.

One night he went over to the temple of Athena, stole her statue and took it back with him, to the Greek ships. Then, another time, he was sent here to spy

on us so he dressed himself in rags and he walked around the city like a beggar, cursing and swearing at the Greeks. Got himself right inside the walls of the city. Then, on his way out, he killed all the sentries and all the guards at the gates.

He's always hanging around the temple of Thymbraean Apollo, just outside the city, waiting for a chance to ambush somebody.

I tell you, Rhesus, the monster we're fighting is thoroughly evil.

**Rhesus:**

Brave men fight the enemy out in the open, Hektor, not in secret.

This man you're talking about, this man who does all his fighting with sly tricks and in secret hiding places, I will catch him alive, impale him through his spine and set him up as a feast for the vultures outside the city.

That's the sort of death that a common thief and temple robber deserves.

**Hektor:**

Come, for now, go and rest. It's still dark. I'll show you where you and your army can settle for the night. It'll be separate from the rest of us.

Now, if we ever need it, the watchword is "Phoebus." Memorise it and tell all your men.

*To the chorus*

You men, go and keep guard at the front line and wait for Dolon who's gone to spy on the Greeks. If he's still unharmed, he'll be heading back towards our camps by now.

*Exit all SR*

**\*SCENE TWO\*\***

*Same time at the front line.*

*Two soldiers are asleep on the floor. One is keeping guard. He's obviously tired. He is examining the moon. Finally he is content. He kicks one of the sleeping soldiers first and then the other.*

**Soldier 1:** *As he kicks the sleeping soldier*

Ey! Who's on guard now? Who's relieving me? It's time. The early constellations are diving and the Pleiades are high!

Look there! The Eagle is flying mid-sky!

Come on, get up! Get yourselves out of your beds!

It's time for your guard duty!

Look at that Moon! See how it shines?

It's almost Dawn! Morning almost! Come on!

Look! There's one of those stars that appear before Dawn!

**Soldier 2:** *Waking up*

Who's rostered to do the first shift?

**Soldier 3:** *Waking up*

Coroebus, I think. Mygdon's son. Or so they tell me.

**Soldier 1:**

Who's after him?

**Soldier 3:**

Corybus' men. The contingent from Paeonia. They woke up the Cilicians and the Mysians woke us up.

**Soldier 1:**

Well then, shouldn't be going over to wake up the Lycians? Didn't the roster put them as the fifth watch?

*Sound of a Nightingale*

**Soldier 3:**

Listen! Hear that nightingale? She's in her nest by the banks of our river, Simois. Blood-stained nest that one! Killed her own child, she did.

*More sounds of the Nightingale*

Beautiful music!

Very sad. Mournful.

*Sounds of sheep and the pipe of a shepherd*

**Soldier 2:**

Ah! The sheep are out and about already, up on the hills of Ida.

**Soldier 1:**

I can hear the delightful music of the shepherd's flute. It's like a sweet lullaby.

Ah, how sweetly Sleep stretches herself over my eyelids the moment Dawn appears!

**Soldier 2:**

Where is that man that Hektor sent over to spy on the Greek ships?

**Soldier 3:**

Yeah, I'm beginning to worry about him. He's taking a long time to get back!

**Soldier 1:**

Perhaps he fell into some hidden ambush and they've killed him!

Soldier:

No idea. I'm very worried about him.

**Soldier 1:**

Well, I say let's go and wake up the Lycians. They're the fifth watch.

*Exit all. SR*

### **SCENE THREE**

*A few minutes later. The stage is empty.*

*Enter Odysseus and Diomedes, furtively, guardedly. Both have their swords drawn.*

*They have just killed Dolon so they are carrying some "spoils." Possibly Dolon's wolf skin and sword, shield, belt, etc.*

*Suddenly a sound of chains clashing against other metal is heard within.*

**Odysseus:**

Diomedes, what was that noise?

Was that a clash of swords my ears picked up or was it something unimportant?

**Diomedes:**

Nothing important, Odysseus.

Some horse's harness hit against the rails of a chariot.

It got me frightened as well, at first but then I figured out what it was.

No, just the noise of a harness.

**Odysseus:**

Right... Careful you don't bump onto any guards in the dark.

**Diomedes:**

I always walk carefully.

**Odysseus:**

But what if you do? What if you wake someone up, do you know the watchword they use?

**Diomedes:**

Yes, Odysseus, it's "Phoebus." Dolon told me.

**Odysseus:**

Look here! Enemy beds. No one in them!

**Diomedes:**

Yes, Dolon had told me there'd no one here.

This is where Hektor sleeps.

My sword is ready for him!

*Odysseus: They slowly enter Hektor's tent, check it out and come out again.*

I wonder what it means. Where do you think they might all be? Could they be setting up some ambush for us?

**Diomedes:**

Probably. Cooking up some scheme somewhere, no doubt.

**Odysseus:**

Now that Hektor is on a winning streak, nothing will stop him. He's become very daring, our Hektor!

**Diomedes:**

So, what do we do now, Odysseus?

The man is clearly not in his tent and so, well, there go our hopes of capturing him.

**Odysseus:**

I think we better hurry back to our ships.

This man is being protected by the same god that's giving him all these victories.

We better not go against Fate.

**Diomedes:**

Why don't we go over and, with these swords, cut off the head of Aeneas? As well as that of Paris, the Trojan I hate the most!

**Odysseus:**

Too dark, Diomedes! Too risky and too difficult to find them. This is their camping ground.

**Diomedes:**

But it's a shame to go back to the ships without inflicting some pain upon our enemy!

**Odysseus:**

What do you mean, some pain, Diomedes? We have caused great pain to the enemy. Indicates the spoils. Aren't these Dolon's belongings? Haven't we killed their precious Dolon who was spying on our ships? Did you expect we'd destroy their whole army tonight?

**Diomedes:**

All right then, I believe you. Let's go back and good luck in doing that!

*Enter the goddess Athena who is not visible to the two men.*

**Athena:**

Are you two leaving the Trojan camp? Is your heart disappointed because the gods did not permit you to kill Hektor and Paris?

*The men nod in agreement*

Well, listen!

Rhesus has come to Troy! And oh, with what great pomp! He came here as their ally.

Now... if that man survives this night, neither Ajax nor Achilles with their spears will be able to hold him back. He'll tear down all of your fences and all your fortifications and he'll cut down a wide path for himself, all the way down to your ships and then he'll destroy the lot of them!

However... if you manage to kill him... if you kill him, you win the lot! The war is yours!

So forget about Hektor and his tent and you, forget about chopping off his head. Hektor's death is destined to come from someone else's hand.

**Odysseus:** *Searching in the dark to see who's talking.*

Ah ha! It's my lady, Athena! Your voice! I hear it and I recognise it! You're always by my side, my Lady!

Always helping me, always there when I have some painful task to perform! Tell me, my goddess, where has this man, this Rhesus, set up his bed tonight? In what part of the Trojan camp is he stationed?

**Athena:**

Not far from here.

He's placed away from all the others, from all the Trojans. Hektor separated him from the rest, at least until Day takes over from Night.

He's easy to find. White horses are harnessed to Thracian chariots next to him and those horses shine like the wings of a swan, so you can see them in the dark. Kill their owner and they're yours to take home as spoils of war. Magnificent spoils! There's no place on Earth that has horses like them.

**Odysseus:**

Diomedes, either you kill the soldiers or you let me do that, while you take care of the horses.

**Diomedes:**

No, I'll take care of the killing and you take care of the horses. You're the one with the clever head, you know all the tricks. It's important that each man is asked to do what he's best at.

*They hear footsteps and hide in the shadows*

**Athena:** *Looking within*

Ah! I can see Paris Alexandros heading this way.

He must have heard from a guard that there are enemy soldiers in their midst. It'd be some vague rumour.

**Diomedes:**

Is he alone or with friends?

**Athena:**

No, on his own. Looks like he's coming over to Hektor's tent to tell him there are spies around.

**Diomedes:** *Eager*

Well, then. Here's the man to slaughter!

**Athena:**



Diomedes, no! Your strength does not surpass that of Fate and this man's Fate declares that his death will not come by your hand but by that belonging to some one else. Now run! Run to the place where you are fated to slaughter someone else.

I'll stay here and make this man, who is my own personal enemy, think that I am his friendly little goddess, Aphrodite, who's come to help him with his troubles. Enough, now! I have said all I wanted to say!

Paris, who's about to suffer, has heard nothing. He's close by but knows nothing.

*Odysseus and Diomedes hide behind the tent.*

*Enter Paris*

**Paris:** *Shouts*

Hektor!

Hektor, my Commander!

*No response*

Hektor, my brother, are you asleep?

There are enemy soldiers around... thieves, maybe, or spies!

*No response. Goes and checks through the flaps of Hektor's tent.*

*Baffled not to find him there.*

**Athena:** *Invisible to Paris*

Courage, Paris!

I, Aphrodite, love you and am always looking out for you!

I am watching over your war with interest and I will never forget the honour you have bestowed upon me and for which I thank you greatly.

The Trojan are winning and, to add to that pleasure, I have brought you a true ally! He is a Thracian. The son of the song-loving Muse and, as they say, of the river Strymon.

**Paris:**

Yes, you have always stood by me and by my city, Aphrodite.

I am proud to say that the greatest deed I have done for Troy was to judge you the winner of the beauty contest.

I have heard –not clearly, I must admit– some rumour among the guards, that there are Greek spies in our camps. It's unclear. One guard says they're here but he hasn't seen them, another says he's seen them come but could tell me no more. It's all very vague.

And that's why I've come to speak with Hektor.

**Athena:**

Don't worry about a thing, Paris. There's nothing troublesome going on in the camp.

Hektor has just gone off to take the army of the Thracian allies to where they can set up camp for the night.

**Paris:**

Fine, Aphrodite. Your words have convinced me, so I'll just go back and stand guard at my spot. I am no longer worried.

**Athena:**

Go ahead, Paris, go and remember that I, Aphrodite, am watching over you all the time. I want nothing more than to see that my friends are happy and you will soon

see proof of that.

*Exit Paris SR*

Now, you men! You, brave, brave, men!

*Odysseus and Diomedes appear from behind the tent. Their swords are drawn.*

Odysseus, son of Laertes, let your sharpened blade rest. Rhesus, the Thracian General has been killed. His horses now belong to you. However, the Trojans now know that you're here and they're on their way, so you better run off back to your ships, quickly!

Go, on, run for your lives! There's a whole tempest of them rushing this way!

Run! Save yourselves!

*Athena vanishes.*

*From within we hear soldiers approaching. It is the chorus.*

*Odysseus and Diomedes are confused and they are rushing about trying to escape.*

**Chorus Within**

Where? Where are they?

**Chorus:**

What's going on?

*Enter Chorus. They have seen the two men.*

**Chorus:**

Bowmen, your arrows! Shoot them!

**Chorus:**

Your arrows!

**Chorus:**

Your swords!

**Chorus:**

Kill them! Kill them!

**Chorus:**

Beat them up!

**Chorus:**

Who is that man?

**Chorus:**

Grab him!

**Chorus:**

And that one there!

**Chorus:**

Over here, men!

*A scuffle ensues and one of the chorus grabs Odysseus, another, Diomedes.*

**Chorus:**

I've got this one!

**Chorus:**

And I've got this one!

**Chorus:**

Damned thieves!

**Chorus:**

They've thrown the whole army into chaos!

**Chorus:** *The one who has Diomedes*

What company are you from?

**Chorus:** *The one who has Odysseus*

Where are you from? Which country?

**Odysseus:**

That is not for you to know! You hurt me even a little and today you will die!

**Chorus:**

What's the watchword? Tell me the watchword or you'll end up with a spear through your chest!

**Odysseus:**

Hold it! Calm down!

**Chorus:**

Get over here men! Beat him!

**Odysseus:**

Are you the one who killed Rhesus?

**Chorus:**

No, not Rhesus but I'll be the one who'll be killing you!

**Odysseus:**

Stop this!

**Chorus:**

No I won't!

**Odysseus:**

Stop! You're beating up a mate!

**Chorus:**

A mate? What's the watchword?

**Odysseus:**

Phoebus!

**Chorus:** *Bemused*

I... right. That's the word, all right. Men, stop your spears!

*Back to Odysseus*

Do you know where all our men have gone?

**Odysseus:** *Pointing towards SL*

We saw them taking that path there.

**Chorus:**

Come on, men. Everyone go after them!

**Chorus:**

Should we scream and shout?

**Chorus:**

And frighten our allies in the middle of the night? No, we better not.

*The Chorus exits through SL which gives an opportunity for the two Greeks to sneak away. A few seconds later, the Chorus re-enters.*

**Chorus:** *Seeing that the men have gone*

Ah! Who was that man who's just gone?

**Chorus:**

What's his name, that impudent man? He'll be going around, boasting that he's escaped my hands!

**Chorus:**

How are we going to find him now?

**Chorus:**

He looks familiar but I... I wonder who it is?

**Chorus:**

He's got very brave feet, that's for sure. Walking around in the dark, right through our ranks and all our sentries!

**Chorus:**

He's either some Thessalian or from some town around the coast of Locris.

**Chorus:**

Could be one of those men who live alone in some island or other.

**Chorus:**

Who was he?

**Chorus:**

Where on earth did he come from?

**Chorus:**

Where's is his country?

**Chorus:**

Who is his god?

**Chorus:** *Suddenly he remembers*

Odysseus!

It's Odysseus, I'm certain! This is all the work of Odysseus! How could it not be?

Look at what he's done in the past!

**Chorus:**

Do you really thinks so?

**Chorus:**

Of course I do. Look at the nasty things he's done to us in the past. This is his sort of boldness all right!

**Chorus:**

Boldness? Who are you talking about, with your boldness?

**Chorus:**

Odysseus, of course!

**Chorus:** *Spits in disgust.*

To say Odysseus is bold is to praise him. Never praise a cunning, treacherous war thief!

He came over here once before. Right into the city.

**Chorus:**

His eyes were all sly-looking, dark. He was dressed in beggars' dirty rags, inside which he was hiding a sword. Filthy, stinking hair all over the place. He was pretending to be begging for his bread, just like a real beggar.

And there he was, the dirty scum, shouting all sorts of curses against the house of Atreus, against Menelaos and Agamemnon as if he was their enemy.

**Chorus:**

He should have been slaughtered before he set foot on Troy's soil!

**Chorus:**

Odysseus or not, I'm still worried. Hektor will blame us. We are the sentries.

**Chorus:**

What's he going to do?

**Chorus:**

He's going to curse us mercilessly!

**Chorus:**

But what for? What have we done?

**Chorus:**

What are you afraid of?

**Chorus:**

He will curse us because those two went right past us!

**Chorus:**

Who did?

**Chorus:**

Those two men! The men who paid the Trojan army a visit!

**Chariot Driver:** *(within. Highly distressed)*

Ah! Ah!

What a horrible disaster Fate has delivered us! Ah!

**Chorus:**

Hush! Everyone shut up. Take your posts!

Perhaps our nets have caught someone after all!

*Enter Rhesus' chariot driver. SR*

*He is badly wounded*

**Chariot Driver:**

Ah! Ah!

What a terrible disaster has struck the Thracians! Terrible! Terrible!

**Chorus:**

The poor sod, he's one of our allies!

**Chariot Driver:**

Ah!

How shocking is my Fate!

Oh, Rhesus! How shocking is your Fate, Rhesus, king of the Thracians!

How shocking the day that you thought of helping Troy!

How shocking the death that has taken you away, my lord!

**Chorus:**

Which of our allies are you, good man? I can't see you clearly in this darkness.

**Chariot Driver:**

Tell me, where can I find one of the Trojan Generals?

Where's the spot where Hektor sleeps? Where is it that he lies beneath his shield?

Take me to the General to whom I can report the awful thing we've just suffered.

Some man has caused us, Thracians, a shattering catastrophe, a catastrophe, as plain as day to see and then slipped away, disappeared from us completely!

**Chorus:**

From what this man is saying, it seems something terrible has happened to the Thracian army.

**Chariot Driver:**

Ah! Our army is destroyed!

Our King is dead!

All done by treachery!

Ah! Ah! My wounds hurt so much!

Ah! They are so deep!

Ah! Come death, take me!

Ah! Both, Rhesus and I came here to help Troy!

We came here to help her, to help Troy! So why does Fate declare that both of us should die in such a shameful way?

**Chorus:**

The poor soldier is using plain words.

His is clearly reporting a disaster which befell our allies.

They are devastated!

**Chariot Driver:**

Devastated, yes! And disgraced!

Devastated and disgraced together. A double disaster, a double disgrace.

If you are to die in battle, though it is painful for the man, it is an inspiration for those left behind and a glory to his house.

But us two, Rhesus and I, we two have fallen stupidly, for no good reason and with no glory!

Once Hektor told us the watchword and showed us where we should sleep, we just fell down and slept. We were exhausted from the long march here. So we fell asleep.

And because our king was told that you, Trojans, had the upper hand in this war and you were just getting ready to attack the enemy ships in the harbour, we placed no guards anywhere in our camp and neither did we not gather all our arms together in any order. Even the horse goads, even them we didn't bother to put next to the chariot yokes. We just dropped down where we were, in no order at all and we fell asleep straight away.

Suddenly though, my heart jumped with concern about the horses. I got up and gave all the horses a generous feed because I knew they would be harnessed at Dawn and made ready for the battle.

Just then, in the deep darkness of the night, I saw two men, wandering about through our camp, suspiciously. I started walking towards them but they got frightened and shot through. I thought it was some allies trying to rob us, so I simply shouted at them, warned them never to come back.

They didn't answer back and I thought nothing more of it. I went back to my spot again and fell asleep.

Then I saw a dream. I saw the horses I've trained and drove on Rhesus' chariot. I saw them, just like people see things in dreams, and in this dream they had wolves, sitting on their backs, riding them and these wolves were using their tails as whips. The wolves were whipping the furry backs of these horses, to urge them forward. The horses, in their turn, went wild with fear. They reared back violently. Snorted angrily through their nostrils and fought back.

I jumped up terrified, as if to rush and defend the horses from the wild beasts. But the moment I raised my head up, I heard the groans of men, dying with pain and then a fast splash of fresh, hot blood hit me.

It was my king's blood. He was slaughtered and he was giving out his last breaths. I jumped up but I had no spear nor sword in my hand and as I was fumbling about in the dark, trying to find a spear, some powerful man charged at me and struck me with his sword here, right by my side.

The gash of my wound is deep. I felt it as his blade dug into me.

I fell on my face in agony.

The men then took the horses and the chariot and ran away.

Ah! The pain!

My legs are giving way. I can't stand up any longer!

Ah!

*He is helped by some of the chorus to sit on a nearby rock.*

I know I saw a slaughter! I was there, I saw it but I don't understand how it happened. How it was that our men got slaughtered like that. I don't know who did it and how!

I strongly suspect though, that the murderers were allies!

**Chorus:**

Unfortunate driver of an unfortunate man!

No, do not distress yourself. Don't think like that. What you've suffered you've suffered in the hands of the enemy.

Ah! I can see Hektor coming now. He has obviously heard about this himself and I can tell he feels your pain.

*Enter Hektor SR*

**Hektor:**

You lot!

You have acted outrageously!

How is it that the spies have managed to go past you without you noticing?

Disgraceful stuff!

These spies have slaughtered, by sword, so many of our men without you bothering them at all! Not when they came in and not when they went out! Who else but you, could be responsible for this?

You are the guards of our army, our sentries!

They've escaped unharmed and laughing at us, at our cowardice! Laughing at the whole Phrygian army, at me, your General!

Be certain of this, though: I swear by Zeus, father of all, that for this deed you shall be dealt with, either with the whip or with the executioner's ax, or else, you can call Hektor a coward!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Hektor, No!

Great Hektor, defender of our city, no!

These men must have snuck in here when I had come to you with the warning that the Greeks were burning watch fires near their ships.

My lord I have not shut my eyes even for a minute during this night. Not to sleep nor to snooze. About that I swear by the springs of our river Simois.

My lord, I am not the one to blame for this disaster, so don't be angry with me and if you ever find that I had really done or even said something I shouldn't have, then I won't raise the slightest protest if you wanted to bury me alive!

**Chariot Driver:** *To Hektor, disgusted.*

Ha! Why are you threatening them and why are you trying to twist my words? You are a barbarian just like me. Neither of us is Greek. The person to blame is you and both, the dead as well as the wounded know it and they will blame no one else. You will need to make a huge speech to me, a speech that has a whole lot of very clever words in it, if you want to convince me that it wasn't you who has slaughtered these men, you and your own allies and they did it because they wanted to steal those horses!

Why else would you have begged your allies to come over here? Why else would you then have them killed?

So, they have come here and now they are dead. You have murdered them yourself.

Not even Paris has disgraced the hearth of hospitality so shamelessly. Not even he has murdered his allies. But you have!

Don't tell me that it was some Greeks who did it. How could they? How could they have passed through the dense lines of the Trojan army without them having been seen by anyone? You and the rest of the Trojans were in front of us. Tell me then, which of your mates has been wounded or slaughtered by these Greek soldiers?

None! No, it was I and other Thracians who have suffered the wounds and the murder. Men who will no longer be able to see the light of day.

In plain words, Hektor, no Greek is to blame for this.

How could a Greek find his way to Rhesus' bed, through the darkness of the night, unless he had some god helping him, showing him where to go and where to look? The Greeks didn't even know Rhesus was here. All this is your invention.

**Hektor:**

From the moment that the Greeks have set foot on this land, I had allies all around me and I have never been accused by any of them of anything. You are the first. May the gods never let me desire horses so much that I would be willing to kill friends for them!

No, this is the work of Odysseus!

It is his doing all right. Who else among the Argives could think of, let alone do, anything like this? And Dolon? I am really anxious about Dolon. Would Odysseus have got to him as well? He's been gone a long time. No sight of him anywhere!

**Chariot Driver:**

I don't know which Odysseus you're talking about. The hand that struck us was not that of an enemy.

**Hektor:**

By all means, think what you like, Thracian.

**Chariot Driver:**

Oh, Thrace! My homeland! I wish I could die there!

**Hektor:**

Don't wish death upon yourself. We have seen enough death already.

**Chariot Driver:**

I have lost my master!

Where can I turn to now?

**Hektor:**



You can turn to my house. There you will be welcomed and healed.

**Chariot Driver:**

How can I be healed by murderous hands?

**Hektor:**

Will this man not stop repeating himself?

**Chariot Driver:**

Curses to the murderer!

I make no charges against you, don't worry but Justice will do her work.

**Hektor:**

Take him away, men!

Take him to my house and treat him better than he would be treated anywhere else.

*Some of the chorus help the driver walk and exit SR*

*To the chorus:*

Go and tell Priam and all those in the tower to bury the dead men. Tell them to bury them just outside the city, on the highway that heads out of it.

**Chorus:**

Why is it that the gods bring us such misery after such victory? What are they up to?

*Rhesus' mother, the Muse appears from above, holding the blood-spattered body of her dead son.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look, my Lord!

What goddess is this above us?

**Chorus:**

She's carrying the corpse of some newly slaughtered man!

**Chorus:**

What a frightening sight to behold!

**Muse:**

Don't be afraid to look, Trojans!

It is I, the Muse, the goddess most honoured by the wise men. One of the nine sisters.

I have come here because I saw my son shamefully murdered by his enemies.

Odysseus, the man who has murdered him will be punished appropriately in the near future.

I mourn your death, my son with my own words of grief.

I weep for you my son, my darling, the tears of a mother's grief!

What a journey you had my son, my darling, to this city!

What dreadful trip it was, my son, my darling, the trip which your father and I begged you not to take!

I mourn for you, my son, my darling!

I grieve for you with pain!

**Chorus:**

And I grieve for your son, dear Muse, even though I'm not a relative.

**Muse:**

Death to the son of Oeneus and death to the son of Laertes who has killed my

noble son and left me childless!

Death, too, to the woman who abandoned her home in Greece to come and lie in a Phrygian bed and have you killed, my son, my darling!

Death to her who has emptied myriads of cities of their brave sons.

In life and in the halls of Hades, son of Philamon, you have heaped bitterness in my heart! It was your impertinence, Thamyris, the impertinence you have shown against the Muses by challenging them that has destroyed you and has made me the mother of this unfortunate boy.

It was when we, the Muses had all gathered on the golden mountain, Pangaeon, to take part in a contest of song and lyre against this Thracian singer, Thamyris. It was then, when I was trying to cross the waters and springs of Strymon that I entered his virile bed.

The Thracian singer, Thamyris, had lost the contest and his insults against our art had earned him the punishment of blindness.

But, you, my son, my darling son, when I had given birth to you, I felt a great shame towards my sisters because I was a virgin and so, I plunged you into the splendid swirling waters of your father. He, in turn, handed you to the nymphs of the springs. He allowed no mortal hands to touch you and take care of you.

These virgins had raised you, my son, raised you well and so you became the first of men. The King of the Thracians.

I had no fear that you'd die while you fought all those bloody battles for the sake of your own country, my son but I knew well your Fate with Troy. That's why I had advised you, I had warned you against coming here. Ever!

But, a constant stream of ambassadors and pleas from Hektor, had convinced you to come here and help your friend.

But, no, the cause of all this disaster is you, Athena!

Even though Odysseus and Diomedes committed the deed, the real culprit is you!

Don't think that I don't know this, Athena. You did this, even though my sister Muses and I often visit Athens, your city and honour it more than all the others.

It was Orpheus, Athena, this young man's cousin, who had initiated your city to your secret mysteries. Orpheus, Athena, the cousin of your victim here! The one you have murdered.

And Museus, too, Athena! Your city's most honoured and most respected citizen! He was trained by us, the Muses and by Phoebus Apollo. And the prize for all that is that here I am, now, with the corpse of my son in my arms, singing a dirge over his murder.

Ah! For this song, I need no other singer to accompany me.

**Chorus:**

You see, Hektor?

The Thracian chariot driver was wrong to accuse us of committing those murders!

**Hektor:**

That, I knew already. We needed no wise prophet to tell us that this was the work of Odysseus.

As for the accusations against me, how could I not act as I did?

The moment I saw the Greeks setting up camp on our soil, I sent heralds to all of my friends, asking them to help Troy. It's true, I've also sent some to Rhesus and

he felt obliged to help me and that's why he came here. But his death fills me with great sorrow and so now I shall prepare the funeral he deserves.

I will make a great heap of magnificent garments as burnt offerings on his pyre. This king came to us as a friend but he has left us in dire misfortune.

**Muse:**

The black earth will not take my son.

I will ask the virgin Persephone, daughter of Demeter, giver of fruit, to let my son's soul remain here, on Earth. She is obliged to show me that she truly honours all the friends of Orpheus.

Of course, to me he will be just like any other man who has died and cannot see the light of day. He will never see me. He will never set eyes upon his mother and he will never approach her.

He will be a man-god.

He will live hidden in the caves of the silver-rich land, able to see sun light and acting as the prophet of Bacchus who has come to live among the crags of Pangaeon and be revered as a god by those who have the knowledge.

My grief will be felt less than that felt by Thetis, the sea goddess who, Fate declares will also lose her son, Achilles.

But first, my son, my sisters and I will sing the hymn of lament and then we'll sing another for Achilles, Thetis' boy who will not be saved by the goddess Athena, the goddess who has taken your life. Apollo's quiver contains an arrow reserved just for him, for Achilles.

Ah! The pains and misery that mortal parents must endure!

Anyone who thinks about these troubles will never have children! They will never give birth to them only to bury them!

*The Muse with Rhesus' corpse disappears.*

*Morning is now breaking.*

**Chorus:**

Rhesus' mother will mourn for her child but you Hektor, you must do what you think must be done.

We stand by your side. Tell us what to do. The day is now dawning.

**Hektor:**

Hurry then! Go to our allies and tell them to get ready. Tell them to harness their horses. And tell them to stand ready with torches in hand and to listen for the sound of the Tyrrhenian trumpet.

When I have crossed the moat and the Greek walls, I will set fire to their ships. Of that I am certain and I am certain that the first rays of today's sun will bring to us a day of freedom.

**Chorus:**

Come men! We must obey our King!

Let us pick up our arms and go to deliver this command to our allies.

Perhaps the god who looks after us will grant us victory.

*Exit all*

# (EURIPIDES) Hekabe (Hecuba)

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>471</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Hekabe** (*Former Queen of Troy*)

**Polyxene** (*Hekabe's daughter*)

**Agamemnon** (*Chief of the Greek Army*)

**Odysseus** (*A Greek Commander*)

**Ghost of Polydorus** (*Son of Priam and Hekabe*)

**Polymestor** (*King of Thrace*)

**Talthybius** (*Herald of the Greek Army*)

**An Old Woman Slave** (*Attendant to Hekabe*)

**Chorus** (*Of Trojan Women, captives of the Greeks*)

...

*Before Agamemnon's tent.*

*Enter the ghost of Polydorus*

## **Polydorus:**

I have come from the lair of the dead and the gates of darkness where Hades lives, far away from the rest of the gods.

I am Polydorus, son of Hekabe and Priam. My mother is Kisseus' daughter.

When the citadel of the Phrygians, Troy, was in imminent danger of falling under the Greek spears, my father, afraid for my safety, had sent me away to Polymestor, his Thracian friend who cultivates this here fertile peninsula of Thrace and with his spear rules over his horse-loving people.

My father has sent with me a large quantity of gold so that if Troy fell, those of his sons who would survive would not lack the means of livelihood. I was the youngest of Priam's sons and that's why he had sent me away. I could not yet wear the arms of war or carry a spear in my young hand.

So, while Troy's boundaries stood intact, while her walls were impenetrable, my father's Thracian friend brought me up in his home properly and like his own flesh and blood. But I was doomed because the moment Troy was raised to the ground, the moment Hektor, my brother was killed, the moment that my father was slain on the holy altar by that murderous sinner, Achilles, the moment my father's palace was destroyed, this Thracian friend of his, Polymestor, slaughtered me and took my gold for himself.

He has slaughtered me, threw me into the sea and kept the gold hidden inside his palace.

Unlamented and unburied, sometimes I lie by the shore and sometimes I am dragged this way and that within the endlessly turbulent waves of the deep. Now, having left my corpse, I hover over my sweet mother, Hekabe. For three days

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<sup>471</sup> <https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/hekabe-aka-hecuba/>

now I'm in the air, the whole time my unfortunate mother has been here, in this peninsula of Thrace, away from Troy. The whole Achaian force is here, sitting idly, its ships anchored around the Thracian shores. This is because Achilles, Peleas' son, appeared above his own tomb and, stopping the whole Greek fleet from sailing on to their home, commanded them to have my sister, Polyxene, sacrificed especially for himself, as a prize of honour and for the glory of his tomb. And so the deed shall be done since the Greeks will not deprive their friend of a gift. This very day, Fate is leading my sister to her death and so my mother will, today, see the corpses of two of her children, mine and that of her unfortunate daughter. So as to find my resting burial, I shall appear at the feet of a slave at the shore. I have begged the leaders of the world below to allow me to be buried by my mother's hands.

Well then, at least all that I wished for shall come to pass. But now, I shall leave this place because my dear, old mother, Hekabe, shall soon come out of Agamemnon's tent. She was startled by a dream she saw, in which I have appeared.

*Enter Hekabe walking feebly with the aid of a walking stick and of her Trojan slaves.*

Poor, unfortunate mother! How different your life is now to what it was before: from royal palaces to slavery and from the heights of joy to the depths of misery! Some god saw your previous glory and is now showing you its opposite.

*Exit the ghost of Polydorus.*

**Hekabe:**

Come, my children, guide this old woman to the front of the house. Come, hold me straight, girls. Hold my ageing hands and let me stand upright. I was your queen once but now I'm your fellow slave. Lend me the crook of your arm and I, with the aid of this cane shall quicken my slow pace.

O, light of Zeus, o dark night! Why does my heart tighten so with dreadful phantoms in the middle of the night? Sacred Mother Earth, mother of the black-winged dreams! I drive out of my mind last night's visions for I have dreamt of Polydorus, my son, who was sent here, to Thrace, for safety and of my darling child, Polyxene. Gods, gods of the underworld, save my son! He is the only anchor my house has now. He lives in the house of his father's friend, at the snowy peaks of Thrace. I'm certain that these nightly visions shall bring some new, insufferable misery. Grief will be cast upon the grieving! My heart has never trembled so much, it has never felt that afraid before.

My Trojan friends, where, I wonder, may I find the prophet Helenus, or my Cassandra to interpret my dreams? Such dreams! I saw a spotted stag writhing in agony in the bloody paws of a wolf that had torn it pitilessly from my arms. And this other thing frightens me also: There, high, above its tomb, stood Achilles' ghost, commanding as a sacrifice to his honour, one of the much suffering Trojan girls.

My gods! O my gods! I beg you! Save my daughter from such an evil deed!

**Chorus:**

Hekabe I've slipped away from my master's tent and rushed over here to you. After the fall of Troy I was selected by lot to be brought here as a slave, a captive of the Greek spear. I haven't come to lighten any of your misery, my Lady but, on the contrary, I am a messenger carrying an insufferable burden of sad news for you.

**Chorus:**

They say that the Greeks, in a general assembly, decided to sacrifice Polyxene, your daughter, for the pleasure of the dead Achilles.

**Chorus:**

You remember when he appeared at the top of his tomb, brandishing his golden arms and holding back the homeward ships? They had their sails wide with the wind and he shouted at them, "Where are you off to, Danaans? Will you leave my tomb bare and without its prize of honour?"

**Chorus:**

It was then when that the furious waves burst all about and a dire division of opinion broke asunder the Greek spear men. Some agreed to Achilles' demands but others did not. Agamemnon, who honours the bed of his mistress, the prophetic maenad, your daughter, Cassandra, fought on your side, Hekabe. Cassandra and Polyxene are your daughters but the two sons of Theseas, true sons of Athens, wanted to honour Achilles' tomb with the blood of a young woman. In their speeches to the army they both insisted that the hero's tomb be honoured with youthful blood and that Cassandra's bed should never be held in higher esteem to that of Achilles' spear.

**Chorus:**

The battle between the opposing views was about even right up until that rascal son of Laertes, Odysseus of the spinning wit and of the sweet, conquering word, convinces the army not to scorn the greatest among the Danaans for the sake of a slave's sacrifice. Nor should it be possible for a fallen Danaan, inhabiting the death-realm of Persephone, to stand before her and announce that the Greeks, homeward bound after their destruction of Troy, have forgotten to honour those who have fallen for their sake.

**Chorus:**

Hekabe, Odysseus will be here any minute now to tear the young foal out of your aged arms and take her away. But you go down to the temples, Hekabe, go down to the altars and fall at Agamemnon's knees. Plead with him and plead loudly, too, with the gods of Heaven and Hell! Your prayers will either prevent the loss of your luckless daughter, or you'll be forced to look upon her while her deep red blood gushes forth from her gold-adorned throat to cover the tomb.

**Hekabe:**

Ah! What a miserable wretch I am! What sounds can I utter? What sorry lament do I sing in my painful old age and in my dreadful, insufferable slavery?

Ah! Who's there that can help me? What children? What city?

My dear husband has gone and so have all my children. What path shall I take now? This one? That one? Where will I find a haven? Which god? Which mighty power will help me now?

Ah, you Trojan women! Messengers of evil, messengers of suffering, you have finished me! You have destroyed me! I want no more of this life of light!

Come, my poor legs, take this old woman to the tent there.

*She shouts into the tent*

Child! My darling child! Child of the most wretched mother, come! Come outside and listen to your mother's words. Come and hear the news I was told about your

life!

*Enter Polyxene, rushing out from a side entrance of the tent.*

**Polyxene:**

Mother, my dear mother! Why the crying? What is this unbearable news you have for me? I ran out of the tent like a frightened bird.

**Hekabe:**

Oh! Oh, my darling child –

**Polyxene:**

Such hard, ominous words, mother! What evil is ahead?

**Hekabe:**

I cry for your soul, my daughter.

**Polyxene:**

Come, mother! Tell me clearly. Hide it no more. You are frightening me, mother! Why this sorrowful lament?

**Hekabe:**

Oh, child of a miserable mother!

**Polyxene:**

Mother what is it? What is this news you must reveal to me?

**Hekabe:**

My child, the whole army of the Argives has unanimously ordered your sacrifice upon Achilles' tomb.

**Polyxene:**

Mother! What are you saying, mother? Explain this dreadful, contemptible news for me, mother! Tell me clearly what you mean!

**Hekabe:**

I utter, my daughter, dire news, indeed. I am telling you that the Argives have decided your Fate.

**Polyxene:**

Ah, my poor mother! How will your unfortunate, painful existence endure this added burden? What power has thrown this insufferable, hateful evil upon you? Poor, poor wretch! You no longer, no more, will have this ill-fated daughter of yours near you, to share the weight of your bonds in your pitiable, old age. You'll see me, mother, being torn harshly from your arms and with my throat cut, like a lion's cub – a calf, sent off to Hades' black world where I, miserable wretch, will be lying alongside the dead.

I care not about my death, mother. It has come as something that is better than my present life so I am not crying for my sake but for yours and yours alone, unhappy Lady.

**Chorus:**

Here's Odysseus, Hekabe, rushing to give you some news.

*Enter Odysseus with his attendants.*

**Odysseus:** *To Hekabe*

Woman, I believe you know already the vote and the decision of the army. Still, I shall speak.

The Achaians have decided to sacrifice your daughter, Polyxene upon Achilles' tomb and they designated me the man to accompany her there. The sacrifice will

be overseen and conducted by Achilles' own son. Of course you know what you must do now: Let us not use force to drag her away from you and don't try to do battle with me! You should know your weakness. Understand the misery that surrounds your life. It is wise to be circumspect even in such moments of misery.

**Hekabe:**

O, what a dreadful struggle awaits me! A huge grief, a torrent of tears. I should have died long ago; Zeus should have destroyed me earlier but he still keeps me here, alive, to witness new, ever more tormenting things.

Odysseus, if slaves are allowed to ask questions of free men, like yourself, questions that do not hurt their soul or heart, then it should be right for us to ask them and for you to answer them. We shall listen.

**Odysseus:**

It is so. Come, ask your questions. I shall not begrudge you the time.

**Hekabe:**

Do you remember, Odysseus, when you came into Troy as a spy, dressed in torn rags, totally unrecognisable? Blood and gore flowed from your eyes and onto your beard then.

**Odysseus:**

I remember it well. It shook me to my very soul.

**Hekabe:**

You remember that Helen recognised you and she had told me only.

**Odysseus:**

Yes, I remember, I had found myself in terrible danger.

**Hekabe:**

Yes, and you fell at my knees, pleading with me, most humbly.

**Odysseus:**

So much so that my hand went dead numb, on your dress.

**Hekabe:**

And what did you say to me, that moment when you were my slave?

**Odysseus:**

I've told you many things. All sorts of cunning words, to escape my death.

**Hekabe:**

And had I not saved you and let you get away?

**Odysseus:**

Yes and so now I can see the light of this Sun.

**Hekabe:**

But you say you've received all this kindness from me and yet, instead of repaying me with equal kindness, you are resolved to do such awful harm to me.

Ah! All of you lot who are jealous of the honours received by political leaders are an ungrateful lot, the whole generation of you! I wish I had never known any of you. You don't care how much you hurt your friends so long as you say something to pacify the masses.

What a flash of wisdom the soldiers must have thought they had, to vote for this girl's death sentence! What Force has made them want to sacrifice a human on a tomb, a place where a bull is the proper offering? And if Achilles seeks justice for his own death by murdering others, why should it be this girl here? What wrong



has she done to him? Instead, it is Helen's sacrifice he should be seeking, for it was she who had brought him to Troy and caused his death. And if his wish was to have the fairest of women sacrificed upon his tomb, then this honour too, belongs to Helen, Tyndareus' daughter, who is by far the fairest. It does not belong to my daughter. It was Helen who has caused you more harm than we Trojans ever did.

I've made this plea in the name of Justice. And now I demand of you to repay the kindness you've received from me. You have said yourself that you have kneeled before me and clutched my hand and touched my aged cheeks, in supplication. Look here! I kneel before you now in the same way and beg you for recompense of the favour I showed you back then. Do not tear Polyxene from my arms! Do not kill her! There have been enough killings already. I find enormous joy in her and with her I forget my misfortune. She is the only solace for my many pains: she is my country, my nurse, my support, the guide of my steps.

Odysseus, hear me! Those who are able to exercise power should not exercise it wrongfully and those who are fortunate should not believe that fortune will stay with them for ever. Look at me, Odysseus! Once, I too was someone great but one single day has changed all that. One single day has stripped me of all my happiness. But now, my friend, I touch your beard and beg you to show pity on me. Have pity on me!

Go back to the army, go back to the Achaians and counsel them not to kill women –the very women that you had not killed when you were dragging them away from their altars, showing them compassion then. The gods will surely show their anger if you do so now. And remember, too that there is a strong law concerning the shedding of blood. One which applies equally for free men and slaves. Go, Odysseus and speak with them and even if your words are not eloquent, your high position among them will help to convince them. Words are not as effective when spoken by a common man as they are when spoken by someone with a strong reputation.

**Chorus:**

Oh, Hekabe! There is no man with heart so cruel that he can hear your groans and pitiful cries and not be moved to tears.

**Odysseus:**

Hekabe, listen to me and learn from my words. Don't make an enemy in your heart of someone who's speaking to you wisely. You have done me a good deed and so I speak sincerely when I say that I am happy to save your life. However, I will not take my word back when I supported the wish of the rest of the army, which is to sacrifice your daughter for the honour of the first among the fighters who had conquered Troy. The army demands it. Most nations suffer exactly because of this very same reason, that is they give no more honours to their brave as they do to their less so. For us, dear Lady, Achilles is worthy of great honour. He was a man who fell for the great glory of Greece. It would be a disgrace to neglect him in death when we loved him while he was alive.

And then again, let us suppose we do as you say. What would happen if, for some reason, we would need to raise up an army again against another enemy? What would others say? They will ask themselves, "shall we fight or shall we not? Shall we be cowards and refuse, seeing that we pay no respect to the fallen soldiers?"

If it were me, I would not care if, when alive, I lived a poor man's life but when I die, I would like to see on my tomb evidence of respect and honour. Such a glory measures for much.

You say that you're suffering dreadfully. This is what I say to that: Greece, too, has its share of old men and women who suffer equally. Brides who lost their brave men, men who are now buried beneath Trojan soil. You, too, must, like them, endure it.

As for us, if our custom of honouring the glorious dead is wrong then we shall suffer the accusation of being ignorant brutes. You barbarians may continue, if you wish, to refuse to regard your friends as friends and refuse also to honour those men who have fallen honourably. Greece will prosper because of this custom, while you will suffer due to your type of thinking!

**Chorus:**

How dreadful a thing slavery is! Fallen by violence, they must endure injustice.

**Hekabe:**

My darling daughter, my pleas to save you from murder have gone in vain. They've been scattered to the winds but you, if you have greater courage than your old mother try and save your life. Plead with him and, like a nightingale, make use of all the sweet tones of your voice. Kneel at Odysseus' knees and beg for mercy. Try to make him feel pity for your terrible Fate. He, too, has children, speak of them.

**Polyxene:**

Odysseus, I can see your hand hidden in the folds of your cloak and your face turned away from me so that I won't touch your beard while I am pleading to you. Fear not, Odysseus. You have escaped from my Lord, Zeus, the protector of all suppliants. Fear not because I shall go with you to the altar, not only because I must but also because I want to die. If I don't, I shall be regarded as a coward; a weak-hearted woman.

Should I live? To what purpose now? My father was the king of the Phrygians. That was the most important thing in my life. Then I was brought up as a true royal bride, one that has provoked many rivalries as to into whose palace and to whose hearth I should go.

I was the lady mistress of the Trojan women then, equal to the gods, if you forget mortality, and I, poor wretch than I am now was much admired among both, the single as well as the married women.

Now I am a slave! This name alone, this name that I cannot get used to, urges me to seek death. Then there's the thought that some cruel man will buy me with silver, me, Hector's sister and sister to many others. A man who'll force me to bake his bread, to sweep the floors and stand at the loom. What a black life that would be! And then there'd be some slave, bought from who knows where, who will defile my bed, a bed that once belonged to kings.

Never!

I cast out the sun's rays from my eyes while they're still free and give my body to Hades.

Come then, Odysseus! Take me and lead me to my murder. Come, because I can see nothing to give me hope or belief that Fate will one day give me joy.

And you, too, mother, don't stop me, either with words or deeds. Share with me,

mother, my only wish that I die before I fall upon some shame I do not deserve. If one is not accustomed to ill luck one must endure it even though it hurts as it hurts the animal in the yoke. Otherwise the pain of living without honour is far greater.

**Chorus:**

Great and wondrous is the stamp of royal blood among mortals. More so among those who are worthy of it.

**Hekabe:**

You spoke well, my daughter but such speech is attended by sadness.

Still, Odysseus, I beg you: if you are to fulfil Achilles' wishes and escape the blame of murder, then don't kill my daughter but take me, instead and kill me upon his tomb. Don't be at all afraid. It was I, after all, who gave birth to Paris who killed, with his arrow, Thetis' son.

**Odysseus:**

No, old woman. Achilles' ghost did not ask for your death but for the death of Polyxene.

**Hekabe:**

Then kill us both. That way earth and he will drink double the blood they want.

**Odysseus:**

Your daughter's death is enough. It is not proper to pile one body upon another. Far better it would have been if there were no need to sacrifice even this one.

**Hekabe:**

But I have the greatest need to die with my daughter! You must kill us both!

**Odysseus:**

What's this? I didn't know that I had bosses!

**Hekabe:**

It's just the same to me. I shall cling to her like the ivy does to the oak tree.

**Odysseus:**

No, Hekabe. Listen to the words of those wiser than you.

**Hekabe:**

Odysseus, I shall never let this young woman here go!

**Odysseus:**

Hekabe, I will not leave without her!

**Polyxene:**

Mother, listen to me! And you, too, son of Laertes, you must understand the pain and indignation of parents when it is justifiable.

Unfortunate mother, do not engage in battles with your captors. Do you want to fall upon the ground and injure your aged body as they drag it away with force? Do you want to feel the shame of being dragged away by the hands of the young? That will be the outcome. No, you do not deserve such a treatment.

Instead, my darling mother, give me your sweet hand and let me touch your cheek with mine for this is the last time I am seeing the light of the sun. I will never see it again. Now you are hearing my final good bye.

Mother! You who gave me life, I am going down to the world below.

**Hekabe:**

Pitiable daughter! Miserable mother!

**Polyxene:**

There, in Hades, I shall be lying, separated from you.

**Hekabe:**

Ah, dear me. What shall I do? What will be my end?

**Polyxene:**

I shall die a slave though my father was free!

**Hekabe:**

And I, my darling, will be a slave and alive.

**Polyxene:**

Unwed, bereft of the wedding songs I deserve.

**Hekabe:**

And I, bereft of my fifty children.

**Polyxene:**

Tell me, mother, what would you like me to say to Hektor and your old husband?

**Hekabe:**

Tell them that I am the most unfortunate woman of them all.

**Polyxene:**

Oh, mother's breasts that nurtured me so sweetly!

**Hekabe:**

Unlucky darling. Untimely death!

**Polyxene:**

Farewell, mother... farewell, Cassandra!

**Hekabe:**

Others shall fare well, my daughter. For me it's not possible.

**Polyxene:**

And you, too, my brother Polydorus, living among the horse loving Thracians.

**Hekabe:**

That is, if he is alive. With such a dreadful fate that I have, I don't believe that he's alive.

**Polyxene:**

He is alive and it will be he who will close down your eyes when you die.

**Hekabe:**

My grief has killed me even before Hades.

**Polyxene:**

Come, Odysseus, cover my head with this cloak and take me away. Take me now because, even before I am killed, my heart has melted with my mother's lamentations and I make hers melt with my own tears.

O light! True, I can say your name but I will not enjoy you for any longer than during this journey I am making towards the sword and to Achilles' tomb.

**Hekabe:**

Ah! I am dead! My limbs are undone. Come, daughter, let me take you into my arms. Let me hold your hand. Don't leave me without a child.

Dear women! I am lost! If only I saw that Spartan woman in the same predicament! That sister of the Dioscouri, Helen! Her, who with her beautiful eyes, destroyed, in the most despicable way, our joyous Troy!

*Exit Polyxene and Odysseus with his retinue. Hekabe falls to the ground and covers her head with her cloak.*

**Chorus:**

Oh, wind! Breath of the sea that sends away the seafaring ships over the ocean's waves! Where will you take this unfortunate woman? In whose house will I, a bought slave, end up? Will it be in some port of Doris or Phthia where, they say, Apidanus, father of beautiful streams, nurtures the valleys? Or will you take me with oars that slice the waves to that island where, for Leto's sake, the Palm tree and the Daphne were first grown and which then brought out the sacred branches, those dear gifts for the children of Zeus? Will I, with the young women of Delos, praise in song the golden headband and the bow of Artemis?

**Chorus:**

Or, will I come to the city of Palas Athena, where I shall weave, with bright threads, on her saffron robe, flowery patterns of the yoking of her lovely mares to her chariot or perhaps I will depict the race of the angry Titans which Zeus, son of Cronos, stopped with the flame of his thunderbolt.

**Chorus:**

Poor children, poor my parents and poor my city! Por Troy, taken now by the Argive spear and lying in utter ruin, engulfed in the smoke of its smouldering fire. As for me, I have left Asia and I shall be called a slave in a foreign land, leaving Europe's houses for the chambers of Hades.

*Enter Talthybius*

**Talthybius:**

Trojan ladies, where may I find Hekabe, once the queen of Troy?

**Chorus:**

She's there, near you, Talthybius. There, lying on the ground wrapped fully with her garments.

**Talthybius:**

O Zeus, what shall I say about you? Shall I say that you truly care for the mortals, or shall I tell that you've received this fame undeservedly, that it is a work of trickery only, because mortals believes in the existence of gods whereas, all along it is Fate that determines all human activity?

Was this not the Queen of the gold-rich Phrygians? Was this not the wife of blissful Priam? Look now, her whole city has perished in war and she, a slave, an old woman without children, lies upon the ground, her poor face made dirty by the dust.

Alas! I am an old man yet I'd rather die than be met by some dishonourable calamity.

Come, unfortunate woman, raise your body and your snow-white head.

**Hekabe:**

Ah! Who is it that won't let my body lie here in peace? Whoever you are, why disturb me in my hour of pain?

**Talthybius:**

I am Talthybius and I have come as a messenger of the Danaans. Agamemnon has sent me to you, my Lady.

**Hekabe:**

My good man, could it be that the Achaians have decided to kill me on Achilles'

tomb? Is this why you've come? What a pleasure your words would be to me then. Come, let us hurry! Lead the way, old man!

**Talthybius:**

No, my lady. I've come to tell you that your daughter has been sacrificed and that you must now bury her. Atreides' two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaos, as well as the Achaian army have sent me to tell you this.

**Hekabe:**

Oh, God! What is it that you're telling me? That you're not here to take me to my death but, instead, to give these dreadful news?

Oh, my darling daughter! You're gone! They've torn you from your mother's arms and now I'm left without children! I've lost you, too! Unfortunate me! What was her end like? Was she respected at all? Or did you kill her as if she were one of your enemies? Speak the truth, though the truth is harsh.

**Talthybius:**

Lady, you're asking me to gather a double harvest of tears from the pain of your daughter's death. I shall cry again now, as I tell you of her death. I shall cry as I cried at the tomb while she was being killed.

The whole Achaian army had gathered before the tomb to witness your daughter's sacrifice. Achilles' son took Polyxene by the hand and placed her at the tip of the tomb. I was close by.

Young, specially chosen Achaians joined him to lend a hand in case Polyxene struggled. Achilles' son took a golden cup, filled it to the brim and raised it high as a libation to his dead father. Then he signalled to me to command the army to be silent so I rose among them and called out, "Silence, Achaians! Let there be silence! Hold still all of you!" And so I had made the whole army still and silent. Then Achilles' son said, "My father! Peleas' son! Receive these libations that propitiate the dead and call them to the upper world. Come and drink the pure dark blood of the girl whom the army and I have offered you as a gift. Be kind to us and let us untie our stern cables, raise our anchors and, leaving Troy behind us, make our journey home pleasant." These were his words and the whole army prayed with him.

Then he grabbed the handle of his golden sword, drew it out of its scabbard and signalled to the chosen Argive youth to take a hold of the girl. Polyxene saw this and immediately said these words: "You who have sacked my city! Argives! I die of my own accord. Let no one touch my body. I shall offer my neck without fear. In the name of all the gods, let me be free when you kill me so that I may die a free woman. I would feel ashamed if down in the halls of Hades the dead call me, a princess, slave." Then the soldiers shouted their approval and Agamemnon ordered the young men to leave the girl free. Hearing this last word of their leader, the soldiers let the girl go.

Polyxene heard Agamemnon's words and taking a hold of her dress, high up from her shoulders, tore it all the way down to her waist, and to her navel, leaving her statuesque breasts naked. Then, with her knees on the ground, she said the saddest and bravest words: "Come, young man. You may hit me where you wish. Here is my breast but if you wish to hit me at the root of my neck, this, too is ready." Then, Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, at once willing and not, and out of pity for her, cut her breath's passageway. The blood gushed out. Still, though she fell dying, she

was careful to fall modestly and in such a way as to keep concealed what should be concealed from the eyes of men.

When her soul left her from the fatal wound, every Argive did some task or other for her: some of them spread leaves all over her body, others brought pine wood for her pyre and if there was someone who had failed to carry anything he'd hear such admonishing words as, "lazy man, are you just standing there? Why aren't you bringing some garments or gems for the young woman? Go! Go and get some tribute for her who is a woman most brave and noble!" Hekabe, as I'm talking to you like this about your daughter, I feel that you are of all the mothers in the world, both the most blessed in your children, as well as the most unfortunate.

**Chorus:**

Dreadful is the evil that has flooded the children of Priam and our city by the will of the gods!

**Hekabe:**

O daughter! So many misfortunes surround me that I don't know which one to turn to first. Were I to turn to one of them, another stops me from doing so and yet another drags me away, one that gives birth to a mountain of many more misfortunes.

I can't erase from my heart what you have suffered, yet you have lightened my unbearable grief because you have endured your suffering so nobly.

It's not an odd thing for an infertile soil to give a good harvest of wheat if the gods grant it favourable weather, or for a fertile soil to give no harvest if it has been neglected in all its needs. With mortals, though, an evil man will always be evil and a virtuous one always virtuous, his character remaining steadfastly honourable even through dreadful times.

Is the difference due to parentage or due to upbringing? Of course, the best upbringing teaches the child that which is good and if he learns this well enough, then through it, through this standard, he can learn what is evil.

These thoughts are arrows, Talthybius, arrows shot in vain, but you say this to the Argives: "Let no one touch my daughter's body! Keep the masses away from her. In a huge army the soldiers are undisciplined and this lack of discipline among sailors is worse than fire so that even he who does no evil is thought of as an evildoer."

*Exit Talthybius*

*(Addressing one of the chorus)*

As for you, my old slave, go and fetch an urn. Dip it into the ocean until it is filled with water and then bring it here to me to give my daughter her last bath. My daughter, the bride who was not wed, the virgin who is no more since now she is married to Achilles. Let me wash her and give her the adornments she deserves. Yet, it is impossible for me! What can I do other than to gather all the adornments I can from these fellow captive women who share this tent with me. Perhaps one of them might have stolen something from her new masters and has it hidden in her house.

You, magnificent palaces! You, once joyful home! And you, Priam, most wealthy in goods and father of the best children and I, their mother! How did we end up having nothing, having lost our former glory? Can any of us now, after this total loss, pride himself for having a grand house or for being known among people as

being honourable? But these are merely words of the tongue and not of the mind; the happy man is he who, in his daily life, is met with no misfortune.

*Hekabe enters Agamemnon's tent*

**Chorus:**

Fate dictated that I should suffer.  
Fate dictated that I should be ruined.  
Fate dictated this

**Chorus:**

From the moment Paris cut down the Pine trees  
On Mount Ida to make a ship for his  
Journey over the sea's waves to  
Helen's bed –  
Helen, the most beautiful woman beneath the  
Sun's golden rays.

**Chorus:**

Anguish and necessities worse than anguish  
Are circling around us.  
From the thoughtlessness of one man  
Sprung forth a multitude of evil, of torment, For the land of Simois.

**Chorus:**

Others now suffer.  
The quarrel between three daughters of gods  
Was decided on Mount Ida by a shepherd and this decision brought to our home  
War, spear, slaughter and destruction.

**Chorus:**

And in Sparta too, by the flowing waters of Eurotas, some Spartan woman cries  
endless tears in her home

**Chorus:**

And a mother of slaughtered sons beats her grey head with her hands

**Chorus:**

And rips great gashes into her cheeks, her nails clogged with the blood of her  
wounds.

*Enter a female slave with two attendants (also female) carrying a covered corpse.*

**Slave:**

Women, can you tell me please where the most wretched Hekabe is? She is more  
unfortunate than every man and woman! No one could deny her that crown!

**Chorus:**

What is it you want, you miserable woman with your evil tongue? How I detest  
dreadful news!

**Slave:**

I bring sad news to Hekabe.

It isn't easy for mortals to announce happy news to someone in the grips of  
misfortune.

**Chorus:**

Here she is now, coming out of the tent. Just in time to hear your words.

*Enter Hekabe*



**Slave:**

Most ill-fated woman, even more so than I can say! You are lost, my lady! You no longer exist. Though you can see the light of the sun, you are without children, without husband and without a country. You are utterly destroyed!

**Hekabe:**

There's nothing new in what you're saying. Your pitiful words come to someone who knows misfortune well. But why are you bringing me the body of my Polyxene? I've been told that her burial is being prepared by the Achaians with great reverence.

**Slave:**

Poor woman! She knows only about Polyxene. She knows nothing about her other troubles.

**Hekabe:**

Ah! Is this then the body of the Bacchic prophetess, my daughter, Cassandra?

**Slave:**

Your cries were for someone who's alive but, instead, you should be mourning this dead man. But uncover the body and look at it carefully, Hekabe. It is the body of someone you know but never thought you'd see.

**Hekabe:** (*uncovering the body*)

Ah! I see the body of my son, Polydorus! The Thracian was looking after him for me at his house. Ah, it's true! I am thoroughly destroyed. I exist no more!

Oh my son! My son!

Now do I begin my frenzied lament!

O, my son!

Now I have learnt of the torment that some

Evil spirit has delivered me.

**Chorus:**

Have you truly understood that your son is dead, you poor, unfortunate woman?

**Hekabe:**

I see the body but I cannot believe the death. The vision is intolerable. Unbelievable. One blow follows another and I will never see a day without grief and tears.

**Chorus:**

Poor woman. We must have the strength to endure insufferable pains.

**Hekabe:**

O, my child! Child of a most wretched mother! What sort of death has found you? What ill fate brought you to this state? Who was the man who killed you?

**Slave:**

I don't know. I found him lying on the shore.

**Hekabe:**

Had the sea cast him out or was he hit by an enemy spear and fell on the shore's smooth sand?

**Slave:**

He was cast out by the ocean waves.

**Hekabe:**

O, my son! Now I understand the vision my eyes saw in my dreams. I was given a message by the black-winged ghost that you, my darling son no longer lived under

the sun's rays.

**Chorus:**

Who killed him, Hekabe? Can you interpret your dream to that extent?

**Hekabe:**

My own, my own friend the Thracian. Polymestor the horseman. Old man Priam has secretly sent my son to his house.

**Chorus:**

What do you mean, Hekabe? Did the Thracian kill him so he could steal Polydorus' gold?

**Hekabe:**

Unutterable! Indescribable! Monstrous! An insufferable sacrilege! Where is the honour of friends? Cursed and despicable man! How could you slaughter this youth, pitilessly tearing his flesh to bits, cutting it up with your sword?

**Chorus:**

Poor, miserable woman! How dreadfully harsh is some god treating you, Hekabe, that you must endure so much suffering.

*Enter Agamemnon*

But hush now. I can see our master, Agamemnon coming.

**Agamemnon:**

Hekabe, why are you so slow? Why have you not come to bury your daughter? Talthybius told me of your orders that no Argive should touch her body, so we've left it there, untouched and waiting for you, but I'm shocked to see that you are still here, wasting your time! I've come to take you there. Everything has been well prepared there and waiting for you –that is if anything of such a business can be said to be good.

Ah! Whose corpse is this? Who is this man I see lying dead beside my tent? By the looks of his clothes he must be a Trojan and not an Argive.

**Hekabe:** (*Aside: Turning her back to Agamemnon.*)

Ah! You poor wretch! And by this you I mean me. I speak to myself as I speak to another.

Come, Hekabe, what should I do now? Should I fall before Agamemnon's knees right now or should I endure my suffering silently?

**Agamemnon:**

You turn your back to me and cry. Why? Tell me what happened. Who is this?

**Hekabe:** (*continues as above*)

But then again, if he pushes me away from his knees because he considers me a slave and an enemy, my pain will worsen still.

**Agamemnon:**

Hekabe, I'm not a seer to be able to work out the ways of your thinking if I cannot hear you.

**Hekabe:** (*continues as above*)

Perhaps I am mistaking his disposition, thinking him to be more hostile than he truly is.

**Agamemnon:**

If you don't wish me to know anything about this issue, then I agree because I don't want to hear about it either.

**Hekabe:** *(continues as above)*

Yet without him I won't be able to get justice for my children.

But why overstudy the matter? I must try whether I succeed or not.

*(She turn to him)*

Agamemnon, I kneel by your knees and beg you. By your beard and by your blessed right arm.

**Agamemnon:**

What is it? What do you want? To be free? That should be easy for you.

**Hekabe:** *(aside)*

No need for that. If the guilty are punished, I can remain a slave for the rest of my life.

*Speaking to Agamemnon*

Nothing, my king! None of the things you are thinking.

**Agamemnon:**

Well then? What help do you want me to give you? Tell me.

**Hekabe:**

Do you see this man upon whose corpse I am shedding tears?

**Agamemnon:**

I do, indeed. But what of it? I don't understand.

**Hekabe:**

I was the one who gave birth to him. It was I who had carried him in my womb.

**Agamemnon:**

Poor woman. Which of your sons was he?

**Hekabe:**

He was not one of those children of Priam who died in Troy.

**Agamemnon:**

So, apart from those children, you had given birth to another one?

**Hekabe:**

Yes, this man you see before you. A birth, it seems, in vain.

**Agamemnon:**

Where was he when Troy fell?

**Hekabe:**

His father, Priam, feared for the boy's life so he had sent him far away.

**Agamemnon:**

And of all his children he had sent away only this one? Where to?

**Hekabe:**

Here, in this land, where his body was found.

**Agamemnon:**

To the king of this land, Polymestor?

**Hekabe:**

Yes, he was sent here to guard some gold, which proved to be his bitter poison.

**Agamemnon:**

Who killed him and how?

**Hekabe:**

Who else could it have been but our Thracian friend?

**Agamemnon:**

Poor woman! So Polymestor was after the gold?

**Hekabe:**

Immediately after he heard the news about Troy's destruction and the tragedy of the Phrygians.

**Agamemnon:**

Where did you find him? Or did someone bring his body here?

**Hekabe:** *Indicating the slave*

This woman, here, found him by the shore.

**Agamemnon:**

Was she looking for him or did she find him by chance?

**Hekabe:**

She had gone to fetch some water for Polyxene's ablutions.

**Agamemnon:**

It seems your friend had killed him and threw him into the sea.

**Hekabe:**

Yes, to be tossed about by the waves, after he had mangled his body in such a pitiful manner.

**Agamemnon:**

You are an unfortunate woman, indeed, Hekabe. Your torment is endless.

**Hekabe:**

I am lost, Agamemnon. There is no torment I have not suffered.

**Agamemnon:**

Poor, wretch! Poor wretch! Which other woman has been born to suffer so much?

**Hekabe:**

No woman! Not unless you count the goddess Misfortune herself. But listen to the reason I have fallen before your knees, Agamemnon: If you believe that my misfortune is proper and according to the holy laws, then I shall bear it. If not, then, for my sake, punish this man, this ghastly friend, who feared neither the gods below nor those in the Heavens and committed this most sacrilegious act, in spite of the fact that he had often shared my table and was first among my friends. Not only had he taken his share of the gold for looking after my son, but he had also killed him. Then, once he had done the murder, he didn't consider my son worthy of burial. Instead, he had thrown him into the ocean.

I am a slave too and equally weak. But strength is with the gods and with their own, sovereign laws. Our lives are based on these laws and with them we determine what is just and what is unjust. This law is now in your hands and if you disregard it and you do not punish those who kill their friends and dare to plunder the shrines of gods, then there can be no justice for the people. So think of such acts as shameful and show me some pity and respect. Stand back a little, Agamemnon. Be like a painter and look carefully at my misery. I was a Queen once but now I am your slave. Once I had many children but now I am an old woman with none. Childless and without a country, I am the most wretched of all.

*Agamemnon turns from her.*

O, poor me! Why, Agamemnon? Where are you trying to escape from me? It seems I have no luck with you either. What an unfortunate woman I am!

We humans try hard seeking to learn all the other lessons of humanity well but we neglect completely the single most important human skill, the skill of persuasion. We should pay well so that we may learn it perfectly and then we would be able to convince people of the things we need and to succeed in getting them. How then can one expect to live well without this skill? I no longer have the children I used to have and I am now destroyed, a slave, dishonoured and over there –there, I see the smoke of my city rising high.

Perhaps this evocation to Aphrodite might displease but I shall make it anyway: Agamemnon, my daughter, Apollo's prophetess, whom the Trojans call Cassandra, now sleeps by your side. What value then do you place, my king, upon these nights of love? What benefit will my daughter receive from you for those sweet kisses in your bed? And what benefit could I receive because of her? The greatest benefit to humans springs from the night and the delights of love within it. So listen now to me: Do you see the body of this dead man here? If you help him it would be like helping a brother-in-law.

There's only one more thing left for me to say to you: I wish I had Daedalus' art, or some other god's and with it put a voice in my arms, my hands, my hair, the soles of my feet and, with them all, fall at your knees, crying and begging with the most eloquent phrases: Master! You are the great beacon of all the Greeks! Hear me and give your hand to bring justice to this old woman, worthless though she might be, because it the duty of a good man to do good everywhere and always to punish the evil men.

**Chorus:**

It is truly remarkable how all things happen to humans! How the laws of Necessity ordain everything, making friends out of the greatest enemies and enemies out of people who were only recently friends!

**Agamemnon:**

I pity you, Hekabe. You, your son, your misfortune and your suppliant hand, move me. If it is possible, I would like, for the sake of the gods and Justice, to have this sacrilegious man punished by your hand and for all things to turn out well for you. But I don't want the army to think that I worked out this scheme of killing the king of Thrace simply because of Cassandra. Because there's something that bothers me a great deal here. The army considers the king of Thrace to be its friend and your dead son to be its enemy. The fact that I sympathise with you is something private and is not shared by the army.

Think about all this, Hekabe because you'll find me eager and quick to help you but not if I will be maligned by the Achaians.

**Hekabe:**

Ah! But there's no such thing as a free man! All men are slaves, Agamemnon! Slaves to money, to Fate, to the cries of the masses, to the written laws! They all stop him from doing what he wants. Well then, since you are afraid and allow the masses to have the upper hand, let me erase this fear of yours. I mean, you, too, may know what I plot against my son's murderer but there is no need for you to help me in its execution. If, however, the Achaians find out and there is a great disturbance among them, or if they come to the Thracian's aid while he is suffering the things he must, prevent them but without making it obvious that you're doing so for my

sake.

As for everything else, don't concern yourself. I shall take good care of them myself.

**Agamemnon:**

But how will you do this? Are you thinking of putting a sword in your aged hand to kill the barbarian? Will you use poison or will someone give you a hand? But who? Where will you find such friends?

**Hekabe:**

These tents hide many Trojan women.

**Agamemnon:**

Do you mean the captives? Those women captured by the Greeks?

**Hekabe:**

Yes. With these women I shall punish the murderer of my family.

**Agamemnon:**

But how will the women be able to overcome the strength of men?

**Hekabe:**

Numbers, when joined with treachery, can cause great terror.

**Agamemnon:**

Terror, indeed. Still, I have little faith in the strength of women.

**Hekabe:**

But why? Was it not women who killed all of Aegyptus' sons? Was it not women who left Lemnos totally without men?

But so be it. Talk no further about this but do take this slave safely to the army. After that, you slave, go to our Thracian friend and tell him this: "Hekabe, once the Queen of Troy, wishes your presence and that of your children for things concerning more yourself rather than her. Bring your children because they, too, must hear what she has to say." In the meantime, you, Agamemnon, delay the burial of freshly sacrificed Polyxene so that the two siblings, twin love of their mother, might be buried on the one, single pyre.

**Agamemnon:**

It shall be done, though had the winds been favourable, the army would have sailed away and I wouldn't be able to fulfil your wishes. But since the god does not give us favourable winds, we are forced to remain idle, waiting to begin our journey home. Let us hope that all turns out well. It is everyone's conviction, individually and collectively as a city, that the evil man suffers and the good man rejoices.

*Exit Agamemnon, his retinue and the Slave. Hekabe covers Polydorus' body.*

**Chorus:**

Troy, our fatherland! Alas, you will no longer be esteemed as being among the unconquerable cities. The cloud of the Greeks covers you totally. You have fallen under their countless spears. They have brought down your crown of tall towers and the ugly stain of war smoke has besmirched you most dreadfully. My poor city, I shall never be able to walk in your streets.

My own destruction came in the middle of the night. That moment after supper when sweet sleep flows gently over your eyes; when, after the songs, after the dances that call the end of the sacrifices, my husband, not having seen the seaborne armies that have trampled upon Troy's ground, hung his spear at its peg and lay down to sleep in his chamber. And I, looking into the endless gleam of my golden

mirror, prepared my hair, tying it high with a headband, preparing myself to fall into my bed. It was at that hour that the great shout reached the city and when, throughout Troy, we've heard that call: "Sons of Greece, when will you take Troy's citadel and go home?" Putting on a single cloak, like a Spartan girl, I left by beloved marriage bed and, poor wretch, fell, a suppliant, to my knees before the statue of revered Artemis. In vain!

And then, after seeing the body of my slaughtered husband, I was dragged away to the ocean. From the ship which was heading back, I, hapless wretch, watched my Troy disappear in the ever growing distance and was overcome by my torment.

I cursed Helen, the sister of the Dioscuri, and Paris, the herdsman of Idis and bringer of the whole catastrophe. It was their marriage that has made me homeless and sent me, a battered soul, away, far from my city. Theirs was not a marriage but some evil calamity visited by some divine vengeance.

Let no salty ocean bring Helen back to the home of her fatherland!

*Enter Polymestor with his two sons, Hekabe's Slave and his servants.*

**Polymestor:**

Priam, loved by all the men and you, dear Hekabe! I shed tears when I see you, when I think of your city and when I think of your daughter who was only just sacrificed.

Alas! There is no certainty in this world. Neither in one's good name nor in one's present fortune. No one can be certain that good fortune will not be replaced by bad. Such things are turned upside-down by the gods, sowing confusion so that we may, in our ignorance worship them. But then, why must we lament upon this if it gets us no further in our misfortunes?

If you have some complaint, though, Hekabe, about my absence, do forget it. It so happens that when you had arrived, I was in the inland precincts of Thrace and then, when I had return, I was just about ready to get out of my house and come over here when your slave here, arrived and, as soon as she had informed me of this, I came.

**Hekabe:**

I feel ashamed, Polymestor, when I look at you in the face at a time when I am suffering such misfortune. Shame grips me now that I stand before someone who has seen me in my joyful days but now he sees me in such dire circumstances. I cannot look at you directly in the eye but do not think this to be a sign of displeasure towards you, Polymestor. In any case, it is caused by the custom that dictates that women must not look directly at men.

**Polymestor:**

Indeed. There's nothing strange about that. But what do you need me for? Why call me here from my home?

**Hekabe:**

There is something very private I need to discuss with you and your sons. But first, do me a favour. Tell your servants to move away from us, from this tent.

**Polymestor:** *(to his servants.)*

Go. I am safe here.

You are a friend of mine, Hekabe and the army of the Achaians are also friendly towards me. Tell me, though, how can a fortunate man help those lacking in good

fortune? As for me, I am ready to help you.

**Hekabe:**

First tell me if my son, Polydorus is alive. You've taken him from my own hands and from the hands of his father, Priam. Tell me this and then I shall ask you about other matters.

**Polymestor:**

But of course he is alive! So far as he is concerned, you are a fortunate woman.

**Hekabe:**

My dear friend! How well you speak! It is worthy of you.

**Polymestor:**

Well, then. What other questions do you have for me?

**Hekabe:**

I would like to ask if he remembers his mother at all.

**Polymestor:**

Yes. In fact he wanted to come here, to you, in secret.

**Hekabe:**

And what of the gold he had from Troy. Is it safe?

**Polymestor:**

It is safe, indeed. It is hidden under lock and key, in my house.

**Hekabe:**

Well then, keep it safe so that you may never have the need of your neighbour's gold.

**Polymestor:**

But of course, my Lady. May I enjoy that which is mine!

**Hekabe:**

So, do you know what I want to say to you and to your sons?

**Polymestor:**

No idea. Your own words will tell me.

**Hekabe:**

They are... Oh, Polymestor! I have loved you before as I love you now...

**Polymestor:**

What is this thing that I and my sons must know?

**Hekabe:**

There are ancient caves full of gold for Priam's sons.

**Polymestor:**

Is this what you want to tell your son?

**Hekabe:**

Exactly, and I want to do it with you as the messenger because you are a god-fearing man.

**Polymestor:**

But what is the need of my sons here?

**Hekabe:**

It would be better for them to know, also... in case you were killed.

**Polymestor:**

Of course. You speak well. It is a wise thought.



**Hekabe:**

Do you know where the temple of Athena is in Troy?

**Polymestor:**

Is that where the gold is hidden? What identifies the spot?

**Hekabe:**

A black rock, standing high above the ground.

**Polymestor:**

Well then, is there anything else you want to tell me about that place?

**Hekabe:**

I also want you to keep safe the money I brought with me from Troy.

**Polymestor:**

Where is it? Do you have it on you or is it hidden somewhere?

**Hekabe:**

It is hidden in those tents, among all the plunder.

**Polymestor:**

But where? These are the tents of the Achaian army.

**Hekabe:**

The captives have their own tents.

**Polymestor:**

Is it safe in there? Are the men away?

**Hekabe:**

Yes, it's only us there. There are no Achaians in there. Go in because the Argives are anxious to set homeward their sails and leave Troy behind them. Then, when you have done what you must, go back with your children to where you have lodged my son.

*Hekabe, Polymestor, his sons, his servants and Hekabe's slave enter Agamemnon's tent.*

**Chorus:** (to Polymestor)

You've yet to receive your proper punishment but you will certainly be punished. Like someone who slips with a false step and falls sideways into the deep sea, your heart's desire will prove to be a false one too and you will lose your life.

Because when Justice and Heaven are both transgressed, there will be doom. Doom and more doom! Your hopes in this path are also false.

See? It has led you, you poor creature, to Hades and it did so by the hand of someone who's no warrior.

**Polymestor:** (screaming from within the tent)

Ah! They are blinding me! Ah!

**Chorus:**

Did you hear, friends, the Thracian's screams of pain?

**Polymestor:** (as above)

Ah, again the horrible blows! Ah, my boys! Alas for your dreadful slaughter!

**Chorus:**

Friends, yet more horrible things are taking place in the tent!

**Polymestor:** (as above)

No! Ah, your fast feet won't save you from my blows! My fists will turn every corner of this tent inside out! Here is my heavy hand!

**Chorus:**

Ladies should we charge inside? This is a crucial moment for Hekabe and the women of Troy. We should stand by her.

*Enter Hekabe from the tent with some Trojan women, their hands dripping blood.*

**Hekabe:** *To Polymestor, who's still inside the tent.*

Go ahead! Strike as hard as you can! Strike everywhere! Leave nothing! Go ahead, smash down the doors! You'll never bring back the sun's bright light to your eyes. Nor will you ever see your sons alive. I have killed them!

**Chorus:**

Could this be true, my Lady? Have you really defeated the Thracian? Is everything you said true?

**Hekabe:**

You'll soon see him yourself! A blind man, blindly stumbling and staggering in front of the tent; and you'll also see the corpses of his two sons whom I, with the help of these noble Trojan women, have killed. I am now avenged!

*Enter Polymestor, blindly and in agony, crawling about on all fours, his face full of blood. The corpses of his two sons are brought out on the eccyclema.*

Look there! You see him? He's coming out of the tent now. But I'll move away from him and from his Thracian frenzy. It is a frenzy with which no one can fight.

**Polymestor:**

Ah! Insufferable agony! Where can I go? Where can I stand? Where is there a harbour for my ship? Ah! I am struggling on my hands and feet, scratching footprints on the ground like a wild mountain beast! Which road should I take? This one or that? I need to grab these man-murdering hags of Troy who have destroyed me. Brutal, brutal, cursed women of Phrygia. Where are they hiding? Into which corner have these frightened cowards scurried? They are trying to escape me.

Come, Sun! Come and cure my bleeding eyes! Take away their darkness!

Ah! Now I hear their dull footsteps! Which way should I charge? Which way can I turn to cram my throat to excess with flesh and bones? How can I get a feast like those the wild beasts enjoy? How can I, poor creature that I am, get my share of Justice for the agony and the insults I'm suffering?

But, o! Where am I rushing off? How can I leave my darling sons behind, alone, to be devoured by the Frenzied Maenads of Hades? To be torn to bloody pieces and then pitilessly thrown away into the mountains, a gruesome game for wild dogs?

Ah! Where? Where shall I stay? Where shall I rest? Where should I go?

I gather my linen robe tight about me like a ship anchored at sea and, here, I rush to protect my sons on their bed of death.

**Chorus:**

Miserable creature! You must endure a suffering most monstrous! Yet, dreadful is the punishment for the man who had committed dreadful deeds. Some god, weighing heavily upon you, has punished you in this way.

**Polymestor:**

Help! Thracians! Come armed with your spears and your shining horses! Come lovers of war! You, too Achaians! Sons of Atreus! I'm calling you! Come to my aid. Come, all of you, in the name of all the gods, come!

Can anyone hear me? Will no one come to help me? Why are you so slow? Women

have destroyed me. Women, captives of war! I have suffered atrocities. Dreadful dishonour, dreadful torment! Come!

Ah! Where may I turn? Where may I go? Shall I fly off to the high vault of the heavens, where Orion and Sirius cast down from their eyes their bright, fiery rays, or shall I, the aching wretch, plunge headlong into the dark passage to Hades?

**Chorus:**

It's well understood by all that if a man's suffering is greater than what he can endure he will seek to end his life.

*Enter Agamemnon with his retinue.*

**Agamemnon:**

I came here because I've heard shouting. The sound of Echoe's voice, daughter of the mountain crags, was heard throughout the whole army camp, bringing it all into turmoil. Had we not known well that Troy's tall towers had already fallen under the Greek spears, this sound would have caused us great fear.

**Polymestor:**

Ah, dear Agamemnon! I knew it was you the very moment I heard your voice. Do you see my plight, dear friend?

**Agamemnon:**

Ah! Polymestor! Poor man! Who has done this dreadful deed to you? Who has blinded your eyes and filled them with blood? Who killed your sons? Whoever it was he bore a great anger for you, indeed and for your children.

**Polymestor:**

It was Hekabe and her fellow captive women who have destroyed me. No, not just destroyed me but worse!

**Agamemnon:**

What? What do you mean? You, Hekabe! Did you do this deed as he claims? Did you really have the audacity to do this dreadful deed?

**Polymestor:**

Ah, what's this? Is she really close by? Show me! Tell me where she is so that I may seize her with my two hands and tear her into bloody pieces!

**Agamemnon:** *To Polymestor*

Hold it, you! What is the matter with you?

**Polymestor:**

By the gods, Agamemnon, I beg you: let me give her the fury of my arm!

**Agamemnon:**

Stop this! Tear out the barbarian from within your heart and speak! Speak so that I may hear you and hear her, in turn, and justly determine the cause of your suffering.

**Polymestor:**

Let me then speak. Polydorus, Priam's youngest son and Hekabe's was brought to me by his father, for me to take care of in my own house. This he did because Priam was afraid lest Troy fell to the Greeks. I have killed that boy, it's true but hear now the reason I did this and see what a good deed I performed and by what wise foresight I came to perform it.

I did this because I was afraid that if the child lived and, being your enemy, he might have gathered all the Trojans and once again populate the city. As well,

if the Greeks had heard that one of the Trojans was still alive, they might have set off again with a new expedition against the land of the Phrygians and, in the process, devastate the meadows and plains of Thrace, have it plundered and make us, Troy's neighbours, suffer gravely, a thing which, my king, we are experiencing even now.

When Hekabe heard of the bloody fate of her son, she had me brought here in the pretence of revealing to me the whereabouts of the boxes of the gold belonging to Priam's sons, supposedly hidden somewhere in Troy. Then she took me, alone with my sons into the tent so that no one else would suspect anything. Inside the tent, I bent my knees and sat in the middle of the bed. Many Trojan women sat around me, some to the left others by the other side, as if they were sitting by the side of a friend. For a while they checked my clothes in the sun and praised the clever work of the Edonian women upon the loom. Others again, pretending to praise my two spears, took them away from me.

Those women who were mothers took my children and feigning tender, motherly love, passed them around from one woman to the next until they were far away from me, from their father.

Then, what do you think of this? After all the sweet talk, these women suddenly brought out of their clothing their hidden swords and slaughtered my children while, the rest of them, like a single beast with many hands, grabbed me hand and foot and held me hard. If I wanted to help my sons and tried to lift my head, they pulled me back by the hair. Nor could I move my arms, poor wretch, because there were so many women holding them. Finally – o torture upon torture! – they struck me the worst of blows. With their brooches, they tore into the pupils of my poor eyes and had them clogged with blood. After that they escaped my hand, running this way and that, all around the tent while I pounced like a wild beast, throwing myself at the bloodthirsty bitches, searching, like a hunter, every wall and hitting out in all directions, breaking everything in my way.

All this I've suffered, Agamemnon, for your own sake; because I had killed Polydorus, your enemy.

But let me spare you the many words: If any of the men from olden days or if any of them now, or in the future, will utter ill words against women, let me put all those words in one short sentence: Neither land nor sea produces such a race and whoever had any dealings with them knows this very well.

**Chorus:**

Don't be so arrogant and don't, because of your personal suffering, paint all of us women with the same brush. There are many of us and some of us are hateful while others of us are evil by birth.

**Hekabe:**

Never, Agamemnon, should words have greater sway for men than do their deeds. When a man does good, his words ought to be good; when he does evil then his words should be unsound. No one should speak well of injustice. About this last thing, there are those clever fellows who have performed it to perfection but they will all, in the end, be destroyed. None of them have escaped so far. These, my opening words were addressed to you, Agamemnon. Now I shall turn to him and make my reply.

You say that the reason you've killed my son was for the sake of Agamemnon and so as to save the Achaians from a double ordeal. Yet, you evil man, first of all, no barbarian would or could become friends with the Greeks. Secondly, what favour were you hoping to gain from Agamemnon that made you so eager to help him? Was it perhaps that you hoped to become his in-law, by any chance? Were you a relative of his? What other reason did you have? Perhaps you were afraid that if the Greeks were to return they would have destroyed your land's harvest. Whom do you think you can convince with all this? If you really want to tell the truth, then it was my son's gold that had killed him. That and your vulgar greed. Otherwise, explain this to me: Why, if you truly wanted to help this man, you did not kill my son at the time when Troy was at its happiest? When its walls stood tall around the citadel, when Priam was alive and Hector's spear ruled the battlefield? Instead, you cared for my son in your own house then and you did delivered him alive to the Argives.

And then, when we Trojans were utterly destroyed and the smoke of the city revealed that it has fallen to its enemy, it was then that you have killed the young friend, the guest of your house.

And further, listen now to the proof that you are a despicable **rogue**:

If you were truly the friend of the Achaians you should have brought the gold – which by the way, is not yours but this boy's- and given it to them! They've been away from their homeland for so long that they needed it. Yet, even now, your heart still insists upon keeping the gold hidden in your own home rather than be parted from it.

Also, if you had taken care of my son the way you should have and if you had kept him safe, you would have gained a good reputation because it is during hard times that one is proven to be a good and trustworthy friend; during good times, it is always easy to find friends.

As well, if you lacked money and my son enjoyed plenty of it then he would have been a great treasure to you. Instead, you not only lost his friendship but the gold is gone, your own sons are gone and you are left in this dreadful state.

As for you, Agamemnon, I say this: You will be seen as being a bad man if you help him because you will be helping an impious friend, one who is untrustworthy to those he should be loyal, unrighteous and unjust and I could then say that you liked base men because you, too, were base. But I shalln't criticise my master.

**Chorus:**

Did you hear that? See how a good cause gives mortals material for a good argument!

**Agamemnon:**

It is a heavy thing for me to judge other people's misdeeds but, since I took up this matter, it would be shameful for me if I had just dropped it, so, judge it I must.

My view, Polymestor, is that you did not kill your guest for my own sake or for the sake of the Achaians but so that you could keep the gold for yourself, in your own home. Now that you're in this dire situation you say whatever you think will serve your interests. Perhaps, for you, barbarians, it is easy to kill your guests but for us, Greeks, this is a thing of shame. How, then can I escape blame if I do not judge you guilty? I can't do it. Since you could endure performing such a dishonourable deed,

then you must also endure its awful consequences.

**Polymestor:**

Oh, the shame! It appears I've been beaten by a woman, a slave and I will be punished by my inferiors!

**Hekabe:**

Is this not just, since you've behaved unjustly?

**Polymestor:**

Ah! My poor children! My eyes! Poor me!

**Hekabe:**

So you're in pain? Do you think that I am not hurting for my own son?

**Polymestor:**

You are enjoying this outrage you've done to me, you despicable creature!

**Hekabe:**

Should I not enjoy my just recompense?

**Polymestor:**

Not for long. When the ocean's waves...

**Hekabe:**

...what? Will they not, perhaps, take me to the Greek shores?

**Polymestor:**

No. Rather, they will cover you! You will fall from the highest mast!

**Hekabe:**

Who will force me to jump from up there?

**Polymestor:**

You, alone, will climb the ship's mast.

**Hekabe:**

Will I do this with wings grown on my back or by what other means?

**Polymestor:**

You will turn into a hound with blood-red eyes.

**Hekabe:**

How do you know that I will change my shape?

**Polymestor:**

Dionysus told me. Dionysus, the seer of Thrace.

**Hekabe:**

Yet has he not given you an oracle about the terrible state you're in now?

**Polymestor:**

No, because then you'd never be able to catch me so treacherously.

**Hekabe:**

Will I complete my cycle of life by dying now or by staying alive?

**Polymestor:**

You shall die and your tomb will be named...

**Hekabe:**

You mean, something relating to my shape?

**Polymestor:**

... "The Grave of the Evil Dog." It will be a sign for the sailors.

**Hekabe:**

I'm not at all interested, now that I have been avenged.

**Polymestor:**

Your daughter, Cassandra, too, must die.

**Hekabe:** *Spits under her armpits.*

Ftoo, ftoo! I spit under my armpits! God forbid! Let that be your own Fate!

**Polymestor:**

This man's wife will kill her. She's the poisonous guard of his house.

**Hekabe:**

May, Klytaimestra, Tyndareus' daughter, never become so mad!

**Polymestor:**

She will also kill him, with a raised axe.

**Agamemnon:**

Hey, you! Have you gone mad? Are you looking for more trouble?

**Polymestor:**

Go ahead, kill me. You, too, will suffer the same fate. A murderous bath awaits you in Argos.

**Agamemnon:**

Slaves, take him away! Take him by force and take him far away from me!

**Polymestor:**

Do my words give you pain?

**Agamemnon:**

Shut his mouth!

**Polymestor:**

By all means, shut it now. I have said all I had to say.

*FX: The sound of a rising wind*

**Agamemnon:**

Take him and cast him onto some deserted island, him and his arrogant tongue!

*Polymestor is taken away*

As for you, hapless Hekabe, go and bury your two dead sons.

You others! Trojan women! You must now go to the tents of your masters because I can feel the wind that will take us all home. Let's hope we all get to our land safely and find our homes all in good order, now that we've rid ourselves of all this hardship.

*Exit all but the chorus*

**Chorus:**

Go, my friends! Go to the ports and to the tents, my friends! Go and taste the hardship of slavery!

*Exit All*

# (EURIPIDES) Andromache

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/andromache/)<sup>472</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae**

**Andromache** (*Hektor's widow, now Neoptolemos' Trojan slave*)

**Hermione** (*Neoptolemos' wife and Menelaos' daughter*)

**Menelaos** (*King of Sparta, Helen's husband*)

**Peleas** (*Achilles' father and Neoptolemos' grandfather*)

**Orestes** (*Hermione's cousin*)

**Thetis** (*Achilles' mother, Peleas' wife, a nereid*)

**Trojan Female Slave** (*Once of Andromache now of Neoptolemos*)

**Chorus** (*Of Thessalian women*)

**Molossos** (*Young son of Andromache and Neoptolemos*)

**Nurse** (*Hermione's aged servant*)

**Messenger** (*To Neoptolemos*)

**Various servants and attendants**

...

*In the distance we see Neoptolemos' palace.*

*Nearer is the temple and a statue of the nereid, Thetis.*

*Andromache, dressed in the clothes of a suppliant, comes out of the palace and walks to the temple.*

*She stands before it and prays for a few seconds before she turns to the audience*

## **Andromache:**

Thebes! Thebes, my country! The brightest gem in all of Asia!

It was from there that I went to King Priam's Palace, in Troy, bearing a rich dowry of gold, to be made Hektor's wife and mother of his children. Yes, that was me then: Andromache, a woman most envied by all other women.

That was me, then!

Now, I am the most unfortunate of all the women ever born, or will be born in the future!

I, Andromache, have witnessed my husband being slaughtered by Achilles and my son, Astyanax, hurled down from Troy's tall towers, when Troy was captured and destroyed by the Greek spears.

And I, Andromache, a member of a household of free people have been dragged here, to Greece, as a slave, a spoil of war, a prize to the islander Neoptolemos for his bravery!

So now, I live here, in Phthia, next to Pharsalia, part of Thessaly. These are the lands where Thetis, the sea nymph and her husband, Peleas lived. They lived here, alone, away from the rest of the world and, in their honour, the Thessalians called these precincts Thetideion.

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<sup>472</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/andromache/>



That building there belongs to Achilles' son, Neoptolemos, who did not want to take the throne of Pharsalia from his grandfather, Peleas and so Peleas is still our King.

It was in this house that I gave birth to Molossos, my master's, Neoptolemos' boy and Achilles' grandson.

And with all the misery that has engulfed me, I had this one hope that kept me going: That if my son survived I would have some sort of support, some help against my fate.

But then, my lord abandoned my bed, the bed of a slave and married the Spartan Hermione who now torments me with her cruel abuse.

She accuses me of using drugs of magic powers against her, of making her barren and of making her husband despise her! She says I'm trying to force her out of the palace so that I can take over as its rightful mistress but I did not come to this bed of my own free will but it was forced upon men and now, look! I have given way to her and here I am, a suppliant at this temple!

Zeus, mightier than all, is my witness and he will testify that it was not my wish to become this woman's rival in bed.

But I just can't convince her of this and now she is plotting to kill me.

Her father, Menelaos, is her accomplice in this plot and he has come here all the way from Sparta. He is inside the palace right now, while I have come out here, to stand as a suppliant by this nearby temple, hoping that the goddess, Thetis, will help me escape death. Peleas and his descendants honour this nereid as a symbol of his marriage to her.

I have sent my son and only child to another house to save him from death because his father isn't here to protect either of us. He is at Delphi right now, seeking forgiveness from Apollo so that Apollo might be good to him in the future. Neoptolemos is seeking forgiveness because once he did something which only the insane would do. He had gone to Pytho and demanded of Apollo recompense for the death of his father, Achilles, whom the god had killed!

*Enter Nurse from the palace*

**Nurse:**

My lady... I'll continue calling you that, since I've been calling you that when we were at your palace, back in Troy and I was your friend then and your husband's friend while he was still alive.

But now, I'm here, my Lady, with news for you but I'm terrified that our masters will see me here, talking to you... but I feel sorry for you, my Lady.

My Lady, Andromache, I must tell you that Menelaos and his daughter are plotting against you. They are devising horrible things against you. Be very careful, my Lady!

**Andromache:**

Dear, dear slave-sister! Yes, now that misery has fell upon me, you are my sister in slavery, even though once I was your Queen. Tell me, what are they up to?

What snares are they preparing in their efforts to take this miserable life of mine?

**Nurse:**

They want to kill your son, my poor Lady!

You have sent him secretly away but they want to kill him!

**Andromache:**

Ah, no!

Has she found out I've sent my son away? But how? Who told her?

Ah! This suffering is overwhelming!

**Nurse:**

I don't know, my Lady. I just heard that they did. Menelaos has already gone to fetch him.

**Andromache:**

Ah, I am lost! Lost, my son!

My son, my son! These two vultures will grab you and tear you apart! They will kill you while your father is still at Delphi!

**Nurse:**

True, my Lady! Had he been here, you'd be in no danger but now, you're all alone with no one to help you!

**Andromache:**

What about Peleas? Does anyone know if he's coming?

**Nurse:**

My Lady, even if he was here he wouldn't be able to help you. He's just too old.

**Andromache:**

Yes, but I've sent for him a number of times!

**Nurse:**

My dear, do you really think that any of these messengers care at all about your plight?

**Andromache:**

No, of course, why should they care about a slave. Will you go for me then?

**Nurse:**

But how will I explain to the folks inside where I've been all that time?

**Andromache:**

Nurse, you're a woman! You can find many excuses!

**Nurse:**

This is a dangerous task, my Lady. As a guard, Hermione is no child!

**Andromache:**

I see!

So, when the need arises you abandon your friends!

**Nurse:**

No, no! You can't accuse me of that!

I'll go! And if anything happens to me, well, so what? What's a slave's life worth, anyhow, not much.

**Andromache:**

Go then nurse and I will let my sighs and tears, the groans of pain which were my life's companions, fill the high heavens!

*Exit the Nurse*

It is a woman's way to constantly speak of her misery, in the hope it will lessen the pain. Her bitterness is always on her lips.

There is so much for me to feel bitter about, to cry about! Not just one, single thing but many things!

I cry for my country and for my dead husband; and I cry for the miserable fate that

has brought me to slavery for no good reason.

We cannot call any mortal happy until we see how he has spent his last day and went to the world below.

*The rest of her soliloquy is a lament which, director-willing, she sings.*

And Paris took Helen to his bed not as a bride

But as a mortal blow to Troy!

The Greek fleet, a thousand war ships strong, Rushed to you, Troy and burned you to the ground!

Fire and sword!

And they rushed to kill my Hektor!

Ah, my Hektor!

Ah, my husband!

Achilles, Thetis' son, the nereid's son, Tied him at his chariot and dragged him round the walls of Troy!

And I!

They took me from my chamber to the shore

My head covered with the shroud of slavery.

The tears I shed then! So many tears rolled down my face!

My city, my home and my husband I had left behind lying in ashes!

Ah what wretched misery is this?

Why live if this is the only life I can live? Why look upon the light of day as a slave to Hermione?

She torments me!

*She runs to the statue of Thetis and throws her arms around it*

Ah, she tortures me! She drove me here, to the statue of this goddess

And I wrap my suppliant arms around it!

Ah! I am melting in tears!

Gushing tears like the waters of a spring from a rock!

*Enter the Chorus*

**Chorus:**

Andromache!

Woman, you have not moved from Thetis' temple all day!

I, a Thessalian, have come to help you, even though you are a daughter of Asia.

**Chorus:**

To see if I can find some means of ending your bitter clash with Hermione, a clash most unfortunate because you both share the bed of Neoptolemos, the son of Achilles.

**Chorus:**

Poor woman!

Realise the reality of your Fate, Andromache!

Look carefully at the impossible situation in which you find yourself!

**Chorus:**

Can you, a woman from Troy, go against your masters?

Hermione is a Spartan! A Spartan, born and bred!

**Chorus:**

Move away from that shrine, Andromache!

**Chorus:**

Leave that place of sacrifice!

This revered goddess will be of no help to you against your mistress' torment!

**Chorus:**

There is no point in you wasting your lovely body with worry about this.

**Chorus:**

Making it ugly with despair!

**Chorus:**

Know this, Andromache: The strong always win!

**Chorus:**

So why fight? You are the weak one!

**Chorus:**

Come now! Come away from that beautiful sanctuary of the divine nereid!

You are but a slave in a foreign land. In a land that belongs to others.

**Chorus:**

You must understand that well, Andromache! You are but a slave in a foreign land.

**Chorus:**

Poor woman, there is not a single friendly face here for you to look upon!

**Chorus:**

You are the most unfortunate of all women, the most wretched of them all!

**Chorus:**

Andromache, my soul felt deep pity for you when I first saw you; that time when you first came here, to this palace, from Troy, but I was too afraid to speak!

**Chorus:**

Too afraid Andromache, too afraid that my mistress, daughter of Zeus' daughter, would find out how I felt about you...

**Chorus:**

...and so I kept quiet.

*Enter Hermione dressed in royal gowns, jewels and crown.*

*She is accompanied by her servants.*

**Hermione:**

The golden crown on my head, the jewels and the embroidered gown that adorns my body have not come from the glorious coffers of Achilles, nor of his father, Peleas!

No, they are gifts which my father, Menelaus has given me. A vast dowry from Sparta, from Laconia!

And so, I can speak to you all as a free woman, indebted to no one!

*To Andromache*

As for you! You are here, as a slave, captured by the war spear, yet you want to throw me out of my own palace and take it for your own!

Your magic potions have turned my husband against me and made my womb barren and useless! Asian women are experts at such evil things!

But I will stop you nevertheless. The temple of the nereid will not help you. Not its altar nor its sanctuary. You will die!

And if some mortal or immortal wants to or can save you, well, forget your old airs and graces and learn about being humble.

You must fall at my feet and sprinkle the floors of my halls with water that you will bring from the river Achelos in golden jugs and, while doing so, learn what your true station in life is now!

Here you will not find Hektor's gold, nor his father's, Priam. This is a city of Greece!

You are a destroyed woman! You have reached the direst depths of your stupidity, woman! You now sleep with the son of the man who has murdered your husband and to have his children!

But that's the barbarians for you!

They're all the same!

Father sleeps with daughter and mother with son! Brother with sister!

The closest relatives will kill one another with no restraint from law.

Don't bring such customs to our city, woman!

It is not proper for a man to control the reins of two women here! Those men who want to live a decent, honourable life will be content with one woman in their bed.

**Chorus:**

Women!

Jealous souls! They will always hate those women who share their husband's bed with them.

**Andromache:**

Ah, youth!

Youth is a dreadful thing if it's not accompanied by an understanding of justice. It is a curse to all of us!

And now, young woman, I am afraid that, even though I have much justice on my side, my position as a slave will stop you from hearing me out. Or, even if you do and I win my case, that, too, will hurt me! Those with mighty pride cannot tolerate being beaten by the wise arguments spoken by the weak!

Yet, I will not subvert my own rights!

Well then, tell me young woman, what would give me the courage to come and destroy your own, lawful marriage? Is not your Sparta far superior in strength to my Troy? Is not your fortune far superior to mine? Or am I, in your eyes, a free woman?

Where will I find the audacity to throw you out of your home and become its mistress? To have your husband's children –wretched slaves to drag around behind me? Where? In a beautiful, healthy body? In a large and powerful city full of friends?

My dear, if you don't have any children, then do you think anyone will allow one of mine to sit on the throne of Phthia? Yes, the Greeks love me because I was once Hektor's wife; and was I not a member of Troy's royal family and not a mere commoner?

No, Hermione! If your husband doesn't love you it's not because of any destructive magic potions of mine. It's because you don't know the art of being a good wife –and there's your destructive magic potion! There's your problem! There's the only reason why he doesn't love you! It is our manners young lady, it is our manners, our ways, that win the love of our husband. It's not only about our beauty.

But what do you do?

The moment something bothers you, you immediately start throwing insults at your husband's country, Skyros and loudly boast about your father's, Sparta! You whine about being a rich woman among the poverty stricken and declare to all and sundry that your father, Menelaos, is far greater a man than Achilles!

That's why your husband hates you!

Understand this, young woman: that even if a woman is given to a terrible man she must be patient and silent and not fight with him battles of pride!

If you were in snow covered Thrace and had married a king who shares his bed with many women, would you have tried to kill all of them? What would happen then? Because of your murder, the whole race of women would be condemned for being insatiable in lust.

It would be a shame accusation!

It is true, in this we are worse than men but we should at least cover this shame with some modesty!

Ah, my Hektor! Even if Aphrodite delivered you into the arms of another, I would still offer my breast to your bastard sons so as not to make you feel any bitterness towards me.

And that's how I kept a hold of my husband's love, Hermione! With kindness, with a good heart! Not you though! Because of your jealous fear you wouldn't let even a drop of heavenly dew fall and settle upon your husband's head!

Take care, Hermione, that you do not surpass the madness your mother had about men! Wise children must avoid the habits of their evil mothers!

**Chorus:** *To Hermione*

My Lady, listen to her! Try as much as it is possible for you to come to some agreement with her.

**Hermione:** *To Andromache*

Ha! Such big words, such arrogance!

You talk as if you're wise and virtuous and I am not!

**Andromache:**

Your words show no wisdom.

**Hermione:**

And I hope my heart never entertains such wisdom as yours!

**Andromache:**

You are young and speak of things that are shameful!

**Hermione:**

And you? You may not utter the words but you do practice the deeds as best you can!

**Andromache:**

Can you not shut up about your love pains?

**Hermione:**

Shut up? Why should I? Is not love a woman's greatest concern?

**Andromache:**

It is, but she should not be shamefully crazed by it!

**Hermione:**

But are not Aphrodite's gifts good and honourable?

**Andromache:**

Not if you don't use them honourably!

**Hermione:**

This is Greece. The customs of barbarians don't apply here!

**Andromache:**

Shame is shame both here and there.

**Hermione:**

You are indeed clever, Andromache but you must die just the same!

**Andromache:**

Look, Hermione. Thetis' statue is watching you!

**Hermione:**

That goddess hates the Trojans who have killed her son, Achilles.

**Andromache:**

His death was caused by Helen, your mother, not by me.

**Hermione:**

How much deeper into my pains will you go on digging?

**Andromache:**

I shall stop right now. Here, see, I am shutting my mouth!

**Hermione:**

Let me hear from you the thing that brought me here.

**Andromache:**

I think you lack some wisdom.

**Hermione:**

Will you never leave this sacred shrine?

**Andromache:**

Never, if by leaving it I shall die.

**Hermione:**

The decision is mine and I won't even waste time waiting for my husband.

**Andromache:**

But nor will I give myself up to you before he comes.

**Hermione:**

I shall set fire to the place and you can suffer the consequences, for all I care.

**Andromache:**

By all means! Burn the place. The eyes of the gods will watch on.

**Hermione:**

Your flesh will feel the worst of pains!

**Andromache:**

Go ahead, kill me! Paint the altar of the goddess with my blood, if you want.

She will make you sure you will pay for it.

**Hermione:**

Barbarian creature! So braze that you're prepared to defy even death! But you will see: soon, you will leave that shrine of your accord. I have the means to make you do it. But no more words from me. I will leave it to the deed to make my intentions clear.

Well, stay there, if you wish. I will make you move away even they pour molten lead all around you! I will have you out of there even before your trusted Neoptolemos returns!

*Hermione exits into the palace*

**Andromache:** *Sarcastically, at Hermione's back*

Ha! My trusted Neoptolemos! Achilles' son! Ha!

How strange it is that gods have given mortals drugs to remedy the bites of wild venomous snakes, yet no one has devised drugs yet to remedy the bites of venomous women, bites that are far more terrible than those of snakes, or the burns of a blazing flame!

We, women, are such a dreadful curse to humanity!

**Chorus:**

Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia, was the cause of great miseries when he brought the three golden goddesses, Athena, Hera and Aphrodite, to the valley of Ida.

**Chorus:**

Great miseries indeed!

Three golden fillies, under a golden yoke, fully armed to do battle for the prize of beauty, came to the grazing fields of a young shepherd's cows. Paris, who lived alone in his hut...

**Chorus:**

And when they came to the shady valley they bathed their splendid bodies in the mountain springs before appearing in front of Paris, Priam's son...

**Chorus:**

And when they came before the Prince, they each compared their charms in spiteful words...

**Chorus:**

And it was Aphrodite who finally won with sweet deceits and promises...

**Chorus:**

And they were words sweet indeed for the ear but bitter for the Phrygian city...

**Chorus:**

And for the citadel's tall towers! Such misery for Troy!

**Chorus:**

But how I wish, oh, how I wish, the woman who had given birth to him, yes, his mother, had smashed his wretched head before he came to settle by cliffs of Ida...

**Chorus:**

When his sister Cassandra, standing next to the prophetic laurel screamed for his slaughter...

**Chorus:**

She screamed for them to tear this curse out of Priam's land.

**Chorus:**

And she went everywhere and begged everyone, all the elders of the city, to have the baby prince killed.

**Chorus:**

If only they listened to her!

Slavery would not have yoked the Trojan women and you, dear lady, would still be sitting on the throne of a royal palace!

**Chorus:**

And Greece would have been saved from the torments and misery that her young



men suffered, wandering about the walls of Troy, spear in hand, for ten long years!

**Chorus:**

No wedding beds would have been left bereft of men nor old fathers of their sons!

*Enter Menelaos, dressed in full armour dragging young Molossos by the hand.*

*They are followed by an armed escort.*

**Menelaos:**

Ha! You have sent your son to a stranger's house without my daughter's knowledge!

But, here he is! We have caught him!

You thought that Thetis's statue over there would save you and this boy but, I'm far too clever for you! Now, if you insist on staying there, at that shrine, it'll be this child that I'll slaughter. Think about it, Andromache and do so carefully. Shall it be you or him who'll die for the wrongs you have committed against me and my daughter!

**Andromache:**

O, glory, glory!

You have puffed up the egos of so many worthless men!

Let those who have gained you honestly be truly blessed but those others! Those who gained you falsely, let them be thought of as no more than Fate's chosen! Glory gained by mere accident!

And so, you, Menelaos, a trivial man, was it you, a general of Greek soldiers, who really took Troy from Priam? Was it really you?

You who just now got all flustered by the words of a mere child, of your daughter, to come and strike at a poor captive woman?

You are not worthy of Troy, Menelaos and Troy did not deserve the likes of you!

Some men appear wise from the outside, they make a splendid show of it, but inside, inside they are distinguished from the common herd only by their wealth. Well, Menelaos, let's get to the nub of this problem.

Let us say, your daughter fulfilled her wish. She has killed me. Fine. What then? She will have to deal with the pollution of murder. Of spilling blood. And then, most people will also hold you condemned as an accomplice to this murder. You are sharing in the deed so you won't be able to escape the accusation.

And then, let us say the other: I escape my death. Will you really kill my son? What do you think his father will think of that? Of you having murdered his only son?

His response is already known. In all his time in Troy he has acted dutifully. He was never called a coward. He has shown himself to be a truly worthy son of Achilles and the grandson of Peleas.

He will throw your daughter out of this house. What will you say then to men when you try to find her another husband? Will you lie and say that she left a man who was unworthy of her virtue? No, you can't say such lies. Who'll have her then? You? Will you take her to live in your halls? Keep her there until she grows old and grey and unmarried?

Poor man! Can't you see what a storm of troubles awaits you?

Is that what you want? Would you rather the future I am describing for you or would you let your daughter suffer, even countless such little love troubles?

Menelaos, you shouldn't repay little troubles with big ones! And if we women, are

such a curse on humanity then men shouldn't imitate us!

If it is true, as your daughter says, that I have used magic to make her barren, then I'll willingly leave this shrine and present myself to her husband for him to judge me and punish me as he pleases, since, if I was responsible for his wife's infertility then I would also be responsible for rendering him childless.

So, that's where I stand.

But, as for you, I fear one thing about your soul: You have destroyed Troy simply because of a quarrel you had about a woman!

**Chorus:**

Andromache, for a woman, you said too much to man!

Good sense has shot itself out of your mind!

**Menelaos:**

Woman, these matters, as you say are petty. Yes, it's even unworthy of the sceptre I hold and of Greece herself but what must not be forgotten is that whatever a man holds dear is far more valuable than the conquest of Troy.

And that's why I have come to my daughter's assistance. To help her regain her rights as a married woman because whatever else a woman may suffer she can endure but when she loses the love of her husband, then she loses her whole life. My brother-in-law must rule over my slaves and my daughter and I should rule over his. It is the way with true friends who keep nothing for themselves but share everything.

That's why I won't behave like a fool and wait until he returns, before I can go about managing my affairs as I see fit.

So come on! Get up and out of that shrine!

Your death will save the life of your son. It's either you or he. One of you must die!

**Andromache:**

Lots! Choices!

If I win the one I am doomed. If I win the other I am destroyed!

Listen to me, Menelaos! You have made too much of a tiny thing! You want to kill me! Why?

What have I done? What city have I betrayed? Which of your sons have I slaughtered? Which of your houses have I burnt?

It was not of my own will to enter my master's bed. Why kill me and not him who committed the offense? You walk right past the source of the evil and jump upon its consequence!

Ah, what a miserable fate!

Ah, my poor country, what horrible suffering I must endure!

Why have I become a mother? Why add yet another load of suffering?

But why mourn all this?

I have seen my Hektor, slaughtered and dragged behind a chariot and I have seen Troy in flames! And I have been dragged by my hair to the Greek ships to be a slave! And then, when I arrived here, in Phthia, I was made to share the bed of my Hektor's murderer!

What joy is there left for me in life? Where can I turn now? My whole life is misery! I have only one son. My only light! My only source of joy yet him too, they have decided to kill!

But no! I won't let them kill him! If this wretched life of mine can save him, then so be it! I would not commit the shameful act of saving my miserable life at the expense of my son's life!

Here! I am walking away from the shrine!

I am in your hands, ready for the slaughter, for the prison, for the hanging!

My son, I am going to Hades so that you may live. If you escape death, then remember your mother. Remember what torment she has suffered before she died. And when you throw your loving arms about your father and when you kiss him, tell him, with tears in your eyes, how they have treated me!

Children are the lifeblood of humanity. Those who have none and scorn the idea, might be enjoying a smaller burden in life but the price for it will be bitterness.

**Chorus:**

I hear your tale, Andromache and I feel sad for you. Such misfortunes move every mortal.

**Chorus:**

Menelaos, you should have tried to speak with your daughter, to get her to come to some agreement with this woman, so she may avert disaster.

**Menelaos:** *To his men*

Men, seize this woman! Seize her and tie her hands up well because what she's about to hear will not please her at all!

*The men obey.*

*To Andromache*

Ha! Now I've got you! I have told you about your son so that I could get you away from that shrine and make you surrender to me and to your death!

So that's where you stand!

Now as to your son! His fate rests with my daughter. It is she who will decide whether he will live or die!

No off you go! Inside!

That will teach you to curb your arrogance when speaking to a free man when you are but a slave!

**Andromache:**

Ah! Treachery! I have been deceived!

**Menelaos:**

Let the world hear you! I won't be denying any of it!

**Andromache:**

Is this what you Spartans call "being wise?"

**Menelaos:**

Just as they do in Troy! Victims must retaliate!

**Andromache:**

Do you think that there are no gods? Do the gods not mete out justice?

**Menelaos:**

I'll deal with their justice when it comes. In the meantime, you will die!

**Andromache:**

And what about this little child that you have torn away from under my wing? Will you kill him also?

**Menelaos:**

No, not I. I will give him to my daughter to do that, if that's what she wants.

**Andromache:**

Oh, my darling!

I am mourning your death now!

**Menelaos:**

Ha! I can't see much hope for him escaping death!

**Andromache:**

O, hateful, hateful Spartans!

Most hateful of all mortals on earth!

Schemers, all of you! Conspirators! Plotters of the most evil deeds! Master liars!

Minds so crooked that not one single, honest thought occurs to them! Crooked, twisted and devious minds!

You prosper in Hellas unjustly!

What's missing in your list of evil?

You are masters of murder! Masters, too of dishonest profit! Masters of deceit!

There is one word on your lips and yet its opposite word in your heart!

Be cursed all of you!

My death, Menelaos, is not as heavy a punishment as you have hoped it would be!

Not this death Menelaos because my real death came the day Troy fell and the day

my glorious Lord, Hektor, fell! Hektor, whose spear had often showed you for what

you really are a coward! Coward on land rushed off to be a coward on his ship!

And now, look at you! Here you are, dressed in all the armour of a wild warrior, ready to kill a woman!

Well, here I am! Kill me!

I shall utter not a single word of flattery for you or your daughter!

It is right that you are great in Sparta and we in Troy!

And, no, don't boast about my misfortune. It could be yours one day!

*Menelaos' men drag Andromache into the palace.*

*Menelaos and the boy follow*

**Chorus:**

I do not approve at all of beds shared by two wives or of children sharing two mothers! They are nothing but bitter trouble for a house.

**Chorus:**

A husband should be satisfied with one wife. One only!

**Chorus:**

And a city should not be ruled by two kings! Two kings double the problems of the city and cause divisions among its citizens.

**Chorus:**

And when two poets try to write the same song, the Muses will turn them into enemies.

**Chorus:**

And when a ship is in the grips of a winter tempest, tossing sailors all about, two pilots and a whole host of wise men around the radar, are less effective than a single, even less knowledgeable, man with absolute right to govern.

**Chorus:**

A house or a city must be ruled by a single man, if the people in them want to see

progress. This is what gives both their strength.

**Chorus:**

And proof of this is this Spartan girl, Hermione, daughter of military Commander, Menelaos. She has stoked a blazing fire of hatred against her rival, the poor Trojan woman and wants to kill her and her son as well!

**Chorus:**

A murder condemned by the laws of all the gods and mortals alike!

**Chorus:**

But you will pay dearly for these deeds, dear lady!

*From the house come Menelaos and his men dragging the bound Andromache and her son, who is clinging tightly to her. Blood is seen on her hands. Menelaos has his sword raised threateningly.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look!

The two poor souls are bound together with the same rope and heading for the same fate.

**Chorus:**

Death!

**Chorus:**

Poor child!

**Chorus:**

Innocent child!

You have done nothing to these masters!

**Chorus:**

Yet you will be killed because of your mother's marriage!

**Andromache:**

Look at me, ladies!

Hands tied, hands bleeding, I am taken to the world below this earth!

**Molossos:**

Mummy, mummy, I too, am coming with you.

Here I am beneath your wings!

**Andromache:**

What a cruel sacrifice!

Come, rulers of Phthia!

**Molossos:**

Father come and help us! Come and help your loved ones, daddy!

**Andromache:**

You will rest with me, my darling. Beneath this earth, next to me, next to my breast!

**Molossos:**

Mummy, what will happen to me?

O, mummy we are both so unfortunate!

**Menelaos:**

Enough!

Go now! Go to the underworld, both of you!

Both of you have come here from enemy towers! You are condemned by two separate judgments: You, woman, by my own whereas you, boy from my daughter's.

It would be stupid to let enemies or their sons live when you can kill them so easily and remove all fear from your house!

Andromache!

Husband! Husband! My Hektor! Priam's son!

If only I had your hand and your spear to help me!

**Molossos:**

What bitter Fate, mother!

What hymn must I sing to ward off this black Fate, mother?

**Andromache:**

There, my son! Him! Our master. Plead with him for your life, my son. Touch his knees!

**Molossos:**

Kind Master, our Master, spare us! Come, please, don't kill us!

**Andromache:**

A trickle of tears runs from my eyes and washes my cheeks, like a spring, hidden deep away from the sun, a spring whose waters wash over a rock.

**Molossos:** *Rushes to Menelaos' knees*

Ah, Master! How can I escape this miserable Fate?

**Menelaos:** *To Molossos*

Why bother begging at my knees, boy? You might as well beg to a sea-hardened rock and to the deaf waves!

I will look after my people but have no sympathy for the likes of you!

It has cost me a great deal of my life to capture your mother's city and her with it, so now you will pay for that cost: You will die! You will descend to the halls of Hades!

*Enter Peleas. An old man, supported by his king's sceptre and a servant.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, I see old man Peleas! Old feet rushing this way!

**Peleas:** *Angry, at Menelaos*

What is all this? I'm asking you, Menelaos! You and you, the executioner! What is going on here? What's causing all this fuss and uproar at the palace?

Tell me!

What secret, lawless schemes are you devising now?

Menelaos, you'd better stop this murder! Don't overrun Justice!

*To the servant*

Help me move faster, servant! I can see now that I must not be slow in this. This is the time when my strength must be reborn!

*Indicating Andromache*

But first, let my words fall upon this woman, like a favouring breeze upon the sails.

*To Andromache*

Tell me, woman. What reason have they given you for tying your hands up like this and dragging you and your son away, like a lamb and its mother? All this while your master and I have been away.

**Andromache:**

Old Prince, you can see what's going on. They have tied me and my son and they are taking us away to kill us. No need to say any more. The moment I knew about

it, I have sent a thousand messengers to let you know also.

Surely you have heard the rumours by now. How this man's daughter started off this dreadful quarrel which has divided the palace and which has brought about my death.

Now, they've just dragged me off that shrine there of the goddess Thetis, the goddess who has given birth to your glorious son, Achilles and whom you hold dear. And they have done this with no proper trial nor waited for my master to return.

They have found us alone and defenceless and now, along with his unfortunate mother, they are going to kill the boy even though he has done no harm to anyone!

Old sir, I fall at your knees! My hands are bound and I cannot stretch them to touch your friendly beard but I beg you, kind sir: Save me, please, sir! Save me, or else we will be both destroyed. Your family will be dealt with shame and I with misery!

**Peleas:**

Release them!

Untie them immediately before someone pays dearly for this!

**Menelaos:**

And I say no!

Not only am I your equal in status, I also have a greater right to her!

**Peleas:**

How so?

This is my house! Do you have a greater right to rule it than I do?

Is Sparta not enough for you?

**Menelaos:**

It was I who had captured her in Troy!

**Peleas:**

Yes but she was handed to my grandson as a prize.

**Menelaos:**

But are not all his possessions also mine?

**Peleas:**

Yes, to protect, not to destroy! Not to cut down with your sword!

**Menelaos:** *Rushes over and roughly grabs Andromache's hand.*

You'll never take her from my hands!

**Peleas:** *Raises his sceptre threateningly*

Let her go or I'll smash your head with this sceptre!

**Menelaos:**

Go on, try it!

Come closer, if you dare! Come on, just try and put a hand on me!

**Peleas:**

Ha! You? You a man? A real man among men?

You're a coward! The chief of them!

You left your house unlocked and unguarded as if the woman inside it was the paragon of goodness! She is the worst kind of woman and that's why she ran off with a barbarian! A Trojan!

But who can be surprised at this? Even if a Spartan woman wanted to be good

how could she, when you allow them all to go about with their breasts bare to the world, their tunics loosened to reveal all and to exercise naked along with men, at the race tracks and the wrestling yards?

What unbearable customs!

How, then can anyone wonder at their lack of virtue?

Ask your Helen this question: Ask her why she had left your house behind and with it her reverence to Zeus the Hospitable and gone off to some foreign land with a young man! Was it for such a woman that you dragged such an enormous Greek army all the way to Troy? You should have let her rot there. In fact, pay her to stay there, not start off a war for her!

But no! Not your type of thinking! Instead, you have ended the lives of many brave soldiers, you have left many mothers and many fathers, aging at home without their noble sons! And I am one of those aging fathers! You! To my eyes you are the most despicable murderer of my son, Achilles! You are the only one who has returned without a scratch on his body! Even your beautiful shields and spears and swords have come back untouched, still in their splendour, still in their sheaths!

I warned my grandson Neoptolemos before he married! I told him to start no relationship with you, to bring no evil mother's child into our house!

A mother's shameful deeds are a bad dowry for her daughter!

Listen to me all you men who are looking for a wife! Look first for an honest mother! And that's not all, Menelaos! That's not all! What you've done to your brother, Agamemnon was outrageous! You were so afraid you were going to lose this... this wonderful wife of yours, you've made him slaughter his own young daughter, Iphigeneia! Outrageous! Stupid!

And then, all right, let us agree on this, and then, after you've captured Troy, did you kill her? Did you kill that horrible woman of yours?

630 No!

The moment you saw her naked breasts, you dropped your sword to the ground and ran into her arms! You kissed that evil, traitorous slut and uttered sweet, fawning words to her! That's how much of a match you are to the calls of lust! There, too, you are found to be nothing but a coward, a slave to Aphrodite!

And now, you have come here, to my grandson's palace and, in his absence, you turn it upside down and want to commit a shameful murder! To murder a poor, innocent woman and her son!

But this young boy, though he might be a bastard thrice over, one day he will make you and your daughter pay for this deed dearly!

Because just like barren land can often yield a greater harvest than the deep, fertile soil, so can bastards be better men than the legitimate ones.

Now, take your daughter and leave this place! Go!

Better for mortals to be related to poor but honest folk than to the rich and dishonest.

And you, Menelaos, you are a nobody!

**Chorus:**

The tongue can turn trivial things into furious quarrels.

**Chorus:**



Wise mortals are careful not to quarrel with their friends.

**Menelaos:**

How on earth can we say that old men are wise or those men who had once earned that reputation throughout Greece, if you, Peleas –you, the grandson of Zeus and the son of the famous Aeacus, who was renowned for his sense of Justice and who had become one of the judges of the world below- how can we think of them as wise, if you utter words that bring shame upon you and insult upon me, all for the sake of a foreign woman, a woman whom you should have driven away to places beyond the Nile or even the Phasis?

You should have, in fact, asked for my help to do that!

This is a woman who comes from Asia, the graveyard of a great many Greek men. This is the woman who has a share in your son's death. Was Paris, who had killed Achilles, not Hektor's brother? And was this woman not Hektor's wife?

Yet here you are, sharing your roof and your table with her and letting her have children who will become your worst enemies!

And when I, thinking of your own welfare and mine, try to kill her, you come and take her away from me!

Let's tell the truth here. If this woman has children but my daughter doesn't, will it not be her children whom you will place upon Phthia's throne? Will it not be these barbarians that you'll make rulers of all the Greeks?

Is it because I find this unfair and you do that makes me so stupid and you so clever?

And then, what if you had a daughter and married her to someone who had treated her as badly, would you have sat in silence? Done nothing about it?

I doubt it! Not by the way you're talking about this foreigner to your own relatives! Man or woman, when it comes to being treated badly or unfaithfully by a partner, the pain is the same.

For a man, his strength is in his own hands, whereas a woman relies on her family, her parents and her relatives, so, of course, I have every right to come to the assistance of my own daughter.

You are an old man Peleas and so, by talking about my years as a general you have done me more good than if you had stayed silent about it.

What Helen went through was not because she had asked for it. Her fate was sent to her by the gods and, in the end, Greece gained from it! Greeks before that, were ignorant about battles and war. They depended upon their bravery but the best teacher is experience!

I have shown self discipline by not killing her the moment I saw her, whereas you, you had killed Phokos, your own brother!

I say all this to you not in anger but for your own good!

And if you keep shouting like this, it will be to the detriment of your own tongue rather than to my views, which are sensible.

**Chorus:**

Best you should stop all this worthless talk, or else, I think both of you will be proven wrong!

**Peleas:**

What terrible customs we must endure these days in Greece!

It's not the soldiers who did all the hard work on the battle field but the General who gets all the credit whenever the army raises a victory trophy. One man, who, among ten thousand men raised his spear, one man who did the work of only one man, gets all the praise!

Then they get into these high offices of the city and bloat their egos with thoughts that they are better or worthier than the common folk! They are nothing! The common folk are far better, far wiser, than these generals, but they simply lack the will or the courage.

You and your brother have done this. You have bloated your egos over the leadership at Troy. Others did all the hard work, others crossed spears and swords, yet it is you two who do all the boasting!

And if you and her don't get out of this house you'll find that I, Peleas am as great an enemy to you was Paris the Trojan! You and your barren daughter! Because my own grandson, Neoptolemos, will drag her out of here by the hair if she can't tolerate women who can have children when she can't!

Sterile cow!

Should her bad luck deprive us of having any children of our own?

Give me space, slaves! Let me see if there's anyone who'd dare stop me from untying this woman's hands!

*To Andromache*

Come now, Andromache, get up!

Let these aged hands untie these knots around yours.

*He finds the task frustrating. To Menelaos:*

You horrible man! You have mutilated her hands! Did you think you were tying up a bull or a lion with all these knots? Or were you afraid she would take a sword and fight you?

*To Molossos*

Come child, come here and help me untie your mother's arms.

Have no fear, my boy, I'll make a great man out of you in Phthia and when you grow up you can be their bitterest enemy!

*To Menelaos and his men*

You would be nothing, you Spartans, you would be better than no one, if you were not known for your talent in battles and war.

**Chorus:**

Old men show no restraint...

**Chorus:**

...unrestrainable when they lose their temper!

**Menelaos:**

Peleas, you fly into abuse and insults far too readily!

Personally, I have not come to Phthia to either cause harm by violence nor to suffer it!

And now I must leave because I am pressed for time. There's a city near Sparta, one that was once friendly to us but has suddenly turned against us. I must march now with my army against that city and take it in hand. Then, the moment I have that under control, I shall be back here and speak with my son-in-law, Neoptolemos, openly and fairly, face to face. I shall speak and I shall hear.

*indicating Andromache* And if he decides to punish her and if he is respectful towards us from now on, then he will receive respect from us in return. If, however, it is anger he wants to deliver, then anger he will receive in return. His deeds will be met with like deeds from me.

Your own words don't bother me at all! After all, what are you? Nothing but a noisy shadow and noise is the only thing you can make.

*Exit Menelaos and his men.*

**Peleas:** *To Molossos*

Come, my son, help me. Come into my arms. That's it. Come, let us go.

*To Andromache*

You, too, poor girl. Come. Come now into the calm waters of a haven. The stormy weather is over for you.

**Andromache:**

May all the gods grant you their blessings, old sir, for saving this child's life and the life of his unfortunate mother! But be on the look out now, though, in case they rush upon us on some deserted road and take me away from you by force, when they see that you're an old man, I, a weak woman and this child, a mere baby!

We have escaped once, let us not become captives twice!

**Peleas:**

Come, enough of the frightened womanish words. Let us go on. Who is there to lay a finger on you? Whoever tries will shed heavy tears for it!

The gods be thanked, I rule over a great army in Phthia, both, cavalry and infantry.

And I, I can still stand upright and am not as old as you think I am! And, old or not, men like that, men like Menelaos, I only have to look at them and they run away!

It is bravery, not age that matters. A brave old man is worth a thousand young men in their prime if they are cowards. What's the use of a strong body if the spirit is weak?

*Exit all*

**Chorus:**

Either be born to wealth or to nobility or be not born at all!

**Chorus:**

When hard times descend upon the nobles, they have abundant help.

Those whose fame declares that they are nobly born are given honour and glory. The legacy of their good deeds is not erased by time but lives on, even beyond their death.

**Chorus:**

Best to win a victory honourably rather than win it by the use of loathsome violence against justice.

**Chorus:**

Mortals will discover that the sweetness of such victories is very short-lived.

**Chorus:**

It dries up and all that is left is the shame of the guilty. A stain upon their house.

**Chorus:**

The life I far prefer is that which gives me no power over justice, neither in my house nor in my city.

**Chorus:**

Peleas, son of Aeacus, lover of Justice!

Old man!

I have no doubt that you and your glorious spear sided with the Lapiths against the Centaurs!

**Chorus:**

That on the ship Argo, you have made that most famous journey through the rough waters past the Clashing Rocks...

**Chorus:**

And that when Heracles, Zeus' glorious son, many, many years ago, had surrounded the famous city of Troy with destruction, you came back to Europe with your well-earned share of praise!

*Enter the Nurse.*

**Nurse:** *To the chorus*

Disaster, my friends, disaster! One upon the other! Today is a day of disasters! My mistress, ladies! My mistress Hermione! Her father has gone and left her alone in there, in the palace and now her heart is full of the awful deed she wanted to commit against Andromache, to murder her and her son and she's all broken up with guilt and wants to kill herself! And she's also afraid that her husband will punish her for plotting to kill the innocent and will banish her from his house in disgrace – or even kill her!

The woman almost managed to hang herself and then her guards took away the sword from her right hand just in time! That's how miserably remorseful she is!

She certainly understands now that what she has done was not good.

I'm exhausted from trying to keep her away from the hanging ropes, my friends. You go in now and try to save her. Perhaps new friends are more persuasive than the old ones whom she sees all day long.

*Shouts and noises of turmoil are heard from within the palace*

**Chorus:**

Ah! The poor woman! I hear the screams and shouts of the servants. Yes, you are right about the turmoil in the house.

**Chorus:**

Poor woman!

*Enter Hermione from the palace, followed by anxious servants.*

*She is wearing a veil and she is tearing at her clothes, in deeply felt remorse and grief.*

**Chorus:**

Here she is!

**Chorus:**

I think she's going to reveal here just how remorseful she is about the horrible things she has done.

**Chorus:**

Her grief is deep!

**Chorus:**

She is trying to free herself from the hands of her servants.

**Chorus:**

She wants to die!

**Hermione:**

Ah! The pain! The misery!

I'll tear my hair out! I'll tear to shreds the flesh on my cheeks, with my nails!

**Nurse:**

No, my child! Why do this to yourself?

**Hermione:** *Tearing at her veil and at her clothes*

Ah! This pain! This misery of mine!

Away! Away from my head! Leave my hair veil, you and your fine threads!

**Nurse:**

Child! Cover your breasts! Tighten up your robe, darling!

**Hermione:**

Cover up? What is the point of covering up?

All my horrible deeds are crystal clear for everyone to see! The things I've done against my husband! These deeds cannot be hidden!

**Nurse:**

You mean about your plans about killing Andromache, your bed's rival? Is that why you are hurting, child?

**Hermione:**

Plans? Yes. The impudent plans of murder I thought up! That's where the pain is!

Oh, what a cursed creature I am! Cursed by everyone!

**Nurse:**

But, child, your husband will certainly forgive this mistake of yours!

**Hermione:**

Why did you take my sword away, Nurse! Go, dear nurse, bring it back to me! Bring it back so that I can plunge it deep into my heart!

And why did you force me away from the noose?

**Nurse:**

What, should I have left you to kill yourself out of sheer madness?

**Hermione:**

What fate is this?

Where can I find a huge, blazing fire that I may jump into? Where can I find a huge cliff above the sea or on a high mountain above a forest? I want to hurl myself over it and die and go to meet the shadows in the world below! They would take care of me!

**Nurse:**

Why torture yourself like this, child? Misfortune is meted out by the gods and sooner or later it comes to all of us!

**Hermione:**

Father!

Father you have abandoned me! You have left me at the edge of the shore all alone!

You have deserted me! Where is the raft that will take me over the waters?

Father, he will kill me! He will kill me!

Father!

This bridal home is no longer mine!

Ah!

Which god will receive me in his shrine as a suppliant? To which statue should I run?

Or should I fall on my knees, a slave, before another slave?

Ah, if only I could fly away from Phthia, like a blackbird through the sky!

Or like that ship that was built by pine wood and rushed through the Clashing Rocks!

**Nurse:**

Hermione, neither your excessive behaviour against the Trojan woman before, nor this excessive fear you're showing now, is worthy of praise.

Do you really think that your husband will end his marriage by heeding the worthless words of a barbarian more than yours?

He married not a captive of Troy but the daughter of a glorious man, from a prosperous city and who gave her a rich dowry.

And do you also think that your father has really abandoned you so that you can be thrown out of your own house? Are you really afraid of such a thing?

Come now, child! Come, let's go back indoors. People may see you outside your house and start their evil gossip. Come!

*Nurse and Hermione are heading for the doors of the palace when one of chorus women sees Orestes in the distance. Her words stops them from exiting the stage*

**Chorus:**

Ha! A stranger!

**Chorus:**

The clothes of some foreign land.

**Chorus:**

He's rushing towards us.

*Enter Orestes and his servants. He doesn't notice Hermione.*

**Orestes:**

Women of this foreign land, is this the home, the palace of Neoptolemos, Achilles' son?

**Chorus:**

That's right but who are you to ask this?

**Orestes:**

I am Orestes. The son of Agamemnon and Klytemnestra and I'm heading for Dodona, the oracle of Zeus.

But I'm here, in Phthia now so I thought I'd look up a relative of mine. Hermione is her name. Hermione, from Sparta. Is the woman alive? Is she well?

She lives far from my land but I still hold her dear to me.

*Hermione rushes over to Orestes and falls at his knees, wrapping her arms around them.*

**Hermione:**

Orestes!

You've appeared here like a true haven appears to a sailor caught in a tempest!

Let me fall at your knees, son of Agamemnon and beg you to help me! Help this woman about whose fate you're concerned.

Let my arms be the suppliant's wreaths around your knees!

**Orestes:**

What?

Do my eyes deceive me or is this really Menelaos' daughter, the lady of this house?

**Hermione:**

Yes, yes, Orestes, it is, it is I, Helen's only daughter. Helen who was Tyndareus' daughter. I was the only child born in Menelaos' halls. You need not doubt that!

**Orestes:**

Oh, Phoebus Apollo! Healer! Rid us of our troubles!

What is it, Hermione? Who is tormenting you, gods or men?

**Hermione:**

Me, in part. My husband, in part. Gods, in part!

Orestes, wherever I look I see my ruin!

**Orestes:**

But what is it, Hermione? What problems could a woman have who is still without children? Unless it's a marital business!

**Hermione:**

Yes, that's it, Orestes! You've worked it out straight away!

**Orestes:**

He's turned to another woman?

**Hermione:**

Yes. Andromache. Hektor's wife. A captive of Troy.

**Orestes:**

It's a nasty thing, a man having two wives, Hermione.

**Hermione:**

That's right, that's right, Orestes, so I tried to fight it.

**Orestes:**

By doing the usual womanish plotting against her?

**Hermione:**

Yes, I plotted to kill her and her bastard child.

**Orestes:**

And did you actually kill them or did something stop you from doing it?

**Hermione:**

Yes, old Peleas! He felt sorry for these commoners.

**Orestes:**

Did you have an accomplice?

**Hermione:**

Yes, my father. He had come over from Sparta for this very reason.

**Orestes:**

And he got beaten by the old man, right?

**Hermione:**

Yes, old Peleas made him feel ashamed, so he went off and left me here, all alone.

**Orestes:**

And so now, you're afraid of your husband for what you've done.

**Hermione:**

I do, yes. He will have every right to kill me.

But there's no point talking about it. I beg you, Orestes, in the name of our mutual father, Zeus, take me away from here! Let's go far away. Let's go to my father's

house!

This house here seems to be able to speak and it's shouting at me to go away! The whole of Phthia hates me! Take me away before my master returns from the oracle of Apollo! He'll kill me when he sees me, Orestes. Kill me under some shameful charge.

Or he could make me a slave to his mistress, who was my slave before all this!

**Orestes:**

But how did you manage to stray so badly?

**Hermione:**

I listened to the words of evil women, Orestes. They came to me and filled my head up with nonsense. They asked me questions like, "what, are you going to put up with this miserable captive living with you, in this house and sharing your marriage bed? By, Hera! There's no way she could come into my house, made love to my husband and not die for it!" It's these horrible, cunning sirens, whispering gossipers, who have fed my ears full with such stupid thoughts.

I had everything I wanted. What was the point of worrying so much about my husband's loyalty to me?

I was rich. I was the mistress of my house. I could have given birth to legitimate children, masters over her bastards.

This needs to be told and told often: The wise husband should never, but never allow his wife to have women visit her at his house! It is these women who instruct their wives about how to do terrible things! It is they who destroy marriages, some for personal gain, others because they were failures themselves and they are looking for company and others are just sluts!

And that's why men's houses get corrupted!

Men should lock their doors, bolt them up, put bars across them and guard them well because it is the visits of these women that cause the damage in the marriage!

**Chorus:**

Hermione, you've freed your tongue too much to lash out against your own sex!

This might be excusable, given your situation but still, women should try and cover up each other's weakness.

**Orestes:**

He who said that we must listen carefully at the words of our enemies, was a wise man.

In fact, when I heard about the turmoil in this house, how you and Andromache had an argument, I did not rush to come over here but waited to see whether you'd stay here or if, after your murderous plotting, you were afraid enough of the Trojan slave to leave the place.

I did not wait for a message from you to come here. I came to ask you if you want to come with me and now I can see that you do.

Because, in fact, you were rightfully mine, from a long time ago. Your father has promised you to me before he left for Troy but then, the liar that he is, when he got to Troy, he offered you to Neoptolemos, your present husband, if he, in return captured the city.

Now, when Neoptolemos returned home, I didn't go back to your father but, instead, I approached him and begged him not to marry you because you were



promised to me but my situation at the time was bad. I had explained everything to him. I told him that since I was exiled, I could only marry someone from within the family; not any woman from outside our household.

But, Neoptolemos refused and insulted me for having killed my mother and then mentioned the blood-eyed goddesses, the Erinyes.

I was mightily hurt. Hurt and humiliated by the disasters that had fallen upon my house and grieved bitterly for having lost you, having been robbed of you, my promised wife; but I took the insult and the loss patiently and went away without you.

But now, now that your fortunes have changed and that you find yourself in such dire circumstances and powerless, I'll take you from here and hand you back to your father.

The household is a mighty thing and whenever we are in trouble, it is the first and foremost support.

**Hermione:**

My marriage, Orestes is my father's business. He will arrange it as best he sees fit. It is not up to me to decide who I am to marry but, yes, take me away from here as soon as you can, before my husband returns or before Peleas hears that I am leaving this house and rushes over with his fast horses.

**Orestes:**

Don't worry about the power of an old man's hand!

And don't worry about Achilles' son, Neoptolemos who has insulted me so terribly, either! With this hand I have weaved a death trap with so many knots that no one could possibly loosen!

I shall say nothing about this trap for now but the moment this trap is snapped, the rock of Delphi will be its witness and, if the accomplices at the Pythian land do not break their oath to me, then he will learn from this mother killer that he has no right to take a woman who belongs to me.

He request for satisfaction from Apollo for the death of Achilles, his father, will end up being a bitter thing for him because even if he has now changed his mind and repented, the god will still administer his punishment.

He will be crushed painfully by the god's hand and by my accusations.

He will taste the hatred that I have for him!

Gods punish their enemies. They don't let them get away with arrogance!

*Exit Orestes and Hermione*

**Chorus:**

Phoebus Apollo!

**Chorus:**

You have built the tall towers on Troy's hill!

**Chorus:**

And you, Poseidon, god of the ocean!

**Chorus:**

Your wine-dark horses drive your chariot over the briny waters!

**Chorus:**

Why did you two gods, whose hands are faultless at their craft, hand over your work to Ares, master of the war spear?

**Chorus:**

You have abandoned Troy!

Chorus: It was the death of Troy!

**Chorus:**

You have set up so many tournaments on the banks of the river Simois!

**Chorus:**

Tournaments of blood!

**Chorus:**

With brilliant chariots yoked to gorgeous horses!

**Chorus:**

Yet not a prize was won! Not a garland was worn!

**Chorus:**

All the kings, all the princes, all of Ilus' descendants are gone for ever!

**Chorus:**

All the flames, all the fires, all the incense in the sacrificial smoke on the altars of Troy have gone!

**Chorus:**

Agamemnon, the son of Atreus is dead. Killed by his wife who had paid for that killing with her own life, taken by her own children. Blood for blood!

**Chorus:**

Killed by the god's order, the god of prophesy himself, given to Agamemnon's son, Orestes.

**Chorus:**

He went straight to Argos, after his visit at the shrine and put his mother to the sword.

**Chorus:**

A mother killer!

**Chorus:**

Lord Apollo!

How could I believe such a thing?

**Chorus:**

And so the sighs and the groans of women echo at the gathering places!

**Chorus:**

Dirges that tell about the poor men whose bed their wives had betrayed for the bed of another!

**Chorus:**

Destroyers of families!

**Chorus:**

This bitter fate ladies, has not fallen on you alone. Not only on you and your friends but the whole of Greece is suffering from this plague!

**Chorus:**

A plague that spread over the fertile fields of Phrygia, soaking them with blood!

**Chorus:**

The drink most beloved by Hades, the god of death!

*Enter Peleas with his men*

**Peleas:**

Ladies of Phthia, I have heard a rumour, an odd story that Hermione, Menelaos' daughter has gone and left these halls here. I'm anxious to know if this is true. When our folk are away, we must try and take care of their concerns.

**Chorus:**

It is true, old man. It would be wrong for me to hide the truth of this disaster in which we now find ourselves.

**Chorus:**

Our queen, has run away!

**Peleas:**

But why what was she afraid of, tell me!

**Chorus:**

Of her husband, old man. Afraid he would throw her out of the house!

**Peleas:**

Is that because she was plotting to kill the young boy?

**Chorus:**

Yes, the captive woman, as well. His mother.

**Peleas:**

Who did she run away with, her father?

**Chorus:**

Orestes, Agamemnon's son. He took her away.

**Peleas:**

Why did he do that? Did he want to marry the woman?

**Chorus:**

That's right!

**Chorus:**

And he also wants to kill your grandson, Neoptolemos!

**Peleas:**

How is he going to do that? Is he going to fight him, out in the open or is he plotting some secret ambush?

**Chorus:**

Ambush. He has some accomplices at Apollo's shrine waiting for him.

**Peleas:**

No!

This is outrageous!

Quick! One of you men run to the temple and warn our friends. Tell them what has gone on here. Hurry, before Achilles' son is murdered!

*One of his men starts to leave but a messenger rushes onto the stage.*

*He is puffed out from running.*

**Messenger:**

Ah! What awful news! What an awful message I must deliver to you, old sir! Awful for you and for all those who love my master!

**Peleas:**

Ah!

My soul speaks to me of a looming disaster!

**Messenger:**

My news, old Peleas!

So terrible were the wounds he has received at the hands of those at Delphi and of the foreigner from Mycenae, that you no longer have a grandson!

*Peleas sways with shock*

**Chorus:**

Oh, no! Old man, no, no! Be careful!

**Chorus:**

Steady old man, don't collapse!

**Peleas:**

I am finished! Dead!

I have lost my speech... my limbs... they have lost the strength to hold me up!

**Messenger:**

No, have courage, old man! Be strong, don't fall down.

If you want to help your loved ones, listen to what has happened.

**Peleas:**

O, Fate! Fate! How heavily you fall upon this poor man, in these his final years!

The only son of my only son! Tell me, man, tell me how he died! It's news that I can't bear to hear but which I must.

**Messenger:**

When we reached the glorious shrine of Apollo, we stopped and feasted our eyes upon the magnificent sight of it, for three whole days! Three times the sun's brilliant light did its circle.

This, however, seems to have made the people who live around those sacred precincts, suspicious of us so they began to gather around in groups and, all the while, Orestes himself was going about whispering into everyone's ear, nasty things such as, "you see that man over there? The one who's going in and out of the god's gold-packed shrine? Do you see him, circling around all the treasures that were offered by all the people? This is the second time he's come here and he's done so, so he can steal it all! Steal all of Apollo's treasures!" Not long after that, the hateful rumour spread across the city like a wild hurricane.

The magistrates rushed to the council halls to have their meetings and the supervisors of the shrine placed guards around its pillars.

We still didn't know anything about all this so we took some sheep that were grazing around the pastures of Parnassus and made our way to the altars of the temple and stood there, next to all the officials and seers. Then, one of them asked Neoptolemos, "young man, what would you like us to ask from the god for you? Why are you here?" To that, he replied, "I want to repent, to make amends for the sin I have committed against the god because a while ago I demanded satisfaction from the god for the death of my father."

Immediately, Orestes' rumour did its evil work. They all took my master to be a liar and that he had gone there with shameful intentions. Neoptolemos, suspecting nothing, crosses the threshold of the temple to pray before Apollo's altar but the moment he began to burn his offerings, a group of men, swords drawn, came out of the ambush they had set up for him, behind some laurel trees and set upon him! Orestes, Klytaemnestra's son was one of them! He was the sole driver of this

ambush!

Neoptolemos, alone and with no one to protect him, was just standing there, in full view of everyone, praying to the god, when all these men jumped from behind and plunged their sharp swords into him!

The first blows weren't lethal so he stepped back, drew his own sword and took some of the armour that was hanging from the pegs on the temple's columns. He looked fierce! He jumped onto the altar and yelled out at the Delphians: "Why are you all trying to kill me? I'm here on a holy mission, to pray to this god. What do you find objectionable in this? Why must I die for it?"

But none of that group of attackers answered him. They started throwing stones at him. Neoptolemos tried to protect himself from this overwhelming rain of rocks, swinging his shield this way and that but it was no use. The stones, then the arrows, the spears and the forked spits which the attackers have torn from the carcasses of the burning oxen, all crowded around his feet.

What a terrible war dance your poor grandson had to dance in order to fight off the attacking weapons!

Then, when they had completely surrounded the man and left him no room even to breathe, he jumped off the sacrificial altar and charged into the group, the way he did back in Troy; and they turned and ran off like doves do when they spot a hawk coming towards them. Many of them fell, both from the wounds that he had given them and the wounds they had received from each other in the great confusion of their flight through the narrow passageways.

And from within those holy precincts of the temple rose up a most unholy scream that echoed back from the rocky cliffs around it.

And then -there was my master! Calm and brilliant in his shining armour, he stood there for a moment, a moment which was suddenly smashed by the shrill shout of a man, from deep within the shrine. A horrible shout that stirred the Delphians up and made them turn back and face your grandson.

And that's when Achilles' son fell!

The man received a fatal hit at his side by a Delphian sword. Then other Delphians added their swords to the victim and so he died.

And when your grandson fell, every Delphian sword was plunged into his corpse. Every Delphian threw a stone at it. Every Delphian ran to pound it until this once beautiful body was thoroughly disfigured. Then, when he fell dead by the altar, replete with the holy fragrance of the smoking offerings, when his body was nothing more than a mess of gore, they picked it up and threw it out of the temple.

Immediately we run and gathered his sorry remains and now we are bringing them here, for you, old sir, to mourn and give him an honourable burial.

So this is how Apollo has treated the son of glorious Achilles! They say that this god leads in prophesy and in judging the deeds of mortals. But this god viewed the man's past quarrel just like evil mortals would.

How could any god who acts like this be called wise?

*Enter a procession of servants carrying the body of Neoptolemos on a bier.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look! Look there!

**Chorus:**

It's the king!

**Chorus:**

They are carrying the king's body!

**Chorus:**

Returning it home from the land of Delphi!

**Chorus:**

What bitter fortune has fallen upon the boy!

**Chorus:**

What bitter fortune has fallen upon you, too, old man!

**Chorus:**

How horrible the homecoming of Achilles' son!

**Chorus:**

How differently you expected it to be, old man!

**Chorus:**

You, too, old King, now share his terrible fate!

**Peleas:**

Ah!

What sight is this!

What a sight to bring into my halls!

Oh, Thessaly! You have killed me! You have put an end to my name, to my race!

There are no more children in my household!

What bitter horrors fate has delivered me!

What friends are there now for me? Where now will I find any joy?

Ah! Beloved lips of my grandson! Beloved cheeks! Beloved hands!

Much better it would have been if your fate had killed you beneath the high walls of Troy, beside the river Simois!

**Chorus:**

His death then would have been honourable!

**Chorus:**

And your life, old man, would have been more joyful!

**Peleas:**

Marriage! Marriage has destroyed this house! Marriage has destroyed this city!

Ah! What misery must I endure!

Oh, my boy!

This monstrous breed of Hermione! A breed that threw upon your marriage and our house this appalling disaster! This appalling death!

How I wish now that I had refused you this cursed marriage!

How I wish she was struck dead by a thunder bolt before your wedding day!

And how I wish you, a mere mortal, had never called Apollo to give you recompense for shooting the lethal arrow that spilled the blood of your father, a god's son!

**Chorus:**

Ah! The loss! The loss! The loss!

**Chorus:**

I wail at the loss!

**Chorus:**

I mourn for the master! I mourn, I mourn for the dead master!

**Chorus:**

Set up the funeral rites! Let us set up the funeral rites for our dead master!

**Peleas:**

Let me cry!

Let me wail for the loss of my grandson!

Poor, miserable man! Luckless man! Suffering old man!

**Chorus:**

Your suffering is the will of the gods, old man!

**Peleas:**

Oh, my darling boy!

You have gone and left my halls utterly empty!

You have gone and left an old man behind! Old and childless!

Oh! Such pain!

**Chorus:**

The old should die before their children, as you should have, old master!

**Peleas:**

Shall I not tear my hair out?

Shall I not pound my head with mortal blows?

Phoebus Apollo! You have robbed me of both my children! Both of them!

**Chorus:**

You have suffered so much, you poor old man!

**Chorus:**

What now for you, old master?

**Chorus:**

What life awaits you now?

**Peleas:**

Endless misery for me now!

Childless and alone, I shall take all the bitter pains until I die!

**Chorus:**

What was the point of all the gods coming to your wedding?

**Peleas:**

All of those blessings of theirs, all my hopes and plans have flown away!

Rushed away, far beyond my vain boasts!

**Chorus:**

Poor man! A lonely man, living in a lonely house!

**Peleas:** *Throws his scepter to the ground in disgust*

I have no land any more, so what is the use of this scepter?

And you! You, Thetis! You wife! You daughter of Nereas who lives in dark caves!

There, you will see me in all my ruin!

*Enter Thetis, a goddess, production permitting, through a deus ex machina.*

**Thetis:**

Peleas, I am Thetis!

In honour of our marriage, Peleas, I have left Nereas' palace and came here to give you some advice. Firstly, you shouldn't distress yourself so excessively about your present situation. Remember, I, too, a goddess and a god's daughter, have also lost a son. Our son, Peleas, Achilles of the swift foot, the noblest of all the sons of

Greece.

Now listen well to the reason I've come here.

Take our son Neoptolemos to the temple of Delphi and bury him there. Let his tomb be a reminder to the Delphians of the violent murder committed by Orestes. Andromache, the Trojan captive must marry Helenus and live in the land of the Molossians. Her son, Molossos, who is the only descendant of Aeacus' race, should go with her and from him will come an unbroken succession of kings who will live happy lives.

The race that springs from you and me, old man, must not be erased. Nor must the race of the Trojan because, even though Troy was razed to the ground by the will of Palas Athena, the gods still care for that city.

Now, since you once were my husband, let me tell you what I will do to please you. Peleas, I shall free you from all that the mortals suffer and make you a god. Immortal. Free from the wear and tear of the flesh and as a god, you will live with me, a goddess, in that halls of Nereas.

The waves of the sea will not wet your feet as you step out to watch our beloved son, Achilles, on the shores of the island of Leuke in the Euxine sea.

But now, Peleas, go to Delphi, that city built by a god and take with you this corpse and once you have buried it there, go to the deep cave which Time has hollowed out of the Sepian rock and wait there.

Wait until I emerge from the sea with a chorus of fifty nereids, who will be your escorts.

This is your fate and it is the will of Zeus that you carry it out.

Now stop grieving over the dead. Death is the fate and the debt assigned by the gods to all the mortals.

**Peleas:**

Farewell now, most revered lady! My beloved wife and my partner in bed, Nereas' daughter!

Your deeds are worthy of your person and of your children, so yes, dear goddess, I shall obey you and I shall stop grieving! And, after I have buried our dead grandson, I shall go to the fair meadows of Pelion where I first held your beautiful body in my arms.

The wise man will take for a partner the daughter of a noble family and give his daughter to a noble husband, not to one who is foul and untrue, no matter how rich the dowry.

Then the gods will never bother them!

*Exit Thetis*

**Chorus:**

The deeds of the gods appear in many shapes...

**Chorus:**

And they often accomplish deeds beyond our hopes...

**Chorus:**

Our wishes might not be granted but the gods will find ways of achieving things we never thought were achievable.

**Chorus:**

Such was the path of our story.



*Exit all*

# (EURIPIDES) Trojan Women

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>473</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Poseidon** (A God)

**Athena** (A Goddess)

**Hekabe aka Hecuba** (Queen of Troy)

**Talthybius** (A Greek Herald)

**Cassandra** (Hekabe's daughter)

**Andromache** (Hektor's wife)

**Menelaos** (Helen's husband)

**Helen** (Menelaos' wife)

**Astyanax** (Young son of Hektor and Andromache: Silent)

**Chorus** (of captive Trojan women)

...

*Just before Dawn.*

*Before the collapsing walls of defeated Troy.*

*Three or four hastily improvised huts, one larger than all the others.*

*Behind the walls we see smoke rising and the occasional flare of flames.*

*Intermittent sounds of buildings crashing and of screams of horror.*

*Around the stage are scattered ruins of statues and building materials.*

*For a few moments shadows of frightened people run in front of the walls and between the huts.*

*A small, blood-spattered altar lies toppled at SR.*

*In front of the larger hut we can just make out the shape of a woman's body lying on the ground, sleeping. It is that of Hekabe.*

*A dim moonlight reveals Poseidon at centre stage.*

## **Poseidon:**

I am Poseidon and I have left behind me the deep and salty waters of the Aegean to come here, to this city, to Troy. The beautiful daughters of Nereus dance their delightful, swirling steps with their splendid feet in that ocean.

I have come here because Phoebus Apollo and I have built this city's towers and because my love for the Trojan folk has never died.

Apollo and I did a great job with these towers. We've built them well, sturdy, strong. Out of stone. We've built them right around the city.

My love for this city and for its people has never left my heart.

Not for a minute.

But look at her now! The Greek spear has destroyed her. Set fire to her. Scorched her! Looted her! And look there, the smoke now chokes her!

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<sup>473</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/trojan-women/>

And all this destruction happened because Palas Athena had advised Epeius, a builder from Phockis, -that's a place in the Parnassos- to build a wooden horse, to stuff it full of armed men and then to secretly slide it through the city's lofty towers.

A wooden idol of ruin it was, an idol, which the later generations will call, "The Wooden Horse."

All the sacred groves and precincts of the city are now deserted. Every god's altar is now drenched in blood.

The city's king, Priam, is himself lying slaughtered at the steps of Zeus' altar, inside his very own palace. The altar of Zeus, the protector of his palace!

Mountains of plundered Trojan gold and spoils have been loaded onto the Greek ships.

They're waiting now, those Greeks who have brought war to this place; they're waiting for a favorable wind to help them sail back home, their hearts gladdened by the hope they'll see their wives and their children. They've been away from home for ten long years.

And as for me, now that Hera, the goddess of Argos as well as Athena, the goddess of Athens, now that these two goddess have fought me and have beaten me, I must leave this glorious city and all of my temples here and be on my way.

These two goddesses have conspired to destroy Troy and all her people. They have conspired and they have won.

You see, when a city suffers, so do her gods. The people no longer have the time nor the mood for holy devotion. We, the gods, suffer.

The river Scamandros echoes violently with the sounds of the crying women who must wait for Fate to tell them whose slave they are going to be.

Fate has declared that some of them will serve the men of Arcadia while others will be slaves to the men from Thessaly. Others still, will be slaves to the sons of Theseus, the king of Athens.

Then there are those who haven't been told their lot yet. These are the choicest of all the Trojan women. They are those picked for the army's top soldiers. That lot of women is waiting here, in these huts. Among them is Helen, daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta. Now, that woman is no greater than any of the other slaves. One of a great many captives. Quite right, too.

*(Indicating Hekabe)* And, if anyone cares at all about that one there, the queen of this city, well, there she is, Hekabe! The poor wretch is lying there, by her city's gates, shedding floods of tears. Her grief is great. The disasters that befell her many. Her daughter, Polyxene, was gruesomely slaughtered, upon Achilles' grave. Slaughtered as a sacrificial offering to Achilles.

Hekabe's husband, her king, the king of Troy, Priam, as well as all of their sons -all of them- are slaughtered.

Her other daughter, Cassandra, whom Apollo had made a prophet and left her a virgin, was taken by that arrogant king of the Greeks, Agamemnon, to sleep with him in his bed. A dire violation of all the laws of his religion.

Well now, Troy! I bid you farewell. You were glorious once! And you, too, fabulous towers. You would still be standing there, proudly, had not Zeus' daughter, Athena, destroyed you all.

*He turns to exit but Athena enters and stops him on his tracks.*

**Athena:**

Poseidon!

You are a great god, Poseidon, honoured among all the other gods and you're the closest relative I have, on my father's side, so... could we now put behind us our old grudge and, perhaps, exchange a few friendly words?

**Poseidon:**

Of course we can, my Lady, Athena. The friendly exchange of words between relatives has a mighty magic effect upon the heart.

**Athena:**

I applaud your calm disposition, my Lord, Poseidon and I bring to you words that are of equal concern to both of us.

**Poseidon:**

You have news from the other gods? Zeus, perhaps, or some other divinity?

**Athena:**

No, no. I need us to talk about Troy. The very land we're standing on right now. I have come to ask for your assistance.

**Poseidon:**

Ah! You're feeling remorse, now, Athena! Is that right?

Now that you see Troy in flames and smoke, you want to forget about the hatred you had for her. Now, you're feeling sorry for her! Is that it?

**Athena:**

Give me the answer first, Poseidon.

Will you help me? Will you work with me on my plan?

**Poseidon:**

Of course, of course I will but tell me first tough, who is it you want to help, the Greeks or the Trojans?

**Athena:**

I want to give joy to the Trojans. I know, I know, I hated earlier but now I want to make the homecoming of the Greek soldiers a bitter experience for them.

**Poseidon:**

How can you do that, Athena? I mean, how can you just jump from excessive love to excessive hate... at the slightest whim of Fate?

**Athena:**

Aren't you aware of how these Greeks have treated me and my temples? Total and absolute disrespect!

**Poseidon:**

I know, I know... Ajax dragged Cassandra by force...

**Athena:**

Not a word from the rest of Greeks! Not a single reprimand! No one reproached him for it!

**Poseidon:**

But it was you who have helped the Greeks beat the Trojans.

They did it with your own powers, Athena!

**Athena:**

In any case, it is them I want you to help me punish!

**Poseidon:**

Ready to help, Athena. What have you got in mind?

**Athena:**

I want them to suffer a terrible journey home.

**Poseidon:**

What, you mean now while they're still on land or afterwards, when they're in the middle of the ocean?

**Athena:**

Once they leave Troy and set sail for their country. Zeus will let loose a deluge of frenzied rain and hail and all the turbulent black winds he can muster upon them.

He said he'll give me his lightning bolt to strike at all the Greek ships.

Set them all on fire.

As for you, I want you to stir the Aegean waters into huge cyclones and typhoons, fill the Euboean gulf with floating corpses.

Let them learn a lesson about honouring sacred temples!

**Poseidon:**

All this shall be done. No need to waste more words upon it.

I shall make turbulent all the waters of the Aegean Sea and hurl many corpses upon the cape of Mykonos and upon the wild crags of Delos and Lemnos and all those jagged points of Kafiarea.

But now, Athena, leave! Go up to Mount Olympus, the gods' abode and get the lightning bolts from the hands of our father, Zeus. Then wait until the Greeks set sail. Off you go!

*Exit Athena. Poseidon takes ne last look at the city*

The mortal who sacks a city and then destroys its temples and its graves, the sacred homes of the dead, is a fool because his own destruction will certainly follow.

*Exit Poseidon.*

*A short pause during which Dawn arrives*

*The sleeping figure of Hekabe moves.*

**Hekabe:**

Come, come, you poor wretch! Come on, lift your head from the ground.

Stretch out your neck!

*She sees the smoke raising behind the walls*

Look! Look!

Troy is no more! You are no longer her Queen, Hekabe!

Hold tight, Hekabe. Stay strong while Fate changes her way.

Accept her new path, follow it, sail with it.

Don't turn your prow against your life's tide. Sail on.

Fate will steer your life's ship.

O! The grief!

How can I not groan with pain when I have lost it all?

Everything. My country, my children, my husband!

Mountains of glorious wealth, passed down to us over many generations, all of it, vanished. Now it is nothing.

What words am I forbidden to utter? What words am I forced say?

What should I mourn?

How heavy is my Fate!

*She tries to get up*

O, my back! My joints! Lying on this hard mattress, all my limbs are aching.

The aches and pains in the temples of my head, on my shoulders! O, my ribs!

O, I wish I could turn a bit this way... no, no, this way...

Ouch!

*She finally manages to get up*

Endless tears, endless groans, endless grief!

A lullaby for the unfortunate!

A dirge without a dance to mourn misfortune.

*She walks to SL and looks into the distance*

Prows of swift ships!

The oars of men guided you through the purple waters of the ocean, sailing from the quite harbours of Greece all the way here, to the sacred city of Troy.

O, I still hear it!

The screeching of your dire trumpets mingled with the sweet tones of our gentle flutes!

You came and hooped your Egyptian plaited ropes onto Troy's harbours. What for?

To do what? To take back that hateful wife of Menelaos! What a blight upon her brother Castor's name she is and a stain upon that of Eurotas, her father.

That woman who slaughtered Priam, the father of fifty sons!

That woman who hurled so much black misery upon me!

Me, Hekabe! Queen of fabulous Troy!

Queen no more!

Now, here I am, sitting by Agamemnon's huts! A slave!

Torn from my palace, my hair shorn in utter grief, I am now an old woman, an old slave! Part of the conquerors' miserable plunder.

*She turns towards the two smaller huts and calls out*

Come out, you women of Troy! Come out and weep with me!

Come, you wives of soldiers! Trojan soldiers, experts in the ways of the bronze spear.

Come out and weep, you poor women of Troy! Unfortunate in marriage!

*The first part of the chorus slowly begins to enter from one of the huts.*

Come! Let us all wail at the sad Fate of our Troy.

Look at her! She's choking in smoke and ashes.

Let me begin the dirge, my friends!

Let me be like a mother bird who teaches her fledglings how to chirp.

Let me begin the song.

But it won't be a song like those I sang when Priam held his sceptre and when the proud feet of a chorus stamped a beat in praise of our city's gods.

**Chorus:**

Hekabe, what is it? What are you saying?

**Chorus:**

Why are you crying? What do your words mean?

**Chorus:**

I could hear your sad speech in the hut.

**Chorus:**

Panic spins in the hearts of the Trojan women inside that hut, Hekabe.  
They grieve over their slavery.

**Hekabe:**

The hands of the Greeks are at the oars of their ships right now, my darlings!

**Chorus:**

What? Why? What do they want?

**Chorus:**

Will they take us away from our home?

**Hekabe:**

I don't know, darlings but I sense the worst!

**Chorus:** *Calling out to the chorus in the third hut*

Come out, come out, friends!

**Chorus:**

Come out you poor, Trojan women, come out and hear what's in store for you!

**Chorus:**

The Greeks are getting ready to sail home!

*The rest of the chorus enters from their hut*

**Hekabe:**

But, no, please, don't! Don't bring out my daughter, Cassandra!

Don't bring my daughter out here! She will be seized by one of her frenzied attacks again and she will embarrass me in front of all the Greek soldiers.

Don't bring Cassandra out here!

Add no more to my calamity.

Poor, unfortunate Troy! You are lost! And lost, too are those who leave you, whether they're alive or dead.

**Chorus:**

I'm trembling with fear!

**Chorus:**

We heard your crying from inside Agamemnon's huts, Hekabe.

Tell us, have the Greeks decided to kill us?

**Chorus:**

What news from the Greeks? All the Trojan Women in the huts are terrified.

**Chorus:**

Have the Greeks taken their oars down from the sterns of their ships?

**Hekabe:**

Child, I was out here at the crack of dawn, out of my wits with fear.

**Chorus:**

Have the Greeks sent a herald for us? Whose slave will I be, poor wretch?

**Hekabe:**

Your lot will be drawn any minute now.

**Chorus:**

Will it be a soldier from Argos, or from Phthia or from some other island country?

**Chorus:**

Who'll me my master, I wonder?

**Chorus:**

I am sick with fear.

**Hekabe:**

Miserable soul! Old and withered soul! Useless, like a drone and at death's door!  
A ghost in the underworld! Who will be my master? And where? What will I be doing?

Will I be waiting at the guests or will I be a nurse for the master's children?

I, Hekabe, the honoured queen of Troy!

**Chorus:**

What lament would do justice to your pain, Hekabe?

**Chorus:**

Or to mine?

**Chorus:**

I will no longer send the shuttle up and down a Trojan loom!

**Chorus:**

Look! There! This is the last time I can look upon the corpses of my sons!

**Chorus:**

Worse! Worse still will come!

**Chorus:**

Dragged to the bed of a Greek!

**Chorus:**

A curse upon such a night!

**Chorus:**

A curse upon such a Fate!

**Chorus:**

Or else to carry water like a miserable slave, from the sacred springs of Peirene!

**Chorus:**

O, Gods, at least take me to that blessed and welcoming land of Theseus!

**Chorus:**

But never, Gods, never make me a slave to that murderous Helen and to Menelaos, the destroyer of Troy!

**Chorus:**

I couldn't bare to look at them again!

**Chorus:**

Never take me to their hateful home by the torrents of the river Eurotas.

**Chorus:**

I've been told about a land nearby that one, by the graceful foot of Mount Olympus.

**Chorus:**

Peneus' blessed land...

**Chorus:**

Wealthy and fertile...

**Chorus:**

There, I'd like to go, if go I must...

**Chorus:**

...but not before I go to Theseus' sacred country.



**Chorus:**

And I've also been told about Hephaistus' fiery land, Aetna.

**Chorus:**

Across from Carthage, mother of Sicily's mountain range.

**Chorus:**

Heralds have spread news around the world of how they crown their victorious athletes with glory.

**Chorus:**

And, across from that place, as the sailor cuts through the Ionian Sea, he'll come, face-to-face with another land...

**Chorus:**

Yes, a land where the famous waters of Krathis flow.

**Chorus:**

I've heard these waters give your hair a golden glow.

**Chorus:**

They nourish the whole country those waters...

**Chorus:**

...and raise splendid men!

**Chorus:** *Notices Talthybius approaching*

Ah, look! I can see a herald, hurrying here from the Greek camp.

**Chorus:**

I wonder what message he'll be delivering to us.

**Chorus:**

He'll tell us that we are now the slaves of the Greeks!

*Enter Talthybius with two guards.*

**Talthybius:**

Hekabe, I've made many trips to Troy to deliver messages to you from the Greeks, so you know me. That's why I came in person to deliver to you this new message.

**Hekabe:**

Ah! It is here, dear friends, it is here!

The fearful news we've been expecting all this time is here!

**Talthybius:**

The news is that the draw has now been completed. You have all been allocated to your Greek masters. Was that what you were afraid of?

**Hekabe:**

Oh! What city then are we off to? Some place in Thessaly, or Phthia or one of Cadmus' countries?

**Talthybius:**

You're all each drawn to a different man. You were not drawn as a lot.

**Hekabe:**

Then who is allotted to whom? Which among us, Trojan women are the lucky ones?

**Talthybius:**

I know who goes with whom but ask me about individuals, not groups.

**Hekabe:**

Tell me, then, Talthybius, who has drawn my unfortunate daughter, Cassandra?

**Talthybius:**

She was Agamemnon's special prize.

**Hekabe:**

So she will be the Spartan woman's slave?

Oh, what misery!

**Talthybius:**

No, not a slave to her but a secret bed-partner to him.

**Hekabe:**

Is this true? Cassandra? The very priestess of the god with the golden hair, Apollo?  
But the god himself had granted her the gift of a virgin's life!

**Talthybius:**

Eros has pierced the king's heart with his arrow and now he's in love with the godly woman.

**Hekabe:**

Oh, dear child! Throw away the sacred keys to the shrine and take down the holy garlands that adorn your head!

**Talthybius:**

What are you saying, woman? Is she not blessed to have won the king's bed?

**Hekabe:**

And the other one? The last daughter you took from me? What has become of her?

**Talthybius:**

Who do you mean, Polyxene or some other one?

**Hekabe:**

Yes, Polyxene, that one. Who has drawn her name?

**Talthybius:**

Her draw is to serve Achilles' tomb.

**Hekabe:**

My daughter? To serve a tomb? Is this a Greek custom or some sort of law?  
Tell me, friend!

**Talthybius:**

Just be happy for your daughter. Her Fate is good. That's all you need to know.

**Hekabe:**

"Her Fate is good?" What do you mean by that? Is she still alive? Can she still look upon the light?

**Talthybius:**

She's in the hands of Fate, so she is released from pain.

**Hekabe:**

And what of the wife of that glorious soldier, Hektor? What will happen to Andromache? What is her Fate?

**Talthybius:**

Achilles' son took her as his special prize.

**Hekabe:**

And me? What will become of me? An old woman, with an old head, who needs a stick to add to her two feet to walk on three. Whose slave will I be?

**Talthybius:**

You'll be serving Odysseus, king of Ithaca.

**Hekabe:**

Ah, poor Hekabe! What Fate rules you!  
 Beat you're your shorn head, Hekabe!  
 Tear at your cheeks with your nails, Hekabe!  
 Ah, poor Hekabe! What Fate rules you!  
 You must now be the slave of that loathsome reptile of a man, an enemy of the just, a lawless and poisonous snake!  
 His double tongue shuffles things about this way and that, turns love into hate and hate into love. It topples everything! Turns everything upside-down!  
 Come, my Trojan Women! Mourn for my loss, wail for my destruction.  
 Now I am destroyed. Now I am gone!  
 Ah, poor Hekabe! What Fate rules you! You have drawn the most unfortunate lot!

**Chorus:**

You know your Fate, Hekabe but what about mine?

**Chorus:**

Who's got my lot in his hand, An Achaian?

**Chorus:**

A Greek?

**Talthybius:**

Come, come, slaves! It's time for you to bring out Cassandra!  
 Hurry! I must take her to our Commander before I take the rest of those whose lot has been drawn to your masters.

*A torch is lit inside the fourth hut which attracts Talthybius' attention.*

What? What's this? Torch light? Fire?

Are the women setting fire to their homes because they'll be taken to Greece or are they setting themselves on fire? Do they prefer death to life?  
 It's a hard thing for the free to put their heads into the yoke of slavery in times of such misfortune, I know but...

Open up! Open the door! I'd hate to be blamed for something that's good for those women but bad for the Greeks!

*Cassandra emerges from her hut carrying a lighted torch in either hand.*

*She wears ribbons on her head, symbols of her profession.*

*She is in a state of frenzy, running this way and that, as if searching for something.*

**Hekabe:**

No, no Talthybius! No one is setting anything on fire.

It's my daughter, Cassandra, rushing about.

She is possessed by a divine madness.

**Cassandra:**

Lord, god of marriage, Hymenaeus! Lord Hymenaeus!

*Hands a torch to Chorus.*

Here, lift it up! Up, high! Come with me. She walks towards the small altar. Here, bring the light here.

*Chorus places the torch into the altar's torch holder.*

*Cassandra stands in front of the altar, praying.*

Lord, god of the wedding bed, Hymenaeus, I bring you light with the fire of the torch!

I bring light to this holy temple!

Blessed is the bridegroom, my god and blessed am I, for you have given me a king's bed, in Greece. Blessed am I, the bride!

Hymen, Hymen, Hymenaeus!

*Turns to Hekabe*

But mother, why cry? Why lament the loss of my dead father and our destroyed city?

See? I have lit the torches to give light and dignity to my marriage!

Here, Hymen! I bring you bright light!

Come, Hekabe! You, too! Carry the wedding torch to my bed. It is the bed of a virgin. Our customs decree it.

*To the chorus:*

Come, friends, dance! Roll your feet this way and that, kick them high!

Dance as you have danced back in my father's happiest days!

O, what a divine dance!

Come Apollo! Lead our dance. I am getting married!

I am the priestess who serves you in your shrine. Your laurel-covered shrine.

God, Hymenaeus, Lord of the wedding bed!

Come, mother! Come join our dance! Lift your feet, mother.

Look! Whirl them round like this, and like this! Come, dance with me.

Join my happy dance!

Come, daughters of Troy! Women with the splendid robes!

Sing out loudly the happy songs of Hymenaeus! Sing out with joy.

Celebrate my happiness!

Come, sing about the man whom Fate delivered to my bed! Sing about my husband!

**Chorus:** *To Hekabe*

My queen, control your frenzied daughter before she dances her way to the camp of the Greek soldiers.

**Hekabe:**

O god! God of the torches, Hephaistos!

You're the god who holds the torches at the weddings of mortals but here... here, this wedding torch is a bitter one! This torch does not shed any light upon our great hopes! It is too dismal a light.

My poor child, Cassandra! It was never my wish to see you married this way, at the point of a Greek spear!

Give me the torch, darling. You're not holding it straight. This divine madness won't let you stand still.

*She takes the torch from Cassandra's reluctant hand.*

Your dreadful fate has not made matters any easier for you and your mind is still disturbed.

*To the chorus*

Come, friends, take the torches inside. Answer her wedding songs with tears!

*Two women take the torches inside and come back out again.*

**Cassandra:**

Mother, come! Wrap my head with wreaths of victory.

Dress me up like a bride. Be happy for me, be happy for my royal wedding!  
Come, send me off to the bridegroom.

*A sinister change of mood*

And, mother, if I give you any resistance in this, if I hold back at all, then drag me there by force! Use force on me, mother use force on me because I swear by Apollo that my marriage to Agamemnon, to that...sarcastically ... glorious king of the Greeks, will come to an end more bitter than that of Menelaos and Helen!

I will kill him, mother!

I will destroy his city, mother and I will avenge the murders of my father and my brothers!

But enough of this lament for now.

I will not tell now of the axe that will fall upon my neck and upon the neck of others. Nor will I tell about the matricide that my marriage will cause or the destruction of the house of Atreus.

I will show them that our city is more blessed than any city in Greece, mother!

I know, I know! I am in the grips of the divine madness! I know that!

But I will now move out of this madness for a short while so that I can tell the story. These Greeks have killed thousands of people! Why?

Because of one woman and her unbridled lust! Because they wanted Helen back!

And their leader –what a wise man their leader is!

In his efforts to destroy what he hated, he destroyed what he loved!

He killed his own daughter, mother! He sacrificed his little Iphigeneia, mother!

That... leader of theirs has destroyed the joy of his very own house!

He has abandoned his love for his children so as to get the love of his brother!

And all for the sake of one woman, a woman who had left her husband, not because she was forced to but because she wanted to.

And so they came here, camped by the banks of our river Scamander, not as exiles from their own fortresses but because of their own free will.

And soon after they've arrived here they began dying.

The god of war, Ares, saw to that.

Ares deprived them of ever seeing their children again and of being dressed and prepared for the underworld by the hands of their wives.

Those Greek men lie here, beneath a foreign soil.

And back in Greece, things were just as bad, mother.

Women were made widows!

They had lost their brave husbands! Many mothers lost their children.

Others, still, died without any children because they saw that raising them would be all in vain.

Houses emptied.

Tombs were neglected. There was no one there to make blood offerings to the gods.

This is the real prize the Greek army has won!

This is the real prize they have truly earned!

But now let my Muse stay silent about the Greeks, lest it be said that I sing only of disasters.

But the Trojans, mother!

Ah! The greatest glory goes to them, my mother!

It is they who have died for their own country!

Those who died on the battlefield, died on their own land and their corpses were carried to their tomb by friendly hands. They were buried beneath their own earth, mother, with all due honours given to them by their own folk. The proper folk.

And those Trojan men who had survived the battle would be living with their families, their wives and children, in their own homes.

These are all joys that the Greeks have never felt.

And Hektor!

You might all think his Fate was a bitter one but listen!

This is how things actually are:

He has died gloriously and with the reputation of a very brave man, a reputation that he owes to the Greeks because had they not turned up, no one would have known about his bravery.

And Paris!

Paris took as wife, Zeus' very own daughter! Had he not done that, had he married some other woman, who would have heard about him and about his house?

But of course! People with any sense at all would avoid war but if war does come, then glorious deaths are no garlands of shame for a city, though, to die shamefully would be a disgrace for it.

So, mother, don't feel sorry for our city and for my marriage. Because through my marriage I shall destroy all those who we both hate.

**Chorus:**

How you laugh in the face of misfortune, Cassandra!

**Chorus:**

In the face of a misfortune that will destroy your whole house!

**Chorus:**

And how you love to prophesy things that just cannot happen!

**Talthybius:**

I swear, woman! Had not Apollo maddened your mind, I'd have you punished severely for sending my generals off on their journey home with such ominous prophesies!

Still, it seems that those with intelligence and fame are no better off than those with none because, here we have the great general of all the Greeks, the beloved son of Atreus, falling in love with this mad woman, here!

Our great Agamemnon has chosen her above all the other Trojan women!

Now, I might not be as rich as he is but I would have never chosen her as my mistress! That's for sure!

And you, Cassandra, since your mind is not well, I decided to cast all your praises for the Trojans and all your curses for the Greeks, to the winds.

Let the winds carry them where they may!

But now, pretty bride, follow me to the ships. My Commander's bed awaits.

You, too, Hekabe. When Laertes' son, Odysseus, calls for you, follow him.

Those who have come to Troy say that you'll be the servant to a very wise woman.

**Cassandra:**

And what a great servant you are!

A truly excellent servant!

Why do they call them "heralds," I wonder!

All these men that hover about in the service of kings and cities?

Criers of death! The whole world hates them!

You say that my mother will be Penelope's servant?

Well, what of Apollo's prophesies, then? He has revealed to me that my mother will die here, in Troy!

I won't go on reproaching you about the rest of what you said.

Poor Odysseus!

He has no idea what's in store for him. The suffering he'll go through will make mine and that of Troy look like pure gold! Luxury!

After the ten years he has spent here, he will spend another ten full years before he sees his home and he will arrive there all alone, to a welcome that will be a very painful one, one that will be worthy of many tears.

And his journey home will be much delayed by Charybdis, that gruesome beast that dwells in the rocks of a gorge that he must pass through- and by the mountain dweller and eater of human flesh, Cyclops- and by the Ligourian Circe who turns men into pigs- and by his ships getting wrecked on the vast and salty sea- and by his lust after the lotus fruit-

and by the frightening human voices that the slaughtered cows of Helios will make -a bitter sound for Odysseus' ears!

To shorten the narrative, folks, Odysseus will enter Hades and after he escapes the waters of the wide ocean he'll arrive home where a million evils will welcome him!

But why do I bother singing the catalogue of Odysseus' pains?

*To Talthybius*

Come! Hurry up, then! Take me as quickly as possible!

I shall marry my husband in Hades!

O, Agamemnon! Chief of all the Greeks! How glorious your fame!

But your burial will be the burial of evil men, Agamemnon!

Evil, since you are evil yourself.

A grave dug by night, it will be, not one that sees the daylight!

And me? What of me? Apollo's prophetess!

I shall be a corpse, tossed about by the winter waves as they thrash violently about past my groom's grave. A naked corpse ready for the wild beasts to feed on.

Me, the priestess of Apollo!

*She takes the ribbons off.*

And you, my sacred ribbons?

Ribbons that adorn the god I love the most, what of you?

*She throws them up in the air*

Farewell! I'm finished with the festivals, with all the celebrations I once loved so much!

Go! Fly, my ribbons! Leave me! Leave my body now.

I tremble at the thought of giving you up. You leave a body that is pure still.

Go! Fly through the spinning winds and go to my prophetic Lord, Apollo!

*Turning to Talthybius*

So, where's your general's ship? Which way do I go to climb aboard?

Come, come, herald! Do not waste any time searching for a favourable wind to swell your sails! Hurry because you're taking me with you.

Me! One of the three Spirits of Vengeance!

*To Hekabe*

Farewell, mother! O, no, don't cry!

O dear land! Land of my brothers and of my father!

All of you now are beneath your own soil!

Soon you will receive me, too!

You will receive a victorious Trojan woman because I will have destroyed those who have destroyed us: The house of Atridae!

*Exit Cassandra, Talthybius and his men. Hekabe collapses to the ground.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Where are this old woman's guardians?

**Chorus:**

Who is looking after Hekabe?

**Chorus:**

You! Can you not see that the poor woman has fallen on the ground?

**Chorus:**

And not a word from her!

**Chorus:**

Quickly, pick her up!

**Chorus:**

Come on!

*Some women try to pick Hekabe up but she refuses their help*

**Chorus:**

What? Will you leave her there, on the ground, you terrible women!

**Chorus:**

Come on, pick the poor old woman up!

**Hekabe:** *Still on the ground*

No, let me stay here. Let me lie here.

Unsolicited kindness is not kindness at all, my girls. Leave me be.

The body knows its proper place. It is here, on the ground.

Because of what I have suffered, because of what I am suffering and because of what I am about to suffer, this is its rightful place.

O, Gods!

I am calling you! I am calling for your help!

O, Gods, what terrible allies you are to me!

Still, it is a proper thing to pray to them when we suffer such pain!

Let me tell you just how blissful my life was back then so you may see just how dreadful my present fortune is.

I was a princess and was married to a king.

We had children and these were special in the Trojan world.

Exceptional, not the average run of the mill children but exceptional in every respect. No other woman, no Trojan, no Greek, no barbarian woman can boast



to having children like mine. Yet, I, alone, saw every one of them fall and die by the Greek spear and I, alone, have shorn my hair at their tombs.

It wasn't by a herald that I had received the news of the death of their father, Priam.

No, I saw that myself, with my own eyes. I was a witness to his slaughter.

They've murdered him at the altar of our own house!

I've witnessed the destruction of our whole city, as well.

And my daughters, women whom I raised to be their husband's pride and joy, all beautiful virgins, they were all taken from me, from my hands, to be made the wives of foreigners. Will I ever see them again? Will they ever see me again?

I have no such hopes.

And to top it all up, the worst of all the disasters that I have to endure, I must now be the slave!

I, an old, grey woman, must go to Greece and do things that least suit my age.

What will I be doing? What will Hector's mother be doing?

Will I be watching their gates, holding the keys, or work in their kitchens, baking their bread?

My shredded body dressed in shameful, shredded clothes will have the hard ground as its bed. This body! A body that was used to a royal bed and to the clothes of a wealthy queen!

How much must I suffer because of the marriage of one woman?

How much have I suffered and how much more must I suffer?

And you, my child, Cassandra! Cassandra, partner of the gods in their frenzy!

What dreadful Fate will accompany your pure love to the gods?

And you, poor darling Polyxene? Where are you now?

Ah, so many sons, so many daughters! All my children! All in vain!

None can help now.

*The servants try again to lift her up*

So why bother lifting me up from this ground?

What do you think I could do? What hope is there for me?

Let me be! My poor feet once wandered softly on Troy's earth but now!

Now those days are gone and now I am a slave. Now, drag me to a pile of stones that I may crash myself upon and, with tears battering my heart, I die there.

Think no man happy until his hour of death.

**Chorus:**

Come Muse! Come help me sing this dirge!

**Chorus:**

Help me tell this new story of ill-fated Troy! This story that is full of tears!

**Chorus:**

The Greeks rolled a huge structure, built on four wheels into the city and it was that structure which brought about my destruction and my miserable enslavement.

**Chorus:**

An enormous horse, made out of mountain pine, chiselled by the sharp adze...

**Chorus:**

A construction whose noise reached the heavens...

**Chorus:**

Whose cheeks were plated with gold...

**Chorus:**

Whose belly was clogged with spears.

**Chorus:**

They left that horse by the gates of our city and the folk saw it from above the walls and shouted with **glee:**

**Chorus:**

"Come, people! Come and see! Our troubles are no longer!  
Come, roll this holy statue to the temple of Athena, the child of Zeus!"

**Chorus:**

So all the folk came out of their homes. Young girls and old men alike!

**Chorus:**

And with joy and song they pulled the devious destroyer of Dardanus' land inside the walls. All of them! All the Trojans rushed out to the gates to make this evil offering to the virgin goddess who rides the immortal horse.

**Chorus:**

They ran out to the ambushing statue, spun plaited ropes around it, as if it were the black hull of a ship and brought it to rest at the stony temple on the holy ground of the goddess.

**Chorus:**

That gift was fatal to Troy.

**Chorus:**

And so the dancing and the singing went on all day until the day ended and the black night began but the sounds of a Lybian flute and Trojan voices continued, still in happy song...

**Chorus:**

...and the feet of the Trojan virgins still dancing with joy...

**Chorus:**

The bright moonlight flickered wide across the city and inside every home, it made the happy eyes heavy enough for sleep.

**Chorus:**

And it was then, the very moment when I was singing and dancing in the temple of Zeus' daughter, Artemis, the goddess of the hills, when the sound of murderous terror spun wildly through all the Trojan homes.

**Chorus:**

Babies threw their frightened little arms around their loving mother's skirts...

**Chorus:**

Ares, the god of war emerged from his ambush...

**Chorus:**

From Athena's dire work. At every altar, in every Trojan home the blood splashed.

**Chorus:**

Young girls in their deserted beds shaved their heads in grief!

**Chorus:**

Victory wreaths for the Greeks...

**Chorus:**

An offering of misery for Troy.

*She suddenly sees Andromache in the distance*

**Chorus:**

Hekabe, look! Look there! Andromache is coming.

**Chorus:**

She's riding on a foreign wagon.

**Chorus:**

At her sighing breast hangs her beloved child, Astyanax!

**Chorus:**

Hector's baby boy.

*Enter Andromache with Astyanax on a wagon.*

*Hector's bronze shield and armour, as well as other Trojan spoils, are hanging from the sides of the wagon.*

*They are followed by Greek guards.*

**Chorus:**

Andromache, you poor woman!

**Chorus:**

Where are they taking you on this wagon?

**Chorus:**

Look! Hector's bronze armour!

**Chorus:**

And all the Trojan spoils taken by the Greek spear.

**Chorus:**

Achilles' son will adorn his Phthian Temples with them.

**Andromache:**

My Greek masters are taking me away!

**Hekabe:**

O, my darling girl!

**Andromache:**

Why groan for me, Hekabe?

**Hekabe:**

O, my girl!

**Andromache:**

Such suffering I must endure, Hekabe!

**Hekabe:**

O, Lord, Zeus!

**Andromache:**

Disaster!

**Hekabe:**

O, my children!

**Andromache:**

All gone, now!

**Hekabe:**

All our joy is gone! Our Troy is gone!

**Andromache:**

Miserable Fate!

**Hekabe:**

Gone are all my noble sons!

**Andromache:**

O, Hekabe!

**Hekabe:**

One evil Fate after another!

**Andromache:**

Evil Fates, indeed!

**Hekabe:**

Miserable Fate!

**Andromache:**

Our own Fate and the Fate of our city!

**Hekabe:**

The smoke is choking our Troy!

**Andromache:**

Come back, come back, my husband, Hector!

**Hekabe:**

He is dead, my poor child, he is dead!

**Andromache:**

Come back Hector! Come back, my protector, my shield!

**Hekabe:**

Hector! Once you destroyed so many Greeks!

Once you were the leader of all the children I bore for Priam.

Come now and take me down to the halls of Hades!

**Andromache:**

We both desire the very same thing, my child.

Both of us unfortunate, both of us beaten by one disaster after another.

Our city was destroyed, Hekabe because the gods were angry with your son, Paris, a man who should have been killed at birth, a man who, to satisfy his lust for a shameful bed, destroyed our Trojan fortress.

The bloodied corpses of our heroes are strewn about all round Athena's temple, a naked plunder for the vultures and a yoke of slavery for Troy.

**Hekabe:**

O, my poor land!

**Andromache:**

The tears gush forth bitterly for you, my country.

**Hekabe:** *Indicating the smoke behind Troy's walls*

And now, look now upon our awful end!

Look at the palace where I gave birth to all my children!

O, my darlings. Your mother abandons you and leaves you behind, in a deserted city.

How painful the grief! How unbearable the loss!

Tears chase tears in our palace.

Only the dead can forget such grief!

**Chorus:**

The unfortunate find sweet solace in tears, in wailing and in the singing of dirges.

**Andromache:** *Indicating her plight*

Hekabe! Hector's mother! The mother of a man who has killed many Greeks!  
Do you see all this?

**Hekabe:**

I see, my child! I see that this is the work of the gods who want to show us that they can exalt things that mortals think are nothing and that they can tear down things that the mortals praise.

**Andromache:**

Look, here, Hekabe! Look at me and look at my son!  
My son and I are carried away like nothing more than spoils of war.  
The nobly born are turned into slaves. Fate has changed everything so much.

**Hekabe:**

Fate is a mighty force, Andromache!  
Only a few minutes ago the Greeks have taken my Cassandra away!

**Andromache:**

Poor soul! It seems another Ajax has suddenly appeared to rob you of your daughter. And then you have more troubles to deal with...

**Hekabe:**

Troubles, indeed! Endless troubles. No way to measure them, no way to count them!

Troubles competing with other...

**Andromache:**

Hekabe, your daughter... your daughter, Polyxene is dead.  
The Greeks have slaughtered her on Achilles' tomb.  
Offered her life as a gift to his lifeless corpse.

**Hekabe:**

Oh, my darling girl! O my poor daughter! My Polyxene!  
Talthybius told me this earlier. His words were mysteriously phrased but true!

**Andromache:**

I saw her there, on Achilles' tomb, with my own eyes.  
I got down off this cart and put a cloak over her corpse.  
Then I stayed there and lamented her loss with my tears.

**Hekabe:**

Unholy, sinful death! O, my darling daughter! How despicable your slaughter!

**Andromache:**

Despicable or not, Polyxene died but she is still luckier than me.

**Hekabe:**

Don't say that, my child. Being dead is not the same as being alive.  
Being dead is to have nothing. Being alive is to have hope.

**Andromache:**

Come, mother! Mother of many children!  
Listen to some wise words. Listen and they will cheer your heart.  
To be dead and to be unborn it is the same thing. But if the choice is between a miserable life, mother, if it is between a miserable life and death, death is preferable.  
Because the dead feel no misery and they know nothing of grief, whereas for the

living mortals, if a happy woman falls into misery she must deal with the memory of the joy she previously enjoyed.

Her soul seeks the joys of the past.

And so, it is the same with Polyxene now.

She has died and, so, it is just the same with her as if she were never born.

As if she had never seen the light of day. She knows nothing now of her misfortune.

I, on the other hand, mother, I have seen and known joy!

I have always dreamt of achieving a good name and there I hit the mark. I had tasted joy!

But now, mother, now my Fate has turned and I have fallen into misfortune.

In Hector's house, I have been a good example of a virtuous woman, behaving in every way like a modest, virtuous woman should behave.

Whatever it is that people would expect from a married woman, I did.

I stayed inside the house because I know that the gossiping tongues chatter idly against a woman who ventures outside her home.

I had put aside all such desire.

Nor did I let those women with the subtle gossip enter my home to tell me about the world outside. I simply listened to my own mind.

It's a good mind, it's a good enough teacher for me.

As for my own tongue, I kept it quiet. And I've kept a lowered eye before my husband because I knew well when I should win an argument and when I should give him the victory of it.

And it was the fame of this virtue that spread throughout the Greek camp and which destroyed me because, the moment the captured me, Achilles' son wanted to make me his wife!

And so I'll be the servant in a murderer's house.

If, then, I were to put Hector out of my mind and put my new husband in my heart, I would be disloyal to the man who died, yet if I show my revulsion towards my new husband, my master, I will be hated by him.

They say that one night in a man's bed erases all revulsion towards him.

No! I think no woman is worse than the woman who, having lost her husband, puts all memory of him aside and turns to love the bed of another.

Not even a little pony, a mare, an animal, with no speech or reason, a beast whose nature is much inferior to ours; not even a young mare, would feel happy after losing her partner and she will find it difficult to put her head through the yoke again.

O, Hector! My beloved Hector! You were enough for me! A strong mind, a strong heart, a wealthy house!

I was an innocent girl when you took me from my father's house and you were the first to unite with me in my maiden bed. But now, my Hector, now you are dead and I am now a captive and taken aboard a ship to Greece, to work the yoke of slavery.

So, Hekabe, is Polyxene's death, a death for which you've spilled so many tears, a more miserable fate than mine? Because, for me, mother, for me, even hope, that thing which every other human being has, even that, even hope has escaped me.

Nor do I allow hope to deceive me. I know full well that I have no hope of ever seeing better days. Though even such deceptions can be pleasant.

**Chorus:**

Your misfortune, Andromache is similar to mine and as you speak of your own fate, you speak of mine at the same time.

**Hekabe:**

I know little of ships and sailors.

So far, I've only seen pictures of them and heard a bit about them but I've yet to step onto a ship's deck.

But they say that when sailors are faced with some storm, one that's not too violent, they try to save their lives by working quickly and eagerly. One of them works the tiller, others work the sails and yet others, try to bale the water from the deck.

That's when the storm is not too violent.

But if it is violent, if the waves of the storm swell and clash and overpower them, they let Fate do her work and abandon the ship to the waves.

And that's what I feel now.

The endless misery that the gods have crashed upon me, overpowered my tongue and I cannot speak. The gods have sent too great a torrent of misery upon me.

So, stop, my darling girl, stop talking of Hector and his Fate now. Your tears cannot save him.

Now you must respect your present master and show him your wonderful nature.

Win his heart and if you can do this, you'll bring joy to many friends and raise this child, this child of my child, to be a man and the greatest supporter of Troy.

And then, in time, more sons from your lineage may raise our Troy to become a city again.

*She notices Talthybius coming in the distance within.*

Ah, but one concern leads to another. Who is this Greek herald coming towards us?

I wonder what new decisions he brings us?

*Enter Talthybius and soldiers*

**Talthybius:**

Andromache, wife of the bravest of all the Greeks, wife of the now dead Hector.

I have bad news for you, news that I will give you against my wishes, so don't hate me. These announcements are made by both, the Greeks and the sons of Pelops.

**Andromache:**

How ominous your words, Talthybius! Speak!

**Talthybius:**

It concerns this child, Andromache...

*uncomfortably*

What words must I use...

**Andromache:**

This child will be separated from me?

Will he be given to another master?

**Talthybius:**

No, no Greek will ever be his master.

**Andromache:**

What? Have you decided to leave him behind?

Here, as a relic to the Troy that was?

**Talthybius:**

Andromache, I don't know how to break these awful news to you. I don't know how to do this gently.

**Andromache:**

You show a good heart to try and soften the blow of bad news.

**Talthybius:**

The news are terrible and I must tell them, Andromache.

The Greeks will kill your son!

**Andromache:**

Ah! I have never heard news more painful than these!

**Talthybius:**

It was Odysseus' decisions. Voted in favour by the rest of the assembly.

**Andromache:**

Will my pains never end?

Will the disasters never stop?

One dreadful misfortune upon another!

**Talthybius:**

Odysseus had told the assembly that they should not let the son of a Trojan noble grow into a man.

**Andromache:**

Would any of them be just as convincing if it concerned their own son?

**Talthybius:**

He's convinced them to have the child thrown from the Trojan towers.

Let that happen, Andromache. You would be doing the wiser thing.

Bear this misfortune with the noble courage you have.

Don't insist on holding on to the boy.

You are weak, Andromache. Weak and powerless.

There's no one here to defend you.

Think carefully of this, woman.

Both your city and your husband are gone and your life is in the hands of others.

How can a single woman possible hope to fight against the Greek army?

Think of that, Andromache and don't fight against it.

Do nothing shameful or outrageous. Throw no curses at the Greeks.

I wouldn't tolerate that at all.

The moment you say anything against us, neither you nor your child will find any understanding from anyone.

Stay silent and receive your plight wisely and your son will not be left unburied.

And you, too, woman, will be received by the Greeks more favourably.

**Andromache:** *To Astyanax*

O, my sweet child! My darling son!

Our enemies will murder you and you will leave your mother all alone.

You will be killed because you are a noble and the son of a noble, a noble and brave



man who has saved many but who cannot save you.

Disastrous marriage! Dreadful wedding! You've brought me here, to Hector's palace, not so that I'd bear a child that would become the sacrificial victim of the Greeks but one who would rule over all the people of Asia.

You're crying, my darling? You understand the awful Fate that awaits you.

Ah, your sweet little arms, hug me!

They hold tightly at my dress like a little bird, trying to bury itself in its mother's wings.

Hector, your glorious father, will not emerge from below the earth with his spear to come and save you; neither will any of his family, nor anyone from Troy's mighty army.

No, my darling! You will be thrown mercilessly from a high cliff. Your neck will break and there you will let out your last breath.

O, young, sweet child! The sweetest burden a mother can have. Dear child!

Oh, the sweet fragrance of your baby flesh!

It was all for nothing, then!

It was in vain that my breast suckled you while you were still in your baby clothes.

All my work, all my pain, all my concern about you, it was all for nothing!

Come, darling! Come now, hug your mother tightly, for the very last time!

Come, put your little arms around me!

Come, kiss your mother on the lips, darling!

*To Talthybius and his men*

You! You barbarians! You, Greeks! The evil things you do!

What has this child ever done to you? Why kill an innocent little boy?

O, Helen! Product of Tyndareus' lineage. Zeus was not your father!

No, I say you're the daughter of many men!

Your first father was Bloodshed and your next father was Hate!

Then came Murder and that lot was followed by every monstrous grief and pain that breeds upon this earth!

A child of Zeus? You? Never! A murderer of so many Greeks and Trojans alike? Never!

May the gods destroy you! You and your sweet eyes that brought destruction to the beautiful land of the Trojans!

Well then, come! Come evil Greeks and take him!

Take my child and throw him over the wall, if that is what you want!

Come on, take him and kill him! Gorge yourselves upon his young flesh!

How can I save him when the gods have destroyed us?

Come, hide my miserable body, toss it in the bowels of some ship!

What a splendid wedding I am heading to, now that I've lost my child!

*A member of the chorus hands Andromache a black scarf with which she covers her face.*

**Chorus:**

Unfortunate Troy!

The deaths are endless and all for the sake of one woman and her hideous bed!

**Talthybius:** *To Astyanax, kindly.*

Come, my son, leave your poor mother's arms now and come with me.

We have to go to the crowning peak of your father's towers where you must leave your last breath. It is an order.

*To his men*

Take him.

*The men take Astyanax's hand and lead him away from his mother.*

*Other guards surround Andromache and lead her out.*

Such cruel messages ought to be delivered by harsher heralds.

I have not the heart for them.

*As Talthybius and the soldiers are leading Andromache and Astyanax out, Hekabe cries out to Astyanax, rushes over to him to clutch him and address him for the last time*

**Hekabe:**

No! No! O, my son! Son of my ill-fated son!

It's unfair! These evil men have torn away your life from me and from your mother, my little boy!

How can I endure this? How can I help you my poor boy, unfortunate boy?

*An angry scuffle ensues and the soldiers separate Astyanax from Hekabe.*

Our only help to you is to beat our breasts and our head.

That's the only power left in us.

*Talthybius, his men, Astyanax and Andromache exit.*

O, my poor city! My poor, Troy! Miserable luck to you and to us both!

What's left for us?

What misery is still to fall upon us to make the destruction complete?

**Chorus:**

O, Telamon!

**Chorus:**

King of Salamis, the island home of bees!

**Chorus:**

An island, washed endlessly by the crashing waves.

**Chorus:**

An island near the sacred rocks of Athena's temple...

**Chorus:**

...where she first revealed to the world the sacred sapling of the green olive.

**Chorus:**

A heavenly garland for her and a gem for her dazzling city, Athens.

**Chorus:**

It was you who came here, Telamon! Here in Troy!

**Chorus:**

A long time ago!

You had come here with Herakles, Alcmene's son...

**Chorus:**

...Herakles, the master of the bow and arrow!

**Chorus:**

He came all the way from Greece, to sack our city, to raze our Troy to the ground.

**Chorus:**

Cheated of his lovely steeds, Heracles, set off with the finest flower of Greek men...

**Chorus:**

...and when he reached the banks of Simois with its sparkling streams, he put down his seagoing oars, tied ropes to his sterns and stepped upon the land with his precise arrows, all ready to murder Laomedon.

**Chorus:**

And so, Herakles blasted all of Apollo's work.

All the stone work, built well by Apollo's master builders, all of it, Herakles blasted with the roaring breath of fire and devastated the Trojan land.

**Chorus:**

And so, it happened twice. Twice the slaughtering spear of the Greeks has destroyed our Dardanian walls. Spear and fire.

**Chorus:**

It was all for nothing, then, Laomedon, all for nothing, that you ran gracefully about in Zeus' halls topping his golden wine cups -a most virtuous occupation, indeed-for the sake of your city.

Look about you, now Laomedon. What do you see?

The land of your birthplace is burning.

**Chorus:**

Listen! Hear that Laomedon? Hear that groan? It is the groan of the sea.

Her beaches groan with agony.

**Chorus:**

Like birds calling for their young...

**Chorus:**

Or for their partners...

**Chorus:**

...their children...

**Chorus:**

...their elderly mothers.

**Chorus:**

Gone are your splendid bath houses...

**Chorus:**

The race course you used to race your horses on...

**Chorus:**

And as you, Laomedon, carry that beautiful, young smile of tranquillity around the throne of Zeus, here, the whole of Priam's land has been wiped out by the Greek spear.

**Chorus:**

O, Eros! Eros, son of Zeus! You came once to the halls of our King Dardanus, to accomplish the will of the Heavens!

**Chorus:**

You've come and you've raised Troy's Towers, high, high into the heart of the Heavens. But no, no! I won't talk of Zeus' shameful deed!

**Chorus:**

But, then, what of Dawn? Dawn with her white wings, the goddess whose splendid light is loved by all mortals...

**Chorus:**

...she saw -she saw!- the devastation of our land...

**Chorus:**

She watched the ruin of our city, Pergamon's city...

**Chorus:**

She sat there and watched it being destroyed even though it was this city that has given her a husband for her bridal chamber, a husband she once snatched from these parts and carried him away in a cart of sparkling golden stars.

**Chorus:**

What joy! What a high hope was that for our city!

**Chorus:**

Alas! No more! Gone! The gods no longer love our Troy!

*Enter Menelaos with guard*

**Menelaos:**

What a glorious day, this is!

Today I shall be holding in these arms my wife, Helen!

I am Menelaos and I, as well as all the Greeks, have suffered a great deal.

I have come to Troy not, as many think, merely because of a woman but because I wanted to punish the man who treated my hospitality with contempt, a man who has deceived me and stole my wife from within my own palace halls!

That man now, that man and his country have been punished. The Greek spear saw to that.

So now I have come for her. I have come for... I get no pleasure in uttering her name... for that Spartan woman, that woman who, I admit, once was my wife.

She's here, in these huts, among all the other Trojan women prisoners.

The soldiers who've suffered so much fighting on her account left it to me to either kill her here or, if I want, to take her back to Greece, alive.

I've decided not to kill her here, in Troy but to take her back aboard our ship, to Greece and kill her there. Let those Greeks in Greece, those who have lost loved ones in this war see and feel some justice.

Right! Guards, go inside the hut and drag the murderous bitch by the hair.

Bring her out here and when the winds are favourable, I'll take her back to Greece.

*Some guards go into the larger hut.*

**Hekabe:**

O Lord, Zeus! Pillar of the Earth upon which you have your throne!

Who you are and what you are is impossible for mortals to fathom.

Hear my prayer, Lord, whether you are a human thought or a natural law!

Your ways are silent, Zeus, yet you drive all human affairs towards justice!

**Menelaos:**

What? What do you mean by this silly prayer?

**Hekabe:**

I praise you, Menelaos for wanting to kill your wife.

But let not her eyes fall upon yours or she will tempt your passion again.

Her eyes! Her eyes enslave the eyes of all men, enslave their cities and set their houses on fire. Her magic spells are mighty!

You and I and everyone else who has suffered know her eyes very well.

*Enter the guards forcing Helen out of the hut.*

*She is wearing expensive, glittering, ostentatious clothes, a stark contrast to the humble*

*and dirty clothes worn by the Queen and the chorus.*

**Helen:**

This is a dreadful start, Menelaos! A frightening start!

Your thugs have dragged me here, in front of these huts against my will!

Yes, yes, I know you hate me.

I have no doubt about that; but will you at least let me know if you or the rest of the Greeks have made any decisions about my future yet?

**Menelaos:**

No, no major discussion took place about you.

The army has decided that since it was me you've hurt, I should have the power to kill you.

**Helen:**

To kill me! Would I, by any chance, be allowed to make my case against this decision, to try at least and show that such a punishment would be unjust?

**Menelaos:**

No, I'm not here to argue with you, Helen but to kill you.

**Hekabe:**

Let her speak, Menelaos.

Let her not die without doing this but let me be the one who'll put to her the other side of the argument; because you, yourself, know nothing of the true measure of Troy's suffering.

Let me speak and I can assure you, my story will result in her death.

Fear not. She will not escape her punishment.

**Menelaos:**

A waste of time... but let her speak, if she wants.

I give her my permission, not because she has asked for it but because of you, Hekabe, because you have asked for it. Let that be made clear.

**Helen: To Menelaos**

Well, in any case, since you see me as your enemy, you won't be responding to my arguments, even if they are just. So, all I can do is argue against the accusations I think you'll be making against me.

*Indicating Hekabe*

First of all, you should direct your accusations at her.

It was she, Hekabe, who gave birth to Paris and it was then when our troubles began.

The destruction of Troy –and of my own- came about because of Priam, her husband, who should have killed Paris. He should have done that when Paris was a baby.

That baby visited her in her dream when she was pregnant with him, as a blazing torch.

But listen to what followed his birth, the birth of Paris.

It was this man who judged the three goddesses in a beauty contest.

Palas Athena bribed him by promising him that he would head the Trojan army against Greece and destroy her utterly.

Hera's promise, on the other hand, was that, if he gave her the prize, he would be made ruler of all Asia and Europe but Aphrodite, who knew and admired my

beauty, told him that her prize to him, if he declared her the most beautiful of the three goddesses, would be me.

So, now listen to what happened after that.

Aphrodite, of course, won the contest and that victory brought about my relationship with Paris a relationship, Menelaos, that proved to be of benefit to Greece. How? Because the Greeks are not ruled by barbarians which would have happened if Paris had chosen one of the other two goddesses.

You were neither beaten by a foreign army nor were you ruled by a foreign king. Greece benefited from my misfortune. Greece has gained happiness whilst I gained misery. Because of my beauty, I was sold; and, instead of crowning my head with garlands, the Greeks now treat me with disdain.

Of course, I know, you'll now tell me that all this doesn't explain my sliding out of your house secretly.

The explanation is that Paris came to Sparta with an ally, an ally who is not at all insignificant. The goddess Aphrodite herself was with him and so – call him Paris or call him Alexandros – it was he who has destroyed this land.

And it was you, you despicable man, you who let Paris come into our palace and then left him there while you went off to Crete!

Never mind!

As for what happened afterwards, it's not to you I'll direct my questions my to me! What got over me?

What on earth made me leave my country and my home to follow him here?

If you must punish anyone, Menelaos, then punish Zeus!

Come, are you strong enough to do that?

Punish that god because even though he rules all the other gods, he is Aphrodite's little slave!

Go on! Punish him and pardon me!

This is where you could make some wise comments: You could say that since Paris was killed and hurled into the underworld and my god-driven marriage dissolved, I should have left my marriage home and come to the Greek ships.

But that's exactly what I wanted to do!

Ask the guards of the walls and the watchmen at the towers. They will be my witness. They will tell you that they've caught me often enough using ropes, trying to sneak down from the battlements of the city but my second husband, Deiphobus would always catch me and drag me back into his house, even against the will of the rest of the Trojans.

Well then, my husband? After all my efforts to come to you, should you not be giving me an award for bravery instead of killing me? Another man has taken me into his home and made me his slave. Would not the award rather than the death be more just?

Who can argue against the will of the gods? And if that's what you want to do, then someone better tell you quickly how stupid that would be!

**Chorus:**

Come now, my Queen, defend your children and your country.

**Chorus:**

Her speech was strong, persuasive, forceful, eloquent.

**Chorus:**

You must destroy it because she is guilty of something dreadful.

**Hekabe:**

First, let me represent the goddesses and, at the same time, prove that this woman is a liar.

There's no way that Hera and the virgin Athena would have lost their minds to such an extent that the first one would sell Greece to the barbarians and the second would subjugate the Athenians to the Trojans. Nor have they ever gone to Ida to engage in some silly beauty contest. Why would they want to do a thing like that? Why would Hera suddenly be overcome by such a silly desire to boast about her beauty? Was she after another husband? Someone stronger than Zeus, perhaps? I wonder who that could be?

There is none, Helen! There's no one more powerful than Zeus!

And Athena? What was that goddess after? Marriage with one of the gods?

She has run away from the marriage bed by asking her father to grant her eternal virginity!

No, Helen, it won't work!

You're trying to make the goddesses look stupid by dressing them up with your own flaws! This will not persuade anyone with a bit of sense.

And then you say that Aphrodite went along with my son to Menelaos' house!

How ridiculous that is! Laughable! Why would she want to come down all the way from the Heavens to do that? Why would she bother? Why couldn't she just simply stay up there and from her throne, pick you up -you and everyone else in the city of Amyclae, for that matter- and just quietly, drop you here, in Troy?

The truth is, Helen, that my son, Paris, was a formidably handsome man.

You took one look at him and your head spun with Aphrodite's lust!

That's the reason why mortals call all their mindless acts "Aphrodite." She has the right name, that one. The first half of it means "Foam-head!"

You saw my Paris in his splendid, exotic, glittering, golden clothes and you went right off your head!

You thought Greece was far too meagre in her wealth for you, so you decided to leave Sparta, come over here, where the gold is overflowing and then completely take over the place with your reckless love for luxury.

Menelaos' palace didn't quite meet the needs of your lavish debauchery, Helen.

All right.

Be that as it may but you also say that Paris took you away by force. Kidnapped you. Did you scream for help at all? Did any other woman hear you?

And this was before your brothers, Castor and Polydeuces went up to the heavens to be among the stars. They were still alive then. Why didn't they hear your cries?

And so, then you came racing over here, the Greeks following right behind you. And then the war started in all its deadly fury and whenever you got news that Menelaos was winning, you'd sing his praises everywhere!

What do you think that did to my son? He was tormented by those praises of yours! He felt that he had to fight some awesome rival for your bed. But then, when the news declared that the Trojans were winning, well then, it was as if Menelaos didn't exist!

Your morals, Helen, followed the wind rather than virtue.

You also claim to have tried escaping Troy by lowering yourself over the walls with ropes because, you said, you were kept here against your will.

Well, tell me, then, Helen: Has anyone ever caught you tying a noose around your neck, or sharpening a knife? Now that's what a brave woman would have done, if she really loved her first husband!

And not only that but how many times have I, personally, advised you to leave? "Come, daughter," I'd say to you, "Come, leave this place. My son will find another wife. Let me take you secretly to the Greek ships! That will put an end to the war; a war that's killing both, Greeks and Trojans alike."

But, of course, you didn't like that advice and never followed it.

No, because while you were in Paris' home you could do as you pleased.

As well, you loved all the attention that our barbarian servants lavished upon you. That was a big thing, in your eyes, all those servants milling about you!

And now look at you! Look at your rich clothes! You've dressed yourself up in this exquisite finery to come out here and to share with your husband the same sky!

Vulgar woman! You should be spat upon!

You should have come out here dressed in humble, old clothes, shaking with dread and with your head shorn, humiliated because of the evil deeds you've perpetrated. You should be behaving with some modesty and not with such crass haughtiness.

*Turning to Menelaos*

And so, Menelaos, listen to the last words of my speech.

They are directed at you.

Kill her!

It will be a crown of glory for Greece. She deserves death. And her death will also be a precedent for all those other women who betray their husband.

Make it law: Death to all the disloyal women!

**Chorus:**

Menelaos do justice to your ancestors and to your house.

**Chorus:**

Punish Helen in a way that will show your nobility in the eyes of your enemies.

**Chorus:**

It will also scotch the rumour, a rumour that's running rampant among the Greeks, that you are too much like a woman.

**Menelaos:** *To Hekabe and the chorus*

Now then. Our words concur.

Helen has fled my house of her own volition to jump into the bed of a stranger.

Aphrodite had nothing to do it. Helen introduced the goddess into her tale merely to boast.

Go now, Helen! Go to the men who will stone you to death.

It will be a swift death.

A swift recompense for the drawn out evils you've committed to the Greeks.

That will teach you to defile my name.

**Helen:** *Falls before Menelaos and puts her arms around his knees*

No, Menelaos! I beg you, by your knees, I beg you!



Don't kill me for something that was caused by the gods!  
Forgive me!

**Hekabe:**

Don't listen to her, Menelaos. Don't betray all those battle mates of yours who were killed for her sake. I beg you, on their behalf and on behalf of my sons!

**Menelaos:**

That's enough, old woman. I don't care at all about what happens to her.  
*To his soldiers*

Men, take her to the ships. We'll send her off to Sparta.

**Hekabe:**

In that case, Menelaos, don't let her get aboard the same ship as yours.

**Menelaos:** *Laughing*

O, why is that? Has she gained that much weight?

**Hekabe:**

No, but there's no lover who doesn't love his lover for ever.

**Menelaos:**

Perhaps but it depends upon the heart of the loved one.

In any case, I shall do as you say.

We won't put her on board the same ship with me.

You're quite right about that.

Once we get to Greece, one way or another, she will serve justice and she will die. Her death will teach all the other women to be sensible. Now, that will certainly be a difficult thing to achieve but, nevertheless, her execution will frighten the foolish women and the worst of the shameless sluts.

*Exit Menelaos, Helen and the soldiers.*

**Chorus:**

Well, then, Zeus! This is your work: You have surrendered your Trojan temple to the Greeks.

**Chorus:**

And its altar and the lush fragrance of all the burnt offerings upon it.

**Chorus:**

And the sacred ethereal flame of the burning myrrh.

**Chorus:**

And the holy citadel of Pergamon.

**Chorus:**

And the ivy-growing valleys of Ida, nourished by the rolling waters of the melting snow, rushing down from her peaks!

**Chorus:**

Ida's peaks, the first to catch the light of the Sun-god.

Earth's most sacred boundary.

**Chorus:**

Well, then Zeus!

Your sacrifices are gone!

**Chorus:**

And the joyful songs of your dancers!

**Chorus:**

And all the night-long vigils for all the gods!

**Chorus:**

And all the statues, wrought in gold.

**Chorus:**

And the twelve sacred Trojan cakes of the full moon.

**Chorus:**

Well, then, Zeus! I want to know if you thought about all this, Lord!

**Chorus:**

Sitting as you are on your heavenly throne, in the sky...

**Chorus:**

Can you see my city now...

**Chorus:**

It's a city destroyed by the spear and by the blazing fire!

**Hekabe:**

O, my dear husband!

Your soul is wandering all about, Your corpse is left unburied, Deprived of the burial bath.

The ship will carry me over the sea

And rush me to the horse-loving land of Greece, There, where the stone walls, built by the Cyclopes, reach the sky; And where the children are gathered about the gates their eyes filled with tears

As they groan and weep and sadly mumble,

"Mother! Mother!

The Greeks are taking me –me, all alone!

They are taking me down to their black ships

And, with oars that cut the water, they will deliver me either to holy Salamis

Or to the high peak of the Isthmus with its twin path,  
Where the gates lead to the land of Pelops."

**Chorus:**

Oh, may the gods burn that ship!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Zeus! Burn Menelaos' ship with a dreadful holy lightning bolt!

Burn it just as it sails through the Aegean.

**Hekabe:**

Burn it, Zeus, as it takes me from my Trojan home

With my eyes flooded with tears!

They are taking me into exile as a slave, in Greece!

**Chorus:**

Your daughter, Zeus! Helen will hold a golden mirror!

**Chorus:**

A golden mirror! What a delightful toy that is for the little girls!

**Chorus:**

I hope she never reaches her father's home in Sparta!

**Chorus:**

Or Menelaos! I hope he never gets to the city of Pitana  
Nor return to the temple of Athena of the golden gates.

**Chorus:**

Menelaos, husband of the most shameful woman, in Greece.

**Chorus:**

Helen, who brought great grief and destruction to the streams of Simois!

*Enter Talthybius with four soldiers, two of whom are carrying the body of Astyanax on a huge, bronze shield.*

*Hekabe and the chorus immediately rush in horror to look at the body.*

**Hekabe:**

Oh! Oh!

**Chorus:**

Despicable sight!

**Chorus:**

Despicable fortune!

**Chorus:**

One disaster falling upon another!

**Chorus:**

Oh, look! Look here, you poor Trojan wives! Look upon the corpse of Astyanax!

**Chorus:**

Murdered by the Greeks!

**Chorus:**

They've hurled him down from the tower!

**Hekabe:**

So much hatred!

**Talthybius:**

Hekabe, there's only one ship with its oars left in the harbour now.

It's heading for Phthia, in Thessaly. On it are the rest of the spoils that belong to Achilles' son, Neoptolemos. The boy, himself had to rush off because he had received some bad news about his grandfather, Peleas. Acastus, the son of Pelias, the king of Iolchus, has banished the boy's grandfather from the country and so the boy didn't want to waste any time here and so, quickly set sail taking Andromache with him.

Her departure filled my eyes with tears. She wailed a heart-renting lament about her country and cried as she farewelled her Hector's tomb. She begged Neoptolemos to permit her to have this child here, Hector's son and hers, buried. This child breathed his last after he was hurled down from the towers.

She also begged Neoptolemos not to have this shield brought back to Peleus' home.

That bronze shield there, had terrified us, Greeks, on the battlefield!

Hector used to hold it up to protect the side of his body.

She didn't want it hanging in the same house or in the same chamber where she would become Neoptolemos' wife. It would be too distressing for Andromache, the mother of this dead boy. She begged him, instead, to bury the boy in the shield, instead of building a cedar coffin and then erecting a stone tomb.

She asked that the boy's corpse be handed to you, personally, so that you may look after it appropriately. Wrap it up with a shroud and put garlands over it. She couldn't bury the poor child herself since her master had to leave in such a hurry.

Once you have adorned of the corpse, we'll come over and cover it with the soil and plant a spear on the grave.

Hurry now and obey these orders.

Oh, I've taken care of one little task for you.

As I was crossing the Scamander river, I stopped and washed the child's corpse and cleaned its wounds.

Now I'll go and dig a grave for him. We should work together to make the task easier for us both. The sooner we finish, the sooner we'll sail for home.

*Exit Talthybius and two of his soldiers*

**Hekabe:** *To the soldiers carrying the body.*

Here! Put this bronze shield down here!

*The soldiers do so and then move back.*

Oh, what a dreadful sight! Oh, child! My eyes can't bear what they see!

Such a bitter sight!

Greeks! Your spears weigh more than your brains!

So frightened of this little boy!

So frightened that you had to murder him!

So frightened of this little boy that you had to invent a new method of murder!

Why? What were you afraid of? That he would rebuild his devastated city?

That he would resurrect Troy?

Well, let me tell you why you are afraid, Greeks!

You are afraid of a little boy because you are nothing!

You have killed Hector who fought gloriously with thousands of other Trojans and you have burnt our city. You have killed thousands of brave men and yet –and yet you were afraid of this little boy!

Fear! Fear without a reason is not what the brave feel!

*She kneels by Astyanax's corpse. The soldiers move back.*

Oh, darling boy! How harsh was your death, my darling!

Had you been killed in a battle defending your country, my boy, had you grown up and married and become a king, equal to the gods, you would have been blessed.

They say that such things are blessings.

But no, my darling. You have witnessed all these blessings, you saw them all around you in your royal house, you felt them in your soul but you, yourself have missed out on them!

Oh, my poor baby!

The beautiful locks on your head! Locks that your mother fondled so often, so lovingly! How she kissed those locks! And now! What they have done to your poor, beautiful head! Dreadful!

The towers of your father's city, my child, the walls that Apollo himself has built, they were the cause of this despicable deed.

Ah! Ah! Look! Look here!

Here where your mother planted all her kisses, here now –oh, I can't utter the word!

Here, through these crushed little bones, I see the vile smile of Murder!  
Murder, this bloody gash on your face, screams out! Murder!  
Oh, and these little arms! How sweet the memory these little arms bring me!  
These are his father's hands! Ah, but look at them now.  
Broken. Limp shreds of flesh and broken bones.

Ah, and your lips! These darling lips! The things you used to say!  
All those grand promises you used to make! How silent you are now!  
You lied to me! You used to jump into my bed and say, "Grandmother, when you die, I'll cut lots of my curls off and come over to your grave with my friends and we'll all sing for your our good byes with words that you will love to hear!"  
You lied because it isn't you who's burying me, my darling, it is I who must bury you, you, my sweet, you, a mere child and I? I am an old woman without a city and without any children.  
What an unlucky corpse I must bury!  
All those cuddles! All those fears about your food! All those worries about every little thing!  
What will the poet write upon your tombstone, my sweet boy?  
"Here lies a child killed by the Greeks because they were afraid of him!"

*To the Greek soldiers*

What a shameful epitaph for the Greeks!

*Back to the corpse*

You've lost all of your father's inheritance, my darling.  
Lost it all except this brilliant bronze shield of his. It will be yours forever, my sweet.  
You will be buried in it.  
And you, shield! Once you protected my Hector's powerful arm. Where is your mighty guardian now?  
Oh, look! Look at the lovely imprint his hand left upon your strap. Hector's hand!  
And here! Here's the sweat of the man! Here, it has left its mark on your lovely rim.  
It is the dear sweat of a man exhausted in battle. Here, where he rested his chin, the sweat poured down from his forehead.

*She raises herself up and addresses the chorus*

Come now, Trojan women. Come, and adorn this poor boy's little corpse!  
Bring whatever you have. Whatever our ill Fate allows us.

*To the corpse*

And from me, too, my son, I'll give you all I've got left.  
Only foolish men rejoice in their prosperity, thinking it is everlasting.  
Fortune behaves like a crazy man, jumping now this way and leaping now the other.  
No fortunate man is fortunate for ever.

*Various women come out of the huts and from behind the walls carrying flowers and other adornments which they offer to Hekabe. A white, royal cloak is among them.*

**Chorus:**

Here they are, Hekabe. The women are bringing you some of Troy's spoils.

**Chorus:**

Here are the adornments for the boy's corpse.

*Hekabe takes them all, kneels back down to the shield and lovingly arranges them around the body.*

**Hekabe:**

We've lost such a young little boy!

You had no time to enter the contests against your peers, my child.

These few adornments, my darling, are not the prizes they give for horse racing victories, nor are they trophies they award to the winners of archery contests, contests which the Trojan traditions hold in high esteem.

Those are trophies which the god-hated Helen has robbed from you. Robbed you of your life and destroyed your household.

No, my boy. It is I, your father's mother who's making these offerings to you, offerings that would have been your inheritance one day.

**Chorus:**

Oh, child! How you've touched my heart! How you've touched my heart dear baby!

**Chorus:**

Astyanax! Lord of the city!

**Chorus:**

Lord by name and Lord you once were in my eyes!

**Hekabe:** *Lifts up the white cloak*

Here, little Lord! This is the fine cloak you'd be wearing on your wedding day, marrying the most virtuous princess in Asia.

Here! I'm wrapping your dead little body with it now.

*Picks up a garland.*

And you, noble shield, you, who my son, Hector, loved so much!

Once you were the glorious mother of a million victories. Accept now this garland from my hands.

You will enter the underworld with my little boy but you will not die.

Oh, it's so much greater a deed to honour you than to honour the spears of that sly and murderous Odysseus!

**Chorus:**

Oh! Oh, my child!

**Chorus:**

What a bitter grief the dark earth will receive, sweet child!

**Chorus:**

Cry, mother, cry!

**Hekabe:**

Ah! My lost little boy!

**Chorus:**

Cry, mother, cry the dirge of the dead!

**Hekabe:**

My boy! My poor little boy!

**Chorus:**

Poor old woman! Unbearable grief, grief that will stay with you for ever.

**Hekabe:** *Tears some strips of cloth from her dress and uses them as bandages*

Let me bandage your wounds with these strips, my boy!

A miserable doctor. A doctor in name but not in practice.

Your father will take care of you better, my boy, when you meet him in the underworld.

**Chorus:** *Beating her head and breast*  
Beat your heads, Trojan women!

**Chorus:** *Beating her head and breast*  
Beat your breasts, Trojan girls!

**Chorus:** *Beating her head and breast*  
Beat your heads, Trojan women!

**Chorus:** *Beating her head and breast*  
Beat your breasts, Trojan girls!

*Hekabe lifts herself up.*

*Suddenly the loud lament stops.*

*A tense moment of quiet. Agitated, yet subdued by a warm thought, her moves are slightly reminiscent of Cassandra's earlier.*

**Hekabe:** *almost whispering, stuttering a little.*  
Dear friends... dear friends... my...

**Chorus:**  
What is it, Hekabe? You are whispering...

**Chorus:**  
What are you thinking, Hekabe?

**Chorus:**  
Tell us, Hekabe, we are your dearest friends!

**Chorus:**  
We are with you!

**Hekabe:**  
It's obvious now, my friends.  
The gods, my friends! The gods had only one thing in mind when they caused all this:

To bring despair to me and hatred to my city!

To bring more hatred to Troy than to any other city on Earth!

All our sacrifices were of no use, my friends...

Still, there is some good in this because if the gods did not turn everything upside down, if they had not buried below the earth all that was above it, the world would not have heard of us. The world would not be singing about us. The Muses would have no cause to sing about us to the coming generations of mortals.

*To the soldiers*

Go on, you Greeks! Take this child and bury it in his poor grave!

He has been prepared as well as he can be.

What difference does it make for the dead if they have a rich funeral or a poor one?

Wealth for the dead is a hollow display for the sake of the living.

*The soldiers approach, pick up the body and leave.*

*Other soldiers appear at the parapets of the wall. They are holding lighted torches.*

**Chorus:**  
Ah, poor child! Your poor, unfortunate mother!

**Chorus:**  
Poor Andromache! All her big dreams about you have been turned into ashes.

**Chorus:**  
So blessed when you were born, my child!

**Chorus:**

A prince!

**Chorus:**

A blessed prince so horribly murdered!

**Chorus:** *Notices the soldiers on the parapet*

Look there! Who are these men up there? Up on the roofs of Troy's houses?

**Chorus:**

They are waving lighted torches about!

**Chorus:**

A new disaster is falling upon our Troy!

**Talthybius:** *Shouts from within*

You, captains! You've been ordered to burn Priam's city, so don't just stand there with the torches idle in your hands. Throw them about! Burn the place!

*Enter Talthybius with soldiers, still shouting at those on the parapet.*

The quicker you burn this place the quicker we can set sail for our happy homes!

*To the chorus*

As for you, daughters of Troy, let me say two things for **you**:

Be ready, so that when the captains sound their trumpet you can rush over to the ships and leave this place.

And you, you poor old wretch, you follow me.

Odysseus has sent these men here to take you to him.

Luck of the draw, old woman. You'll be his slave in his country.

**Hekabe:**

This then is the final pain! This is the crown of my misery.

They're burning my city and they're taking me far away from my land.

Come old feet! Move a little faster then.

*To Talthybius*

But hold on a little.

Let me say goodbye to Troy.

Troy, my Troy!

So glorious in your days!

So glorious among the barbarians!

Soon, the glory of your name will be forgotten!

They've made ashes out of you and slaves out of us, slaves who'll serve masters in other lands.

Gods! Gods! Hear me, gods!

But why am I calling upon them now?

They didn't come when we had called upon them before. They didn't listen then.

*Suddenly she grabs the hands of the two women nearest to her and tries to rush to the walls.*

Come, let us rush into the pyre, women! It is far more noble for us to die together here, in our own burning land!

*Talthybius and his men rush to stop her*

**Talthybius:**

Stop! You poor old fool! Your misfortune has made you mad!

*To his soldiers*



Come on, men, come and take her away quickly.  
Take her to Odysseus. She is his prize.

**Hekabe:**

Zeus! Son of Cronos, Lord of our Phrygian race, can you see this?  
Can you see the our suffering? Suffering unworthy of the race of Dardanus?  
Can you see it, Cronos?

**Chorus:**

Of course he can, Hekabe!  
Of course he sees it all but our great city, our great Troy is gone!

**Chorus:**

Our Troy no longer exists!  
*Huge crashes followed by raising flames behind the walls.*

**Hekabe:**

Ah, look there! Look there!  
All the houses, all the houses and all the city's towers are ablaze!

**Chorus:**

Just like smoke, billowing upon the wind, our city falls apart...

**Chorus:**

Destroyed by enemy spear...

**Chorus:**

...and by the fierce force of fire!

**Chorus:**

Land, palaces and men, all have fallen!

**Hekabe:**

My land, my land! Nurse of my children!

**Chorus:**

My land, my land! Nurse of my children!

**Hekabe:**

Oh, my children! My children!  
This is your mother's voice. Do you not know it?

**Chorus:**

Your sad voice is calling the dead, Hekabe!

**Hekabe:** *Kneels down and beats the ground with her hands. The chorus does the same. Her calls and those of the chorus are directed at the underworld.*

The dead! The dead!

I bend my aged legs and fall upon my knees and I beat the earth with both my hands!

The dead! The dead!

**Chorus:**

And I, too, beat the earth with my hands and call out to my husband beneath the soil!

**Chorus:**

Husband!

**Chorus:**

Husband!

**Chorus:**

Husband!

**Hekabe:**

They are taking us away!

**Chorus:**

These are the voices of grief!

**Hekabe:**

They are taking us to be slaves!

**Chorus:**

Slaves in another land!

**Hekabe:**

Priam! My Priam, my poor husband!

You are gone, my dear husband!

No grave for you Priam! No friend beside you either!

If only you knew of my misery!

**Chorus:**

A black death has covered his eyes.

**Chorus:**

A holy man, butchered by the unholy.

*They get up. Hekabe looks around her for the last time*

**Hekabe:**

All the temples of the gods, all my beloved city!

**Chorus:**

Ruined!

**Hekabe:**

Ruined by the murderous fire and the spear.

**Chorus:**

Beloved Troy!

**Chorus:**

Soon you will crash down upon our beloved earth and lose your glory.

**Hekabe:** *Points at the smoke raising behind the walls*

Just like smoke, the dust will raise to the sky and I will lose sight of my home.

**Chorus:**

Our city's name will be gone!

**Chorus:**

Every single thing vanishes in its own way.

**Chorus:**

There will be no Troy for us any more.

*A loud crash from behind the walls*

**Hekabe:**

Oh! Did you hear that?

**Chorus:**

Yes, yes! All the towers are falling!

*More loud crashing*

**Hekabe:**

The whole earth is trembling!

The whole city!

Ah! Help me! I'm shaking. I cannot walk.

Help me, my friends! Help me walk!

Come, my friends, let us enter our days of slavery!

**Chorus:** *Runs to help her*

Ah! Our poor city!

**Chorus:**

Poor Troy!

**Chorus:**

Come then, let us all go to the ships of the Greeks!

*All exit.*

# (EURIPIDES) Suppliant Women

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/suppliant-women/)<sup>474</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

...

## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Aethra** (*Mother of Theseus*)

**Theseus** (*King of Athens*)

**Adrastus** (*King of Argos*)

**Evadne** (*Wife of Capaneus, one of the Seven*)

**Iphis** (*Evadne's father*)

**Athena** (*Goddess*)

**Theban Herald**

**Athenian Herald** (*silent*)

**Argive Herald** (*former servant of Capaneus*)

**Chorus 1** (*of the mothers of the Seven*)

**Chorus 2** (*of the sons of the Seven*)

**Various Attendants** (*to the mothers and to Theseus – silent*)

**Servant** (*to Iphis – silent*)

...

*Before the temple of Demeter and Persephone, at Eleusis, Attica.*

*An altar to the right of the temple.*

*Further to the right is a rock upon which Evadne will stand when she first appears (Line 980)*

*Aethra is by the altar, praying.*

*Kneeling all around her is the Chorus of the mothers of the Seven men who had died fighting against Thebes. They are holding olive branches, from which hang white ribbons of cotton wool, signifying they are suppliants.*

*Aethra is dressed in ceremonial white, the mothers and their attendants in mourning black. The latter also have their hair shorn.*

*Around this chorus stand their attendants.*

*At the steps to the temple Adrastus lies prostrate, his head covered by his cloak.*

*He is surrounded by what will become the second chorus, the sons of the Seven.*

*All except the sons are middle aged with grey hair.*

## **Aethra:**

Demeter!

Lady of the hearths of Eleusis!

And you, too, servants of the temple.

Give me your blessing, Give my son Theseus your blessing, Give this city, Athens, your blessing and Give the land of Pitheas, my father, your blessing!

It was there, in the plush halls of Pitheas' palace that I, Aethra, was raised and made the wife of Aegeus, Pandion, obeying Apollo's oracles.

<sup>474</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/suppliant-women/>

I ask for these blessings because I see before me these old women who have left their homes at Argos and came here to fall at my knees with suppliant branches, driven by their unbearable suffering.

They have lost their brave sons!

Killed before the gates of Cadmus.

Seven noble men led by Adrastus, the King of Argos, when he wanted to take for his exiled son-in-law, Polynices, his due heritage from the estate of Polynices' father, Oedipus.

They want to bury their brave sons!

Killed by the spear of war, they remain here, unburied, a shame against the laws of the gods. Those in power of this land will not grant permission to these mothers to perform the burial rites of their slaughtered sons.

*Indicating the prostrate Adrastus*

And there lies Adrastus, his face soaked with tears, his heart lamenting the loss of all the men he led to this unfortunate expedition.

He is here to share with me the burden of helping these women in their hour of need.

He has asked me to beg my son, to try and persuade my son to restore the bodies of these men to their mothers, either by speech or by spear, so that they may bury them according to the laws.

He says only my son and the city of Athens could accomplish this.

I have only just arrived here, to this shrine, to Eleusis, to offer sacrifices so as to ensure the abundance of the earth's crop. Eleusis is first land to see the sheafs of the fruitful corn shimmer above its soil.

I stand here and wait.

Here at the doubly holy sanctuary of Demeter and her daughter, I stand holding these green branches, symbols not of force but of supplication and in sympathy with these here mothers, childless and grey with age and in reverence for their ribbons of prayer.

I have sent a herald to the palace of my son, Theseus, to ask him to come here and either banish these poor women and their misery from the city or else lighten the burden of our obligation by performing some pious act that would please the gods. Wise women must always let men act on their behalf for all their needs.

**Chorus:**

Lady, I fall before your knees!

I beg you, I, an old woman, with aged lips beg you, my lady:

Save our sons!

**Chorus:**

And I, too, beg you, my lady:

Don't let their dead bodies be torn apart by the wild mountain beasts!

**Chorus:**

Look at me, my lady!

Look how I tear at my aged cheeks with my own nails!

**Chorus:**

My tears drench my face!

**Chorus:**

What am I to do?

**Chorus:**

I could not dress my own son's body for the burial house, nor see a mound of earth raised over his grave.

**Chorus:**

You, too, great Lady, have blessed your marriage bed by bearing a son, so let me now have some share of your love for that son.

**Chorus:**

Show some pity for the weighty grief I feel for the death of my own luckless son!

**Chorus:**

Move your son's heart. Persuade him to go to the river Ismenus and bring into our hands the corpses of the young men, longing for their burial.

**Chorus:**

I have come here, dear Lady, to these fire loving altars of the goddess, not as a pilgrim but as one who is forced to fall on her knees and pray a just prayer.

**Chorus:**

You have the power to relieve our misery, dear Lady –

**Chorus:**

– through your noble son.

**Chorus:**

Through an ocean of misery, I beg your son now, to place into my own hands the body of my own son.

**Chorus:**

Let me embrace his unfortunate limbs.

*The attendants begin to groan, cry, beat their breasts and scratch their cheeks in mourning.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

A new wave of tears!

A new wave of groans!

A new wave of pain!

**Chorus:**

Pain follows pain!

Tears follow tears!

Hands tearing at the breasts!

**Chorus:**

There, the hands of our attendants beat out the sound of misery!

Companions to our misery, Companions to our pains, Take up the dance that Hades loves!

**Chorus:**

Tear the blood out of your white cheeks Tear it out with your nails!

This is the way the living honour the dead!

**Chorus:**

A sweet delight, An unquenchable delight Fills my lamenting tears.

**Chorus:**

A relentless waterfall Pouring forth from a steep ravine.

**Chorus:**

It's in a woman's blood to cry with pain when her children die.  
To lament, to wail and to groan, when her children die!  
It's in a woman's blood!

**Chorus:**

Hades, take me!  
Hades, take me that I may forget this pain!

**Theseus:** *From within as he's approaching*

What is all this wailing? This beating of breasts? This groaning?  
What is all these loud dirges?  
All this noise! It seems to be coming from this temple here.  
What could be happening?

I am so afraid for my mother. I hope she hasn't come to some grief. She's been away from the house too long. I'm looking for her.

*Enter Theseus with attendants*

What is going on here?

What odd things I see here!

There's my old mother, sitting by the altar, surrounded by all these foreign women.  
And what misery I see on their faces! Tears fall fast to the ground. Bitter tears.  
They have their hair shorn and their clothes! These are not the clothes people wear at festivals.

What is going on?

Mother, what is it? What is this?

I fear something dreadful has happened.

Mother tell me! It is your duty to tell me and mine to listen to you.

**Aethra:**

Theseus, my son! These are the mothers of the seven warriors who died by Cadmus' gates.

Like guards, they have circled me, with their suppliant branches.

**Theseus:**

And this man, there?

That man who's groaning with sorrow, who is he?

**Aethra:**

That is Adrastus. I am told he is the king of the Argives.

**Theseus:**

And what about those boys next to him? Are they his sons?

**Aethra:**

No, they are the sons of the warriors killed in that battle.

**Theseus:**

So, why are they here, supplicants to us?

**Aethra:**

My son, I know why but I'd better let them tell their own story from here on.

**Theseus:** *To Adrastus*

You there!

You, with your head buried in your cloak.

I'm addressing you. Stop your mournful sighs and talk to me.

No work is finished if the tongue does not speak of it.

**Adrastus:** *Slowly uncovers his head, rises to his feet and speaks*

Lord Theseus! Gracious in victory! King of Athens!

I have come as a suppliant to you and to your city.

**Theseus:**

Tell me then, what is it that you are after? What do you need?

**Adrastus:**

Do you know of the disastrous expedition that I led?

**Theseus:**

Yes, I do. Your passage through Greece was not a quiet one.

**Adrastus:**

During that expedition, I have lost the finest men of Argos.

**Theseus:**

That is the work of war for you. Heartless.

**Adrastus:**

I went to the city to ask for the bodies of those men.

**Theseus:**

By sending heralds of Hermes, the god who relays messages during battle?

Did you ask for them so that you may bury them?

**Adrastus:**

Yes, Theseus but their killers refused.

**Theseus:**

But your request was a sacred one. What did they say to you?

**Adrastus:**

What did they say to me? Their victory has damaged them.

**Theseus:**

And so, why have you come to me, for advice or for something else?

**Adrastus:**

King Theseus, I want you to try and bring back to me the sons of Argos.

**Theseus:**

But what about this brave Argos of yours? Where is it now? Or is it all merely the hot air of boasting?

**Adrastus:**

We have fallen and destroyed by the war. That's why we have come to you, Theseus.

**Theseus:**

Was this something you decided on your own or was it the decision of the whole city?

**Adrastus:**

All of Danaus's descendants beg you to help us bury our dead.

**Theseus:**

But why did you raise up seven companies of men to march against Thebes, Adrastus?

**Adrastus:**

As a favour to my sons-in-law, Theseus.



**Theseus:**

Which ones? To which Argives did you give your daughters?

**Adrastus:**

No, I gave them to no Argives. These marriage ties were not made to native men.

**Theseus:**

So you gave your Argive daughters to foreigners?

**Adrastus:**

Yes, Theseus. They were foreign men. Thebans. Tydeus and Polyneices.

**Theseus:**

What made you do a thing like that?

**Adrastus:**

I was tricked, Theseus. Tricked by Apollo's oracles!

**Theseus:**

What did Apollo say about these marriages?

**Adrastus:**

He said, "Marry your daughters to a boar and a lion."

**Theseus:**

What did you make of that oracle?

**Adrastus:**

One night two exiles appeared at my door...

**Theseus:**

Two of them? Who were they?

**Adrastus:**

These men fought against each other. They were Tydeus and Polyneices.

**Theseus:**

Yet, even though you thought that these men were beasts, you still gave your daughters to them?

**Adrastus:**

Yes, they were beasts, all right. The way they fought each other! So I thought that this was what the oracle meant. These were the beasts to whom the oracle said I should marry my daughters.

**Theseus:**

But why did they leave their countries to come to you?

**Adrastus:**

Tydeus was exiled because he had spilled kindred blood.

**Theseus:**

What about the other son of Oedipus? Why did he leave Thebes?

**Adrastus:**

He wanted to avoid killing his brother. A curse made by Oedipus.

**Theseus:**

A prudent act this one. Go into self exile so as to avoid shedding the blood of your brother.

**Adrastus:**

But, unfortunately, those who had stayed behind wronged those who had left.

**Theseus:**

You mean, Polyneices had robbed Tydeus of his inheritance?

**Adrastus:**

And that's why I had marched against Thebes. To punish this crime. Polyneices' crime and that's where I was destroyed.

**Theseus:**

But, before you started on this expedition, did you consult the seers and with the flames of burnt offerings?

**Adrastus:**

Ah! Now you're asking me difficult questions. That's exactly where I failed.

**Theseus:**

Obviously, then, you went to war without the blessings of the gods!

**Adrastus:**

Worse than that, I went off to war against the wishes of a seer. Amphiaraus himself. The only god fearing man amongst the seven generals!

**Theseus:**

You ignored sacred advice so easily?

**Adrastus:**

Yes, Theseus! I was maddened by the shouts of young men!

**Theseus:**

Boldness and not wisdom has sent you to war, Adrastus. The heart and not the head.

**Adrastus:** *Kneels as he addresses Theseus.*

Yes, Theseus. I was the very same thing that has destroyed many generals.

But now, Theseus, bravest of all the Greeks, king of Athens I, an old man, a king also who saw prosperity himself, must shame himself and fall upon the ground and beg you! With my arms clasping your knees, Theseus, I must yield to my ill Fate and beg you to take pity! Take pity on my own misery and on the misery of these women, these mothers whose sons have been slaughtered in battle. Bring back the bodies of these men!

The loss of their children has aged them and now, even though they can hardly move their aged limbs, they've come here to place their feet upon this foreign soil. They have not come to Demeter's sacred mysteries as suppliants, Theseus! They have come to bury their slaughtered sons, Theseus, though it is their sons who should, instead, be burying them!

It is their sons who should be conducting the funerals of these women!

*Adrastus rises to his feet.*

It is wise for the wealthy to look at the poor. Wise too, for the poor to look at the wealthy with adulation so that they, too, might strive for wealth; and equally as wise for the fortunate to look at the pains suffered by the unfortunate.

Life is a misfortune. In this ocean of misfortune, joy is sparse and in short supply.

What I say is sad indeed but what can I do? A bitter heart makes the lips bitter.

The poet who wants to sing joyful songs must know joy himself. If his soul is in pain, he has neither the ability nor the right to make happy the hearts of others.

You have every right to ask, "but why leave behind the land of Pelops, to come and burden Athens with this task?" and it would be my duty to answer you.

Sparta is a wild and devious country and the other countries are small and weak.

Athens though could well take up this task.

Athens takes pity on the pitiable and is lead by you, a good and strong leader. Many cities have been destroyed because they lacked such a leader.

**Chorus:**

I agree with Adrastus, Theseus. Take pity on my misfortunes.

**Theseus:**

I had the same discussion with others and my opinion is still the same.

Someone once said that the life of mortals has more ill fortune than good. I disagree.

The reverse is true. There is more good fortune than bad in our lives.

Otherwise, we wouldn't be alive in the first place.

I thank the god who has put order into our disordered and wild lives.

That god has put reason into our thoughts and words into mouths, so that we can understand each other. Then he has given us the fruit of the soil to eat and with that fruit he gave us the heavenly rain drops that nourishes that fruit and quenches the thirst of our bellies.

As well as all that, the same god, has taught us how to set up fortresses against the Winter's attacks of icy cold and the sun's blaze of Summer.

He taught us how to sail the oceans and make trade with other nations so that each nation can obtain what it lacks.

Things that are dark to the human mind are brought to light by seers who examine the flows of flames, the ways of entrails and the flight of birds.

Since the god has armed our lives with all these blessings are we not being too demanding when we say want even more?

But our arrogance and our pride makes us think we are mightier and wiser than the god.

And you, Adrastus! You, obviously are one of that lot. The thoughtless lot!

You have bought to Apollo's oracle and gave your daughters to foreigners, thinking that it is the gods who give daughters to marriage, instead of fathers.

You have mingled the blood of your noble house with foul blood and so you've ruined it. What wise man does this? What wise man mingles the just with the unjust? Wise men bring to their houses men who are blessed.

Gods do not distinguish between the destinies of mortals. If mingled, the sinner and the innocent will be punished as one.

And you have disobeyed the gods by ignoring the words of the seers and pushed on with your expedition. You have taken all Argos to that war and you have driven your own city to its destruction.

Instead of listening to the will of the gods you have listened to the will of young men who love nothing more than to be honoured in battle, to create mindlessly more and more battles with no regard for the safety of the poor, innocent folk, sending them all to an undeserved destruction. Young men! One wants to be a general, another to take hold of all power, no matter what devastation he causes in the process and yet another to cease all the wealth, no matter what pains he causes to the majority of the his people.

Adrastus, there are three groups of people. There are the rich who are never satisfied because their wealth is never enough for them –these citizens are totally

useless for the city. Then there are the poor who, because their daily bread is never enough, are dangerous because they are deceived by the tongues of crooked politicians and by their own envy and so they aim the arrows of their hatred towards the rich.

And then, between these two, there is a third. This one is between them. It's there to keep the order, it's there to keep the city safe.

So, now, after all you've done, after this all this, you ask me to become your ally? What good reason is there for that? How should I put to my own people?

Leave!

Good bye!

You have acted unwisely and I am under no obligation to shoulder the consequences of your unwise acts.

Go!

**Chorus:**

Theseus, it's true.

He has made a mistake but that's the way of young men. Forgive him now.

**Chorus:**

We have come, my Lord, to you, as someone who can mend such mistakes.

**Adrastus:**

My Lord, I did not come to you to ask you to be the judge of my deeds or to punish me for any errors I might have committed. No, I have come to ask for your help but if you decide not to grant it, then, so be it. What else am I to do but accept your will?

To the Chorus Come, dear ladies. Leave your suppliant's leaves there and come, let us leave.

Let the gods be our witness. Let Demeter herself, the torch carrying goddess, and let the sun's light also bear witness to the fact that the prayers of our suppliant priestesses have not been answered.

But, oh, my Lord!

Think of this: You and I are related! Our blood runs back to common ancestors.

Your mother was Pittheus' daughter –Pittheus, the son of Pelops and all of us here, all of us are from Pelops' land!

The blood which flows in our veins, Theseus, is the same as that which flows in yours. And so, what will you do now? Will you betray this tie of blood?

Will you send away from your land old women who've received nothing of what they are owed?

No, you can't!

The beast find its safety behind its rock, the slave finds it at the altar of the gods and the city, when the storms of winter hit a city it will find its shelter in another.

No mortal's prosperity is eternal.

*The suppliant women, slowly approach Theseus*

**Chorus:**

Poor woman!

**Chorus:**

Leave Persephone's sacred ground and go to him! Go and grasp his knees!

**Chorus:**

Beg of him!

**Chorus:**

Ask him to bring to you the corpses of your fallen sons!

**Chorus:** *Loud cry of distress*

Ah!

**Chorus:** *Loud cry of distress*

Ah!

**Chorus:**

The sons who have fallen beneath the walls of Cadmus' city!

**Chorus:** *Loud cry of distress*

Ah!

**Chorus:** *In a fainting spell*

Hold me! Ah, the pain! Lift up my poor aged hands!

Ah!

**Chorus:** *At Theseus*

By your beard, old friend! Theseus, I beg you!

**Chorus:**

Dear friend, all the eyes of Greece hold you in glory!

I hold your knees in supplication, my Lord!

**Chorus:**

I hold your hand, my Lord and beg for pity!

**Chorus:**

Pity!

**Chorus:**

I beg for pity!

**Chorus:**

My heart begs for my son!

**Chorus:**

My legs wander for my son!

**Chorus:**

Lord Theseus!

Young Lord!

Don't let our sons lie unburied, above the ground, here in the land of Cadmus, to please the beasts of the wild.

**Chorus:**

Heed the tears on my cheeks, my Lord!

Heed my aged knees upon which I fall to beg you for the burial of my sons!

*Aethra covers her face with her robe and releases a loud lament which makes Theseus turn towards her.*

**Theseus:**

Mother, why the tears?

Why cover your eyes with your finely woven robe?

Is it the sad sound of these laments?

Yes, I, too felt its pain somewhat but now, raise your aged head and stop your tears. You're sitting by the altar of Demeter. Show reverence to the goddess.

**Aethra:**

Ah!

**Theseus:**

No, mother!

Don't cry because of the fate of these women!

**Aethra:**

Ah, poor, poor women!

**Theseus:**

Mother, you are not one of them! You do not share their fate.

**Aethra:**

My son, shall I say something which will give you and our city some honour?

**Theseus:**

Yes, do. Women can offer much wise council.

**Aethra:**

But, I'm a little hesitant to utter what it's in my mind.

**Theseus:**

That's a shame, mother. Keeping wise words from your dear son!

**Aethra:**

No, I won't stay silent now so as to have this silence punish me some time in the future. Nor will I hold back something that needs to be said through fear that speech making is unbecoming to women.

It is this my son: First of all, my boy, while in all other matters you are behaving correctly, you mustn't make the mistake of ignoring the will of the gods because dishonouring the gods will bring you disaster.

Secondly, if you were not asked to show courage in defence of someone who has suffered a wrong, I would stay silent but this deed you are asked to perform, my son, will bring you great honour. It is a deed that I recommend highly and without any hesitation.

Perform it!

Use what force is necessary to make these cruel men change their ways. They have prohibited the proper burial ceremonies to be conducted over the bodies of the dead.

This is an insult to all the Greeks. It is a violation of the laws of the heavens, laws respected highly by all of Hellas. With no respect for the laws, there is no respect for the communities of men.

And then, if you will not act upon this, people will say that it was due to cowardice on your behalf. That you have failed to deliver the garland of glory to our city through lack of courage. They will say that you have once shown courage by fighting a wild boar but you now show cowardice when you need to fight against spears and helmets. Courage in the face of a trifling errand but cowardice in the face of a noble task.

You are my son, Theseus, so you should not act like that.

Have you not noticed how your country behaves when she's mocked and disparaged? She turns at her mockers and shows them a fierce face.

Ready to fight them.

Because your city is nourished by battle. Not like those other cities who live in dull

quietude. The eyes of their men too, are dull, cowardly.

Hurry then my son!

Corpses and grief-stricken women need your help. Go to them!

When the cause is virtuous I do not fear for your life.

I can see that the Cadmians have prospered so far but the dice of their fortune will soon fall differently.

The gods can overturn everything.

**Chorus:**

Dear friend!

Your words are a delight for his ears and mine also.

This is a joy doubly felt.

**Theseus:**

Mother, everything I have said to Adrastus here, is true.

I have expressed my views about his mistakes and how they have brought about his downfall.

But you're right. It's not in my character to run away from dangerous tasks and by my many deeds of virtue in the past, I have already exhibited to the Greeks my willingness to punish those who perform evil deeds.

No, it is not possible for me to refuse a task simply because it's difficult. What would my enemies say if they found out that the person who has asked me to perform it was you, mother, the very person who bore me and the very person whose heart trembles for my safety?

I will do this, mother. I will go and persuade the Thebans to release the corpses of the fallen men. I will try using words first but if words fail to persuade them, then I will use force. The gods will not go against us for such a purpose.

I also want the city to vote on this and I am sure they will agree with me, not only because I wish it but because they, too want it even more than I do.

In any case, I have made the citizens of this city its rulers, by giving them freedom and the equal rights to vote as they wish.

As proof of what I will be pleading with them, I shall take Adrastus along to the assembly and once I have convinced them I'll select a group of young, Athenian men and bring them back here. Then, from the army camp, I'll send a messenger over to Creon asking him for the bodies of the dead men.

*Turning to the Chorus*

So, you old ladies, remove the sacred branches of supplication from my mother so that I may take her to our paternal home.

Mother, give me your hand.

It would be a miserable son who would not appreciate the gifts he has received from his parents and who would not do the same for his own children.

From the hands of his children he will receive what his own hands had given to his parents.

*The Chorus take away their suppliant branches.*

*Exit Theseus, Aethra and Adrastus.*

**Chorus:**

Have you heard, Argos?

Have you heard, Argos, land where my fathers walked?

Have you heard, Argos, land of the many horses?  
Have you heard the words of our god fearing King?

**Chorus:**

A King, great in the eyes of Pelasgia and Argos!

**Chorus:**

May the King bring us the blood soaked bodies of our sons!

**Chorus:**

The peak of a mother's sorrow and her deepest consolation.

**Chorus:**

Argos, the land of the river Inachus, will owe our King eternal gratitude for that holy deed.

**Chorus:**

What will Athens do for us?

Will she make us her friends and help us with the burial of our sons?

**Chorus:**

Come, goddess!

Come Pallas Athena!

Help us, protect us!

**Chorus:**

Protect the laws of mortals from pollution.

**Chorus:**

Goddess, you honour justice and you always punish injustice.

You come to the rescue of the suffering.

*Enter Theseus with armed guards, followed by a Herald and Adrastus.*

**Theseus:** *To the Herald*

Herald, you have always served me and the city well by carrying our messages wherever we tell you.

Now, you must cross the eddies of the rivers Asopus and Ismenus and head for that arrogant King of the Cadmeans. When you find him, tell him this:

"Theseus, your neighbour, asks this favour from you: bury the dead soldiers. It is his belief that this is the correct thing for you to do. In exchange, the whole race of the Erechtheids will become your friends and allies."

If the Cadmeans agree to this, thank them and come straight back home but if they refuse to take heed of this message then give them another. Tell them to prepare themselves for a visit from my men, armed with spears and shields.

*Pointing into the distance within*

Our army is there, by the springs of Calichoros; and it's ready and waiting for the orders to march. The Athenians were quick to agree to this battle when they heard my request.

*He sees the Theban Herald approaching within*

Wait a minute!

Perhaps this man coming might save you the journey. He looks like a messenger from the Cadmeans but I can't be sure.

*Enter Theban Herald*

**Theban Herald:**

Who rules this land?



Who will receive the message I have from Creon, ruler of the land of Cadmus since the day when Polyneices had killed Eteocles, his brother, outside our seven gates?

**Theseus:**

Hold it stranger!

You began your speech with the wrong word. There is no "ruler" here. This city is free of such men. It is ruled by the citizens themselves, rich and poor alike and it is they who hold the various offices of the State, in annual turns. Rich and poor are equal here.

**Theban Herald:**

Ha! And your words – they're like a lucky throw of the dice for me!

My city, the city that has sent me here, is ruled by one man and one man only, not by a whole herd of them. It is a city which allows no one to trick its people with sweet words, trick them into doing now one thing, now another – into doing things that suit his own purposes. It doesn't have men whose first speeches are received well but then they destroy everything. And then, what do they do, these men? They lie to hide all the damage they've caused and with those lies they escape justice!

How can a mindless herd rule a city properly? It can't!

Wisdom cannot be obtained by haste but by patience, by time.

Take a poor farmer for example. Even if he is wise, how is he going to be able to apply himself to the city's affairs when he's so burdened by the hard work on his farm?

And then, it's a bitter thing to see, men of base birth enter a city, make some fine speeches to the people and then with those speeches become even more prominent than the nobles!

**Theseus:**

Oh, what an eloquent herald we have here! What a profusion of irrelevant little words!

All right then, my man. You've started this debate so let's perform it. You said your piece now hear **mine**:

There's no heavier burden for a city to bear than a monarch.

To begin with, a city like that has no laws that are equal to all of its citizens. It can't. It is a place where one man holds all the laws of the city in his own hands and dictates them as he wants. What then of equality?

Written laws, however, give this equal treatment to all, rich and poor. If a poor man is insulted by a rich one, then that poor man has every right to use the same words against that rich man.

The poor can win against the rich if justice is on his side.

The essence of freedom is in these words: "He who has a good idea for the city let him bring it before its citizens."

You see? This way, he who has a good idea for the city will gain praise. The others are free to stay silent.

Is there a greater exhibition of fairness than this?

No, where the people hold the power, they can watch with great enjoyment the youth of their city thrive.

Not so when there is a single ruler. He hates that. The moment he sees someone who stands out in some way, he becomes afraid of losing his crown and so he kill

him.

So how could a city possibly flourish like that? How could it grow in strength when someone goes about culling its bright youth like a farmer goes about cutting off the highest tips of his wheat during Spring?

Who would anyone want to bother with wealth and livelihood for his boys if it will all end up in the ruler's hands? Or his girls. Why bother raising sweet daughters in your house if they, too, will end up with the ruler, whenever he wants them, leaving you with tears of sorrow? I'd rather die than have my daughters dragged against their will into a wedding bed!

So, these are the arrows I shot at your argument.

But now tell us, herald, what is the message you have for this city?

Your speech would have cost you dearly had you not been sent here by your city to deliver us that message.

The job of the messengers is to deliver their message and then leave.

Tell Creon that the next time he wants to send a messenger here, to send one far less chatty than you.

**Chorus:**

Ha! The uncouth always insult the gods even when the gods present them with gifts!

**Chorus:**

They think the gifts will last for ever!

**Theban Herald:** *To Theseus*

Very well, I'll give you the message but about the other matter, we'll agree to disagree.

The message is this: I and all the other Cadmeans ask that Adrastus stays outside this city but since he's here, you must break those sacred suppliant boughs and send him away before Dawn.

And don't try to take the corpses by force. Argos and the Argives are none of your concern.

Do as I say and you'll be able to navigate your city through the tempest. Disobey and all of us –us, you and your allies- will have to face its monstrous deluge.

Think about it carefully. Forget the feeble excuses and boasts about your "free city" and forget your anger against my speech.

And forget hope!

Hope tricks people. Do not trust it! It raises an anger among them, among their cities, against each other. Hope brings cities to war.

And when the subject of war is discussed and voted upon by the people, not one of them thinks that he might die in it. It will always be someone else –he hopes! But if Hades suddenly appeared before his eyes, just when he's about to cast his vote for war, then Greece would not be destroyed by the madness of spears and shields.

And yet, people know which is the better choice of speeches. They all know the difference between good and evil. They all know that Peace is far better than War. They know very well that the Muses love Peace and the Avenging Spirits hate her.

Peace finds joy in the sight of beautiful children and glory in prosperity.

But we, foolish mortals, reject all these good things and begin wars. We turn the

weaker man into a slave and so we have one man making a slave out of another and one city subjugating another city!

And you!

Will you help the men of an enemy army, men who have been killed?

Will you give a proper burial to men whose own insolence has brought them to their destruction?

Well then, in your opinion, it was wrong that Capaneus' body was turned into smoke by the thunderbolt. Capaneus, the man who leaned his ladders up against our city's gates and swore that whether the gods wanted it or not, he would raze the city to the ground! Is that what you think?

And do you also think that the gaping earth should not have swallowed up the seer, along with his chariot and its four horses together? Nor that the other generals should lie by the gates, their skulls crushed to dust by the huge boulders? Then Theseus, say that you are wiser than Zeus! Say that, or else admit that the gods are right to slaughter the ungodly!

Wise, indeed!

Wise men, Theseus love first their children, then their parents and then their country, which they should try and make greater rather than destroy.

The unwise, the insolent leader, like the young sailor will make mistakes. The wise knows when to do nothing because even that, even doing nothing when nothing is called for, can also be a brave thing.

Forethought is also bravery.

**Chorus:**

Zeus has punished them enough. There was no need for you to deliver this insulting speech!

**Adrastus:** *To the Herald*

Vile creature!

**Theseus:**

Hold your tongue, Adrastus!

You're talking out of turn. The message was delivered to me, not you, so let me give him my reply.

Let me talk to your first point.

Since when is Creon my ruler or since when is he mightier in force than I am? Since when can he force Athens to do his bidding?

No stream flows up the mountain and we won't be allowed to be ordered about this way.

Now, I have not come to Thebes with these Argives to cause war and I am not the one who has caused it in the first place and so far as the bodies of the dead soldiers goes, I do not seek to bring more battles and more deaths to your city. I seek only to do what is right by the law of all the Greeks: To bury them with honour. What impropriety do you see in this deed?

If the Argives have caused you any harm, well, they are now dead. You have won the war and have gained the glory that accompanies such a victory and they have received the shame that accompanies its loss. Justice has found its rightful place.

Now let the dead be buried beneath the soil and the let each element go back to where it come from before it reached the day's light: Let the spirit raise back

into the ether and the body back into the earth.

Our bodies are our own only for as long as life lives in it. After that, they must go back to the one who nourishes them: Earth. Don't think that you're causing harm only to Argos by not burying their dead men. No, that is wrong. The whole of Greece will be angry if people deprive the dead of their proper burial.

If a law like yours is ever written then we will see brave men turned into cowards.

Here you are, in front of me, delivering horrible threats to me, yet you're afraid to bury the dead! Why? What are you afraid of? That they will shake off the soil and take over your land –from inside the grave?

Or are you afraid that deep beneath the soil they will give birth to children who will avenge them?

You have uttered stupid and idle words to express stupid and idle fears,.

Stupid mortals! They should know the true source of their misery.

Our whole life is one big struggle. For some of us, the blessings of a good fortune had come in the past; for others it will come in the future and for the rest of us that good fortune is now. The gods only have good fortune always because they are always thanked and honoured by the unfortunate, hoping to gain some reversal of their ill luck and they are thanked and glorified by the fortunate fearing death. Those who understand this will endure their misfortune with no anger and by doing nothing to hurt anyone else or the city.

Well then, Herald. What will you do?

Will you do the proper thing and give us the bodies of the slain men, to bury according to the laws of the gods?

Because if you don't then what will take place is obvious: I shall come around myself and bury them by force. I will not let it happen that the whole of Hellas will hear that heaven's ancient law was disregarded by me and by the city of Pandion.

**Chorus:** *To the Herald*

Courage, my man.

If you protect the light of our Lady Justice from being extinguished, then no man may accuse you of anything improper.

**Theban Herald:**

Shall I say something brief in response?

**Theseus:**

Say whatever you want. You haven't been too silent so far.

**Theban Herald:**

You will never take the bodies of the Argives from our land!

**Theseus:**

Well, then, let me say something brief to you, in return.

**Theban Herald:**

Go ahead. I won't rob you of your turn.

**Theseus:**

I will. I will take the bodies of those men away from the land of Asopus and I will bury them!

**Theban Herald:**

You'll need to do that with spears and shields!

**Theseus:**

I have fought more difficult battles than this one.

**Theban Herald:**

So you were born and raised to take on all enemies, ey?

**Theseus:**

All those who are insolent, yes. I have no quarrel with the good folk.

**Theban Herald:**

You and your city, Theseus, are seem to be always busy.

**Theseus:**

Athens fights many battles. That's why she's a glorious city!

**Theban Herald:**

Come then, Theseus. Come to the city born of a dragon's spear.

Come and find out what it feels like to be hurled into the dust.

**Theseus:**

A dragon? How tough can a dragon be?

**Theban Herald:**

You will find out and learn. You are still young enough.

**Theseus:**

Tough words do not get me angry.

Go! Leave this land and take your tough words with you. We are getting nowhere like this!

*Exit Theban Herald.*

**Theseus:** *to his men*

And now, men, we must begin.!

You, men, with the light arms and the spears, begin the march.

You, charioteers, place the bit into the your horse's frothing mouths and set off for Cadmus' land.

I will take my sharp sword and head off to his seven gates. I will deliver my own message to him.

Adrastus, stay here. Do not to follow me and mingle your fortunes with mine.

I, a fresh general, will lead a fresh army for a fresh war to meet my own destiny.

I ask for one thing only: That all the gods who serve Justice be my allies.

All these things, together, bring about victory.

Bravery means nothing if it is not aided by the gods.

*Exit Theseus and his men, including the Athenian Herald.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Pitiful mothers of pitiful generals!

**Chorus:**

An ashen fear sits heavily upon my heart...

**Chorus:**

What? What was that strange thing you said?

**Chorus:**

...A fear that the army of Pallas Athena will put to the test!

**Chorus:**

Test? How? By the clash of spears or by the exchange of words?

**Chorus:**

Exchange of words?

May that be the will of the gods and may that happen!

**Chorus:**

But if not?

If the spears clash and the blood is spilled...

**Chorus:**

If murder, war takes hold of our city...

**Chorus:**

If breasts heave out heavy sighs...

**Chorus:**

Wails of loss...

**Chorus:**

What then of us?

**Chorus:**

What will they say of us who are the cause of it?

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Perhaps, the man who saw the face of Victory will now see the evil face of Fate!

**Chorus:**

A happy consolation fills my soul.

**Chorus:**

You speak as if you think the gods are just!

**Chorus:**

Who else decides the fates of men?

**Chorus:**

Men and gods differ greatly when it comes to justice.

**Chorus:**

Past fears have blurred your judgment.

What comes is this: Vengeance calls for judgment as does one murder for another and the gods who hold all sway come to give respite to the suffering mortals.

**Chorus:**

If only!

If only we could go to Thebes!

**Chorus:**

Ah, Thebes, the land of the high towers!

**Chorus:**

Yes, and leave behind us this fountain, the fountain of the goddess Callichorus!

**Chorus:**

If some god had given you wings to fly over to the city of the twin rivers you could know the fate of our dear friends.

**Chorus:**

Fate!

What does Fate have in store for this land's noble king?

What is his destiny?

**Chorus:**

Let us invoke the gods we have invoked before!

**Chorus:**

They are our first harbour in times of fear.

**Chorus:**

Oh, Zeus!

Father of our ancestors. Lord of our mother, Io, the heifer...

**Chorus:**

...daughter of the river Inachus.

**Chorus:**

Come, Zeus, be this city's benevolent ally.

**Chorus:**

Be our saviour!

**Chorus:**

Bring them back, Zeus!

Bring back your darling men!

The defenders of your city, Argos!

Men who were insulted by the Thebans!

**Chorus:**

Bring them back, Zeus!

To receive the proper burial of fire.

*Enter the Argive Herald*

**Argive Herald:**

Ladies, I have much good news to report!

I was one of those taken prisoner in the battle near Dirce's fountain, the battle that cost the seven captains their lives but I have escaped and so, here I am to tell you of Theseus' great victory!

But to cut a long story short, let me first tell you that I was the servant of Capaneus, the captain whom Zeus burnt to ashes with his fiery thunderbolt.

**Chorus:**

Dear friend!

How wonderful it is to see you back home and to hear your news about Theseus!

Now make truly complete the pleasure of your message by telling us that the Athenian army is also safe!

**Argive Herald:**

The Athenian army is safe and it has accomplished all that Adrastus wanted to achieve when he had marched with his Argive army from Inachus to fight Thebes.

**Chorus:**

How did it happen, Herald, that Aegeus' son and his men come to raise a trophy

of victory to Zeus?

**Chorus:**

Please tell us, Herald. You were there, we were not.

**Chorus:**

It will please us greatly if we hear the full story from you.

**Argive Herald:**

The bright rays of the sun which are the true measure of the day, had just touched the earth. I placed myself on a tower near the Elektran Gate, from where I could see clearly for quite a distance.

I could see the army grouped into three divisions. The light armed division was spread along the slopes of what they tell me is called the Hill of Ismenus. At the head of the right wing was the king himself –Aegeus' noble son- along with his personal guard, the ancient race that had settled in Kekropia.

The left wing was taken up by Paralus. He and his spear men stood hard by the Spring of Ares.

On the edges of the army stood the cavalry, split into two equal divisions. The chariots were stationed just in front of the sacred tomb of Amphion.

The Cadmian army stood in front of the city walls, behind them, the corpses of the dead men, for whom they were to fight.

The four-horse chariots of the armies faced each other.

Then Theseus' herald cried out so they could all hear:

"Soldiers, be still!

Men of Cadmus, listen to me and listen to me well!

We have come here to take the bodies of the dead who must be buried. We want to do this because this is the law of all the Greeks and we want to observe that law. We have no wish to shed blood!"

Creon made no answer to this but simply sat silently near his weapons.

Then the battle began by the drivers of the chariots.

The opposing chariots drove through each other's lines, bringing their warrior passengers up into line with each other and these men fought, sword against sword, the drivers wheeling back and forth to come to their aid.

Then Phorbas, the chief of the Athenian cavalry and, on the other side, all the chiefs of Cadmus' cavalry, saw the clash of the chariots and they both joined in the battle. And the battle wavered this way and that, the Athenians holding the upper hand one minute and the Thebans the next. I saw the whole thing. This is not second hand report because I was right there, on the very spot where the chariots and the cavalry were battling it out and I saw with my own eyes all the awful horrors that took place.

But where should I begin? Which horror do I speak of first?

There was the great cloud of dust, raising all the way up to the heavens and the cavalry, rushing about now this way, now that, like giant ocean waves. Then there were the men who were tangled up in the straps of their horses, dragged about and smashed against rough rocks.

Blood gushing out everywhere like great rivers when men were thrown about here and there, some against rocks, others headlong onto the earth, others giving out their last breath upon their crumbled chariots.



The moment Creon saw that his cavalry was winning, he picked up a shield and charged forward before his Thebans had time to weaken their resolve.

Theseus, though, wasted no time. He raised his shiny weapons and charged forth as well. Then the battle raged all over the field.

They killed and they got killed and the shouts of encouragement and command echoed as they passed from one mouth to the next:

"Get them!"

"Kill them!"

"Drive your spears forward, men! Drive it into the Athenians!"

But the descendants of the dragons' teeth fought valiantly. They have managed to force or left wing to retreat while theirs was beaten back our right wing. The battle was hanging in the balance.

That's when our general's bravery shone brightly.

Not only did he keep an eye on those who had the upper hand but he ran over to help those who were struggling.

His command echoed across the battlefield:

"Smash those spears men! Kill these men, descendants of dragon's teeth! Kill them or else our Athens is destroyed!"

And that raised the spirits of the Athenian men.

Then Theseus picked up his Epidaurian weapon, a fearsome club and started swinging it to his left and to his right, breaking skulls and necks, making helmets fly.

The Thebans had no chance. Not even one to turn and run away.

I jumped up and down with joy, shouted in glee and clapped my hands.

Theseus and our men charged for the gates of the city where the poor folk, the young as well as the old were wailing and running to the temples terrified and though Theseus could have easily entered the city, he stopped short of that.

He stopped outside the gates and said, "I have not come to lay low the city but to ask for the corpses of the dead."

That's the sort of general people should always elect. A brave man in time of danger but a man also who will not tolerate the insolence of people who, in time of prosperity lose the joy that comes with it and, instead, try to climb to the highest rung of the ladder.

**Chorus:**

Ah!

Now I believe in the gods!

Now, that my eyes have seen this unexpected day, this day when the Thebans were punished I feel the weight of my grief lighten.

**Adrastus:**

Zeus!

Tell me Zeus, why is it that mortals boast wisdom?

Wisdom is with you, Zeus! Mortals do whatever you decide!

We thought that our Argos was impenetrable, that we were great in number, young and strong. Eteocles made us a fair offer. Moderate, agreeable requests and terms.

But we refused and that refusal brought us our ruin.

Then it was the turn of the foolish mortals of the city of Cadmus.

Foolish men. They were once prosperous but, just like a poor man who suddenly sees wealth in his hands they, too, became insolent and by that insolence, were ruined.

Stupid mortals!

Like those bow men who pull the bow string too far back and overshoot the mark.

Disaster strikes you justly.

You give a deaf ear to the counsel of your friends and instead, give way to the force of the circumstance.

Whole cities do the same.

To bring their misfortunes to their end, they forego speech and grab the sword.

Blood! They choose blood, instead of words!

Bah!

Why think of such things now?

Tell me, herald, how did you make your way here safely? Then I'll ask you some more questions.

**Argive Herald:**

The moment the city burst into an uproar of spears, I ran out through the gates where our army was entering.

**Adrastus:**

And what of the corpses, the cause of the war?

Did you bring them back with you?

**Argive Herald:**

Yes, the corpses of those who led the seven illustrious divisions.

**Adrastus:**

What do you mean? What about the corpses of the rest of the soldiers?

**Argive Herald:**

They have been buried. In the valleys of Cithaeron.

**Adrastus:**

On this side or the other, and who did the burying?

**Argive Herald:**

This side. Theseus buried them. In the village. In Eleutherae, under the shade of the huge rock.

**Adrastus:**

And those corpses he didn't bury? Where did you leave those?

**Argive Herald:**

Near by, Adrastus. All your efforts have come to a good conclusion.

**Adrastus:**

It must have been bitter work for the slaves to remove those corpses from the slaughter.

**Argive Herald:**

Slaves? We allowed no slave to do this work!

**Adrastus:**

Ah!

Look how honorably Theseus has treated these men!

**Argive Herald:**

That's certainly what you would have said if you were there while he was looking

after them.

**Adrastus:**

And did he wash the wounds of the poor men himself?

**Argive Herald:**

Not only that but he also made up their biers for them. Spread the sheets over their bodies.

**Adrastus:**

What a dreadful task, that would be! Shocking!

**Argive Herald:**

Shocking? Why? Such misfortunes can happen to any mortal.

**Adrastus:** *Distressed*

Ah!

Ah!

If only I had died with those men!

*The chorus is shocked and react to Adrastus' words*

**Argive Herald:**

No point in crying, Adrastus. Look at the old ladies. You've made them cry as well.

**Adrastus:**

These old ladies, they are my teachers in sorrow.

Ah!

I lift my hands to farewell my dead friends!

I cry for them! I mourn their loss!

I sing the song of Hades for them!

I now weep alone, left behind, miserable me!

Life's breath! It's the only thing that man cannot recover once he loses it!

For all else there is a remedy.

*Exit Argive Herald*

**Chorus:**

Joy and sadness in the one event!

Glory for the city and double honour for its generals, yet what is for us?

**Chorus:**

A bitter task!

We must look upon the bodies of our dead sons!

**Chorus:**

Yet a fair one, if, after the most unbearable pain of all, this unexpected task does happen.

**Chorus:**

How I wish!

How I wish, Cronos, the god of Time, the father of all our days kept me unwed to this very day!

**Chorus:**

Why did I think it would be such a terrible thing if I had never married and never bore any children?

**Chorus:**

Terrible indeed!

Now I feel the terror!

Now that I must feel the terror of losing my dear sons!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

Our sons!

*Enter Theseus and his soldiers, carrying the biers with the bodies of the fallen men.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

The bodies of the fallen men!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

How I wish!

How I wish I could join them in their death!

**Chorus:**

How I wish I could join them in their journey to Hades!

**Adrastus:**

Mothers!

Mothers of these men!

Groan!

Cry!

Wail!

Listen to my sighs and let out yours in turn!

**Chorus:**

My son, my son, my son!

**Chorus:**

My son!

What a bitter word for a mother to utter when her son is dead!

**Chorus:**

My son!

Let me speak to you even in death!

**Adrastus:**

Ah! No!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

My son!

**Chorus:**

Ah, son of mine!

**Adrastus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

Unbearable the sight!

Unbearable the pain!

**Adrastus:**

Unbearable the suffering!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

How heavy this burden!

**Adrastus:**

Ah!

Turn your eyes at my suffering, Argos!

**Chorus:**

Turn your eyes at mine, also, good city!

No more children for this miserable wretch!

**Adrastus:**

Ah!

Bring them closer!

Bring them here!

*The bodies are brought before Adrastus*

Ah!

The blood!

Look at the blood on their bodies!

Our poor sons!

Unjustly slaughtered by unworthy men!

Their death decided the battle.

**Chorus:**

Let me take him into my arms!

Let me hold my son!

**Adrastus:**

You have, you have a sorrow that...

**Chorus:**

A sorrow too heavy to bear!

**Adrastus:**

Ah!

The sorrow!

**Chorus:**

And that of their mothers!

**Adrastus:**

Hear me, you poor mothers!

Hear me!

**Chorus:**

Your sorrows are ours too!

**Adrastus:**

How I wish the Theban soldiers had smashed me to the dust, to die with these men!

**Chorus:**

And I!

How I wish I was never taken to a man's bed!

**Adrastus:**

Oh, mothers!

Unhappy mothers!

Look at this ocean of misery!

**Chorus:**

We have torn our flesh with our finger nails!

**Chorus:**

We have covered our hair with ash!

**Adrastus:**

Ah!

Ah!

How I wish the earth had swallowed me up!

How I wish the wind had split me asunder!

How I wish Zeus hurled his thunderbolt upon my head!

**Chorus:** *To Adrastus*

The weddings you have seen were bitter!

**Chorus:**

Apollo's prophesy was bitter!

**Chorus:**

The grim Spirits of Vengeance have left the house of Oedipus!

**Chorus:**

They have left his house and came to us!

**Theseus:**

I meant to ask you before, Adrastus; when you came to meet the men and mourn their death but I thought I had better let it pass until later.

So let me ask you now, Adrastus. What has made these men so brave? What is the source of their bravery? Explain this to the young sons of our own citizens, since you know and are such a wise man. I saw them with my own eyes, the daring deeds by which they had hoped to capture Thebes.

But I won't ask you to relate to me this one thing, a thing that would make me a laughing stock and it is this: Who stood against each of them? Whose spear killed them in the end?

Retelling all this would be idle chatter for both, the teller as well as the hearer. How could anyone tell? When all the spears are flying across one's eyes, how could he discern with any certainty, which hero was which?

Not only could I not ask such a question but I also couldn't believe anyone who dared suggest that they could tell me who these men were.

When a man stands face-to-face with an enemy, he can see little beyond what he needs to see.

**Adrastus:**

Then listen, Theseus because what are asking me to do is very much what I would like to do any way. You are asking me to give praise to these men, these dear friends of mine and I shall do so, by being truthful and just towards them.

I have seen with my own eyes, the deeds they performed, deeds with which they hoped to conquer Thebes.

Look here, at this man! This is Capaneus. Burnt by Zeus' violent thunder bolt. All his wealth did not make him arrogant or boastful. He had the modesty of a poor man. He hated those who shunned the simple sufficiency in things and always boasted about their greed and their gluttony. Happiness, he used to say, was not in the volume of food one has in his belly. Happiness is in eating modestly.

To his, who were few in number, friends, he was true and loyal. All of them, whether they were near him or away abroad. Honest, affable, moderate to everyone: his friends as well as his family. He uttered no undisciplined words to anyone.

This one, the second man I'll speak of is Eteocles.

He excelled in other things.

Here was a poor young man who held many high offices in Argos. He shunned money. His friends would offer it to him but he'd stay away from it. Money, he'd say, gold, would enslave his character and always keep it in a yoke. He'd never take it into his house.

He hated those who did the wrong by his city but not the city itself. It's not the city's fault if its governor causes it to gain a bad reputation.

The third one, here, is Hippomedon. This one hated the easy life. The sweet Muses could not seduce him. Too strong for them. All his life, he lived out, in the countryside, with Nature. He let Nature harden his body and resolve. Hard, clean, Nature's work turned him into a brave man: He hunted, he rode horses and he bent the bow's string. His dream was to offer his city a well trained body.

Ah! Here's Parthanopeus. Atalanta's son. Unequal in beauty.

Born in Arcadia. Came down to the streams of Inachus as a lad and there he was raised. In Argos. He became a true Argive. Behaved like all good immigrants should. He hurt no one and made no enemies of anyone in the city. Hated squabbling. Squabbling, whether by immigrants or locals is the biggest reason for them becoming unbearable.

Served in the Argive army and fought for Argos, just like all those born in Argos.

He joined in the city's fortunes. Felt joy when it prospered and sad when succumbed to misfortune.

Loved by many –men and women- but he was careful not to offend anyone.

Ah! Tydeus!

Worthy of big lofty but fewer words.

Tydeus was no brilliant orator but an excellent, resourceful warrior, excellent skills on the battlefield. Not quite as clever as his brother, Meleager but in battle, he was praised just as highly for his use of the spear.

Just as ambitious a soul for glory as that of his brother but Tydeus always preferred action to words.

From what I've told you about these men, Theseus, you'd understand why they dared fight and die before the towers of Thebes. Good birth, good upbringing, instills honour and he who lives honorably, won't tolerate shame.

Courage, Theseus, is something that can be taught. Even a little boy can be taught to say things and hear things that he cannot comprehend but what he is taught he keeps until he is old.

That's way, all children must taught to be virtuous.

**Chorus:**

Ah, my son!

I have carried you in my womb and I have raised you into a man so that you may suffer!

**Chorus:**

Hades has robbed me of all my joy!

Hades has taken from me the fruit of my labours!

**Chorus:**

Hades has robbed me of my son!

Who will look after me, in my old age now?

**Theseus:**

And here is Amphiaraus, the noble son of Oecles!

The gods themselves have praised him openly by taking him alive, along with his four-horse chariot, down to the depths of the earth.

And Polyneices, Oedipus' son!

Him I praise personally and honestly.

He was my guest when, as a voluntary exile, left Cadmus' city to come to Argos.

But, Adrastus, about these men. Do you know what I would like to do?

**Adrastus:**

I only know one thing, Theseus: To heed your words!.

**Theseus:**

Now, Capaneus, who was struck by Zeus' thunder bolt...

**Adrastus:**

A sacred corpse. Do you think we should bury him elsewhere, away from the others?

**Theseus:**

Yes. The other corpses I shall cremate on one single pyre.

**Adrastus:**

I see.

And Capaneus' tomb? Where will you build it?

**Theseus:**

Right here, beside this temple.

**Adrastus:**

We will let the servants work on this task.

**Theseus:**

Yes. I, myself, will take care of these.

Come then let us carry the bodies away!

**Adrastus:**

Come, unhappy mothers. Come closer to your sons!

**Theseus:** *Tries to stop him*

No, that's not a good idea, Adrastus.

**Adrastus:**

Why not, Theseus? Shouldn't mothers be allowed to touch the bodies of their own sons?

**Theseus:**

No, Adrastus. The sight of these men, so deformed by death, would kill the poor women.

**Adrastus:**

I agree, Theseus. The blood and the wounds on these men is a heavy sight.

**Theseus:**

So why add to their grief?

**Adrastus:**



I agree with you.

Women, Theseus is right. You must stay here and bare your pain with patience. Then, you may collect their bones once we have committed their bodies to the pyre.

*To the corpses*

Poor men! Sons of mortals! Why must you pick up spears and slaughter each other? No more! Stop! End the wars and keep your cities and your citizens in peace. Life is short. We should see it through quietly and with as little pain as possible.

*Exit Theseus, Adrastus and the men carrying the corpses with the dignity of a funeral procession.*

**Chorus:**

No longer am I the mother of a beautiful sons!

No longer am I the mother of beautiful children!

**Chorus:**

No longer can I share the joy of the rest of the women of Argos who are the mothers of beautiful sons.

**Chorus:**

Artemis, goddess of childbirth!

Where are your sweet words?

Where is your sweet consolation to the childless?

**Chorus:**

My life is misery!

**Chorus:**

Like a dark cloud, spun about by the blasts of howling winds!

**Chorus:**

Once we were the mothers of the noblest sons of Argos!

Seven unlucky mothers of seven glorious sons!

**Chorus:**

Old age now takes us, childless, miserable creatures.

**Chorus:**

I stand too far from the living and too far from the dead.

My Fate has me away from both.

**Chorus:**

What's left for me at home now?

Memories of my son are stored there.

Tears of grief!

**Chorus:**

My shorn hair, the tresses of mourning.

Tresses that cannot bear a garland.

**Chorus:**

The libations for the departed dead.

**Chorus:**

And the songs!

The songs that Apollo, the god with the golden hair will not allow.

**Chorus:**

Dawn will always find me weeping.

And the robe will rest drenched upon my breasts.

*Suddenly, smoke drifts gently from within, USL, behind the rock.*

**Chorus:** *Indicating within, SL.*

Ah!

Look there!

I see a sacred tomb.

**Chorus:**

It is the last home of our dead Capaneus.

**Chorus:**

And there, look!

Beyond the temple. The holy pyres that Theseus has lit for the other men.

*Evadne is suddenly seen standing on the rock beside the temple. She is dressed splendidly, as if a bride.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

And there, near the temple, the famous Evadne, daughter of King Iphis and the glorious wife of Capaneus, who was struck by Zeus' fire.

**Chorus:**

But why is she standing on that high rock, next to the holy temple of the goddess? Why did she take that path?

**Evadne:**

What a brilliant light Apollo's chariot spread across the sky!

The Moon goddess, too! How bright her light as her steeds galloped across the dark night! She held a speeding torch that night! That night when the whole of Argos celebrated my wedding! The whole of Argos sang the sweet wedding songs! The whole of Argos raised my joy as high as tall towers.

The joy of my groom, as well!

My great, my noble Capaneus, of the bronze weapons!

Oh, husband!

I have rushed here, into the blazing flames of your pyre.

Rushed like a frenzied woman, my husband, to join you within your bitter tomb, to end the burdens of my bitter life.

When the gods take away those you love, it is best you die also.

That death is the sweetest.

**Chorus:**

There, Evadne! You are standing near that pyre.

**Chorus:**

Funeral pyres are Zeus' treasure vaults.

**Chorus:**

There!

On that pyre, lies your husband's body, Evadne!

Slain by Zeus' own thunderbolt!

**Evadne:**

I can see it!

Now I can see the end of my journey!

Fate has guided my steps.

Here, by leaping from this rock onto the pyre, I shall gain the glory owed to my home.

I shall join my own body with that of my dear husband inside the glow of these flames. My flesh shall burn next to his and together, we shall enter Persephone's marriage chamber in the Underworld.

Capaneus!

I will never abandon you to the halls of Hades, beneath the earth!

Come, light the wedding torch, let the marriage begin!

Let the Fate of the children of our Argos be good, in their marriage!

Let the husband's heart be filled with loyalty for his wife and let his soul mingle with hers.

**Chorus:** *Indicating within*

Evadne, look!

Your father, old Iphis, is coming this way.

**Chorus:**

Poor man, he is about to hear the dreadful news.

News he never expected to hear. News that will hurt him a great deal.

*Enter Iphis with two servants*

**Iphis:**

O, you poor, poor women!

And I poor, old wretch!

I have come here, dragging two loads of despair.

I must find the body of my son, Eteocles, who was killed by a Cadmean spear. I must put it on a ship and take it back home with me. And I must also find my daughter, Capaneus' wife, who has suddenly disappeared from her home. The poor woman desperately wants to die with her husband.

At first we had her guarded very closely, watching out that she didn't leave the house but then, when this disaster hit us, I've loosened the watch a little and so she ran off.

We are fairly certain though that she must be somewhere around these parts.

Please tell me if you have seen her recently.

**Evadne:**

No need to ask them, father. Look over here.

I am here, standing upon this rock, father, hovering over Capaneus' pyre, like a bird in grief.

**Iphis:**

Darling child!

What dreadful wind has brought there? Why take on that journey?

What made you run away from my home to come here?

**Evadne:**

I'd rather not tell you, father but it would only make you angry.

**Iphis:**

I am your father, child! Is it not fair for a father to know such things?

**Evadne:**

But you will judge me unfairly, father.

**Iphis:**

And your dress, Evadne! Why are you dressed so formally?

**Evadne:**

Why? The formality, father seeks some sort of glory.

**Iphis:**

Child, you don't look like a woman in mourning for her dead husband.

**Evadne:**

Yes, father. These clothes have an unusual purpose.

**Iphis:**

But you are standing next to your husband's pyre, next to his tomb!

**Evadne:**

Yes, father because this is my path to a glorious victory.

**Iphis:**

Victory, child? What victory? I demand you tell me more!

**Evadne:**

A victory, father, over all of the women beneath the gaze of the sun.

**Iphis:**

In what way do you want to be better than them, Evadne? In wisdom or in Athena's skills with the cloth?

**Evadne:**

No, father. In virtue.

I want to lie next to my husband, in Hades.

**Iphis:**

What are you saying, child? What sort of sick riddles are these?

**Evadne:**

Father, I shall jump into my dead husband's pyre.

**Iphis:**

Darling, no! Don't let the ears of the world hear such words!

**Evadne:**

But that's exactly what I want to do, father! I want the whole of Argos to know about it!

**Iphis:**

No, no, no! I do not approve of you doing this!

**Evadne:**

It's all the same, father, whether you do or you don't.

You will not be able to catch me as I jump from here.

Watch me, father. This might be bitter for you but to share in my husband's pyre is wonderful for me and for my husband.

*Evadne jumps*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

What a horrible thing to do, woman!

**Iphis:**

Ah!

And there! There ends my miserable life, Argive women!

There it ends!

**Chorus:**

Ah! Poor man!

What cruel treatment grief you've suffered, old man!

**Chorus:**

How can you cope with such a sight, you poor, unfortunate man?

**Iphis:**

Unfortunate? Where is a man more unfortunate than me?

**Chorus:**

Unfortunate man!

You are now sharing Oedipus' Fortune!

**Chorus:**

You, old sir, and my city as well!

Unfortunate, both!

**Iphis:**

Ah!

How I wish!

How I wish that mortals could live their youth twice and twice their old age, too!

When we make mistakes in our homes, we think about them again and the second time around, we correct them; but not with life.

If we could live as youths twice and twice as old men, we could also correct the mistakes we made in our first life, during our second.

I used to see people around me have children and it made me wish to have children of my own but it was that very wish that has destroyed me. But if I had suffered this present destruction back then, and if by being a father like all the others, had learnt what a terrible thing it is to lose your children, I would have never had to endure this evil destruction!

But, I did have a child. A brave son, who had made me a proud father but now I have lost him!

Ah! So be it!

But what now? What's next for this poor old man?

Should I go back home? That empty home? That desolate home?

Should I go back to an empty life?

Or, should I go to live in my son's home, a home I used to smile every time I visited, back in the days when my daughter was alive?

But no, she, too is dead now.

Ah!

How she used to pull my cheeks down to her lips! How she used to take my head between her two hands! What is sweeter for an old man than a daughter's love?

The hearts of sons are stronger but their caresses are not as heartening.

Come, servant!

Quickly, take me home and hide me there! Hide me there in that dark place where I can waste my old body away with starvation and there die!

What good would it do me to hold by child's bones in my hands?

Damn you, old age! Unbeatable old age! Who can wrestle with you and win? How

I loathe you!

And all those who try and drag out their lives! I loathe them too. They try to prolong their lives, to turn the stream of their river away from its course, with all sorts of drugs and magic potions and spells! Useless to the earth, they should just die and leave their place to the young!

*Exit Iphis with servant.*

*A moment later enters Theseus with his retinue and the sons of the seven dead, who are carrying urns of ashes.*

**Chorus:**

Ah, look!

**Chorus:**

They are bringing the ashes of our dead sons!

**Chorus:**

Girls help me!

Help hold this weak woman up!

**Chorus:**

Oh!

The grief!

The grief for my lost son has taken my strength away!

**Chorus:**

I have seen so many years and I have felt so much pain but what greater pain is there for mortals than to see their children dead?

**Son 1:**

Old mother, here, here is my father's body!

I have gathered it from the pyre.

All I hold dear, old mother, is in here.

Such a light weight, such a heavy grief!

**Chorus:**

Oh, my son, my son!

You bring tears to the mother of her slain darling!

Just a little dust! That's all that remains from the bodies of those glorious men from Mycenae!

**Son 2:**

You are left without a child, old mother and I am left without my dear father!

I shall live in his empty house, old mother and I shall live like an orphan, without his father's loving arms around him.

**Chorus:**

Oh, my son!

What is left of all the pains I endured for your birth, my son?

Is this my thanks for all my sleepless nights?

What now of all the loving kisses I've put upon your sweet face?

**Son 3:**

He's gone, old mother, gone for ever!

Oh, father, father, father!

They have all gone for ever!

**Chorus:**

The wind now holds them. Ashes from the pyre.

**Chorus:**

They have wings now.

**Chorus:**

They have taken the path to Hades' dark world.

**Son 4:**

Father!

Father, do you hear my groans?

**Son 5:**

Father!

Will the day ever come when I will pick up my shield and rush to avenge your death?

**Chorus:**

Oh, may that day come, my son, when you can avenge the death of your father!

**Son 6:**

Let the heavens make it possible that my father's death be avenged some day.

**Chorus:**

Evil that will not rest!

Enough now the pain!

**Chorus:**

Enough the groans!

Enough the grief that eats at my soul!

**Son 7:**

One day, father!

One day the sparkling waters of the Asopus river will welcome your son, all dressed in his bronze war gear, as a General of the Argives!

**Chorus:**

A General and an avenger of your dead father.

**Son 1:**

Father, father, father!

Even now I can see you before my eyes!

**Chorus:**

Yes, I can see him too! He is kissing your cheek sweetly!

**Son 3:**

But your words, father!

Your soothing words have been taken by the wind. They have gone!

**Chorus:**

He has left behind two grief-stricken people. Your mother and you, a boy who will be grieving for his father all of his life.

**Son 4:**

Ah!

This grief is so heavy!

**Son 5:**

I cannot bear this pain!

**Chorus:**

Give me the ashes. Let me take my son to my breast!

**Son 6:**

My tears roll at the sound of those words, old mother!

**Son 7:**

They tear apart my heart, old mother!

**Chorus:** *To the urn*

Oh, my son!

You have gone, my son!

**Chorus:**

I will never see you again, my son!

**Chorus:**

My darling, son!

**Chorus:**

A mother's sweetest sight!

**Theseus:**

Adrastus, women of Argos, the boys in front of you hold, in their arms, the ashes of their glorious fathers, whose bodies I have rescued.

Let them keep those ashes, as a gift from me and from the citizens of Athens but you must remember this deed well. Remember what I have personally done for you and always be thankful for it. Tell these boys to be thankful also and to always honour this city and remember what it has done for them. These boys, as well as their children's children.

Zeus and the rest of the heavens are witnesses to this deed. You will be returning home as worthy recipients of a great gift from us.

**Adrastus:**

Theseus, we acknowledge your good deed to the land and the people of Argos with great and undying gratitude. We needed a benefactor and you came to us as one. We will treat you with equal nobility.

**Theseus:**

Well then, is there anything more I can for you?

**Adrastus:**

No, Theseus. We bid you and wish you fare well! You and your city deserve it.

**Theseus:**

We shall, Adrastus and may you also fare well!

*Athena appears from above*

**Athena:**

Theseus!

Listen to the words of the goddess Athena! Listen well to my words!

Listen to what you must do for the benefit of your city.

Don't simply give those bones to these boys, to take away to Argos, without first obtaining some recompense for your labours and for the labours of your city, in rescuing those bones.

Demand of them an oath which must be sworn by this man here, Adrastus. He is their king and has the authority to swear this oath on behalf of all the children of Danaus.

And this is the oath that he must swear:

That the Argives will never raise a hostile army against this land and if some other



country does so, the Argives will use their own forces to stop that country from attacking it.

That the Argives must pray that their land will be destroyed utterly if they break this oath and march against Athens.

Now listen to where you must perform the sacrifice for this oath.

You have, in your house, a tripod, with bronze legs. It is the one that Heracles had asked you to dedicate to the Pythian's shrine, at Delphi, after he had devastated the city of Troy and before he had set off on another mission.

Over this tripod, cut the throats of three sheep. Then, on the inside walls, in the hollow of the tripod's belly, inscribe the oath. When you've done this, give the tripod to the god who rules the shrine, to keep for the eyes of the whole of Greece, as a witness and a reminder of the oath.

Then bury the knife with which you have slaughtered the sheep and spilt their blood over the tripod. Bury it deep into the bowels of the earth, near by the pyre where the bodies of seven chiefs burned.

If ever your city is being attacked by the Argives, display this knife and the sight of it will send your attackers into disarray and fill their journey back home with utter sorrow.

Once you have completed all these tasks, let the bodies be escorted out of the country.

Then dedicate to the gods as a sanctuary, all the land where the pyre was built and the bodies burnt by the purifying fire. That spot where the three roads that lead to the Isthmus meet.

Those were my words to you Theseus.

To the sons of the Argive heroes, I address these words:

When you become men, you will destroy the city of Ismenus and thus exact justice for your murdered fathers. You, Aegiaeus, Adrastus own son, will take your father's place and become a young general. Tydeus' son, Diomedes, will come from Aetolia and join you and you will both lead an army. And as soon as your beards have taken hold over your cheeks, you two must lead that army, an army of the sons of Danaus, against the towers of the seven-gated Thebes.

You will charge at them like powerful lion cubs and they will receive from you the bitter destruction of their city.

This cannot be avoided.

And throughout the whole of Greece you will become so famous that songs will be sung about you for many generations and they will name you "The Successors," the sons of the seven. All this, with the help of the Heavens.

**Theseus:**

Lady Athena, I shall do as you say and hope that you correct my every error.

*Indicating Adrastus.* I will bind this man with an oath.

Athena, be our guide because when you are with us, the city cannot go wrong and will stay safe for ever.

*Exit Athena*

**Chorus:**

Come, Adrastus. Let us go and take this oath before this man and the citizens of Athens. The difficult deeds they have accomplished for us have earned them our

honour.  
*Exit All*

# (EURIPIDES) Phoenician Women

*This edition is based on the [publicly available](#)<sup>475</sup> translation by George Theodoridis*

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## **Dramatis Personae:**

**Jocasta** (*Oedipus' ageing mother and wife*)

**Tutor** (*Antigone's aged, male tutor and servant*)

**Antigone** (*Oedipus' daughter*)

**Polyneices** (*Oedipus' exiled son*)

**Eteokles** (*Oedipus second son. King of Thebes*)

**Creon** (*Jocasta's brother*)

**Menoceus** (*Creon's son*)

**Chorus** (*Of young Phoenician female servants of the temple*)

**Teiresias** (*Theban seer*)

**Messenger** (*Soldier in Eteocles' army*)

**Second Messenger** (*Slave to Eteokles*)

**Oedipus** (*Former king of Thebes*)

...

*The Royal palace of Thebes, a two story building.*

*To its right stands an altar, the last hints of the smoke, after the burning of sacrifices, rising from its centre.*

*To its left, a statue of Apollo.*

*The palace doors open and Jocasta walks out slowly, wearily and with the aid of a walking stick.*

*She is dressed in black and her hair is cut short. She is in mourning.*

## **Jocasta:**

Lord, Sun!

With your speedy horses and your golden chariot you cut a blazing track across the starry sky! But it was you, Lord Sun, you who had sent that cursed ray upon us, upon Thebes, that ray that a long time ago, saw Cadmus leaving his sea-girt Phoenicia to come to this land.

Cadmus had married Harmonia, Apphrodite's daughter and with her he had the boy Polydorus, who, they say, had Labdacus and who, in turn, had Laius.

As for me, I am known as the daughter of Menoeceus. Creon is my brother and we both have the same mother.

My father named me Jokasta.

Laius married me but, even after a long time, we had no children, so he went to Phoebus Apollo, the prophet god to ask him what we could do about it to beg him to grand that this house acquire male heirs.

But the god, instead, gave him a warning.

"Lord of horse-raising Thebes," he told Laius, "don't sow children against the will

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<sup>475</sup><https://bacchicstage.wordpress.com/euripides/phoenician-women/>

of the gods! If you do have a son, that very son will kill you and your whole house will be drenched in blood!"

But, one night, during a drunken fit, Laius succumbed to lust and so, I gave birth to our son. Then, when the boy was born, Laius remembered what the god had told him and realised the error of his deed, so he gave the baby boy to a shepherd and told him to, first pierce the child's ankles with iron spikes (that's why the Greeks later called him Oedipus – swollen foot) and then to expose it on the rocky, Mount Citheron, in Hera's meadow.

But then Polybus' horse herders found him and took him to the palace of their mistress and handed him to her who put to her breast the baby which was born by my own labour pains and convinced her husband to let her raise him.

Eventually, when my son had reached the state of manhood and the tawny beard first covered cheeks, he either suspected something, or had heard something from someone and so he went to the temple of Phoebus Apollo, anxious to find out who his parents were. Laius, my husband and the boy's father, also started off to visit the god and ask him if the child was still alive.

The two came across each other at the Spilt Path, in Phocis.

Laius' driver called out to Oedipus to make way for the king but Oedipus, arrogantly kept walking until the horses' hooves stepped onto his feet and injured and bloodied his tendons.

Then, but there's no need for me to go on about these sad events... then the son slew the father, took his father's chariot and handed it to his foster father, Polybus. Then, after my husband's death, the Sphinx began to pillage and torment the city and my brother Creon announced that he would marry me to whoever could solve that wily maiden's riddle.

Somehow or other, Oedipus, my son, managed to solve the riddle in the Sphinx's song and so, he was handed the sceptre of this land and became its king and then, totally without knowing married me, his own mother while his mother, too, was totally unaware that she was sleeping with her own son.

I gave him two sons, Eteokles and the glorious Polyneices and two daughters, one of whom her father named Ismene and the other, her older sister, I named Antigone.

Eventually Oedipus –what pain had not the poor man endured!- discovered that he was married to his mother and committed a most horrible deed upon his eyes. With a golden brooch he tore out his pupils, turning them into pools of blood.

But when my sons grew up, when the first beards began to darken the cheeks, they put Oedipus –their father!- behind locked doors, to hide him and to hide also the shame of his fate so that it might be forgotten. And to achieve this it took a great deal of cunning.

He lives here, still. In the palace.

His pains have so deranged his mind that he shouts at his sons the most unholy curses. He prays that they would tear this house apart –sword against sword!

So, the two brothers, afraid that the gods would heed Oedipus' curses and act upon them if they continued to live together, decided that the younger of the two, Polynices, would volunteer to leave the country and that Eteocles would remain here as the king. Then, every year they would trade places.

But, the moment Eteokles took over the throne, refused to give it up and drove his brother out of the country and into exile.

Polyneices then went to Argos, married the princess, king Adrastus' daughter, raised a large army and brought them here to Thebes, the city of seven gates.

He is just outside the walls and demands that Eteokles hands him the throne and his share of the land. I tried to end this dreadful squabble by asking the two to call a truce and come to a meeting before they take up their spears. My messenger came back with the news that Polyneices agreed.

*Raises her hands in prayer*

Come Zeus!

Zeus, who lives in the brilliant halls of the heavens, come and save us all! Bring peace between my sons! If you are a wise god then you should not allow a man to suffer eternal misery.

*Exit Jocasta into the palace*

*Antigone's Tutor appears on the roof via steps behind it.*

*He is talking to Antigone who is waiting on the steps below for his permission to join him.*

**Tutor:**

Dear Antigone, you are your father's true daughter. You bring glory to his house! Your mother has given you permission to leave your young women's quarters and to come up here, the highest part of the palace because you want to take a look at the Argive army. Hold on a minute, dear, so that I see if there are any people in the street because if they see us, they'll have words to say not only to me but also to you. Slaves and mistresses should not be seen together in public.

I'll tell you everything I know, everything I saw and heard when I went down there, to their camp, offering a truce to your brother; and then all I saw and heard here, when I returned with his own truce.

*He looks all around*

No, I cannot see any people nearby so you can climb this old cedar step-ladder. Come up and look there! Come and look at the size of the enemy's army, Antigone! It spreads across the plains from the streams of Ismenus all the way to the waters of Dirce!

**Antigone:**

Help me climb the steps, old friend.

Stretch out your aged hand to help my young hand!

**Tutor:**

Here, my young lady. Take it!

*Antigone appears beside the Tutor*

You're just in time to see the army of the Pelasgians in motion. They are now separating the different companies from each other.

**Antigone:**

Great Hecate, Leto's daughter!

The whole place is ablaze with bronze!

**Tutor:**

That's right, Antigone.

This is no trifling little visit that your brother, Polyneices, is paying us.

That's a huge cavalry and an even greater infantry out there!

**Antigone:**

Have the bronze bolts been shot across the gates on Amphion's walls of stone?

**Tutor:**

Have no fear, my lady. The city is safe inside.

Look out for the head of the army. See if you can recognise him.

**Antigone:**

Who is that man there, the one who stands in front of the army, with the white crest, the one who holds that heavy bronze shield so lightly?

**Tutor:**

One of the captains, my lady.

**Antigone:**

What is his name, old friend and where is he from?

**Tutor:**

That's Lord Hippomedon, my lady and they say that he is a Mycenean. He lives near the springs of Lerna.

**Antigone:**

How frightening he looks! How wild!

Like one of those earth-born giants. He has a face like one of those dazzling stars, like those they draw in pictures.

Unlike any mortal!

**Tutor:**

And what about that captain there? Can you see him, crossing the waters of Dirce?

**Antigone:**

Who is he? His armour looks different.

**Tutor:**

That's Oeneus' son, Tydeus.

His heart is full of war. Like all the Aetolians.

**Antigone:**

Is he the one who married my brother's wife's sister?

What strange weapons he carries. They look half foreign.

**Tutor:**

Yes, my young lady. The Aetolians have small shields and hurl small spears – very accurately.

**Antigone:**

How do you know all this, old teacher?

**Tutor:**

I saw their shield markings when I went there carrying the truce offerings to your brother, Polyneices. I recognise the warriors from their shields.

**Antigone:**

And that young man with the long curls and the grim face, the one who is walking near Zethus' tomb, who is it? Obviously a captain also, judging by all those armed men who are following close behind.

**Tutor:**

That there is Atalanta's son, Parthenopaeus.

**Antigone:**

The goddess, Artemis, who hunts in the forests, should shoot him and his mother with her arrows and kill them both for coming here to sack my city!

**Tutor:**

I hope she does, too, child but they have a right to come here and I'm afraid the gods will see and recognise that right.

**Antigone:**

My dear old teacher, please show me the man who, by a miserable fate, was born of the same mother as me!

Tell me, old friend, who is Polyneices?

**Tutor:**

There! See that tomb there?

That's the tomb of Niobe's seven virgin daughters.

Next to it is Adrastus. Polyneices is standing next to him.

Can you see him?

**Antigone:**

Yes but not too clearly.

I can barely make out his face and the outline of his chest.

Ah, my darling brother! How I wish I could just rush high up into the clouds! To run over one that's been caught in the grips of a speeding wind!

Rush to him and wrap my arms tightly around his dear neck!

Poor, unfortunate exile!

Look how he stands out in his golden armour, old friend! It flashes like the rays of the morning sun!

**Tutor:**

Well, if he heeds the truce, child, he'll be here soon and fill your heart with joy!

**Antigone:**

And that man, over there, old friend. The one holding the reins of that white chariot, who is he?

**Tutor:**

That, my dear young mistress is the prophet Amphiaraus. He has the sacrificial victims with him, to quench the thirsty earth with their blood.

**Antigone:**

Dear goddess Selene, girdled by a light of gold, daughter of the dazzling Sun, look at him!

Look how steadily, how knowledgeably, he uses the goad on his horses!

But where is that man, Capaneus, the one who utters such dreadful insults at our city?

**Tutor:**

There he is, Antigone! Calculating. Working out how to scale our walls. Measuring them all from top to bottom.

**Antigone:**

Oh, Nemesis! Goddess of retribution!

And you, too, crashing thunders and piercing lightning of Zeus!

You have the power to subdue the undisciplined arrogance of men.

That is the man who says that he will capture the women of Thebes with his spear and hand them over as slaves, to Mycenae and to the Trident of Lerna, the waters

of Poseidon's Springs!

O blessed Artemis, blessed daughter of Zeus! You with your golden hair!

Don't ever let it happen that I should suffer such slavery!

**Tutor:**

Go inside, my child.

You have seen all you wanted to see. Go inside and stay within the walls of your own chambers. The city is in a terrible chaos and a crowd of women has entered the royal palace and women, by their very nature love to criticise.

They love to grab onto some little thing and exaggerate it, add to it; they just love to say terrible things about one another!

*Antigone and the Tutor descend into the palace.*

*Enter the chorus of Phoenician Women. They are dressed in foreign clothes and, while they say they are slaves, they are not slaves of war but free women, who were chosen to serve in the temple of Apollo.*

**Chorus:**

We have left behind the Phoenician island, washed by the Tyrian sea, to come here as the finest prize to Apollo, to serve in his temple, his home, beneath the snow-covered peaks of Parnassus.

**Chorus:**

We have sliced the Ionian waters with our oars, aided by the blasts of Zephyros that sang sweet songs in the skies above the unharvested briny fields all along the shores of Sicily.

**Chorus:**

Our city chose us as the fairest in beauty to be a gift for Loxias Apollo and so we have been sent here, to Cadmus' land, to Laius' towers, the home of my kin, the glorious sons of Tyrian Agenor.

**Chorus:**

And so we are Apollo's servants!

**Chorus:**

We are dedicated to him, like offerings of gold.

**Chorus:**

And the purifying waters of Castalia are waiting for me now to wash my splendid, maidenly tresses, in reverence to Phoebus Apollo.

**Chorus:**

Oh, you shining rock of fire! Twin-peaked light of Dionysus!

**Chorus:**

And you, too, vine that bursts forth the daily bunch of lush grape blossoms!

**Chorus:**

And you, too, Cave where the god slew the dreaded Python!

**Chorus:**

And you, mountain tips where the nymphs keep a lookout!

**Chorus:**

And you, too, sacred snow-lashed mountain!

**Chorus:**

How I wish I could dance free of fear, a circle around you, to please those free of death!



**Chorus:**

We have left behind Dirce, now, for Phoebus' sacred hollows in the centre, the navel, of the Earth.

**Chorus:**

But now, look!

**Chorus:**

The deathly god of war, Ares, has come before these walls and set ablaze the blood of hatred for this city!

**Chorus:**

Oh, may this never happen!

**Chorus:**

Friends share the pains of friends and Phoenicia will share the pains of this city of seven gates.

**Chorus:**

Ah! The pain, the pain!

**Chorus:**

The race and the children are from the same mother, lo the horned woman whose pains are my pains also.

**Chorus:**

The city is surrounded by a blaze!

**Chorus:**

A cloud, thick with flashing shields, a true sign of a blood-shedding war!

**Chorus:**

Yet the god of war knows that very soon the dreaded Erinyes, those goddesses of retribution, will visit the sons of Oedipus!

**Chorus:**

Argos! Pelasgian Argos, I fear your might!

**Chorus:**

And I fear, too what the gods are about to bring!

**Chorus:**

He comes to take back his house and he rightly comes bearing weapons!

*Enter Polyneices.*

*He is anxious. Cautious. Sword in hand and suspicious of a possible ambush.*

**Polyneices:**

It was easy for me to enter the city. The bolts were drawn back and the gates opened for me. That's why I'm afraid that they've set up a trap for me. They want to catch me and then not let me go without first covering my body with bloody wounds.

I must turn my eye carefully in every direction, to make sure I escape their treachery.

This trusty sword gives me the courage and confidence to go on.

*Suddenly a noise that startles him*

Who's there?

Or have I jumped at a mere noise?

Every little thing seems like imminent danger to brave men, when they are walking on enemy territory!

But I trust my mother who persuaded me to come here under a truce.

I trust her, yet I don't trust her!

*Noise from people coming and going within the palace*

Still, the altar is just here and there are people in the palace. I'd better put my sword back into its dark scabbard and ask these women here who they are.

*To the chorus*

Foreign ladies, tell me what country have you left to come here to this Greek house?

**Chorus:**

Phoenicia.

**Chorus:**

That's the land we were born and raised.

**Chorus:**

Agenor's descendants have sent us here as gifts to Phoebus Apollo, the first fruits of victory but when Eteocles, Oedipus' noble son, was about to escort us to Phoebus' sacred temple and altars, the Argive army came to attack the city.

**Chorus:**

Now you tell us in turn, who you are and why you are here, within the walls of the kingdom of Thebes with its seven gates.

**Polyneices:**

The people of Thebes call me Polyneices. My father is Oedipus, who is the son of Laius. My mother is Jocasta and she is Menoeceus' daughter.

**Chorus:**

Ah!

A son of the race of Agenor!

It is they, our royal family, who have sent us here!

*They fall to their knees before Polyneices*

**Chorus:**

We fall at your knees, my lord, as the customs of our land demand.

**Chorus:**

At long last, my lord, you have returned to your birthplace!

*The chorus stands and one of them goes to the gate of the palace*

**Chorus:**

Ey, in there! open up!

**Chorus:**

My queen, come out here! Come, open the gates!

**Chorus:**

My queen, do you hear us? You are this man's mother.

**Chorus:**

Come, my queen, leave the chambers of this high roofed palace and come to embrace your son!

*Enter Jocasta walking slowly but excitedly, supported by a walking stick.*

**Jocasta:**

Young ladies, I've heard your Phoenician calls and so I managed to drag my ageing and trembling legs, supported by this third one, all the way out here to see my son!

*She sees Polyneices*

Oh! Oh, my son! Oh my child!

After all this time, after all these days, I finally see your face!

Come, my son, wrap your arms around your mother!

Come, let me touch your cheek!

Come, let your thick black hair shade my neck!

*They embrace*

Oh, my son!

My son!

Finally! Here you are, in your mother's arm!

I could have never foresee this. I could have never dared to hope for this!

*She separates from him and begins to walk around him, examining him with joy.*

Oh, my son! What words can I say to you? What things can I do to remember the old joys? Shall I let my happiness make me dance round and round? Like this – or like that? Oh, how I missed the pleasure of those joys, my son!

My son, my son!

How empty you left your father's house when you went away, exiled by your brother, by his madness!

How you are missed!

Missed by your friends and missed by the whole of Thebes!

That's why I've cut short this gray hair of mine! Let it fall to the ground along with my tears!

How I grieved, my boy!

Look at my clothes, my son! They are not white! No, they are dreadful, miserable, black rags!

And your father! He is inside the palace. Blind, old, steeped in misery and regret for the loss of a pair of sons, let loose from the yoke of his house.

He rushes to draw a sword upon himself, one minute and then throws a noose over the rafters the next, all the while groaning and lamenting the curses he has hurled upon his sons. He cries and cries and hides himself in his darkness.

But I hear you have married a foreign wife, my son! You have married and you are enjoying fatherhood in a foreign house, away from your mother! You have made foreigners your new relatives!

This is a heavy blow to me, my son. To me and to Laius, your ancestor. It is a heavy blow to us, this foreign marriage of yours!

And it was not me who lit the wedding torches for you, my son, as our custom requires of a blessed mother. Nor has the river Ismenus enjoyed your marriage and you have stayed distant from him. You did not take the wedding baths in his springs and Thebes did not shout out for you those joyful cries they shout when a bride enters her house.

Curse them whoever it was who caused all this!

Curse it, if it was the sword!

Curse her if it was Eris, the goddess of strife!

Curse him if it was Oedipus, your father!

Curse him if it was some malevolent god who brought havoc into the house of Oedipus!

Curse them all because it is I who has suffered the pains of their work!

**Chorus:**

The pains of childbirth are powerful!

**Chorus:**

All women –all of them!- love their children!

**Polyneices:**

Mother, it was both wise and foolish for me to come here and walk among enemies!

There is no question about the fact that all men love their country and if anyone says otherwise, well, that man just loves words. His sentiments though are elsewhere.

But, mother, I was gripped by the fear that my brother might set a trap for me and kill me. That's why I had my sword drawn at the ready and walked cautiously around the city, my eyes scanning its every corner. There is only one thing that gives me relief from that fear and that is your truce; that and your trust it was that made me enter the walls of my paternal home.

And I have shed many tears, mother, when, after such a long time, I saw our palace, the altars of our gods, the training grounds of my childhood and the waters of Dirce!

How unjustly I was driven away from all this!

Tears flooded my eyes, mother!

And then, grief upon grief, I see you, my darling mother, with your hair cut short and dressed in these black rags!

Ah! Such misery!

How dreadful it is, mother, for members of the same family to hate one another!

How impossible it is to bring about a settlement!

And how does my blind father cope in the palace with his darkness? And my two sisters, how are they? No doubt they would be also mourning my exile!

**Jocasta:**

Some god has corrupted the seed of the race of Oedipus and it began with me. It was I who broke Apollo's law and in an unfortunate hour, married your father and gave birth to you.

But let's not think of these things. Mortals must endure what the immortals send them.

Now, my son, I am afraid to ask you what I want to ask you because I don't want to hurt you but my wish to do so is great.

**Polyneices:**

Ask me whatever you want, mother. Leave no questions unasked. Your wish is my pleasure to fulfil.

**Jocasta:**

Well then, son, the first thing I long to know is this: What is it like, to be deprived of one's own home? Is it a great suffering?

**Polyneices:**

Much greater a suffering to experience than to talk about, mother!

**Jocasta:**

How do you mean? What's the worst of it for the exiles?

**Polyneices:**

The worst of it, mother, is the fact that there is no free speech.

**Jocasta:**

That's a slave's life, you're describing, not to be able to speak freely.

**Polyneices:**

And you are forced to put up with the stupidity of those in power.

**Jocasta:**

Yes, that, too is a great suffering: To be forced to join company with fools!

**Polyneices:**

Yet, for a man to get what he wants, he must go against his own nature and act like a slave.

**Jocasta:**

They say that exiles live on hopes.

**Polyneices:**

Yes, hopes that look good in the mind but slow to arrive.

**Jocasta:**

Hopes, make men love their misery

**Polyneices:**

But has time not shown how hollow these hopes are?

**Jocasta:**

How did you survive before you got married?

**Polyneices:**

Sometimes I got enough to eat and sometimes I didn't.

**Jocasta:**

But didn't your father's friends out there not help you?

**Polyneices:**

One must try to do well by himself. Friends disappear the moment luck disappears.

**Jocasta:**

And what of your noble birth? Did that not raise high your prospects?

**Polyneices:**

No, noble birth did not feed me. It is a curse to be poor.

**Jocasta:**

It seems then that a mortal's best friend is his country.

**Polyneices:**

No words can describe just how true that is, mother!

**Jocasta:**

Why go to Argos, though? What did you have in mind?

**Polyneices:**

Some oracle that Apollo gave to Adrastus.

**Jocasta:**

What oracle? What did it say? I haven't heard of this oracle.

**Polyneices:**

The oracle had told him to marry his daughters to a boar and a lion.

**Jocasta:**

But what did you have to do with these beasts, my son?

**Polyneices:**

I have no idea. God took a hold of my fate.

**Jocasta:**

The god is wise. And what about the wife? How did you come to select her?

**Polyneices:**

It was night and I had gone to Adrastus' house.

**Jocasta:**

Looking for a bed for the night as a wandering exile would?

**Polyneices:**

That's right but then, a little later, another exile turned up.

**Jocasta:**

And who was that, no doubt another poor miserable soul!

**Polyneices:**

Oeneas' son, a man called Tydeus.

**Jocasta:**

But how did Adrastus come to think you were beasts?

**Polyneices:**

Because we began fighting about the night's bed.

**Jocasta:**

And so, that's how Adrastus came to understand the meaning of Apollo's oracle.

**Polyneices:**

And that's how he came to give us his daughters!

**Jocasta:**

But how are you managing with your wife, are you happy with her or unhappy?

**Polyneices:**

So far, I have no complaints about my marriage.

**Jocasta:**

How did you manage to bring such an army with you here?

**Polyneices:**

Adrastus swore to both his sons-in-law, me and Tydeus, that he would restore us both to our country, me first and so, many Argive and Mycenaean nobles came to do me this miserable but necessary favour. Miserable, because I am marching against my own city.

I swear by the gods, mother, that I raise my spear against my loved ones against my will. But it's now up to you mother, to bring these troubles to an end. It is up to you to bring two loving brothers together again and to put an end to my pains as well as yours and those of the whole city.

It's an old saying, mother but I will say it, just the same: Among mortals, wealth is held with the greatest esteem and of all things that this world has, wealth is the most powerful and it is for this wealth that I have come here with thousands of armed men.

A poor noble, mother, counts for nothing!

**Chorus:**

Ah, here's Eteocles!

He, too has come to discuss the truce.

**Chorus:**

Come, now, mother Jocasta. It is your task to speak such words that will reconcile your two sons.

*Enter Eteocles with his men.*

**Eteocles:**

Here I am, mother! I've come only because you've asked me to come.

So! Now, what are we to do? Let the words begin!

I've stop arranging the two divisions of our troops around the walls of the city so that I could come and listen to your wise words about how to resolve our differences.

It is the promise of these negotiations that made me allow this man to enter our city.

*He moves threateningly towards Polyneices but Jocasta stops him.*

**Jocasta:** *Raising her hand to stop Eteocles.*

Stop!

Justice never comes with haste!

It is the slowly considered words that often bring about the wise result.

Tame those fierce glares and stop all this maddened huffing and puffing!

You are not staring at a gorgon's severed head but at your very own brother who has come here.

And you, Polyneices! Turn and look at your brother in the eye. It is only when you talk face-to-face that your tongue softens and your ears become more receptive.

*The brothers obey her reluctantly*

Now, I want to give you two some wise advice and it is this: When one angry friend visits another angry friend, when they meet face-to-face, all other matters should be forgotten and the only thought in their minds should be the business that had brought them together.

So, now, you Polyneices, my son, you speak first. You have come here at the head of an Argive army, as one who has been wronged.

May one of the gods be the judge of the matter and reconcile your troubles.

**Polyneices:**

Truth's words are simple to utter and justice needs no subtle explanations. Justice is self explanatory. Injustice, however, being a sickness, requires complicated medicines and it is this sort of thinking that I have constructed about my father's house.

I have left the house, of my own will, so as to save both of us –Eteocles and me– from the curses Oedipus, has made against us. I have left the house and the land for him to rule until a year has passed and I returned to rule in turn. That, I thought, would save all of us, including myself, from falling into this dreadful hatred and animosity, the way it's happening now.

But, he went back on his word. First he consented to this way of doing things and took great oaths, calling the heavens to witness them but then he kept none of his promises! Here he is, still holding on to the throne and onto my share of its wealth.

But I am still prepared to simply take what is mine and to dismiss my army so long as I take my turn at the throne and return it back to him when his turn comes about.

I would rather not sack my own city or plant ladders up against its walls but I would try to do if I don't receive justice.

The heavens know that in spite of doing the just thing in every respect, I am being deprived of my own country in the most unjust and unholy manner.

Mother, I have used clear and simple words to show the justice of my story, instead of gathering up tricky and complicated arguments. These should satisfy both, the wise as well as the simple folks.

**Chorus:**

It seems to me that you are telling the truth, though I wasn't born nor raised in Greece.

**Eteocles:**

If all agreed with what is wise and what is just then there'd be no disputes between men. But, mother, the way things are right now there is nothing among mortals that is the same and equal. Perhaps in words but certainly not in practice.

Mother, I will speak fully and leave nothing out.

Mother, I would go to the heavens, if I could. To the stars and to where the sun rises in the morning, and then to the depths of the earth to take a hold of the greatest goddess ever, Kingdom!

Mother, I will not allow anyone else to take this great blessing from me. Mother, I want to keep it for myself! Only cowards will exchange the greater for the lesser. And then, what shame I would feel if I allowed this man here, this man who has come here with an army so as to destroy our city, to get what he wants!

Thebes would feel disgraced if I were to show that I was afraid of those Mycenaean spears and let him take her throne.

It is not right for him to try and reach some agreement by force of arms, mother because words can achieve everything that the arms of an enemy can achieve.

Still, if he wants to live here, in our city, in any other manner, than that will be fine but I will never tolerate being a slave to anyone when I can be the ruler!

Well then!

Now let the fire start!

Let the swords clash!

Fill the battle ground with chariots of war!

I will not give my kingdom to this man!

And if one should perform a deed of injustice, then let it be performed for the sake of a kingdom. Let virtue be done for all else!

**Chorus:**

Eloquent speeches should not be made to justify wicked deeds. Such practice bitterly harms justice.

**Jocasta:**

My son! Eteocles!

My son, not everything about old age is bad. Experience, for example makes the aged wiser than the youth.

But, my son, why do you revere the goddess Ambition, the worst of all the deities? She is not for the just! Shun her! We've seen her work often enough in the past. She enters the cities and houses of prosperous people and then leaves only after ruining those who had dealings with her and yet you've lost your mind over her!

No, my son. The goddess you should revere is Equality.

She unites friend to friend, city to city, ally to ally because among mortals, the



ways of Equality are the ways of their laws. Where we see one with less than another, there we also see the makings of war.

It is this very divinity, Equality, who has set up man's measuring devices and standards. She it is who constructed ways, numbers, for different measures, like weight.

Night's dark eyelid and the rays of the Sun travel the same distance around the year and neither of them is envious when the other dominates and both serve our needs.

So, you, my son, a mere mortal, should you not accept to hand your brother his rightful share of your father's estate? Where then do you see Justice?

To be a king is an unjust thing. A thing of unjust prosperity. Why do you place such an excessive value upon it? Why think of it as such a big thing, full of honour and glory? It's a hollow thing! Why work so hard just so you can pile up the possessions in your halls? Where's the value in that? There is none! The wise folks know that what suffices is ample.

We, mortals have no possessions of our own. We simply take care of those that belongs to the gods. Then they simply take it back when they want it.

Wealth is not permanent a thing. It is short-lived.

But if I were to ask you to choose one of these two things: which do you prefer to save, your throne or your country, what would your answer be?

Would it be, the throne?

What if your brother and his Argive spears smash the spears of Thebes?

Then you will witness the fall of this city's walls, and a great many Theban girls being dragged away against their will by the enemy's men.

That wealth you're so much in love with, will become a most dreadful thing for Thebes.

But then again, you are also in love with ambition and with that throne!

That's what I say to you, Eteocles and to you, Polyneices, I say that Adrastus did you a stupid favour and you, my son, are doing a stupid thing, coming here to destroy your own city! May you never succeed in this but let us say you did. How on earth will raise the trophy of victory to Zeus? How could you perform any sacrifices after you have destroyed your own city? What will you inscribe upon the spoils that you'll set up by the streams of our river Ismenus? Will it be, "Polyneices has dedicated these shields to the gods after he has set flames to Thebes?" I hope, my son, that you will never receive such a fame from Greece!

Then, what if you lose and he survives and you leave behind countless of dead soldiers? How will you ever make it back to Argos after that sort of loss?

Some Argive citizen will tell, Adrastus, "What a dreadful marriage you've given us, Adrastus! You have ruined us for the sake of a bride!"

Polyneices, my son, you are in pursuit of a twofold ruin: You will lose everything you have there and you will gain nothing here.

Forget all this, my sons! Both of you, forget all this extreme violence!

There is nothing worse than the madness of two fools!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Gods!

Avert this evil! Bring peace to the sons of Oedipus!

**Eteocles:**

Mother, there's no time left for a subtle war of words. The time has run out and, in any case, your wisdom will be wasted. We will love one another only on the terms I have said, which are that I hold onto the throne of this land and rule it as its king. So give up on your silly, lengthy admonitions and leave me alone.

*Indicating Polyneices.*

And you! Get out of here! Out of our walls or else die!

*Anger rising on both sides*

**Polyneices:**

Is that so? And who is this brave, invincible man who will plunge his sword into my body and escape his own death?

**Eteocles:**

Who? He's right here, in front of you. *He grasps the hilt of his sword.* Can you see what I have in my hands?

**Polyneices:**

I do. But the wealthy are cowards and far too much in love with life.

**Eteocles:**

Is this why you brought a whole army here, to fight a coward?

**Polyneices:**

Yes. It's wiser for a general to be safe in his victory than to be bold and sorry in defeat.

**Eteocles:**

Such bold words from you! Your boldness comes from mother's truce and it is that which will save your life.

**Polyneices:**

I'll say it once more: I am here to get both, the throne and my share of the estate.

**Eteocles:**

We owe you nothing!

This is my house and I shall stay in it.

**Polyneices:**

And you will hold on to my share!

**Eteocles:**

Yes. Now go! Leave this place!

**Polyneices:**

O, altars oh of my father's gods!

**Eteocles:**

Altars that you came to destroy!

**Polyneices:**

Listen to me gods!

**Eteocles:**

What god would hear you after you have marched here to destroy your own country?

**Polyneices:**

And you, shrines of Amphion and Zethus, sons of Zeus, riders of white horses!

**Eteocles:**

They, too, hate you!

**Polyneices:**

Hear me, gods! I am sent away from my own land!

**Eteocles:**

Yes, the land to which you have come to sent us away!

**Polyneices:**

Such injustice, gods!

**Eteocles:**

Save your praying for Mycenae, not here!

**Polyneices:**

You utter such sacrilege!

**Eteocles:**

But I am not my country's enemy, like you!

**Polyneices:**

Because you have exiled me without my share of father's wealth.

**Eteocles:**

Not only that but I will also kill you!

**Polyneices:**

O, father, father! Listen to what I must endure!

**Eteocles:**

And he can hear what you're up to with your army, as well!

**Polyneices:**

And you, mother?

**Eteocles:**

It is not proper for you to call her "mother!"

**Polyneices:**

Oh, Thebes, my city!

**Eteocles:**

No, not Thebes! Go to Argos and call upon the waters of Lerna, instead!

**Polyneices:**

Don't worry, I am going.

Mother, thank you!

**Eteocles:**

Go! Get out of this country!

**Polyneices:**

I am going but let me see my father!

**Eteocles:**

That is one wish you won't be enjoying!

**Polyneices:**

What about my young sisters?

**Eteocles:**

No, you'll never see them either!

**Polyneices:** *Shouting towards the palace*

Sisters!

**Eteocles:**

Why call them? You are their bitterest enemy!

**Polyneices:**

Well, then, mother, farewell to you!

**Jocasta:**

Well, I shall fare, my son, with what I am about to suffer!

**Polyneices:**

Miserable Fate!

I am no longer your son, mother!

**Jocasta:**

A fate miserable in so many ways!

**Polyneices:** *Indicating Eteocles*

He has made my life a miserable insult!

**Eteocles:**

Insults to the insulter!

**Polyneices:**

Where will you be making your stand outside the walls?

**Eteocles:**

Why ask that?

**Polyneices:**

So that I may stand directly opposite you and kill you!

**Eteocles:**

Precisely what I wish for, as well!

**Jocasta:**

Oh what horror!

What will you do, my sons?

**Polyneices:**

That will become obvious very soon, mother!

**Jocasta:**

Can you not escape your father's curses, my sons?

**Eteocles:**

Let the whole house come down!

**Polyneices:** *Brandishing his sword*

This sword will not stay idle for long. Soon it will be covered in blood.

And I call upon Thebes, this land that raised me and to her gods, to witness just what bitter dishonour I have suffered here and how like a slave I am driven away! Like a slave and not like one whose father is Oedipus, who is his father also!

Thebes, my city, if you suffer anything at all, blame it on this man, here, not on me!

It was not my wish to come here and it is not my wish to wage war against you.

*Turning to the statue of Apollo*

And you, too, Phoebus Apollo, lord of the highways, farewell!

My house, my childhood friends and statues of all our gods, who receive our sacrifices, farewell to you all! I have no idea if I will ever address you again though, hope never sleeps and I hope that with the help of the gods, I will kill this man and rule this country!

**Eteocles:** *To Polyneices:*

Go! Leave this land!

It was by divine inspiration that our father called you Polyneices, "man of much strife!"

*Exit Polyneices.*

*Eteocles and Jocasta, enter the palace.*

**Chorus:**

Cadmus came from Tyre to this land where the four legged calf let her virgin body fall upon the ground for him, and so, the words of Apollo's oracle came true.

**Chorus:**

This was the place he had to found a city, this was the place where the fields grew wheat, and where the streams of Dirce nourished the lush and fertile plains.

**Chorus:**

And this was the place where Zeus lay with Semele and Dionysus was born; and when still but a baby, the curly shoots of ivy wove a burgeoning green wreath all around him...

**Chorus:**

...a blessing to the god who the women of Thebes worshipped with dances in bacchic ecstasy.

**Chorus:**

This was the place where Ares' murderous serpent, a guard most fierce watched over the watered fields and the rushing streams with an ever-roving eye.

**Chorus:**

Cadmus killed that beast!

**Chorus:**

Killed it with a marble stone.

**Chorus:**

Bashed and bloodied its head with his mighty murderous arm.

**Chorus:**

He had come to that stream to use its lustral waters.

**Chorus:**

Then he obeyed Pallas Athena, the goddess who was not born of a mother, and threw the snake's teeth into the deep furrows of the fertile earth.

**Chorus:**

And from the earth's top soil the vision sprung of men in full armour who fought a full and slaughtering fight among themselves and, once again, became one with the deep, dear earth.

**Chorus:**

And the fight soaked with blood the good earth that had brought them forth to the light of the sunny breezes of the heavens.

**Chorus:**

O, Epaphus, son of Zeus, child of the heifer, Io, our ancestor, I call on you in my foreign tongue!

**Chorus:**

I call on you, Epaphus, with the call of a foreigner!

**Chorus:**

Come, Epaphus, come, I pray to you, come to Thebes!

**Chorus:**

Come to this land which your descendants founded and in which the twin goddesses settled, Persephone and Demeter, the all-loving, the torch bearer, the mistress and nurse of all, the goddess of the Earth.

**Chorus:**

Bring them here, Epaphus, bring these torch bearing goddesses to defend this land.

**Chorus:**

All things are easy for the gods!

*Enter Eteocles and some men.*

**Eteocles:** *To one of his men*

You! Go and bring here Creon, son of Menoeceus and brother to Jocasta, my mother!

Tell him that I wish to talk with him before we begin the battle and the shooting of spears – about private and state matters.

*He suddenly sees Creon approaching*

Ah! Never mind. The man has saved you the trouble. I see he's heading towards my palace.

*Enter Creon*

**Creon:**

Ah, king Eteocles! It took a lot of work to find you, sir!

I have walked over to all the gates and to all the guard posts of Thebes, looking for you!

**Eteocles:**

Uncle Creon! I, too wanted to see you!

I have talked with Polyneices about the terms of peace but, personally, I have found them most unsatisfactory.

**Creon:**

What I've heard is that, relying on the support he has from his father-in-law, Adrastus, Polyneices considers himself greater than the whole of Thebes!

But let us leave this for the gods to decide my boy. I have come to talk to you about something that is far more important.

**Eteocles:**

Oh, yes, and what is this? What do you mean, "important?"

**Creon:**

A prisoner has arrived, one of our men who has escaped from the hands of the Argives.

**Eteocles:**

Yes? And what news has he brought us from their camp?

**Creon:**

That the Argives will surround the city walls with their spears.

**Eteocles:**

In that case, let the city send out its troops!

**Creon:**

Send them out where, my boy?

Are you so young that you cannot see what's in front of you?

**Eteocles:**

What do you mean, where? Outside, of course, at the trenches, to fight our enemies!

**Creon:**

But our army is small, Eteocles, whilst theirs is vast!

**Eteocles:**

Bah! I know what that lot is like. Brave in words, weak in action!

**Creon:**

But the Argives, my boy! They are well respected by all the Greeks.

**Eteocles:**

Don't worry, Creon. I'll soon cover the plain out there with their corpses!

**Creon:**

That's my wish, as well but, from what I can see, it will take a great deal of pain.

**Eteocles:**

Are you suggesting I should keep our army locked up within the walls?

**Creon:**

Well, my boy, victory depends entirely upon wisdom.

**Eteocles:**

So you think that I should follow some different paths to it, do you?

**Creon:**

Yes, you should follow all the paths available. Try them all first before you risk everything.

**Eteocles:**

Should we set up an ambush at night, perhaps?

**Creon:**

Only if you can secure a safe way back here, if things go wrong.

**Eteocles:**

Night evens things out for both sides but it favours the daring.

**Creon:**

The darkness of the night can be terrible if your plan misfires.

**Eteocles:**

What if I attack them while they're having their supper?

**Creon:**

That might cause them a bit of panic but in the end, what we are after is victory.

**Eteocles:**

They can't retreat from there because Dirce's ford is too deep.

**Creon:**

The best plan is to be well prepared and well defended.

**Eteocles:**

What if we attack them with our cavalry?

**Creon:**

The Argives are well protected all around by their chariots.

**Eteocles:**

What should I do, then? Hand the city over to them?

**Creon:**

Of course not, my boy! But you are a smart man, think of a smart plan.

**Eteocles:**

What plan, Creon? What plan is smarter than those I have already suggested?

**Creon:**

I hear that they have seven chiefs who...

**Eteocles:**

...who have been ordered to do what? What strength could there be in seven men?

**Creon:**

They have been ordered to lead seven companies of men and storm our seven gates.

**Eteocles:**

So, what should we do about that, Creon? My patience has run out.

**Creon:**

Do the same. Choose seven chiefs yourself and set them at the gates, against theirs.

**Eteocles:**

To do what, do the fighting themselves or lead companies of soldiers?

**Creon:**

Lead companies.

Choose the bravest of your men, Eteocles.

**Eteocles:**

I understand. To hold back the Argives from scaling our walls.

**Creon:**

And for them to be co-commanders to you. One chief cannot see everything that is going on, on a battlefield.

**Eteocles:**

And how shall I choose them? Should I seek out bravery or wisdom?

**Creon:**

Both. The one is nothing without the other.

**Eteocles:**

Fine. I shall do as you suggest, Creon.

I will go to our seven towers and there place guards, equal in number to those of the enemy. It would take me too long to mention each one of them by name and the enemy is already hard against our walls.

I must leave for the battle now and not have my hand stay idle.

If only I could meet my brother, face to face, clash with him spear to spear and kill him for coming here, to destroy my city! Still, Creon, if Fate fails me, you should make sure that my sister, Antigone, marries your son, Haemon. Now, as I go out on my way to the battle, I confirm their previous betrothal to each other. You are my uncle, my mother's brother, so there's no need to say too much about this: look after her well, for your sake as well as mine.

My father has acted like a fool, taking his own eyes out! He'll receive no praise from me for that act but his curses might well kill both, me and my brother.

Oh and one more thing remains to be done. We must ask the seer, Teiresias if he has a message from the heavens to tell us but I will send your son, Menoeceus, named after your own father, to bring him here. He'll talk with you freely but not with me because I have often scorned his prophetic art to his face and so he bears



a grudge against me.

But now, Creon, I leave you with this command for Thebes: If victory is mine, then the corpse of Polyneices should not be buried within these walls and if anyone dares bury it, even if he is one of his kin, then he should be put to death. These are my words to you, Creon.

Now these are my words to my slaves.

*To his men*

Bring my weapons out here. My weapons and my armour for the spear clash ahead. The victory of that will be mine because I have justice on my side.

*Some men come out from the palace with his armour and help him wear it.*

And now I pray to the goddess Eulabeia, the most apt of the gods to save this city.

*Exit Eteocles and his men (SL)*

*Exit Creon (SR)*

**Chorus:**

O, Ares!

**Chorus:**

O, god of war!

God of many toils!

Why do you love blood and death so much?

**Chorus:**

Why are so much out of harmony with the songs and dances of Dionysus?

**Chorus:**

Come, toss your curls to the breeze with the young garlanded dancers!

**Chorus:**

Come, Ares! Sing to the lute's soft breaths, the home of the grace of their dancing! feet!

**Chorus:**

Why do you, instead, lead the gloomy dance of war, breathing into the chests of the Argives the lust for Theban blood?

**Chorus:**

It's not Bacchus' thyrsus that you wave madly, nor do you dance dressed in fawnskin but among chariots and with bridled steeds you wheel about your strongly hooved colt.

**Chorus:**

And with frenzy you push and you urge your wild horses by the waters of Ismenus and charge with spears and hatred against the race of the earth born!

**Chorus:**

And against these stone walls you marshal a chorus of war, armed with bronze swords and spears.

**Chorus:**

How dreadful a goddess is Strife!

She has brought these troubles to the lords of this land, the sons of Labdacus whose sorrows are endless.

**Chorus:**

Kitheron!

**Chorus:**

Kitheron, Artemis' most loved sacred precinct!

**Chorus:**

Kitheron, rich with leaves, rich with snow, rich with wild beasts!

**Chorus:**

How I wish you had not saved the discarded baby, Oedipus, Jocasta's son, a boy cast away from his home to die!

**Chorus:**

A child marked with golden pins on his feet.

**Chorus:**

How I wish the winged virgin, Sphinx, that beast from the mountain, had not come to bring bitter death to this land, singing her vile, unmusical songs.

**Chorus:**

She hovered over our walls and with her four taloned feet she snatched away Cadmus' sons. Away into the light of the boundless sky.

**Chorus:**

A murderous beast sent by Hades from his halls to destroy the Cadmeans.

**Chorus:**

And now a new strife has sprung among Oedipus' sons and inside his palace and inside his city!

**Chorus:**

That which is wrong can never be called right and children of such a sinful marriage can never be a source of pride for the mother who bore them.

**Chorus:**

And they are a stain upon their father, the man who is also their brother.

**Chorus:**

There is a tale, Earth, there is a tale which the barbarians tell and which I heard, here, at home, how you once, a long time ago, brought forth the race of the red crested snake, whose teeth were sown in your soil.

**Chorus:**

A snake, they say that fed on beasts, a glory and a censure to the ears of the Thebans.

**Chorus:**

Then came Harmonia's wedding where the gods, children of Heaven were invited

**Chorus:**

Amphion was also there and with his lyre, charmed the rocks and so the fortress of this land rose up between the eddies of the double river, Dirce which nourish the lush valley at the mouth of Ismenus.

**Chorus:**

And so, Io, my horned ancestress, gave birth to the Cadmeian race, to the kings of Thebes.

**Chorus:**

And so it is that Thebes, our city, with the countless blessings bestowed upon her, blessings on top of blessings, became the pinnacle on Ares' crown.

*Enter Creon (SR), immediately before the blind seer, Teiresias, who enters the stage from the opposite direction. Teiresias is walking with the aid of a walking stick and*

*is led by his daughter. He is wearing a golden crown. These two are accompanied by Menoeceus.*

*The girl is holding under her right arm tablets of Teiresias' oracles.*

**Teiresias:**

Lead on, my daughter. You are the eyes that can guide my blind man's steps, just like the stars are guides to the sailors. Walk in front of me and make sure I place my feet securely upon this level ground. Don't let me fall, my child.

Ah, how feeble is your father!

Hold well in your maiden hand the divinations I made when I sat in my holy chair of prophesy and examined the signs made by the birds.

*Turning to Menoeceus*

Tell me, Menoeceus my child, tell me son of Creon, how much further through the city do we have to go to reach your father?

My knees are tired, my son and I must make far too many short steps. It's hard for me to go on for much longer.

**Creon:**

Ah! Teiresias! Courage, old friend!

You can now anchor your feet here, near your friends.

*To Menoeceus*

Son, give him a hand.

When an old man travels, whether he's on foot or on a carriage, he still needs the help of others.

**Teiresias:**

Ah, I am here!

But what is the urgency, Creon?

**Creon:**

First take a breath and gather your strength after this steep climb up here and then I'll tell you.

**Teiresias:**

It's true, the journey has exhausted me!

I've only just come back from Athens, the land of the Erechthians, yesterday.

There, too, there was war! Eumolpus, king of Thrace had declared it against the Athenians, descendants of Cecrops for whom I had declared a splendid victory and for which I was awarded this golden crown you see on my head. It was from the Athenians' first spoils of war.

**Creon:**

I'll take your victory crown as a good omen, Teiresias.

You know well that we, too are tossing about in a most perilous tempest of war with the Greeks! Perilous, indeed for Thebes!

Eteocles, our king has asked me to call for you and to learn from you what we should do to save the city. He has already donned his armour and he is on his way to do battle with the Argives.

**Teiresias:**

Had it been Eteocles asking me that question, I would have held my tongue and uttered no oracle but since it is you who needs to know, I shall tell you.

This city, Creon, has been sick for a long time, from that day that Laius had his son,

a son which the gods did not want and who had become his mother's husband. This was a wise warning sent by the gods to the Greeks when they caused poor Oedipus to destroy his eyes in such a bloody manner.

It was a warning which Oedipus' sons wanted to conceal, thinking that they could trick the gods and escape their wrath but, in that, they had made a dreadful mistake. Because, in order to hide this warning from the eyes of the world, they have not only neglected to give their father the honour due to him but they have also forbidden him from going outside of the palace. This has enraged the poor man most violently and so, hurt by the suffering and the indignity, he lashed out at them by uttering the most terrible curses.

About all this I spoke often and did all I could but this only made me their enemy. But their death is imminent, Creon. Each will die by the hand of the other and the dead will be many, both, from the Argives, as well as the Thebans and their corpses will be heaped the one upon the other and Thebes will fall into bitter mourning!

And you, poor Thebes, you and your army, will be totally destroyed, unless someone listens to my words.

What should have happened is that neither of these two men be made citizens or rulers of this city because they are both cursed by the gods and they will overturn it and destroy it.

But, since evil has now triumphed over virtue, there is only one remedy left for the survival of Thebes, though, because it is neither safe for me to reveal the medicine that will save it, nor is it too easy for those who have been hurt by this misfortune to accept it, I shall go.

Farewell, Creon!

I, too, as one man among many, shall suffer what I must.

What else can I do?

*He turns to go by Creon holds him back*

**Creon:**

No, no, stay here, old man!

**Teiresias:**

No, don't try to stop me, Creon.

**Creon:**

But why do you want to leave?

**Teiresias:**

It is not I who is leaving Creon but your own fortune.

**Creon:**

Tell me what can save Thebes and her people!

**Teiresias:**

You want to know this now but soon, you will not want to know.

**Creon:**

What? Why would I ever not want to know how to save my city?

**Teiresias:**

So, do you really want to know?

**Creon:**

Yes, I do. Really! What is there in the world that I should want more?

**Teiresias:**

Then I shall tell you my prophecies.

First though, tell me, where is Menoeceus, the boy who brought me here?

**Creon:**

He is right here, old man. Standing next to you.

**Teiresias:**

Then tell him to go away. he must not hear my prophecies.

**Creon:**

Menoceus is my son and, if he has to, he will be quiet.

**Teiresias:**

So, you want me to speak in front of him?

**Creon:**

Yes, it would make him very happy to hear how we can save our city.

**Teiresias:**

Well then, hear the path of my oracles and what you should do if you want to save Thebes.

You have asked most earnestly to hear what Fate declared. Well, then listen: This child of yours, Menoeceus, you must sacrifice him for the sake of the city.

**Creon:**

What? What tale is this you're telling me, old man?

**Teiresias:**

I have told you what it is you must do!

**Creon:**

Oh! So much pain in such few words!

**Teiresias:**

Pain, yes, to you, Creon but salvation to your city!

**Creon:**

No, I have heard nothing!

No, I have understood nothing!

To Hades with the city!

**Teiresias:**

Ha! Creon is no longer Creon. He is some other man! He is going back on his word.

**Creon:**

Go Teiresias! Go and farewell to you. I have no need of your oracles.

**Teiresias:**

Has your misfortune killed the truth, Creon?

**Creon:** *Falling to his knees before Teiresias in desperate supplication*

Old man, I beg you, by your knees and by your grey beard!

**Teiresias:**

Creon, why, pray to me? Fate's ill cannot be averted.

**Creon:**

Teiresias, keep this quiet. Tell none of the citizens about this.

**Teiresias:**

Are you asking me to act unjustly? No, I cannot keep silent!

**Creon:**

But do you want to kill my son?

**Teiresias:**

Others will consider that. I will simply speak.

**Creon:**

Ah! How did this curse ever fall upon me and upon my son?

**Teiresias:**

Well may you ask that question and it is well that you wish to discuss it.

This young man must be sacrificed. Killed in the chamber where the earthborn serpent, the guardian of Dirce's waters was born, giving the earth a libation with his blood.

This he must do to placate the ancient wrath that Ares, the god of war, is holding against Cadmus for seeking to avenge the slaughter of the earthborn serpent.

Do this and you'll have Ares as your ally!

Then, if the earth receives fruit, in return for fruit and mortal blood for the loss of the blood of her offspring, she will look kindly towards you again after having sent to you a race of sown men, wearing golden helmets.

But a descendant of those men, Creon, one who is born from the jaw of the serpent, must die and of those men, of that race of the sown men, you are the only survivor.

You alone, are pure in the lineage from both sides, that of your mother as well as of your father and so are your sons.

Haemon can not be sacrificed because, though he has not yet married and has not tasted of the bed of love, he is, nonetheless, betrothed and has a wife. Menoeceus, here, however is not and so, if he is indeed devoted to Thebes, he will save her and give her glory, by offering himself, like a colt, for the sacrifice.

This will cause great consternation to Adrastus and his Argives as they go back home, leaving behind their many dead.

Creon, you can choose one of these two fates: to save you city or your son.

So, now, I have told you all I know!

*To his daughter*

Take me home, now child.

Prophets are fools to practice their art. If they prophesy things that are disagreeable to those who have consulted them, then they are seen as hateful creatures; but then, again, if they feel sorry for them and they lie to them, then they sin against the heavens!

Only Phoebus Apollo, who is afraid of no mortal, should utter oracles for us.

*Exit Teiresias and the girl*

**Chorus:**

Creon, you are speechless!

**Chorus:**

Not a word from you!

**Chorus:**

But I am just as shocked as you are Creon!

**Creon:**

But what could I say? It's obvious what I'm going to say: I'll never fall so low as to offer my own child to be slaughtered for the sake of the city!

Everyone loves his child and no one would offer it for slaughter.

I have no desire to be praised for having murdered my own son.  
But I am old enough to do this myself and I am ready to do it: to die for my country.  
Come now, my son. You must flee! Quick before the whole city finds out.

Forget these incoherent utterances of the prophets and hurry, leave Thebes!  
Run my son because he will go to the all the authorities and to all the generals at  
the seven gates and tell every captain there! If we hurry we may be able to save  
your life, otherwise, they'll kill you!

**Menoceus:**

But go where, father? To which city? To which friend?

**Creon:**

Go as far away from Thebes as you can, my boy!

**Menoceus:**

Tell me where and I will obey.

**Creon:**

Go through Delphi.

**Menoceus:**

In what direction, father?

**Creon:**

Towards Aetolia.

**Menoceus:**

Then? Where to after Aetolia?

**Creon:**

Onward towards Thespotia.

**Menoceus:**

To the sacred precincts of Dodona?

**Creon:**

That's right.

**Menoceus:**

Then? Where to after Dodona?

**Creon:**

The god will tell you which way.

**Menoceus:**

What about money, father?

**Creon:**

I'll give you some gold.

**Menoceus:**

Very well, father.

Now you go and I'll make one last visit to my aunt Jocasta, your sister, whose breast  
I first sucked when I was left a motherless orphan baby.

I shall go and say good bye to her and then go off to escape death and save my  
life.

**Creon:**

Then go my son and go quickly and don't give obstacles to your self!

*Exit Creon*

**Menoceus:**

See how easily I took my father's fear away, ladies? Tricked with mere words!

Now I can do as I like.

He wants to send me away and deprive Thebes of her good fortune.

He wants to send me away and turn me into a coward.

It's something that can be excused of an old man but not for one like me, to betray the country that has given birth to me.

Let me tell you this, ladies:

I shall go and save Thebes!

I shall go and give my life for her!

How shameful it would be if, while those men who are not bound by any oracles or even by any of Fate's decrees, stand out there, outside these walls, by their shield, ready to fight and risk their lives for their country, I, like a coward, try to escape? I would be no better than a traitor to my father and to my brother and to my city and I will be shown to be that wherever I go!

By Zeus, who sits in his throne among the stars, no!

And I swear by Ares, the god of blood, the god who had established as rulers of this land, the sown men who rose from the earth: I shall go to the highest peak of the battlements and there kill myself with my own sword so that my blood will spill upon the serpent's dark and deep cave, the very place that the prophet had named and thus, save my city.

I have said what I wanted to say.

Now I go to give the city a gift. Not a mean gift at that. My life. A cure from this plague!

If every man could take a hold of every useful thing he can his hands on and contribute it to his country's common good, then cities would suffer less and prosper more.

*Exit Menoeceus*

**Chorus:**

Winged Sphinx, you came!

**Chorus:**

You came, daughter of Earth and of the murderous Snake, the Echidna of the Underworld!

**Chorus:**

A dire lineage!

**Chorus:**

A long time ago, you came, murderer of myriads!

**Chorus:**

A long time ago you came and plundered ruthlessly the land of the Thebans!

**Chorus:**

You came and brought myriads of groans and sighs of bitter lament!

**Chorus:**

And of destruction!

**Chorus:**

Half virgin beast with blood dripping talons you swooped onto the land with your fast-fluttering wings and tore away our young men from the waters of Dirce!

**Chorus:**

You came and you sang a cursed song of death -no lyre beside it- that filled the



land with wails.

**Chorus:**

Some murderous god was the cause of it all!

**Chorus:**

And so the mothers cried!

**Chorus:**

And so the daughters cried!

**Chorus:**

Shrieks of wailing upon shrieks of wailing!

**Chorus:**

The houses groaned with the weeping!

**Chorus:**

And the whole city groaned with the shrieks of wailing. One street, then the next, all weeping in their turn!

**Chorus:**

One groan after another! An unbearable, irrepressible noise, a fierce thunder rose every time the winged virgin took away one more man from our city.

**Chorus:**

And so the time rolled on and Apollo, through his oracles, had sent poor Oedipus to Thebes and, for a time, the Thebans rejoiced and then, in turn, were made to grieve.

**Chorus:**

He had solved the riddle of the Sphinx, a glorious victory, but then, the poor man, married his mother, poor man, a dire marriage –

**Chorus:**

Poor man! A bitter marriage that polluted the whole city and brought about the bloody curses he drove upon his sons, to fight a gory battle against each other.

**Chorus:**

Poor man!

**Chorus:**

How I admire!

How I admire Menoeceus, the man who's gone to die for his country!

**Chorus:**

He will bring tears to his father's eyes but a glorious victory to his city, this city, Thebes, of the seven gates!

**Chorus:**

Dear Pallas Athena!

Grant that we be mothers of such great sons!

**Chorus:**

Dear Pallas Athena! You, it was who inspired Cadmus to performing that brave deed which made the serpent's blood soak the rock, which cast the divine curse, the murderous curse upon this land.

*Enter Messenger*

*He rushes and knocks hard on the palace gate*

**Messenger:**

Hey there!

Anyone guarding this gate?

Open up! Send Jocasta out here!

Hey! Can't you hear me? How long must I bang on this gate?

Jocasta, Oedipus' beautiful wife! Come out here! I have good news for you! Come, stop your grieving, Jocasta! Shed no more tears!

*Enter Jocasta from the palace*

**Jocasta:**

Ah! Dear man!

Are you here with bad news? Is my son, Eteocles dead?

You have always stood by his shield, my good man, always protecting him from enemy arrows so you must have something terrible to tell me about him.

Is my son alive or dead, my good man? Tell me!

**Messenger:**

He's alive, my lady! Don't worry. Let me free you of that fear.

**Jocasta:**

And the walls? The seven gates? How are they?

**Messenger:**

The walls are not breached, my lady. The city is safe.

**Jocasta:**

And another question that matters to me, my good man. What about Polyneices, do you know if he's alive or dead?

**Messenger:**

So far, my lady, both your sons are alive.

**Jocasta:**

Bless you!

Now tell me, how did you manage to keep the Argive spears away from our gates from where you stood, inside the walls? Tell me so that I can go upstairs and brighten the blind man's heart! Tell me how our city was saved.

**Messenger:**

Thebes was saved because Creon's son, Menoeceus, died for her.

He went and stood at the summit of our battlements and plunged his black sword deep into his throat. Then your son assigned seven companies of men, each with their own captain and placed them at each of the seven gates to look out for the Argives and ward off their spears.

Then he made up a force of reserves for the cavalry and another of shieldsmen for the infantry so that they could rush quickly to any weak spot along the walls when the need arose.

From high up our towers we saw the Argive army with its white shields, leave Teumessus and come charging towards the trenches. Then they burst forth and surrounded our Cadmean lands. Suddenly and all at the same time, war cries and trumpets howled from both sides, from theirs as well as from our own battlements.

The first of their captains was Parthenopaeus, son of the huntress, Atalanta. He charged at our Neistean Gate with his men, a company thick with shields held high. In the centre of his shield was embossed his family emblem, his mother, killing the Aetolian boar with her far-shooting bow.

Next came Amphiaraus, the seer, with his sacrificial offerings on his chariot. He

charged at our Proetid Gates. His shield was of a humble design, with no brightly coloured emblems embossed on it.

Then came Prince Hippomedon. He marched to the Ogygian Gate. The emblem on his shield was that of the all-seeing Argus his dappled eyes gazing, some opening as the stars were rising and others closing with those setting, something we discovered after his death.

Tydeus was stationed at the Homoloian Gate. His shield was embossed with the skin of a lion, its mane standing on end and, like the Titan Prometheus, he carried a torch in his right hand, ready to burn our city.

Polyneices, your son, charged with his men against the Crenaeon Gate. On his shield were the flesh-eating steeds of Potniae, all in a frenzied gallop.

They were grouped around the centre of the shield, near its strap, which made them look even more wild.

No less a lover of war than Ares, the god himself himself, Capaneus drew up his company against the Electran Gate. On the iron circle of his shield he had embossed the image of one of the earth born giants who had just torn up from its foundations a whole city and was now carrying it on his shoulders, a message for us about what he intended to do to Thebes.

Adrastus stood at the seventh gate. He carried his shield with his left arm and on that shield were drawn a hundred hydras, the proud emblem of Argos.

And from the middle of the battlements the hydras were snatching with their jaws our sons, the sons of Cadmus.

I was able to see all these things, my lady as I was taking our watch-word around to all our captains along our walls.

In the beginning, my lady, we were fighting with bows and arrows and with spears and with slings, weapons for distance, and with huge stones.

We were winning the battle when Tydeus and your son together, shouted out, "Hey, sons of the Danaans! Why wait until we are cut to pieces by their missiles? Let's all rush at the gates together! All of us, footmen and cavalry, chariots, all of us together!"

When they heard these words, everyone moved!

Many of them fell to the ground with their heads steeped in blood. Many from our side, too, fell to the ground, in front of our walls, their last breath gone and their rushing blood, quenching the earth's thirst.

Then Atalanta's son, who's from Arcadia and not from Argos, threw himself upon our gates like a typhoon and shouted to have fire and picks brought around to raze the city to the ground.

But our own Periclymenos, Poseidon's son, breaks his rage by hurling at his head a rock so large it could fill a wagon! A huge, coping stone he tore away from the battlements. It smashed the man's blond head into pieces, breaking all the joints on his skull and bloodying his young cheeks, bursting with the first blush of beard. He won't be returning to his mother, Maenalus' daughter with the beautiful bow.

Your son, Eteocles, confident that these gates are secure, left them and went to attend to others. I followed him.

I saw Tydeus and his marshalled men hurling their Aetolian spears into the gaps

at the top of the turrets with such accuracy that our men began to flee from those high battlements. Your son though, like a hunter cheering his hounds, brought them all together again and roused them into returning to their posts. After that, after we corrected that danger, we ran off to other gates.

Ah, Capaneus and his madness! How could I ever describe such a rage?

There he was, charging at us with this huge, long-necked ladder, full of bluster, screaming that not even Zeus with his fierce bolts would stop him from razing the tallest towers of our city to the ground!

A hail of stones were hurled at him but he, still shouting, crouched under his battered shield and began climbing one slippery rung after another but, just as he reached the top of the tower, Zeus delivered his lightning bolt! The earth shuddered and everyone became afraid. Capaneus rolled down from his ladder. His body fell apart and his limbs were tossed in opposite directions. His hair was shot to Olympus, his blood into the ground, his arms and legs, like Ixion on his whirling wheel, rolled all about; and his scorched corpse fell to the earth!

Adrastus then saw that Zeus was working against his army so he pulled his troops back, away from the trenches. Our troops, however, saw this sign from Zeus as an auspicious one and so we charged at the centre of Argive army all in one force, chariots, cavalry and foot soldiers all together.

A bloody chaos reigned with swords and spears clashing, dead soldiers thrown from their chariots and wheels and axles crashing upon each other and corpses piling up upon more corpses.

So, at least for today, we have saved the city's walls, though only the gods know if the city will keep its good luck after today. After all, it was some god or other who has saved it today.

**Chorus:**

It is good to gain a victory but it would be even better if the gods continued with their kindness. That would make us very happy.

**Jocasta:**

Fate and the gods have been good to us. My sons are alive and our city has escaped destruction. Not so for poor Creon though who, it seems has reaped the bitter harvest of my marriage to Oedipus.

The poor man has lost his son, a good turn for Thebes but a dreadful grief for him.

But, tell me, what will my sons do next?

**Messenger:** *Nervously. He is obviously holding back some dire news.*

No, don't ask me that, my lady. Don't ask me what next. Just accept that so far, so good!

**Jocasta:**

What? Why? Your answer frightens me. I can't leave this question unasked!

**Messenger:**

But your sons have escaped death, my lady. What more do you want?

**Jocasta:**

I want to hear if I am just as fortunate in all other matters.

**Messenger:**

Let me go, my lady. While I am here with you, your son is out there, alone and

without my protection!

**Jocasta:**

You are hiding something dreadful from me. Concealing it in darkness!

**Messenger:**

Perhaps I am – but I will not add misery to your blessings!

**Jocasta:** *She grabs him by his cloak*

Yes, you will!

Unless you can escape me by flying off into the heavens!

**Messenger:**

My lady!

My lady, why didn't you just let me deliver my good news and then leave? Why do you insist on my telling you news of misery?

Both your sons, both of them, have come up with this shameless, this reckless idea of fighting each other in single combat, away from the rest of the army.

Oh, how I wish they hadn't uttered their speeches to the Argive and the Theban men!

It was Eteocles who did that first. He climbed up to the highest tower, ordered the men to be silent and then, and then he spoke.

"Generals of the Greek army! Noble sons of the Danaans who made their home here, and you, sons of Cadmus! Don't trade your lives for my sake or for the sake of Polyneices! I will settle this conflict by fighting my brother alone and if I kill him I shall keep the house for myself but if I lose, then I shall let him have it all to himself. You, Argives, leave the battleground and go home. Don't leave your lives here. Enough of the Sown Men have done so."

These were the words of Eteocles.

Then, your other son, Polyneices, stood out, in front of his army and praised him for those words.

Straightaway both armies, Argives and Thebans, roared together with their approval, thinking the words were just. Then, the two generals poured libations and, in the space between the two divided armies, they swore to keep to these terms. Then, the two young sons of Oedipus began to cover their bodies with their bronze armour. They were helped each by his own men, Eteocles by the best of the Sown Men and, his brother, Polyneices by the best of his Danaans.

And there they stood in their shimmering armour, neither flinching for a moment, each madly eager to shoot his spears at the other. Their friends came from their side to rouse their champion with words like this: "Polyneices, you can do it. You can raise a trophy of victory to Zeus and bring words of glory and fame to Argos."

And to the other one, his friends would say, "You are now fighting for Thebes, Eteocles. Win and you shall have the sceptre of the city!"

These are the words they used to urge their champions into the fight.

In the meantime the seers sacrificed the sheep and examined the bursts of the flames and how the gall bladder burst, moisture and heat being enemies as well as the tips of the flames which foretold one of two things, victory or defeat.

Now, my lady, Jocasta, if you have any powers of persuasion over them, with words of wisdom or charm, go and stop your sons from this dreadful fight. The danger

for them is great. The victory prize for you will be bitter tears, if the result is the loss of both your sons in the one day!.

*Exit the messenger*

*From within we hear Antigone singing a gentle song*

*Jocasta goes to the gate of the palace, opens it partially and shouts.*

**Jocasta:**

Antigone!

Antigone, my girl, come outside! Come!

Come, my daughter! Such heaven-sent disasters are not for singing songs or dancing or amusing yourself with childish things.

Come, come! You and your mother must try and prevent your brave brothers from killing each other. Come Antigone! Hurry!

*Enter Antigone from the palace*

**Antigone:**

Mother, darling, what new family disaster are you announcing here, in public, in front of our house?

**Jocasta:**

Your brothers, dear! Your brothers will lose their lives soon!

**Antigone:**

Why, what do you mean, mother?

**Jocasta:**

They are standing against each other ready for mortal dual.

**Antigone:**

Oh, no, mother!

Mother what are you telling me?

**Jocasta:**

Nothing pleasant, my daughter. Come, we must hurry!

**Antigone:**

But mother, where could I go? I can't leave my women's quarters!

**Jocasta:**

To the battlefield!

**Antigone:**

No, mother. I'm too ashamed to be seen in public.

**Jocasta:**

Come, Antigone. This is no time for modesty!

**Antigone:**

But what could I do there?

**Jocasta:**

You could try and stop your brothers from killing each other.

**Antigone:**

Mother! How could I ever do that?

**Jocasta:**

By falling at their knees and begging them, darling. Come!

**Antigone:**

Lead the way, mother. Let's go to the battlefield.

**Jocasta:**

Hurry, darling, hurry!

If I can catch them before they start the fight, we shall all live but if we're too late and they die, then I too, will lie down next to them and take my own life!

*Exit Jocasta and Antigone.*

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

How my heart trembles with terror!

**Chorus:**

How my whole body trembles with terror!

**Chorus:**

With pity for the mother!

**Chorus:**

Bitter pity for the poor mother!

**Chorus:**

Two brothers! Two brothers!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Zeus!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Earth, what pain is this!

**Chorus:**

Which brother will draw the blood of the other?

**Chorus:**

Which neck will be pierced by the murderous spear!

**Chorus:**

Pierce the shield!

**Chorus:**

A brother's life taken by a brother!

**Chorus:**

Ah!

**Chorus:**

For which of the two corpses?

**Chorus:**

For which death shall we wail?

**Chorus:**

Oh, Earth!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Earth!

**Chorus:**

Pain upon pain!

**Chorus:**

Twin the beasts!

**Chorus:**

Twin the murderous hearts!

**Chorus:**

Two spears brandished for two souls!

**Chorus:**

Two murders for two murders!

**Chorus:**

Two bodies will fall!

**Chorus:**

Two bodies will fall!

**Chorus:**

A war prize dedicated to you, Thebes, the bloody corpses of two luckless men!

**Chorus:**

What thinking has brought them to this path?

**Chorus:**

To fight in single combat!

**Chorus:**

Poor men!

**Chorus:**

I shall wail in a foreigner's tongue!

**Chorus:**

I shall wail and I shall shed my tears of mourning for the dead!

**Chorus:**

The murderous Fate is almost done!

**Chorus:**

The slaughter is almost done!

**Chorus:**

The light of this day will see their future!

**Chorus:**

Oh, goddesses of Vengeance!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Erinyes!

**Chorus:**

What dreadful death!

**Chorus:**

What horrible slaughter you wrought upon these brothers!

**Chorus:**

Ah, look!

Creon is coming here, to the palace!

**Chorus:**

What clouds cover his face! What sadness!

**Chorus:**

I'll stop my wailing.

*Enter Creon*

**Creon:**

Ah, what despair! Oh, what sadness!



Which of the two should I cry for, me or my city, a city covered by a cloud of despair big enough to drag it down to the waters of Acheron, the river of Death.

Yes, my son has gained glory for his name because he has died for his city but for me, for me, it is a deed of the darkest gloom!

I have just picked him up from Dragon's Cliff, self-slaughtered and brought him here, in my sad arms. My house groans with the pain and I, an old man, brought my lost son's corpse here for Jocasta to give it its burial wash and lay it out for the grave.

The living must honour the dead and revere the god of the underworld.

**Chorus:**

Your sister, Jocasta, old man and her daughter, Antigone have gone out.

**Creon:**

Gone out? Where to? What's happened? Tell me!

**Chorus:**

She heard that her sons are about to enter into a single combat against each other for the throne of Thebes.

**Creon:**

What? What do you mean? I was tending to my son's corpse and did not get to hear any of this.

*Creon makes to leave but is stopped by the chorus*

**Chorus:**

No, Creon, your sister has left a while ago now.

**Chorus:**

I think Oedipus' two sons have already finished the combat for their life.

**Creon:** *Sees the messenger approaching*

Ah!

And there I see the signs that tell the result!

That messenger's eyes, his sad face! They tell all!

*Enter Messenger*

**Messenger:**

Ah!

Where can I find the words? How can I speak my message?

**Creon:**

With what terror you begin your message!

**Messenger:**

Ah, how painful is this message that I must bring!

Oh, I say it again: How dreadful are these news!

**Creon:**

More dreadful news upon the old ones?

**Messenger:**

Creon, your sister's sons no longer see the light of day!

**Creon:**

Dreadful indeed are the news you bring. Dreadful the pains for me and for the city!

**Messenger:**

Oh, palace! Oh, halls of this house, did you hear these words? Did you hear the news that both of Oedipus' sons have died of the same fate?

**Chorus:**

Yes, if these walls had a heart, they, too would weep!

**Creon:**

What bitter fate!

What heavy pain!

What agony!

**Messenger:**

And yet there are more dreadful news for you to learn, old man!

**Creon:**

How can there possibly be any news sadder than this?

**Messenger:**

Your sister, too, died with her sons!

**Chorus:**

Oh, cry!

**Chorus:**

Raise your groans high!

**Chorus:**

Beat your heads with your white hands!

**Creon:**

Poor, Jocasta! What end has the Sphinx brought to your life and to your marriage!

*Exit Creon*

**Chorus:**

Tell us!

Tell us how the slaughter of the two men happened?

**Chorus:**

How did the combat, Oedipus' curse take place?

**Chorus:**

Tell us!

**Messenger:**

About our city's successes before our walls you already know. The surrounding walls are not too far away so you have heard about what went on there.

Once the two young sons of Oedipus –generals and chiefs, both- had worn their bronze armour, they went and set themselves up between the two armies, ready for the duel of bronze spears.

Polyneices turned towards Argos prayed with these words: "Hera," he said, "Reverend Hera, I have married Adrastus' daughter and now live in Argos, so I belong to you! Help me, Hera, kill my brother and make this right hand of mine stained with his blood in victory, a victory over my enemy.

This is an awesome crown I am asking from you, Hera, to kill my own brother!" Many soldiers shed tears and exchanged glances at these words of his.

Eteocles had turned towards the temple of Pallas Athena and prayed with these words: "Daughter of Zeus, let my hand throw this spear of mine and grant that it pierces his chest and kill him. He has come to destroy my land."

Then the Truscan trumpet burst, like a blazing torch, a signal of murderous battle, the two threw themselves wildly upon each other and clashed like two boars with their tasks sharpened for the kill and their beards soaked in the foam

of frenzy.

They charged at one another with their spears, each crouching behind his own shield to let his opponent's steel slide off it inflicting no injury and if one of them raised his eyes above the circle of his shield, the other would try to plunge his spear into his face, trying to be the first to draw blood. But both were extremely careful to keep their eyes protected behind their shield so that the spears did no damage to either of them.

The terror was more marked on the onlookers than on the combatants since the sweat flowed more freely from them.

Then, Eteocles tried to kick a stone away from his path and in this way exposed his leg outside the shield. This was an opportunity for Polyneices to thrust his Argive spear which he took, wounding Polyneices' thigh. The Danaans roared triumphantly.

Eteocles, however, saw that Polyneices, in thrusting his spear into his thigh, had exposed his shoulder and so, the wounded man plunged his own spear into the breast of Polyneices which gave the Cadmeans their turn in cheering.

But the head of Eteocles' spear broke and so, the man totally helpless, retreated step by step until he found a rock which he picked up and hurled it at his brother, breaking his spear in half.

So now they have come to a point in the combat where they were even. Neither had a spear left to throw.

So, then it was the swords! Both men clutched their sword by the hilt and pounced at each other, clashing their shields together and raising high the clamour of war.

Eteocles then employed a trick which he had learnt when he had visited Thessaly.

With his left foot he moves back from the tangle, all the while making sure his front is well protected by his shield. Then, he puts his right foot forward and plunges his sword into Polyneices' navel, right through until it hits his spine.

Polyneices falls, his ribs and his stomach crumbling into one agonizing, bloody mess. This, thought Eteocles was the end of his enemy. He thought himself the winner and master of the combat, so he threw down his sword and moved in on his brother, trying to strip him of his armour.

But he was so engrossed in that task that he neglected to think about his own safety and that was his ruin: His fallen brother was still breathing faintly and still had his sword within his grasp so he made one last effort and managed to plunge it into Eteocles' liver.

And so, the both of them fell to the ground, next to one another, their mouths full of earth, the prize of victory equally divided between them.

**Chorus:**

Oh, Oedipus, how I pity you!

**Chorus:**

It seems some god has made true your curse to your sons, Oedipus!

**Messenger:**

And now hear what more suffering has been heaped upon all this!

Just when the two men were breathing their last, their doomed mother comes rushing on the scene, with her young daughter Antigone close behind.

And then, when she saw that their wounds were fatal, she groaned in agony, "Oh, my sons, my sons! I have come too late to help you!"

Then she threw herself upon each of her sons in turn and groaned and wailed miserably for all the futile effort she put into suckling them.

Antigone, their sister, also fell beside them and cried in utter sadness. "Oh, my brothers!" she said. "Men who would be taking care of your aged mother! My beloved brothers! Men who would be taking care of my marriage!"

Just then, Lord Eteocles, hearing his mother's voice, let out his last, dying sigh, deep from within his chest and placed a moist hand on her. He didn't utter a word but, from the tears in his eyes, one could tell just how much he loved her.

The other brother, Polyneices, who was still alive, when he saw his sister and his old mother, said, "Mother, we are dying! I am said for you and for my sister and for my dead brother who, though I loved him, we became enemies. Yes, mother, enemy or not, he was my brother and I still loved him! Mother and you, my dear sister, bury me here, in my native land and pacify the city. Let me have so much of my land that I need now, even though I have lost my share of the palace."

Then, Polyneices placed his mother's hand onto his eyelids and said, "mother, you close my eyes and farewell. The darkness is already covering me."

Then both brothers surrendered their sad lives at the same time.

But then, when their mother saw this, in a fit of unbearable grief, snatched a sword from one of the corpses and performed a deed most horrible: She plunged the sword deep into her throat and fell dead upon the corpses of her beloved sons, her arms embracing them both.

Then the two armies sprang to their feet and began arguing about which of them was victorious. Our side was saying it was we who had won but Polyneices' army claimed victory was theirs. The generals on both sides argued fiercely. As far as the other side was concerned, it was Polyneices, their man, who, with his spear had inflicted the first wound. Others again said that no one could claim victory since both men were dead.

At this, Antigone walked away from the battlefield and army of the enemy rushed once again for their spears.

But, by some lucky providence, the Theban army happen to be sitting next to their shields and so we quickly surprised the Argives before they got themselves fully protected.

None of them stood up to meet our attack and the battlefield was overrun by the fugitives and the blood streamed out from the countless who fell under our spears.

When the war ended and we had won, a victory statue of Zeus was erected. Others snatched the shields of the Argives and brought them inside the walls as prizes of war.

Some men are helping Antigone bring her two dead brothers here for their friends to mourn.

And so, some of this city's struggles had a happy ending whereas others a sad one.

*Exit Messenger. A moment later enters Antigone, followed by soldiers who are carrying the corpses of her two brothers and of Jocasta.*

**Chorus:**

Ah! Look!

**Chorus:**

Ah! The dreadful catastrophe that fell upon this house is no longer words for the ear but a sight for the eyes!

**Chorus:**

Here they are! We can see the corpses of the three dead here, in front of the palace!

**Chorus:**

A shared death deprived them all of the light of day.

**Antigone:**

I do not veil the delicate skin of my face but let my curls shade it.

I care not for the deep purple of my virginity under my eyelids.

I feel no shame for the blush of my face.

I come, I hurry, a wild bacchant of the dead.

I throw away the scarf from my hair.

I let loose my delicate saffron robe.

I usher the dead with the wails of grief.

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

Oh, Polyneices! How well your name bears your deeds!

Oh, Thebes! Your wrath is no wrath but murder upon murder!

With grim murder upon dreadful murder and with grim bloodshed upon dreadful bloodshed you brought the House of Oedipus down!

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

Oh, palace! What singer, gifted in the groans of grief, shall I call to cry with me, to cry with me, my palace, my home, to cry with me over these three corpses, a mother and her two sons, a sight that will please the hearts of the goddess of Vengeance? It was Erinyes, the goddess of Vengeance, who has destroyed the House of Oedipus, a long time ago, the very moment when Oedipus, in his wisdom had solved the song of riddles, sung by that savage singer, the Sphinx and killed her.

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

Oh, father!

What woman, Greek or foreign or any other woman of noble birth and mortal blood of ancient times has ever suffered so much, so much bitter, so much visible pain?

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

How shall I sing my lament?

What bird will sing with me my lament? What bird that sits at the highest branches of the oak tree or a pine, will accompany me, me, a motherless maid? What bird will cry with me? A motherless maid who'll spend the rest of her life grieving a bitter

grief, crying ever-flowing bitter tears, alone.

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

*She tears some hair from her head*

Which one? On whose body shall I scatter the first cuttings of my hair? Who shall I lament first? Shall it be my mother? Shall I scatter my hair on her two breasts from which I first sucked milk?

Or shall it be the black wounds of my two brothers?

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

*She throws it on the corpses of the brothers and then goes to the gate of the palace and calls Oedipus*

Father! Poor, aged father! Poor blind father! Leave the house and come outside!

Come, father! Come and show the full misery of your life, Oedipus!

You have spread upon your eyes a gloomy darkness and now drag your endless days within those walls.

Father! Do you hear me, father?

Are you dragging your aged feet into the courtyard or are you lying in your miserable bed?

*Enter Oedipus, struggling blindly with a walking stick.*

**Oedipus:**

Ah!

Antigone, why have you dragged my blind feet out here, into the light of the day?

I was inside, inside the bitter darkness of my room, inside my bed!

Ah, your heart-renting tears, my daughter!

Ah, this walking stick!

I walk about in the white air like an invisible phantom! Am I a dead man come from Hades or am I a dream with wings?

**Antigone:**

Ah, my poor father!

A disaster, father! A message disaster for you!

Your sons, my father! Your sons and your wife, no longer see the light of day, father!

Your wife, father, who stood by your walking stick always, guiding your blind feet!

Ah, my poor father!

**Oedipus:**

Ah!

Suffering! Suffering to groan for! Suffering to cry for!

What fate! What fate, child, caused three souls to leave the light of life?

Tell me, daughter, what fate caused this?

**Antigone:**

Oh, father!

I say this out of grief and not of a need to criticize you or to mock you, my father but it was the avenging spirit you sent to them, the curse you sent upon them with its heavy load of swords and fire, with horrible wars crashed upon your sons, my

father!

Oh, my father!

Oh, my dear father!

**Oedipus:**

Ah!

Ah!

Ah!

**Antigone:**

Why these heavy sighs now father?

**Oedipus:**

Oh, my sons!

**Antigone:**

Yes, father, you are in agony now but what if you could look upon the sun god's four horse chariot and turned your sight upon these corpses, my father?

**Oedipus:**

The suffering of my sons is clear but my wife! Daughter, tell me please, what fate was it that caused her death?

**Antigone:**

Her tears and wails were all there for everyone to witness!

She bared her breast, father! To her sons, she bared her mother's breast, bared it to them in supplication!

She rushed to them and found them by the Electran gate. There, by the valley where the lotus flowers bloom where they were fighting a duel like two lions locked inside a den. They thrust their spears at each other, eager to see wounds.

Their bodies were already covered in gory wounds, in the crimson libation of blood, cold and crusted, a libation that Ares, the god of war would pour and Hades, the god of the underworld would accept.

She took a sword, one of beaten bronze, from the dead and plunged it deep into her body and then, the grief stricken mother fell onto the corpses of both her sons.

Ah, my father, my father! All this suffering! All in one single day! Whoever the god might be, father he has heaped upon us all this suffering today!

*Enter Creon. He has heard part of Antigone's speech and the words of the chorus*

**Chorus:**

So much suffering!

**Chorus:**

So much suffering fell upon the House of Oedipus today!

**Chorus:**

May our fortunes be better from now on.

**Creon:**

Enough!

Enough of the tears now! It is time to think of the burial.

Now, hear my words, Oedipus.

Your son, Eteocles has given me the throne of this city as dowry to my son, Haemon, to marry your daughter, here, Antigone. So, now, I will not allow you to live here, in Thebes. The words of the seer, Teiresias are clear: "This city," he said, "will never prosper if you continue to live here."

So, I say to you, not out of arrogance or enmity but for the sake of the city, to prevent your avenging spirit from destroying it: Leave us! Leave this land!

**Oedipus:**

Oh, Fate!

What misery you've made of my life, even from the very start! No other mortal has ever suffered such misery! Even before I left my mother's womb, before I saw the light of the sun, Apollo foretold my father, Laius, that I would be his murderer!

Oh, Fate!

Oh, misery!

Then, the moment I was born, my father orders my death, calling me his enemy, since Fate had declared that he would die by my hand. And, while my lips were still seeking out my mother's breast, he sent me, poor creature, out to Mount Citheron, to be a pitiful morsel for the wild beasts.

But from that, I was rescued.

Ah, if only Citheron had sunk into the pits of Tartarus for having failed to end my miserable life! Instead, Fate made me Polybus' slave and I, poor man, killed my father and slept with my mother who gave birth to my sons who are my brothers! Then I destroyed those sons of mine by passing on to them the curses that I had received from my father.

And no, it was not I and of my own free will who has destroyed my eyes and killed my sons. I am not that bereft of sense. No, behind it all, I see the hand of some god or other.

But, so be it!

And now, who will come to guide my blind feet? *Indicating the dead Jocasta* This dead woman here? She would, if she were alive. Of that I am certain. *Indicating the dead sons.* My two lovely boys? No, not they either for they are not mine any longer. Am I still young enough to make a living? Where?

Creon, why are you destroying me so utterly? Sending me away from my land is like death to me! Yet, no, I shall not fall at your knees to beg! Even though I am ruined, I shall not betray the nobility that I once had.

**Creon:**

You've decided not to touch my knees and that is good. On my part, I have decided that you should not stay in Thebes.

Now, of these dead, take one of them, this, Eteocles, into the palace. The other, Polyneices, who has come with a foreign army to destroy his own country, throw him outside the borders of Thebes and leave him there unburied and to all the citizens of Thebes, to all the Cadmeans, I make this proclamation: Whoever is caught placing a wreath upon this man's corpse, or trying to give it a burial, that person's reward will be death. Let him lie there, unmourned, unburied, food for the carrion birds.

As for you, Antigone. Stop crying over these corpses and take yourself indoors! You must live like a proper, unmarried girl, waiting for your day of marriage to my son, Haemon.

**Antigone:**

Father! What dreadful miseries must we endure!

Father I pity you more than I pity these dead because it is not that some of your



pains are more bearable to you than others but that all of your pains are equally unbearable!

And as for you, new king, why insult my father by exiling him from his country and why make laws against this unfortunate dead man?

**Creon:**

That was an order made by Eteocles himself, not me.

**Antigone:**

A foolish order and you are being foolish for pursuing it.

**Creon:**

What? Should we disobey orders?

**Antigone:**

No, we should not, if they are evil and made out of hatred.

**Creon:**

What? Is it evil to throw this man's corpse to the dogs?

**Antigone:**

Yes, because you're the punishment is not lawful.

**Creon:**

It is certainly lawful! He was an enemy to his country, though he was not born one.

**Antigone:**

Fate meted out his punishment.

**Creon:**

Let his burial be also a part of his fated punishment!

**Antigone:**

What fault of his was it that he came seeking his share of the land?

**Creon:**

Let me speak to you in plain terms: This man will not be buried!

**Antigone:**

I will bury him myself, even though the city forbids it!

**Creon:**

Then bury yourself next to him!

**Antigone:**

What greater honour is there for two siblings to be buried together?

**Creon:** *To his men*

Take her! Take her into the house!

**Antigone:**

Never! I shall never let go of this body!

**Creon:**

This matter was decided by god, young woman, not by you!

**Antigone:**

God has also decided that the dead must not be insulted!

**Creon:**

No soft soil shall be scattered over this corpse!

**Antigone:**

Yes, it will, Creon. Soil will be scattered over this corpse for the sake of his mother, here!

**Creon:**

Antigone, you're wasting your time. You will not get your way!

**Antigone:**

Let me at least wash the body, Creon!

**Creon:**

No, this is one thing that Thebans are also forbidden to do!

**Antigone:**

Look at his dreadful wounds! Let me wrap them in bandages!

**Creon:**

No, you will pay no honours to this corpse!

**Antigone:** *Falling to her knees by the side of Polyneices*

Oh, my darling brother!

Let me kiss your lips! She does so

**Creon:**

All this grieving! You are putting your marriage in jeopardy!

**Antigone:**

Marriage? Do you think I will marry your son while I'm alive?

**Creon:**

Of course you will. How do you think you will escape his bed?

**Antigone:**

On that night I shall act like a true Danaid and kill my husband!

**Creon:** *To Creon*

Do you see, Creon? Do you witness the impudence, Creon? How your daughter insults me?

**Antigone:**

This sword, this steel is my witness!

**Creon:**

Why on earth do you not want to marry to my son?

**Antigone:**

I will join my poor father, here, in his exile.

**Creon:**

Ah! You might think that to be an act of bravery but it is one of stupidity.

**Antigone:**

I shall join my father in exile and I shall join him also in death!

**Creon:**

Go then! I will not let you stay here and kill my son!

Leave this land now!

*Exit Creon and his men.*

**Oedipus:**

My daughter, I praise your willingness to...

**Antigone:**

But father, how could I get married and let you leave the city all alone?

**Oedipus:**

Daughter, you should stay here and enjoy your happiness. I'll look after my own problems.

**Antigone:**

But father, who is there to help you with your blindness?

**Oedipus:**

Fate will point out the place where I shall lie down and die.

**Antigone:**

Oh, where is that Oedipus who had the wisdom to solve riddles?

**Oedipus:**

Gone, darling!

I was blessed by one day and destroyed by another!

**Antigone:**

And I must share in your misfortunes, father!

**Oedipus:**

It would be shameful for a daughter to be wandering about with her blind father.

**Antigone:**

No, not shameful, father but an honour, father, if she is a wise woman.

**Oedipus:**

Let me now touch your mother's corpse.

**Antigone:** *Takes him to Jocasta's corpse and places his hand on it.*

There, father. Touch the dear old woman with your hand.

**Oedipus:** *Does so.*

Oh!

Oh, my poor mother!

Oh, my poor wife!

**Antigone:**

There, the most heartbroken woman of them all!

There, all around her lies the cause of all her suffering!

**Oedipus:**

And the bodies of Eteocles and Polyneices? Where are they?

**Antigone:** *Guides him to them*

They are here, father. Here. They lie next to each other.

**Oedipus:**

Put my blind hand upon their unfortunate faces.

**Antigone:** *Does so*

Here, father. Touch the faces of your dead sons with your hand.

**Oedipus:**

Poor sons of mine! Such a miserable fall!

Poor darling sons of a miserable father!

**Antigone:**

Oh, Polyneices! The name dearest to my heart!

**Oedipus:**

And so, my daughter, now Apollo's prophesy has been fulfilled.

**Antigone:**

Which prophesy is this, father?

Are there even more misfortunes to hear, on top of all the others?

**Oedipus:**

Yes, daughter.

I will die in Athens as a fugitive.

**Antigone:**

But where, father? What Attic tower will welcome you?

**Oedipus:**

Colonus, the sacred ground of Poseidon, the god of horses.

But come then my daughter, if you truly want to share in my exile, help me, help your blind father.

**Antigone:**

Ah, poor me! An exile!

Come then, father, stretch out your dear hand to me and let me guide you, like a wind guides a ship.

*Oedipus stretches out his hand and Antigone places it on her shoulder.*

**Oedipus:**

There! Guide me, my poor, unfortunate daughter. Let us go.

**Antigone:**

Unfortunate, indeed, father!

Unfortunate, indeed! I have been more unfortunate than the most unfortunate of all the Theban women.

**Oedipus:**

Where should I place my aged foot, my dear girl?

Where should I place my walking stick?

**Antigone:**

This way, father!

Walk this way, father!

Walk with me, father!

You are as frail as a dream, father!

**Oedipus:**

Ah! I am an old man!

Ah! I am a miserable exile!

Ah! I have suffered pain after pain!

**Antigone:**

You have suffered, poor man!

You have suffered because Justice is blind to the wicked and deaf to the fools!

**Oedipus:**

Ah! I am the man whose fame scaled the upper heavens!

Ah! I am the man whose name was passed into the songs of Victory!

Ah! I am the man who solved the unsolvable riddle of the Sphinx!

**Antigone:**

You are bringing up the old story of the Sphinx, father!

Forget the old glories, father!

Look at what misery is ahead of you, father!

You are exiled from your country!

You will die at some unknown place, father!

And I, I leave behind, to my young girlfriends, my tears of longing!

I leave my land for some other distant place to live the life not fit for a young girl.

**Oedipus:**

Ah! What noble heart you have, my daughter!

**Antigone:**

Nobility, which will give me glory, thanks to my father's suffering!

Ah, father! The insults heaped upon you and upon my poor brother whose dead body will be thrown outside the walls of his city, unburied! But, even if I have to die for it, father, I will come and bury it in secret.

**Oedipus:**

Go and see your girlfriends, darling!

**Antigone:**

They have heard enough of my wails and my troubles.

**Oedipus:**

Then go to the hallowed hills of Bacchus, to his women followers, the Maenads.

**Antigone:**

I did that once.

I wrapped a Cadmean fawn-skin around me and led their dance to those sacred hills. This holy company of Semele. It was not a service for which I received any thanks.

**Oedipus:** *Turns to the audience*

Men and women of my glorious city, look at me!

It is I, Oedipus, the man who solved the unsolvable riddle!

I am the man who once was among the greatest!

I am the man who cut short the horror of the murderous Sphinx!

Look now, upon Oedipus!

Look now upon an exile!

Look now upon a shamed man!

Look now upon a man in misery!

But why all this lament?

Why all these tears?

They serve no purpose!

I am a mortal and so I should endure whatever fate the gods deliver me!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Victory!

**Chorus:**

Oh, Victory, take charge of my life and never stop weaving your garlands for me!

*Exit all*