

Jocasta, wife of Oedipus, is alive, and old. But she cannot stop the suicidal clash between her two sons, one attacking, one defending Thebes. But which of them has right on his side? By the end the aged blind Oedipus and his daughter Antigone survive, but hope does not.

THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN

Euripides' *Phoinissai*

Translated by Andrew Wilson

For Daphne Phelps

Phoinissai

(Phoenissae)

The Phoenician Women

By

EURIPIDES

Translated by Andrew Wilson.

CHARACTERS

JOCASTA, wife and mother of Oedipus

TUTOR

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta

CHORUS of PHOENICIAN WOMEN

POLYNEICES, son of Oedipus and Jocasta

ETEOCLES, his brother

CREON, Jocasta's brother

TEIRESIAS, an old blind prophet

MENOECEUS, Creon's son

MESSENGER

ANOTHER MESSENGER

OEDIPUS

SCENE

The royal palace, Thebes

Enter JOCASTA - she is an old woman, dressed in black. She looks like a peasant, but this is belied by the dignity of her speech. She has to speak the prologue: it will embarrass her, but she has steeled herself to getting through it with a minimum of fuss and emotion. She begins and ends with a prayer.

JOCASTA *[A prayer, formal but sincere]*

O Sun, whose horses race with trails of flame,

How dire for Thebes thy beam that pierced the gloom

That day when Cadmus came to Theban soil

And left his home on the Phoenician shore.

[More matter of fact now]

Cadmus married Aphrodite's daughter, Harmony *[a wry smile]*

And fathered Polydorus, whose son they say was Labdacus,

And Labdacus was ... *[cautiously]* Laius' father.

I am the daughter of Menoeceus: Creon

Is my brother; my name is ... Jocasta. *[Embarrassed pause]*

My father's choice of name - I can't help what I'm called.

Laius married me.

And when we still stayed childless -

After many years of active marriage -

He went to ask Apollo, requesting

Sons to help us rule the land.

Apollo said: "King of Thebes, rich land where horses graze,

Sow not your seed in the furrow:

The gods are violently opposed.

If you beget a son

That son

Will kill you,

And all your house

Shall come to a bloody end."

But Laius got drunk, and thinking only of his sexual

Gratification,

Planted a child in me.

When the baby was born, he began to realise what he'd done -

Flouting the god's express command.

He took the child to a place called Hera's Meadow,

High on Mount Cithaeron, and gave it

To shepherds, to abandon it,

Having skewered its ankles with a metal spike.

Hence the name all Hellas knew him by -

Club-footed Oedipus.

Some of Polybus' herdsmen found him, took him home

To wealthy Corinth,

And handed him to the Queen, who hugged him close:

She put the child my pains had brought to birth

To her own breast, and told her husband that

She'd had a boy. [*Pause*]

Time passed. My son grew up. Soon he felt
The first downy hairs upon his cheek.
Was it intuition or had someone told him?
He went to the oracle of Apollo wanting to
Discover who his parents were - at the precise time
Laius had gone there too, to find out if his son still lived.
Their routes led them both to the same spot:
A place in Phocis where the road splits into two.
And Laius' driver shouted at my son:
"Get off the road - the king wants to come past!"
But Oedipus walked on as if he hadn't heard -
Aloof and arrogant.
The horses caught him with their hooves,
And Oedipus' feet began to bleed.
And then ... but what's the point of all these details?
The crime's what counts.
[Briskly] The son killed the father, took the chariot,
Gave it to Polybus, the man who'd brought him up. [Pause]

Time passed. The monstrous Sphinx was victimising Thebes,
And as I no longer had a husband, my brother Creon
Advertised my marriage bed; I was on offer -
The reward for the man who solved the riddle of the Sphinx.
Somehow Oedipus, my son, became the one to understand her
song,

And for his effort received the royal sceptre of this land.

He married his mother unawares, poor boy.

Nor did his mother know it was her son

She clung to nightly in her bed.

I bore my son four children: two boys - 55

Eteocles and mighty Polyneices - and two girls; 56

One, whose father chose her name, was Ismene;

Her elder sister, named by me, Antigone.

When he found out the bed he'd slept in was his mother's,

Oedipus punished himself savagely, appallingly.

He put his eyes out, stabbing at them with

My gold dress-pins until his eye-sockets

Were a mess of blood. *[Pause]*

Time passed. When my sons began to grow their first beards,

They locked their father up, hoping his story -

So difficult, so embarrassing to explain -

Could be forgotten.

Oedipus lives, a prisoner in his room.

He spends his time cursing his sons - the most foul curses;

He's ill - the things he's gone through have destroyed

His mind. He raves: "No son of mine shall get my house

Unless he kills his brother with his sharpened sword."

The pair of them panicked; and afraid the gods
Might activate the curse if they stayed here together,
Agreed that Polyneices - the younger -
Should leave Thebes - he was quite willing to go -
While Eteocles should stay and rule the land.
Each year they would change over.
But once he'd got his seat firmly on the throne,
Eteocles refused to give it up, and drove
Polyneices out of Thebes. He went -
Now stateless - to Argos, made friends there with the king
Adrastus, married his daughter, and has returned
To Thebes, leading a mighty force of Argive spearmen.
Reaching our city here with its seven gates, he is
Demanding his father's sceptre and his share of land.
I, to try and stop the bloodshed, persuaded
My sons to make a truce, to meet and talk
Before they take their spears in hand to fight.
The messenger I sent reports that Polyneices will attend.

O Zeus, who dwell'st in the shining folds of heaven,
Save us! Let my children, please, make peace.
You are intelligent; it can't make sense to victimise
The same pathetic mortal time after time.

[Exit into the palace]

An elderly man - an old family retainer - (the messenger just referred to by Jocasta) appears on the roof. ANTIGONE, a young girl in her early teens, can be glimpsed climbing the ladder behind him.

OLD MAN Miss Antigone! Everyone's talking about how grown-up you're looking; your father must be very proud. Your mother has given permission for you to leave your private quarters and go up on the roof to see the Argive forces. Wait! Let me spy out the land first, in case anyone sees us from the street. I'll get the blame if they do - that's all in a day's work for a slave: but they'll criticise you too: "Royal princess, flaunting herself, how disgraceful!" And I'll tell you all I heard and saw in the enemy camp when I went there to offer the truce to your brother and brought their counter-offer back.

[He climbs out on to the roof]

Coast's clear! None of our fellow- citizens in sight! Come up the ladder - watch your footing, it's rather rickety. Look at the size of the enemy force! Right across the plain, all along the Hismenus and the Dirce.

ANTIGONE Give me your hand! An experienced hand is what I need - this is all so new to me. Reach down and help me up the steps.

OLD MAN Right, hold on, girl! We've picked just the right moment. The Argives are on the move - the various battalions are taking up their positions.

ANTIGONE Lady Hecate, daughter of Leto! Look at the way the whole plain shimmers with bronze - like lightning flashes in a storm!

Polyneices has done himself proud - not exactly come alone - all those horses! All those weapons!

I hope the gates are securely shut! The walls *do* have proper gates with bronze bolts fitting into the stone sockets?

OLD MAN Bless you, 'course they do! All of us inside the city are completely safe. But look at him - the one in front! Know who he is?

ANTIGONE Who's the one nearest us with the white-plumed helmet, leading his army, with his great bronze shield on his arm?

OLD MAN A captain, miss.

ANTIGONE Who? Where from? Don't tease me, tell me his name!

OLD MAN He's from Mycenae; his home's the valley of Lerna; he's a king - Hippomedon.

ANTIGONE O god, he's gorgeous! But scary too - looks like a picture I saw of a Titan, a massive giant, his head up among the stars - not like the sort of men you see nowadays!

OLD MAN You see the man wading through the Dirce?

ANTIGONE He's different, his armour is quite different: who is he?

OLD MAN The son of Oeneus, Tydeus - a ruthless warrior from Aetolia.

ANTIGONE He must be the one who had the double-wedding with Polyneices: he married one sister and my brother the other. His armour's weird; it doesn't look Greek at all.

OLD MAN All the Aetolians have those strange shields, my dear - and deadly shots they all are with the javelin.

ANTIGONE Who is that, coming round the Tomb of Zethus, with that lovely long hair and those eyes - I feel myself go weak just looking at him. A captain? There's a troop in full armour marching behind him.

OLD MAN He is Parthenopaeus, son of Atalanta.

ANTIGONE I think it'll need Artemis with her arrows, and her mother, to come down from the mountains and tame him! To think a man like that is here to destroy my city!

OLD MAN We could use her help - but [*ominously*] the enemy come with justice on their side: I fear the gods may be aware of that.

ANTIGONE But where is he? My brother? The one who's had such hateful treatment, my darling, where is Polyneices?

OLD MAN That's him next to Adrastus, near the Tomb of the seven daughters of Niobe. See?

ANTIGONE I can't see him properly; it's just a shape, a silhouette - it could be him.

O I wish I could run to him, driven like mist blown by the wind, run to my brother and throw my arms round his darling neck. He's been away so long and I've missed him so. He really stands out with his golden armour, doesn't he? Blazing like the first rays of the morning sun.

OLD MAN He'll be coming here, now the truce is fixed - so you'll have your wish.

ANTIGONE And who, old man, is that - riding the white chariot?

OLD MAN Amphiaraus, lady, that is - the warrior-priest.

Those are the victims for sacrifice: their blood

Soon to pour in streams upon the earth.

ANTIGONE Selene, shining moon, daughter of the blazing sun!

Look at the strong, firm way he drives his horses!

Hear the whip crack! But where is the dangerous one, you know,

Who's always threatening how he'll smash our town to bits?

OLD MAN Capaneus? There. Working out how high our walls are -

So his assault-ladders will be long enough to reach.

ANTIGONE [*She screams*] Ahhh!

Nemesis! Zeus' Thunder! Bolts of Lightning!

We'll need superhuman powers to put down such blazing arrogance!

Who does he think he is, a god?

He's the man who thinks he's going to make us Theban girls his war- captives, skivvies for the ladies of Argos, or force us to slave at the spring of Amymone, carrying water-pots on our heads. Please never, never, let me be a slave like that, holy Artemis, golden-haired daughter of Zeus!

OLD MAN All right, miss. Go back into the palace and get under cover: stay in your own quarters. You've seen all you wanted to, and

much good may it do you. A crowd's coming. The whole city

is in turmoil - there's a throng of women approaching the royal palace.

Gossip-mongers - that's the word for women:

They only need some little thing to set them off -

Starts off small, but as they pass it on it soon gets huge.

Nothing women love more than a chance to blacken each other's names.

They climb back down the ladder and disappear from view to avoid being seen by the Chorus. The CHORUS, dark and exotic-looking young women, enter. They are from Phoenicia, chosen to serve Apollo and on their way to Delphi, but trapped here in

Thebes by the war. They are thus both complete strangers and at the same time distant kin to the people of Thebes through Thebes' founder Cadmus as well as to the Argive attackers, through Io.

CHORUS

First Strophe (half chorus)

I sailed from sea-washed Tyre
My Phoenician island home
And came - I was chosen, specially picked -
To serve in Apollo's temple
At Delphi
Housed beneath the snow-capped
Peaks of Parnassus.
We crossed the Ionian Sea;
I remember the ship - the smell of pine -
And the West Wind, riding down from Sicily
Over the glassy sea
Which stretched like an empty plain,
His breath the sweetest sound in the heavens.

First Antistrophe (other half chorus)

My city held a competition
To pick the most beautiful girls
For Apollo - and I was chosen,

And came to the land of Thebes -
We are of their race,
Cadmus is the ancestor we share -
Sent to the towers we'd all heard about,
That Laius built.
I'm going to be a temple-maid -
You'll see me stand there looking like
A statue newly made from beaten gold!
The only thing I've still to do
Is wash my hair -
A young girl's pride and glory -
In the Castalian Spring,
And dedicate my life to Apollo.

Epode - full chorus

I see the morning sun
Paint the twin summits of Parnassus where Dionysus lives
The colour of fire.
I picture the vine
Which every day puts forth fresh grapes in clusters
While always in flower;
And the sacred cave of the serpent,
And the steep rocks
From where the gods look down,

And the holy snow-swept mountain itself!

I cannot wait to move on from Thebes

And join the whirling dancers -

No longer a nervous new recruit! -

Around the navel-stone,

The very centre of the world!

Second Strophe (first half chorus)

But now it seems the brutal god of war

Stands at the gates,

With firebrand flaming blood

To set this town ablaze - O please don't let him!

We share the sufferings of our kin,

We share what happened here in seven-gated Thebes

To cousins of our Phoenician land.

We feel the pain! It hurts us too!

We share *your* blood, also, attackers from Argos;

We share one ancestress -

We both are children of Io's torment,

Io the girl with horns!

Your pain is our pain!

Second Antistrophe (second half chorus)

All round the city, lying like a dense 250

Low mist, are enemy shields,
Like smoke that only needs one bloody spark
To blaze into the flame of battle,
A message for the War God to unleash
The Furies' violence
On the sons of Oedipus.
O Argos, ancient land!
I tremble at your battle-power,
And wonder if it's sent by god.
A man who fights to win back his home
Takes up arms
For a cause that's just.

The Chorus withdraw, as Polyneices enters furtively and nervously.

POLYNEICES

The sentries unbarred the gates cheerfully enough and welcomed me in, inside the city walls. This makes me nervous. I'm terrified they've lured me into a trap, and I shall be hacked to pieces, like a hunted animal caught in a net.

So. Keep the eyes peeled, keep looking ahead, and behind, in case I blunder into an ambush. Best draw my sword - with that in my hand, I feel in command, ready for anything.

Ah! [*he cries out in sudden terror*] Who's there? [*recovering his bravado somewhat*] I'm not scared of a noise, am I? The slightest thing seems frightening when you're on a dangerous mission in enemy territory. But I do trust my mother. I don't entirely trust her - but she it was persuaded me to come here, under the ceasefire. Well, there must be a handy escape-route - an altar somewhere I could scramble to for sanctuary - and I see there are people about. [*He notices the Chorus*] There are some women there in front of the palace - I'll put my sword away and ask them who they are.

[*To the Chorus*] Ladies! I see you are not Greek - where are you from? How do you come to be standing outside the palace in Thebes?

CHORUS LEADER Phoenicia was the home where I grew up, and the Phoenicians - descended like the Thebans from Agenor - sent me here. They are presenting me to Apollo, to show their thanks for victory won. But when the son of Oedipus was about to send me on to Delphi, and the holy oracle seat, the Argives invaded Thebes. Now it's your turn - tell me who *you* are who've come to the city of towers and seven gates.

POLYNEICES My father is Oedipus, son of Laius. My mother is Jocasta, daughter of Menoeceus. The people of Thebes know me as Polyneices.

CHORUS LEADER

My cousin! We are related through my king, Agenor, who sent me here!

I fall at your feet, my lord,

The way we were taught to at home!

You come at last to your father's land!

They shout excitedly

My lady! Come quick! Outside! Open the doors!

Can you hear me? Mother! It's your son!

What's keeping you?

Leave what you're doing in the palace!

Come out and throw your arms around your son!

Jocasta's voice is heard as she hurries from the palace

JOCASTA

I can hear you! I know your

Phoenician voices, young ladies!

My old feet can't carry me any faster

Or I'll fall.

My son! At last! I can't believe how long it's been!

Let's look at you. Hug me to you.

Let me stroke your cheeks, feel your

Hair - how long it's grown! So soft, so curly,

How dark it looks against my poor old neck.

She cries out with emotion

You're here!

I never thought, I never dared to hope

I'd hold you in my arms again.

What can I say about you? There's so much!

I want to touch you and talk to you -

I feel like whirling you round

And dancing for joy,

As in the happy days

Long ago.

O my darling! You left an empty space

In your father's house,

When you went as an outcast,

Expelled by your brother's

Evil rage.

Your family missed you.

Thebes missed you.

When you went, I hacked all my hair off,
Grey though it was, weeping, distraught
With grief.

I don't bother with my clothes, my sweet,
No more bright colours;
I slop around in these old dirty rags.

Your father, now old as well as blind, is inside.
Our house was like a chariot pulled by two horses -
With one of them gone
There was no one to guide us.
Your absence has sent him into deep despair.
Once he found a sword and tried to stab himself - 331
Another time he tried to hang himself from the roof-beams:
Self-pity at the way he cursed his sons.
He lives alone, in darkness, a recluse, depressed;
And all we hear are groans and cries of agony.

Sudden change of tone; angrily.

You've got yourself married, I hear,
To a foreigner!
I suppose a man has needs, for sex, for sons -
But to a foreigner!

I can't tell

How much this makes your mother grieve.

What Laius your grandfather would have thought

I do not know:

It seems to me a marriage of this kind is doomed.

I never had the chance to light the torch -

A mother so looks forward

To doing this for her son

On his wedding day.

I never had a chance

To fill the proud long-necked

Wedding-jar, bringing the waters of

Hismenus to bless the wedding and

Purify the bride.

There was no singing in Thebes

To welcome your new wife home.

What was the fatal moment

When the house of Oedipus

Was finally doomed?

Was it when you took up arms?

When you quarrelled?

Or when your father screamed his curse?

Or has some evil power all along

Been torturing our family
For its amusement?
It is hard to keep going,
But in the end it's always up to me to cope,
Whatever happens.

All women love their children,
Despite the pain that brings their birth,
And the harsher pain
As they grow up.

POLYNEICES Mother. I was mad risking my life to come here among enemies, but I saw the sense in it, too. Love of one's country is an emotion that effects us all. If anyone denies this, he is just arguing for the sake of it. I was so nervous; and I felt so much afraid that it was some trick of my brother's to have me killed. I crept through the town, sword in hand, looking about me. Just one thing kept me going - the guarantee you gave and the ceasefire you'd arranged - allowing me inside the walls of my home town. I cried when I reached home. It was so long since I'd seen the palace, the altars of the gods, the wrestling-ground where I trained as a boy, the water of Dirce. It is not right that I have had to forget them, to live in a foreign state - and the tears just filled my eyes. [*He is close to breaking down*] Now here's fresh pain, seeing you with your hair cut off, all dressed in black. I cannot bear it! It's a terrible thing, mother, to have an enemy inside the house, within the family. [*He changes the subject abruptly, embarrassed by his display of emotion*] What does my blind old father do all day at home, staring at the darkness? What news of my two sisters? Do they weep for me? Do they miss me at all?

JOCASTA Some god is sadistically destroying the family of Oedipus. It started when I had the baby, that forbidden child; then I sinfully married your father, and in sin became your mother. But what of it? We have to put up with what the gods hand out. [*She, too, briskly changes the subject*] But there's a question - I hope it won't upset you - but I've been longing to ask it.

POLYNEICES Ask away! Don't feel embarrassed. Your wish, dear mother, is my command! [*Almost lightly - he is glad to have something specific to talk about*]

[*The conversation is therapeutic for her as well*]. **JOCASTA**

Then here's the first question I'd like answered. What is it like to lose your homeland? Is it so awful?

POLYNEICES Absolutely terrible. Even worse than I'd led myself to expect.

JOCASTA In what way? What is the most intolerable part?

POLYNEICES The worst thing is the way you can't say what you think.

JOCASTA A slave's life - not to say what's in your mind.

POLYNEICES You have to tolerate the stupidity of those in power.

JOCASTA Very painful - pretending to be as stupid as a bunch of fools.

POLYNEICES But you have to make the best of slavery, grit your teeth.

JOCASTA "An outcast lives on hope", the saying goes.

POLYNEICES Hope has a smiling face, she makes you promises ...

JOCASTA And time reveals how empty promises can be.

POLYNEICES Hope is a treacherous whore who leads you on, then lets you down.

JOCASTA What did you live on, before marriage secured your needs?

POLYNEICES Some days I had a meal, others I didn't eat at all.

JOCASTA Your father's friends were no help? Did they not return our hospitality?

POLYNEICES Dream on! Nobody wants to know a man who's down and out.

JOCASTA Your royal blood, couldn't that have given you a start?

POLYNEICES You can't pick food from a family tree.

JOCASTA One's country, then, it seems, is what a man loves most.

POLYNEICES You can't begin to know how dear it is!

JOCASTA What took you to Argos? Did you mean to end up there?

POLYNEICES Apollo had given Adrastus some oracle.

JOCASTA What did it say?

POLYNEICES "Marry your daughters to a lion and a boar."

JOCASTA And did one of these animal descriptions fit you?

POLYNEICES I don't know. It seemed my fate was in Apollo's hands.

JOCASTA [*Bitterly*] No doubt the god had some plan in mind. How did the marriage come about?

POLYNEICES One night, I arrived at Adrastus' palace door.

JOCASTA Looking for a bed like some wandering tramp?

POLYNEICES Just so. And then a second tramp appeared.

JOCASTA Who? I suppose he was in the same sad state as you!

POLYNEICES Tydeus, son of Oeneus.

JOCASTA How then did Adrastus know which animal was which?

POLYNEICES The way we came to blows over the bed!

JOCASTA And then he tied it in with the oracle?

POLYNEICES And gave his two daughters to the pair of us.

JOCASTA Has it been a happy marriage, then?

POLYNEICES No cause for complaint so far.

JOCASTA And how did you manage to persuade the army to follow you here?

POLYNEICES Adrastus had sworn an oath to both us sons-in-law -

To restore us to our homelands: me first.

Dozens of leading men, Danaans and Mycenaean, came

And offered help - an offer, though painful, I could not refuse.

I'm leading an army to attack my home.

The gods are witness it was not my choice

To fight my family: it was the family who denied me choice.

The solution to our quarrel is in your hands, mother.

Decide between us brothers, and stop the pain

That's hurting me and hurting you,
And hurting the city most of all.
It's an ancient platitude, but it has to be said:
Money and Power are all men care about.
That's what I've brought ten thousand men to get:
My name is worthless without cash.
Here comes Eteocles to join the discussions.
It's up to you, Jocasta, as their mother,
To find the arguments to make your sons agree.

ETEOCLES enters from the palace, attended by two guards.

ETEOCLES Mother, I am here. I have come because you asked me to. What must I do? [*A pause; silence*] Someone say something, for god's sake! I was sorting out the city defences; I've had to stop to come and submit to this "arbitration" of yours. It was your idea to grant a ceasefire and let this man inside the walls.

JOCASTA Calm down! Haste does not make for sound judgment: patient discussion brings the best results.

Stop glaring like that! Stop huffing and puffing! It's not the freshly-severed Gorgon's head you're looking at, it's your own brother!

You, Polyneices, turn round and look your brother in the face.

Each look the other in the eye: you [*to Polyneices*] will put your case better then, and he'll be able to understand more clearly.

I want to give you both a piece of advice.

When a family member has quarrelled with another,

And comes to talk things over face to face,

He should stick to the issue, and nothing else,

And not dredge up bad memories from the past.

Let's have your statement first, Polyneices, my son.

You've come with an army of Argives,

Because, as you allege, you've suffered wrong.

May some god please be judge and help us sort this foul mess out.

POLYNEICES It's simple when one's case rests on the truth:

A just case needs no subtle arguments -

It has a logic of its own.

An unjust case is like a man diseased; it needs

A medicine-chest of fancy remedies.

I thought our mutual interests, mine and his,

Were more important than our father's property.

Wishing to avoid the curse which Oedipus

Had laid upon us both that day, I volunteered

To go away from Thebes myself and leave it clear

For this man to be king for one whole year.

I would then rule when my turn came round:

I did not intend to quarrel with him.

I never thought that jealousy would make

Him the author, me the victim of such spite,

As things turned out.

He swore an oath before the gods - just as did I -

But he's done nothing as he promised:

He clings to the royal power himself,

And keeps my portion of the family wealth.

I am now ready to take my army and lead it away from Thebes,

If I can live in my house, and head the family when it's my turn,

Allowing an equal time, when due, to him.

I shall not sack my own city.

I shall not move the assault-ladders - I've got them ready -

Into place against the walls,

As long as I receive my due: if not,

I am prepared to act.

I call the gods as witnesses that I have justice on my side,

And that to rob me of my home

Breaks every rule of civilised life.

That's it, in full, mother.

You don't need to be an intellectual -

A simpleton can see my case is just.

CHORUS LEADER I know I'm not a Greek, but I think what you said makes sense.

ETEOCLES If we could all agree on what is "fair" and what is "wise"

There would be nothing for men to argue and debate about.

"Fairness" or "equality" are not things, they are simply words.

Because we have a word for it, that does not prove a thing exists.

I shall speak frankly, mother, and hold nothing back.

I would climb the star-studded vault of heaven,

Or descend to the black pit of hell, if I could do just this:

Possess total power.

Power to me's a goddess, tall, and beautiful and out of reach.

She's what I want, mother, and I can't bear

To think of handing her on to someone else.

I want to keep her for myself.

I would not be a man, if I threw away

The greater share to take the lesser.

I should look a fool if this man got what he wanted

By marching in with his army and laying waste my land.

It would be a disgrace to Thebes to surrender to fear,

And hand the sceptre that is mine to a terrorist to wield.

He must not be allowed to influence

Our conference by threats of violence:

Words kill quarrels, not swords and blood.

If he just wants to live here in Thebes - that's fine.

But if he wants my power, there is no way

I'll let my mistress go without a fight.

When I can be master, why should I be his slave?

Let's have the flames, let's have the clash of steel, 521

Yoke up the horses, let chariots crowd the plain: 522

I shall not give my royal power to him!

Most men have many vices: I have one -

I worship Power.

Wrong in her defence I don't call wrong at all.

CHORUS LEADER Only fine arguments should be allowed to use fine words:

This is evil - no decent person could stomach what he's said.

JOCASTA There's not a lot to say for being old, Eteocles my son;

But we do have one advantage over the young - experience of life.

Why do you worship Selfishness, that most foul of idols, boy?

Don't do it. She is a false god. She visits families -

And cities too - that before were quite content,

And leaves whoever deals with her destroyed.

You are obsessed with self. Far better to respect Unselfishness -

She binds together: families, states and friends.

Fair shares for all is nature's way: when have-nots compete

With have-lots, War is round the corner.

Counting things out, weighing and measuring, evolved

So men could claim an equal share.

Darkness and daylight balance each other over a year -

They don't squabble or sulk when it's time to hand over!

Can night and day, then, each do equal service to mankind,

While you can't even bear to let

Your brother share the royal throne?

Where is the justice there?

Why do you worship one-man rule,

With its selfish, one-sided pleasures,

And think it's so big to be an autocrat?

You think you get respect? It's none of it sincere.

You want a houseful of valuables -

And a houseful of worries to go with them?

What is the point of having "more"?

"Rich" is just a word, an empty name.

To have sufficient for your needs:

For anyone of sense that's quite enough.

There's no such thing in fact as "property".

Ownership stays with the gods; they lend us things,

Then when it suits them, take them back.

So. I'll put the question as simply as I can.

Do you prefer to rule alone, or save the state?

To rule, you say? And if your brother wins,

And the Argive spear outfights the Theban lance,

You will see your land of Thebes overrun,

You will see young Theban girls, hundreds,

Carried off as spoils of war and raped.

The wealth you crave will ruin Thebes:

So much for your 'ambition'.

That's all I've got to say to you. Now, Polyneices.

Adrastus and yourself are a brace of fools:

He for egging you on and sponsoring this invasion,

You for unthinkingly accepting his largesse.

Use your imagination. If you capture us - which heaven forbid -

How in god's name could you celebrate your triumph,

And dedicate your battle-spoils to Zeus?

How will you feel, performing the sacrifice
At the victory parade? For taking your own town?
And is this the inscription you'll have put up
In Argos, by the river Inachos :
"Polyneices burnt Thebes to the ground
And dedicates these shields to the gods"?
Is this the kind of fame you want among the Greeks?
Or suppose you're beaten, and Eteocles comes out on top.
How will you explain at Argos
The thousand bodies you abandoned here?
I can imagine the talk: "Damn you, Adrastus!
Damn the marriage you arranged! For the sake
Of a daughter and her wedding, you betrayed us all."
You lose both ways, my son, stripped of your place
In Argos, or else a sorry corpse in Thebes.
Compromise! compromise! A pair of stubborn fools
At loggerheads compound each other's folly.

CHORUS LEADER Gods - avert the catastrophe: make the sons of Oedipus agree!

[The trochaic tetrameters should give a faintly ridiculous air to the brothers' remaining posturings. The metre should be subtly apparent]

ETEOCLES Mother this debate is over: I have no more time for words.

More discussion would be useless; all your hopes have been in vain.

I will only strike a bargain on the terms already known:

I'm the king, I hold the sceptre, I stay ruler of this land.

No more words of pious wisdom, thank you mother, that's enough.

[*To Polyneices*] Out! I want you here no more! Remove yourself from Thebes, or die!

POLYNEICES Who is man enough to make me? Is there someone in your force

Who can draw his bloody sword at me, and live to tell the tale?

ETEOCLES Here he is, he's right beside you: see what I hold in my hand? [*he has his hand on the hilt of his sword*]

POLYNEICES Yes, I see; but Wealth's a coward - the rich don't put their lives at risk.

ETEOCLES Why've you brought so many friends if I am such a feeble threat?

POLYNEICES I've no need to play the hero, since I hold the upper hand.

ETEOCLES You are safe to boast and bluster, since the truce protects your life.

POLYNEICES Yours as well! Now, once again! I want my turn, my share of power!

ETEOCLES Don't waste your breath: this is my house, and I shall go on living here.

POLYNEICES You'll monopolise the power?

ETEOCLES Yes I will, so off you go!

POLYNEICES O altars of our national gods!

ETEOCLES Which you have come to desecrate.

POLYNEICES Listen to me!

ETEOCLES Who would listen to a traitor to his land?

POLYNEICES Home of gods who ride white horses ...

ETEOCLES They all hate you just as I!

POLYNEICES I am driven from my homeland ...

ETEOCLES Which you came to loot and burn!

POLYNEICES Gods! The injustice!

ETEOCLES Don't use *our* gods! Back to Argos, pray to theirs!

POLYNEICES So, you mock religion?

ETEOCLES But I don't invade my fatherland!

POLYNEICES I had to, since you drove me out.

ETEOCLES And I shall kill you if you stay.

POLYNEICES Father! Hear how I am treated!

ETEOCLES He also hears what you have done!

POLYNEICES Mother, listen ...

ETEOCLES Don't you even dare to speak your mother's name!

POLYNEICES City!

ETEOCLES Argos is your city! Grovel at some Argive shrine.

POLYNEICES I shall go, don't worry, brother. Mother, thanks ...

ETEOCLES Just go! At once!

POLYNEICES Yes, I'll go; but first, please, let me see my father ...

ETEOCLES Not a chance!

POLYNEICES And my little sisters ...

ETEOCLES No, you'll not set eyes on them again!

POLYNEICES Sisters!

ETEOCLES Both of them detest you, they don't want to hear from you.

POLYNEICES Mother, can I say goodbye?

JOCASTA You don't know how this hurts me, son.

POLYNEICES Son! I am your son no longer ...

JOCASTA I was born for grief and pain!

POLYNEICES See the violent way he treats me ...

ETEOCLES Who began the violence, then?

POLYNEICES In the battle, where's your station?

ETEOCLES What do you ask this question for?

POLYNEICES One to one! I'd love to face you.

ETEOCLES That's my dearest wish as well!

POLYNEICES O I'm finished! What are you going to do, my sons?

POLYNEICES You'll soon find out.

JOCASTA Don't you fear your father's curses?

ETEOCLES Let the whole house go to hell!

POLYNEICES My sword will soon be red with bloodstains. There is much for it to do.

O gods! And you, the land that reared me, you must be my witnesses:

I am driven out of Thebes, an outcast, treated like a slave,

Not a son of Oedipus, who is *my* father, not just his.

Thebes, whatever is your fate, remember he's to blame, not I.

I came to Thebes reluctantly, and I'm expelled against my will.

You, Apollo, [*to an image beside the doors*] guide me as I say farewell

To the palace with its marble statues, and the friends I had.

I don't know if we shall ever have the chance to meet again.

But my hopes are still alive: I'm confident that with god's help

I shall kill my brother, and be ruler of this land of Thebes. [*Exit*]

ETEOCLES Go to hell, then! Polyneices! What a happy choice of name!

Father must have been clairvoyant, when he named you "Truculent".

Jocasta, Eteocles and Attendants retire into the palace.

CHORUS

Strophe: first half chorus

Cadmus came to Thebes
From Tyre. He was shown where to settle:
A heifer simply fell in his path -
Just as the oracle foretold,
That said his fated home would be
Where plains grow wheat,
Watered by a lovely river,
With a spring to irrigate the soil,
Dirce, who'd make the grass grow green
And quicken the deep-sown seeds;
Where Semele lay with Zeus
And gave birth
To Dionysus.
The twining ivy
Sent out bright new shoots
To shade the baby, and bless his birth,
Which Theban girls
And women mad with joy
Celebrate with dancing.

Antistrophe: second half chorus Then, suddenly, there was the
deadly snake

Of Ares, cold-blooded guardian,
Watching them beadily,
Only its eyes moving, flicking back and forth,

As they played by the water-meadows
And the grass-fringed stream.
Cadmus came to the stream
To wash his hands.
He killed it
With a rock.
He'd been hunting; he bent back his arm
And hit its head,
Where death was hidden.
Athena, goddess with no mother, the warrior,
Instructed him
To sow the serpent's teeth,
Plant them firmly in the ground.
And then from the earth
Sprang up a fine display:
Men fully- armed pushed up through the soil.
They clashed and fought,
Metal on metal,
Until the earth embraced them once again;
Soaked up the blood
Where briefly they had felt
The sun's warmth
And the gentle breeze.

Epode: full chorus And you, son of our ancestress Io,

Epaphos, child of Zeus,

I call upon you in a song

From home, with a melody

From home.

Come, come

To this land:

Your descendants founded Thebes,

Helped by Persephone

And her mother Demeter,

Queen of the Universe.

Who is the Earth, Mother of all that lives.

They were your co-founders.

Escort them, goddesses with torches

To defend this land of Thebes.

There is nothing gods cannot do.

Eteocles re-emerges from the palace shouting instructions to a guard

ETEOCLES You! Go and fetch Creon, son of Menoeceus, my mother's brother. Tell him this: I wish to consult him on some personal business and certain matters of state before the fighting starts. No, don't bother! Save your legs; I see him hurrying towards the palace.

Enter CREON. He seems agitated.

CREON I've been all over Thebes looking for you, Eteocles - round all the gates and sentry-posts trying to track you down.

ETEOCLES I've been wanting a word with you too, Creon. The meeting with Polyneices: I found our discussions left much to be desired.

CREON I've heard all about his ambition. He thinks that with his army and Adrastus, Thebes is his for the taking! Well, the gods will sort him out!

I need your advice on a more practical problem.

ETEOCLES What's that? What problem?

CREON We've been interrogating an Argive prisoner.

ETEOCLES Well? Did he give any new information?

CREON He says they're planning an immediate all-out assault.

ETEOCLES Then we must put in a pre-emptive counter attack.

CREON Attack where? Your youthful enthusiasm ignores the realities of the situation.

ETEOCLES Across the trenches, using the element of surprise.

CREON We've only got a small garrison: they have unlimited fire-power.

ETEOCLES I know they've got unlimited cheek!

CREON Argos has a formidable reputation in Greece.

ETEOCLES Don't worry: I shall carpet the plain with Argive dead.

CREON I wish you joy - I only see the difficulties involved.

ETEOCLES I refuse to keep my army pent inside the walls.

CREON Victory requires patience, planning and common-sense.

ETEOCLES You think I should consider other tactics, then?

CREON Explore every alternative, rather than risk everything in one battle.

ETEOCLES A surprise attack at night!

CREON Fine, if you've got a secure escape-route in case of failure.

ETEOCLES Darkness evens out the risks - and the attackers have the edge!

CREON Night attacks are notoriously unpredictable.

ETEOCLES Should I attack at sundown, while they're eating their meal?

CREON You'd certainly surprise them! But would you win?

ETEOCLES We would have problems retreating across the Dirce - it's very deep.

CREON There's no infallible strategy: except watch carefully, and be prepared.

ETEOCLES Suppose I launch a cavalry attack on their position?

CREON It's well defended - with chariot squadrons.

ETEOCLES What *do* you want me to do, then? Hand the city over to them?

CREON Of course not. But use your intelligence - you've got the brains.

ETEOCLES What strategy is there that's better than what I've suggested?

CREON They've got seven men, so I've heard ...

ETEOCLES And what's this massive posse briefed to do?

CREON In charge of seven companies, each covering one of our gates.

ETEOCLES What can we do? No point in waiting - we need a plan now!

CREON Exactly! Select seven men yourself against them to defend the gates.

ETEOCLES Are we talking single combat, or do you mean each in charge of a company?

CREON Choose your best men, and give each a company.

ETEOCLES Agreed. They'll deal with any attempt to scale the walls.

CREON They'll be your co-commanders - one man can't be everywhere.

ETEOCLES Selected for guts or brains?

CREON Both are essential.

ETEOCLES OK. I shall look at the seven gates, and appoint a commander for each, as you suggest - matching and marking the enemy dispositions. No time to go through

the list of names now, with the enemy knocking at the gates. I'm off - can't stand here idle any longer.

If only I could meet my brother in the fight - face to face:

Then he'd meet death, on the end of this spear!

He turns to leave, but pauses

I'm on my way to fight now. If I don't manage to achieve success, sort out my sister Antigone's wedding to your son Haemon - the engagement and so forth have already been arranged. My mother - you're her brother, no need to spell it out here. Just look after her as you think fit - anything you think I'd have approved of. My father - he's got himself and his stupidity to thank for his blindness. I owe him nothing. His curses, though, if fate's on his side, could still prove lethal.

He makes to leave again, but turns back

There's one thing I've been putting off - if the old bird-man, Teiresias, has got any divine words of wisdom for us, I suppose we'd better have him in. I'll get hold of your son - the one you named after his grandfather - Menoeceus, and send him to fetch Teiresias. He'll be happy coming to talk to you, Creon; I've been somewhat unappreciative of his prophetic skills in the past, and he won't be doing me any favours.

He stops a third time

Finally - and this is an official order to the city as well as to you - I must make this clear: if our side wins, Polyneices' body is never to be buried in Theban soil, and the penalty for anyone who attempts to bury him - anyone, even a member of the family - is death. 779

He calls to the guards

Bring my armour, and help me on with my equipment - I'll need the full works. 780

They go to fetch the armour as he poses to finish his speech in heroic vein

I go forth to the proving-ground of battle, armed with the justice of my cause, and victory shall be mine! But caution is important - and vital, too. I make a prayer to Mistress Security, to keep the city safe.

Eteocles finally goes off : Creon remains

CHORUS

Strophe: FIRST HALF-CHORUS

Sweat-stained Ares, why with blood
And with death do you stop the dancing,
Change the music at the feasts of Bacchus?
You never let down your hair, and put on
A garland, joining the lovely dancers,
Young girls flushed with beauty's springtime,
And sing with the flutes' breath
Songs of love that implore you to dance.
Your dancers are armed and ugly Argives
Panting for the blood of Thebes,
Stamping to a rhythm that drowns out the flutes.
Your revellers don't come dressed in doeskin
Spinning, possessed by the music,
Whirling the dance-sticks, the holy thyrsus.
They come with chariots and clattering
Clip-clop of hammering hooves,
Muddying the streams of Hismenus,
Argives and Thebans
Possessed by hate.
You dress *your* party-goers
In shields and armour;
A wall of metal facing

The wall of stone.
Eris, goddess of family strife,
Has awesome power.
She engineered this agony
For the royal family of this land,
For the house built by
Generations gone before
With so much sweat.

Antistrophe: SECOND HALF-CHORUS

Cithaeron, loved by Artemis the huntress,
Snow-breasted wilderness
Where woods teem with wildlife,
I wish you had never been nurse
To Oedipus, the baby
Taken from his mother's bed of labour
To die in your arms, an infant rejected by his family;
Famous now for what he did
With dress-pins made of gold.

And I wish *she*'d never come,
The feathered wonder, fatal female
From the hills, to curse this land;
The Sphinx, with her screeching tuneless song,

Perched, savage claws clamped on the walls,
Preying on the sons of Cadmus,
Bearing them away into the tractless sky
To please the gods of hell below the earth.

And now the vicious tree of sorrow
Flowers again
In Oedipus' house, and all through Thebes.
A rotten tree produces unwholesome fruit.
Such windfalls were these ill-gotten sons,
Fruit of incestuous coupling;
Their mother's pain,
Their father's shame.

Epode: FULL CHORUS

The earth had a child
One day, she had a child:
That's what I heard
One day, I heard, back home.
The child was a serpent,
His coils were crimson
And he lived on blood.
When his teeth were planted,
Up sprang a race

Who made Thebes famous,
Who made Thebes weep.
Then the goddesses came
To Cadmus' wedding,
When he married Harmony;
And the walls of Thebes shot up
As Amphion strummed his lyre;
The towers of Thebes grew high
While the rivers flowed both sides -
Dirce and Hismenus,
And made the plains grow green.
And Io, fore-mother of our race, she with horns,
Mothered kings in the line of Cadmus,
And Thebes, as one generation crowned with success
Was surpassed by the next one greater still,
Reached the height where now she stands -
Poised to receive the garland of triumph,
Woven by the war-god.

Enter TEIRESIAS, the old blind prophet, helped by his young daughter and accompanied by Creon's son Menoeceus. He is panting with exertion.

TEIRESIAS

Lead on, girl. You have to be the eyes to guide my blind old feet, like a star for sailors. Help me plant my steps where the ground is smooth - you go first, in case I stumble: your father's tired. Don't drop those wooden tablets! They are the notes I made on what the birds' behaviour meant, while I was taking the auspices at my special place.

Menoeceus, my boy, for god's sake, how much further is it? How far to the city to find your father? My knees are aching - I've hardly got the strength to put one foot in front of the other.

CREON Hang on, Teiresias; just a few more steps and you'll be home and dry. Give him a hand, son! Like a cart, an old man can do with a friendly hand to lighten the burden!

TEIRESIAS Phew! We're here! Now what's so mightily important, Creon?

CREON It'll keep until you've got your strength back, and your breath. The climb's taken it out of you.

TEIRESIAS Yes! I only got back yesterday from my trip to Athens! There was some war on, against Eumolpus. I managed to ensure the Athenians won! They gave me this golden crown - look - the first pick of the spoils!

CREON Let's hope your crown is an omen of victory for us! We're threatened with a tidal wave, you must have heard - the Argives seem poised to swamp us, and Thebes is in deadly peril. The king has already left - Eteocles has put his armour on and gone to face the Argive battle- power. He instructed me to find out from you what it would be best for us to do to save the city.

TEIRESIAS Eteocles! He'd have got no oracles out of me! He'd have found my lips tight shut. But as it's you who asks, I shall speak.

Creon, this land has long been sick,

Since Laius defied the god's express command,

Slept with his wife, and sired the son,

His mother's husband, wretched Oedipus.

The ghastly destruction of his sight, the horror of it,

Was all part of the gods' design -

That he should be a living demonstration to the Greeks.

Oedipus' sons, wanted to suppress the facts,

Hoping that with time, all would be forgotten -

As if the gods would not notice what they were up to!

They made a serious blunder. By denying their father

His rights, and keeping him locked in the house,
They caused the poor old man to brood, and nurse
his anger, until it was out of his control.
An explosion of terrible curses was the result -
The result of mental illness and the sub-human way they'd treated him.
I did all I could, said all I could,
But the sons of Oedipus would not listen;
And I merely earned their hatred for my pains.
It's not far off, the day when they
Shall kill each other, mark my words!
As corpses on corpses fall,
As Argive and Theban weapons rain indiscriminately down,
They shall provide our land with the harsh music of mourning.
You, god-forsaken city, shall be pounded to rubble,
If someone does not hearken to my words!
And my first word of advice is this:
No man of Oedipus' blood must be allowed to stay in Thebes
As king, or private citizen: they are a jinx.
If they remain on board the ship will sink!
Or, seeing that evil is dictator over good,
There is one other way to intervene and save the state ...
But no, I dare not mention it!
It would be too risky for me, and too unpleasant
For those responsible for finding a cure to save the city's life.

I shall depart. Farewell.

I shall suffer whatever awaits with the rest of Thebes.

I'm only one man. What can my suffering matter?

CREON Stay where you are, old man! [*attempting to restrain him*]

TEIRESIAS Get off me!

CREON Wait! Why are you leaving?

TEIRESIAS Your fate awaits you: I shall not!

CREON Tell us, your countrymen, your country, how to save the state.

TEIRESIAS Ah! That's what you want: you won't want it when you hear!

How could I not want to save my land?

TEIRESIAS You really do want to be told, then? This is your solemn wish?

CREON What could one be more sincere about than this?

TEIRESIAS Presently you shall hear my god-sent advice. First, I'd like to get this clear: where is Menoeceus, who came here with me?

CREON Still here; he's just next to you.

TEIRESIAS Let him remove himself; out of earshot of my prophecies.

CREON A son of mine can be relied upon to hold his tongue.

TEIRESIAS You wish me to speak in front of him?

CREON He'll share the joy of knowing how we shall be saved.

TEIRESIAS Then attend to these my words inspired by god:

Kill Menoeceus.

You must sacrifice your son to save the fatherland.

A stunned silence

You forced me to reveal his fate.

CREON What? What sort of gibberish is this, old man?

TEIRESIAS This is the message: you must act on it.

CREON In a few seconds you have ruined everything! This is monstrous!

TEIRESIAS For you, maybe: but for the fatherland a wonderful promise of salvation.

CREON I was not listening! I did not hear! Bugger Thebes!

TEIRESIAS It's a different story now! You've changed your tune!

CREON And bugger off yourself! I do not need your 'prophecy'.

TEIRESIAS Truth, then, is the victim, if it's not convenient to you.

CREON I kneel to you! Be merciful! You're old, your hair is white - where is your sympathy?

TEIRESIAS Why are you grovelling at my feet? You pray to change that which cannot be changed.

CREON Shut up! Nothing of this must reach the public's ears. I forbid you to speak of it!

TEIRESIAS You ask me to do wrong! I shall not be silent!

CREON What are you trying to do to me? Will you kill my son?

TEIRESIAS No - others will take care of him; my role is to proclaim the truth.

CREON Why me? Why has this fearful blow fallen on my son and me?

TEIRESIAS You have a right to ask and insist on a reply.

[He warms to his theme with relish - the expert asked to pontificate on his favourite subject.]

Where lurked the serpent born from Earth

That spied on Dirce's spring,

There must this boy be made blood-sacrifice,

And repay to Earth blood

From Cadmus' bloodline:

To lay to rest the ancient wrath of Ares,

Who is punishing Cadmus' heirs
For the snake - child of Earth - that Cadmus killed.
And if they do so, the Thebans shall win Ares to their side.
And, if Earth gets fruit (your son)
For the fruit she lost (the snake),
That is gets blood for blood,
You'll have her on your side too!
Just as when she produced that golden crop of warriors!
Menoceus must die,
Because one of the descendants of the serpent's teeth
Must die.
You are the final full-blooded survivor of those warriors -
Pure on maternal and paternal sides, and thus your sons are, too.
Haemon's marriage makes him exempt from sacrifice.
He hasn't actually gone to bed, of course, but his mind's on sex -
He's only technically 'unmarried'.
But this young colt still gallops free, and, as an offering for his city,
Would, by his death, save the land that gave him birth.
He'll give Adrastus and his Argives the bitter taste of defeat,
A veil of gloom to blight their futures,
While Thebes shall keep her glory.
It's time to choose: save your city or your son!

He turns to go

That's all from me: lead on, girl, take me home.

It's a thankless job, being a prophet.

Interpret things the way 'they' do not like, they turn on you:

If you falsify results to save them pain -

Well, then you antagonise the gods.

Apollo should do his own dirty work:

Speak to men direct. Then they'd have to take notice.

Teiresias leaves, led away by his daughter.

CHORUS LEADER Creon, why are you silent? Have you lost your voice?

I'm not surprised; I'm just as shattered as you must be.

CREON What can one say? My course is obvious:

My patriotism is not so fanatical that I'll let the city sacrifice my son!

Nothing is more precious to people than their children -

No one would ever give his own son up to be killed.

I don't want to be a hero, if it means I lose my son!

I'll die myself - I'm ready to show my loyalty that way:

The best of my life's over, anyhow.

Come on then, lad, before it's all over the city;

Ignore the prognostications of prophets -

Out of the country, and fast!

If we can move before he goes round the Seven Gates

telling the officers and commanders, you are safe:

If we're too late, that's it: you're dead.

MENOECEUS Where can I run to? What city? What friends do we have?

CREON As far away from here as possible.

MENOECEUS Name the place, and I'll work out how to get there.

CREON Go past Delphi ...

MENOECEUS Then where?

CREON Into Aetolia ...

MENOECEUS And from there?

CREON To the Thesprotian frontier ...

MENOECEUS To the oracle of Dodona?

CREON You've got it.

MENOECEUS How will this protect me?

CREON The god will find a way.

MENOECEUS What'll I use for money?

CREON I'll have all the gold you need sent on.

MENOECEUS Thankyou, father.

CREON Now, off you go!

MENOECEUS I must just tell aunt Jocasta: she's been like a mother, since I first sucked milk from her breast, after my own mother died. As soon as I've said goodbye to her, I shall go, and save my life.

CREON All right! Get on with it. Don't let it take too long.

Creon leaves: simultaneously Menoeceus makes as if to enter the palace, but returns as soon as his father has gone.

MENOECEUS Ladies! I think I fooled my father rather well,

White lies so I can carry out my plan.

He's trying to smuggle me away, make me look a coward,

And rob Thebes of her destiny.

It's understandable, I suppose, at his age,
But I could never forgive myself, if I
Betrayed the land that gave me birth.
You may as well know, then:
I shall go, and save the city;
I shall give my life, and die for my country.
It would be unthinkable if men not ordered by a god,
Free of divine pressure, stand side by side,
Against the enemy, unafraid of death,
Fighting for fatherland up against the walls,
Whilst I betray father, brother and city, sneaking off.
Wherever I went, I should be branded traitor.
By Zeus, the sky-god, and bloody Ares, god of War, 1006
Who once made the offspring of the serpent's teeth rulers of this land,
I shall go and stand high on the walls and let 1008
My blood cascade into the deep black cave below
That was the serpent's lair, just as Teiresias explained,
And set my country free. My speech is finished.

Menoeceus goes off to die with dignity. The Chorus show their approval and admiration.

CHORUS *Strophe : first half chorus*

You came, you came
You bitch with wings,
Spawn of the black snake;

Earth's labours dropped you,

Thief of Thebans,

All-snatching, all-screeching

Half woman half serpent

Hybridised abomination

Hovering

Stooping

Talons

Ripping

Tender flesh.

You stole, you stole

The young men,

Lifting them

From their Theban villages,

Bringing tears

To their land.

You hissed: they screamed;

Discordant

Music to die to

In pain.

Which god's bloodlust made this happen?

Mothers screaming

Young girls screaming
Families mourning
Aieee! Yelling!
Aieee! Shouting!
As house after house
Joined the shrill chorus,
And handed on the torch of pain.
Like being trapped in a storm at night
The pain jabs,
The thunder cracks
Loudly, all round and at random.
So when the bird-bitch
Swooped, and one more Theban boy
Disappeared.

Antistrophe: second half chorus

He came, later,
Dispatched from Delphi,
Oedipus, the doomed,
To this land, to Thebes:
They loved him then,
But in return he gave them
Grief.
Triumphantly

He solved the Sphinx's riddle,
Disastrously
He fouled the city
With his marriage
Not a marriage,
To his mother.
He it was, in agony,
Aimed curses at his sons,
And now they stalk through blood
To the final reckoning,
Latest stain on the house.

I've got a crush, a crush
On the boy who's gone to death
For the land of his birth.
Leaving Creon to cry,
Unbolting the seven gates
To let in Victory!
When I'm a mother,
When I have children, please,
I want one like him,
Please, Pallas Athena,
You who made Cadmus
Throw the stone

Which killed the serpent,
Spilling it's blood,
Which launched him on that trail of deeds
That brought this pain to Thebes today;
This punishment from the gods 1065
That tears this land apart.

Enter a MESSENGER

MESSENGER

Hey! Anyone on gate-duty in this palace?

Open up! Get Jocasta out here!

Hey! [*hammering on the doors*]

The doors to the palace open, and JOCASTA comes out. She fears the worst, and is already in tears

Well, you took your time - come on out,

Listen to this, wife of Oedipus: You can dry your eyes.

No more need for tears and weeping.

JOCASTA You dear man, have you not then come to bring me news of Eteocles' death? I know you; you're the one who stands beside him with the shield to keep off enemy weapons: give me the news. Is he dead, my son, or still alive?

MESSENGER Alive! Don't worry any more - I'm here to set your fears to rest.

JOCASTA What happened? Are the walls and all the seven gates still holding out?

MESSENGER They stand secure. The city has not fallen.

JOCASTA Did the army face the full force of the Argive attack?

MESSENGER It was touch and go - but with the war god on our side, we outclassed the Argive horde.

JOCASTA One thing, please, for god's sake; about Polyneices, have you heard anything? I must know whether he's alive.

MESSENGER Both brothers, like a sturdy pair of colts, still thrive; so far.

JOCASTA God bless you! Now - the Argive army - how did you manage to keep them from the walls? Tell me. How delighted the blind old man inside will be, to hear the country's safe.

MESSENGER As soon as Creon's son, dying for the fatherland, standing on the highest part of the wall, had drawn his sword and cut his throat to save this land, Eteocles allocated the seven commanders to the seven gates, the main defence against the Argive power, and positioned reserve cavalry to support the cavalry, and reserve infantry to back up the infantry, so if there was a weak point on the walls, reinforcements could be there at once.

From the Acropolis we could see the white shields of the Argives moving out from Teumessos. As soon as they'd crossed the trench, they started doubling towards the city walls. The war-cries sounded and the bugles blared - theirs and ours together.
1103

First of the Argives, leading his company towards the Neistan Gate - their wall of shields a fearsome sight - was **Parthenopaeus**, 1106

descended from Artemis the huntress. He had the family emblem on his shield: Atalanta shooting her arrows and felling the Aetolian boar.

At the Proetid Gate, the warrior-priest **Amphiaraus** was driving his chariot, his victims for sacrifice there beside him. He had no flashy emblems, just a modest blank shield.

At the Ogygian Gate Lord **Hippomedon** was charging, with his emblem on his shield: it was Argus the all-seeing, covered in painted eyes - those facing the rising stars were open, while the eyes facing the setting stars were closed. I only saw this later, of course, after he was dead.

At the Homoloid Gate, **Tydeus** was leading his column; over his shield he had a lion's skin - complete with fearsome mane. In his right hand he was carrying a flaming torch to set the town on fire, looking like the new Prometheus.

At the Crenaeon Gate your son **Polyneices** looked as if he had the war god in his company. His shield was really something special: wild horses were galloping, bucking with fear - they were controlled by a lever inside the shield near the handle, so you'd think they were really stampeding in panic.

The one who fancies himself as great a warrior as Ares was leading his company towards the Electran Gate: **Capaneus**. On the iron plates on his shield was an earth-born giant carrying on his shoulders an entire city, which he had prised up from its foundations with crowbars - a foretaste of what might happen to Thebes!

Adrastus was at the seventh gate. He'd decorated his shield with a picture of a hundred snakes - the Argive emblem multiplied! In its jaws, every snake had a Theban that it had pulled down off the walls. [*Defensively, as Jocasta and the Chorus are looking somewhat incredulous at the amount of detail*] I had a chance to get a proper look at these shields when I was given the task of taking the password round to our company commanders.

We started by bombarding them from a distance - arrows, javelins, long-range slings, and plain ordinary stones. When we started to get the advantage, Tydeus and your son shouted: "Argives! Before we're ripped apart by this barrage, why not let's make an all-out attack on the gates - infantry, cavalry and chariots together?" Soon as the message got through, no one held back. Men were falling like flies, heads gashed open, right in front of the city you'd have seen them tumbling like nightmarish acrobats. The dusty ground greedily sucked up the streams of blood.

Atalanta's son Parthenopaeus - an Arcadian, incidentally, not a true Argive - charged at the gate like a whirlwind, screaming for

firebrands, and pickaxes to undermine the wall. There he was, going berserk, when Periclymenus, the sea-god's son, stopped him in his tracks by pushing a massive chunk of masonry on to his head: part of the battlements - would have been a whole wagon-load by itself. Well - it flattened his head all right - hair had been blond - skull just fell apart, like a garment when someone's ripped the seams. His face - his fresh, attractive face - was now a bloody pulp. His mother was Atalanta - lovely shot with a bow - the huntress of Mount Maenalus: well, he won't be going home to her, not now.

When he saw how well things were going at this gate, your son Eteocles hurried off elsewhere, and I went too. I see Tydeus and his team, safe behind their wall of shields, directing a hail of javelins - Aetolian type, they were - at the parapet above the gate: so effectively that they'd cleared the defenders right away. But your son rallied them like a huntsman does his hounds, and soon had them back in position. We hurried on to other gates, now we'd stopped the rot at this.

How can I describe Capaneus? He was like a madman. He came charging up holding a fully-extended assault-ladder, incredibly long, and he was boasting that not even a lightning-bolt from Zeus would stop him taking Thebes, and pulling down its towering walls. Well, he was proclaiming this, and inching upwards - his body bent double under his shield as we were pelting him with stones - steadily moving up the shiny rungs. He'd just poked his head over the parapet when Zeus got him with a thunderbolt! The earth shook at the crack, and everyone was scared to death. His

limbs were blasted from his body - arms and legs spinning through the air in flames like Ixion's wheel. His torso, when it hit the ground, still alight.

When Adrastus realised Zeus had turned against his army, he withdrew his men beyond the trench. But our side, seeing the lightning on the right, and knowing it meant Zeus was helping us, surged out in hot pursuit - chariots, cavalry, infantry - and stormed right into the enemy lines. It was all very bad. Men were dying, some catapulted from their chariots; wheels were flying through the air, axles smashed down on axles, while corpses piled up on the corpses lying underneath.

So, then. We held off catastrophe. Thebes' towers are still standing, so far. Whether our luck continues to hold depends on the gods. For the moment, some supernatural power has kept us safe.

JOCASTA I'm pleased we're winning. If this is some part of the gods' greater plan, I would be happy.

The gods, and luck, have both been good. My sons are alive, and the city has escaped.

Creon, it seems, inherits the ill-luck which

began when Oedipus and I were married. He has lost a son -

splendidly for the city, although tragically for him personally.

JOCASTA Come on now, on with the story: what do those two sons of mine plan next?

MESSENGER Best not to ask. They've had luck on their side - so far.

JOCASTA This sounds ominous. Go on.

MESSENGER Is there anything more important than to know your boys are safe?

JOCASTA No, if I'm happy when I hear what happened next. [*She is blocking his exit*]

MESSENGER Let me go! Your son's been left without his shield-bearer.

JOCASTA There's something bad you're hiding, trying to keep me in the dark.

MESSENGER I haven't the heart to spoil your good news with bad.

JOCASTA You have to tell me, unless you sprout wings and fly away.

MESSENGER O gods! Why did you not let me go after the good news and avoid the bad? Your two sons both intend - a thoughtless piece of heroics - to fight a duel, by themselves, without their armies. They've said such things - in public, in front of the Theban and Argive armies - things I never thought I'd hear.

It was Eteocles' initiative. He ordered a herald to sound the call for silence; then standing on the highest point along the wall he began: "Argive leaders, who have come here, and you men of Thebes, no need to give away your precious lives over Polyneices and myself. I will free you from all risks, by fighting with my brother hand to hand. If I kill him, I shall be sole head of the family, and if I lose, I'll hand the government to him. You are excused the battle, Argives; go back home, don't throw your lives away - the Theban bodies lying here are quite enough."

That is what he said. Your other son then, Polyneices, leapt up from his lines, and praised the speech. And all the Argives and the folk of Thebes applauded, thinking this a fair suggestion. They made a truce, and, between the lines of spears, the leaders swore to stand by the agreement.

Already the two youngsters, sons of aged Oedipus, were putting on their armour, burying their bodies in bronze. Their friends assisted them - our leader has the noblest Thebans at his side, while Polyneices' seconds were Argos's finest. They were standing there resplendent, no sign of fear in either face, each snarling with eagerness to hurl his spear at each. Friends came by to give encouragement, with words like these: "Polyneices, you'll be the one presenting the victory-statue to Zeus; think of the fame, what a legend you will be in Argos!" To Eteocles they said: "Now you're fighting for Thebes! When your splendid victory is won, the power is all yours!"

So they went on, firing them up for battle. Priests have been slaughtering cattle; they've been studying the flames, brooding

on the precise significance of particular kinds of flicker. The sign for victory and the sign for defeat are not that easy to tell apart.

If then you have any influence, or cunning schemes, or magic brew, conjure them up! Make haste; divert your children from this tragic match! There's no time to lose. A prize of tears is what you'll win, if you are robbed this day of both your boys.

Jocasta shouts inside the palace

JOCASTA Antigone, my child! Come here! Outside! No dancing today. Leave your games with the girls, this is an emergency: you must help me! Help your mother try to stop your brothers - they're both of them such fine young men - from murdering each other!

Antigone comes running out of the palace

ANTIGONE What on earth's the matter, mother? What's all this noise outside the house?

JOCASTA O my darling, your brothers' lives are all fouled up.

ANTIGONE What do you mean?

JOCASTA It's all on a single spear-thrust!

ANTIGONE My god! What can we do, mother?

JOCASTA I don't know yet - but come with me.

ANTIGONE Where? You mean leave my quarters?

JOCASTA To the army!

ANTIGONE I'd be embarrassed!

JOCASTA No time to worry about your feelings now.

ANTIGONE What will I have to do?

JOCASTA Stop your brothers fighting!

ANTIGONE How?

JOCASTA Just do what I do; throw yourself on the ground - beg and plead!

[To the Messenger] Show me the way. Let's waste no more time.

Come on then, girl, come on. If I can get there before they start, my life is safe: if they are dead, I'll share their death. *[Exeunt]*

The Chorus scream as if they'd already heard the news of death.

CHORUS

I have a feeling of terror,
Terror churns my stomach,
I'm sick with fear.
O how I feel, I feel
For the mother's agony. 1287
Two sons - which will it be? 1288
Which will make his brother bleed?
O horror! Zeus! Mother Earth!
Slice his brother's neck
Take his brother's life
Shields locked
Blood pouring.
I can't bear it! I hate it!
For which crumpled corpse
Shall I scream the death-scream?

They scream. It is a shrill and chilling sound.

Two animals
Breathing blood
Tensed to fight.
A lunge, a thrust;
Fall, collapse,
A pool of blood.

Blood-brothers.

You fools! Why did you agree

To meet and fight?

What were you thinking?

I'm not a Greek

But I shall shriek and yell

And weep

Over your bodies.

It's nearly time for the lottery

Of Death. The sword

Shall settle what is to be.

Don't let it be death, o Furies,

Not death!

CREON approaches, alone.

I can see Creon, a sad grey cloud moving towards the palace.

Time to interrupt our dirge.

CREON [*Weeping*] What shall I do? I don't know whether it's myself I'm weeping for, or for the city. The storm winds are over Thebes, setting the city on course for hell, and my son is dead, giving his life for her. The fame and glory that he's won are little consolation to me. 1314

I picked him up from under Serpent's Crag, and carried him in my own arms - his broken body, how much hurt he did himself! - and brought him home, where everyone is still distraught with grief. I'm an old man now. I've come to find my sister Jocasta - we're old together - ask her to wash and lay out my son, who is my son no

more. We who are not dead have a duty to show correct respect to those who've died, and carry out the rites the gods of death demand.

CHORUS LEADER Creon, your sister has gone. She's taken her daughter Antigone and gone. They left together.

CREON Which way? To what new catastrophe? Show me where.

CHORUS LEADER I heard her sons were going to fight a duel, to see which of them should rule the royal house.

CREON What's this? I have been so taken up with my son's death I had not heard this latest news.

CHORUS LEADER Anyway, your sister went some time ago. I think the sons of Oedipus may well have run their race for life by now.

CREON O gods! Yes, here comes the proof.

A second MESSENGER is seen approaching

CREON I see a man coming, a messenger, ashen-faced, trying to avoid my eye.

He will report in full what went on.

I am in despair. I don't know how to start -

I don't have words, or tears enough.

We are finished. There will be no comfort in this message.

The news is bad, the worst. It's agony for me to speak.

CREON I've had my share of shocks today: what now?

Your sister's sons no longer live, Creon.

CHORUS No! This news is bad indeed - and for the city, not just me.

CREON [*Shouting*] House of Oedipus! The boys are dead! Together at a single stroke!

CHORUS Yes, the house would weep, if walls could feel.

CREON O gods! Disastrous! I feel knocked out by fate.

MESSENGER 2 That's not the worst, I fear. There's more bad news.

CREON There can't be! There is no further blow to fall.

MESSENGER 2 She's dead. Your sister died beside her boys.

CHORUS *[To a background of screams]*

Force out the screams!

Force them out!

Let them come!

Release them!

Raise your arms 1351

Beat your heads 1351

Bruise the knuckles.

CREON My darling, it was the Sphinx's riddle changed your life - bringing you your marriage - and now it ends like this.

How was it done? The double death that Oedipus's curse foretold?

Tell me!

MESSENGER 2 You know of our success outside the walls - Thebes is small, news travels fast. When old Oedipus's sons had armed themselves, they took up their positions between the two battle-lines, ready for their duel of arms, poised like wrestlers. Turning to face Argos, Polyneices prayed:

"Lady Hera. Since I married Adrastus's daughter, and Argos is my home, I belong to you. Grant that I may kill my brother; let my spear- arm taste the blood of victory." A most shocking prize he prayed to win - a brother's death. The enormity of it had many weeping, as they caught each other's eye.

Eteocles, facing the temple of Athena of the Golden Shield prayed:

"Daughter of Zeus. Grant that I throw my spear to win a glorious victory. As I straighten this elbow, let it speed to pierce my brother's chest."

Then like a sudden flame bursting out, the call of the bugle gave the sign to start the murderous fight. They shot towards each other with terrifying speed. Like two boars sharpening their vicious tusks, they locked as if embracing, drops of saliva dripping on their beards. They sprang apart, for space to hurl their spears. They were each bent double, crouching behind their shields, hoping the iron points would bounce off harmlessly. If one spotted the other peering round the rim, he levelled his spear, to get him in the face while he had the chance. But they cannily kept their eyes below the shield-rims, so both their spears thrust wide. I tell you, more sweat was dripping off the spectators than off the combatants, so intensely did their friends feel fear on their behalf.

Eteocles then kicking aside a stone under his foot, afraid he might slip on it, exposed his leg outside his shield. Polyneices, seeing his chance to put in a thrust, jabbed, and got him in the calf - the Argive spear- point went clean through his leg. The whole Argive army was on its feet, cheering like mad. But, distracted by the reaction, he'd left his shoulder unprotected. Eteocles, wounded though he was, spotted it, and got Polyneices a mighty stab in the chest. This got the Thebans going - they were in ecstasy - but he'd broken off his spear-point in the thrust. With his spear now out of action, he edged back and picked up a lump of marble - it hit Polyneices' spear half way down, and snapped it. Both had now lost their main weapon, and it was anybody's fight once more,

Immediately they drew their swords, and grappled, banging 1404

their shields together, and shoving with feet firmly planted. 1405

Then somehow Eteocles remembered the Thessalian dummy - something he'd learnt on visits there, and brought it into play. Moving out of the attacking position, he took a pace back and then sideways with his left foot, taking care not to expose his vulnerable belly, then stepped forward with his right; he lunged, and thrust his sword through navel and jammed it in between the vertebrae. Polyneices doubled up in agony and collapsed, blood gushing out. Triumphant Eteocles, thinking it was all over, threw his sword to the ground, and bent to strip the armour off his victim. Intent on this, he did not realise he might still be vulnerable. This is what did for him. His brother was still breathing - just - he'd held on to his sword as he crashed down, and now, with a final effort, Polyneices, the one who'd fallen first, stabbed out and reached Eteocles's heart.

So there they lie - both face-down biting dirt - side by side. They failed to settle who should have the power.

CHORUS LEADER [*Weeping uninhibitedly*] How my heart goes out to you, Oedipus:

Your curses, it seems, have been honoured by the god.

MESSENGER 2 Hear then the rest of the bad news.

Her children had already fallen, and lay dying, when their mother, poor distraught creature, arrived on the scene. When she saw their injuries, and realised they were fatal, she cried out: "My children, My mission was to save your lives. I am too late." Throwing herself beside each child in turn, she was weeping, screaming, showing the breasts from which they'd fed, shouting how useless all her love had been. "My sons! No support now for my old age!" Their sister crouched beside her, shielding her. "My brothers," she sobbed. "No one now to see me married."

Eteocles' chest heaved, and he released a great gasp - as if dying was such hard work - he'd heard his mother, and placed his clammy hand on hers. He made no sound, but the tears in his eyes spoke for him, signalling his love.

Polyneices was still breathing. Seeing his sister, and the old woman who had been his mother, he said this: "Mother, I'm dying. I'm sorry for what I've done to you, and to my sister, and to the body there, my brother's. He was family, and became my enemy, but he is family still. Bury me, my mother and my sister, my family, in my native earth. Persuade the city to forget its anger, and let me have just this small measure of my fatherland, although I never lived to call it home. Let it be your hand that shuts my eyes" - and he puts his mother's hand there over his eyes himself - "and ... goodbye. I feel the darkness closing in."

Simultaneously both brothers breathed their last. Their tragic lives were over.

Their mother, soon as she realised it was the end, swamped

by her feelings, snatched up a sword from beside the bodies, and what she did was ... horrible. Holding the point against her neck, she pushes home the blade; and there she lies in death - between the sons she loved so much, an arm around each one. *[Pause]*

The troops jumped to their feet and started arguing - we said my boss had won, the others that Polyneices had. The leaders were quarrelling too: some said Polyneices had been first to land a blow, others that since both were dead, then neither side could win.

During this, Antigone slipped away unnoticed. By now the armies were rushing for their weapons. Luckily, the Thebans had had the foresight to keep their weapons close, and used their shields to sit on. So we got in first: we fell on the Argives, surprising them still strapping on their armour. Not one of them stood to fight: they scattered all across the plain in abject rout. The earth was soon awash with blood, as they fell in thousands to our spears.

And so we won the war. Some set up a statue of Zeus as a victory trophy, while others started stripping the shields off the Argive corpses, and carrying their loot back into the city. Another group, with Antigone, are bringing the bodies here for their families to mourn. So; for Thebes our efforts end in triumph - and in tragedy. *[Exit]*

CHORUS No longer is the misery of this house

Something we'd only heard about.

It's possible to see, nearing the palace,

The bodies of the three fallen,

Together in death

With an equal share

Of eternal darkness.

ANTIGONE has entered, followed by bearers carrying the three bodies.

Her hair is loose, and the top half of her dress is unfastened.

ANTIGONE

I am no more the "shy little girl"

Hiding my head, my hair, my body wrapped up

Away from public gaze.

No "maidenly modesty" screens my face -

Everyone can see my reddened eyes,

My flushed and fiery cheeks.

I threw off my veil, let my long hair hang loose,

Undid my dress -

How inappropriate the saffron silk now looks on me,

Chief mourner for these bodies. 1492

I feel suddenly freed from all restraint: 1492

A bacchant, possessed by Dionysus,
In a festival not of Life
But Death.
[She cries and groans]
Polyneices; so your name was your destiny after all.
O Thebes!
"The truculent"; "Much-quarrelling". It was your quarrel -
Hardly a quarrel, it was bloody murder,
Murder matching murder
Callously committed
With unspeakable bloody violence:
Murder extinguished the family
Of Oedipus.
No dirge
No funeral music
No consoling ceremony
Nothing can help my house,
My family,
There's tears,
Just tears,
As I bring home
Its three blood-sodden members
The mother and her sons:
A glad sight to the Fury,

The Spirit of Vengeance.

This rounds off her destruction

Of Oedipus' family,

That began when he made

The unintelligible riddle of the beast-woman,

The Sphinx's song, plain to understand,

And brought her life

To a violent end.

No Greek nor any other woman,

No one past or present,

Has ever endured

The kind of agony

The weight of human suffering

That I visibly bear.

This is my aria to grief.

Is there somewhere, maybe cowering among the leaves

Of a great oak tree,

Or in the needles of some towering pine,

An orphaned nestling

Piping piteously for her

Missing mother,

Whose note could echo

My grief?

My cries, like hers,
Are the prelude merely
To a life of weeping,
A lifetime spent in sorrow,
Each day new tears to shed.

When I tear out my hair,
Whose body should receive the first fistful?
My mother's? Should I lay it on her breasts
From which they once together sucked
The milk of life?
Or on my brothers'
Obscenely mutilated corpses?

[She cries and screams]

Father! Come out of the house!
It's just as dark out here.
I know you're old,
But show the world
What your wretched life has done to you.
Leave the house
Where once you dropped that thick dark curtain
Over your eyes
Where now
You live out the sad exhaustion of your days.

Where are you?

Are you stumbling, old and lost,

Fumbling your way from pillar to pillar?

Or are you in bed

Nursing your pain?

Enter OEDIPUS slowly and painfully from the palace

OEDIPUS

Antigone, my child, why have you brought me into the light?

I was on my bed in my room in the dark,

And your screaming, your piercing shouts

Directed my steps as accurately 1542

As any blind man's stick.

Is this what you wanted to see? 1543

This pallid ghostly shadow,

This spectre from the land of death,

This flickering dream?

ANTIGONE Father. There are some cruel words you have to hear.

Your sons are dead, so is your wife,

She who was always there to care and guide your steps.

O father! [*she breaks down*]

[*He groans*] **OEDIPUS** My sufferings!

Something else to cry for, to protest about!

Three lives.

How?

How did they die?

My child!

Please say.

ANTIGONE I'm not blaming you.

I do not gloat and say "I told you so".

This hurts me so much to say it:

Your curse, a demon

Bringing swords and fire and bloody murder,

Visited your sons.

O father! [she breaks down again]

[Groans]

Why are you crying?

OEDIPUS For my sons!

Just cry, just let the tears flow out.

But if you could see, if the four-horsed chariot of the sun

Burned through your blindness, and you

Could see the bodies ...

OEDIPUS Enough. I can picture my dead sons.

But my suffering wife - how did she meet her fate?

ANTIGONE She was crying uncontrollably;

She did not mind who saw her

As she bared her breasts, hoping

To shock the conscience of her sons.

She found them by the Electran Gate
In a meadow thick with spikes of asphodel
And spears;
My mother saw a ball of fury;
Her sons like lions locked in deadly combat
Over some lair,
Their wounds already pumping out 1575
The hot libation
Which Ares offers, when it's cooled, 1576
To the death-god Hades.
She picked up a sword
From by the bodies,
Then like a smith who tempers freshly-hammered bronze,
She plunged it deep into her flesh.
In agony of love for both her sons,
She fell between them.
A god, who arranges such things,
Has brought together all this pain
Father, for our family
Today.

CHORUS Today has seen the fulfilment of many dreadful things for Oedipus's house.
May the future be happier!

[*Stepping forward*] **CREON** Stop all the weeping.

The burial's all we've got to think of now.

You, Oedipus, must hear what I have got to say.

Eteocles, your son, entrusted the ruling of this land to me, and gave the kingship as dowry for the marriage of the girl Antigone to Haemon, my son. Accordingly, I can no longer let you stay in Thebes. Teiresias said quite plainly that the city would not achieve success as long as you were living here. No hard feelings I hope - this is politics. So, remove yourself. I have no personal grudge, but I fear that curse which dogs you may do our city further harm.

OEDIPUS Fate! From my conception you singled me out for pain and misery. Before I even emerged into the light from my mother's womb, Apollo had prophesied to Laius that this foetus would become its father's murderer. What chance, then, did I have?

When I was born, the father who had sown my seed at once began to plan my death, believing his baby was an enemy, as the oracle had said he would be killed by it. He despatched me, crying for my mother's breast - a pathetic meal to feed the wolves on Mount Cithaeron. But there I'm rescued: Cithaeron should be hurled into the deepest pit of hell - it refused to let me die, and my curse brought me to a slave's life, in King Polybus's house. When - under the curse - I killed my father, I entered my wretched mother's bed, and became father of brothers, whom I have destroyed, passing on the curse of Laius to my sons. I am an intelligent man - some god it must have been who forced me to blind myself and curse my sons: I would never have acted so unless the victim of divine malevolence.

Ah, well. What shall I do now, as obviously the curse is active still? Who will be my guide, and steer the blind man's feet? My wife is dead - were she alive, she would have helped, I know. My sons, that fine sturdy pair of colts? Mine no more. Am I still fit enough to look after myself? Impossible! Why do you sentence me to death, Creon? My death it is, if you drive me from Thebes.

I shall not grovel, nor abase myself in front of you like some peasant. I was once a king: however bad things get, I shall not compromise my dignity.

CREON You made a wise decision, not to fall at my feet, and I did too, when I decided to permit your stay here to be prolonged no further.

[*To the pall-bearers*] These bodies: I want you to take this one to the palace. The other, the one who came with troops to sack his native city, Polyneices - dispose of his corpse outside the city limits. Do not bury it.

I want a proclamation made to all the citizens, as follows:

"Whoever is caught laying a wreath, or burying this body in the earth, shall face the punishment of death."

Pull yourself together, Antigone, stop snivelling over the bodies, and get yourself indoors.

ANTIGONE Father! How brutally he treats us both!

My heart goes out to you, more than to the dead.

Your life has not been sometimes tragic, sometimes not,

But every moment has been filled with grief. Father! [*Embraces him*]

[*To Creon*] Two questions now for you, our new-found king.

Why do you treat my father so outrageously,

And drive him out of Thebes?

Why do you make up laws to terrorise a corpse?

CREON Eteocles' decisions. I had nothing to do with them.

ANTIGONE They are insane, and you're a fool obeying them.

CREON Sorry? Am I a fool to obey orders?

ANTIGONE Yes, if they are bad, or plain vindictive!

CREON So, is it not justice that he should be a present for the dogs?

ANTIGONE Justice as practised by you is outside the law.

CREON He put himself outside it when he became an enemy of the state.

ANTIGONE [*Bitterly*] And is death not punishment enough?

CREON No, he forfeited his right to burial, as well.

ANTIGONE What was wrong in trying to claim his portion of the land?

CREON He is not to be buried, and that's that!

ANTIGONE I shall bury him, whatever the state says.

CREON Dig another grave beside it, for yourself!

ANTIGONE Excellent. Two of the family shall lie side by side.

CREON Seize her, and take her indoors!

ANTIGONE No - I'm holding my brother's body, and I shan't let go!

CREON The judgment has been made: Fate, my girl, decides, and not your childish whims!

ANTIGONE This too has been decided: you shall respect the dead!

CREON No one shall spread earth on him! No libations!

ANTIGONE For her sake, his mother's, Jocasta's, Creon!

CREON Don't waste your breath. You cannot win.

ANTIGONE Let me at least wash the body.

CREON This is on the list of things forbidden to the city.

ANTIGONE May I just dress the ugly wounds? [*Kneeling beside the body*]

CREON You will give no respect to this corpse in any way whatsoever.

ANTIGONE My darling: at least I can kiss your lips goodbye.

CREON Stop all this nonsense! This is no way to prepare yourself for your wedding day.

ANTIGONE Do you think I'd marry a son of yours? I'd rather die!

CREON I'm afraid you have no choice. How could you escape?

ANTIGONE You know the story of the Danaïds, the sisters who killed their husbands on their wedding night? I'll be like one of them tomorrow!

CREON You see the way she dares to flout me?

ANTIGONE I mean it. I swear by this sword blade.

CREON What's changed your mind about the marriage? You were keen enough before.

ANTIGONE I intend to share my poor misused father's banishment.

CREON Very noble, and quite stupid.

ANTIGONE I shall die with him as well, be sure of that.

CREON Go then! Leave my country! I shall not let you kill my son. [*Exit, into the palace*]

OEDIPUS Antigone! Thankyou for your gesture, but ...

ANTIGONE If I get married, father, you'd go to exile alone.

OEDIPUS Stay and be happy. I shall make the best of my lot.

ANTIGONE Who will look after you? You're blind, remember, father.

OEDIPUS When I fall over, that shall be my bed - chosen by fate.

ANTIGONE Is this the famous Oedipus, the great problem-solver?

OEDIPUS He is dead. One day set me up: the same day knocked me down.

ANTIGONE Then you *do* need me to help, to share your burden?

OEDIPUS A blind old man travelling with his young daughter - people would be horrified.

ANTIGONE No they wouldn't - if she was a sensible girl, they'd say "How fine!"

OEDIPUS Help me, so I can touch your mother's face.

ANTIGONE There you are. Stretch out your hand and feel the careworn face you loved so much.

OEDIPUS Mother! Wife! You poor unhappy woman.

ANTIGONE This is the saddest thing I ever saw.

OEDIPUS Where is Eteocles's body? And Polyneices'?

ANTIGONE They both lie just near you, side by side in death.

Put one hand on each, so my hands can see their sad faces.

ANTIGONE There. You can touch both your sons.

OEDIPUS Here lies my family - wretched children of a wretched father.

ANTIGONE Polyneices - I always loved you the most!

OEDIPUS Apollo's oracle, my child, is now coming true.

ANTIGONE What oracle's that? More suffering to add to what we have?

OEDIPUS He said I'd die in Athens, a man without a home.

ANTIGONE Is it precise about the location, then?

OEDIPUS Holy Colonus, where the horse-god's temple is.

Come on then, lead your blind old father off.

Seeing you're so keen to share my life on the road.

ANTIGONE Come on then. The bleak path of exile beckons.

Hold your hand out, you old fool - you need me behind you,

Like a wind taking a ship out of port.

OEDIPUS All right, all right! I'm under way.

Your thankless job's to be the blind man's stick.

ANTIGONE I am, I am - the saddest girl in Thebes.

OEDIPUS Where does my foot go next?

Where should I place my stick?

ANTIGONE Here - here - lean on me

And here, and here, keep walking on,

Don't let your strength give out ...

OEDIPUS [*Panting*] Look at me, driven from my home at my age - a helpless exile.

What's been done to me is unjust, unfair!

ANTIGONE Unfair! Unjust! What do you expect?

There is no Justice up there watching out for crime,

And no power corrects the fools who let the criminals succeed.

OEDIPUS I am the man who was world-famous -

Even the gods in heaven heard the songs about

My famous victory,

When I solved the bird-bitch's insoluble riddle ...

ANTIGONE Not the Sphinx again!

No point in dragging up your past success:

Concentrate on the future - finding a place

Where you a homeless, stateless, penniless, eyeless

Tramp

May die

In peace.

Antigone slowly leads her father off. The bodies remain until they are out of sight, when they can be removed appropriately by the attendants

The usual text of the play does not end here - but there is considerable doubt whether this last scene was originally part of Euripides' play.

ANTIGONE

I left my friends

In tears.

They'll miss me

As I leave my home

To wander "as no young girl should"

Severing all ties with my past.

Small comfort

That my "heroic self-sacrifice"

Will bring me useless fame.

The way he treated you

And my brother

Is obscene.

An outrage.

They are taking his body off to dump it.

I shall go and bury him tonight, father,

Even if it means my death.

OEDIPUS Go back, and say goodbye to your friends ...

No, I've cried enough.

OEDIPUS Go back, and pray at the altars of the gods ...

No, they've had enough of prayers from me.

OEDIPUS Go up to the mountains, where Dionysus'

Sanctuary is kept holy, by the young girls

Who've dedicated their lives to him ...

ANTIGONE Dionysus? The god I put a doeskin on for,

And danced myself into a stupor up the side of a mountain?

I honoured his mother, Semele -

Put in all that effort for the gods -

And what did they ever give me in return?

AMW Casa Cusenì, Taormina, November 1993