

How seriously should we take a tragedy where the poisoning of a pigeon is the most dramatic event in the play? A young man, brought up as an orphan in Apollo's temple in Delphi begins to doubt the god's sincerity when he's presented with a father (whom he instinctively dislikes) and then a mother (for whom he feels sympathy, but tries to murder!). Are either of them his real parents? Can he really trust a god who (apparently) raped his mother and attempted a cover-up, and then fobbed him off with a father who had no part in his begetting?

ION

By EURIPIDES

Translated by Andrew Wilson

For AMANDA & JAMES

ION

A tragedy

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CHARACTERS

HERMES, the messenger of the gods

ION, a slave in Apollo's temple at Delphi

CHORUS of Athenian women, Kreousa's attendants

KREOUSA

XOUTHOS, her husband

OLD MAN, Kreousa's slave

MESSENGER

PRIESTESS of Apollo

ATHENA

SCENE

Delphi, in front of the Temple of Apollo.

HERMES

Atlas - the one who holds up the sky, antique home of the gods, on his metal-plated shoulders - had a daughter, Maia, who slept with mighty Zeus and produced me, Hermes, errand-boy to the gods. I've come here to the land of Delphi, where Apollo squats upon the navel-stone and with his oracles - always open for business - gives voice to men on what's new and what's in store.

There is a Greek city - you may have heard of it - named after Pallas Athena of the golden lance, where, at the northern foot of the Acropolis, a place which the kings of the land of Attica call the Long Rocks, the princess Kreousa, daughter of Erechtheus, was raped by Apollo. To stop her father finding out - this was the god's idea - she disguised her swelling bump. When her time came, Kreousa gave birth to her son at home, and smuggled the baby to the same cave where she'd been bedded, and left him there to die in the rounded shell of a well-woven cradle, a tradition of her ancestors which she kept, dating back to Erichthonios the earth-born. The daughter of Zeus - Athena - provided him with two snakes as his bodyguards, and entrusted him to the virgin daughters of Aglauros to look after. This is the origin of the custom where the Athenians bring up their children with snakes - jewellery ones, that is, made of gold. She put the precious baby things which she had acquired next to the child and abandoned it - to die. And Apollo - he is my brother - made this request: "Brother, go to the people, the ones sprung from the earth of famous Athens - you know the goddess's city - and take the newborn baby from the cleft in the rock, with his cradle and the clothes he's wrapped in, and bring him to my oracle at Delphi, and set him down right in front of the entrance to my temple. Everything else - the boy is mine, as you have guessed - will be my concern."

Performing this service for my brother, I picked up the plaited basket, and placed the baby on the steps of this temple, uncovering the cradle so the boy could be seen. As the sun's horses completed their circuit, the priestess happened to enter the precinct of the god. Catching sight of the innocent child, she was amazed that any local Delphian girl would dare to dump her secret love-child on the god's doorstep, brazen enough to cross the sanctuary's bounds. But sympathy conquered outrage - the god was there in support, making sure the baby was not rejected - and so she took him in and brought him up, although she did not know that Apollo was his father, nor who the mother was that gave him birth. Nor has the boy has any idea who his parents are.

When he was young he used to roam free around the altars, living on scraps from the offerings. But when he grew up, the Delphians made him guardian of the god's gold, and he became the trusted custodian of everything in the sanctuary; he still lives a life of devotion here in the holy precinct. Kreousa, the young man's mother, married Xouthos due to circumstances I'll tell you of: there raged a bitter war between Athens and the men of Khalkis, who control the island of Euboia. For sharing the struggle with them and fighting at their side, Xouthos received a reward: Kreousa as his bride. He was no kin of theirs, but born in Akhaia son of Aiolos who had Zeus for a father. Despite many years of marriage, he and Kreousa are childless: which is why they've come to Apollo's oracle here - through their desire for children. Apollo has steered their fate in this direction, and has not ignored them, it seems. For when Xouthos goes into the oracle here, he will provide him with a son, and let him believe that he actually is his. When he comes to his mother's house he will be recognised by Kreousa - so that Apollo's part in his procreation may remain secret, while the boy obtains all his birthright. And he will give him the name Ion, founder of the land of Asia, by which he will be known throughout Hellas.

But I shall step into this laurel thicket, so that I can discover what has been decided about the boy; for I see Apollo's son coming out, to sweep clean the entrance in front of the temple with twigs of bay. I shall be the first of the gods to greet him with the name Ion, which he is destined to receive.

ION

Look! Piloting his shiny four-horse chariot, Helios already lights up the earth below, and the stars run off into the sacred darkness at this fire in the sky.

The untrodden summits of Parnassos reflect the return of the day and welcome it on mortals' behalf. Smoke from burning incense drifts above the roof of Phoebus's temple. The Delphian woman is in position on the holy tripod, chanting her prophecies for the Hellenes - the ones which Phoebus has told her to.

Come, you from Delphi who work for Phoebus, go to the silvery whirlpools of the Castalian spring, and when you've washed yourselves in the pure water, come up to the temple. Watch your tongues - don't go saying anything which the customers waiting for the oracle might misinterpret.

Meanwhile I perform the jobs which I've always done since I was a boy: I shall sweep the temple entrance keeping it sweet with branches of bay, and freshly-consecrated flowers, and lay the dust on the floor with a damp mop. Then I'll scare off the flocks of birds who spoil the dedications with my bow and arrows. I have no mother, no father - so I treat the temple of Phoebus, which acted as a parent to me, as my family home.

Greetings, my broom of lovely fresh-cut bay twigs, which sweeps away Phoebus's burnt-offerings around the temples, cut from the gods' garden, where holy moisture drips, despatching water in an everflowing stream to make the leaves of the holy myrtle green. With this I sweep the god's floor every day, beginning my daily servitude as the sun arrives on swift-beating wing.

O Paian, Paian the Healer, blessed may you be, blessed, o son of Leto.

Work is beautiful, o Phoebus, when I slave for you, proud as I am to serve the oracular centre. Glorious is the work - my hands serve gods, not mortals. I do not grow tired labouring at my work which brings me fame. Phoebus is my father and true parent. I thank the one who feeds me, and all round the temple I name Phoebus, my father, as my saviour.

O Paian, Paian the Healer, blessed may you be, blessed, o son of Leto.

That's enough hard work with the boughs of bay! Now from the golden jugs, I'll spill Gaia's spring, which cascades from the eddies of Kastalia, throwing water to make all glisten. I belong to the god from the moment I leave my bed. I hope to serve Phoebus all my days, unless some happy accident makes me stop.

Look there! The birds are gathering to leave their nests on Panassos. I order you not to perch on the roof, keep off the golden-topped buildings. I'll shoot you with my arrows, messenger of Zeus, outdoing the strength of other birds with your claws. This second one flapping towards the offerings is a swan. Please take your big red feet somewhere else. Your voice - much as it may harmonise with Phoebus' lyre - will not save you from my arrows. Spread

your wings: take off! Go and haunt Artemis' wetlands. You'll bleed if you don't listen, for all your glorious song.

Look now! What is this new bird flying in? Surely it isn't trying to build a nest under the sturdy eaves for its chicks? My arrows whistling past you will scare you away; do you ignore me? Go and breed by the pools of Alpheios, or the glades of the Isthmos, do not let the offerings and Phoebus' temple be polluted. I hesitate to kill you, who carry the gods' messages to mortals, but I have my job to do, slaving for Phoebus. I shall never stop doing my duty for those who look after me.

CHOROS

-- So Athens isn't the only place with colonnades and porticoes for the gods, or well-cared-for streets! Here in Delphi, too, home of Loxias son of Leto, are some lovely-looking statues.

-- Hey, look at this! It's the Lernaian hydra with its golden coils: Zeus's son is killing it. Darling, please look!

-- I'm looking. And next to him there's someone else lifting up a flaming shield - can it be the one who's in the stories told back home, the warrior Iolaos, who shares Heracles's struggle, and helps the son of Zeus?

-- And my! Have a look at this one riding on his flying horse! He's fighting a massive creature with three bodies breathing fire!

-- I'm looking everywhere you point. Look at the Giants' children on the stone wall.

-- Dears, we are looking there.

-- Then you see the woman brandishing her shield with its Gorgon in Encelados's face...

-- Of course I do. It's Athena, my own goddess.

-- Well then - and the vicious twin-bladed thunderbolt in Zeus's hands that aim his weapons so accurately?

-- Yes, he is incinerating the dreadful Mimas with his fire.

-- And Bromios - Bacchus - is fighting the children of Earth with his unmilitary weapons of ivy.

LEADER

Hey you, by the temple, it's you I'm talking to. Is it all right to enter the sanctuary - if I take my shoes off ...

ION

No, it is not permitted.

LEADER

Well then, can I ask you a question?

ION

What is it you want to know?

LEADER

Is Apollo's temple really at the centre of the earth, its navel?

ION

Yes: there it is, buried in flowers, in the middle of the Gorgons.

LEADER

Just as the story says!

ION

If you have sacrificed your honey-cake outside the temple, and you want to ask Phoebus something, carry on to the altar. But if you haven't killed a sheep you can't come into the inner part of the temple.

LEADER

I understand. Thank you. We won't break the the god's rules. We'll be happy having a look around outside.

ION

Have a good look at everything - whatever is open to the public.

LEADER

My mistress gave me permission to look at the temple here.

ION

You are slaves then: where is your home?

LEADER

The same as Athena's. I live in the royal palace with the king and queen. But here she is: you can ask her yourself.

ION

You have the look of a lady: the way you walk and the clothes you wear prove this, whoever you are, ma'am. Anyone who knew anything about breeding would assume just looking at you that you are from a family of importance.

Oh! That's not what I expected, to see you blinking back the tears, and making your beautiful face all wet. What makes you so upset when you look at the holy oracle of Apollo, ma'am? Why do your eyes stream with tears? People are usually happy when they see the temple walls?

KREOUSA

I understand why you are surprised to find me crying. When I saw the house of Phoebus, it brought back an old memory. Somehow though being here, I thought I was back home.

Poor women! How the gods behave! But so what? Where can we turn for justice, when our lives are ruined by the injustice of our betters?

ION

What is this secret unhappiness of yours, ma'am?

KREOUSA

Nothing. I let down my guard. In future I shall keep quiet, and you must forget what I said.

ION

Who are you? Where are you from? What family were you born into? By what name should I call you?

KREOUSA

My name is Kreousa, my father was Erechtheus, Athens is the land of my birth.

ION

What a famous city you come from! What a distinguished family! How I envy you, ma'am.

KREOUSA

This is all I am fortunate in. Beyond this, in nothing.

ION

Please, is the story men tell true...

KREOUSA

What is your question? What is it you want to know?

ION

Did your father's ancestor really spring from the earth?

KREOUSA

Yes, Erichthonios did. But my ancestry is no use to me.

ION

And did Athena deliver him, from the earth?

KREOUSA

Yes, but she's still the virgin - she didn't give birth to him.

ION

She gave him, as shown in the painting ...

KREOUSA

To Kekrops's daughters to look after - but not look at.

ION

I heard the girls opened the box the goddess gave them.

KREOUSA

For which they were killed, staining the acropolis with their blood.

ION

All right. What about this? Is the story true or false...

KREOUSA

Ask away! I have plenty of time.

ION

Did your father Erechtheus sacrifice your sisters?

KREOUSA

He steeled himself, for his country's sake, to kill his girls.

ION

And you were the only one of the sisters to be saved?

KREOUSA

I was only a newborn baby in my mother's arms.

ION

And was your father really swallowed up in a hole in the ground?

KREOUSA

Blows from the sea-god's trident destroyed him.

ION

Is there a place there called the Long ...

KREOUSA

Why do you ask this? You take me back to something I'd tried to forget ...

ION

Apollo honours it, often, with flashes of lightning.

KREOUSA

Honours it? If only I had never set eyes on it.

ION

Why do you hate the god's favourite place?

KREOUSA

No reason. I know of something shameful that happened in the caves.

ION

Your husband - which Athenian married you, my lady?

KREOUSA

He's not from Athens, but a settler from another country.

ION

Who? Presumably he's royal?

KREOUSA

Xouthos, son of Aiolos, with Zeus as an ancestor.

ION

How come a foreigner managed to get you, a true-born Athenian?

KREOUSA

Euboia is a city, a neighbour of Athens ...

ION

Separated by a stretch of water, so they say.

KREOUSA

This place he captured, fighting alongside the sons of Kekrops.

ION

He came as an ally? And then married you?

KREOUSA

He got me as a prize of war - a reward for the work of his spear.

ION

Have you come to the oracle with your husband, or on your own?

KREOUSA

With my husband. He's checking out the precinct of Trophonios.[300]

ION

As a sightseer, or for a consultation?

KREOUSA

There's one thing he wants to hear - from both him and Phoebus.

ION

Are you worried about your crops, or is it about children?

KREOUSA

We are childless, although we have shared a bed for so very long.

ION

You mean you are barren, and have never borne a child?

KREOUSA

Phoebus knows all about my childlessness.

ION

You poor lady. Although you have many reasons to be happy, you are not happy.

KREOUSA

But who are you? How I envy your mother!

ION

They call me the slave of the god, ma'am, and that's who I am.

KREOUSA

Dedicated by a city, or were you purchased?

ION

I only know one thing. I am Apollo's property.

KREOUSA

Now it's my turn to feel sorry for you, my young friend.

ION

Because I don't know who my mother was, or who my father.

KREOUSA

Do you live here in the temple, or do you have a home?

ION

Home is anywhere in the temple precinct where I lay my head.

KREOUSA

Were you a little boy when you came here, or older?

ION

Those who seem to know say I was a baby.

KREOUSA

Then was there a Delphian girl who nursed you?

ION

I never suckled at a woman's breast. The girl who brought me up ...

KREOUSA

Who was she, you poor child? I've found someone who suffers as I suffer.

ION

... was Apollo's priestess - so I call her mother.

KREOUSA

Now that you've grown up, how do you support yourself?

ION

The altars - and the passing tourists - give me food.

KREOUSA

Your poor desperate mother. I wonder who she was?

ION

Probably I was some woman's mistake.

KREOUSA

But you manage to live. And you are nicely dressed.

ION

In the god's uniform - I am his slave. [327]

KREOUSA

Did you never have the urge to try and trace your parents?

ION

No - I have no clue to go on, ma'am.

KREOUSA

O god! There is another woman who suffered the same thing as your mother.

ION

Who? I would be so pleased if there was someone to share my pain.

KREOUSA

She is the reason I've come here - before my husband.

ION

To ask what? I can help you, ma'am.

KREOUSA

I have a private question to put to Apollo.

ION

Tell me. I can put in a word for you.

KREOUSA

This is the story, then. But I'm embarrassed ...

ION

Then you won't get anywhere. You can't expect the god to play guessing games!

KREOUSA

I have a friend ... who says she slept with Apollo.

ION

A human woman with Apollo! Watch what you say!

KREOUSA

And she had the god's baby, unknown to her father.

ION

Impossible! She is embarrassed at being disgraced by some man.

KREOUSA

She says that's not true, and she has suffered agonies.

ION

How so, if her lover was a god?

KREOUSA

She abandoned the baby that she had, left it outside...

ION

Where is it? Still alive?

KREOUSA

No one knows. This is what I want to ask the oracle.

ION

If it is dead, what happened to it I wonder?

KREOUSA

She believes wild animals killed the wretched creature.

ION

What evidence does she have for thinking this?

KREOUSA

When she went back to look, she couldn't find him where she'd left him ..

ION

Were there bloodstains on the ground?

KREOUSA

She didn't say. But she looked again and again.

ION

How long since the boy disappeared?

KREOUSA

If he were alive, he'd be about your age.

ION

And she's had no other child since then?

KREOUSA

The god victimises her. His mother is suffers still.[355]

ION

But what if Apollo rescued him, and is secretly looking after him?

KREOUSA

It would not be right for him to keep to himself a responsibility he ought to share.

ION

O how her misery seems in tune with mine.

KREOUSA

You too, I suppose, must miss your mother?

ION

Please don't bring back an emotion I thought I had suppressed.

KREOUSA

I'll say no more. Carry on with the answer to my question.

ION

So. Are you aware of the weak point in her case?

KREOUSA

Is there any point where here case isn't weak, poor woman?

ION

How can the god reveal the truth about something he wants to stay secret?

KREOUSA

His oracle is surely open to all of Greece?

ION

He is embarrassed by the affair. Do not put him on the spot.

KREOUSA

But what about his victim's pain? Her feelings?

ION

There's no way anyone will put this question for you. If Apollo were accused of rape - in his own temple - he would be bound to make your advocate suffer for it severely. Drop the case, ma'am. One must not provoke a confrontation with the god. We should be foolish indeed if we tried to force the gods to say what they do not want to say, or reveal it through sacrifices of sheep on the altar, or the flight of birds. If we proceed, against the will of the gods, we'll be rewarded, ma'am, with consequences we did not want. Only what they give freely can benefit us.

LEADER

All mankind is wretched, and each of us has his own individual strand of misery. In human life any happiness is hard to find. [382]

KREOUSA

Apollo, then you were unfair and you still are to the woman who is not here, whose case we are discussing. You did not save your own child, the one your duty it was to save, and you will not tell the truth to his mother when she asks, whether he no longer lives, so she may create a memorial for him, or if he is still alive ... but one must put all this aside, since I am prevented by the god from knowing what I want to.

But look, I see my dear husband Xouthos approaching, coming out of the chambers of Trophonios. Don't say anything to my husband about what we discussed, in case I look bad for putting my friend's case without consulting him, and the problem goes off in some direction other than the one I'd bargained for. It's hard for women to handle men; the good ones get confused with the bad, and we all of us end up hated. But bad luck is normal for us.

XOUTHOS

My greetings! To the god for accepting my initial enquiries auspiciously - and to you, my dear. You look worried - was it because I was gone so long?

KREOUSA

Of course not. Anyway, you're here now. But tell me, what pronouncement do you bring from Trophonios? Is there any way we're going to have children?

XOUTHOS

He did not think it appropriate to pre-empt Apollo's answer. [407] But he did give one piece of information. I shall not return home from the oracle without a child, and nor will you.

KREOUSA

Holy mother of Apollo! If we were to come away happy, it would wipe out all the problems we've had with your son in the past.

XOUTHOS

This will happen. But who speaks to the god on our behalf?

ION

I take you as far as the temple; once inside you are taken care of by others, sir. They are leading Delphians, who've been lucky enough to be selected to sit by the tripod.

XOUTHOS

Excellent. I have all the information I need if I go inside. As I understand a general sacrifice has been made in front of the temple on behalf of the visitors. I wish to receive the god's predictions today - as it is a favourable one. You, my dear, take branches of bay to all the altars, and pray to the gods to deliver me an oracle in Apollo's house that promises children.
Exit into the temple.

KREOUSA

I will, of course I will. If Apollo is now prepared to make amends for his past crimes, that will hardly make him my best friend, but I shall accept whatever he offers - after all he is a god.
Exit.

ION

Why does the lady continually make these veiled accusations against the god? Is it because she loves this friend she's consulting the oracle for? Or is she hiding something that needs to be kept hidden?

But what's the daughter of Erechtheus to me? She's no concern of mine. [435] I'll go and get the gold jugs and fill up the ceremonial wash-basins with water. I must have words with Apollo. What's up with him? Raping women and abandoning them? Fathering children in secret and leaving them to die? Please, no. You have the power: choose good. If men turn out bad, the gods punish them. How then can it be right for those who lay down the law for men to be seen as outside the law? For if - it'll never happen, I'm just following a train of thought - you, and Poseidon and Zeus ruler of heaven had to pay for your crimes, you would bankrupt the temples! You don't think ahead - you just chase immediate gratification: but it is wrong. It's not fair any more to criticise men for aping the gods' pleasures: we should blame their teachers! *Exit.*

CHOROS

You, my Athena, born without the pains of labour, you I beg, blessed goddess of Victory, delivered by the Titan Prometheus from Zeus' head, come to the temple of Apollo, flying from your golden bedroom on Olympus [459] to the streets where at the earth's centre the temple of Apollo gives true advice to those who crowd around the tripod. You, too, daughter

of Leto, Artemis: both goddesses, both virgins, divine sisters of Apollo. Pray, as young women yourselves, that the ancient family of Erechtheus win at last a prophecy with a clear promise of children.

People have a rock-solid investment of happiness that can never be exhausted, if young lives of children blossom and bring joy to their parents' homes; it's like collecting a legacy of riches passed on by their parents to the next generation. It's a defence in times of trouble, and just as wonderful in the good times, and provides a sure protection for the homeland in times of threat. I'd rather have children with all a parent's worries than money and a plush apartment. A life without children is something I'd hate: and I've no time for those who favour it. I'd choose life with children - and a modest income.

O cave of Pan, and the acropolis which embraces it, where the Long Rocks are, where the three daughters of Aglauros perform their graceful dances on the grassy slope in front of the temples of Athena, to musical patterns of the of the resonant reeds, when, Pan, you play your pipes in the sunless caverns. A place where a girl once dropped Apollo's baby, poor bitch, and left it as dinner for the vultures, a gory meal for animals - the price for her joyless coupling. I never heard a tale of gods' children fathered on mortal women that had a happy ending - not in tales told in the women's quarters, nor in books.

ION

You girls, keeping an eye out for your mistress waiting here by the holy temple walls, has Xouthos left the temple and the sacred tripod yet, or is he still waiting inside to enquire about his lack of children?

LEADER

He's inside, sir. He's not come out of the temple yet. But I just heard the noise of doors opening as if he was about to emerge; yes, now I can see him coming out.

XOUTHOS

My son, good morning! How wonderful to be saying this for the first time!

ION

Good morning. You seem fine, and that makes two of us who are fine.

XOUTHOS

Let me kiss your hand, and give you a hug.

ION

Are you all right? Or has the god addled your brain, sir?

XOUTHOS

As right as rain. And now I've found my darling one, I'll don't intend to let him go.

ION

Easy! Keep your hands off my garland - you'll ruin it.

XOUTHOS

I need to touch you. And I'm not embarrassed to show my love to what is mine.

ION

Let go! Or you'll feel one of my arrows in your ribs!

XOUTHOS

Why are you trying to get away? Don't you recognise your closest friend in all the world?

ION

I have no wish for friendship with some gross and crazy stranger.

XOUTHOS

Kill me then, and burn my corpse. But if you do, you'll be your father's murderer.

ION

How can you be my father. Why do I have to listen to this absurd nonsense?

XOUTHOS

It's not. If you'd let me explain, all would become clear to you.

ION

What are you going to say?

XOUTHOS

I am your father and you are my son.

ION

Says who?

XOUTHOS

Apollo who brought you up says so.

ION

Can you prove it?

XOUTHOS

Yes, if you believe the oracle of the god.

ION

You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick.

XOUTHOS

No, I heard correctly.

ION

What is this statement of Apollo's?

XOUTHOS

That the person who met me ...

ION

Met you when?

XOUTHOS

Coming out of the god's temple

ION

Would what?

XOUTHOS

Be my son.

ION

A real one, or a gift?

XOUTHOS

A gift, but really mine.

ION

And I was then the first you met?

XOUTHOS

None other, my child.

ION

How on earth did this come to happen? Why?

XOUTHOS

Both of us are looking for that answer.

ION

Well! And who did you provide for me as a mother?

XOUTHOS

I do not know.

ION

Didn't Apollo say?

XOUTHOS

I was so overjoyed, I didn't ask.

ION

Perhaps I came from mother earth!

XOUTHOS

The earth does not bring children forth.

ION

How though would I come to be yours?

XOUTHOS

I don't know, I'd have to ask the god.

ION

Well then, let's try some other tack.

XOUTHOS

That would be better, my son.

ION

Did you ever have illicit sex?

XOUTHOS

A youthful indiscretion, yes.

ION

Before you married the daughter of Erechtheus?

XOUTHOS

Certainly not after.

ION

That was then when you sowed my seed?

XOUTHOS

The time would fit.

ION

Then how did I end up here ...

XOUTHOS

I have no idea.

ION

So far away?

XOUTHOS

This is a mystery to me as well.

ION

Have you ever been to the Pythian rock before?

XOUTHOS

For the festival of Bacchus.

ION

And did you stay with some local person?

XOUTHOS

He introduced me to some Delphian girls ...

ION

To a band of worshippers, or do you say otherwise?

XOUTHOS

They were Maenads, followers of Bacchus.

ION

And were you in possession of your faculties, or drunk?

XOUTHOS

I was enjoying the celebrations.

ION

That then is when I was conceived. [554]

XOUTHOS

Fate has tracked you down, my son.

ION

How did I get to the temple?

XOUTHOS

Probably the girl just left you there.

ION

At least I'm not a slave by birth.

XOUTHOS

Come to your father's arms, then, son.

ION

I suppose one ought not to disbelieve the god.

XOUTHOS

Positive thinking!

ION

What more could I want ...

XOUTHOS

Now you see what you were meant to see.

ION

Are you the grandson of Zeus?

XOUTHOS

And your father.

ION

So I am holding, then, the man who fathered me.

XOUTHOS

If the god is to be believed.

ION

Hello, father.

XOUTHOS

It gives me such joy to hear that word.

ION

And today ...

XOUTHOS

Has made me happy.

ION

My lovely mother, when will I see you as well? Now I miss you more than before, and I long to see you, whoever you might be. But perhaps you are dead, and there would be nothing I could do.

LEADER

We share in the family's good luck! I would, though, have hoped that my mistress too, and the house of Erechtheus, could have had success in her quest for a child.

XOUTHOS

My son, the god's decision to reveal your identity, and bring us together was an excellent one. You now have something you never had before - a father's love. But your instincts were right; I would also love you, my child, to find your mother, and I myself would find out what sort of girl she was. It will take time, but maybe we shall find the answers. Anyway, time to say goodbye to squatting here at the god's pleasure and living on handouts: share my plans - come to Athens where your father's power and prosperity await you: [578] I am immensely rich. Instead of the twin stigmas of low birth and poverty, you will acquire a pedigree to go with your wealth.

You have nothing to say? Why are you scowling and looking at the ground? You seem on edge, worrying your father and spoiling his joy.

ION

Things look different from a distance and from close to. I was pleased at what happened, finding you, my father: but listen to what I know. They say that Athens is famous for its people who are native, sprung from the earth - not immigrants. When I move in there'll be two problems - my father's an immigrant, and I am a bastard. And having this handicap, and in position of weakness... I'll be a no-account nobody. But if I try to align myself with the top couple in the city, I'll be hated by the ordinary people - higher status breeds envy, while decent folk who should be on my side say nothing, and keep their heads down: they'll be quick enough to mock and call me fool if I try to make my way in a city scared to speak its mind. And I'll have to guard against the men with ideas and influence if I want to get elected to higher office. That's the way things are. Those who control the state and its patronage can't stand competition.[605]

I'd come as an interloper to a strange house, whose mistress has no children, nursing her disappointment alone, without support. She'll take it hard, and she'll be right to detest me, looking at me standing beside you, and constantly in your company - without a child of her own she'll take your happiness amiss: and then will you take her side and let me down, or stand by me and wreck your marriage?

There are so many ways for women to remove their husbands - a knife is all it takes, or a little poison. But actually, I'm sorry for your wife, growing old, still childless. It's painful for one of such proud descent not to have a child.

The royal life is overrated: the public face is seductive, but behind the palace doors it stinks. Who could be happy and fulfilled, when all the time you're looking over your shoulder, with the perpetual terror of assassination? I'd rather live an ordinary life and happy, than be a king, whose cronies are crooks, and who thinks his real friends are plotting murder. You'd

tell me money makes it all worth while, that cash compensates? But I don't want the scandal, the jealousy (desperately clinging to power), and the continual hassle. Give me just enough, without the pain.

What I had here was great, believe me, father. First - the best thing there is - my time's my own ; there are a few niggles, of course - but no riff raff ever shoves me aside: in the city I could get mugged by some lowlife . Whether it's prayers to the gods, or talking to people, everyone I deal with is cheerful, not dismal and depressed. All the time I meet new faces - and I'm new to them: many come as customers, and leave as friends. I have what all men pray for - or certainly should: my background and my upbringing have made me a good person, fit to serve the god. Taking all together, father, I believe I'm better off here than I would be there. Let me keep my life the way it is: it's just as generous to leave me my little bit, as heap me with great wealth.

LEADER

Well said - if my friend can share her happiness with you.

XOUTHOS

Enough! I don't need your lectures! You've struck lucky - accept it! My plan is, son, here where I found you, to hold a celebration, open to all, lay on a party for everyone, a sacrifice to make up for the birthdays we never celebrated. But for the moment I shall entertain you as if you were just a guest I was inviting home, not as my son. I shall pretend to be taking you on a tour of Athens - I don't want to upset my wife by flaunting my luck while she is still without a child. I'll pick my opportunity later on to convince her to accept you as heir to my throne.[659]

I'm going to call you "Ion" in celebration of the chance whereby we met: It means "he who comes" - you were the first to meet me coming from the temple of the god. Go and invite all your friends - we want a full house for the sacrifice. It'll be your farewell party, before you leave Delphi. You slave-women had better keep your traps shut: breathe a word to my wife and I'll have you killed.

ION

I'll come then. But there's one thing missing - unless I find my mother it all means nothing to me. And if I could choose her, she'd be an Athenian: I believe in free speech - as an Athenian, this would be my birthright! When a newcomer arrives in a city where all are native-born, even if he's a citizen on paper, he's still a slave. Only the true-bred have the right to have their say!

Exeunt Ion and Xouthos

CHOROS

I see tears and tantrums and outpourings of grief when the queen finds out her husband's met success and found a son, and she still without a child and now deprived of hope. What sort of revelation is this you've given, o son of Leto? Where did this boy who lurks around your temple come from? Who brought him up? Who is his mother? I can't believe this oracle has no sting in its tail. I dread the crisis which now looms. It doesn't add up: his message

does not ring true - it's far too neat, too pat - coincidence or scam? The boy ... who doubts he's someone else's?

-- My friends, are we going to tell our mistress the truth? "A word in your ear, your husband's a liar" - when she had such total confidence in him?

-- Now she's wrecked, while he's triumphant.

-- A lonely old age for her to look forward to, while her husband ...

-- throws her devotion in her face.

-- That pig, who came to her home from overseas, took over her wealth: and how does he repay her? Damn him, curse him: he played my lady false.

-- When he lights the holy flame to torch his sacrifice, I hope the gods ignore him. He'll find out where my allegiance lies. I'm loyal to the queen.

-- Now the time for the feast is near: here comes the new father with his new son.

-- You ridges of mount Parnassos, that lead up to the rocky peak in which the sky appears to rest, where Bacchus brandishes the flickering torches as he nimbly leaps among his Bacchai: don't let the boy come to my city: let his new life be short, let's have him dead. Is my city to be invaded and over-run by foreigners? Let us be ruled by the dynasty of Erechtheus, our founding father.

Enter Kreousa and an old man, her slave.

KREOUSA

Old man, once tutor to Erechtheus' father - when he was alive -and mine as well, up you get, and come with me to the oracle so you can share my joy if Apollo has produced an oracle about having children. It's lovely to share god news with friends. And - god forbid - if the news is bad, it's nice to have a friendly face around. Though I'm now your mistress, I look on you as a father, as my own father did once.

OLD MAN

My daughter, you show how worthy you are of your fine forefathers, upholding their traditions, and you have done nothing to disgrace your family, your ancestors born from the earth. Give me your arm, and help me to the temple. My god, but it's a steep climb to the oracle! Be a doctor for my old age and help get my old legs up there.

KREOUSA

Keep up then. Watch where you put your foot.

OLD MAN

All right. There's nothing wrong with my brain, only my poor old legs.

KREOUSA

Let your stick be your guide.

OLD MAN

That's like the blind leading the partly-sighted.

KREOUSA

That's quite good! But don't give up.

OLD MAN

I don't want to. But I just don't have what it takes.

KREOUSA [*to the Chorus*]

Women, my loyal fellow-workers at the loom and shuttle, my husband – I see he's gone – what answer did he get to the question we came about, about our children?

LEADER

Oh god!

OLD MAN

Not a promising start.

LEADER

Poor you.

OLD MAN

Is it some bad news from the oracle for my lady?

LEADER

Help. What shall we do? It will kill her.

KREOUSA

Why the fuss? What are you scared of?

LEADER

Shall we tell her, or say nothing? What's best?

KREOUSA

Out with it. I realise you've got bad news for me.

LEADER

I'll tell you, though I'd rather die – twice over. You can never have children. Never cradle them in your arms or hold them to your breast.

KREOUSA

Then just let me die.

OLD MAN

My daughter ...

KREOUSA

This is a disaster for me, a blow that makes want to disappear. I'm finished.

OLD MAN

My baby.

KREOUSA

I feel as if I've been stabbed clean through the heart.

OLD MAN

Wait! It may not yet be time to despair ...

KREOUSA

Too late. My tears are starting.

OLD MAN

... Until we know for sure ...

KREOUSA

Know what?

OLD MAN

Whether your husband has had the same bad news – or whether you alone...

LEADER

Apollo gave him a son. He's celebrating by himself, away from her.

KREOUSA

This second blow completely cripples me.

OLD MAN

Is he going to father this child with some woman – or does he already exist?

LEADER

Apollo has given him a young man who's grown up already. I saw him.

KREOUSA

What do mean? What you say cannot be true. It's not possible.

OLD MAN

I agree. Explain. What did the oracle say exactly? Who is this boy?

LEADER

The god promised your husband that he'd give him as a son whoever he met first as he left the precinct.

Kreousa screams

KREOUSA

No! No! The god has given his answer: no son for me. I'm childless, childless! For my whole life. I'm to live in an empty house.

OLD MAN

Who did the god mean? Whose path did this poor woman's husband cross? How was it he saw him? Where?

LEADER

You know the young man who was sweeping the temple here? Ma'am, he's the boy.

KREOUSA

My friends, you cannot know what it's like, the pain, the pain I'm going through. If I could just fly away far from this land of Greece, swept off in the stormy sky to somewhere beyond the stars.

OLD MAN

What name is his father giving him? Do you know? Or is it not yet decided?

LEADER

Ion. It means “he who comes” - because he was the first who came upon his father.

OLD MAN

What about his mother? Who is she?

LEADER

I cannot say. But the husband has gone off – I'm telling you all I know – without a word to his wife here, to the festival tents, to sort out a sacrifice of welcome, and a birthday celebration. He's organising a banquet in honour of his new son.

OLD MAN

Ma'am, we've been betrayed - both of us: we suffer together – by your husband. It's part of a clever plot not just to make us look fools, but to drive us out from your family's house, the royal palace of Erechtheus. There's nothing personal – I don't hate your husband, but my loyalty is to you, not him. He infiltrated your city and your home and married you, and took over your inheritance – and now secretly gives it away to other women's children. I'll show you what I mean by secretly. When he found out you couldn't have a child, he couldn't bear to be like you and share your misfortune, but, sneaking off into some slave-woman's bed, he fathered this brat – and had him packed off to Delphi to be looked after. And he was brought up as a server in the god's temple, to avoid suspicion. When he was told the boy was grown up, he convinced you to consult the oracle about your failure to have a child. It was not the god who lied, it was him! He lied about the child he'd had before, and devised this cunning scheme. If he got caught, he could blame the god, but if all went to plan, he'd bring him back and make him king of Athens. He made up the business of the name – pretending Ion was the name the boy had just been given.

LEADER

How I've always despised those crooks who concoct their evil plans, then use their skill to keep them hidden. Honest but simple is better than a clever villain.

OLD MAN

And the worst part of his villainy is this: bringing some brat, some nobody, a slave-woman's bastard into your home, to be its master. It wouldn't be half as bad if he'd imported the son of a decent woman, consulting you first, and because you could not bear a child yourself. If this were unacceptable to you, he could have married a woman of his own race.

But now you must do what any woman would. Get a sword, or whatever – maybe poison – to kill your husband and his son before they kill you. I'm very happy to help – I can get into the place where the boy is fixing the banquet, and kill him. It might get me killed, but I'll be paying you back for all you've done for me. Slavery is a shameful word, but there's no shame in being a slave: a decent slave is just as good as a free man.

LEADER

I too, madam, want to be a part of it, whatever happens – even if I die.

KREOUSA

My heart, how can I be silent?

How can I tell of that clandestine coupling without shaming myself?

But what's there to stop me?

I'm not in some "who's the purest?" competition.

Isn't it my husband who's the rat,

while I'm the one robbed of my home, my children?

My dreams are over. I thought they could still come true,

if I kept quiet about the rape, and the baby I weep for.

No longer! Before the throne of Zeus up among the stars, before

the goddess who lives on my rocky citadel,

and the sacred shore of the Tritonian lake,

I shall no longer cover up the sex we had.

I'll throw off the weight that presses on my heart

and I shall be at peace.

My eyes are wet with tears,

my emotions are raw, brutalised

by men and gods.

I shall reveal them as traitors - boorish traitors -

who forced me into sex, and played me false.

Apollo, son of Leto - you who coax music from a dead tortoise and seven-strings

to accompany country folk's raucous songs, - you are to blame.

I am exposing you to the bright light of day.

You came to me your hair a gleam with gold,

when I was gathering flowers.
The golden colour of the blossoms in my arms reflected yours.
You grabbed me by my wrists
and into a dark cave -
I was shouting for my mother -
you, the god, brutishly, forced me
penetrated me, performing the act Aphrodite loves.
Helplessly, I bear you a son, and afraid my mother would find out,
deposit him where you raped me - my shame in that bed of shame.
But what's this? No! My baby's gone - a buzzards' banquet.
Yours too, you rat. And you just smugly strum your lyre, go on
singing your songs.
Yes! It's you I'm talking too, Leto's son!
You who dispense wisdom
from your golden throne
at the centre of the world,
a word in your ear!
You lousy fucker!
You've given my husband a son - his family's future is secure.
For what? What favour did Xouthos ever do you?
But our child, yours and mine,
ripped from his baby-clothes,
snatched away by a vulture,
don't you feel anything?
You are a son of Zeus.

Leto gave you birth.

You are a disgrace to them and to Delos.

Your own birthplace, the sacred palm tree and the laurels,

are revolted by you.

LEADER

My god, a mighty store-chamber of wickedness is opening up, forcing everyone here to weep.

OLD MAN

I'm looking at you, my lass, but I cannot make you out. I don't understand. There I was pumping out the bilges - I'd been weeping buckets - when a new wave knocks me overboard. You've veered away from one source of misery, and seem to be on another tack entirely. What are you claiming? What are you accusing Apollo of? What's this about a baby? Where is his grave, the one that pleased the animals? Go over it again.

KREOUSA

I'm ashamed, embarrassed - but I will tell you.

OLD MAN

The I can show proper sympathy.

KREOUSA

Listen then. You know the cave on the north side of the Acropolis? It's called the Long Rocks.

OLD MAN

I do. There's a temple of Pan and an altar.

KREOUSA

It was there I experienced my ... terrible ordeal.

OLD MAN

What? Tell me - just so I can weep along with you.

KREOUSA

I wa forced into a vile coupling with Phoebus, though I tried to fight him off.

OLD MAN

I suspected something, lass ... was I right?

KREOUSA

I don't know. What did you suspect?

OLD MAN

Some secret trouble. You couldn't hide your tears.

KREOUSA

And so now I'll tell you what it was about.

OLD MAN

A liaison with Apollo! How could you hide it?

KREOUSA

I had a baby. Can you bear to listen to my story?

OLD MAN

Where? Did you have help? Or did you go through with it all alone?

KREOUSA

Alone in the cave where I was raped.

OLD MAN

Where is the child? Perhaps you aren't childless!

KREOUSA

Dead, old friend. Left out for wild animals to eat.

OLD MAN

Dead? And Apollo let this happen?

KREOUSA

He did. Packed him off to Hades.

OLD MAN

Who left him there? Not you?

KREOUSA

It was me. In the early morning, after I'd wrapped him up well.

OLD MAN

Did anybody know what you were up to?

KREOUSA

I trusted to luck than no one would see me.

OLD MAN

How did you steel yourself to leave him?

KREOUSA

How did I? I was crying, and trying so hard to tell him how I felt...

OLD MAN

It was a terrible thing you did. But what Apollo did was worse.

KREOUSA

If you could have seen my baby reaching out towards me ...

OLD MAN

Thirsty? Needing a cuddle?

KREOUSA

He belonged in my arms. And I refused them to him.

OLD MAN

What were you thinking when you left your baby there?

KREOUSA

I presumed the god would rescue his own child.

OLD MAN

How chill a wind is blowing through your great house!

KREOUSA

Why are you hiding your face. Are you crying, my dear old friend?

OLD MAN

Yes. I can't bear to see you, and your family humiliated.

KREOUSA

Such is life. Nothing lasts.

OLD MAN

But enough of our tears. There's work to do!

KREOUSA

Must I do anything? I'm too depressed. I can't think.

OLD MAN

Apollo started it - it's all his fault. You must be revenged!

KREOUSA

How can a mortal woman take on a god?

OLD MAN

His sanctuary, where the oracles are given. Burn it down!

KREOUSA

No fear! Haven't I got enough problems?

OLD MAN

Something you can do. Kill your husband.

KREOUSA

I couldn't. He was a good man - once.

OLD MAN

Well then -what about the son he's foisted on you.

KREOUSA

How? If it were possible, I'd be prepared to do it.

OLD MAN

Your bodyguard - they have weapons. Tell them to stand by.

KREOUSA

Immediately. Where will it be done?

OLD MAN

In the tents, where he's entertaining his friends.

KREOUSA

No. It would be too obvious. And risky to involve my slaves.

OLD MAN

All right I give up. You think of something yourself.

KREOUSA

I do have a plan I think might work.

OLD MAN

I'll go along with any plan that works.

KREOUSA

Try this. You know the battle of the sons of Earth?

OLD MAN

When the Giants attacked the gods on the plain of Phlegra?

KREOUSA

The Earth gave birth to the Gorgon, a terrible monster.

OLD MAN

To help her sons, a problem for the gods?

KREOUSA

Yes. And Zeus' daughter, the goddess Pallas, killed it.

OLD MAN

I think I've heard this story, a long time ago ...

KREOUSA

Athena wears the Gorgon's skin.

OLD MAN

It's what they call her aegis, the robe of Pallas, isn't it?

KREOUSA

That's been its name since she won it fighting for the gods.

OLD MAN

Of course. But how can it help destroy your enemies?

KREOUSA

You know Erichthonios who ...

OLD MAN *interrupting excitedly*

the Earth gave birth to - your grandfather ...

KREOUSA

when still a baby, Athena gave him ...

OLD MAN

What? Don't keep me in suspense!

KREOUSA

Two drops of the Gorgon's blood.

OLD MAN

Which do what?

KREOUSA

One kills, one cures.

OLD MAN

How was it given to the child? Did he keep it on him?

KREOUSA

Yes, in a small bottle, on a golden chain round his neck. And he passed it on to my father.

OLD MAN

And when he died it passed to you?

KREOUSA

Yes - I wear it here - on my wrist.

OLD MAN

How are the two properties controlled?

KREOUSA

When the Gorgon was killed, one drop of blood came from her own artery ...

OLD MAN

What does that do? What effect does it have?

KREOUSA

It protects against disease, and is life-giving.

OLD MAN

And what about the other? What does that do?

KREOUSA

It kills. It's the poison from the Gorgon's snakes.

OLD MAN

How do you keep them separate? They aren't mixed?

KREOUSA

No. Good and evil are like oil and water.

OLD MAN

Then my dear girl, you have everything you need!

KREOUSA *showing the phial on her wrist*

With this the boy will die. And you will be the one to give it to him.

OLD MAN

Where? How? Just tell me what to do, and I will see it's done.

KREOUSA

In Athens, when he comes into my home.

OLD MAN

You didn't like my plan, but this is not a good idea.

KREOUSA

Why? Oh! I see where your thoughts are leading.

OLD MAN

Even if you don't do the killing, you'll be a suspect.

KREOUSA

Of course. The wicked stepmother!

OLD MAN

Kill him here, where you can claim innocence.

KREOUSA

And I don't have so long to wait for my satisfaction.

OLD MAN

And you'll get in first by ruining your husband's triumph before he can put one over on you.

KREOUSA *as she hands him the phial*

Get on and do it, then. This is the thing I inherited, Athena's golden vial, take it, and go to where my husband is performing his private sacrifice. After the meal, when they're thinking about pouring the libation to the gods, get it out from where you've hidden it in your clothes, open it and pour it into the young man's cup. Make sure you're not seen, and that it is the drink intended for the one who thinks he'll be master of my house. Once it passes his lips, he's no longer on his way to success in Athens. His journey ends here.

OLD MAN

You go back to the hotel. I'll do exactly as we planned.

Kreousa departs

Come on, old legs! Pretend you're young again. Take me to the enemy, as my lady asks. Help me with the killing that will cleanse her house. If you are on the winning side, you can afford to obey the law. But when there's an enemy to be dealt with, there's no law can stop you.

CHOROS

Lady of the crossroads, Hecate, daughter of Demeter,
queen of all souls who roam abroad in the dark or in the light,
escort the cup of death which my mistress sends,
from the severed throat of the Gorgon,
the daughter of Earth, the drops of her blood,
to the jumped-up schemer, ambitious to infiltrate
the palace of the Erechtheids.

But if the death-plot fails, if my mistress' plans
are unfulfilled, and the moment to strike -
on which her hopes depend - is missed,
her life will be in ruins.

A sharp sword awaits, or someone will knot a rope around her neck,
blotting out pain with pain.

A princess of a royal house could not live
to see another dawn's light,
if she had to bear a stranger, someone else, ruling in her palace.

How ashamed I feel
in front of Dionysus, patron of song,
when he watches the torchlit procession

at his all-night festival
when no one sleeps, by the dancing streams,
while the sky shimmers with starlight - thanks to Zeus -
and the moon dances too,
and the fifty daughters of Nereus,
who dance over the sea and the swirling rivers,
in honour of the girl with the crown of gold,
Persephone and her divine mother.

Ashamed
when Apollo's homeless brat
sets out to rule a city
founded by the labour of others.

How many of you, chasing musical glory,
write defamatory songs about women: Forbidden Sex,
Tainted Love! But how easily we defeat the male sex
when it comes to self-control.

It's time men took their turn being slandered
for their sexual misdemeanors.

This man has forgotten he has no children,
he didn't father a son to bring joy to the family,
to his wife. But he bestowed his favours elsewhere,
and acquired this bastard boy.

A SERVANT *enters*

SERVANT

Ladies, where can I find the daughter of Erechtheus, the queen? I've been searching all over town. I can't find her.

LEADER

I know you! What is it? What's the panic? What's your news?

SERVANT

They're after us. The authorities are looking for her, to stone her to death.

LEADER

My god! What are you saying? Has our secret plot to kill the boy been discovered?

SERVANT

You knew about it? You're in very deep trouble.

LEADER

How was the hidden plan revealed?

SERVANT

By the god. To avoid pollution - two wrongs do not make a right.

LEADER

How? I beg and plead with you, tell me! I'd rather die, if I have to, knowing the truth.

SERVANT

When Kreousa's husband left the oracle of the god, he took his new-found son, and set about organising a sacrifice for the gods and a meal to celebrate. Xouthos went to where the flame of Bacchus shoots forth, saying he would wet the twin rocks of Dionysus, to make up for the birth ceremonies he'd missed. "Meanwhile you, my boy, stay and help the workmen put up the marquee. Then if I'm not back in time, carry on with the sacrifice to the gods of birth, and get the banquet ready for our friends when they arrive."

Taking some calves, off he went. The young man [*The messenger, being loyal to Kreousa, won't call the boy by name*] conscientiously measured out a square 100 feet each way, and supervised the setting up of the tent. Poles were erected, and canvas stretched over them. He was careful to shut out not only the midday sun, but the slanting evening rays too. Everyone in Delphi was invited to the feast. He got sacred tapestries from the treasure-house, and hung them up - something for the guests to marvel at. First he draped a swathe of material across the roof: this had been an offering from the son of Zeus - spoils from the Amazons presented to the god by Heracles. There was a design woven into the cloth: Uranus parading the stars in the vaulted sky. [*He's trying to postpone the inevitable point of his message*]

Helios was driving his horses down into the sunset, revealing the gleaming light of Hesperos, the evening star. Night in her black cloak was driving her chariot, pulled by just two horses; the stars followed in her train. In the centre of the sky were the Pleiades and Orion with his sword, while at the top was Arctos, the Bear, with his golden tail. From the moon, full and round when she demarcates the months, shot spear-like beams. And there were the Hyades, whose storm-warnings sailors rely on, and Dawn, bring light, and chasing the stars away.

On the walls were a variety of Persian tapestries: oared galleys ranged against Greek triremes, creatures half man half beast, deer-hunting on horseback, lion-hunts. By the doorway was Kekrops with his daughters. He was shown as a coiled snake - it was the offering of some Athenian.

Golden mixing-bowls had been set up in the centre of the banqueting space. A herald went out to invite anyone who wished to come to the feast. The place filled up. Wearing garlands they tucked into the lavish meal. A good time was being had by all, when Kreousa's man, the old boy, stepped into the central spot, making everyone laugh as he fussed about, bringing jugs of water for people to wash their hands, lighting frankincense, passing gold cups round - always the centre of attention. When the flutes began to play, meaning it was time to start the drinking, the old man shouted out: "Get rid of these little wine-cups - bring some big ones! Don't let these good people have to take so long to start enjoying themselves!" There was much bustle as golden cups embossed with silver were brought out. He chose one for the young prince, and, as if doing him a special favour, handed it to him full, having dropped into the wine a deadly poison, which they are saying my lady had given him, so the boy would bid farewell to life. Nobody of course knew this. As he, the newly-discovered son, was getting ready with the others to pour the libations, one of the slaves shouted something. Brought up in the temple as he was, and familiar with the proper procedures, he recognised this as a bad omen, and asked for a new mixture of wine to be prepared. He told everyone to throw the old wine away, before they poured the official offering. There was complete silence. We refilled the mixing bowls with water and wine from Byblos.

While this was happening, a flock of doves flew into the marquee - tame ones, they live in the sanctuary. They settled where the wine had been poured out, and began dipping their beaks in and drinking it. To most of them it did no harm. But one dove chose the spot where the new prince had poured away his wine, and started drinking it. Immediately it had a fit, its feathers twitching in wild convulsion. It let out a weird and piteous shriek. The whole assembly of diners was aghast at what was happening to the bird. It made a choking sound, then died, rolling over with its little pink legs in the air.

The boy, the son according to the oracle, dropped his cloak and jumped over the table. He was shouting: "Who's trying to kill me? Tell me, you old fool! You were the one who was so eager to give me the cup, it was you who handed it to me." Then he grabbed the old man by his elbow, and started searching him, hoping to find the evidence on him. It was there. He was forced to reveal Kreousa's schemes and the way the drink had been doctored. Immediately he [*The messenger is reluctant still to use Ion's new name*]... the young man Loxias's oracle had selected, told the diners to follow him. He ran straight to the Pythian magistrates. "I have been poisoned, here in this holy precinct," he said, "by a foreign female, the daughter of Erechtheus." Unanimously the council of the Delphians sentenced my lady to death by stoning, for 'the attempted killing of a protected person, and for intent to murder in the holy sanctuary'.

She chose a desperate solution, and now she is in a desperate plight. The entire community is looking for her. She came here because she wanted a son from Phoibos. She's not just lost her hope of children, but her life as well.

CHOROS

There is no escape from death, none at all, as far as I can see. I despair.

All was laid bare when the wine, mixed with the deadly drops of snake's venom, was spilled. Laid bare was the murderous intent. A disaster for me, and for the queen, sentenced to execution by stoning.

There is no escape. I'd have to grow wings and fly, or tunnel through the darkness under the ground. There's no racing chariot standing by, no ship waiting in the harbour.

There is no escape. Not when the god decides against us, and makes it impossible.

What suffering does your poor heart still have to bear, ma'am? What will become of us, your accessories, willing to harm a fellow creature, believing it to be right?

KREOUSA

Girls! They're after me. They want my blood. The people of Delphi have found me guilty. They've decided on my fate..

LEADER

We know your situation, what's happened. You poor thing.

KREOUSA

Where can I run to? I only just got out of the house in time. They were coming to kill me - I managed to give them the slip.

LEADER

Only to the temple, the altar.

KREOUSA

What's the point of that?

LEADER

It's against the law to kill someone who's taken refuge.

KREOUSA

But I'm condemned by the law!

LEADER

They have to get hold of you first.

KREOUSA

Here they are! The prosecution armed with swords! They're coming for me!

LEADER

Stay by the altar. If they do kill you there, you'll make your killers guilty of desecration. Be brave!

ION

Athens, my father's land, where the river Cephissus flows, roaring like a bull! This woman, a viper, how did you produce her, a fire-breathing serpent? Nothing she won't stoop to, more venomous than the drops of Gorgon's blood she tried to murder me with. Grab her! Take her up Parnassus and push her off a cliff, let that fine hair of hers tangle and catch in the rocks hair as she slides to her death!

What a stroke of luck this happened, before I got to Athens and was killed by my stepmother. I got your measure here, among my friends, discovered what an enemy you are. As soon as I was trapped in your house you'd have had me despatched straight to Hades.

No, Apollo's altar won't save you nor will his temple. He's not on your side, he's on mine, mine and my mother's. I do have a mother: I think of her although she is not here.

Look at the bitch! She piles crime on crime? What's her next move? She's cringing at the altar to escape payment for what she's done.

KREOUSA

I command you not to kill me! Not just for my sake, but for the sake of the god on whose ground we are standing.

ION

You and Apollo? What can you have in common?

KREOUSA

I am giving him my life, as sacrifice to him.

ION

But you just tried to poison someone belonging to the god!

KREOUSA

You were no longer his. You belong to your father.

ION

Xouthos may be my biological father, but I am still the the god's property.

KREOUSA

You were, you mean. Now I belong to him, not you.

ION

Your actions offend the gods. Mine were pleasing to them.

KREOUSA

I tried to kill you because you are an enemy to my land.

ION

Enemy? There was no army, no invasion!

KREOUSA

There was! And you destroyed the family of Erechtheus, as surely as if you'd set fire to the palace.

ION

Where were the torches, where were the flames?

KREOUSA

You were going to usurp my place, take my family from me.

ION

My father gave me the land which he had won.

KREOUSA

What rights did a son of Aiolos have in the land of Pallas?

ION

He saved Athens; with the power of his army - that is a fact.

KREOUSA

He did. He helped. But that does not make him an Athenian.

ION

So you were going to kill me through fear of what I might become?

KREOUSA

To save my life I had to strike first.

ION

You have no children. You are jealous because my father found me.

KREOUSA

Because I am childless, does that give you the right to steal my home?

ION

And wasn't I entitled to share my father's home?

KREOUSA

You're entitled to his shield, his sword. That's all the property you'll get.

ION

Get away from the altar, get off the god's property.

KREOUSA

Tell your mother what to do, not me! If you ever find her.

ION

Then you accept you must be punished for trying to kill me?

KREOUSA

Yes - provided you have me put to death here, inside the precinct.

ION

Why is it your choice to die like a sacrificial victim?

KREOUSA

It will hurt someone who hurt me.

ION [*with a cry of disgust*]. It's bad. The laws the god made for humans are not fair - or sensible. Evil-doers should not be allowed to take sanctuary on an altar - they should be

driven off. A criminal's hand should not touch something beautiful belonging to the gods. The people wronged, the innocent, they should have a right to divine protection. Not the way it is - when the gods give all-comers, good or evil, the same opportunity.

The priestess of Apollo appears suddenly.

PRIESTESS

Wait, my son. The priestess of Apollo, picked out as she is from all the young girls of Delphi, has a duty to preserve the ancient traditions of the oracle. Thus I have left the tripod and stepped outside the temple walls.

ION

My dear mother! How good to see you! [*to Kreousa*] She's not my real mother, of course.

PRIESTESS

He thinks of me as his mother - and I like that.

ION

You've heard how this woman tried to have me killed?

PRIESTESS

I have indeed. And your reaction is not only harsh but wrong.

ION

Is it wrong to punish a murderer with death?

PRIESTESS

Wives always find stepchildren hard to deal with.

ION

And you could say I have a difficult stepmother!

PRIESTESS

Enough! You are to leave the temple and go to your homeland...

ION

Then you are no longer in charge of me. No more advice!

PRIESTESS

Go to Athens, with clean hands, and the blessing of the gods.

ION

Only a man who kills his enemies is clean.

PRIESTESS

Not you. Listen to the advice I'm giving you.

ION

All right. I know you mean well. Tell me.

PRIESTESS

You see this object I'm holding?

ION

Looks like an old cot.

PRIESTESS

Once upon a time I found a baby in it - you!

ION

What? I haven't heard this story before!

PRIESTESS

I kept it secret. Now is the time to reveal the truth.

ION

You've had it all this time. Why did you hide it?

PRIESTESS

The god wanted to have you in the temple as a servant.

ION

And now he doesn't? How can I know what's true?

PRIESTESS

He has designated a father for you, and dismisses you from this place.

ION

Why did you keep this thing? Were you told to?

PRIESTESS

I took the hint from Apollo ...

ION

To do what? Don't keep me in suspense!

PRIESTESS

To keep the object I had found safe - until this moment...

ION

Is it going to help me? Or do me harm?

PRIESTESS

Tucked inside it are the baby clothes you were wearing.

ION

Could these give me a clue as to who my mother was?

PRIESTESS

Yes. Since it's the will of the god. Previously it wasn't.

ION

This is the day my dreams come true!

PRIESTESS

Take them with you and go and find your mother.

ION

Go and find her where? The world is a big place. She could be anywhere in Europe ... or Asia!

PRIESTESS

That is your problem to solve! I raised you, because of the god, and now I return these things to you, which he required me to keep safe - though I did it willingly. Why he wanted me to, I have no idea. No one else on earth knew I had them, or where they were hidden.

And so, goodbye. I always felt like a mother to you. [*She hugs him*]

Start your search by thinking where your mother might be. Find out first if a young girl from Delphi had you and dumped you outside this temple. Next, was she Greek? That's all there is from me, and from Phoibos, who's had his part to play.

She goes back into the temple.

ION

Damn! I'm starting to cry, thinking of her, my mother and her secret affair; she never even breastfed me, but had to abandon me as soon as I was born. I lived the life of a slave in the god's house, without even a name. The god means well, but things still turn out badly. All the time I should have been cradled in my mother's arms, enjoying a start in life, I was robbed of her care, the care of the one I should have loved the most. How sad for my mother! She's shared the same fate, robbed of the joy a child would have given her.

And now I'll take this cot and dedicate it as an offering to the god. That way I shan't find out anything I'd rather not. If my mother is a slave, it would be worse to find out than to stay ignorant.

O Phoibos, I dedicate this to your temple...

But what am I doing? The god was keen to help; he preserved these mementoes of my mother for me. Why am I going against him? I must be brave and go through with it. I cannot defy destiny. I'll loosen the ribbons, untie the knots that someone tied to keep my things secure and hidden. What secret is under here? Look! The cot, and these bedclothes are as good as new - no mildew, no sign of age! The god must have done his work. All this time these precious things have been waiting for me.

KREOUSA

Am I dreaming? What's this I see?

ION

Shut up! Enough already of your ...

KREOUSA

Don't tell me to shut up. You can't tell me what to do. I can see the cot that I once put my ...you in! My son! When you were a tiny baby! In the cave of Kekrops, the Long Rocks. I'm leaving the altar. I don't care if I have to die.

ION

Grab this woman! She must be crazy to leave the holy altar. Handcuff her.

KREOUSA

Go ahead and kill me! I've got this, I've got you, and your things I thought were lost.

ION

This is some terrible scam!

KREOUSA

No! I love you, and I've found you, my love!

ION

Love me? You just tried to have me murdered!

KREOUSA

You are my son. Surely a parent can love her son?

ION

Stop this nonsense. I'll prove you're lying, easily.

KREOUSA

I'm ready, my son. Fire away!

ION

Is this cot empty or in there something inside?

KREOUSA

Yes, your baby clothes, that you were wearing when I abandoned you.

ION

You must describe them to me. Don't try to look!

KREOUSA

If I make a mistake, I'm happy to be put to death.

ION

Tell me then. Your confidence is frightening.

KREOUSA

Have a look. There's the piece I wove when I was a young girl...

ION

More detail! A girl could have woven anything!

KREOUSA

It's not finished. More like a sort of practice piece.

ION

What's it like? You're not going to trick me like this.

KREOUSA

There' a Gorgon embroidered in the centre of the dress.

ION

O my god! Is fate closing in on me?

KREOUSA

There's a border of snakes -like the aegis, the breastplate of Athena.

ION

Look! Here it is! It's true!

KREOUSA

I wove this as a girl. I've not seen it for so long!

ION

Is there anything else? Or was that a lucky guess?

KREOUSA

Snakes! Snakes made of gold, antiques, a gift from Athena, copies of the ones Erichthonios had - to protect the child, so tradition says.

ION

And how do they work? What do you do with them?

KREOUSA

The baby wears them round his neck.

ION

Here they are. But I want to know what the third thing is.

KREOUSA

A crown of olive-leaves I put on your head that day, from the tree which Athena first planted on the Acropolis. If it's there, it will still be green, as leaves from her sacred tree never fade.

ION [*He hugs his mother and kisses her*] My mother! My own mother! Holding you makes me so happy! As happy as you are holding me!

KREOUSA

My baby! Light of my life! Apollo! I'm so sorry for all I said. He's in my arms - I thought he was dead, his home below ground with Persephone. I never really thought I'd find him!

ION

Here I am - in your arms - the one who was dead but not dead. My beloved mother!

KREOUSA [*in ecstasy*]

O joy! How bright the sky looks now!

What words can I say?

Or shout?

How did I find this joy beyond all hope?

Where did this happiness come from?

ION

This is the most incredible thing that's ever happened to me! That I should turn out to be your son.

KREOUSA

But I'm still afraid.

ION

Surely not that I'll disappear again?

KREOUSA

I'd given up all hope. Madam priestess, who put my baby in your arms? Who brought him to the house of Loxias?

ION

It was the hand of god. But let's count our blessings and look forward, not dwell on the misery of the past.

KREOUSA

My son, Your mother wept for you when she gave birth, she wept when you were separated from her love. Now with your cheek against mine, I feel the most exquisite pleasure.

ION

Pleasure for us both - I feel the same.

KREOUSA

Childless? No son? No longer! My house is a home at last. My country has a king! Erechtheus' family has a future. The earth-born race no longer faces the darkness of extinction: the sun is shining once more!

ION

Mother, let my father join us and share the joy I've given you both.

KREOUSA

My son. What are you saying? [*muttering*] Now I am found out, unmasked.

ION

What do you mean?

KREOUSA

He's not your father. Someone else was.

ION

So I was an unmarried mother's bastard?

KREOUSA

There was no party, no festival where you were conceived, my son.

ION

I knew it! No royal blood for me! Who was he?

KREOUSA

She is my witness. The gorgon-slayer, Athena. ...

ION

What's this about?

KREOUSA

... who lives on the olive-covered hill, the Acropolis in my home city ...

ION

I can't make head or tail of this.

KREOUSA

... by the rock where the nightingale sings, Apollo ...

ION

Why bring Apollo into it?

KREOUSA

... bedded me - no one knew ...

ION

Go on. Only please say something that helps me. Something pleasant.

KREOUSA

... nine months later, I gave birth to you in secret. Your father was ... Apollo!

ION

If it's true, this is good news, indeed.

KREOUSA

My mother never knew. I wrapped you in the baby-clothes I'd made for you. I never fed you or bathed you. You were dumped in an empty cave to die, to be torn to pieces, a feast for the birds of prey.

ION

How could you?

KREOUSA

I was afraid. Fear made me throw you away. I wish I hadn't!

ION

And I was on the point of killing you!

KREOUSA

What happened long ago was grim. Grim too what's happened today. We are swirled backwards and forwards by fate - as if caught in a storm. Let the past be the past. Enough bad things. May there be a gentle breeze to lift us out of trouble, my son!

LEADER of the CHOROS

In the life of men nothing can seem impossible, after today.

ION

Fate! The lives of thousands have been turned upside down, as you dole out failure and success at random. How close I came to the point of no return. I could have done something irrevocable: killed my mother.

Damn! Is it possible to work it all out, now, in the clear light of day?

An amazing stroke of luck that has reunited us, mother. I can hardly find fault with my pedigree! But there are some things I want to discuss with you, privately. Come nearer. I have to whisper - no one else must hear.

Consider this. Did you, like many silly young women, make a mistake, and get mixed up in a clandestine affair? Then did you put the blame on the god, trying to escape the shame of having me, saying Apollo was the father, when he wasn't?

KREOUSA

By Athena the Victorious, who fought against the earth-born giants with her spear in her chariot by Zeus' side, my son, there is no way you have a mortal father! Your father is the one who looked after you, lord Apollo!

ION

Why then did he give his own son to another man, and say Xouthos fathered me?

KREOUSA

Xouthos was not your father! Apollo is your father. He gave you to Xouthos. As one friend might give another a son of his, someone to be an heir to his house.

ION

Is the god truthful, or are his oracles nonsense? That's the question, mother, that I find so disturbing.

KREOUSA

Listen! This is what I believe. Apollo, for your benefit, is setting you up with a distinguished family. If it was generally known that you were the god's son, you would not have this fine pedigree, nor, in fact, a father! How could that have happened, when I was prepared to kill you to keep our liaison secret? He gave you to another man as your father, to help you.

ION

This doesn't add up. This is not the answer I'm looking for. I shall go inside the temple, and put the question to Apollo. Is my father a man, or Loxias?

Suddenly, the goddess Athena appears in all her gleaming divinity on the temple roof. A moment of sparkling camp -and potentially comic.

Holy shit!

ATHENA

Flee not. I am no enemy for you to flee

But here and home in Athens, I'm a friend.

I've come straight to you from your ancient land

that takes its name from me, Pallas. I sped,

I made good time; Apollo sent me here.

He did not think it right to come himself

in case he might been seen to shoulder blame

for what went on today upon this stage.

I'm here to make the speech on his behalf.

This woman gave you birth. Your father is

Apollo. He gives you to whom he gave you -

Who's not your father - so that people think

you're really an aristocrat by birth.

But, since it all came out - a consequence

of what occurred today - you were afraid

that you'd be murdered by your mother's plot

and she was fearing she'd be murdered too -
he had to rescue both, and sort things out.
Apollo'd meant to keep the question quiet for now,
then back in Athens, you'd find out she was
your mother, and Kreousa'd know
you were the son Apollo gave her then.
But so that I can get this over with,
the mission I drove here to carry out,
listen, the pair of you, to what the god
predicts will be the fate of each of you.

Kreousa: take this boy, go back to Kekrops' land,
install him there upon the royal throne. He is
Erechtheus' kin, so thus deserves to rule
my land. In Greece he will find fame. His sons
all four from the same stock - will give their names
to those who dwell in my rock-covered land:
Geleontes, Argades, Hopletes, - and,
Aigicores who take my aegis' name.
When fate decrees, their sons shall colonise
the island cities of the Cyclades, and take
the coastal lands. This will bring strength and power
to my country. And they shall settle too
upon the plains of Asia that confront
the European lands across the strait.

From Ion they'll be called Ionians,
and win much glory.
Xouthos and you will also have offspring:
Doros, after whom the Dorian state
will take its name - the famous land of Pelops.
The second son, Achaïos who'll be king
of all the coast along from Rhion, he
will win renown as founder of the people
who will take their name from him. This is
exactly how Apollo had it all planned out.
First he arranged a heathy pregnancy
for you, and kept it secret from your friends.
When you produced this child and left him there
wrapped in his baby clothes to die, the god
told Hermes to transport the babe right here
and nurtured him and wouldn't let him die.

Don't breathe a word how this young lad is yours,
so Xouthos's dream may still be kept intact,
while you have all the good things that you wished.

Rejoice. From this day forth I prophesy
you'll both find luck and no more misery.

ION

Pallas, Zeus Almighty's daughter, I have heard all that you said.

I believe it absolutely. I'm convinced that I'm the god's
son; this woman is my mother. I suspected it before.

KREOUSA

Listen now to what I say. Before I never praised the god
But I praise Apollo now because he gives me back my son.
Once he never cared about him. Once I hated this, his shrine,
and his hateful oracles. But now its gates seem welcoming!
See I even love the knocker, see me now caress the doors!

ATHENA

How you've changed! You praise Apollo, I commend your change of heart.
The plans of gods are slow to ripen, but we get there in the end!

KREOUSA

Let's set out for home, my baby...

ATHENA

... Off you go, I'll follow you.

KREOUSA

What a splendid guide we have ...

ATHENA

... and one who loves your city too!

KREOUSA

Take your seat upon the throne ...

ION

... that belongs to me by right.

CHOROS

Zeus and Leto's son Apollo! Now it's time to say goodbye.

To the audience, as they process out.

If you think your house is doomed, cheer up! The gods are on your side.

In the end the good get good things, while the bad don't do so well!

