

## SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Eteocles:

Thebans, the man who safeguards thoroughly  
The state, conducting it unsleepingly,  
Must speak directly. For if we succeed,  
We thank the heavens. But if - and, indeed,  
May it not happen - bad luck is our fate,  
It's only I whom Thebans will berate  
With uproar and laments incessantly.  
May Zeus defend us from such tragedy!  
You still approaching youth and you who, though  
Beyond your prime, continue yet to grow        10  
In strength and you who stand on the apogee  
Of your maturity, must fittingly  
Aid Thebes and all the altars therein placed  
So that their fame may never be erased.  
Aid, too, your progeny and Mother Earth,  
Your darling nurse, who ever since your birth  
Has raised you, as upon her kindly soil  
You crept, and took upon herself the toil  
Of educating you that you might bear  
Her shield and be her citizen and care        20  
For Thebes in time of need. Up to this day,  
Although for ages under siege we lay,  
Heaven has favoured us as we have fought  
Our enemy, but now we have been taught  
By him who with unerring skill spells out  
The import of prophetic birds without

His sacred fire. The lord of prophecy  
Declares the greatest Greek hostility  
Is being planned at night, for they intend  
To take our city. Hurry and attend            30  
Our walls and gates! Put on your armour! Pack  
The parapets! Prepare for the attack!  
Take up position on the towers! Be strong,  
And stand your ground with bravery along  
The open gates! And do not be afraid  
Of this alien crowd! For God will aid  
Our cause and bring it to a happy end.  
I've taken it upon myself to send  
A group of scouts and others to observe  
Their army, as I'm sure that they will serve    40  
Us well, and once I've heard their full account,  
I will not be deceived by any amount  
Of trickery.

Scout:

                    O great Eteocles,  
I've witnessed all our foe's activities  
And have a sure report. Seven warriors who  
Are murderous platoon-commander, slew  
A bull upon a black shield; in its gore  
They dipped their hands, and then an oath they swore  
By Ares and by slaughter-loving Fright  
That they would raze our city with their might    50  
Or, after death, with blood besmire the ground.  
Upon Adrastus' chariot we found  
They placed memorials of themselves, to be

Remembrances to each man's family  
Back home, while weeping. But no piteous  
Wailing escaped their lips: their valorous  
Spirits would heave, blazing courageously  
Like warlike lions. No timidity  
Delayed your knowledge; when I left their site,  
I saw them casting lots how, in the fight,      60  
Each squadron-leader, randomly assigned,  
Should lead his men across the gates. So find  
The choicest Thebans - post them speedily  
At every gate. In the vicinity  
The Argives, fully armed, are hastening  
Hither, dust-circled, while the glistening  
Foam from the steeds' mouths splatter on the plain.  
So, like a careful helmsman on the main,  
Make certain of our Thebes' security  
Before war's stormcloud takes it violently.      70  
The army's waves now crash across the land,  
So take the first opportunity at hand.  
For my part, I shall keep a watchful eye  
Upon the lookout; you, enlightened by  
My sure report of the activity  
Beyond the gates, will have the guarantee  
Of safety.

Eteocles:

Zeus! Earth! All you gods, who nurse  
Our city and watch over her! Strong Curse,  
My father's agent in retaliation!  
Don't doom my city to annihilation,      80

A city uttering the tongue of Greece!  
Don't give her to the enemy! Release  
Our homes from danger! May they not possess  
Cadmus' free city! May they never press  
Us underneath the yoke of slavery.  
Save us! I hope the commonality  
Will benefit from this, because a state  
That flourishes will always venerate  
The gods.

Chorus:

Loud cries of grief I wail in fear.

The news is voiceless, yet it's true and clear – 90

The army is let loose. They're coming. See!

The mounted throng floods onwards rapidly.

The dust that whirls about can testify

To this. The pastures of my land now lie

Beneath the blows of hooves; a roaring sound

Drums in my ears, dispersing all around

And rumbling like an unrelenting tide

Of water crashing down a mountainside.

You heavenly ones, send out your battle yell

Over our ramparts that you might repel 100

This present evil! Ready for the fight,

The white-shield army rushes here to smite

Our city. On which gods, then, should I call

To rescue us? Or should I rather fall

Before their statues? Ah, the time is nigh,

You blessed gods, firmly enthroned on high,

To hold fast to them. Why do we not dash

To challenge them? Do you not hear the clash  
 Of shields? When shall we, if not instantly,  
 Robe and bewreath your statues so that we 110  
 May make our vows? I see the clash – it's not  
 The clatter of one single spear! So what  
 Will you now do? Will you betray, Ceres,  
 The land wherein you've dwelt for centuries?  
 God of the golden helmet, cast your gaze  
 Upon the city which in former days  
 You cherished. Guard our city and its land,  
 You heavenly gods! Behold this suppliant band  
 Of maidens praying that from slavery  
 They might be saved! A superfluity 120  
 Of warriors about the city casts,  
 Their helmet-plumes a -tossing, by the blasts  
 Of Ceres sped. Great Zeus, defend us all  
 From capture at their hands! The Argives sprawl  
 Around the citadel. Their weapons shake  
 Us all with terror, as the bridles make  
 The sound of men's destruction as they rattle  
 Upon the steeds as they sweep on to battle.  
 Seven bold captains of their army stand,  
 One at each gate, a spear held in his hand, 130  
 Assigned by lot. Poseidon, lord of steeds,  
 Who rule the sea, give succour to our needs!  
 O Zeus-born Pallas, who in war delight,  
 Prove saviour of our city in this fight!  
 And, Ares, pity us and guard us, too,  
 Showing your kin to us! And, Cypris, you

Who are the primal mother of our race,  
 Defend the Cadmean people who can trace  
 Their blood from you! We come to you and cry  
 Our prayers. Lord of the Wolf, Apollo, fly 140  
 Hither! Be wolflike to the enemy  
 And match them groan for groan! O progeny  
 Of Leto, fit your bow with darts! The sound  
 Of rattling chariots circling around  
 The town I hear. O Hera! The hubs grate  
 And grind beneath the axles' heavy weight.  
 Beloved Artemis! Hear how the air  
 Storms with those shaking weapons everywhere!  
 What's happening to our city, and indeed  
 What will the future bring? Where will God lead 150  
 Us finally? Our battlements – ah woe! –  
 Are struck from far by countless stones. Oh! O  
 Beloved Phoebus! I can hear the clash  
 Of bronze-bound shields as to the gates they dash.  
 O son of Zeus, who have the sacred skill  
 To arbitrate if we should suffer ill  
 In battle or else be victorious,  
 And Onca, blessed queen, come, succour us  
 And our seven-gated home! Divinities,  
 Who have the sacred power to safeguard these  
 Battlements, we now toil beneath the spear  
 Of alien warriors: as is fitting, hear  
 Our maidens' prayers as they their hands stretch out.  
 Beloved spirits, gather all about  
 Our city! Show your love for it! And see

Our offerings and bring us remedy!

Recall our sacrifices and our care

Of you!

Eteocles:

    This is impossible to bear.

Intolerable creatures, I demand

Of you, is this the best way you have planned, 170

And would our troops be fortified at all,

When here they are besieged, now that you fall

Before our guardian-gods to shriek and cry,

The sort of thing abominated by

The wise? With a woman I could never dwell,

Neither in times when things are going well

Nor when they're not. When she's contented, she

Is over-bold, but in timidity

She's even worse, at home and everywhere.

So now your clamorous rushing here and there 180

Has cowed the people, and the enemy

Is strengthened by your nonsense; meanwhile we

Are ruined by it. This is what you get

If you consort with women. If you're set

Against my rule – no matter whether you

Are man or woman or between the two –

A penalty of death I now dictate

And by no means will you avoid the fate

Of stoning by the people. The affairs

Of state in every case should be the cares 190

Of men, not women. Do no harm and stay

Inside. Well? Do you hear me? Yea or nay?

Chorus:

Dear son of Oedipus, I felt such fear  
Hearing the crashing chariots dashing here,  
The screaming hubs which whirled around each wheel,  
The slashing reins, the fire-forged bits of steel  
Within the horses' mouths.

Eteocles:

Then tell to me

If any helmsman found security  
Upon a vessel that was foundering  
By fleeing prow to stern?

Chorus:

But, crediting 200

The gods, to their old statues hastily  
I came when deadly stones rained thunderously  
Against the gates. Just then I went in dread  
To beg the Blessed Ones that they might spread  
Protection through the city.

Eteocles:

Pray that we

Can from the tower repel the enemy.  
The gods of a captured city, though, they say,  
Abandon it.

Chorus:

May this divine assembly never quit  
Our city. May I never witness it  
Marauded and then captured by the foe.

Eteocles:

When calling on the gods, be wise and know 210



Obedience is the mother of Success,  
Salvation's wife, or so it's said.

Chorus:

Oh Yes,  
But God's supreme in power, and frequently  
That power banishes harsh misery  
From helpless men when storms are lowering.  
The duty of a man is offering  
A sacrifice to gods above when he  
Confronts the enemy; yours is to be  
Silent and remain indoors. No foe  
Has conquered Thebes – the gods have willed it so. 220  
The rampart keeps the enemy from us.  
Why do these things make you so furious?

Eteocles:

I don't begrudge your honouring the race  
Of gods, but lest the Thebans you disgrace  
With cowardice, be calm and do not fear  
Too much.

Chorus:

I heard strange sounds approaching here,  
All jumbled, and I came in, tremulous,  
Into our stronghold, where the gods hear us  
At worship.

Eteocles:

If of men about to die  
Or wounded you are made aware, don't cry 230  
Out loud – on the blood of humans Ares feeds.

Chorus:

But now I hear the snorting of the steeds!

Eteocles:

Pay little notice!

Chorus:

Thebes, from far below

The earth, is sending out her groans, as though

We were surrounded.

Eteocles:

It's enough that I

Am making plans for this.

Chorus:

They terrify,

Those crashing gates – they're louder than before.

Eteocles:

Won't you be silent? Speak of this no more!

Chorus:

O gods, do not betray our citadel!

Eteocles:

Suffer in silence! Damn you all to hell!

240

Chorus:

Gods, don't condemn me to base slavery!

Eteocles:

You'd shackle me and all the citizenry!

Chorus:

Great Zeus, attack our foe!

Eteocles:

Zeus, what a breed

Of women you have spawned for us!

Chorus:

Indeed

A breed that's full of woe, as are all men  
Whose cities have been captured.

Eteocles:

Why, though, when

You still embrace gods' statues, do you speak  
Ill-omened words?

Chorus:

My terror makes me weak

And grasps my tongue.

Eteocles:

If only to my plea

You'd grant a small request!

Chorus:

Then tell it me

250

As quickly as you can, that right away  
I'll know it.

Eteocles:

Wretched woman, don't dismay

The people! Silence!

Chorus:

Alright. I am mum.

I'll suffer with the others what's to come.

Eteocles:

That's better. In addition, stay away  
From all the statues of the gods and pray  
A stronger prayer, so that the gods contend  
With those who fight against us. Then attend  
My prayers and sing the song of victory,

The sacred cry of grace and gaiety, 260

Which reassures our friends and takes away

Our fear. Now to the gods, our staunch mainstay,

Both on the plain and at our meeting-place,

Who to the springs of Dirce show their grace,

And to Ismenus' waters, I declare

That, if the city's saved, all prospects fair,

The altars of the Holy Ones will flow

With blood of sheep and bulls – I'll have it so.

I'll offer trophies, too, and I will crown

The shrines with arms of those who were brought down 270

With spears. Pray, and leave off your lamentation

And all your wild and useless exhalation!

For thus you can't escape your destiny.

I'll garrison six warriors, with me

The seventh, at each exit on the wall

To fight with pride before swift heralds call

Upon us with despatches to incite

Us all.

Chorus:

I heed you, but my heart through fright

Finds no repose, arousing fear that we

Will be surrounded by the enemy, 280

Just as a dove will tremble for her brood

Because of snakes which think of them as food.

Some now advance against our fortification,

A vast array of men, all in formation.

Oh how will I bear this adversity?

Others cast rough stones at the citizenry

On all sides. You divinities, who trace  
 Your birth from Zeus, rescue the Cadmean race.  
 What plain would be more rich than this we see  
 Should we abandon to the enemy 290  
 This deep-soiled land? What is more nourishing  
 Than is the water found in Dirce's spring,  
 Sent by Poseidon and the progeny  
 Of Tethys? All you gods, accordingly,  
 Who guard our city, cast upon the foe  
 Outside our walls destruction! Make them throw  
 Their arms away in panic! May we gain  
 Glory from you. Defend us and remain  
 Upon your thrones on high. Listen to us  
 As we shriek out. For it's calamitous 300  
 To hurl an ancient settlement pell-mell,  
 As now our foe is doing, into Hell,  
 Hunted with spears, cast into slavery  
 And, through divine will, ravaged shamefully  
 To ashes by a Greek, to take away  
 As captives all our women, whether they  
 Are young or aged, dragged off by the hair,  
 Their cloaks all rent. A city, empty, bare,  
 Laments the human spoil with many a cry.  
 A heavy destiny I prophesy. 310  
 It's pitiful that modest girls, unwed,  
 Should be deported from their homes and tread  
 Upon a loathsome path. It is my guess  
 That those who have to die will suffer less  
 Than shall the captives, when the enemy

Has brough all Thebes to ruin utterly.  
Man drags off man, or kills, or sets alight  
Fires. We're all polluted with the blight  
Of smoke. Ares goes on a killing spree  
And storms about, quelling the citizenry, 320  
Defiling awe, while through the town there rise  
Great tumults, and before our very eyes  
Appears a towering barricade. The sound  
Of wailing mothers I can hear resound  
Over their bloodied infants. Thebans lie  
Beneath the fatal spear, while, as they fly,  
Across the city, Thebans, too, are found  
Raping and looting. Plunderers abound;  
The needy call to the needy for the sake  
Of company, each hankering to take 330  
The lion's share, and there is little doubt  
What from these miseries will come about.  
The varied fruits, now fallen to the ground,  
Give pain to serving-girls when they have found  
Earth's ample bounty snatched off recklessly  
By looters. Maids, confined to slavery,  
Feel a new grief, doomed now to grace the bed  
Of enemy spearsmen, as though they were wed  
To a rich spouse. To bear that nuptial rite  
Will bring them tears and misery at night. 340

Chorus Leader A:

The scout is bringing fresh news hastily.

Chorus Leader B:

Oedipus' son, our lord, has seasonably  
Arrived to hear him. He is stumbling, too,  
Through haste.

Scout:

With certain knowledge, I'll give you  
News of the enemy. Each warrior's spot  
Before each gate has been assigned by lot.  
Already Tydeus blindly rages near  
The Proetid gate; forbidden by the seer  
To ford the Ismenus, since the augury  
The sacrifices show is contrary, 350  
He, hot for battle, gives a hissing shout,  
Just like a snake at noon, and lashes out  
At Oecles' skilful son and jeers and calls  
Him coward, saying, "You don't have balls,  
Prophet, for war," and with this raillery  
He shakes the overshadowing plumes, all three,  
Upon his helmet; forged of bronze, bells ring  
Beneath his shield, a fearsome jangling.  
And on that shield a haughty symbol lies –  
Ablaze with stars, well-fabricated skies, 360  
And at its core a full moon shining bright,  
The most revered of stars, the eye of night.  
Wearing his arrogant armour, Tydeus craves  
Battle: he yells across the bank and raves,  
A charger champing at the bit as he  
Waits for the trumpet's war-cry eagerly.  
Whom will you send against him? Who's the one  
To conquer Tydeus as our champion

After the gate's unbarred?

Eteocles:

I would not quail

At baubles. Signs and symbols can't assail 370

Or wound or kill me. Bells and crests can't bite

Without a spear, and that which you call 'night'

Shining with heaven's stars might prove to be

A prophet in its imbecility.

For if, as he lies dying, night should fall

Upon his eyes, then he might rightly call

That arrogant symbol 'night': his prophecy

Would then have turned that foul barbarity

Against himself. Now I will nominate

Astacus' trusty son to man the gate 380

And face him. He is noble and adores

The throne of Righteousness, and he abhors

Proud speech; he's slow to act disgracefully

And he's no coward, for his family

Originates from those men who were sown

From dragons' teeth – he is indeed our own,

Sprung from one spared by Ares, who'll decide

With one throw of the dice the winning side.

However, Melanippus now is sent

By Justice, his own kinsman, to prevent 390

His mother's death caused by the enemy.

Chorus:

Then to our champion be the victory!

His cause is just. But I am shuddering

When I observe our people perishing



For their loved ones.

Scout:

Ah yes, may he succeed.

A giant of a man, larger indeed

Than is the man who was described of late,

Has been assigned to man the Electran Gate:

He's Capaneus, and his boast is too proud

For a mere human, threatening out loud 400

Against our walls. And may Fate not fulfil

Those thoughts because "Whether the gods should will

Or no," says he, "I will annihilate

The city; even if it is my fate

To have conflict with Zeus, if it should fall

Upon the plain, it will not change at all

What I intend to do." Zeus' weaponry

He likens to midday torridity.

Upon his shield a man is seen to bear

A torch, though he's unarmed, and on this flare, 410

His weapon, one can see, in words of gold,

'I will destroy this city.' So unfold

Your strength against this man. Who, then, will stake

His life with steadfast heart and never quake

Against his boasts?

Eteocles:

Here, too, with interest

Gain follows gain, because the tongue is best

In censuring vile thoughts. Here Capaneus

Makes threats and sends his swollen boasts to Zeus,

Though a mere man, and shouts in wicked glee

Against the gods. I trust that rightfully 420

The fire-breathing thunderbolt will slay

That man, more toxic than heat at midday.

Polyphontes will oppose him, for, despite

His wordiness, he's fiery in a fight,

A stolid rock with Artemis' good will

And the other gods. Now tell me who will fill

The other places at the gates.

Chorus:

May he

Who vaunts about the city brazenly

Be slain! And may the thunderbolt block his way

Before he comes and carries me away 430

At spear-point.

Scout:

Of the warrior who drew

The next lot for the gates I'll tell to you.

It chose Eteoclus, whose company

Will now attack the Neistan Gate; and he

Wheels round his steeds, which make a snorting sound

Straight through their bridles as he yearns to pound

Our troops. Their muzzles whistle barbarously,

Filled with their haughty breathing. Gaudily

His shield is decked, while up a battlement

A hoplite's climbing with a firm intent 440

To take it. From a letter written out

For him, he reads out to us in a shout

That from the battlements even Ares

Can't hurl him. Send a steadfast warrior, please,

Against him. Keep the yoke of slavery  
From Thebes.

Eteocles:

I'd send this man fortuitously –  
Megareus - though he's been sent indeed  
Already. He's descended from the seed  
Of Creon and the people who were sown  
From dragons' teeth, and in his hands alone 450  
There rests his boast. He'll not withdraw in fear  
Of horses' furious snorting looming near,  
For he will either die or pay the earth  
The full price for his nurture since his birth,  
Or kill two men and the city on display  
Upon the shield, then haul the spoil away  
To decorate his father's house. Tell me  
Another's boasts and speak them thoroughly!

Chorus:

O guardian of my home, may he, I pray,  
Succeed and may this be a luckless day 460  
For all his foes. Just as with frenzied mind  
They vaunt against the city, Zeus, in kind  
Requite them in your rage!

Scout:

Now Number Four

Takes his position with a yell before  
Onca Athena's gate – Hippomedon,  
A massive man. I shuddered as he spun  
His shield about him, I have to confess.  
The shield's designer had such skilfulness:

It shows its symbol, Typhon, as he casts  
From his fire-breathing mouth thick, murky blasts 470  
Of smoke, fire's darting sister. All around  
The hollow-bellied shield the rim is bound  
With snaky braids. He's raised the battle-cry  
And madly yearns for war, inspired by  
Ares and with a look that causes fright  
We must assail him in a rousing fight.  
Already Panic boasts of victory  
Right there about the gate.

Eteocles:

Primarily,  
Athena, who lives by the gate, detests  
Outrageousness in men and, as from nests 480  
Of nestlings snakes are driven, she will drive  
Him off. Besides, a trusty warrior I've  
Chosen to match that man – Hyperbius,  
The son of Oenops: he's solicitous  
To seek his fate which this calamity  
Has wrought: in spirit or vitality  
Or in his skill in arms he does not bear  
Reproach. Lord Hermes has opposed this pair  
In man-to-man combat – appropriately,  
Since each man is the other's enemy. 490  
As are the gods upon the shields. The one  
Has fire-breathing Typhon while upon  
The other one stands Father Zeus, upright,  
Who holds a thunderbolt ablaze with light,  
And he's invincible, as far as we

Have seen: such is the gracious charity  
Of the Divine Ones: we are on the side  
Of the victorious, they are allied  
With those who'll be subdued, if in the fray  
Against that enemy Zeus wins the day. 500

It's likely that the mortal adversaries  
Will fare as well as the divinities,  
Since Zeus, as on Hyperbius's shield  
He is depicted, will make Typhon yield.

Chorus:

I'm sure that Zeus's enemy, since he  
Has on his shield an earth-born deity,  
Unloved by the eternal gods and men,  
Will lose his head before the gate.

Scout:

Well, then,

May it be so! The fifth man, who has won  
The Northern Gate, near the tomb of Amphion, 510

Zeus-born, I'll now describe. This enemy  
Swears by the very spear he wields, which he  
Reveres more than a god and values more  
Than his own eyes, that he will surely score  
A victory and sack the city. He  
Is a handsome warrior, the progeny  
Of a mother mountain-bred, half-man, half-youth –  
His beard is barely growing yet in truth,  
His hair still thick. Now with a savage heart

And terrifying look he makes his start; 520  
He's called Parthenopaeus, but that name



Who'll blame that man when beaten heavily  
Within our ramparts. May this prove to be 550  
The truth if the gods are willing.

Chorus:

His words spear  
My heart, my hair stands stiffly as I hear  
Such loud threats, such boasting impiety.  
May all the gods destroy them utterly  
Right here in Thebes!

Scout:

The sixth man I shall name  
Is the most moderate and earns his fame  
As the best seer in war – Amphiaraus  
The Great: at the Gate of Homolos he lets loose  
Insults at Tydeus. 'Causer of unease,  
The primal teacher of iniquities 560  
To Argives, vengeance-seeker, homicide,  
The slave of Butchery, Adrastus' guide  
In evil, ' he yells out. Raising his eyes,  
He calls out 'Polynices', in his cries  
Exaggerating each part of the word.  
He shouts, 'Will all the gods, when they have heard  
About this deed, be joyful and suppose  
It's fine for us to hear and for all those  
In future days to tell of – that you fought  
Your forebears' city and its gods and brought 570  
A host against them? Is it right to bring  
Extinguishers to your maternal spring?  
And shall your fatherland, when captured by

The spear for your own sake, be your ally?  
I will enrich the earth, a buried seer  
Beneath the enemy's soil, for I'll not fear  
Disgrace in death. Let's fight!' He was serene,  
Holding his all-bronze shield, on which was seen  
No symbol. He burned with avidity  
Not to *appear* the bravest, but to *be*  
The bravest, reaping the fruit deep in his mind  
Wherein his sure reflections are designed.  
Send brave, wise men against him, I'd advise.  
He who reveres the immortals terrifies.

580

Eteocles:

Alas that honest men associate  
With impious men due to a sign of fate!  
In all things nothing is more evil than  
An evil partnership. Its fruits no man  
Should reap: a meadow of delinquency  
Harvests but death. A man of piety  
May board a ship of sailors who are hot  
For some misdeed, discovering his lot  
Is suffering death among the kind of men  
Whom all the gods detest, or else, again,  
An upright man may find himself among  
Some men of his own city who do wrong  
Against the gods by slighting them and hate  
All strangers but discovers that his fate,

590

Though he is undeserving, is to be  
Victim of the same trap, and so he  
Is struck by Zeus's scourge which everyone

600



Must feel. Just so, the seer, Oecles's son,  
Though wise, just, noble, pious, full of skill  
In prophecy, yet with men who do ill  
Consorts, men who talk injudiciously,  
Men who came hither in an odyssey,  
And if Lord Zeus should wish it, he will fall,  
Dragged down in devastation, with them all.  
I don't believe, then, that he will assault  
The gates, although not due to any fault 610  
Of cowardice or lack of will – oh no,  
He knows he'll die in battle with the foe,  
If Loxias's prophecies should come  
To their fulfilment – he is either mum  
Or speaks point-blank. However, I will place  
A man against him who hates any race  
Of foreigners, the mighty Lasthenes:  
He has an old man's commonsense but he's  
In splendid physical shape, his eyes are keen,  
And where some part of the enemy's frame has been 620  
Uncovered by his shield, he's swift to drive  
His spear. But it's God's gift when mortals thrive.

Chorus:

Gods, hear our just prayers and fulfil them! May  
Our city have good fortune! Turn away  
The evils borne in war! Aim them instead  
On those invaders! May Zeus strike them dead  
Outside our ramparts!

Scout:

At the seventh gate

Is your own brother. I will tell the fate  
He prays for in the city: after he  
Has climbed upon the battlements to be 630  
Proclaimed the king and shouted his ovation  
In triumph, there should be a confrontation  
Between the two of you, and, once you've died  
Beneath his sword, that he'll die by your side,  
Or, if you should survive, he'll make you pay  
With deportation in the selfsame way  
You exiled him in shame. Such threats as these  
Are shouted out by great Polynices  
As he invokes the gods. He holds his shield,  
New-made and rounded, on which is revealed, 640  
Well-styled, a woman walking modestly  
Before a man in arms which seem to be  
Of hammered gold: as the words signify,  
She claims she's Justice, for those words say "I  
Will bring this man back home again, and he  
Shall have the city, moving openly  
Within his father's halls." Such signs indeed  
Are fixed upon their shields. Decide with speed  
Whom you should send against him. You will find  
No fault in my announcement, but what kind 650  
Of active measure you must undertake  
To steer our Thebes is your judgment to make.  
Eteocles:  
Alas, my weeping kin, from Oedipus  
Descended. How the gods are rancorous  
Against you! How they spawned insanity

In you! Our father's curses came to be  
Fulfilled. But I must neither weep nor grieve  
At this point, for I fear it might conceive  
A grief more hard to bear. We soon shall know,  
Regarding Polynices, who is so 660  
Well-named, what will be fulfilled by his shield.  
What will those babbling letters on it yield,  
Along with all the wanderings of his mind?  
Will he return to Thebes? Well, we might find  
This so if Justice, maiden progeny  
Of Zeus, had been attending to what he  
Performed and thought, but ever since the day  
He left the womb or in his childhood play  
Or in his later youth or when the hair  
Grew thick upon his cheek, she did not care 670  
For him or think that he was qualified  
To be a worthy man, and by his side  
I do not think that she will choose to stand  
To aid the razing of his fatherland.  
Indeed she would be false to her own name  
If she were ally to a man of shame.  
Convinced of this, I'll go and make my stand  
Against him face-to-face, for what demand  
Could be more just? Thus, brothers shall we be  
Fighting against each other, enemy 680  
Against an enemy, a leader, too,  
Facing another leader. Quickly, you,  
Bring me my greaves, for they will ward away  
The spears and stones.

Chorus:

Nay, son of Oedipus, nay!

Dearest of all our men, don't act the same

As him who has been called an evil name.

It is enough that we are coming near

Close contact with the Argives. We can clear

This bloodshed with our rites. But when a man

Kills a relation, that stain never can

Grow old.

Eteocles:

If one falls foul of villainy,

Then let it be without indignity,

690

Since that's the only benefit the dead

Can gain. However, nothing can be said

To be renowned that's vile and mean.

Chorus:

Ah, child,

What do you hanker for? Don't be so wild

For battle that your mad intensity

Absorbs you. Curb this evil fervency

While it's still young.

Eteocles:

God urges on this deed,

And therefore let the whole of Laius' seed,

Hated by Phoebus, be through destiny

Swept by the blasts of wind destructively

700

Into Cocytus' flood!

Chorus:

You're eaten through

With savage lustfulness compelling you  
To lawless murder, which can only breed  
Resentment.

Eteocles:

My dear father's curse indeed,  
Hateful and ruinous, is hovering  
Before my moistless eyes, foreshadowing  
Some gain before my death.

Chorus:

Don't let it force  
You to it. For if you in your life's course  
Are noble, you're no coward, folk will say.  
Will not the avenging Fury go away  
With its dark aegis when the gods receive  
Your sacrifice?

Eteocles:

The gods, though, took their leave  
Some time ago and do not pay us heed.  
Yet they admire our grace when we must cede  
To death. Accordingly, why should we shy  
Away from deadly fate?

Chorus:

Your fate is nigh.  
The spirit, though, may change eventually  
And bring a gentler wind. But presently  
It seethes.

Eteocles:

Yes, Oedipus's curses made  
Them so. The truth too clearly was displayed

By phantoms in my nightly dreams, for they  
Showed me my father's wealth shared out.

Chorus: Obey

Us women, though you may be disinclined.

Eteocles:

Surely you must have something else in mind

To tell me. Make it quick!

Chorus:

Don't make your way

Down to the seventh gate.

Eteocles:

Just let me say

You'll not blunt my sharp purpose.

Chorus:

Nonetheless

God holds a victory in righteousness,

Even a base one.

Eteocles:

Soldiers must not hold

That maxim.

Chorus:

Do you dare to be so bold

730

That you would reap the blood of your own kin,

Your very brother?

Eteocles:

When you're given sin

By the gods, you can't escape.

Chorus:

How that goddess

Who ruins homes fills me with fearfulness!

For she's unlike other divinities,

Foreshadowing all future tragedies.

I shudder that the Furies will fulfil

His father's crazy oaths. This strife-filled ill

Will now destroy his sons. An émigré,

A Chalybean man from faraway 740

Scythia, apportions their patrimony,

A savage, iron man who bitterly

Divides the land in which they may reside

Once they have been destroyed and are denied

These spacious plains. But when they both are dead

By mutual slaughter and the dust has fed

On their black blood, who is here who can clear

Them both of that pollution? How I fear

This house's recent troubles which are blent

With those that came before. By that I meant 750

The ancient sin, which soon shall be repaid.

Up to the third generation it has stayed –

Ever since the time Laius defied

Apollo, who at his oracle inside

The centre of the earth, thrice said that he –

Laius - , if he should leave no progeny

At death, would save the city. Subjugated

With thoughtlessness through longing, he created

The instrument of his death, the parricide

Oedipus, who then sowed his seed inside 760

The sacred field of his nativity,

Whence he endured his bloody progeny.

The bridal pair in madness were connected.

A swell of evils seems to be projected

Onwards. As one wave sinks, another one

Rises with triple crests that it might run

Against the city's stern, while in between,

No wider than a wall, there can be seen

A narrow bulwark, and I fear that we –

The city and its monarchs – all will be 760

Destroyed. The compensation must be great

When ancient curses consummate the fate

They prophesied. These curses do not die

Once spoken. When their wealth is piled too high.

Seafaring merchants find that they must throw

It overboard. For who was honoured so

As Oedipus by all divinities

And those who shared his board and companies

Of thronging men when he repelled that bane

That plagued us? But when he once more was sane, 780

His wretched marriage caused him misery,

And so, distressed by this anxiety,

He used the very hand with which he struck

The man who had begotten him to pluck

His eyes out, eyes that he had valued more

Than his own progeny. And then he bore

Into his sons in anger, bitterly

Cursing them that one day his property

They would divide in battle. How I fear

The rapid-running Furies now are near 790

Fulfilling this!



Scout:

Daughters by mothers nursed,  
Take heart! Our city is no longer cursed  
With fear of slavery. Strong men have found  
That all their boasts have fallen to the ground.  
The weather's fair and, though we're buffeted  
By many waves, no water has been shed  
On us. The walls hold and we've fortified  
The gates with champions who will decide  
The outcome one-on-one. Primarily  
All's well at six gates, but, unfortunately, 800  
Apollo, Leader of the Seventh, chose  
The seventh gate, intending to impose  
Upon the children of King Oedipus  
The ancient misjudgments of King Laius.

Chorus:

What further thing will happen to us?

Scout:

We  
Are saved, but both those kings, the progeny –

Chorus:

Who? What's that? You make me tremulous.

Scout:

Be calm! Attend! The sons of Oedipus –

Chorus:

Ah, seer of evils!

Scout:

Incontestably  
They bite the very dust.

Chorus:

For all to see? 810

Are they still lying there? It must be said,  
Though it is hard to bear.

Scout:

Both men are dead.

They killed each other.

Chorus:

What, with brotherly

Destruction?

Scout:

Yes indeed, their destiny

Was all too equal. An ill-fated day

Consumes the family. And yet we may

Both sorrow and rejoice – on the one hand

The city fares well, yet those in command,

Those two, divided up their property

With hammered Scythian steel-wrought weaponry. 820

The only land they own will be the clay

In which they will be buried, swept away

Through Oedipus' curses. Thebes is safe indeed,

But those two kings born of the selfsame seed

Moisten the earth through mutual butchery.

Chorus:

Zeus and the gods who hold the custody

Of Thebes and Cadmus' walls, am I to yell

In triumph that our city now fares well

Or mourn our childless chiefs, who fittingly

Are 'Full of Strife', who plotted evilly 830

And thus were slain? Black curse of Oedipus,  
 Brought to fulfilment! How a hideous  
 Chill stings my heart! I, maenad-like, compose  
 My threnody as I now learn of those  
 Two corpses dripping blood, how they were slain  
 Because of cruel fate. This spear-refrain,  
 Sung to the flute, was fated. For this curse  
 Has done its work and couldn't have done worse.  
 Laius's plans, devised in heedlessness,  
 Are strong. Thebes causes me uneasiness. 840  
 Divine decrees don't lose their edge. You who  
 Have brought to us extensive sorrow, you  
 Are past belief in what you've done, but still  
 We are assailed with lamentable ill.  
 It's clear the scout's report is plain to see –  
 Twofold distress and twofold butchery  
 Of kin! What can I say? That sorrow bred  
 Of sorrow all around this house is spread.  
 Friends, sail upon the winds of grief and row  
 The sacred, slack-sailed, black-clothed ship of woe 850  
 To Acheron, a land that lacks all sun,  
 Where Phoebus never walks, a land no-one  
 Has seen. But hither come Antigone  
 And Ismene, here to chant their threnody  
 Over their brothers, such a bitter thing  
 To undertake, and I believe they'll sing  
 With fitting lamentation from their fair,  
 Deep-bosomed breasts. But first, before that air,  
 The Furies' awful hymn will prove to be

Our duty, and also, subsequently, 860

Hades' black victory song. O luckless two,  
In kin more cursed than all the women who  
Wear girdled robes! My cries aren't spurious  
But from the heart. You were delirious,  
You men, ignoring friends. Iniquity  
Can't wear you down, and to your misery  
Your father's house you've captured with your spear.

A miserable death has met you here,  
Avenging your outrage. Set to suppress  
Your home, you cast about, to your distress, 870

To gain sole rule. Now reconciliation  
Is bought with iron swords. Retaliation  
From Oedipus has now fulfilled it all.  
A blow upon your left sides caused your fall,  
Those sides that once had shared a single womb.  
Ah, curses that demanded doom for doom!  
A father's curse brought down unspeakably  
Both house and men: this doom amicably  
These two now share. The city's filled with groans  
Of grief: the land that loved its leaders moans, 880

The ramparts, too. The brothers' property,  
However, stays with their posterity.  
For these dread-fated men resolved through strife  
And their own death what they oppugned in life.  
That property, with anger in each heart,  
They portioned out so that an equal part  
Would go to both. But he who brought this brawl  
To its conclusion is condemned by all

Their friends, and Ares also is to blame.  
For under iron strokes to this they came. 890  
Under these strokes what now awaits this pair,  
You might perhaps enquire of us – a share  
In their own father's tomb. Heart-rending cries  
Of pain and lamentation now arise,  
A joyless wail out of a mind distressed  
With tears that pour forth from a grieving breast  
Which, as I mourn these princes, waste away.  
These wretched princes, I would have to say,  
Harmed all their citizens exceedingly  
And all the strangers who extensively 900  
Died in the fight. No-one's ill-fated more  
Among all mothers than the one who bore  
Those princes. Once her own child she had wed,  
She gave birth to those sons, who now lie dead  
Through kindred, slaughtering hands. For they indeed  
Had been created from the selfsame seed,  
Now split apart with hatred. Now their strife  
And hate reach their conclusion, and their life  
Is mingled with the blood-soaked earth, and they  
Are truly one in blood. Their dreadful fray 910  
Was ruthlessly resolved. Across the sea  
A stranger, sharpened iron rapidly  
Snatched from the flame, came hither. Ruthless, too,  
Was cruel Ares, for it was he who  
Made sure to portion all their property,  
And thus their father's curses came to be  
Fulfilled. In their sad state these men possess

This god-sent portion of unhappiness.

Beneath them lies a superfluity

Of earth. They've wreathed about their family 920

Much trouble. Now the Curses raise a cry

That pierces, as the family turns to fly

In all directions. There stands at the gate

A monument to Ruin, where their fate

Was met, and vengeance ended finally.

Antigone:

You struck each other simultaneously.

Ismene:

Killing, you died.

Antigone:

You slaughtered with a spear.

Ismene:

By a spear you died.

Antigone:

What you committed here

Is wretched.

Ismene:

You have suffered wretchedly.

Antigone:

Mourn!

Ismene:

Weep!

Antigone:

You're laid out for the exequy. 930

Ismene:

Though you have killed.

Antigone:

My heart is grown insane

With wailing.

Ismene:

How my heart whimpers in pain.

Antigone:

Ah brother, how I weep in my distress!

Ismene:

Brother, I mourn you in my wretchedness.

Antigone:

Your dearest kinsman caused your dying breath.

Ismene:

And you have caused your dearest kinsman's death.

Antigone:

Here is a double grief that we must tell.

Ismene:

A double sight to see.

Antigone:

Such sorrows well

Around them.

Ismene:

Brotherly griefs stand side-by-side.

Chorus:

O Fate, the giver of a grievous tide

940

Of troubles, awful shade of Oedipus,

Black Fury, the force you inflict on us

Is mighty.

Antigone:

Sorrows difficult to face –

Ismene:

He showed me when he came back from his place  
Of exile.

Antigone:

He did not come back again  
Once he had killed his brother.

Ismene:

Ah, but then,  
Though saved, he lost his life.

Antigone:

Indeed, that's true

Ismene;

But then he slew his dearest brother, too.

Antigone:

Ah wretched family! We truly are  
A lineage born beneath an evil star...

950

Ismene:

...that suffers evil.

Antigone:

Kindred misery,  
So full of groans.

Ismene:

Threefold catastrophe!

Antigone:

Now of the Fury you indeed have learned –

Ismene:

As have you.

Antigone:

From the time when you returned.



Ismene:

Indeed, to face our brother with a spear.

Antigone:

A tale of ruin, terrible to hear!

Ismene:

A ruin that is terrible to see!

Antigone:

The grief!

Ismene:

The sin!

Antigone:

For land and family

Ismene:

And me.

Antigone:

And me.

Ismene:

I pity you, my king.

For all your grief and dreadful suffering.

960

Antigone:

I pity both of you, for of all men

You are the most lamentable.

Ismene:

For then

You were deluded.

Antigone:

Where, then, shall they rest?

Ismene:

Where their esteem is greatest would be best.

Beside their father, then, whose tribulation  
They brought about.

To broadcast council's purpose and decrees  
For Theban citizens. Eteocles,

Form a procession for him. This decree 990

The Cadmean council made.

Antigone:

To them I'll say

One thing – if nobody will help to lay

To rest my brother, I will bury him

Alone, though I'll be risking life and limb.

I'm not ashamed to act defiantly.

Our mother's womb deserves our courtesy,

Although our parents shared a wretched fate.

So willingly, my soul, appropriate

His sins, though they're unwilling, and reside

In kindred spirit with those who have died.

1000

No hungry wolves will tear his flesh – indeed

Do not let anyone have *that* decreed!

Though I'm a woman, I will find a way

To give him burial. I'll bear the clay

In my robe's linen folds. Thus will I hide

His corpse with my own hands. Let none decide

It otherwise. Take heart, this deed I can

Perform.

Herald:

This flouts the city's law. I ban

Your deed.

Antigone:

I ban what you have said to me!

Herald:

And yet you may be treated viciously

1010

By those who have avoided wickedness.

Antigone:

Well, let them all be vicious! Nonetheless

He *will* be buried.

Herald:

What? Will you revere

With burial a man whom all folk here

Detest?

Antigone:

The gods from some time long ago

Stopped holding him in approbation.

Herald:

No,

Until he put this land in jeopardy,

They honoured him.

Antigone:

He bore iniquity,

Committing it in turn.

Herald:

And yet, in fact,

He damaged every Theban by his act,

1020

Not just one man.

Antigone:

Goddess Disharmony

Has the last word in controversy.

I'll bury Polynices. As for you,

Stop your long-winded talk.

Herald:

Well then, pursue

You're reckless plan. It's vetoed.

Chorus:

Miseries!

Furies, famed murderers of families,

Uprooting Oedipus's family!

What should I do? What will become of me?

What plan should I devise? How can I bear

Neither to weep for you or to take care 1030

Of burying you? And yet I feel such fear

And turn away in dread of people here

In Thebes. At least you will, Eteocles,

Have many mourners, but Polynices

Will have no single mourner, wretched man,

With just one dirge which just one sister can

Intone.

Chorus A:

Let Thebes devise some punishment

Or pardon for those people who lament

Polynices. We'll inter him and we'll go

Behind the cortege. We all share this woe, 1040

We of this race, approving differently

Each different eventuality.

Chorus B:

We'll go with this corpse. For, with the consent

Of Thebes and Justice, he an army sent

To save us all from being overturned

Though all the gods assisted him, and churned

By waves of foreigners, for it was he

Who showed his leadership and sovereignty.





