

# **THE SUPPLIANTS**

by Euripides



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translated by E. P. Coleridge

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CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY  
AETHRA, mother of THESEUS  
CHORUS OF ARGIVE MOTHERS  
THESEUS, King of Athens  
ADRASTUS, King of Argos  
HERALD, of Creon, King of Thebes  
MESSENGER  
EVADNE, wife of Capaneus  
IPHIS, father of EVADNE  
CHILDREN of the slain chieftains  
ATHENA  
Guards, attendants, soldiers

(SCENE:—Before the temple of Demeter at Eleusis. On the steps of the great altar is seated AETHRA. Around her, in the garb of suppliants, is the CHORUS OF ARGIVE MOTHERS. ADRASTUS lies on the ground before the altar, crushed in abject grief. The CHILDREN of the slain chieftains stand nearby. Around the altar are the attendants of the goddess.)

## AETHRA

O DEMETER, guardian of this Eleusinian land, and ye servants of the goddess who attend her fane, grant happiness to me and my son Theseus, to the city of Athens and the country of Pittheus, wherein my father reared me, Aethra, in a happy home, and gave me in marriage to Aegeus, Pandion's son, according to the oracle of Loxias. This prayer I make, when I behold these aged dames, who, leaving their homes in Argos, now throw themselves with suppliant branches at my knees in their awful trouble; for around the gates of Cadmus have they lost their seven noble sons, whom on a day Adrastus, king of Argos, led thither, eager to secure for exiled Polyneices, his son-in-law, a share in the heritage of Oedipus; so now their mothers would bury in the grave the dead, whom the spear hath slain, but the victors prevent them and will not allow them to take up the corpses, spurning Heaven's laws. Here lies Adrastus on the ground with streaming eye, sharing with them the burden of their prayer to me, and bemoaning the havoc of the sword and the sorry fate of the warriors whom he led from their homes. And he doth urge me use entreaty, to persuade my son to take up the dead and help to bury them, either by winning words or force of arms, laying on my son and on Athens this task alone. Now it chanced, that I had left my house and come to offer sacrifice on behalf of the earth's crop at this shrine, where first the fruitful corn showed its bristling shocks above the soil. And here at the holy altars of the twain goddesses, Demeter and her daughter, I wait, holding these sprays of foliage, a bond that bindeth not, in compassion for these childless mothers, hoary with age, and from reverence for the sacred fillets. To call Theseus hither is my herald to the city gone, that he may rid the land of that which grieveth them, or loose these my suppliant bonds, with pious observance of the gods' will; for such as are discreet amongst women should in all cases invoke the aid of men.

## CHORUS (chanting)

strophe 1

At thy knees I fall, aged dame, and my old lips beseech thee; arise, rescue from the slain my children's bodies, whose limbs, by death relaxed, are left a prey to savage mountain beasts,

antistrophe 1

Beholding the bitter tears which spring to my eyes and my old wrinkled skin torn by my hands; for what can I do else? who never laid out my children dead within my halls, nor now behold their tombs heaped up with earth.

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strophe 2

Thou too, honoured lady, once a son didst bear, crowning thy lord's marriage with fond joy; then share, O share with me thy mother's feelings, in such measure as my sad heart grieves for my own dead sons; and persuade thy son, whose aid we implore, to go unto the river Ismenus, there to place within my hapless arms the bodies of my children, slain in their prime and left without a tomb.

antistrophe 2

Though not as piety enjoins, yet from sheer necessity I have come to the fire-crowned altars of the gods, falling on my knees with instant supplication, for my cause is just, and 'tis in thy power, blest as thou art in thy children, to remove from me my woe; so in my sore distress I do beseech thee of my misery place in my hands my son's dead body, that I may throw my arms about his hapless limbs.

(The attendants of the goddess take up the lament.)

strophe 3

Behold a rivalry in sorrow! woe takes up the tale of woe; hark! thy servants beat their breasts. Come ye who join the mourners' wail, come, O sympathetic band, to join the dance, which Hades honours; let the pearly nail be stained red, as it rends your cheeks, let your skin be streaked with gore; for honours rendered to the dead are credit to the living.

antistrophe 3

Sorrow's charm doth drive me wild, insatiate, painful, endless, even as the trickling stream that gushes from some steep rock's face; for 'tis woman's way to fall a-weeping o'er the cruel calamity of children dead. Ah me! would I could die and forget my anguish

(THESEUS and his retinue enter.)

**THESEUS**

What is this lamentation that I hear, this beating of the breast, these dirges for the dead, with cries that echo from this shrine? How fluttering fear disquiets me, lest haply my mother have gotted some mischance, in quest of whom I come, for she hath been long absent from home. Ha! what now? A strange sight challenges my speech; I see my aged mother sitting at the altar and stranger dames are with her, who in various note proclaim their woe; from aged eyes the piteous tear is starting to the ground, their hair is shorn, their robes are not the robes of joy. What means it, mother? 'Tis thine to make it plain to me, mine to listen; yea, for I expect some tidings strange.

**AETHRA**

My son, these are the mothers of those chieftains seven, who fell around the gates of Cadmus' town. With suppliant boughs they keep me prisoner, as thou seest, in their midst.

**THESEUS**

And who is yonder man, that moaneth piteously in the gateway?

**AETHRA**

Adrastus, they inform me, king of Argos.

**THESEUS**

Are those his children, those boys who stand round him?

**AETHRA**

Not his, but the sons of the fallen slain.

**THESEUS**

Why are they come to us, with suppliant hand outstretched?

**AETHRA**

I know; but 'tis for them to tell their story, my son.

**THESEUS**

To thee, in thy mantle muffled, I address my inquiries; thy head, let lamentation be, and speak; for naught can be achieved save through the utterance of thy tongue.

**ADRASTUS** (rising)

Victorious prince of the Athenian realm, Theseus, to thee and to thy city I, a suppliant, come.

**THESEUS**

What seekest thou? What need is thine?

**ADRASTUS**

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Dost know how I did lead an expedition to its ruin?

**THESEUS**

Assuredly; thou didst not pass through Hellas, all in silence.

**ADRASTUS**

There I lost the pick of Argos' sons.

**THESEUS**

These are the results of that unhappy war.

**ADRASTUS**

I went and craved their bodies from Thebes.

**THESEUS**

Didst thou rely on heralds, Hermes' servants, in order to bury them?

**ADRASTUS**

I did; and even then their slayers said me nay.

**THESEUS**

Why, what say they to thy just request?

**ADRASTUS**

Say! Success makes them forget how to bear their fortune.

**THESEUS**

Art come to me then for counsel? or wherefore?

**ADRASTUS**

With the wish that thou, O Theseus, shouldst recover the sons of the Argives.

**THESEUS**

Where is your Argos now? were its vauntings all in vain?

**ADRASTUS**

Defeat and ruin are our lot. To thee for aid we come.

**THESEUS**

Is this thy own private resolve, or the wish of all the city?

**ADRASTUS**

The sons of Danaus, one and all, implore thee to bury the dead.

**THESEUS**

Why didst lead thy seven armies against Thebes?

**ADRASTUS**

To confer that favour on the husbands of my daughters twain.

**THESEUS**

To which of the Argives didst thou give thy daughters in marriage?

**ADRASTUS**

I made no match for them with kinsmen of my family.

**THESEUS**

What! didst give Argive maids to foreign lords?

**ADRASTUS**

Yea, to Tydeus, and to Polyneices, who was Theban-born

**THESEUS**

What induced thee to select this alliance?

**ADRASTUS**

Dark riddles of Phoebus stole away my judgment.

**THESEUS**

What said Apollo to determine the maidens' marriage?

**ADRASTUS**

That I should give my daughters twain to a wild boar and a lion.

**THESEUS**

How dost thou explain the message of the god?

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**ADRASTUS**

One night came to my door two exiles.

**THESEUS**

The name of each declare: thou art speaking of both together.

**ADRASTUS**

They fought together, Tydeus with Polyneices.

**THESEUS**

Didst thou give thy daughters to them as to wild beasts?

**ADRASTUS**

Yea, for, as they fought, I likened them to those monsters twain.

**THESEUS**

Why had they left the borders of their native land and come to thee?

**ADRASTUS**

Tydeus was exiled for the murder of a kinsman.

**THESEUS**

Wherefore had the son of Oedipus left Thebes?

**ADRASTUS**

By reason of his father's curse, not to spill his brother's blood.

**THESEUS**

Wise no doubt that voluntary exile.

**ADRASTUS**

But those who stayed at home were for injuring the absent.

**THESEUS**

What! did brother rob brother of his inheritance?

**ADRASTUS**

To avenge this I set out; hence my ruin.

**THESEUS**

Didst consult seers, and gaze into the flame of burnt-offerings?

**ADRASTUS**

Ah me! thou pressest on the very point wherein I most did fail.

**THESEUS**

It seems thy going was not favoured by heaven.

**ADRASTUS**

Worse; I went in spite even of Amphiaraus.

**THESEUS**

And so heaven lightly turned its face from thee.

**ADRASTUS**

I was carried away by the clamour of younger men.

**THESEUS**

Thou didst favour courage instead of discretion.

**ADRASTUS**

True; and many a general owes defeat to that. O king of Athens, bravest of the sons of Hellas, I blush to throw myself upon the ground and clasp thy knees, I a grey-haired king, blest in days gone by; yet needs must yield to my misfortunes. I pray thee save the dead; have pity on my sorrows and on these, the mothers of the slain, whom hoary eld finds reft of their sons; yet they endured to journey hither and tread a foreign soil with aged tottering steps, bearing no embassy to Demeter's mysteries; only seeking burial for their dead, which lot should have been theirs, e'en burial by the hands of sons still in their prime. And 'tis wise in the rich to see the poor man's poverty, and in the poor man to turn ambitious eyes toward the rich, that so he may himself indulge a longing for possessions; and they, whom fortune frowns not on, should gaze on misery's presentment; likewise, who maketh songs should take a pleasure in their making; for if it be not so with him, he will in no wise avail to gladden others, if himself have sorrow in his home; nay, 'tis not even right to expect it. Mayhap thou'lt say, "Why pass the



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land of Pelops o'er, and lay this toil on Athens?" This am I bound to declare. Sparta is cruel, her customs variable; the other states are small and weak. Thy city alone would be able to undertake this labour; for it turns an eye on suffering, and hath in thee a young and gallant king, for want whereof to lead their hosts states ere now have often perished. LEADER OF THE CHORUS

I too, Theseus, urge the same plea to thee; have pity on my hard fate.

### THESEUS

Full oft have I argued out this subject with others. For there are who say, there is more bad than good in human nature, to the which I hold contrary view, that good o'er bad predominates in man, for if it were not so, we should not exist. He hath my praise, whoe'er of gods brought us to live by rule from chaos and from brutishness, first by implanting reason, and next by giving us a tongue to declare our thoughts, so as to know the meaning of what is said, bestowing fruitful crops, and drops of rain from heaven to make them grow, wherewith to nourish earth's fruits and to water her lap; and more than this, protection from the wintry storm, and means to ward from us the sun-god's scorching heat; the art of sailing o'er the sea, so that we might exchange with one another whatso our countries lack. And where sight fails us and our knowledge is not sure, the seer foretells by gazing on the flame, by reading signs in folds of entrails, or by divination from the flight of birds. Are we not then to proud, when heaven hath made such preparation for our life, not to be content therewith? But our presumption seeks to lord it over heaven, and in the pride of our hearts we think we are wiser than the gods. Methinks thou art even of this number, a son of folly, seeing that thou, though obedient to Apollo's oracle in giving thy daughters to strangers, as if gods really existed, yet hast hurt thy house by mingling the stream of its pure line with muddy waters; no! never should the wise man have joined the stock of just and unjust in one, but should have gotten prosperous friends for his family. For the deity, confusing their destinies, doth oft destroy by the sinner's fate him who never sinned nor committed injustice. Thou didst lead all Argos forth to battle, though seers proclaimed the will of heaven, and then in scorn of them and in violent disregard of the gods hast ruined thy city, led away by younger men, such as court distinction, and add war to war unrighteously, destroying their fellow-citizens; one aspires to lead an army; another fain would seize the reins of power and work his wanton will; a third is bent on gain, careless of any ill the people thereby suffer. For there are three ranks of citizens; the rich, a useless set, that ever crave for more; the poor and destitute, fearful folk, that cherish envy more than is right, and shoot out grievous stings against the men who have aught, beguiled as they are by the eloquence of vicious leaders; while the class that is midmost of the three preserveth cities, observing such order as the state ordains. Shall I then become thy ally? What fair pretext should I urge before my countrymen? Depart in peace! For why shouldst thou, having been ill-advised thyself, seek to drag our fortune down? LEADER

He erred; but with the young men rests this error, while he may well be pardoned.

### ADRASTUS

I did not choose thee, king, to judge my affliction, but came to thee to cure it; no! nor if in aught my fortunes prove me wrong, came I to thee to punish or correct them, but to seek thy help. But if thou wilt not, must be content with thy decision; for how can I help it? Come, aged dames, away! Yet leave behind you here the woven leaves of pale green foliage, calling to witness heaven and earth, Demeter, that fire-bearing goddess, and the sun-god's light, that our prayers to heaven availed us naught.

### CHORUS (singing)

...who was Pelops' son, and we are of the land of Pelops and share with thee the blood of ancestors. What art thou doing? wilt thou betray these suppliant symbols, and banish from thy land these aged women without the boon they should obtain? Do not so; e'en the wild beast finds a refuge in the rock, the slave in the altars of the gods, and a state when tempest-tossed cowers to its neighbour's shelter; for naught in this life of man is blest unto its end. Rise, hapless one, from the sacred floor of Persephone; rise, clasp him by the knees and implore him, "O recover the bodies of our dead sons, the children that I lost—ah, woe is me!—beneath the walls of Cadmus' town." Ah me! ah me! Take me by the hand, poor aged sufferer that I am, support and guide and raise me up. By thy beard, kind friend, glory of Hellas, I do beseech thee, as I clasp thy knees and hands in my misery; O pity me as I entreat for my sons with my tale of wretched woe, like some beggar; nor let my sons lie there unburied in the land of Cadmus, glad prey for beasts, whilst thou art in thy prime, I implore thee. See the teardrop tremble in my eye, as thus I throw me at thy knees to win my children burial.

### THESEUS

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Mother mine, why weepest thou, drawing o'er thine eyes thy veil? Is it because thou didst hear their piteous lamentations? To my own heart it goes. Raise thy silvered head, weep not where thou sittest at the holy altar of Demeter.

**AETHRA**

Ah woe!

**THESEUS**

'Tis not for thee their sorrows to lament.

**AETHRA**

Ye hapless dames!

**THESEUS**

Thou art not of their company.

**AETHRA**

May I a scheme declare, my son, that shall add to thy glory and the state's?

**THESEUS**

Yea, for oft even from women's lips issue wise counsels.

**AETHRA**

Yet the word, that lurks within my heart, makes me hesitate.

**THESEUS**

Shame! to hide from friends good counsel.

**AETHRA**

Nay then, I will not hold my peace to blame myself hereafter for having now kept silence to my shame, nor will I forego my honourable proposal, from the common fear that it is useless for women to give good advice. First, my son, I exhort thee give good heed to heaven's will, lest from slighting it thou suffer shipwreck; for in this one single point thou failest, though well-advised in all else. Further, I would have patiently endured, had it not been my duty to venture somewhat for injured folk; and this, my son, it is that brings thee now thy honour, and causes me no fear to urge that thou shouldst use thy power to make men of violence, who prevent the dead from receiving their meed of burial and funeral rites, perform this bounden duty, and check those who would confound the customs of all Hellas; for this it is that holds men's states together,—strict observance of the laws. And some, no doubt, will say, 'twas cowardice made thee stand aloof in terror, when thou mightest have won for thy city a crown of glory, and, though thou didst encounter a savage swine, labouring for a sorry task, yet when the time came for thee to face the helmet and pointed spear, and do thy best, thou wert found to be coward. Nay! do not so if thou be son of mine. Dost see how fiercely thy country looks on its revilers when they mock her for want of counsel? Yea, for in her toils she groweth greater. But states, whose policy is dark and cautious, have their sight darkened by their carefulness. My son, wilt thou not go succour the dead and these poor women in their need? have no fears for thee, starting as thou dost with right upon thy side; and although I see the prosperity of Cadmus' folk, still am I confident they will throw a different die; for the deity reverses all things again. LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Ah! best of friends, right well hast thou pleaded for me and for Adrastus, and hence my joy is doubled.

**THESEUS**

Mother, the words that I have spoken are his fair deserts, and I have declared my opinion of the counsels that ruined him; yet do I perceive the truth of thy warning to me, that it ill suits my character to shun dangers. For by a long and glorious career have I displayed this my habit among Hellenes, of ever punishing the wicked. Wherefore I cannot refuse toil. For what will spiteful tongues say of me, when thou, my mother, who more than all others fearest for my safety, bidst me undertake this enterprise? Yea, I will go about this business and rescue the dead by words persuasive; or, failing that, the spear forthwith shall decide this issue, nor will heaven grudge me this. But I require the whole city's sanction also, which my mere wish will ensure; still by communicating the proposal to them I shall find the people better disposed. For them I made supreme, when I set this city free, by giving all an equal vote. So I will take Adrastus as a text for what I have to say and go to their assembly, and when have won them to these views, I will return hither, after collecting a picked band of young Athenians; and then remaining under arms I will send a message to Creon, begging the bodies of the dead. But do ye, aged ladies, remove from my mother your holy wreaths, that I may take her by the hand and conduct her to the house of Aegeus; for a

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wretched son is he who rewards not his parents by service; for, when he hath conferred on them the best he hath, he in his turn from his own sons receives all such service as he gave to them.

(AETHRA leaves the altar and departs.)

**CHORUS** (singing)

strophe

O Argos, home of steeds, my native land! ye have heard with your ears these words, the king's pious will toward the gods in the sight of great Pelasgia and throughout Argos.

antistrophe 1

May he reach the goal! yea, and triumph o'er my sorrows, rescuing the gory corpse, the mother's idol and making the land of Inachus his friend by helping her.

strophe 2

For pious toil is a fair ornament to cities, and carries with it grace that never wastes away. What will the city decide, I wonder? Will it conclude a friendly truce with me, and shall we obtain burial for our sons?

antistrophe 2

Help, O help, city of Pallas, the mother's cause, that so they may not pollute the laws of all mankind. Thou, I know, dost reverence right, and to injustice dealest out defeat, a protection at all times to the afflicted.

(THESEUS addresses one of his own heralds.)

As he speaks, the HERALD from King Creon of Thebes enters.)

**THESEUS**

Forasmuch as with this thy art thou hast ever served the state and me by carrying my proclamations far and wide, so now cross Asopus and the waters of Ismenus, and declare this message to the haughty king of the Cadmeans: "Theseus, thy neighbour, one who well may win the boon he craves, begs as a favour thy permission to bury the dead, winning to thyself thereby the love of all the Erechtheidae." And if they will acquiesce, come back again, but if they hearken not, thy second message runneth thus, they may expect my warrior host; for at the sacred fount of Callichorus my army camps in readiness and is being reviewed. Moreover, the city gladly of its own accord undertook this enterprise, when it perceived my wish. Ha! who comes hither to interrupt my speech? A Theban herald, so it seems, though I am not sure thereof. Stay; haply he may save the thy trouble. For by his coming he meets my purpose half-way. **THEBAN HERALD**

Who is the despot of this land? To whom must I announce the message of Creon, who rules o'er the land of Cadmus, since Eteocles was slain by the hand of his brother Polyneices, at the sevenfold gates of Thebes?

**THESEUS**

Sir stranger, thou hast made a false beginning to thy speech, in seeking here a despot. For this city is not ruled by one man, but is free. The people rule in succession year by year, allowing no preference to wealth, but the poor man shares equally with the rich. **THEBAN HERALD**

Thou givest me here an advantage, as it might be in a game of draughts; for the city, whence I come, is ruled by one man only, not by the mob; none there puffs up the citizens with specious words, and for his own advantage twists them this way or that,—one moment dear to them and lavish of his favours, the next a bane to all; and yet by fresh calumnies of others he hides his former failures and escapes punishment. Besides, how shall the people, if it cannot form true judgments, be able rightly to direct the state? Nay, 'tis time, not haste, that affords a better understanding. A poor hind, granted be he not all unschooled, would still be unable from his toil to give his mind to politics. Verily the better sort count it no healthy sign when the worthless man obtains a reputation by beguiling with words the populace, though aforetime he was naught.

**THESEUS**

This herald is a clever fellow, a dabbler in the art of talk. But since thou hast thus entered the lists with me, listen awhile, for 'twas thou didst challenge a discussion. Naught is more hostile to a city than a despot; where he is, there are first no laws common to all, but one man is tyrant, in whose keeping and in his alone the law resides, and in that case equality is at an end. But when the laws are written down, rich and poor alike have equal justice, and it is open to the weaker to use the same language to the prosperous when he is reviled by him, and the weaker prevails over the stronger if he have justice on his side. Freedom's mark is also seen in this: "Who hath wholesome counsel to declare unto the state?" And he who chooses to do so gains renown, while he, who hath no wish, remains silent. What greater equality can there be in a city? Again, where the people are absolute rulers of

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the land, they rejoice in having reserve of youthful citizens, while a king counts this a hostile element, and strives to slay the leading men, all such as he deems discreet, for he feareth for his power. How then can a city remain stable, where one cuts short all enterprise and mows down the young like meadow-flowers in spring-time? What boots it to acquire wealth and livelihood for children, merely to add to the tyrant's substance by one's toil? Why train up virgin daughters virtuously in our homes to gratify a tyrant's whim, whenso he will, and cause tears to those who rear them? May my life end if ever my children are to be wedded by violence! This bolt I launch in answer to thy words. Now say, why art thou come? what needest thou of this land? Had not thy city sent thee, to thy cost hadst thou come with thy outrageous utterances; for it is the herald's duty to tell the message he is bidden and hie him back in haste. Henceforth let Creon send to my city some other messenger less talkative than thee.

**LEADER OF THE CHORUS**

Look you! how insolent the villains are, when Fortune is kind to them, just as if it would be well with them for ever. **THEBAN HERALD**

Now will I speak. On these disputed points hold thou this view, but the contrary. So I and all the people of Cadmus forbid thee to admit Adrastus to this land, but if he is here, drive him forth in disregard of the holy suppliant bough he bears, ere sinks yon blazing sun, and attempt not violently to take up the dead, seeing thou hast naught to do with the city of Argos. And if thou wilt hearken to me, thou shalt bring thy barque of state into port unharmed by the billows; but if not, fierce shall the surge of battle be, that we and our allies shall raise. Take good thought, nor, angered at my words, because forsooth thou rulest thy city with freedom, return a vaunting answer from thy feebler means. Hope is man's curse; many a state hath it involved in strife, by leading them into excessive rage. For whenso the city has to vote on the question of war, no man ever takes his own death into account, but shifts this misfortune on to his neighbour; but if death had been before their eyes when they were giving their votes, Hellas would ne'er have rushed to her doom in mad desire for battle. And yet each man amongst us knows which of the two to prefer, the good or ill, and how much better peace is for mankind than war,—peace, the Muses' chiefest friend, the foe of sorrow, whose joy is in glad throngs of children, and its delight in prosperity. These are the blessings we cast away and wickedly embark on war, man enslaving his weaker brother, and cities following suit. Now thou art helping our foes even after death, trying to rescue and bury those whom their own acts of insolence have ruined. Verily then it would seem Capaneus was unjustly blasted by the thunderbolt and charred upon the ladder he had raised against our gates, swearing he would sack our town, whether the god would or no; nor should the yawning earth have snatched away the seer, opening wide her mouth to take his chariot and its horses in, nor should the other chieftains be stretched at our gates, their skeletons to atoms crushed 'neath boulders. Either boast thy wit transcendeth that of Zeus, or else allow that gods are right to slay the ungodly. The wise should love their children first, next their parents and country, whose fortunes it behoves them to increase rather than break down. Rashness in a leader, as in a pilot, causeth shipwreck; who knoweth when to be quiet is a wise man. Yea and this too is bravery, even forethought. **LEADER**

The punishment Zeus hath inflicted was surely enough; there was no need to heap this wanton insult on us.

**ADRASTUS**

Abandoned wretch!

**THESEUS**

Peace, Adrastus! say no more; set not thy words before mine, for 'tis not to thee this fellow is come with his message, but to me, and I must answer him. Thy first assertion will I answer first: I am not aware that Creon is my lord and master, or that his power outweigheth mine, that so he should compel Athens to act on this wise; nay! for then would the tide of time have to flow backward, if we are to be ordered, as he thinks. 'Tis not I who choose this war, seeing that I did not even join these warriors to go unto the land of Cadmus; but still I claim to bury the fallen dead, not injuring any state nor yet introducing murderous strife, but preserving the law of all Hellas. What is not well in this? If ye suffered aught from the Argives—lo! they are dead; ye took a splendid vengeance on your foes and covered them with shame, and now your right is at an end. Let the dead now be buried in the earth, and each element return to the place from whence it came to the body, the breath to the air, the body to the ground; for in no wise did we get it for our own, but to live our life in, and after that its mother earth must take it back again. Dost think 'tis Argos thou art injuring in refusing burial to the dead? Nay! all Hellas shares herein, if a man rob the dead of their due and keep them from the tomb; for, if this law be enacted, it will strike dismay into the stoutest hearts. And art thou come to cast dire threats at me while thy own folk are afraid of giving burial to the

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dead? What is your fear? Think you they will undermine your land in their graves, or that they will beget children in the womb of earth, from whom shall rise an avenger? A silly waste of words, in truth it was, to show your fear of paltry groundless terrors. Go, triflers, learn the lesson of human misery; our life is made up of struggles; some men there be that find their fortune soon, others have to wait, while some at once are blest. Fortune lives a dainty life; to her the wretched pays his court and homage to win her smile; her likewise doth the prosperous man extol, for fear the favouring gale may leave him. These lessons should we take to heart, to bear with moderation, free from wrath, our wrongs, and do naught to hurt a whole city. What then? Let us, who will the pious deed perform, bury the corpses of the slain. Else is the issue clear; I will go and bury them by force. For never shall it be proclaimed through Hellas that heaven's ancient law was set at naught, when it devolved on me and the city of Pandion. LEADER

Be of good cheer; for if thou preserve the light of justice, thou shalt escape many a charge that men might urge. THEBAN HERALD

Wilt thou that I sum up in brief all thou wouldst say?

**THESEUS**

Say what thou wilt; for thou art not silent as it is. THEBAN HERALD

Thou shalt never take the sons of Argos from our land.

**THESEUS**

Hear, then, my answer too to that, if so thou wilt. THEBAN HERALD

I will hear thee; not that I wish it, but I must give thee thy turn.

**THESEUS**

I will bury the dead, when from Asopus' land I have removed them. THEBAN HERALD

First must thou adventure somewhat in the front of war.

**THESEUS**

Many an enterprise and of a different kind have I ere this endured. THEBAN HERALD

Wert thou then begotten of thy sire to cope with every foe?

**THESEUS**

Ay, with all wanton villains; virtue I punish not. THEBAN HERALD

To meddle is aye thy wont and thy city's too.

**THESEUS**

Hence her enterprise on many a field hath won her many blessings. THEBAN HERALD

Come then, that the warriors of the dragon-crop may catch thee in our city.

**THESEUS**

What furious warrior-host could spring from dragon's seed? THEBAN HERALD

Thou shalt learn that to thy cost. As yet thou art young and rash.

**THESEUS**

Thy boastful speech stirs not my heart at all to rage. Yet get thee gone from my land, taking with thee the idle words thou broughtest; for we are making no advance. (The THEBAN HERALD withdraws.) 'Tis time for all to start, each stout footman, and whoso mounts the car; 'tis time the bit, dripping with foam, should urge the charger on toward the land of Cadmus. For I will march in person to the seven gates thereof with the sharp sword in my hand, and be myself my herald. But thee, Adrastus, I bid stay, nor blend with mine thy fortunes, for I will take my own good star to lead my host, a chieftain famed in famous deeds of arms. One thing alone I need, the favour of all gods that reverence right, for the presence of these things insures victory. For their valour availeth men naught, unless they have the god's goodwill.

(THESEUS and his retinue depart. The following

lines between the SEMI-CHORUSES are chanted responsively.) FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

Unhappy mothers of those hapless chiefs! How wildly in my heart pale fear stirs up alarm! SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

What is this new cry thou utterest? FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

I fear the issue of the strife, whereto the hosts of Pallas march. SECOND SEMI-CHORUS

Dost speak of issues of the sword, or interchange of words? FIRST SEMI-CHORUS

That last were gain indeed; but if the carnage of battle, fighting, and the noise of beaten breasts again be heard in

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the land, what, alas! will be said of me, who am the cause thereof? **SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

Yet may fate again bring low the brilliant victor; 'tis this brave thought that twines about my heart. **FIRST SEMI-CHORUS**

Thou speak'st of the gods as if they were just. **SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

For who but they allot what'er betides? **FIRST SEMI-CHORUS**

I see much at variance in their dealings with men. **SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

The former fear hath warped thy judgment. Vengeance calls vengeance forth; slaughter calls for slaughter, but the gods give respite from affliction, holding in their own hands each thing's allotted end. **FIRST SEMI-CHORUS**

Would I could reach yon plains with turrets crowned, leaving Callichorus, fountain of the goddess! **SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

O that some god would give me wings to fly to the city of rivers twain! **FIRST SEMI-CHORUS**

So might'st thou see and know the fortunes of thy friends. **SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

What fate, what issue there awaits the valiant monarch of this land? **FIRST SEMI-CHORUS**

Once more do we invoke the gods we called upon before; yea, in our fear this is our first and chiefest trust.

**SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

O Zeus, father to the child the heifer-mother bore in days long past, that daughter of Inachus! **FIRST SEMI-CHORUS**

O be gracious, I pray, and champion this city! **SECOND SEMI-CHORUS**

'Tis thy own darling, thy own settler in the city of Argos that I am striving from outrage to rescue for the funeral pyre.

(A MESSENGER enters.)

### **MESSENGER**

Ladies, I bring you tidings of great joy, myself escaped—for I was taken prisoner in the battle which cost those chieftains seven their lives near Dirce's fount—to bear the news of Theseus' victory. But I will save thee tedious questioning; I was the servant of Capaneus, whom Zeus with scorching bolt to ashes burnt. **LEADER OF THE CHORUS**

Friend of friends, fair thy news of thy own return, nor less the news about Theseus; and if the host of Athens, too, is safe, welcome will all thy message be.

### **MESSENGER**

'Tis safe, and all hath happened as I would it had befallen Adrastus and his Argives, whom from Inachus he led, to march against the city of the Cadmeans. **LEADER**

How did the son of Aegeus and his fellow-warriors raise their trophy to Zeus? Tell us, for thou wert there and canst gladden us who were not.

### **MESSENGER**

Bright shone the sun, one levelled line of light, upon the world, as by Electra's gate I stood to watch, from a turret with a far outlook. And lo! I saw the host in three divisions, deploying its mail-clad warriors on the high ground by the banks of Ismenus; this last I heard; and with them was the king himself, famous son of Aegeus; his own men, natives of old Cecropia, were ranged upon the right; while on the left, hard by the fountain of Ares, were the dwellers by the sea, harnessed spearmen they; on either wing were posted cavalry, in equal numbers, and chariots were stationed in the shelter of Amphion's holy tomb. Meantime, the folk of Cadmus set themselves before the walls, placing in the rear the bodies for which they fought. Horse to horse, and car to car stood ranged. Then did the herald of Theseus cry aloud to all: "Be still, ye folk! hush, ye ranks of Cadmus, hearken! we are come to fetch the bodies of the slain, wishing to bury them in observance of the universal law of Hellas; no wish have we to lengthen out the slaughter." Not a word would Creon let his herald answer back, but there he stood in silence under arms. Then did the drivers of the four-horse cars begin the fray; on, past each other they drave their chariots, bringing the warriors at their sides up into line. Some fought with swords, some wheeled the horses back to the fray again for those they drove. Now when Phorbas, who captained the cavalry of the Erechtheidae, saw the thronging chariots, he and they who had the charge of the Theban horse met hand to hand, and by turns were victors and vanquished. The many horrors happening there I saw, not merely heard about, for I was at the spot where the chariots and their riders met and fought, but which to tell of first I know not,—the clouds of dust that mounted to the sky, the warriors tangled in the reins and dragged this way and that, the streams of crimson gore,

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when men fell dead, or when, from shattered chariot-seats, they tumbled headlong to the ground, and, amid the splinters of their cars, gave up the ghost. But Creon, when he marked our cavalry's success on one wing, caught up a shield and rushed into the fray, ere that despondency should seize his men; but not for that did Theseus recoil in fear; no! snatching up at once his glittering harness he hied him on. And the twain, clashing their shields together as they met in the midst of the assembled host, were dealing death and courting it, shouting loudly each to his fellow the battle-cry: "Slay, and with thy spear strike home against the sons of Erechtheus." Fierce foes to cope with were the warriors whom the dragon's teeth to manhood reared; so fierce, they broke our left wing, albeit theirs was routed by our right and put to flight, so that the struggle was evenly balanced. Here again our chief deserved all praise, for this success was not the only one he gained; no! next he sought that part of his army which was wavering; and loud he called to them, that the earth rang again, "My sons, if ye cannot restrain the earth-born warriors' stubborn spear, the cause of Pallas is lost." His word inspired new courage in all the Danaid host. Therewith himself did seize a fearsome mace, weapon of Epidaurian warfare, and swung it to and fro, and with that club, as with a sickle, he shore off necks and heads and helmets thereupon. Scarce even then they turned themselves to fly. I cried aloud for joy, and danced and clapped my hands; while to the gates they ran. Throughout the town echoed the shrieks of young and old, as they crowded the temples in terror. But Theseus, when he might have come inside the walls, held back his men, for he had not come, said he, to sack the town, but to ask for the bodies of the dead. Such the general men should choose, one who shows his bravery in danger, yet hates the pride of those that in their hour of fortune lose the bliss they might have enjoyed, through seeking to scale the ladder's topmost step. LEADER

Now do I believe in the gods after seeing this unexpected day, and feel my woes are lighter now that these have paid their penalty.

### ADRASTUS

O Zeus, why do men assert the wisdom of the wretched human race? On thee we all depend, and all we do is only what thou listest. We thought our Argos irresistible, ourselves a young and lusty host, and so when Eteocles was for making terms, in spite of his fair offer we would not accept them, and so we perished. Then in their turn those foolish folk of Cadmus, to fortune raised, like some beggar with his newly-gotten wealth, waxed wanton, and, waxing so, were ruined in their turn. Ye foolish sons of men! who strain your bow like men who shoot beyond their mark, and only by suffering many evils as ye deserve, though deaf to friends, yet yield to circumstances; ye cities likewise, though ye might by parley end your ills, yet ye choose the sword instead of reason to settle all disputes. But wherefore these reflections? This I fain would learn, the way thou didst escape; and after that I will ask thee of the rest.

### MESSENGER

During the uproar which prevailed in the city owing to the battle, I passed the gates, just as the host had entered them.

### ADRASTUS

Are ye bringing the bodies, for the which the strife arose?

### MESSENGER

Ay, each of the seven chiefs who led their famous hosts.

### ADRASTUS

What sayest thou? the rest who fell-say, where are they?

### MESSENGER

They have found burial in the dells of Cithaeron.

### ADRASTUS

On this or that side of the mount? And who did bury them?

### MESSENGER

Theseus buried them 'neath the shadow of Eleutherae's cliff.

### ADRASTUS

Where didst thou leave the dead he hath not buried?

### MESSENGER

Not far away; earnest haste makes every goal look close.

### ADRASTUS

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No doubt in sorrow slaves would gather them from the carnage.

**MESSENGER**

Slaves! not one of them was set to do this toil.

[A speech belonging to ADRASTUS has been lost.]

**MESSENGER**

Thou wouldst say so, hadst thou been there to see his loving tendance of the dead.

**ADRASTUS**

Did he himself wash the bloody wounds of the hapless youths?

**MESSENGER**

Ay, and strewed their biers and wrapped them in their shrouds.

**ADRASTUS**

An awful burden this, involving some disgrace.

**MESSENGER**

Why, what disgrace to men are their fellows' sorrows?

**ADRASTUS**

Ah me! how much rather had I died with them!

**MESSENGER**

'Tis vain to weep and move to tears these women.

**ADRASTUS**

Methinks 'tis they who give the lesson. Enough of that! My hands lift at meeting of the dead, and pour forth a tearful dirge to Hades, calling on my friends, whose loss I mourn in wretched solitude; for this one thing, when once 'tis spent, man cannot recover, the breath of life, though he knoweth ways to get his wealth again.

**CHORUS** (singing)

strophe

Joy is here and sorrow too,—for the state fair fame, and for our captains double meed of honour. Bitter for me it is to see the limbs of my dead sons, and yet a welcome sight withal, because I shall behold the unexpected day after sorrow's cup was full.

antistrophe

Would that Father Time had kept me unwed from my youth up e'en till now when I am old! What need had I of children? Methinks I should not have suffered overmuch, had I never borne the marriage—yoke; but now I have my sorrow full in view, the loss of children dear.

Lo! I see the bodies of the fallen youths. Woe is me! would I could join these children in their death and descend to Hades with them!

(THESEUS and his soldiers enter, carrying the corpses of the slain chieftains. ADRASTUS and the CHORUS chant the lament responsively.)

**ADRASTUS**

Mothers, raise the wail for the dead departed; cry in answer when ye hear my note of woe.

**CHORUS**

My sons, my sons! O bitter words for loving mothers to address to you! To thee, my lifeless child, I call.

**ADRASTUS**

Woe! woe!

**CHORUS**

Ah me, my sufferings!

**ADRASTUS**

Alas! We have endured, alas!—

**CHORUS**

Sorrows most grievous.

**ADRASTUS**

O citizens of Argos! do ye not behold my fate?

**CHORUS**



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They see thee, and me the hapless mother, reft of her children.

**ADRASTUS**

Bring near the blood-boltered corpses of those hapless chiefs, foully slain by foes unworthy, with whom lay the decision of the contest.

**CHORUS**

Let me embrace and hold my children to my bosom in my enfolding arms.

**ADRASTUS**

There, there! thou hast—

**CHORUS**

Sorrows heavy enough to bear.

**ADRASTUS**

Ah me!

**CHORUS**

Thy groans mingle with those of their parents.

**ADRASTUS**

Hear me.

**CHORUS**

O'er both of us thou dost lament.

**ADRASTUS**

Would God the Theban ranks had laid me dead in the dust!

**CHORUS**

Oh that I had ne'er been wedded to a husband!

**ADRASTUS**

Ah! hapless mothers, behold this sea of troubles!

**CHORUS**

Our nails have ploughed our cheeks in furrows, and o'er our heads have we strewn ashes.

**ADRASTUS**

Ah me! ah me! Oh that earth's floor would swallow me, or the whirlwind snatch me away, or Zeus's flaming bolt descend upon my head!

**CHORUS**

Bitter the marriages thou didst witness, bitter the oracle of Phoebus! The curse of Oedipus, fraught with sorrow, after desolating his house, is come on thee.

**THESEUS**

I meant to question thee when thou wert venting thy lamentations to the host, but I will let it pass; yet, though I dropped the matter then and left it alone, I now do ask Adrastus, "Of what lineage sprang those youths, to shine so bright in chivalry?" Tell it to our younger citizens of thy fuller wisdom, for thou art skilled to know. Myself beheld their daring deeds, too high for words to tell, whereby they thought to capture Thebes. One question will I spare thee, lest I provoke thy laughter; the foe that each of them encountered in the fray, the spear from which each received his death-wound. These be idle tales alike for those who hear or him who speaks, that any man amid the fray, when clouds of darts are hurtling before his eyes, should declare for certain who each champion is. I could not ask such questions, nor yet believe those who dare assert the like; for when a man is face to face with the foe, he scarce can see even that which 'tis his bounden duty to observe.

**ADRASTUS**

Hearken then. For in giving this task to me thou findest a willing eulogist of friends, whose praise I would declare in all truth and sincerity. Dost see yon corpse by Zeus's bolt transfixed? That is Capaneus; though he had ample wealth, yet was he the last to boast of his prosperity; nor would he ever vaunt himself above a poorer neighbour, but shunned the man whose sumptuous board had puffed him up too high and made him scorn mere competence, for he held that virtue lies not in greedy gluttony, but that moderate means suffice. True friend was he, alike to present or to absent friends the same; of such the number is not great. His was guileless character, a courteous address, that left no promise unperformed either towards his own household or his fellow-citizens. The next I name is Eteoclus; a master he of other kinds of excellence; young, nor richly dowered with store, yet high in

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honour in the Argive land. And though his friends oft offered gifts of gold, he would not have it in his house, to make his character its slave by taking wealth's yoke upon him. Not his city, but those that sinned against her did he hate, for a city is no wise to be blamed if it get an evil name by reason of an evil governor. Such another was Hippomedon, third of all this band; from his very boyhood he refrained from turning towards the allurements of the Muses, to lead life of ease; his home was in the fields, and gladly would he school his nature to hardships with a view to manliness, aye hasting to the chase, rejoicing in his steeds or straining of his bow, because he would make himself of use unto his state. Next behold the huntress Atalanta's son, Parthenopaeus, a youth of peerless beauty; from Arcady he came even to the streams of Inachus, and in Argos spent his boyhood. There, when he grew to man's estate, first, as is the duty of strangers settled in another land, he showed no pique or jealousy against the state, became no quibbler, chiefest source of annoyance citizen or stranger can give, but took his stand amid the host, and fought for Argos as he were her own son, glad at heart whenso the city prospered, deeply grieved if e'er reverses came; many a lover though he had midst men and maids, yet was he careful to avoid offence. Of Tydeus next the lofty praise I will express in brief; no brilliant spokesman he, but a clever craftsman in the art of war, with many a shrewd device; inferior in judgment to his brother Meleager, yet through his warrior skill lending his name to equal praise, for he had found in arms a perfect science; his was an ambitious nature, a spirit rich in store of deeds, with words less fully dowered. From this account then wonder not, Theseus, that they dared to die before the towers; for noble nurture carries honour with it, and every man, when once he hath practised virtue, scorns the name of villain. Courage may be learnt, for even a babe doth learn to speak and hear things it cannot comprehend; and whatso'er a child hath learnt, this it is his wont to treasure up till he is old. So train up your children in a virtuous way.

**CHORUS** (chanting)

Alas! my son, to sorrow I bare thee and carried thee within my womb, enduring the pangs of travail; but now Hades takes the fruit of all my hapless toil, and I that had a son am left, ah me! with none to nurse my age.

**THESEUS**

As for the noble son of Oecleus, him, while yet he lived, the gods snatched hence to the bowels of the earth, and his chariot too, manifestly blessing him; while I myself may truthfully tell the praises of the son of Oedipus, that is, Polyneices, for he was my guest-friend ere he left the town of Cadmus and crossed to Argos in voluntary exile. But dost thou know what I would have thee do in this?

**ADRASTUS**

I know naught save this,—to yield obedience to thy hests.

**THESEUS**

As for yon Capaneus, stricken by the bolt of Zeus—

**ADRASTUS**

Wilt bury him apart as a consecrated corpse?

**THESEUS**

Even so; but all the rest on one funeral pyre.

**ADRASTUS**

Where wilt thou set the tomb apart for him?

**THESEUS**

Here near this temple have I builded him a sepulchre.

**ADRASTUS**

Thy thralls forthwith must undertake this toil.

**THESEUS**

Myself will look to those others; let the biers advance.

**ADRASTUS**

Approach your sons, unhappy mothers.

**THESEUS**

This thy proposal, Adrastus, is anything but good.

**ADRASTUS**

Must not the mothers touch their sons?

**THESEUS**

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It would kill them to see how they are altered.

**ADRASTUS**

'Tis bitter, truly, to see the dead even at the moment of death.

**THESEUS**

Why then wilt thou add fresh grief to them?

**ADRASTUS**

Thou art right. Ye needs must patiently abide, for the words of Theseus are good. But when we have committed them unto the flames, ye shall collect their bones. O wretched sons of men! Why do ye get you weapons and bring slaughter on one another? Cease therefrom, give o'er your toiling, and in mutual peace keep safe your cities. Short is the span of life, so 'twere best to run its course as lightly as we may, from trouble free.

(The corpses, followed by the CHILDREN of the slain chieftains, are carried off to the pyre which is kindled within the sight of the persons on the stage.)

**CHORUS** (singing)

strophe

No more a happy mother I, with children blest; no more I share, among Argive women, who have sons, their happy lot; nor any more will Artemis in the hour of travail kindly greet these childless mothers. Most dreary is my life, and like some wandering cloud drift before the howling blast.

antistrophe

The seven noblest sons in Argos once we had, we seven hapless mothers; but now my sons are dead, I have no child, and on me steals old age in piteous wise, nor 'mongst the dead nor 'mongst the living do I count myself, having as it were a lot apart from these.

Tears alone are left me; in my house sad memories of my son are stored; mournful tresses shorn from his head, chaplets that he wore, libations for the dead departed, and songs, but not such as golden-haired Apollo welcometh; and when I wake to weep, my tears will ever drench the folds of my robe upon my bosom. Ah! there I see the sepulchre ready e'en now for Capaneus, his consecrated tomb, and the votive offerings Theseus gives unto the dead outside the shrine, and nigh yon lightning-smitten chief I see his noble bride, Evadne, daughter of King Iphis. Wherefore stands she on the towering rock, which o'ertops this temple, advancing along yon path?

(EVADNE is seen on a rock which overhangs the burning pyre. She is dressed as though for a festival.)

**EVADNE** (chanting)

What light, what radiancy did the sun-god's car dart forth, and the moon athwart the firmament, while round her in the gloom swift stars careered, in the day that the city of Argos raised the stately chant of joy at my wedding, in honour of my marriage with mail-clad Capaneus? Now from my home in frantic haste with frenzied mind rush to join thee, seeking to share with thee the fire's bright flame and the self-same tomb, to rid me of my weary life in Hades' halls, and of the pains of life; yea, for 'tis the sweetest end to share the death of those we love, if only fate will sanction it. LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Behold yon pyre, which thou art overlooking, nigh thereto, set apart for Zeus! There is thy husband's body, vanquished by the blazing bolt.

**EVADNE** (chanting)

Life's goal I now behold from my station here; may fortune aid me in my headlong leap from this rock in honour's cause, down into the fire below. to mix my ashes in the ruddy blaze with my husband's, to lay me side by side with him, there in the couch of Persephone; for ne'er will to save my life, prove untrue to thee where thou liest in thy grave. Away with life and marriage too! Oh! may my children live to see the dawn of a fairer, happier wedding-day in Argos! May loyalty inspire the husband's heart, his nature fusing with his wife's! LEADER  
Lo! the aged Iphis, thy father, draweth nigh to hear thy startling speech, which yet he knows not and will grieve to learn.

(IPHIS enters.)

**IPHIS**

Unhappy child! lo! I am come, a poor old man, with twofold sorrow in my house to mourn, that I may carry to his native land the corpse of my son Eteoclus, slain by the Theban spear, and further in quest of my daughter who

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rushed headlong from the house, for she was the wife of Capaneus and longed with him to die. Ere this she was well guarded in my house, but, when I took the watch away in the present troubles, she escaped. But I feel sure that she is here; tell me if ye have seen her.

**EVADNE**

Why question them? Lo, here upon the rock, father, o'er the pyre of Capaneus, like some bird I hover lightly, in my wretchedness.

**IPHIS**

What wind hath blown thee hither, child? Whither thy journey? Why didst thou pass the threshold of my house and seek this land?

**EVADNE**

It would but anger thee to hear what I intend, and so I fain would keep thee ignorant, my father.

**IPHIS**

What hath not thy own father a right to know?

**EVADNE**

Thou wouldst not wisely judge my purpose.

**IPHIS**

Why dost thou deck thyself in that apparel?

**EVADNE**

A purport strange this robe conveys, father.

**IPHIS**

Thou hast no look of mourning for thy lord.

**EVADNE**

No, the reason why I thus am decked is strange, maybe.

**IPHIS**

Dost thou in such garb appear before a funeral-pyre?

**EVADNE**

Yea, for hither it is I come to take the meed of victory.

**IPHIS**

"Victory!" What victory? This would I learn of thee.

**EVADNE**

A victory o'er all women on whom the sun looks down.

**IPHIS**

In Athena's handiwork or in prudent counsel?

**EVADNE**

In bravery; for I will lay me down and die with my lord.

**IPHIS**

What dost thou say? What is this silly riddle thou propoundest?

**EVADNE**

To yonder pyre where lies dead Capaneus, I will leap down.

**IPHIS**

My daughter, speak not thus before the multitude!

**EVADNE**

The very thing I wish, that every Argive should learn it.

**IPHIS**

Nay, I will ne'er consent to let thee do this deed.

**EVADNE**

'Tis all one; thou shalt never catch me in thy grasp. Lo! I cast me down, no joy to thee, but to myself and to my husband blazing on the pyre with me.

(She leaps into the pyre.)

**CHORUS** (chanting)

O lady, thou hast done a fearful deed!

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### **IPHIS**

Ah me! I am undone, ye dames of Argos!

### **CHORUS** (chanting)

Alack, alack! a cruel blow is this to thee, but thou must yet witness, poor wretch, the full horror of this deed.

### **IPHIS**

A more unhappy wretch than me ye could not find.

### **CHORUS** (chanting)

Woe for thee, unhappy man! Thou, old sir, hast been made partaker in the fortune of Oedipus, thou and my poor city too.

### **IPHIS**

Ah, why are mortal men denied this boon, to live their youth twice o'er, and twice in turn to reach old age? If aught goes wrong within our homes, we set it right by judgment more maturely formed, but our life we may not so correct. Now if we had a second spell of youth and age, this double term of life would let us then correct each previous slip. For I, seeing others blest with children, longed to have them too, and found my ruin in that wish. Whereas if I had had present experience, and by a father's light had learnt how cruel a thing it is to be bereft of children, never should have fallen on such evil days as these,—I who did beget a brave young son, proud parent that I was, and after all am now bereft of him. Enough of this. What remains for such a hapless wretch as me? Shall I to my home, there to see its utter desolation and the blank within my life? or shall to the halls of that dead Capaneus?—halls I smiled to see in days gone by, when yet my daughter was alive. But she is lost and gone, she that would ever draw down my cheek to her lips, and take my head between her hands; for naught is there more sweet unto an aged sire than a daughter's love; our sons are made of sterner stuff, but less winning are their caresses. Oh! take me to my house at once, in darkness hide me there, to waste and fret this aged frame with fasting! What shall it avail me to touch my daughter's bones? Old age, resistless foe, how do I loathe thy presence! Them too I hate, whoso desire to lengthen out the span of life, seeking to turn the tide of death aside by philtres, drugs, and magic spells,—folk that death should take away to leave the young their place, when they no more can benefit the world.

(IPHIS departs. A procession enters from the direction of the pyre, led by the CHILDREN of the slain chieftains, who carry the ashes of their fathers in funeral urns. The following lines between the CHORUS and the CHILDREN are chanted responsively.)

### **CHORUS**

Woe, woe! Behold your dead sons' bones are brought hither; take them, servants of your weak old mistress, for in me is no strength left by reason of my mourning for my sons; time's comrade long have I been, and many a tear for many a sorrow have I shed. For what sharper pang wilt thou ever find for mortals than the sight of children dead?

### **CHILDREN**

Poor mother mine, behold I bring my father's bones gathered from the fire, a burden grief has rendered heavy, though this tiny urn contains my all.

### **CHORUS**

Ah me! ah me! Why bear thy tearful load to the fond mother of the dead, a handful of ashes in the stead of those who erst were men of mark in Mycenae?

### **CHILDREN**

Woe worth the hour! woe worth the day! Reft of my hapless sire, a wretched orphan shall I inherit a desolate house, torn from my father's arms.

### **CHORUS**

Woe is thee! Where is now the toil I spent upon my sons? what thank have I for nightly watch? Where the mother's nursing care? the sleepless vigils mine eyes have kept? the loving kiss upon my children's brow?

### **CHILDREN**

Thy sons are dead and gone. Poor mother! dead and gone; the boundless air now wraps them round.

### **CHORUS**

## THE SUPPLIANTS

Turned to ashes by the flame, they have winged their flight to, Hades.

**CHILDREN**

Father, thou hearest thy children's lamentation; say, shall I e'er, as warrior dight, avenge thy slaughter?

**CHORUS**

God grant it, O my child

**CHILDREN**

Some day, if god so will, shall the avenging of my father be my task; not yet this sorrow sleeps.

**CHORUS**

Alas! Fortune's sorrows are enough for me, I have enough of troubles now.

**CHILDREN**

Shall Asopus' laughing tide ever reflect my brazen arms as I lead on my Argive troops?

**CHORUS**

To avenge thy fallen sire.

**CHILDREN**

Methinks I see thee still before my eye, my father—

**CHORUS**

Printing a loving kiss upon thy cheek.

**CHILDREN**

But thy words of exhortation are borne on the winds away.

**CHORUS**

Two mourners hath he left behind, thy mother and thee, bequeathing to thee an endless legacy of grief for thy father.

**CHILDREN**

The weight of grief I have to bear hath crushed me utterly.

**CHORUS**

Come, let me clasp the ashes of my son to my bosom.

**CHILDREN**

I weep to hear that piteous word; 'it stabs me to the heart,

**CHORUS**

My child, thou art undone; no more shall I behold thee, thy own fond mother's treasure.

**THESEUS**

Adrastus, and ye dames from Argos sprung, ye see these children bearing in their hands the bodies of their valiant sires whom I redeemed; to thee I give these gifts, I and Athens. And ye must bear in mind the memory of this favour, marking well the treatment ye have had of me. And to these children I repeat the self-same words, that they may honour this city, to children's children ever handing on the kindness ye received from us. Be Zeus the witness, with the gods in heaven, of the treatment we vouchsafed you ere you left us.

**ADRASTUS**

Theseus, well we know all the kindness thou hast conferred upon the land of Argos in her need, and ours shall be a gratitude that never waxeth old, for your generous treatment makes us debtors for a like return.

**THESEUS**

What yet remains, wherein I can serve you?

**ADRASTUS**

Fare thee well, for such is thy desert and such thy city's too.

**THESEUS**

Even so. Mayst thou too have the self-same fortune!

(ATHENA appears from above.)

**ATHENA**

Hearken, Theseus, to the words that I Athena utter, telling thee thy duty, which, if thou perform it, will serve thy city. Give not these bones to the children to carry to the land of Argos, letting them go so lightly; nay, take first an oath of them that they will requite thee and thy city for your efforts. This oath must Adrastus swear, for as their king it is his right to take the oath for the whole realm of Argos. And this shall be the form thereof: "We Argives

## THE SUPPLIANTS

swear we never will against this land lead on our mail-clad troops to war, and, if others come, we will repel them." But if they violate their oath and come against the city, pray that the land of Argos may be miserably destroyed. Now hearken while I tell thee where thou must slay the victims. Thou hast within thy halls a tripod with brazen feet, which Heracles, in days gone by, after he had o'erthrown the foundations of Ilium and was starting on another enterprise, enjoined thee to set up at the Pythian shrine. O'er it cut the throats of three sheep; then grave within the tripod's hollow belly the oath; this done, deliver it to the god who watches over Delphi to keep, a witness and memorial unto Hellas of the oath. And bury the sharp-edged knife, wherewith thou shalt have laid the victims open and shed their blood, deep in the bowels of the earth, hard by the pyres where the seven chieftains burn; for its appearance shall strike them with dismay, if e'er against thy town they come, and shall cause them to return with sorrow. When thou hast done all this, dismiss the dead from thy land. And to the god resign as sacred land the spot where their bodies were purified by fire, there by the meeting of the triple roads that lead unto the Isthmus. Thus much to thee, Theseus, address; next to the sons of Argos I speak; when ye are grown to men's estate, the town beside Ismenus shall ye sack, avenging the slaughter of your dead sires; thou too, Aegialeus, shalt take thy father's place and in thy youth command the host, and with thee Tydeus' son marching from Aetolia,—him whom his father named Diomedes. Soon as the beards your cheeks o'ershadow must ye lead an armed Danaid host against the battlements of Thebes with sevenfold gates. For to their sorrow shall ye come like lion's whelps in full-grown might to sack their city. No otherwise is it to be; and ye shall be a theme for minstrels' songs in days to come, known through Hellas as "the After-born"; so famous shall your expedition be, thanks to Heaven.

### THESEUS

Queen Athena, I will hearken to thy bidding; for thou it is dost set me up, so that I go not astray. And I will bind this monarch by an oath; do thou but guide my steps aright. For if thou art friendly to our state, we shall henceforth live secure.

(ATHENA vanishes.)

### CHORUS (chanting)

Let us go, Adrastus, and take the oath to this monarch and his state; for the service they have already done us claims our reverence.

—THE END—