

## PHOENISSAE

Jocasta:

Sun-God, who through the bright stars make your way,  
Mounted upon a chariot whose inlay  
Is golden, whirling out your flame with fast  
Horses, ah what dreadful beams you cast  
On Thebes when Cadmus left Phoenicia's strand!  
He wed Harmonia, Cypris' daughter, and  
Begot Polydorus, from whom Labdacus  
And Laius came, it's said. Now to Laius  
I'm wed. I am Jocasta, progeny  
Of Menoecus and, by consanguinity, 10  
The sister of Creon, born of the same  
Mother. Now for a long time since I came  
To Laius' palace, thus to be his wife,  
He found himself living a childless life.  
And so he questioned Phoebus that we may  
Be blessed with sons. The god was moved to say:  
"O lord of equine Thebe, you must not sow  
A furrow of young ones, for thus you'd go  
Against our will. If you beget a son,  
He'll murder you and all your house will run 20  
With blood." But once, when drunk, he lay with me  
And I gave birth to a child. But presently,  
Aware of the unholy deed he'd done  
According to the god, he gave his son

To a shepherd to expose. His ankles he  
 Told him to pierce with spikes (accordingly,  
 We call him Oedipus, or Swollen-Feet)  
 And then expose him on the rocky seat  
 Of Mt. Cithaeron on the grassy ground  
 Of Hera. Polybus' horse-herders, though, found                      30  
 The babe and took it to the royal house  
 Of Polybus and gave it to his spouse,  
 Who suckled it, convincing Polybus  
 That she should nurture it to manhood. Thus  
 When once his cheeks displayed a tawny beard  
 He either felt mistrust of something weird  
 Or heard something from someone else, and so  
 He went to Phoebus' temple, keen to know  
 Who were his parents, as did Laius, too,  
 Seeking to find out if the baby who                      40  
 Had been exposed was dead or living yet.  
 At a crossroads in Phocis the two met.  
 Laius' charioteer cried out, "Make way  
 For the king, you stranger!" Oedipus didn't say  
 A word but walked on superciliously.  
 The steeds' hooves drew blood from his feet, so he –  
 For what more need I say but this? – then slew  
 His father and then took the chariot to  
 Polybus, who, when the Sphinx was ravaging  
 Thebes, stated anyone unravelling                      50  
 Her riddle would be king here. Then my son  
 Worked out the maiden's song and thus he won  
 The kingdom. Unaware, then, he wed me,

And his own mother did not know that she  
Was sleeping with her son. To him I bore  
Two daughters and two sons – yes, we had four  
Children, Polyneices and Eteocles,  
And then two daughters, younger both than these,  
Antigone and Ismene. When the king,  
Who has experienced much suffering, 60  
Discovered that his mother shared his bed,  
He gouged his eyes out – how those pupils bled! –  
With a golden brooch. But when my sons became  
Grown bearded men, they hid him out of shame:  
To keep his woe unnoticed needed skill.  
Now he is living in the palace still,  
Cursing his sons and praying that they might  
Divide the kingdom with a sharp sword's bite.  
They feared, though, that this might become a fact  
If they should dwell together, so a pact 70  
Was made – that Polyneices leave the land  
(He was the younger one), while the command  
Eteocles would hold. Then annually  
They'd switch. But once he'd gained ascendancy,  
Eteocles held on and promptly sent  
His brother into exile, who then went  
To Argos, wedding into the family  
Of Adrastus. Now a mighty company  
Of men he's brought, intending to attack  
Our gates and force his brother to give back 80  
The sceptre. I've prevailed upon one son,  
Under a truce, to meet the other one

In hopes to end this strife. I'm told he'll come  
And will observe this moratorium.  
Heavenly Zeus, save us and reconcile  
My sons! For sometimes surely you will smile  
On a poor wretch. [exit Jocasta] [enter Antigone and Servant]

Servant:

                    Antigone, although  
Your mother has permitted you to go  
Up to the topmost balcony to see  
The Argive troops, give me the liberty                      90  
Of checking first if Thebans can be seen  
(Though to a slave like me it would have been  
But slight, it would bring you a reprimand  
If we'd be seen together). Once I've scanned  
It all I will report on everything  
To you about the Argives when I bring  
The truce's terms. No Theban is nearby,  
So mount the ancient steps and from on high  
Survey the plains. Beside Ismenus' streams  
And Dirce's fountain see the mighty reams                      100  
Of enemy troops.

Antigone:

                    Stretch out your hand to me  
And help me climb – age past maturity  
Assisting youth!

Servant:

                    Yes, maiden, here's my hand!  
You're just in time to see the Argive band  
About to separate each company,

One from the other.

Antigone:

O great Hecate,

The battlefield is totally aflame

With bronze!

Servant:

How splendidly Polyneices came

Back home again! The steeds! The weaponry!

Antigone:

Are the gates barred, the bolts placed perfectly 110

In Amphion's walls of stone?

Servant:

Yes. Have no dread!

All's safe. But ask the man who is their head.

Antigone:

That one there with the white crest – who is he?

He walks before the army, easily

Bearing a shield of bronze.

Servant:

A captain.

Antigone:

Who,

Though, is he? Of whose kin? I beg of you,

Tell me!

Servant:

He traces his descendancy

From Mycenaean lands, he claims, and he

Is Lord Hippomedon and by the streams

Of Lerna he resides.

Antigone:

How proud he seems, 120

How fearful, like a giant born from earth,  
Resembling nobody of mortal birth,  
With stars engraved upon his shield!

Servant:

Do you

See him who's crossing Dirce's stream?

Antigone:

Yes. Who

Is he? His armour's different.

Servant:

He's the son

Of Oeneus, Tydeus. He's Aetolian.

Antigone:

What? Polyneices' brother-in-law? Oh, what  
A half-barbaric look his armour's got!

Servant:

Yes, all Aetolians carry shields, my dear,  
And they're unerring marksmen.

Antigone:

Ah, how clear 130

Your knowledge of them is! How is that so,  
Old man?

Servant:

I saw them and I learned to know  
Their seals when to your brother I had gone  
To take the terms of truce. I looked upon  
Them closely.

Antigone:

Who's that young man over there

By Zethus' tomb with long and flowing hair,

So fierce to see? A captain? Everyone

In arms is at his heels.

Servant:

Atlanta's son,

Parthenopaeus.

Antigone:

Artemis, you who

Hunts with Atlanta, run the villain through 140

For coming here and threatening to lay

Waste to our city!

Servant:

Child, I hope she may

Do that, but I'm afraid that they can claim

The right to come against us all the same

And with the gods' approval.

Antigone:

But show me

The man who by some evil destiny

Became my brother!

Servant:

Look, then, over there –

Niobe's virgin daughters' tombstone, where

Adrastus stands. Well, Polyneices, too,

Is there, next to him. Do you see?

Antigone:

I do, 150

But not too clearly. The periphery  
That marks his chest I'm scarce able to see.  
Would I could speed across the sky, as fleet  
As some wind-driven cloud, that I might greet  
My darling brother and embrace my dear,  
So long in exile, very far from here!  
Old man, he looks so worthy of great praise,  
His weapons flashing like the morning rays.

Servant:

He'll hither come, bound by the armistice,  
To fill your heart with joy.

Antigone:

But who is this 160

Whose chariot, pulled by white steeds, brings him here?

Servant:

Lady, that's Amphiaraus - he's a seer:  
His sacrificial victims will soon drench  
The earth with their spilt blood and thereby quench  
Her thirst.

Antigone:

Selene, girdled by a light  
Of gold, child of the Sun who shines so bright  
And goads his steeds in turn so quietly,  
Where is he who insults so dreadfully  
This city?

Servant:

Capaneus? He's there as well:

He's measuring the walls that they might tell 170  
Him how to scale them.



Antigone:

Nemesis, I pray,

And Zeus's bolts and peals of thunder, stay  
His boasts! He says the Theban girls he'll give  
To Mycenae's dames and force them all to live  
In bondage by the streams of Amymone,  
Dear to Poseidon. May I never see  
That bondage, Artemis!

Servant:

Child, go inside

And in the shelter of your room abide!  
A multitude of women comes this way,  
And everything is now in disarray. 180

Now, every woman loves to criticize  
And, with a chance to talk, hyperbolize.  
It seems that they are happy to repeat  
Nothing about each other that is meet.

Chorus:

Out of the swell of the Tyrrhenian Sea  
I came here from Phoenicia's isle to be  
A slave to Lord Apollo where he dwells  
Beneath snow-capped Parnassus. Through the swells  
Of waves I came, across the barren sea,  
Thrust by the West Wind brought from Sicily, 190  
The sweetest music in the heavenly sky.,  
My city's choice, to Cadmus' land came I.  
Agenor's famed sons are my family  
In Thebes. I'm now Phoebus' auxiliary,  
For to the god I have been dedicated,

Just like his statues that are all created  
 Of gold. I'm here to drench my glorious hair  
 With the Castalian waters, in my care  
 Of Phoebus. Greetings, rock that sets alight  
 The double flash of fire upon the height                      200  
 Of frenzied Dionysus, and you, vine  
 That drops its clustered grapes to make our wine  
 Day after day and you, o cave, as well,  
 Of the dread snake, you mountain-tops where dwell  
 The guardian nymphs! Would I could fearlessly  
 Dance for the deathless god, leaving Dirce,  
 And seek Apollo's valleys at the core  
 Of all the world! The impetuous god of war  
 Has come before us and is kindling  
 A murderous blaze – Gods, stay his capturing                      210  
 Our city! Comrades share their pain, and we  
 Will also share this city's misery.  
 We're Io's children – our blood's all the same,  
 And as my own these miseries I claim.  
 A massive cloud of shields is kindling  
 A battle that it's threatening to bring  
 To Thebes. The god of war, though, surely knows  
 The dreaded Furies will inflict their woes  
 On Oedipus's sons. Argos, I fear  
 You and the gods – that man is coming here                      220  
 In arms and he has justice on his side.  
 Polyneices  
 These bolts have easily let me inside  
 The walls. Have they, then, caught me in their net?

I won't leave here unscathed: no, they won't let  
Me do that. Therefore I must strive to be  
Observant and watch out for treachery.  
This sword will make me bold. Is that a sound  
That I should fear? Ah, everything is bound  
To daunt the daring once their feet begin  
To tread on hostile land. Yet I trust in 230  
My mother – yet I don't, for she urged me  
To come here under truce. Well, happily  
Help is at hand – the altar's hearth is near  
And I can see that there are people here.  
Sword sheathed, I'll ask these women who here stand  
Who they may be. You of another land,  
Where are you from?

Chorus:

Phoenician-born and -bred

Are we. Agenor's grandsons had us led  
Hither as spoils of war that we might be  
Apollo's servants. When the progeny 240  
Of Oedipus sent me to preserve the flame  
Of Loxias, the Argive army came  
Against this city. In return tell us  
Who you are.

Polyneices:

I'm the son of Oedipus,

Laius's son: Jocasta, progeny

Of Menoeceus, was she who gave birth to me.

I'm Polyneices.

Chorus:

Sir, my masters send

Me here. Before you, lord, my knees I bend,  
The custom of my home. At last you're here,  
Back in your native land again. All cheer                    250  
To you! Come out, my lady! Here is he  
To whom you once gave birth. Come out and see!  
Quickly, come clasp your son in your embrace!

Jocasta:

I'm stumbling out to see his darling face  
Once more. Ah, throw your arms about my breast!  
Stretch out your cheeks to me and let them rest  
On mine! And place your dark and curly hair  
Against my neck! My son, I did not dare  
To think I'd look on you again one day.  
How can I find the words I want to say?                    260  
I long to dance in a delightful maze  
Of joy, reliving all my former days.  
My son, you left the house in desolation  
When exiled by your brother's violation.  
Your friends all missed you, so I cut off all  
These snow-white locks of mine and let them fall,  
Mingled with tears. Not dressed in robes of white,  
I wear these old dark rags – a piteous sight!  
The old blind man still hungers for the brace  
Of disaffected brothers, while his face                    270  
Is wet with tears. To kill himself he sped  
With sword or noose that hung above his head.  
In darkness now he hides himself away  
And weeps, while you, my child, as people say,

Are wed, with children, far away from me,  
And foreigners are now your family.  
A heavy blow to me, and Laius, too,  
Your ancestor, my dearest son – that you  
Married a foreigner! I did not light  
The torches for you, son, as is my right. 280

Ismenus did not see your wedding-day  
And you still live abroad, so far away.  
The streets of Thebes were silent as the bride  
Was entering the house. I cast a tide  
Of curses on whoever is to blame  
For this, for I hold fast it's all the same  
Whether it's sword or strife or Oedipus  
Or Heaven itself that wrought this riotous  
Attack on us, for I am suffering  
The woes that each of these can surely bring. 290

A woman's children are a wondrous thing  
To them, for they all love their own offspring.

Polyneices:

Mother, I'm wise and idiotic, too,  
To walk among my foes. For it is true  
That all must love their native land, for he  
Who doesn't think so speaks but idly,  
His thoughts elsewhere. I felt such dreadful fear  
Eteocles would kill me that I'm here  
With sword in hand while looking all about.  
The truce, though, and your promise crushed some doubt 300  
I had. I wept when I once more had found  
My home, the shrines, my childhood training-ground

And Dirce's fountain, whence unlawfully  
I was exiled: the tears flowed copiously.  
And now I look at you with your all hair  
Cut short and in black robes. Care after care!  
Hatred's a dreadful thing between dear friends:  
How hard it is sometimes to make amends!  
What is my father doing hiding there  
In murkiness? And my two sisters – where  
Are they? Do they not live in lamentation  
As they shed tears about my deportation?

310

Jocasta:

Our house is falling – some divinity  
Intends to bring it down accursedly.  
I broke a law when I gave birth to you  
And your two sisters, and your brother, too.  
Why speak of this? For we must bear our fate.  
I wish to ask you... But I hesitate  
Lest I should hurt you.

Polyneices:

Mother, ask away!

Leave nothing out!

Jocasta:

Then I would have you say 320

How hard it is to be a deportee.

Polyneices:

It's very hard indeed – harder for me  
To bear than tell of it.

Jocasta:

Tell me, therefore,

How does it irk?

Polyneices:

Well, there is nothing more  
irksome than not being able to speak free.

Jocasta:

Why, that's a burden borne in slavery.

Polyneices:

Well, we must stomach the absurdities  
of rulers.

Jocasta:

Joining in the idiocies  
of others is too painful.

Polyneices:

We must go  
against the nature we were born with, though, 330  
and knuckle under with obsequiousness  
if we're expecting to achieve success.

Jocasta:

Hope is the food of exiles, it's been said.

Polyneices:

Yes, if it's fair, though always it's ahead.

Jocasta:

But doesn't time expose its emptiness?

Polyneices:

In loss it has a certain winsomeness.

Jocasta:

Before you married, how did you get by?

Polyneices:

Sometimes, I ate enough, but sometimes I

Did not.

Jocasta:

Did not your father's friends out there

Assist you?

Polyneices:

One should always try to care 340

For one's own self to gain prosperity.

Friends disappear when once fortuity

Is absent.

Jocasta:

Did your noble breeding lead

To wealth?

Polyneices:

Though poverty's a curse, my breed

Could not feed me.

Jocasta;

It seems that there's no man

Who thinks he has no greater treasure than

His native land.

Polyneices:

You could not say how dear

It is.

Jocasta:

What was your plan, then, to come here?

Polyneices:

Adrastus was given a prophecy

From Lord Apollo.

Jocasta:

What, then, could it be? 350



Jocasta:

I cannot guess.

Polyneices:

His daughters must be wed

To a lion and a boar – that's what it said.

Jocasta:

What's that to you? What do you have to do

With beasts?

Polyneices:

I do not know. I'm summoned to

My fate by Phoebus.

Jocasta:

He is wise. Alright –

How did you win your wife?

Polyneices:

Well, it was night

When to Adrastus' portico I'd gone.

Jocasta:

To find a bed that you might lie upon

While wandering in exile?

Polyneices:

Yes, that's true,

But then there came another exile.

Jocasta:

Who? 360

Some wretch, no doubt.

Polyneices:

Tydeus, Oeneus's son.

Jocasta:

How did Adrastus have the opinion

That you were beasts?

Polyneices:

Well, we began to fight

Over which bed we'd earmarked for the night.

Jocasta:

Did he then work out what the oracle said?

Polyneices:

He did, indeed, and then gave us to wed

His two girls.

Jocasta:

Were you happy then?

Polyneices:

As yet

I am content.

Jocasta:

Tell me, how did you get

The troops to follow you?

Polyneices:

Adrastus swore

An oath to me and Tydeus to restore 370

Us both back home to Thebes, and I would be

The first. So many chiefs have joined with me –

A bitter though a needful service, for

Against my Argos I'll be waging war.

Witness, you gods, that I unwillingly

Advance my weapon with hostility

Against my friends. Please, mother, terminate

This miserable conflict and placate

Two loving brothers. Banish this distress  
For us and Thebes! So let me now express 380  
What's long been said before – prosperity  
Is valued most by men, its potency  
Greatest of all, and I'm determined, then,  
To gain it as these ample troops of men  
I lead. A noble man who yet is scant  
Of affluence is insignificant.

Chorus:

Look over there! Here comes Eteocles  
To talk about the truce. Jocasta, please  
Speak to these sons of yours advisedly  
So everything results in harmony. [enter Eteocles] 390

Eteocles:

I'm here to aid you, mother. Let someone  
Begin the conference! What's to be done?  
Our troops' two sections I've stopped marshalling  
That I might hear your prudent counselling,  
Now that you have persuaded me to let  
This man within our walls.

Jocasta:

But tarry yet,  
For hastiness can never be the key  
To just results, but rather leisurely  
Debate will win the day. Therefore suppress  
The fierceness of your look and your excess 400  
Of panting rage! The Gorgon's severed head  
Is not before you now – no, in its stead  
You see your brother. Therefore turn around

And face him, for that way you will be bound  
To listen and speak better. Let me tell  
You something now and heed my counsel well –  
When someone is Impatient with his friend  
And faces him, he has to keep the end  
He hopes to bring about in constant view,  
And nothing else. Now, Polyneices, you 410  
Must be the first to speak because you lead  
An army, seeking vengeance. Now we need  
Some reconciling gpd.

Polyneices:

To take that share, dismissing every man, 430

And occupy the palace and restore  
The realm to Polyneices' hands once more  
A year from now. I have no wish to bring  
Ladders against our towers, ravaging  
The land. I will, though, if robbed of my right.  
I'll call the gods to witness that in spite  
Of my just dealing I'm unlawfully  
Robbed of my land – a godless travesty.  
Mother, I've been quite clear and have not tried  
To trip you up but urge you to decide 440  
Fairly, a judgment pleasing in the eyes  
Of both the unassuming and the wise.

Chorus:

Although I was not born in Greece, to me  
It seems that you have spoken sensibly.

Eteocles:

If everyone agreed on righteousness  
And wisdom, there'd be no contentiousness.  
But, as it is, fairness and probity  
Have no existence in humanity.  
I tell you, mother, I would take flight high  
And join the stars and sun up in the sky 450  
Or go to Hades, if I could do so,  
To win great Tyranny, but, mother, no!  
I will not yield – it shows faint-heartedness  
To lose the greater and procure the less.  
Besides, I shame to think he should command  
A host to come and lay waste to the land.  
For it to Thebes would be a great disgrace

If I should yield and let him take my place,  
Fearing his troops. For he should not have tried  
To reconcile by force - words can decide 460  
Much more even than swords. If he would stay  
In Thebes on other terms, he surely may.  
I'll never willingly surrender! Why  
Should I become his underling when I  
Can rule? Therefore bring on your weaponry!  
Commence the battle! Let the cavalry  
Harness their steeds! Bring out the chariots! For  
I'll not surrender to him. This is war!  
If we must sin, to sin for tyranny  
Is fairest – in all this let piety 470

Be our ambition! Justice does not heed  
Ill deeds because she finds them harsh indeed.  
Jocasta:

Eteocles, my child, not merely ill  
Attends old age, for my experience still  
Can sometimes find much wiser things to say  
Than youth can say. Why, son, do you, then, pray  
To vile Ambition, of all deities  
The very worst? Steer clear of her, for she's  
Unjust! To many homes once prosperous,  
And cities, too, she has been ruinous, 480  
And yet you worship her so frenziedly.  
It's better to acclaim Equality,  
Who makes agreements wherever she goes  
And prospers. But less things always oppose  
The greater ones, the genesis of hate.

For it is Equity that checks each weight,  
Each measure, number, while the sightless eye  
Of night and the resplendent sun on high  
Go on their yearly journey equally  
And neither one of them feels jealousy                      490  
When it must yield. Though both the sun and night  
Are mortals' servants, you'll begrudge his right.  
But where is the impartiality  
In that? Why do you honour tyranny  
So much? Admiring glances? Surely no! –  
An empty joy! Or do you long for woe  
That riches bring? But wealth is empty, too!  
For wise men are contented to make do  
With what they have. Of all humanity  
None has possessions of his own, for we                      500  
Manage the gods' possessions for them. When  
They need something, we give it back again.  
Wealth's not secure but transient as the day.  
I'll ask you two things and would have you say  
Which you prefer – would you be a ruler or  
Preserve your city? Do you hanker for  
The former? If this man gains victory  
And Thebes is conquered, you are bound to see  
So many captured maidens violated;  
This wealth, with which you're so infatuated,                      510  
Will be a stain on Thebes, while you yet stay  
Obsessed with your ambition. Let me say  
Adrastus was a fool to do for you  
That favour; and you, Polyneices, too,

Are stupid in your coming here to lay  
 Waste to our Thebes. If you succeed – o may  
 It never happen! – how could you prepare  
 A trophy to Lord Zeus? How could you dare  
 To sacrifice when you have devastated  
 Your Thebes? What spoils, then, will be dedicated 520  
 Near Inachus? “Now Thebes has met her fate,  
 I, Polyneices, here now dedicate  
 These shields to the gods”? May you not, in this land,  
 Win fame like that! If, on the other hand,  
 You’re beaten and your brother wins the day,  
 How could you possibly then go away  
 And leave upon the field so many dead?  
 For something like this surely will be said:  
 “This match, Adrastus, that you orchestrated  
 Was evil and thereby we’re desolated.” 530  
 You seek a two-fold ruin, son, I fear,  
 And you’ll lose everything both there and here.  
 My sons, lay all your violence aside –  
 They’ll breed such evil when they coincide.  
 Chorus:  
 O gods, avert these woes that trouble us  
 And reconcile the sons of Oedipus!  
 Eteocles:  
 We are beyond words, mother, for we still  
 Delay, a thing that causes nought but ill.  
 For you can never reconcile us two  
 Upon the terms that were proposed by you. 540  
 No, I shall keep the sceptre and be king



Of Thebes. So cease this tedious cautioning  
And let me be! You, Polyneices, go,  
Or you will die.

Polyneices:

Who then will kill me, though?

Who's so invincible as to murder me  
Without his being killed identically?

Eteocles:

He's very near. You see my hands?

Polyneices:

I do,

But wealth is cowardly, and so are you,  
A man too fond of life.

Eteocles:

Then did you come

To battle with a man not worth a crumb? 550

Polyneices:

Yes, since a general who's unwavering  
Is better than a rash one.

Eteocles:

Gambling

Upon a truce that saves your life, now you  
Have turned to boasting.

Polyneices:

That's what you've done, too.

Once more, then, I demand that you shall give  
My sceptre back.

Eteocles:

I won't! No, I'll still live

In my own house.

Polyneices:

And keep more than your share?

Eteocles:

Yes! Leave!

Polyneices:

By my ancestral gods, I swear –

Eteocles:

Which you are here to crush!

Polyneices:

Hear me –

Eteocles:

But who

On earth would listen to you after you 560

Have marched against your fatherland.

Polyneices:

I swear

By temples of the gods whom white steeds bear –

Eteocles:

They hate you!

Polyneices:

I am being driven out

Of my own land –

Eteocles:

Yes, since you were about

To raze it.

Polyneices:

Godless man!

Eteocles:

I'll make it clear –

Call on Mycenae's deities, not here!

Polyneices:

Unholy man, I say!

Eteocles:

But even so,

I've not, like you, become my country's foe.

Polyneices:

To drive me out without my share!

Eteocles:

I'll kill

You, too!

Polyneices:

O father, do you hear the ill 570

I'm suffering?

Eteocles:

He hears all that you do.

Polyneices:

And, mother, you?

Eteocles:

It is not right that you

Should speak your mother's name.

Polyneices:

My city! Oh!

Eteocles:

Go, then, and summon Lerna's waters! Go

To Argos!

Polyneices:

Yes, I will, don't worry. I

Must thank you, mother.

Eteocles:

Leave this land, then! Fly!

Polyneices:

First let me see my father!

Eteocles:

I am set

Against allowing that.

Polyneices:

At least, then, let

Me see my sisters!

Eteocles:

You will never see

Them either. You're their bitterest enemy - 580

Why would you wish to call on them?

Polyneices:

Godspeed,

Mother!

Jocasta:

My son, I'm speeding well indeed.

Polyneices:

I am your son no longer.

Jocasta:

To such woe

Have I been born!

Polyneices:

My brother treats me so

Outrageously.

Eteocles:

The same as he does me.

Polyneices:

Upon the city walls where will you be?

Eteocles:

Why do you ask me this?

Polyneices:

I plan to place

Myself against you as your death you face.

Eteocles:

As do I.

Jocasta:

O my sons, what will you do?

Polyneices:

By the event it will be shown to you. 590

Your father's curses you, my sons, must flee. [exit Jocasta]

Eteocles:

No, let the house be brought down totally!

Polyneices:

My sword will soon be plunged in gore, as planned.

I call as witnesses my native land

And the gods – observe the treatment I've been given

As in dishonour I am being driven

From Thebes, as though a slave and not the son

Of Oedipus, for I am such a one,

As much as he. If Thebes is harmed, then lay

The blame on him, not me, for, as I say, 600

I came against my will, while forcefully

I'm driven out, likewise unwillingly.  
Apollo, lord of highways, I bid you  
Farewell, my friends and the gods' statues, too,  
Where sheep are sacrificed. For I don't know  
If I will speak to you again, although  
Hope's still awake and makes me confident  
That I shall slay him, once the gods have lent  
A hand, and reign here.

Eteocles:

Get out! Oh, how true

That name is that our father gave to you! 610

Chorus:

When Tyrian Cadmus left home and came to  
This land, an untamed heifer promptly threw  
Itself before him, prophesying he  
Would dwell on wheat-rich plains, where the Dirce  
Cascades her lovely waters on the leas  
With all their seeds of grain; it was on these  
That Bromius's mother, Semele,  
Gave birth to him after Lord Zeus and she  
Had lain together (in his cot a twine  
Of ivy wreathed about the god of wine, 620  
The shades of bright-green garlands burgeoning,  
For Theban maids would soon be revelling  
In Bacchic ecstasy). Now this was where  
Ares's vicious serpent took fierce care  
To guard the watered meadows. Cadmus slew  
That monster with the marble stone he threw,  
When he went for some water. The beast's head

I wish to see you, too, because to me

The terms are far from satisfactory.

I hear he has a wider aspiration

In Thebes while trusting his affiliation

With Adrastus' troops. Let's let the gods decide.

The hitch with which we're likely to collide

I'm here to tell you.

Eteocles:

Which is...? Tell me, then.

Creon:

We've spoken to one of the Argive men

Who has been captured.

Eteocles:

And what does he say?

Creon:

He says the Argive army plans to stay 660

Around the Theban walls.

Eteocles:

And therefore we

Must lead our army out.

Creon:

How can that be?

Do your young eyes not notice what they ought?

Eteocles:

We'll cross the trenches. Battle must be fought

Immediately.

Creon:

Their troops are copious

But ours are small.

Eteocles:



I know they're valorous

In words!

Creon:

Argos has some authority

Among the Greeks.

Eteocles:

Cease your anxiety!

I soon will fill their plain with Argive dead.

Creon:

I wish you could, but I see snags ahead. 670

Eteocles:

I'll not hold back my men!

Creon:

Yet victory

Has to rely on counsel totally.

Eteocles:

You want me, then, to try another way?

Creon:

Try every one you can – that's what I say –

Before you risk all.

Eteocles:

Could we maybe set

A trap at night?

Creon:

Yes, if we're sure to get

Back safely if it fails.

Eteocles:

Night equally

Affords its risks but favours those who fight

With bravery.

Creon:

The darkness of the night 680

May cause disaster.

Eteocles:

Should I start the fight

While they are dining?

Creon:

That may cause some fright,

But we need victory.

Eteocles:

Well, Dirce's stream

Can hinder their retreat.

Creon:

Well, any scheme

We have must be well guarded.

Eteocles:

Could we ride

Against them?

Creon:

All their troop are fenced inside

A ring of chariots.

Eteocles:

What's left for me

To do? Surrender to the enemy?

Creon:

Oh no! Just come up with a better plan!

Eteocles:

What possible approach is better than 690

My own?

Creon:

They've seven men, I hear.

Eteocles:

But what

Have been their orders? Seven's not a lot!

Creon:

One man for every gate.

Eteocles:

But what are we

To do? I'll not wait till we're totally

Devoid of every option.

Creon:

Seven men

Select and post against each one!

Eteocles:

But then

Will each of them command his companies

Or fight alone?

Creon:

He'll lead, Eteocles.

Select the bravest soldiers.

Eteocles:

Very well,

For leadership is needed to repel

Their climbing up our walls.

Creon:

Others must share

Command, for one man can't be everywhere

At once.

Eteocles:

Should I choose them for bravery

Or introspective rationality?

Creon:

Both are essential.

Eteocles:

It shall then be done –

I'll post our men to fight one against one.

I'll not waste time to say each name – oh no,

Not when beneath these walls I see the foe.

My hands won't long be idle. May I meet

My brother face-to-face! Then I'll defeat 710

The man in battle, killing him with my spear,

His punishment for daring to come here

Against my country. But if I should bear

Misfortune at his hands, you must take care

To see Antigone, my sister, wed

To your son Haemon. And now, as I head

Towards the battle, I will verify

Their previous betrothal. Uncle, I

Don't need to say too much of this – just take

Great care of her, not only for your sake 720

But mine as well. My father was insane

For putting out his eyes and will obtain

Scant praise from me, for by his curses he

May slay us, too. There's still one thing that we

Must do – go to Teiresias to find

Out if, as prophet, he has in his mind

Something of Heaven's will. I'll send your son  
To fetch him hither, for he's such a one  
Who'll readily converse with you, although  
I've mocked at his prophetic art, I know, 730  
Straight to his face. If my cause should hold sway,  
Creon, on you and on the city I lay  
This one decree – for you must understand  
That never in the soil of Theban land  
Shall Polyneices' body lie, and he  
Who buries him must die, even if he be  
A friend. Bring me my arms so that I may  
Start out at once for the appointed fray.  
I pray that Justice leads to our success,  
And we will offer prayers to Watchfulness, 740  
The most productive goddess, that we might  
Save Thebes.

Chorus:

Ares, who caused so much affright,  
You love all slaughter, out of harmony  
With festivals of Bacchic revelry.  
Wherefore is that? You do not toss your hair  
As young girls, crowned for dancing, sing an air  
Accompanying the flute's delightful breath.  
Instead you spark off warriors' lust for death,  
Your revels lacking music. You don't gad  
About and wildly wave the thyrsus, clad 750  
In fawnskin. To Ismenus you repair  
With steeds and chariots, inspiring there  
The Argive army with a hatred for

Sparta and in bronze armour threatening war  
Against her walls. Strife's a goddess to fear,  
Providing woes for princes ruling here.  
Snow-capped Cithaeron, dear to the goddess  
Artemis, you holy valley with its tress  
Of leaves, packed with wild animals who roam  
Your woods, would Oedipus, cast from his home, 760  
Had not been reared by you, upon the child  
A golden brooch! Would that the winged, wild  
And monstrous maid, the Sphinx, had never found  
Grief here, her songs spouting a tuneless sound!  
She came here from the hills and snatched away  
The sons of Cadmus, sent from Hell to slay  
The Cadmeans. Once more there's dolorous  
Discord between the sons of Oedipus.  
Wrong can't be right, and there can never be  
Integrity in lawless progeny. 770  
Earth, by some foreigners I heard it said  
In my own home that you once bore and bred  
Out of the teeth of a snake with blood-red head,  
A serpent that on feral animals fed,  
A race that would bring Thebes celebrity  
But end up bringing her indignity  
As well. In days gone by, to solemnize  
Harmonia's wedding, came the gods. The skies  
Greeted the walls as at the lovely sound  
Of Amphion's lyre they rose high from the ground, 780  
Along with Thebes's citadel, between  
The rivulets of Dirce and the green

Meadows before Ismenus. Horned Io  
Has been ancestor of our kings, and so,  
With blessings piled on blessings, we became  
The pinnacle of Ares' crown of fame. [enter Teiresias, Antigone and Menoeceus]

Teiresias:

Lead on, my daughter, for you are the eye  
To my blind feet, a star up in the sky  
For sailors; lead me on to level ground,  
Then go before, for otherwise I'm bound 790  
To trip. Your father's weak. Keep in your hand  
The signs which in my holy chair I scanned,  
The auguries. Menoeceus, please tell me  
How far it is to Thebes that I may see  
Your father. For my knees are weak and I  
Have come a long way and can hardly try  
To carry on.

Creon:

Take heart! You're very near  
Your friends, Teiresias. The harbour's here.  
Child, take his hand! A chariot must wait  
For other people to alleviate 800  
Its load, as he must wait.

Teiresias:

I'm here at last.  
But tell me, Creon, why you've been so fast  
In bidding me.

Creon:

Ah, that I can't recall.  
Recover, get your breath and shake off all

Your weariness.

Teiresias:

I'm weary, as you say,

Indeed, for I arrived but yesterday

From Athens, where they have been fighting, too –

Against Eumolpus, where the laurel's due

I gave to Cecrops' sons. Here, as you see,

I won this gold crown for that victory 810

As first-fruits of the spoils.

Creon:

An omen! For,

As you well know, we, too, are now at war –

With the Danaids, and Thebes is struggling

Against the foe. Eteocles, our king,

Has gone to fight them, and he has impressed

Upon me to bid you to do your best

To save the city. I'd be reticent

With King Eteocles nor would have spent

A word on him, but I will speak to you,

Who wish to learn of me. This land, it's true, 820

Has long been troubled ever since the day

His father Laius with Jocasta lay,

Begetting hapless Oedipus to be

Jocasta's spouse against the gods' decree.

His eyes' destruction was their punishment

For Greece: the sons of Oedipus then went

Astray, keen to throw over it the veil

Of time, thinking that they could never fail

To break free from the gods. They took away



Their father's due of reverence, and they 830

Deprived him of his freedom, maddening  
The luckless man, and therefore, suffering  
And in disgrace, he cursed them dreadfully.

Since I revealed it all, they hated me.

Now they're both facing death, while heaps of slain

On either side will cause a bitter pain

In Thebes. Perhaps I can persuade one man

To stop the madness - the most likely plan

Is to prevent a child of Oedipus

From ever being a citizen among us

Or – Heaven protect us! – being allowed to reign 840

Over this land, for they are both insane

And will crush Thebes. But since the good can be

Brought to destruction by iniquity,

There is one other way – although I may

Not speak of it, and it would cause dismay

To tell of it in those who happily

Are able to supply a remedy –

I'll go away. I now bid you goodbye;

I will endure what is to come, if I 850

Must do so, for what else is there to do?

Creon:

Stay!

Teiresias:

Do not touch me!

Creon:

Wait though! Why do you

Desire to leave?

Teiresias:

What's leaving you, my friend,  
Is your own fortune.

Creon:

How can we defend  
Our city?

Teiresias:

You may want this now, although  
In a short time, you won't.

Creon:

How is that so?  
Teiresias:

You really want to hear?

Creon:

I do indeed –  
How could I not?

Teiresias:

Then soon you will pay heed  
To what I say. But first I'd like to know  
Where is Menoeceus.

Creon:

You don't have to go                      860  
Too far – he's by your side.

Teiresias:

Then let him leave!  
Creon:

But he's my son: your words he will receive  
To keep but to himself.

Teiresias:

You'd have him hear

What I tell you?

Creon:

Yes, it will give him cheer

To know we can be safe.

Teiresias:

My prophecy,

Therefore, is this – if you successfully

Fulfil it, then your actions will suffice

To save our city -: you must sacrifice

Your son Menoeceus.

Creon:

What??

Teiresias:

Just so.

Creon:

Such ill

In so few words!

Teiresias:

To you, yes, but they will 870

Save Thebes.

Creon:

My ears are stopped! I will refrain

From loving Thebes.

Teiresias:

The man is quite insane.

Creon:

Farewell – it's not your prophecy I need.

Teiresias:

In your ill luck will you, then, never heed

The truth?

Creon:

By your grey hair and by your knees

I beg you –

Teiresias:

I won't listen to your pleas!

Fate's ill can't be averted.

Creon:

Do not say

A word of this!

Teiresias:

Oh no, I cannot stay

Silent, for that would be unjust.

Creon:

Will you,

Murder my child, then?

Teiresias:

Other men will do 880

The deed – I'm but the seer.

Creon:

I and my son

Are victims of a curse – how was this done?

Teiresias:

You've every right to question what I say.

Precisely where the earth-born dragon lay

Watching by Dirce's springs he must be slain,

A gift to Cadmus, for the ancient stain

Of Ares' wrath – thus Ares will requite  
The serpent's death. If you perform this rite,  
He'll be your ally. You, atoning, then,  
With fruit for fruit and blood for blood, again      890  
Will earn the friendship of the earth, for she  
Once yielded from her soil her progeny  
Of armoured men. And one of those created  
Out of the dragon's teeth has now been fated  
To die. Now, you and your two sons alone  
Are the survivors of that race thus sown.  
Haemon, your other son, is almost wed,  
Thus held exempt – his blood will not be shed  
Because he is betrothed. Menoecus, though,  
In death might save his country from the foe;      900  
The Argives will leave many dead behind.  
Creon, there are two fates – make up your mind!  
The city's or your son's? Now lead me back,  
Daughter! In prophets there exists a lack  
Of sense, for if one gives out a reply  
That's adverse, he becomes detested by  
Thos who consulted him, but if he should  
Deceive or pity them, it's still not good,  
For then he wrongs the gods. The only seer  
Should be Apollo, for he has no fear      910  
At all. [exit Teiresias and Antigone]

Chorus:

Creon, why do you not reply?

Creon:

What can I say? For it is clear what I

Should answer. I will never bear such ill  
As to allow the citizens to kill  
My son to save the city. All men dote  
Upon their children, and none will devote  
Their sons to be dispatched. You honour me  
Yet kill Menoeceus simultaneously!  
I'm in the prime of life, prepared to die  
For Thebes. But come, my son, with all speed fly 920  
From here! Dismiss these reckless warnings! – he  
Will tell the chiefs and rulers, but if we  
Forestall him, you are saved: if we are late,  
However, you must submit to your fate.

Menoeceus:

Where can I go?

Creon:

The furthest from this land.

Menoeceus:

Name somewhere and I'll bow to your command.

Creon:

Aetolia.

Menoeceus:

Where shall I go from there?

Creon:

Continue to Thesprotia.

Menoeceus:

Ah! Where

Dodona stands?

Creon:

That's right – you understand.

Menoceus:

And who'll protect me there?

Creon:

The god's command 930

Will send you thence.

Menoceus:

But what support shall I

Be able to unearth?

Creon:

I will supply

You with finances.

Menoceus:

Thank you, father, though

You must be gone, while I myself will go

To Aunt Jocasta who once suckled me –

I had no mother in my infancy –

To say farewell to her before I leave.

Quick, go! [exit Creon] Hah, I was clever to deceive

My father, for his fears I could allay,

For he was urging me to run away, 940

Depriving Thebes of safety, rendering

Me cowardly. It's alright pardoning

An old man, but there isn't any way

That you could pardon me if I betray

The country of my birth. Then know that I

Will go and save my city, for I'd die

For her, and it would bring much shame to me

If I did not. Those whom no prophecy

Constrains and those who are not obligated

By Heaven stand there unintimidated 950

By Death, shoulder to shoulder, fighting for

Their country in an internecine war,

While, like a coward, from my land I flee,

A traitor both to Thebes and family,

Base anywhere I go. By Zeus and all

His stars, by Lord Ares, who casts a pall

Of blood in warriors and who created

Sown men who from the earth were generated,

I'll stand upon the battlements way up high –

Above the dragon's deep, dark den will I 960

Offer myself and set my country free,

The very spot marked in the prophecy.

I will yield up my life, an offering

That's far from mean, and rid us of the sting

Of this affliction. For if every one

Of us did everything that could be done

To aid our land, our woes would now be few

And we would prosper in the future, too.

Chorus:

O earthborn creature, on that hellish day

You brought your winged, viper self to prey 970

Upon us all, replete with death and woe,

Half-maiden, yes, a murderous monster, though,

With ravenous claws. You caught some youths one day

Near Dirce with your most discordant lay,

A deadly curse upon us all, and he

Who wrought this was a deadly deity.

Mothers and maidens filled their homes with groans,



Lamenting cries, lamenting songs and moans,  
In turns throughout the city. Ah, the sound  
Resembled thunderclaps whenever she found      980  
And bore a man away. From Delphi sent,  
Came Oedipus, a sign of merriment  
Back then but afterwards a cause of grief.  
He guessed the riddle, bringing us relief,  
But then he wed his mother – godlessly –  
And stained our land with this impurity,  
Cursing his sons, thus leading them to war.  
And now we have great admiration for  
This man who for his country's cause has gone  
To meet his death, though leaving tears upon      990  
His father's cheeks. A crown of victory  
He's brought to all our seven gates. May we  
Be mothers thus, our progeny all fair  
In looks, dear Pallas, you who through the air  
Propelled a well-aimed stone that it might kill  
The serpent, thereby letting Cadmus spill  
Its blood, and thus a curse upon this land  
Was cast. [enter Messenger]

Chorus:

    A herald with an urgent hand

Knocks at the gate.

Messenger:

    Hey! Bring Jocasta out!

Who's there? Open the door! Once more I shout. 1000

Noble Jocasta, cease your long lament! [enter Jocasta]

Jocasta:

Surely, dear friend, you have not now been sent  
To tell me that Eteocles has died –  
For you indeed have always marched beside  
His shield while warding off the enemy.  
So say what tidings you have brought to me!  
Is he alive or dead?

Messenger:

                                  He's living still,  
So do not fear – I rid you of the thrill  
Of terror.

Jocasta:

                                  And the walls?

Messenger:

                                  Unpulverized  
They stand yet – we have not been vandalized.   1010

Jocasta:

But have our troops been close to jeopardy?

Messenger:

Too close, but Theban warriors proved to be  
The stronger.

Jocasta:

                                  What, then, of my younger son?

He lives?

Messenger:

                                  They both do.

Jocasta:

                                  Ah, god's benison  
Be on you! When besieged, how did you beat  
The Argives off and force them to retreat?

Tell me, so that I may then go inside  
And tell my blind spouse that we now reside  
In safety.

Messenger:

When Menoiceus took his stand  
Upon the turret's top to save this land, 1020  
Plunging his sword into his throat, your son  
Set seven companies to man each one  
Of Thebes's seven gates and constantly  
Keep watch upon the Argive enemy,  
While horse would cover horse, and those who fought  
On foot did likewise - thus aid could be brought  
To any point at once. We saw the foe  
With their white shields as they prepared to go  
Out of Teumesus. Then, when they were near  
Our trench, the Argives started to career 1030  
Up to the walls. And then the battle-cry  
And trumpet-call rang out from us on high,  
And from the Argive ranks. The progeny  
Of Artemis led out a company  
Towards the Neitian Gate, this leader's name  
Parthenopaeus. On these soldiers came,  
Behind thick rows of shields, while on his own,  
Within the very core of it, was shown  
Atalanta who was clearly seen to slay  
The boar, her arrow shot from far away. 1040  
And then up to the gate of Proetus  
There came the prophet Amphiaraus,  
The victims on his chariot, though he

Had no egregious sign, his weaponry  
Quite plain. And next there came Hippomedon  
To the Ogygian Gate, with Argus on  
His shield with his ever-attentive eyes,  
Some open with the stars up in the skies,  
Some hiding in the dark, as could be seen  
When he was slain. Now Tydeus, too, had been 1050  
Assigned the Homoloian Gate, to sack  
The city, on his shield a lion's back,  
Prometheus bearing a torch in his right hand.  
Your own son Polyneices, of this land  
Both born and bred, against the Fountain Gate  
Was set, while on his shield at a frantic rate  
Were galloping the colts of Potniae,  
And they appeared to any human eye  
Distraught by means of some contraption wrought  
Upon the handle. Capaneus had brought 1060  
His men to Electra's gate – the god of war  
Could not be bolder! On the shield he bore  
There loomed a giant, from the earth's soil born,  
Upon his back a city which he'd torn  
Out of its base, a menacing hint to us  
Of what's in store for Thebes. Then Adrastus,  
A hundred vipers on his shield, was posted  
Before the seventh gate, the Hydra, boasted  
About in Argos, at his arm. The shield  
On which these serpents were engraved revealed 1070  
Them bearing in their jaws our men inside  
Our very walls. Now I identified

Each one as to our generals I brought  
The watchword. At the battle's start, we fought  
With arrows, spears and slings, weapons which go  
A long way, and with what stones we could throw.  
Then as we were gaining the upper hand,  
Your son and Tydeus yelled out the command:  
"Before you're torn to pieces in the fray,  
You sons of Danaus, do not delay 1080  
To fall upon the gates with all your might,  
All cavalry and charioteers and light-  
Armed troops." They all responded to the call  
Immediately, and I saw many fall;  
Like tumblers, so many men were cast  
Down to the earth, where they breathed out their last  
With streams of blood. Then Atalanta's son,  
Who was not Argive but Arcadian,  
Stormed at the gates and called for picks and flame  
To raze the town. But Periclymenus came, 1090  
Poseidon's son, and heaved upon his head  
A wagon-load of stone that had been shed  
Down from the battlements, thus shattering  
The strata of his skull, enveloping  
His yellow hair and youthful cheeks with gore.  
He'll never see his mother anymore,  
That splendid archeress, the progeny  
Of Maenalus. Your son went on the see  
The gates secure. I followed him and spied  
Tydeus and rows of troops hurling a tide 1100  
Of spears over the towers so that our men

Retreated but he rallied them again,  
As hunters cheer their hounds. Then, after we  
Had stopped the madness there, immediately  
We sought the other gates. How can I tell  
Of Capaneus's crazy actions? Well,  
He bore a ladder as he rushed about –  
“Not even Zeus's fire,” he would shout,  
“Will hold me back from bringing ruination  
On Thebes!” Then under a precipitation                    1110  
Of stones, beneath the shield to which he clung,  
He set about to climb, rung after rung,  
And just as to the pinnacle he came  
He was by Zeus's bolt of thunderous flame  
Smitten. The earth re-echoed, everyone  
Was filled with fear and from his perch he spun  
Like Ixion's wheel, limbs shattered, with his head  
Turned to Olympus, while his blood was shed  
Upon the ground. Now that Adrastus knew  
That Zeus was hostile to his troops, he drew                    1120  
Them back beyond the trench. Our cavalry,  
Once they had seen that lucky augury,  
Drove forwards while our hoplite warriors cast  
Their spears – in fact, it all happened so fast.  
Many were dying, some were headlong tossed  
From chariots, and many wheels were lost  
While axles clashed, dead heaped on dead. Today  
At least we've kept the enemy away,  
But in the future, if this land will be  
Favoured, the gods must bring security                    1130

To Thebes, as Zeus has done today.

Chorus:

It's good

To gain a victory, and yet I would

Be happier still if every deity

Would show to us his generosity.

Jocasta:

Fortune is kind, my sons yet live, my land

Is not in ruins, but I understand

That, through my marriage, Creon feels great pain,

For he has lost his son – a public pain

But private grief. But to your tale once more!

Please tell me what my two sons have in store. 1140

Messenger:

All's well with you – that's all you need to hear.

Jocasta:

Yet my suspicions you arouse, I fear.

Messenger:

Besides your sons, what do you wish to know?

Jocasta:

I'd have you tell to me how things will go

For me.

Messenger:

I must go back – I can't defend

Your son while I am with you.

Jocasta:

You portend

Some dreadful thing!

Messenger:

Ill tidings following

Good news I'd shun.

Jocasta:

Unless you should take wing

And leave, you mustn't.

Messenger:

Why not let me go

Instead of forcing me to let you know 1150

Bad news? Your sons plan deeds of desperation

In single combat. I heard their oration

(I would I had not heard those words at all!).

Upon the lofty tower, standing tall,

Eteocles begged silence and began:

"Greek captains, Argive leaders, every man

In Thebes, don't barter all your lives on me

Or Polyneices! Of this jeopardy

I free you. With my brother I will fight,

And if I slay him, I will have the right 1160

To rule alone, but if I should be slain

Myself, then Polyneices will obtain

The realm. Argives, go home and there reside

In peace. Too many earth-born men have died."

Your other son agreed with what he'd said,

And from both sides there came the go-ahead.

The leaders from each side then stood before

The armies and to this agreement swore

An oath. Your sons donned armour with the aid

Of each one's chief. A dazzling sight they made,

Both of them eager to propel the spear.



Their friends came to them, all with words of cheer: 1170

“Polyneices, give your city fair renown

With Zeus’s image as a victor’s crown.”

“Eteocles, for Thebes you now will fight –

If you’re victorious, you have the right

To rule.” The seers were present, offering

Sheep to the gods, carefully studying

The tongues and forks of fire, whose clammy smell

Prognosticates that things won’t turn out well,

The tapering flame that acts ambiguously,

A sign of both defeat and victory. 1180

But if you have the power of subtle speech

Or have a magic spell, go now and reach

Out to your sons! Restrain them from this fight

And warn them of the perils that they might

Encounter! You will suffer great dismay

If you should lose them both in just one day. [exit Messenger] [enter Antigone]

Jocasta:

Come out, Antigone! The gods have sent

A crisis. Now’s no time for merriment

Or girlish games! You and your mother must

Save two brave men from plunging to the dust, 1190

One slaughtered by the other.

Antigone:

What new fear,

Mother, have you brought to your comrades here?

Jocasta:

Your brothers are in danger.

Antigone:

What?

Jocasta:

They plan

On single combat, fighting man to man.

Antigone:

Oh no! Mother, what do you have to say?

Jocasta:

No welcome words. Come, daughter, come away!

Antigone:

What? To my chamber?

Jocasta:

No, we need to see

The army.

Antigone:

No, I cannot bear to be

Among a crowd of people.

Jocasta:

Ah, but you

Must cast off modesty.

Antigone:

What shall I do? 1200

Jocasta:

Conclude your brothers' strife!

Antigone:

How can that be?

Jocasta:

Fall down before their knees along with me!

Antigone:

Then lead me on, for we must not delay!

Jocasta:

Yes, if we can forestall them, then I may  
Yet live, but if they kill each other, I  
Will lie down with the two of them and die.

Chorus:

O gods, my mind is trembling with fear  
And I feel pity for this mother here.  
Which of her brace of sons will slay the other?  
The pain! O Zeus! O earth! To kill one's brother! 1210  
Twin savage beasts, two murderous souls who wield  
Their spears will soon shed blood upon the shield  
Of one of them. Ah, such unhappiness  
To think of single combat! This distress  
I'll wail in foreign accents. Ah, their fate  
Depends on death – today will arbitrate  
That fate. It's for the Furies to decide  
Which of the brothers is the homicide.  
But here comes Creon with a clouded brow,  
So I will cease my lamentations now. [enter Creon]1220

Creon:

Am I to mourn my city with this screen  
Of cloud around her, just as if she'd been  
Through Hell – or my own self? My son has died  
To save his land and thus is glorified,  
Though this has brought on me a wealth of care.  
I took him from the dragon's rocky lair  
In my sad arms. The house is weeping, too.  
I now am looking for Jocasta, who  
Is of my age, in order that I may

See to the bathing of my child and lay 1230

Him out. Pay honour to Persephone.

Chorus:

Creon, your sister and Antigone

Have left.

Creon:

Whither? Tell me what has occurred.

Chorus:

Of her two sons sad tidings has she heard –

That they'll engage in combat one on one.

Creon:

What do you mean? In mourning my dead son

I didn't hear of this.

Chorus:

Some time ago

Your sister left. Some may already know

The outcome of the struggle.

Creon:

Loik! I see

A gloomy messenger – this tragedy 1250

He seems to know. [enter Messenger]

Messenger:

How am I to relate

The news I'm bringing?

Creon:

Miserable fate!

Your looks are grim.

Messenger:

My tidings are severe

Indeed.

Creon:

More dreadful news for us to hear!

Tell us!

Messenger:

Creon, your nephews both are gone.

Creon:

A dreadful tale of woe to bring upon

Both me and Thebes! O house of Oedipus,

Have you been told these tidings brought to us?

Chorus:

If it could weep, it would.

Creon:

A grievous blow

Of fate!

Messenger:

Ah, if you only knew the woe 1250

Of others!

Creon:

What? More dreadful to abide

Than this?

Messenger:

Your sister with her sons has died.

Chorus:

Ah, wail and strike your heads!

Creon:

O wretched queen,

To end your life this way and to have seen

Your marriage ruined by the Sphinx! Tell me

How came about this dreadful tragedy,

The curse of Oedipus!

Messenger:

Of course you heard

Of our successes here, for they occurred

Not far away. The sons of the old king,

Once they'd adorned themselves in dazzling 1260

Bronze armour, stood before the troops of men

To start the contest. Polyneices then

Faced Argos, praying: "Hera, since the land

In which I'm dwelling now is your land and

Since I have wed Adrastus' child, I may

Claim that I'm yours. Grant, then, that I may slay

My brother." At this many warriors wept

As they looked in each other's eyes and swept

Their glances all around. Eteocles

Turned to Pallas Athene, praying – these 1270

Were his words: "Daughter of Zeus, may my right hand

Destroy the man who's come to sack our land."

Then like a blazing torch the trumpet sounded,

The sign for battle, and the two men bounded

And clashed like sharp-tusked boars, their beards immersed

In frenzy's foam. Thus with their spears they burst

Upon each other, both men crouched below

His shield, thus causing the weapon of his foe

To glance off safely with no injury.

But if one showed his face, his adversary 1280

Would try to pierce his eyes. But both took care

To shield his eyes and cause each spear to spare

Them both. The others, though, were full of dread  
As from their bodies sweat was freely shed.  
Eteocles tried to kick a stone that lay  
Upon his path, and thereby straightaway  
His leg was seen. His brother thrust his spear  
Into his thigh, which caused his men to cheer.  
The wounded man, however, now beheld  
His brother's shoulder showing and propelled 1290  
His spear into his breast, and cheering then  
In turn broke out among the Theban men.  
Eteocles' spear, though, shattered at its head,  
And now it seemed he was as good as dead.  
He found a rock, however, which he threw,  
Thus breaking Polyneices' spear in two.  
They now were even, with no spear to fling,  
So now it had come down to battling  
With swords, which each took hold of by the hilt  
And, wielding them, pounced forwards at full tilt. 1300  
A crafty trick he'd learned in Thessaly  
Eteocles now introduced, for he  
Withdrew himself from the immediate fight,  
Then drew one foot back, keeping in his sight  
His brother's gut, then thrust his weapon through  
His navel so that it was jammed into  
His spine. Dripping with blood, Polyneices fell,  
His ribs and belly churning in the hell  
That was his agony. The other, though,  
Thinking he'd won the fight, began to go 1310  
About despoiling him, his sword now thrown

Upon the ground and on this task alone  
He was intent, and this is why he died:  
His brother was breathing faintly, at his side  
His sword, which now he plunged with one last blow  
Into Eteocles's heart. Although  
They lie together, slaughtered, side by side,  
The citizens of Thebes must yet decide  
Who was the victor.

Chorus:

Ah, how dolorous

I feel for all your sorrows, Oedipus! 1320

Your curses are fulfilled.

Messenger:

Yet there's more woe –

As her two sons lay dying, you must know  
Jocasta ran there with Antigone  
And when she saw their wounds immediately  
Cried out, "My sons, the help I'd bring to you  
Is too late." Then on both of them she threw  
Herself in turn, in sorrow whimpering,  
Recalling all her toil in nurturing  
Them both. Antigone, also, as she lay  
Beside her, mourned: "Brothers, you were the mainstay 1330  
Of Mother. Now you've left me woebegone  
Without a husband to rely upon."  
Gasping, Eteocles, once he had heard  
His mother, though he could not breathe one word,  
Touched her, his eyes filled full of unfeigned tears  
Proving to her that she should have no fears



Of his love. His brother was still breathing, too,  
And said, "Oh, mother, how I pity you,  
My sister and my brother! For although  
Polyneices later came to be my foe, 1340  
I loved him still. So, ladies, bury me  
In Thebes and lull the city's enmity,  
Though I was exiled. O my mother dear,  
Now close my eyes forevermore" – and here  
He put her fingers on his lids – "for I  
Am wrapped around in darkness now. Goodbye!"  
As one, they breathed their last. With grief oppressed,  
His mother snatched a sword from them and pressed  
It to her throat. And even now she lies  
With those whom she loved better than her eyes, 1350  
Her arms around them both. The army then  
Sprang to its feet at once, and all the men  
Began to wrangle – for the victory  
We thought our lord had gained, the enemy  
Believing otherwise, since their lord's blow  
Had been the first, they said. Yet, since we know  
That both are dead, another theory  
Is neither side could claim the victory.  
Antigone crept off. The enemy sought  
Their arms at once, but by some chance forethought 1360  
We still were armed and made a swift attack  
Before the foe could get their weapons back.  
Not one withstood our onset, for they fled  
And left upon the plain their countless dead.  
Our warfare had been crowned with victory,

An image of Zeus set up for all to see.  
Some stripped the corpses of their shields and sent  
Them all within the walls, others were bent,  
With young Antigone, to mourn those who  
Had been their friends and brought their corpses through  
The gates. Thus did we see the city sway  
Between the good and evil in this fray. [enter Antigone]

Chorus:

Not only is there hearsay to make plain  
The sorrows of the house - three of the slain  
Lie here before the gates. One common death  
Has been their lot and robbed them of their breath.

Antigone:

I feel no modesty, I feel no shame,  
I do not veil my delicate cheeks but frame  
Them with my curls while honouring the dead  
In Bacchic revelry, and from my head                      1380  
I fling my mantle, my robe flying free  
In all its saffron-yellow delicacy.  
Polyneices, rightly thus named after all!  
Woe, Thebes, to you, encumbered with a pall  
Of strife and gore! The house of Oedipus  
You have brought down in grim and ruinous  
Bloodshed. What tuneful wailing can I bring  
To mourn my home, fearfully sorrowing,  
Bearing my mother and her sons – all three  
I loved! – the outcome of atrocity                      1390  
Most welcome to the Fury. Oedipus  
Worked out the Sphinx's song, a joy to us,

But she destroyed his family, although  
The Sphinx was slaughtered. Ah, such dreadful woe!  
What Greek, what mortal of nobility,  
What foreigner has borne such tragedy?  
What bird, perched high above us, will intone  
A mournful song for me, left all alone?  
Let me lament the lonely life that I  
Must live in tears of woe until I die! 1400  
Should I first cast the hair from off my head  
Upon my mother on whose breast I fed  
Or by my brothers' ghastly wounds? Oh, oh,  
My father, with your sightless eyes, come, show  
Your misery! You've cast a darkling mist  
Upon your eyes and here you now exist  
In weariness within. Are you aware  
Of what I say or do you roam somewhere  
Across the court or do you sleeping lie  
Upon your wretched couch? [enter Oedipus]  
Oedipus:

Child, why am I 1410

Dragged out here, stumbling out of my room  
To face the light, relinquishing the gloom,  
Invisible as a phantom of the air  
Or Hades or a flying dream, my hair  
Now grey?

Antigone:

Father, harsh news! No longer do  
Your sons look on the light; Jocasta, too,  
Your wife Jocasta, she who staunchly led

Your blind footsteps just like a staff, is dead.

Oedipus:

O Heavens, I may well lament and cry.

Three lives! But tell me, child – how did they die? 1420

Antigone:

I don't reproach or mock you, father – no,

But sadly I must tell you that this woe

Comes from your curse in fire and ruthless strife,

And that is how your sons have left this life.

Oedipus:

My sons, my sons!

Antigone:

Yes, father, you're in pain,

But if you should acquire your sight again –

Oedipus:

But, daughter, tell me how Jocasta died.

Antigone:

All witnessed her laments – oh, how she cried!

She rushed out to the plain and bared her breast

To both of them – a mother's last request. 1430

She found her sons at the Electran Gate,

A place where lotus blooms... Alas, too late!

They fought like lions, desperate to kill

Each other, with a devastating spill

Of blood, now cold, poured by the god of war,

To Hades dedicated. Then she bore

A sword, plucked from the dead, which then she thrust

Into her flesh and crumpled to the dust,

Her arms about her sons. This very day

The god who brings to mortals all dismay 1440

Has brought them here.

Chorus:

## The house of Oedipus

Begins its woes. May he be prosperous

Once more, however.

Creon:

Cease your lamentation,

For we must focus now our concentration

On burial. Hear what I have to say,

Oedipus! Eteocles allowed me sway

In Thebes – it was a dowry to my son

Who wed Antigone. And so have done!

Teiresias has made it very clear

That Thebes won't prosper while you're living here.<sup>1450</sup>

Be sure that I am not your enemy

And don't inflict on you discourtesy

But fear the grief this land will undergo

From those avenging fiends that cause such woe.

Oedipus:

Ah destiny! No mortal man on earth

You've troubled more than me – before my birth

Apollo told my father that I'd be

His killer: then, at my nativity

My father tried to kill me, thinking I

Would be the one at whose hand he would die. 1460

While I was yet unweaned once I was born,

I was exposed in hopes that I'd be torn

To pieces by wild beasts upon the base

Of Mt. Cithaeron. I escaped that place,  
However. Would that mountain had descended  
Straight into Hell, because it has not ended  
My life! It then became my destiny  
To toil for Polybus. Then, wretchedly,  
I slew my father, Laius, and I came  
To Queen Jocasta's chamber, to our shame. 1470  
Two sons I spawned, who were my brothers, too:  
Now, as a legacy of curses due  
To me, I killed them. I'm not so insane  
That I would blind myself and cause such pain  
Or kill my sons without some god to thrust  
Me to it. But enough of that! What must  
I do, poor wretch? Who now will be my guide  
And tend a blind man's steps? She who has died?  
If she yet lived, I know well that she would.  
My brace of noble sons? They're gone for good! 1480  
Am I so young myself that I might still  
Survive? Creon, why do you seek to kill  
Me utterly? For if you banish me,  
I *will* be dead. But I will never be  
A timid pleader. I would not betray  
My past grandeur for all of my dismay.  
Creon:  
With such words, sir, you've spoken very well,  
But I could not allow you here to dwell.  
Take these dead to the palace, but the other,  
That traitor there, Eteocles's brother, 1490  
Cast out beyond the borders of this land,

Unburied, for this is my stern command –  
Whoever's seen to wreath his corpse or give  
It burial is not allowed to live.

Antigone, cease mourning! Go inside  
Until tomorrow when you'll be the bride  
Of Haemon!

Antigone:

Father, how have we been tossed  
Into misfortune! More than these we've lost  
I mourn for you, whose woes go on and on  
From birth. The tragedies you've undergone! 1500  
And, Creon, as for you, our new-made king,  
Why are you so bent on dishonouring  
My father with exile? Why a decree  
Over a lifeless corpse?

Creon:

It wasn't me –  
It is Eteocles who has decreed  
This law.

Antigone:

You, then, are foolish to take heed  
To it.

Creon:

Is it not right, though, to obey  
The orders he gives out?

Antigone:

No, not if they  
Are ill-advised.

Creon:

What's that? Is it not right  
To cast that other one far from our sight                      1510  
As food for dogs?

Antigone:

                                    The vengeance you exact  
Frustrates the law.

Creon:

                                    Yes, if it were a fact  
That he's a traitor now.

Antigone:

                                    His destiny  
He's paid to fate.

Creon:

                                    So let the penalty  
Be paid in death.

Antigone:

                                    What crime did he commit  
In claiming his birthright?

Creon:

                                    Be sure of it –  
He'll not be buried.

Antigone:

                                    Yes – by me, although  
The state forbids the deed.

Creon:

                                    Well, then, do so  
And you'll lie next to him.

Antigone:

                                    Then I'll have died



In noble fashion, lying side by side

1520

With one so dear.

Creon:

Take her inside!

Antigone:

Oh no!

For you will not constrain me to let go

Of him.

Creon:

My girl, this is the law's decree,

Not what seems good to you.

Antigone:

Listen to me –

“Do not insult the dead”

Creon:

No-one must strew

Moist dust upon the corpse.

Antigone:

I'm begging you,

By Queen Jocasta!

Creon:

But you toil in vain

To change my mind, for you will not obtain

Your wish.

Antigone:

But let me bathe his corpse.

Creon:

That, too,

Is vetoed by the city.

Antigone:

Surely you

1530

Will let me bind his wounds.

Creon:

You'll never pay

Respect to this dead man.

Antigone:

Surely I may

Kiss his dear lips?

Creon:

Do not allow this woe

To taint your marriage!

Antigone:

Do you think I'll go

And marry Haemon while I still have life?

Creon:

You must!

Antigone:

He'll have to find another wife.

Creon (to Oedipus):

You see how she reproaches me?

Antigone:

This steel

Shall be my witness now.

Creon:

Why do you feel

This urge to shun your marriage?

Antigone:

I will share

My father's exile.

Creon:

Noble thought! But there 1540

Is folly in it.

Antigone:

And I plan to be

A sharer in my father's death.

Creon:

Then flee

This country! For you will not kill my son. [enter Creon]

Oedipus:

Thank you for your devotion, dearest one!

Antigone:

How could I wed with you in banishment

And all alone?

Oedipus

Stay here and be content!

Alone I'll bear my woes.

Antigone:

But who will care

For you?

Oedipus:

Wherever fate determines, there

I'll fall upon the ground.

Antigone:

But where is he

Who solved the riddle?

Oedipus:

Lost. One day blessed me, 1550

The next destroyed me.

Antigone:

But may I not share

Your sorrows, father?

Oedipus:

Wandering everywhere

With me would shame you, daughter.

Antigone:

Ah, no shame,

But honour, if she proves a prudent dame.

Oedipus:

Now take me to your mother! Let me place

My hand upon my dear Jocasta's face!

Antigone:

There!

Oedipus:

My poor mother! My poor wife!

Antigone:

Ah, she

Of all mankind has the most misery.

And here's the cause of all her sorrow.

Oedipus:

Where

Are my two sons?

Antigone:

They're lying over there. 1560

To their poor faces be my blind hand's guide.

Antigone:

There! Touch your children, who in warfare died.

Oedipus:

Sad sons of a sad father!

Antigone:

O my brother

Polyneices, you who more than any other

I loved!

Oedipus:

My child, Apollo's augury

Has been fulfilled.

Antigone:

What's that? More misery?

Oedipus:

I'll die in Athens, as he prophesied,

After a life of wandering.

Antigone:

Inside

Which Attic town will you be tolerated?

Oedipus:

The home of the horse-god in venerated 1570

Colonus.

Antigone:

Aged father, stretch your hand

And let me guide you as you leave this land,

Just like a breeze that guides ships on the sea.

Oedipus:

I'm leaving. Yes, poor child, be guide to me!

Antigone:

I will. I am the saddest maid in all

Of Thebes.

Oedipus:

Bring me my staff lest I should fall!

Antigone:

You're fragile as a dream. This way!

Oedipus:

To thrust

An old man from his country is unjust.

The pains I bear!

Antigone:

But Justice does not see

The wicked and ignores inanity. 1580

Oedipus:

So many songs were sung at my success

When to the Sphinx I hazarded a guess

About her riddle.

Antigone:

Ah, the Sphinx once more?

Enough of this! The sorrow was in store

Already – that you'd suffer banishment

And die elsewhere. I leave off my lament

With my girlfriends to end up wandering,

As no maid should, to ease the suffering

Of Oedipus. This will make me well-known.

I grieve for all the insults that were thrown 1590

On you and Polyneices. Secretly

I'll bury him, although my penalty

Is death.

Oedipus:

To your companions you should show

Yourself.

Antigone:

My own laments suffice.

Oedipus:

Then go

And at the altars pray!

Antigone:

My piteous tale

Is quite enough for them.

Oedipus:

Well, then, avail

Yourself of Bacchus! Seek his sanctuary,

Where Maenads dance in secret revelry.

Antigone;

Ah, Bacchu, for whom I once capered, dressed

In Theban fawn-skin underneath the crest 1600

Of hills and sang out loud to Semele!

Oedipus:

You dwellers in famed Thebes, look now at me!

I solved the famous riddle and was thought

A great man, and successfully I fought

The Sphinx's power, now in humiliation

Exiled. Why all this useless lamentation?

I must accept my fate.

Chorus:

Great Victory,

Be with me still, always respecting me!







