

The Seven Against Thebes

Aeschylus

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The Seven Against Thebes

The Seven Against Thebes

Aeschylus

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Dramatis Personae

ETEOCLES, son of Oedipus, King of Thebes
A SPY
CHORUS OF THEBAN WOMEN
ANTIGONE
ISMENE
sisters of ETEOCLES
A HERALD

Scene

Within the Citadel of Thebes. There is an altar with the statues of several gods visible. A crowd of citizens are present as ETEOCLES enters with his attendants.

ETEOCLES

Clansmen of Cadmus, at the signal given
By time and season must the ruler speak
Who sets the course and steers the ship of State
With hand upon the tiller, and with eye
Watchful against the treachery of sleep.
For if all go aright, thank Heaven, men say,
But if adversely—which may God forefend!—
One name on many lips, from street to street,
Would bear the bruit and rumour of the time,
Down with Eteocles!—a clamorous curse,
A dirge of ruin. May averting Zeus
Make good his title here, in Cadmus' hold!
You it beseems now—boys unripened yet
To lusty manhood, men gone past the prime
And increase of the full begetting seed,
And those whom youth and manhood well combined
Array for action—all to rise in aid
Of city, shrines, and altars of all powers
Who guard our land; that ne'er, to end of time,
Be blotted out the sacred service due
To our sweet mother—land and to her brood.
For she it was who to their guest—right called

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Your waxing youth, was patient of the toil,
And cherished you on the land's gracious lap,
Alike to plant the hearth and bear the shield
In loyal service, for an hour like this.
Mark now! until to-day, luck rules our scale;
For we, though long beleaguered, in the main
Have with our sallies struck the foemen hard.
But now the seer, the feeder of the birds
(Whose art unerring and prophetic skill
Of ear and mind divines their utterance
Without the lore of fire interpreted)
Foretelleth, by the mastery of his art,
That now an onset of Achaea's host
Is by a council of the night designed
To fall in double strength upon our walls.
Up and away, then, to the battlements,
The gates, the bulwarks! don your panoplies,
Array you at the breast-work, take your stand
On the floorings of the towers, and with good heart
Stand firm for sudden sallies at the gates,
Nor hold too heinous a respect for hordes
Sent on you from afar: some god will guard!
I too, for shrewd espial of their camp,
Have sent forth scouts, and confidence is mine
They will not fail nor tremble at their task,
And, with their news, I fear no foeman's guile. *A Spy enters.*

THE SPY

Eteocles, high king of Cadmus' folk,
I stand here with news certified and sure
From Argos' camp, things by myself descried.
Seven warriors yonder, doughty chiefs of might,
Into the crimsoned concave of a shield
Have shed a bull's blood, and, with hands immersed
Into the gore of sacrifice, have sworn
By Ares, lord of fight, and by thy name,
Blood-lapping Terror, Let our oath be heard—
Either to raze the walls, make void the hold
Of Cadmus—strive his children as they may—
Or, dying here, to make the foemen's land
With blood impasted. Then, as memory's gift
Unto their parents at the far-off home,
Chaplets they hung upon Adrastus' car,
With eyes tear-dropping, but no word of moan.
For their steeled spirit glowed with high resolve,
As lions pant, with battle in their eyes.
For them, no weak alarm delays the clear
Issues of death or life! I parted thence
Even as they cast the lots, how each should lead,
Against which gate, his serried company.
Rank then thy bravest, with what speed thou may'st,

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Hard by the gates, to dash on them, for now,
Full-armed, the onward ranks of Argos come!
The dust whirls up, and from their panting steeds
White foamy flakes like snow bedew the plain.
Thou therefore, chieftain! like a steersman skilled,
Enshield the city's bulwarks, ere the blast
Of war comes darting on them! hark, the roar
Of the great landstorm with its waves of men
Take Fortune by the forelock! for the rest,
By yonder dawn-light will I scan the field
Clear and aright, and surety of my word
Shall keep thee scatheless of the coming storm.

ETEOCLES

O Zeus and Earth and city-guarding gods,
And thou, my father's Curse, of baneful might,
Spare ye at least this town, nor root it up,
By violence of the foemen, stock and stem!
For here, from home and hearth, rings Hellas' tongue.
Forbid that e'er the yoke of slavery
Should bow this land of freedom, Cadmus' hold!
Be ye her help! your cause I plead with mine—
A city saved doth honour to her gods! *ETEOCLES, his attendants and most of the crowd go out. The CHORUS OF THEBAN WOMEN enters. They appear terror-stricken.*

CHORUS *singing*

I wail in the stress of my terror, and shrill is my cry of despair.
The foemen roll forth from their camp as a billow, and onward they bear!
Their horsemen are swift in the forefront, the dust rises up to the sky,
A signal, though speechless, of doom, a herald more clear than a cry!
Hoof-trampled, the land of my love bears onward the din to mine ears.
As a torrent descending a mountain, it thunders and echoes and nears!
The doom is unloosened and cometh! O kings and O queens of high
Heaven,
Prevail that it fall not upon us! the sign for their onset is given—
They stream to the walls from without, white-shielded and keen for the fray.
The rush of their feet? to what shrine shall I bow me in terror and pray? *They rush to pray to the gods.*
O gods high-throned in bliss, we must crouch at the shrines in your home!
Not here must we tarry and wail: shield clashes on shield as they come
And now, even now is the hour for the robes and the chaplets of prayer!
Mine eyes feel the flash of the sword, the clang is instinct with the spear!
Is thy hand set against us, O Ares, in ruin and wrath to o'erwhelm
Thine own immemorial land, O god of the golden helm?
Look down upon us, we beseech thee, on the land that thou lovest of old.

strophe 1

And ye, O protecting gods, in pity your people behold!
Yea, save us, the maidenly troop, from the doom and despair of the slave,
For the crests of the foemen come onward, their rush is the rush of a wave
Rolled on by the War-god's breath! almighty one, hear us and save
From the grasp of the Argives' might! to the ramparts of Cadmus they crowd,

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And, clenched in the teeth of the steeds, the bits clink horror aloud
And seven high chieftains of war, with spear and with panoply bold,
Are set, by the law of the lot, to storm the seven gates of our hold!

antistrophe 1

Be near and befriend us, O Pallas, the Zeus-born maiden of might!
O lord of the steed and the sea, be thy trident uplifted to smite
In eager desire of the fray, Poseidon! and Ares come down,
In fatherly presence revealed, to rescue Harmonia's town!
Thine too, Aphrodite, we are! thou art mother and queen of our race,
To thee we cry out in our need, from thee let thy children have grace!
Ye too, to scare back the foe, be your cry as a wolf's howl wild,
Thou, O the wolf-lord, and thou, of she-wolf Leto the child!

strophe 2

Woe and alack for the sound, for the rattle of cars to the wall,
And the creak of the griding axles! O Hera, to thee is our call!
Artemis, maiden beloved! the air is distraught with the spears,
And whither doth destiny drive us, and where is the goal of our fears?

antistrophe 2

The blast of the terrible stones on the ridge of our wall is not stayed,
At the gates is the brazen clash of the bucklers—Apollo to aid!
Thou too, O daughter of Zeus, who guidest the wavering fray
To the holy decision of fate, Athena! be with us to-day!
Come down to the sevenfold gates and harry the foemen away!

strophe 3

O gods and O sisters of gods, our bulwark and guard! we beseech
That ye give not our war-worn hold to a rabble of alien speech!
List to the call of the maidens, the hands held up for the right,

antistrophe 3

Be near us, protect us, and show that the city is dear in your sight!
Have heed for her sacrifice holy, and thought of her offerings take,
Forget not her love and her worship, be near her and smite for her sake! *ETEOCLES and his retinue re-enter.*

ETEOCLES *addressing the CHORUS*

Hark to my question, things detestable!
Is this aright and for the city's weal,
And helpful to our army thus beset,
That ye before the statues of our gods
Should fling yourselves, and scream and shriek your fears?
Immodest, uncontrolled! Be this my lot—
Never in troublous nor in peaceful days
To dwell with aught that wears a female form!

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Where womankind has power, no man can house,
Where womankind feeds panic, ruin rules
Alike in house and city! Look you now—
Your flying feet, and rumour of your fears,
Have spread a soulless panic on our walls,
And they without do go from strength to strength,
And we within make breach upon ourselves!
Such fate it brings, to house with womankind.
Therefore if any shall resist my rule
Or man, or woman, or some sexless thing—
The vote of sentence shall decide their doom,
And stones of execution, past escape,
Shall finish all. Let not a woman's voice
Be loud in council! for the things without,
A man must care; let women keep within—
Even then is mischief all too probable!
Hear ye? or speak I to unheeding ears?

CHORUS *chanting*

Ah, but I shudder, child of Oedipus!
I heard the clash and clang!
The axles rolled and rumbled; woe to us,
Fire-welded bridles rang!
Say—when a ship is strained and deep in brine,
Did e'er a seaman mend his chance, who left
The helm, t' invoke the image at the prow?

CHORUS *chanting*

Ah, but I fled to the shrines, I called to our helpers on high,
When the stone-shower roared at the portals!
I sped to the temples aloft, and loud was my call and my cry,
Look down and deliver, Immortals!

ETEOCLES

Ay, pray amain that stone may vanquish steel!
Where not that grace of gods? ay, ay—methinks,
When cities fall, the gods go forth from them!

CHORUS *chanting*

Ah, let me die, or ever I behold
The gods go forth, in conflagration dire!
The foemen's rush and raid, and all our hold
Wrapt in the burning fire!

ETEOCLES

Cry not on Heaven, in impotent debate!
What saith the saw?—Good saving Strength, in verity,
Out of Obedience breeds the babe Prosperity.

CHORUS *chanting*

'Tis true: yet stronger is the power divine,
And oft, when man's estate is overbowed
With bitter pangs, disperses from his eyne
The heavy, hanging cloud!

ETEOCLES

Let men with sacrifice and augury
Approach the gods, when comes the tug of war:

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Alaids must be silent and abide within.

CHORUS *chanting*

By grace of the gods we hold it, a city untamed of the spear,
And the battlement wards from the wall the foe and his aspect of fear!
What need of displeasure herein?

ETEOCLES

Ay, pay thy vows to Heaven; I grudge them not,
But—so thou strike no fear into our men—
Have calm at heart, nor be too much afraid.
Alack, it is fresh in mine ears, the clamour and crash of the fray,
And up to our holiest height I sped on my timorous way,
Bewildered, beset by the din!

ETEOCLES

Now, if ye hear the bruit of death or wounds,
Give not yourselves o'ermuch to shriek and scream,
For Ares ravins upon human flesh.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Ah, but the snorting of the steeds I hear!

ETEOCLES

Then, if thou hearest, hear them not too well

LEADER

Hark, the earth rumbles, as they close us round!

ETEOCLES

Enough if I am here, with plans prepared.

LEADER

Alack, the battering at the gates is loud!

ETEOCLES

Peace! stay your tongue, or else the town may hear!

LEADER

O warders of the walls, betray them not!

ETEOCLES

Beshrew your cries! in silence face your fate.

LEADER

Gods of our city, see me not enslaved!

ETEOCLES

On me, on all, thy cries bring slavery.

LEADER

Zeus, strong to smite, turn upon foes thy blow!

ETEOCLES

Zeus, what a curse are women, wrought by thee!

LEADER

Weak wretches, even as men, when cities fall.
What! clasping gods, yet voicing thy despair?

LEADER

In the sick heart, fear maketh prey of speech.

ETEOCLES

Light is the thing I ask thee—do my will!

LEADER

Ask swiftly: swiftly shall I know my power.

ETEOCLES

Silence, weak wretch! nor put thy friends in fear.

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LEADER

I speak no more: the general fate be mine!

ETEOCLES

I take that word as wiser than the rest.
Nay, more: these images possess thy will—
Pray, in their strength, that Heaven be on our side!
Then hear my prayers withal, and then ring out
The female triumph—note, thy privilege—
Yea, utter forth the usage Hellas knows,
The cry beside the altars, sounding clear
Encouragement to friends, alarm to foes.
But I unto all gods that guard our walls,
Lords of the plain or warders of the mart
And to Ismenus' stream and Dirce's rills,
I swear, if Fortune smiles and saves our town,
That we will make our altars reek with blood
Of sheep and kine, shed forth unto the gods,
And with victorious tokens front our fanes—
Corslets and casques that once our foemen wore,
Spear—shattered now—to deck these holy homes!
Be such thy vows to Heaven—away with sighs,
Away with outcry vain and barbarous,
That shall avail not, in a general doom!
But I will back, and, with six chosen men
Myself the seventh, to confront the foe
In this great aspect of a poised war,
Return and plant them at the sevenfold gates,
Or e'er the prompt and clamorous battle—scouts
Haste to inflame our counsel with the need. *ETEOCLES and his retinue go out.*

CHORUS *singing* *strophe 1*

I mark his words, yet, dark and deep,
My heart's alarm forbiddeth sleep!
Close—clinging cares around my soul
Enkindle fears beyond control,
Presageful of what doom may fall
From the great leaguer of the wall!
So a poor dove is faint with fear
For her weak nestlings, while anew
Glides on the snaky ravisher!
In troop and squadron, hand on hand,
They climb and throng, and hemmed we stand,
While on the warders of our town
The flinty shower comes hurtling down!
Gods born of Zeus! put forth your might
For Cadmus' city, realm, and right!

antistrophe 1

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What nobler land shall e'er be yours,
If once ye give to hostile powers
The deep rich soil, and Dirce's wave,
The nursing stream, Poseidon gave
And Tethys' children? Up and save!
Cast on the ranks that hem us round
A deadly panic, make them fling
Their arms in terror on the ground,
And die in carnage! thence shall spring
High honour for our clan and king!
Come at our wailing cry, and stand
As throned sentries of our land!

strophe 2

For pity and sorrow it were that this immemorial town
Should sink to be slave of the spear, to dust and to ashes gone down,
By the gods of Achaean worship and arms of Achaean might
Sacked and defiled and dishonoured, its women the prize of the fight—
That, haled by the hair as a steed, their mantles dishevelled and torn,
The maiden and matron alike should pass to the wedlock of scorn!
I hear it arise from the city, the manifold wail of despair—
Woe, woe for the doom that shall be—as in grasp of the foeman they fare!

antistrophe 2

For a woe and a weeping it is, if the maiden inviolate flower
Is plucked by the foe in his might, not culled in the bridal bower!
Alas for the hate and the horror—how say it?—less hateful by far
Is the doom to be slain by the sword, hewn down in the carnage of war!
For wide, ah! wide is the woe when the foeman has mounted the wall;
There is havoc and terror and flame, and the dark smoke broods over all,
And wild is the war—god's breath, as in frenzy of conquest he springs,
And pollutes with the blast of his lips the glory of holiest things!

strophe 3

Up to the citadel rise clash and din,
The war-net closes in,
The spear is in the heart: with blood imbrued
Young mothers wail aloud,
For children at their breast who scream and die!
And boys and maidens fly,
Yet scape not the pursuer, in his greed
To thrust and grasp and feed!
Robber with robber joins, each calls his mate
Unto the feast of hate—
The banquet, lo! is spread—seize, rend, and tear!
No need to choose or share!

antistrophe 3

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And all the wealth of earth to waste is poured—
A sight by all abhorred!
The grieving housewives eye it; heaped and blent,
Earth's boons are spoiled and spent,
And waste to nothingness; and O alas,
Young maids, forlorn ye pass—
Fresh horror at your hearts—beneath the power
Of those who crop the flower!
Ye own the ruffian ravisher for lord,
And night brings rites abhorred!
Woe, woe for you! upon your grief and pain
There comes a fouler stain. *On one side the SPY enters; on the other, ETEOCLES and the SIX CHAMPIONS.*

LEADER OF THE FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Look, friends! methinks the scout, who parted hence
To spy upon the foemen, comes with news,
His feet as swift as wafting chariot-wheels.

LEADER OF THE SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Ay, and our king, the son of Oedipus,
Comes prompt to time, to learn the spy's report—
His heart is fainer than his foot is fast!

THE SPY

Well have I scanned the foe, and well can say
Unto which chief, by lot, each gate is given.
Tydeus already with his onset-cry
Storms at the gate called Proetides; but him
The seer Amphiaraus holds at halt,
Nor wills that he should cross Ismenus' ford,
Until the sacrifices promise fair.
But Tydeus, mad with lust of blood and broil,
Like to a cockatrice at noontide hour,
Hisses out wrath and smites with scourge of tongue
The prophet-son of Oecleus—Wise thou art,
Faint against war, and holding back from death!
With such revilings loud upon his lips
He waves the triple plumes that o'er his helm
Float overshadowing, as a courser's mane;
And at his shield's rim, terror in their tone,
Clang and reverberate the brazen bells.
And this proud sign, wrought on his shield, he bears,—
The vault of heaven, inlaid with blazing stars;
And, for the boss, the bright moon glows at full,
The eye of night, the first and lordliest star.
Thus with high-vaunted armour, madly bold,
He clamours by the stream-bank, wild for war,
As a steed panting grimly on his bit,
Held in and chafing for the trumpet's bray!
Whom wilt thou set against him? when the gates
Of Proetus yield, who can his rush repel?

ETEOCLES

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To me, no blazon on a foeman's shield
Shall e'er present a fear! such pointed threats
Are powerless to wound; his plumes and bells,
Without a spear, are snakes without a sting.
Nay, more—that pageant of which thou tellest—
The nightly sky displayed, ablaze with stars,
Upon his shield, palters with double sense
One headstrong fool will find its truth anon!
For, if night fall upon his eyes in death,
Yon vaunting blazon will its own truth prove,
And he is prophet of his folly's fall.
Mine shall it be, to pit against his power
The loyal son of Astacus, as guard
To hold the gateways—a right valiant soul,
Who has in heed the throne of Modesty
And loathes the speech of Pride, and evermore
Shrinks from the base, but knows no other fear.
He springs by stock from those whom Ares spared,
The men called Sown, a right son of the soil,
And Melanippus styled. Now, what his arm
To-day shall do, rests with the dice of war,
And Ares shall ordain it; but his cause
Hath the true badge of Right, to urge him on
To guard, as son, his motherland from wrong. *MELANIPPUS goes out.*

CHORUS *chanting*

Then may the gods give fortune fair
Unto our chief, sent forth to dare
War's terrible arbitrament!
But ah! when champions wend away,
I shudder, lest, from out the fray,
Only their blood-stained wrecks be sent!

THE SPY

Nay, let him pass, and the gods' help be his!
Next, Capaneus comes on, by lot to lead
The onset at the gates Electran styled:
A giant be, more huge than Tydeus' self,
And more than human in his arrogance—
May fate forefend his threat against our walls!
God willing, or unwilling—such his vaunt—
I will lay waste this city; Pallas' self,
Zeus's warrior maid, although she swoop to earth
And plant her in my path, shall stay me not.
And, for the flashes of the levin-bolt,
He holds them harmless as the noontide rays.
Mark, too, the symbol on his shield—a man
Scornfully weaponless but torch in hand,
And the flame glows witbin his grasp, prepared
For ravin: lo, the legend, wrought in words,
Fire for the city bring I, flares in gold!
Against such wight, send forth—yet whom? what man

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Will front that vaunting figure and not fear?

ETEOCLES

Aha, this profits also, gain on gain!
In sooth, for mortals, the tongue's utterance
Betrays unerringly a foolish pride!
Hither stalks Capaneus, with vaunt and threat
Defying god-like powers, equipt to act,
And, mortal though he be, he strains his tongue
In folly's ecstasy, and casts aloft
High swelling words against the ears of Zeus.
Right well I trust—if justice grants the word—
That, by the might of Zeus, a bolt of flame
In more than semblance shall descend on him.
Against his vaunts, though reckless, I have set,
To make assurance sure, a warrior stern—
Strong Polyphontes, fervid for the fray;—
A sturdy bulwark, he, by grace of Heaven
And favour of his champion Artemis!
Say on, who holdeth the next gate in ward? *POLYPHONTES goes out.*

CHORUS *chanting*

Perish the wretch whose vaunt affronts our home!
On him the red bolt come,
Ere to the maiden bowers his way he cleave,
To ravage and bereave!

THE SPY

I will say on. Eteoclus is third—
To him it fell, what time the third lot sprang
O'er the inverted helmet's brazen rim,
To dash his stormers on Neistae gate.
He wheels his mares, who at their frontlets chafe
And yearn to charge upon the gates amain.
They snort the breath of pride, and, filled therewith,
Their nozzles whistle with barbaric sound.
High too and haughty is his shield's device—
An armed man who climbs, from rung to rung,
A scaling ladder, up a hostile wall,
Afire to sack and slay; and he too cries
(By letters, full of sound, upon the shield)
Not Ares' self shall cast me from the wall.
Look to it, send, against this man, a man
Strong to debar the slave's yoke from our town.

ETEOCLES *pointing to MEGAREUS*

Send will I—even this man, with luck to aid— *MEGAREUS departs as soon as he has been marked out.*
By his worth sent already, not by pride
And vain pretence, is he. 'Tis Megareus,
The child of Creon, of the Earth—sprung born!
He will not shrink from guarding of the gates,
Nor fear the maddened charger's frenzied neigh,
But, if he dies, will nobly quit the score
For nurture to the land that gave him birth,

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Or from the shield-side hew two warriors down—
Eteoclus and the figure that he lifts—
Ay, and the city pictured, all in one,
And deck with spoils the temple of his sire!
Announce the next pair, stint not of thy tongue!

CHORUS *chanting*

O thou, the warder of my home,
Grant, unto us, Fate's favouring tide,
Send on the foemen doom!
They fling forth taunts of frenzied pride,
On them may Zeus with glare of vengeance come

THE SPY

Lo, next him stands a fourth and shouts amain,
By Pallas Onca's portal, and displays
A different challenge; 'tis Hippomedon!
Huge the device that starts up from his targe
In high relief; and, I deny it not,
I shuddered, seeing how, upon the rim,
It made a mighty circle round the shield—
No sorry craftsman he, who wrought that work
And clamped it all around the buckler's edge!
The form was Typhon: from his glowing throat
Rolled lurid smoke, spark-litten, kin of fire!
The flattened edge-work, circling round the whole,
Made strong support for coiling snakes that grew
Erect above the concave of the shield:
Loud rang the warrior's voice; inspired for war,
He raves to slay, as doth a Bacchanal,
His very glance a terror! of such wight
Beware the onset! closing on the gates,
He peals his vaunting and appalling cry!

ETEOCLES

Yet first our Pallas Onca-wardress she,
Planting her foot hard by her gate—shall stand,
The Maid against the ruffian, and repel
His force, as from her brood the mother-bird
Beats back the wintered serpent's venom'd fang.
And next, by her, is Oenops' gallant son,
Hyperbius, chosen to confront this foe,
Ready to seek his fate at Fortune's shrine!
In form, in valour, and in skill of arms,
None shall gainsay him. See how wisely well
Hermes hath set the brave against the strong!
Confronted shall they stand, the shield of each
Bearing the image of opposing gods:
One holds aloft his Typhon breathing fire,
But, on the other's shield, in symbol sits
Zeus, calm and strong, and fans his bolt to flame—
Zeus, seen of all, yet seen of none to fail!
Howbeit, weak is trust reposed in Heaven—
Yet are we upon Zeus' victorious side,

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The foe, with those he worsted—if in sooth
Zeus against Typhon held the upper hand,
And if Hyperbius (as well may hap
When two such foes such diverse emblems bear)
Have Zeus upon his shield, a saving sign. *HYPERBIUS goes out.*

CHORUS *chanting*

High faith is mine that he whose shield
Bears, against Zeus, the thing of hate.
The giant Typhon, thus revealed,
A monster loathed of gods eterne
And mortal men—this doom shall earn
A shattered skull, before the gate!

THE SPY

Heaven send it so! A fifth assailant now
Is set against our fifth, the northern, gate,
Fronting the death—mound where Amphion lies
The child of Zeus. This foeman vows his faith,
Upon a mystic spear—head which he deems
More holy than a godhead and more sure
To find its mark than any glance of eye,
That, will they, nill they, he will storm and sack
The hold of the Cadmeans. Such his oath—
His, the bold warrior, yet of childish years,
A bud of beauty's foremost flower, the son
Of Zeus and of the mountain maid. I mark
How the soft down is waxing on his cheek,
Thick and close—growing in its tender prime—
In name, not mood, is he a maiden's child—
Parthenopaeus; large and bright his eyes
But fierce the wrath wherewith he fronts the gate:
Yet not unheralded he takes his stand
Before the portal; on his brazen shield,
The rounded screen and shelter of his form,
I saw him show the ravening Sphinx, the fiend
That shamed our city—how it glared and moved,
Clamped on the buckler, wrought in high relief!
And in its claws did a Cadmean bear—
Nor heretofore, for any single prey,
Sped she aloft, through such a storm of darts
As now awaits her. So our foe is here—
Like, as I deem, to ply no stinted trade
In blood and broil, but traffick as is meet
In fierce exchange for his long wayfaring!

ETEOCLES

Ah, may they meet the doom they think to bring—
They and their impious vaunts—from those on high!
So should they sink, hurled down to deepest death!
This foe, at least, by thee Arcadian styled,
Is faced by one who bears no braggart sign,
But his hand sees to smite, where blows avail—

The Seven Against Thebes

Actor, own brother to Hyperbius!
He will not let a boast without a blow
Stream through our gates and nourish our despair,
Nor give him way who on his hostile shield
Bears the brute image of the loathly Sphinx!
Blocked at the gate, she will rebuke the man
Who strives to thrust her forward, when she feels
Thick crash of blows, up to the city wall.
With Heaven's goodwill, my forecast shall be true. *ACTOR goes out.*

CHORUS *chanting*

Home to my heart the vaunting goes,
And, quick with terror, on my head
Rises my hair, at sound of those
Who wildly, impiously rave!
If gods there be, to them I plead—
Give them to darkness and the grave.

THE SPY

Fronting the sixth gate stands another foe,
Wisest of warriors, bravest among seers—
Such must I name Amphiaraus: he,
Set steadfast at the Homoloid gate,
Berates strong Tydeus with reviling words—
The man of blood, the bane of state and home
To Argos, arch—allurer to all ill,
Evoker of the Fury—fiend of hell,
Death's minister, and counsellor of wrong
Unto Adrastus in this fatal field.
Ay, and with eyes upturned and mien of scorn
He chides thy brother Polyneices to
At his desert, and once and yet again
Dwells hard and meaningly upon his name
Where it saith glory yet importeth feud.
Yea, such thou art in act, and such thy grace
In sight of Heaven, and such in aftertime
Thy fame, for lips and ears of mortal men!
"He strove to sack the city of his sires
And temples of her gods, and brought on her
An alien armament of foreign foes.
The fountain of maternal blood outpoured
What power can staunck? even so, thy fatherland
Once by thine ardent malice stormed and ta'en,
Shall ne'er join force with thee." For me, I know
It doth remain to let my blood enrich
The border of this land that loves me not—
Blood of a prophet, in a foreign grave!
Now, for the battle! I foreknow my doom,
Yet it shall be with honour. So he spake,
The prophet, holding up his targe of bronze
Wrought without blazon, to the ears of men
Who stood around and heeded not his word.

The Seven Against Thebes

For on no bruit and rumour of great deeds,
But on their doing, is his spirit set,
And in his heart he reaps a furrow rich,
Wherefrom the foison of good counsel springs.
Against him, send brave heart and hand of might;
For the god-lover is man's fiercest foe.

ETEOCLES

Out on the chance that couples mortal men,
Linking the just and impious in one!
In every issue, the one curse is this—
Companionship with men of evil heart!
A baneful harvest, let none gather it!
The field of sin is rank, and brings forth death
At whiles a righteous man who goes aboard
With reckless mates, a horde of villainy,
Dies by one death with that detested crew;
At whiles the just man, joined with citizens
Ruthless to strangers, recking nought of Heaven,
Trapped, against nature, in one net with them,
Dies by God's thrust and all-including blow.
So will this prophet die, even Oecleus' child,
Sage, just, and brave, and loyal towards Heaven,
Potent in prophecy, but mated here
With men of sin, too boastful to be wise!
Long is their road, and they return no more,
And, at their taking-off, by hard of Zeus,
The prophet too shall take the downward way.
He will not—so I deem—assail the gate—
Not as through cowardice or feeble will,
But as one knowing to what end shall be
Their struggle in the battle, if indeed
Fruit of fulfilment lie in Loxias' word.
He speaketh not, unless to speak avails!
Yet, for more surety, we will post a man,
Strong Lasthenes, as warder of the gate,
Stern to the foeman; he hath age's skill,
Mated with youthful vigour, and an eye
Forward, alert; swift too his hand, to catch
The fenceless interval 'twixt shield and spear!
Yet man's good fortune lies in hand of Heaven. *LASTHENES goes out.*

CHORUS *chanting*

Unto our loyal cry, ye gods, give ear!
Save, save the city! turn away the spear,
Send on the foemen fear!
Outside the rampart fall they, rent and riven
Beneath the bolt of heaven!

THE SPY

Last, let me name yon seventh antagonist,
Thy brother's self, at the seventh portal set—
Hear with what wrath he imprecates our doom,

The Seven Against Thebes

Vowing to mount the wall, though banished hence,
And peal aloud the wild exulting cry—
The town is ta'en—then clash his sword with thine,
Giving and taking death in close embrace,
Or, if thou 'scapest, flinging upon thee,
As robber of his honour and his home,
The doom of exile such as he has borne.
So clamours he and so invokes the gods
Who guard his race and home, to hear and heed
The curse that sounds in Polyneices' name!
He bears a round shield, fresh from forge and fire,
And wrought upon it is a twofold sign—
For lo, a woman leads decorously
The figure of a warrior wrought in gold;
And thus the legend runs—I Justice am,
And I will bring the hero home again,
To hold once more his place within this town,
Once more to pace his sire's ancestral hall.
Such are the symbols, by our foemen shown—
Now make thine own decision, whom to send
Against this last opponent! I have said—
Nor canst thou in my tidings find a flaw—
Thine is it, now, to steer the course aright.

ETEOCLES

Ah me, the madman, and the curse of Heaven
And woe for us, the lamentable line
Of Oedipus, and woe that in this house
Our father's curse must find accomplishment!
But now, a truce to tears and loud lament,
Lest they should breed a still more rueful wail!
As for this Polyneices, named too well,
Soon shall we know how this device shall end—
Whether the gold-wrought symbols on his shield,
In their mad vaunting and bewildered pride,
Shall guide him as a victor to his home!
For had but justice, maiden-child of Zeus,
Stood by his act and thought, it might have been!
Yet never, from the day he reached the light
Out of the darkness of his mother's womb,
Never in childhood, nor in youthful prime,
Nor when his chin was gathering its beard,
Hath justice hailed or claimed him as her own.
Therefore I deem not that she standeth now
To aid him in this outrage on his home!
Misnamed, in truth, were justice, utterly,
If to impiety she lent her hand.
Sure in this faith, I will myself go forth
And match me with him; who hath fairer claim?
Ruler, against one fain to snatch the rule,
Brother with brother matched, and foe with foe,
Will I confront the issue. To the wall!

The Seven Against Thebes

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

O thou true heart, O child of Oedipus,
Be not, in wrath, too like the man whose name
Murmurs an evil omen! 'Tis enough
That Cadmus' clan should strive with Argos' host,
For blood there is that can atone that stain!
But—brother upon brother dealing death—
Not time itself can expiate the sin!

ETEOCLES

If man find hurt, yet clasp his honour still,
'Tis well; the dead have honour, nought beside.
Hurt, with dishonour, wins no word of praise!

CHORUS *chanting*

Ah, what is thy desire?
Let not the lust and ravin of the sword
Bear thee adown the tide accursed, abhorred!
Fling off thy passion's rage, thy spirit's prompting dire!

ETEOCLES

Nay—since the god is urgent for our doom,
Let Laius' house, by Phoebus loathed and scorned,
Follow the gale of destiny, and win
Its great inheritance, the gulf of hell!

CHORUS *chanting*

Ruthless thy craving is—
Craving for kindred and forbidden blood
To be outpoured—a sacrifice imbrued
With sin, a bitter fruit of murderous enmities!

ETEOCLES

Yea, my own father's fateful Curse proclaims—
A ghastly presence, and her eyes are dry—
Strike! honour is the prize, not life prolonged!

CHORUS *chanting*

Ah, be not urged of her! for none shall dare
To call thee coward, in thy throned estate!
Will not the Fury in her sable pal
Pass outward from these halls, what time the gods
Welcome a votive offering from our hands?

ETEOCLES

The gods! long since they hold us in contempt,
Scornful of gifts thus offered by the lost!
Why should we fawn and flinch away from doom?

CHORUS *chanting*

Now, when it stands beside thee! for its power
May, with a changing gust of milder mood,
Temper the blast that bloweth wild and rude
And frenzied, in this hour!

ETEOCLES

Ay, kindled by the curse of Oedipus—
All too prophetic, out of dreamland came
The vision, meting out our sire's estate!

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

The Seven Against Thebes

Heed women's voices, though thou love them not!

ETEOCLES

Say aught that may avail, but stint thy words.

LEADER

Go not thou forth to guard the seventh gate!

ETEOCLES

Words shall not blunt the edge of my resolve.

LEADER

Yet the god loves to let the weak prevail.

ETEOCLES

That to a swordsman, is no welcome word!

LEADER

Shall thine own brother's blood be victory's palm?

ETEOCLES

Ill which the gods have sent thou canst no—shun! *ETEOCLES goes out.*

CHORUS *singing*

strophe 1

I shudder in dread of the power, abhorred by the gods of high heaven,
The ruinous curse of the home till roof—tree and rafter be riven!
Too true are the visions of ill, too true the fulfilment they bring
To the curse that was spoken of old by the frenzy and wrath of the king!
Her will is the doom of the children, and Discord is kindled amain,

antistrophe 1

And strange is the Lord of Division, who cleaveth the birthright in twain,—
The edged thing, born of the north, the steel that is ruthless and keen,
Dividing in bitter division the lot of the children of teen!
Not the wide lowland around, the realm of their sire, shall they have,
Yet enough for the dead to inherit, the pitiful space of a grave!

strophe 2

Ah, but when kin meets kin, when sire and child,
Unknowing, are defiled
By shedding common blood, and when the pit
Of death devoureth it,
Drinking the clotted stain, the gory dye—
Who, who can purify?
Who cleanse pollution, where the ancient bane
Rises and reeks again?

antistrophe 2

Whilome in olden days the sin was wrought,
And swift requital brought—
Yea on the children of the child came still
New heritage of ill!
For thrice Apollo spoke this word divine,

The Seven Against Thebes

From Delphi's central shrine,
To Laius—Die thou childless! thus alone
Can the land's weal be won!

strophe 3

But vainly with his wife's desire he strove,
And gave himself to love,
Begetting Oedipus, by whom he died,
The fateful parricide!
The sacred seed—plot, his own mother's womb,
He sowed, his house's doom,
A root of blood! by frenzy lured, they came
Unto their wedded shame.

antistrophe 3

And now the waxing surge, the wave of fate,
Rolls on them, triply great—
One billow sinks, the next towers, high and dark,
Above our city's bark—
Only the narrow barrier of the wal
Totters, as soon to fall;
And, if our chieftains in the storm go down,
What chance can save the town?

strophe 4

Curses, inherited from long ago,
Bring heavy freight of woe:
Rich stores of merchandise o'erload the deck,
Near, nearer comes the wreck—
And all is lost, cast out upon the wave,
Floating, with none to save!

antistrophe 4

Whom did the gods, whom did the chief of men,
Whom did each citizen
In crowded concourse, in such honour hold,
As Oedipus of old,
When the grim fiend, that fed on human prey,
He took from us away?

strophe 5

But when, in the fulness of days, he knew of his bridal unblest,
A twofold horror he wrought, in the frenzied despair of his breast—
Debarred from the grace of the banquet, the service of goblets of gold
He flung on his children a curse for the splendour they dared to withhold.

The Seven Against Thebes

antistrophe 5

A curse prophetic and bitter—The glory of wealth and of pride,
With iron, not gold, in your hands, ye shall come, at the last, to divide!
Behold, how a shudder runs through me, lest now, in the fulness of time,
The house—fiend awake and return, to mete out the measure of crime! *THE SPY enters.*

THE SPY

Take heart, ye daughters whom your mothers' milk
Made milky—hearted! lo, our city stands,
Saved from the yoke of servitude: the vaunts
Of overweening men are silent now,
And the State sails beneath a sky serene,
Nor in the manifold and battering waves
Hath shipped a single surge, and solid stands
The rampart, and the gates are made secure,
Each with a single champion's trusty guard.
So in the main and at six gates we hold
A victory assured; but, at the seventh,
The god that on the seventh day was born,
Royal Apollo, hath ta'en up his rest
To wreak upon the sons of Oedipus
Their grandsire's wilfulness of long ago.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

What further woefulness besets our home?

THE SPY

The home stands safe—but ah, the princes twain—

LEADER

Who? what of them? I am distraught with fear.

THE SPY

Hear now, and mark! the sons of Oedipus—

LEADER

Ah, my prophetic soul! I feel their doom.

THE SPY

Have done with questions!—with I—with their lives crushed out—

LEADER

Lie they out yonder? the full horror speak!
Did hands meet hands more close than brotherly?
Came fate on each. and in the selfsame hour?

THE SPY

Yea, blotting out the lineage ill—starred!
Now mix your exultation and your tears,
Over a city saved, the while its lords,
Twin leaders of the fight, have parcelled out
With forged arbitrament of Scythian steel
The full division of their fatherland,
And, as their father's imprecation bade,
Shall have their due of land, a twofold grave.
So is the city saved; the earth has drunk
Blood of twin princes, by each other slain.

CHORUS *chanting*

The Seven Against Thebes

O mighty Zeus and guardian powers,
The strength and stay of Cadmus' towers!
Shall I send forth a joyous cry,
Hail to the lord of weal renewed?
Or weep the misbegotten twain,
Born to a fatal destiny
Each numbered now among the slain,
Each dying in ill fortitude,
Each truly named, each child of feud?
O dark and all-prevailing ill,
That broods o'er Oedipus and all his line,
Numbing my heart with mortal chill!
Ah me, this song of mine,
Which, Thyad-like, I woke, now falleth still,
Or only tells of doom,
And echoes round a tomb!
Dead are they, dead! in their own blood they lie
Ill-omened the concert that hails our victory!
The curse a father on his children spake
Hath faltered not, nor failed!
Nought, Laius! thy stubborn choice availed—
First to beget, then, in the after day
And for the city's sake,
The child to slay!
For nought can blunt nor mar
The speech oracular!
Children of teen! by disbelief ye erred—
Yet in wild weeping came fulfilment of the word! *ANTIGONE and ISMENE approach, with a train of mourners.*
bearing the bodies of ETEOCLES and POLYNEICES.

Look up, look forth! the doom is plain,
Nor spake the messenger in vain!
A twofold sorrow, twofold strife—
Each brave against a brother's life!
In double doom hath sorrow come
How shall I speak it?—on the home!
Alas, my sisters! be your sighs the gale,
The smiting of your brows the plash of oars,
Wafting the boat, to Acheron's dim shores
That passeth ever, with its darkened sail,
On its uncharted voyage and sunless way,
Far from thy beams, Apollo, god of day—
The melancholy bark
Bound for the common bourn, the harbour of the dark!

Look up, look yonder! from the home
Antigone, Ismene come,
On the last, saddest errand bound,
To chant a dirge of doleful sound,
With agony of equal pain
Above their brethren slain!
Their sister-bosoms surely swell,

The Seven Against Thebes

Heart with rent heart according well
In grief for those who fought and fell!
Yet—ere they utter forth their woe
We must awake the rueful strain
To vengeful powers, in realms below,
And mourn hell's triumph o'er the slain!

Alas! of all, the breast who bind,—
Yea, all the race of womankind—
O maidens, ye are most bereaved!
For you, for you the tear—drops start—
Deem that in truth, and undeceived,
Ye hear the sorrows of my heart! *To the dead*
Children of bitterness, and sternly brave—
One, proud of heart against persuasion's voice,
One, against exile proof! ye win your choice—
Each in your fatherland, a separate grave!
Alack, on house and heritage
They brought a baneful doom, and death for wage!
One strove through tottering walls to force his way,
One claimed, in bitter arrogance, the sway,
And both alike, even now and here,
Have closed their suit, with steel for arbiter!
And lo, the Fury—fiend of Oedipus, their sire,
Hath brought his curse to consummation dire
Each in the left side smitten, see them laid—
The children of one womb,
Slain by a mutual doom!
Alas, their fate! the combat murderous,
The horror of the house,
The curse of ancient bloodshed, now repaid!
Yea, deep and to the heart the deathblow fell,
Edged by their feud ineffable—
By the grim curse, their sire did imprecate
Discord and deadly hate!
Hark, how the city and its towers make moan—
How the land mourns that held them for its own!
Fierce greed and fell division did they blend,
Till death made end!
They strove to part the heritage in twain,
Giving to each a gain—
Yet that which struck the balance in the strife,
The arbitrating sword,
By those who loved the twain is held abhorred—
Loathed is the god of death, who sundered each from life!
Here, by the stroke of steel, behold! they lie—
And rightly may we cry
Beside their fathers, let them here be laid—
Iron gave their doom, with iron their graves be made—
A lack, the slaying sword, alack, th' entombing spade!
Alas, a piercing shriek, a rending groan,

The Seven Against Thebes

A cry unfeigned of sorrow felt at heart!
With shuddering of grief, with tears that start,
With wailful escort, let them hither come—
For one or other make divided moan!
No light lament of pity mixed with gladness,
But with true tears, poured from the soul of sadness,
Over the princes dead and their bereaved home
Say we, above these brethren dead,
On citizen, on foreign foe,
Brave was their rush, and stern their blow—
Now, lowly are they laid!
Beyond all women upon earth
Woe, woe for her who gave them birth!
Unknowingly, her son she wed—
The children of that marriage-bed,
Each in the self-same womb, were bred—
Each by a brother's hand lies dead!

Yea, from one seed they sprang, and by one fate
Their heritage is desolate,
The heart's division sundered claim from claim,
And, from their feud, death came!
Now is their hate allayed,
Now is their life-stream shed,
Ensanguining the earth with crimson dye—
Lo, from one blood they sprang, and in one blood they lie!
A grievous arbiter was given the twain—
The stranger from the northern main,
The sharp, dividing sword,
Fresh from the forge and fire
The War-god treacherous gave ill award
And brought their father's curse to a fulfilment dire!
They have their portion—each his lot and doom,
Given from the gods on high!
Yea, the piled wealth of fatherland, for tomb,
Shall underneath them lie!
Alas, alas! with flowers of fame and pride
Your home ye glorified;
But, in the end, the Furies gathered round
With chants of boding sound,
Shrieking, In wild defeat and disarray,
Behold, ye pass away!
The sign of Ruin standeth at the gate,
There, where they strove with Fate—
And the ill power beheld the brothers' fall,
And triumphed over all! *ANTIGONE, ISMENE, and the CHORUS all take part in the following responsive dirge.*
Thou wert smitten, in smiting,
Thou didst slay, and wert slain—
By the spear of each other
Ye lie on the plain,
And ruthless the deed that ye wrought was, and ruthless the death of the twain!

The Seven Against Thebes

Take voice, O my sorrow!
Flow tear upon tear—
Lay the slain by the slayer,
Made one on the bier!
Our soul in distraction is lost, and we mourn o'er the prey of the spear!

Ah, woe for your ending,
Unbrotherly wrought!
And woe for the issue,
The fray that ye fought,
The doom of a mutual slaughter whereby to the grave ye are brought!

Ah, twofold the sorrow—
The heard and the seen!
And double the tide
Of our tears and our teen,
As we stand by our brothers in death and wail for the love that has been!

O grievous the fate
That attends upon wrong!
Stern ghost of our sire,
Thy vengeance is long!
Dark Fury of hell and of death, the hands of thy kingdom are strong!

O dark were the sorrows
That exile hath known!
He slew, but returned not
Alive to his own!
He struck down a brother, but fell, in the moment of triumph hewn down!

O lineage accurst,
O doom and despair!
Alas, for their quarrel,
The brothers that were!
And woe! for their pitiful end, who once were our love and our care!

O grievous the fate
That attends upon wrong)
Stern ghost of our sire,
Thy vengeance is long!
Dark Fury of hell and of death, the hands of thy kingdom are strong!

By proof have ye learnt it!
At once and as one,
O brothers beloved,
To death ye were, done!
Ye came to the strife of the sword, and behold! ye are both overthrown!

O grievous the tale is,
And grievous their fall,

The Seven Against Thebes

To the house, to the land,
And to me above all!
Ah, God! for the curse that hath come, the sin and the ruin withal!

O children distraught,
Who in madness have died!
Shall ye rest with old kings
In the place of their pride?
Alas for the wrath of your sire if he findeth you laid by his side! *A HERALD enters.*

HERALD

I bear command to tell to one and all
What hath approved itself and now is law,
Ruled by the counsellors of Cadmus' town.
For this Eteocles, it is resolved
To lay him on his earth-bed, in this soil,
Not without care and kindly sepulture.
For why? he hated those who hated us,
And, with all duties blanielessly performed
Unto the sacred ritual of his sires,
He met such end as gains our city's grace,—
With auspices that do ennoble death.
Such words I have in charge to speak of him:
But of his brother Polyneices, this—
Be he cast out unburied, for the dogs
To rend and tear: for he presumed to waste
The land of the Cadmeans, had not Heaven—
Some god of those who aid our fatherland—
Opposed his onset, by his brother's spear,
To whom, tho' dead, shall consecration come!
Against him stood this wretch, and brought a horde
Of foreign foemen, to beset our town.
He therefore shall receive his recompense,
Buried ignobly in the maw of kites—
No women-wailers to escort his corpse
Nor pile his tomb nor shrill his dirge anew—
Unhouselled, unattended, cast away
So, for these brothers, doth our State ordain.

ANTIGONE

And I—to those who make such claims of rule
In Cadmus' town—I, though no other help, *Pointing to the body of POLYNEICES*
I, I will bury this my brother's corse
And risk your wrath and what may come of it!
It shames me not to face the State, and set
Will against power, rebellion resolute:
Deep in my heart is set my sisterhood,
My common birthright with my brothers, born
All of one womb, her children who, for woe,
Brought forth sad offspring to a sire ill-starred.
Therefore, my soul! take thou thy willing share,
In aid of him who now can will no more,

The Seven Against Thebes

Against this outrage: be a sister true,
While yet thou livest, to a brother dead!
Him never shall the wolves with ravening maw
Rend and devour: I do forbid the thought!
I for him, I—albeit a woman weak—
In place of burial—pit, will give him rest
By this protecting handful of light dust
Which, in the lap of this poor linen robe,
I bear to hallow and bestrew his corpse
With the due covering. Let none gainsay!
Courage and craft shall arm me, this to do.

HERALD

I charge thee, not to flout the city's law!

ANTIGONE

I charge thee, use no useless heralding!

HERALD

Stern is a people newly 'scaped from death.

ANTIGONE

Whet thou their sternness! burial he shall have.

HERALD

How? grace of burial, to the city's foe?

ANTIGONE

God hath not judged him separate in guilt.

HERALD

True—till he put this land in jeopardy.

ANTIGONE

His rights usurped, he answered wrong with wrong.

HERALD

Nay—but for one man's sin he smote the State.

ANTIGONE

Contention doth out-talk all other gods!

Prate thou no more—I will to bury him.

HERALD

Will, an thou wilt! but I forbid the deed. *The HERALD goes out.*

CHORUS *singing*

Exulting Fates, who waste the line
And whelm the house of Oedipus!
Fiends, who have slain, in wrath condign,
The father and the children thus!
What now befits it that I do,
What meditate, what undergo?
Can I the funeral rite refrain,
Nor weep for Polyneices slain?
But yet, with fear I shrink and thrill,
Presageful of the city's will!
Thou, O Eteocles, shalt have
Full rites, and mourners at thy grave,
But he, thy brother slain, shall he,
With none to weep or cry Alas,
To unbefriended burial pass?

The Seven Against Thebes

Only one sister o'er his bier,
To raise the cry and pour the tear—
Who can obey such stern decree?

SEMI-CHORUS

Let those who hold our city's sway
Wreak, or forbear to wreak, their will
On those who cry, Ah, well—a-day!
Lamenting Polyneices still!
We will go forth and, side by side
With her, due burial will provide!
Royal he was; to him be paid
Our grief, wherever he be laid!
The crowd may sway, and change, and still
Take its caprice for justice' will
But we this dead Eteocles,
As Justice wills and Right decrees,
Will bear unto his grave!
For—under those enthroned on high
And Zeus' eternal royalty—
He unto us salvation gave!
He saved us from a foreign yoke,—
A wild assault of outland folk,
A savage, alien wave!