

AESCHYLUS

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

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[Reformatted 2019]

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In the following text, the numbers without brackets refer to the English text, and those in square brackets refer to the Greek text. Indented partial lines in the English text are included with the line above in the reckoning. Stage directions and endnotes have been provided by the translator.

In this translation, possessives of names ending in -s are usually indicated in the common way (that is, by adding -'s (e.g. *Zeus* and *Zeus's*). This convention adds a syllable to the spoken word (the sound -iz). Sometimes, for metrical reasons, this English text indicates such possession in an alternate manner, with a simple apostrophe. This form of the possessive does not add an extra syllable to the spoken name (e.g., *Hermes* and *Hermes'* are both two-syllable words).

BACKGROUND NOTE

Aeschylus (c.525 BC to c.456 BC) was one of the three great Greek tragic dramatists whose works have survived. Of his many plays, seven still remain. Aeschylus may have fought against the Persians at Marathon (490 BC), and he did so again at Salamis (480 BC). According to tradition, he died from being hit with a tortoise dropped by an eagle. After his death, the Athenians, as a mark of respect, permitted his works to be restaged in their annual competitions.

Seven Against Thebes was first produced in 467 BC in Athens, as the third part of a trilogy

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based on the attack of an Argive army on Thebes. The first two plays (called *Laius* and *Oedipus*) and the satyr play which concluded the performance (*Sphinx*) have been lost. The production won first prize in the competition for that year.

When Oedipus, king of Thebes, discovered he had killed his father, Laius, and married his mother, Jocasta, he put out his eyes and (in some accounts) left the city. He also quarrelled bitterly with his two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, and cursed them, saying that they would one day come to war over their inheritance. Eteocles and Polyneices agreed to alternate as kings of Thebes, and Eteocles assumed the position first. When Eteocles refused to let Polyneices have his turn, Polyneices raised an army from other regions of Greece, gathered troops at Argos, and marched to attack Thebes, laying siege to the city. The invading army was led by Adrastus, king of Argos. Aeschylus's play begins while the siege is taking place.¹

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ETEOCLES: king of Thebes, son of Oedipus.

MESSENGER: a military scout.

CHORUS: young women of Thebes.

ANTIGONE: sister of Eteocles and Ismene.

ISMENE: sister of Eteocles and Antigone.

HERALD: a servant of the city council.

ATTENDANTS: Servants and slaves of Eteocles.

CITIZENS OF THEBES

SOLDIERS: including the six champions chosen to guard the gates.²

[The action takes place in Thebes, in a public space immediately in front of the royal palace, which stands at the back of the stage. There is a crowd of CITIZENS gathered in front of the palace. Enter ETEOCLES with ATTENDANTS]

ETEOCLES *[addressing the crowd]*

You citizens of Cadmus, any man
who seeks to guard the fortunes of a state
and guide the city's tiller from the stern
must never do so with his eyes asleep,
and words he utters must be to the point.
For if we should succeed, the credit goes
to gods above, but if—and I do hope

¹There are a number of different accounts of how the two brothers determined who should govern Thebes and who was the first to rule. Aeschylus's play seems to rely upon the notion that Eteocles is the legitimate king, but the issue was traditionally not at all clear.

²The six Theban champions, whose names occur later in the text are Melanippus, Polyphontes, Megareus, Hyperbios, Actor, and Lasthenes.

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this never comes to pass—we have bad luck,
the name Eteocles would then become
a single shout repeated many times 10
by citizens in every part of Thebes,
as they cried out in discontent and grief.
May our Protector Zeus, for his name's sake,
shield our Cadmean town from all such ills!¹
But now you men—and I mean those who still [10]
have not reached full maturity and those
whom time has taken past their finest years
but yet whose ample bodies are still strong,
as well as those now in their prime of life,
as is quite reasonable—all you men 20
must help to save the city and the altars
of your country's gods, so that for children
and their most cherished nurse, our mother earth,
the honours due to them are not destroyed.
For she was the one who took the trouble
to give you all your childish nourishment
when you were infants, still crawling around
on her munificent soil. She raised you
and trusted you to live in houses here
and carry shields, so you would stand by her 30 [20]
when she required your help. Up to this point,
Zeus has favoured us. We have been besieged,
but, thanks to the will of the gods, the city
has, for the most part, coped with war quite well.
But now the prophet tending flocks of birds,
who with his ears and his intelligence
and his unerring skill interprets omens
his birds provide without the use of fire,
this man, this master of such prophecies,
has told us that in their night assembly 40
Achaean are now planning an assault,
their greatest yet, to overwhelm our city.²
So all of you must move and with all speed [30]
to battlements and gates within the walls.
Go there with all your armour, fully man
the parapets, take up your positions

¹Cadmus was the legendary founder of Thebes, whose citizens were therefore often called Cadmeans.

²The prophet in question is Teiresias, the famous blind seer, who listened for omens in the cries of birds he looked after. This method differed from the usual practice of sacrificing an animal (i.e., using fire) and inspecting the entrails for omens. The word Achaean or Argive refers to the foreign troops attacking Thebes.

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on tower platforms, and then, once in place,
wait there bravely for the gates to open.
You need not fear this crowd of foreigners.
Zeus will take care that things work well for us. 50
I have sent out spies to scout their army,
men whom I trust to carry out the task.
When I hear from them, I will not be caught
by any tricks our enemies might try.

[The CITIZENS leave to take up their positions. Enter the MESSENGER, one of the scouts Eteocles has sent out]

MESSENGER

Eteocles, great king of the Cadmeans,
I have come back here bearing a report, [40]
describing what I know about that force
outside our walls. I scouted them myself
and clearly witnessed how they moved around.
Seven of their leaders, mighty warriors, 60
slaughtered a bull on a shield dyed black with blood,
then plunged their hands into the creature's gore,
and swore by Ares, Enyo, and Terror,
who delights in blood, that they would either seize
this city of Thebes, devastate the town,
and empty it, or sacrifice their lives
and have their own blood mingle with the soil.¹
And on Adrastus' chariot they placed [50]
some personal tokens, so their parents
could remember them in their own homes. 70
They shed some tears, but no word of sorrow
passed their lips, for their spirits of steel,
afame with courage, panted like lions
with warfare in their eyes. No fear of theirs
will keep you waiting for the proof of this.
I left them casting lots, allowing chance
to organize how each of them would lead
his own contingent to a chosen gate.
So you should pick the bravest warriors
from all the soldiers here inside the city 80
and set them in position at the gates,

¹Ares was the god of war, and Enyo a goddess of war. Terror was sometimes described as a companion of Ares on the battlefield. Adrastus, king of Argos, helped Polyneices gather the troops for the attack on Thebes.

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right at the entrances—and quickly, too.
For the Argive forces heavily armed
are already drawing near, stirring up
clouds of dust, and glittering drops of foam [60]
from panting horses sparkle on the plain.
So like a careful helmsman on a ship,
you must secure the city, before the storm
from Ares strikes us like a hurricane.
For their army, a massive tidal wave, 90
now roars across dry land, and you must seize
as quickly as you can an opportunity
to save us. As for me, whatever happens,
my loyal eyes will still be vigilant.
You will get clear reports, so you will know
what is going on out there, beyond the gates,
and will remain secure.

[Exit MESSENGER.]

ETEOCLES

O Zeus and Earth,
and all you native gods who live in Thebes—
and you, the Curse, that powerful Fury [70]
who will avenge my father, do not let 100
my city be captured by the enemy,
pulled to pieces, and totally destroyed,
a place that speaks the language of the Greeks.
Do not wipe out our homes and families.
May those enemies of ours never hold
beneath slaves' yokes this land of freedom,
and this Cadmean state. Assist us now!
My words, I think, speak to our common good,
for a successful state rewards its gods.¹

[Exit ETEOCLES and the CITIZENS. Enter the CHORUS.]

CHORUS

Filled with terror I scream out in grief! 110
Their forces flood our walls!

¹The Furies were the goddesses of blood revenge, particularly within the family. Eteocles is praying that Thebes will not become a victim of divine revenge for what happened to his father, Oedipus, once king of Thebes, who had called down a curse on his two sons (for details of the curse see line 1070 below).

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They've left their camp!
A massive horde of mounted warriors
is quickly threatening to engulf us all! [80]

The dust-filled air I see around me
confirms the facts for me—
that voiceless messenger's report
is simple, clear, and true.

Horses' hooves
are trampling on my native soil.
My ears can hear the noise 120
as it flies here and there,
the roar of an unbridled river
crashing down on mountain rocks!

O all you gods and goddesses, save us!
Raise your shouts high above our city walls
to turn aside this charging deadly tide!

An army of white shields with weapons raised,
has launched a full assault against our walls— [90]
their force is pushing our defenders back!¹

Who will protect us? Which god or goddess 130
will come to our assistance now?

Or should I fall in supplication here
before these statues of my country's gods?²

O all you blessed ones above,
seated on your thrones,
the moment now has come for us
when we must clutch your images.

Why waste our time in useless wailing?
Do you not hear that noise—
that din of clashing shields? 140 [100]
Has that not reached your ears?

¹The white shields are the mark of the invading Argive army.

²These lines indicate that beside the doors of the palace there are a number of statues of the most important deities in Thebes. The Chorus moves towards them and starts decorating the figures.

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If this is not the time, when shall we use
the sacred robes and garlands in our prayers?¹

I see the noise—it is no clash
of just a single spear.

What will you do, O Ares?
Will you betray the land
where you have lived since ancient times?

O god with the helmet all of gold,
look down, look down upon our city, 150
which once you loved so well.²

Come, all you gods who guard our state,
defenders of our land! Gaze down on us, [110]
a group of young girls pleading
they will never be enslaved,
while waves of nodding helmet plumes
driven by blasts from war god Ares
smash on our city walls.

O Father Zeus,
who brings all things to their fulfillment,
protect us all from enemy hands. 160
For now the citadel of Cadmus [120]
has Argives all around it, and our fear
of warlike weapons makes us tremble,
for iron bits inside their horses' jaws
are screaming death.

And seven warriors,
preeminent spearmen in that army,
stand fully armed at their allotted posts
before the seven gates.

And you, O Pallas, [130]
you Zeus-born power who delights in war,
become the saviour of our city!³

¹The robes and garlands were used to decorate the altars and statues of the gods.

²Ares was the father of Harmonia, the wife of the founder of Thebes, Cadmus, and hence associated with the city.

³Pallas is a common name for the goddess Athena.

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And you, 170
Poseidon, lord of horses, king of the sea,
with that fish-spearing weapon of yours
release us from this fear,
and bring us some relief.

You, too, Ares—alas! alas for us!—
preserve the place which carries Cadmus' name
and openly display your kinship to him.

And you, Cypris, first mother of our race, [140]
protect us, for every one of us is born
from your own blood.¹ 180

We come to you in prayer,
calling to gods to hear our cries!

And you
Apollo, lord of the wolf, become a wolf,
and with your howls drive back our enemies!
And you, too, Artemis, beloved child of Leto,
prepare to shoot your bow!²

Alas! Alas!
I hear the rattling din of chariots [150]
moving round our city! O lady Hera!
The wheels are creaking as they bear
the axle's heavy load!

Alas! Alas! 190
Beloved Artemis, the frantic air
is trembling as the battle spears fly past!

What is happening to our city?
What lies in store? Toward what final end
is god directing us?

Alas! Alas!

¹Cypris is an alternative name for Aphrodite. Cadmus's wife, Harmonia, was a daughter of Ares and Aphrodite.

²Apollo was traditionally associated with wolves, perhaps by a process of assimilating older religious practices. Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto, twin sister of Apollo, was associated with hunting.

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The slingers' stones from far away
have struck our outer walls!

O dear Apollo! The bronze shields clash [160]
before our very gates! O child of Zeus,
who has the sacred power to sway 200
the outcome of a fight!

And you,
divine queen Onca, for the city's sake
defend the seven gates of your own home!¹

O all you gods whose duty is to help,
you guardian gods and goddesses,
defenders of our country's fortresses,
do not betray our city under siege
to armies from a foreign land! [170]

Listen, O listen,
as we young women stretch our hands
and offer up these righteous prayers! 210

O dearest spirits above,
surround our city, rescue us,
and demonstrate your love.

Consider all those offerings
the people make to you,
and, as you do, defend us here!

And for my sake remember, too,
our city's sacred sacrificial rites
performed by pious worshippers. [180]

[Enter ETEOCLES with soldiers.]

ETEOCLES

You there! You insufferable creatures! 220
I ask you, is this is the most useful way
to save our city and encourage our men
when they are being attacked right here?
You fling yourselves at statues of the gods

¹ Onca was a Theban goddess, closely linked to Athena.

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who guard the city and then scream and howl—
acts which decent people find offensive.
Whether in misfortune or in better days,
I hope I never share my loving home
with any female! When a woman is strong,
her boldness makes one shun her company, 230
but when she is afraid, she is even worse, [190]
at home and in the town. And now your shrieks
and running around, flying here and there,
have spread a spirit of craven cowardice
among the citizens—the finest way
to help our enemies outside these walls,
while those inside the town are overwhelmed
by their own people. This is what happens
when you live with women. So now, if anyone,
male or female or something in between, 240
fails to acknowledge my authority,
we'll have a vote to sentence him to death,
and there is no way at all he will escape.
The people's hands will stone him. What goes on
outside the home is the concern of men. [200]
Let woman play no part in such affairs.
She should remain inside and not cause trouble.
Are you women listening to me or not?
Or am I speaking to the deaf and dumb?

CHORUS

Dear son of Oedipus, I was afraid. 250
I heard the noise of rattling chariots,
grating axle-hubs on spinning wheels,
the screaming coming from the horses' mouths
with harness bits of fire-hot iron.

ETEOCLES

That made you flee? When a ship is labouring
in heavy seas, has any sailor ever found [210]
a way to save himself by running off
from stern to prow?

CHORUS

But I rushed to the gods—
our ancient images—and put my trust in them,
as deadly hailstones hammered on our gates. 260
That's when my fear urged me to offer prayers,

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asking the blessed ones to hold their shield
high above the city.

ETEOCLES

You should pray
the wall holds out against those enemy spears.
If so, that will, of course, be the work of gods.
But then, they say that when a town is seized
its gods abandon it.

CHORUS

This group of gods—
never in my life may they desert me! [220]
And may I never live to see our citadel
overwhelmed and its defenders
attacked with enemy fires! 270

ETEOCLES

When you call on gods,
do not act foolishly. For, as they say,
Obedience is the mother of Success,
and Success the wife of Preservation.

CHORUS

Yes, that is true. But the power of gods
is even higher still. When times are bad,
it often lifts a helpless woman up
out of her wretched misery and pain,
with storm clouds hovering above her eyes.

ETEOCLES

When we are struggling with our enemies,
it is up to the men to carry out
our sacrifice and offerings to the gods. 280 [230]
A woman's duty is to hold her tongue
and stay inside the home.

CHORUS

Thanks to the gods
our citadel has not been overrun—
our walls are keeping out those hordes of men
attacking us. In such a circumstance
what jealous anger makes you so displeased?

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ETEOCLES

I bear you no ill will for worshipping
whatever higher spirit you may wish. 290
And as long as you do not discourage
your fellow citizens, you can relax
and stop being so afraid.

CHORUS

I heard a strange, confusing noise!
And so, shaking in my fear, [240]
I rushed here to the citadel,
our holiest place of worship.

ETEOCLES

If you find out that men are being killed
or suffering from wounds, do not react
with screams of such distress, for food like this 300
feeds Ares, god of war, with human blood.

CHORUS

Wait! I hear horses snorting!

ETEOCLES

What you hear
is clear enough, but you should not respond
to what you hear with this excess.

CHORUS

A rumble
is coming from the ground, as if those beasts
are moving all around us!

ETEOCLES

I have plans
to deal with them. Is that not sufficient?

CHORUS

I am afraid. The hammering at the gates
is getting worse!

ETEOCLES

Why can't you keep quiet! [250]
Do not talk like this within the city. 310

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CHORUS

O you divine company of gods,
do not allow our fortress to be seized!

ETEOCLES

You stupid women! Keep your mouths shut tight,
and just put up with it!

CHORUS

O you gods,
our fellow citizens, do not make me a slave!

ETEOCLES

But you are making slaves of all of us,
me and the city.

CHORUS

O almighty Zeus,
let your blows fall upon your enemies!

ETEOCLES

O Zeus, what a breed you have created
by giving us these women!

CHORUS

As sad a breed
as men whose city has been overwhelmed.

320

ETEOCLES

How can you speak such ominous words,
while clinging to a sacred statue?

CHORUS

My courage is gone. Fear has seized my tongue.

ETEOCLES

What I ask of you is easy to provide,
a simple thing to do.

[260]

CHORUS

Tell us what that is—
as quickly as you can. I will soon know
if I can do it.

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ETEOCLES

Do not speak at all,
you wretched women. Do not make your friends
so frightened.

CHORUS

I will not say a thing.
I must share the fate of all the others.

330

ETEOCLES

Compared to how you spoke out earlier,
I find these words of yours acceptable.
But in addition to this, stay away
from statues of the gods, and make your prayers
that the gods fight on our side more forceful.
When you have heard my vow, then you must sing
for victory, that joyful sacred cry,

the holy shout we Greeks by custom raise
to cheer our friends and take away the fear
they have of fighting war. And now I speak
to the gods who live in our own city,
those dwelling in the plain, and those who watch
our market place, and to our native streams,
the springs of Dirce, the river Ismenus—
to all these I swear that if we do succeed
and save the city, we will dye blood red
the altars of the gods with butchered sheep
and offer sacrificial bulls to them.

340 [270]

We will give them trophies, and I will hang
the spear-pierced battle garments of our foes
as spoils of war within gods' sacred homes
and place the fighting armour by their shrines.

350

[280]

That is the way you should pray to the gods,
without the screaming you enjoy so much
or all that uncontrolled and futile wailing.
Such things will not help you evade your fate.
Now I will go to set six men in place—
and I will be the seventh—to make a stand
as mighty warriors at our city gates,
the seven passages through our walls,
before some messenger comes rushing here
or urgent news arrives and dire need
inflames us all.

360

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[ETEOCLES exits with his SOLDIERS]

CHORUS

I understand his words.
But fear brings no relief into my heart,
enveloped as it is by anxious cares, [290]
which fan the flames of terror there
about the army now around our walls.
A serpent threatening her bed
will fill a trembling dove with restless dread 370
for offspring in the nest.

Crowds of men
arranged in groups are moving up
against our walls! What will become of me?

And others there are hurling jagged rocks
and pelting citizens from every side! [300]
O Zeus-born gods, use every means
to save our city and our fighting men,
those children sprung from Cadmus!

What country will you change for ours,
what finer stretch of ground, 380
if once you hand our enemies
this fertile soil and Dirce's springs,
most nourishing of all those streams
which flow from the Encircler of the Earth, [310]
Poseidon, and from Tethys's sons?¹

And so, you gods who guard our city,
let fall upon those men outside our walls
a lethal fate. Let them grow deranged
and cast aside their weapons!
Win glorious honours for yourselves 390
from all our citizens! On our behalf,
act now to save the city!

Stay here,
in answer to the prayers we cry,
and shield your splendid thrones. [320]

¹Poseidon, god of the sea, was also the god of rivers and streams. Tethys was the wife of her brother Oceanus, and they were both primal gods of the oceans. Their children were river gods.

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To throw an ancient city down
to Hades brings a pitiful regret—
a ravaged victim of the enemy's spear
is badly pulverized to dust and ash
by the will of the gods and an Argive man,
its women led out as captive slaves, 400
the young and the old—alas, such grief!—
hauled off like horses pulled by the hair,
while enemy soldiers rip at their clothes.
These women, now lost, abandon the town
with howls of pain and mingled screams,
while the desolate city calls out in grief
“How I fear for your wretched fate!”

It is a brutal day when modest girls
are plucked unripe before those nuptial rites
tradition demands and have to cross 410
the hateful thresholds of their owners' homes.¹

What can I say? I claim that those who die
enjoy a better fate than captured girls.
For once a city has been overwhelmed,
how many dreadful things it has to suffer!
One soldier drags away or kills another [340]
or else he kindles fires, and all the town
is stained with smoke, while savage Ares,
whose conquest of a people drives his rage,
pollutes all piety with his foul breath. 420

The rumbling moves across the city.
A towering iron ring now makes its way
against the citadel. Our men collapse
beneath the spears of men. Young mothers,
red with blood, cry for the infant child
they have just suckled at the breast, [350]
while their own friends are chased and raped.

Those men with loot now gather for a feast,
and those with nothing meet with other men
who have no spoils of war, for when they eat 430

¹The image here comes from the customary marriage rituals where the bride crosses through the doorway of her new husband's house.

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they want their comrades there, men whose hunger
is equal to or greater than their own.
No need to measure out their portions now!¹

The ground is littered with all kinds of fruit,
a painful, bitter sight for servants' eyes.
The chaos grows, and many of earth's gifts [360]
are carried off and squandered uselessly
in waves of looting.

Young female slaves
now face misfortunes never known before
in a joyful spearman's dreadful bed, 440
for when the enemy has seized the town
they must expect this nightly ritual—
their sole release from tears and sorrow.²

*[Enter a MESSENGER and ETEOCLES with escort, from different sides of the stage.
ETEOCLES has with him the six warrior leaders he has chosen to guard the city gates.]*

CHORUS MEMBER 1

My friends, I think this scout bring a report,
some news about the army. His legs and feet [370]
are really moving quickly as he comes.

CHORUS MEMBER 2

Our king himself is also drawing near,
the son of Oedipus, in time to hear
the messenger's account. That rapid pace
makes how he moves appear uneven. 450

MESSENGER

I have confirmed the details and can speak
of what our enemies out there are doing,
how every champion, according to his lot,
has been assigned his place. For some time now,

¹This curious (and difficult) passage seems to be saying that the victorious soldiers, both those with loot and those without, will have a great feast of celebration, and there will be no need to worry about supplies of food because they have all the provisions of the captured city to feed on.

²These lines have occasioned some debate, and the precise meaning is disputed. The translation above tries to capture the horrible irony of the scene—the nightly rape is the only “release” the young women get from their lives as captive slaves.

Tydeus has been stationed at the Proetus gate,
 making a huge noise.¹ For Amphiaraus,
 the prophet, will not let him cross the ford
 of the Ismenus river—the omens
 from the sacrifice are inauspicious.
 But Tydeus, in a rage and thirsting
 for a fight, keeps making hissing noises, 460 [380]
 like a snake at noon, and accusing him,
 saying that Oecleus' son, the prophet,
 a clever man, desires to shirk his fate
 and has no spirit for the coming fight.
 He shouts these taunts and shakes his helmet plumes,
 three overarching crests, while from his shield
 bells made of bronze and hanging underneath
 create a fearful sound. And on that shield
 he bears an arrogant sign—a fiery sky 470
 patterned with lesser stars and a full moon,
 the most revered of stars, the eye of night,
 shining from the bright centre of the shield. [390]
 Roaming there with this conceited armour,
 in his eagerness to fight, he bellows
 at the river banks, just like a war horse
 fiercely champing at the bit and snorting,
 as it awaits the trumpet's call. What man
 will you select to stand against him?
 Who can we trust to guard Proetus' gate 480
 once the barrier is gone?

ETEOCLES

Those trappings
 a man carries will never frighten me.
 Mere emblems have no power to wound,
 for helmet crests and bells lack any bite
 without a spear. And this night you talk of, [400]
 which happens to be painted on the shield,
 a heavenly sky glittering with stars—
 such foolishness might prompt a certain man
 to make predictions. If Tydeus dies
 and night falls on his eyes, then this proud sign 490
 will for its bearer prove quite true and just,

¹It is not clear who is being referred to by the name Proetus. One conjecture is that it may come from a certain Proetus whose grandson helped construct the walls of Thebes. Tydeus was a heroic warrior king of Calydon and father of the well-known Homeric warrior Diomedes.

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for it will indicate that he is dead.
And so this arrogance of his becomes
a prophecy against himself. As for me,
I will set the trusty son of Astacus
to combat Tydeus and hold the gate.

[MELANIPPUS steps forward.]

Descended from a noble line, he honours
the throne of self-restraint and hates proud speech, [410]
a man reluctant to act shamefully,
with no desire to fight like any coward. 500
His family roots are with those warriors
born from the dragon's teeth whom Ares spared,
so Melanippus comes of home-grown stock,
a true son of this soil.¹ By rolling dice,
Ares will choose the victor in their fight,
but Justice flows in Melanippus' blood—
in fact, she is the one who sends him out
to shield his mother from a hostile spear.

[Exit MELANIPPUS.]

CHORUS

May the gods make this champion of ours
successful, for, as he sets off to fight 510
for his own land, he does so justly.
But still, fear makes me shudder when I see
the blood-stained corpses of those men who die [420]
in battles on behalf of their own race.

MESSENGER

May the gods indeed grant him success.
The lot was drawn for the Electran gate,
and it picked out a giant of a man—
Capaneus, a greater warrior
than the one I talked about before.
His boasting goes beyond all human pride, 520
with terrifying threats against our walls,

¹When Cadmus chose a site where he would found Thebes, he had to kill a dragon there. Then, on divine instructions, he sowed the dragon's teeth into the ground. Armed warriors sprung up and began fighting and killing each other. The conflict was abruptly stopped with a few of the men left. These warriors became the original Thebans.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

which Fate, I pray, will not let him fulfil.
He says he will destroy our citadel,
with or without permission of the gods,
boasting that even if Zeus's daughter
descended to the plain and blocked his way,
she could not hold him back, and he declares
her thunderbolts and lightning are no more
than noontime heat. The symbol on his shield
depicts a naked man who carries fire,
two flaming torches ready in his hands,
and an inscription in gold lettering
announcing 'I will burn down the city.'
You must send someone to confront this man.
Who will stand up against such arrogance,
without feeling afraid, and hold his ground?

ETEOCLES

This man's bragging works to our advantage,
the way the first man's did. For people's tongues
betray the truth of their unholy thoughts.
As Capaneus makes his threats, he stands
prepared to act, dishonouring the gods.
His mouth is always shouting empty gibes,
and, though a mortal man, he hurls up
loud and swollen boasts to Zeus in heaven.
I trust a just and fiery thunderbolt
will fall on him, and when it does, the heat
will not feel like a painted noontime sun.
Against this man we will set Polyphontes.

[POLYPHONTES steps forward.]

Although he likes to talk, he is
a mighty fighter with a fiery spirit.
With goodwill from our guardian Artemis
and other gods, we can rely on him.

[Exit POLYPHONTES.]

Now talk to me about another leader
picked by lottery to assault our gates.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

CHORUS

May those who raise such arrogant cries
against our city perish! May the power
of lightning push him back, before he leaps
inside my room and with his boastful spear
drives me with force out of my virgin bed!

MESSENGER

Now I will describe another warrior
selected to attack our city walls. 560

When their bronze helmet was turned upside down,
the third man's lot jumped out—Eteoclus,
chosen to hurl his group of warriors [460]
against the Neistan gate. His team of horses
eager to attack the wall, strain at the bit,
as he wheels them round. The heavy breath
from snorting nostrils fills their headgear
and makes them sound just like barbarians.

You cannot miss the emblem on his shield, 570
a ladder with a man in armour on it
scaling ramparts of an enemy town
he wishes to destroy. And this man, too,
has written letters that announce his boast—
'Not even war god Ares can dislodge me
and hurl me from the wall.' So you must send [470]
a trusted fighter out to this man, too,
and guard our people from the yoke of slaves.

ETEOCLES [*leading MEGAREUS forward*]

I will dispatch this man without delay—
and choosing him is fortunate for us. 580

There! He is being sent, a man who carries
what he boasts about in his own hands—
Megareus, son of Creon, a seed
of that earth-born race. No roaring sounds
from frantic horses will make him panic
or shift him from the gate. No. He is a man
who will either die and give his country back
what she paid to raise him, or he will seize
two warriors and the city on the shield
and with those spoils adorn his father's home. 590

[*Exit MEGAREUS.*]

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Now, tell me all about another braggart,
and give me every detail of his boasting.

[480]

CHORUS

O you who guard my home, I pray this man
will be successful and bring his enemies
to grief, and as, with their deluded minds,
they make excessive threats against our city,
so may avenging Zeus look down on them
and grow enraged.

MESSENGER

Another man—a fourth—
is moving up into position now,
at the gate beside Athena Onca,
shouting as he goes—Hippomedon,
a fighter holding an enormous weapon—
his shield—which is embossed with a design
circling around the whole circumference.
It made me shudder—that I can't deny.
Whoever made the emblem for that shield
was no cheap artisan. The figure there
is Typhon. His mouth is breathing fire
and heavy smoke thick with flaring embers,
swift sisters of those flames.¹ Along the rim
of the round concave belly of the shield
are twisting serpents holding it in place.
The man himself has raised his battle cry,
and, possessed by Ares, rages for a fight,
as if he were a follower of Bacchus,
with a horrific scowl. We must prepare
to make a valiant stand against this man—
by now his fearful boasts have reached the gate.

600

[490]

610

[500]

ETEOCLES

Onca Pallas, who lives beside the city,
near the gate, hates an arrogant boaster,
and she will be the first to hold him off,
like a venomous snake from her young brood.
But we will also pick Hyperbios,
the loyal son of Oenops, to fight him

620

¹Typhon was a fabulous giant monster with a hundred heads.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

man to man, for Hyperbios is keen
to test his fortune and to learn his fate.

[*HYPERBIOS steps forward.*]

In looks, in courage, and in feats of arms
he is beyond reproach. And now Hermes,
god of chance, has brought both men together,
as is appropriate, for these two men 630
will meet in battle as two enemies,
just like the warlike gods on their two shields.¹ [510]
For Hippomedon's armour proudly shows
a fire-belching Typhon, whereas Hyperbios
has Father Zeus erect on both his feet,
a flaming lightning bolt gripped in his fist.²
And no one has yet seen a conquered Zeus.
It is true one cannot always count on
the goodwill of the gods, but nonetheless
we are with the conquerors in that fight, 640
and they are with the conquered, if Zeus
is more ferocious in a war than Typhon.
So the insignia these warriors bear
may well decide the outcome of the clash
when they both meet, and our Hyperbios
may find in Zeus depicted on his shield [520]
a fortunate defence.

[*Exit HYPERBIOS.*]

CHORUS

I well believe
the man opposing Zeus will lose his head
before our gates, since on his shield he bears
the unloved image of an earth-born spirit, 650
a form detested by all mortal men
and by the long-lived gods.

MESSENGER

May he prevail!
And now I will describe the warrior

¹ Hermes was the god of lotteries, and the warrior combats here were determined, in part, by drawing lots.

² Typhon (or Typhoeus) was one of Zeus's most important adversaries in the war between Zeus and the Giants, a conflict in which Zeus was victorious.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

selected as the fifth one to attack
from his location at the Northern Gate,
across from Amphion's grave, a son of Zeus.¹
He swears by his own spear, in which he trusts—
believing it more sacred than a god [530]
and even more important than his eyes—
that he will ravage our Cadmean town, 660
in spite of Zeus. These are his very words,
this child of a mother born up in the hills—
a handsome man and still a youthful lad,
with the initial growth of thick, soft hair
just showing on his cheeks. And now he moves
with a savage will and terrifying eyes.
Nothing about him seems like a young girl,
although his name suggests he looks that way.²
As he moves to his place before the gate,
he boasts aloud, and on the circular shield 670 [540]
of hammered bronze he holds in front of him
an emblem of our city's shame—the Sphinx,
who eats men raw, a symbol held in place
with bolts, a skillful piece of work.³ Her body,
stamped in bronze, gives off a brilliant glitter.
Down below she grips a single victim,
someone from Thebes, so that the spears we throw
will be directed chiefly at this man.
He does not look as if he marched this far
to trade blows in a minor scrap or two 680
and make his lengthy trip a shameful waste.
[Parthenopaeus from Arcadia
is not that sort of man. He was received
in Argos as a resident, and now
he wishes to repay that city state
for all their fine support by threatening
our Theban walls. May Zeus deny him that!]⁴

¹Amphion was a legendary figure who helped to build the walls of Thebes.

² The warrior's name, as we learn later, is Parthenopaeus (which means "with a face like a girl"). His mother was Atalanta, who lived in the mountains of Arcadia.

³The Sphinx was a monster that had terrorized Thebes by killing anyone who could not answer a riddle. When Oedipus appeared, he solved the riddle and saved the city.

⁴The authenticity of the lines within square brackets has been debated.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

ETEOCLES

O if only the gods would give those men [550]
the very things they keep imagining
in those sacrilegious boasts they utter. 690
Then they would surely die in misery,
completely overwhelmed.¹ We have a man
to match this one, as well, the Arcadian
whom you have just described. Our champion
is not a man who brags, but his hand sees
what must be done.

[ETEOCLES leads ACTOR forward.]

His name is Actor,
a brother of the one I named before.
He will not let a man who simply talks
and does not act come swarming through the gate
to multiply our troubles or allow 700
any man to pass whose hostile shield depicts
an image of that hateful, vicious beast,
who will complain while still outside the town [560]
to the one who carries her towards the gate,
when she receives a heavy battering
below our city walls. If gods are willing,
may what I say prove true!

[Exit ACTOR.]

CHORUS

These words of yours
have pierced me to the heart, and when I hear
the noisy boasts of loud and sinful men,
my hair stands up on end. I pray the gods 710
destroy them all and swallow them in earth!

MESSENGER

The sixth man I will name is Amphiaraus,
a forceful warrior—and very wise,
an extremely strong courageous prophet,
now in position at the Homoloid gate. [570]
He keeps on shouting many cruel insults
at mighty Tydeus, calling him names

¹ These men boast that they can conquer the city without the aid of the gods. If the gods agree to leave them all alone and not help them, Eteocles insists, they will all perish.

like ‘murderer,’ ‘disturber of the peace,’
 ‘greatest source of trouble for the Argives,’
 ‘summoner of vengeance from the Furies,’ 720
 ‘willing agent of a general slaughter,’
 and ‘counsellor of evil to Adrastus.’¹
 He also looked up at the skies and cried
 to your own brother, great Polyneices,
 reproaching him, and in his final words
 he twice divided up your brother’s name
 and emphasized each part.² When he called out,
 he used the following words:

“This fight of yours—
 will that be something pleasing to the gods, [580]
 a worthy enterprise to hear about 730
 and tell in future years—that you destroyed
 your father’s city and your native gods
 by bringing in an army from outside
 to attack the place? What sort of justice
 leads you to choke off that nourishing spring
 where you were born? And if, because of you,
 your native land is captured by the spear,
 how will the country ever be your friend?
 As for me, I will fatten up the earth,
 a prophet buried in a hostile soil. 740
 So let us go to war! I do not expect
 to meet a shameful fate.”³

As he said this,
 the prophet calmly held his plain bronze shield, [590]
 a simple circle which displayed no sign,
 for he does not wish merely to appear
 the finest warrior—he wants to prove it.
 From the deep furrows in that mind of his
 he reaps the fruit where his firm counsels grow.
 I would suggest you send out wise, brave men

¹Adrastus was king of Argos and part of the expedition against Thebes. Amphiaraus, his brother-in-law, advised against the expedition and did not wish to go, but his wife Eriphyle (sister of Adrastus) persuaded him to change his mind. Tydeus, from Sicyon, had gone to Argos to atone for a murder with a temporary exile. Amphiaraus, this speech suggests, blames Tydeus for inciting Adrastus to launch the expedition.

²Polyneices comes from two words: *polu* meaning *much* and *neikos* meaning *strife*. I have added the final phrase (*emphasized each part*) to clarify the meaning.

³According to traditional stories, Amphiaraus had prophesied his own death at Thebes.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

to stand against him, for any warrior
who worships gods is someone we should fear. 750

ETEOCLES

Alas for those ominous twists of fate
which in those groups where men associate
combine the righteous and profane together!
In all our actions, nothing can be worse
than evil company. The fruits of that [600]
are not worth reaping, for fields of folly
yield a deadly crop. A reverent man
who sails off in a ship manned by a crew
of reckless sailors eager to do wrong 760
will sometimes perish with that group of men
the gods detest, or else a virtuous man
living with fellow citizens who hate
all visitors and disrespect the gods
is caught up with them in a common trap,
which he does not deserve, and overwhelmed,
struck by god's whip which lashes all alike.
That how things will turn out for the prophet,
Oecleus's son, a temperate man—
just, noble, and respectful of the gods, 770 [610]
a powerful seer, but now an ally
of evil men whose arrogant boasting
defies good sense. Those men are on a march,
the pathway leading back is very long,
and so, if it is Zeus's wish, this one
will be dragged down with all the others.
I do not think he will attack the gate,
not from cowardice or lack of spirit,
but because he knows he must meet his fate
here in this fight, if Apollo's prophecies 780
bear fruit, and usually he stays silent
or else says something truly pertinent.
But still, I will also appoint a man, [620]
great Lasthenes, to keep this foreigner
far from our gate.

[LASTHENES steps forward.]

He has the wisdom
of an older man and a young man's strength.
His eyes are quick. His hand does not delay

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

in thrusting with his spear at naked flesh
his enemy's shield has left uncovered.
But man's success is given by the gods.

790

[Exit LASTHENES.]

CHORUS

O you gods, hear our righteous prayers
and fulfil them all, so that our city
may prove successful. Turn aside from us
the evils which afflict those in a war
and let them fall on that invading force.
May Zeus hurl down his thunderbolt
outside the walls and kill them all!

[630]

MESSENGER

Now I will announce the seventh warrior
beside the seventh and the final gate—
your own blood brother. I will describe
the way he calls down curses on the city
and the fate he prays for. For he desires
to scale our battlements and then proclaim
that he is king of Thebes and raise a cry
of triumph when he has seized the city.
He prays to meet and kill you in the fight
and then to perish by your side, or else,
if you survive, to pay you back with exile,
in the same way you once dishonoured him
and forced him from his home. With words like these,
great Polyneices calls his native gods
and summons his paternal deities
to act as close custodians of his prayers.
He holds a brand new circular shield
displaying two shapes, skilfully attached—
a man in armour made of hammered gold
behind a woman calmly leading him.
She claims to be a figure of Justice,
to judge from what the letters say: 'This man
I will lead back, and he will have his land
and will roam free in his ancestral home.'
These are the signs created for their shields.
It is now up to you to send out there
the one you think is best. You will not find
I have been wrong in what I have announced.

800

810

[640]

820

[650]

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

From this point you must yourself decide
the proper course to map out for our state.

ETEOCLES

O all this madness brought on by the gods,
this great abomination, my family,
the race of Oedipus, so full of tears. 830
Now, alas, those curses of my father
are fully realized. But it's not good
to weep or wail about our lot, in case
that helps produce an even worse lament.
As for their champion called Polyneices,
a most appropriate name, we will soon know
where that insignia of his will lead,
whether those babbling letters stamped in gold [660]
on his own shield and his erratic mind
will lead him home. If Zeus's virgin daughter, 840
Justice, were with him in his thoughts and deeds,
that might soon come to pass. But as it is,
when he came from the dark maternal womb,
when he was raised and reached maturity,
and when his cheek had its first growth of hair,
that goddess never recognized or glanced at him.
And now he seeks to hurt his fatherland,
I do not think she stands beside him. In fact,
Justice would truly contradict her name [670]
if she became the ally of a man 850
who does such shameful things. This I believe,
so I will be the one to stand against him.
Yes, I will go in person. What other man
can say he has a better claim than me?
One ruling general against another,
a brother against a brother, one foe
goes out to stand against another foe.
We must move quickly! [Bring my armour here
to guard against their spears and stones.]¹

CHORUS

Son of Oedipus, dearest of all men, 860
do not get angry and be like that man
whose name lacks all respect. Cadmeans
are going to fight the Argives hand to hand,

¹The authenticity of the lines in square brackets has been debated.

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and that will be enough. The blood they shed [680]
we can atone. But when the men who fight
share common blood, as you two brothers do,
and those who die are killed by their own kin,
time never can remove the dreadful stain.

ETEOCLES

If a man can suffer evil without shame,
that is all right—the only benefit 870
the dead receive is honour. However,
you cannot speak of glory in those acts
which injure him and make him a disgrace.¹

CHORUS

But why are you so keen to go, my son?
Do not let mad delusions from the gods
cram your soul with passion for this fight
and carry you away. Cast out the evil urge,
this mad desire for war, while it is young.

ETEOCLES

The gods are driving these events so hard!
Let all the race of Laius ride the winds 880 [690]
down waves of Cocytus. That is their lot,
since Phoebus hates them so.²

CHORUS

But this desire
which gnaws at you and drives you on to kill,
to slaughter other men unlawfully—
that urge yields bitter fruit.

ETEOCLES

Yes, that is true.
My loving father made a dreadful curse
and on my dry, unweeping eyes his words,

¹Here Eteocles seems to be saying that honour demands he face his brother, even if that leads to his death. Without honour, the dead have nothing.

²Laius was the father of Oedipus, Cocytus a river of the underworld. Eteocles is reminding himself and others of how the tragic stories of his family originate in the hostility of Phoebus Apollo. See lines 1032 ff. below for more details of the origin of Apollo's quarrel with the family of Laius.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

those fatal words, still sit and say to me:
'Win something for yourself before you die.'¹

CHORUS

But do not let yourself be driven to it. 890
If you preserve your life by acting well,
no one will call you coward. And surely
that dark avenging Fury with her aegis [700]
will quit your house as soon as gods receive
a sacrificial gift from your own hands?²

ETEOCLES

The gods abandoned us some time ago.
But they respect one gift we offer them—
the grace we manifest in dying. Why then
should I avert my own destructive fate?

CHORUS

Right now your fate is standing close to you, 900
but that demon spirit, still boiling hot,
perhaps will alter what it now desires
and come on gentler winds.

ETEOCLES

Yes, those curses
Oedipus pronounced have made it seethe.
Those phantom visions I saw in my sleep [710]
dividing up my father's property
were all too real!³

CHORUS

You should attend to us,
although you hate to hear what women say.

¹The curse seems to be urging Eteocles to kill his brother before he dies himself, because that will bring him a temporary benefit, presumably the personal satisfaction and glory of winning the battle. The debate here between the Chorus and Eteocles (which has been much discussed) is focusing on the tension between the Chorus's desire for Eteocles to act with some prudence, so as to avoid continuing the family curse by killing his brother (an act which will prolong the history of disasters for Thebes), and Eteocles's passionate desire to surrender to his own feelings.

² The term *aegis* most commonly refers to a garment (a collar or cape) or a shield which serves as a protection. In traditional Greek stories, the aegis can also serve as a weapon to terrify one's enemies and paralyze them with fear.

³These lines may refer to a passage in an earlier play in the trilogy (now lost).

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

ETEOCLES

Propose some action that is possible—
and keep it brief.

CHORUS

Do not go in person,
not on that journey to the seventh gate.

910

ETEOCLES

My resolve to go there has been sharpened.
You will not blunt its edge by what you say.

CHORUS

But victories are honoured by the gods,
even those men win without the glory.

ETEOCLES

A fighting man cannot accept those words.

CHORUS

What you are seeking is to harvest fruit
by slaughtering your own blood brother.

ETEOCLES

But no one has the power to run away
from evils which the gods themselves present.

920

[Exit ETEOCLES.]

CHORUS

The goddess who destroys entire homes
makes me shake with fear, for this divinity,
unlike other gods, always speaks the truth
in prophecies of evils yet to come.

[720]

That Fury summoned by his father's prayer
will now fulfil those curses earlier
which Oedipus in his mad fit pronounced.
This child-destroying quarrel drives her on.

A stranger now divides their legacy.
A foreign, savage-minded, iron sword
forged by the Chalybes in Scythia
is carving out grim parts of their estate,

930

[730]

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

assigning land to them where they may dwell,
as much as they will need when they are dead
and have no share at all in these wide plains.¹

But when they both are gone, two brothers slain
by one another, and dusty earth has drunk
the dark streams of their crimson blood, who then
can offer absolution, cleanse their guilt?

O this house, whose latest evil deeds
now mingle with those crimes from long ago!

940 [740]

That ancient wrong, so swift in its revenge
and lasting now three generations long—
I mean when Laius, against Apollo's will
thrice uttered at the centre of the earth
when in his Pythian oracle he said
the king would save his city if he died
without producing children, nonetheless . . .

. . . overpowered by folly in his love
created his own fate, his son Oedipus,
who killed his father and then lived on
to plant his seeds of blood in sacred soil
where he was born, in his own mother's womb.
For madness held that couple in its grip.

[750]

950

A sea of evil drives its surge ahead.
When one wave falls, another rises up,
its triple-crested water crashing down
around the city's stern. And the defence
which stands between us and the sea is thin,
no wider than a wall. I am afraid
the city and its kings will be destroyed.

[760]

960

When the moment comes for ancient curses
to be fulfilled, they bring a heavy freight,
for deadly threats do not just disappear.
The wealth of enterprising merchant men,
once grown too gross, must be hurled overboard
and cast out from the ship into the sea.

[770]

¹The Chalybes, a people living in Scythia near the Black Sea, were famous for their metal work.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

What man has ever been admired so much
by gods, by citizens who share our feasts,
or by our people's densely packed assemblies 970
as Oedipus was when he was honoured
that day he rid the city of the Sphinx,
the deadly beast who snatched our men away?

But when his better judgment realized
the wretchedness of his ill-fated marriage, [780]
the overwhelming pain drove his heart mad,
and he then carried out a double evil.
With the very hand that killed his father
he stabbed out both his eyes, dearer to him
than his own children . . .

. . . and he cried out 980
against the sons he fathered, assailing them
with wild and vengeful words. Alas, those curses
from his bitter tongue, which swore that one day
both of them, with swords in hand, would slice up
his possessions!¹ And now my fear is this— [790]
that Fury rushes here to see the curse fulfilled.

[The MESSENGER enters.]

MESSENGER

You there! Young girls, nurtured by your mothers,
take heart! Our city state has just been freed
from slavery's yoke! And all those boasting words
from mighty warriors have now collapsed. 990
Our ship is sailing on with sunny skies.
Though it was hit by many stormy waves,
our town took on no water. City walls
are standing firm, and we have reinforced
the gates with leading front-line warriors,
who kept us safe by fighting hand to hand.
We have, in general, had good success
at six of our city gates, but lord Apollo,
god of the seventh day, chose for himself [800]
the seventh gate, and so he has fulfilled 1000

¹ The quarrel between Oedipus and his sons arose because Oedipus believed they were disrespecting him by not obeying his instructions and by serving him inappropriate food at dinner.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

upon the family of Oedipus
the foolishness of Laius long ago.¹

CHORUS

What strange new things are going on
which now affect the city?

MESSENGER

Our town is safe.
But those two kings with common blood . . .

CHORUS

Those kings?
What are you saying? These words of yours
drive me insane with fear!

MESSENGER

Calm down and listen.
The sons of Oedipus . . .

CHORUS

Alas, the sorrow!
I sense disaster coming!

MESSENGER

Beyond all doubt.
They are both dead, stretched out in the dust.

CHORUS

Out there?
Both lying out there? Such dreadful news!
What else? Tell me!

1010

MESSENGER

Both sons were killed.
They slaughtered one another.

[810]

CHORUS

And so
in a single instant each kindred hand
struck down a brother.

¹Apollo was given this title (god of the seventh day) because traditionally he was born on the seventh day of the month. Some Greek cities offered him sacrifices on that day each month.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

MESSENGER

Yes. That demon spirit
gave both of them an all-too-equal fate.¹
And truly, all on its own it eats away
that doomed and fatal clan. In what goes on
we have good cause to weep and to rejoice—
our city has done well, but both our leaders, 1020
the two generals, have divided up
their property and everything they own
with swords of hammered Scythian iron.
Now all they will possess is land enough
to give each man a grave—ill-fated sons,
who, in accordance with their father's curse,
were carried off. Our city has been saved, [820]
but as for our two kindred kings cut down
by one another, earth has drained their blood.

[Exit MESSENGER.]

CHORUS

O almighty Zeus and you gods 1030
who help protect our city and you
who truly shield Cadmean walls,
shall I cry out with joyful triumph
because my city is unharmed,
or shall I mourn the leaders in this war, [830]
those poor, ill-fated, childless men,
so rightly named as 'full of strife,'
whose evil purposes destroyed them.

O the carrying out of that dark curse
which ends the family of Oedipus! 1040
An aching chill falls on my heart,
and, like a maenad, I now frame my song
to fit the grave, for I have heard
of those two men so pitifully slain
and of their bodies dripping blood.
Alas for that ominous melody,

¹The demon spirit (*daimon*) is a frequently invoked but elusive concept, without a precise English equivalent. It refers both to the fate of the family of Laius (something determined from beyond—i.e., by Apollo) and also to the very nature of the people in the family, who seem in some way cursed by their own self-destructive passion (which arises from their distinctive characters).

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

that concert played with spears!

The special prayer of Oedipus, [840]
the father's curse against his sons,
has taken effect. It did not fail. 1040
And Laius's disobedient passion
retains its power in this. I fear
what happens to the city now.

Those words once spoken by the gods
do not lose their sharp edge.

[The funeral procession for ETEOCLES and POLYNEICES begins slowly to emerge, carrying the bodies towards the city. ANTIGONE and ISMENE are among the mourners.]

CHORUS

O you who bring us so much sorrow
and have done things beyond belief!
A heavy time of woe has come to us,
not from mere words but from your deeds!

It is so obvious, so plain to see, 1060
the truth of what that messenger proclaimed.
I sense a twin-felt sorrow—two warriors slain
by a brother's hand! A double share of pain [850]
has been fulfilled. What is there left to say?
What else but this—O sorrow piled on sorrow
for hearth and home?

But now, my friends, follow
the wind of sighs, and let those hands which sweep
across your heads so rapidly row on
and bear away the bodies of the dead
in the sacred ship with slack, black sails, 1070
which always glides across the Acheron
to unseen, sunless lands which all men share,
a place Apollo's foot will never tread.¹ [860]

But look! Ismene and Antigone
are drawing near, coming to carry out

¹This difficult passage is comparing the way in which the mourners beat their heads rhythmically in grief to the hands which row the ship of the dead across the Acheron river into the underworld. Apollo, as the god of light, never visits Hades.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

a bitter rite, their brothers' funeral song.
I do not think there can be any doubt
their deep and passionately loving hearts
will chant a fitting dirge to mark their grief.

Before their cry, it would be right for us 1080
to sing that hymn of praise all men detest
to those avenging goddesses, the Furies,
and shout out Hades' hateful victory song. [870]

Alas for you two sisters, too, of all women
who bind their robes beneath their breasts
the most unhappy in your brothers' fate,
my tearful sighs come straight from my own heart—
my shrill lament tells how I truly feel.¹

[The CHORUS now joins the members of the funeral procession standing over the bodies of ETEOCLES and POLYNEICES]

O you hard-hearted, senseless men,
who showed no trust in your own friends 1090
and would not rest when troubles came,
with your unhappy spears you fought
and now have won your father's home.²

In all the harm done to their house
to their own misery they found [880]
a truly wretched death.

Alas, alas!

You two, who sought to overthrow
the walls of your own home and looked
with bitter eyes to being the only king,
have now been reconciled with swords. 1100

¹This curious line about how their grief is genuine may refer to the fact that, as we see at the very end of the play, many Thebans had different feelings about Eteocles and Polyneices. The former died defending the city and was thus a hero, worthy of full funeral rites; whereas, the latter died attacking the city and therefore was a traitor. A dispute over the appropriate burial rites for both brothers continued the curse on the family of Oedipus and led to Antigone's death.

²In this lament over the dead bodies, the characteristics of one brother are applied to them both, as if they were a single person. The "home" the two brothers have won is the grave. In the scene which follows, the lines are shared by the full Chorus, parts of the Chorus, and by Ismene and Antigone, and there has been much debate about how the lines should be properly assigned (since that is not at all clear from the Greek text). I have separated lines which seem to belong to the Chorus (or part of it) from those which seem to belong to Antigone and Ismene.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

And thus, indeed, the sacred Fury
of Oedipus, your father, ends her work.

[The CHORUS LEADER removes the cloth covering the bodies.]

Struck on your left sides! Yes, wounded there,
through ribs that shared a common womb. [890]
Alas, for these divinely fated men!
Alas for curses seeking death for death!

Yes, deadly blows to house and body
have struck them down, thanks to that wrath,
an unspeakable rage and a father's curse.

Here, with this death, their strife is over. 1110
And our whole city grieves, the towers groan, [900]
this land, which loves its people,
moans in sorrow. Now their entire estate
remains for their posterity, those things
that launched the war which doomed them
and found fulfillment in their death.
These men whose anger was so quickly roused
have split their property between them
and each one has an equal share—but still
the one who brought their quarrel to a close 1120
has earned the condemnation of their friends,
who find no joy in savage Ares. [910]

So here they lie, struck down by iron.
And now that iron has laid them low,
one might well ask what lies in store,
two shares in their ancestral grave.

Our painful, sharp, heart-wrenching groans,
the grief we truly feel from our own pain
in this dejected mood, bereft of joy,
attend on both of them, as real tears 1130
pour from my heart and as it wastes away [920]
with weeping for this pair of royal sons.

To these unhappy men one might well say
they did great harm to citizens of Thebes
and to those ranks of foreigners who fell
to widespread slaughter in that war.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Of every women who has given birth,
all those who earn the name of mother,
the one who bore these men was truly doomed.¹
She chose as husband her own child
and then gave birth to sons, who finished up
by turning hands produced from the same seed
to murdering each other.

1140

[930]

Yes, both from just one seed,
but split apart, no longer friends, locked
in that mad fight, then utterly destroyed,
the final act of their fraternal strife.

Their enmity is done, and their two lives
is mingling with the gory earth. So now
they truly share one common blood.

A bitter stranger from beyond the sea
resolved their fight with sharpened iron
snatched quickly from the fire—and bitter, too,
the one dividing their inheritance,
destructive Ares, who brought about
their father's curse and made it true.

1150

[940]

In their unhappy state they do possess
their own allotted shares of heaven-sent grief,
and beneath both corpses earth will now extend
the boundless wealth those brothers craved.

O you have wretched
your family home in harsh distress,
and now to end it, with all your friends
driven off in flight in all directions,
those spirits of revenge are screaming out
their shrill triumphal song, and in the gates
a trophy stands to goddess Ruin,
where those two brothers fought
and where the demon killed them both,
before what she was seeking out was done.

1160

[950]

¹Their mother was Jocasta, wife and mother of Oedipus. When she found out the truth of her marriage, she killed herself.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

[ANTIGONE and ISMENE move forward to stand by the bodies of their two brothers. ANTIGONE addresses Polyneices, and ISMENE addresses ETEOCLES.]

ANTIGONE

You struck and were struck down.

ISMENE

And you were killed while killing.

ANTIGONE

You slew him with a spear.

ISMENE

And from that spear you died.

1170

ANTIGONE

Such a pitiful act!

[960]

ISMENE

Such wretched agony!

ANTIGONE

Let our groans sound.

ISMENE

Let our tears flow.

ANTIGONE

Now you lie dead.

ISMENE

You did the killing.

ANTIGONE

Alas!

ISMENE

Alas!

ANTIGONE

My mind is mad with grief.

ISMENE

My heart groans here inside.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

ANTIGONE

Aaaiii! You pitiful man!

ISMENE

You, too, his wretched brother.

[970]

ANTIGONE

You lie there dead,
killed by your own kin.

ISMENE

You slaughtered him,
your own dear relative.

ANTIGONE

A double grief
to talk about!

ISMENE

A double sight to see!

ANTIGONE

Such sorrow all around them.

1180

ISMENE

One brother lies beside his brother.

CHORUS

A heavy Fate that carries so much pain—
the awe-inspiring shade of Oedipus!
O you dark Fury, your power is so great.

ANTIGONE

Alas!

[980]

ISMENE

Alas!

ANTIGONE

Such a horrific sight . . .

ISMENE

. . . revealed to me by his return back home.

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ANTIGONE

But he did not come home, once he had killed.

ISMENE

He saved himself and lost his life.

ANTIGONE

Ah yes,
he was destroyed.

ISMENE

And yet he also killed.

ANTIGONE

O this doomed race!

ISMENE

Such wretched suffering!

1190

ANTIGONE

A hapless grief which carries our own name!

ISMENE

A triple tide of sorrow!

CHORUS

A heavy Fate
that brings us so much agonizing pain—
the awe-inspiring shade of Oedipus!
O you dark Fury, your power is so great.

ANTIGONE

You know her now by what you did.

ISMENE

And you in that same instant met her, too.

ANTIGONE

When you came back to your own city.

ISMENE

To face your brother with a spear.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

ANTIGONE

A deadly thing to talk about.

ISMENE

A deadly sight to see.

1200

ANTIGONE

Alas, such pain!

[1000]

ISMENE

Alas, so many troubles!

ANTIGONE

For our own home and land.

ISMENE

And most of all, for me.

ANTIGONE

And more, as well, for me.

ISMENE

O how I mourn your suffering, my king!

ANTIGONE

Alas for both of you, most pitiful of men!

ISMENE

Both gripped by ruinous illusions!

ANTIGONE

Where shall we put them in the earth?

ISMENE

Wherever they get most respect.

ANTIGONE

More cause for grief!
Alas! For they must lie beside their father.

[1010]

[Enter HERALD.]

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

HERALD

I must announce what has just been proposed
and what the people's council has resolved
for citizens of our Cadmean city.¹ 1210
They have decreed Eteocles may have
a grave dug in the land which cherishes him,
for he despised her enemies and chose
to die here in the city, thus honouring
ancestral shrines with his own piety.
He perished free of blame, in the very place
where there is honour in a young man's death.
Those are the words I was sent here to say 1220
about Eteocles. As for his brother,
the council has decreed that the corpse
of Polyneices shall be thrown away
without a grave, outside the city, [1020]
as food for dogs. He wanted to destroy
the land of Cadmus and would have done so,
if a god had not stood up and stopped him
with his brother's spear. Though he is dead,
he still remains polluted from his crime
against his father's gods, whom he dishonoured, 1230
by launching foreign troops against our walls
and trying to seize the city. And thus,
they have declared he will receive no honours—
his grave will lie beneath the flying birds.
That burial will give him his reward.
No one is to attend to him or raise
a funeral mound or, on his behalf,
sing any shrill and reverent lament.
His friends are not to honour him at all
by bearing him away in a procession. 1240 [1030]
Our Theban council has set out these laws
to deal with funeral rites for our two kings.

ANTIGONE

Well, this is what I have to say to those
who rule in Thebes: if no one else is willing
to help me find a grave for Polyneices,
then I will take the risk all by myself

¹It is not entirely clear where the political authority in Thebes rests, now that both kings are dead. In other versions of the story, Creon (brother-in-law of Oedipus, and hence the uncle of Eteocles and Polyneices) assumes control once the two brothers are gone.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

and bury my own brother. I feel no shame
in going against our city councillors
so lawlessly. For with that corpse I share
an overwhelming bond, the common womb 1250
from which we two were born, both children
of unhappy and ill-fated parents.

And thus my soul is willing now to share
the troubles of a man who has no will
and live in blood communion with the dead. [1040]
No hollow-bellied wolves will rip his corpse.

Let no one set that up as a decree!
Though I am a mere woman, I will find
some way to dig a grave and bury him
with what I carry folded in my robes. 1260
I will cover him myself. So spare me
all those laws which say I may not do it.
And do not fear, for I will find a way.

HERALD

I am saying you must not flaunt the city.

ANTIGONE

And I am saying you should not bother me
with futile proclamations.

HERALD

The people,
who have just escaped from a disaster, [1050]
may well be harsh on you.

ANTIGONE

Let them be harsh!
This man here will not remain unburied.

HERALD

But the city hates this man. Will you now
give him the honour of a funeral? 1270

ANTIGONE

So far he has not received much honour
from the gods.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

HERALD

That is not true—
the gods afforded him all due respect
until he put this land of ours in danger.

ANTIGONE

He was paying back the harm he suffered.

HERALD

But what he did hurt all the citizens,
not just one man.¹

ANTIGONE

The final god
to bring an end to any argument
is Eris, who resolves disputes with war. 1280
No more of your long-winded reasoning,
for I will bury Polyneices.

HERALD

As you wish.
But I have told you it has been forbidden.

[Exit HERALD.]

CHORUS

Alas! Alas for you demonic Furies, [1060]
who boast about a family destroyed
and have just utterly wiped out the race
of Oedipus. What happens to me now?
What do I do? Where is the road ahead?
How can I endure not weeping for you
or not escorting you to your own grave? 1290
I sense the hatred of our citizens.
I am afraid. And so I turn away.
Now you, Eteocles, will have a crowd
to mourn your death, but no one will lament
poor Polyneices. A single sister
will offer him a funeral song alone. [1070]
Who finds that burial acceptable?

¹The herald's point here is that the citizens as a group did not harm Polyneices, since he was driven away by Eteocles.

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[The CHORUS escorts the bodies off stage, half going with POLYNEICES, and half with ETEOCLES.]

HALF CHORUS 1

Let this city hand out punishment or not
to citizens who weep for Polyneices.
We here will still attend his funeral march 1300
and help to bury him, since all our race
shares in the grief we feel and city laws
have sanctioned different acts at different times.

HALF CHORUS 2

And we will now escort Eteocles,
as Justice and our city say is right.
For with the sacred gods and mighty Zeus [1080]
he was the one, of all our citizens,
who saved this city of Cadmeans
from being overwhelmed and foundering
beneath a wave of foreign warriors. 1310

[The CHORUS and the funeral processions slowly leave the stage.]

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATOR

Ian Johnston is an Emeritus Professor at Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia. He is the author of *The Ironies of War: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* and of *Essays and Arguments: A Handbook for Writing Student Essays*. He also translated a number of works, including the following:

Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, Eumenides*)
Aeschylus, *Persians*
Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*
Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*
Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*
Aristophanes, *Birds*
Aristophanes, *Clouds*
Aristophanes, *Frogs*
Aristophanes, *Knights*
Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
Aristophanes, *Peace*
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Abridged)
Cuvier, *Discourse on the Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Earth*
Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Diderot, *A Conversation Between D'Alembert and Diderot*
Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*
Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*
Euripides, *Bacchae*
Euripides, *Electra*
Euripides, *Hippolytus*
Euripides, *Medea*
Euripides, *Orestes*
Homer, *Iliad* (Complete and Abridged)
Homer, *Odyssey* (Complete and Abridged)
Kafka, *Metamorphosis*
Kafka, *Selected Shorter Writings*
Kant, *Universal History of Nature and Theory of Heaven*
Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*
Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, Volume I
Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*
Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*
Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life*
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* [Second Discourse]
Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* [First Discourse]
Rousseau, *Social Contract*
Sophocles, *Antigone*
Sophocles, *Ajax*
Sophocles, *Electra*
Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*
Wedekind, *Castle Wetterstein*
Wedekind, *Marquis of Keith*.

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Most of these translations have been published as books or audiobooks (or both)—by Richer Resources Publications, Broadview Press, Naxos, Audible, and others.

Ian Johnston maintains a web site where texts of these translations are freely available to students, teachers, artists, and the general public. The site includes a number of Ian Johnston's lectures on these (and other) works, handbooks, curricular materials, and essays, all freely available.

The address where these texts are available is as follows: [johnstoniatexts](http://johnstoniatexts.com)

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