

SUPPLICES

Aethra:

Demeter and you servants of her shrine,
Confer elation on this son of mine,
Me, Athens and Pittheus's land as well,
Where happily I have been wont to dwell,
Brought up there by my father who gave me
As wife to Aegeus, Pandion's progeny,
Thanks to Apollo's words. I make this prayer,
Seeing those aged women over there,
Who've left their homes in Argos and now throw
Themselves before my knees in fearful woe. 10
Around our gates their seven sons are dead,
Those noble sons whom Argos' king once led,
Adrastus, who is eager to restore
To Polyneices, his child's spouse, once more
A share in the wealth of our former king
That now these mothers may start burying
Their dead. The victors, though, will not concede
To giving them their sons and pay no heed
To the gods' precepts. Here Adrastus lies
Upon the ground, tears streaming from his eyes, 20
Sharing the burden of their prayer to me
And grieving for the sorry tragedy
Of those he led to fight the city's foe.
He wants me to persuade my son to go
And aid the burial, importuning
Through words or force of weapons, burdening

My son and Athens only with this chore.
I'd left my home to make an offering for
A fruitful crop, where crops first bristled through
The soil. And at these shrines we worship two 30
Deities, Demeter and Kore. I stand
And wait, the leafy branches in my hand,
Those branches that are symbols not of might
But pleas and understanding for the plight
Of those poor aged mothers, reverent
Towards the sacred wreaths. My herald went
To summon Theseus here that he may try
To take this evil from us or untie
The suppliant bonds and show their piety
To the gods' will. Women of diplomacy 40
Should always seek the aid of men.

Chorus:

I fall

Before your knees, my lady, and I call
On you to save my children. Lady, they
Were left upon the field of battle, prey
To mountain beasts. Behold the tears that spring
Into my ancient eyes! My mangling
Hands tear my old and wrinkled skin! What's left
For me to do? I've never been bereft
Before, and therefore I have never spread
My children out at home and seen them dead 50
And yet unburied. In the past you, too,
Have borne a son, my queen, and therefore you
Adored your husband, and so share with me

Your feelings – I so grieve my progeny
As to persuade, implore, beseech and plead
That you provide me with what most I need –
Go to the river Ismenus now and bring
Those sons slain in their prime and wandering
Without a tomb! It's through necessity
That I have come here and not piety. 60

Before the fire-crowned altars on my knees
I fall before you with my valid pleas,
Which you can honour since you, too, possess
Children. I pray, extinguish my distress
And give me back my son that I may wind
Him in his mother's arms once more. My mind
Is plagued by sorrow's charm – I am insane
With its insatiability and pain:
It's like some stream that trickles from a steep
Rock's face forever. Women always weep 70
When they are met with the calamity
Of children dead. O may my memory
Of death depart! [enter Theseus]
Theseus:

Why all this lamentation,
Breast-beating, dirges? Give an explanation!
This fluttering alarm disquiets me.
Has something happened to my mother? She
Is why I'm here, for she's been long away.
Ah, what is this strange sight? What can I say
Of this? My mother's here, surrounded by
Some foreign women who let out one cry 80

Of woe – they're weeping piteously, their hair
Is shorn to show their grief, the robes they wear
Don't intimate delight. What does it mean,
Mother? You must explain that I might glean
What has occurred. The tidings must be new.

Aethra:

My son, these are the seven women who
Were mothers to our seven chiefs, for they
Were slain around our gates, and here they stay,
Keeping me prisoner, as you may see.

Theseus:

And who's that man who's groaning plaintively? 90

Aethra:

Adrastus, so they say, Argos's king.

Theseus:

Are those his children who are gathering
Around him?

Aethra:

No, the sons of those who fell.

Theseus:

Why are they here?

Aethra:

I know, but let them tell

Their tale themselves!

Theseus [to Adrastus]:

You there, you with your head

Hidden beneath your cloak! Yes, you, I said!

Speak! Silence will achieve nothing at all.

Adrastus:

Victorious prince of Athens, here I call

On you and Athens. Please hear my petition!

Theseus:

What is your need?

Adrastus:

You know my expedition

Ended in ruin?

Theseus:

Yes, I surely do,

For it was not in silence you went through

Our land.

Adrastus:

The bravest Argives have I lost

Among my warriors.

Theseus:

Such is the cost

Of war.

Adrastus:

To get them back to Thebes I've gone

With my demands.

Theseus:

Did you rely upon

The heralds?

Adrastus:

Yes, I did, but even so

The men who killed them would not let them go.

Theseus:

What did they have to say to your fair plea?

Adrastus:

Hah! They've been spoiled by their own victory. 110

Theseus:

Why come to me?

Adrastus:

I hope that you will bring

Them back.

Theseus:

In vain was all your trumpeting,

It seems. Where's Argos now?

Adrastus:

We've failed indeed,

And therefore we've come to you in our need.

Theseus:

Is this your private wish, then? Or maybe

It's only yours.

Adrastus:

The whole citizenry

Implores you for your aid.

Theseus:

Why did you bring

Your seven armies?

Adrastus:

I was favouring

Two sons-in-law.

Theseus:

Which Argives did they wed?

Adrastus:

No Argives, sir.

Theseus:

What, did you choose instead 120

Two foreigners?

Adrastus:

Yes, foreign men they were,

Thebans – Tydeus and Polyneices, sir.

Theseus:

Whatever was it made you do a thing

Like that?

Adrastus:

I was tricked by the auguring

Of Phoebus.

Theseus:

What, then, did he say?

Adrastus:

He said,

“Your girls must to a boar and lion be wed.”

Theseus:

And what did you make of this prophesy?

Adrastus:

I’ll tell you, for two exiles came to me

One night.

Theseus:

Tell me their names, then! Two, you say?

Adrastus:

They constantly had altercations. They 130

Were Polyneices and Tydeus.

Theseus:

Well then,

Were they wed to wild beasts – not really men?

Adrastus:

Yes, since they scrapped like those two monsters.

Theseus:

And

Why was it that they left their native land

And came to you?

Adrastus:

Well, firstly Tydeus slew

A kinsman and was exiled.

Theseus:

Of the two,

What of the other one? Why did the son

Of Oedipus leave Thebes?

Adrastus:

Ah, that was done

By reason of his father's curse, for he

Was not to kill his brother.

Theseus:

Prudently

140

Was that decision made.

Adrastus:

He who was still

In Thebes, however, visited great ill

Upon the exile.

Theseus:

Tydeus' legacy

He took from him?

Adrastus:

He did. Accordingly

I marched against the town to avenge the crime
And was destroyed.

Theseus:

Did you, before the time
Of your departure, see the seers and stare
Into the sacrificial flames?

Adrastus:

Ah, there
Is where I failed the most.

Theseus:

It seems that you
Have not been gratified by Heaven's due. 150

Adrastus:

It's even worse than that – I went despite
Amphiaras.

Theseus:

And so Heaven's light
Abandoned you?

Adrastus:

The din of younger men
Manipulated me.

Theseus:

Discretion, then,
You left to favour courage.

Adrastus:

Yes, that's true,
And many a general knows his downfall's due
To that. Bravest of kings, to cast my pleas
Upon you as I fall and clasp your knees

I feel ashamed. A king with snow-white hair,
Most blessed in days gone by, I now must bear 160

My troubles. Save the dead, I beg of you!

Have pity on my woes, have pity, too,

On these old mothers, now bereft, who yet

Have tottered to a foreign land to get

Due burial for their sons. No embassies

Are they to Queen Demeter's mysteries.

The sons they will inter were young, while they

Should be interred themselves, now old and grey.

The rich should see a poor man's poverty,

While in their turn poor men should long to be 170

Wealthy. Those who are fortunate should fear

Distress. Song-writers should derive great cheer

From what they do – if they're in pain, then they

Can't gladden others. You perhaps might say,

"Why bypass Spartan land and burden us

With this?" I'll tell you – Sparta's barbarous,

Her customs fluctuating, while elsewhere

The states are small and weak. You can take care

Of this, and you alone, for you can see

One's misery, and you have proved to be 180

A gallant shepherd, still young as you are.

Others, for want of such a guiding star,

Have perished.

Chorus:

Theseus, hear my pleading, too.

Have pity on my woes, I beg of you.

Theseus:

I've talked this out so many times before.

Some people have declared that there is more

Bad than there's good. I contradict them, though –

The good predominates. If it weren't so,

We'd not be here at all. That god I praise

Who gave us rules after chaotic days 190

And brutishness. First, reasoning he brought

And then a tongue to clarify one's thought,

Bestowing fruitful crops and drops of rain

To make them grow and nourish all the grain;

And, furthermore, he gave us sanctuary

From storms and scorching heat, and mastery

Of sailing to develop further trade

With foreign lands. And should our insight fade,

The seer will gaze upon the fire's light,

Examine entrails and observe the flight 200

Of birds. With what the heavenly gods provide

To mortal men, do we show too much pride

In spurning it? Do we believe that we

Are better than the gods? I think I see

That folly in you too, because, although

You listened to Apollo, even so

You mixed the pure line of your ancestry

With muddy water. No, one certainly

Should not confuse what's wrong with what is just.

For prosperous friends into one's family must 210

Be brought. The god, confusing destinies,

Will often bring about twin miseries

And harm both reprobate and innocent.

You led your Argive army when you went
To war and thus the gods you've disobeyed
Because the auguries the seers had made
You flouted. For the prophets had declared
Heaven's will, and you, in scorn of them, then dared
To mar your city, duped by younger men,
Those who pursue preeminence, and then 220

You added war to war unrighteously.
Of those young men, one had the urge to be
A general, one would appropriate
Power, a third wants to accumulate
Gain, careless of the ills people would bear
Through his avidity. I say that there
Are three genres of folk – the prosperous,
A useless bunch, forever covetous
For more, the poor, who cherish jealousy
More than is right, full of timidity. 230

And wound those men above them, taken in
By the eloquence of vicious men of sin,
While the third class, that stands between those two,
Saves cities and observes the order due
To every state. What ruse should I propose
That you be my ally ahead of those
Who are my countrymen. Farewell, I say,
For you've been ill-advised to your dismay.

Chorus:

He erred, as young men are most apt to do,
But pardon him! For aid we've come to you 240
I don't ask you to judge my misery,

And, if my fortunes should prove me to be
Mistaken, I'm not here for punishment
Or redress but your aid. I'll be content,
However, with the words you had to say.
How can I help it? Women, let's away!
But leave the pale green boughs! You deities, hear!
Demeter, let the sun's bright light make clear
That we have been forbidden a reply!

Chorus:

But, lord, we are related, you and I. 250

What are you doing? Will you, then, betray
These suppliant symbols? Will you drive away,
Unanswered, these old women? Do not so!
Even a wild beast finds a rock to go
To hide behind, slaves seek a shrine, a city,
When tossed with storms, will find another's pity
And safety. No mortal prosperity
Will last. Poor women, leave Persephone!
Go, grasp his knees, beseeching him to bring
Your sons back! Ah, hold on to me! The sting 260
I feel! Kind friend, the eminence of Greece,
I beg you by your beard that you'll release
Our sons! Don't leave them lying uninterred
In Thebes, a welcome quarry for a herd
Of wandering beasts while you, my lord, are still
A young man! Look upon the tears that spill
From my old eyes! Here am I at your knees
As I beg for my children's obsequies.

Theseus:

Mother, why do you weep, hiding your eyes
Beneath your veil? Did you, then, hear those sighs 270
Of misery? It tugged at my heart, too.
Raise up your head! Don't weep, I beg of you!

Aethra:

I must!

Theseus:

It's not for you, though, to lament

Their woe.

Aethra:

But they are plagued with discontent.

Theseus:

But you are not.

Aethra:

But may I tell you, son,

Something that will bring fame for everyone

In Athens?

Theseus:

Yes, for there are often wise

Counsels from women.

Aethra:

Yet the word that lies

Within my heart is difficult to say.

Theseus:

To keep prudent enlightenment away 280

From friends is shameful.

Aethra:

I'll avoid the blame,

Therefore, of keeping silence, to my shame.

My splendid plan I'll not hold back through fear
That women should not give advice. So here
It is – my son, give heed to Heaven's will
In order that you do not meet with ill
By slighting her. For on this point you fall,
And on this point alone, because in all
Things else you're wise. I would have patiently
Stayed mum, but there is need to gallantly 290
Defend those who have suffered wrong. No dread
I feel to urge these men to pay the dead
Their due. So check the men who would impede
The laws of Greece, for it is laws indeed
That hold men's states together. Some may say
That it was cowardice that made you stay
Aloof in terror and that you have run
Aground when you, with courage, could have won
Glory for Athens. Though once you had fought
A savage boar, your bravery was nought 300
When it was time to grapple with the foe.
No! If you are my son, do not do so!
Your land eyes its protestors fearsomely
When they mock her for her deficiency
Of counsel. There are other people who
Live in dull quietude – they're cowards, too.
Hurry, then, son! These women and the dead
Need you. The cause is good, so there's no dread
I feel for you. Although I am aware
Of Thebes' prosperity, I sense that there 310
Will be a different casting of the die,

For Heaven reverses all things by and by.

Chorus:

Ah, best of friends, you've pleaded well for me

And for Adrastus: thus my ecstasy

Is doubled.

Theseus:

Mother, what I've said is fair,

And the opinions that I declare

Have tripped him up, and yet I also see

The truth of the advice you gave to me –

That it's not in my nature to refrain

From dangers. By a long and glorious reign 320

I've shown this virtue, ever punishing

The wicked in this land. Toil is a thing

I can't refuse. What would my enemies do

If they found out you were the person who

Asked me to do this – you, the very one

Who trembles for the safety of her son?

Yes, I will do it – I'll rescue the dead

With winning words or, failing that, instead

Apply the spear. The gods will back me, too.

The city, though, must sanction what I do, 330

Which my wish will secure. However, by

Communicating this in person, I

Will make the people well-disposed to me.

For I will, when I set this city free,

Give all an equal vote. So I will take

Adrastus here to prove that I now make

A worthy plea. I'll choose a company

Of Athenian youths to bring back here with me.

Remaining under arms, I shall convey

A note to Creon in which I will pray 340

That he'll release the dead. You ladies, though,

Take up my mother's holy garland so

That I may take her by the hand and lead

Her to Aegeus, for he's a wretch indeed

Who does not serve his parents for what they

Have done for him, for there will come the day

That he'll be served, too, by his progeny.

Chorus:

O Argos, home of steeds, so dear to me,

You've heard the pious edict of the king –

It's bound to prove a most important thing 350

TO Argos and Pelasgia. Success

To him! Reverse my great unhappiness

When he's returned the gory dead and make

Argos his friend by offering her aid!

For pious toil can truly gratify

A city and its grace will never die.

I wonder what the city will decree –

Will she conclude a friendly truce with me?

Shall we retrieve our sons? O Athens, may

You not pollute the laws of man and stray 360

From right, which you revere, I know for sure,

And quell injustice, keeping men secure

When they're afflicted.

Theseus [to a herald]:

You've well served our land,

And with my proclamations you have spanned
Vast distances: now I would have you span
Asopus and Ismenus – tell that man,
That haughty Cadmean king, “Theseus, he who
Dwells near you, begs a favour, sir, of you –
And he believes that it’s the proper thing
To do: the boon he craves is that you bring
The dead back home for burial. And thus
The whole of Thebes will be close friends with us.” 370
If he agrees, give him our gratitude,
But if he answers you in hostile mood,
Tell him, “Expect an army, then! For I
Have camps at Callichorus standing by.”
The city took this task on willingly
When it perceived my wish. Who’s this I see,
A herald? Do not leave! Perhaps he may
Save you the toil of going all that way.

Theban Herald:

Who rules here? I’ve a message from my king,
Creon of Thebes. To whom am I to bring 380
The news, the worst of all my messages:
Polyneices slew his brother Eteocles
Before the seven Theban gates.

Theseus:

I fear

You’ve started falsely – there’s no ruler here.
We are not ruled at all – no, we are free.
Yearly the people rule successively.
Our wealth is shared.

Theban Herald:

Then this is like a game
Of checkers, for the land from which I came
Has just one ruler. Yes, there's no-one there
Who puffs up all the citizens with fair 390
And specious words, forever tampering
With them, now dear to them and lavishing
His favours, now a threat to all: but he
Can hide his defects and escape scot-free
When others' wrongs appear. And anyway,
How could the mob be able to hold sway,
Not being wise? Oh no, one must be slow,
Not quick. A needy farmer, even though
He might not be unschooled, won't even then
In politics convince his fellow-men. 400
Wise men count it no healthy indication
When worthless men obtain a reputation
With crafty speech.

Theseus:

He has a genius
For words, this fellow! But since you have thus
Entered this contest, listen awhile to me,
For you it was challenged this colloquy.
Nothing's more hostile than a despot: where
He is there are no statutes here or there
Common to everyone – his tyranny
Is everything, ousting equality. 410
But when the laws are written down, we find
An equal justice serving all mankind,

Wealthy or weak. The weaker people may
Speak to the prosperous in the same way
When wronged by them. A weak man will win out
Against a stranger when there is no doubt
That justice sides with him. The following
Encapsulates freedom: "Let that man bring
To council any good ideas that he
May have engendered." Thereby you may see 420
That man receives esteem, while other men
May hold their tongues. What greater fairness, then,
Can you perceive? For when absolute might
Is held by citizens, they may delight
In having youthful townsfolk, while a king
Counts this a danger, ever hankering
To slay the leading men, all those whom he
Thinks wise, thus showing his timidity.
How can a state retain its steadiness
When it's deprived of its adventurousness, 430
The young mown down like flowers in the spring?
What profit is there then in garnering
Wealth for one's children when the tyrant's store
Is added to while you toil more and more?
Why raise one's girls at home virtuously
If they'll end up with him whenever he
Wants them and leaves you with sad tears to shed?
Rather than have them dragged to a wedding-bed
Against their will I'd die. These darts I shoot
At what you say, which strongly I refute. 440
What is the message you have for this land?

If you had not come here at the command
Of Thebes, your outrage would have cost you dear.
It's your professional duty to come here,
Tell us your news and hurry back. So say
To Creon that his next communiqué
Comes with a messenger less garrulous
Than you!

Chorus:

Ah, villains are contemptuous
When Fortune smiles upon them, just as though
Believing that it always would be so. 450

Theban Herald:

I'll speak of what I have discussed with you,
About which you held the opposing view.
You can't admit Adrastus to this land,
But since he's here, it's Creon's firm command
To drive him out and shun the suppliant bough
Before the sun has set. Yes, do it now!
And do not try to wrest the dead away –
Argos means nought to you. Do as I say
And billows will not harm your ship of state.
But if you don't, then fierce will be your fate 460
In battle. We and our allies shall rise
Against you. Check your anger and be wise!
Forget your boasts that your Athens is free!
Forget all hope – hope's full of trickery,
Inflicting strife and leading many men
To burst out in excessive rage. For when
A city has to take a vote on war,

No soldier has a single prospect for
His own demise, but rather he'll assume
That death in war is someone else's doom, 470
And Greece, if death appeared to them before
They went to vote, would never rush to war.
We all prefer the good and not what's ill
And peace is for mankind much better still
Than war. Peace is the Muses' friend, the foe
Of sorrow, and her joys in children show,
Always delighting in prosperity.
For we cast things away when wickedly
We go to war, the stronger fettering
The weaker, and the cities following 480
To slavery. Would you rescue our foes
Even beyond their deaths and bury those
Who have been crushed by their effrontery?
Was Capaneus, then, not appropriately
Demolished by a bolt of thunder when
He raised a ladder at our walls and then
Swore he would sack us, though the deity
Would be opposed to his profligacy?
Should not the earth have snatched the seer away,
Steeds, chariot, all, while other chieftains lay, 490
Crushed by great boulders? Boast, then, that your wit
Transcends the wit of Zeus or else admit
The gods are right to slay ungodly men.
The wise should love their children first and then
Their parents and their country, which they ought
To help to flourish and not bring to nought.

A leader's haste brings failure; when at sea
The sailor's calm and shows sagacity
When there is need for it. Farsightedness
As well will show a leader's fearlessness. 500

Chorus:

Zeus punished us enough – that's clearly so.
No need for insults, adding further woe!

Adrastus:

The swine! –

Theseus:

Adrastus, peace! It's not for you
To speak to this herald before I do –
He came to me, not you, and I must speak
Before you do. [to the herald] The answer that you seek
I'll give to you: Creon does not rule me
And I am not aware his mastery
Exceeds my own. Why should he, then, enforce
Athens this way? For then the tidal course 510
Of time would be reversed. I did not fight
In Thebes myself, nor did I think it right
That they should do so. They should certainly
Inter their dead, causing no injury
To any state, and keep the law intact.
Is this not good? It is a patent fact
You took fine vengeance on your enemy,
And now they're dead, swathed in ignominy,
And Justice now has found her rightful berth.
Let them inter their dead beneath the earth, 520

Each element returning to the place

It left, and send their breath up into space,
Each body to the ground. We but possess
Our bodies while we live, which evanesce
Back to their mother earth on our demise.
However, it should come as no surprise
It's not just Argos who will feel the blow
Of your decree, for you should surely know 530
The whole of Greece will rage at what you've done,
That proper rites are banned by anyone.
Into the stoutest hearts you'll strike great fear.
Is it to threaten me that you've come here,
While your own folk fear burying the dead?
You think they'll taint the land? That's what you dread?
Or do you think they'll bring young ones to birth
From far below in caverns of the earth
To wreak their vengeance? What a mad expense
Of words! Your paltry terrors make no sense! 540
You idiots, learn from human misery!
The whole of life's made up of drudgery.
There are some men who soon find happiness,
Some have to wait, while fortune's dealings bless
Some folk at once. The gods are blessed, for they
Are thanked and honoured by poor men who pray
To them. The fortunate also glorify
Them with their thanks in fear that they must die.
Fortune is courted by all wretched men
That they might win her smile; but then again 550
The rich extol her, too, in abject fear
That her auspicious gale might disappear.

So heed these things and bear with moderation
Your wrongs and free yourselves from indignation!
Don't harm the city and do not impede
Them from performing this most pious deed!
Let them inter the corpses of the slain,
For, if you should refuse, the issue's plain –
I'll bury them myself. It shan't be said

The old decree for burying the dead 560
Was set at nought by Pandion and me.

Chorus:

Be of good cheer! For if equality
Is prized by you, you will stay clean away
From many a charge that many a man will lay
Against you.

Theban Herald:

Shall I, then, be brief?

Theseus:

Oh yes.

Since you are hardly prone to speechlessness,
Say what you will!

Theban Herald:

You'll never take away

Those Argives.

Theseus:

Hear, then, what I have to say!

Theban Herald:

I must, it seems.

Theseus:

I will inter the slain

Once I've removed them from where they have lain 570

Since death.

Theban Herald:

Thereby, you'll run the risk of war.

Theseus:

I have experienced harsher things before.

Theban Herald:

Born, then, to take on every enemy?

Theseus:

The insolent ones – I have no enmity

For people who are virtuous.

Theban Herald:

Then come here –

Let's go to the city born of a dragon's spear!

Theseus:

What warrior could spring from a dragon's seed?

Theban Herald:

You'll learn that to your cost – you're young indeed.

Theseus:

The boastful words you speak don't stir my heart

At all to anger. Leave my land! Depart! 580

We're getting nowhere here! [exit Herald] Hear my command,

You men! We shall set out for Cadmus' land.

Each charioteer, put the bit upon your steed

And urge it on to Thebes with all due speed!

Put on your armour, too, you infantry!

With my sharp sword I'll seek their gates and be

The messenger myself. Adrastus, though,

Remain behind! I don't want you to go

And blend your fate with mine. Now will I lead
Fresh troops in a fresh war. One thing I need 600

And one thing only – every deity
Who honours Justice should be a friend to me.
And thus we'll conquer. Valour will bring ill
If it does not possess a god's good will.

First Chorus:

Unhappy mothers of the unhappy dead!
My heart is wildly stirred up by pale dread!

Second Chorus:

What's this new cry you're uttering?

First Chorus:

I fear

The issue of the strife that's brewing here.

Second Chorus:

Issue of swords or words?

First Chorus:

We would succeed

With interchange of reasoning indeed. 610

But if our land is brimming with bloodshed
And beaten breasts, alas, what will be said
Of us, their cause?

Second Chorus:

May Destiny bring low

The victor! That brave thought is twining so
About my heart.

First Chorus:

The gods, it seems, the way

You speak of them, are just.

Second Chorus:

They are, for they

Decide our fates.

First Chorus:

I see much variation

In their affairs. Your former trepidation

Warped you. "An eye for an eye", it has been said,

And yet all mortal men the gods instead 620

Have freed from pain, each thing's allotted end

Held in their hands.

First Chorus:

I wish that I could wend

My way to the turreted plains, leaving the springs

Of the goddess!

Second Chorus:

May a god afford you wings!

First Chorus:

The city of two rivers I would see!

Second Chorus:

So that you may find out the destiny

Of all your comrades.

First Chorus:

Let me understand

What fate awaits the monarch of this land!

Second Chorus:

Now we invoke the gods once more.

First Chorus:

When we

Feel fear, they're our initial sanctuary. 630

Second Chorus:

Zeus, lord of Io, child of Inachus...

First Chorus:

...I pray, be gracious and stand up for us!

Second Chorus:

I hope to save your Argives – I'm on fire

To liberate them for their funeral pyre. [enter Messenger]

Messenger:

I bring you joyful news – I from the strife

Near Dirce's spring absconded with my life.

The seven chiefs are dead, and here I bear

The news of Theseus' victory. I'll spare

Your tedious questions: I served Capaneus,

Who was burnt by the scorching bolt of Zeus. 640

Chorus:

Dear comrade, I rejoice to hear that you

Are back, and Theseus' news is welcome, too.

And if our army, too, is safe, then we

Are wholly blessed.

Messenger:

The army certainly

Is safe. Adrastus fulfilled his intent

When with his Argive troops to Thebes he went.

Chorus:

How was success achieved? Tell us, for we

Were not in Thebes to see the victory.

Messenger:

The sun shone bright, one levelled line of light,

As by Electra's gate I watched the fight. 650

I stood upon a turret way up high,
Where I, though far away, could clearly spy
Three armies on Ismenus' banks. The king
Had posted his own troops on the right wing.
As many Cecropian men, too, could be seen
Beside the king. The other wing had been
Embraced by Paralus. Armed with the spear,
He and his warriors were posted near
The spring of Ares, while the cavalry
Were on the outskirts of the infantry. 660

The Cadmeans were on the walls – they'd brought
The corpses of their foes for which they fought
And stood before them, where the monument
Of Amphion stood. Each cavalry regiment
Was posted there, and chariots were placed
Beside them all. Then Theseus' herald faced
Them all. "Peace and be still, you men," he said.
"For we have come to Thebes to claim our dead,
For we all wish to honour the decree
Of Greece and bury them – the butchery 670

Must stop." To this Creon gave no reply
But sat there, mute. The fight was started by
The charioteers; the warriors, too, they brought
Up into line beside them. Some men fought
With swords, some wheeled their horses back again
So that they could engage with those same men
Whom they had driven back. When Phorbas, he
Who was the captain of our cavalry,

Observed their thronging chariots, he and
The Theban cavalrymen met hand to hand 680
With varying results. The perturbation
I saw! It was not just mere information:
No, I was there! In my chronology,
However, which of these events should be
The first to tell of? Dust-clouds that arose
Up to the sky? Or shall I speak of those
Men tangled in their reins, dragged to the ground
And smashed against the sharp rocks? All around
Were streams of blood and men thrown hither and yon,
Some onto rocks, others cast down upon 690
The earth. As well, some gave out their last breath,
Their crumbled chariots housing them in death.
His cavalry upon the winning side,
Before his men had time to blunt the tide
Of their resolve, Creon immediately
Picked up a shield and charged impetuously
Before them. Theseus did the same, and then
The field was filled with raging battle. Men
Killed and were killed. Shouts of encouragement
And of direction echoed as they went 700
From mouth to mouth: "Kill Theseus' men and thrust
Your spears at them! Drive them into the dust!"
And not for that did Theseus cringe in dread –
He snatched his armour up and on he sped.
The warriors that the dragon's teeth had reared
Were savage enemies, much to be feared:
They broke our left wing but were put to flight

By us when they were routed by our right.
And thus the war was balanced evenly.
And once again our chief deserved to be 710
Acclaimed, for this was not the one success
He gained – he looked around and sought to press
Part of his army that was wavering:
He called to them and caused the earth to ring:
“My sons, if you cannot restrain the spear
Of earth-born warriors, we are lost, I fear.”
And bravery arose among the men
Of Cranaus’s regiment: he then
Picked up a massive club, a fearsome thing
From Epidaurus, used it as a sling 720
And tore necks clean apart immediately,
And now the Thebans could not even flee.
I danced and clapped and raised a joyful shout.
They reached the gates, attempting to get out.
Both young and old yelled out as they all fled
To crowd about the temples in their dread.
But Theseus, though he might have gone inside
The walls, held back his men – “I’m here,” he cried,
“Not to destroy the town but to request
Our slain dead.” Such a general is the best 730
Of options, for he shows his bravery
In war, yet hating the effrontery
Of those who do not welcome happiness
When they have generated their success
But seek to scale its highest rung.
Chorus:

This day,

So unexpected, forces me to say

I have trust in the gods. My misery

Is lighter now they've paid the penalty.

Adrastus:

How are we humans wise? O Zeus, it's you

On whom we all depend, and what we do 740

Is at your will. Our Argos we had thought

Forceful, assuming that our young men fought

With zeal, so when Eteocles was set

For making terms, despite the offer, yet

We turned them down and thereby perished. Then

Those foolish fortunates, those Cadmean men,

Just like some beggar who has suddenly

Obtained great riches, become wantonly

Violent and in their turn have been laid low.

You injudicious folk who strain your bow 750

Beyond the mark, your suffering is right.

You're deaf to friends and thus give up the fight.

You cities, though you might bring to a head

Your ills by parley, use the sword instead.

But carry on! I'd like to learn the way

That you escaped, and then I'll hear you say

The rest.

Messenger:

War shook the city as I went

Between the gates. Just as each regiment

Had entered.

Adrastus:

Did you bring our fallen dead?

Messenger:

We did – those seven chiefs.

Adrastus:

What's that you said? 760

Where are the rest who fell?

Messenger:

Those men have found

Within Cithaeron's dells a burial ground.

Adrastus:

Which side, though, of the mountain? Who was he

Who buried them?

Messenger:

Beneath the promontory

Of Eleutherae. Theseus it was.

Adrastus:

But where

Are those whom Theseus did not bury there?

Messenger:

Nearby.

Adrastus:

The slaves, though, must have bitterly

Taken those corpses from the butchery!

Messenger:

No slaves were used for that.

Adrastus:

Ah, is that so?

Those men were treated honorably, though. 770

That's true. You would have said that if you'd seen

Him there.

Adrastus:

And did he wash their gashes clean

Himself?

Messenger:

Not only that – he also made

Their biers for them, and over them he laid

The sheets.

Adrastus:

A shocking burden!

Messenger:

Shocking? Why?

That is a common thing.

Adrastus:

If only I

Had died with them!

Messenger:

No need to weep, for see,

These women, too, are weeping copiously.

Adrastus:

They're teaching us to mourn But let that go!

I raise my hands and sing a hymn of woe 780

To Hades, and upon my friends I call

To weep alone for them. For life is all –

Once it is spent, it's vanished utterly,

Though one may yet regain prosperity.

Chorus:

Here's joy and sorrow. In our people's eyes

The state's renowned, and there's a double prize

Earned by our captains. What a bitter sight –
My fallen sons! Yet, if I see aright,
When I behold the unexpected day,
It's welcome, sweeping sorrow clean away. 790
Would I had been unwed till now! For why
Did I need children? I don't think that I
Would have felt too much pain without them, though
The loss of my own children brings such woe.
I see these corpses – would I could descend
To Hades with them at their fateful end! [enter Theseus]

Adrastus:

You mothers, for the fallen raise a cry
And to my note of woe wail in reply!

Chorus:

To my dear sons I call out bitterly.

Adrastus:

I'm full of woe!

Chorus:

Alas, such misery! 800

Adrastus:

We have endured –

Chorus:

Such woes!

Adrastus:

Behold my fate!

Chorus:

I've lost my children. What a hapless state

I'm in!

Adrastus:

Bring in the corpses smeared with gore,
Slaughtered unworthily! They won this war!

Chorus:

In my enfolding arms let me embrace
My sons!

Adrastus:

There!

Chorus:

Sorrow difficult to face!

Adrastus:

Alas!

Chorus:

Their parents groanings coalesce
With yours.

Adrastus:

Hear me!

Chorus:

Oh, such unhappiness!

Adrastus:

Would that the Thebans had left me for dead!

Chorus:

Would I had not lain on a husband's bed! 810

Adrastus:

O hapless mothers, look upon this sea
Of troubles!

Chorus:

We have rent our cheeks, and we
Have strewn our heads with ashes.

Adrastus:

Would that I

Could sink beneath the earth or through the sky

Be snatched up by a whirlwind or, with a jolt,

Be paralyzed by Zeus's flaming bolt!

Chorus:

Bitter the marriages that you have seen!

How bitter Phoebus' oracles have been!

The sorrow from the curse of Oedipus

Destroyed his house, a curse so poisonous. 820

Theseus:

I was about to question you when you

Were venting all your lamentations to

The regiments, but I will let that go,

But, though I dropped the matter, even so

I ask about these young men's ancestry

That they should shine so bright with bravery.

Inform our younger citizens – for you

Are skilled in that – that they might know it, too.

Their daring deeds I saw myself, too great

To tell, by which they sought to seal the fate 830

Of Thebes. One question I'll hold back from you

Lest I provoke your laughter – "Who killed who?"

They're idle tales to hear for, in the fight,

With clouds of arrows blinkering one's sight,

One sees but little.

Adrastus:

Listen, then, to me –

I can declare with all sincerity

What you have asked of me. First, Capaneus,

Who was struck by the thunderbolt of Zeus –
Though he was wealthy, his prosperity
He did not brag about; neither would he 840
Deflate a poorer man, and he abhorred
The sort of people who always adored
Boasting about their greed and turned away
From simple things. Indeed, he used to say
That virtue did not live in gluttony
But happiness meant eating modestly.
He relished his few friends, both far and near,
And to each one of them he showed great cheer,
Both friends and family. Eteoclus
Is next, in many things most dexterous. 850
Though he was young and lacking means to live,
He was esteemed. Though friends would try to give
Him gifts of gold, he would reject it all,
For he'd not have his character in thrall
To money's yoke. He felt no hatred for
His city – no, but what he *did* abhor
Were those who sinned against her. For no blame
Would reach a city for the evil name
It got through some vile governor's command.
Then there's Hippomedon, third of this band: 860
When young, he spurned the arts, contentedly
Living out in the country; happily
He took on many hardships with the aim
Of manliness, always pursuing game,
Rejoicing in his steeds, straining his bow,
Because he wished to serve his city. Lo!

Parthenopaeus, the fair progeny
Of Atalanta: he from Arcady
Came to the river Inachus and passed
His childhood in Argos, and when at last 870
He grew to adulthood, first, in the way
Of those who leave their motherland to stay
Elsewhere, he felt no pique or jealousy
Against the state. No quibbler was he,
The chiefest source of bother one can show,
Stranger or citizen alike. Oh no,
He joined the army, fighting for the state
As though her son. Whenever Argos' fate
Was happy, he showed his own happiness,
And he was deeply grieved at her distress. 880
Though loved by many men and women, he
Was careful not to cause indignity
To anyone at all. Next, Tydeus, who
Deserves some lofty words, though they'll be few.
No spokesman, he was yet a clever man
In wartime, always with a cunning plan.
His brother Meleager showed much more
Judgment than he, but in the art of war
He's praised as much, because in weaponry
He had conceived perfect proficiency. 890
Richly ambitious, he'd an inclination
Equal to deeds and not confabulation.
From this account, then, do not wonder why
Before the walls they were prepared to die!
A noble birth brings reverence, and he

Who's virtuous despises villainy.

For courage can be taught – even a tot

Is taught to utter and take heed of what

He does not understand, though what one's told

And learns he's wont to treasure till he's old. 900

So train your children in a virtuous way!

Chorus:

My son, I brought you up to such dismay,

And brought to nothing were my labour pains,

For Hades now has taken away the gains

Of all my hapless toil. My son is dead,

The son I bore, and all my days ahead

Will lack a nurse for me.

Theseus:

While yet he saw

The sun, Oecleus's son into the maw

Of earth was snatched, his chariot also, blessed

By all the gods. Polyneices, once my guest 910

Before he went to Argos, there to dwell

In voluntary exile, I knew well

And thus could sing his praises truthfully.

You know what I would have you do for me?

Adrastus;

Obeying you's the only thing I know.

Theseus:

Well, Capaneus, by Zeus's bolt brought low –

Adrastus:

Will you, because his body has been blessed,

Inter him separately?

Theseus:

Yes, but the rest

Will be one pyre.

Adrastus:

His tomb, therefore, will you

Set somewhere else?

Theseus:

Yes, that's what I will do - 920

I'll build a tombstone by this temple.

Adrastus:

Make

Your slaves immediately undertake

This task!

Theseus:

I'll do the rest. Then bring the biers!

Adrastus:

You women, weeping your unhappy tears,

Approach your sons!

Theseus:

No, no!

Adrastus:

What's that you say?

Must they not touch their sons?

Theseus:

Oh no, since they

Would see that they have altered so.

Adrastus:

That's right.

The bloody wounds would be a bitter sight.

Theseus:

Don't swell their grief!

Adrastus:

Be patient now, I pray,

Ladies! What Theseus says makes sense. When they 930

Are cast into the flames, each one of you

Shall take the bones. O wretched men, why do

You slaughter fellow-men in battle? Cease

From that and save your states in mutual peace!

Short is the span of life, so it would be

Better to live our lives more placidly.

Chorus:

A mother no more, I am no longer blessed,

Nor do I share the happy lot the rest

Of Argive mothers have. Queen Artemis

Won't kindly greet us childless mothers. This 940

Is now my life, and like a wandering cloud

I drift before the blast that howls out loud.

The seven noble Argive sons are gone,

We hapless others left to carry on.

My sons are dead and I am piteously

Crippled with age, and thus it seems to me

That I am neither quick nor dead. I weep

(That's all that's left for me) and here I keep

Sad memories – the hair shorn from his head,

His garlands as libations for the dead, 950

And songs, but not those which the golden-tressed

Apollo welcomes. Waking from my rest,

I'll weep and drench my robe. Look there! I see

Capaneus's tomb in readiness to be
Devoted to his name, and there outside
The shrine, the pyres that Theseus sanctified
For all the other men, and now I see
Capaneus's noble bride, the progeny
Of King Iphis. Why is she standing high
Upon the rock above the shrine? And why 960
Did she pick out that path? (enter Evadne)
Evadne:

What radiancy
The sun-god's chariot sends blindingly!
The goddess of the Moon is shining bright,
Her horses galloping across the night.
Once all of Argos on my wedding-day
Raised up a chant, both dignified and gay,
To honour us, but frenziedly I've sped
To share the flames with you where you lie dead.
I'm weary of my life – the sweetest death
Is surely to surrender one's last breath 970
To lie with him one loves, should Destiny
Allow it.

Chorus:

There's the pyre you oversee,
Lord Zeus's treasure! There lies Capaneus,
Your husband, vanquished by the bolt of Zeus!

Evadne:

I see the goal of life here where I stand,
And in my leap may Fortune lend a hand!
In honour's cause I'll leap into the fire

And mix our ashes in my husband's pyre
Upon the couch of Queen Persephone.

For I will ever show fidelity 980

And stay with you as we lie side by side.

No longer will I be a living bride.

And may my children joyfully be wed

And gain a happy and a loyal bed

Where souls shall mingle!

Chorus:

Old Iphis near,

Your father, and he's drawing close to hear

Your news, which he will be distressed to know.

Iphis:

Unhappy daughter, what a twofold woe.

I have come here in abject misery

To take my son Eteoclus, for he 990

Was slain in Thebes. I also am in quest

Of my Evadne, who rushed out, distressed,

Longing to die with Capaneus, her spouse.

Before, she had been guarded in the house,

But once I had taken the watch away

Because of all our woes, she went astray.

I'm sure she's here. So – is she?

Evadne:

Here am I,

Father, upon this boulder way up high

Above the pyre! I hover like a bird,

Here where my husband's ashes were interred. 1000

Iphis:

What brought you here, my child? Why did you sneak
Across the threshold of my house to seek
This land?

Evadne:

 You would be vexed at my intention,
Father, so I am disinclined to mention
My goal.

Iphis;

 Your father has no right to know??

Evadne:

You would not judge it wisely.

Iphis:

 Wherefore, though,
Are you decked out like that?

Evadne:

 This robe conveys
A longing to receive some public praise.

Iphis:

You do not seem to mourn your lord.

Evadne:

 That's true –
The aim of my appearance may be new. 1010

Iphis:

You're standing by the pyre!

Evadne:

 Certainly –
This is my path to glorious victory.

Iphis:

What victory?

Evadne:

A victory to be won
Over all women underneath the sun.

Iphis:

Was this decided, then, judiciously
Or through Athena's work?

Evadne:

In bravery,
For I'll die with my lord.

Iphis:

What's that you said?
Some riddle?

Evadne:

I will lie down with the dead
Capaneus.

Iphis:

My daughter, do not speak that way
Before this crowd!

Evadne:

I must, so that I may
Tell every Argive.

Iphis:

I will not consent.

Evadne:

It doesn't matter, for from my intent
You cannot sway me. On the pyre I throw
Myself – it is no joy to you although
It is to us.

Chorus:

A fearful deed to see!

Iphis:

O ladies, I am ruined utterly!

Chorus:

Ah, this is such a cruel blow to you,

And yet, poor wretched women, we must view

Its total horror.

Iphis:

No-one more than me

Is so unhappy.

Chorus:

Ah, such misery, 1030

Old man! How you have suffered from the fate

Of Oedipus, as has my own poor state!

Iphis:

Why may we not live twice as long? That way,

If anything goes wrong for us, we may

Look at it with a closer eye and then

Emend it. But the lives of mortal men

Endure but once. A second spell to live

For both the young and old alike would give

A chance to right each wrong. For once I'd seen

Other people who had children, I was keen 1040

To be a parent, too, yet tragedy

Resulting from that wish has seized on me.

But if my present anguish I had known

And learned that losing children of one's own

Is such a cruel thing, sad days would not

Have taken hold of me – I who begot

O aged mother, here

Chorus:

 This evil's wakeful still.

Of trouble and dismay I've had my fill.

Children:

My arms will be reflected in the tide

Of bright Asopus when, troops at my side,

I shall avenge my father. Do I see

You, father?

Chorus:

 Yes, you do, and lovingly

He kisses you.

Children:

 Ah, yes, but what you say,

Your soothing words, the wind has blown away.

Chorus:

Two mourners have been left upon this earth

By him – yourself and she who gave you birth. 1100

Children:

This heavy load of sorrow has oppressed

Me so!

Chorus:

 I'll hold these ashes to my breast.

Children:

I hate those dreadful words.

Chorus:

 My child, you're gone –

Your own fond mother will not look upon

Her dear child anymore. [enter Theseus]

Theseus:

Adrastus, you

I now address, and all you women who

Were born and bred in Argos – do you see

The ashes of these men redeemed by me,

Held in these children's hands? They're yours, I say.

Keep this in mind until your dying day! 1110

Mark well how I have treated you! You, too,

You children, I will say the same to you.

Honour this city! Hold the memory

Of everything that you've received from me!

Be Zeus the witness, and the gods who dwell

In Heaven, that you have been treated well!

Adrastus:

Theseus, we know the kindness indeed

That you conferred on Argos in her need.

You'll always have our thanks, and we will be

Prepared to offer reciprocity. 1120

Theseus:

How can I serve you still?

Adrastus:

Fare well, for you

Are worthy of it, and your city, too.

Theseus:

I will. The same to you! [enter Athena]

Athena:

Now, Theseus, lend

An ear to your advantage! Do not send

These children with the bones so casually!

No, firstly they must give a guarantee
To pay you back for all your application.
Adrastus, as the monarch of his nation,
Must give his promise that no Argive band
Will lead its armoured troops against this land, 1130
Repelling others who may come to fight
Against them, and you must possess the right,
If they should violate the guarantee,
To devastate their city utterly.
Now listen while I tell you where to slay
The victims: you've a tripod which one day
Heracles, once Troy was crushed and he now faced
Another venture, told you to have placed
Upon the Pythian shrine – there slay three sheep
And carve the oaths that you'll have sworn to keep 1140
Within the shrine, and to Apollo hand
The tripod so that all the Grecian land
May see them. Bury the knife, with which you've slashed
The throats of those three offerings and splashed
Their blood, deep down beneath the earth, beside
The pyres where the seven chiefs abide,
For it will strike the Argives with dismay
And drive them off in total disarray
And they will journey home in great distress.
Once this is all completed with success, 1150
Take them away. Then you must dedicate
To all the gods the places where of late
The pyre sanctified the chiefs. That's where
The three roads to the Isthmus meet. So there –

Those are my words to you. Next will I speak
To Argive sons – when you are at your peak,
Ismenus you shall quell, the justice due
To your dead fathers. Aigideus, you, too,
Will lead the army in your father's place,
And Tydeus' son will join you, keeping pace 1160
With you, and Diomedes was he named.
As soon as your young cheeks with beards are framed,
You'll lead your regiments to Thebes and sack
The battlements – they'll say, "Our foe is back!"
You'll be like lion's whelps in full-grown might,
And minstrels' songs will celebrate the fight.
You 'After-born' they will immortalize,
So notable shall be your enterprise,
Thanks to the god.

Theseus:

Athena, I obey.

For you've made sure that I'll not go astray. 1170
I'll bind him by an oath, but you must guide
My steps aright. For if you're on our side,
We'll be secure.

Chorus:

Adrastus, let us take

The oath for what he's fulfilled for our sake!

