AESCYLUS

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
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 Polynices, and cursed them, saying that they would one day come to war over their inheritance. Eteocles and Polynices agreed to alternate as kings of Thebes, and Eteocles assumed the position first. When Eteocles refused to let Polynices have his turn, Polynices 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

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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.
this never comes to pass—we have bad luck, the name Eteocles would then become a single shout repeated many times by citizens in every part of Thebes, as they cried out in discontent and grief. May our Protector Zeus, for his name's sake, shield our Cadmean town from all such ills!

But now you men—and I mean those who still have not reached full maturity and those whom time has taken past their finest years but yet whose ample bodies are still strong, as well as those now in their prime of life, as is quite reasonable—all you men must help to save the city and the altars of your country's gods, so that for children and their most cherished nurse, our mother earth, the honours due to them are not destroyed. For she was the one who took the trouble to give you all your childish nourishment when you were infants, still crawling around on her munificent soil. She raised you and trusted you to live in houses here and carry shields, so you would stand by her when she required your help. Up to this point, Zeus has favoured us. We have been besieged, but, thanks to the will of the gods, the city has, for the most part, coped with war quite well. But now the prophet tending flocks of birds, who with his ears and his intelligence and his unerring skill interprets omens his birds provide without the use of fire, this man, this master of such prophecies, has told us that in their night assembly Achaean troops are now planning an assault, their greatest yet, to overwhelm our city.

So all of you must move and with all speed to battlements and gates within the walls. Go there with all your armour, fully man the parapets, take up your positions

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

2 The 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.
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. I have sent out spies to scout their army, men whom I trust to carry out the task. When I hear from them, I will not be caught by any tricks our enemies might try.

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

MESSENGER

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

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

[Exit MESSENGER.]

ETEOCLES

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

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

CHORUS

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

\(^1\)The 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).
They’ve left their camp!
A massive horde of mounted warriors
is quickly threatening to engulf us all!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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1 The white shields are the mark of the invading Argive army.
2 These 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.
SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

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,
which once you loved so well.²

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

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

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

And you, O Pallas,
you Zeus-born power who delights in war,
become the saviour of our city!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.
And you, Poseidon, lord of horses, king of the sea, with that fish-spear 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, protect us, for every one of us is born from your own blood.¹

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 moving round our city! O lady Hera! The wheels are creaking as they bear the axle’s heavy load!

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

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

Alas! Alas!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And for my sake remember, too,
our city’s sacred sacrificial rites
performed by pious worshippers.

[Enter ETEOCLES with soldiers.]

ETEOCLES
You there! You insufferable creatures!
I ask you, is this 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

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

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

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

CHORUS
But I rushed to the gods—
our ancient images—and put my trust in them,
as deadly hailstones hammered on our gates.
That's when my fear urged me to offer prayers,
asking the blessed ones to hold their shield high above the city.

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

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

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

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

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

CHORUS  
Thanks to the gods  
our citadel has not been overrun—  
our walls are keeping out those hordes of men  
attacking us. In such a circumstance  
what jealous anger makes you so displeased?
ETEOCLES
I bear you no ill will for worshipping whatever higher spirit you may wish. And as long as you do not discourage your fellow citizens, you can relax and stop being so afraid.

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

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

CHORUS
Wait! I hear horses snorting!

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

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

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

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

ETEOCLES
Why can’t you keep quiet! Do not talk like this within the city.
CHORUS
   O you divine company of gods,
do not allow our fortress to be seized!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHORUS
   My courage is gone. Fear has seized my tongue.

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

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

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

CHORUS

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

ETEOCLES

Compared to how you spoke out earlier,
I find these words of yours acceptable.
But in addition to this, stay away
from statues of the gods, and make your prayers
that the gods fight on our side more forceful.
When you have heard my vow, then you must sing
for victory, that joyful sacred cry,
the holy shout we Greeks by custom raise
to cheer our friends and take away the fear
they have of fighting war. And now I speak
to the gods who live in our own city,
those dwelling in the plain, and those who watch
our market place, and to our native streams,
the springs of Dirce, the river Ismenus—
to all these I swear that if we do succeed
and save the city, we will dye blood red
the altars of the gods with butchered sheep
and offer sacrificial bulls to them.
We will give them trophies, and I will hang
the spear-pierced battle garments of our foes
as spoils of war within gods’ sacred homes
and place the fighting armour by their shrines.
That is the way you should pray to the gods,
without the screaming you enjoy so much
or all that uncontrolled and futile wailing.
Such things will not help you evade your fate.
Now I will go to set six men in place—
and I will be the seventh—to make a stand
as mighty warriors at our city gates,
the seven passages through our walls,
before some messenger comes rushing here
or urgent news arrives and dire need inflames us all.
[ETEOCLES exits with his SOLDIERS]

CHORUS

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

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

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

What country will you change for ours,
what finer stretch of ground,
if once you hand our enemies
this fertile soil and Dirce’s springs,
most nourishing of all those streams
which flow from the Encircler of the Earth,
Poseidon, and from Tethys’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
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.

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.
To throw an ancient city down
to Hades brings a pitiful regret—
a ravaged victim of the enemy’s spear
is badly pulverized to dust and ash
by the will of the gods and an Argive man,
its women led out as captive slaves,
the young and the old—alas, such grief!—
hailed 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
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
or else he kindles fires, and all the town
is stained with smoke, while savage Ares,
whose conquest of a people drives his rage,
pollutes all piety with his foul breath.

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

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

1The image here comes from the customary marriage rituals where the bride crosses through the doorway of her new husband’s house.
they want their comrades there, men whose hunger is equal to or greater than their own.
No need to measure out their portions now!

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

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

[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 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.

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 the saying that the victorious soldiers, both those with loot and whose 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, like a snake at noon, and accusing him, saying that Oecleus’ son, the prophet, a clever man, desires to shirk his fate and has no spirit for the coming fight. He shouts these taunts and shakes his helmet plumes, three overarching crests, while from his shield bells made of bronze and hanging underneath create a fearful sound. And on that shield he bears an arrogant sign—a fiery sky patterned with lesser stars and a full moon, the most revered of stars, the eye of night, shining from the bright centre of the shield. Roaming there with this conceited armour, in his eagerness to fight, he bellows at the river banks, just like a war horse fiercely champing at the bit and snorting, as it awaits the trumpet’s call. What man will you select to stand against him? Who can we trust to guard Proetus’ gate once the barrier is gone?

ETEOCLES

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

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.
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.

[MELANIPPU steps forward.]  

Descended from a noble line, he honours  
the throne of self-restraint and hates proud speech,  
a man reluctant to act shamefully,  
with no desire to fight like any coward.  
His family roots are with those warriors  
born from the dragon’s teeth whom Ares spared,  
so Melanippus comes of home-grown stock,  
a true son of this soil. 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 MELANIPPU.]  

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

MESSENGER  
May the gods indeed grant him success.  
The lot was drawn for the Electran gate,  
and it picked out a giant of a man—  
Capaneus, a greater warrior  
than the one I talked about before.  
His boasting goes beyond all human pride,  
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.
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 noonday sun. Against this man we will set Polyphontes.

[POLYPHONTES steps forward.]

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

[Exit POLYPHONTES.]

Now talk to me about another leader picked by lottery to assault our gates.
CHORUS
May those who raise such arrogant cries
against our city perish! May the power
of lightning push him back, before he leaps
inside my room and with his boastful spear
drives me with force out of my virgin bed!

MESSENGER
Now I will describe another warrior
selected to attack our city walls.
When their bronze helmet was turned upside down,
the third man’s lot jumped out—Eteoclus,
chosen to hurl his group of warriors
against the Neistan gate. His team of horses
eager to attack the wall, strain at the bit,
as he wheels them round. The heavy breath
from snorting nostrils fills their headgear
and makes them sound just like barbarians.
You cannot miss the emblem on his shield,
a ladder with a man in armour on it
scaling ramparts of an enemy town
he wishes to destroy. And this man, too,
has written letters that announce his boast—
‘Not even war god Ares can dislodge me
and hurl me from the wall.’ So you must send
a trusted fighter out to this man, too,
and guard our people from the yoke of slaves.

ETEOCLES [leading MEGAREUS forward]
I will dispatch this man without delay—
and choosing him is fortunate for us.
There! He is being sent, a man who carries
what he boasts about in his own hands—
Megareus, son of Creon, a seed
of that earth-born race. No roaring sounds
from frantic horses will make him panic
or shift him from the gate. No. He is a man
who will either die and give his country back
what she paid to raise him, or he will seize
two warriors and the city on the shield
and with those spoils adorn his father’s home.

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

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

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

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

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†Typhon was a fabulous giant monster with a hundred heads.
man to man, for Hyperbios is keen
to test his fortune and to learn his fate.

[HYPHERBIOS steps forward.]

In looks, in courage, and in feats of arms
he is beyond reproach. And now Hermes,
god of chance, has brought both men together,
as is appropriate, for these two men
will meet in battle as two enemies,
just like the warlike gods on their two shields.¹
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,
and they are with the conquered, if Zeus
is more ferocious in a war than Typhon.
So the insignia these warriors bear
may well decide the outcome of the clash
when they both meet, and our Hyperbios
may find in Zeus depicted on his shield
a fortunate defence.

[Exit HYPHERBIOS.]

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,
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.
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
and even more important than his eyes—
that he will ravage our Cadmean town,
in spite of Zeus. These are his very words,
this child of a mother born up in the hills—
a handsome man and still a youthful lad,
with the initial growth of thick, soft hair
just showing on his cheeks. And now he moves
with a savage will and terrifying eyes.
Nothing about him seems like a young girl,
although his name suggests he looks that way.²
As he moves to his place before the gate,
he boasts aloud, and on the circular shield
of hammered bronze he holds in front of him
an emblem of our city’s shame—the Sphinx,
who eats men raw, a symbol held in place
with bolts, a skillful piece of work.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
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.
²The 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.
ETEOCLES

O if only the gods would give those men
the very things they keep imagining
in those sacrilegious boasts they utter.
Then they would surely die in misery,
completely overwhelmed.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
any man to pass whose hostile shield depicts
an image of that hateful, vicious beast,
who will complain while still outside the town
to the one who carries her towards the gate,
when she receives a heavy battering
below our city walls. If gods are willing,
may what I say prove true!

[Exit ACTOR.]

CHORUS

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

MESSENGER

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

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,’
‘willing agent of a general slaughter,’
and ‘counsellor of evil to Adrastus.’
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. When he called out,
he used the following words:

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

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

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

ETEOCLES
Alas for those ominous twists of fate which in those groups where men associate combine the righteous and profane together! In all our actions, nothing can be worse than evil company. The fruits of that are not worth reaping, for fields of folly yield a deadly crop. A reverent man who sails off in a ship manned by a crew of reckless sailors eager to do wrong will sometimes perish with that group of men the gods detest, or else a virtuous man living with fellow citizens who hate all visitors and disrespect the gods is caught up with them in a common trap, which he does not deserve, and overwhelmed, 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, 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 bear fruit, and usually he stays silent or else says something truly pertinent. But still, I will also appoint a man, great Lasthenes, to keep this foreigner far from our gate.

[LASTHENES steps forward.]

He has the wisdom of an older man and a young man's strength. His eyes are quick. His hand does not delay
in thrusting with his spear at naked flesh
his enemy’s shield has left uncovered.
But man’s success is given by the gods.

[Exit LASTHENES.]

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

MESSENGER
Now I will announce the seventh warrior
beside the seventh and the final gate—
your own blood brother. I will describe
the way he calls down curses on the city
and the fate he prays for. For he desires
to scale our battlements and then proclaim
that he is king of Thebes and raise a cry
of triumph when he has seized the city.
He prays to meet and kill you in the fight
and then to perish by your side, or else,
if you survive, to pay you back with exile,
in the same way you once dishonoured him
and forced him from his home. With words like these,
great Polyneices calls his native gods
and summons his paternal deities
[640]
to act as close custodians of his prayers.
He holds a brand new circular shield
displaying two shapes, skilfully attached—
a man in armour made of hammered gold
behind a woman calmly leading him.
She claims to be a figure of Justice,
to judge from what the letters say: ‘This man
I will lead back, and he will have his land
and will roam free in his ancestral home.’
These are the signs created for their shields.
It is now up to you to send out there
the one you think is best. You will not find
I have been wrong in what I have announced.
From this point you must yourself decide the proper course to map out for our state.

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

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

¹The authenticity of the lines in square brackets has been debated.
and that will be enough. The blood they shed we can atone. But when the men who fight share common blood, as you two brothers do, and those who die are killed by their own kin, time never can remove the dreadful stain.

ETEOCLES
If a man can suffer evil without shame, that is all right—the only benefit the dead receive is honour. However, you cannot speak of glory in those acts which injure him and make him a disgrace.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 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.
those fatal words, still sit and say to me:
‘Win something for yourself before you die.’

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

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

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

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

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

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1 The curse seems to be urging Eteocles to kill his brother before he dies himself, because that will bring him a temporary benefit, presumably the personal satisfaction and glory of winning the battle. The debate here between the Chorus and Eteocles (which has been much discussed) is focusing on the tension between the Chorus’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.

3 These lines may refer to a passage in an earlier play in the trilogy (now lost).
ETEOCLES
Propose some action that is possible—
and keep it brief.

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

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

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

ETEOCLES
A fighting man cannot accept those words.

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

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

[Exit ETEOCLES.]

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

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

A stranger now divides their legacy.
A foreign, savage-minded, iron sword
forged by the Chalybes in Scythia
is carving out grim parts of their estate,
assigning land to them where they may dwell, as much as they will need when they are dead and have no share at all in these wide plains.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!

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

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

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

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

¹The Chalybes, a people living in Scythia near the Black Sea, were famous for their metal work.
What man has ever been admired so much
by gods, by citizens who share our feasts,
or by our people’s densely packed assemblies
as Oedipus was when he was honoured
that day he rid the city of the Sphinx,
the deadly beast who snatched our men away?

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

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

[The MESSENGER enters.]

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

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.
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!

MESSENGER
Both sons were killed.
They slaughtered one another.

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.
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,
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,
but as for our two kindred kings cut down
by one another, earth has drained their blood.

[Exit MESSENGER.]

CHORUS

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

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

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).
that concert played with spears!

The special prayer of Oedipus, the father’s curse against his sons, has taken effect. It did not fail. And Laius’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, the truth of what that messenger proclaimed. I sense a twin-felt sorrow—two warriors slain by a brother’s hand! A double share of pain has been fulfilled. What is there left to say? What else but this—O sorrow piled on sorrow for hearth and home?

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

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

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

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

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 Polynice. 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.
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.  [910]
And our whole city grieves, the towers groan,
this land, which loves its people,
moans in sorrow. Now their entire estate
remains for their posterity, those things
that launched the war which doomed them
and found 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
has earned the condemnation of their friends,
who find no joy in savage Ares.

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

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

To these unhappy men one might well say
they did great harm to citizens of Thebes
and to those ranks of foreigners who fell
to widespread slaughter in that war.
Of every women who has given birth, all those who earn the name of mother, the one who bore these men was truly doomed.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.

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 snatchèd quickly from the fire—and bitter, too, the one dividing their inheritance, destructive Ares, who brought about their father’s curse and made it true.

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

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

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

ANTIGONE
Such a pitiful act!

ISMENE
Such wretched agony!

ANTIGONE
Let our groans sound.

ISMENE
Let our tears flow.

ANTIGONE
Now you lie dead.

ISMENE
You did the killing.

ANTIGONE
Alas!

ISMENE
Alas!

ANTIGONE
My mind is mad with grief.

ISMENE
My heart groans here inside.
ANTIGONE
   Aaaiii! You pitiful man!

ISMENE
   You, too, his wretched brother. [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.
ANTIGONE
But he did not come home, once he had killed.

ISMENE
He saved himself and lost his life.

ANTIGONE
Ah yes, he was destroyed.

ISMENE
And yet he also killed.

ANTIGONE
O this doomed race!

ISMENE
Such wretched suffering!

ANTIGONE
A hapless grief which carries our own name!

ISMENE
A triple tide of sorrow!

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

ANTIGONE
You know her now by what you did.

ISMENE
And you in that same instant met her, too.

ANTIGONE
When you came back to your own city.

ISMENE
To face your brother with a spear.
ANTIGONE  
A deadly thing to talk about.

ISMENE  
A deadly sight to see.  

ANTIGONE  
Alas, such pain!  

ISMENE  
Alas, so many troubles!

ANTIGONE  
For our own home and land.

ISMENE  
And most of all, for me.

ANTIGONE  
And more, as well, for me.

ISMENE  
O how I mourn your suffering, my king!

ANTIGONE  
Alas for both of you, most pitiful of men!

ISMENE  
Both gripped by ruinous illusions!

ANTIGONE  
Where shall we put them in the earth?

ISMENE  
Wherever they get most respect.

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

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

\textbf{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

\textsuperscript{1}It is not entirely clear where the political authority in Thebes rests, now that both kings are dead. In other versions of the story, Creon (brother-in-law of Oedipus, and hence the uncle of Eteocles and Polyneices) assumes control once the two brothers are gone.
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
from which we two were born, both children
of unhappy and ill-fated parents.
And thus my soul is willing now to share
the troubles of a man who has no will
and live in blood communion with the dead.
No hollow-bellied wolves will rip his corpse.
Let no one set that up as a decree!
Though I am a mere woman, I will find
some way to dig a grave and bury him
with what I carry folded in my robes.
I will cover him myself. So spare me
all those laws which say I may not do it.
And do not fear, for I will find a way.

HERALD
I am saying you must not flaunt the city.

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

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

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

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

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

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

ANTIGONE

He was paying back the harm he suffered.

HERALD

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

ANTIGONE

The final god
to bring an end to any argument
is Eris, who resolves disputes with war.

No more of your long-winded reasoning,
for I will bury Polynoeices.

HERALD

As you wish.

But I have told you it has been forbidden.

[Exit HERALD.]

CHORUS

Alas! Alas for you demonic Furies,
who boast about a family destroyed
and have just utterly wiped out the race
of Oedipus. What happens to me now?
What do I do? Where is the road ahead?
How can I endure not weeping for you
or not escorting you to your own grave?

I sense the hatred of our citizens.
I am afraid. And so I turn away.
Now you, Eteocles, will have a crowd
to mourn your death, but no one will lament
poor Polynoeices. A single sister
will offer him a funeral song alone.

Who finds that burial acceptable?

¹The herald's point here is that the citizens as a group did not harm Polynoeices, since he was driven away by Eteocles.
[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 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 he was the one, of all our citizens, who saved this city of Cadmean from being overwhelmed and foundering beneath a wave of foreign warriors.

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

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