



SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

BY Aeschylus

SEPTEM CONTRA THEBAS

The third and only surviving drama in Aeschylus' Oedipus tetralogy, probably first produced in Athens in 467 BC.

Translated by Andrew Wilson

The translation from the Greek iambics (iambic trimeter) is into English iambic pentameters ("Blank Verse"). The Greek choral and lyric passages match the original meters using stressed syllables to imitate Greek macra. The lines in the translation exactly match the line numbers of the OCT editions. The spurious ending from line 1005 to the end is omitted, and a brief imagined ending is appended instead.

For Juliet

THE OEDIPUS TETRALOGY

III

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

Characters

ETEOKLES, KING OF THEBES

A SPY, A SOLDIER IN THE THEBAN ARMY

CHORUS OF THEBAN WOMEN

A MESSENGER

Scene

INSIDE THE CITY OF THEBES.

EARLY MORNING.

ETEOKLES

Cadmus's people, the crisis that we face
Demands a speech, from him, the city's lookout,
The man on the poop-deck, steering the ship, who can't
Allow himself to sleep. If we do well,
It's 'gods be thanked'. But if, and pray it won't,
Disaster happens, Eteokles would be
The one whose name the city would abuse
With constant, loud, complaints. May Zeus protect
Our city to which Cadmus gave his name.
But now it falls on you – the youngster still
Not quite a man, him, too, no longer young,
And all now in their prime, who, as they should,
Are proud their body's strength is at its peak:
Protect our city, and the altars of
Our national gods – they must not lose respect;
Our children; earth – our mother and dear nurse.
She sheltered you as crawling infants, soothing
Your childhood fears within her land's embrace,
She raised you: patriots, proud of your shields,
She trusts you'll handle this emergency.
Thus far the gods incline to favour us,
For some time now the war's been going well.
Thanks to the gods, for those who guard our walls.
But now, the seer, the shepherd of the birds,
Using his ears and his intelligence,
Just that, and faultless skill, this master of
Prophetic arts, tells, by signs from the birds,
How an immense Achaean assault force,
Advances through the night, a dangerous threat.
So, all of you, go man the city walls,

The turrets, gates. With all your weapons! Go!
Reinforce the battlements, cover the platforms
On the towers, stand by the gates, let no one in,
Be brave, don't let this mob of foreigners
Intimidate you. God makes all things good.
I've sent out spies, to check their strength.
They will not let me down. When they report
No fear that I'll be fooled by dirty tricks!

KATASKOPOS

Eteocles, excellency, Kadmeians' king,
I have definite news of what's out there,
The enemy. I saw it all myself.
Men, seven of them, leaders, wild, possessed,
Slaughtered a bull and dipped their hands into
Its blood pooled in a shield, upturned, and black,
Then swore an oath, by Ares, Enyo, and Fear,
Lover of blood: either they'd disembowel,
Obliterate the Kadmeians' city,
Or die and soak the earth here with their blood.
They had keepsakes of themselves to present
To parents back at home, which they brought, weeping,
To Adrastus' chariot: but no words of regret.
Their hearts are hot, like molten steel, with manly
Nerve, they roar like lions poised to pounce.
For proof of this, you won't have long to wait:
I left them drawing lots, so each, would have
A gate assigned by chance for him to man.
Deploy your finest men against them, the elite,
At every gate where roads lead out. Be quick!
The Argive force full-powered is nearly here,
Advancing, raising dust, while horses snort

And spray the plain with gleaming flecks of foam.

You, like the sharp-eyed helmsman of a ship,

Safeguard the city well before the storm

Of Ares hits. A wave of warriors roars

To land. So, do whatever's quickest now,

I as a loyal scout, shall keep an eye

On things as they occur. I'll make it clear

What's going on: informed, you will be safe.

ETEOKLES

O Zeus, o Earth, o gods that guard our city,

O Curse! O potent vengeful spirit of my father!

Do not uproot this city, grub it out

From Greece, destroyed, a subjugated slave,

Do not let this free land, Kadmus's town

Endure the crushing yoke of servitude.

Be our defence! We share a cause, I hope:

A city that succeeds honours the gods. *[Exit]*

CHORUS

Anxiety, terrible, immense! [78]

I'm screaming! The army, from the camp, unleashed!

Look at the masses of horsemen, they are closing fast.

Dust in the air persuades me, there, plain to see.

Its message is clear, doesn't need words, it's true.

Ground everywhere resounds, clattering thud of hooves,

Invading my ears. [84]

It swoops, roaring like an unexpected storm,

Water drumming on the rocks.

Io, io! You gods, and goddesses, avert

All of the bad that waits. [88]

[A cry]



The noise seems to leap, [90]
 And stream over walls. The white shields all massed
 Are menacing the city, advancing -
 Who will defend us? Who's able to drive them back?
 Which goddess? Which god?
 In front of these icons should I just throw myself down?
 They're our nation's gods! [96]

[A shout]

O all you gods enthroned! [98]
 It's time to embrace the statues. Why wait?
 When all we do is scream?
 You hear, you surely hear the clanking sound of shields?
 If not now, then when to robe, garland you,
 While we are saying prayers?
 I've seen the noise! The rattling of more than one man's shield!
 What now, Ares? Let down your own land,
 Our patron, from old times?
 Our city, look, look hard, o god with the helmet of gold,
 City once you promised you loved! [107]

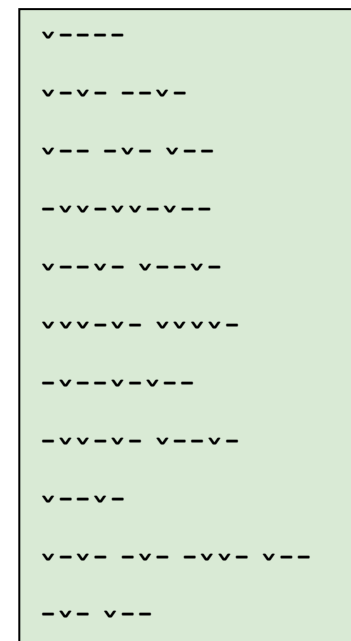
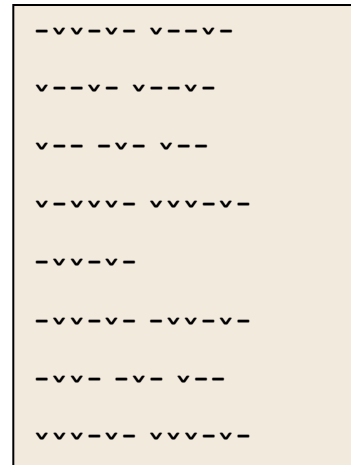
Gods of our country, city-protectors, come all, come, [109]
 Look at this band of girls We all appeal to you,
 Save us from slavery!
 Helmeted men, a flood-tide of them rising, blown [112]
 By storm-winds; the city, stung by the hot breath of War. [115]
 O Zeus, father, sovereign of all,
 Please stop them! Don't let these invaders take us! [117]
 For Argive troops surround the stronghold [120]
 Of Kadmos. The tools of war frighten us!
 See how the bits that chafe horses' mouths
 Complain, snorting, the sound of slaughter. [123]

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Seven commanders, look, the army's élite
 With spears shaking grimly, guard seven gates,
 They stand, on guard where lot assigned them.
 So you, daughter of Zeus, lover of war, the power:
 City-defender be,
 Pallas! And you, the horse-god who commands the sea,
 You with your fish-spear that kills, Poseidon,
 Give us our freedom, pray you, set us free from fear.
 And Ares, please, please! [135]
 The city Kadmos named, give it
 Protection, show that you're her guardian.
 You also, ancestor, Aphrodite, [140]
 Defend us, for we descend from your blood,
 And with our prayers and hymns that call upon gods
 Now we come close to you with singing.
 You too, the Wolf-god, you must turn to a wolf [145]
 To those who attack,
 Enjoy the sounds when they weep. Daughter of Leto, you too:
 Have your bow there ready.



Strophe 1

A terrified scream.

Clattering, rumbling, din, chariots – Hera, queen! – [152]
 City surrounded.
 Squealing of wheel hubs, noise, axles protest, the load -
 Artemis, be loved!
 Finding it hard to see! Mad paroxysm of spears!
 What is it happening, city of ours, what next?
 How will it end? Where is god leading us? [157]



Antistrophe 1

They scream again in naked terror

Someone is hurling stones, hitting our shelter! Help! [158]

Dearest Apollo!

Up from the gates, the clank, bronze-banded shields collide.

Child of mighty Zeus -

God with the power to end war and decide who wins,

And we ask you as well, Onka, our holy queen,

Watch over the city of seven gates [165]



Strophe 2

Omnipotent deities, [166]

You powerful gods, powerful goddesses who

Guard the towers of this our land,

Do not abandon our spear-fenced town,

To face a force with alien speech.

Listen attentively; listen to pleas of girls

Who lift our hands in prayer.



Antistrophe 2

O all you gods, dear to us,

Bring freedom! Our city needs your embrace.

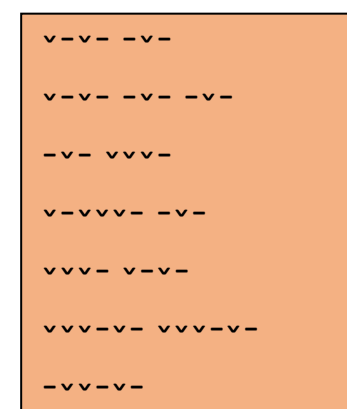
Show you hold our city dear

Recall rituals we all performed:

Having recalled, now give us help!

And please be mindful how well we observed the rites:

Offerings, sacrifice.



ETEOKLES

You babies are unbearable! I ask

Is this the best way you can help this city,

And boost morale for people under siege,

Grasping the statues of the city gods,
 This caterwauling, loathed by decent men?
 Neither in bad times nor in good would I
 Choose to live my life amid the female sex!
 They win? Can't handle their conceit.
 But scared? They're worse! In public and at home.
 And now you've set the people panicking.
 Your flapping's undermined morale, caused fear,
 You do your best to boost the enemy,
 Whilst we are sabotaged by our own side.
 That's what you get with women in your space.

So. Anyone one who does not heed my words,
 Male, female or whatever – the sentence
 Of death will be decided on for them:
 Public stoning. No chance they won't be dead.
 Men's business, war. Women's opinions
 Don't count. Stay home. That way you do no harm.
 You heard? Did not? Or, woman, are you deaf?

CHORUS

Strophe 1

O son of Oidipous. What a state I was in [203]
 Hearing the chariot noise, rattling clattering rumble
 And when the axles were all squealing, wheels a-whir,
 Horses' mouths, whistling breath, snapping at bits forged in the fire,
 Straining at the reins, relentless. [207]



ETEOKLES

Your point...? At sea do you see sailors rush
 From poop to prow to try to save a ship,
 In danger of capsizing, swamped by waves?

CHORUS

Antistrophe 1

Straight to the statues, though, it was I ran, the gods' [211]
Time-honoured images: it was on them I relied,
When they poured down, stones, like a blizzard, beside the gates,
Terrified, I was forced by all the din to beg the gods
To come and protect our city. [215]

ETEOKLES

You pray the walls withstand the enemy spears:
Sure, this is what the gods can do. But when
A city's captured, gods depart, it's said.

CHORUS

Strophe 2

Never may this divine confederation leave [219]
While I'm alive, and may I never look upon
Enemy flames burning this city, while hostile troops
Overrun the town and sack it.

ETEOKLES

No more invoking gods; a bad idea.
Obedience is the mother of success:
That is what keeps us safe; that's common sense.

CHORUS

Antistrophe 2

Truly she is. But god's strength remains greater still,
Often in troubled times, he's pulled a helpless man
Out of a desperate spot, when clouds overhang,
Blinding his eyes to what's right to do.

ETEOKLES

Men's work this is, doing the sacrifices,
Due rites for the gods, knowing our enemy:
Yours is to shut your mouths and stay at home.

CHORUS



Strophe 3

It is the gods who help make sure that our city's safe, [233]
Fortifications keep enemy hordes away,
How on earth could this be wrong?



ETEOKLES

I don't object if you worship the gods.

But do keep calm, don't show your fear so much:

Or you make people scared and panicky.

CHORUS

Antistrophe 3

It was unusual noises I heard made me so scared; [239]
To the acropolis, terrified I ran here
Sanctuary where the gods reside.



ETEOKLES

Well, don't if you see men wounded or dying,

Start screaming; don't then make a fuss: for Ares

This is his bread and butter: blood and death.

CHORUS

And there it is! Horses neighing – I hear them!

ETEOKLES

Some things you hear best to pretend you don't!

CHORUS

The ground, the encircled city is in pain.

ETEOKLES

Then let me handle it. That is my job.

CHORUS

I'm scared! There's louder noise comes from gates.

ETEOKLES

Be quiet! No talk like that around the town.

CHORUS

You gods, do not let our defences fail!

ETEOKLES

To hell with you! Shut up, put up with it!

CHORUS

You're the people's gods, save me from slavery!

ETEOKLES

You make yourself a slave, me too, us all.

CHORUS

Almighty Zeus, aim fire at the enemy.

ETEOKLES

Zeus! Women! What a generous gift you gave!

CHORUS

We feel the pain, like men, whose city's sacked.

ETEOKLES

Bad talk! How can you dare, clasping the gods?

CHORUS

My fear made me speak, and cowardice.

ETEOKLES

Would you perform a small request for me?

CHORUS

Tell me right now, I'll know then what's required.

ETEOKLES

Keep your mouth shut, my girl, don't scare your friends.

CHORUS

I will. I'll bear my fate with all the rest.

ETEOKLES

I prefer these words to those you started with!

Something else now you can do: let go the statues.

Choose a better prayer: "Gods, please fight for us!"

My prayers, listen to them, then sing the anthem

Of victory, sacred patriotic chant,

Traditional Greek song of sacrifice,

Inspiring friends, and filling foes with dread!

"To our city's gods, gods of our land, who guard

Our countryside, our public space, and to

Dirke's springs, Hismenus' waters, I vow,

If all goes well, and if our city's saved,

Bloodying the altars of the gods with sheep

To set up trophies and to dedicate

The enemy armour dented by our spears, to hang

In your holy temples." Ask gods like this,

And not with tears, with wild and useless shrieks.

Which do nothing to save you from your fate.

But I shall go with six men, me the seventh,

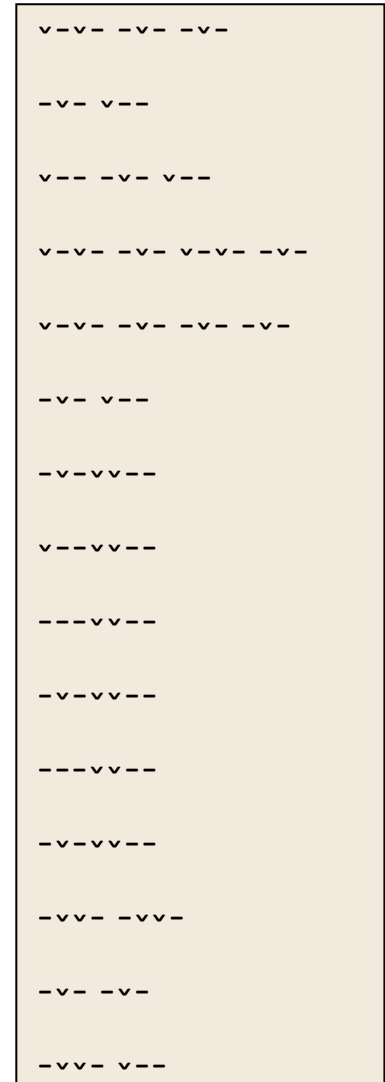
To face the enemy, in equal strength,

And station one at all our seven gates,
 Before a messenger arrives in urgent haste,
 And heats up a crisis to emergency.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

Agreed. My heart throbs with fear; sleep it can't. [287]
 Heart's attendants, worries,
 Ignite my panic, set ablaze dread -
 At men who creep round the walls; I'm like a dove, cowering,
 So timorous, scared lest snakes, slumber's dire saboteurs,
 Slide into her chicks' nest.
 Some are heading, in full force
 At our fortifications
 En masse. What will my fate be?
 Others picking up stones, are
 Pelting people surrounded,
 Hurling jagged and hard rocks.
 Do all you can, Children of Zeus,
 Gods, protect, keep from harm
 Kadmus's town, its people. [303]



Antistrophe 1

What sort of land will you find, better than

This one, should we give up

This fertile earth of ours to foemen?

And Dirke's waters, most life-sustaining liquid, of all

That he, the earth-shaker, Poseidon brings forth for us,

Helped by Tethys' children?

Guardian gods of our city,

Bestow ruin upon those

Besiegers who attack us

Let their warriors be slaughtered

And abandon their weapons.

Give the glory to our men,

Be for us our city's defence

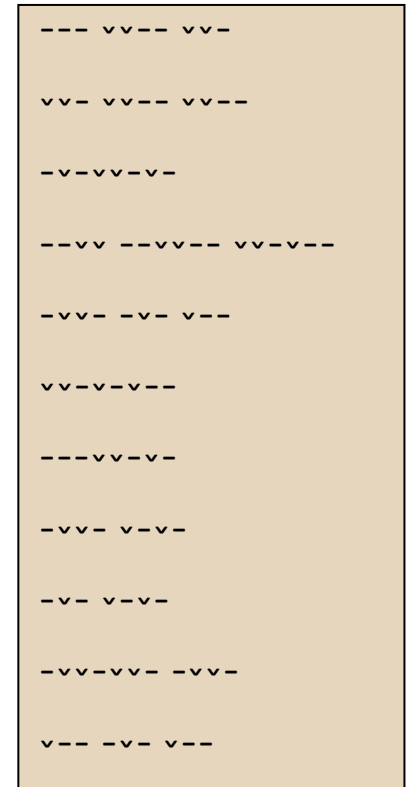
Stay with us, in your place,

These are the prayers that girls sing.

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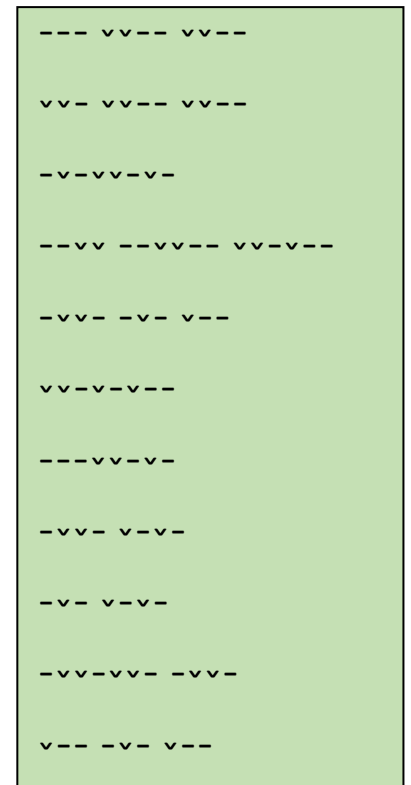
Strophe 2

How grievous for a town so very old
To be hurled into Hades, and at spear-point,
Trapped, enslaved, and reduced to ash,
Grey cinders, and sacked – shockingly – by Argos’s man, with gods’ help!
Women are corralled and then, they’re dragged off –
See it! – helpless, old ones, young girls –
Just like horses are, by their hair,
Losing their clothes, ripped off their backs,
While the city empty now
Cries for its people bewildered, in despair.
A fearsome crushing blow awaits us.



Antistrophe 2

Shed your tears, for the young girls, prematurely
Made to tread on a road, hateful to travel,
Dragged from homes without marriage rites.
I truly declare one who is dead’s much better off than these are.
Many malign actions follow conquest -
See it! - when a city crumbles,
Men take other men, take their lives,
Burn it all down, the smoke pollutes
Every street, while Ares, mad,
Tamer of men, does his worst, spreading the doom,
And snuffs out any chance of goodness.



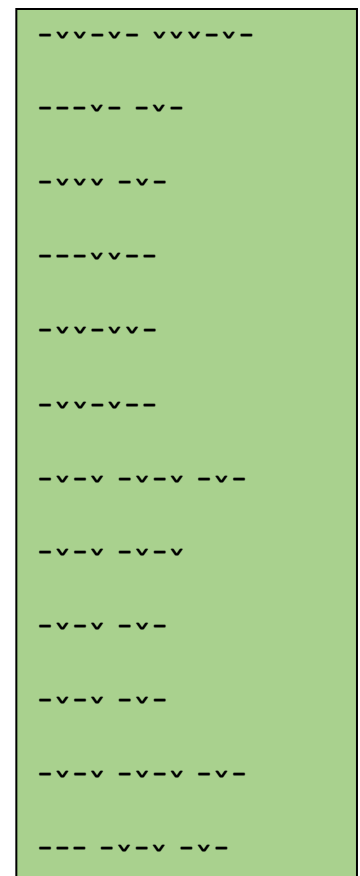
Strophe 3

Rumbling, borborygmi, as the city falls,
Huge, wall-like, the net closes in.
Men kill men, felled by spears.
Bawling blood-spattered babes scream,
Torn from the mothers, who
Moments ago, gave them breast milk.
Looting kinsmen, roving through the city streets;
Those with plunder join with others,
Empty handed men call out
Finding someone else deprived:
“Don’t want less, don’t want the same: it’s more we want!”
Does reason still exist, can one believe?



Antistrophe 3

Produce of every sort falls on the ground, and so
Disappoints the house whose enforced
‘Caretakers’ it hates so much.
Earth’s gifts, strewn in confusion,
Wastefully washing away,
Valueless trash in gutters.
Young girls newly slaves must face new pain; to be
Prisoners of a man whose luck has
Found him on the winning side,
Better class of enemy.
Hope is when the nightly ritual comes round,
Some compensation may relieve the pain.



LEADER OF SEMICHORUS 1

See there, the agent, friends, it looks to me, brings us
Some new intelligence about the troops.
He's back; In haste – speeding as if on wheels!

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS 2

And look, here comes the king himself, the son
Of Oidipous, on cue, to hear his spy's report,
He too is eager, quickening his stride.

MESSENGER

May I say I know the enemy's orders well,
And how each by lot is posted at the gates.
So Tydeus thunders near the Gate of Proitos,
Right now, the priest won't let him cross the stream
Of Hismenos: the sacrifice went wrong.
Tydeus, though, mad with lust to join the fight,
Yells like a snake roused by the midday sun
To hiss its rage, hits out at Oikles' son,
The prophet whose skill is dodging death, afraid
To fight. With taunts like these, he shakes his mane,
His helmet's three enormous plumes; while bells
Of bronze ring terror out, behind his shield.
The shield displays this arrogant design:
Depicted is the sky ablaze with stars,
And on the boss, the glorious full moon,

President of the stars gleams, eye of night.
A hint of madness as he screams beside
The river in his ostentatious gear,
In love with war, and snorting like a horse
Who's Champing at the bit, waiting to hear
The trumpet's call. Who will you match him with?
Which champion when the Proitos gate's unbarred?

ETEOKLES

A man's accoutrements would not scare me!
Symbolic emblems have no power to wound.
Plumes and bells do not have teeth, like spears!
This 'night' you mention on his shield, twinkling
With starry sky: To some his foolishness
Might seem prophetic. If he died and night
Fell on his eyes, this arrogant symbol
Would rightly suit the one who carried it,
And would be quite appropriate, for one
Who prophesied his own inflated pride!

I shall post Astacus's trusty son
To face Tydeus, as champion of this gate.
He's of good family; respects the throne
Of Self-restraint; loathes boastful blustering;
No taste for shameful deeds, loves to be brave.
Descended from those Sown Men Ares spared,
A recent shoot: a true son of our soil,

Melanippus! The result depends on Ares' dice.

Justice, his kinsman, now despatches him

To save his native soil from enemy spears.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

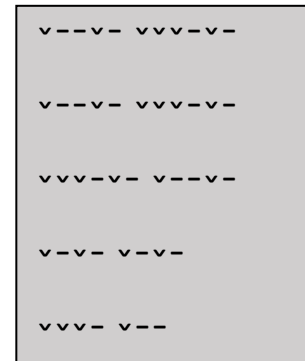
May gods grant our champion defender all

Success! Justice, go with him as he sets forth

Battling for the city. Fearful I am,

To see the bloody deaths of men

Losing their lives for loved ones.



MESSENGER

So may the gods indeed give him success.

Kapaneus was allocated the Electran Gate.

He is a second giant, bigger than

The one described just now, but his conceit

Is superhuman: he'll destroy our walls,

And sack our city god willing or not –

Not even Zeus' s 'bone of contention'

If it should strike would stop his reckless charge:

Lightning and bolts of thunder he's compared

To midday heat upon a summer's day.

His shield displays a man unarmed except

For fire, a flambeau blazing in his hands,

These words in gold: "I'll burn the city down."

A man to match this warrior: who can stand

Against this braggart without trembling?

ETEOKLES

Another boast, then, we may profit from!

When men's ambitions seem too arrogant,

Their tongue it truly is takes them to court.

Kapaneus threatens, all prepared to act:

Insulting gods, revealing nakedly

His thoughts, in cheerful blasphemy.

He sends, though mortal, waves of loud abuse

To Zeus. I trust the thunderbolt that will

With justice land on him will not at all

Be like the sun god's warming midday rays!

The man for him, however big he talks,

Is Polyphontes, fiery, spirited,

Dependable defender, with support

From Artemis in front, with other gods.

Tell me who's stationed at the other gates.

CHORUS

Antistrophe 1

I wish death to him, the one who boasts aloud

I hope lightning hits, thunderbolts strike him dead

Before he leaps across my threshold, and drives

Me from the place where girls are safe

With an unruly spear-thrust.



MESSENGER

I will. The third lot from the bronze inverted

Helmet jumped out to choose Eteoclus, as third,
To throw his men against the Neistan gate.
He spins his mares, eager to make it to
The gates, snorting and straining at the reins.
Their panting breath forced through their muzzled teeth
Creates a whistling noise, like Asian flutes.
His shield is emblazoned without restraint
No modesty about his shield's design!
A man in armour scales a ladder's rungs
To reach an enemy tower he means to sack.
He too has writing on his shield, boasting
Ares could not dislodge him from the walls.
Against this man send someone trustworthy,
To keep the yoke of slavery from our town.

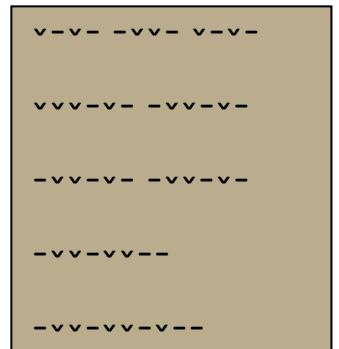
ETEOKLES

He's been sent! One whose deeds boast for him, son
Of Kreon, of 'The Sown' race, Megareus,
He won't run from the gates in fear of crazed
Snorting horses and their thundering hooves,
He'll either die, paying the earth that bred him,
Or take two men, him and the one on his shield -
City and all - spoils for his father's house.
Let's hear another's boasts! Don't spare the details!

CHORUS

Strophe 2

Indeed, I pray hard that success may come to you,
Who are my family's champion, and that they will fail.
They with their crazy thoughts utter such boastful words,
Smearing the city: avenging
Zeus ought to look upon them with outrage.



MESSENGER

Another one, the fourth, patrols the gate
Next to Athena Onka and is making noise!
Hippomedon – a huge man, tall, well-built.
I tell you, can't deny, I shivered when he spun
His shield, a disc big as a threshing-floor.
The armourer who put such work into
This shield was not an ordinary smith:
Typhon breathing black smoke and sparks out of
His maw, seeming about to turn to flame.
inside the hollow rim around the shield
The curving belly writhes with tangled snakes.
His war-cry's boom resounds, enthused like Ares,
A Bacchant battle-mad with terror-stare.
Be on your guard against a man like this:
Now, at the gates, Terror is making boasts.

ETEOKLES

First then, Athena Onka, who's a neighbour
To the gate, who hates a cocksure man, will keep

Him from the nestlings, as a vicious snake.

Hyperbios, Oinops's trusty son

Chosen to match him man to man, desires

To make his name with what fate sends his way,

Physique? or courage? Weapon-handling skills?

He has them. Hermes' lot has matched them well.

As enemies they face each other, man on man,

The gods they each have blazoned on their shields

Are foes: one has got Typhon, breathing fire,

While, on Hyperbios's, Father Zeus

Stands, lightning bolt he's firing up in hand.

513

Such is the friendship gods bestow on us!

515

We're on the winning side, they're with the losers,

If Zeus is stronger in the fight than Typhon!

517

Hyperbios's emblem tells us Zeus

518

Should save him since he, Zeus, is on the shield!

520

CHORUS

Antistrophe 2

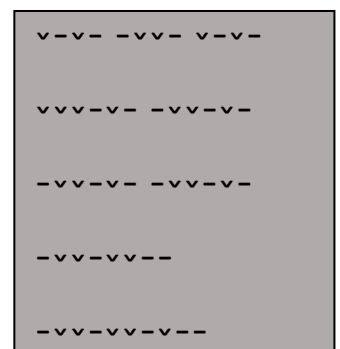
I am convinced he who is owner of the shield

On which is Zeus's opponent, the friendless hulk

Born from the Earth, by men and by the deathless gods

Image most truly detested,

Shall at the gates have his skull split open!



MESSENGER

So be it! I can name the fifth man now

Who's stationed at Gate five, the northern gate,
Close to the tomb of Amphion, son of Zeus.
He swears, by his spear, which he respects
More than a god, and loves more than his life,
That he will sack the Kadmeians' city
In spite of Zeus! A fresh-faced lad, whose mother
Roamed in the hills, a boy-man, talks like this!
His beard is now just fluff upon his cheeks:
A thicker crop will sprout as he matures.
His character belies his girlish name:
He's cruel - and faces us with piercing stare.
He flaunts contempt as he stands at our gates,
He totes an insult to our city on
His shield of bronze, curved to protect his life:
The figure of the Sphinx who eats men raw,
Polished, in high relief, is welded on.
She clasps a man beneath her, a Kadmeian,
Meant as a major target for our spears.
No small-time pedlar he of war, he's come far
Hoping to make it worth his journey's cost,
Parthenopaios from Arcadia. A man like this
[Repaying Argos for his welcome there]
Growls threats at us! May god frustrate his plans!
ETEOKLES
If, with god's help, their plans recoiled on them,

Due to those self-same boastful blasphemies,
 They would be wiped out wholly, wretchedly.
 There is a man for him, the Arcadian
 You named, no boaster, but who knows his task,
 Aktor, whose brother I picked out just now,
 He won't permit a mouth not backed by deeds,
 To penetrate the gate and spread alarm,
 He won't let in a man outside who bears
 An image of the loathsome beast on his
 Offensive shield. The Sphinx will blame its owner
 When she is beaten black and blue under
 The walls! God willing, my words would come true.

CHORUS

Strophe 3

His words penetrate inside where my heart
 Is beating, my hair feels like it stands on end,
 When I'm hearing the boastful threats
 Of men who do not respect gods, loud talkers, may
 The gods rob them of life on our soil.



MESSENGER

The sixth is a most modest man, I'd say,
 Brave soldier and a seer, Amphiareus.
 He's posted at the Homoloian Gates,
 With caustic words he often censures Tydeus:
 Murderer, rabble-rouser, instructor-

In-chief of evil ways to Argos, rous-er
Of the Curse, the errand-boy of Fear,
Adrastus' right-hand man for these bad plans.
He then turned as he'd done before on him,
Your brother Polyneikes, making play
Of what his name means: 'he who quarrels much'.
He calls his name and then he makes this speech:
"This action, I suppose, endears you to the gods,
Great for the young, to learn, and talk about,
Sacking the city of your forefathers
And family gods, heading a foreign force!
What legal claim chokes up one' source of life?
How can your fatherland, grabbed by your spear
So frantically, accept you as a friend?
But I in contrast shall enrich this soil -
Holy man buried here in enemy ground.
Let's fight. I expect death but not dishonour."
The prophet coolly spoke these words, clutching
His shield of plain bronze: no emblem it had.
He does not want to seem, but be the best,
From the deep, rich furrows of his mind he harvests
The fruits of careful thought which flourish there.
I beg you send to face him someone wise
And brave. Tough call, a man who fears the gods.
ETEOKLES
So sad, when fate requires a decent man

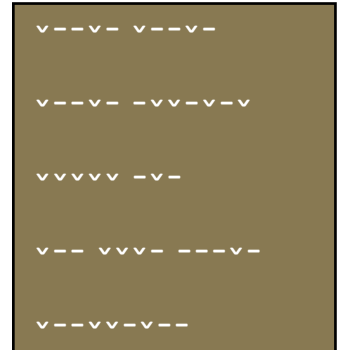
To link himself with total reprobates.
 In any business there is nothing worse
 Than evil company – a barren harvest. 600
 A godly man who boards a ship whose crew 602
 Are criminals fired-up for crooked deeds,
 Dies with the godforsaken types on board;
 In politics, an upright, sincere man
 Caught up with xenophobes and atheists,
 Ends in the same net as the sinful do,
 Whipped into line by god's impartial lash.
 Just so, this holy man, Oikles's son,
 Modest, fair-minded, brave and reverent,
 A great seer, fallen in with undevout
 Big-talking charlatans, despite himself,
 Will be dragged down along with those who march
 In that drawn-out parade which can't turn back.
 In fact, I think he won't attack the gates,
 Not that he's lacking courage or desire,
 He knows, though, it's in battle he must die,
 So Loxias's prophecy bear fruit. 618
 But still we'll post a man for him, Lasthenes, 620
 To guard the gate. Hates foreigners, combines
 Old man's experience with young man's strength –
 Sharp eyes and quick reactions too, to spot
 And aim for where the shield leaves flesh exposed.

But it's the gods who give success to men!

CHORUS

Antistrophe 3

O gods when you hear the prayers which we now
Are sending to you, honour them, so the city may
Be successful, and turn away
The bad things on the invaders. Outside the walls
May Zeus strike them all dead with lightning!



MESSENGER

Now for the seventh, at the seventh gate:
I'll say it - your own brother! And tell you
The city's fate he prays for, vows he'll bring
To pass: to seize the walls and be named king,
To yell the paeon in the land he's won,
To duel with you, and if he kills you, die
With you, or if you live, to punish you
With exile, banishment, like you did him.
He shouts such things, and calls upon the gods
Of his ancestors, of his native land, to endorse
His aims – in full. So Polyneikes prays.
He totes a brand-new shield, a round one, whose
Well-executed emblem shows two figures:
A woman, simply dressed, is seen to lead
A man in armour made of beaten gold.
She says that she is Justice, with the words:

“I lead this man back home, and he shall have
His father’s city, freedom of his halls.”

Such are the clever things found on their shields. 649

I trust you’ll not find fault with my report. 651

You must yourself map out your country’s course.

ETEOKLES

This tragic house of ours, of Oidipous,

Sent mad by gods, detested by the gods!

Our father’s curse is now made real indeed.

No time to weep, feel sorry for myself,

Digging up something worse to cry about.

The one who’s name fits – Polyneikes – him.

We’ll soon know if his shield makes any sense,

If that gold-plated gibberish from his

Deranged mentality will help him back.

Had Zeus’s virgin daughter, Justice, any

Place in his thoughts or deeds, perhaps it might!

Not when he fled the darkness of the womb,

Not as a child, or young boy growing up,

Not when his beard’s first hairs showed on his chin,

Did Justice reckon him a worthy case.

And certainly not now, I’m sure, does she

Support him in the pillage of his fatherland.

A Justice who rubs shoulders with a man

So reckless, rash, would not deserve the name.

As I believe this, I shall go myself
And stand against him. Whose claim is more just?
Leader to leader, brother to brother,
Rival to rival; I'll face him. Quick, bring
My greaves! Arm me against the spears and arrows.

CHORUS LEADER

No! Dearest friend, Oidipous' son, do not,
Please, match the rage of him who's evilly named.
It is enough that Kadmeians and Argives
Will fight. Blood, shed in war, can be washed off.
But when two linked by blood destroy themselves
In death like this, time cannot heal the crime.

ETEOKLES

If fate decrees this dreadful thing, may it
Occur without disgrace. Death's consolation!
But death with dishonour? No glory there!

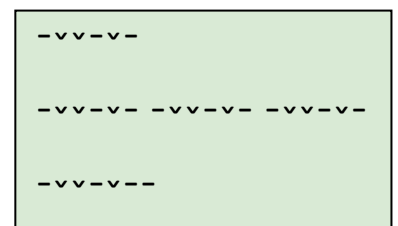
CHORUS

Strophe 1

What is this madness, boy?
Why is this anger-filled, crazy-for-battle doom carrying you away?
Stop it before it's too late!

ETEOKLES

Since god it is pushing this thing so hard,
Let it go with the wind, let all of Laius' race,
Which Phoebos hates, be swept away to Hell!



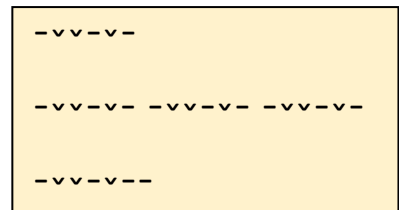
CHORUS

Antistrophe 1

Rage with its savage teeth

Never stops driving you onwards, to slaying men, reaping a bitter crop:

Bloodshed the gods prohibit.



ETEOKLES

Yes it's my father's hateful Curse fulfilled:

Its eyes – no tears, no pity – always on me.

It tells me that an early death brings gain.

CHORUS

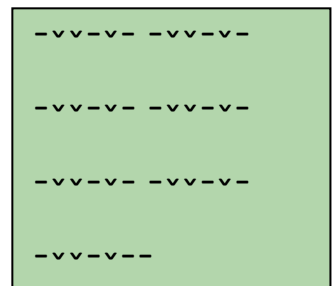
Strophe 2

Do not be driven on! You will not look so bad -

Saving one's life is good! Gone will the Fury be,

She and her hell-black shield, soon as the gods receive

All of your sacrifices.



ETEOKLES

It seems already I'm rejected by the gods.

Would an offering gain favour, now I'm doomed?

Why should I still object to facing fate?

CHORUS

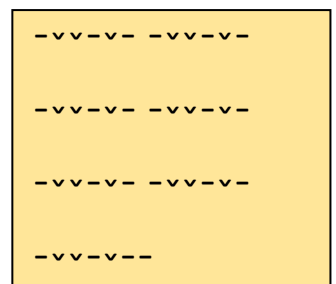
Antistrophe 2

Now, while you can still, yield, possibly god could change,

Even with all this time, what he intends to do.

He could direct at you much more agreeable winds.

Though at the moment it's storms!



ETEOKLES

The storms were caused by Oidipous's curse.

The visions in my dreams were all too true,

Nightmare of how my father split his wealth.

CHORUS

You may not value women, hear us, though!

ETEOKLES

If you say something useful. Make it brief.

CHORUS

Don't take the path towards the seventh gate.

ETEOKLES

You won't blunt me, a sharpened knife, with words!

CHORUS

Gods love winners. Win without heroics!

ETEOKLES

A maxim that no warrior could accept!

CHORUS

But do you want to shed a brother's blood?

ETEOKLES

When gods bring evil, you cannot evade it.

CHORUS

Strophe 1

I fear the home-wrecker, the goddess [720]

Who is nothing like the gods, who's

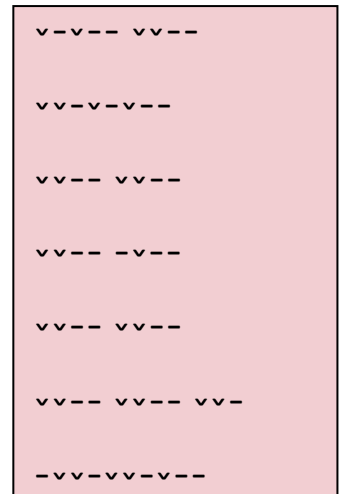
Never wrong foretelling evil,

The Erinyes, may accomplish

What the father, with his curses

That he let fly in his madness, in his rage

Prayed for – awakened by wrangling brothers.



Antistrophe 1

To settle how Oidipous' estate [726]

Is apportioned, comes a settler–

Chalybos, Scythian, harsh, fierce

In his passions: he is "Iron".

There are plots which they may govern

When they're dead men, just enough space, for their needs,

When they've no longer a claim on this land.



Strophe 2

When they are dead, killers both, [734]

Both of them victims, and dusty earth, soaking up the blood

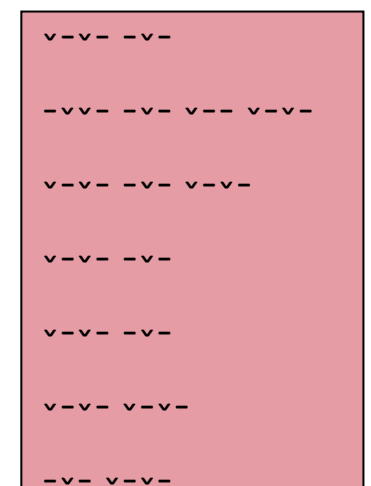
That flowed in torrents, is satisfied, is there

A soul to cleanse, purify

With sacrifice, save us from

Pollution? How entwined they are -

Ancient woes with recent ones!



Antistrophe 2

I tell of sin long ago [742]

Slow was the reckoning, alive for three generations, since

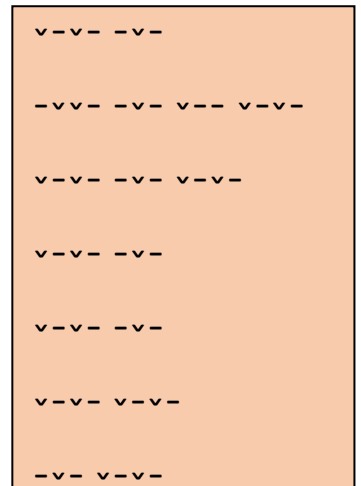
When Laios faced down Apollo, who'd said thrice,

At Delphi, through oracles

Sent out from Earth's centre, that

Were he to die without a child

He would save his city, but ...



Strophe 3

Embracing foolishness - it was his choice - [750]

He fathered his own ruination,

The parricide Oidipous, who

Sowed his seed in mother's

Forbidden plot, from which he'd been born,

Blood-stained root of his family.

Insane, uncontrollable passion

Forced the pair together.



Antistrophe 3

It's like when, flush with evil, tides roll in, {758}
As one wave goes down, so the next one
Rears up, and its talon-like crests
Roil, to swamp our town's decks.
A wall between is all our defence,
Not much width to protect us.
Along with the king I am fearful,
Scared the city is doomed.



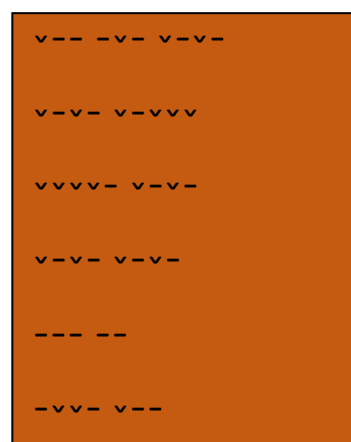
Strophe 4

A weighty price is paid, when curses that [766]
Were uttered long ago are fulfilled.
Once they come to life, they can't be dodged.
Successful men who grow too rich
Reduce their fortune
Toss overboard their surplus.



Antistrophe 4

Among men, whom have gods who share our town, [772]
Its altars, bustling square, looked up to
Quite as much as they did Oidipous,
When they showed honour to the one,
Who saved our land, from that
Man-eating deadly hell-cat?



Strophe 5

But then, conscious what he'd done, [778]

He became upset, in agony -

His marriage, so much pain –

Hating it, frenzied with passion,

He did two appalling things:

Hands that had murdered his father

Put out his eyes, no more to see his children.



Antistrophe 5

He then launched - against the sons [785]

The pair he had fathered shamefully -

With raging, bitter tongue,

Curses: that they would one day with

Hands that were both clutching IRON

Share out his goods. Now I fear

Fleet-footed Fury will make it happen.



MESSENGER

Your mothers raised you to be timid girls ...

Good news! You won't be slaves. The city's saved.

The fearful boasts of mighty men have failed.

The city's storm is past. Despite the seas

That crashed against her sides, she's not capsized.

The walls survive, gates barricaded by

Our stalwart champions fighting one on one.

It all went well at six gates – on the whole.

But holy lord Apollo favours “seventh” -

He chose the seventh gate, to make Oidipous’

Sons pay for Laios’ old stupidity.

CHORUS

This news, what does it mean for our city?

803

MESSENGER

The men are dead, dead at each other’s hand.

805

CHORUS

Which men? You mean...? I’m all confused. I dread...

MESSENGER

Simple enough. Just listen. Oidipous’s ...

CHORUS

I knew it! Said it would be bad! O gods!

MESSENGER

Sons lie – to make it clear - dead in the dirt...

CHORUS

Both lie there? Hard to take. But tell me more.

MESSENGER

With their own hands they took each other’s life.

The same demon was clearly in them both,

The one that wipes out their unlucky clan.

Thus we must celebrate and weep as well,

The city found success, its leaders though,

The generals both, have split their property –

Finally – with hammered Scythian steel.

They'll own the ground they're buried in, their tombs,
In sad fulfilment of their father's curse.

CHORUS

Anapaests

O Mighty Zeus, o gods who protect
This City of ours, and who keep Cadmus'
Walls and his citizens safe and secure,
Should I celebrate and shout for joy
That the city's escaped unscathed?
Or should I weep for the sad unlucky
Leaders, who died with sin in their hearts:
How apt were their names? "True Glory" -
Eteockles: Polyneikes – "The Man
Of many disputes, full of quarrels."

822

Strophe 1

Black, and consummated Curse; [832]
The family's Curse – and Oidipous',
A bitter frost now strikes me to my very core.
I made a song, graveside dirge,
Lost in my emotions, when
I heard of bodies oozing blood,
So cruelly dead. It was a bad
Omen: death-song, spears, in tune.



Antistrophe 1

Father's prayer, his public curse,
Has been fulfilled. It's done, the end.
The disobedience of Laïos found its mark,
The city's grief plain to see.
Words of god preserve their edge.
You've brought us so much grief, I can't
Believe what you have done. The pain,
Our distress, though, prove it's real.

-v- v-v-
vvv- v-v-
v-v- v-v- v-v-
v-v- -v-
-v- v-v-
v-v- v-v-
v-v- v-v-
-v- v-v-

What happened's evident: the herald's news was clear. [848]
It's doubly bad, we have to bear a double blow.
Killing each other, a double disaster, brings an end. What words?
What else but "Family troubles should be kept at home."
Go with the wind, and let tears flow free.
As oars strike at the waves, let mourning blows rain on
Your heads: this rite always escorts the sacred ship
Across Acheron with sails of black, ungarlanded,
To lands of darkness where Apollo cannot tread,
Sunless abode to which all must come. [860]

v-v- v-v- v-v-
v-v- v-v- v-v-
-vvvvv vvvvvv
v-v-
v-v- v-v- v-v-
-vv- -v- v-
v-v- v-v- v-v-
vvv- -vvv- v-v-
vvv- v-v- v-v-
v-v- v-v- v-v-

Strophe 1

SEMICHORUS A

So sad, so sad! Senseless men, [875]

Ignored your friends, persisted in your evil quest.

You sacked a house with the spear -

Fools! It was your father's.

SEMICHORUS B

They were fools who met with a meaningless death,

One which succeeded in wrecking their house.



Antistrophe 1

SEMICHORUS A

So sad, so sad! Undermined [881]

Your family house, knocked down the walls, but found no joy

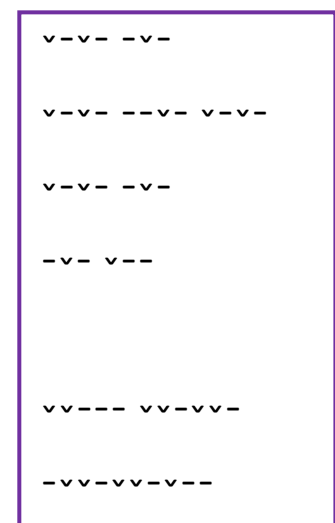
In sole command: reconciled

Now by iron weapons.

SEMICHORUS B

Your father's Erinys, Oidipous's Curse [885]

Has been fulfilled to the last detail.



Strophe 2

SEMICHORUS A

The left side was where they both were hit [888]

Right through the ribs spilling guts

That came from one mother's womb.

Such pain! Terrible curse!

Such pain! Both giving death, both getting death in turn.

SEMICHORUS B

You tell me how their bodies were pierced through: [895]

But the house was stricken too,

By hate they could not speak,

And by their father's curse,

Fate they were content to share.

v--v- v--v-
v--v- -v-
v--v- -v-
v--vv-
v--vv--vv--v-

v-- -v- v--v-
-v- v--v-
v-- -v-
v-- -v-
-vvvvv-

Antistrophe 2

SEMICHORUS A

Today mourning grips the city: walls, [900]

The towers, are mourning; the land,

mourns men she loved. So it is:

The fulfilment of death [904]

Has come from their dispute to these unfortunates. [905]

SEMICHORUS B

Despite their raging anger they split their [906]

Property: so each would own

The same. Their arbiter

Was fair, though blamed by friends -

Nor was the war-god on side.

v--v- v--v-
v--v- -v-
v--v- -v-
v--vv-
v--vv--vv--v-

v-- -v- v--v-
-v- v--v-
v-- -v-
v-- -v-
-vvvvv-

Strophe 3

SEMICHORUS A

They lie like this, felled by blows of iron: [911]

And iron blows still to come await them.

“What blows?” you ask. Iron digs

The family grave they will share.

SEMICHORUS B

My mind’s pain, excruciating, [915]

Discharges laments;

Feelings of hurt, feelings of grief, so pungent

Come by themselves, cancelling joy,

Pouring out tears straight from my heart -

Shrivelling heart, wasting away, mourning the fate

This pair of kings has met with.

✓-✓- -✓- ✓--

✓-✓- -✓- ✓--

✓-✓- -✓-

✓-✓- -✓-

-- -✓- ✓--

✓---✓-

-✓✓- -✓✓- ✓--

-✓✓- -✓✓-

-✓✓- -✓✓-

-✓✓- -✓✓- -✓✓-

-✓✓- ✓--

Antistrophe 3

SEMICHORUS A

About these sad men you can describe what [922]

Damage they did fellow-citizens, but

Included were foreigners

In numbers, too, killed by war.

SEMICHORUS B

How unfortunate their mother [926]

Beyond others who

Carried that name, 'mother of sons'. Her husband!

It was her son made her his wife

Who then gave birth to these two boys,

Who lie here dead, mutually slain.

Hands of a brother killed both.

v - v - - v - v - -

v - v - - v - v - -

v - v - - v -

v - v - - v -

- - - v - v - -

v - - - v -

- v v - - v v - v - -

- v v - - v v -

- v v - - v v -

- v v - - v v - - v v -

- v v - v - -

Strophe 4

SEMICHORUS A

Yes, brothers, same seed, and same oblivion: [933]

It was their hate severed them,

Driven insane in the fight which finished off their quarrel.

SEMICHORUS B

The hate's now stopped. They dwell together, [938]

In soil soaked by their blood

Now mixed – indeed they are of one blood.

A stranger came from abroad: for their dispute -

Savage cure, born from fire,

Sharp iron! But savage too was he who split

Their property – cruel Ares, making their

Father's curses come true.

v-v- -v- v-v-
vvv- -v-
vvv-vv--vv-v--

v-- -v- v--
v-vvv-
v-- -v- v--
v-v- -v- v-v-
-v- v-v-
--v- -v- v-v-
v-v- -v- v-v-
-v- v--

Antistrophe 4

SEMICHORUS A

Sad wretches, they have and hold their share of pain, [947]

Allotted them by the gods.

While underneath them the earth, infinite, wealthy, shall lie.

SEMICHORUS B

Appalling, how the pair of you crowned [950]

Your family with pain.

The triumph, victory song was sung, though,

By Curses' shrill voices, while the family

Was destroyed and put to flight.

And now there is, standing by the gates where they

Both fell, the trophy of Ruin, goddess who

Conquered them. Her task done.

v--v-- --v- v--v--
vvv-- --v-
vvv--vv--vv--v--

v-- --v- v--
v--vvv--
v-- --v- v--
v--v-- --v- v--v--
--v- v--v--
--v-- --v- v--v--
v--v-- --v- v--v--
--v- v--

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS A

You hit as you were hit ...

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS B

...you killed, and died.

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS A

You killed with a spear ...

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS B

With a spear you died,

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS A

Sad what you did ...

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS B

Sad what you got

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS A

You're lying dead

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS B

You put me here.

965

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS A

It's time to weep

LEADER OF SEMICHORUS B

It's time for tears.

964

Strophe 1

SEMICHORUS A [cry of pain] [966]

SEMICHORUS B [cry of pain]

A My mind in anguish has gone mad.

B My heart within in me pounds with grief.

A It shocks me. You so pitiful!

B It shocks me. You so weebegone!

A Brother's hand took your life.

B You took your brother's life.

A Two deaths to tell...

B Two deaths to see.

A <Their suffering came from close at hand>

B < No closer tie than brother with brother.>

CHORUS

O gods! Fate, you dispenser of pain and trouble,

[975]

And Oedipus's potent ghost, you too,

Black-cloaked Erinys: your power is truly vast.

∨--∨∨∨ ∨--∨∨∨

∨∨∨- ∨-∨-

∨-∨- --∨- ∨-∨-

Antistrophe 1

SEMICHORUS A [cry of pain]

SEMICHORUS B [cry of pain]

A Pain is very hard to watch ...

B As coming home he showed to me.

A He made a kill, and lost his home ...

B He strained to win and lost his life.

A He lost his, yes ...

B ...and took this man's.

A Doomed family ...

B Doomed to suffer pain.

A A family mired in wretchedness ...

B Condemned to suffer endless grief.

CHORUS

O gods! Fate, you dispenser of pain and trouble,

[986]

And Oedipus's potent ghost, you too,

Black-cloaked Erinys: your power is truly vast.



Epode

SEMICHORUS A You knew her power while still on the march.

SEMICHORUS B You knew it not much later when

A You reached the city, coming home

B And then confronted him with spears.

A Terrible to tell

B Terrible to see.

A The suffering!

B The pain!

A For the family!

B And for the land!

A I grieve, my lord, for your cruel fate.

B <I weep, poor king, for your sad end >

A No one can ever have suffered more than you ...

B You both were taken in by evil powers.

A Where shall we place their bodies in the earth?

B Wherever they'll find most respect.

A Beside their father. That he would not like!

B <His sons are dead. That's what he wished for them.>

A <And with their death, his Curse has been fulfilled.>

B <The line of Labdacus is now extinct.>

<CHORUS

Come let us escort the bodies to their resting place.

The ancient Curse that stuck at Laius's house has come at last

To its not unforeseen conclusion.

His sin that outraged gods and men has been paid for in full.

He sowed his seeds though he had been

Forbidden by the gods to scatter them

A seeding that destroyed him, compounding the sin.

His son continuing the curse planted

his seed which he'd no right to sow

In unhallowed ground, sinful to plough.

And the unnatural fruit that he harvested

From those sin-tainted fields, produced in him

A loathing so profound that he was driven

To curse the offspring of his loins

He cursed his sons. so Laius' curse lived on.

The Curse has plagued three generations

The father, son and now these grandsons here.

Erinyes are sent by gods to punish men

Who disobey the rules the gods lay down:

But always with Justice: men's deeds are such

That they by choosing what is wrong

Like hunters who leave bait out for their prey,

They lure the Curse towards themselves.

A family that should not have come to be

Exists no more . The curse has done its work.>

