

Statius: The Thebaid

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BkI:1-45 Invocation to the Muses

The Muses' fire inspires my mind to tell of fraternal war,
Of alternate kingship, of guilty Thebes disputed over
In impious hatred. Goddesses, where do you command me
To begin? Shall I sing the origins of that fateful people,
Of the Sidonian rape, and the sway of Agenor's inexorable
Decree, that sent Cadmus to sail the waves in search?
The tale is long were I to recall that ploughman's fearful
Sowing of conflict, the warriors out of unholy furrows,
Were I to pursue all that followed; how Amphion's
Music drew piles of stone to form Thebes' Tyrian walls;
What led to Bacchus' fierce anger against his kindred city;
The savage act of Juno, through which wretched Athamas
Bent his bow, his wife Ino embracing the Ionian wave,
Plunging fearless into the depths with Palaemon her son.
Yet swiftly I leave the joys and sorrows of Cadmus'
Days behind: let my poem content itself with the troubled
House of Oedipus, since, as yet, I do not dare to sing
Of Italian arms and northern victories; twice-conquered
Rhine; the Danube twice brought under the rule of law;
The Dacians, in league, hurled from their mountain peaks;
Or earlier still the fight on the Capitoline resolved in youth;
O Domitian, a glory added to Latium's fame, who as you
Pursue your father Vespasian's aims anew, Rome wishes
Hers for eternity. Though the starry paths be more confined,
Where a shining tract of heaven, free of Boreas, the Pleiades,
The forked lightning, beckons you; though the Sun curbing
His fiery-footed steeds set his radiant halo on your brow,
Or Jove, on high, grant you an equal share of the wide sky,
May you, powerful on earth and sea, forgo the heavens,
May you rest content with the governance of mankind.
A time will come, when filled with brighter Pierian flame,
I shall sing your deeds: now, I but tune the lyre, enough
To recount Aonian conflict; a sceptre fatal to two brothers;
Anger outlasting death, flames warring still in strife above

The pyre; the bodies of kings left unburied, and cities
Emptied by continual slaughter, while Dirce's crystal
Spring ran red with Lernaean blood, Thetis horrified
As the Ismenus, accustomed to flow past arid shores,
Rose in mighty flood. What hero would you have me first
Recall, Clio? Shall it be Tydeus, extravagant in his wrath?
Or the laurel-crowned seer Amphiaraus' precipitous fall?
Wild Hippomedon too urges himself upon me, driving-on
The hostile corpse-filled waters, and I must mourn bold
Parthenopaeus, sing Capaneus' unheard-of consternation.

BkI:46-87 Oedipus invokes Tisiphone

Once Oedipus with guilty hand had pierced his impious eyes,
And, condemned to eternal night, concealed his shame
He dragged out what life was left in a long drawn-out dying.
He pledged himself to darkness, and in the furthest corner
Of his dwelling he kept house, far from the rays of heaven;
Yet the fierce light of his conscience hovered round him
On restless wings, the avenging Furies were at his heart.
There he turned his sightless orbs, in crude, pitiful living
Punishment, towards the air, struck at the echoing earth
With bloodied hands, and uttered this prayer in wrath:
'You Gods that rule guilty spirits and Tartarus too small
For retribution, and you, Styx, livid in the shadowy deep
I see; and you, Tisiphone, to whom I pray so often,
Assent, and grant your favour to my dark request.
If I am worthy, if it was you who nursed me in your lap
When I fell from the womb, and strengthened me when
They pierced my feet; if I sought Delphi's Castalian
Spring flowing from the twin peaks, sought my father,
Though I might have lived content with Polybus as
Substitute and, catching the aged Laius in a narrow place
In triple-cleft Phocis, severed the old man's trembling head;
If, taught by you, I had the wit to solve the cruel Sphinx's
Riddle; if I entered the sweet madness of woeful marriage
With my mother, suffering many a night of sin, engendering

Children fit for you, as well you know; and if thereafter
I pressed yielding orbs against harsh fingers, relinquished sight
Beside my wretched mother's corpse; hear me, if my prayer
Is worthy and such as yourself might whisper to my frenzy!
Those I begot, no matter in what bed, failed to aid me,
Bereft of sight and sceptre, or to ease my grief with words.
Behold how, in their pride – oh agony! – these kings, made so
By my tragedy, mock at my blindness, scorn their father's pain.
Am I anathema to them too? Does the father of the gods see
And yet do nothing? Let you, at least, my fated champion,
Emerge, and set there my progeny in line for punishment.
Don this blood-stained crown I ripped with gory fingers
From my brow, spurred on by a father's prayers, get you
Between these brothers, and let steel dissolve their pact
Of blood. Queen of subterranean Tartarus, grant the act
Of evil I desire. Youthful spirits will be quick to follow.
Come, in worthy measure, and you'll know them mine.'

BkI:88-113 Tisiphone responds

The savage goddess turned her cruel face towards him
As he spoke. She chanced to be seated by foul Cocytus,
And loosing the serpent locks about her head, had let
Their snaky tongues lap at its sulphurous waters.
Now, swifter than Jove's lightning or a falling star,
She leapt from the shore: a crowd of phantoms fled
Fearing to face their mistress. She through shades,
Through fields black with the swarm of ghosts,
Sought Taenarus' threshold from which none return.
Day felt her near, Night's pitch-dark cloud obstructed
Him, frightening his gleaming horses: far-off, tall
Atlas shuddered, the sky trembling on his shoulders.
Rising swiftly from Malea's cleft she sped along
The familiar route to Thebes: no path does she travel
Faster, to and fro, holding her own Tartarus no dearer.
A hundred asps, erect, cast their shadows on her face,
A fraction of those that made her fearful hair; a steely

Light lurked in her sunken eyes, as when Thessalian
Witchcraft makes the eclipsed moon blush through cloud.
Her skin was taut and swollen, suffused with venom;
Her blackened mouth filled with fiery vapour, from which
Drought, plague and famine bring death to all; on her back
A dreadful cloak stiffens, knotted blue-black on her breast:
Atropos, the Fate, and Proserpine herself tend her dress:
Then their hands shake with wrath: the one gleams with
Funereal fire, the other lashes the air with a living snake.

BkI:114-196 She sows division In Thebes

She stood where Cithaeron's highest summit meets
The sky, green tresses hissing fiercely all as one,
A sign to earth which all the Achaean seashores
And Pelop's kingdom widely echoed. Parnassus,
Half-way to heaven, and Spartan Eurotas heard;
Oeta's mountain-range wavered and slid side-wards,
And the Isthmus barely withstood the double wave.
Ino, Palaemon's mother, caught him from the waves,
As he roamed on dolphin back, and pressed him to her.
When, at the Cadmaean citadel, Tisiphone halted
Her headlong course, and poisoned the atmosphere
With her accustomed cloud of vapour, shock gripped
The brothers' hearts and ancestral madness seized
Their minds, with envy of the other's good fortune;
Fear, engendering hatred; the fierce desire for rule;
Breach of mutual give and take; ambition impatient
Of subservience; the need to stand supreme, alone;
And conflict, the companion of shared sovereignty.
Just as two bullocks that a farmer takes from the wild
Herd and yokes to the plough, rebel; never having felt
The weight before that bows their necks and shoulders,
Such that, equally matched, they pull apart and strain
The ropes, with their crooked track vexing the furrow;
So the indomitable brothers raged in headlong strife.
Now they agreed, in alternate years, to exchange

Kingship for exile; so by malign treaty they decreed
Fortune must change sides, and the sceptre's holder
Be ever-tormented by the swift course of succession.
This was the brotherly love between them, this the sole
Barrier to war; doomed to fail before the second reign.
This too was in days before coffered ceilings gleamed
With thick gilding, our high halls columned in Greek
Marble, with wide space to hold the assembled clients.
No spears then guarded the restless sleep of kings,
No ranks then of steel-bearing sentinels, no wealth
To drown jewels with wine, and gold with dainties:
Naked power armed them, at war for a pauper's crown.
While they disputed as to who should plough cramped
Dirce's barren acres or hold the Tyrian exile's petty
Throne, justice perished, human and divine, all good,
All decency in life and death. Oh, wretched men, what
Purpose had your wrath? What though by such evil
You sought earth's boundaries, that which the sun sees
When he leaps from the eastern threshold, that which
He gazes on as he sinks beyond the gates of Spain, all
The countries his slanting rays touch, those the north
Wind cools, those the moist south warms with its heat?
What though Tyre's wealth and Phrygia's be gathered
Together in one place? A cursed citadel, a house of terror,
Sufficed to hatred, a monstrous madness was the price
Of mounting Oedipus' throne. Now Polynices' kingship
Was set aside, deferred by lot. What a day that was, for you,
In your empty palace, cruel Eteocles, seeing all power yours,
All other men subservient, no head held as high! Now,
The opposition begins amongst the Theban people, now,
The silent masses resent their king, and as is the manner
Of the populace, the coming man is favourite amongst them.
So those, wishing to harm the ruler with base venom, ever
Unwilling to suffer those above them, began to mutter:
'Is it the harsh Fates who inflict this burden on Thebes,
To be forever changing those we must fear, to bow
Our shoulders unsurely beneath alternate yokes?

Divided themselves, they control a nation's destiny,
 By force render Fortune fickle. Are we to be always
 Enslaved by each exile in turn? Father of gods and men,
 Was it you who decided that this pair should so decree?
 Or was Thebes' ancient destiny determined in the days
 When Cadmus, searched the Carpathian Sea as decreed
 Vainly seeking the Sidonian bull's seductive burden,
 Founded, as an exile, a kingdom in Hyantean fields,
 And fraternal warfare erupted from pregnant earth,
 As an augury of what faced his remote posterity?
 See how absolute power acts more cruelly, rises
 To threaten us with stern gaze? What menace
 Inhabits that face, how his pride oppresses all!
 Can he be a mere citizen again, ever? His brother
 Was kinder to the suppliant, gentler of speech, more
 Patient in doing right. No wonder, lacking sole power.
 We are a base mob, now, fit to be used by any master.
 Just as chill Boreas drives the sails one way, moist Eurus
 Another, and the ship's fate hovers between them,
 Caught in dire uncertainty, alas, a fate too cruel for any
 Nation to bear, so the one commands, the other threatens.'

BkI:197-247 Jupiter addresses the Gods

Now, at Jupiter's orders, the supreme gods assembled
 In the house of the whirling heavens, at the centre
 Of the sky. All places neighbour upon it, the spaces
 Of sunrise and sunset, land and sea revealed to light.
 Towering Jove himself makes his way among the gods,
 So that all tremble though his aspect remains serene;
 And mounts to his starry throne; nor do the skyey ones
 Dare at once to follow, waiting till the Father himself
 With tranquil gesture, allows them to be seated. Soon,
 A mass of vagrant demigods, with the river-gods kin
 To the highest clouds, and the winds, their roar restrained
 By fear, fill the golden hall. At the majesty of the mingled
 Deities the dome trembles, its heights glow a deeper blue,

And its doorways shine, florescent with arcane light.
Silence was commanded; the earth was mute with terror.
He spoke from on high (his sacred words are both weighty
And immutable, and the Fates follow his every dictum):
'I groan for the sins of earth, and the human mind that no
Vengeful Fury can satisfy! I weary of wielding my wrathful
Lightning bolts, such that the Cyclops' shoulders tire of their
Forging, and Vulcan's anvils exhaust their supplies of fuel.
Though I suffered the Sun's steeds, loosed by the unskilled
Phaethon, to set the sky on fire while the wheels ran wild,
And the earth was covered with the lad's ashes, even that
Had no effect, nor that you Poseidon, my brother, with your
Great trident let the sea roam newly-free over dry land.
Now I am forced to punish two Houses, born of my blood.
One stream descended to Adrastus in Persean Argos,
The other flowed from its source to Aonian Thebes.
The same character marks them both: who does not know
Of Cadmus' troubles, how often the host of Furies, roused
From their infernal halls, made war; of the evil bacchanals
Of the Theban women, their wild coursing through the deep
Forests, and those actions of the gods best left unspoken.
I could scarcely enumerate in the space of a day and a night
Till the following dawn, all the profane exploits of that race.
That impious heir, Oedipus, even dared to climb into his own
Father's bed, and defile his innocent mother's womb,
So returning (monstrously!) to his own source. He paid,
However, a lasting penalty before the gods, excluding light,
And he no longer breathes our air; and then, in falling,
His sons (a deed lacking all morality) trampled his blind orbs.
Now, now, shall your prayer be answered, fateful old man.
Your darkness is worthy of your desire: that Jove avenge.
I shall bring new warfare on that guilt-ridden kingship,
And tear that whole fatal stock out by the root. Let the seed
Of battle be King Adrastus' gift of his daughter in a union
Not blessed by heaven. His line too I resolve to afflict
With punishment; since Tantalus' deceit, and the outrage
Of his cruel banquet are yet present in the depths of my heart.'

BkI:248-282 Juno replies

So spoke the all-powerful Father, but wounded by his words
And with a sudden tremor in her burning heart, Juno gave
This answer: 'Is it I whom you command to wage war, O
Most righteous of the gods, is it I? You know I ever aided
The Cyclopean towers and great Phoroneus' famed sceptre
With men and wealth, though in that land you chose to kill
Argus, guardian of the Pharian heifer Io, in deadly sleep,
And enter Danae's prison tower in your aureate disguise.
I forgive your deceitful antics in bed, yet I hate that city
Where you show yourself openly; thunder; hurl what should be
Mine, the lightning-bolt, sign and compact of our great union.
Let Thebes expiate its crimes, but why make Argos its enemy?
If discord in our sacred marriage chamber is worth the price,
Then raze Samos and ancient Mycenae in war, and lay Sparta
Level with the soil. Why should your wife's altars, piled high
With eastern incense, rejoicing in festal blood, warm any land?
Let Mareotic Coptos rather know the smoke of holy vows,
Rather the mournful currents of the sistrum-rattling Nile.
If races must expiate the crimes of their ancient ancestors,
If such late resolve has entered your troubled mind, to review
Past times, how far must we return to cancel earth's mad deeds,
Amending the ages backwards? Begin at once with Olympia
From which the sea-travelled waters of Alpheus slide, retracing
From afar his Sicanian amours: or where Arcadians set your altar
(Shamelessly) on sullied ground. Where sped Oenomaus' chariot,
A gift of Mars, and horses fit to be stabled by Thracian Haemus.
Where yet, stark and unburied, lie the mangled heads of suitors,
Torn from their bodies. Yet the tribute of a temple there pleases
You; and Cretan Mount Ida that falsely claims your burial place.
Why begrudge me a house in the land of Tantalus? Avoid the pain
Of war, take pity on your own. There are wicked realms for you,
On every side, more fit to have royal daughters wed guilty men.'

BkI:283-311 Jupiter sends Mercury to stir up strife

So Juno ended, with both request and reproach combined. Yet
The words of his reply were not harsh, though they were firm:
'I scarcely dreamt you'd bless any action I might take against
Your Argos, despite my justice; nor do I ignore that, given any
Chance, Bacchus and Dione would plead at length for Thebes;
Though reverence for my power should forbid it. Indeed I call
On Pluto my brother's Stygian waves to witness my fixed, my
Irrevocable decree: and no speech shall ever alter my intention.
So, Mercury, move your wings, fly faster than the urging wind,
Glide through the pure air to the land of darkness, and there say
To its lord, your uncle: let aged Laius ascend to the earth above.
Slain by his son Oedipus' sword, Lethe's shore, in accord with
The laws of deep Erebus, has not yet known him. Let him carry
My commands to Eteocles, his fatal grandson, whose brother,
Polynices, hopes much from exile, stirred by Argive friendship.
Let the foul king, as he would, keep Polynices from his palace;
Let him refuse the agreed alternation of royal power. Let that
Hereafter be a cause of wrath; what follows I will surely guide.'
The grandson of Atlas obeyed his father's words, now swiftly
Fastening the winged sandals to his ankles, covering his head
With his broad hat: so moderating the heat of the fiery stars.
Then he took the wand in his right hand, which banishes sweet
Sleep, or brings it on, and with which he enters black Tartarus
And gives breath again to the bloodless shades. Down he sped,
And shivered as the thin atmosphere received him. Without
Pausing, he undertakes his high swift flight through the void,
And he traces a gigantic arc as he travels through the clouds.

BkI:312-335 Polynices journeys to the Isthmus

Long a wanderer, exiled from his native land, Polynices,
Son of Oedipus, secretly traversed the wastes of Aonia.
Time and again his thoughts dwelt on his kingship long
Overdue, and sighed at the lingering seasons, at the slow
Pace of the stars. He brooded constantly, day and night,

On this recurring question: would he ever see his brother
Humbly relinquish power, and leave him sole authority
In Thebes? He would happily barter a lifetime for that day.
Now he bemoans the long stretch of exile, now he embraces
Princely pride, and imagines himself seated there on high,
His brother already dethroned: tormenting hope plagues
His thoughts, prolongation of desire consumes the dream.
Thus he decided to strike out boldly for the cities of Inachus;
Danae's fields; Mycenae darkened when the sun turned back.
Did a Fury lead him as his guide; or the fortunes of the road;
Or did inexorable Atropos summon him in that direction?
He left the glades where Ogygian fury howled, and hills
Blood-stained by Bacchic rites. From there he passed,
To the land where Cithaeron extends, sinking gently
To the plane, and slopes its weary heights to the sea.
Here, taking the steep and narrow rocky path, leaving
Behind Sciron's infamous cliffs, and the fields of Scylla
Where purple-locked Nisus ruled, and wealthy Corinth,
In the midst of the land he could hear the twin seas roar.

BkI:336-389 Polynices reaches Argos in a storm

Now Phoebus's work was done, Titanis was rising nearby,
Through the wide silent sky, carried in her dew-wet chariot,
Parting the cool atmosphere. Now all the birds and beasts
Were still, Sleep clouding biting care, leaning down from
The air; and bringing sweet forgetfulness of life's labours.
But no reddened clouds in the sky promised day's return,
No long twilight shone with refracted light thinning shadow.
Black impenetrable night rose more densely over the earth,
Hiding the heavens. Now the caves of ice-bound Aeolia
Resounded with the wild threat of the oncoming storm.
The winds roared together in conflict, plucking at the arc
Of the sky, stirring it on its hinges, as if each would snatch
The heavens for itself. Auster, the southerly, most congealed
The night, whirling in coils of darkness, pouring dense rain
Which harsh Boreas, the north wind, solidified with his cold

Breath before it fell. Now quivering lightning seared the sky,
Now the scorched air was pierced by sudden bursts of light.
Now Nemea, now the high Arcadian peaks, Taenarus' forests,
Were drenched through. Inachus foamed in spate, Erasinus
Surged in icy flood. Embankments failed to hold the waters,
That filled the once dry courses. And foaming with ancient
Venom, Lerna's swamps surged frothing from their deeps.
Every wood was shattered; gusts broke the ancient limbs;
The shadowy haunts of Lycaeus, seen by no summer suns
Throughout the distant ages, were laid naked to the eye.
Now Polynices marvelled at rocks flung from the heights,
Now his ears were assaulted by the roar of cloud-fallen
Torrents flowing from the mountains, sweeping the flocks
And shepherds' huts away in a mad whirl. Swiftly, frantic,
He took his doubtful desolate way through black silence.
Fear and his brother Terror oppress him from every side.
Like a sailor caught on a wintry sea, to whom neither
The slow Wain nor the Moon with her friendly glow
Show his course, who hangs confused in the midst
Of the tumult on land and wave, forever anticipating
Treacherous reefs in the shallows, or cliffs with jagged
Outlines foaming above his lifted prow, so the Cadmean
Hero; crossing the dark forest; now quickening his steps;
Driving wild beasts from fearsome lairs with his great
Shield; thrusting himself through thickets (spurred on
By the strength of his dark fears) till night was overcome
By the halls of Inachus, and Larisa's pinnacle shone forth
Throwing light on the city steeps. There he hastened, urged
By hope, Juno's temple on high Prosymna lay to the left,
To the right Lerna's dark marsh-pools, scorched by Hercules.
At last he reached the open gates, and entered. There lay
The royal courtyard, there he lay down against the doors
Of the unfamiliar palace, all his limbs stiffened by wind
And rain, and welcomed restless sleep to his harsh bed.

BkI:390-446 Tydeus and Polynices quarrel

In Argos, King Adrastus, on the verge of old age, governed
His people in peace. He was of rich ancestry, tracing his line
To Jupiter on either side. He had lost his better half, supported
Though by the twin gift of flourishing daughters, and to him
Phoebus had prophesied (a fatal thing to speak of, but a truth
Soon to be revealed!) that fate was bringing each a husband,
One a tawny lion, one a bristling boar. Though their royal father,
And Amphiaraus too, who was skilled in considering the future,
Pondered this, neither understood it, since Apollo, its source,
Forbade enlightenment, so worry festered in the father's heart.
See then! Fate drives Tydeus the Olenian from ancient Calydon
(Exiled by guilt and fear, chancing to shed his brother's blood)
And in the drowsy depths of night he too trod the selfsame path.
The same chill wind and rain assailed him and, ice on his head
And shoulders, hair drenched by the stormy showers, he came
To the same yard where the earlier exile lay on the chill ground.
Here fortune stirred both to the peak of a bloodthirsty quarrel.
They disdained to shelter from the night under a shared roof.
For a while they bickered, exchanging verbal threats. Then
When hurling abuse had sufficiently inflamed their anger,
They rose and bared their chests, challenging naked combat.
Polynices was taller, long-limbed and in his prime, but equal
Strength upheld Tydeus' brave spirit, and the courage in every
Fibre of his body was all the greater despite his smaller stature.
Now they shower mighty blows, like those of javelins or those
Of Rhipaeian hailstones, on face and curving temples, or pound
On bended knees at unprotected loins. As when, at Olympia,
Jupiter's quinquennial games return, and the sand grows hot
With the athletes' sweat, while the shouting crowd spur on
Tender youth, and mothers apart wait to know who has won,
So flushed with hatred, though not inspired by thought of glory,
Those two rushed in. Clawing hands raked at the eye-sockets,
Entering deep into yielding flesh. Perhaps (anger so urged them)
They might have unsheathed the swords at their sides, perhaps
The young Theban might have fallen to the enemy's blade,

For his brother to mourn (and perhaps better so) if the old king
 Sober and full of cares, had not found sleep hard to come by,
 So wondered at this strange turmoil in the depths of night,
 At the groans from straining chests, and made his way there.
 Crossing the high halls in the bright torchlight, unbarring
 The doors, there on the threshold he meets a fearful sight,
 Torn flesh and faces stained with showers of blood. He cried:
 'What's the reason for this madness, you young strangers?
 No subject of mind would dare to commit such violence here.
 Why this fierce urge to disrupt the quiet of night with brawling?
 Was the day not long enough for this, do you find it so irksome
 To settle for peace of mind and sleep awhile? Come, explain:
 Where do you hail from; where journey, what's your dispute?
 Your blood-letting suggests the conflict of two proud races,
 And such angry quarrelling argues you are of no low degree.'

BkI:447-481 Adrastus pacifies the combatants

Scarcely had he finished before they began with a shout,
 And sideways looks: 'O gentle King of the Achaeans,
 What need for words? You can see yourself how our faces
 Stream with blood.' Such is the speech they interweave,
 In mingled tones of wrathful utterance, till Tydeus begins
 The tale in order: 'Seeking solace after sad misfortune,
 I left monster-bearing Calydon's riches and the fields
 Of Achelous. Behold, deepest night found me within
 Your borders. Why should this fellow deny me shelter
 From the storm, merely because he chanced to reach
 Your threshold before me? Even the bi-formed Centaurs,
 They say, lodge together; the Cyclopes in Etna couch
 With one another. If savage monsters have their natural
 Rules and laws, for us to share beds on the ground –
 But why continue? You will either depart, good fellow,
 Delighting in the spoils, or find me, unless my strength
 Is exhausted, sapped by grief, one born of Oeneus' race,
 And not yet degenerated from my father's warrior line.'
 'Nor do I lack high birth or courage,' answered the other,

Though, conscious of the past, he hesitated to declare
His father's name. Then the kindly Adrastus replied:
'Now come, dispel the menace that night and anger
Or courage suddenly evoked, and pass beneath my roof.
Let your right hands be clasped and pledge your hearts.
What has happened was not in vain, nor the gods absent;
Perhaps this anger was herald of your future friendship,
And the memory will not prove unpleasant.' Nor was
The old king an idle prophet, for they say that after their
Conflict they were bound in such loyalty as led Theseus
To share the worst with reckless Pirithous, and Pylades
To face Megaera's fury, and shield the maddened Orestes.
Even in the heat of that moment they allowed the king
To calm their angry hearts with words and (now amenable
As a sea the winds fought over grows calm, while a light
Lingering breeze flaps the canvas) they entered the palace.

BkI:482-532 Adrastus prays to the goddess of Night

There, Adrastus first had chance to scan the heroes' clothes
And fierce weapons. On Polynices back hung a stiffened
Lion-skin, with tangled mane, like to the one that Hercules,
Amphitryon's son, tanned and wore in Teumesos' valley,
In his youth, before he had battled with the Nemean lion.
While glorious spoils from a Calydonian boar stretched
Over Tydeus' broad shoulders, a hide bristling fearfully,
And adorned with backward-arcng tusks. Astounded
By so clear a fulfilment of the prophecy, the aged king
Acknowledged the warning that Apollo's sacred oracle
Had sounded from the echoing cave. His eyes glazed,
His frozen lips fell mute, and a tremor of joy ran through
His body. He saw that these would be those sons-in-law
Manifestly led there by a god, whose prophesied arrival,
In the symbolic semblance of wild beasts, Apollo the augur
Had enigmatically signified. Stretching his arms to the stars,
He cried: 'O Night, who clasping to you the labours of earth
And sky, send the burning stars on their wide-ranging track,

Allowing the weary creatures to recharge their spirits, until
The rising sun prompts them to prepare for toil, of your grace
You grant me the proof I have long sought in my perplexity
And error, revealing the unwinding of an ancient destiny:
Stand by that work and render your omens true. This house
Will ever worship and honour you while the years measure
Their passage. Black cattle will bow their necks, goddess,
As your chosen sacrifice, and Vulcan's flame sprinkled
With fresh milk will consume the lustral entrails. Hail,
Ancient promise of the tripods, and the darkened caves!
Fortune, I have snared the gods.' So he spoke, clasping
Both by the hand and leading them to the inner halls
Of the palace. Flames still flickered amongst the grey ash
Of the dormant altars, their heat yet warming the sacrificial
Offerings. He commanded the fires relit, the recent rites
Renewed, and rival servants ran in haste to obey his word.
The royal hall hums with varied action. Some there adorn
The couches with fine-woven purples, rustling gold-thread,
Piling cushions high, others polish the circular tables, set
Them in place. Yet others try to banish night's dark shades,
Raising lamps on gilded chains. To some falls the roasting
On spits of the raw flesh of slaughtered beasts, to others
The heaping high of baskets with corn ground by the mill.
Adrastus is pleased with his busy and obedient household.
Now he gleams himself, propped high on proud silken cloth,
On his ivory throne. There too the young guests recline,
Their wounds washed and dried, and gazing at each other's
Bruised and battered faces, mutually forgive. Then the aged
King sent for Acaste (his daughters' nurse, their faithful
Guardian, chosen to protect that modesty reserved for lawful
Love) and the long-lived monarch whispers in her listening ear.

BkI:533-595 Adrastus tells of the daughter of Crotopus (*Psamathe*)

She was not slow to obey, and his two daughters swiftly
Left the inner chambers: lovely to behold, their faces
Were equal to those of armed Pallas, and Diana of the bow,

Except that they inspired no terror. They saw the faces then
Of men new to their modest eyes. Both pallor and blushes
Showed on their noble cheeks, and their glances ashamed
Returned to their venerable father. When all had satisfied
Their appetites with the banquet, the scion of Iasus, called,
As was his custom, for the servants to bring the bowl bright
With gold, fashioned in relief, from which Danaus and old
Phoroneus were accustomed to pour libations to the gods.
Its surface was chased with sculpted figures: Perseus, born
Of the shower of gold, bore Medusa's severed snaky head,
And almost seemed leaping still into the passing breeze,
While her heavy eyes and dulled countenance seemed yet
To grow pale in the life-like gold. There Ganymede too,
The Phrygian hunter, was raised aloft in the eagle's claws,
Gargara sinking behind, Troy receding, as he rose higher;
While his hounds tire their jaws in vain, barking at clouds,
And leaping at shadows. Adrastus, poured streams of wine
From this cup, invoking the gods in turn, Apollo above all.
His crowd of servants and companions adorned with chaste
Laurel gave praise together summoning Phoebus to the altar,
For whom this festal day is celebrated, for whom there glow
The re-kindled fires, with lavish incense, on the smoking altars.
'Perhaps, young men', said the king, 'you are curious to know
Why we perform these rites, why we grant the highest honour
To Apollo? Religion persuades us to it, and not without reason.
Tested of old by grievous affliction, so the people of Argos
Now make sacrifice. Listen to me, and I will unfold the tale:
Apollo had killed the Python, engendered by Earth, the dark
Monster with its writhing coils that had smothered Delphi
Within those seven black folds, scoring the ancient oak-trees
With its scales, striking it as it lay by the Castalian spring,
Its triple-forked tongue seeking water to feed its dark venom,
The god making many wounds with his weapons, finally,
Leaving the monster spread over a hundred acres of Cirrha's
Plain, when seeking to expiate that recent slaying he came
Beneath the modest roof of our own Crotopus. In his house
He had a daughter, scarce out of childhood, an inviolate

Virgin of wondrous beauty. Better if she had never shared
Delian mischief, Phoebus' secret love! For, by the waters
Of the Inachus, Nemea's river, she was taken by the god,
And when Cynthia showed her full face for the tenth time
She gave birth to a child, destined to be Latona's grandson.
Fearing punishment (since her father would have shown no
Mercy or forgiveness, regarding that forced union) she took
To the pathless hills, and once amongst the sheepfolds secretly
Entrusted her son to a highland shepherd who might rear him.
Grassy turf was the boy's cradle, one unworthy of his birth,
And the home that sheltered him was woven of oak branches.
His limbs were warmed by a wrapping of strawberry-tree bark,
A hollow reed lulled him to sleep, sharing earth with the sheep.
But the Fates would not concede even that. As he lay unaware
On the green turf, lips open to breathe the air, a pack of rabid
Murderous dogs tore him apart, in their blood-stained jaws.
When the evil news reached his mother, the shock drove shame;
Fear, father from her mind. She filled the house with wild cries,
And distraught, with her breasts bare, went of her own will
To that father of hers and confessed. Unmoved he commanded
(Infamously!) that she enter the darkness of death she desired.

BkI:596-672 Adrastus concludes his tale

Too late, Apollo remembered their union. To avenge her cruel
Fate, he summoned a monster begat in the Furies' cruel den,
In the depths of Acheron; it had the face and breast of a girl;
Yet from its head rose a hissing snake, fronting the livid brow.
Moving by night, this fatal curse, slid foully into bedrooms;
Tore new-born infants from their mother's breast; devoured
Them in blood-stained maw; fed richly on a country's grief.
This proved too much for one Coroebus, a man noted for his
Skill and bravery in arms, who offered to lead a small chosen
Band of the hardiest youths, ready to set fame above life itself.
The monster, having plundered another home, was passing
The double gates, with the bodies of two children dangling
At her side, her claws already in their entrails, nails of iron

Hot at their tender hearts. The young hero faced her circled
By the warrior band, and buried his long blade in her breast
Of flint, sought the core of life with his glinting blade, then
Returned Pluto's monstrous shade to him, to keep forever.
All joyed to view, close at hand, the eyes darkened in death,
The dreadful flux of its belly, and the breasts clotted thick
With the gore of our lost ones. The men were stupefied, then
After tears came great rejoicing despite their pallor. Some
Crushed the dead limbs with hardened staves (vain solace
For their sorrow) thrusting sharp stones into the eye-sockets.
Their power to do so failed to assuage their anger. Carrion
Birds flew from her unfed, circling with night-bound cries,
And the jaws of ravening dogs and fearful wolves gaped dry.
Robbed of his vengeance, Apollo waxed fiercer still against
The wretched folk, and seated amongst the topmost shades
Of twin-peaked Parnassus, the cruel god sent plague-bearing
Shafts from his angry bow, spreading a dense blanket of mist
Over the fields, and the high towers built by the Cyclopes.
Sweet lives expire. Death with his blade severs the Sisters'
Threads, and clasping the defeated city bears it to the shades.
Their lord asks why: why the endless sinister fire from heaven,
Why should Sirius now reign all year round? Apollo, the cause,
Now commanded that the young men who saw the monster die
Should be sacrificed. Happy in their courage those noble spirits:
Earning a name throughout the ages, not basely hiding their act
Of bravery, nor fearing to go to certain death. Coroebus though
Stood at the entrance to Cirrha's temple, and faced the square,
Daring then to exacerbate the God's anger, with his words:
'Thymbrean Apollo, I am not here by force or in supplication.
My love of country, my clear conscience summoned me here.
Phoebus, I am the one who laid your mortal avenger low, I am
The one you seek, cruel god, with your dark clouds and murky
Light your black plague of ill omen. Though savage monsters
Be dear to the gods, though men's lives lost to the world may be
Of less value to them, though cruel heaven thus prove merciless,
Why has all Argos deserved this? Rather, I, I alone, greatest
Of gods, should offer my life to the Fates. Or does this seem

Kinder to you, to see houses desolate and the land alight,
 The men who plough it given to the flames? Why let words
 Restrain your arrows and your power? The mothers wait
 Expectantly, offering their prayers once more. I am content,
 I have deserved no mercy from you. Stir your quiver, then,
 And stretch the sounding bow; put this noble spirit to death;
 Yet as I die, dispel the dark mass that hangs over Inachian
 Argos.' A just fate waits on the deserving. Leto's fiery son
 Was gripped by reluctance to kill, and yielding he granted
 The hero life's sombre beauty: then the evil mists vanished
 From the sky and Coroeus left the threshold of Apollo's
 Temple exonerated by the astonished god. So every year
 We perform the appointed rites at this solemn festival,
 And fresh worship appeases Phoebus' shrine. You two
 Visiting this altar by chance, of what stock are you both?
 Though if the cry that reached my ears just now spoke true,
 One here descends from Calydonian Oeneus, and knows
 The rule of Porthaon's house. But who are *you* that visit
 Argos, tell? Now is the moment for a wealth of words.'

BkI:673-720 Polynices declares his parentage

At this the Ismenian hero gazed with sadness at the ground,
 And glancing at Tydeus on his left, after a long pause, spoke:
 'It would be better to have waited until the sacred rite was done,
 Before asking about my race and country, what ancient line
 I am from: it troubles me to confess it amidst the worshippers.
 But if you are so eager to know this wretched man's origin,
 My ancestor is Cadmus; my land is Mars' own Thebes;
 And Jocasta is my mother. Adrastus was moved, why hide
 From your host what he knows well? (He had recognised him.)
 He knows, news does not fail to make its way to Mycenae.
 Whoever shivers in Arctic light, or drinks from the Ganges,
 Or enters Ocean dark at sunset, or finds himself stranded
 By Syrtes' uncertain shore, knows of the king, his horror,
 And his eyes destroyed through shame. Do not complain,
 Or take on yourself the sorrows of those who reared you.

In my race too, respect for kin often went awry, yet guilt
Is not visited on later generations. If you differ from them
You may deserve success and make amends for your race.
But now with sloping shaft the icy Wain grows fainter,
Pour wine on the altar, and let us again and then again
Sing out our prayer to Leto's son, our parents' saviour.
O Father Phoebus, whether in Patara's thickets among
Snow-bound Lycian hills, or delighting to drench golden
Locks in Castalia's chaste water, whether at Thymbra
As patron of Troy, where the tale goes you carried blocks
Of that Phrygian stone on your shoulders, without reward,
Or whether you choose to favour Latona's Mount Cynthus,
Whose shadow meets the Aegean, while no longer needing
To seek for Delos, now fixed in the sea: yours is the bow
You bend against fierce enemies, yours the arrows, gifts
Of your heavenly Father, yours the ever radiant cheeks;
You have skill to read the threads the Parcae spin, the fate
Beyond, and great Jove's resolves – what plagues or wars
The year will bring to men, what kingdoms comets topple:
You conquered Phrygian Marsyas with the lyre; you spread
Earthborn Tityos over Stygian sands to your mother's honour;
Green Python and Theban Niobe shuddered to know the fall
Of your arrows; and for you alone Megaera the grim avenger
Presses food on starving Phlegyas, where he lies beneath
Echoing cliffs, urging him, as his table companion, to eat
Unholy meats, while nausea counteracts his eternal hunger:
Oh, come, be mindful of our hospitality, and grant your love
And favour to Juno's fields, whether it is right for us to call
You roseate Titan as the Achaemenians do; or, it may be,
Osiris bringer of fertile crops; or Mithras twisting the horns
Of some reluctant bull, in the depths of a stony Persian cave.'

End of Book I

BkII:1-70 Mercury returns with Laius' shade

Meanwhile Mercury, Maia's winged son, had returned
From the chill shades, as mighty Jove had commanded;
Heavy cloud on all sides denied him passage, torpid air
Enveloped him; no zephyr sped him on his way, only
The foul breath of that silent country. Here Styx circled
In its nine folds, there blazing torrents blocked his path.
After him trailed old Laius' trembling shade, slowed
Still by his wound. The impious blade with like stroke
Had transfixed his body, to the hilt, and driven home
The Furies' primal wrath. Yet on he went, his steps
Steadied by the healing wand. Then the sterile groves
The phantom-haunted fields, the sombre forest stood
Amazed; Earth herself wondered at opening upwards;
And even the dead without light showed the livid hue
Of envy. One especially whose twisted purpose it had
Ever been in the upper world (thus his life ended ill)
To insult the wretched and gripe at prosperity, cried:
'Go then, fortunate man, for whatever use you may
Be summoned. Whether Jupiter commands it, or some
Great Fury forces you to the light, or some priestess
Of Thessaly in her frenzy makes you quit your secret
Sepulchre, go, view the sweet sky and the sun you
Left behind, and the green earth, and oh, the rivers'
Pure springs, yet you will be all the sadder entering
These shadows once again.' Cerberus saw them, too,
Where he lay on the dark threshold, and reared his
Snarling heads. Fierce to the crowd that passes in,
His black neck was already swelling with menace,
Already he pawed at the bones littering the ground,
But the god soothed his bristling with Lethe's wand,
And closed his adamant eyes in triple slumber.
There is a place (that the people of Inachus named
Taenarus) where foaming Malea's dread promontory
Rises into the air; no gaze finds its summit, standing

High and serene, looking down on wind and rain;
And only the weary stars make it their station. Yet
The exhausted winds have their sleeping quarters
There, and there too are the paths of the lightning.
Dense clouds guard the mountain's middle-slopes,
While no sound of wings reaches the highest; no
Hoarse thunder rumbles. But when the sun is low,
Its vast shadow sends long fingers over the waters,
And swims on the abyss. Deep in the inner bay,
Taenarus bends its lofty shores, where the billows
Dare not break. There Neptune harbours his steeds
Wearied by the Aegean waves; their hooves paw
The sands, their fish-like tails merge with the water.
In this place, they say, a winding path leads pale
Ghosts to black Pluto's great halls enriched by death.
If the Laconian farmers speak true, screams are heard,
The groans of those who are punished, and the land
Is awake with dark tumult; often the stir and voices
Of the Furies sound in broad daylight, and Cerberus
The tri-formed keeper of the dead, heard by the farmers,
Drives them from the fields. This was the way by which
The god, cloaked in dark shadow, reached the upper world,
And shaking the subterranean mist from his face, cleared
His form with draughts of fresh air. Towards Arcturus,
Under the full and silent moon, he passed among fields
And races. Sleep, driving Night's horses, met him there
And turning aside from heaven's direct course he rose
Hastily to honour the deity. Laius' shade flew on below
The god, viewing the stars he had lost, and his homeland.
Now he gazes on Cirrha's heights, and Phocis tainted
By his burial. They came to Thebes and he groaned,
At his son's threshold, loath to enter that familiar place.
And when he saw his own blood-stained chariot, its shaft
Resting against the tall pillars, he almost turned away,
In confusion; nor was it Jove the Thunderer's command
That held him back, but the power of the Arcadian wand.

BkII:71-133 Laius' shade appears to Eteocles in sleep

By chance, it was the day of Jove's famous lightning-bolt
When his abrupt rescue of you, tender Bacchus, joined you
To him. That gave the Tyrian colonists a reason to prolong
A sleepless night in festive rivalry. In fields and houses,
Everywhere, among the empty wine-bowls and garlands,
They exhaled the breathy wine-god. There many a pipe
Of boxwood and many a cymbal sounded above the beat
Of the bull-hide drums. Cithaeron itself drove sane-minded
Mothers through the wild woods in a kindlier Bacchic rite.
Such feasts do the wild Bistones gather to on Rhodope,
Or in Ossa's vales; and to them a half-dead sheep, meat
Snatched from the lion's jaws, and blood mixed with fresh
Milk is a luxury; while if ever the fierce odour of Ogygian
Wine breathes on them they love to scatter wine-cups
And stones and, after spilling a friend's innocent blood,
To start the day once more, and reload the festive tables.
Such was the eve when, from the silent air, swift-flying
Mercury glided to Eteocles' bed. The Echionian king
Had laid his huge frame on a tall mattress, his limbs
Resting on heaped Assyrian robes. Ah, mortal minds
All ignorant of their fate! Even such dine, and sleep.
Then old Laius does as he is ordered; and lest he seem
An illusory phantom of the night, he adopts the blind
Visage and voice of long-lived Tiresias, and the familiar
Fillets of wool. His hair and the white beard on his chin,
And his pallor he retained, but a headband not his own
Circled his hair, where fillets entwined with grey olive
Gracefully emerged. He seemed then to touch the breast
Of the king with a twig, and to speak these fatal words:
'This is no time to sleep, you who embrace night's depths,
Sluggishly; heedless of your brother. Great deeds summon
You where you lie and weighty plans. You snore, like
A steersman asleep under dark clouds, all careless of his
Sails, and sea-driven rudder, while the winds raise high

The mighty Ionian waves. Even now (so Rumour has it)
 Polynices prides himself on fresh marriage, and gathers
 Strength to seize the kingdom, and make you resign it,
 Promising himself an old age in your palace. Adrastus,
 Destined by prophecy to be his father-in-law, and Argos,
 The dowry, emboldens him, while Tydeus, tainted with
 A brother's blood, is his comrade, bonded to him for life.
 Leave, swollen one, and you can expect your brother's
 Long exile. Pitying from on high, the father of the gods
 Himself sends me to you: Hold Thebes, drive off your kin,
 As blind with desire for power he would you, let him not
 Trust for long in the evil he's begun, wishing his brother
 Dead, nor allow him to foist Mycenae's rule on Cadmus.'
 He spoke, and then departed (already the steeds of light
 Were putting the pale stars to flight), tearing the twigs
 And fillets of wool from his hair, revealing himself to be
 The king's grandfather. Bending over his fatal grandson's
 Bed, he bared the wide wound at his throat, and drenched
 The sleeper with a stream of blood. The king's slumber
 Was broken. He raised his limbs, and leapt from that
 Place of horror. Shaking off the phantom flow of gore,
 He shuddered to see his grandfather, and turned at once
 To seek his brother. As a tigress, at the sound of the hunt,
 Her stripes rippling, shakes off the depths of sleep, roars
 And shows her claws and, attacking the crowd of men,
 Seizes one alive in her jaws, meat for her blood-stained
 Cubs, so the furious king fought with his absent brother.

BkII:134-200 Adrastus pledges his daughters in marriage

And now Aurora, the dawn, has risen from her Mygdonian
 Bed, and driven the chill shadows from heaven's heights,
 Shaken the dew from her hair, blushing at the chasing sun.
 From her Lucifer in reddened cloud turns his waning fires,
 As he leaves the sky with slow steeds, till the fiery father
 Fully shows his face, forbidding even his own sister's rays.
 Then Adrastus, Talaus' aged son; Polynices the Dircaean

Hero; and he of Achelous, Tydeus, hastened from their beds.
Over the latter two, wearied by wind and storm, Sleep had
Poured his brimming horn, but the king's rest was troubled
As he pondered the gods' will and the bonds of hospitality
Newly-forged, and asked what fate the finding of these
Sons-in-law had brought him. They met in the central hall
Of the palace and clasped hands in turn, then were seated
Where private matters could be safely raised and argued.
The two were hesitant, and Adrastus spoke first: 'Young
Nobles, whom Night has not brought here to my kingdom
Without some higher purpose, whose steps Apollo guided
To my house through lightning, rain and threatening thunder,
I think it cannot be unknown to you, as to all the Pelasgians,
That eager crowds of suitors seek my daughters in marriage;
For they, a happy pledge to me of grandchildren, are entering
Womanhood under the one star. You need no father's word,
You could judge their grace and modesty at last night's feast.
Men both proud of their kingdoms and their far-flung power
(The list is long of Spartan and Thessalian lords) and mothers
Throughout the towns of Achaea have marked them out, hopes
Of posterity; nor did your own Oeneus reject more suitors for
Deianira, nor Oenomaus race more to death for Hippodamia.
But it is not right for me to choose among the sons of Sparta,
Or those from Elis: my blood and the inheritance of my palace
In the due course of things are promised to you. Thanks be
To the gods, you are such in birth and mind that the prophecy
Proves welcome. These are the honours you win for passing
So harsh a night, these the prizes attendant on your quarrel.'
They listened, then for a while fixed their gaze firmly on each
Other's faces, each seeming to yield the first word to the other.
But Tydeus, ever the bolder in action, began: 'How niggardly
Is your mature wisdom in confessing to your fame, how well
You temper favouring Fortune with virtue! To whom does
Adrastus bow in lordship? Who does not know how, summoned
From the throne of your ancestral Sicyon, you brought order
To unruly Argos? If only kind Jupiter might grant you rule
Of all the races the Dorian Isthmus holds back, and the far

Countries beyond its boundary. The sun would not have fled
 From dire Mycenae, nor vales of Elis grieved at those bitter
 Chariot races, nor other Furies have pursued other kings, nor
 Would all you deplore more deeply, Theban, have occurred.
 As for us, we are willing, and our hearts are open.' So spoke
 The one and the other added: 'Would not any man accept
 Such a father-in-law? Exiles as we are, banished from our
 Native lands, Venus has not yet brought joy, but the sorrow
 Has abated in our hearts, and the pain fixed there has ceased.
 This is no less a solace than the vessel finds, that driven by
 The rushing gale sees friendly shores ahead. We are pleased
 To follow fair omens of royalty, and spend what is left of fate
 And life's toils under your star.' Spending no longer in speech,
 They rose, and the Inachian father heaped promise on promise,
 Swearing to help them both to recover their native kingdoms.

BkII:201-268 His daughters wed the heroes, Polynices and Tydeus

So, the news spread through the city: bridegrooms were there,
 For the king's daughters; peerless Argia, and Deipyle no less a
 Match in beauty; that the girls mature now were ready to be wed,
 And happily all prepared to rejoice. Rumour reached other cities,
 Their neighbours, stirring the countryside round about, as far as
 The glades of Lycaeus, past Parthenius, and to Ephyre's fields.
 That same goddess of disturbance descended on Ogygian Thebes,
 Cloaked the city with her wings, frightened King Eteocles there
 With echoes of night past, chanting of wedding feasts and guests,
 Royal pacts and mingling of blood-lines, and then (what licence
 The monster has; what madness she brings!) with sounds of war.
 All Argos attended on the expected day: the royal halls were filled
 With a happy crowd; close at hand they view images of ancestors,
 Bronze contending with living faces. Hands have dared to create
 All this! Here twin-horned Father Inachus himself sits, leaning
 To his left, against his tilted urn. Old Iasus, gentle Phoroneus
 There too; warlike Abas; Acrisius angry with the Thunderer;
 Coroebus bearing the monster's head on a naked sword-point,
 And a likeness of Danaus, crime already present in his mind.

A thousand leaders follow. A wave of subjects murmurs there,
And flows through the noble doors, while all of the notables,
And those whose rank approaches royalty are ranked in order.
The inner halls are bright with the flames of sacrifice, noisy
With women's cares; a band of chaste Argive ladies surround
The mother, others ring the girls, praising their new lords,
Comforting their fears. They move amongst them, splendid
Of face and dress, modesty blushing in their radiant cheeks,
Eyes downcast. The last breath of virgin love steals over them,
And the shame of first experience troubles their countenances.
Then virtuous showers wet their faces, and their tears delight
Their affectionate parents. It is as though Pallas, and Diana,
Apollo's stern sister, both fierce in looks and weapons, blond
Hair braided, were to glide from the heavens leading their
Sacred bands, she of Aracynthus, she of Cynthus; such that
You'd never find by gazing, if that were permitted, which
Owned to richer beauty, or more grace, or greater authority;
Both such that were they to exchange dress with one another,
Pallas would adorn the quiver, and Diana the crested helm.
The sons of Inachus rivalled one another in joy, wearying
The gods with vows, worshipping in accord with their rites.
Some offered sacrificial beasts, and entrails, others, by altars
Of bare turf, invoked the gods with incense (no less heard
If their thoughts found acceptance) adorning their doorways
With gathered branches. But behold, sudden terror (so harsh
Lachesis decreed) startled their spirits; the father's joy fled,
The day was spoiled, as they neared the threshold of virgin
Pallas' temple, she who holds Argos' citadel no less dear
Than Athenian heights. Here, by ancient custom when ripe
For marriage, the chaste daughters of Iasus would dedicate
Their virgin tresses, in propitiation of the wedding couch.
As they reached the lofty citadel, a bronze shield, the spoil
Of Arcadian Euhippus, fell to the steps from the tall summit
Of the shrine, striking down the bridal torches at the head
Of the procession, quenching their flames; then, as they
Hesitated to step forward, they were frightened by the blare
Of a mighty horn from the temple's depths. Scarce crediting

Their hearing, all turn towards the king at the first alarm:
The dire omens of things to come, move them all, filled
With fear and murmuring. No wonder though, for Argia
Wears a fatal ornament, her husband's present, the luckless
Necklace of Harmonia. Long, the well-known tale of woe
Which I will tell, by which the gift acquired its cruel power.

BkII:269-305 The necklace of Harmonia

Vulcan, so they say, made it for Harmonia, a gift to adorn
Her wedding day, for he had long resented Mars' furtive
Pleasures, while punishment had failed to prevent adultery
Detected, even the vengeful chains powerless to restrain.
The Cyclopes, though their skills were in more massive
Work, laboured on it, and the Telchines, famed in crafts,
Lent zealous hands. But he himself sweated most of all.
He set a ring of emeralds, florescent with secret fires,
Around its adamant forged with ill-omened shapes,
With Gorgon's eyes; ash from a lightning-bolt's remains,
Dross of a Sicilian anvil; shiny crests from green snakes'
Heads; and there a weeping shoot of the Hesperides, with
The fatal gold of the Golden Fleece. With these he mingled
Various ills, a lock snatched from Tisiphone's black tresses,
And the most harmful powers that Venus' girdle granted;
These he smeared cunningly with lunar foam, and over
The whole spread bright poisons. Neither Pasithea, first
Of the charming Graces, nor Cupid, the Idalian boy, had
Shaped it, but Grief, Anger, Sorrow, and Strife set there
The whole force of their hands. It first wrought its ill
When Harmonia's cries turned to a serpent's hiss and she
And Cadmus furrowed Illyria's plains with prostrate forms,
And trailing bodies. Then daring Semele had scarce hung
The baneful gift at her neck, when Juno disguised crossed
The threshold. They say you too, unhappy Jocasta, owned
That lovely curse. With its glory you enhanced your looks,
To light, ah, such a marriage bed! Many another followed.
Eriphyle, wife of the doomed seer Amphiaraus, viewed it,

And at every banquet and altar nursed fierce secret envy:
If only she might one day make that cruel trinket her own.
Alas, the attendant auguries failed to warn. Oh, the grief
She prayed for, the tragedy she desired, impious woman!
She earned her own: yet a wretched husband's embraces
Betrayed, a guiltless son's insanity – were those deserved?
Now Argia shone with the gift, out-gleaming her sister's
Lesser gems with its greater splendour of accursed gold.

BkII:306-362 Polynices desires to rule in Thebes

After twelve days the royal banquets and the people's
Celebrations ended. Now the Ismenian hero turned his
Gaze towards Thebes, seeking to rule his own kingdom.
He thought of the day when fate favoured his brother,
When he stood in the Echionian palace a mere subject:
When he saw the gods had spurned him, friends lost
In fearful confusion. None stood with him, Fortune
Had fled. Only Antigone, his sister, wished to travel
With the exile on his sorrowful way, and even she
He left on the threshold, his vast anger stifling tears.
Night and day he listed those whom he saw delighted
At his leaving, those especially who courted the evil
King, and those few who shed a tear for the fugitive.
Then grief consumed his spirit, and a maddened rage,
And hope that, long deferred, proves heaviest of cares.
This cloud of thoughts circling in his mind, he planned
Now to journey to Thebes, Dirce, the halls of Cadmus
He was denied. Like a bull, leader of the herd, exiled
From his beloved valleys, driven from his customary
Pastures by some victor, and forced to live far from
His stolen heifers, one who when his power returns
Sets his mighty neck muscles straining, breaks oak
Trees with his chest, and so longs, stronger than ever
In hoof and horn, to fight to reclaim his meadows,
And herd, that the victor fears his return, and all
The herdsmen, amazed, scarcely know him: thus,

And not otherwise does the young Teumesian hero
Sharpen his anger in his silent heart. His loyal wife,
Sensed his private urge to be gone. Lying on their bed
Clasping him, in the first pale light of dawn, she cried:
'Deceiver, what is it, what journey are you plotting?
Nothing escapes a lover. I feel the piercing sighs, your
Sleepless cares, you who never slumber peacefully.
How often when I touch you, I find your face is wet
With tears and your breast alive with dark anxieties!
The severing of our bond, our marriage, a widowed
Youth are not the worst, though our love is yet new,
And our bed has not yet cooled from our sacrament:
It is your safety, my beloved, I freely confess: that
Torments me. Will you go unarmed and friendless
To win a kingdom? Will you have the power to quit
Thebes if he refuse? And Rumour, that's ever-skilful
At unmasking kings, reports him as vain, arrogant,
Proud of his spoils, set against you: his year not done.
Prophecies alarm me now, the entrails that convey
The gods' menaces, gliding birds, troubled visions
In the dark, and Juno who (as I remember) never
Has deceived me, comes to me in the dead of night.
Why go unless some guilty passion draws you, or
Have you a finer father-in-law in Thebes?' At this,
The young Echionian gave a laugh, and soothed
His wife's tender sorrow with an embrace, planting
Timely kisses on her mournful eyes, and quenching
Her tears: 'Let your heart be free of fear; have faith,
A peaceful day of speeches will greet the deserving.
Anxieties yet greater than your years do not suit you.
Let Jupiter determine our fate that day, and Justice,
If she chooses to turn her eyes toward us from heaven,
And defend what is right on earth: perhaps the day
Will come when you'll see the walls of your husband's
City, and walk there as the queen of both our realms.'

BkII:363-409 Tydeus goes to Thebes as emissary

Such his words, then swiftly he left the dear threshold.
He spoke, sadly, to Tydeus, companion in his actions,
And faithful sharer of his cares (so strong was the love
That bound them after their quarrel) and to Adrastus.
The discussion was lengthy, debating many options,
All finally agreeing on the best: to test his brother's
Good faith first, requesting the safe transfer of power.
Brave Tydeus volunteered for the task, though Deipyle
His wife tried hard to restrain this boldest of Aetolians.
Yet her father's word, and an emissary's assurance
Of safe return, and her sister's rightful prayers prevailed.
Now Tydeus took the rough tracks by woods and shore:
Where Lerna's marshes lie, the scorched Hydra yet
Warmed in their guilty depths; through Nemea where
Fearful shepherds, still afraid of lions, sound no flutes;
By Corinth whose flank slopes towards the easterlies,
And Sisypheus' harbour Cenchrea and Palaemon's
Lechaeum separate those breakers angered by land.
From there he passed by Megara, and left, by gentle
Eleusis, and now trod Boeotian fields and entered
Agenor's Thebes. Beneath its towers he found harsh
Eteocles enthroned on high, fenced with sharp lances.
Though the lawful period of his reign was now done,
The fierce King governed the people, not his brother.
He sat, happy to commit any crime, yet complaining
That no claim had yet been made against the promise.
Tydeus presented himself (an olive branch declared
The emissary) and on request announced his name
And purpose. Forthright as he was, and always prone
To anger, his words were a mix of the just and severe:
'If plain good faith and respect for the pledge you gave
Were yet yours, it were better if you had sent envoys
To your brother now your year has passed; laid your
Honours aside as agreed; renounced authority readily;
So that after his wanderings amongst strange cities,

His undeserved suffering, he might reign here at last,
As he desires. But since the love of kingship is sweet,
And power seduces I am here to make demand of you.
Already the swift globe has spun on its axis, already
The vanished shadows have returned to the mountains,
While your brother, a penniless exile, was enduring
Sad hours in unknown places. Now is the time for you
To suffer daylight under an open sky, feel earth's chill
In your limbs, and kneel humbly beside foreign hearths.
Put an end to happiness. Rich in purple, conspicuous
With gold, you have mocked your poor brother's lean
Years long enough. I counsel you to unlearn the joys
Of kingship and in patient exile to merit your return.'

BkII:410-481 Eteocles refuses to stand down

He spoke, and Eteocles' hot heart roared in his silent
Breast, just as a snake, long thirsting in its hollow pit,
Rears, angered by a cast stone, weaves its whole body,
And summons its venom into its scaly neck and jaws:
'Were I at all unsure, before, of my brother's enmity;
If his secret hatred was at all obscure; this alone would
Provide the proof. How wildly you threaten, in his name,
As though the enemy's sappers were already undermining
Our walled palisades while trumpets called the squadrons
To assault! If you'd spoken your message among Bistones,
Or the Geloni pale under the northern sun, your eloquence
Could scarce have been less, nor you the less attentive to
Impartial justice. Yet I'll not accuse you of any madness.
You've executed your commission. Now since all you say
Is full of menace and, hand on hilt, you demand the throne,
Devoid of good faith, and peaceful offers, take this reply
To the Argive king, words not equal to yours in harshness:
'The sceptre that a just fate, and the honour due my years
Pronounce mine, I hold and long will hold: to you belongs
Kingship by marriage, gifted to you by your Inachian bride.
Let Danae's gold accumulate (why should I desire a greater

Realm?) Rule Argos and Lerna, under happy auspices: I
 Will rule Dirce's rough pastures and the shores Euboea's
 Waves confine, not afraid to call poor Oedipus my father:
 Yours is nobility writ large (Pelops and Tantalus your
 Ancestors) allied now more closely still to Jupiter's line.
 Would your queen, accustomed to her father's fine house
 Suffer this as her home, where our sisters would of right
 Spin threads of anxiety for her, or our mother dishevelled
 From long mourning, or that accursed king audible
 Maybe in the depths of darkness, would offend her?
 The people's hearts by now are accustomed to my yoke:
 I bear the shame, alas, for commoners and nobles both.
 Must they suffer uncertainty and change of rule so often
 That they groan; grudging obedience to a dubious claimant?
 A brief reign is unsparing of a nation. Witness the dread,
 Witness the dismay the citizens show at our arrangement.
 Shall I abandon all those whom you are sure to punish?
 Brother, you send in anger. Even if I were willing, if I read
 Affection where gratitude is due, the noblemen will not
 Allow me to desert the throne.' Tydeus no longer bore it,
 And in the midst of these final words, replied: 'You shall,'
 And again, 'You shall; though ramparts of adamant ring
 You round or Amphion sound another tune and build triple
 Walls for you, neither the blade nor fire shall protect you
 From punishment for your actions: you will die beneath
 Our swords, striking the earth wearing the crown you stole.
 Such you deserve; but, good king, I pity all those lives you
 Hold cheap, sending them to death in bitter battle, snatching
 Them from their wives and children. What corpses will roll
 Amongst those blood-stained waters, Cithaeron and Ismenos!
 This then is brotherly love, this your great loyalty! Nor do I
 Wonder at the crimes of your race: such was the author
 Of your being, such your father's impure marriage; and yet
 Origins deceive us: you alone are true heir of Oedipus. Such,
 You man of violence, is the reward you shall reap for your
 Action and your sin. We demand our year of rule. But I delay.'
 This he shouted, boldly, turning from the threshold, then ran

Headlong between the astounded ranks. So Diana's avenging
Boar, in his bristling pride, hurls lightning from tusked jaws
While the Pelopean hunters pressing hard roll rocks in his path
And shattered trees from Achelous' broken shores: first he
Hurls Telamon to the ground, now fells Ixion, then turns
On Meleager: there at last he halts at a spear-thrust, freeing
The blade caught in his straining shoulder. So the Calydonian
Hero, Tydeus, quitting the shuddering council grinds his jaws,
As though it were he himself who were denied the throne.
He hurries on his way, hurls aside the peace-offering of olive
Branches, while from the thresholds of their houses women
Watch amazed, and hurl curses at the fierce son of Oeneus,
And in the depths of their hearts at the stubborn king as well.

BkII:482-526 Eteocles prepares an ambush for Tydeus

Nor was the king idle, never free of wicked plans and vile
Treachery. He tempted loyal youths, chosen for battle skills,
First with ardent words and then with gold, and proposed
A vicious nocturnal ambush, eager to kill this emissary,
(A role sacred to all throughout history) with hidden blade.
What does kingship not hold cheap? What stratagems
Would he not devise if Fortune delivered him his brother?
O, blind counsels of the wicked! O crime, ever the coward!
A crowd of men sworn to arms, enough to assault a camp
Or shatter the high walls of a city with steady blows from
A battering ram, seek to take a single life. In close order,
Fifty warriors pour from the tall gate. So much for courage!
Glory to you who are thought worthy of such weapons!
A short cut leads through the trees. They hurry forward
On a secret track through the dense forest, saving time.
They choose a fitting site for ambush, far from the city,
Where a tortuous pass is hemmed in by hills, shrouded
By shade from the heights above, leafy wooded ridges
Curving inwards (Nature had made the place for crime,
The darkness aiding concealment.) A rough and narrow
Path pierced the cliffs, below a plain and a broad stretch

Of sloping meadows. Opposite was a dark ledge, home
To the Sphinx. Here the savage creature once waited,
Lifting pale cheeks, and eyes filled with putrid matter,
Feathers clotted with vile gore, standing on human limbs,
Pressing half-chewed bones to her naked breasts, viewing
The plain with wavering gaze, watching for some stranger
Who might dare to meet the challenge of enigmatic words,
And have commerce with her evil tongue. Then, quickly
Sharpening her extended nails, her livid hands, her teeth
Bared to wound, with frightful wings she would flap
Against the traveller's face. Her riddle went unsolved,
Until Oedipus (a monster like herself, alas!) trapped her;
And subdued, her wings trailing, she dashed her foul
Form against the rocks below. The woods revealed their
Horror; cattle feared the nearby meadows, and hungry
Flocks shunned the tainted grass. The Dryad choruses
Dislike its shade unfitted to the rites of Fauns; even
The carrion birds flee the monstrous grove. There,
With muffled steps, the fatal band arrive, and leaning
On their spears, their shields grounded, wait for their
Proud enemy, ringing the wood with a circle of guards.

BkII:527-612 Tydeus faces his attackers

Night had begun to cloak Phoebus with her dewy mantle
And had cast her dusky shadows over earth, when nearing
The woods Tydeus saw, from a high hill, the reddish gleam
Of soldiers' shields and crested helms, where branches left
Openings in the trees and, in the shadows opposite, tremors
Of flickering moonlight strayed over their bronze armour.
Shocked by the sight, he still went forward, merely gripping
His bristling spears and sheathed sword's hilt more tightly.
Then, free of base fear, he challenged first: 'Where do you
Hail from, men, with hidden weapons?' No voice answered,
And the suspicious silence stirred mistrust of their intent.
Behold, Cthonius, their trusty leader hurled a spear that flew
Through the darkened air, from his huge arm; but Fortune

And the god deflected its flight. Still it struck the expanse
Of black, bristling Olenian boar-hide over his left shoulder,
Close to the flesh, the headless shaft scratching at his throat.
Then his hair stood on end, and the blood froze at his heart.
Fiercely, he shouts at them, angered in mind, face pale with
Fury (not dreaming the size of the enemy force): 'Come out,
Face me here on the open field! What, scared to try? Such
Cowards then? Alone, I challenge you to fight, a man alone.'
At this they rush him, he sees more men than he had thought
Run from countless hiding places, some from the ridge, some
Adding to them from the valley's depths, many from the plain,
The whole path gleaming with weapons, as wild beasts raised
By the hunt reveal themselves at a cry. Oppressed, one path
Lay clear; he headed for the vile Sphinx's steep cliff: rasping
His clutching hands on the sheer crag he climbed the harsh
Heights, and gained a rock safe from danger behind while
The risky path lay below. From the cliff he prised a huge
Boulder, one that bullocks straining fully at the yoke would
Scarce have torn from the ground to bring it within a wall;
Then he raised it with all his strength, balancing the mighty
Mass on high, like great-hearted Pholus, the Centaur, lifting
An empty mixing bowl to fling it at his Lapith adversaries.
Stupefied, the men below on the fatal track saw him there.
He hurled the rock, and its downfall overwhelmed them:
Heads, hands, weapons, with shattered breasts and armour
Were crushed beneath. Four men groaned there, smashed
To a common pulp. Now the terrified band relinquished
The attack since those who had fallen were noted warriors:
Dorylas the lightning-bolt, a king among men for his fiery
Courage; Theron, scion of Mars, trusting in his earthborn
Ancestry; Halys, a horseman second to none (foot-soldier
Now and dead on the ground); and Phaedimus, of the line
Of Pentheus, a race Bacchus had not yet forgiven. The men,
Appalled by their sudden end, broke their ranks in confusion.
Seeing this, Tydeus hurled two javelins he had carried in his
Hands and then set against the cliff at his fleeing enemies.
Then he freely chose to leap down, and snatch up the shield

He had seen thrown aside when Theron was crushed, so as
 To protect his naked chest against weapons. Head and back
 Guarded by its familiar presence, defending his front
 With that enemy shield, he took his stand. Once again
 The sons of Ogygus closed their ranks and stood firm.
 Tydeus swiftly draws his Bistonian sword, great Oeneus'
 Gift of Mars, and facing this group and that on every side
 Shakes off the gleaming iron shafts. Their numbers impede
 Them, shields caught together, their blows without force,
 Striking at their own comrades, lurching about entangled
 In the mass, while Tydeus waits for each attack, offering
 A slim target to the spears, impregnable. So giant Briareus
 If we can believe it, in Thracian Phlegra, took up arms
 Against the gods, scorning Apollo's bow on the one side,
 And frowning Pallas' serpents on the other; here Mars'
 Thessalian pine tipped with a blade, there lightning bolt
 On lightning bolt to weary the Cyclopes; attacked in vain
 By all the Olympians, not all his hundred hands employed.
 Such was Tydeus' ardour, thrusting his shield to and fro,
 Retiring, and circling the spot, then bearing down on his
 Trembling enemies, plucking out the many javelins stuck
 Quivering in his shield, to re-arm himself. Often he felt
 Sharp blows, but none reached the life within, none could
 Hope to kill. He himself whirls raging Deilochus round,
 And calls Phegus, who threatens him with his raised axe,
 To go join Deilochus among the shades, and likewise
 Dircaean Gyas, and Echionian Lycophontes. Till, in fear,
 They search and call the roll, their appetite for slaughter
 Diminished, grieved at the thinning of their dense ranks.

BkII:613-681 He completes the slaughter

Behold Chromis, descendant of Cadmus (Chromis whom
 Phoenician Dryope carried in her womb, and gave life to
 When, suddenly caught up in the dancing, she forgot her
 Burden, so that as she dragged a bull by the horn, for your
 Sake Bacchus, her contractions began with the strain of it,

And the child was born). Brave Chromis, clad in the skin
Of a slain lion, grasping his spears, brandishing a knotted
Club of pine-wood, berated them thus: 'Shall one man,
One man alone, return to Argos, warriors, in triumph at
The numbers he has killed? They will scarce believe it
When he reports. Alas, friends, are our hands and weapons
Useless? Cydon, Lampus is this the promise that we gave
The king? Yet as he shouted to them, a Theban javelin,
Plucked from the shield, entered his open mouth, pierced
His throat. His voice failed, the severed tongue gushed
Blood. Still he stood, until death seized his limbs, then
Fell to the ground, collapsing silently, biting on the spear.
You too, the sons of Thespius, why should I deny you
Your fame and honour? Periphas (none more renowned
For his natural gifts and love of kin) one of the two, raised
His dying brother from the earth, cradling the drooping
Head with his left arm, his brother's body with the right.
Grief strained the armour none too large for his sorrow,
His helmet-straps barely held a helm drenched in tears.
Yet, as he groaned deeply, a heavy spear from behind
Shattered his rib-cage at a thrust, and pierced his own
Brother's chest, its shaft pinning both of them together.
The brother gazed, eyes still alight with life, then seeing
His dying brother, closed them. Yet his spirit was not yet
Flown, and life hovering despite the wound, he cried:
'Enemy, may your sons deal you such an embrace, such
Kisses.' So they were doomed alike to die, and answering
Their sad prayer to die together, sealed each other's eyes.
At once Tydeus drove the terrified Menoetes before him,
On shield and spear, till retreating, hastily, the Theban
Stumbling in panic, tripped on the rough ground and fell.
Hands spread wide in entreaty, he pushed the thrusting
Blade from his throat: 'By those shadows and the stars
That glide across them, by the gods and this your night,
Let me carry the sad news to Thebes, sing your praises
Before the trembling people, in contempt of their king;
So may our weapons fall idle, the iron fail to pierce your

Flesh, and you return victorious as your friend desires.' With unchanging expression, Tydeus replied thus: 'You Shed your tears in vain; you too, if I mistake not, swore To bring your unjust king my head. Now say farewell To conflict and the light. Why seek to live a coward's Life? War abides.' At this the spear, withdrawn, was Wet with blood. Angered, he pursued his beaten foes With bitter words: 'This night sees no return of your Triennial ancestral rite: here are no Cadmean orgies, Here are no women intent on Bacchic desecration. Think you those are the skins of fawns and frail wands You bear, joining lascivious dances to unwarlike song, To the sound of Marsyas' pipe that real men know not? To the shades with you, O band of cowards! So Tydeus Roared, but his limbs began to fail him, and the blood Throbbled wearily in his breast. Now his hand was lifted In febrile blows, his steps slowed, the hand behind his Shield-boss no longer raised the shield weighted with Spears, a cold rain fell from his panting chest, his hair And burning face were dewed with blood, all the foul Spray from the dying. He was like a lion that chasing The shepherd from the fields, gorging on Numidian Sheep, its hunger sated in bloody slaughter, its mane And neck weighed with gore, stands among the dead, Gaping with sickness, filled with the meat, its fury lost Till now it merely snarls, with empty jaws, at thin air, And licks away soft wool with its protruding tongue.

BkII:682-743 He pays homage to Pallas Athene

Sated with spoils and slaughter, Tydeus would have Entered Thebes to show himself to the people and Their king, in triumph, if you Pallas had not deigned To counsel him, afire and filled with the fog of battle As he was: 'Scion of proud Oeneus' race, to whom I have just granted victory over neighbouring Thebes, Have done: do not test the patience of the generous

Gods. Ask only that this exploit finds credence; you
 Have chanced Fortune far enough. Now, go.' One
 Unwilling survivor of the sad slaughter remained,
 Maeon, son of Haemon, outlived his friends, having
 Foreseen it all, since he was skilled in reading omens
 From the flight of birds; nor had he failed to warn
 The king, but Fate ensured that he was not believed.
 The wretch was doomed to an unprofitable life. He
 It was to whom Tydeus gave a pitiful task; 'Whoever
 You may be of Aonia's sons, you, who by my grace
 Survive the slaughter to see tomorrow's sun, I order
 You to take your lord this message: 'Build ramparts
 Round your gates, sharpen up your weapons, inspect
 That ring of walls time has weakened, but above all
 Pack them tightly with men; add to your dense ranks.
 Behold this place stained far and wide by my sword:
 So we will come at you, in war.' Having spoken, he
 Readied himself to pay due homage to Pallas, with
 The blood-stained spoils. Joyfully he gathered arms
 From the ground and viewed the results of his deeds.
 An oak stood there, its tender youth long forgotten,
 On a mound in the midst of the plain, vigorous still
 And tough, with thick bark, and curving branches.
 He brought dented helms and fastened them there;
 Shields too scored with gashes, fixing there swords
 Shattered by blows, spears drawn from dead limbs.
 Then standing by the bodies and a pile of weapons,
 He began, while the long night-bound ridge echoed
 His words: 'Oh, glory and spirit of your great father,
 Fierce goddess, mighty in war, on whose fair head,
 In fearful beauty, sits the grim helm; at whose breast
 The blood-spattered Gorgon glares (nor could Mars
 Nor Bellona armed with spear for battle raise more
 Fiery trumpet blasts), show favour to these honours,
 Whether you come from Pandion's Athenian citadel
 To see this slaughter, or turn aside from Aonian Itone,
 Lover of the dance, or comb your hair bathed in Libya's

Lake Tritonis, to which, at your call, your pair of virgin
Mares bear you, drawing your chariot on swift wheels:
To you I dedicate the shattered spoils, and shapeless
Trophies of these warriors. But if I should reach my
Native Calydonian lands again, and Aetolian Pleuron
Open her gates at my return, I shall dedicate a golden
Shrine to you on the city's heights where it may be
Sweet to you to gaze on Ionian storms, where wild
Achelous raises the waves with his yellow head,
Leaving the Echinades, behind him, in his wake.
There I shall portray ancestral battles and the dread
Visages of great-hearted kings, and there I shall fix
Weapons to high walls, weapons I have gathered
Won by my efforts, and those that you, Tritonia,
Will grant when Thebes is taken. There a hundred
Calydonian maidens, vowed to serve your virgin
Altars, will duly wind purple ribbons striped with
White about the Attic torches made of your chaste
Olive-tree. And an aged priestess shall feed your
Eternal flame, your arcane image never to be seen.
In war or peace, by custom, you shall then receive
First fruits, nor shall Diana resent her loss of them.'
He spoke then took again the road to sweet Argos.

End of Book II

BkIII:1-52 Maeon returns to Thebes

But the treacherous king in his Aonian palace finds no rest
In the perilous night, even though the dew-wet stars must
Journey long until the dawn. Anxiety keeps vigil in his
Mind, and exacts punishment for the crime he planned,
While fear, the worst of prophets in time of doubt, broods
Over many things. 'Alas,' he cries, 'why all this delay?
(Since he had thought it an easy task and Tydeus no great
Challenge to such a force, not rating courage and spirit
Against large numbers.) 'Did they miss him on the road?
Was help sent him from Argos? Has rumour of the plot
Spread to neighbouring cities? Did I choose too small
A force, great Mars, or are they weaklings? Yet brave
Chromis is there, and Dorylas, the scions of Thespius
Like two great turrets; they could raze all Argos at my
Order. Nor it seems to me is he impervious to weapons,
His limbs are scarcely made of bronze or adamant. Oh,
Cowards, if combat was joined, to struggle helplessly
Against one man!' So he agonises, stirred by conflicting
Doubts, blaming himself above all for not striking down
The emissary as he spoke in the assembly, so sating his
Foul anger openly. Now he feels ashamed of his actions,
And regrets them. Like the master of a Calabrian vessel
In Ionian waters (no stranger to the sea but deceived, by
Capella the Olenian star's clear rising, into leaving fair
Harbour) when a sudden crack of thunder echoes loud
Through the firmament and Orion bends the sky lower;
Who longs to be ashore, and struggles to reverse course,
But is driven on by a mighty gale astern, and forgetting
His skill groans and blindly goes where the sea takes him:
Thus Etoecles, the Agenorean king, berated Lucifer for
Dawdling, dawn for rising too slowly for anxious men.
Behold, as Night retreated and her chariot withdrew,
As the stars sank, while great Tethys urged on the Sun
Who lingered in eastern waters, the massy depths were

Stirred, a sign of grievous trouble, and the earth shook;
Mount Cithaeron moved, loosening its ancient snows.
The rooftops were seen to rise, the seven gates seemed
Level with the mountain ridge. The cause was apparent.
Maeon, Haemon's son had returned in the chill dawn,
Angered by Fate, grieving that death was denied him.
His expression was not yet visible, but at a distance
He gave signs of great disaster, beating at his chest
And groaning: as for his tears he had shed them all.
So a herdsman, his cattle slaughtered in the night
By wolves after a sudden gale, when the wild horns
Of a winter moon have driven them into the woods,
Who, at dawn, finds the carnage there before his eyes,
In plain view, and fears to tell his master, face to face,
Of the tragedy, covering his head with dust, fills all
The fields with his lament, calling to the long ranks
Of lost bulls, hating the silence of their empty stall.

BkIII:53-113 Maeon commits suicide

When the women gathered at the threshold of the gate
Saw him alone (the horror!) no band of brave warriors
Round him, frightened to question him, they raised a cry
Like that last clamour when a city falls, or a ship sinks.
As soon as he was granted the audience he desired, he
Spoke to the hateful king: 'Fierce Tydeus spared you this
One wretched life of our great company. It was decreed
By the gods perhaps, or Fortune, or, though pride hates
To confess it, his invincible might. I who report it to you
Scarce believe it; all are fallen, all. Night's wandering
Planets I call as witnesses; my comrades' shades; the evil
Omen of this earthquake at my return: that I won this cruel
Favour, this gift of shameful life, by no tears or cunning:
But the gods' decree, inflexible Atropos, and a prophecy
Long ago that such fate would be denied me, averted death.
Now, that you may see my heart clings not to life, unafraid
Of the final hour, I say to you: 'Murderer, you've launched

An unholy war, oblivious to the omens, proud to abolish
Rule of law, and reign while your brother's doomed to exile.
A host of orphans, lost families, will haunt you with endless
Lament – and *fifty* ghosts will fly about you bringing fell
Terror by night and day, for I linger not.' Though the fierce
King was already moved to anger, his scowling face suffused
With blood; though Phlegyas, and Labdacus a man not slow
To mischief (these the king's bodyguards) prepared to drive
Maeon out by force, anticipating the king's command, he,
The great-hearted seer had already bared his sword, and now,
Gazing at the blade, and then the tyrant's fierce visage: cried:
'You shall never have me in your power, nor strike the breast
That great Tydeus left unwounded. I go with joy, reach for
The death that was snatched from me, borne to my friends'
Shades that await my coming. You, I leave to your brother,
And the gods – ' the sword he plunged deep in his side cut
Short his speech. He doubled over, fighting against the pain,
Straining against the mighty wound; then fell, and the blood
Gushed from mouth and flank with his last sobbing breaths.
The nobles were startled, the anxious councillors murmured.
Maeon's loyal wife and parents, the joy at his return so soon
Lost, carried his corpse home, its face grim, rigid with death
Achieved. But the infamous king's wild anger was unsated;
He forbade the funeral fires, and impiously, though in vain,
Sought to deny the oblivious shade the quiet of the tomb.
And you, Maeon, splendid in spirit and destiny, never to be
Forgotten (as is fitting), who dared to challenge a king face
To face, and sanctify the path to wider freedom: what song,
Prophet beloved by the gods, what speech of mine suffices
To enhance the glory you deserve? Not in vain did Apollo
Teach you celestial wisdom; judge you worthy of his laurel:
Dodona, mother of sacred groves, and the Delphic oracle,
(Apollo silent)) are pleased to keep the nations in suspense.
Now you too, go, make your way through Elysian fields
Far from Tartarean Avernus, where the realm lies closed
To Ogygian shades, where the guilty tyrant's orders lose
Their power. Let your limbs and clothes remain untouched

By blood-stained beasts, and the woods, the sad reverence
Of the birds, keep you from harm beneath that naked sky.

BkIII:114-168 Ide mourns the sons of Thespius

Now grieving wives and children and sorrowful parents
Poured from the city to the plain, the open wilderness,
Each running, desperate to seek their own dead, in sad
Rivalry, and as they went thousands accompanied them,
Trying to bring solace; others were keen to see the scene
Of one man's deeds, the night's mighty action. The road
Was loud with lament, the fields resounding to their grief.
But when they came to the fatal cliffs, the accursed wood,
Their first sorrow, their tears were as nothing to the pitiful
Clamour raised by the common cry; stirred by the blood,
The crowd were driven mad. There stood dread Mourning,
Clothes torn and blood-stained, striking his breast, calling
The women near. They examine the helms of the cold dead,
Pointing out the corpses they can name, clutching prostrate
At others' and their own. Some trail their hair in the gore,
Others close eyes and lave deep wounds with their tears,
Some draw out spears with vainly cautious hands, others
Lay severed limbs in place, and set heads on their necks.
Ide, noble mother of the Thespiadae, now of twin corpses,
Wandered through thickets, and over the wide dusty plain,
Her hair vilely erect, her nails pressed to her bruised face
(Not merely pitiable, distressed, but with terror in her tears)
Everywhere she searched among the weapons and bodies
Seeking her boys, helplessly, and bemoaning every corpse,
Trailing her grey tresses on the fatal ground. So does some
Thessalian woman, whose nation's dark craft it is to bring
The dead to life with magic spells, visit the battlefield at
Night rejoicing in recent conflict, holding her splintered
Torch of ancient cedar-wood on high, rolling the bodies
Over in their blood, examining the dead to see which one
She might most command in the light, as the sad conclave
Of spirits moan, and dark Avernus' lord waxes wrathful.

The sons of Thespius lay together beneath a distant rock,
 Happy in that they died on the same day by the same hand,
 Linked by the spear that had pierced their wounded chests.
 When she found them, Ide's tears streamed down, crying:
 'Children, shall a mother endure to see such an embrace,
 Such kisses? Was cruel death to join you in this way,
 At the end? What wound shall I press, what face shall I
 Stroke first? Are these a mother's strength, a womb's fate,
 Through whom I thought to reach the gods and outdo all
 Ogygian parents in my glory? How much happier with
 Their lot, more sweetly wed, are those whose beds are
 Barren, whose house Lucina, summoned by childbirth,
 Never sees! My labour pains are now a cause of sorrow.
 Not in the thick of battle, famous for your fate, your
 Daring actions, destined to live in the memory of nations,
 Did you find these wounds, a grieving mother laments;
 You died an obscure death, amongst the crowd, alas,
 Lying unnoticed, amongst the gore, none to praise you.
 No, I dare not part your hands locked in this sad embrace,
 And break the union of such a passing. Go, ever brothers,
 Un-dissevered by the final pyre, mingle ashes in the urn.'

BkIII:169-217 Aletes condemns the king's actions

No less lament arose from Cthonius' wife; from Pentheus'
 Mother Astyoche; as they realised the extent of the carnage.
 Your children, Phaedimus, mere lads, learned of the loss
 Of their father. Marpessa bathed the corpse of Phylleus,
 Her betrothed; Acamas' sisters washed his blood-stained
 Body. Then they took an axe to the ancient trees, clearing
 The summit of the nearby hill that overlooked the night's
 Work, and echoed to the moans; there, in front of the flames,
 As they refused to be called away from their individual pyres,
 Aged Aletes solaced the ill-starred gathering with his words:
 'Often our people has suffered misfortune, tested by various
 Twists of fate, ever since the stranger from Sidon, Cadmus,
 Sowed warriors' seed in Aonian furrows, from which those

Armed men rose, such that the farmers feared their fields.
But the lament was no greater than this when the ancient
Theban palace of Cadmus sank to ash at a lightning-stroke,
Cruel Juno so decreeing; nor when wretched Athamas with
Funereal dirge came down from the trembling mountain,
Carrying half-dead Learchus, and cried, alas, with insane joy!
Nor did our Phoenician houses ring more loudly when weary
Agave, recovered from her madness, was frightened to see
Her companions' tears. One fatal day alone was like to this,
Equally calamitous, the day when Niobe, Tantalus' daughter,
Paid for her proud boast and, encompassed by her total ruin,
Raised all those corpses from the ground to seek the pyre.
Such was the people's mourning then, when young and old,
With a long file of women, reproaching the gods with cries
Of pity, bore a pair of corpses from each of the seven gates.
I remember how I myself (though not old enough to assist)
Wept none the less, equalled my parents' grief with my own.
Yet those actions were the work of deities. I could no more
Lament, Diana, that Actaeon's Molossian hounds destroyed
Their master, he profaning your chaste pool, sacrilegiously
Spying on you or, Bacchus, that royal Dirce became a pool,
Her blood suddenly transformed; for the Sisters had spun
That cruel thread, as Jove saw. But now it is by the work
Of an evil king that so many of the finest of our countrymen,
Of our innocent citizens, are dead. The news of the broken
Pact has not yet reached Argos and already we grieve for
What the worst of war will do. How men and horses will
Sweat in the mud and dust! Oh, how deeply will the rivers
Be cruelly stained with blood! Let war be the work of youth,
Green to battle, as for me let my pyre be lit while it may, let
Me be covered with my ancestral earth!' So the aged man
Cried out, heaping reproaches on Eteocles, calling him
Cruel; an abomination: sure to pay dearly for his crimes.
Where did such licence come from? His last day was near,
His life was done; he sought honour in death long-delayed.

BkIII:218-259 Jupiter sends Mars to rouse Argos to war

The lord of the stars watching the blood-drenched citizens,
Meanwhile, from the heights of the world, ordered Mars
To be swiftly summoned. He had been ravaging the wild
Bistones, wreaking havoc in the Getic townships, and now
Was urging his chariot on to the heavenly citadel, vaunting
His splendid helm with its lightning-bolt crest, the shield
Of sombre gold alive with the fearful shapes of monsters.
His thunderous wheels sound in the sky while his shield
Blazes blood-red, its disc rivalling that of the distant sun.
When Jupiter saw him, still panting from his Sarmatian
Labours, his chest coated with the storm of war, he cried:
'My son, get you to Argos, as you are; go with a dripping
Blade, in a cloud of anger. Let them discard constricting
Reins, and hating all, longing for you, rush to dedicate
Hands and lives away: spur the tardy, wreck the treaties:
We charge you with this, lawfully to set the celestial host
Themselves alight with war, and shatter my peace. I too
Have already sown the seeds of conflict. Tydeus returns
With news of wicked ambush, a royal crime, and so
A shameful provocation to war: stealth and treachery he
Avenged with his own weapons. Make sure he's believed.
As for you, O deities, my bloodline, do not dispute in hate,
Nor try to tempt me with rival entreaties. Fate, the dark
Distaff of the Sisters, assures me: this day was doomed
To war from the creation of the world, these nations born
To fight each other. And should you disapprove my
Seeking retribution from these people for evils past,
And to punish their sinful offspring, I swear by this
Eternal citadel, the sanctuary of my thoughts, and those
Rivers of the underworld, that I too hold sacred, that I,
With my own hands will seize the walls of Thebes; then
Raze them to their foundations, snatching up her towers
And hurling them from on high onto Inachian rooftops,
Or sending rain to sweep them into the cerulean deep,
Though Juno herself should labour to protect her hills

And temples in the whirlwind.' He finished speaking,
And they, so amazed at his decree you'd have declared
Them mortal, kept silence and controlled their thoughts,
As the winds hold their peace, when the sea grows calm,
And the shoreline stretches out in a tranquil slumber,
While idle summer soothes the clouds and forest-leaves,
The gale being done; and all the marshes and sounding
Lakes subside, and the sun-scorched rivers flow silently.

BkIII:260-323 Venus confronts Mars

Mars, proud of his task, and still aflame in his burning
Chariot, tugged the reins leftwards. He had just reached
His journey's end, plunging from the sky, when Venus
Took her stand fearlessly there before his horses. They
Reared back, their rigid manes subsiding in supplication.
Then leaning against the top of the shaft, her tearful face
Averted, while the horses bowed their heads and champed
The foaming bit before their mistress' feet, she spoke out:
'O finest of fathers, war against Thebes, is it war you plan,
The destruction of your own descendants? Harmonia's race,
And the union we celebrated in heaven, and these my tears,
Do they not deter you, madman? Is this the reward for my
Shame? Is this what my lost name and honour, and Lemnos'
Net of chain deserve from you? Go your way, freely, yet
Elsewhere Vulcan defers to me, and my wronged husband
Though angered, serves me yet. If I ordered him to sweat
For me, spending sleepless nights at his everlasting forge,
He would be pleased and toil at new weapons, even for you.
But you – I seek to move stone, a heart of bronze, with my
Requests. Yet regarding this alone I entreat you, simply this:
Why did you have me wed my dear daughter, Harmonia,
To a Tyrian husband, those fatal nuptials, boasting that
Tyrians of Cadmus' serpent-blood, a race descending
From the line of Jove, would be renowned in battle, their
Hearts eager for action? How I wish the girl had married
Beyond Thrace and Boreas, beneath the Sithonian Bear!

Was it not shame enough that Venus' daughter slithers
Across the ground, shedding venom over Illyrian turf?
Yet now an innocent people –' Here the lord of war
Could stand her tears no longer. Switching his spear
To his left hand he leapt from his tall chariot in a trice,
Clasping her to his shield, bruising her in his grip.
Then with fond words he attempted to soothe her.
'O my solace after war, my sacred delight, my soul's
Only peace, you alone of the deities have the power
To face my weapons without harm, to stand before
These steeds though they neigh amongst the slaughter,
And snatch this sword from my hand. I do not forget
That marriage of Sidonian Cadmus, nor your loyalty
(Seek no pleasure in false reproaches!): I'd sooner,
God though I am, be plunged in my uncle's infernal
Deeps, and be led helpless among the pallid shades.
Yet, charged with carrying out the Fates' warnings,
And the supreme father's will (since Vulcan is no fit
Choice for the task) how can I oppose Jove or flout
His decree? Even now I saw the earth, sky and sea
Tremble at his words (what power!) and saw the ranks
Of deities cowed. But, have no fear, love, in the end
Since no power can prevent it, I will be there when
Those two nations battle beneath the walls of Thebes,
To aid them, allied in arms. Through blood-drenched
Fields you'll see me seal the Argives doom, nor will I
Disappoint you. It is my right, the Fates agree.' So he
Spoke, and drove his fiery horses forth. No swifter does
Jove's wrath strike the earth, when he stands on snowy
Thracian Othrys, or Thessalian Ossa's chill northern peak
Among the clouds, the lightning in his hand. The blazing
Bolt, with triple tail, leaps down, bearing the god's fierce
Message, scaring the heavens, to send an omen to rich
Fields, or drown the wretched mariners in the waves.

BkIII:324-393 Tydeus returns to Argos

Now Tydeus completes his journey, and fearful to behold
Traverses with tired steps the Danaan fields, and the slopes
Of green Prosymna. His hair thick with dust, sweat flowing
From his soiled shoulders over his deep wounds, eyes red
And inflamed through lack of sleep, rabid thirst parches his
Throat, yet his mind, conscious of his deeds, fills with glory.
So a warring bull returns to his pasture, neck and shoulders
Drenched with blood, his rival's and his own, his dewlaps torn,
Yet wearied, his courage is yet high, and he still paces proudly,
Scorning the ground, while his foe lies on bare earth, groaning
In shame, trying to deny the raw pain he is feeling. Such was
Tydeus, nor had he failed to stir the cities along his way, all
That lie between Boeotia's river Asopus, and ancient Argos,
Relating the tale everywhere, time and time again, of how he
Had gone as an emissary from the Greeks to seek the realm
Of exiled Polynices, but met with violence, treachery, crime
In the night; that was how the Echionian king kept his oath.
The brother was denied his rights. All were swift to credit it.
The god, lord of war, had persuaded them to believe his tale,
And Rumour had increased their fear, once it was admitted.
Entering the gates, suddenly, as venerable Adrastus chanced
To be holding council, he shouted at the very palace doors:
'Warriors, to arms, to arms! And you, the great lord of Lerna,
If the blood of your brave ancestors runs in your veins, take
Up your weapons! The love of kin is dead, the nations know
Neither justice nor morality nor do they pay heed to Jupiter.
Better if I had been sent as envoy to the wild Sarmatians or
To King Amycus, the cruel keeper of the Bebrycian forest.
Not that I complain at my mission, or the orders I received:
I am glad I went myself, and put guilty Thebes to the test.
They waged war against me, if you would believe it, war,
As if I were a mighty tower or walled town: warriors chosen
To set an ambush, and carrying every kind of weapon, and I,
Defenceless: they attacked at night with cunning, but in vain:
Now they lie drenched in their own blood, by a desolate city.

Now, O now is the time to for action, while they're troubled,
Pale with fright, while they are retrieving their dead. Now,
My father, now I would seek to go, while they remember
The weight of my hand, though I myself am wearied after
Making ghosts of those fifty warriors, and though I still bear
These wounds caked and foul with blood!' The Argives,
Troubled in their turn, leapt from their seats, Polynices,
The Cadmean hero above all, his gaze anguished, cried:
'Hated by the gods, a victim of life, as I am, can I view
Your wounds and feel content? O, my brother, was such
The homecoming you planned for me? Was it towards me
Those weapons were pointed? O shameful longing for life!
Unhappily, it is I who thwart my brother from committing
The crime he planned! Let your walls, at least, my friends,
Know peace and quiet. I must not prove a cause of trouble
To you. I am but a guest. I know (good fortune has not made
Me so unaware) how sad it is to be torn from wife, children,
And fatherland: so, let no man blame me for his family's ills;
No angry mother look at me askance. I will go freely to my
Death, though the best of wives, and her father, restrain me
As he did once before. I owe a life to Thebes; to you, brother;
And to you great Tydeus.' So with a flurry of words he tries
Their hearts, and aims his entreaty. His distress rouses anger,
And hot tears of indignation. There is but one thought in all,
In those chilled with sluggish age, not merely in the young,
That they must leave their homes behind bereft; summon
The neighbouring forces; and march at once. But Adrastus,
The king, profoundly wise, and no novice to the exercise
Of power said: 'Leave it to the gods and my consideration,
I beg you. Your brother shall not wield the sceptre blithely,
But nor are we desirous of war. Yet, let us welcome Tydeus,
Oeneus' noble son, triumphant after such mighty bloodshed,
Let rest refresh his brave spirit; anger must not act unwisely.'

BkIII:394-459 Adrastus and the seers seek omens

At that, his pale bride and troubled comrades gathered round
Tydeus, who was weary from the fighting and his journey.
He was content to stand in the hall's depths, leaning his back
On a huge pillar, while Epidaurian Idmon (quick with a blade,
Gentle with compounds of warm herbs) bathed his wounds.
Caught up in his memories, he recounted again the origins
Of the dispute, what each man had said, the place of ambush,
The moment of furtive combat, the opposition, their names
And fame, the toughest duels, and how he spared Maeon
To carry the dread news. The loyal band of men, the nobles,
His father-in-law, were astounded, and Polynices smouldered.
Now the setting Sun had set free his fiery steeds by the curving
Rim of the western sea, and was bathing his red hair in Ocean's
Stream. Nereus' attendants thronged towards him from the deep,
With the swift-running Hours. They took the reins, relieved him
Of the mass of his golden crown, freed his chest of the burning
Leather straps, then they let out his faithful horses to their soft
Pasture, while the chariot was reversed with its pole in the air.
Night fell, stilling the cares of men, the movement of creatures,
Wrapping the sky in a mantle of darkness, sweet to all but you,
Adrastus, and Polynices. As for Tydeus, generous sleep had
Enfolded him in mighty dreams of valour. Now armed Mars
Among night-wandering shadows, strikes Arcadia's borders,
Nemea's fields, the peak of Taenarus and Apollo's Therapne
With his thunderous weapons, and fills their troubled hearts
With longing for him. Madness and Anger adorn his crest,
Panic, armour-bearer, gives rein to the steeds, and Rumour,
Alert to every noise, surrounded by false tidings of conflict,
Flies before his chariot, driven by the horses' panting breath,
Beating her restless wings, with a deep murmuring sound,
Urged on with blood-stained whip by the charioteer, to cry
False news and true, while the god from his high chariot
Spurs her forward, his Scythian lance at her head and back.
Even as Neptune, master of the Winds, drives them outward
From the Aetolian cave, and urges them freely over the wide

Aegean, a sombre company roars about Mars' reins as he goes:
 Gales and dark Storms, dense Clouds, and black Tempests,
 Tearing at Earth's foundations: shaken to their roots, trembling,
 The Cyclades withstand them, while Delos fears to be parted
 From Myconos and Gyaros, calling for help to her foster-child.
 Now a seventh dawn's blushing face brings bright day to gods
 And men, as aged Adrastus leaves his inner sanctum, anxious,
 Troubled in mind regarding war and his ambitious sons-in-law,
 Uncertain whether to let weapons hold sway; let nations stir;
 Or to rein-in anger and clamp loosened swords in their sheaths.
 On the one hand he favours peace and tranquility, on the other
 Inglorious quietude seems shameful, while men's new found
 Longing for battle is hard to quench. He ponders long: at last,
 One thought commends itself, to consult prophetic minds,
 And perform the sacred rites that forecast truly. To you,
 Wise Amphiaraus, and Melampus son of Amythaus (older
 But young in spirit, and blessed with Phoebus' gift) is given
 The task of reading the future. It is hard to say which seer
 Apollo favours more, which is more graced by Delphi's waters.
 To begin they read the blood and entrails of sheep, seeking
 The gods' will, alarmed as discoloured hearts, veins boding
 Ill, greet them. Yet they decide to go seek omens in the sky.

BkIII:460-498 They consult the flight of birds

There is a mountain whose bold ridge rises to the heavens
 (The farmers of Lerna call it Aphasas) that had long been
 Sacred to the Argive people. They used to say swift Perseus
 Pierced the clouds there as he hovered in flight, while his
 Fearful mother watched her boy's parting steps from a crag
 And almost followed. This the two seers, their sacred heads
 Adorned with leaves of grey olive, brows with snow-white
 Ribbons, climbed once bright sunrise melted the hard frost
 On the damp fields. First Amphiaraus in customary prayer
 Seeks the favour of the god: 'Almighty Jupiter (since we
 Are taught that you grant wisdom through the flight of birds,
 Sending omens on swift wings, and revealing in the heavens

Prophecies and hidden causes) Delphi does not more surely
Send the divine word from its cave; nor the Chaonian leaves
Thought to produce sounds at your command in the groves
Of Epirus, while parched Ammon feels envy, and the oracle
In Lycian Patara, and Apis by the Nile, and Branchus who
Equals his father by repute, and that Pan whom farmers hear
At night in Lycaonian shadows by wave-swept Pisa, seek
To compete; than does he, more possessed in spirit, to whom
You, Dictaeon Jove, reveal yourself, rousing prophetic birds.
Unknown it is why they have long possessed this wondrous
Honour; whether because the creator of the heavenly palace
Decreed it so, when he wove new beings from random chaos,
Or whether to them, who take to the air transformed, bodies
Changed from those we owned before, rarely landing here
On earth, the purer sky devoid of evil teaches truth, only you
The supreme originator of earth and gods can rightly know.
Let us learn from the sky, in advance, if Argive strife is here,
And of the toil to come. If that request is granted and the cruel
Fates decree we should rattle the gates of Thebes with Argive
Spears, show a sign, send thunder on the left; let every bird
Flying about the stars cry benign omens in harmony in their
Secret tongue. If you deny it, cause delay, and cloud the void
Of day with birds on the right.' So he spoke, and disposed his
Limbs on a tall rock; then he added prayers to other unknown
Deities, and found delight in the darkness of the wide universe.

BkIII:499-565 The omens are revealed

Once they had apportioned the stars between them and scanned
The heavens attentively with close gaze, then Amythaon's son
Melampus, the seer, finally spoke: 'Amphiaraus, do you see
How under the high dome of the living sky not one bird wings
Its peaceful way, hangs wheeling in the heavens in airy course,
Or screams a benign omen as it vanishes? No raven, attendant
Of the tripod; no fiery eagle, bearer of the lightning bolt, is by;
No hooting taloned owl of fair Minerva with favourable sign.
Vultures and raptors cry from far above, plundering their prey.

Monstrous things take wing, fateful birds shriek in the clouds,
Screech owls and nocturnal horned owls wail, calling out death
And disaster. What portents of the gods should have primacy?
Lord of Thymbra, great Apollo, shall the heavens be given over
To such as these? In fury their curved talons slash away at each
Other's heads and with flapping wings like mourners who beat
Their chests they stir the breezes, strike at their feathered breasts.'
Amphiaraus answered: 'Revered father, I have often delivered
Omens of subtle Apollo. Even when, among the regal demigods,
Thessalian Argo, that ship of pine, carried me onwards in green
Youth, those warriors were amazed when I foresaw the dangers
Of the sea and land, and Jason consulted me as often as Mopsus,
As I told of things to come. Yet I have never seen the heavens
More prodigious of terrors: though still greater things appear.
Look upwards: innumerable swans are marshalling their ranks
In the bright regions of the deep sky, driven by Boreas perhaps
From the Thracian north, or summoned by the fertile richness
Of placid Nile. Take them as symbolising Thebes; since calm
And silent they wheel in unbroken rings as though behind walls
And ramparts. But see, a nobler flight approaches in the void.
I see seven eagles, weapon-bearers of highest Jupiter, exulting
In tawny line. Consider them the Argive royalty. They invade
The circles of the snowy flock, opening their hooked beaks
For fresh slaughter, plunging with talons drawn. Do you see
How the air drips blood as never before, how day rains feathers?
Yet what fierce anger of baleful Jove's drives the conquerors
To sudden death? One eagle, seeking the heights, bursts into
Flame from the sun's torch, his pride quenched; the wings
Of another, younger eagle, fail as he flies after larger birds;
One falls entangled with his prey; one turns back in flight
Leaving the ranks of his comrades to their fate; another ends
In a mass of storm-cloud; a sixth dying feeds on a living bird;
Revered Melampus, why weep covertly? I know the seventh
Who falls there.' Terror gripped the seers, appalled by a weight
Of futurity, suffering the vision of all that would come to pass.
They wished they had not witnessed that gathering of birds,
Not forced their wish on heaven that denied them, distressed

That the gods had heard their prayer. Why did poor mortals
On this earth first nurture the ill longing to know futurity?
Shall we call it a *gift* of the gods! Or is it that we ourselves,
This greedy species, are never satisfied with what we have,
And must predict the birth and end of life, what the kind
Father of the gods intends, what harsh Clotho has in view?
So divination from entrails, sounds of birds in the clouds,
The movements of the stars, the footsteps of the moon,
Thessalian witchcraft. But the ancestral race of the golden
Age and the Arcadians born of rocks and trees did not so.
Their only wish was, by hand, to tame the fields and forests,
And what tomorrow might bring was sin for a man to know.
We a depraved and lamentable crew question the high gods
Deeply, hence comes fear and anger, hence comes treachery
And crime, and a host of demands, beyond all moderation.

BkIII:566-597 Argos prepares for war

Amphiaraus tore the sacred ribbons and the guilty garlands
From his head, threw away the twigs, and without honours
Descended the hateful mountain. Now with the war trumpets
To hand and distant Thebes oppressing his heart, he cannot
Stand the sight of the multitude, nor the king's council nor
The noble gatherings, but cloistered in his dark dwelling he
Refuses to divulge the omens of the gods (Melampus clings
To the countryside from shame and anxiety): Amphiaraus
Keeps silent for twelve days raising doubts among the people
And their leaders, but then the Thunderer's high command
Sounds out, emptying fields and ancient cities of their men.
Everywhere Mars, the god of war, drives countless columns
Before him. Men desert their homes joyfully, leaving loved
Wives and children weeping on the threshold, so strongly
Do the gods grip and inspire them. Eagerly they snatch
Weapons from their doorposts, commandeering chariots
From the shrines, refurbishing the pikes tarnished with rust,
Swords sheathed in their neglected scabbards, grinding them
To render them new again, ready to deal out cruel wounds.

Some try the fit of rounded helms, jerkins of bronze mail,
 The tunics clinking with disused iron. Others bend Cretan
 Bows from Gortyn. Now the ploughshares, sickles, harrows,
 And curved hoes redden fiercely in the consuming furnace.
 They dare to hew strong shafts from sacred wood, to cover
 A shield from a slaughtered ox too old for work. Into Argos
 They burst, and cried war at the doors of the sorrowful king,
 War with their mouths, war at their heart. The clamour rose,
 Loud as the crashing of Tyrrhenian breakers; or as the giant
 Enceladus shifting from side to side, while fiery Aetna above
 Thunders through its depths, the summit gushes, the straits
 By Pelorus contract, and the severed lands hope to be united.

BkIII:598-677Amphiaraus counters Capaneus' enthusiasm

Capaneus was inspired by a mighty lust for war, his swollen
 Pride had long argued against the endless peace (he was noble
 And of ancient blood, while he himself had outdone the finest
 Deeds of his fathers. He had scorned the gods with impunity,
 Restless for justice, and prodigal of life when anger prompted.)
 Like a denizen of the dark woods of Pholoe, or one who might
 Stand equal with Aetna's brothers, he shouted before the doors
 Of Amphiaraus' dwelling, where a crowd of warriors with their
 Leaders gathered: 'What cowardice is this, you sons of Inachus,
 And you Achaeans our allies? Must so many warriors, prepared
 And armed, linger uncertain at a single citizen's plebeian gate?
 (Oh, for shame!) Were Apollo himself (so cowards and Rumour
 Have it, whoever speaks!) to bellow in frenzy, deep in his cave,
 Under Delphi's hollow peak, I'd not wait for the pallid priestess
 To announce her fearful and enigmatic prophecies. Courage is
 My god, and the sword I hold. Now let this priest with his holy
 Deceptions appear, or I'll test this mighty power of birds today.'
 The Achaean warriors shouted joyfully and added their assent
 To his madness. Forced at length to show himself, Amphiaraus
 Cried: 'I am not drawn from darkness by a young blasphemer's
 Reckless cries, or those words; wild though his threats may be.
 A storm of other cares assails me. My last day will be subject

To another fate, my death will not be due to mortal weapons.
Yet my love for you and all-too-powerful Phoebus urge me on
To speak my knowledge. I will lay bare to you what lies beyond,
What things will come. As for you, madman, no warning will
Serve, for you alone our lord Apollo is silent. Wretched men,
Why rush to arms when the Fates and the gods above oppose it?
What Fury's whip lashes you in your blindness? Are you so
Tired of life? Do you hate Argos so? Is home not sweet? Care
You not for omens? Why did you urge me climb with trembling
Steps to the arcane summit of Perseus' mountain and interrupt
The council of the gods? I might have remained in ignorance
Like you as to the outcome of the conflict, the days of darkness,
The fate that begins here to unravel for all of you, and for me.
I summon as witness the secret places of the universe that I
Have questioned, the cries of birds, and you lord of Thymbra,
Never before so harsh in your reply, to the omens that I saw.
I witnessed portents of great disaster, terror for men and gods,
The Fury Megaera's laughter, and Lachesis, snapping the rotten
Threads of generations. Hurl down your weapons. See, the god
Opposes your frenzy! Behold the god! Wretches, what glory
Is there in heaping Aonia, Cadmus' fatal fields, with your
Defeated corpses? But why do I vainly prophesy? Why warn
Of certain fate? I go.' The priest groaned, his lips now sealed.
Capaneus responded to him: 'Let these ravings augur, only
That you, yourself, shall live empty and inglorious years,
And Etruscan clangour never echo round your brow. Why
Quench the better hopes of the brave? Is it simply so you
May keep your foolish birds, son, house, and a marriage bed
Where you lie fast asleep, that we must leave noble Tydeus
Un-avenged, all silent as to his wounds and the broken pact?
If you'd forbid these Greeks to wage savage war, then go
Yourself as emissary to our Theban enemies. Those ribbons
Will guarantee your safety. In short, your speech plucks
Pretexts, some darkened pattern of action, from thin air!
The gods are wretched indeed if they pay heed to chants
And human prayers. Why put fear into unknowing minds?
Fear first made the gods of this world. For now let this

Raving go unpunished. But when, from our helms, we drink
Dirce's waters, and those of Ismenos, to the trumpet's cry,
I warn you: do not try to stop me then, while I long for
Weapons and the sound of war, delaying battle with your
Birds and entrails. Those fragile ribbons and the madness
Of your dread Apollo will not help you then: There I shall
Be augur, and all who are ready to rave in battle with me.'
Again the mighty roar of the warriors thundered out, rising
In vast tumult to the stars. It flowed like the swift torrent,
Set loose by the mountains now freed of their winter cold
By spring breezes, that rushes across the plain, and leaps
Vain obstructions in its course: fields, cattle, houses drown
In the cross-currents, until the ungovernable tide is halted
By a steep hill slope, or comes to rest among vast ramparts.
But now night intervened to interrupt this leaders' quarrel.

BkIII:678-721 Argia, Polynices' wife, urges war

Now Argia could no longer endure her husband's anguish;
Her troubled heart both sharing in and pitying his distress.
Unadorned, she ran to her revered father's high palace, her
Beauty marred by the marks of tears on her face, hair torn,
Carrying little Thessander in her arms, to his beloved sire,
As night gave way to fresh light, and only the Ploughman
And his Wain remained to eye the stars sinking into Ocean.
Entering, she threw herself down before her royal father:
'Father, even were I slow to tell you, you surely know why
I visit your house at night in tearful supplication, without my
Sorrowful husband. Yet I call on the sacred laws of marriage
As witness, and yourself, father, sleepless suffering demands
This, not he. For since Hymen and favourless Juno first raised
Ill-omened torches the pain and torment at my side has stolen
My rest. Were I a dreadful tigress, or possessed a heart harder
Than the sea-cliffs, still I could not bear it. You alone can help;
Yours the great power to heal. Let there be war, father; view
The thwarted fate of your exiled son-in-law, and this his child,
Who would feel ashamed some day of his birth. Oh, where is

The welcome you first showed, hands clasped, and the gods as
Witness? Surely Polynices is that man of fate Apollo foretold?
I burned no guilty torch of love, warmed by no stolen flame;
Your revered order, your counsel I cared for. But now how
Cruel were I to despise the plaintive cries of the wretched!
Father, you know not the feelings of a chaste and loving wife
Married to a grieving husband. Now in sorrow I ask a sombre
Joyless favour that brings with it fear and grief, though
When the sad day comes that severs our embraces, when
The trumpets sound their harsh signal to the departing host,
When the cruel metal hides your faces, then dear father,
Perhaps I shall demand its opposite.' He, accepting tearful
Kisses from her lips, answered: 'Daughter, I could never
Criticise such sorrow, set fear aside; your request deserves
Praise, it is worthy to be considered, but the gods (no, no,
Do not relinquish hope for what you urge!) and my qualms,
And the varying duties of kingship must give me thought.
What ought to be shall be, child, nor shall you complain
That you wept to no purpose. Comfort your husband, let
This just delay seem no harsh loss: with great preparations
One moves slowly, child. It will benefit the war.' He speaks,
While dawning light gives warning, great cares bid him rise.

End of Book III

BkIV:1-31 The Argives set out for war

Phoebus had thrice eased harsh winter with his breezes,
Forcing the passing days to increase their narrow bounds,
Before wise counsel had been overturned by demanding
Fate, and these wretches given at last the licence for war.
First Bellona waved her red torch from Larisa's summit,
And with her right hand sent her massive spear whirling;
It flew, whistling, through the clear sky and so landed
On the high rampart of Aonian Thebes. Then entering
The camp and mingling with the warriors clad in steel
And gold, she cried out, loud as a squadron, handed
Swords to departing men; drove on the horses; called
Troops to the gates: the brave not needing to be urged,
And even the cowards gaining a brief access of courage.
The appointed day arrived. Whole flocks were ritually
Sacrificed to Gradivus and the Thunderer; the priest,
Finding nothing favourable in the entrails, feigning
Good omens for the soldiers. Now their fathers, wives
And children, flowed among them blocking their path
To the outer gates. The weeping was unrestrained.
Helm and shields were wet with tears as they spoke
Their sad farewells, and a family to be sighed for hung
About every warrior. They tried to grant kisses through
Closed visors, while crests nodded to their embraces.
Those who had called a moment past for their swords,
For death itself, now groaned, anger quenched, giving
Way to tears. So, when voyagers are ready to set sail
On some long journey, and the fluked anchor is hauled
From the deep, and a breeze fills the sails, the dear ones
Cling to them, vying to twine their arms about their neck;
Sea-mist and kisses blur their weeping eyes; left behind,
They stand there yet, waving to the vessel from the cliff,
And still gaze from the heights, for sweet it is to follow
The flying canvas, saddened by the rising offshore wind.

BkIV:32-73 The leaders depart: Adrastus

Now, ancient Fame, and you, past Ages of the world,
You that remember leaders, and celebrate their lives,
Set out the names. And you, Calliope, raise your lyre,
O queen of the sounding groves, and tell of the armies
And the weapons Mars conjured, the cities he emptied
Of their people, since no deeper wisdom comes to any
Mind than that which flows from your fount. Adrastus,
The king, full of years, sad and weighed down by care
Walked barely unaided among cries of encouragement,
Glad to feel the steel at his side, attendants bearing his
Shield behind him. His charioteer held the swift horses
There at the gate, Arion already neighing for the yoke.
Larisa arms her men, for the king, and high Prosymna;
Medea better for grazing; sheep-rich Philius; and Neris,
Fearing the Charadros as it foams down its long valley;
Cleonae of the massive tower, and Thyrea fated to reap
Spartan dead. With them march the men who till rocky
Drepanum, and tend the fields of olive-bearing Sicyon,
Mindful of this king whom they once drove elsewhere;
And those whom the slow Langia passes in silent flow,
And the Elisson that curves sinuously between shores,
Owing to grim honour since its harsh waters are said
To bathe the Stygian Furies: fresh from the destruction
Of Thracian palace, or the impious roofs of Mycenae,
Or Cadmus' dwelling, they'll plunge their faces deep,
Their snaky tresses panting for Phlegethon's streams;
And the river flees from them as they swim, its pools
Darkening endlessly with venom. There too are men
From Corinth, that solaced Ino's cries; and the host
From Cenchreae, where a fountain known to the poets
Sprang from under Pegasus' hoof, where the Isthmus
Thwarts the seas, and separates their breaking waves.
A host three thousand strong follows Adrastus, proudly,
Some bearing pikes, some stakes hardened in the fire
(There is no one race and so no single kind of weapon)

Some whirling curved slings, making a circle in thin air.
Adrastus, revered for his power and his years, joins
Them, moving like a great bull among pastures he
Has long possessed; his neck droops, his shoulders
Are hollow, yet he is still leader; the other steers lack
Courage to try him in battle, seeing his horns splintered
By many a blow; the great scars of wounds on his chest.

BkIV:74-115 The leaders depart: Polynices and Tydeus

Beside Adrastus, Polynices, his Theban son-in-law lifted
His banner, in whose cause they fought, to whom the whole
Army lent its anger: and volunteers rallied to him from his
Native land. Some championed the exile, their loyalty made
Firmer by misfortune, some mainly wished a change of ruler,
While many were won to the rightness of his superior cause.
Moreover Adrastus granted him rule of Aegion and Arene;
And power over Theseus' Troezen, lest he lack glory leading
Too mean a force, and feel the lost honours of his homeland.
His clothes and weapons were those he had worn as a fated
Guest that winter's night. A Teumesian lion-skin adorned his
Back, the blades of twin javelins gleamed, while on the sharp
Sword at his side a menacing Sphinx, embossed, firmly sat.
Already in his hopes and prayers, his realm regained, he sees
His mother's form, his loyal sisters; yet he looks backward far
Towards Argia where she leans distraught from a high turret.
She draws her husband's thoughts and gaze from sweet Thebes.
Behold Tydeus like a lightning-bolt in their midst has roused
A host of his countrymen, strong again in body, overjoyed
At hearing the first trumpets sound. He was like a snake that
Slithers from his deep den at the mild breath of spring sunlight,
Free of moulted skin, shedding the scaly years, a green threat
Among rich grasses, marking trouble for the labourer who finds
Him gaping from the turf, and feels the first venom of his fangs.
Rumours of war brought Tydeus allies too, from Aetolia's cities.
Stony Pylene heard the call; and Pleuron where Meleager's
Sisters wept for him, and were turned to birds; steep Calydon,

And Olenos that challenges Mount Ida with its tale of Jupiter;
And Aetolian Chalcis whose haven hosts the Ionian waves;
And Achelous, whose river-god's horn was broken by Hercules,
So that even now he scarcely dares to raise his mutilated brow
From the liquid depths and mourns, head sunk in his green cave,
While his shores breathe dust and parch. These warriors' chests
Were protected by shields of bronze-covered wicker, they bore
Cruel pikes, and Mars their ancestral god adorned their helmets.
A chosen band of men surrounded the brave son of Oeneus,
Ready for war, and marked with the scars of that evil night.
He equals Polynices in his menace and his anger, such that
It seems in doubt for which of them the fight will be waged.

BkIV:116-164 The leaders depart: Hippomedon

Vaster than these, the Doric ranks appeared, newly armed,
Men that plough your banks, and with many a ploughshare
Lyrceus; and your shores, Inachus, chief of Achaean streams,
(Since no fiercer river flows over Persean soil, when Taurus
And the watery Pleiades shine, foaming, swollen with the rain
From Jove his son-in-law); and men swift Asterion encircles,
And Erasinus bearing Dryopian harvests; and those who till
The Epidaurian fields (the hills are kind to Bacchus' vines,
But not to Sicilian Ceres' corn). Distant Dyme sent warriors,
Neleian Pylos dense squadrons (Pylos was not yet famous,
Nestor was still young, in his second span of life, but he
Refused to join the doomed army). Hippomedon led them
All, teaching them the love of glorious valour. On his head
A bronze helmet swayed, with its triple snowy plume erect,
Chain mail chafed his sides beneath his shield, a golden arc
Covered his shoulders and chest, all Danaus' night-work
Engraved in the metal; fifty marriage chambers all ablaze
With crime, with the black torches of the Furies; the father
Himself in the bloodstained doorway praising the guilty,
Examining the swords. A Nemean steed bore Hippomedon
Down from the citadel of Argos and, fearing his weapons,
Filled the fields with a vast flying shadow, raising a long trail

Of dust over the plain. Hylaeus the Centaur hurtled like that
From his mountain cave, shattering the undergrowth with his
Shoulders and bi-formed breast; Ossa dreading his passing;
Cattle and wild beasts crouching in terror; even his brothers
Not without fear, till with one vast leap he reached the pools
Of Peneus, damming the mighty river with his opposing mass.
What mortal voice could describe the weight of steel, the ranks,
The power. Ancient Tiryns too was stirred to action, by her god
Hercules, not lacking brave men, or degenerated from the days
Of her great son, but her wealth sunk in decay, no riches adding
To her strength; only a rare dweller in the fallow fields marking
Her towers raised by the Cyclopes' sweat. Yet still she yields
Three hundred courageous hearts to the countless ranks of war.
They've no throwing spears or baleful flashing swords: on their
Backs are tawny lion skins, their national garb; their pine staves
In their hands; with inexhaustible quivers crammed with arrows.
They sing their praise of Hercules and a world rid of monsters;
And far beyond leafy Oeta the god hears. Nemea too gives men;
And the sacred vineyards of Cleonaeon Molorchus, all they have
Gathered for the battle: far famed is the glory of his poor cottage,
The arms of the god, his guest, are depicted on its doors of willow,
And in his tiny field are shown the oak on which the god leaned
His club and unstrung bow; the marks of his elbow in the ground.

BkIV:165-186 The leaders depart: Capaneus

And Capaneus marched out, head and shoulders taller than the rest.
His shield was made from the hides of four untamed steers, topped
With a rigid mass of heavy bronze, embossed with the vile Hydra,
Newly slain, branched and triple-crowned: part, embossed in silver,
Shone with savage living heads, part was treated, a new technique,
Darkened in tawny gold as if in death; round it flowed the sluggish
River-marshes of Lerna, dark blue in steel. While his broad chest
And wide flanks were protected by closely-woven iron mail, no
Women's work, a thing of awe. From his helmet's glittering crest
A Giant arose. A cypress stripped of branches with point attached,
Was his spear, that none but he could hurl. Under his command fall

Those nurtured by fertile Amphigenia, flat Messene, mountainous
Ithome, Thyron and Aepy piled on its hilltop, Helos, and Pteleon,
And Dorion mourning for Thamyras, its Getic bard, who thought
To surpass the Aonian Muses in song, and was condemned to a life
Of silence, voice and lyre instantly mute (who can slight the deities
Face to face?) He had forgotten Celaenae, the home of the satyr,
Marsyas hung and flayed for daring to try his skill against Apollo.

BkIV:187-245 The leaders depart: Amphiaraus

Now even the will of Amphiaraus, the far-seeing augur, grew faint,
And yielded: he indeed knew the outcome, and the fatal omens,
But Atropos herself placed weapons in his uncertain hand, her power
Outweighed the god of prophecy's. Nor was his own wife's treachery
Lacking, his house glittered already with forbidden ore, the golden
Necklace the Fates had warned would bring destruction to the seer.
His faithless spouse knew (ah, the guilt!) but chose to barter her
Husband for a gift, coveting the spoils of powerful Argia, wishing
To glow with stolen adornment. Argia, happily placed the fatal
Necklace in the hands of her beloved Polynices, and without a tear
Said: 'To me, bright ornaments do not suit these times, I would
Take no pleasure in making myself beautiful in your sad absence.
It will be enough to solace my doubts and fears with the consolation
Of friends, and sweep the surface of the altars with my unkempt hair.
Should I (shameful thought!) wear rich Harmonia's golden dower,
While you are encased in threatening helm, and sounding steel?
Fortune will grant me ornaments more fitting, my garb outshine
Argos' brides, when I am the consort of the king, when you return
To me, and the temples are filled with votive choirs. For now, let
Her who wishes, and is happy at her husband's absence, wear it.'
Thus the fatal gold entered Eriphyle's house and set in motion
The mighty antecedents of her crime. Tisiphone smiled grimly,
Rejoicing in things to come. Meanwhile Amphiaraus stood behind
His Taenarian steeds, bred out of Castor's Cyllarus in an unknown
Unequal union, as they pawed the ground. Parnassian wool threads,
Denoting the seer, adorned him; his helm was wreathed with olive
Leaves, and a white ribbon twined round its scarlet plume. Now,

He handled the taut reins and, at the same instant, those weapons
In his hand. His chariot quivering with a forest of iron, had slots
For javelins on either side. He himself, with weighty spear, seen
From afar, shone with light from the conquered Python graved
On his shield. Men from Apollo's Amyclae followed his chariot;
From Pylos, and Malea shunned by nervous mariners; Caryae
Skilled in music in Diana's honour; Pharis, and Cytherean Messe,
Mother of doves; and a phalanx out of Taygetus; and hardened
Warriors from the banks of the swan-filled Eurotas; Mercury,
Himself, the Arcadian god, nurtured these men in the naked
Dust, and imbued them with the power and fury of raw valour;
Minds, filled with vigour thus, lead them on to sweet rituals
Of death with honour, while parents applaud their children's
Fate, urging them on to die, while a multitude sheds tears for
Their youth, and mothers rest content with a wreathed corpse.
These warriors gripped the reins and flourished twin javelins,
Clasped together; their massive shoulders were bare, a rough
Cloak hung down their back, and Leda's swan-crest adorned
Their helmets. They were not the only ones to follow the seer:
Sloping Elis added to the force, and the men of low-lying Pisa
Who swim the yellow Alpheus, which reaches Sicily untainted
By its long sea-journey. They churn their crumbling fields far
And wide with chariots beyond count, and tame steeds for war;
A glory that endures among a race known for King Oenomaus'
Broken axles and vile deeds. The horses gnaw at the foaming
Bits, and a white rain showers down, to fleck the furrowed sand.

BkIV:246-308 The leaders depart: Parthenopaeus

You too, Parthenopaeus (a novice in war, alas, but such is the urge
For new glory!), led out the Parrhasian squadrons unbeknown
To your mother. His stern parent, Atalanta, chanced to be hunting,
With her bow, in far glades beyond chill Mount Lycaeus (or else
The youth would not have gone). No more handsome a face would
Go into that grave danger, no peerless form more favoured; nor
Did he lack courage but simply years of a more mature strength.
What spirits of the groves and rivers, what nymphs of the woodland

Dells did he not fill with burning passion? They say Diana herself,
Seeing the lad, with gentle steps, treading the grass in Maenalus'
Shade, forgave her companion Atalanta, and set the Amyclaeon
Quiver with its Dictaeon arrows on his shoulder. He charged out,
Filled with Mars' audacious zeal, afire with the sound of trumpets
And weapons, ready to mar his yellow hair with the dust of battle,
And return on a captured enemy mount. He was tired of the woods,
Ashamed his arrows had not tasted the dubious glory of taking
Human life. Shining with gold he flamed ahead now, clothed
In purple, clasps of Iberian metal creasing the folds of his robe.
On his virgin shield his mother was depicted in the Calydonian
Hunt. At his left side his brave bow rattled, while his Cydonian
Arrows jostled in a quiver pale with electrum bright with jasper
From the east, arrows whose feathers rasped his back. He rode
Astride a charger swifter than a frightened deer, clothed in two
Lynx hides, that wondered at the weapons of a greater master.
His handsome colour and the freshness of youth in his cheeks
Drew all eyes. The Arcadians, an ancient race, old as the moon
And stars, sent him loyal troops. The race was born, so legend
Tells from tall forest trees, when Earth, astonished, felt the first
Tread of feet. There were no houses, cities, fields or marriage
Laws as yet. Oaks and laurels bore new offspring; the shadowy
Ash created a nation; a vigorous lad came from a fertile rowan.
They say the alternation of light and dark night amazed them,
And that following the setting sun at a distance they despaired
Of day. High Maenalus also was thinned of farmers; deserted,
The Parthenian forest; while Rhipe, Stratie and windy Enispe
Gave troops for war. Nor was Tegea idle; nor Cyllene, happy in
Her winged god, Mercury; nor Aleae, forest shrine of Minerva;
Nor swift Clitor; and the River Ladon, father of Daphne, she
Almost Apollo's bride; nor Lampia, white on its snowy ridge;
Nor Pheneos, named the source of Styx, flowing to dusky Dis.
The Arcadian Azanes came, emulating the cries on Cybele's Ida;
The Parrhasian chiefs; the men of Nonacria's land which delights
The quiver-bearing Thunderer (love laughed at his disguise as
Diana); Orchemnos, too, rich in cattle, Cynosura in wild beasts.
The same ardour emptied Aepytus' fields and high Psophis,

And the mountains known for Hercules' exploits with his club
Against Erymanthus' monstrous boar, and Stymphalos' birds.
All are Arcadians, one race divided only in their ways of life.
Some bend Paphian myrtles back from the root, and practise
Fighting with shepherds' staves, some are armed with bows,
Some with stakes. One has a helmet, one wears his customary
Arcadian hat, while another masks his head with the savage
Gaping jaws of a Lycaonian bear. The warlike crowd, those
Hearts sworn to do battle, were not joined by the warriors
From neighbouring Mycenae, since the fatal banquet was
Occurring there, when the sun turned backwards at midday;
There, those other brothers were locked together in conflict.

BkIV:309-344 Atalanta resists Parthenopaeus' departure

The news her son was leaving as the leader of the Arcadians
In the war now reached Atalanta. Her step faltered, her bow
Fell by her side. Swifter than the wings of the wind she fled
The forest; rocks and rivers with brimming banks obstructing
Her path; she ran with her robe all gathered up, as she was,
Her yellow hair blowing in the breeze, as a tigress robbed
Of her cubs angrily tracks her enemy's course. Reaching
The camp, she pressed herself against the bridle (he, pale
And downcast): 'Why this furious longing, my son, where
Does this cruel courage in your youthful heart arise from?
Are you fit to rule men in war? Can you bear the weight
Of fighting, and lead squadrons of warriors with swords?
What strength do you have for that? I turned pale but now
Seeing you thrusting a hunting spear against a fierce boar,
Forced back, knee bent, in that close combat, near collapse;
And if I'd not fired an arrow from my curved bow, where
Would your war be? My arrows will not help you there,
Nor my polished bow, nor your piebald horse in which
You put your faith, with its black markings. A boy scarce
Ripe for Dryads' chambers, the passions of Erymanthian
Nymphs, you set out on a great enterprise. The omens are
Valid. I wondered why Diana's temple seemed to shudder

Of late, and she was seen in her infernal guise, as spoils
Of war fell from the sacred dome; it slacked my bowstring,
And made my hands falter, uncertain of every arrow shot.
Wait till your honours increase, and your years are greater,
Your rosy cheeks shadowed, and my looks no longer yours.
Then I will lead you to war myself, and the steel you long
For, and I'll shed no mother's tears to summon you back.
Take your weapons home, for now. You Arcadians, born
Of rocks and trees, will you stop him?' She would have
Spoken longer, but the leaders surrounded her and her son,
And crowding near they comforted her and tried to calm
Her fears. Now the harsh trumpets bray. She clasps her
Son still in her fond embrace, commending him to Adrastus.

BkIV:345-405 The Queen of the Theban Bacchantes complains

Elsewhere the people of Mars and Cadmus, dismayed by
The king's madness, and alarmed at the grievous news,
(Since it was rumoured the Argives were descending on
Them in strength) slowly, shamed by their ruler and his
Cause, and yet surely nonetheless, prepared for conflict.
None were eager to unsheathe their swords, nor protect
Their shoulders with their father's shields, nor groom
Their teams of horses, these the delights of war. Rather,
They worked dejectedly, without anger or commitment,
With fearful gestures. One was grieved at the thought
Of the illness of a loving parent, another at the thought
Of his sweet young wife, and of the luckless offspring
Swelling her womb. None were on fire for the war-god.
The walls themselves were crumbling with long neglect.
The flanks of Amphion's great towers were now fragile
And decayed. Brute toil, in silence, repaired the ramparts
That the song of a sacred lyre had once raised to heaven.
And yet a lust for vengeance in battle did inspire the cities
Of Boeotia, stirred not so much though by the wish to aid
An unjust king as by wanting to assist an allied nation.
The monarch indeed was just like a wolf that has raided

A packed sheepfold; his chest still dripping with vile gore,
His bristling jaws foul with bloodstained strands, he quits
The pen gazing uneasily, this way and that, to discover
Whether the sturdy shepherds have witnessed the deed
And pursue him; till, aware of his own audacity, he flees.
Busy Rumour added fear on fear: one alarm had Lernaean
Cavalry already wandering along the banks of Asopus.
Another had Cithaeron taken, the haunt of Bacchantes,
And Teumesos another, while Plataeae, her watch fires
Alight in the darkness, was said to be aflame. For who
Had not freely known and witnessed Tyrian house gods
Dripping sweat, Dirce's water flowing red, strange births,
And the Sphinx giving utterance from her cliff? And then
Fresh terror troubled their anxious hearts: their woodland
Queen of Bacchantes was suddenly possessed; scattering
The sacred baskets, she flew down from the Ogygian peak
To the plain, waving her triple pine torch to and fro, wildly,
With bloodshot eyes, her frenzied cries filling the startled
City, in her passion, shouting: 'Nysaeon father, mighty
Bacchus, you have longed since ceased to love your own
People. Now you run with your iron-tipped wand shaking
Warlike Thracian Ismara, command Lycurgus to imagine
A forest of vines; or you rave in flagrant triumph beside
The swollen Ganges, or the furthest shores of the Red Sea
And the lands of sunrise, or emerge golden from the waters
Of the Hermus. Yet we, your children, who have cast aside
The *thyrsi*, the wands of our nation used in holy worship,
Endure war, and terror, and the crimes of kin, the gifts
Of an unjust reign. Raise me Bacchus: set me down where
Amazonian armies, in eternal frost, howl beyond the peaks
Of Caucasus, rather than hear me tell of monstrous deeds,
And a brood of unhallowed rulers. Lo! You possess me,
(Not such was the madness, I dedicated to you, Bacchus.)
Now I see a pair of mighty bulls, of one breed, that clash.
They lock long horns, butting head on head, and then die
Savagely, in mutual wrath. And he the worst, that sinner:
Yield, you who seek to fight alone for the ancient pasture,

Communal hill slopes. Woe to you! Such bloody conflict
When another holds rights to the meadow!' So she cried,
Then as Bacchus left her, her face grew still, in icy repose.

BkIV:406-487 Tiresias summons the shades

Alarmed now by the omen, and unequal to a host of fears,
The king, sick at heart, sought aid and counsel of the blind
Old seer, wise Tiresias; so men did, fearful of the unknown.
He declared that the gods themselves reveal less of truth in
The rich slaughter of cattle, the flight of birds, in quivering
Entrails, the tripod's riddles, or the movements of the stars,
Or in the flow of smoke over the incense-bearing altars, as
They do through spirits summoned from the shores of death.
He then enacted the sacred rites of Lethe, plunging the king
Below the surface of the Ismenos, where it meets the sea,
And purging all about him with the ragged entrails of sheep,
Wafts of odorous sulphur, fresh herbs, and lengthy prayers.
There stood a grove, rich in years, bent by robust old age,
Its boughs un-lopped; where sunlight never penetrated.
Winter could not touch it, and over it neither southerlies,
Nor northerlies, blowing from the Getic Bear, had power.
Beneath lay a hidden quiet; terror kept a void of silence,
There; and echoes of excluded light cast an eerie pallor.
The shade was not lacking a deity: Diana frequented it,
As guardian of the wood; her image carved from cedar
And pine was hid in sacred shadow beneath its boughs.
Her darts whistled unseen among the trees, the howling
Of her hounds was heard by night, when she crossed
Her uncle Dis's threshold, exchanging Hecate's form
For one new and better; or weary of the mountains, as
The sun at zenith counselled sweet sleep, she planted
Her arrows all around her, and rested, her head leaning
On her quiver. Beyond is a vast stretch of plain, fields
Of Mars, the furrows that yielded warriors to Cadmos:
Daring, the man, who after the fighting among brothers,
Among the deep-drenched furrows, first turned the soil

Again with ploughshare, tilling the blood-stained earth!
Even now at noon, or in the black solitudes of night,
The fateful soil breathes out dense tumultuous vapours,
And the dark sons of earth rise up in phantom conflict;
Then the farmer runs in fear from the field he was set
To plough, the oxen rush homewards in mad frenzy.
There, the aged prophet ordered dark-fleeced sheep
And black cattle to be tethered, the finest of the herds
(Since the ground was suited to Stygian rites, the soil,
Drenched once by the blood of warriors, to his liking).
Dirce and sad Cithaeron groaned, then valley-echoes
Died to a stunned silence. There, with his own hands,
He twined dark garlands round the curved horns, then
At the edge of the wood, as times before, he poured
Draughts of rich wine on the ground, into the hollows,
In nine places; offerings of fresh milk and Attic honey;
And blood, seductive to the shades. He offered as much
As the dry earth would drink. Then tree trunks, rolled
To the spot, were used to make triple fires for Hecate
At his command, and as many for the Furies, the virgin
Daughters of accursed Acheron. Then a ditch was dug,
And pines heaped in the air, for you, lord of Avernus,
And beside it a lesser altar piled for Ceres' Persephone.
Mourning cypresses were twined, in front and all around,
And now the beasts collapsed to the blows of an axe
On their bowed heads, while pure meal was scattered.
Then his daughter Manto, with blood caught in bowls,
Made a first libation, and circling all the pyres thrice,
In her revered father's manner, offered still-quivering
Entrails, livers and lungs, swiftly set light to the dark
Branches with blazing torches. When Tiresias heard
Boughs crackling in the flames, and then the roaring
Of the gloomy piles (fierce heat breathed on his face,
And the fiery vapour heated his hollow eye-sockets)
He cried out (the pyres trembling at his mighty voice):
'Dread realms of Tartarus, you, kingdom of insatiable
Death, and you Hades, cruellest of the three brothers,

You, to whom are given the shades that serve you,
And the guilty for eternal punishment, you whom
The palace of the lower world obeys, open the silent
Places, and stern Proserpine's abyss, to my summons.
Call out the host hidden in hollow night, and so allow
The ferryman, his vessel filled, to re-pass the Styx.
Let all cross together, but grant the shades more ways
Than one of rising to the light. Daughter of Perses,
Separate the pious spirits of Elysium from the rest,
Let airy Mercury with his wand of power lead them;
But Tisisphone, do you show the guilty dead the path,
The most of Erebus, and the most of Cadmus' race,
To the wide shore of day, flailing your snaky tresses
Three times, racing ahead of them with burning yew;
And let not Cerberus' triple jaws obstruct them there,
Or turn aside the shades that rise, longing for the light.'

BkIV:488-535 The ghosts gather

He spoke, then the aged seer and the virgin of Apollo
Waited expectantly; they felt no fear, since the god
Was in their hearts: but Oedipus's son was overcome
By deep dread. In his anxiety he gripped now the hand,
Now the shoulder, now the sacred fillets of the prophet
In his dread chant, and wished now the rites would end.
He felt like the huntsman waiting the approach of a lion,
Roused from its lair, in the undergrowth of a Gaetolian
Forest, by the shouting, who steadies his nerves, clasps
The weapon, sweat-drenched, in his grip, as fear freezes
His face, and his legs tremble; as he imagines the beast
Nearing, its size – hearing the fatal omen of its roaring,
And gauging, with blind trepidation, the sound it makes.
Then Tiresias, as the phantoms still failed to advance,
Called out: 'Goddesses, for whom we have sprinkled
Libations on the flames, and poured wine with our left
Hands on the hollowed earth, I summon you to witness,
I can endure no more delay. Am I, as priest, to be heard

In vain? Shall you come to the command of a Thessalian
 Witch's rabid chant? Or, if a Colchian cries, drugged
 With Scythian potions, shall Tartarus turn pale, shudder
 In fright? Do you care less for me? Though I choose not
 To raise corpses from tombs, or scatter the ancient ash
 From brimming urns, or profane the assembled gods
 Of heaven and Erebus, or chase after bloodless faces
 With a blade, and snatch the sickly innards of the dead,
 Do not, I warn you, do not scorn my fading years, or
 The shadow on my darkened brow. I too can be cruel:
 I know what you fear may be uttered, may be heard.
 I could trouble Hecate (did I not revere you, Apollo,
 Lord of Thymbra) and the greatest of the triple world,
 Whom it is blasphemy to know. He – but I am silent:
 The peace old age seeks forbids it. I summon you, now –'
 But, eagerly, Manto, devotee of Phoebus, intervened.'
 Father, you are heard: the bloodless crowd approaches.
 The Elysian void lies open, the vast hidden darkness
 Of earth splits apart, woods and black rivers appear;
 Acheron spews livid sand; fiery Phlegethon rolls dark
 Smoke over his waters; Styx between, bars the parted
 Shades. I see Him, pale upon his throne, around Him
 The Furies, servants of His deathly work, there I see
 The grim marriage-chamber and the bed of Proserpine,
 The Stygian Juno. Black Death is seated there, alert,
 Counting the silent gathering, on his master's behalf;
 While yet greater crowds await their turn. The Cretan
 Judge, Minos, shakes his harsh urn, demanding truth
 With threats, forcing them to recount their lives from
 Their inception, and confess at last their hidden crimes.
 Shall I tell you of the monsters of Erebus; Scyllas there,
 Centaurs vainly raging; the Giants' twisted chains, solid
 Steel; the cramped shade of hundred-handed Briareus?'

BkIV:536-578 Manto summons Argive and Theban spirits

‘No, guide and support to my old age,’ replied her father,
‘Do not tell me what all men know. Who has not heard
Of Sisyphus and his ever-returning stone, of Tantalus
And the deceptive pool, Tityus food for the vultures,
And Ixion dizzied on his eternal wheel? I too when my
Blood was swifter saw the hidden realms, while Hecate
Led me, before Hera destroyed my sight, before Jupiter
Drove all light inwards to my breast. Summon Argive
Spirits here and Theban rather, with your prayers, bid
All others, daughter, turn away, sprinkled four times
With milk, to quit the dismal grove. Tell me the look
And manner of the shades, you bring, their appetite
For the blood we spilled, and which of those nations
Seems more proud; point by point illuminate my night.’
She did as he commanded, casting a spell, like Medea
Without her guilty crimes, or Circe, changer of forms,
On Aea’s shore; a spell that scattered all the shades,
And recalled some. Then she addressed her revered
Father: ‘Cadmus lowers his feeble serpent’s mouth
To the pool of blood first, then Cytherea’s daughter
Harmonia succeeds her husband, the two snakes drink
From the eddies. Their followers, the warriors of Mars
Born from the earth, whose life-span was a single day
Surround them, all armed, hands on their sword-hilts.
They attack, feint and parry with the fury of the living,
Ignoring the sad pit, thirsting for each other’s blood.
Next a crowd of daughters and lamented grandchildren
Approach. There Autonoe, bereaved of her Actaeon,
And Ino fleeing Athamas’ bow, pressing her sweet lad
To her panting breast, and Semele arms outstretched to
Defend her womb. Cadmean Agave follows Pentheus
Her son, her Bacchic wand broken, grieving, free now
Of the god, her breasts bare and bleeding. He now flees
Through Lethe’s wilds, and beyond the Stygian Lake,
Where Echion his more kindly father weeps for him

And re-unites his dismembered body. I recognise sad
Lycus, and Athamas, the son of Aeolus, throwing now
The corpse of his son Learchus over his burdened
Shoulder. Nor has Actaeon lost the aspect or stigma
Of his changed form as yet: his brow still roughened
With antlers, sword in hand, he repels his hounds,
Jaws apart to tear him. And behold, Niobe, Tantalus'
Daughter, envied for her long train, appears; to count
Her dead children in proud mourning; not downcast
By grief, but joyful rather to escape the gods' power,
And be free to grant her foolish tongue more scope.'

BkIV:579-645 The ghost of Laius prophesies

As the virgin priestess described all this for her father,
His white hair with its sacred ribbons stood on end,
And the blood was driven from his haggard visage.
He no longer leant on his supporting stave or looked
To the loyal girl, but standing erect and tall he cried:
'Cease, your tale, my daughter. I have light enough
Now from beyond; the mist disperses; the darkness
Is stripped from my face. Inspiration fills me, sent
By Apollo above or the ghosts themselves. Behold,
I see what I just heard, but look, the Argive shades
Are mournful, their eyes are downcast. Grim Abas,
Guilty Proteus, gentle Phoroneus, maimed Pelops,
And Oenomaus, are soiled with dust, while streams
Of tears bedew their faces. From it I augur Thebes
Shall have the better of this war. But what of that
Gathering crowd? Warriors by their weapons, by
Their wounds; why do they show chests and faces
Drenched with blood, and with illusory clamour
Devoid of peace, raise high their arms towards us?
Am I wrong, majesty, or are those your fifty men?
See there Cthonius, Chromis, Phegeus; see, Maeon
Adorned with our prophetic laurel. Warriors, do not
Be angered, this was no mortal's doing, believe it!

Steely Atropos wove the hour. You are free of life's
Trials, while Tydeus and the horrors of war are ours.'
So saying, as they pressed forward he drove them back
With twigs tied by sacred ribbons, pointing to the blood.
The shade of Laius stood alone on Cocytus' sad shore.
Mercury had already returned him to pitiless Avernus.
Now, breathing endless hatred, looking askance at his
Fell grandson (whose face he knew) he kept far from
The blood and offerings, yet still the Aonian seer drew
Him in: 'Great king of Tyrian Thebes, where no kindly
Day has shone on Amphion's citadel since your death,
Now sufficiently avenged for your blood-stained end,
Your shade appeased by the disasters of your progeny,
Whom, wretched one, do you avoid? Oedipus, whom
You curse, lies long in the grave, and knows the close
Confines of death, his exhausted visage sunk in blood
And filth, cast from the light of day: a fate worse than
Any death, believe me! What reason have you to shun
Your innocent grandson? Confer, face to face; sate
Yourself on sacrificial blood; and, with anger or pity
Towards your family's fate, reveal events to come,
The war's disasters. Then I'll let you cross that Lethe
Forbidden you, in the boat you long for, and restore
You to pious ground, and entrust you to the deities
Of the Styx.' Softened by the promise of such gifts,
Laius moistened his cheeks with blood, and replied:
'My peer as prophet why, as you reviewed the host
Of spirits, did you choose me, from all this crowd,
As augur, to speak to you of the future? It is enough
To know the past. Does my noble grandson (shame
On him) ask counsel of me? Bring Oedipus, bring
Him to your wicked rites, who was happy to put
His father to the sword, and return to his source,
Thrusting himself on his innocent mother. Now,
His son must weary the gods and the dark councils
Of the Furies, and ask my shade for help in battle!
Yet if I am welcome so, as a prophet for sad times,

I will speak, so far as Lachesis and grim Magaera
Let me. War is upon you, war from every quarter
In innumerable numbers; Mars, at fate's command,
Urges on Lerna's children with his goad. Earth's
Portents, and the weapons of the gods, await them;
Lovely death; sinful decree that delays the final fire:
Thebes victory is certain, but fear not! Your fierce
Brother shall not have the kingdom, only the Furies.
Through twin impieties and luckless weapons (alas!)
Your cruel father will prevail.' With this, he sank back,
And left them troubled by his enigmatic prophecies.

BkIV:646-696 Bacchus perceives the Argive threat

Meanwhile the Argives, a host on the march, held to
Shady Nemea and the thickets that knew Hercules'
Glory. Already they burned with desire to gather
Theban plunder, to raze and ravage homesteads.
Phoebus, say now, who deflected their anger, what
Caused delay, what events intervened on the way.
Of its inception, a few elements of the tale remain.
Bacchus was returning with his exhausted army
From conquered Haemus. There beneath the stars
Of two winters he had taught the warlike Getae
To bear his emblems, with Othrys' frosty ridge;
And Rhodope to grow green with Icarian vines.
Now he brought his leafy chariot to his mother's
Argos. Wild lynxes followed him on either side,
While his tigers licked at the wine-damp bridles.
Victorious Macedonian Bacchantes in the rear
Carried the spoils; cattle, and half-dead wolves,
And wounded bears. His was no idle train: Anger
And Madness, and Fear, and Courage were there,
Ever-intoxicated Ardour, and wavering footsteps,
And a host with all the hallmarks of their leader.
Seeing Nemea in arms, beneath a cloud of dust,
And the daylight on fire with the glitter of steel,

Yet Thebes unprepared for war, he was stunned.
Though subdued in speech, and lacking vigour,
He commanded the cymbals, drums, twin pipes
That blared round his deafened ears to fall silent,
Then he spoke: 'This army seeks to destroy me,
And my race. Their ancient rage finds new heat.
Savage Argos and my implacable stepmother's
Wrath fuel this war against me. My mother turned
To ashes, the flames I was born in, the lightning
I myself saw flare, are not those enough? Now
The wicked goddess even attacks with steel what
Survives: a dead mistress' tomb, unarmed Thebes.
I'll weave delay by guile. Onward, my companions,
Onward to the plain!' His Hyrcanian tigers bristled
At his signal; and before he ended, reached Argos.
It was the moment when breathless noon lifts the sun
To heaven's high zenith, when heat stands sluggishly
In the gasping fields, and every grove admits the light.
He summoned the watery powers, and surrounded by
Their silent host, began: 'Nymphs of the wild, deities
Of the streams, and you, the greater part of my army,
Perform this task I set you faithfully. Choke the Argive
Founts, and rivers, the marshes, and wandering brooks
With dust, for me, awhile. In Nemea, above all, where
War against my city is afoot let all the deeps run dry.
Phoebus is at the summit of his path as yet, only let
Your goodwill not fail. The stars grant power to my
Plan, and Erigone's scorching dog-star Sirius foams.
Go with a will; enter the hidden places of the earth.
Later I shall see you in full flow, and the finest gifts
Offered in worship of me shall be yours in honour,
And I will ward off the licentious Satyrs' nocturnal
Mischiefs, and those lustful approaches of the Fauns.'

BkIV:697-738 Bacchus causes drought in Argos

He spoke, and a thin film seemed to spread over their
Faces, and their moist emerald-green tresses grew dry.
At once a burning drought drained the fields of Argos.
The waters evaporated; founts, lakes were encrusted;
Riverbeds hardened to baking mud. The impoverished
Soil was sick, and the stalks of wheat folded at each
Tender base. The flocks stood helpless by the shores,
The herds sought in vain the rivers they once waded.
Thus when the ebbing Nile conceals himself in his
Vast cavern; holds at their source the liquid snows
Of an eastern winter; the valley steams abandoned
By the flood, and gasping Egypt waits for the sound
Of her watery patron, until he grants their prayers,
In bringing nourishment down to the Pharian fields,
Granting the precursor of a long year of harvests.
Guilty Lerna was dry; Lyrceus, and mighty Inachus,
And Charadros that rolled rocks in his flood; bold
Erasious that ever overflowed his banks; Asterion,
Boisterous as the sea, a familiar sound on pathless
Heights, keeping the shepherds from their slumber.
Langia alone, also by order of the god, nurtured her
Silent waters in secret shade. The death of Opheltes
Had not yet granted the goddess sad renown, fame
Was not yet hers. But she watched grove and stream
In the wilderness. Great glory awaited the Nymph,
For the Nemean games, of alternate years, at which
Achaëa's finest labour, and the funereal rites, would
Revive the tale of sad Hypsipyle and sacred Opheltes.
Now men no longer had the strength to lift hot shields,
Or endure the constraints of armour (such the savage
Thirst that parched them). Not only were their mouths
And dry throats afire, but an inner agony gripped them:
Their pulse beat raggedly, their veins congealed, sour
Blood clung to their parched organs. Then crumbling
Soil, the dusty earth, breathed out hot vapour. No foam

Flowed from the horses' mouths, they champed dry bits,
Thrusting their tongues against the bridles. The riders'
Rule was scorned; inflamed, the creatures raged over
The land. Adrastus sent scouts in all directions. Were
The marshes of Tiryns still moist, did Amymone's
Waters still remain? All stagnated, drained by hidden
Fire, nor was there hope of rain from the sky. They
Might as well have scoured sandy Libya, the pale
Deserts of African Syene that no cloud ever shades.

BkIV:739-796 Hypsipyle guides the Argives

Then suddenly (for Bacchus himself had planned it),
As they wandered the woodlands they saw Hypsipyle,
Lovely in her sorrow. Opheltes was clasped to her breast,
The ill-fortuned child of Inachian Lycurgus, not her own;
Her hair was dishevelled, her clothes in rags, yet her face
Had the marks of royalty, and her dignity was clearly
Not eclipsed by misfortune. Adrastus, amazed, now spoke
To her: 'Divine lady of the forest (for your fair visage
And your modesty show you are no mortal) blessed
In not needing to seek for water under this blazing sky,
Give succour to your neighbours. Whether Diana, Leto's
Daughter, the bow-bearer, sent you to some marriage
Chamber from her chaste company, or some lover of no
Common order descended from the stars to beget a child
(For the ruler of the gods is himself no stranger to Argive
Nuptial beds) behold our wretched ranks. Our mission is
To put guilty Thebes to the sword, but savage thirst now
Robs us of courage, an unwarlike fate consumes our idle
Powers. Help us in our trouble, lead us to some turbid
River or muddy swamp; nothing is too shaming, nothing
Too vile, for our plight. You now we ask in lieu of winds
And rainy sky; restore our ebbing strength and sinking
Courage for war; and let your child then prosper beneath
Favourable stars. Let Jupiter grant us merely to retrace our
Steps, and what war-spoils will we gift you! I'll repay you,

Goddess, with Theban flocks and copious blood, and here
A mighty altar will mark the grove.' He gasped out these
Words, panting with the heat, his parched tongue impeded
By his rasping breath. His men were subject to like pallor,
Their mouths gaping helplessly. The Lemnian, her eyes
Downcast replied: 'Would that I had not suffered sorrows
Beyond the mortal! Though I am descended from celestial
Race, how should I be your goddess? You witness a mother
Bereaved, fostering a child entrusted to her care. The gods
Alone know whether mine are nurtured at the breast; yet I
Owned to a kingdom and a mighty father. But why speak,
Why keep you, weary, from the water you crave? Come
With me, and let us see if Langia's channel still holds her
Perennial stream. She it is that ever flows; under the zenith
Of raging Cancer and when Sirius shakes his blazing crest.'
The poor child, alas, clung to her, and lest she proved too
Slow a guide to the Pelasgi, she set him down on the ground
Nearby (so the Fates ordained) and when he would not be
Left behind consoled his sweet tears with knots of flowers
Loving murmurs: as Mount Ida re-echoes to mighty wails,
When Cybele, the Great Berecyntian Mother, commands
The quivering Curetes to dance round the tiny Thunderer,
And they strike their sacred drums in emulation; so now
The child, on the breast of the vernal earth, in dense grass,
Cries for his dear nurse, calling for milk, and then smiles
And attempts words that his tender lips struggle to sound.
He wonders at the forest noises or plucks at what comes
His way, or with open mouth breathes in the day. Thus he
Wanders through the woods unaware of danger, careless
Of life. Such was tender Mars in the Thracian snow, such
The winged boy Mercury on the Arcadian peak, such was
Mischievous Apollo, crawling on the shore, swaying Delos.

BkIV:797-843 The Argives drink at Langia's stream

Now the Argives made their way through the undergrowth,
The wilds dimmed with green shade, Some surrounded their
Guide, others followed en masse or pushed ahead. Hypsipyle,
Dignified and swift, pressed onwards in the midst of them.
Now they approached the stream, the sounding valley echoed,
And the splashing of water on stone struck their ears. Argus
Was in the lead; showing his standard to the prompt platoons
He raised the joyful call of 'Water! Then from mouth to mouth
The cry ran: 'Water!' So run the shouts of sailors at the oars
On the shores of the Ambracian sea (loud the land returns
The echo) when the helmsman points, in salute to Apollo,
At Actium's looming promontory. Now officers and ranks
Plunge indiscriminately in the flow, a shared thirst uniting
The mingled throng. Bridled teams enter with their chariots,
And horses, carrying their armed riders, are borne along.
Some are deceived by whirling currents, slippery rocks.
They have no scruples in trampling kings caught in the flow,
Or swamping the upturned faces of yelling comrades. Waves
Break and the waters are torn apart all along their course.
Once a gentle lucent green in a liquid track, now its channel
Is muddied, churned to the depths, and the tumbled banks,
The uprooted turf, darken it. Yet they drink it regardless,
As it flows, thick with mud and debris, even if their thirst
Is slaked, like armies fighting a pitched battle in the flood,
Or conquerors sacking a city they have captured. But now,
One of the kings surrounded in the midst by water cried:
'Nemea, long queen of the green glades, Jove's chosen one,
When will your opposition end? You were not crueller even
To Hercules when he throttled the raging lion, and drove
Its breath back into its swollen chest. Let it be enough,
That you counter your people's actions thus far. And you,
Horned source of everlasting streams, you who never yield
To any sun, flow freely from whatever source your cool
Mouth lets loose its immortal torrent. For you do not rely
On frosty winter granting you unknown snows, the rains

Returning you water snatched from some other fount, nor
Some favour from the pregnant clouds of the northerlies;
You are self-reliant and no star counteracts your course.
Not Apollo's Ladon, nor Xanthus, menacing Spercheus,
Nor Nessus the Centaur's Lycormas, will surpass you.
You I shall celebrate (honoured next to Jove), in peace
Beneath a host of gleaming spoils, at the festive table:
Only welcome us joyfully in triumph, once more yield
Your streams to our weariness, in generous hospitality,
And graciously then receive this army you have saved.'

End of Book IV

BkV:1-47 Adrastus asks to hear Hypsipyle's story

Their thirst quenched at the river, its shores and bed trampled,
The warriors left the much diminished shallows behind them;
Now the war-horses devoured the plain more briskly, soldiers
On foot, refreshed, thronged over the wide fields. Their strength,
Courage, menace, was evident again, as though they'd drunk
Flames of war and readiness for battle from blood-steeped water.
Marshalled in formation, disciplined ranks, each in correct position
With its former leader, they were ordered to resume their march.
Now dust rises once more from the earth, and the woods reveal
The passage of gleaming weapons. The host is like the raucous
Flocks of birds, over-wintering near Pharos, that, when the icy
Northern days lengthen leave Egypt's Nile, in clamouring flight,
Casting a shadow on land and sea, while the pathless sky echoes;
Once again they endure wind and rain, swim flowing snow-melt,
And spend their summer days beneath unencumbered Haemus.
Then Adrastus, Talaus' son, surrounded by a crowd of his peers,
Standing under an ancient ash, leaning on the spear of Polynices
Who stood beside him, said: 'Oh, tell us who you may be, you
Who have gained the glory of saving countless men from death,
And honour that Jupiter himself would not despise, come tell us,
As we hasten from your streams, where your home and country is,
Beneath what stars you drew breath. Say who your father may be,
For you are not far from the divine, though Fortune deserts you,
Your aspect is that of noble blood, your troubled face evokes awe.'
The Lemnian girl sighed, shed a few reluctant tears, then replied:
'General, you ask me to re-open dreadful wounds: concerning
Lemnos and the Furies, and men slain with shameful weapons
In their beds. Oh, the crime, the cold madness haunts my heart!
Oh, alas for those on whom that wild savagery fell! Oh, Night!
Oh, my father! Yet, lest you be ashamed of your kindly guide,
I am one, my captains, who helped my father to flee and hide.
Why weave a long prologue to those ills? War summons you,
And the great enterprise you cherish. This much I shall say:
I am Hypsipyle, daughter of that Thoas of whom you know;

Taken captive I now endure this servitude to your Lycurgus.’
They listened eagerly; she now seemed nobler, more worthy
Of their respect, fit to have guided them. Now a wish arose
In them all to hear her story. Principally, Adrastus urged her:
‘Come (Nemea is not yet ready to unleash its power widely,
Hampered as we are by foliage, and screened by forest shade)
Set out the crime, your merit, and the sorrows of your people,
And how you came here, troubled, an exile from your realm.’

BkV:48-84 Hypsipyle’s tale – Lemnos at war with Thrace

It is sweet for the wretched to talk, and recount former sorrows.
She began: ‘The Aegean Sea surrounds Lemnos, the isle where
Weary Vulcan rests after visiting fiery Aetna. Athos nearby
Darkens the sea with the shadow of his forests, and darkens
The land with his vast slopes. The Thracians farm those shores,
The Thracians were our doom, and thence the crime. Our land
Was rich, her children flourishing, and she no less renowned
Than Samos, or sounding Delos, or the innumerable islands
On which the sea casts its foam. It pleased the gods to trouble
Our lives, though we too were to blame; we offered no fires
To Venus; the goddess went unsung among us. Even divine
Hearts may be hurt, and thoughts of vengeance rise within.
So she came from ancient Paphos, from her hundred altars,
Changing her looks, her face and hair; she put off amorous
Ways and banished her Idalian doves, they say; and certain
Women set rumours flying, that in the darkness of midnight
The goddess flitted through bedchambers with the Furies,
The Tartarean Sisters, bearing other flames than theirs, far
Greater weapons; set twining snakes in the secret depths
Of houses, bringing blind terror to the nuptial thresholds,
Without pity for Vulcan her husband, despite his loyalty.
Forthwith, tender Spirits of Love, you fled from Lemnos.
Hymen was silent, his torches reversed; chilled the affections
Of the marriage couch. No nights of joy; none sleeps in fond
Embrace; savage Hatred and Madness roam everywhere,
And Strife keeps the midst of the bed. The men are set on

Rooting out the proud Thracians on that opposing coast,
Shattering their fierce race in war, although their homes
Are before them, and their children are there on the shore.
They would rather endure Edonian winter, the Bear
Above their heads, or after battle, in the dead of night,
Listen in silence to the sudden surge of rushing torrents.
Their sad wives languished in endless tears, day and night,
Consoling each other, gazing across the sea to cruel Thrace,
(Though as for me, my carefree virgin years spared me).

BkV:85-169 Hypsipyle's tale – Polyxo urges the women to slaughter

The sun was halfway through his arc, balancing his shining
Chariot on Olympus' summit, as though at rest; four times
Thunder pealed in the blue sky; four times Vulcan's forge
Breathed plumes of smoke; and the Aegean waters stirred
Without a breeze, striking the shores in mighty breakers,
When suddenly, breaking with custom, old Polyxo rose in
Dread frenzy, left her room, and rushed into the light of day.
Like an inspired Teumesian Maenad, when rites summon
And Ida's boxwood flutes urge her, and Bacchus is heard
On the mountain tops, so with staring eyes suffused with
Blood she roused the deserted city with her wild clamour,
Beating on doors, calling at the thresholds for all to gather.
Her sons, unfortunate companions, clung to her as she
Ran. All the women burst from their houses and rushed
At once to the citadel of Pallas, on the heights. There, all
Crowded in haste, massed together in confusion. Then,
Unsheathing a sword the instigator to crime demanded
Silence, and from amongst us dared to speak to us thus:
'Deserted wives of Lemnos, I come, urged by the gods,
And by righteous indignation to enact a punishment
(Summon your courage, and act beyond your gender!)
If you weary of endlessly tending an empty house,
The flower of your youth shamefully blighted, barren
Years passed in eternal lament, I promise I have found
A way to renew affection (and divine help will not prove

Wanting). Only assume a strength equal to your sorrow.
 First tell me this, this third chill winter who has known
 Union in marriage, the secret graces of the bedchamber?
 Whose breast has been warmed by her mate? Whose
 Birth-pangs has Lucina witnessed, say, or who pulses
 With what she prayed for, swelling with the months?
 Custom grants even wild birds and beasts that grace.
 Oh, cowards! Did not a Greek father, Danaus, hand
 Weapons of vengeance to virgin daughters, and drench
 The young unsuspecting men with blood in their sleep,
 Delighting in treachery: are we a mere useless crowd?
 And if we need a nearer precedent, let Procne, the wife
 From Rhodope teach us courage, who took vengeance
 In marriage, with her own hands, in feasting with her
 Husband. Nor will I, who urge you, stand apart, free
 Of crime or care. My quiver is full, and I have laboured,
 As you see. These four together by my side, their father's
 Pride and solace, though their hugs and tears delay me,
 I shall stab with the blade, mingling the blood from these
 Brothers' wounds, and while they breathe add their father's.
 Will you equally summon the courage for this slaughter?
 She was urging them on when sails gleamed on the sea
 Before them: the Lemnian ships returned. Polyxo seized
 On the moment, ecstatically: 'The gods themselves call
 Out to us, and shall we fail them? Behold, it is our fleet!
 A god, a god of vengeance, delivers them to our wrath,
 And favours our actions. No idle vision, mine in dream:
 Venus it was who stood by me with naked sword-blade,
 Clear to sight, clearer than sleep. "Why waste the time?"
 She cried: "Purge your rooms of these estranged spouses.
 I will bring you other marriage-torches, finer husbands."
 Speaking she placed the sword, this very one, on my bed.
 Oh, wretched ones, why not take measures while the time
 For action's here. See the foaming sea churned by strong
 Shoulders. Perhaps they bring Bistonian brides with them.'
 Provoked by this, a great clamour rose towards the stars.
 It was as if Scythia blazed with the Amazonian tumult

Of that crescent-shielded host's attack, when Mars yields
His weapons to them, and opens the gates of savage war.
Nor were there discordant cries, from the differing factions,
In the manner of the masses, but rather one single uproar,
One madness in them all, the same wish to destroy homes,
Sever life's thread in young and old, slay foreign babes
At the breast, and bear a sword through every generation.
There in the green grove (that cast shade far over the earth
Close by Minerva's tall hill, itself dark but overshadowed
By a towering mountain so the sunlight was doubly lost)
They pledged their oath. You, Mars' Enyo bore witness,
And you, Proserpine: the Stygian goddesses were there
Before their presence was even invoked, Acheron opened;
And yet Venus was there unseen, mingling everywhere,
Venus clasped their weapons, Venus stirred their wrath.
Nor was the sacrifice as usual, Charops' wife offered up
Her son. They girded themselves for action and pierced
His startled flesh with steel, hands stretching out eagerly
From every side; and over the pulsing blood they swore
To crime sweet to them; a new ghost circled its mother.
How I shuddered in my bones to witness such things,
How my visage blanched! I was like a deer surrounded
By bloodthirsty wolves, her gentle heart lacking strength,
Whose scant trust is in speed, and flies headlong in terror,
Thinks herself taken now; now, eludes their snapping jaws.

BkV:170-205 Hypsipyle's tale – They attack the men

The fleet had arrived, and now the keels had met the sand,
And competing in their haste, the Lemnian men leapt ashore,
Poor wretches, whom neither their raw courage in Thracian
Warfare, nor even the enmity of the severing sea had killed!
They filled the tall shrines of the gods with burning incense,
And dragged there the promised victims: the smoke is black
On every altar; the gods grant no flawless palpitating entrails.
Jupiter shed darkness from dew-wet Olympus more slowly
Than usual; and with delicate care, I think, he held the sky

From turning, while the Fates protested, nor did the night
Ever last longer after the sun's work was done. Though late,
The stars did shine in the heavens, while Paros and wooded
Thasos, and the host of the Cyclades reflected their light,
But Lemnos alone was deep concealed, enveloped by heavy
Cloud: gloom and fog were woven round her, and a black
Mist overhead. Lemnos alone was lost to all passing sails.
Now, relaxing at home, or in the shade of the sacred groves,
The warriors feasted richly, emptying great golden goblets
Of wine to their depths, telling at leisure the tales of their
Battles along the Strymon, their sweat and toil on Rhodope
Or on icy Haemus. And amidst the garlands and banqueting
Their wives reclined, that finely dressed but impious crew.
Venus had rendered their husbands gentle, on this their last
Night of life; vainly granting brief respite after so long, she
Gifted the wretched men with a breath of short-lived passion.
Then the dances fell silent, and there was an end to feasting
Or dalliance, and the first sounds at nightfall died away.
Sleep, cloaked with the darkness now of his brother Death,
And moist with Stygian dew embraced the city of doom,
Pouring deep slumber from his implacable horn, parting
The host of men. Wives and daughters-in-law were awake,
Prepared for crime, and the Sisters gladly sharpened their
Cruel weapons. They set to their evil work, a Fury ruling
Every heart. No differently do Hyrcanian lionesses circle
The herds in the Scythian fields, dawn hunger drives them
Out to seek their prey, eager cubs demanding nourishment.

BkV:206-264 Hypsipyle's tale – Hypsipyle saves Thoas

Which of that crime's thousand shapes should I now
Relate to you? Gorge stood daringly above Helymus,
Wreathed in garlands on a pile of cushions, breathing
Out the wine's vapour as he regained strength in sleep,
And probed his disordered clothing for a place to strike,
As fatal slumber deserted him at the approach of death.
In doubt, his vision confused, he seized his enemy in

Close embrace, but she, as he held her, swiftly plunged
The blade into his back, until the tip touched her own
Breast. So the deed was done. His head fell back, yet
Eyelids quivering, he still murmured lovingly, seeking
Gorge, nor did his arms slip from her unworthy neck.
I will not describe the deaths of others, cruel though
They were, only the deaths in my own family: I saw
You fall, yellow-haired Cydon, and you, Crenaeus,
Your uncut tresses flowing to your shoulders: you
Were my foster-brothers, my father's other offspring.
You too, mighty Gyas, whom as my betrothed I feared,
I saw you fall to a blow from blood-stained Myrmidone,
And saw Epopeus too, stabbed by his barbarous mother,
As he played among the couches and festive garlands.
Lycaste unarmed wept over her brother Cydimus, equal
To her in age, gazed at the doomed man, his looks so like
Her own, the blush on his cheek, the locks she herself had
Twined with gold, as their cruel mother, having killed her
Husband, stood there thrusting the sword into her hands,
Urging her on with threats. Like some wild creature owned
By a gentle master that has lost its customary aggression,
And is slow to offer fight, reluctant to revert despite goads
And the lash, so she collapsed on his body as he lay there,
Falling, so that his streaming blood soaked all her breast,
Then pressing her hair, all torn, into the fresh wounds.
And when I saw Alcimede carrying her father's severed
Head, its mouth still moving, the sword in her hand still
Eager for blood, my hair stood erect and a cruel tremor
Pierced my innards. It seemed like my father Thoas,
And the fatal hand seemed mine. I ran at once to my
Father's room. He, long awake (for what sleep is there
For those who rule?) was asking himself (though our
House was far from the city) what the noise was, why
Those sounds in the night, why clamour and not peace.
I related, as he trembled, the grievous crimes in order,
And the cause of such audacity: 'They are maddened,
And no force can quell them. Follow me, unfortunate

One, since if you linger they will take you, and perhaps
You will die with me.' So roused, he leapt from the bed,
And we made our way through the deserted byways
Of the city, concealed in the dark, finding everywhere
The heaped corpses from the night's massacre, where
Cruel twilight had seen them slain in the sacred groves.
Here where faces pressed to couches, sword-hilts erect
In wounded breasts, broken fragments of huge spears,
Knife-rent clothes among bodies, upturned wine-bowls,
Entrails drenched in blood, and bloody wine pouring
Over the wine cups from severed throats. There lay
A crowd of young men; here a gathering of the old
No weapon should have touched; here half-dead lads
On the threshold of life, laid on the breasts of their
Groaning fathers, sobbing, breathed out their spirits.
The feasts of the Lapiths on chill Ossa explode in no
Crueller manner, whenever the cloud-born Centaurs
Grow heated with deep draughts of wine: the first
Pallor of anger has scarce been seen, when rising
To their feet they upset the tables, eager for battle.

BkV:265-301 Hypsipyle's tale – The ghost of Thyoneus

Then Thyoneus revealed himself to us in our trepidation,
Bringing help to his son Thoas in his peril, and shone
At first with a sudden blaze of light. I recognised him,
Though his swelling temples were not wreathed with
Garlands, nor his hair with yellow grapes. Clouded,
His eyes shedding unseemly tears, he spoke to us:
"My son, while the Fates allowed I ensured Lemnos
Would be powerful, and feared by other nations, my
Efforts were unceasing, for you, in that lawful labour.
The gloomy Parcae have cruelly cut the thread, nor
Could I avert these ills by the many words and tears
I have poured out in supplication before mighty Jove.
To Venus, his daughter, he granted a vile privilege.
Speed your flight, and you, girl, my worthy offspring,

Guide your father by way of the double wall that runs
To the shore: here at the gate where all seems silent,
Baleful Venus stands, with a sword urging on the mad.
(Why this violence from her, why this martial spirit?)
Trust your father to the deep: I'll prolong your care."
So saying he vanished into air; and darkness obscuring
Our sight, he lit our path with a long track of flame.
I followed the sign he gave; then entrusted my father,
In a wooden hull, to the winds, to the Cyclades that
The Aegean embraces, and the gods of the sea. Nor
Would our mutual tears have ceased were it not that
Lucifer was banishing the stars from the Eastern sky.
Then with many a fear in mind and barely trusting in
Bacchus, I left the sounding shore: my steps urgent,
But my troubled mind still gazing behind; nor could I
Help viewing from each hill, the rising wind and waves.
Dawn rose in shame, and the sun, unrolling the heavens,
Turned his light from Lemnos, pursued his slanting path
Behind a cloud. The madness of that night was exposed,
And shame suddenly filled them with fear of the dawn,
(Though all were guilty): they buried their victims deep
In earth or burnt them impiously on hastily-built pyres.

BkV:302-334 Hypsipyle's tale – Hypsipyle reigns

Now Venus, and the band of Furies, sated, left the city
They had taken; and the women realising what they had
Done tore their hair and drenched their eyes with tears.
At a blow, the island, wealthy, rich in land, men, arms,
Famous and honoured by its Getic triumph, had lost
Its powers, was orphaned and severed from the world,
And not by some inundation, enemy, or unlucky storm.
Men no longer ploughed the earth or the waters, silent
The houses, deep the stain, all things fouled with black
Blood, and only us alive in the great city's buildings,
The savage spirits of the dead sighing on the rooftops.
I too built a blazing fire in a hidden corner of our palace,

And threw my father's weapons, sceptre, and notable
Garments, his royal clothing, into the flames. Grieving,
With blood-stained sword, and tangled hair, I stood by
The empty and deceitful pyre, in fear lest any passed,
Praying it might not prove an ill omen to my father,
And so allay doubts and fears regarding his death.
For this service, once the false illusion of his murder
Had gained credence, I was granted rule and occupied
(In punishment!) my father's throne. Who was I, so
Besieged, to refuse? I agreed, but only after endless
Prayer to the gods, and brooding on the truth, and my
Innocence. I inherited thus (by such dire authority!)
An exhausted realm, a sorrowing powerless Lemnos.
More and more the grief troubled their waking senses,
They lamented loudly, and slowly came to hate Polyxo.
Now they allowed themselves to build altars to the dead,
Commemorate the atrocity, and swear by the buried ashes.
So it is when quivering heifers, stupefied, see their leader
And master of the stall, to whom the glory and pastures
Of the horned herd belong, slain by a Massylian lion,
Their breed is maimed, its pride vanished, and the fields,
The very rivers, the silent trees grieve for the dead king.

BkV:335-375 Hypsipyle's tale – The Argonauts arrive

Behold! Splitting the waters with bronze prow the pine
Keel from Pelion came, guest of the wide virgin waters.
The Minyae row her, a double wake whitening from her
High bows, such that you might think Ortygia torn from
Its root, or a slice of hillside is coursing over the seas.
But when the oars were raised in the air and the waves
Fell silent, a voice sweeter than dying swans or Apollo's
Lyre came from the ship and the very waters drew close.
Later we learned Oeagrian Orpheus was making music,
Leaning against the mast amongst the oarsmen, helping
Them to forget their heavy labour. They sailed to lands
Of Scythian Boreas, and the shores of Pontus between

The clashing rocks. Seeing them we thought they were
Thracian warriors, and fled to our city in tumultuous
Panic, like a dense throng of cattle or a flight of birds.
Alas, where were the Furies now? We climbed walls
And towers along the harbour and shore, all granting
A view over the open sea. There in trembling haste
The women hauled stakes and stones, their husbands'
Blood-stained swords and armour tainted by death.
Shameless, they donned coats of mail and set helms
On their bold heads. Minerva blushed in amazement
At the audacious crew, and Mars on distant Haemon
Laughed. Then finally the wild frenzy left their minds.
No ship, they thought, but punishment for their crime,
The tardy justice of the gods, was nearing over the brine.
Now the Pelasgian ship was but a Cretan arrow's flight
From land when Jupiter sent a storm-cloud pregnant
With dark rain, and drove it onwards above the rigging.
The sea grew rough, and the sunlight lost, the darkness
Of the sky was soon matched by the colour of the waves.
Fierce winds blew dense clouds and churned the deep,
And the wet sand rose to view in the black whirlpools.
The whole ocean hung poised in the conflicting winds,
Then over-arching breakers neared the stars and toppled.
The vessel faltered, and her onward progress slowed,
Then tilting she thrust the Triton figurehead at her bow
Now to the heavens, now into the depths of the flood.
The strength of those demigods, those heroes, brought
No relief, as the crazed mast thrashed the stern, then
Leaned forward perilously to touch the curving waves,
And the oar thudded uselessly into each oarsman's chest.

BkV:376-444 Hypsipyle's tale – The Argonauts reach land

While the warriors were labouring to counter sea and wind,
We, from the cliffs, and highest sections of the walls hurled
Missiles from above, with feeble trembling arms, at Telamon,
And Peleus (what daring!) and sought Hercules with arrows.

As for the Minyans, attacked by weather and the enemy, some
Defended with their shields, others baled water from the hold,
Others fought; but their efforts blunted by the ship's motion,
Their deflected strength lacked force. We sent down a greater
Hail of darts, the storm of iron vying to outdo the storm; such
A shower of hardened stakes and shattered millstones, javelins
And flaming missiles like streaks of fire fell, now in the waves,
Now aboard the ship, till the pine deck echoed and the planks
Groaned in the hollow cavities below. So Jupiter lashes green
Meadows with Hyperborean snow, till on the plain every single
Creature's buried, birds are driven to earth, the harvest flattened
By ruinous ice, the mountains roar and the rivers surge in wrath.
But now Jove's lightning broke through the cloud, and the great
Warriors showed plainly in its light, such that our hearts froze,
Our nerveless hands relaxed, the unaccustomed weapons fell
From our grasp, and we reverted to our gender. We saw the sons
Of Aeacus and Ancaeus, directly threatening our walls, Iphitus
Thrusting the vessel away from the cliffs with his long spear.
But Hercules, Amphitryon's son, towered clear above the others,
Tilting the vessel on one side then the other, longing to plunge
Into the waves. But Jason, as yet unknown, ah, to me, leapt
Nimbly over oars and benches, over the backs of the heroes,
Urging on with hand and voice Meleager, Oeneus' great son,
Then Idas and Talaus, then one of the Tyndarides drenched
With the white sea-spray, then Calais as he struggled, in his
Father Boreas' icy fog, to lash the sails to the mast again.
Their blows strike the sea and the walls; but the foaming
Waters yield no way, the spears bounce from the towers.
The helmsman Tiphys wearied by the massive breakers,
The helm unresponsive in his grasp, grew pale, and altered
Course time and again, aiming the bows away from the reef,
Into the deeps to either side, until from the bowsprit's tip
Jason, Aeson's son, waved a branch of Mopsus the seer's
Palladian olive, seeking a truce though the crew demurred:
The roaring tempest swallowing his voice. Then came a lull
In the fighting, and with it the gale, exhausted, subsided,
And the sunlight shone again after the Olympian turmoil.

The fifty heroes, their ship duly moored, leapt from the sheer
 Side, shaking the foreign earth: proud and tall, and of mighty
 Parentage, their brows were calm and faces recognisable,
 Now that their visages were no longer swollen in anger.
 So the gods are said to emerge from their hidden portals
 When they wish to re-visit the houses and the humble
 Banqueting tables of the Ethiopians, under the rising sun;
 And then it is that rivers and mountains give way to them,
 Earth's proud to bear their tread, and sky-bearing Atlas rests.
 There we saw Theseus, proud of saving Marathon of late,
 From the wild bull; and Zetes and Calais, sons of Aquilo,
 Thracian brothers, with red whirring wings at their brows;
 And Admetus, whom Phoebus thought it no shame to call
 His superior; and Orpheus so untypical of harsh Thrace;
 And Meleager, scion of Calydon; and Peleus the son-in-law
 To Nereus of the deep. Castor and Pollux, the twin sons
 Of Oebalus confuse the eye with their teasing similarity;
 One wears a bright cloak, the other the same, both wield
 A spear, both are smooth-faced and bare-shouldered, both
 Have a shining star in their hair. Young Hylas too had dared
 The voyage, adapting to Hercules' great stride as he follows,
 Whose huge bulk he can yet scarcely match in a race: bearing
 Lerna's weapons, in joy, sweating beneath the mighty quiver.

BkV:445-498 Hypsipyle ends her tale - Jason, exile, slavery

Now Venus was there again, and Love with silent flames tested
 The violent hearts of Lemnian women; as imperial Juno filled
 Their minds with the heroes' bearing and prowess, the marks
 Of noble lineage. Every house vied to welcome the strangers.
 Then fire was renewed on the altars, sinful thoughts forgotten.
 Then came feasting, pleasant slumber, nights of rest, though
 I think their pleasing nature was not unwilling by the gods.
 Perhaps, Generals, you wish to know my own error, the fault
 Of Fate? By the ashes of my kin, by the Furies, I swear, it was
 Not my fault or intention (the dear gods know) to kindle flame
 In Jason, though he had the charm to captivate a young girl.

Phasis has its own dire laws; alien the love Colchis engenders.
Now the starry nights, shedding their cold, grew warm with
Long hours of sunlight, and the swift-turning year revolved.
Now new birth and progeny came in answer to our prayers.
Lemnos was noisy with the sounds of longed-for children.
I too gave birth with the rest, to twins, memories of forced
Marriage, made a mother by my harsh guest, I renewed my
Father's name. What happened to them after I left I do not
Know: they are twenty by now if the Fates have allowed
Them to flourish, and Lycaste has raised them as I wished.
The seas were calm, and a gentler southerly filled the sails.
As if the ship herself were tired of lingering in the tranquil
Harbour, she strained at her cable tied to the facing cliffs.
The Minyae longed to depart, and Jason summoned his
Comrades – oh, the savage! If only he had sailed beyond
Our shores that time, a man neglectful of his offspring,
And his promised word! What of his fame among distant
Peoples, what if the golden fleece of Phrixus was restored!
The hour of sailing was set. Tiphys, the steersman, divined
The following day's weather, and Phoebus' place of setting
Blushed red. One more lament, and the eve of a departure.
Dawn had scarcely broken, as Jason standing high on deck,
Gave the order to leave; and the sea was struck by the oars.
We followed them with our gaze from cliffs and mountain
Tops as they cleft the foaming surface of the outspread deep,
Until the light tired our flickering eyesight, seeming to merge
The wide sea and sky as one, and levelling down the waters
At the far horizon. A rumour reached the port that Thoas had
Crossed the sea and ruled now in his brother's Chios, that I
Was innocent, that the blazing pyre had been mere deception.
The impious crowd made a clamour, spurred on by their guilt,
Claiming responsibility. And hidden voices began to be raised
Among the multitude: "Were we happy to kill, was she alone
Faithful? Was it not the gods and fate? If the city is so sinful,
Why is she our queen?" Terrified of such murmurs (of a cruel
Punishment, with my royalty no defence) I, alone and in secret,
Took to the winding shore, leaving the accursed city by way

Of my father's prior route. But Bacchus did not appear a second Time. A pirate crew, landing there, spirited me away, I keeping Silent all the while and they brought me to your land as a slave.'

BkV:499-587 The Serpent

So the Lemnian exile repeated her story to the Lernaean kings
Consoling her ills with her sad and lengthy tale, forgetful (so
The gods intended) of the child she had left behind. He sank
His drooping face with heavy eye-lids into the thick grass,
And, tired of play, fell asleep, his hand still clutching the turf.
Meanwhile a serpent, a holy earthborn terror of the Achaean
Woods, slithered over the meadow, drawing his huge bulk on,
And gathering it behind him. His eyes were full of livid flame,
The green foam of venom pouring from his mouth. The triple
Tongue flickered between three rows of curved fangs, the cruel
Hood on his gilded brows extended. The farmers declared him
Sacred to Argive Jupiter who tended the site and the poor men's
Offerings made on woodland altars. Sometimes the serpent slid
In sinuous circles round the god's shrine, sometimes he scraped
The timber of the unfortunate groves, de-barking great ash trees
With his embrace. Often he stretched from riverbank to bank,
And the waters frothed with the thrashing of his scaly folds.
But now all the earth was parched, by order of the Theban deity,
Now the water Nymphs were hidden in the sand, he grew angry,
His curved flanks driving his sinuous length along the ground,
While he raged noxiously at the fires of his desiccated venom.
Through the arid pools and marshes and dry springs he roved,
Wandering through empty river-courses, flickering uncertainly
With his mouth up-turned, or furrowing the exhausted fields,
Bent down to the clinging soil, seeking moisture in green turf.
Grasses wilted as his head passed, stricken by his hot breath,
The plain dying to his hiss: as vast he was as Draco, the snake
That divides the Great and Little Wains in the sky; or Python
Who shook the twin peaks of sacred Parnassus, twining his
Coils about them, till you pierced him, Apollo, with a hundred
Wounds, and he died under the weight of your forest of arrows.

What decision of the gods, child, cursed you with the burden
Of so heavy a fate? Must it then lay you low, though barely
At life's threshold? Surely it was to render you holy through all
The ages, worthy in death of so grand a sepulchre? Caught by
The lashing of its tail you perished, child, the snake all unaware.
Sleep fled your body instantly, but your eyes opened to death.
Yet when from your startled mouth a dying wail met the air,
And your cry then fell silent broken like an incomplete utterance
In dream, Hypsipyle heard. In mortal fear she ran on legs that
Would barely carry her. By her augury, she was quickly sure
The cry meant disaster, and casting her eyes in all directions
She searched the ground in vain, calling again and again words
That the child would know. There was no sign of him, no trace
Of his path through the meadow. The sluggish serpent lay coiled,
Filling wide acres even so, his head lying exposed on his green
Body. The poor woman shuddered at the sight and with her cries
Stirred the forest depths; the snake merely lay there quiescent.
But her cries reached the Argives, and at their leader's order,
Parthenopaeus, the Arcadian knight, ran to the spot and found
Out the cause. Then, at the flash of weapons and men calling,
The fearful snake lifted his scaly neck. The tall Hippomedon
Seized a rock, a boundary marker, and with a mighty effort
Sent it whirling through the air, as when a millstone is fired
From a catapult against barred gates in war. The warrior's
Effort was in vain, the serpent had already flexed his supple
Neck, avoiding the imminent blow. The ground shook, knots
Of vegetation sprang apart in the pathless woods. Capaneus
Rushing to confront the enemy with his ash spear, now cried:
'You'll not escape my blows, whether you're simply a savage
Creature of the fearful grove, or merely a plaything of the gods
(Let the gods have you!) no, not if you merged your body
With a Giant's.' The spear flew quivering through the air, then
Entered the monster's gaping jaws, severed the roots of his cruel
Triple tongue, flashed through the erect hood, the ornament to his
Darting head, and stuck deep in the earth, drenched in the black
Venom from his throat. He had scarcely felt the pain throughout
His length, when with a rapid action, coiling round the weapon,

Tearing the spear from the soil, he fled to the god's dark shrine;
There measuring his vast length on the ground he hissed away his
Life-breath, beseeching his master's altar. The kindred swamps
Of Lerna mourned him in indignation; the Nymphs that would
Strew him with spring flowers; the fields of Nemea, his haunts;
And the woodland Fauns in every grove broke their reed-pipes.
Jupiter himself in the highest heavens called up his weapons,
And tempestuous winds and storm clouds gathered, but the god's
Anger was not roused sufficiently as yet; Capaneus was reserved
For a weightier missile; nevertheless the breath of the lightning
Blast as it reached earth touched the tip of the crest on his helm.

BkV:588-637 Lament for the dead Archemorus (Opheltes)

Now the place was rid of the serpent, the unhappy Lemnian
Searched the fields, and at the distant summit of a little hill
She paled to see the grass bedewed with blood. There she
Ran, to discover tragedy, and wild with the weight of grief
Fell to the guilty earth in an instant, speechless, without tears
Faced with the disaster. In her misery she rained down kisses
On the child's body, and tried to catch the flight of the living
Spirit on her breath. The face was damaged, and the breast,
The skin was torn away, the frail bones visible, the tissues
Drenched in the fresh blood, the corpse one whole wound.
So when a slow-moving snake has ravaged the nest, killed
Some bird's young in a shadowy ilex tree, the returning
Mother is startled at the silence of her once-noisy home,
And flutters about it, letting fall the food held in her beak,
Seeing only the blood and scattered feathers from its ruin.
She clasped the torn limbs to her breast, poor soul, twining
Her hair about them. At last her throat set free her voice
And made a path for her sorrow, till her moans resolved
Themselves in words: 'Archemorus, sweet image of my
Children lost to me, solace for my lost land and royalty,
Pride and joy of my servitude, what cruel god has taken
Your life, you whom I left playing, crawling in the grass?
Where is your star-like face? Where are the half-formed

Words, the sounds and laughs and gurgles only I could
Understand? How I used to tell you of Lemnos, the Argo,
And lull you to sleep with my long tale of woe! Thus I
Found solace while I put this little one to my breast. Now,
Bereaved the flow of milk falls vainly on your sad wounds.
I recognise the work of the gods. O, dire presentiments in
Sleep, O fear in the night, O Venus who never appeared
To my vision in the darkness, except to bring me sorrow!
Why accuse the gods? I myself (why afraid to confess as
I face death?) exposed you to fate. What madness filled
My mind? How did such neglect of my charge overcome
Me? While I, in my vanity, retold the history of my country,
The tale of my renown (what fidelity, what sense of duty!),
Lemnos, I paid, for my crime. Where is the deadly serpent?
Lead me to him, Generals, if you are thankful for my help,
And favourable to my sad speech; or kill me yourselves
With your swords, rather than that I should be hateful to my
Sad lords, on seeing them, and his bereaved mother, though
My love and grief are no less than hers. Shall I bear this
Melancholy burden to pour into his Eurydice's lap? Should
The earth not sink me first in deepest darkness?' With this,
Her face stained with soil and blood, she twined about
The great kings' feet, silently reminding them of her aid.

BkV:638-698 The anger of Lycurgus

And now the startling news that ran through Lycurgus' halls,
While he was making sacrifice, filled his house with tears,
And his own eyes, as he was descending from the summit
Of Aphasas, Perseus' mountain, where he'd been offering
Sacred portions to the angry Thunderer, shaking his head
As he returned from inspecting the unpropitious entrails.
Keeping to himself there, he sought no part in the Argive
Fight; not lacking courage, constrained by the temple altars.
He still recalled the former oracles and the gods' warning,
Those words repeated to him from the depths of the shrine:
'Lycurgus, you must give an early sacrifice to the Theban

War.' So alerted, the dust of an army nearby grieved him,
 Wincing at the blare of trumpets, wishing the warriors ill.
 Behold (the gods do not deceive!) Thoas' daughter came
 Bearing those mangled remains. The mother, Eurydice,
 Leading a group of women, a grieving crowd, advanced
 To meet her; Lycurgus' love for his son was no less active,
 Stronger in disaster, a father's fierce anger repressed tears,
 And with long strides he covered the intervening ground,
 Crying: 'Here is one to whom the loss of my little child's
 Spilt blood is welcome. Why is she still alive? Drive her
 Bound before us, comrades, forward quickly with her. I'll
 Soon make her forget that tale of Lemnos, and her father,
 And the lie regarding that divine lineage she's so proud of.
 Grasping his sword, he advanced, about to deal death in his
 Anger, when Tydeus, Oeneus' heroic son, took action,
 Thrusting the other backward aggressively with his shield,
 And gritting his teeth: 'Cease your foolishness, madman,
 Whoever you may be!' Capaneus moved forward likewise,
 And fierce Hippomedon, and the Arcadian, Parthenopaeus,
 The former his sword raised, the latter levelled, dazzling
 The man with the glittering of steel. On the other side, a band
 Of farmers rallied to their king. Between them the gentler
 Adrastus stepped, along with Amphiaraus who respected
 His dealings with those adorned with sacred ribbons, saying:
 'No, I beg you! Sheathe those swords, and be you the first.
 We are of one blood.' But Tydeus was not at peace. 'Would
 You dare send our guide, savour of the Argive host, to her
 Grave, thankless before so many thousands (in revenge
 For what?) she who was queen, the child of Thoas, a man
 Whose father was Bacchus the shining one? Oh, coward,
 Is it not enough that while your countrymen have flocked
 To arms from every quarter, you alone among all the busy
 Ranks choose peace? Choose then, and may Greek victory
 Find you at the graveside yet, and still mourning this death.'
 He spoke. Lycurgus' anger ebbed, his reply was calmer:
 'I did not think, for my part, that it was you at the gates,
 Rather that Thebes and her hostile army had arrived. Enter

And slay us if it is your pleasure to shed the blood of friends,
Employ your might at home, and let impious fire destroy
Jove's undefended shrine (what then is not permitted?) if,
Lord and master here, I have no right to deal with a lowly
Slave, in accord with the sorrow weighing on my heart.
Yet he sees, he sees, the ruler of the gods, and his anger
Though tardy will abide.' So saying, he gazed towards
The heights. The houses elsewhere rang with the clash
Of weapons. Even now, Rumour had outpaced the swift
Squadrons, and embraced twin conflicts with her wings.
Some said Hypsipyle, thus blamed, had been dragged
Away to her doom, others that she was already dying.
Believing so, their anger countenanced no delay. Now
Weapons and blazing torches threatened the palace,
They called for the overthrow of the monarchy, for
Lycurgus to be seized and carried off along with Jove's
Statue and his altars. The halls re-sounded to women's
Screams and grief, retreating, turned to flee from terror.

BkV:699-753 Hypsipyle is reunited with her sons

But Adrastus, high in his chariot, carrying Thoas' daughter
With him, before the clamorous crowd of men, passed
Through their midst and shouted: 'Enough! Here is no
Savage act, nor does Lycurgus deserve such an assault.
And, behold, here is she who found the blessed stream!
Just such is the scene when a northerly and easterly on
One side, and a southerly with its dark rain on the other,
Have roused the ocean with their opposing gales, daylight
Is banished and the tempest reigns; then comes the king
Of the deep with his great steeds; and bi-formed Triton,
Swimming alongside, signals far and wide to the falling
Breakers, until the sea is level and hills and shores appear.
Which of the gods brought solace for her pain; countering
Her tears with an answer to her deepest prayer; bringing
Unlooked-for joy to sad Hypsipyle? You it was, Bacchus,
Founder of her line, who brought her two sons to Nemea

From Lemnos' shore, preparing a wondrous fate for them.
 Their mother was the reason for their presence; Lycurgus'
 Generous house had welcomed them; there, news of his
 Child's death had reached the king. They, as his guests,
 Supported the king (oh Chance and men's minds blind
 To the future!), but when they heard cries of Lemnos
 And Thoas, they swept past weapons and outstretched
 Hands, and weeping clasped their mother in their eager
 Embrace, taking her in turns to their breast. She was
 Frozen, as if turned to stone, her gaze fixed ahead, she,
 Of her own experience, not daring to trust the gods.
 But seeing their faces, and their swords from the Argo
 Jason had left behind, and his insignia on their clothes,
 Her sorrows left her, eyes filled with tears of a different
 Kind, and she fainted, overcome by so great a blessing.
 There were signs too from the heavens, tumultuous cries
 Of joy, and the drums and cymbals of the god sounded
 Through echoing air. Then the virtuous son of Oecles,
 Amphiaraus, once the ebbing anger of the crowd brought
 Calm, and their silence allowed them to hear his speech,
 Cried: 'Oh king of Nemea and you sons of Inachus, you
 Leaders appointed, hear what Apollo clearly commands.
 This trouble comes to the Argive army from long ago,
 In straight descent, brought by the Fates. The drought
 And the vanishing streams; the death-dealing serpent;
 The lad singled out, alas, by a name that is our destiny,
 Arechemorus; all this arises from the gods' supreme will.
 Contain your anger, and set your hastily-seized weapons
 Aside: the child must be accorded the lasting honours he
 Deserves. Let the brave offer pure libations to the dead
 Who was their own; may you Apollo bring more delay,
 And we be barred from making war by fresh circumstance,
 And may fatal Thebes recede forever in the far distance.
 But you, Lycurgus and Eurydice, you the fortunate, whose
 Destiny exceeds that of other noble parents, whom lasting
 Fame will attend throughout the ages, whilst Father Inachus
 And Lerna's marshes shall flow, whilst Nemea casts her

Flickering shadows on the fields, do not violate the rites
By weeping, do not reproach the gods: for the child is now
A god, nor would he have preferred Nestor's long years,
Or to outlive Phrygian Priam.' Thus he ended his speech,
And night wrapped all the heavens in hollow darkness.

End of Book V

BkVI:1-117 Preparations for the Funeral and the Games

On the footsteps of Rumour, the news swept widely through
The Danaan cities that the sons of Inachus were establishing
Rites at the new tomb, as well as memorial games in which
Brave men in hot competition would ready themselves for war.
A festival in the Greek manner! Pious Hercules first appointed
Such honours for Pelops at Olympia; olive wreath on his dusty
Brow. Then Phocis, free of the serpent's oppression, celebrated
The Pythian Games to recall the triumph of young Apollo's bow.
Then came the dark rites observed at Palaemon's gloomy altars
When brave Leucothea returns to a friendly shore at the Isthmian
Festival, renewing her lament: both shores are loud with mourning
And Echionian Thebes responds with tears. And now the scions
Of kings, those sons of Argos who linked her to heaven, whose
Mighty names Aonia's land and Tyrian mothers uttered with sighs,
Met there, in Nemea, and roused their naked strength to combat.
They were like sailors about to venture on unknown seas, whether
To meet the Tyrrhene storms, or the wide Aegean, who first test
Helm and rigging and oars, gently, on a placid lake, and learn how
To anticipate real risks, who when they are trained are confident
And strike out far on the waves, without regard to the fading shore.
Bright Dawn's toil-bearing chariot had risen in the sky, and Night,
And Sleep with his emptied horn, were fleeing that pale goddess's
Waking course. Now the streets were loud with grief, the tearful
Palace with groans; and far off pathless forests received, distorted
And multiplied the sounds. The father sat stripped of holy ribbons,
His tangled hair and his unkempt beard matted with funereal dust.
Opposite him the bereaved mother, more distraught and grieving
More than the men, set her maids an example, urging, exhorting
Them, despite their willingness, and striving to clasp her child's
Violated corpse, returning to it whenever she was dragged away.
The father himself restrained her. Then, when the Inachian kings
Arrived at the threshold with sad faces of mourning too, as if this
Tragedy were fresh, and the infant suffering his first wounds, or
The deadly serpent in the very hall, though weary they redoubled

The blows against their breasts, the walls echoing their clamour.
The Pelasgi felt the reproach, and countered the charge with tears.
Adrastus himself, whenever the noise died, and a stunned silence
Gripped the house, yielding him space, with words of unprompted
Solace, consoled the father. He spoke of destiny, of the harshness
Of our human condition, of inexorable fate, or recalled those other
Children who, thanks to Heaven, still lived. Yet while he spoke
The lament began again. Lycurgus was no more quieted with words,
However well-meant, than the fierce Ionian Sea's wrath by the noise
Of men's prayers on the deep, or errant lightning by veils of cloud.
Meanwhile the child's bier, a bed destined for the pyre, was woven
From tender branches of sad cypress. The base was strewn all over
With rustic greenery, then more elaborate wreaths of herbs, topped
By a mound of flowers doomed to die. The final tier heaped high
With Arabian perfumes, the riches of the east, held masses of white
Incense, and long-lasting cinnamon the gift of the aged King Belus.
The summit quivered with gold, a soft curtain of Tyrian purple rose
Above, glittering at every point with cut gems, its centre woven
With acanthus leaves, round the form of Linus and the fatal hounds.
The mother had always hated that wondrous work, and averted her
Eyes from the omen. The love of glory, mixed with pride and pain,
Spread weapons and ancestral trappings, from the afflicted palace,
Round the bier, as though some giant figure was being born to his
Funeral, a mighty corpse for the flames; yet barren and empty fame
Delights the grieving, and the tiny corpse was greater for its funeral.
So endless honour and piteous pleasure graced the tears. Gifts more
Weighty than his years were given to the pyre; for an earlier vow
Of his father's had caused a miniature quiver and arrows, innocent
Missiles, to be made for him, and horses of proven worth, all bred
From the stables' famous line, were being reared for him, and shields
And glittering belts were being readied, anticipating growing strength.
Elsewhere, at the command of the learned augur, the army laboured
To raise high the mountainous pyre, with tree trunks, fallen branches
And dark offerings, to expiate their guilt at slaying the serpent, before
Their ill-omened war began. A grove was felled whose ancient foliage
Had never known the axe, richer in its dense shade than all the forests
Of Argolis and Lycaeus, that lifted their crowned summits to the stars.

Sacred in majestic age it stood, said to be older than human ancestry;
And a true witness to the passing of generations of Nymphs and Fauns.
Its pitiful ruin was imminent. Driven by fear the creatures fled, the birds
Flitted from their warm nests. The towering beech, the Chaonian oaks,
The cypress unharmed by winter and spruce-trees fell, to feed the funeral
Fire, rowan and ilex trunks, yews with their poisonous sap, and ash-trees
Fated to drink blood, shed in the accursed war, long-lasting hardwoods.
Then the sea-going fir and pine-boughs, aromatic when cut, were split,
As alder, friend to water, and the vine-bound elm bowed their uncut tips
To the ground. The earth groaned. The forests of Mount Ismara, no more
Swiftly uprooted, are so torn away, when Boreas from his rocky cave,
Lifts his head; nor does fire bring faster ruin to the trees when a southerly
Gale blows. Pales; Silvanus, lord of the shade; and the host of demigods
Leave the places that they love, haunts of ancient peace; and as they go
The woods groan in unison, while clinging Nymphs embrace the oaks.
So, in a captured city, when the enemy general releases his eager men
To plunder, the signal is scarcely given when the whole city is gone;
Without restraint they level everything, drag away, drive and carry off
Whatever they can, with far greater tumult than ever they made in war.

BkVI:118-192 Eurydice mourns her son

Now, shared toil had raised twin altars of like size, one to the sad shades
The other to the gods, when a pipe of curving horn boomed low as a sign
Of grief, the pipe that according to Phrygia's rites of mourning precedes
The youthful dead. They used to say that Pelops appointed such chanting
And ceremony to mark the passing of children; and Niobe dressed in black
Brought twelve urns so, to Sipylos; of her children slain by the twin bows.
The Greek generals brought funeral gifts, their offerings, to be burned,
Each signed, to testify in piety to the honours his race had won. Later,
Amid wild shouts, the bier itself was raised on the shoulders of young
Men (the leader had chosen them from a host of warriors). The Lernaean
Generals surrounded Lycurgus, a gentler company circled the queen.
Hypsipyle was there, not unattended. The sons of Inachus remembered
And guarded her, her sons supported her by her bruised arms, so their
Mother might lament. But no sooner had Eurydice left her ill-starred
House, than speech rose from her bared throat, and with a prologue

Of blows to her breast, and long drawn out sighs, she began: 'Not thus, My son did I hope to follow you, with this long train of Argive women, Nor did I imagine, in my foolish prayers, that your childhood would end Like this, my thoughts were not so cruel. How should I dream, in my Ignorance, that Thebes and conflict were what I should fear? Which god Chose to begin this war by a sacrifice of our blood? Who dedicated Your death, sinfully, to its success? Yet your house, Cadmus, grieves Not; no child is mourned among Thebes' Tyrian people. It is I who Suffer the first fruit of tears, untimely death to the sound of trumpets, The clash of swords; I who thoughtlessly trusted a nurse I thought true, And handed her my babe. Why not? She had told me how she saved Her father, by her cleverness, and kept her innocent hands unstained. Behold her: this woman who alone she says abjured the deadly oath, Immune to the madness of her fellow Lemnians! This daring woman, (You believe her yet!) this woman strong in her devotion, abandoned Not her king or lord but another's child, disloyally, in a lonely field, Unthinking, leaving him by a path in a dangerous wood. No fearful Serpent (what need, alas, for such deadly monsters) but strong winds Merely, branches blown by the wind, or terror alone might have been Enough to kill him. Nor, in my sad loss, can I accuse you warriors; With such a nurse this mother's tragedy was always inevitable. Yet, My child, you were fonder of her, it was her you heard and recognised When she called, ignoring me: your mother had little joy of you. She, The undutiful, heard your cries and tearful laughter, she knew the lisp Of your first words. She, while you lived, acted as your mother: I now. But, alas, I lack even the power to punish her as she deserves! Generals, Why these vain rites, these gifts for the pyre? I beg you, by the sacrifice I have made at the commencement of war, deliver her (the shades ask no Less) deliver her to the ashes and the parent she destroyed. So Theban Mothers may mourn their child, as I do.' She tore her hair, repeatedly, In supplication: 'Deliver her up: do not call me cruel, eager for blood, Since I will die along with her, if I can only sate myself with gazing At that stroke of justice, and we be hurled together on the same pyre.' Calling out, seeing Hypsipyle lamenting in another more distant place (For neither was she sparing of hair or breast) and indignant that she Too was grieving publicly, she cried: 'Forbid her this, at least, you Nobles, and you, General, for whose war this pledge of the marriage

Bed has died. Drag that hateful woman from these funeral rites. Why Does she show her accursed self with his mother? Why is she here, In our hour of tragedy? For whom does she, who embraces her own Children, mourn?' So she spoke, then suddenly ceasing her cries, She fainted. It was as if a calf, with little strength, his vigour drawn As yet from the udder, had been cheated of his first milk, carried off By a wild beast, or sent by a herdsman to the cruel altar. The dam, Bereft, rouses valley, rivers, trees with her lowing, asks a question Of the empty fields; she is last to leave the sad meadow, devoid Of any desire for home, turning unsated from the grass before her.

BkVI:193-254 The Funeral of Archemorus

Lycurgus himself hurled his proud sceptre and Jove's emblems On the pyre, and with a blade cut the hair of his beard and head, Covering the tiny face of the dead child with the severed mass, And uttered words that mingled with his tears: 'Perfidious Jove, I would have consecrated these locks to you for a far different Reason, if you had granted my son to offer his youthful beard With them in your temple. But your priest's words have not been Endorsed, his prayer was denied. Let this shade, who is far more Worthy of them, possess them.' The fire was lit, the flames roared In the lower branches; it was hard to restrain the maddened parents. The Danaans stood as ordered, their shields raised, barring the sight From unlawful view. The ashes glistened; no embers were ever Richer than they. Gems split, silver fused in a mass, gold melted From embroidered fabrics. Logs swelled with Assyrian unguents, Charred honey and pale saffron hissed, and on them were poured Bowls of foaming wine; cups of dark blood; milk dear to the dead. Then the Greek kings led out seven squadrons (of a hundred riders Each) with insignia reversed. According to custom, they circled The pyre anti-clockwise, the rising flames bowing as they passed. Three times they traversed the ring, weapons clashed on weapons, Four times beating on their shields they raised a din, four times The handmaidens' palms a softer sound as they beat their breasts. A second fire received the dying sheep and still-breathing cattle. But then, at auspices of strange disaster, the prophet commanded

The mourning to cease, though he knew that the omens spoke true.
 Clockwise they wheeled retracing their course, spears quivering,
 And each threw an offering into the flames, from his equipment,
 A bridle, a choice belt, a javelin, or the crest that shaded his helm.
 It was over, and already the fires, exhausted, sank to ash. They
 Quenched the flames, dousing the pyre with floods of water, till
 Their labour ceased at sunset, duty narrowly ended with the dark.
 Nine times had Lucifer dismissed the dew-wet stars from the sky,
 And as often at night, as Hesperus, heralded the Moon's light,
 (Though the knowing constellations are not deceived, detecting
 Him as one, in his rising and his setting) and a wondrous work
 Was complete! A building stood there, all of stone, a mighty
 Temple for the child's ashes and, within, a frieze told the story:
 Here Hypsipyle pointed out the stream to the weary Danaans;
 Here the child crawled, here he slept while the scaled serpent
 Dragged its rasping length round the margins of the hill; one
 Could almost hear the blood-filled hiss from its dying mouth,
 So expertly was the snake shown, coiled round a marble spear.
 And now a crowd arrived, from street and field, eager to see
 The Games, the mock battles (Rumour had brought them all).
 Even those whom youth or weary age had left at home, free
 Of the horror of war, appeared. No greater host ever raised
 A clamour on Corinth's shores or beside Oenomaus's course.

BkVI:255-295 The Funeral Games – The opening procession

A valley, embraced by woods, sat in a circle of green winding
 Hills; shaggy ridges stood around, and a solid mound with twin
 Shoulders terminated the exit from the plain, whose level lifted
 To grassy brows and gentle slopes, that curved with long paths,
 Green turf, and no sudden defiles. There when the fields were
 Already reddened by the sun, a troop of warriors took their seats.
 They took pleasure in the number, the looks, and bearing of their
 Comrades in the crowd, and in their confidence in such a host.
 There a hundred black bulls, the pride of the herd, were led,
 A slow-moving mass; and a like number of heifers and steers
 Without horns as yet, of the same colour. Then a procession

Of brave images of ancient ancestors appeared, skilfully done;
The faces seemed alive. First Hercules, crushing the panting
Lion, shattering its bones with hard friction against his chest.
Though it was made of bronze, in their honour, the Inachians
Were still fearful at the sight. Father Inachus came next, leaning
On the crest of his reed-filled bank, and tipping his brimming urn
To the left. Behind him, Io, now four-legged, her father's grief,
Watched Argus, starred with those eyes that never closed. Jove,
In gentler mood, had exalted her in Egypt and already the Dawn
Was worshipping her as guest. Then father Tantalus, not hung
Above the illusory waters or snatching at the empty air and its
Retreating branches, but the good Tantalus dinner-guest of Jove.
Elsewhere Pelops the victor, in his chariot, grips the reins that
Neptune gave him, while Myrtilos the charioteer, clutches at
Falling wheels, and the spinning axle leaves him far behind.
There too is stern Acrisius, with his daughter the guilty Danae,
And Coroebus the monster-slayer, and sad Amymone beside
The spring Neptune created for her, and Alcmena, triple moons
About her head, taking pride in her babe Hercules. Aegyptus
And Danaus, sons of Belus, clasp right hands in their doomed
Pact, Aegyptus depicted with gentle look; but on Danaus' face
The marks of deceit, sign of the fatal marriages, of that night
Of murder are plain to see. A thousand other images follow.
Pleasure at last is satisfied: Valour calls the brave to compete.

BkVI:296-354 The Funeral Games – Competitors for the chariot-race

The first event was the chariot-racing. Apollo, recount the names,
Of the horses, and those famous charioteers; for there was never
A nobler set of coursers arrayed. It was as though a swarm of birds
Raced in swift flight; or Aeolus had the wild winds scour the shore.
First came Arion, conspicuous for the flame of his red mane. His
Sire was Neptune, if legend is true, who was the first with bridle
And bit to break a colt on the sandy shore, sparing him the whip;
A colt with insatiable desire for motion, restless as the wintry sea.
In harness with Neptune's steeds, he'd swim the Ionian and Libyan
Deeps, carrying his ocean father to every shore. Clouds, amazed,

Were left behind; east and west winds chased him in emulation.
He was no less superb on land, carrying Hercules over the deeply
Ploughed fields as he performed labours for Eurystheus; still wild
And unmanageable even for that son of Amphitryon. Later, a gift
Of the gods, he deigned to obey Adrastus, having grown milder
In the intervening years. Now the king, with many an admonition,
Allowed his son-in-law, Polynices, to manage him; telling him how
To soothe the horse when excited, not to handle him harshly, nor
To grant him free rein. 'Others you urge, with goads and threats.
He will lead, and more swiftly than you may wish.' So when, with
Tears, the Sun set Phaethon, his child, in his fast chariot, handing
Him the fiery reins, he warned the joyful youth of the dangerous
Constellations, whole regions inimical to passage, and to keep
To the temperate zone between the poles; great love he showed,
Fearful and cautious. But cruel Fate prevented the young man
Heeding his advice. Amphiaraus was close favourite to win
The palm, with his team of Spartan horses, offspring of Cyllarus,
Bred in secret, while Castor was far off, at the mouth of Scythian
Pontus, his Amyclaeon reins exchanged for an oar. Amphiaraus
Wore snowy white, and snowy were the coursers that stretched
Their necks beneath the yoke; his helm and ribbons matching
His white plume. Admetus, from Thessaly's shore, also there
Could barely control his barren mares, the Centaur's foals they
Say, and I believe it, they so scorn breeding, avoiding mating
For the sake of strength. They were like night and day mingled,
White with dark markings, strong in colouration, worthy to be
Of that herd that ceased to graze on hearing the Castalian reed's
Piping, when Apollo played as shepherd to fortunate Admetus.
And behold, Jason's young sons, their mother Hypsipyle's fresh
Glory, Thoas, named from his grandfather, and Euneos, named
From 'the good ship' Argo, riding like chariots. Twins, they
Were identical in all; looks, dress, chariots, teams; and no less
So in their wishes; each desired to win, or be beaten only by his
Brother. Chromis and Hippodamus competed too, one the son
Of Hercules, the other of Oenomaus; such that you might doubt
Which of the two grasped the reins more fiercely. One raced
The team of Getic Diomedes, the other that of his Pisan father.

Both chariots stained with dark blood displayed cruel trophies.
The turning post at one end of the course was a bare oak, long
Naked of its leaves; the other a stone block, the farmers' mark.
Between lay four javelin-throws, three arrow-flights, of space.

BkVI:355-409 The Funeral Games – Apollo attends the race

Meanwhile Apollo, the lyre in his hands, lulled the noble band
Of Muses with his song, as he gazed at Earth from Parnassus'
Airy summit. First he sang of the gods, for often he would tell
Of Jupiter and the battle at Phlegra, of the serpent he had slain;
And in praise of his brothers. Then he revealed what propels
The lightning bolt; what spirit guides the stars; whence rivers
Derive their animation, the winds their nourishment; from what
Fount the vast ocean pours; what path the sun takes so nights
Shorten or extend; whether the ground sits lowest, or above
And underpinned by another hidden world. He ended, quieting
The Sisters eager for more, and fastening his lyre, with the bright
Leaves of his wreath, to a laurel bush, and untying the embroidery
At his breast, he heard cheering there, and was drawn to the sight
Of Hercules' Nemea, and what seemed to be a mighty chariot race.
He chanced to see Admetus and Amphiaraus (heroes known to him)
Standing together in the field, and spoke to himself: 'What god
Brings together these kings, my most loyal followers, in rivalry?
Both are virtuous, both loved; I could not choose between them.
The former, when I was a servant in Pelion's fields (so Jupiter
Commanded, the dark Sisters willed) gave incense to me, his
Underling, and would not treat me as his inferior; the latter is
A friend to the oracle, a pious disciple of that divine calling.
The first deserves the preference, yet the other's end is near.
Admetus shall know the path of old age, but no joy remains
To you, Amphiaraus; Thebes and the dark chasm are at hand.
You know it, unhappy one, long the birds have so prophesied.'
He murmured the words and tears almost staining his inviolable
Face he reached Nemea in one radiant leap, more swiftly than
His father's lightning or his own arrows. Long present himself
On land, his trace yet lingered in the sky, and a bright trail still

Shone along the breeze. Now Prothous shook lots in a bronze
Helmet, and each competitor knew his place and starting order.
The men, splendid ornaments of earth, and their horses no less
Splendid, both of divine race, waited behind the barrier, while
Hope, fearful courage, pent-up confidence welled within them.
Nothing felt certain at heart: eager to race, they were yet afraid:
The chill before battle seized all their limbs. The horses equalled
Their masters in ardour. Their fiery eyeballs rolled. Champing
At the bits scorched with blood and foam, the posts and bars
Could scarce withstand their pressure, and between them rose
The smoking breath of repressed rage. To stand there motionless
Was torture, heavy hooves struck out prematurely, the energy
Of a thousand pacing movements wasted. The faithful grooms
Combed out the tangled manes, with words of encouragement
And advice. The Tyrrhenian trumpet sounded opposite them,
And all leapt from their place. What sails on the sea fly so,
Missiles in battle, or clouds in the sky? The winter rivers
And the rush of flames are not so swift. Meteors fall more
Slowly, the accumulated rain, and the torrents from the hills.

BkVI:410-468 The Funeral Games – The chariot-race begins

The Pelasgi saw and named them as they shot forward, then
They were snatched from view, shrouded in blinding dust.
Wrapped in the one fog, their faces lost in the tumult, they
Scarcely knew each other amidst the shouts and clamour.
The pack thinned out, staggered according to the quality
Of each, a second circuit trampling over tracks of the first.
Now their chests almost touch the horses' backs, now
They round the posts, knees straining, reins grasped hard.
The wind combs flowing manes, the neck-muscles swell
Below, and the dry ground drinks white showers of foam.
There's a thunderous sound of hooves, a hiss of wheels.
Arms are wearied, the air whistles with the crack of whips:
No denser the lash of hail from the ice-bound Bear, the rain
That streams down from the horns of the She-Goat, Capella.
Arion, prescient, sensed another charioteer than his master,

And unknowingly feared Polynices, dread son of Oedipus.
From the very start he was angry, at odds with his burden,
Wilder in his ardour than was his custom. The Inachians
Thought him inflamed with desire for glory, but it was his
Charioteer he fled, he whom he menaced in his wild fury,
As, ahead of them all, he searched the field for his master.
Amphiaraus followed, a distant second, neck and neck
With Thessalian Admetus; the twins, Euneos and Thoas
Ran close; now one in front, now the other, they give way,
They lead again; loving brothers undivided by glory's rivalry.
Chromis the fierce, and fierce Hippodamus, made up the rear,
No novices, but held back by their ponderous teams of horses.
Hippodamus was ahead, and feeling the breath of the pursuit,
His own shoulders hot with the heavy gasping of those mouths.
Now Apollo's augur, Amphiaraus, hoped to take the lead,
Dragging on his reins, and running it tight around the post.
Admetus too was on fire with fresh hope, as Arion, unchecked
By his true master, strayed to the right, far out along the bend.
Now Amphiaraus, Oecles' son, was ahead, and Admetus no
Longer third, but Arion, the horse of Neptune, cutting back
From a wide circuit, pressing both hard, at last overtook them,
Their joy short-lived. A cry rose to the stars, the sky trembled,
And the crowd lifted to their feet, revealing the bare benches.
But Polynices grew pale, the reins loose in his hand, his whip
Idle, just as a helmsman, whose skill fails him, rushes towards
The rocks, driven by the waves, no longer steering by the stars,
Throwing away the power of his art now overcome by chance.
Once more, over the plain, they drove, directly or obliquely,
Swerving and pursuing their course, axle meeting axle, spoke
To spoke; no truce or trust. You'd have thought it a war, cruel
War, but without the clash of steel; so wild were they for glory.
They shudder and threaten death, hooves scraping against rims.
Whips and goads are no longer enough; they urge their teams
On by name. Shouting to Pholoe; Iris; and the trace horse, Thoe;
Admetus calls, while the augur, Amphiaraus chides Aschetus,
And Cycnus, 'the Swan', worthy of his name. Strymon hears
Chromis call to him, fiery Aetion hears Euneos; Hippodamas

Taunts the lagging Cydon, Thoas begs his piebald, Podarces,
To fly. Only Polynices, the scion of Echion, is darkly silent
In his errant chariot, fearing to reveal a tremor in his voice.

BkVI:469-549 The Funeral Games – The chariot-race ends

The horses' effort seemed scarcely begun and already they were
Starting the fourth lap of the dusty course. Exhausted, their limbs
Streamed with sweat, their parched mouths breathed and expelled
A dense hot vapour, their forward rush was no longer at full pace,
And their long drawn-out panting racked their heaving flanks.
Then bold Fortune chose to decide the issue long in doubt.
Thoas crashed, trying eagerly to pass Haemonian Admetus,
Nor could his brother help him, willing though he was, since
Hippodamus, scion of Mars, obstructed him with his chariot.
Then Chromis, rounding the bend of the inward goal, grasped
Hippodamus' axle, and held it with the whole strength of his
Sire, Hercules; the horses tried vainly to escape, straining
At their bridles and stretching out their necks. In such a way
The tide will hold Sicilian vessels fast, while a southerly gale
Seeks to drive them on; their swollen sails static in mid-ocean.
Now Chromis hurled the charioteer from his shattered chariot,
And sought to drive ahead. But when the Thracian horses saw
Hippodamus on the ground, their old hunger returned, in their
Fury they would have torn him trembling limb from limb, had
Chromis, the Tirynthian hero, heedless of the race, not dragged
The team away, and to loud applause withdrawn from the race.
Meanwhile Apollo had long desired for you the honour that he
Promised, Amphiaraus. Thinking the time ripe at last to show
His favour, he entered the churned spaces of the dusty course,
As the race was ending, when final victory was in the balance.
A monstrous phantom with snakes for hair, and fearful looks,
He either raised from Erebus, or conjured for a brief moment,
With cunning art; certain it is that he revealed the abomination,
Adorned with innumerable terrors, to the heavens above. Not
Even the gatekeeper of dark Lethe could eye it without fear,
Nor the Eumenides themselves, without the deepest horror; it

Would have troubled the horses of the Sun or Mars, in flight.
Golden Arion saw it and his mane sprang erect, his shoulders
Reared, and he hung there, his fellow and their partners either
Side, suspended in mid-air. The Theban exile, Polynices, fell
And landed on his back, sprawling till he could free himself
From the reins; the chariot released from control, swept away.
As he lay there on the sand, Amphiaraus, Thessalian Admetus,
And Euneus, the Lemnian hero, flew past, swerving as best
They could to avoid him. At last his friends approached; he
Lifted his head, sunk in darkness, from the ground, raising
His bruised limbs, and returned unexpectedly to Adrastus.
How close death came, Theban, if harsh Tisiphone had not
Prevented it! What a mighty war would have been averted!
Thebes, and your brother, would have mourned, publicly;
Argos and Nemea; while, for you, Lerna and Larisa would
Have dedicated their shorn locks, in prayer; and your grave
Would have known more worshippers than Archemorus'.
Now Amphiaraus, Oecles' son, though certain of the prize
Had he simply followed the masterless Arion in front of him,
Still burned with desire to overtake the now empty chariot.
The god gave renewed strength. Swifter than the East Wind
He flew, as though from the starting gate when first emerging
Onto the track, while he chided swift Achetos, and snowy
Cycnus, plying reins and whip across their back and mane.
Now at last, no one ahead, the fiery wheels drew the axle on,
The sand was churned and scattered in the air; yes, even then
The earth groaned and threatened angrily! Perhaps Cycnus
Might have drawn ahead and Arion lost, but his sire Neptune
Would not allow it. So, in a fair result, the horse retained his
Glory while victory went to Amphiaraus, the seer. Two young
Men brought him a reward for victory, the bowl of Hercules,
Which the Tirynthian used to carry in one hand and, victorious
Over monsters or in war, tilt it foaming into his upturned mouth.
It showed Centaurs fiercely moulded, terrifyingly shaped in
Gold, and on its surface torches, stones, other bowls hurled
Amidst the slaughter of the Lapithae, the powerful anger
Of the dying everywhere; while he himself was holding wild

Hylaeus, twisting the Centaur's beard and plying his club.
For Admetus a cloak was the reward, with a flowing Maeonian
Border, dyed repeatedly to a deep purple. Here Leander was
Depicted, swimming Phrixus' sea, gleaming bluish in watery
Hue. Scorning the waves, his hands seemed to sweep apart,
He about to change stroke with his arms, and the very fabric,
Showing his wet hair, seemed moist. Opposite Hero of Sestos
Sat, watching anxiously from the summit of her tower, yet
In vain: with the lamp nearby, her accomplice, about to fail.
Adrastus ordered these rich gifts to be granted the winners.
His son-in-law he consoled with an Achaean serving-girl.

BkVI:550-645 The Funeral Games – The foot-race

Next Adrastus invited the runners to compete for fine prizes:
In a test of agility, where valour plays little part, a peaceful
Activity in the service of the rites, yet not unavailing in war
If the right arm fails. First Idas emerged, his brow recently
Wreathed with Olympian leaves; and the men of Pisa and Elis
Greeted him with cheers. Alcon of Sicyon followed; and then
Phaedimus, twice proclaimed victor on the Isthmian sands;
And Dymas who once ran faster than wing-footed horses,
But of late followed them, slowed by age. And many others,
From here and there, unknown to the crowd, came forward
In silence. Now there are calls from the packed stands for
Arcadian Parthenopaeus; they murmur his name, his mother
Atalanta famed for her speed. Who does not know of her
Matchless Maenalian beauty, and her flying feet no suitor
Could overtake? The mother's glory weighed on the son,
Already known far and wide for slaying the deer on foot
In the open glades of Lycaeus, for catching a speeding
Javelin as he ran. At last he leapt lightly from the ranks,
To a roar of expectation, dashing from the crowd, as he
Unpinned the gold clasp of his cloak. His limbs gleamed,
Their splendour revealed, his fine shoulders and naked
Chest no less delightful than his face, and yet his visage
Eclipsed by his body. He himself, though, deflected praise

Of his beauty, and kept admirers at bay. Then, no novice,
He concentrated on oiling his flesh with the rich pressings
Of Athene, while Idas, Dymas, and others did the same.
Just so, when the heavens shine over the tranquil ocean,
And reflections of the starry sky tremble on the waves,
Though all are bright Hesperus shines more brightly,
Glowing as deeply in dark water as in the heights above.
Idas was second to him in beauty and not greatly slower
In speed, close to him in age but a little older; the oil
Of the wrestling ground had already encouraged a faint
Growth of down on his cheek, a hint of shadow below
The cloud of his uncut hair. Now they flexed muscles,
Testing, and exercising, their languid limbs in various
Ways, putting themselves artificially in motion. Now
They sank on their bended knee, now slapped their oily
Chests with the flat of their hand, now raised an eager
Leg, or brought a brief sprint to an end in a sudden halt.
When the signal fell, offering an equal start, they soon
Devoured the course, and the naked runners gleamed
Over the field. It even seemed the swift horses had run
Less swiftly earlier over the same terrain. You might
Have thought them so many arrows loosed by a Cretan
Host, or by retreating Parthians. So, fleet-footed stags
In the Hyrcanian wilds, hearing, or thinking they hear,
The roar of a hungry lion in the distance, will blindly
Run, swept on by panic, and crowded together in fear,
Their horns clashing loud and long in mingled flight.
The Maenalian lad fled from sight, faster than the wind,
Shaggy Idas pressed after him, panting heavily at his
Shoulder, his breath and shadow falling on his back.
Next came Dymas and Phaedimus straining in rivalry,
With Alcon quick on their heels. Parthenopaeus' blond
Uncut tresses flowed behind his head: the Arcadian
Had tended it from his earliest years, promising it as
A gift to Diana Trivia, dedicating it boldly (in vain)
To his native altar should he return a winner from war.
Now untied and pouring freely over his back, it flew

Behind him in the breeze, hindering him and flying
In the face of Idas threatening his footsteps. Idas now
Saw the chance to commit a foul, and near the finish
As Parthenopaeus was about to cross the winning line,
Idas seized his hair, and dragging him back, passing
Him by, reached the finish gate, leading by a distance.
The Arcadians roared in anger, and called for weapons,
Then, armed, ran to support their king should the stolen
Prize and honour won not be restored, pouring onto
The track; others applauded Idas' cunning. Meanwhile
Parthenopaeus covered his face with the dust and wept;
The grace of tears adding to his beauty. In his distress
He tore with blood-stained nails now at his chest, now
At his face and hair, undeserving of this shame; on all
Sides, discordant clamour raged, while aged Adrastus
Unsure, delayed his judgement. At last he spoke: 'Lads.
End your quarrel. Your skill must be tried a second time.
But not in each others' tracks: Idas, keep to this side,
Parthenopaeus take the other; let there be no cheating.'
They heard and obeyed. Then Parthenopaeus of Tegea
Addressed the goddess, silently, in supplication: 'Lady
Of the Forests, since these locks are dedicated to you,
And my vow has led to this disgrace, I beg, if my mother,
And myself have deserved any favour from you through
Our hunting, I beg that this ill-omen not accompany me
To Thebes, nor this shame to Arcady remain.' The proof
He was heard was that the track scarce felt his passage,
The air barely moved between his legs, and his swift feet
Hung above the dust, leaving it untouched. With a shout
He burst from the gate, with a shout returned to the king,
Grasped the palm, and put to an end to sighing. The race
Was done, the prizes were ready. Arcadian Parthenopaeus
Received a horse, shameless Idas claimed a shield, all
The rest departed content with gifts of Lycian quivers.

BkVI:646-718 The Funeral Games – The discus competition

Now Adrastus invited any strong man, who wished, to try
His skill at the discus, and proudly demonstrate his strength.
Pterelas responded, yet, arching his whole body, he was only
Able to land the slippery mass of bronze nearby. The scions
Of Inachus watched in silence, pondering the task. Then a host
Of competitors appeared, two Achaeans, three sons of Ephyre,
A Pisan, and an Acarnanian the seventh. Hope of glory would
Have brought still more, had not the tall Hippomedon appeared
Among them, spurred on by the spectators, and carrying another
Solid discus in his right hand, crying: ‘Try this one, men, instead,
You who go to shatter walls with rocks and to demolish Tyrian
Towers, try this: as for that other weight, who could not throw it?’
He caught it up, effortlessly, hurling it to one side. They moved
Away amazed, declaring themselves outmatched. Only Phlegyas,
And ardent Menestheus (shame and their ancestry alone kept
Them in the contest) reluctantly chanced their arms. The rest
Of the young men willingly conceded, and bowing to the discus,
Withdrew ingloriously. So in Thracian fields the shield of Mars
Strikes Mount Pangaeus with an evil glare, and gleaming terrifies
The sun, and booms deeply when the god beats it with his spear.
Phlegyas of Pisa began the competition, drawing all eyes to him;
Such power his body-shape promised. First he coated his hand
And the discus with soil, then shaking off the dirt turned the disk
Round and round to determine which side best suited his grip,
And then his forearm. He possessed no lack of skill. This sport
Had ever been his passion, not only when he attended the rites
That glorified his land, but when he would measure the Alpheus
From bank to bank, sending a discus over the river at the widest
Part, and never landing it in the water. So, confident in his skill,
He began by measuring the heavens with his arm not the rough
Acres of ground, and bending alternate knees he gathered his
Strength and whirled the discus above him to reach the clouds.
Swiftly it sought the heights, accelerating as if it was falling,
Till at length, with less velocity, it returned exhausted to earth,
And plunged into the ground. So the eclipsed sister of the Sun

Falls, when drawn down from the astonished stars, and people
Beat bronze to aid her, in vain fear, while Thessalian witches
Their spells heard, laugh in victory to view her panting steeds.
The Greeks applauded now, to a dark look from Hippomedon,
And the crowd hoped for an even mightier throw over the plain.
But evil Fortune came to him, she who loves to destroy reckless
Expectations. How many of us can compete against the gods?
He was aiming already to cover a vast distance, his neck was
Already swivelling, his flank withdrawing, when the discus
Slipped and fell in front of him, frustrating his throw, leaving
Him empty-handed. The crowd groaned, only a few enjoyed
The sight. Then Menestheus with trepidation approached to try
His skill. Cautiously, and with many a prayer to you, Mercury,
He roughened the surface of the heavy discus with dust. Hurling
By his powerful arm, with greater fortune, it sailed out, landing
A good way down the track. The crowd applauded and an arrow
Was set to mark the spot. Hippomedon threw third, approaching
That test of strength with slow and ponderous tread. And he took
To heart the message implied by Phlegyas' fate and Menestheus'
Good fortune. He felt the familiar weight in his hand, and raised
It high, testing his rigid flanks and powerful arms, then swung
The burden with a tremendous whirl, himself following through.
The discus took to the air with a fearsome leap and already far on
Preserving the impetus from the hand that flung it, kept its flight,
Passing the mark of Menestheus by a long way, as was certain,
And falling far beyond the rival throw, with a crash like a great
Mass of falling masonry, setting the green flanks and summits
Of the arena hill trembling. It was like that rock Polyphemus
Hurling, blindly, from smoky Aetna, hearing it fall in the wake
Of the departing vessel, and not far from his enemy, Ulysses.

BkVI:719-825 The Funeral Games – The boxing

Then Adrastus ordered the emblem of a tiger presented
To the winner: it shone with a surround of yellow gold,
And the claws were likewise tipped. Menestheus received
A Cretan bow and quiver of arrows. 'But to you, Phlegyas,'

He said, 'foiled by mischance, I give this sword to wear,
Once Pelasgus' pride and defence, nor will Hippomedon
Grudge you this, I think. Now, time for greater courage,
Raise the boxing gloves face to face. Here valour is close
To that needed for the heat of battle.' Capaneus, the Argive
Took his place, massive to view, a source of massive fear,
Fitting the rawhide gloves, blackened with lead, on hands
As hard as himself. 'Stand up, one of you many thousands
Of warriors, and let it be one of Aonian race, one whom
It would be no sin to send to his death, so my valour might
Not be stained with my countrymen's blood.' Their minds
Were numbed, and terror kept them silent. At length then,
Unexpectedly, Alcidas, from Sparta of naked athletes,
Leapt up. The followers of the Dorian kings felt wonder,
But his friends knew that he trusted in his teacher, Pollux,
And had been nurtured beside the sacred wrestling floors.
The god himself had held him in his hands, moulding his
Arms (seduced by love of the material) and often placed
Him opposite, marvelling at him as he stood aggressive
As himself, then lifting him high in triumph and pressing
Him to his breast. Capaneus, thinking him of no account,
Scorned his challenge, as if in pity, demanding a different
Opponent. But at last he was forced to take position, his
Languid neck already swelling at the provocation. Poised,
On their toes, they raised hands like lightning bolts. Heads
Well back they watched each other carefully, barring every
Approach. Capaneus showed the breadth of his limbs from
Every angle, his large-boned stance like Tityos' looming
Large from the Stygian fields, if that is the grim vultures
Had allowed it. Alcidas was scarcely out of boyhood,
But his strength was more mature than his years suggested,
And youthful energy gave such promise of a mighty future
That none wished to see him beaten or savagely bloodied,
And they watched the spectacle with anxiety and prayers.
The two men measured each other with their gaze, both
Hoping for a first opening. There was no immediate blow,
Or show of anger. For a while they planned their move,

In hidden wrath and fear. They merely sparred with raised
Arms, and tried their gloves, dulling them with rubbing.
Alcidamas, the better boxer, delayed his charge, held back,
Husbanding his strength, and fearful of a lengthy contest.
Capaneus, seeking to do harm and careless of his defence,
Went all out, working both arms without restraint, grinding
His teeth uselessly, surging forward then checking himself.
But the Spartan, with sharp foresight, watchful in accord
With his native skill, parried the blows or evaded them;
Sometimes, with a swift indulgent nod of the head, he
Emerg'd unscathed, then he would smother the others
Weapons with his hands, or advanced his feet while
Drawing back his head. Often he engaged his opponent
Whose strength was greater than his own, attacking him
Boldly (so sharply honed his skill, so practiced his aim),
Moving inside him, overshadowing him, leaping in the air.
As a wave gathers, and rushes at the menacing rocks, then
Breaks, then ebbs, so he circled round his angry adversary,
Then stormed his defence. Behold he raises rigid fore-arms,
Steadily, threatening the flanks, the eyes. As Capaneus
Defended against them, he distracted him, and cleverly
Slipped in a sudden blow between the hands, so gashing
The middle of the brow; now the blood flowed, a warm
Stream staining the temples. Capaneus was not yet aware
Of the wound, and wondered at the crowd's sudden shout,
But chancing to draw a weary hand over his face, seeing
Blood-spots on his glove, he was more indignant than ever
A lion or a tiger is at the javelin's stroke. In a passion,
He drove the retreating youth over the ground, pushing
Him backwards, bending his spine; and he ground his
Teeth violently, doubling, multiplying, his whirling blows.
Many landed in thin air, some struck his opponent's gloves.
With quick footwork the Spartan evaded the thousand
Deaths that hovered round his hollow temples; he recalled
His skill, and facing his foe retreated with counter-blows.
Now both, breathing heavily from their efforts, wearied.
The one attacked more slowly, the other was less agile

In defence. Both trembled at the knees, forced to rest.
 So when high waves have wearied the rowing sailors,
 At a signal from the stern, they will lower their oars,
 But have scarcely rested for a while when a second
 Order rouses them again. See how Alcidamas ducks
 His opponent's furious onslaught, evading him now by
 Deliberately plunging his shoulders forwards. Capaneus
 Then tumbled headlong, and as he rose again, the bold
 Lad struck him, and then turned pale at his own success.
 The scions of Inachus raised a shout, louder than the sea
 Or the wind in the forest. When Adrastus saw Capaneus
 Struggling from the ground, raising his arms intent on
 Unacceptable revenge, he cried: 'Go friends, I beg you,
 He's maddened; run swiftly, he's in a fury, grip him tight!
 He'll not stop till he mingles shattered bone and brains;
 Bring the palm and the prizes; take the Spartan away, or
 He'll be killed.' Without delay, Tydeus rushed forward,
 Hippomedon not far behind. By a joint effort they drew
 Capaneus' arms behind him, restraining him, with much
 Persuasion: 'Leave off, you've won. It's better to spare
 The loser's life. He's one of us, too, a comrade in battle.'
 The hero was unmoved, pushing away the palm-branch
 And the gift of armour offered, bellowing: 'Leave me
 Be! I'll gouge those cheeks with which the half-breed
 Won favour, mark them with dust and gore, and send
 His marred body to the grave, for his Oebalian master
 To mourn.' He spoke: but his friends steered him away,
 Swollen with anger, and contesting the result, while
 All the Spartans praised the foster-child of renowned
 Taygetus, and from a safe distance mocked the threats.

BkVI:826-910 The Funeral Games – The wrestling

Meanwhile great-hearted Tydeus, tormented by others'
 Achievements and the awareness of his own prowess,
 Was goaded into action. He was skilled with the discus,
 And at running, no less so with the gloves, but above

All other sports he loved the wrestling. Thus he would
Spend his moments of respite from the wars, and, oiled,
Ease battle tensions, challenging mighty opponents in
The sports arena and along the banks of Achelous, happy
To have the river-god as teacher. So, when brave ambition
Drew warriors to the wrestling, the Aetolian stripped his
Fearsome native boar-hide from his back. Agylleus set
His long limbs against him, a man of Cleonaeon stock,
No less in stature than Hercules, his huge shoulders
Ever towering above other men. But lacking vigour,
His father's strength of body, he ran to fat, his limbs
Flowing, loose and lax. Hence Tydeus' bold confidence
Of beating so huge an opponent. Though he himself
Seemed small, he was heavy-boned, with firm knotted
Muscle. Never had Nature sought to frame so great
A spirit nor such immense power in so small a body.
After they had rubbed oil into their flesh, both jogged
To the centre of the field and drenched themselves in
Handfuls of sand, dusting each others' gleaming limbs
All over, flexing their shoulders, stretching their arms.
Now skilful Tydeus cleverly bends Agylleus down
To the ground, stooping his own back, knees close
To the sand. Like the cypress-tree, queen of the Alps,
Bowed to the earth by a southerly wind, and scarcely
Clinging on by the roots, though destined to return
To the same heights as before, so towering Agylleus
Spontaneously bent double, inclining his huge limbs,
And groaning at his smaller foe. Now with their hands
Each tried for a grip, on head, neck, shoulder, chest,
Flanks or elusive legs. Sometimes they hung a long
While grasping each others' arms, and then fiercely
Broke a finger-grip. No less savagely do two bulls,
Potential leaders, struggle grimly while the fair herd
Awaits the winner mid-meadow; furiously they strain
Heaving breasts, while desire goads them on, easing
The pain of wounds. So boars with lightning tusks,
And shambling bears with shaggy grasp, give battle.

Tydeus proved resilient; unwearied by sun and sand
His limbs retained their power, his flesh was firm
His sinews tightened by harsh toil. Agylleus though
Slackened, snatching his breath, exhausted, he gaped
In distress, sand flowing from his body in a stream
Of sweat, as he touched the earth furtively to support
Himself. Tydeus was on him, harrying and, feinting
At the neck, caught at the legs, but in vain, his arms
Too short to gain their objective. His tall adversary
Fell upon him, smothering him from sight beneath
His vast collapsing mass. Like the worker in some
Spanish mine, who going below, leaving daylight
And the living behind him, feels the suspended
Roof tremble, sees the fractured rock crumbling,
Till, with a sudden crash, he is buried beneath it,
Covered by the fall of earth, his body all crushed
And broken, unable to return its indignant spirit
To the stars above. But the more vigorous Tydeus,
Superior in heart and spirit, slipped, at once,
From beneath the iniquitous mass, and circling
The other as he moved uncertainly, clung to his
Back then twined around his sides and stomach,
In a firm swift hold. Next, squeezing his knees
Between Agylleus' thighs as he struggled in vain
To escape the grip, and clutch at Tydeus' side,
That irrepressible opponent (wonderful and terrible
To see) lifted him in the air. So, as the tale tells,
Antaeus, the Libyan son of Earth, bathed in sweat,
Struggled in Hercules' arms once he had been
Lifted from the sand; and with no hope of release,
Unable to touch his mother Earth even with the tips
Of his toes, revealed the source of his strength.
A roar of pleased applause rose from the crowd.
Balancing Agylleus' on high, Tydeus suddenly
Released him to fall sidelong, following him
As he descended, simultaneously grasping his
Neck with his right hand, his thighs with his feet.

Thus trapped, Agylleus weakened, only the shame
Prompting him to struggle. At length he sprawled
On the ground, flat on his front, and after a long
Pause rose dejected, leaving rough furrows marked
On the ground. Tydeus took the palm in his right
Hand, and the gift of shining armour in his left,
Saying: 'This I won even though no small part of my
Blood was left on Dirce's plain (as you have heard)
Where I gained these scars, my pledge to Thebes –'
And here he showed the wounds, handing the prize
His glory had won to his comrades, while Agylleus
In turn received an unvalued armoured breastplate.

BkVI:911-946 Adrastus receives an inauspicious omen

Warriors now came forward to fight with naked swords:
Epidaurian Agreus and the Theban exile, Polynices, he
Whose doom was not yet upon him, already stood there
Armed, but the royal scion of Iasus, forbade their duel:
'O, you young men! Death has victims enough in store!
Save your brave spirits and mad eagerness for the blood
Of your enemies. Polynices, for whom we have deserted
Our ancestral lands, our beloved cities, do not, I beg you,
Before war begins, allow chance and your brother's wish
(May the gods defend us) to have so much power over us.'
So saying he gifted both with a gilded helmet, ordering
That his son-in-law's noble brow be wreathed, lest he
Lack glory, and that the Theban be loudly proclaimed
Victor: and the dark Fates echoed that cry as an omen.
His generals then urged him to honour the festal games
With some action of his own, so paying his last respects
To the tomb. And lest the leaders lack outright victory,
They asked him to shoot Cretan arrows from his bow
Or send a light javelin towards the clouds. Cheerfully
He complied, and surrounded by the foremost warriors,
He descended from the green hill to the plain, ordering
His armour-bearer to bring his light quivers and bows.

He intended to traverse the wide arena from a distance
With a shot, and transfix a given ash-tree with a wound.
Who can deny that omens arise from the hidden causes
Of events? Fate is revealed to men, and yet they disdain
To see, so prior notice of the future is largely wasted.
Thus we call omens mere chance, and Ill-Fortune gains
The power to harm us. Swiftly covering the ground, that
Fateful shaft struck the tree then (dreadful to witness!),
Flew back through the air it had traversed reversing its
Path to the target, and falling close to the quiver's edge.
The leaders speculated to no purpose: some said winds
In the low clouds had turned the arrow, others that it
Was repulsed by the shock of striking the trunk. Deep
Lay its mighty import, yet its evil was still apparent:
A war was promised from which the arrow's master
Would return alone, to a melancholy homecoming.

End of Book VI

BkVII:1-63 Mercury is sent to rouse the war-god Mars

While the Pelasgi thus delayed the onset of the Theban war,
Jupiter watched them, no kindness in his heart, and shook
His head, so that the stars on high trembled at the motion;
Atlas complaining: Earth weighed heavier on his shoulders.
Then Jove addressed Mercury, the swift Arcadian god: ‘Go,
Lad, and in one rapid leap glide to the north as far as those
Thracian dwellings, and the pole of the snowy constellation,
That Great Bear, where Callisto feeds her flames (forbidden
To sink into the Ocean) on wintry clouds and my own rain.
There, quickly, deliver his father’s urgent command to Mars,
Who perhaps lays his spear aside to breathe, though he hates
To rest or, more likely, plies weapons and insatiate trumpets,
Revelling in the courage of a race he loves. Spare nothing!
I thought he was ordered, long ago, to rouse Inachian troops,
And all the peoples the Isthmus separates or Malea’s angry
Waters thunder round: yet that host have scarcely passed
Beyond their walls, and halt to worship! They are so intent
On applause at the funeral rites of a slain innocent, you might
Think they were home from war. Is this your wrath, my Mars?
The discus spins in recoil, and makes earth resound; Spartan
Gloves meet in combat. If Mars owned to the frenzy, the wild
Delight in battle he’s so proud of, he’d be putting innocent cities
Ruthlessly to the sword then burning them, felling people who
Called on the Thunderer, while exhausting the wretched world.
But now he’s mild in warfare, and resigns himself to my anger.
Unless he hastens the war and hurls the Danaan host against
The Theban walls faster than I command let him (and yet
I threaten nothing cruel) let him become a kind and gentle god,
Let his savage ways transform to peaceful ones, let him return
The sword and horses, and end his power over life and death.
I’ll watch over the earth and order universal peace. Minerva
Will prove sufficient to deal with the Theban war. He spoke
While already Mercury was approaching the land of Thrace:
As he glided down from the Great Bear’s gateway to the pole,

He was tossed this way and that by the tempests ever-present
In that region, the lines of storm-clouds in the sky, the south
Wind's first gasps. A dense hail rattled on his golden mantle,
While his shady broad-brimmed Arcadian hat gave little cover.
There he found barren woods, and Mars' shrine, shuddering
As he gazed. There under far-off Haemus lies the god's savage
Home, surrounded by a thousand Frenzies. Its walls are iron,
Iron-clad its trodden thresholds, its roof as well rests on iron
Columns. Apollo's ray is daunted, light avoids the dwelling,
And a harsh glare dulls the stars. Its guards suit the place:
Mad Impulse leaps from the outer gate, blind Evil, red-hot
Anger, blood-stained Terror. Treachery lurks with hidden
Blade, and Strife grasping a double-edged sword. The court
Echoes with countless Threats, sombre Courage takes his
Stand in the centre, ecstatic Rage, and armed Death seated
There, with blood-filled countenance. On the altars flames
Snatched from burning cities, and blood derived from war,
Those alone. Trophies from many lands and captive races
Dot the temple heights and surrounds: fragments of iron
Gates, warships' keels, empty chariots, skulls they crushed,
The very groans almost. Every relic truly of violent harm.
Mars was to be seen everywhere, but not with slack visage
As Vulcan with his divine art had displayed him; he had
Not yet been shown in the light of an adulterer, nor as yet
Been punished for his shameful union in that net of chains.

BkVII:64-104 Mars sets out to join the Argive host

The winged god had barely begun his search for the lord
Of the shrine when, behold, the ground quaked and horned
Hebrus bellowed as his waters were parted. Then the horses
Of war roaming the valley all foamed at the mouth, among
The quivering grasses, a sign of his arrival, and the closed
Gates of everlasting adamant flew open. He appeared now
In his chariot, adorned with Hyrcanian gore, transforming
The wide fields with a dire spray of blood: at his back were
The spoils, the weeping masses. The woods and deep snow

Gave passage. Dark Bellona controlled the team with her
Blood-stained hand; pricked them on with her long spear.
Mercury froze at the sight, and lowered his gaze. Jupiter
Himself would have been awed if he had been there, he
Would have withdrawn his threats, retracting his order.
The Lord of War spoke first: 'What command is this you
Bring from Jove, out of the wide heavens? For you would
Not of your own free will come to this place, my brother,
To my wintry storms, you who live by dew-wet Maenalus,
And the mild mountain breezes of sun-drenched Lycaeus.'
Mercury gave out the Father's decree. Mars in an instant
Had his horses whipped into flight, panting though they
Were from constant effort; he too filled with indignation
Over the battle-shy Greeks. Jove's anger ebbed, on high,
At the sight, and slowly and weightily his looks altered,
As when an easterly fades, and vanishes, over the ocean,
Leaving it conquered, a calm swell and gently rolling sea
Replacing the exhausted tempest; though the vessels still
Lack their rigging, and the sailors still catch their breath.
The funeral games and their unarmed contests, had ended,
But the crowd had not yet dispersed. Silence fell while
Adrastus the hero poured wine on the ground to appease
Archemorus' ashes, saying: 'Little one, grant that we may
Celebrate this day with many a triennial renewal. Let not
Ivory-shouldered Pelops show more eagerness to visit
Olympus' altars, the shrines of Elis; nor let the serpent
Glide more willingly to Castalia's Pythian temple; nor
Palaemon's shade swim, to Corinth's pine-clad Isthmus.
We deny you to weeping Avernus, lad, and join our sad
Rite to the eternal stars. Now we are an army in haste.
But if you ensure we conquer the Theban cities with our
Swords, then a great altar we'll build to proclaim your
Worth, then you shall be a god, worshipped not only
In the Inachian cities, but a divinity invoked in captive
Thebes.' So the king prayed, for all; and each himself.

BkVII:105-144 Mars causes panic

Now Mars' thrusting steeds were treading Ephyre's shore,
Where Acrocorinthus lifts its head into the upper skies,
And casts its shadow alternately on the Isthmus' twin seas.
There the god commanded Panic, one of his crew of dire
Companions, to advance before the team: none better at
Instilling breathless fear, at hiding reality from the mind.
The monster has countless voices and hands, and whatever
Face he chooses; all things are believed if he's their author,
And he drives whole cities mad with his terrible onslaughts.
If he persuades the wretched of twin suns, or that the stars
Are falling, the ground is shaking, ancient forests sinking,
They are sure to see it. Now he invented something new
And sly. He raised the illusion of dust on the Nemean
Plain. The generals gazed astounded at the fog overhead.
He added tumultuous noise, a clamour that seemed like
Weapons clashing, galloping cavalry, fearsome shouts
On the wandering breeze. The leaders' hearts pounded,
The men murmured, confused: 'What noise is this, or
Are we deceived? Why are the stars concealed by dust?
Are the Ismenians upon us? That's it, they're approaching.
Would Thebes dare? Well do you think they'll wait till
We've finished with funeral rites and tombs?' So Panic
Bewilders them, and changes his appearance as he makes
His way through the ranks; now one of Pisa's thousands,
Now a Pylian, now a Spartan by his looks, and he swears
The enemy are close, troubling the men with false alarms.
To the fearful nothing is false. So, when Mars appeared
Himself among the maddened army, and in swift circuit
Was borne round the heights of the sacred valley, thrice
Raising his spear, thrice lashing his steeds, thrice beating
His shield against his chest, each man ran for his arms,
For his arms or another's, in wild disorder; snatching
Helms, and harnessing horses not theirs. A savage lust
For death and slaughter, raged in every breast, nothing
Stood in their passion's way, and they plunged forward

As if compensating for delay. The shores resounded as
The wind from the land rose and vessels fled harbour;
Everywhere sails were flying, loose tackle thrown about,
Oars floated and every anchor dragged free, until from
Mid-ocean they viewed sweet land, comrades left behind.

BkVII:145-226 Bacchus complains to Jove

Bacchus had seen the Inachian cohorts swiftly gathering
For the march: sad at heart, his shining face distraught,
He turned to the city of Thebes and groaned, recalling
The palace that nursed him, and his father's lightning.
His hair and garlands disordered, the thyrsus fell from
His hand, the grape-vines slid untouched from his horns.
Dishevelled, inglorious, in tears as he was, he appeared
Before Jove who happened to be alone in his heavenly
Halls. Bacchus, in a guise never seen before (though his
Father understood why), spoke as a suppliant: 'Almighty
Sire of the gods, will you raze Thebes? Is your consort
So cruel? Have you no pity for the dear land, the house
You deceived, and my mother's ashes? Enough that you
Once hurled fire from the clouds; we think, unwillingly.
Now a second time you bring dark flames to the earth,
Though not on oath to the Styx, nor asked to by a lover.
What next, my father, angry but just: a lightning-bolt
For me? Yet you do not visit Danae's house so, nor
Parrhasian Callisto's forest, nor yet Leda's Amyclae.
It seems of all your sons I am the most disregarded.
Yet I was the sweet burden you sewed into your thigh,
To grant me a new threshold on life, and a lost womb,
Completing my mother's term. And my unwarlike
Followers, unpractised in war, know only my ranks,
My struggles, how to garland their hair with leaves,
And whirl to the sound of the pipes: they fear only
The thyrsi of brides, the revels of married women.
How can they withstand Mars and his war-trumpets?
Behold what work he is preparing, that fervid one!

What if it were your Curetes he had armed, ordering
 Them to defend themselves with their useless shields?
 And now you favour Argos (was there no one else
 To choose?) Oh, Father, your decisions are worse
 Than the danger itself. Must we be ruined to enrich
 My stepmother's Mycenae? For my part, I'll yield,
 But what will become of my slaughtered people's
 Rites and sacraments, and the ashes of my mother,
 Who conceived me to her sorrow? Must I flee too,
 To Thrace, to Lycurgus' forests, or to India where
 I triumphed, to be their captive? Give the fugitive
 A sanctuary. My brother Apollo (I begrudge him
 Not) fixed Latona's island, Delos, fast in the deep;
 Minerva banished Neptune's fount from her citadel;
 I myself have seen Io's son, Epaphus, rule the East,
 Nor are Mercury's Cyllene nor Minos' Mount Ida
 Troubled by war-horns. Why am I your only son
 Whose altars offend? Thebes (since my influence
 Counts for little) is where you had your long night
 With Alcmene, and gave her Hercules; and there
 You chose to love Antiope, daughter of Nycteus;
 And there live the race of Tyre, scions of that bull
 Kinder than the lightning; at least protect Agenor's
 Progeny.' The Father smiled at these reproaches.
 Calmly he raised him as he knelt with outstretched
 Arms and, kissing him, gave this tranquil answer:
 'My boy, it's not my wife's doing, as you suppose,
 Nor am I so obedient to her fierce demands. We
 Are led by the immutable spinning of the Fates;
 Ancient, long delayed, are the causes of this war.
 Whose anger ebbs so readily, who is more sparing
 Of human blood than I? Heaven and these halls,
 Eternal as myself throughout the ages, are witness
 To the whirling lightning bolts I have often stilled,
 How seldom their fire determines events on earth.
 I was even unwilling to let Mars destroy the Lapiths,
 And Diana to ravage ancient Calydon, though they

Had suffered wrongs that cried out for vengeance,
 There is too much slaughter, it irks me to transform
 Spirits, and return so many to life in new bodies.
 Yet it is time I extirpated the scions of Labdacus
 And Pelops; you know yourself how prompt Thebes
 Is to attack the gods (to say nothing of Dorian crime);
 You too (regarding Pentheus) – yet since that ancient
 Wrath is forgot, I should be silent. Though Pentheus
 Who was neither stained with his father's blood, nor
 Guilty of sullyng his mother's bed and begetting his
 Own brothers, was torn and scattered across the wilds.
 Where were your tears then and these heartfelt cries?
 It is not to my own anger I sacrifice these fell sons
 Of Oedipus. Earth and heaven and piety, and violated
 Trust; Nature, and the Furies themselves, demand it.
 Be not over-concerned for your city. I have not yet
 Decreed an end to Theban history, a more menacing
 Time shall come, and another generation's vengeance.
 Let Juno complain for now.' At this, Bacchus regained
 His calm and his demeanour. So the ranks of roses fade,
 Scorched by a burning sun and a harmful southerly, but
 If the day clears, and Zephyr's breeze revives the air,
 Fresh buds open and gleam, all the lost beauty returns,
 And the unadorned twigs are dressed in a new glory.

BkVII:227-289 Antigone asks about the Theban allies

Meanwhile a messenger had brought sure news to Eteocles'
 Astonished ears, that the Grecian generals were marching
 In lengthy column and would soon be no great distance
 From the Aonian fields; at their approach all men trembled
 And felt apprehension for Thebes. The messenger reported
 Who they were, by their name and lineage and coat of arms.
 The king, concealing all fear, demanded to be told, yet hated
 The informant: he decided to rouse his allies with a speech,
 And so determine his own strength. Mars had awakened all
 Aonia, Euboea and the neighbouring land of Phocis, such

Was Jupiter's desire. The signals flew swiftly in sequence,
And the allies marched from afar, showing their armed might.
They filed into the plain close to the city, doomed, awaiting
War's madness. There was no enemy in sight as yet, though
Mothers mounted the battlements, an anxious throng, to show
The children their fathers' in shining armour, figures of terror
To them under their helms. High on a lonely tower, Antigone
Whom the people were not yet allowed to see, concealed her
Tender face with a black veil. In attendance was Laius' former
Armour-bearer, an old man, but revered by the royal maiden.
She spoke first: 'Is there hope that these troops can withstand
The Pelasgi, my father? We hear that all of Pelops' scions are
Descending on us. Tell me, I pray, of the allied kings and their
Armies: since I already see which standards our Menoeceus
Commands, which soldiers are Creon's, how noble Haemon
Exits the tall Homoloid Gate, under the sign of his bronze
Sphinx.' So Antigone, in her ignorance, to whom old Phorbas
Replied: 'Behold, Dryas has brought a thousand archers from
Tanagra's cold hill: his snow white shield displays a trident,
And a fierce lightning-bolt in gold. He is the grandson, his
Courage attests it, of tall Orion: I pray such ancestral omens
Stay far from here, and virgin Diana forgets the old offence.
Ocalee, Medeon, dense-wooded Nisa, and Thisbe echoing
With Dione's doves have joined his force, to serve our king.
Next is Eurymedon, a woodland terror, with the arms of his
Rural father, Faunus, and a crest of pine instead of horsehair:
And a terror I think he'll prove in mortal combat. Erythrae
Rich in flocks bears him company, and the men of Scolos
And Eteonos, dense with rugged ridges, Hyle's brief shore,
And the proud folk of Atalanta's Schoenos, who cultivate
The famous site of her running; they brandish ashen pikes
In the Macedonian manner, and shields scarcely capable
Of defending against cruel wounds. Behold, the Neptunian
Folk of Onchestus rush forward shouting; those Mycalesos
Nurtures on her pine-covered acres; and Palladian Melas;
And Hecate's watery Gargaphie; and those whose young
Ears of corn Haliartos begrudges, smothering the growing

Crops with over-abundant weeds. Their weapons are rough,
Boles of trees, their helms are hollow lion masks, and bark
Furnishes their shields. Since they lack a king, see there,
Our Amphion leads them (he is easy to recognise, girl)
His helmet showing a lyre, and also the ancestral bull.
Bravo, young man! He is ready to chance the swords,
And defend the walls dear to him with his naked chest.
You too, Heliconian throng, are come to aid our effort,
And you, Permessus and Olmuis, happy in the Muses'
Streams, have armed your wards though they hang back
From war. You can hear the troops exult in their native
Chorus, like the swans along bright Strymon when pale
Winter yields. Go happily, and never shall your praises
Die, and the Sisters shall sing your wars in endless song.'

BkVII:290-373 Laius' armour-bearer details the troops

He spoke then the girl briefly interposed a question. 'Those
Two now, what line unites them, brothers surely by their
Matching coats of arms, and tall matching helmet crests?
Would that my brothers were so agreed!' The old man smiled:
'You are not the first to be deceived by the sight, Antigone.
Many (since their ages are deceptive) have called them so.
But they are father and son, and have confounded the laws
Of aging. The nymph Dercetis in burning desire for union,
Shamelessly violated Lapithaon before his maturity, a lad
Ignorant of the marriage bed, unripe for conjugal flames.
Fair Alatreus was born not long after, and overtook his
Father still in the flower of youth, adopting his insignia,
Mingling ages. They rejoice now, wrongly, in the name
Of brothers, the father more so; since he takes pleasure
In the thought of one day being the younger. The father
Brings three hundred cavalry to the war, his son the same.
They have abandoned meagre Glisas, and its vineyards,
They say, and the crops in the fields of fertile Coronia.
Now see Hypseus there overshadowing his tall steeds,
His left side defended by the seven layered bull's-hide

Of his shield, his chest by triple-meshed steel, while he
 Never fears for his back. His spear is a marvel of ancient
 Timber, released it ever pierces armour and flesh, and his
 Hand never fails of its aim. Asopus the river-god is named
 As his father, and worthy to be so regarded when he surges
 In spate, sweeping bridges away as, roaring, he churned
 His waters against Jupiter, his son-in-law, in vengeance
 For Aegina his virgin daughter, snatched away, they say,
 From her father's stream clasped in Jupiter's embrace.
 The river-god rose with furious courage and gave battle
 With none to call on for aid, until finally triple-lightning
 And thunder dislodged him and he gave way. Even now
 The valiant flow's gasping shores delight in breathing out
 Ash and Aetnean steam into the sky, signs of the struggle.
 So shall we marvel at Hypseus on the plains of Cadmus,
 If only fortunate Aegina has succeeded in placating Jove.
 Hypseus leads the men of Itone, and Minerva's squadrons
 From Alalcomenae, that Midea and vine-rich Arne supply;
 And the farmers of Aulis and Graea, and green Plataeae;
 And those who plough Peteon's furrows, and hold our
 Stretch of Euripus' flowing course; and you sited there,
 Anthedon, where Glaucus plunged from the grassy shore
 Into the beckoning sea, cerulean then in beard and hair,
 And shocked at the fish's tail merging with his thighs.
 They seek to slice the breeze with twisted sling and shot,
 While their javelins will out-soar the Cydonian arrows.
 And you Cephissus would have given us fair Narcissus
 Too, but already the hard-hearted lad shows his pallor
 In Thespieae's fields, and his father's desolate wave
 Bathes the flower. Who shall name for you, the men
 From Phoebus and ancient Phobis; from Panope, Daulis,
 Cyparissos and the vales of Lebadia and Hyampolis
 Under the jagged cliffs; or those whose oxen plough
 Twin Parnassus, Cirrha and Anemoria, the Corycian
 Glades, and Lilaea sending out your icy fount, where
 Python would quench his gasping thirst and deflect
 Your stream from the sea. Behold the laurels twined

About every helmet, and the shields showing Tityos
 Slain by Apollo; Delos; the quiver the god emptied
 Here by Thebes, laying low Niobe's children. Fierce
 Iphitus leads them who lost, of late, Naubolus, his
 Father, the son of Hippasus, once your host most
 Gentle Laius: I still drove, still gripped the reins,
 With no thought of danger, while you already lay
 Under the horses' hooves, your neck maimed by
 Cruel blows (O, would my blood too had flowed!)'

As he spoke tears ran down, pallor seized his face,
 And a sudden sob stifled the passage of his voice;
 His ward's presence warmed the old man's loving
 Heart and, reviving, he spoke in a trembling voice:
 'Antigone, my cause of anxious care, my last joy,
 For you I have fended off the death long overdue,
 (Fated perhaps to see more crime, the same familial
 Bloodshed) lingering here to see you safely married.
 Such would realise my hopes: oh, then discharge me,
 You Fates, from wearisome life. Yet while I struggle
 Helplessly, see again now what mighty leaders pass:
 I have not named Clonis or the long-haired sons
 Of Abas, nor you rocky Carystos, nor low-lying
 Aegae nor high Caphereus. Now my sight is dim,
 And they are still, your father commands silence.'

BkVII:374-423 Eteocles' speech; Argive portents

Scarcely had the old man on the tower spoken, than
 Eteocles, from his platform, began: 'Brave kings,
 Whom I, your leader, would not hesitate to obey,
 Fighting as a common soldier to defend Thebes,
 I do not seek to rouse you, since you freely take
 Up arms, and of your own will swear to battle
 For my just cause. Nor can I praise you enough
 Or thank you as you deserve; the gods will repay,
 And your spoils, when the enemy is conquered:
 You have come here to defend a city, your ally.

No warlike colonists from alien shores, no sons
Of a foreign soil, but a native enemy attacks her,
One that commands a hostile army though his
Father and mother were Theban, as his sisters,
Are and I. Behold, villain, from wherever it is
You now plan your own race's destruction,
The peoples of Aonia are here, willingly: and I
Have not been abandoned to you, you savage!
Even you should recognise what these cohorts
Wish: they forbid me to restore you the throne.'
So he spoke, and duly gave his orders: who
Should prepare to fight, who guard the walls,
The strength of the vanguard and the centre.
So, when the light shines through the wattle
Fence, the shepherd opens the gates while
The dew is fresh, and sends out the leaders
Of the flock, the ewes following in a pack;
He himself raises the pregnant ones and those
Whose udders trail the ground, and carries
The stumbling lambs to their mothers' feet.
Meanwhile the Argives spent a night and day
Under arms, then another night and day, so
Their wrath drove them, despising rest, barely
Pausing for sleep or food. They flew towards
The enemy, ignoring portents, though Chance,
The harbinger of certain Fate, contrived many
As if in prophecy. For birds and beasts offered
Dire warning, as did the stars, rivers opposed
Their flow, the Father thundered, evil lightning
Flashed; terrifying voices rose from sanctuaries,
While the temple doors closed, spontaneously;
Now it rained blood, now stones; now ghosts
Appeared, ancestors confronting them weeping.
Then even the oracles of Apollo's Cirrha fell
Silent, an unaccustomed howling filled Eleusis,
And prophetic Sparta saw the Twin Brothers
Fight (what horror!) inside their opened shrine.

Arcadians say Lycaon's maddened shade barked
In the silence of the night, Pisa reported Oenomaus
Racing over his cruel plain, while a wandering
Acaranian slanderously reported that Achelous
Was now maimed in both his horns. Mycenae
Sought to propitiate Perseus' gloomy image,
And Juno's troubled ivory statue. Countrymen
Told of Inachus bellowing powerfully, while
A dweller by the Isthmus claimed that Theban
Palaemon gave out a lament over the twin seas.
The Argive phalanx heard all this, but eagerness
For war was deaf to the gods, and forbade fear.

BkVII:424-469 The Argives reach Thebes

Now they had reached the streams of Boeotia,
And your banks, Asopos. The squadrons did not
Dare to ford the hostile river yet, since it poured
In spate over the terrified countryside. Was it
A mountain storm, a rain-cloud, that roused it,
Or the river's own will and Jupiter interposing
The river's waters denying their armed passage?
Yet fierce Hippomedon forced his nervous mount
Into the flood, a great section of earth following,
And leaving the generals behind cried out from
Mid-stream, holding weapons and harness aloft:
'Onwards soldiers, thus do I vow to be the first
To lead you against the walls and enter Thebes.'
Ashamed to linger they all plunged into the flow.
So when a herdsman is driving cattle on through
An unknown ford, the herd stand dismayed: far
Off the distant shore seems and fearful the space,
But when the leader forges a passage, the water
Seems kinder, the depth less, the far shore closer.
Not far away they saw a ridge, with ground fit
For a safe encampment, from which they could
Even view the Theban city's Sidonian towers.

The site delighted them, offering them security,
A hill with broad summit, with an open sloping
Field below, not overlooked by other heights.
Nor was hard labour needed to fortify the spot,
Nature had favoured the place, wonderfully:
Rocks rose to form a rampart, shelves plunged to
Fair ditches, four chance mounds made parapets.
The rest of what was needed they soon supplied,
Till the sun left the hills and sleep brought rest.
Who could describe the shock to the Thebans?
Facing a war likely to destroy them, black night
Terrified the sleepless city with threatened dawn.
They scurried about the battlements, in their fear
Nothing seemed to be truly defensible or secure.
Amphion's towers were fragile, endless rumours
Circulated, terror announcing other greater foes.
They saw the Inachian tents opposite, and alien
Campfires in the hills. Some called on the gods
In prayer and complaint, or talked to their horses
And their weapons; while others in tears clasped
Their loved ones in their arms, and sorrowfully
Detailed their funeral rites against an ill morrow.
If a light sleep closed their eyes, they seemed in
Battle; dazed the delay seemed now a gain, now
Wearied them; they feared the light and prayed
For light to come. Tisiphone shook her twin
Serpents and ran through both armies, thrusting
Each brother before the other's eyes, their father
Before both, while he far off in the palace depths,
Is roused, invokes the Furies, reclaims his sight.

BkVII:470-533 Jocasta seeks to end the war

Now the dawn had swallowed the chill Moon
With the misted stars, and Ocean was swollen
With impending light, while the wide waters
Open to the new day grew calm with the rays

Of his labouring chariot, when behold, Jocasta
Exited the gate, in all the majesty of her sorrow,
Her fierce gaze veiled by her loose white hair,
Her cheeks bloodless, arms bruised by the fury
Of her grieving. She bore an olive branch twined
With black wool, like to the eldest of the Furies.
On either side, her daughters, the stronger sex
For now, supported her, as she worked aged limbs,
Moving quicker than seemed possible. Reaching
The enemy camp she pressed her naked breasts
Against the barriers, begging for admittance, with
Tremulous cries: 'Unbar the way! The impious
Mother of such enemies requests it. This womb
Has the right, the execrable right, to enter here.'
The warriors trembled with terror at the sight
And still more the sound of her. A messenger
Was despatched to Adrastus and soon returned.
At his command they let her enter, granting
Her passage between the swords. At her first
Sight of the Achaean leaders, maddened with
Grief she let loose a dreadful cry: 'Argive princes,
Will you lead me to the enemy that I bore. Under
Which helmet, say, shall I find my son?' Polynices
The Cadmean hero ran to the distracted woman
And embraced her, comforting her as he held her,
Filling her with tears of joy and, between pressing
Her and his dear sisters to his breast, murmuring:
'Mother, mother.' But the aged woman revealed
A bitter anger behind her tears: 'O, Argive prince,
Why feign tender tears and reverence towards me?
Why clasp me about the neck, why hold your hated
Mother to your armoured breast? Are you not then
The wandering exile, and the pitied guest? Whose
Compassion would you not rouse? Long columns
Of men await your orders, and many swords glitter
Beside you. Oh, wretched woman! Is this the child
I wept for day and night? If you respect yet the words

And wisdom of your people, I, who bore you, beg,
If not command, while the armies are silent as yet,
And piety shudders expectantly at war, that you
Come with me, and look a moment on your city's
Gods, its homes that you are about to burn, speak
To your brother (why do you look askance?) speak
To him and claim the throne, while I play arbiter.
Either he will grant it, or you will at least take up
The sword again with better reason. Do you fear
Some trick, that I your own mother may be here
To deceive you? Morality has not so fled our ill
House. Were it even Oedipus himself who led you,
You'd have scant need of fear. But if persist you
Must, we bring you, cruel son, an unsought gain,
Take your sisters hostage, bind their hands behind
Them, and fetter me in chains. Your father who
Offends you, he too shall be brought here somehow.
Now, you Inachians, I address my sorrow to your
Sense of right. For each of you has left little ones,
And aged parents with tears like mine behind you.
Trust a mother with her flesh and blood, and if
This young man here is dear to you, as I pray,
After so short a time, think what is fitting to me,
To a mother's breasts, you Pelasgi. Even Thracian,
Even Hyrcanian kings, would grant such a request,
Even those whose madness exceeds ours. Consent,
Or I will die clasping my son in my arms, and war
Shall outlive me.' Her words moved those proud
Warriors. You might have seen helmets nodding
In acquiescence and weapons wet with pious tears.
Like raging lions, the solid impacts of whose chests
Have beaten armed huntsmen to the ground, whose
Anger then has swiftly waned, so that they become
Content to ignore their hunger, sure of sating it on
The captive foe, so the Pelasgi were stirred, hearts
Wavering, and their fierce ardour for war lessened.

BkVII:534-563 Tydeus argues against her counsel

Before their eyes Polynices was turning to kiss now
His mother, now innocent Ismene, now Antigone
Entreating him in floods of tears; his mind in turmoil,
And power forgotten: he wished to obey his mother,
And gentle Adrastus did not demur; but here Tydeus
Mindful of the justice of their wrath, forestalled him:
'Send me, instead, who sampled Eteocles' good faith
Not long ago (and I in no way his brother!) send me
To face a king the marks of whose notable propensity
To peace and honest dealing I still bear on my breast.
Where were you then, aged mother, broker of peace
And trust, when your people detained me, that night,
With their sweet hospitality? Are those the dealings
To which you'll subject your son? Show him the field
Then, still rich in Theban blood and my own! And you,
Polynices, too mild, too little mindful of your kin, will
You follow her? When all around you unsheathe their
Swords, will the weapons be stayed because she weeps?
Do you think he'll return you to the Argive camp, you
Fool, once you are behind his walls and in his power?
This lance will sooner be changed to wood, and grow
Leaves while Inachus and Achelous flow backwards.
If gentle speech and an end to savage warfare is what
They seek, well, this camp is open too, and has as yet
Offered no reason for their mistrust. Or am I suspect?
Well then I'll absent myself, and my wounds with me.
Let him enter, with his mothers and sisters to mediate.
Suppose even that you prevail, he vacates the throne
Peacefully, will you not have to restore it once more?'
Now the army was again swayed, convinced by his
Counsel, as a southerly meets a northerly in the sky
And conquers the opposing waves. Once more war
And its madness were at hand; a wild Fury grasped
Her moment, sowing the seeds of the opening battle.

BkVII:564-627 A Fury sows the seeds of battle

Two tigresses were wandering by Dirce's stream,
Once yoked to the savage chariot of Eastern warfare,
Now gentle, released of late by victorious Bacchus
From Erythraean shores, to retirement in Aonian fields.
An aged priest and a host of the god's followers would
Adorn them, by custom (till they forgot past warfare
And the scent of Indian grasses) with ripened clusters
From varied vine-shoots, lacing their markings with
Streaks of purple, until the very hills and herds (who
Would have thought it?) loved them, and the heifers
Dared to low around them. For no pangs of hunger
Made them murderous; they were fed by hand, wine
Was poured and they bent back their fearsome heads.
They roamed the countryside in peace, and if they
Padded quietly into some town, houses and shrines
Were warm with offerings, believing that Bacchus
Himself had entered. Now the Fury touched them
Thrice with her snaky whip, forcing them to return
To their savage nature. They erupted in violence,
And that countryside no longer recognised them,
Like two lightning bolts bursting from the distant
Heavens, trailing fiery tresses through the clouds.
No differently, they with sudden charge and fearful
Roars, bounded over the plain and with mighty leap
Launched themselves at a charioteer, and it was yours
Amphiaraus (an omen for you, since it chanced to be
Your horses that were being led to the nearby pool)
Then they attacked Taenarian Idas (who followed)
And Aetolian Acamas: wild was the flight of horses
Through the meadows, till Aconteus who was brave
In the hunt (he was an Arcadian), fired by the sight
Of men being slaughtered, pursued the tigresses, as
They turned towards the trusted battlements, with
Showers of missiles and grasping spear after spear
Drove the weapons time and again through their

Flanks and back. Trailing a long stream of blood
The reached the gates half-dead, spears protruding
From their sides, giving out almost human groans
And rested their wounded chests against the walls
They had loved. You would have thought cities
And shrines were being sacked, Sidonian homes
Set alight by evil torches, such a clamour rose
From the open ramparts. The Thebans had rather
The cradle of mighty Hercules or Semele's bower
Or Harmonia's inner room had collapsed. Phegeus,
A worshipper of Bacchus, now attacked Aconteus
In turn; he, with no weapons left, still triumphing
At the creatures' deaths. The men of Tegea rushed
To his rescue, but too late; already the young warrior
Lay dead, sprawled on the sacred corpses, avenging
Bacchus' sorrow. So the council of the Argives was
Interrupted by a sudden tumult in the camp. Jocasta
No longer daring to address them, now fled, through
The manifestly hostile crowd. They, lately so gentle,
Now drove her and her daughters away, while Tydeus
Was quick to seize the opportunity: 'Go then, trust
Now in your hopes of peace and good faith! Could
Eteocles not at least delay his wickedness until we
Had dismissed his mother, and she returned?' Then
He drew his sword and called to his comrades. Fierce
The clamour now, and the anger red hot on both sides.
Battle came unplanned, officers confused with men,
Generals' orders ignored, horses and chariots mingled
With infantry; an indiscriminate host presses on them
As they run, no time to identify themselves or the foe.
So the men of Thebes and Argos clashed in sudden
Tangles. Banners and trumpets were left in the rear,
All the clarions followed in search of the front line.
So great a battle sprung from so small a cause! So
The wind builds strength within the clouds; gently
Stirs the leaves and the moving treetops; but then
It sweeps the forest and lays bare the shaded hills.

BkVII:628-687 The deaths of Pterelas and Eunaeus

Now, Pierian Sisters, we ask you not of far-off deeds,
Rather tell us of your battles, and your Aonians. For
You watched, close by the battle, while Helicon's lyres
Shuddered at the Tyrrhenian braying. Theban Pterelas
Was betrayed by his horse, in the fray, the reins slack,
His hand weary so that, out of control, it carried him
Through the enemy's scattered ranks. Tydeus' spear
Ran the horse through the shoulders and transfixing
The young man's left thigh, pinned him to his mount
As he slipped; the animal fled, his master nailed to
His back, and bore him onwards without shield or
Reins, like a Centaur yet possessed of his dual-life,
Bearing off his own dying self. The steel's work
Went on; the warriors raging in turn; Hippomedon
Felled Sybaris, Menoeceus Pylion Periphas, Itys
Fell to Parthenopaeus: Sybaris the blood-stained
Sword took, Periphas the spear, Itys a treacherous
Arrow. Mavortian Haemon's blade sweeps away
The head of Inachian Caeneus; the startled eyes
Seek the trunk across the body's fresh division,
The heart seeks its head. Abas was seizing his
Armour as he lay there, but caught by an Achaean
Shaft, dying, lost his enemy's shield and his own.
And who persuaded you, Eunaeus, to abandon
The worship of Bacchus and his sacred grove,
Which his priest must not leave even for a night,
Exchanging Bacchus' madness for that of war?
What threat were you? Nysaeon wreathes of pale
Ivy entwined the fragile substance of your shield,
And a white ribbon bound your vine-wood spear,
With shoulders hidden by your hair, downy cheeks,
An unwarlike corselet blushing with Tyrian weave,
Sleeves on your arms, embroidered sandals on your
Feet, you are swathed in linen, while a shining clasp

Of gold with tawny jasper jaws bites your Taenarian
 Cloak, as behind it clatters a bow-case and bow,
 Beside a gilded lynx-skin quiver of swift arrows.
 Possessed by the god, he challenged a thousand foes
 Calling loudly: 'Away! Apollo's Cirrhaean heifer
 With fair omen first revealed the site of these walls.
 Spare them: stones rose of themselves to build them.
 We are a sacred race: Jupiter is son-in-law to our city,
 Mars its father-in-law. Bacchus we call, without a lie,
 Our foster-son, and mighty Hercules.' As he boasted,
 Savage Capaneus with his cloud-touching spear moved
 To confront him. As a lion in his dark lair is roused
 At dawn to anger, but sees from his rugged cave a stag
 Or steer not yet equipped with horns for battle, so that
 He rushes joyously through the band of hunters and
 Hostile weapons, eyes his prey, ignores his wounds;
 So Capaneus rejoicing in the unequal match balanced
 The weight of his mighty cypress spear for its flight.
 But before he threw it, he shouted: 'Doomed man,
 Why try to scare us with your womanish howling?
 If only he whom your madness serves would come
 Himself! Go, sing your song to the Theban women!'

With that he flung his spear. It flew as though no
 Force opposed its passage, scarce striking the shield
 Before it exited Euneus' back. His arms fell, the gold
 Shook to his drawn-out breaths, the blood poured out,
 Redder than his corselet. Brave lad, you died there,
 Aonian Bacchus' second love, you died and Thracian
 Mount Ismara mourned for you with broken thyrsi,
 Tmolus and fertile Nysa too, and Ariadne's Naxos,
 And Ganges pledged by fear to Theban mysteries.

BkVII:688-722 Amphiaraus leads the fight

The Argive squadrons found Eteocles no sluggard,
 Though Polynices' made less use of his sword, loath
 To use it against his countrymen. It was Amphiaraus

Who was foremost amongst the Argives, and yet his
Horses were already suspicious of the ground. They
Turned the indignant earth to clouds of dust. Apollo,
Saddened, granted his priest hollow glory, shedding
Splendour on his final passing, lighting his helmet
And shield with starry gleams. Nor were you, Mars,
Slow to yield a gift to your brother: that no hand
Or mortal weapon had power to harm the prophet
In that battle; his death hallowed, for Dis to revere.
So he was carried into the very midst of his foes,
Certain himself of his doom, that very knowledge
Bringing him strength. His limbs seemed mightier,
The day vaster, his sight of the heavens never so
Extensive, had there been but time! Now Courage,
Death's near neighbour, distracted him. He burned
With insatiable lust for savage war, revelling in
The strength of his right hand; pride in his fiery
Spirit. Is this the man who eased human suffering,
And so often robbed the Fates of their power? How
Different now to the servant of tripod and laurel
Skilled at knowing Apollo in every bird's flight!
Like an outbreak of plague, or the grievous rays
Of a hostile star, he sacrificed a countless host
With his sword, to his own shade. With a javelin
He killed Phlegyas, and proud Phyleus, while his
Scythed chariot felled Clonis and Chremetaon
(One standing to face him, the other severed at
The knee); then Chromis with a spear-thrust;
Long-haired Gyas; Lycoreus sacred to Phoebus
(Though unknowingly, for he had already struck
With the full thrust of his ash spear when the man's
Helm fell, and the sacred ribbon came into view);
Alcathous, with a stone, he who had wife and home,
And shore-loving children by the pools of Carystos:
He had long been a searcher of waters, now the land
Deceived him, in dying he came to know the virtue
Of storm and wind and the gentler perils of the sea.

BkVII:723-770 Apollo takes the reins

Meanwhile Asopian Hypseus had viewed the massacre
Of his comrades from afar, eager to change the course
Of the battle, though already routing the Tirynthians
With his chariot in like measure. Seeing the augur, he
Thought little of present bloodshed and desired to meet
Him with sword and will. A varied wedge of enemy
Warriors barred his way; proudly he raised a spear
Cut on his father's banks, crying: 'Father, Asopos,
Rich distributor of Aonian streams, famous still
For the ashes of Jove's lightning bolts, grant power
To my right hand. Your son asks it, and this oak-spear,
Foster child of your stream. I can scorn Phoebus now,
Since you opposed the father of the gods. I shall give
The augur's weapons to your waters, and his ribbons
Mournful without him.' His father heard, and sought
To grant his wish, but Apollo denied him, deflecting
The spear instead to strike Amphiaraus' charioteer,
Herses, who fell from the chariot as the god himself
Grasped the loose reins, disguised as the Lernaean,
Haliacmon. Then no banners tried to oppose his fiery
Passage, their trembling bearers fell from mere fright
And a coward's death overtook them. An onlooker
Might have wondered whether the onrushing horses
Were more slowed by their burden or urged on. As
A cloud-covered mountainside, undermined by storms
Of a new winter, its ancient mass ruined by erosion
No longer supporting its weight, slides to the plain,
A fearful horror, sweeping off men, fields, swathes
Of mature timber, until at last, its plunge exhausted,
It wearily hollows out a valley, blocks flowing rivers;
So the chariot, weighed down by the mighty warrior
And the great god, raged here and there hot with blood.
Apollo himself sat there controlling reins and weapons,
Directing the spear-thrusts and deflecting enemy darts,

Robbing impending missiles of their power to strike.
Melaneus, on foot, was beaten to the ground; Antiphus
Unaided by his horse's height; Aetion born of Heliconis
The nymph; Polites, notorious for slaying his brother;
Lampus who tried to sleep with Manto the prophetess;
Against him Phoebus himself shot his sacred arrows.
Now the horses, smelling the blood, snorted in alarm
At dying men; the wheel-tracks reddened with gore
From severed limbs, warriors crushed in their furrows.
Some, already unconscious, the impious axle grinds,
Others, half-dead from their wounds, see it approach
Their faces, powerless to escape. Now the harness was
Wet with blood, and the pole too slippery to step on,
The wheels were clogged, and the horses' hooves
Slowed by trampled entrails. Apollo himself madly
Plucks arrows from the corpses, or spears left jutting
From the bones; the ghosts shriek, and follow after.

BkVII:771-823 Amphiaraus is swallowed by the earth

Now Apollo acknowledged his servant for the last time:
'Use the light you possess, and achieve immortal renown
While irrevocable Death still fears our combined presence.
We are outdone. You know the merciless Fates can never
Rewind the thread. Go, delight, long promised to the hosts
Of Elysium; at least you'll not have to suffer from Creon's
Command, and lie there nakedly, with burial denied you.'
Amphiaraus then replied, taking breath from the fighting:
'Long have I sensed you in the swaying chariot, seated
Beside this fatal yoke, Cirrhaean father (why such honour
To the doomed?) how can you ward off present death?
Already I hear the flow of the rushing Styx, and the black
Rivers of Dis, and the triple jaws of the baleful guardian.
Receive the laurels brought to adorn my head, which it
Were sacrilege to take down to Erebus, receive them.
Now, Phoebus, if any grace is owed to your departing
Prophet, with my final words I commit to you a hearth

Betrayed, the punishment of an evil wife, and the noble
Madness of a son,' Apollo leapt down in tears, grieving
He averted his face: then the chariot and the soon to be
Masterless horses groaned. No differently does a vessel
At night, in the blind turmoil of a north-westerly wind,
Realise she must perish, when the Twins flee the rigging,
Quit hull and sails their sister Helen's fire has doomed.
Now the earth began to shudder, collapsing; the surface
Quaked, and a thicker dust was stirred; now the plain
Bellowed with subterranean noise. Warriors, alarmed,
Thought this the stir of battle; these were battle-sounds;
And quickened their steps; but a different tremor bows
Men and weapons and wondering horses. Now leafy
Crowns nod, now battlements, and the Ismenos flows
Through broken banks; anger forgotten, they fix their
Trembling weapons in the ground, or shaken, lean on
Their wavering spears, as meeting face to face both
Sides draw back and witness there each other's pallor.
As when Bellona joins navies in battle on the waves,
Contemptuous of the ocean, and a more benign storm
Rises, then each looks to himself; threat of death in other
Guise sheathes their swords; shared fear makes for peace.
Such was the uncertain state of the battle over the plain.
Was the earth in labour trying to expel a raging blast
Of storm-wind from her womb, an imprisoned fury?
Or had some hidden flow of water gnawed crumbling
Soil and undermined it by erosion? Or was the fabric
Of the rolling sky bearing down on them somehow?
Or had Neptune's spear stirred the ocean, and hurled
A heavier weight of sea on the neighbouring coast?
Was it a commotion for the seer, or did earth threaten
The two brothers? Behold, the ground splits; a mighty
Cavern reveals its precipice; the stars, the spirits fear
In turn. A huge void swallowed him, taking the horses
As they sought to cross; neither weapons nor the reins
Fell from his hand. Thus he drove the upright chariot
Down to Tartarus, looking upwards at the sky as he fell,

Groaning to see the earth re-close, till a fainter tremor
Closed the riven plain again, sealing light from Avernus.

End of Book VII

BkVIII:1-83 Dis objects to the invasion of his realm

When the seer suddenly fell among pallid shadows,
Invading the house of the dead, exposing the secrets
Of the underworld's king, such that the armoured
Corpse caused turmoil, all were seized with horror.
There by Stygian shores they marvelled at horses,
Weapons, the alien flesh; for his limbs had neither
Been consumed by fire nor came blackened from
The sad urn, but were warm with the sweat of battle,
His shield wet with blood and dust of the split plain.
The Fury had not yet greeted and purified him with
A branch of yew, nor had Proserpina marked him
By the dark gate as one of the company of the dead.
His arrival even surprised the Fates at their spinning,
And only on seeing the augur did the startled Parcae
Snap the thread. Safe in Elysium, the shades looked
Round them at the noise, as did those in the deep pit
Further off whom another night oppresses, a host
Blind with a different darkness. Then stagnant lakes
And scorched marshes groaned aloud, and Charon,
The pale boatman of the ghost-bearing stream, cried
Aloud that Tartarus had been cleft to its depths by
A strange rupture of earth above, and that a shade
Had reached there by another road than his river.
The lord of Erebus was seated there, in his citadel
At the centre of his unhappy realm, and happened
To be interrogating the dead on their life's ill deeds,
Angered with all shades and pitying nothing human.
The Furies stood around him, the ranks of Death,
And cruel Punishment dangling her jangling chains.
The Fates bring the souls, with an identical gesture
Of the thumb condemn them: the work is onerous.
Close by the virtuous Minos and his revered brother,
Rhadamanthus, grant milder judgement, tempering
That of the bloody monarch; Cocytus, Phlegethon

Are there, swollen with tears and fire respectively,
While Styx pursues the perjuries of the gods. Dis,
When the upper world gave way, though unused
To feeling dread, feared the stars above, and spoke,
Displeased by dancing light: 'What divine disgrace
Has opened Avernus to a hostile sky? Who shatters
The dark and speaks of life to the silent host? Who
Threatens us? Which of my brothers wars against me?
I'll join combat: let the boundaries of the realms end!
Who would be best pleased? The third lot drawn cast
Me down defeated from high heaven; left me the world
Of the guilty; yet even that is not mine: entered now
And exposed to the fatal stars. Is then Olympus' proud
Ruler spying out my strength? The Giant's chains were
Already rattling, the Titans eager to reach the ethereal
Sky, and attack our unfortunate Father. Why does he,
In his cruelty, deny me my gloomy leisure, a restless
Quiet, loathing the daylight I have lost? If I pleased
I could lay all my kingdom open, and shroud the Sun
With a Stygian veil, prevent Mercury from returning
To the upper regions (what do I care for his errands to
And fro between the worlds?) detain both the Twins.
Why should I torment Ixion with that endless whirling?
Why should the water not wait for Tantalus? Is Chaos
To be profaned by the living and I endure it? Pirithous'
Reckless passion tried my patience, and Theseus sworn
To support his audacious friend, savage Hercules too,
Cerberus' iron-gated threshold falling silent, with its
Guardian removed. Tartarus was even open to Orpheus'
Thracian song; shamefully (alas!) I saw the Eumenides
Weeping wretched tears at his seductive harmony, while
The Sisters' re-spun their thread. I too, the harsh violent
Law receiving kinder interpretation, made a single stealthy
Visit, though I scarcely dared to do so, not to the high
Heavens, but to bring my bride from the Sicilian fields.
They claimed I had not the right, even then, and Jupiter
Straight away imposed unjust conditions, and her mother,

Ceres, divided the year in two. But why waste speech?
Tisiphone, go, avenge Tartarus' realm: now if ever do
Your worst, show new-created monsters, reveal some
Vast unknown abomination, something the world has
Never witnessed, to make me marvel and your sisters
Envious. Or rather let two brothers, (as a preliminary
Omen of our hatred) yes brothers, rush to attack each
Other in ecstatic war. Let a savage warrior there gnaw
His enemy's skull like a rabid beast, and let another
Deny a dead man his funeral pyre, and pollute the air
With his naked corpse. Let brutal Jove enjoy the sight.
And let this madness not invade my kingdom alone,
Find one who will make war against the gods and repel
The flame of the lightning bolt, and angry Jupiter's
Smoking shield. Let me witness the whole world more
Afraid to meddle with black Tartarus than pile Pelion
On leafy Ossa!' While he spoke the gloomy palace
Trembled at his words; his own realm and that pressing
Down from above were shaken. No more powerfully does
Jove move heaven with a frown and twist the starry poles.

BkVIII:84-126 Amphiaraus explains his presence there

'As for you' he cried, 'what death was yours, you who
Rush headlong through the void on your unlawful track?'
Amphiaraus approached the menacing God. He was now
Faint to sight, and on foot, yet still on his head the symbols
Of prophecy that none had plucked from him, the ribbons
On his brow, though faded; and he yet held a dying branch
Of olive. 'O mighty end of all that is (though to me who
Know the elemental causes, creator too) soften your threats,
I beg you, and your irate heart, deeming a man, and one who
Fears your laws, not worthy of wrath. I enter Lethe to dare
No offence like Hercules' (how dare I think it?) nor through
Unlawful passion (pay credit to these sacred emblems); no
Need for Cerberus to flee to his cave, nor Proserpine to fear
My chariot. An augur I was, and favoured at Apollo's altars;

I call Chaos to witness it (for how could Apollo be invoked
 Here?). I do not suffer this strange fate because of any crime,
 Nor did I deserve to be snatched from the nurturing daylight.
 Minos could find the truth, the urn of the Cretan judge would
 Reveal it. Betrayed for evil gold through my wife's treachery,
 I joined the Argive ranks knowingly (and so a crowd of recent
 Shades are here, some by my hand); in a sudden convulsion
 Of the earth, your darkness swallowed me (I feel the horror
 Still) out of the midst of thousands. Imagine my thoughts as I
 Passed through the hollow guts of the earth in long descent,
 Twisting in the shrouded air. Ah me! Of me, nothing is left
 To comrades or country, or is captive in Thebes. No more
 I'll see the houses of Lerna, or return to my stunned father
 Even in the form of ashes. I have no tomb; no pyre, no tears
 Alas, of loved ones sent me onwards. I bring to you all there
 Was to bury, no use to me these steeds. I will make no demur
 At drinking those waters, and forgetting my tripods forever.
 What role is there for a prescient seer while the Fates spin
 Your bidding? But let your heart relent, I pray, be gentler
 Than the gods. If my sinful wife should enter your realm
 One day, save your grim punishments for her. She, kind
 Lord is more deserving of your wrath.' Dis, embarrassed by
 His own wrath, now accepted the plea. Thus a lion reveals
 His anger and his claws when the glitter of Massylian steel
 Confronts him, but if his enemy falls he will prove content
 To pass the vanquished by, leaving them their life, intact.

BkVIII:127-161 The Argives react to his loss

Meanwhile the warriors sought the chariot noted for its
 Ribbons and triumphal laurel, and for its master lately
 Formidable in the open field, his weapons glorious; he
 Never routed or put to flight. The squadrons retreated
 Suspicious of the ground, soldiers by-passing signs
 Of the treacherous quake; the melancholy site, a greedy
 Pit avoided still, in honour of that infernal burial scene.
 Palaemon, scarcely crediting his eyes, ran to Adrastus,

Busy urging on his men elsewhere, to bring the news.
 Still trembling (since by chance he had been standing
 Near to the falling prophet, and was wretchedly pale
 From the sight of the chasm) he spoke: 'Fly, my lord,
 Turn back: let's see if the Dorian lands are still intact,
 If our native city is yet where we left it. What need for
 Weapons and bloodshed? Why do we draw swords, in
 Vain, against Thebes? This accursed soil swallows all;
 Chariots, arms and fighting men. Even this ground on
 Which we stand seems fated to subside. I myself saw
 The path to nocturnal darkness, and the earth's depths
 Shattered, and Oecles' son, alas, one dearer than all
 To the prescient stars, plunging downwards. In vain
 I stretched out my hands and called to him. Do I seem
 To speak of marvels? Lord, the horses' tracks are there,
 Where I left them, the dust smoking, and the ground
 Wet with their foam. It was no common evil. Earth
 Knows its foster-children; the Theban ranks still stand.'
 Adrastus, amazed, was slow to believe. But Mopsus
 Told the same tale, as did the terrified Actor. Now
 Bold Rumour, with fresh alarms, cried that more than
 One had been consumed. The troops fled of their own
 Will, not waiting for the proper trumpet call. But their
 Speed was sluggish, their knees giving way as they ran.
 The horses themselves (as if they knew) proved stubborn,
 Disobeying, spontaneously, every command to quicken
 Pace, or raise their heads from the ground. The Thebans
 Redoubled their attack, but shadowy Vesper was already
 Leading out the lunar steeds; a brief respite was granted
 The warriors, a sad space of rest, a night of growing fear.

BkVIII:162-217 The lament for Amphiaraus

Imagine the scene now that licence was granted to lament.
 Helmets loosened; how the tears flowed! Weary they took
 No pleasure in familiar concerns. They threw aside their
 Blood-drenched shields, and no man wiped his spear or

Praised his mount, or combed and dressed the tall crest
Of his gleaming helm. They scarcely took the time to wash
Deep gashes, or bind life-threatening wounds, so great was
The sorrow everywhere. Not even the toil of battle could
Persuade them to eat and nourish themselves for the fight.
As they wept everything reminded them of your glories,
Amphiaraus, your heart rich in truth; and among the tents
There was talk only of the gods' departure, and the deities'
Abandonment of the army: 'Alas, where now is the chariot
And its laurels, the familiar arms, the crested helm twined
With ribbons? Is this the work of Castalian pools or caves,
Or the rites beside the tripod? Is this Apollo's gratitude?
Who now will speak to us of falling stars; the meaning
Of lightning on the left; or of what divine message lurks
In sacrificial entrails; when to go, when to delay; which
Hour is opportune for savage warfare, or favours peace?
Who now will reveal futurity; to whom shall the flight
Of birds reveal our destiny? You knew the outcome of
This war as well, our fate and your own, and yet (what
Courage your holy heart possessed) you joined us still,
Luckless comrade. And when earth and the fateful hour
Summoned you, you gave yourself still to decimating
The Theban ranks, and felling those hostile standards.
Then even in the midst of death we saw you depart
Spear poised a fearful sight to the enemy. Now what
Realm holds you? Do you possess the power to split
The earth and return from Stygian deeps? Or do you
Sit happily beside the Fates, your divinities; and learn
Or teach, in harmonious speech, of things to come?
Or has the lord of Avernus pitied you, and given you
Blessed groves, and a task observing Elysian birds?
Whatever your fate you'll be the subject of eternal
Grief to Phoebus, an ever-fresh disaster; long to be
Mourned in silent Delphi. Today the shrine is closed
In Tenedos; at Chryse; in Delos, anchored by a divine
Birth; shut is the sanctuary of long-haired Branchus;
And this dawn no suppliant shall approach the temple

Doors in Claros; or Didyma's or any Lycian threshold.
Even Jupiter Ammon's horned oracle shall fall mute,
And the Dodonian oak that speaks for Molossian Jove;
And Trojan Thymbra. Rivers will seek to turn to dust
The laurels wither; and no birds shall haunt the clouds;
The heavens themselves will cease to grant sure omens
From their prophetic cries. The day will soon be here
When you too shall be worshipped in shrines dedicated
To the Fates, and your own priest shall lead the rites.'
Such was the solemn tribute they paid the prophet-king,
As though they granted gifts and sad obsequies to his
Burning pyre, and consigned his spirit to gentle earth.
Now all were down-hearted, with minds averse to war;
Just as when Tiphys, helmsman of the Argo, was lost
To sudden death, quitting the brave Minyae; the tackle
No longer obeyed, the steering-oar refused the waves,
The winds themselves seemed to blow with less force.
Now wearied by lament, their grief exhausted in speech,
Their hearts were eased, and night fell, lightening their
Cares with sleep, which gently overcomes men's tears.

BkVIII:218-270 The rejoicing in Thebes

But elsewhere, in the Theban city, men passed a different
Night: they spun out the hours with various diversions
Indoors and out; the very sentries on the walls at ease.
Twin cymbals sounded, Idaean drums and boxwood flutes
Modulated by the breath. And everywhere, holy paeans
Hymned the beloved gods, each native divinity in turn;
Everywhere were garlands and wreathed wine-jars. Here
They mock the non-prescient augur's death and compete
To praise their own Tiresias in fitting contrast; there they
Rehearse their own ancestor's deeds, and sing of ancient
Thebes from her foundation. Some told of the Sidonian
Waves, the Ocean furrowed by the mighty bull, Jove's
Horns clasped tightly by weak hands; others of Cadmus
And the weary heifer, and fields ripe with blood-stained

Conflict; yet others of the stones that rose to the music
Of a Tyrian lyre, when Amphion animated living rock.
Some praised the pregnant Semele, others Cytherean
Nuptials when Harmonia was escorted home by many
A brotherly cupid with his torch. No table lacked its
Tale, as if Bacchus with his wand, fresh from ravaging
The jewelled Hydaspes and the countries of the East,
Was displaying to the nations the banners of a dusky
Triumph, and the unknown Indies. They say Oedipus,
Who was ever hidden from sight in his sinister abode,
Came to join the crowd involved in a public banquet;
Cleansed the dark dust from his white hair, cleared
The loose unkempt locks from his countenance, then
Tolerated his fellows' kind greetings, and the solace
He had previously rebuffed; and even wiped the dried
Blood from his eyes and swallowed food. He listened,
And spoke to everyone, he who was accustomed only
To assail Dis and the Furies and perhaps Antigone his
Helper, with his melancholy complaints. The reason
For his presence was deceptive. It was not the good
Fortune of Thebes in war that pleased him, merely
War itself. He urged his son on, and approved his
Actions, but without the wish to see him victorious;
Rather with silent longing he meditated on the seeds
Of evil and the first clash of swords. So his pleasure
In the feast, and the unusual joy in his face. Thus
Phineus, after the hunger of his long punishment,
Hearing the screeching in the house had ceased,
That the Harpies had been driven away (though
Not quite believing it) sat to table, food, wine-cup
Undisturbed by the flapping of those savage wings.
Meanwhile the rest of the Argive army lay there,
Wearied by anxiety and battle. From the camp's
High rampart, Adrastus listened with faint heart
To the joyful tumult. Though he suffered the ills
Of old age, sadly power drove him to vigilance.
The clamour of bronze, the bitter-sounding flute,

The noise from Thebes, insolent drunken cries,
Wavering torchlight and temporary fires stung
Him. Thus when at sea the crew falls silent, sunk
In universal sleep, careless of drowning, trusting
Their lives to the helmsman, he stands wakeful,
Lonely at the stern; he and the tutelary divinity
That rides the vessel inscribed with their name.

BkVIII:271-341 Thiodamas prays to Earth

It was the hour before approaching dawn, the hour
When Phoebus' bright sister, knowing his steeds
Are harnessed, hears the roar of Ocean's hollow
Breakers heralding the day, and with a flick of her
Whip dispels the stars. The king had summoned
His gloomy council; groaning, they ask who will
Succeed to the tripods, to whom the abandoned
Laurel will pass; the sacred ribbon's lonely glory.
All want Thiodamas, without delay, the eminent
Son of holy Melampus. Amphiaraus himself
Used to share with him the secrets of the gods;
With him alone, omens from the flight of birds.
Far from jealous of such arts, he was delighted
For Thiodamas to be called his peer, or his near
Equal. The magnitude of the honour astounds
Thiodamas now, the unexpected glory amazes
Him; humbly he reveres the proffered laurel,
Denying he's fitted for the burden, so worthy
To be coerced. Thus, a son of the Persian king
For whom it were better if his father had lived,
Chancing to inherit the throne and its power,
Weighs the joy against his anxiety and doubt:
Are his nobles loyal, will the people oppose his
Rule, to whom shall he entrust the Euphrates'
Shore, the Caspian Gate? So he is reluctant
To accept fealty and mount his own father's
Steed, thinking his hand too immature to hold

The sceptre, his brow too slight for the crown.
Once his hair was adorned with twists of wool,
And he was fit for the gods, Thiodamas walked
In triumph through the camp to a joyful tumult,
Preparing, as his first act as priest, to appease
Earth, the mourning Danai no less approving.
So he ordered two altars constructed of living
Timber and turf, adding numerous flowers for
The goddess, her own gifts returned, heaped
Fruit and whatever the fertile year had brought.
Sprinkling the hearths with pure milk, he began:
'O eternal womb of divinities and men, you who
Yield rivers and forests, and all the seeds of life,
Prometheus' handiwork and Pyrrha's stones; you
Who first nurtured hungry men, and developed
Them; you who surround and bear the sea; to you
Belong the gentle herds of cattle, the aggression
Of wild beasts, the calm of birds: firm, enduring
Strength of a world that has no setting, round you
The swift substance of the sky, and the chariots
Of sun and moon circle, as you hang in empty air,
O centre of all things, undivided by the great gods!
So your gifts alone suffice the many nations, races
And lofty cities on your surface; bearing Atlas
Who shoulders the sky, labouring to support those
Starry abodes on high without your help. We, alone
Goddess do you refuse to bear; are we too weighty?
What crime, I pray, do we expiate, unaware? Is it
That we come here from the lands of Inachus, we,
An alien folk? Every soil is man's home and it ill
Becomes you, noble one, to distinguish, by so harsh
And arbitrary a boundary, between peoples, who
No matter where they are or hail from, are yours.
Be common ground to all, bear both sides' arms.
Grant us, I pray, to gasp away our spirits, fighting
In these battle ranks, and return them to the sky.
Do not drag living bodies into the grave so hastily,

Be not so sudden. We will come to you by the road
 All take, the path approved. Only hear our prayer,
 Make firm the wavering plain for the Pelasgi, let
 The swift Fates be not forestalled. And you, so dear
 To the gods, Amphiaraus, whom no hand, no Theban
 Sword slew, but whom great Nature clasped to her
 Naked breast, and enfolded, as though she buried
 You in Cirrha's cave as you deserved, grant me,
 I pray, knowledge of your rites, and commend me
 To heaven and the truth-speaking altars, and teach
 Me what you were about to tell the people. I will
 Carry out your prophetic work, and invoke you;
 Ambassador for your god, in Phoebus's absence.
 The place where you were lost will be more sacred
 Than Delos or Cirrha, to me; better than any shrine.'
 So saying, he interred black sheep and dusky cattle
 In the earth, heaping undulating piles of sand over
 Their living bodies, paying the seer a tithe of death.

BkVIII:342-372 The armies advance

So things were among the Argives when the war-horns
 Sounded opposite them, and the bronze clamour stirred
 Cruel swords. Tisiphone, from Teumesos' peak, gave
 Her support, shaking her locks, rousing the trumpets,
 Adding her cries and hisses. Mount Cithaeron rang
 With the alien sounds; as did the stones, once rising
 To a different music. Now Bellona pressed against
 The quivering doors and armed portals, and now
 Thebes went forth through many a gateway. Cavalry
 Disrupted infantry; chariots blocked warriors, running
 As though the Danai were driving hard at their back.
 So the jostling squadrons crowded through the Seven
 Gates. Creon, by lot, left through the Ogygian; Eteocles
 Through the Neistan; Hamon took the lofty Homoloian;
 Hypsus and tall Dryas went by the Proetian and Electran;
 Eurymedon's men shook the Hypsistan, as Menoeceus,

The great-hearted, claimed all the Dircaean's ramparts;
So, when the hidden Nile drinks Ethiopian snow, product
Of an alien climate, at his great delta, the divided flow
Carries the gifts of winter to the sea over seven plains,
The Nereids fleeing in rout to their deeps, afraid to meet
With a sea free of brine. But yonder the Inachian army
Advanced slowly and sadly, especially the ranks of Elis
And Lacadaemon, and the warriors of Pylos. They, bereft
Of their augur, Amphiaraus, follow the newly-appointed
Thiodamas, but rally to him loyally as their commander.
It was not only your own men who missed you, master
Of the tripods, but the whole phalanx felt your loss.
Less prominent the seventh crest among the squadrons.
Thus if an envious cloud, in the liquid air, veils a star
Of the Great Bear the constellation's glory is marred,
The icy pole is no longer the same with one fire veiled,
And mariners, confused, count the unfamiliar luminaries.

BkVIII:373-427 Battle is joined

But battle summons me now: now let Calliope lend anew
Fresh strength, and Apollo more mightily direct my lyre.
A dark day brought to all the fatal hour they themselves
Had demanded. Issuing from Stygian shades, Death joyed
In the open sky, flying he covered the plain, inviting men
Towards his black maw; never choosing the rank and file,
But those victims most worthy of life, marking those in
The prime of years, the brave, with a blood-stained claw.
Now the Furies snatched the threads from the Fates, now
The Sisters' spinning of those wretches' lives was ruined.
The Lord of War standing amidst the plain, his spear-blade
Still un-wet, turned his shield towards now these, now those,
Stirring weapons, effacing thoughts of wife, children, home.
Away went love of country and, last to flee, the love of life.
Anger maintained their grip on hilt and spear, panting breath
Tried to burst from their armour, helms shook with risen hair.
What wonder that men burned? The very horses were on fire

Against the foe, showering the dusty ground with white foam,
As though their bodies were at one with their masters owning
Their rider's rage: so fiercely they champ the bit, and neigh
For battle, rearing high, shifting their horsemen backward.
Now they charged, and the front ranks met in a cloud of dust.
Both sides rushed equally swiftly towards each other seeing
The space between them diminish. Now shield struck shield,
Boss beat on boss, foot met foot, and spear encountered spear;
Thus the two armies strained against each other, their breath
Smoked as one, while plumes on alien helms mingled. The face
Of war was still fair: the crests erect, riders atop their mounts,
No chariot driverless, armour in place, shields gleaming, belts
And quivers splendid, their gold as yet not marred with blood.
But a skill careless of life lets valour loose, more furiously
Than when the Bear lashes airy Rhodope with layers of snow
As the Kids are setting; or when Jove thundering from the sky
Makes all Ausonia echo; or Syrtis is shaken by the dense hail,
When dark Boreas brings Italian rains to Libya. The day was
Blackened with missiles, and clouds of steel hung in the sky,
The air too crowded for fresh darts. Some died from enemy
Spears, some from their own javelins returned on them, shafts
Clashed in the air, losing direction failing to wound, blades too,
Slings rained a shower of whistling stones, swift shot; arrows,
Poisoned, threatening dual death, imitated the lightning bolts.
Earth has no space for more missiles, and each strikes a target.
Often they fall and kill by accident, chance does valour's work.
The armies now press forward, now retreat, gaining and losing
Ground by turns. So, when Jove menacingly gives rein to gusts
And storms, heaven's hosts in conflict afflict the earth below
With opposing tempests, now a southerly gale blows strongest,
Now a northerly, till in the battle of the winds either the one
Conquers with an excess of rain or the other clears the sky.

BkVIII:428-479 The first encounter

Asopian Hypseus was first into battle, repulsing the Oebalian
Squadrons (since with the great pride of their race they were

Breaking the Euboean line, using their solid shield-bosses),
Killing Menalcas, leader of the vanguard. He was Laconian
In mind as well as race, a foster child of the Spartan river;
Nor did he disgrace his ancestors. He pulled the spear, that
Had penetrated chest and back, from flesh and bone, lest
He be shamed, and with failing grip returned it to his enemy
Streaked with blood. Dying, Taygetus, that beloved stream
Flashed before his eyes, the battles, his lash-marks as a boy,
Which his mother had praised. Now Theban Amyntas aimed
An arrow at Phaedimus, Iasus' son. Oh, swift Fate! Already
Phaedimus twitched on the ground and Amyntas' bow-string
Was surely still humming. Calydonian Agreus lopped Phegeus'
Right arm from his shoulder; still on the ground, grasping its
Sword and thrusting. Acoetes, passing before it where it lay
Struck at it in fear, severed though it was. Savage Acamas
Conquered Iphis; fierce Hypseus slew Argus; while Pheres
Felled Abas. Bleeding from various wounds they lay there,
Iphis the horseman, and Argus the foot-soldier, and Abas
The charioteer. Now Inachian twins slew twins of Theban
Blood (masked by their helmets in the cruel fog of war!)
And as they stripped the corpses of their armour, they saw
The horror; the brothers looked at each other and together
Grieved over their mistake. Ion, a worshipper of Jupiter
At Pisa, brought down Daphneus worshipper of Phoebus
At Cirrha, and threw his horses into confusion. Jupiter
From the heights praised the former, while Apollo, slow
To bring aid, showed pity for the latter, though in vain.
Fortune brought glory to mighty warriors on both sides,
Drenched in enemy blood. Theban Haemon harried and
Killed Danaï, while Tydeus in fury pursued the Theban
Forces. Minerva inspired the former, Hercules the latter.
So you might think two rivers bursting from mountain
Slopes and falling, a dual catastrophe on the plain, are
Competing, in spite, as to which should toss earth, trees
Higher, or drown bridges deeper; and whenever a single
Valley contains both and they might meet, each proudly
Goes its own way, refusing to reach the ocean together.

Onchestian Idas shook a smoking torch as he disrupted
The Argive ranks, forging a fiery path amongst them.
Tydeus, with a mighty blow of his spear, from close
Quarters, stabbed him, splitting his helmet, the huge
Warrior falling on his back, the blade in his forehead.
The brand fell and the flames licked at his temples.
Tydeus cried: 'Call Argos merciful: we grant you your
Pyre: burn Theban in your own flames!' Then as a tiger
Rejoicing in its first kill goes through the whole flock,
He killed Aon with a stone, Pholus and Chromis with
His sword, and ran the two Helicaones through with
His spear. Maera, the priestess of Aegean Venus, was
Their mother, though the goddess forbade her to bear
A child: now, though prey to you blood-stained Tydeus,
That mother was praying for them at Venus' cruel altar.

BkVIII:480-535 Tydeus overcomes Haemon

No less did random slaughter drive Herculean Haemon;
His insatiable blade carried him through the host of men,
Now humbling Calydon's proud forces, now Pylene's
Grim ranks, now the foster-children of grieving Pleuron,
Until with an already wearied arm he reached Olenian Butes,
Whom he attacked as he turned to forbid his troops to flee.
He was a boy, a boy with cheeks unshaven, locks unshorn.
Before he was aware, the Theban axe poised in mid-flight
Had sliced his helm and split his temples, severed tresses
Falling onto his shoulders: with no time for fear, he leapt
From this life by an unanticipated path. Then Haemon slew
Blond Hypanis and blond Polites, the former had dedicated
His beard to Apollo, the latter his tresses to Bacchus, yet
Both gods proved unkind. To their corpses Haemon added
Hyperenor; and Damasus, who turned to flee but received
Haemon's spear between the shoulders, through the chest
So that the spear-point sent the shield flying from his grasp.
Ismenian Haemon would still have been killing his Inachian
Foes, Amphytryon's son Hercules guiding his aim, granting

Him strength, but now Pallas sent cruel Tydeus to meet him.
Face to face the divinities came, each favouring an adversary,
And Hercules spoke gently: 'My faithful sister, what chance
Brings us together in the mist of war? Has Queen Juno forged
This evil? Sooner would I (what madness!) oppose our great
Father's lightning bolts and war against him. Haemon's race –
Well I'll disavow it, since you favour his enemy, as I would
If your Tydeus' threatened my son, Hyllus, in close conflict,
Or my father, Amphitryon, returned from the Stygian depths.
I will always remember, goddess, how your hand and aegis
Worked for me, when I wandered the earth, a slave to cruel
Mischance. Ah, you yourself would have accompanied me
To pathless Tartarus, did Acheron not deny access to the gods.
You granted me a father and the heavens – who could speak
Worthily of these things? Take Thebes if you are minded
To destroy her. I yield for my part, and ask your pardon.'
With these words he withdrew. Minerva was moved by his
Respect, and her countenance was once more as it had been,
The ardour lessened, the snakes erect at her breast subsiding.
Theban Haemon felt the goddess leave him. His darts flew
Less fiercely, and he failed to realise his previous skill.
His strength and courage waned more and more, and he felt
No shame in retreating. Tydeus attacked him as he withdrew,
And balancing a javelin only he could hurl aimed at the point
Where the helm's lower rim rests on the shield's edge, where
The vital parts of the throat showed white. Nor did his hand
Fail him. The spear would have killed Haemon, but Minerva
Forbade it, deflecting it to wound the left shoulder slightly, as
A favour to her worthy brother, Hercules. Haemon, however,
Feared to remain and face the blood-stained Tydeus in battle.
His mind was troubled, confidence and willpower dispelled.
So a wild boar whose bristling temples have been grazed by
Some Lucanian spear (the thrust not reaching into the brain,
The arm not following through) deflects its anger, swerves
To one side, seeks to stop the spear penetrating once more.

BkVIII:536-553 The deaths of Prothous and Corymbus

Behold Tydeus, Oeneus' son, indignant that Prothous, leader
Of a band of men, should happily send missiles against them
With sure aim, pierced two bodies in his fury, horse and man,
With a single pine-wood spear. Prothous fell beneath his mount,
And as the rider sought the reins that had slipped from his hand,
The wounded creature trampled his face and chest beneath his
Helm and shield, until it loosed the bridle with its dying breath,
And lay with its neck across its master. So, an elm and a vine
Fall on Mount Gaurus, a dual loss to the farmer, though the elm
Is the sadder, longing for the forest lost to both, not so much
Lamenting its own boughs in the fall than the companion grapes
It loathed to crush. Corymbus of Helicon, who was formerly
A friend of the Muses, had taken arms against the Danai. Aware
Of what the Stygian Fates had spun, one Muse, Urania, had long
Foretold his death from the stars' alignments. Yet he longed for
War and warriors, so as to sing them perhaps. Long to be praised
In song himself, he lay there, as the Sisters silently wept his loss.

BkVIII:554-606 The wounding of Atys

Young Atys had been betrothed from a tender age to Agenorian
Ismene. Cirrha was his home yet he was no stranger to Thebes
And its army. He had not shunned her parents despite knowing
Their sad history, rather her chaste desolation and the courtesy
Due to innocent affliction commended the girl to her lover. He
Was no ordinary man, and the girl's heart was at one with his,
Each would joy in the other if fate allowed. War prevented
Their marriage, fuelling the young man's anger against the foe.
He was among the first to charge, harrying the hosts of Lerna,
Now on foot with flickering sword, now mounted with the reins
In his hand, as though the spectators' eyes were following him.
His mother had clad his slender shoulders and smooth chest
In triple purple. Then, lest he be dressed less well than his
Beloved, she gilded his arrows, belt, sleeves, and horse's
Trappings, and added scrolls of gold to his helm. Trusting,

Alas, to such finery he challenged the Argives to battle. First
He attacked the weaker squadrons with his spear; returning
To his friends in the lines with the spoils on killing his man.
So a young Caspian lion in Hyrcanian shade, lacking as yet
A terrifying yellow mane, or history of bloodshed, will raid
At leisure a flock not far from the fold, while the shepherd is
Absent, and sate its hunger on a tender lamb. He even showed
No fear of Tydeus, not knowing him by his armour and, taking
Measure only of his size, dared to provoke him again and again,
With slender darts, while Tydeus gnashed his teeth and pursued
Other foes. At last the Aetolian turned his eyes to the source of
These feeble blows, and with a dreadful laugh cried: 'Perverse
Man, I perceive you desire great fame from death.' With this
He carelessly launched a lightweight javelin, not considering
This audacious adversary worth his sword or spear. And yet
The missile still pierced the hidden arteries of the groin, as
Though he had hurled it with all his might. Tydeus swept by,
Atys' death assured, disdaining to take the spoils, crying:
'We'll not hang such trophies on your walls, Mars, or yours
Warlike Minerva. May shame prevent me carrying such arms
Myself. If Deipyle had left her bower and followed me to war,
I'd scarcely have given *her* them to play with.' So he spoke,
And his thoughts drew him on to greater battle prizes. Thus,
A lion after countless killings, ignores frail calves and soft
Heifers, mad to plunge in blood on the neck of a mighty bull,
Leader of the herd. But Menoeceus heard Atys' fall and his
Dying cry and, turning his horses, leapt from his speeding
Chariot. The men of Tegea were advancing on Atys' corpse
Where he lay; while the Thebans feigned indifference. He
Called out: 'For shame, you Theban youth, belying your
Ancestors born of the earth! Where are you heading for,
You degenerates? Shall Atys, a friend, defending our blood,
Lie here? As such a friend still, the unhappy champion
Of a wife not yet his: do we ignore such pledges?' Filled
Then with a proper sense of shame, the troops stood taller,
While each man's thoughts returned to his own beloved.

BkVIII:607-654 The dying Atys is carried to Thebes

Meanwhile in a private inner chamber, the sisters, Antigone
And Ismene, of a different character than their two brothers,
Innocent daughters of unhappy Oedipus, talked of their ills
Together, not those of the present but those far back destined
By fate. One laments their mother's second marriage, the other
Their father's ruined eyes; one the reigning brother the other
The exiled; and both the war. Hence a weighty meditation on
What sad prayer to make: fear points both ways. Whom to
Wish vanquished in the struggle, whom victorious? The exile
Silently tips the scale. So Pandion's birds, the nightingales,
Returning to their familiar site, the home they left when winter
Drove them out, perch on the nest, tell to the place their tale
Of ancient woe; their sad, broken utterance is mistaken for
Speech, and yes, their murmurs seem not dissimilar to words.
Now after tears and long silence, Ismene began again: 'What
Mortal illusion is this? What breach of trust? Can it be our
Cares keep vigil while we rest, and clear images of our
Thoughts return in sleep? Behold, I who should knowingly
Have no concern with marriage chambers even if profound
Peace reigned, I saw, in the night (alas, for shame!), nuptials
Sister: how did mindless slumber bring me my betrothed, he
Barely known to me by sight? Not of my own will, dreaming,
I gazed at him, sister, while my loyalty was somehow pledged.
At once everything seemed in turmoil, a sudden fire interposed,
And his mother was pursuing me with frantic cries, demanding
That Atys return to her. Is this a vague prophecy of disaster?
Not that I fear, while our home is safe, and the Dorian army
Are here, and we can forge a peace between our brothers.'
They were still speaking, when in an instant a confused din
Filled the palace, and Atys, rescued by a mighty effort, was
Carried in yet living, barely a drop of blood in his veins.
His hand covered the wound, his head overhung the rim
Of his shield, his hair streamed backwards from his brow.
Jocasta met him first and called in a trembling voice for his
Beloved Ismene; since her son-in-law's fading voice asked

Only for her, her name alone fell from his chill lips. Women
Wept, Ismene raised her hands to her face, cruelly restrained
By shame; yet she must go, Jocasta granting this last request
Of the dying youth; showing her; beckoning the girl forward.
On the point of death, four times, he bravely raised his head
And failing eyes at her name. He gazed only at her, the light
Of day neglected, not sated by the sight of her beloved face.
Then, since his mother was absent, and his father had found
Peace in death, his betrothed had the pitiful task of closing his
Eyes. Then finally the witnesses distant she confessed her
Sorrowful affection, and bathed his wound with her tears.

BkVIII:655-766 The death of Tydeus

While this was happening in Thebes, Bellona, bristling with
Fresh snakes and torch, was renewing the conflict. Warriors
Longed to fight, as if they had only just raised their hands
In conflict and every sword were still newly burnished.
Tydeus was foremost. Though Parthenopaeus bent a sure
Bow, though Hippomedon on his furious steed trampled
The faces of the dying, though Capaneus' pine spear flew
Seen by the Theban squadrons from afar, the day belonged
To Tydeus, it is him they feared and fled, as he shouted:
'Where are you off to? Behold, now you can avenge your
Dead comrades and repay me for that sad night. I am he
Insatiable in slaughter who took those fifty lives. Come,
Bring me as great a host again! Where are their fathers?
Where are the loving brothers of the fallen? Why so
Forgetful of the loss? How ashamed I am to have left
For Inachian Mycenae so content! Is this what remains
Of Thebes? Are these the king's men? And where, I
Wonder is that noble leader?' As he spoke he saw
Eteocles himself urging on the left wing of his army,
Conspicuous by the gleam of his proud helm. Tydeus
Attacked him ardently, as eagerly as a fiery eagle above
A snowy swan, shrouding the frightened creature with
Its vast shadow. He was the first to call out: 'O King,

Most just ruler of the Theban people, shall you fight
In armour and show your sword at last, or would you
Not rather wait for night and the darkness you love?’
The other spoke no reply, but sent a spear, in answer,
Whistling towards his enemy. The watchful hero swept
It aside at the end of its trajectory and hurled a missile
Furiously himself with a greater force than ever. The
Lance sped savagely on its way bent on ending the war.
(Theban and Argive gods, on either side, favoured its
Passage), but a cruel Fury deflected it, leaving Eteocles
To his errant brother. The spear flew awry and struck
Phlegyas the armour-bearer. A vast melee ensued for
Tydeus attacked more furiously still with naked sword,
While the Theban host defended their retreating leader.
So in the depths of night a strong band of cowherds
Will drive a wolf away from the steer he has caught:
He leaps at them obstinately, and disdains to attack
Those who bar his path and charge at him, but only
The creature he has first assaulted. So Tydeus ignored
The ranks of lesser men s ranged against him, passing
Them by. Yet he pierced Thoas’ face, Deilochus’ chest,
Clonius’ flank and grim Hippotades’ groin. Sometimes
He severed limbs from their trunks, and sent helmet
And head whirling to the sky. Eventually his path was
Choked with the corpses and the armour of the fallen.
The Theban army expended its strength on him alone,
And at him alone all missiles were aimed. Some clung
To his frame, others fell uselessly; some Minerva tore
Free, many stood proud from his shield, its boss dense
With spears, a quivering forest of steel, while the boar
Hide on his back and shoulders was ripped and torn.
Now the tall crest on his helm was shorn, and the image
Of Mars crowning its grim peak plunged to the ground,
An unhappy omen for the wearer: now the bare bronze
Was welded to his temples, while stones resound against
It, and thud onto his shield. His helmet filled with blood,
And a dark flow of gore, mixed with sweat, bathed his

Wounded chest. He looked back at his comrades urging
Him on, and at loyal Minerva who, far off, hid her eyes
Behind her shield, on her way to move her divine father
With her tears. Behold, an ash spear sliced the air, bearer
Of wrath and a mighty doom; though its wielder was not
Apparent, it was Melanippus, the son of Astacus. He
Did not claim the deed, and hoped his hand in it might
Stay hidden, but his troops' delight revealed him where
He trembled. Now Tydeus, letting his round shield fall,
Bowed to one side, while Theban shouts and Pelasgian
Groans mingled, as the latter stretched their arms out
To protect him, defending him despite himself. But he
Had seen that detestable son of Astacus, far off through
The intervening ranks; with all his remaining strength
He willed himself to strike, hurling a spear that Hoplaus
Had handed him. A stream of blood was forced from him
By the effort. Then his sorrowing comrades dragged him
Away, although he still longed to fight (what ardour!),
Begging for a spear and, on the verge of death, refusing
To expire. They set him down at the edge of the field,
Propped up by a shield on either side on which he leant,
Promising him, amidst their tears, that he would return
To Mars' cruel conflict. But he himself felt the light
Receding, and the final cold gripping his heart; leaning
On the ground he cried: 'A favour, sons of Inachus, not
That my bones be taken back to Argos or my Aetolian
Home: I care nothing for funeral rites. I despise limbs
Whose strength has failed, a body that refuses to obey
My will. But oh, that head of yours Melanippus, oh if
Someone would bring me that! For I doubt not you are
Writhing on the ground, my skill remaining to the last.
Go, Hippomedon, I beg you, if you possess one drop
Of Atreus' blood; go, young Arcadian glorying in your
First war, and you, Capaneus, now the greatest warrior
Of this Argive host! All were moved at this, Capaneus
The first to leave. He found Astacus's son, lifted him
From the dust, and carried him over his left shoulder,

(Still breathing, staining his captor's back with blood
From his open wound) like Hercules returning from
The Arcadian cave with the captive boar, to Argive
Acclaim. Tydeus raised himself and turned his head
To see him, wild with joy and wrath, contemplating
The gasping mouth, the savage eyes, and recognised
Himself in the other. He commanded the enemy's
Head be severed and brought to him. Holding it in his
Left hand, he glared at it fiercely, proud to feel it
Cool, and see those grim eyeballs, still trembling,
Grow still. But though the unhappy man was content,
Tisiphone the avenger demanded more. As Pallas
Appeared, having swayed her father's emotions,
Bearing immortal glory to the wretched Tydeus,
Gazing at him, she saw his jaws drenched with fluid
From the shattered skull, polluted with the matter
From a human brain (his comrades could not wrest
It away). The bitter Gorgon on her shield stood tall,
With flailing snaky locks; the asps rearing before
The goddess' face and masking it. Turning away
From the prostrate Tydeus, she fled, not returning
To the stars until the mystic torch and the waters
Of the guiltless river, Ilissos, had purged her eyes.

End of Book VIII

BkIX:1-85 Polynices' lament for Tydeus

Reports of Tydeus' bloodthirsty frenzy exasperated
The Thebans. The Inachians themselves showed little
Grief for the fallen warrior, blaming him, complaining
That he'd exceeded the bounds of hatred. It is even said
That Mars, most turbulent of gods, though then raging
At the forefront of the work of carnage, was offended
By mankind, refusing to look and guiding his frightened
Horse another way. So the Cadmean warriors drove on
To avenge the dead Melanippus, outraged by such savage
Behaviour, roused as though their fathers' bones had been
Disturbed in their graves, their ashes fed to cruel monsters.
The king himself inflamed them further: 'Will any man
Now show mercy or humanity to the Argives? They tear
Our bodies apart with their sharp teeth (what madness,
Have they exhausted their weapons?) You would think we
Battled Hyrcanian tigers, or fought with fierce Libyan lions.
Now Tydeus lies there (oh, the lovely solace of death!)
Gripping his enemy's skull in his mouth, dying, relishing
The unholy gore; where we use ungentle steel and flames,
They show naked hatred: their savagery needs no weapons.
Let them reveal their madness to you, supreme Father, let
Them enjoy their glorious renown. No wonder they were
Left to complain of the gaping void as earth herself fled.
How should the very ground itself support such as they?'
So saying, he led his shouting men in a major onslaught.
All were raging to possess the armour of the hated Tydeus,
And snatch his corpse. In the same way flocks of carrion
Birds veil the stars if a far-off breeze brings a noxious smell
Of bodies left without burial: they fly to them with eager cries,
The high atmosphere is alive with flapping wings, and lesser
Birds flee the sky. Now Rumour's swift murmur spread wide
Through the Theban plain among the ranks (speedier than ever
Since she brought sad news) until she glided into Polynices'
Apprehensive ear, bringing him a tale of most grievous loss.

The young man's tears, about to flow, were frozen: he was
Slow to believe the story; Tydeus' valour that he knew so
Well both urged him to accept the death and to deny it.
But when the disaster was attested on good authority,
A mist clouded his eyes and mind. His blood congealed;
His arms and legs were heavy; his helmet wet with tears;
And his shield, loose in his grasp, snagged on his greaves.
He walked sorrowfully, with feeble steps, trailing his spear
As though he was weighed down with a thousand troubles,
And ached in every limb; his comrades stood apart, marking
His passage with groans. At last he threw aside the weapons
Burdening him, and flung himself unarmed on the lifeless
Body of his noble friend, shedding tears, crying: 'Is this,
O Son of Oeneus, my foremost champion in battle, is this
Reward, I have rendered you, deserved; that you should lie
Here, a corpse, on Cadmus' hated field, while I survive?
Now I am exiled indeed, banished forever, since my better
Brother, alas, has been taken from me! I no longer desire
The rule of lot and the perjured crown of guilty kingship.
What do I care for a prize bought so dearly; for a sceptre
That you cannot hand me? Go men, leave me alone with
My warrior brother: no need for further deeds of arms and
Wasted lives. Go, I beg you. What more is there to ask?
Tydeus is lost! What death can atone for this? O Adrastus,
O for Argos and the brave brawl on that night of our first
Meeting, the blows that Tydeus and I traded, brief anger,
And the pledge of eternal friendship! Why did you not
Kill me with your sword, great Tydeus (as you might) on
Our father-in-law's threshold. In my cause, instead, you
Willingly went to Thebes, to my impious brother's palace,
From which no other would have returned, as though you
Had gone to win the sceptre and its honours on your own
Behalf. Already Fame no longer speaks of Telamon and
Peleus, of Pirithous and Theseus. How nobly you lie there!
What wound should I first examine? What of this blood is
Yours, what your enemy's? What host, what countless
Throng laid you low? Or do I err and Mars himself struck

You with the full force of his spear, in jealousy?’ So he
Spoke, and grieving drenched with tears the warrior’s face
Still slippery with gore, repositioning the right hand. ‘Must
You lay down your life in hatred of my enemies, and I yet
Live on? He drew his sword wildly from the scabbard,
And readied it for slaughter. His friends held him back
And Adrastus rebuked him, calming his bursting heart
With counsel on fate and the vagaries of war. Gradually
He drew him away from the beloved dead, from whom
His grief and noble wish to die arose, and silently, as he
Spoke, returned the weapon to its sheath. Polynices was
Led like an ox that has lost the partner of its labours,
Listlessly deserting in mid-field the furrow he started,
And dragging at one side of the unbalanced yoke, with
Bowed neck, as the weeping ploughman lifts the other.

BkIX:86-143 The struggle over Tydeus’ body

Behold, at Eteocles’ urging, a select band of Theban
Warriors advances under his banner, men whom Pallas
Would not scorn in war, or Mars at the end of his spear;
Opposing them stood tall Hippomedon, shield tight
Against his chest, and lance extending far before him,
Like a rock fronting the waves, unmoved under the sky,
On which the breakers shatter; it stands impervious to
Any threat, the sea itself retreating from its harsh face,
While wretched sailors wrecked in its lee know it well.
Eteocles spoke first (choosing a strong spear as he did so)
‘Are you not ashamed, before the gods and the sky above,
To defend this dead man, this corpse that dishonours our
Warfare? A fine thing, a memorable deed to bury this wild
Beast, lest he go to Argos, to be wept for with funeral rite,
Vomiting evil gore on his soft bier. Dismiss your anxiety
For what no carrion bird, impious monster, nor fire itself
Did we allow it, would consume!’ Without more words,
He hurled the long javelin. Blunted by the tough bronze
It still penetrated and stuck fast in the shield’s next layer.

Pheres and fierce Lycus followed him, but Pheres' spear
Fell back uselessly to earth, while Lycus' missile grazed
The helmet with the tall and terrifying crest. The plumes,
Severed by the spear point, scattered widely, the metal
Bare of its glory. Hippomedon held fast, refusing, though
Provoked, to charge the opposing ranks but, dancing over
The same piece of ground, thrust and drew back on every
Side, never letting his arm reach out too far. As he moved
He defended the body closely, weaving around and over it.
So a cow protects her first-born defenceless calf, fending
Away a prowling wolf, wheeling, and sweeping her horns
About, uncertainly, in a circle; showing no fear for herself,
She rages forgetting her gender, a female imitating mighty
Bulls. At length a pause in the hail of darts allowed return
Fire. Now Alcon of Sicyon had come to Hippomedon's aid,
And swift Idas' Pisaeon squadron arrived to form a wedge.
Heartened by their presence, Hippomedon launched a huge
Lernaeon shaft, himself, against the enemy. It flew like an
Arrow unchecked, ran Polites through, and unrelentingly
Pierced the shield of Mopsus nearby. Then Hippomedon
Speared Cydon of Phocis, Phalantus of Tanagra, and Eryx
As he turned to grasp a weapon, through his head with
Its mop of hair. Eryx wondered as he died at the presence
Of the blade in his hollow throat that had not arrived via
His mouth; his teeth, expelled by the point, and his last cry,
Bubbling blood, emerged together. Leonteus, concealed
Behind lines of weapons, dared to stretch out his arm
Stealthily, and clutch Tydeus' prostrate body by the hair:
Hippomedon saw him and, despite the threat on all sides,
Severed that presumptuous hand, with his cruel sword,
Chiding him as he did so: 'Tydeus himself it is, Tydeus
Who robs you of your hand: fear even the lifeless corpses
Of warriors in future and beware, you wretch, of touching
The mighty dead!' Three times the Theban phalanx pulled
The grim carcass away, three times the Danai retrieved it.
So in the straits of Messina where the Sicilian Sea fights
Itself, a ship will hover despite the anxious helmsman's

Efforts, driven back along her course with flapping sails.

BkIX:144-195 Tisiphone intervenes

Theban hands would not have had the strength to drive Hippomedon from his ground, nor would catapults have Moved him from his station with their missiles; blows Ruinous to high towers, would have tested his shield And rebounded, but impious Tisiphone remembered The orders of the king of darkness, and considered Tydeus' crime. Craftily, she entered the field of war. The armies felt her in their midst, and a sudden sweat Poured from men and horses, though with bland face She appeared as Inachian Halys, the unholy brand of Fire and her whip absent, her snaky hair silent at her Command. Armed, she approached fierce Hippomedon, Her eyes and voice calm, yet he feared her face as she Spoke, and wondered at his fear. Weeping she said: 'Famed warrior, you protect your dead friend in vain, The corpse of an unburied Greek (are our fears then For the dead, is it our business now to build tombs?); Adrastus himself has been captured by a Theban band, And is being dragged away, asking aid, with voice and Hand, above all from you; I see him slipping in blood, His white hair, alas, stripped of its shattered diadem! He is not far; among that knot of men in the dust-cloud.' The hero stood there anxiously weighing his fears, for Some time. The harsh maiden roused him: 'Why do You hesitate? Shall we go on? Or does this corpse hold You, and are the living of less account?' He entrusted The sad work of his own struggle to his comrades, and Went, deserting his close friend but looking back, ready If they chanced to call him. Then following the weaving Footsteps of the fierce goddess he ran this way and that, Seemingly without clear direction, till the impious Fury Throwing away her shield, a host of asps bursting from Her helmet, disappeared darkly from his view. The mist

Dispersed and the unhappy hero saw the sons of Inachus
At rest, and the chariot of Adrastus who was quite safe.
Now the Thebans had the corpse. Loud cries attested to
Their joy, shouts of victory reached Hippomedon's ear,
And filled his heart with private grief. Tydeus' body was
Dragged over enemy soil (by the harsh power of fate!)
That Tydeus for whom of late a great space had been left
On either side as he chased the men of Thebes, whether
On foot, unchecked, or behind the reins. His weapons
Gone, his hands at peace, his savagery no more, the foe
Were pleased to abuse his features rigid in death, his
Fearsome countenance, with impunity. This is the wish
Brave and cowardly alike pursue, ennobling their hands,
Keeping the bloodstained weapons to show their wives
And children. So when a lion, that has long ravished
The Moorish countryside, causing all the flocks to be
Penned, and their owners to keep watch, has been
Battled to the ground by bands of weary shepherds,
The land rejoices, the farmers with loud clamour,
Approach the place where he now glares, impaled,
From a roof-beam or hung to adorn an ancient grove:
Tug at his mane; open his huge jaws; tell their losses.

BkIX:196-265 The battle at the Ismenos

Though fierce Hippomedon saw that the battle for
The corpse was lost, the body taken, and his toil in
Vain, he pursued relentlessly all the same, barely able
To distinguish friend from foe, wielding his sword
Blindly, as long as nothing slowed his onrush. But
Now the ground was slippery with fresh carnage;
And corpses, weapons, shattered chariots slowed
His progress, as did the wound in his left thigh
Made by Eteocles' spear; in his passion he had
Either feigned to be unharmed, or ignored the hurt.
At last he saw the sorrowing Hopleus, the faithful
Comrade of great Tydeus, and his armour-bearer

In the battle though he had failed to save him. Now
He held the reins of Tydeus' charger that ignorant
Of its master's fate, neck bowed, was chafing only
At its idleness, at Tydeus venturing more attacks
On foot. The hero mounting grasped him tightly,
He being irked by a strange weight on his proud back
(Having known one master only since he was tamed)
And spoke to him: 'Unhappy steed, oh why refuse
Your destiny? No more for you the sweet burden
Of your proud master. No more shall you stride
The Aetolian plain, or rejoice to trail your mane in
The pools of Achelous. As to what remains, come
Avenge the beloved dead, at least: then follow him
And do not as a captive hurt Tydeus' exiled shade,
By carrying some haughty rider.' The horse heard
And seemed to take fire, sweeping the hero away
Tempestuously, less chary at a like touch on the rein.
Thus a Centaur, part-human, leaps from airy Ossa
To the valley, the tall forests trembling at his face,
The plain below at his hooves. Alarmed the Thebans
Crowded together in breathless flight, while the hero
Pressed on them with his mount, slicing through their
Necks with his steel blade, leaving their fallen bodies
In his wake. So, they reached the River Ismenos, its
Channel fuller than usual (ill omen) and moving as
A swollen mass. Here was a brief respite for the fearful
Men weary from their flight over the plain. The stream,
Host now to the conflict, amazed by warriors, glittered
With clear reflections of their armour. Into the waves
They leapt, and the bank collapsed with a mighty splash,
Shrouding the opposite shore in dust. Hippomedon also,
With no time to loose the reins, spurred a mightier leap,
And rushed on his panicked enemies through the hostile
Flow, leaving only his javelins behind, fixed in the green
Turf and entrusted to a poplar tree. The Thebans terrified
Let the rushing current take their weapons. Some doffed
Their helmets and the cowards hid as long as they could,

Holding their breath underwater. Many now tried to swim
The river, waists hampered by their belts, chests dragged
Under by their soaked corselets. Such is the panic that
Seizes silvery fish beneath the swollen flood when they
See a dolphin searching the slopes of the hidden deep;
The whole shoal flees to the bottom, they crowd afraid
Among green seaweed, nor re-appear until the dolphin
Leaps again from the surface preferring to race the ships
He has spied. So Hippomedon drove fleeing Thebans;
He used his arms and the reins together in mid-stream,
Pushing the horse on with blows from his feet; the light
Hooves accustomed to the plain flailed through the water
Seeking the sand below. Theban Chromis felled Ion,
Antiphos in turn slew Chromis, Hypseus slew Antiphon,
Astyages also and Linus, he leaving the river on the verge
Of escaping, had not the Sisters forbidden it, his first
Threads of fate ordaining that he would not die on land.
Hippomedon pressed on the ranks of Thebes, while
Asopian Hypseus harried the Danai, the river terrified
Of both. Both dyed the water with blood, and neither
Was destined to survive the river. Now mangled heads
And limbs rolled downstream, severed arms floated
With their trunk, the flood carrying spears and light
Shields, and unstrung bows, plumes hampering helms
From following the flow. The surface of the water was
Thickly strewn with loose weapons, its depths with
Bodies; of warriors struggling in their death-throes,
And of the living men thrust backwards by the river.

BkIX:266-314 Slaughter in the flood

Young Argipus had grasped the branch of a riverside
Elm as the flood swept him away: fierce Menoeceus
Now severed his well-formed arms with his sword.
Argipus fell, his efforts lost, gazing in shock at his
Shorn limbs clutching the tall tree above. Hypseus'
Spear dealt Sages a mighty wound; he sank beneath

The wave, blood rising from the depths in place of
 A corpse. Agenor leapt from the bank to help his
 Brother and clutched him, but the wretched man
 Dragged him down in a close embrace: Agenor
 Might have broken free, but refused to escape
 Without his brother. Capetus' right hand rose in
 Menace, but a spiralling eddy sucked him into its
 Whirling core: his face vanished, his hair; and last
 The hand clutching his sword disappeared beneath
 The fast-flowing waters. Death came to the wretched
 In a thousand guises: a Mycalesian spear from behind
 Buried its blade in Agyrtes' back. He looked around,
 But its source was unseen: thrust forward by the force
 Of the current, the spear had run loose and tasted blood.
 Tydeus' Aetolian steed, stabbed in its mighty shoulder,
 Reared high with its dying strength, and hanging there
 Beat the air. But Hippomedon was not dislodged by
 Shock. Pitying the horse, groaning, he drew the blade
 From the wound, and of his own will loosed the reins.
 Then on foot he re-entered the fray, more sure of his
 Aim and footing, and slew one warrior after another
 With his sword: sluggish Nomius and brave Mimas;
 Thisbaean Lichas, Anthedonian Lycetus, Thespiades,
 One of twins, his brother Panemus begging for a like
 Fate, but Hippomedon replied: 'Live on, and go alone
 To the walls of cursed Thebes, your parent's sole son.
 Thank the gods that Bellona with blood-stained hand
 Placed the fight in this rapid stream. The waters drive
 You cowards onwards on your native flood, nor shall
 Unburied Tydeus' naked shade cry mournfully above
 Your pyre. Earth bears him and will dissolve him into
 His elements; you shall make raw food for the fishes.'
 Thus he bore down on his foes salting their wounds
 With words. Now he raged with his sword, now he
 Snatched floating javelins and returned them. He
 Slew Theron, a follower of virgin Diana, and Gyas
 A farmer, and wave-wandering Erginus, unshorn

Herses, and Cretheus scornful of the sea's power
Who had often run before the Euboean tempests
In a tiny boat, daring Caphereus' stormy headland.
Such are the ironies of fate. His chest pierced by steel,
He rolled in the waves, shipwrecked, alas, on strange
Waters! You too, Pharsalus, a Dorian spear felled you
As you crossed the river in your tall chariot to rejoin
Your comrades, felled you and lost you your horses,
Drowned, being yoked, by the force of the cruel flood.

BkIX:315-403 The death of Crenaeus

Come now, learned Sisters: of your indulgence, tell me
Whose efforts vanquished great Hippomedon in those
Swollen waters, and how Ismenos himself was roused
To battle. Your task is to work backwards and dispel
Years of fame. Young Crenaeus, the son of Faunus
And the Nymph Ismenis, delighted in making war
In his mother's stream, he whose first sight was that
Faithful flow, whose cradle was its green shores and
Natal waters. Deeming the Furies powerless there, he
Happily traversed his grandfather's embracing flood,
From bank to bank. The waves lifted his feet whether
He went downstream or across, and when he breasted
Its current, the river, no obstruction, retreated for him.
The waves cover the thighs of Glaucus, its guest from
Anthedon, no more fawningly; Triton rises no higher
From a summer sea, nor does Palaemon, hurrying back
To his mother's fond embrace, spurring on his tardy
Dolphin. Crenaeus' armour adorned his shoulders; his
Fine shield gleamed with gold, on which was engraved
The origins of the Theban people. There Europa, the girl
From Sidon, riding the white back of the seductive bull,
And trusting now in the waves, no longer held the horns
In her tender hand, and the water played around her feet;
You'd have thought the bull on that shield was alive as it
Cut the billows. And the river lent credence to the scene,

The Ismenos of like colour to the sea. Now Crenaeus
Boldly sought Hippomedon with his weapons and with
Provocative words as well: 'This is not Lerna, ripe with
Poison; no Herculean serpents drink these waters. This
Is a sacred river that you enter, sacred waters (as you
Will find, you wretch!) that nurture gods.' Hippomedon
Made no answer but attacked, though the river massed
Itself against him, slowing his hand that still executed
The stroke though hindered and penetrated life's inner
Sanctums. The water shuddered at the outrage; the woods
On both shores wept; and the hollowed banks gave out
A deeper murmur. In death, a last cry issued from Crenaeus'
Mouth: 'Mother!' he called and the river closed over her
Unfortunate son's last words. She, stricken by the blow,
Surrounded by a host of her grey-green sisters leapt from
The glassy depths in frenzy, her hair dishevelled, and tore
At her face and her green dress, wildly, beating her breast
Again and again. As she burst from the water she called
His name, over and over, in a quivering voice. Crenaeus
Was nowhere to be seen, but his shield lay floating on
The surface, speaking death only too clearly to his mother.
He himself floated far off, where the Ismenos is changed
In its final outflow by its first contact with the sea. She
Lamented as Halycone does for her wave-borne home
And salt-drenched nest when cruel Auster and hostile
Thetis have robbed her of her children, her shivering
Nestlings. Bereaved she sank again and, hidden deep
Beneath the river, searched in vain for the body of her
Poor son, through many a current still making moan.
Where the liquid path shone before her as she went,
Often the harsh river opposed her, and her eyes dimmed
With a film of blood. Nonetheless, she swam swiftly,
Thrusting away javelins and swords, searching helmets
And bending back prone bodies with her hands. Not even
The ocean deterred her and she was entering the brine,
When a compassionate band of Nereids pushed his corpse,
Now possessed by the tall breakers, to his mother's breast.

Embracing him as if he were alive she drew him back, laid
Him on the shore's bed and dried his wet face with her soft
Hair. Adding to her cries of pain, she spoke: 'Is this the gift
Your parents those demigods, and Ismenos, your immortal
Grandfather, grant you? Is this the way you shall reign over
Our flood? This sounding, alien shore is gentler, alas, to the
Wretched; and gentler the waves that mingling with the river
Returned your body, seemingly awaiting your sad mother?
Are these my looks; are these the eyes of your wild father?
Are these the tresses of your wave-revolving grandfather?
You were once known as the glory of woods and water;
While you lived I was treated as a greater goddess, queen
Beyond comparison of the Nymphs. Alas where is that host
Now that haunted your mother's threshold, nymphs of the
Dell begging to be your slaves? Why do I bear you in my
Sad embrace, Crenaeus, I who had better have remained in
The cruel deep, not for myself but as my tomb? Ah, harsh
Father have you no shame, no pity for such ruin? What deep
Ineluctable marsh in the innermost recesses of your flow,
Hides you, where neither news of your grandson's dreadful
Fate or my lament can reach you? See how Hippomedon
Rages, more powerfully than before, swaggering through
Your flood, the banks and waves trembling before him,
The water drenched with our blood at every blow. You
Prove sluggish, prepared to serve the fierce Pelasgi. Come,
At least to the funeral and the ashes of your own. Not his
Pyre alone, but mine too you shall kindle here.' With this
She beat her breast, staining its innocence with her blood.
Her cerulean sisters echoed her lament. So in a haven of
The Isthmus, they say, Leucothea, not yet a Nereid, wailed
As her chill gasping son Melicertes spewed, on her, cruel brine.

BkIX:404-445 The river-god learns of his grandson's fate

Father Ismenos was ensconced in his secret cave, from which
The wind and clouds drink, which nourishes the rainbow, so that
Richer harvests grace Tyrian fields. When, above the sound of

His own waters, he heard the distant lament, his daughter's
Fresh grief, he lifted his neck coated with moss, his hair heavy
With ice, and the full-grown pine fell from his loosened grasp,
His urn, relinquished, rolled away. Along his banks the groves
And tributaries wondered as his head emerged, mired with
Ancient silt. So he rose from his swollen flood lifting his face,
Foam-covered, and his chest down which the streams from his
Cerulean beard coursed in sounding flow. One of the Nymphs
Greeted her father and told him of his grandson's fate, their
Family tragedy, and taking his hand named the blood-stained
Culprit. Ismenos, towering above the deep river, struck at his
Face, shook his horns entwined with green sedge, and spoke
In sombre tones: 'Ruler of the gods, is this my reward, I who
Have often played host and confidant to your doings (nor am
I afraid to recount them): those Satyrs' horns on a deceptive
Brow; that night when the moon was forbidden to unyoke
Her chariot; that pyre as a dowry, lightning elicited by a trick;
And I nurturing the mightiest of your sons, or do they too
Hold my services of little worth: Hercules crawling by my
Shore; Bacchus' flames extinguished for you by my waters.
See the carnage, what corpses I carry in my flood dense
With weapons and covered in a second layer. A series of
Battles occupies my whole channel, all my waves breathe
Horror, and new shades stray below, and above where my
Banks are linked by darkness. I, a river that echoed with
Sacred cries, I who am used to bathing Bacchus' horns
And tender thyrsi with my pure spring, I am choked with
Corpses, and seek a narrowed passage to the sea. Strymon's
Impious pools brim with less gore, foaming Hebrus is dyed
No redder when Mars makes war. Do my nurturing waters
Not admonish you and your company, Bacchus, forgetful
Now of your childhood? Or are you happier subduing
Hydaspes' eastern streams? As for you, Warrior, who now
Exult in the blood and spoils of an innocent youth, unless
I prove mortal and your blood divine you will not return
From me to mighty Inachus, to cruel Mycenae, in victory.'

BkIX:446-491 The Ismenos rises against Hippomedon

So he spoke, and gnashed his teeth, signalling to the raging Waters. Chill Cithaeron sent help from his mountain slopes, Commanding ancient snows, that feed the wintry winds, to Melt. His brother Asopus added voiceless power to his flow, Contributing streams from earth's open veins. Ismenos too Explored the bowels of the hollow earth, rousing the pools, The settled lakes, and sluggish marshes; and, lifting his eager Face to the stars, absorbed the mists and dried the moist air. Now taller than either bank he overran his shores; Hippomedon Mid-river who had stood chest and shoulders above the waters Wondered at their sudden increase as he sank lower. On every Side swift gusts and swollen waves rose like the sea when rain Drains the Pleiades, or dark Orion falls upon frightened sailors; So the Teumesian river tossed the hero, lifted by the flat of his Buckler, on the sea-like flood; leaping and foaming, to overtop The hero's shield with a dark tide, then falling back, in breaking Waves, to return with greater volume. Not content with his liquid Mass, Ismenos snatched at trees that bound the crumbling banks, Whirling away the ancient boughs, and rocks loosed from his bed. The unequal fight of man and water now hung poised, and the god Grew indignant; for the hero, undaunted by his threats, refused to Flee. He met and entered the oncoming waves, cleaving the flow With his outstretched shield. Standing firm, as the ground eroded Beneath him, legs tensed against the slippery rocks, Hippomedon Strained with his knees, clung to his foothold in the treacherous Mud undermining him, rebuking the river: 'Ismenos, why this Sudden anger? From what deeps do you draw this strength, slave Of an unwarlike god, free from all blood except in female orgies, When Bacchus' pipes call and maddened women stain the triennial Festival.' He spoke and the god came against him, his visage wet With a cloud and rain of floating sand. The god raged wordlessly, Rising with an oak tree's trunk and striking his adversary's chest With all the power of wrath and deity. At last Hippomedon was Forced to retreat, the shield shaken from his hand, and slowly Turning his back he reversed his steps. The waters bore down

On him; the river following in triumph as he stumbled onwards.
The Thebans assailed him too with a shower of stones and steel,
And drove him back from the banks on either side. What was he
To do, attacked by weapon and wave? There was neither chance
Of fleeing the flood, nor an opportunity there for glorious death.

BkIX:492-539 The death of Hippomedon

A standing ash tree jutted from the edge of the grassy bank, whether
Rooted in earth or water was uncertain, but friendlier to the water,
Occupying the flood with its outspread shade. He clutched at it for
Help (how else could he reach the shore?) hooking it with his right
Arm, but it could not withstand his weight. Overcome by a burden
Greater than its strength, it gave way. Detached from its roots in
The waves and those on dry land, the trunk brought itself and the bank
Down on the anxious hero, who was now at the end of his endurance,
And in its sudden collapse enclosed him with its mass. Here the waters
Combined in an inescapable pit filled with mud, and with whirlpools
Ebbing and flowing. Now the winding eddies encircled the general's
Shoulders, then his neck. Confessing at last to his defeat, foreseeing
Death, he cried: 'Great Mars (for shame!) will you drown me here,
To vanish beneath sluggish pools and marsh, like a shepherd caught
In the angry waters of a sudden torrent? Was I so unworthy of death
By the blade?' Juno, roused at last by his prayer, accosted Jupiter:
How far will you go, great father of the gods, how far, in oppressing
The Inachians? Already Minerva has been brought to loathe Tydeus;
Delphi has fallen silent, her prophet lost. Now shall my Hippomedon,
Who is of Mycenaean race, whose home is Argos, whose deity am I,
Above all (is this how loyalty is repaid?), be prey for the cruel beasts
Of the ocean? Did you not once grant tombs and funeral pyres to all
Those vanquished? Where are the Cecropian flames after battle; how
Shall Theseus grant him the final fire?' Jupiter listened to his consort's
Just plea, and cast his gaze readily towards Cadmus' walls; seeing his
Nod, the river subsided. The hero's bloodless shoulders and pierced
Chest appear to view, as a rockbound shore the sailors sought appears
When a storm raised by the high wind has abated, the waves retreating
From the jagged cliffs. What use in being so near the shore? Theban

Warriors attacked him on all sides with a shower of weapons. Nothing
Protected his limbs, he was defenceless before death. His wounds open.
The blood no longer held beneath the river is released to the naked air,
And looses the contents of his veins. He stumbled, chilled by the water,
His footing unsure, and fell forward as an oak tree falls on Getic Haemus
Topped by the fury of the north wind or by its own decay, its foliage
Once touching the sky, now leaving behind a vast void of air; forest
And mountain trembling as it totters, as to what direction it will drop,
Which trees it will overwhelm in sequence. None was so daring as to
Touch his sword or helm. Approaching closely with locked shields,
The Thebans viewing the mighty dead could scarce believe their eyes.

BkIX:540-569 The death of Hypseus

At last Boeotian Hypseus approached and pulled the sword from
Hippomedon's cold grasp, loosening the helm from the grim face.
Then he went through the Theban ranks displaying the helmet high
On the point of his gleaming blade, and boasting loudly: 'Here's
Fierce Hippomedon, here's the formidable avenger of the dreadful
Tydeus and the conqueror of the blood-stained river.' Great-hearted
Capaneus saw him from afar and repressed his sorrow. Aiming a huge
Spear he cried: 'Help me, right arm, my only all-powerful and present
Deity in battle, I call on you; I, the scorner of gods, adore you alone.'
So saying he himself fulfilled the prayer. The pinewood shaft passed
Quivering through the shield, the corselet's bronze mail, and finally
Found the heart deep in Hypseus' mighty chest. He fell with a crash
Like a tall tower that collapses, shaken to the depths by countless
Blows, opening a breach to the city's conquerors. Capaneus stood
Over him: 'I shall not deny the glory of your death; behold, I
It was gave you your wound; die happy, and boast more loudly
Than other shades!' Then he seized sword and helmet, snatched
Hypseus' shield, and holding them above Hippomedon's corpse,
Cried: 'Receive your spoils and the enemy's together, mighty
General. A funeral will be granted your ashes, and due honours
To your shade; meanwhile, until we can render you your pyre,
Capaneus, your avenger, clothes your limbs with this sepulchre.'
So Mars, impartially, devised similar wounds for the Argives

And the Thebans alike, in the harsh exchanges of the battlefield.
Here fierce Hippomedon, there Hypseus, no less active in the war,
Are lamented, and the mourning on both sides gives them solace.

BkIX:570-636 Atalanta prays to Diana

Meanwhile stern Atalanta the Tegean mother of Parthenopaeus,
The young archer, was troubled by gloomy visions in her sleep.
Before dawn, she took her way to the chill waters of Ladon, her
Hair flying in the wind, feet bare as usual, to purge her sinister
Thoughts in the living waters. In the night, oppressed by a weight
Of cares, she'd repeatedly seen spoils she had dedicated falling
From the walls of shrines; and she herself, exiled from the forests,
Banished from the Dryads, wandering among unknown sepulchres;
Or her son's triumphs, after the war, his companions and weapons,
His usual steed, but never he himself; or again her quiver sliding
From her shoulder, and her familiar images and portraits consumed
By fire. But that night above all seemed to portend danger, rousing
Maternal feelings in the poor woman's breast. There was an oak
Rich in growth, known throughout Arcadia's forests, which she
Had chosen from the many others in those groves, and consecrated
To Diana Trivia, rendering it numinous by her worship. There she
Would lay aside her bow, wearily, and there she hung the boars'
Curving tusks, and the hides stripped from lions, and antlers large
As great branches. The boughs were scarcely visible it was so hung
With rustic trophies all around, the glint of steel dispelling the shade.
She saw herself, in dream, tired from the hunt, returning proudly from
The mountains carrying the freshly severed head of an Erymanthian
Boar, only to find the tree on the ground dying, ravaged by wounds,
Its leaves scattered, its limbs dripping blood. The Nymphs replied
To her questions by telling of blood-stained Maenads and Bacchus'
Hostile cruelties. As she groaned and beat her breast with phantom
Blows, her eyes had opened to the darkness; leaping from her sad
Couch she examined her face for the signs of those imagined tears.
Now, when she'd bathed her hair three times in the river to expiate
The horror, and added words of solace for a mother's anxious cares,
She ran through the morning dew to armed Diana's shrine, joyful

To see the oak and the familiar ranks of trees. Then standing there
 At the goddess' threshold, she prayed, though in vain: 'Powerful
 Virgin of the forests, whose ungentle banner and fierce campaigns
 I follow, scornful of my gender and in no Greek fashion (nor have
 The harsh folk of Colchis or the troops of Amazons worshipped
 You with greater ardour) the dances and the wanton sport of night
 Were never mine, and though violated by a hateful union I never
 Bore smooth thyrsi or soft wool but even afterwards, even then,
 Remained a huntress in the gloomy wilds, a virgin at heart, nor
 Did I choose to hide my fault in some secret cave, but showed
 My son and, confessing, placed him trembling at your feet; nor
 Was he unworthy of my blood; for the boy soon crept towards
 My bow and, with tears and lisping speech, asked for weapons;
 Grant, I pray, that I may see him victorious in battle (for what
 Do these nights of fear, these dreams threaten?), he who went
 To the war brave and hopeful, trusting too much, alas! in you;
 Or if I ask too much, grant me at least to see him, once more.
 Let him labour here and bear your arms. Suppress the dire
 Signs of evil. Why in our groves, Diana of the Woods, must
 Hostile Maenads and Theban deity reign? Ah me! Why deep
 Within (may I prove an augur ignorant of futurity!) why so
 Deeply do I interpret a mighty omen from this oak-tree? Alas,
 If sleep sends me true presage of what comes; by your mother's
 Labour, gentle Diana, and your brother's glory; pierce this
 Luckless womb with your arrows. Let him know of the death
 Of his unhappy mother first.' She spoke and saw that even
 Snowy Diana's altar stone was moist with the flow of tears.

BkIX:637-682 Diana journeys to Thebes

The fierce goddess left her lying there at the sacred threshold,
 And sweeping the cold altar with her tresses. Diana leapt
 Leafy Maenalus, among the stars, where the sky's far paths
 Shine for deities alone, and steered her high course towards
 The walls of Thebes, viewing all the earth from the heights.
 Now midway on her journey, passing over the leafy ridges
 Of Parnassus, she saw her brother, in a gleaming cloud, his

Face sadder than was his habit, returning from the Theban
Battlefield, mourning Amphiaraus' death in Earth's abyss.
That region of the sky reddened as the two shining ones met,
At their sacred conjunction a light burning on both sides,
Their bows joining and quivers responding. He spoke first:
'Sister, I know: you are seeking the troops of Labdacus
And the Arcadian who braves a fight beyond his strength.
His faithful mother has asked it of you: and would that
The Fates might let you grant her prayer! Consider my
Feelings! Helpless to intervene I saw my votary's face,
(For shame!) turned towards me, sacred fronds, and weapons,
Sink into Tartarus' void. Nor, cruel that I proved, unworthy
Of worship, could I halt his chariot and close death's chasm.
You see my sacred cave in mourning, sister, and my oracle
Mute: such the sole gifts with which I reward my loyal seer.
Do not try to bring useless help, a vain and mournful effort.
The lad's end is nigh, his fate unalterable: your prophetic
Brother shall not deceive you: there is no room for doubt.'
With consternation, the virgin goddess replied: 'Yet at least
I can seek honour for him at the last, and the solace in
Death that is mine to grant; nor shall he who impiously
Stains his wicked hands with the innocent youth's blood
Escape punishment. My arrows too have the right to fly
In anger.' So saying she flew on, grudgingly allowing her
Brother's kiss, and in her wrath sought the fields of Thebes.
And now that leaders on both sides had been slain the fight
Grew fiercer, vengeance rousing mutual anger. Here roared
The squadrons of Hypseus, troops robbed of their general,
There the orphaned cohorts of dead Hippomedon. They
Offered their straining bodies to the steel with the same
Mad eagerness to drain alien blood as to shed their own.
Neither side had advanced a step, but ranked in a wedge,
Were laying down their lives before the savage foe, face
Forwards, when Latona's swift daughter glided down
From the air and stood on the summit of Dirce's peak.
The hills knew her and the woods trembled to recognise
The goddess, there where bare-breasted she had once

Slain Niobe's brood, with cruel arrows and tireless bow.

BkIX:683-775 She intervenes to aid Parthenopaeus

Parthenopaeus meanwhile, now the slaughter had begun
Swept through the ranks on a stallion new to the bridle,
To whom war and suffering were previously unknown.
The horse was adorned with a striped tiger-skin, those
Gilded claws tapping at the shoulders. The mane was
Knotted, flat, curtailed; and a crescent necklet of white
Boar-tusk, a mark of the forest, bounced at his chest.
Parthenopaeus himself wore a cloak twice-steeped in
Oebalian dye, and a tunic bright with gold (the only
Garment his mother had woven) gathered round his
Loins with a slender band. He had allowed his shield
To rest on the horse's left shoulder, while his sword,
Too large for him, weighed heavily. A golden brooch
With a polished clasp to the belt that hung around his
Strong flanks, was his delight. And he loved the rattle
Of scabbard and quiver, and of the chain-mail falling
From his helm to touch his back; and to give sometimes
A joyous toss of his horse-hair crest and let the shining
Gems on his helmet glitter: though when his brow was
Hot with battle, he freed it and rode with his head bare.
Then his hair gleamed handsomely; handsome his eyes
With tremulous rays, and cheeks whose lack of downy
Beard annoyed him with their tardiness. Nor was he
Made vain by praise of his beauty, marring his looks
With many threatening frowns, though his angry brow
Maintained a seemly aspect. The Theban warriors,
Remembering their own sons, freely gave way to him,
Withdrawing their levelled spears, but he charged on,
Flinging cruel javelins at those who showed him pity.
Even the Sidonian Nymphs on the Teumesian ridges
Praised him as he fought, winning their favour in
Sweat and dust; and they sighed with silent longing.
As Diana watched the spectacle, tender sorrow melted

Her heart's depths and she marred her cheeks with tears:
'What refuge from approaching death can your faithful
Goddess find for you now? Did you then rush to battle
Of your own free will, fierce boy, who one must pity?
Alas, it was raw courage and impatience drove you,
And the love of glory exhorting valorous death! Long
Have Maenalus' forests seemed too small for you, lad,
As age prompted; and those paths to wild beasts' dens
Barely safe there without your mother whose woodland
Javelins and bow your precociousness lacked the strength
To manage. Now she offers lament and many a reproach
At my altars, wearying doors and thresholds deaf to her.
You happily rejoice at the fine noise of the trumpets and
The shouts of battle, only your poor mother foreseeing
Your death.' Then lest she be there as a helpless witness
To the dying youth's final glory, she entered the ranks
Of warriors, hidden by a dark mist. First she stole light
Arrows from the brave lad's quiver and filled it with
Celestial darts, none of which falls without taking blood.
Then she sprinkled ambrosial liquid over his limbs, over
His horse too, so that his body might be unmarred by any
Wound before the end, accompanying this with sacred
Chants and words of secret knowledge that she herself
Teaches Colchian women by night in the hidden caves,
Or in pointing out wild herbs to them as they search.
Now with outstretched bow he spurs here and there, fierily,
Beyond reason, forgetting his native land, his mother, self;
Spending the heavenly arrows too swiftly. So a young lion
Scorns the gory food his Gaetulian mother brings, feeling
The mane rising on his neck and savagely examining his
Adult claws and, exercising his freedom at last, delights
In the open plains, all thought gone of returning to the den.
Reckless lad, whom do you not slay with your Parrhasian
Bow? Your first arrow caught Coroebus of Tanagra: fired
Through the narrow slit between the helmet's lower edge
And the rim of his shield, it suffused his throat with blood,
And his face flushed with the fire of divine poison. Eurytion

Met a crueller fate; the point of the wicked triple barb buried
Itself in his left eyeball. Pulling out the arrow with the ruined
Orb at its end, he ran at the archer, but what can the powerful
Shafts of the gods not accomplish? The wound brought twin
Darkness to the other eye, completing its effect: foolishly he
Still pursued his tormentor in thought, until he stumbled over
The prostrate Idas and fell: there he lay, poor wretch, gasping
Among the corpses of that savage battle, praying to friends
And foe alike for death. Parthenopaeus added to his victims
Abas; Argus notable for his tresses; and his brother Cydon
Loved incestuously by his unfortunate sister. Cydon was
Pierced through his groin, and Argus through his temples
With a slanting shaft, the steel tip visible on the one side,
The sleek fletches on the other, blood flowed from both.
The sharp arrows show no mercy. Lamus was not saved
By his beauty, Lygdus by his sacred ribbon, or Aeolos
By his youth. Lamus was pierced through the face, Lygdus
Groaned at a wound in the thigh, Aeolos at a deep gash
In his pale forehead. One, steep Euboea nurtured; one,
White Thisbe sent; one, green Erythrae will not see again.
Parthenopaeus aim never misses, no missile flies without
Divine help, his right hand knows no rest and every arrow
Joins its whirring flight to its precursor. Who would believe
A single hand and bow was at work? Now he aimed ahead,
Now at random launched an attack on one side or the other,
And then fled his assailants, looking back only to aim his bow.

BkIX:776-840 Mars banishes her from the field

And now the Thebans were united in wonder and indignation.
Amphion, of Jupiter's illustrious race, spoke first, unaware
As yet of the carnage Parthenopaeus had dealt: 'How long
Can you stave off fate, lad, who richly deserve to bereave
Your parents? Your pride and audacity run high only because
No one deigns to fight you, thinking it not worth battling you
For so little, considering you beneath their anger. Go back to
Arcadia, and wrestle with your peers, while Mars works off

His rage here on the real battlefield. Yet, if the melancholy
 Glory of the grave tempts you we'll grant you a man's death!'

Meanwhile Atalanta's fierce son, deeply stung, was seething
 And before the other had finished replied: 'I am too old to take
 Up arms against Thebes if this is her army! Who is so young
 He would refuse to fight the likes of these? You see Arcadian
 Not Theban stock before you, the seed of a warlike race. No
 Maenad woman, slave to Echionian Bacchus, gave birth to me
 In the silence of night. I never set an unsightly turban on my
 Brow or brandished a shameful spear. I learned from the cradle
 How to crawl over frozen rivers, and enter the dreadful lairs
 Of wild beasts; and (what more to say?) my mother always
 Has bow and blade about her, while your ancestors ever beat
 Hollow drums.' This was too much for Amphion, who hurled
 A mighty javelin at the speaker's mouth. But Parthenopaeus'
 Horse, scared by the fatal brightness of the steel, swerved aside,
 And, as he turned, the eager missile passed his master by. All
 The more fiercely Amphion, with drawn sword, was seeking
 The youth when Latona's daughter appeared suddenly amidst
 The battle, and stood before his eyes, full face, opposing him.
 Maenalian Dorceus was often at his side. Atalanta, in her anxiety,
 Had entrusted him, bound as he was to the youth by innocent
 Affection, with protecting the lad's tender years in battle. Diana,
 Masked with his features, spoke: 'Enough, Parthenopaeus, you
 Have harried the Ogygian troops enough! Now think of your
 Unhappy mother and whoever of the gods may wish you well.'
 Unafraid he replied; 'Most loyal Dorceus, all I ask is that you
 Allow me to stretch him on the ground, this man who carries
 Weapons to compete with my weapons and boasts my armour
 And sounding reins. The reins I'll grasp, the adornments I'll
 Hang from Diana's high lintel, the captured quiver will be my
 Gift for my mother.' Diana heard and smiled amid her tears.
 Meanwhile Venus in a distant region of the sky watched all
 This, embracing Mars. Speaking to her dear lord of Thebes,
 Of Cadmus, and of the descendants of their dear Harmonia,
 She opportunely stirred the resentment hid in his silent heart.
 'Mars do you not see how Diana, flaunting her virginity, shows

Herself among the warrior host, how boldly she governs armies
And martial banners? See how many of our race she supplies
As gifts for slaughter? Are valour and wrath now deemed hers;
And you left to hunt the deer? The Lord of War, roused to battle
By her just complaint, now plunged into the fray, anger alone his
Companion as he plummeted through the outstretched void, his
Other Frenzies labouring in the fight. Swiftly now he came to
Leto's sorrowing daughter, and reprimanded her with a harsh
Warning: 'These are not the battles that the Father of the Gods
Allotted you. Unless you leave the field of arms now, shameless
One, you will find that even Pallas is unequal to this right hand.'
What could she do? Mars' spear on the one hand, the youth's
Fatal thread full-spun on the other; and, far off, Jove's frowning
Countenance. She went, defeated at last by her shame alone.

BkIX:841-876 Dryas wounds Parthenopaeus

But Mars surveyed the Theban army and roused dread Dryas,
Whose blood derived from turbulent Orion, and whose hatred
Of Diana's companions was hereditary (hence his rage). He
Fell on the routed Arcadians with his sword, leaving their
Leader defenceless. In serried ranks he slew the people
Of Cyllene; the men of shadowy Tegea, Aegyptian generals
And the Telphusian troops, trusting to kill Parthenopaeus,
Whose hand grew weary, his strength expended. For, tired
Now, Parthenopaeus switched squadrons, here and there.
A thousand presages of doom oppressed him, black mists
Of death went before him. Now, alas, he found few friends
Remained, saw the true Dorceus, felt his strength ebbing
Gradually, felt his quiver exhausted; his shoulder lighter.
Now it was harder and harder to raise his weapons, even
To himself he seemed but a boy – then fierce Dryas flamed
Before him, his shield glittering dreadfully. A sudden pang
Gripped the Arcadian's face and body. As a white swan,
Seeing above him an eagle, bearer of the lightning bolt,
And folding his quivering wings to his breast, longs for
Strymon's bank to open; so the youth, beholding the form

Of savage Dryas, was seized not with anger but a shudder
Presaging death. Pallid he still raised his shield, and praying
In vain to Diana and the gods, readied his unresponsive bow.
About to shoot, straining both arms, the bow-tips meeting
The arrow's point; the cord, his chest; suddenly Dryas' spear,
Hurled towards him with great force, cut the tense vibrating
String in two; his shot was lost, the arrow fell idly from his
Useless hand, and the bow-tips sprang erect. Then, in turmoil,
The luckless youth dropped reins and shield, unable to endure
The wound the spear had made piercing the fabric covering
His right shoulder and the flesh beneath. A second spear
Hamstrung his horse, halting its flight. Then Dryas himself
Fell (wonderfully strange!) unconscious of any wound;
The weapon's sender and the cause to be revealed some day.

BkIX:877-905 The death of Parthenopaeus

The youth meanwhile was carried by his friends to a quiet
Corner of the field. Dying, he wept (alas, the innocence of
Youth) for his fallen horse! His helm unloosed, his features
Sank, and there in his flickering eyes failing beauty faded.
Time and again they gripped his hair, and lifted his head
That would not stay erect, while (a tragedy to make Thebes
Herself weep) blood ran purple from his snow-white breast.
At length he cried, his sobbing breath interrupting speech:
'I die, Dorceus; go comfort my poor mother. If anxiety
Delivers true presentiments, she has already seen for sure
This sad hour of evil in sleep or through some omen. But
With honourable cunning you must keep her fears at bay,
And long deceive her. Do not approach her suddenly or
When she has weapons in her hands. And when at last
You must confess; tell her that my last words were these:
'Mother, I have deserved this; punish me, though it may be
Against your will. A mere lad I took up arms, and refused
To stay even when you restrained me; nor even in battle
Did I spare you fear. Live; and be angered rather by my
Brave pride. Now lay fear aside; you will gaze in vain

From Lycaeus' hill, hoping for a distant sound through
The mist, and for the dust raised by my troops. Cold I lie
On the naked earth, and you not here to touch my face
Or receive my parting breath. But this lock of hair,
My bereaved mother (and with his hand he offered it
To the blade) this lock of hair, you used to comb to
My disdain, you'll possess in place of my whole body.
To it grant burial, and duly ensure that no novice blunts
My arrows, my beloved hounds are led no more among
The glades. As for this bow, unlucky in its first campaign,
Burn it, or hang it high as a reproach to ungrateful Diana.'

End of Book IX

BkX:1-48 The Thebans set a watch on the Argive camp

Dewy Night, impelled by Jove's command, shrouded Phoebus
At the western gate. Jove took no pity on the Argive camp
Nor on the Theban forces, but it saddened him for so many
Foreign warriors, and the innocent, to be thinned by the sword.
The plain was disfigured by the broad patches of shed blood.
There were corpses robbed of their pyres, abandoned limbs;
There were weapons; and the horses that men had ridden so
Proudly: left behind. Now the inglorious armies with battered
Standards disengaged their failing lines. The gates that proved
Too narrow for warriors going to battle seemed wide to those
Returning. The sorrow was equal on both sides; but that four
Danaan squadrons had lost their great captains gave solace
To Thebes, each one straying, like vessels on a swelling sea,
The steersmen gone, guided by the winds, chance and the gods.
The Tyrians were so bold as to stand their sentries down, but
They kept watch solely for the enemy's flight, if they, content
To turn for home perhaps, should seek Mycenae. Passwords
Were given, and turns of duty set: the leaders of this nocturnal
Warfare being Lycus at his request, and Meges chosen by lot.
Then, their dispositions agreed, they hoisted their weapons,
Food, and means for fire. The king exhorted them as they left:
'Conquerors of the Danai (tomorrow's dawn is near, darkness
That intervened to save the cowards will not last forever), be
Of good cheer; bear hearts that are worthy of heaven's favour.
Lerna's glory and her greatest warriors are slain. Tydeus has
Gone to vengeful Tartarus. Death stands amazed at Amphiaraus'
Living shade; Ismenos boasts the spoils of stricken Hippomedon;
We are ashamed to count only Parthenopaeus among our trophies.
Victory is in our hands; the noble leaders of their army, the crests
Displayed by their seven squadrons are fallen. Are we to go in fear
Of aged Adrastus; my brother, with his inexperience; or Capaneus'
Crazed threats? Go now; light watch-fires around the besieged.
There is nothing to fear from the foe. You'll guard wealth, spoils,
Already yours.' So he encouraged the fierce scions of Labdacus.

They were ready to repeat their exhausting toil, and turned round,
Without respite; dust, sweat and blood mingled on their bodies;
Scarce taking time for those who would meet and talk with them,
Even shaking off their loved ones' embraces. Then they divided
The watch of the enemy camp between them, front, rear, curved
Flanks, and surrounded the ramparts with hostile fires. So a great
Pack of ravening wolves with gaping jaws will gather at nightfall,
From the surrounding countryside, starved with hunger, despite
Its attendant daring; now they press against the very sheepfolds,
Their bellies tormented by hope denied, by the quavering bleats,
And odour of rich flesh from the pens. All that is left them is to
Blunt their claws and rasp their chests against the solid posts,
And grind their fangs, un-moistened by blood, at the threshold.

BkX:49-83 Juno resolves to help the Argives

But prostrate in the courts of the far-off Argive temple, before
Their native altars, a host of suppliant Pelopean women begged
Sceptred Juno for aid and for their loved ones' return, pressing
Their faces against the painted doors and cold stones, showing
Their little children how to lie prone in worship. Their prayers
Had already laid day to rest; now night followed with its cares
The heaped altar fires keeping vigil. They had also brought her
A gift in a basket, a robe whose wondrous fabric no barren or
Divorced woman had handled, adornment for the chaste goddess,
And not to be scorned. The rich purple blazed with gold, with
Various embroidered work. There was the goddess herself
Innocent of marriage, betrothed to great Jupiter, timorously
About to change from sister to wife. With downcast eyes she
Tasted the kisses of young Jove, she as yet un-betrayed,
Not knowing a husband's deceptions. With this garment
The Argive women veiled the holy ivory and made their
Prayers with tears and pleas: 'Queen of the starry heavens,
Gaze on the sacrilegious towers of Theban Semele, shatter
The paramour's tomb, and hurl another lightning bolt (as you
Can) against rebellious Thebes.' What was Juno to do? She
Knew that the Fates and Jove were against her Argives, yet

She would not have the prayers or the gift offered in vain.
Then Fortune helped, and gave her a vital opportunity for aid.
From on high, she saw the city gates closed, and the Greek
Ramparts surrounded by a vigilant guard. She trembled with
The sting of anger; her hair, stirring, shook the sacred diadem.
She'd burned no more fiercely when, deserted among the stars,
She had waxed indignant against Alcmene who bore the burden
Of Hercules; against Jove's double infidelity. Now she resolved
To plunge the Thebans in the sweetness of an untimely sleep.
And offer them to Death. She ordered her servant Iris to don
Her usual bands of colour, and assigned her the whole task.
That gleaming goddess obeyed her orders, and left the sky,
Descending to earth along the suspended bridge of her bow.

BkX:84-155 The House of Sleep

Beyond the misty regions of western night, and all their dusky
Peoples, lies a still grove no star can penetrate; below it a massy
Cave with porous rocks pierces a hollow hillside, where sluggish
Nature placed the house of idle Sleep, his untroubled dwelling.
Shadowy Rest and lazy Oblivion and torpid Sloth with never
Wakeful face, guard the threshold. In the hallway Ease and
Silence sit mutely with folded wings, keeping blustering winds
From the ceiling, forbidding branches from straying, depriving
Birds of their song. Here is no roar of waves, though all shores
May sound; nor any from the sky. Close by the cavern, even
The stream flowing among rocks and boulders down the steep
Valley is silent. Every sheep of the black herd around lies on
The ground; the new shoots droop; a breath from the earth bows
The grasses. Within, fiery Mulciber's carved a thousand images
Of the god. Here wreathed Pleasure clings to his side, there his
Comrade Toil sinks to rest; and elsewhere he shares a couch with
Bacchus or Mar's child, Love. While further on, in the deepest
Recesses of the dwelling, he lies down with Death, though none
Are saddened by that thought. These: the images. He himself rests
In the damp cave, on sheets strewn with soporific flowers. His
Clothes breathe; the covers are warm from his idle body; above his

Couch, dark vapour is exhaled from his gasping mouth. One hand Supports the hair tumbling from his left temple, the other has let fall His forgotten horn. Around him, countless dreams of various kinds Wander, true mixed with false, ardent with sad, the misty hosts of Night that cling to the rafters and doorposts, or rest on the ground. The glow that surrounds the cave is dim and faint, and languid lights That invite the first moments of slumber expire in flickering flames. Here Iris, the many-coloured maiden hovered in the dark-blue sky. The woods were bright, the gloomy valleys smiled on the goddess, And, struck by her gleaming arch, the house awoke. But Sleep was Untouched by the goddess' shining rays and the sound of her voice; He lay there as before until Thaumás' daughter shed all her light Upon him, shining deep into his motionless eyes. Then the golden Source of rain-showers spoke to him: 'O Sleep, kindest of the gods, Juno commands you to capture the Theban generals, the people Of fierce Cadmus, who now elated by the battle's outcome watch The Achaean camp and deny your power. Grant her heartfelt prayer: Rarely could you earn Juno's goodwill so easily, without offending Jupiter.' So saying, she thumped his idle breast with her hand lest Her words were wasted, admonishing him again and again. With The sole look on his face of agreement, he assented to the goddess' Command. Iris left the damp cave, her bow more heavily charged And she brightened her darkened rays with rich showers of rain. Sleep too roused his feet and his winged temples to action, filling His billowing cloak with the chill air of a sombre sky. Silently He flew through the upper levels of the air and loomed heavily Over the Theban fields. His influence brought birds, wild creatures, Cattle to the ground; wherever he flew the waters dropped languidly From the cliffs, the woodland trees bowed their crowns, and stars Fell in greater numbers from the drowsy sky. The god's presence Was first felt as a sudden darkening of the plain, and the endless Noise and cries of the warriors were hushed. But when he hovered On moist wings, entering the camp in the densest of black shadows, Their eyes drifted and their heads bowed; words were left unfinished In mid-speech. Soon they let fall their gleaming shields and cruel Javelins, and their faces sank wearily on their chests. And now all Was silent: even their war-horses were powerless to stay standing,

And sudden falls of ash extinguished the watch-fires they had lit.

BkX:156-218 Thiodamas the augur is inspired

But Sleep did not lull the Argives to like slumber; the seductive Powers of the night-wandering god refrained from loosing his Mists on the neighbouring camp. The armed Argives stood there, Indignant at the shameful nocturnal effrontery of the watch-fires. Behold now a sudden ecstasy, a divine madness, gripped the mind Of Thiodamas, either at Juno's prompting or kindly Apollo's rousing Of his new priest, commanding him with wild disturbance to reveal The future. Thiodamas leapt into their midst, dreadful to see And hear, unable to endure the deity's power that a frail receptive Mind cannot contain. Its promptings overflowed; the naked frenzy Filled his visage; the flow of blood alternately swelling and draining His quivering cheeks. His gaze wandered here and there; tossing His head, he flailed the wreath about that was entwined in his hair. So Cybele, the Great Mother of Mount Ida, drives the blood-stained Phrygian from her dread shrine, unconscious that steel has pierced His arms, as he beats the sacred torches against his breast, whirls His gory tresses, and deadens the fresh wounds by his flight, till All the fields are in dread, spattered the sacred pine-tree of worship, And the lions that draw her chariot rise up, in their astonishment. Thiodamas ran to the inner council chamber, the revered house Of the standards, where Adrastus made ill by their long series Of cruel disasters deliberated, in vain, on their desperate state. About him the newly-appointed generals, seconds-in-command To the dead, stood in those places left empty by the great kings, Not joyful at such promotion to the heights, but grieving still. Likewise when a ship has lost her captain, and wanders about In mid-course, the officer at the prow, or he who guards her Flanks, takes command of the straying rudder; but the vessel Is stalled and her tackle slow to respond while the divinity, Whose figurehead is at the stern, fails to accept a lesser hand. Now the augur, inspired, filled the Argives with fresh courage: 'Generals, I bring mighty commands and dreadful admonitions From the gods: these words come not from my own mind:

Amphiaraus, he who agreed to your calling me to his service,
And entrusting me with his sacred ribbons, he it is that speaks.
A night rich in action and suited to a noble stratagem, is now
Revealed by divine augury. Valour calls to us directly, and
Fortune demands our efforts. The Theban ranks are stupefied,
Sunk in sleep. Now is the moment to avenge our dead kings,
And a wretched day. Grasp your weapons now, open the gates
Without delay: this action will ensure them their funeral pyres,
And us our own. I foresaw it, during the day's fighting as our
Army was humbled, and, beaten, we turned our backs. I saw it
(I swear, by the tripods and my lost master's strange fate) and
Around me birds flapped their wings auspiciously. But now I
Am certain: a moment ago, in the silent night, he himself rose,
Rose from the earth that split once more; just as he once was
(The shadows had only veiled his horses) Amphiaraus came
To me, no phantom of idle slumber, no product of mere sleep.
He cried: 'Will you leave the Inachians to squander this night
In idleness, you degenerate? (If so, give back my Parnassian
Wreaths; return to me my divine powers!) Did I not teach you
The secrets of the heavens, in the flight of birds? Go, at least
Take vengeance for my sake with the sword!' He spoke, and
He, in his chariot, with raised spear seemed to push me towards
The threshold. To work, then, and make use of the divine; our
Enemies are not lying here: battle is afoot and savage power.
Who will join me, while the Fates allow, eager to raise himself
To the heights? Behold, again the birds of night prove benign;
Even though my comrades in this army hold back, I'll obey,
I'll go alone, for he indeed comes with me, shaking the reins.'

BkX:219-295 He leads an attack on the sleeping Thebans

So he cried, disturbing the night, and the generals were roused
As though the same god were in all their hearts; they burned
To accompany him in the one cause. He himself was prompted
To choose thirty men, the pick of the army. Round him, other
Warriors protested loudly, asking why they must stay in camp
In vain idleness. Some boasted their noble birth, others their

Ancestral deeds or their own, others call for lots to be drawn,
Then on all sides they demand it. Adrastus rejoiced in their
Protests and his spirits rose. Likewise on Pholoe's high slopes,
The keeper of swift horses is happy, when foals have swelled
The herd in teeming spring, to see some struggling to climb
The heights, others swimming the torrents, others vying with
Their parents; then he ponders in mind which should be broken
Gently to the harness; which will ride well; which are born for
War and the sound of trumpets; which to win the Elean palm.
Thus the aged leader of the Achaean host. Nor is he absent from
Their enterprise: 'From where does this sudden inspiration come?
Which of you gods has returned to shattered Argos? Is courage
Here, in misfortune, does the blood of our race still flow, do
The seeds of virtue endure in a time of wretchedness? Now
I commend you, noble warriors, and delight in my comrades'
Glorious sedition. Yet guile, and secret warfare is our plan,
Our movements must be hidden: a crowd is no use for dark
Mischief. Keep your spirits high; behold, dawn will visit
Vengeance on our foes. Then the fight shall be in the open,
And we will attack together.' After these words, soon
The warriors valour was harnessed and controlled. It was
As though Aeolus, the cave of the winds in uproar, were
To place another rock against the door, and imperiously
Block the exit, just as the winds were eager for the waves.
The prophet added Agylleus, son of Hercules, and Actor
To his strength: the latter skilled in persuasion, the former
Boasting a strength equalling his father's. Each of the three
Led ten men of the thirty, a formidable force even to face
The Thebans. Thiodamas, new to warfare, adopted a martial
Air, laying sacred twigs aside, Apollo's emblems; handing
His brow's adornments to the aged king; and donning helm
And mail, a gift of Polynices in thanks. Fierce Capaneus
Weighed Actor down with a great sword; scorning, himself,
To attack an enemy with guile or follow divine command.
Agylleus exchanged weapons with fierce Nomius: what use
Hercules' bow and arrows in battles in the deceptive dark?
Then they leapt from the steep battlements to the rampart,

Lest the loud creaking of the bronze gate sound too loud.
It was not long before they saw their prey, scattered over
The ground, seeming as though they were already dead,
And slain by the sword. Now with loud voice the priest
Exhorted them: 'Forward comrades, wherever the lust
For endless slaughter takes you, favourites of the gods,
I pray you do not fail them! See the cohorts defenceless
In vile languor. Shame on them! Are these the men who
Dared to besiege the Argive camp, and keep guard over
Warriors? So saying he drew his gleaming sword, and
Passed swiftly through the dying host. Who could count
The dead or put names to the lifeless throng? Randomly
He struck at back and chest, leaving the helmets to stifle
Their murmurs, their wandering ghosts bathed in blood.
One man was stretched out carelessly on a couch; one
Had sunk at last with sagging steps onto his shield, barely
Gripping his weapons; others lay grouped among wine cups
And armour' others leant on their shields where the final mist
Of fatal sleep had overcome each drowsy man where he lay.
Divinity was there, since Juno, armed and brandishing
A torch, bright as the moon, with her bared right arm, lit
The Argives' way, strengthening their courage and pointing
Out the victims. Thiodamas felt the goddess' presence, but
Hid his joy in silence. Now his hand slowed, his sword
Grew heavier, and his anger waned at such success.
Thus, a Caspian tigress, who has slaughtered huge steers,
Her rage quenched by endless bloodshed, her jaws weary,
The stripes of her coat smeared with thick foul gore, will
Survey the scene and grieve that her hunger is diminished.
So the exhausted seer wandered amongst the Theban dead.
At times he prayed for a hundred hands and arms for battle,
At times he wearied of draining the blood from torpid flesh
Wishing instead that the enemy might rise up against him.

BkX:296-346 The conclusion of the slaughter

Elsewhere, Actor and Agylleus, great Hercules' scion, were
Wasting the drowsy Thebans, the troops advancing in a swathe
Of blood. The grass was soaked black with gore, and the tents
Were awash with sanguinary streams. The earth smoked; one
Exhalation of death and sleep together rolled across it. None
Of the prostrate men raised their heads, so dense the darkness
With which the winged god hovered over the wretches, their
Eyes opening only in death. Ialmenus, doomed never to see
Another sunrise had spent his last night's watch in play and
Music: singing a Theban song of victory, overcome by the god,
His head drooped leftward, now he lay slumped over the lyre.
Agylleus drove his spear through the back and chest, striking
The right hand on the tortoiseshell plectrum setting the fingers
Quivering among the strings. Spilt blood upset the wine-cups.
Water mixed with that dire stream, and Bacchus' wine too
Revisited the depths of the mixing bowls and dishes. Fierce
Actor killed Thamyras in his brother's embrace; Tagus stabbed
Wreathed Echeclus from behind; Danaus severed Hebrus' head,
Snatched unaware by the Fates, his spirit flitting to the shades
With no pain, escaping the torments of a cruel death. Stretched
On the cold ground near his chariot and faithful horses, Calpetus
Disturbed them with his heavy breathing as they cropped their
Native turf. His moist mouth overflowed as inflamed with wine
He tossed and turned in sleep. The Inachian seer slit his throat
Where he lay, and a great gush of blood drove out the wine, as
His fragmentary cry was stifled by the gore. Perhaps his rest
Had been prophetic and in his heavy slumber he had dreamed
Of Thiodamas, and of a Thebes blackened and in mourning.
The fourth watch of the drowsy night remained, with drifting
Cloud and many stars obscured, as Bootes fled at the approach
Of the Sun's mightier carriage. Now the action had ended, and
Actor called to Thiodamas: 'This unlooked-for success should
Satisfy the Pelasgi. Few of that host, I think, have escaped
Cruel death; only cowards whom a living shame may conceal
In the bloody depths. Halt this, while good fortune attends us.

Fatal Thebes has her deities too; and perhaps those who have Favoured us are departing.' Thiodamas agreed, and raised his Dripping hands to the stars: 'Apollo, I assign to you these spoils Of a night you revealed to me, even though my hands are not yet Cleansed with water, since I, a fierce warrior of the tripods and A faithful priest, gave this welcome sacrifice to you. If I have Responded to your urging, not disgraced the charge you gave, Come again to me; deign to invade this mind of mine again. Now I bring you only a crude offering, broken weapons and The blood of soldiers, but if ever, Paeon, you grant us to see Our native country and the shrines we long for, remember My vow, Lycius, and claim an equal number of rich gifts For your sacred portals, and as many bulls.' So he prayed, And re-called his comrades from their successful action.

BkX:347-383 The Argives try to retrieve their champions' corpses

Among them, as was fated, were Calydonian Hopleur and Dymas The Arcadian, both past companions of their leaders, both dear To them, and both still grieving and indignant at surviving them. Hopleur the first to speak, challenged Dymas: 'Noble Dymas, Have you no thought for your dead king now he is lost? Already The Theban dogs and carrion birds may have him. What will you Arcadians take back to your country? Behold his angry mother Will meet you on your return, asking where his body is. In my Thoughts, Tydeus, whatever state his body, however un-mourned His death may be, lacking a grave, rages still. I still wish to go Search throughout the cruel field, or the very midst of Thebes.' Dymas replied: 'I swear by these scattered stars, by the shade of My leader, a god to me, I am of the same mind. Dejected by grief, I have waited to find a companion, but now I will lead the way.' His face turned sadly towards the heavens, he prayed: 'O Moon, Mistress of the arcane night, if as they say your divinity appears In triple form, if you visit the woods with a different face, Diana, (Gaze upon us now at least) it is your dead companion we seek, Your own lad, the peerless foster-child of the forests.' The goddess Inclining her chariot towards them, brought the arc of her horns

Near, and shed her kindly rays, revealing the bodies. The plain lay
Open to the view, with Thebes and lofty Cithaeron. So, when Jove,
In anger, shatters the night sky with thunder, clouds part, the starry
Flames appear in the lightning flash, the world is suddenly displayed
To sight. Dymas received the rays, and Hopleus, struck by the same
Glow saw Tydeus. They signalled to one another through the dark,
Rejoicing, and each lifted to his shoulders a beloved burden, as
Though restored to life, returned from cruel death. Wordless, not
Daring to weep for long, cruel day being close and the sunrise
Threatening to reveal them, they walked mute through the gloomy
Silence, striding out, grieved to see the dying shadows grow pale.

BkX:384-448 The deaths of Hopleus and Dymas

Fate is hostile to virtue, and Fortune is rarely a friend to great
Actions. Already they could see the camp, and in their minds
Were close and their loads lighter, when a sudden cloud of dust
And noise rose behind them. Brave Amphion led the cavalry,
At his king's command, to check the guarded camp by night.
He was the first to see something stirring, far off in the plain's
Pathless regions, unclear to sight (light had not yet dispelled
All the darkness) something indistinct, like bodies in motion.
Suddenly, discerning mischief, he cried out: 'Halt, whoever
You may be? Clearly they were enemies. The Argives pressed
Ahead: afraid, but not for themselves. Amphion now threatened
The anxious men with death, hurling a spear from some distance,
But aiming high as a warning, pretending to a misdirected throw.
The weapon pierced the ground before Dymas' eyes, he chancing
To be in front, and checked his step. But great-hearted Aepytus
Had no such thought of losing an opportunity, and transfixed
Hopleus from behind, even grazing the body of Tydeus where
It hung from his shoulders. Hopleus fell, still carrying his noble
Leader, and died still grasping him, happy not to feel the body's
Subsequent removal, descending unknowing to the cruel shades.
Dymas turned and seeing that the pursuers were close upon him,
Was unsure whether to meet their attack with weapons or prayer.
Anger counselled weapons, Fortune urged him to pray, not fight.

He was uncertain of either course. But anger overcame entreaty. He set the pitiful corpse at his feet, twisting the huge tiger-skin That chanced to clothe his back to the left to act as a shield, then Stood firm, presenting his drawn sword, facing their weapons, Prepared equally to kill or die. So a lioness with cubs, attacked In her wild lair by Numidian hunters, standing over her young Gnashes her teeth in grim and piteous manner, in her confusion; She could dislodge the men and shatter their weapons in her jaws, But love for her offspring fills her savage heart and in her fury She still looks for her cubs. Now Tydeus' left hand was cut away, Though Amphion forbade desecration, and Parthenopaeus' body Was dragged about by the hair. Only then, too late, Dymas asked For quarter, and lowering his sword pleaded: 'By the cradle of Bacchus born of the lightning, by Ino's flight, by the tender years Of your Palaemon, handle him more gently! If any of you delight In sons at home, if any here is a father, grant the boy his meagre Handful of dust and a little fire. He asks it, his mute face makes Request. Give me to the wild beasts; it is more fitting that I am Food for the carrion crows, since I dared him to fight this war.' 'Not yet,' Amphion replied, 'tell me first, if you are so eager To bury your king, what battle plan the cowardly Argives make; What is it, broken and weary as they are, that they intend? Out With it, and quickly. Then take your leader and your life, go Freely and inter him.' The Arcadian shuddered and drove his Blade, hilt and all, into his breast: 'That would be all I lacked To crown my misfortune, that I should turn traitor and dishonour Argos in her distress! Nothing is worth that price nor would he Have wished to win burial thus.' So saying he hurled himself On the boy's corpse, bleeding from his deep wound, with these Last words: 'Let me grant you this funeral shroud at least!' So, A brave and noble pair, Aetolian Hopleus and Arcadian Dymas That noted warrior, breathed out their mighty spirits embracing The kings they had loved, and delighting in death. Hallowed, You too will live in memory throughout the ages, though my Song rises from a lesser lyre than Maro's, and perhaps his Euryalus shall not scorn your company among the shades, And Phrygian Nisus' glory shall grant you entrance there.

BkX:449-508 Capaneus leads the attack on Thebes

Now fierce Amphion sent report of the action to the king,
Informing him of the enemy's guile, restoring the captive
Bodies. He himself went to taunt the besieged Pelasgi,
And flaunt the severed heads of their countrymen. From
Their battlements meanwhile the Argives saw Thiodamas
Returning, and were unable to contain their outburst of joy.
Discerning the shields and drawn swords red with blood
From the recent slaughter, fresh cries rose to the mighty
Heavens, and the warriors leaned from the upper ramparts,
Each man eager to greet his friends. Likewise when a nest
Of fledglings spy their mother in the air flying homewards,
They long to reach her, hang from the rim, gaping, about
To fall, did she not spread her feathers to prevent them,
And rebuke them with her careful wings. While the men
Told their tale of the covert action, and summarised their
Silent killing, their joyous embraces granting satisfaction
To their friends, and awaited Hoplaus, and complained
At Dymas' delay, behold, the leader of the Theban troops,
Amphion, arrived on swift wings. He was not pleased by
His tally of dead for long, seeing the field drenched by
The warm blood of Thebes' countless host and their army
Expiring in ruin. A trembling seized him, such as grips those
Touched by a fire from heaven and, shuddering, his voice
Sight and strength failed as one. His horse, of its own free
Will, turned about, as he groaned, and the squadron fled
Kicking up dust behind it. They had not yet reached Thebes'
Gates when the Argive cohort, buoyed by the night's success,
Charged onto the field. Over the limbs and weapons of those
Fallen, over earth fouled by blood, over mounds of the dying,
The horses thundered, while a bloody rain bathed and clogged
The chariot wheels. The warriors relished taking that path, as
Though in their pride they trampled Thebes and Sidonian roofs
In the pools of blood. Capaneus urged them on: 'Your valour
Has been hidden long enough, Pelasgians. Now, now will

The victory this day shall witness be glorious to me; come,
Openly with me, through dust and clamour, before all eyes.
I too bear prescient omens in the dread fury of my drawn
Sword.' So he spoke, and King Adrastus and his son-in-law,
Polynices, burned with ardour, and the augur followed now
More sadly. Soon they were near the walls (while Amphion
Was still relaying the new disaster) and would have entered
The unfortunate city there and then, if Megareus, on a high
Watchtower, had not shouted in an instant: 'Close every gate,
Men, the enemy is approaching, barricade the gates all round.'
Sometimes excess of fear grants strength: swiftly every gate
Was barred; except the Ogygian where Echion was slow to
Close it and the bold Spartan warriors broke through,
Only to fall at the threshold: you Panopeus, who lived on
The slopes of Taygetus; and you Oebalus, a swimmer in
The chill Eurotas; and you O Alcidas, victor on every
Wrestling ground and lately a winner in the Nemean dust,
Whose first gloves were tied by Pollux, Tyndareus' son,
Himself, eyes seeking your mentor's bright constellation;
Though the god himself has set; his star deserting you all.
One the Oebalian forest shall mourn; one the Spartan girl's
Deceptive shore by that river where Jove played the swan;
One Diana's Amyclaeon Nymphs, that one whose mother,
That taught him the rules and wise precepts of battle, shall
Complain that he learned his lesson only too well. So Mars,
Raged at the vulnerable threshold of Echionian Thebes.

BkX:509-551 The Argives attack the gates and walls

At length Acron, shoving with his shoulders, Ialmenides
Thrusting with the full force of his body, turned the timber
Of the bronze-clad gate on its hinges, both straining like
The groaning bullocks that plough Pangaea's fallow soil.
Their efforts achieved both gain and loss, enemy soldiers
Trapped inside, but their own comrades shut out. Greek
Ormenus fell within. As Theban Amyntor stretched out
His hands in a flood of entreaties, his neck was severed,

And his head, its tongue still moving, fell to the ground,
His fine necklet, drenched with blood, falling from his
Throat onto the hostile sand. Meanwhile the ramparts
Were breached, the first ranks of the defenders lacking
Courage and retreating. The Argive infantry reached
The walls, but horses balked at leaping the wide moat;
They halted trembling fearing the gap, startled at being
Urged forward: now they make to plunge from the lip,
Now of their own accord they rear against the harness.
Some men tore away defensive lines set in the ground,
Others toppled barriers in front of the gates, or sweated
To remove iron palisades and push stones from their
Base with rams tipped by echoing bronze. Some hurled
Torches at the roofs, exulting when they lodged firmly,
Some mined the foundations, or tested the hollow towers
Blindly from beneath the linked shields of their *testudo*.
But the Thebans occupied every high point on the walls,
And, as their only course of action, hurled fire-blackened
Stakes against the enemy; bright steel javelins; fire-balls
That ignited as they flew through the air; even the stones
From the walls. The battlements poured out a fierce hail
While the windows, defended, emitted whistling darts.
Like gales that lurk in the clouds above Malea, or high
Ceraunia, and gather over the darkened hills to burst
Against ships' sails, the Theban weapons overwhelmed
The Argive troops. But the warriors refused to avert their
Faces or chests from the dreadful onslaught, and faced
The walls, oblivious to danger, pre-occupied with their
Weapons alone. Antheus was circling the walls in his
Scythed chariot when the plunging weight of a Theban
Spear struck him from above. The reins were torn from
His hand, and thrown backwards he was caught by his
Greaves encasing dying flesh. A mischance in battle,
Astounding to behold, his shield dragged on the ground,
The dust was ploughed by the smoking wheels, as
His spear traced a third furrow, while the lolling head
Followed making a long trail in the dust, the broad wake

Marked by his backward-streaming hair showing plain.

BkX:552-627 Tiresias prophecies

Now the trumpet's mournful clangour batters at the city,
Breaking through blocked portals with its piercing bray.
Covering the approaches, at each gateway, stands a fierce
Ensign-bearer, displaying to all their disasters and victories.
Within, the scene is dire. Mars himself scarcely delighted
In the sight. The frenzied city was maddened by terror:
Grief, Madness, Panic and blind Flight encompassed by
Darkness tore it apart in a chaos of discord. You would
Have thought the battle was within. The heights seethed
With movement, the streets were confused with cries,
And in their minds they saw fire and sword on every
Side, and themselves weighed down by cruel chains:
Fear consumes the future. Now they thronged the roofs
And temples, the unyielding altars surrounded by lament.
The same terror gripped all ages. Old men summoned
Death, the young turned red then pale, hallways shook
To the cries of women wailing. Children wept without
Understanding, troubled, and frightened simply by their
Mothers' tears. Driven by love, the women's despair
Showed no shame: they handed their husbands' weapons,
Roused anger and courage in them, exhorted them, ran
Alongside, and never ceased to point, groaning, to their
Houses and their little children. So, when a shepherd has
Disturbed wild bees, while plundering their hive in some
Stony cavern, the savage swarm hum loudly, exciting
Each other with their buzzing, and fly at the enemy's
Face; then, wings failing, they lament, surrounding
The golden nest with its honeyed cells, pressing their
Bodies against the combs that cost them so much labour.
The crowd's sentiments were divided, a conflict sowing
The seeds of discord: some called (not quietly, but openly
With loud shouts) for the restoration of Polynices as king,
Losing, in their fear, all respect for Eteocles: 'Let the exile

Return and reign for his year as agreed: let the unfortunate Man revisit his Cadmean home and his father's blindness. Why should we pay in blood for a deceitful and perjurious Crime perpetrated by the king?' Others cried: 'It is too late To invoke their pact. Polynices will seek total victory now.' Others again, a suppliant throng, begged Tiresias, tearfully, As the sole consolation in time of trouble, to read the future. He kept the gods' decrees suppressed, concealed in his heart: 'Did our leader credit my advice and warnings before when I opposed this treacherous warfare? Yet, wretched Thebes, Doomed to perish if I am silent, I shall endure the sound of Your destruction, feeling the Argive flames warm my empty Sockets. Piety; let me concede; ready the altars, girl, let us Make enquiry of the gods.' Manto obeyed, and her keen Vision reported to him that the crimson flame of the altar Fire split in two, yet a bright tip rose clearly in the midst; Then she described to him how it twisted in a double spiral, In the phantom image of a snake, wavering with fragmentary Redness: and thus Manto illuminated her father's darkness. Tiresias embraced the wreathed flames a while, breathing The prophetic vapours, his face filled with passion. His hair Rose in dread and dismay, wild tresses lifting the trembling Ribbons. You might have thought his blind orbs had vision, That the long-exhausted colour had returned to his cheeks. At length he gave voice to his seething frenzy: 'Listen, O guilty scions of Labdacus, to the final sacrifice the gods Require. Sweet salvation comes, but by a harsh road. Mars' Serpent demands a cruel offering, and the rites for the dead. Whoever is the youngest of the people of the snake let him Die. Only in this way will victory be granted. Happy is The man who shall leave this life to win so great a prize.' Creon stood beside the prophetic seer's cruel altar, saddened But until now only mourning his country's and the common Fate: suddenly he felt Tiresias' words as an immense lightning Bolt, stricken, as though a flying javelin had pierced his breast, Knowing that his son Menoeceus was the one required, for Deep dread turned the father's heart to ice, and fear persuaded.

He stood there anguished and in shock, as the Sicilian shore
Receives the waves thrown back by the Libyan surge. Now
He begged in vain for the seer, filled with Apollo's power
As he was and demanding action, to be silent; now grovelling
At his feet, now clasping his mouth tight shut as he chanted.
Already Rumour grasping the sacred utterance flew with it
In her embrace, and soon all of Thebes proclaimed the oracle.

BkX:628-685 Divine Courage inspires Menoeceus

Clio, come now, since the ages and the annals of antiquity
Are in your keeping, recount the tale that is in your memory:
Tell how the youth was inspired to delight in glorious death
(Since such ardour is not stirred in men except by the gods).
Divine Courage, attendant on Jupiter's throne, from which
She is only rarely granted to the world so Earth may know her,
(Either when the almighty Father gifts her to us, or she herself
Deigns to enter the mind that can receive her as she did then)
Leapt down rejoicing from the celestial regions – the bright
Stars gave way for her as she fell, the heroic fires she herself
Has placed in the sky; and now she trod the earth, although
Her gaze is never far from the heavens. She thought it well
To alter her looks, and appear as prophetic Manto, so that
Her words might be believed entire; and cunningly shed
Her former aspect. The power and severity left her eyes,
But something of the beauty remained, with softer aspect.
She laid aside her sword, replacing all with a seer's robe,
Whose folds descend, while a sacred ribbon is bound about
Her formal tresses (replacing victory's laurels), though her
Austere countenance, and long stride, yet betray her divinity.
So Omphale, Hercules' Lydian wife, smiled to see him bereft
Of his bristling hides, huge shoulders bursting the Sidonian
Robes as he broke the distaffs and ruined the beaten drums.
Courage found you, Menoeceus, standing near the Dircaean
Gate; not unfit for the sacrifice required; worthy of the deed.
The entrance to the massive gateway was unbarred, and you
And warlike Haemon were laying the Danaans low, though

You took the lead despite both being of one blood, brothers
In all things. The dead were piled around. Every dart found
Its mark, every blow wrought slaughter (even though Divine
Courage had not yet appeared); neither mind nor heart rested.
His eager weapons had no respite, the very Sphinx, guardian
Emblem of his helmet, seemed maddened; her image seemed
Alive, roused by the sight of blood, glittering as the spattered
Bronze gleamed. But the goddess stayed his hand and sword
As he fought: 'O, great-hearted youth, whom Mars would know,
Above all others, to be of Cadmus' warlike seed, leave these
Petty skirmishes; not such is the due your courage owes you.
The stars summon you: think more nobly, and you shall raise
Your spirit to the heavens! For this my Tiresias has raved at
The blessed altars; flames and entrails will it; Apollo urges.
They demand an earth-born hero to save our country's blood.
Rumour chants the prophecy, the people of Cadmus rejoice,
Trusting in you: feel the god's inspiration: grasp a noble fate.
Go hasten, I beg, before Haemon, behind, takes your place.'
So she spoke and, as he hesitated, stroked his chest, silently
With her great hand and left her influence in his heart. No
More swiftly does a cypress tree blasted by lightning feel
The angry flames from root to tip, than that youth possessed
By divine power; spirit exalted; felt the love of glorious death.
Seeing her walk and bearing as she turned away; how 'Manto'
Rose from earth to the sky; he cried, wonderingly: 'Whichever
Deity you are that summons me, I follow; I hasten to obey.'
Even as he went, he stabbed Agreus of Pylos who threatened
The rampart. The armour-bearers relieved him of his burden.
A delighted crowd at his entry hailed him now as their saviour,
A bringer-of-peace, and their god, filling him with noble fire.

BkX:686-737 Cleon seeks to dissuade him

Now, breathlessly, he was making his way to the battlements,
Pleased to have avoided his parents in their distress, when
He met Cleon, his father, and both stood still, eyes downcast,
Neither speaking. Cleon was the first to begin: 'What event

Brings you from the battle? What do you seek more urgent
Than the war? Tell me, son, I pray you. Why so grim, why
This pallor in your cheeks? Why do your ferocious eyes
Not meet your father's gaze? You've heard the seer's utterance,
That's plain. Son, I beg you, by your years and mine, by your
Unhappy Mother's breast, my son, do not believe the prophet!
Would the gods deign to inspire an impious old man with
Empty sockets in his hollow face, a punishment like that of vile
Oedipus? What if this is treachery, a cunning ruse of the king,
Who in his desperate state fears our nobility, and your courage,
Notable among the generals? Perhaps the words thought to be
The god's are his; and his, the command. Rein in your hot mood,
Grant time, exercise a brief delay; impulse is ever a bad master.
Grant your father this request, I beg you. Then your brow may
Be marked by old age's grey hairs, and you yourself become
A parent, and live, brave boy, to fear as I do. Do not leave us
A house bereft. Do other fathers and their children move you?
For shame! First have pity on your own. That is piety, that is
True honour: the rest is only glory, vain honours, reputation
Wrapped in death. I am no coward that seeks to dissuade you.
Go, make war; pierce the Danaan ranks; brave their swords;
Make yourself a target: I will not restrain you. But let me wash
Away your streaming blood with my tears and let me heal your
Quivering wounds, and send you time and again into cruel battle.
Such is what Thebes requires.' He clasped his son's neck then
Held his hands, but neither words nor tears moved the young
Man, pledged to the gods. Rather, at their prompting, he chose
To keep his own counsel, and deceive his father, allay his fears:
'Ah, good father, you are mistaken, you are ignorant of what we
Should truly fear. The commands or utterances of frenzied seers
Trouble me not nor move me with their untruths (let the cunning
Tiresias sing them to himself and his daughter) no not if Apollo
Himself were to ope his shrine and rave in my face. But my dear
Brother's grievous mischance brings me back to the city of my
Own free will. Haemon groans, between their lines and ours,
Barely out of the dust of battle, Argos almost had him – but I
Delay. Go, comfort him in his uncertain state, tell the bearers

To take care, and carry him gently. I go to find Aetion, skilled
In healing wounds and calling back a life that is ebbing away.’
Cutting short his speech, he hurried onwards; Creon’s mind was
Immersed in a dark fog, his thoughts confused. His duty seemed
Uncertain, his fears in conflict; the Fates urging him to believe.

BkX:738-782 Menoeceus sacrifices himself

Meanwhile warlike Capaneus drove the host emerging from
The open gates over the level field; now cavalry squadrons,
Now infantry, now chariots trampling on their driver’s bodies.
His men batter at the high towers too with a continuous hail
Of rocks, routing the enemy bands, with their blood on fire.
Now Capaneus inflicts fresh wounds with swift whirling lead,
Now spins a javelin high with his outstretched arm. No spear
Reaches the battlements but brings down its man, returning
Wet with slaughter. The Pelopean phalanx no longer believe
Tydeus or Hippomedon, Amphiaras or Parthenopeus, dead:
Rather that the spirits of his friends have merged together in
The one body, so well does Capaneus fill the void they left.
No man’s age or rank or beauty move him. He rages against
Those who fight and those who plead alike. No one opposes
Him for long or hopes for some perverse eventuality of battle.
Far off men dread the frenzied weapons, the fearful plumes
And visor. But pious Menoeceus now took his chosen stand
On the battlement. Holy his looks, more majestic than his
Usual aspect, as though he had descended suddenly from
The heavens. Doffing his helmet, recognizable to all, he
Gazed down on the ranks of warriors and with a loud cry
Called attention to himself and brought silence to the field.
‘Deities of battle, and you O Phoebus, who grant me so noble
A death, grant Thebes the joy I have pledged and bought with
The gift of my blood. Drive back the enemy, and thrust their
Vile remnants on captive Lerna. Let Father Inachus reject his
Inglorious foster-children as they tend their lacerated backs.
But let the price of my death restore temples, land, homes,
Wives and children to the Thebans. If I am pleasing to you

As sacrifice, if my ears heard the prophet's utterance without
Dismay, and accepted when Thebes still disbelieved, grant
What is due to Amphion's walls, in exchange for my life,
And appease, I beg you, the father I deceived.' So he spoke,
And with glittering blade dealt himself a solitary blow, that
Pierced the flesh and freed a noble spirit that disdained its
Body, and grieved to be confined. Bespattering the tower
And walls with blood so purifying them, he plunged into
The midst of the warriors below, still grasping the sword,
His corpse aimed at the fierce Achaeans. But Valour and
Piety seized his body in their arms and carried it gently
To the earth. For his spirit had long since sped to Jupiter's
Feet, and claimed for itself a place among the noblest stars.

BkX:783-826 His mother Eurydice mourns him

Now, recovering the body without effort, since the Argives
Withdrew in reverence, of their own accord, the people bore
The hero within the walls, with ritual celebration. Carried
On the shoulders of the Theban warriors, in long procession,
All the folk accorded him grateful honour, calling him their
Guardian spirit, above Amphion and Cadmus their founder.
Some heaped his corpse with garlands, some with scattered
Flowers of the spring. His body placed in the ancestral tomb
And their praises done, they returned to battle, while Creon
Mourned with tears, his anger forgotten: and then the mother,
Eurydice, had her chance to lament: 'Did I nurture you, noble
Boy, as a sacrifice for fierce Thebes, a pious scapegoat, as
Though I was some worthless creature's mother? What sin
Have I committed? Which of the gods hates me so? I saw
No son return to me in monstrous union. I bore no grandchild,
Through a fatal marriage with my own child. And yet, see you,
Jocasta has her sons, and beholds them still captains and kings.
Must I make cruel offering in war (was such your pleasure, god
Of the lightning bolt?) so that those brothers, sons of Oedipus,
Might take turns with the crown? Why do I complain though
Of gods and men? It was you, cruel Menoeceus, who, above all,

Hastened to kill your unhappy mother. Why such love of death?
 What cursed madness seized your mind? What did I conceive?
 What did I bear? A child so unlike myself. Surely it was Mars'
 Serpent and the earth flowered with our ancestor's new-born
 Weapons – hence that wretched courage, and all too much of
 That war-god's fire in your heart, nothing of your mother. See,
 Destroyed of your own free will, you go to the shades, without
 The Fates so wishing. I feared Capaneus' weapons and the Danaï,
 But this hand I should have feared, this and the weapon I gave
 You in my foolishness. See how deeply the blade entered his
 Throat? The Danaï themselves could not have struck deeper.'
 The unhappy woman would have gone on speaking, filling
 The world with her complaint, but her companions led her
 Away and her maids, comforting her regardless, kept her to
 Her chamber, where she sat, her cheeks scarred by her nails.
 She took no note of daylight or words of entreaty nor, bereft
 Of mind and voice, turned her distraught gaze from the ground.
 So a fierce tigress whose cubs have been taken lies alone in her
 Scythian lair, and licks the paw-prints on the still-warm stone;
 Her rage gone, the wilderness quiet, her rabid hunger stilled,
 Flocks and herds pass unafraid, as she lies there and watches;
 Where are those for whom she stored nourishment in her body,
 Those to whom she, long awaited, might bring her rich prey?

BkX:827-882 Capaneus again assaults the city

So much for the war of weapons, trumpets, steel and wounds:
 Now Capaneus must be brought to battle with the starry sky.
 I may no longer sing in that manner poets so often adopt;
 I must ask a more exalted inspiration of the Aonian groves.
 Goddesses dare all with me! Did a frenzy, out of the depths
 Of night grip the warrior? Did the Stygian Sisters take arms
 Against Jupiter, following Capaneus' banner? Or was he
 Filled with courage beyond all bounds, a reckless thirst for
 Renown, and the fame that a glorious death may bring? Or
 Was his previous success the mere harbinger of disaster,
 The gods in their anger, enticing mortals to their doom?

Now Capaneus scorned the ground, tiring of that slaughter
On the plain. His and the Argives' missiles were exhausted
Long since, and his arm was weary. He gazed up at the sky,
Then with a grim look took the measure of the high towers,
And had a long wooden scaling ladder with countless rungs
Brought forward. Terrible from afar he brandished a blazing
Torch of flaring oak, that reddened his arms, reflecting fire
From his shield. 'This is the gateway to Thebes,' he cried,
'This is the way my rising courage commands me to go, here
Where the walls are slippery still with Menoeceus' blood.
I will test what his sacrifice achieved, and whether Apollo
Deceives.' So saying he mounted the ladder step by step,
To gain the besieged city. So the giants appeared amongst
The clouds, when impious earth was piled high as though
To overtop the gods, with Jove anxious since Ossa almost
Reached him before vast Pelion had been heaped upon it.
Then the Thebans, truly terrified by this ultimate act of fate,
(Thinking the city faced final ruin and Bellona had arrived
With blood-stained brand to level its towers to the ground)
Vied to launch huge stones and stakes from every rooftop,
And whirl loaded slings – how ineffective javelins proved
And cloud-wandering arrows! – eagerly winding catapults,
And hurling iron masses. The missiles flung, from above
Or behind, failed to bring him down. Balanced in thin air,
As though he were treading firmly on the level ground,
Capaneus climbed upwards despite that mighty avalanche.
Thus a river will batter against a bridge with endless waves,
Piling against the ancient timbers, till gaps appear between
Its stones and beams fall; all the more violently the river,
Sensing success, hammers away and drags at the failing
Mass with its powerful surge until its swift flow loosens
All the bolts, and, victorious, runs smoothly, its course free.
At last Capaneus towered above the long-sought summit,
And standing erect gazed at Thebes fearful below, terrified
By his vast shadow. Now he threw taunts at Amphion's
Turrets, their defendants cowering in dismay: 'For shame!
Are these frail things the walls that danced to his lyre's

Unwarlike song, in that oft-told lying fable of Thebes?
How hard can it be to level walls raised by gentle music?
With which he attacked the blocks of stone with hands
And feet, demolishing wooden tiers and flooring in his
Path. The bridging planks flew apart, the stone ties of
Roof coverings gave way, the battlements were dismantled.
Re-utilising them, he hurled broken fragments onto houses
And temples below crushing the city with its own defences.

BkX:883-939 The death of Capaneus

But now the gods who favoured Thebes or Argos gathered
Round Jove, shouting their various complaints; the Father,
Trying to be fair to all, witnessing their mighty outbursts
Of temper, knew that only he himself could control them.
Bacchus groaned as his stepmother watched, and looking
Askance at his father, cried: 'Where is your fierce hand,
And the flames that, sadly, formed my cradle? Where, oh,
Where is the lightning-bolt?' Apollo, whose oracle helped
Found Thebes, grieved for the city; Hercules, weighing
Lerna against it, stood there irresolute, with strung bow;
Perseus, Danae's winged son, lamented for his mother's
Argos. Venus wept for Harmonia's people, and fearful
Of her husband Vulcan, stood apart from him, gazing
At Mars in silent anger. Bold Minerva rebuked the Aonian
Gods, while Juno stood there, mute, tormented with fury.
Yet none of this troubled Jupiter's calm. The noise had
Subsided when, behold, Capaneus' voice was heard in
The heavens: 'Do none of the gods defend trembling
Thebes? Where are those idle foster-children of this
Accursed land, where are Bacchus and Hercules? I am
Tired of attacking weaklings; come then (for who is
Worthier to face me?) See, I hold Semele's tomb and
Ashes. Come, battle against me with your fires, Jupiter!
Or are you only brave when terrifying a frightened girl
With your thunder, or razing her father Cadmus' towers?
The gods, lamenting his words, groaned. Jupiter himself,

Merely laughing at the madman, shook his sacred locks:
'If the giants' audacity at Phlegra failed, what can a man
Expect? Must I strike you, too?' The crowd of deities urge
Their patient leader on, from every side, grinding their
Teeth and demanding militant retaliation, nor does Juno,
Subdued, dare any longer to thwart the Fates. Now even
The heavenly region thundered of its own accord, without
Jove's signal; clouds gathered without a wind, and the rain
Rushed forth. You might have thought giant Iapetus had
Slipped his Stygian chains, or Ischia and Aetna, overcome,
Had released their prisoners to the sky above. The gods
Were ashamed of such apprehensions, but when they saw
Capaneus stand amidst the whirling globe, wildly demanding
Battle, they silently turned pale, astonished, unsure if Jove
Would launch his lightning-bolt. Over the Ogygian tower's
Summit, the clouds began to rumble darkly and the heavens
To veil themselves in gloom. Yet Capaneus still clung there,
On the now shrouded heights, crying out as lightning flared
From the heart of the restless storm: 'These, yes these flames
I should deploy against Thebes now, re-lighting my torch,
Re-kindling its smouldering oak-wood.' At these very words
The lightning struck him, hurled with Jupiter's full strength.
First the plumes on his helm were charred and the scorched
Boss of his shield fell away; then all his limbs were aglow.
The ranks fell back, both armies terrified, anticipating his
Plunge from the heights wondering whom his fiery corpse
Might strike. He felt the fire hiss, in his helm and hair, then
Within him, and trying to clutch the chain-mail with his
Hand, touched the glowing remains at his breast. Yet still he
Stood there expelling his last breath towards the stars, his
Smoking frame pressed to the stones he hated. Nor would
He have fallen if his earthly powers had not deserted him,
His spirit freed. Had his body failed him a moment later,
He would even have greeted Jove's second lightning-bolt.

End of Book X

BkXI:1-56 The Thebans counter-attack

Once the fury of mighty Capaneus' outrageous daring
Had faded, and he had exhaled the flames within him,
(Thebes' wall branded by the track of vengeful lightning
That accompanied his fall from the battlements) Jupiter,
Victorious, calmed the shaken regions with his right hand,
And, with a look, restored the skies above, and the light.
The gods praised him as though he came breathless from
Battling the giants at Phlegra, and heaping Aetna above
Scorched Enceladus. Capaneus' corpse, grim of aspect,
Still grasping fragments of the shattered tower, lay there,
Bequeathing to the nations the memory of his deeds, not
Unappreciated by Jupiter himself. The outstretched body
Bulked as large as that of the violator of Apollo's mother,
Tityos, in Avernus, where even the vultures shudder as
They retreat from the cavities of his chest, viewing that
Prostrate giant's limbs, his wretched entrails regenerating
To nourish them once more. So Capaneus, flung to earth,
Burdened the foreign field he scorched, the soil exhaling
Sulphur from the sky. Thebes breathed again, the bowed
Masses in the temples rose. Mothers dared to release their
Children from their arms, as the prayers and the despairing
Lamentations ceased. But the Achaeans sped over the plain
In scattered flight, fearing not merely the enemy squadrons
Or mortal blades, but the wrath of Jupiter still before their
Eyes, their armour burning them, and their helmets ringing,
With every pang of fear. In their terror, Jove himself seemed
To pursue them, and block their escape route with his flames.
The Theban army pressed on behind, taking advantage of that
Sky-born tumult. So growling bears, eager wolves approach,
After a lion in Massylian fields has rent the untamed leaders
Of the herd with his mighty jaws; the scavengers with lesser
Rage that come to feed on another creature's prey. Eurymedon
On one flank, urged them on, wild and bristling in his armour,
Rough-cut javelins in his hand, his nature to stir trouble (Pan

Was his father); on the other flank young Alatreus, his deeds
More powerful than his years suggested, matching his youthful
Father; both joyful but the begetter happier, nor was it possible
To say whose weapons rang louder; who threw the swifter spear.
The ramparts of the Argive camp were crowded with a dense
Swarm of fugitives. Mars, your transformations! The Pelasgi
Who had lately scaled Thebes' wall, now defended their own;
So clouds retreat, so crops bow this way and that as the south
Wind veers, so with white foam the tide now veils now bares
The thirsting sands. Tyinthians died far and wide, who copy
The accoutrements of their nursling god; while that fierce son
Of Amphytrion, their Hercules, grieved as he watched among
The stars at Nemean hides, clubs, quivers, drenched in blood.
On the iron-clad top of an Argive tower stood Enyeus, adept
At urging men on with the trumpet to martial action. But now
He was sounding the retreat for those in trouble, urging their
Flight, giving the direction of the camp. Suddenly a missile
Descending caught him aslant, and passed through his hand
And his left ear as he blew. Now, his spirit fled to the empty
Breeze, his mouth cold and silent; the last note echoing alone.

BkXI:57-135 Tisiphone rouses her sister Megaera

Then Tisiphone, revelling in evil, exercised by the blood of both
Peoples, sought to end the war by a duel between the brothers.
Yet she doubted herself adequate to such a conflict unless she
Roused Megaera, with her kindred snakes, from the infernal deep,
To act as her companion in war. So she took herself to a secluded
Valley, and dug at the soil with her Stygian blade, and murmured
The name of her absent sister, and (sure signal to the Elysian realm)
Raised a horned serpent from her hair to utter a lengthy hiss. He was
The king of her dusky tresses, and when earth, sea and sky heard
Him they shuddered, and Jove again looked towards Aetna's fires.
Megaera, who was standing beside Dis while Capaneus, bathing his
Noble shade in the stream of Styx, was lauded by the assembled host,
Heard the sound. Bursting the earth apart, the dead rejoicing, she stood
At once, beneath the stars; and while the blackness below grew lighter,

So the daylight above waned. Her dark sister, with a clasp of the hand,
Welcomed her, saying: 'Alone on earth, facing a hostile world, Sister,
I have executed our Stygian Father's dread commands, and endured
The frenzy imposed, while you others hold Elysium and the compliant
Shades in check; nor have my labours been in vain: nor my spoils here
Shameful. That all this plain is drenched, pooled with steaming blood,
That Lethe's bank holds a countless swarm, such is my meaning, those
The happy tokens. Why speak of it? Let Mars have them, and let Enyo
Boast of them to the world. You saw (for he was surely visible from
The Stygian shades) that general's jaws foul with blood, face dripping
With dark gore, as he chewed insatiably on the wretched skull I gave
Him. Just now did you not hear a dreadful noise descending to your
World from the stars? That sacred thunderstorm was mine; I mingled
Among the warriors with their frenzied weapons, scorning the warring
Gods and the lightning-bolt's mighty wrath, but now (I must confess)
My heart grows weary with long labour, Sister, my hands are slowed:
Hell's torch of yew is dulled by the light; unwonted rays of too many
Stars make my serpents drowsy. Join forces with me, you whose fury
Is still intense, whose joyous tresses wave fresh from Cocytus' fount.
We shall prepare no customary battle, no war of armies, but brothers'
Swords must be drawn in conflict, brothers' I say (though kindly Faith,
And Piety resist us, they shall be conquered). A mighty task! Let us
Assume their hatred and their hostile weapons. Why do you delay?
Come: choose which banner you shall bear. Both ready, and ours.
Yet I fear lest the uncertain mob, a mother's pleas, or Antigone's
Gentleness in entreaty, retard our progress somewhat. And even he,
Who wearies us with his prayers and calls on us to avenge his lost
Sight, plays the father: he is said to weep by himself alone, apart
From all others. Indeed I myself hesitate to burst into Thebes, my
Familiar home. Make the impious exile obey you; urge on Argive
Wickedness; let mild Adrastus not prevail; and beware lest the host
Of Lerna delay. Go, and return as my enemy, in this duel of theirs.'
Such were the tasks the sisters undertook, taking their separate paths;
Just as the North wind and the South stir war from the opposite poles,
The former feeding on Rhypaeon snows, the latter on Libyan sands;
And sea, rivers, sky, woods complain while disaster looms; farmers
Bemoan their losses, yet pity the sailors overwhelmed in the depths.

When Jupiter from high Olympus saw the daylight thicken, the sun's Trembling orb stained and spotted, he uttered a spate of grave words: 'You gods have seen martial fury taken to the limit of what is lawful, Or acceptable in war, though one of them chose impious means; daring, But doomed to fall by my hand. Now a terrible duel approaches, one Unknown before to wretched earth. Avert your eyes! Let them hide From Jove, and attempt such things only in the gods' absence. Enough To have seen Tantalus' dire banquet, Lycaon's guilty altars, Mycenae Hastening to shroud the sky with starry darkness. Now too day must be Confounded. Earth, receive the clouds that veil evil, let the sky be dim; I am resolved to spare the universe and my celestials the sight. Let not The stars of kindly Virgo or the Twins bear witness.' So the almighty Father spoke, removing his gaze from the guilt-ridden fields, while The lands beneath now missed the clear skies that were dear to them.

BkXI:136-204 Megaera spurs on Polynices

And now the virgin daughter of Erebus traced Polynices path through The Argive army and found him at the gate itself, uncertain whether To attempt escape by death or flight from such weighty misfortune. The doubts in his troubled mind were fuelled by omens. Wandering The ramparts in the depths of night, in ill thought, anxious, considering The worst, he had seen the image of his wife Argia, lacerated, bearing A funeral torch (the gods show us signs: so she would walk; the torch Such as she would carry for her husband): when he asked where she Was going, why the grief, why the emblems of mourning, she merely Wept, and silently averted the flame. He knew the dark vision existed Only in his mind; for how could his wife have come from Mycenae, And be suddenly there on the rampart, but he recognised it as a fatal Warning of his approaching death, and accepting it as such was afraid. Yet now when the Fury out of Acheron touched his breastplate three Times with her whip, he burned, helpless with martial ardour, eager Not so much for the throne itself, but for fratricide, and slaughter, For the death of a brother drenched in blood. He spoke to Adrastus, In a moment: 'A last survivor of the Argives and their allies, Father, I have reflected on our present troubles. There was a time, before Achaean blood was shed, when I might have gone forth to fight my

Own battles, and not sent out the flower of the Danaan people, nor
 Sacrificed the lives of kings, nor made so many cities grieve, that I
 Might place a crown upon my head. But since the moment for such
 Courage has now passed let me at least make reparation according
 To my deserts. Father, though you hide the wound deep, and respect
 You son-in-law's sense of honour, I am the one, exiled from throne
 And country (an ill guest; would I had been inflicted on some other
 City!), who when you ruled in righteous peace...yet exact punishment
 Now: I challenge my brother (why shudder? It is decreed and fated.)
 To mortal combat. Do not try to prevent me: you cannot. Not even
 If my mother or my unfortunate sisters, dressed in mourning, were
 To encumber my arms, or my father to press his blind face against
 My shield, and obstruct me as I rushed out to fight, would I desist.
 How can I watch these last Inachian lives be lost, or take advantage
 Of your deaths? I saw the earth open and gape wide on my account,
 And did not enter. I brought about Tydeus' crime and saw him dead:
 Defenceless Tegea demands her king of me, and his bereaved mother
 Cries to me from some Parrhasian hollow. I failed to climb the banks
 Of Ismenos while Hippomedon's blood stained its waters; nor did I,
 Scale the Theban tower with you, Capaneus, to share the lightning
 And the frenzy. Was I so afraid of death? But I shall make payment,
 Worthily. Let the Pelasgian wives, mothers, and aged fathers whom I
 Have robbed of so much joy, and whose houses I have made desolate,
 Gather together wherever they may be. I and my brother shall fight,
 What more is needed? Let them watch and pray for Eteocles' victory.
 And now farewell, my wife, and farewell sweet Mycenae! May you,
 Dear sire be kind to my ashes (for the blame for my ills falls not on
 Me alone, the gods and the Fates must share my guilt) and after this
 Battle save my body; defend it from the scavengers and my brother;
 Take back my urn; and make a better marriage for your daughter;
 That is all.' They wept, as Bistonian snows melt with spring's return,
 And mighty Haemus slides and Rhodope slips into the river gorges.
 The aged king tried to calm the exile's ardour with words of gentle
 Encouragement, but the blood-stained Fury cut short his words with
 Fresh terrors and in the guise of Inachian Phereclus brought Polynices'
 Swift charger and deadly arms, the helm shutting out well-intentioned
 Speech in an instant. Then she summoned him: 'Delay no more, make

Haste! Eteocles too, they say, advances from the gate.' So, all-powerful
She grasped him and hurled him onto his horse. Pallid, he flew over
The open plain, and saw, all about him, the goddess' looming shadow.

BkXI:205-256 Tisiphone re-directs Eteocles' prayer

The Theban king was offering sacrificial thanks to Jove for the bolt
Of lightning, thinking the Danaï's power had diminished, but in vain.
Neither the heavenly Father, nor any other deity, had visited the altar,
For wicked Tisiphone was among the trembling acolytes, re-directing
His words to the lord of the underworld: 'Greatest of gods, for Thebes
Owes her origin to you; though fierce Juno and her accursed Argos
Were envious, from the day when you scattered the Sidonian dancers
On the shore and, as seducer, uttered deceitful lowing over the calm
Waters, and deigned to bear Europa on your back. Nor is it an idle tale
That you ravished Cadmean Semele, lustily invading her Theban home;
Think yet, I ask, of your kin in marriage with gratitude, and the walls
We cherish, and as our champion wield the thunder. We saw you stir
The clouds and defend our high towers, as though your own celestial
Palace were attacked; we recognised the saving lightning-bolt with joy,
The flames our ancestors witnessed. Now receive the pick of our herd,
A votive bull, and the high-piled incense. But worthy thanks are beyond
The work of mortals. Let Hercules and our Bacchus compete in gratitude
Towards you; you preserve these walls for them.' Thus Eteocles prayed,
But dark flames struck at his mouth and eyes, hurled the crown from his
Head and engulfed it. Then the angry bull bloodied the shrine with its
Foam before the sacrificial blow could fall, breaking from the restraining
Crowd and, in the turmoil, carrying the altar away with a frantic tossing
Of its horns. The attendants scattered; the soothsayer consoled the king.
He, sadly persistent, ordered the rite to be renewed, and then completed,
Hiding his deep-felt fear with an assumed air of confidence. So, when
Hercules felt the Oetaean shirt of flame clinging to his limbs and the fire
Deep in his bones, he still sought to offer the prayer he had commenced,
Pouring the incense; still steadfast, enduring the pain; but not long after,
A great groan was forced from him, and Nessus' poison raged victorious
Within him. Now Aepytus, breathless with his haste, mind in confusion,
Came running with a message for the king. He had abandoned his post

By the gate, and panted out his barely intelligible words to the trembling Monarch: 'Leader, break off your pious worship and those ill-timed rites. Your brother threatens the walls on horseback, attacks the barred gates, Calling out your name, demanding to fight you alone in battle. Behind Him his saddened comrades weep, and both armies groan as he speaks, Clashing their arms in protest, but he still summons you, crying: "Now Is the moment, Great Begetter of the Gods. What less does Capaneus Deserve?"' In turmoil, the king shuddered with profound hatred; yet Rejoiced despite his anger. Thus when a bull, the leader of the herd Enjoying peace, his rival exiled, hears the faintest sound of the hostile Bellowing and recognises its menace he stands before the herd alight With fierce wrath, breathing out his readiness in ardent foam, stabbing The ground with his hoof, the air with his horns, until the earth quakes And the trembling valleys, shuddering, await the onset of their duel.

BkXI:257-314 Creon berates Eteocles

The courtiers did not desert their king: 'Let Polynices beat at the walls In vain. Does he dare to come this far with his shattered forces?' 'His is The madness of despair: seeking peril, risking danger, despising safety.' 'Rest here, secure of your throne, we'll repel the enemy, command us!' So the surrounding throng but, behold, Creon, still passionately grieving, Came ready to speak his mind, and licensed to do so by the state of war. The father knows no peace, Menoeceus' death chafes his heart, he still Seeks his image, clasps him, sees the streams of blood pour from his Breast, as he falls eternally from the cruel tower. Sensing that Eteocles Was uncertain, hesitant, he cried: 'You must go. Grant us reparation. We'll no longer be forced to endure you, worst of leaders and brothers, King only of your subjects' deaths and sorrows, and guilty of the Furies' Presence and the war. We have atoned enough, before the unkind gods, For your perjury. You have been to this city, strong in arms and riches And thronged but now with citizens, like a plague from the sky or from Marshy ground, and even now your shadow over-looks its emptiness. You lack men to serve you: the earth holds them, devoid of life; their Native river already bears them to the sea. Some lack limbs, others Tend agonising wounds. Can you give brothers, fathers or sons back To us wretches, return the dead to their fields and homes? Where are

Mighty Hypseus and our close-neighbour Dryas, where now are those
 Men of prophetic Phocis, and the captains of Euboea? Them the equal
 Chances of battle brought to death at least, while my son, (Ah, shame!)
 Was made a royal sacrifice, like a dumb beast of the herd, (Woe is me!),
 Sprinkled with the altar libations in unholy rite and commanded to die.
 Do you hesitate yet? Summoned by the armed enemy will you now
 At least, keep faith? Or does the questionable Tiresias order another
 Into battle, and once more weave oracles to my sorrow? Why else is
 Haemon left to me and him alone? Order *him* to go, while you watch
 From your seat in this high tower. Why the fierce rage? Why look to
 Your crowd of lackeys? They too would have you pay the penalty.
 Even your mother and sisters loathe you. Ardent against you, your
 Brother threatens steel and death, tearing at the barred and guarded
 Gates, do you not hear?' So Creon spoke, grinding his teeth, seething
 With rage and misery. The king replied: 'You cannot deceive me.
 Your son's glorious fate is not what moves you. Such cant and rant
 Become a father, but hope lurks beneath those tears, hope and hidden
 Desire. You make his death a pretext for your mad ambition, urging
 Me on, as one does who is next in succession to the vacant throne.
 But Fortune will not so abandon Thebes that the sceptre falls to you,
 One so undeserving of so great a son! Nor would I find it hard to take
 Present vengeance. But to arms, to arms first, my men! Let brothers
 Meet in battle: Creon would ease his sorrow. Let frenzy rule now:
 When I am victor you will pay for all.' So he deferred their quarrel
 For a time, and sheathed the sword that anger was already thrusting
 Into his hand, as a snake, disturbed at random by a shepherd, that
 Coils and rises gathering the poison from its whole length into its
 Jaw, yet if its enemy directs his steps away a little, and the threat
 Subsides, drinks its own wrathful venom, its neck swollen in vain.

BkXI:315-353 Jocasta pleads with Eteocles, her son

But Jocasta, Eteocles' mother, fearful, distraught, at the first rumour
 Of unfolding fate (nor slow to credit it) ran, with torn hair, lacerated
 Face and bare and bleeding breast, unmindful of her sex or what
 Was fitting. She was like Pentheus' mother, Agave, clambering
 Madly to the summit of the mountain to bring the promised head

To cruel Bacchus. Neither her companions, nor her fond daughters
 Could keep pace with her, such strength did profound misery
 Grant the unhappy woman; bloodless age made wild by sorrow.
 Meanwhile the king was donning his glorious helm, taking up
 His fierce javelins, and examining his mount that rejoiced at
 Trumpet-calls, fearless of the bugles, when suddenly his mother
 Loomed before him. He and his followers turned pale with fear,
 And his squire withdrew the spear he was proffering. She cried:
 ‘What madness is this? Why is some Fury risen again to oppress
 Our kingdom? Will you yourselves stand face to face, after all?
 Is it not enough to have led your respective armies up till now,
 And delegated action? To what shall the victor seek to return?
 To my arms? Oh, happy for once is my dire husband’s blindness!
 Presumptuous eyes, you are punished, that I should see this day!
 Whither cruel man do you turn your threatening gaze? Why does
 Your face turn flushed and pale by turns? Why do your clenched
 Teeth hold back a sinful muttering? Woe is me! You may conquer,
 But first you must wield your weapons here: I will stand on the very
 Threshold of the gate: an unhappy omen, a dreadful image of sin.
 You must trample these white hairs, these breasts, you wicked man,
 And ride your charger over your mother’s womb. Spare me; why
 Thrust me from your path with hilt and shield? I took no dark
 Vows to Stygian gods nor prayed to the Furies with blind speech,
 Against you. Hear me! Your mother, alas, cruel man, it is who
 Pleads with you, not your father. Hesitate to commit this crime,
 And measure what you do. Yes your brother beats at the walls,
 And stirs up impious war against you: no mother or sister stands
 There to obstruct him. All things here entreat you, all here lament:
 There, Adrastus can scarcely alone dissuade him from this duel;
 Perhaps he even demands it; while it is from my embrace that you
 Leave your gods and your ancestral threshold to fight your brother.’

BkXI:354-402 Antigone pleads with Polynices, her brother

Elsewhere Antigone sped with silent step towards the hostile
 Tumult (chaste virginity not restraining her) eager to reach
 The summit of the Ogygian Gate; with aged Actor at her heels,

Even though the strength to reach the very top might fail him.
She hesitated a moment gazing at such extent of military force,
Then recognised (what horror) Polynices, her brother, crying
Aloud in his pride as he attacked the city. At once her lament
Filled the air around, and she called to him loudly, making as
If to hurl herself from the walls: 'Brother, hold your fire, look
To this tower a moment, turn your brave helm towards my eyes!
Are they your enemies? Is it thus we should invoke the annual
Pact; ensure good faith? Are these eyes a motive for complaint?
Is this a humble exile's fine cause? By your Argive home (since
You no longer care for your Theban one) if in this place any are
Still dear to you, then I beg you, my brother, quench your pride.
See: two armies, and a host of others on both sides, beseech you.
Your Antigone loyal to her suffering own, suspected by the king,
Sister to you alone, pleads with you, oh hard heart! At least leave
Off your frowning looks. Let me know that face I love, perhaps
For the last time, and find my lament may move you. Our mother
Already sways Eteocles with her tearful pleas, and they say he will
Sheath his drawn sword. Are you still resolute for me? For me who
Night and day lament your exile and your wanderings, who often
Calmed our father's growing anger against you? Why acquit your
Brother by a crime? Was it not he who broke the covenant agreed,
Broke faith; is it not he, the guilty one, who is cruel towards his kin?
Yet behold, though challenged, he does not appear.' At these words,
His anger slowly began to weaken, though the Fury opposed such
In words and action: already his grasp slackened, the reins loosened,
He fell silent; then his groans erupted, his helm confessed his tears;
Wrath abated, and he felt ashamed either to appear guilty or depart;
When suddenly Tisiphone opposed the mother and drove Eteocles
Through the shattered gates. He cried: 'I come, envying you in one
Thing alone, that yours was the first challenge. Do not cavil at this
Delay, our mother held firmly to my arm. Now my country, land
Unsure of your rightful king, oh now you must belong to the victor!' Polynices was no less strident. 'You savage, will you learn finally
What good faith means, meeting me on level terms? Now, for the first
Time in a good while, fight against me, my brother; such is the only
Ground; the only pact that remains.' So he spoke, eyeing his brother

With hostile intent. For in his heart's depths he chafed at the king's
Endless retinue, his royal helm and purple-clothed mount, his shield
Glittering with gold, even though he himself was scarcely ill-dressed
And shone in no common cloak; Argia herself had fashioned his in
Maeonian style, her skilful fingers stitching gold thread to the purple.

BkXI:403-446 Adrastus tries to intervene in the conflict

Now prompted by the Furies, the brothers went out into the dusty plain,
Each with his dark companion to goad and guide him. The Furies it was
Who held the reins, adorning trappings and glittering armour, placing
Serpents to augment the crests. Crime bound by fraternal blood stood
In the field that mighty duel born of a single womb; beneath their helms
Twin faces gazed at one another. The banners trembled, the trumpets fell
Silent, the martial horns were dumb. Thrice thundered the eager king
Of the dark realms, thrice he shook the earth's foundations, and the very
Gods of battle fled. Vanished, renowned Valour: extinguished, Bellona's
Torches; Mars drove his fearful horses far away, merciless Minerva with
Her Gorgon breastplate stood aside; and in their place loomed the Stygian
Sisters. People crowded the open rooftops in their misery, tears falling
On all sides, and lamentation filling every height. Old men moaned that
They had lived too long, mothers stood bare-breasted telling their sons
Not to watch the fight. The lord of Tartarus himself commanded his gates
Be opened, and sent the Ogygian ghosts to view their countrymen's foul
Deeds. Seated on their native hills, in a sad circle, they polluted daylight,
Rejoicing their own sins were now surpassed. But when Adrastus heard
That the pair (openly taunting each other) were about to fight and that
Shame no longer hindered their crime; he drove his chariot swiftly there
And set it between them. He himself was justly venerated for his years
And royalty, but what did foreign dignity mean to such as these, who
Cared not for kith and kin? Still he implored them: 'Children of Inachus
And Thebes must we gaze on such wickedness? Where is right, where
Respect for the gods? Is this true warfare? Desist, relinquish your anger,
My enemy (though if anger could hear, you are not so distant from me
In lineage); and you, my son-in-law, I urge you too: if your desire for
A sceptre is so great, I'll doff my regal robes, go: take Lerna and Argos
For your own!' His persuasive words no more calmed their fiery mood,

Or altered their fixed intention, than Scythian Pontus, arched in towering Waves, prevents the Cyaenean rocks from clashing. Seeing his prayers Were in vain, that the chargers were galloping into battle in twin clouds Of dust, and the maddened brothers were already fingering their javelins' Throwing-straps, he fled, leaving all behind; the camp, and the men, his Son-in-law and Thebes (urging Arion on, who wheeled about, warning Of Fate) all pale as Dis, the ruler of the shades and last to inherit his Share of the world after the adverse casting of the lots, who descended In his chariot, entering Tartarus, with all the earth and the heavens lost.

BkXI:447-496 The goddess Piety is opposed by Tisiphone

Yet Fortune did not further the duel as yet, but delayed and retarded The sin's inception; lingering a while. Twice they rode to the attack In vain, twice benign errors made the horses swerve before meeting, And the spears fell aslant, innocent of impious blood. Both tugging At the reins, they urged the guiltless creatures on with cruel spurs. The armies too were troubled by this awesome and unnatural duel Allowed by the gods. Murmurs and muttering rose from both sides. There were frequent attempts to renew the war and, by attacking, Obstruct with warring troops this unfortunate fight between the two. Meanwhile Piety has been seated in a secluded region of the heavens Discontented with earth and the companionship of the gods; and not In her former and familiar guise with face serene, but her ribbons Stripped from her hair and weeping over the fraternal strife, like The anguished mother and unhappy sisters of those two combatants; Abusing cruel Jove and the guilty Fates, threatening to leave the sky And its light and so descend to Erebus, favouring a Stygian home: 'Why did you create me, Primal Nature, to contend with the savage Passions of living things and even gods? I am nothing to people now. No reverence is shown me, anywhere. Oh, madness! Oh, mankind, Oh, Prometheus' dire arts! How fine it would have been if Earth had Not been re-populated after Pyrrha! Behold this race of mortals!' So she spoke, and sensing the moment to help had come, said: 'Let Me try at least, though in vain.' She leapt down from the heavens; Beneath the darkening clouds a snowy trail marked the goddess' Sad footsteps. She had barely touched the plain when, in an instant,

Both armies turned mild and pacific, perceiving all the wickedness.
Then faces and breasts were wet with tears and silent terror gripped
The brothers. Bearing the likeness of weapons and fittingly dressed,
She called to men here and there: 'Go, move, prevent them, you
Who have brothers and sons in Argos, and you with your dear ones
Here in Thebes. Can you not see that, unsought, the gods pity them?
That spears fall short; the horses baulk, Fortune herself resists this.'
She might almost have resolved their doubts, if grim Tisiphone had
Not seen through her disguise, and swifter than lightning was there
Rebuking her: 'Sluggish deity, involved in things of peace, why
Obstruct the work of war? Be gone, shameless one! This is our day,
Our field of action. Your defence of guilty Thebes comes too late.
Where were you when Bacchus stirred contention, when his orgies
Drove armed women mad? Where were you idling when the snake
Of Mars drank of the unholy pool, when Cadmus ploughed the soil,
When the Sphinx was vanquished, when Oedipus was questioned
By his father, when Jocasta was lit by our torches to her bridal bed?'
So Tisiphone savaged her and, as Piety shrank back before her face
And withdrew her own modest countenance, she brandished her torch,
And pressed towards her, her serpents hissing, until the meek goddess
Drew her cloak over her eyes and fled, bearing her complaint to Jove.

BkXI:497-579 Eteocles and Polynices kill each other

Then indeed were men spurred on to fiercer anger: ripe for conflict;
The troops' minds were changed, and they gathered again to watch.
Once more the wicked contest began, the impious king readied his
Weapons and he was the first to chance a throw of his deadly spear.
The weapon struck Polynices' shield-boss, but failed to penetrate,
Foiled by the layers of gold. Then the exile advanced, and uttered
A fatal prayer: 'You gods, whom Oedipus of the lacerated face
Asked to stir the fires of wickedness, and not in vain, I make no
Wild demand: I'll atone for my actions and pierce my breast with
This very blade, if he will leave me grasping the sceptre in death,
And, the lesser shade, take this grief-bearer with him.' The spear
Flew swiftly between the horseman's thigh and his horse's flank,
Threatening death to both, but the rider moved his knee to evade

The blow, though the point, while failing of its purpose, struck
His mount slantwise through the ribs. Then the charger, scorning
The tightened reins, hurtled forward, and stained the ground red
With a pool of blood. Polynices exulted, believing the blood his
Brother's, while Eteocles himself feared the same. Now the exile
Flicked the reins and dashed on blindly, in his eagerness, to meet
The wounded horse. Hands, harness, weapons clashed, and both
Steeds stumbling crashed to the ground. As when a brace of ships,
That a cloud-bearing southerly at night drives together, shattering
Their oars and entangling their rigging, sink together, interlocked
As they are, to the ocean bed after a lengthy struggle between them,
And against the darkness also and the storm: such was the shape of
That encounter. They clashed without rule or skill, only courage
And anger; viewing each other with fiery hatred and hostile glares
Through their visors. There was not an inch between them, their
Swords locked, their hands clasped, hearing each other's murmurs
Of rage loud as trumpet-cries or bugles sounding. Fiercely they
Struggled, as wild-boars, fuelled by anger, crashing together like
Lightning-bolts, arch their bristling backs, eyes quivering with
Flame, their curved tusks hooked together and clashing noisily,
While a hunter watches the duel from some rock nearby, pale,
Hushing his hounds to silence. The brothers dealt no fatal blow
As yet, but bloodshed had begun, the crime was now enacted.
No need for the Furies now; they merely marvelled, and stood
Applauding, envying a human madness greater than their own.
Each brother sought the other's blood with furious desire, and
Unaware of his own blood flowing. At last, exiled Polynices
Whose cause was greater and anger stronger, exhorted himself
To greater effort, and leaning in drove his sword deep into his
Brother's body, where the end of the corselet barely covered
The thighs with a fringe of metal. Eteocles as yet felt no pain,
But sensing the first chill of cold steel drew his wounded body
Behind his shield. Soon, growing more and more conscious of
His hurt, he began to gasp in distress, his enemy giving him no
Quarter, taunting him as he retreated: 'Where are you off to now,
Brother? Here's the result of languid somnolence, of a regal and
Enfeebling peace, here's the result of long-sheltered rule! While

Here, see my limbs hardened by exile and poverty. You should
 Learn to bear life's deprivations, and set no score by pleasures.'
 So the wretched pair fought on. There was yet strength and blood
 In the evil king, despite his weariness, and his legs still carried
 Him for a while; but then he created a deliberate ploy, collapsing
 Apparently in his death throes. Cithaeron echoed with the clamour;
 His brother raised his arms to heaven, thinking himself victorious:
 'Be blessed, my prayers were not in vain. I see his eyes closing,
 His face sunken in death. Bring me his sceptre and the crown
 From his head, while he still lives!' So saying he approached
 The dying man, seeking to take his armour too and weapons
 As though to carry them to his land, as spoils, and hang them
 In triumph in some temple. But his brother was not yet a shade,
 Clinging to life with a vengeful anger, and when he saw his
 Brother loom over him, bending towards his chest, he raised
 His sword covertly and with the bare remnants of his failing
 Strength, joyful in death, set the blade in his brother's breast.
 Polynices cried: 'You live yet? Or is it your anger that still
 Survives you, traitor, ever unworthy of the abodes of peace?
 Come with me to the shades! There I'll demand, once more,
 What was agreed, if Minos the Agenorean judge's Cnossian
 Urn still stands and kings are thereby punished.' Ceasing,
 He fell, the whole weight of his armour crushing his brother.
 Go, savage spirits, and in death pollute grim Tartarus, and
 Exhaust the torments of Erebus. And you, Stygian goddesses,
 Spare mankind such malice: and may no later day witness
 So foul a crime, but throughout all the lands and centuries,
 May the monstrous sin fade in the minds of new generations,
 And let only those who rule us still recall that dreadful duel.

BkXI:580-647 Oedipus mourns: Jocasta kills herself

When Oedipus learned of the fatal result, he emerged from
 The dark depths of his dwelling, offering his imperfections
 To the light: beard and hair caked and filthy with primal gore,
 Matted tresses cloaking his Fury-ravaged head. The hollows
 Of his eye-sockets too were foul with traces of gouged matter.

Antigone's shoulder bore the weight of his left hand, his right
Rested on his stave. It was as if Charon, ferryman of sluggish
Avernus, wearying of the dead, were to leave his boat and rise
To the upper world, to trouble the sun and the fading stars, he
Neither strong or patient enough to bear the air above for long;
Leaving his task to grow as the generations wait on the shore
For the tardy boatman. So Oedipus in the light, saying to his
Companion as she wept deeply: 'Lead me to my sons, I pray,
Place a father beside their fresh corpses!' The girl hesitated,
Unsure of his intent. Bodies, weapons, chariots hampered them,
Entangling and delaying their passage, and the old man's steps
Faltered amidst the carnage while his pitiable guide laboured.
At last the girls' cry proclaimed the long sought-for bodies.
And he threw himself across the cold forms, unable to utter;
He lay groaning over their bloody wounds but his words,
Though repeatedly attempted, failed to sound. Finally, as he
Caressed the helms, seeking their obscured visages, his
Long wordless sighs resolved into speech: 'Piety, so tardy,
Do you now strike my spirit, after so long a time? Can
Human sympathy still exist in this heart of mine? Nature,
Behold you conquer this unhappy father, yes, you conquer!
Behold I groan and tears flow from these arid sockets, while
My impious hand obeys, and womanlike it beats my breast.
Cruel warriors, only too truly sons of mine, receive these
Obsequies due a monstrous fate. I cannot even see which
One is which, to sound appropriate words. Antigone, tell me,
I beg, which am I holding? How then can your savage father
Accompany your funeral? Oh, if my sight might return to me
That I might gouge those eyes again, and lacerate my face!
Oh, sorrow, Oh, parental vows and sinful prayers heard all
Too clearly! Which deity, standing beside me while I prayed,
Took up my words and relayed them to the Fates? Madness
Caused this, a Fury, my father, mother, kingdom, my ruined
Eyes, not I, I swear it by Dis, by blessed darkness, and by
My innocent guide; so may I die worthy to enter Tartarus,
So may the angry shade of Laius not shun me! Alas, what
Fraternal knot, what wounds I touch! Let me seek to loose

These hands, and unchain these hostile fetters at the last.
Now, at least, may your father come between you!' Thus,
Lamenting, little by little he assumed the angry mantle
Of the dead, and sought a weapon, though covertly lest
His daughter denied him. But the cautious Antigone had
Removed all such from his reach. The old man cried out
In wrath: 'Where are the guilty swords? Ah, Furies, is
Every inch of iron sunk in their flesh?' As he spoke, his
Sorrowful companion raised him, suppressing her own
Grief in silence, happy only in that her fierce sire mourned.
Earlier, the queen, alarmed by the noise of incipient combat,
Had retrieved Laius' sword from its store, that lamentable
And ill-famed relic of a sceptred king. She railed against
The gods, her accursed marriage bed, her son's madness
And her first husband's shade; struggled with the sword,
And at last leaning forward drove the blade into her breast.
The wound opened her aged veins and her unhappy couch
Was cleansed in blood. Ismene collapsed on that withered
Chest that grated at the blow, and weeping dried it with her
Hair as she lamented. So, sad Erigone wept beside the body
Of her murdered father in the Marathonian wood, and then
Her tears exhausted, intent on death, unloosed the fatal rope,
And chose the firmest branch from which to hang herself.

BkXI:648-707 Creon threatens Oedipus with exile

Now Fortune, in her malice, glad to have destroyed the two
Leaders' hopes, passed Amphion's kingdom and his sceptre
To another, and Creon inherited Cadmus' power. Alas, a sad
End to war! On his behalf had the brothers died. The seed
Of Mars rendered him illustrious, and Menoeceus' sacrifice
Of himself for his country gained Creon, the father, favour
With the people. He mounts Thebes' mournful throne, fatal
To tyrants. Alas the seductiveness of power, the ill-advised
Love of the sceptre! When does the coming man ever learn
From his predecessor's fate? Behold, Creon, happy to stand
In that accursed place, and handle the blood-stained helm.

What can good fortune not do! Now his paternal heart began
To turn to other matters: as the king, forgetting Menoeceus.
Imbued with the cruel practices of that palace, he gave orders
(Evidence and proof of his own ways) that the Danai be denied
Funeral pyres, that their ill-fated army of sad homeless shades
Be abandoned to the naked sky. Then, beside the Ogygian Gate
He met Oedipus returning; for a moment he was afraid, silently
Confessing himself the lesser man, and checked his ready anger.
But soon he was a king once more and boldly reproached his
Sightless enemy. 'Omen hateful to the victor, be gone: and take
Yourself far off. Divert your Furies from us, purge the very walls
Of Thebes by your departure. Your fond prayers are answered;
What more remains for you to ask? Your sons are dead: now, go.'
Oedipus quivered with mad rage, his cheeks trembled as though
He still had sight, his years receded. Then he thrust his daughter
Aside, cast away his staff, and supported only by his anger let
Words erupt from his swelling breast: 'Are you bent on cruelty
Already, Creon? You wretch, you rose but now to treacherous
Royalty, my fortune's place, and already you assume the right
To trample on the wreckage of kings. Already you deny tombs
To the vanquished, and banish your countryman from the walls.
Bravo, you are worthy to maintain the Theban sceptre, if such
Are your first deeds. But why restrict your new prerogatives,
Madman? Why interpret your powers so narrowly? You threaten
Exile. A timid kind of royal inclemency is this! Why not show
Your greed, and stain your savage blade at once? Believe me,
You can. Let some ambitious henchman appear and sever this
Unflinching head fearlessly. Begin! Or do you wait for me to fall
Prostrate, with beseeching hands, at the feet of my ungentle lord?
Would you let me if I tried? Do you threaten me with punishment,
And imagine any terrors remain? You demand I leave this palace?
I forsook the sky and earth of my own will, and turned my hand
In vengeance against my own face, no one forcing me so to do.
What does a hostile king command more? I will fly this accursed
Dwelling: what matter where I take my darkness or my long
Dying? Will any nation if asked not grant a wretch as much soil
As he can cover in his own country? Is Thebes so sweet, and is

The light brighter here, do such propitious stars soothe my face,
Have I a mother here, and sons! Rule Thebes, command it under
The same auspices as Cadmus ruled, and Laius, and I: may you
Wed so and get such loyal sons: and may you lack the courage
To evade Fortune with your own hand; but love the light when
She snares you. Enough of these omens I utter. Daughter, come,
Lead me away. Yet why should I link you to my sorrows? Grant
Me a guide, king!' But sorrowing Antigone feared abandonment.

BkXI:708-760 Antigone pleads with Creon

She offered up a different entreaty: 'Revered Creon, by Menoeceus'
Sacred shade I beg you (so may your reign be happy), pardon now
This afflicted man, and forgive his proud words. Misery has long
Granted him this manner of speech. It is not yourself alone that he
Shows fierceness towards; made harsh by sorrow he thus addresses
The Fates and the gods. He is often difficult even with me. In his
Ungovernable heart freedom in misery and the grim hope of cruel
Death have long existed. Behold even now he cleverly provoked
Your anger, and sought the punishment. But I beg you to employ
The greater wisdom of sovereignty and from your height overlook
The fallen, and respect the ruinous downfall of former greatness.
He too once sat high on the throne with men at arms around him,
Granting aid and justice to the wretched, and dealing fairly with
The powerful and the needy, he who of all that host has now but
A single woman to attend him, and he not exiled as yet. Is he an
Obstacle to the fortunate? Do you need to show hatred, exert
Royal power against him; and thus drive him from your house?
Perhaps you fear he will groan too loudly at your door, annoy
You with untimely prayer? Fear not, he will weep far away
From the palace. I will calm him when this mood arises, and
Teach him subservience. I will remove him from company,
And hide him in a solitary place: let that be his exile. For what
Foreign city would accept the wanderer? Would you have him
Try Argos; creep like a beggar into hostile Mycenae; take news
Of Aonian losses to the door of a vanquished Adrastus, and beg
For bare necessities: a king of Thebes? Why expose the crimes

Of our unhappy race, and display our shameful deeds? Hide,
What we are, I beg you. It will not be for long, Creon. Pity
The aged man, and let me bury my parents' sad remains here,
For here Thebans, at least, may be interred.' So she begged,
Humbly, until her father, with savage threats, scorning pardon,
Drew her away. He was like the lion beneath a lofty crag, at
Whom forest and mountain once trembled in his prime, but
Now lies motionless, disabled by long years; yet magnificent
Of mien, and best left undisturbed even in old age. If the noise
Of cattle meets his drooping ears, he rises, remembering how
He was, groaning at his decayed powers, that other lions now
Rule the plains. Creon was moved by her plea, but would not
Grant all she asked, denying them both part of his indulgence.
'You shall not be banished beyond your country's borders,
So long as you do not soil her homes and her sacred shrines
With your presence. Let the wilderness know you, and your
Own Cithaeron. Behold this ground, scarred by a war, where
Two nations lie in their own blood, shall be a dwelling-place
For your shade.' So he spoke, and proudly returned to his
Royal palace, amid the feigned acclamation of his followers
And of the sorrowing people. Meanwhile the defeated Danai
Left those deadly ramparts furtively: none with their rightful
Standard or leader. They went silently, randomly, to shameful
Return, inglorious life rather than honourable death. Darkness
Favoured their going, welcome night shrouding the fugitives.

End of Book XI

BkXII:1-59 The Thebans burn their dead

Though the waking Sun had not yet driven the stars from the sky,
The moon, with fading horn, saw light looming as Dawn dispersed
The speeding clouds, and readied the vast ether for Phoebus' return:
The sparse Theban forces wandered from their houses, complaining
Of the night's delays. They had rested, at last, in their first slumber
After battle, yet uncertain peace banished sleep and victory brought
Memories of savage warfare. At first they scarcely dared to advance
And pull down the barriers at the ramparts, or unbar the gates fully.
Their old fear and horror at the now empty plain were still before
Their eyes. Confounded, as sailors, long tossed about the seas, feel
The ground heave at first, they wondered that nothing opposed them,
And imagined that the routed army might yet rise up against them.
So when Idalian doves see a yellow snake climb to the sill of their
Dovecote, they will drive their young inside, and defend their nest
With their claws, stirring their unwarlike wings to battle. Even if it
Retreats, the white flock still fear the open air and, launched at last
In flight, they will yet look back in terror from amidst the heavens.
The Thebans approached the remains of their fallen, a lifeless host,
Driven by grief and mourning their cruel guides. Here are weapons
And corpses but they see only the faces of their dead with the bodies
Of strangers beside them. Some grieve over the chariots and speak
To the masterless horses, since such is all that remains; others plant
Kisses in devastating wounds, and mourn for lost valour. The chill
Carnage is sifted: severed hands still grasping sword-hilt or spear
Are revealed, and arrows fixed in eyeballs. Some, rushing there with
Hands raised ready to lament find no trace of their loved one amongst
The slaughter; while elsewhere pitiful arguments begin over formless
Flesh as to who should render what is due and lead the funeral rites.
Often mistaken they wept for enemy dead (while Fortune mocked)
Nor could they know in their misery what flesh to respect and what
To trample. But those whom grief left unvisited, those with families
Unscathed, wandered the deserted Danaan camp, hurling firebrands,
Or (an after-battle solace) roamed about to find where Tydeus lay,
Or whether the lost augur's gulf still yawned, or where Capaneus,

Enemy of the gods, might be and whether the ashes of the lightning Bolt still glowed among his limbs. They consumed the whole day With weeping, nor did the evening gloom drive them away. In their Grief they found relief in lamentation and indulging their sorrow. None went to their homes and, all night through, the host sat beside Their dead, taking it in turns to mourn, or with fire and self-inflicted Blows scare away wild creatures. Nor did they close their eyes, Neither soothed by gentle starlight, nor wearied by endless tears. Aurora was striving with Lucifer for a third time before they had Gathered the glories of the forest, mighty timbers, from bereaved Teumesos and Cithaeron, the mountain-trees most suited to pyres. The corpses of those destroyed were burnt on high-built biers. The Ogygian shades rejoiced at this final tribute, but the naked Host of Argives moaned wretchedly and flew lamenting round The flames they were denied. Even the spirit of savage Eteocles, Received burial honours, though by no means royal ones, while Polynices was still treated as an Argive, his exiled spirit scorned.

BkXII:60-104 Creon leads the funeral rites for Menoeceus

Neither Creon nor Thebes would allow Menoeceus to be burned On a common fire, and instead of a pile of timber like the rest His pyre was a warrior's mound of chariots, shields and armour Of the Argives. As a victor, the corpse's hair was dressed with Peace-giving laurel and ribbons, and among enemy spoils he lay, Like Hercules rich amidst Oeta's flames as the stars claimed him. Creon sacrificed living things there, Pelasgian captives, bridled Horses, to solace those brave in battle: the tall flames quivered, And then the father's lament burst forth: 'O my son, who would Have ruled Echion's city with me and after me if too great a desire For high glory had not possessed you, revered child, whose death Embitters future honour and the thankless offices of kingship: You dwell in the vaulted sky with the gods; immortal in valour You attend their company (so I believe); yet for me you'll be Always one to grieve for as well as worship. Let Thebes build Altars and dedicate high temples; let your father simply mourn. Now alas what fitting rights, what obsequies shall I grant you?

No less, had I but the power, than to pull down deadly Argos
And Mycenae and mingle their ashes with yours and my own
Whose life (what horror!) and title have been won by my son's
Death. Did not one single day of impious warfare, send you
My boy and those fatal brothers to Tartarus? Do Oedipus and I
Not bear an equal load of sorrow? How alike, good Jupiter, our
Mourning for those shades! My son, receive new offerings for
Your triumph. Receive this sceptre that guides the hand, this
Crown that sits proudly on the brow, gifts you have made your
Father, though scarcely to his joy. Let Eteocles' sad shade see
You as king, yes, king.' So saying, he loosed them from his
Head and hand and, his anger rising again, spoke once more
And violently: 'Let them call me merciless and cruel because
I forbid Lerna's dead to be burnt like you. Would I could grant
Endless feeling to their corpses, driving their wretched souls
From Erebus and heaven, and lead the wild beasts, myself,
The carrion birds with curved beaks, to those accursed kings!
Alas, that the kindly earth and time itself will dissolve them
Where they lie! Once more I command this, once more: let
None dare solace the Pelasgi with helping flame! Or he will
Expiate his crime with death, and replace the bodies he has
Consumed with his own. I swear this by the gods and mighty
Menoceus.' He spoke, and his attendants led him to the palace.

BkXII:105-172 The Argive wives set out for Thebes

Meanwhile the widowed and bereaved Inachian women left
Empty Argos, hurriedly (Rumour drove the wretched souls)
And like a crowd of captives each bore her own wounds too:
All were in a similar state, hair hanging down to their bared
Breasts, faces bloodied from the lacerating nails, their soft
Arms swollen from blows. Argia, first among the mourners,
Queen of that black-clothed host, helplessly sought the way,
Now sinking against her sorrowing maids, now rising again.
Caring nothing now for palace or father, she had one loyalty;
And one name, that of her beloved Polynices, was on her lips.
She would leave Mycenae now and live by Dirce in Cadmus'

Ill-omened city. Next, Deipyle, yielding nothing to her sister,
Led the Calydonian women, and those of Lerna, to Tydeus'
Death-bed. She, poor woman, heard of her husband's crime,
The vile gnawing, but grieving love forgives all to the fallen.
After her came Nealce, harsh of visage and yet pitiable; she
Called to Hippomedon in fitting lament. Then Amphiaraus'
Impious wife, Eriphyle, doomed to raise a vacant pyre. Last,
Maenalian Diana's bereaved companion, Atalanta, leads on
The dignified Evadne, and a host of mourners; the former
Grieves and laments her darling boy's ordeal; as the other
Remembering Capaneus her mighty husband, goes weeping
Grimly, in anger at the highest stars. Hecate watched them
From the Lycaean groves and followed groaning, while Ino
The Theban mother wailed for them from her Isthmian tomb,
As they approached the Isthmus; and Ceres though mourning
Her own wept for the night-bound flock, showing her secret
Fires for the wanderers. Juno herself led them on by-roads
And hid their trail lest their own people forbade the journey,
And the glory of the great enterprise was lost. Moreover Iris
Was charged with preserving the dead bodies of the leaders.
She bathed the decomposing limbs with arcane juices, and
Ambrosial dew, to maintain the corpses longer for the pyre,
And prevent their flesh rotting before they met the flames.
Behold, Ornytus (an Argive abandoned by his comrades,
And hampered by a recent blow) with dust-streaked face
And bloodless wound was making his feeble way, timidly
And stealthily, over remote un-trodden ground, leaning on
His shattered spear. He was amazed to find the lonely spot
Troubled by sudden commotion, seeing the flock of women,
Now the sole remainder of Lerna's army, he had no need
To ask the reason for their journey, which was obvious, but
Was the first to speak, in sadness: 'Which path do you take,
Poor souls, which path? Do you hope for burial for a lost
Husbands' ashes? A guard stands vigil over the dead, and
Keeps count of the unburied bodies for the king. There are
No tears, all human access is forbidden: only wild beasts
And carrion birds may approach. Will Creon respect your

Mourning justly? Sooner could the pitiless altars of Busiris
Be appeased, the hunger of Diomedes' horses, the Sicilian
Divinities. Perhaps he will seize you, as suppliants, if I
Know his mind, and have you killed, not by your husbands'
Bodies but far from their beloved shades. Why not flee while
The path is safe, return to Lerna and grant names, all that is
Left to you, to empty tenantless sepulchres, and then summon
Their absent spirits to the vacant tombs? Or why not implore
Aid from Athens, since it is nearby, and it is rumoured that
Theseus has returned joyful in victory from the Thermidon?
Creon must be driven by weapons and war to observe our
Human customs.' So he spoke, their tears ceased, and their
Deep impetus for the journey was lost, their faces frozen
As one, in pallor. So when the roar of a hungry Hyrcanian
Tigress reaches the gentle heifers, the very fields troubled
At the sound, a great fear seizes them all: which of them
Will the predator take, whose shoulders will she cling to?

BkXII:173-227 Argia decides to defy Creon's edict

Immediately dissent arose, opinion was variously divided.
Some were for appeasing Thebes and proud Creon; others
Thought the folk of Athens in their clemency might grant
Them grace. Shameful return was far from their thoughts.
Now it was that Argia, with unfeminine power, conceived
An impassioned plan, and despite her gender set out on
A dreadful task. She resolved (a stubborn hope born of
Noble peril) to directly oppose the king's impious decree,
As not even a bride of Rhodope or foster-child of snowy
Phasis, flanked by the virgin Amazons, would dare to do.
Then she carried out an artful stratagem so as to detach
Herself from the loyal host and, made daring by the depth
Of her grief and despising life, to challenge the merciless
Gods and the blood-stained king. Piety and chaste love
Urged her on. Polynices was there before her eyes, with
Every action, now as guest in distress, now her betrothed,
Before the marriage altar, now gentle husband, now in his

Grim helmet, sad in her embrace, then looking back often
From the outer threshold; yet no image came to her mind
More frequently than that of his naked ghost, in the mire
Of the Theban battlefield, demanding burial. Troubled in
Mind she was pained by her maddened thoughts, in love
With the dead, that most chaste of passions. So she turned
To her Pelasgian companions, saying: 'You must summon
Up the hosts of Athens and Marathon, and may Fortune
Smile on your pious efforts. But I, who was the sole cause
Of such disaster, must penetrate the Theban palace, suffer
The first lightning-bolts of his reign. The gate of that fierce
City will not prove deaf to my knock. My husband's parents
Are there, his sisters: I shall not enter Thebes as a stranger.
Do not try to prevent me. A mighty impulse urges me on,
And my spirit's augury.' She spoke no more, but chose
Menoetes (once guide and guardian of her maiden modesty)
Alone; and though new to the place, ignorant of it, hurried
Off, in the direction from which Ornytus came. When she
Thought she had left the companions of her grief far behind,
She cried: 'Am I to wait (ah, painful!) for a tardy decision of
Theseus while you rot on enemy soil? Will his nobles, will
A favourable soothsayer assent to war? Meanwhile your body
Is assailed, and I would rather expose my own limbs to those
Carrion birds than yours. Most faithful one, if you have any
Feeling among the shades, you are complaining to the gods
Of Styx that I am slow and callous. Oh, if you are naked yet,
If by chance you are already consumed: either way the crime
Is mine. Must violence indeed mean nothing to the mourner?
Must death and savage Creon mean nothing? Your warnings
Spur me on, Ornytus!' So saying, with headlong haste, she
Devoured the Megarian fields. Each person she met pointed
Out the way, shuddering at her appearance, respecting her
Wretchedness. On she went, grim of face, dreading nothing
In her heart or of what she heard, trusting in her extreme
Woe, and more formidable than fearful, like the leader of that
Band of Phrygian worshippers, on the night when Dindymus
Echoes with lament, one whirled away to pine-bearing Simois'

Stream, and chosen by the goddess for self-mutilation, herself
Gifting the knife, decking the victim with wool-twined wreath.

BkXII:228-290 She makes her way to the battlefield

Already the sun had hidden his burning chariot in the Hesperian
Flood, to return from other deeps, but Argia was indifferent
To day's departure, absorbed by grief in her heavy task. Nor
Was she afraid of the dark landscape, nor checked her passage
Over pathless rocks, among boughs about to fall, through secret
Glades of the forest, dark even under a cloudless sky, through
Plough-land bordered by hidden ditches, through rivers careless
Of their fords, past slumbering creatures and the perilous lairs
Of dreadful monsters; such is the power of courage and grief.
Menoetes was ashamed of his slower pace, and wondered at
The strength of his weak foster-child. How many dwellings
For man and beast did she not disturb with her pained lament?
How frequently she lost her way; how frequently the solace
Of her accompanying torch failed her as the cold darkness
Overcame its flame! Now, before the travellers, Pentheus'
Ridge sloped downwards into a wide declivity, and there,
With panting breath, his strength almost gone, Menoetes
Began to speak: 'I believe, Argia, that if the hope our toil
Has nourished does not deceive me Theban houses are close,
And bodies too, in need of burial: the air around is seething,
Heavy and unclean; great birds fly there through the void.
Here is that cruel ground, the city nearby. See how the vast
Shadows of the walls extend over the plain, and dying fires
Flicker from the watchtowers. The city it is. A moment ago
The dark itself held deeper silence, and only stars relieved
The blackness of the night.' Argia shuddered, and stretched
Her right hand towards the walls: 'City of Thebes, once my
Desire, now a hostile place, yet dear to me even so if you
Were to return me my husband's corpse unharmed, see you
What magnificence attends me; what company surrounds me,
As I near your gates for the first time, I, the daughter-in-law
Of your great Oedipus? My prayer is not excessive: for as

A stranger I ask but a body, a lament, a pyre. I ask for one
Who was exiled from his realm and defeated in war, one
Whom you judged unworthy of his father's throne. Give
Him back to me. And if the dead take form, and spirits
Wander free when the flesh is gone, I beg that you may
Come to me, Polynices, and you yourself show the way,
And lead me to your corpse, if I so deserve.' She spoke,
Then entered a shepherd's hut nearby, relit the flame
Of her dying torch, and ran wildly onto the fatal field.
Thus Ceres, in her bereavement, lighting her brand at
Aetna's lava, cast the light of her mighty flame over
The shores of Ausonia and Sicily, following the tracks
Of that dark rapist, vast furrows in the dust; Enceladus
Himself echoed her wild outcry, and his fires erupted
To light her path: the rivers, woods, waves and clouds
Cried out: 'Persephone', only the palace of the Stygian
Lord was silent: it breathed not a word of Persephone.
Now Argia's loyal foster-father warned her to remember
Creon, in her distraction, and to lower her torch and go
Secretly in stealth. The queen, lately feared through all
The cities of Argos, the wildest dream of her admirers,
The august hope of her nation, in hostile night, without
A guide, and with the enemy nearby, stumbling alone
Over weapons and grass slippery with blood, fearing
Neither the darkness nor the crowd of shades gathered
About her, spirits lamenting their lost flesh, trampling
On blade and spear in blind passage, seemed unaware;
Her sole concern to spare the corpses, thinking every
Dead man her own, and scanning them keenly where
They lay, turning them onto their backs then bending
Over them complaining at the dim light from the stars.

BkXII:291-348 She discovers Polynices' corpse

It chanced that Juno had stolen from her mighty spouse's
Embrace and was making her way through the sleep-laden
Darkness of the skies, to the walls of Theseus' Athens,

To sway Minerva and prepare the city to receive the pious
Suppliants. She grieved on seeing from heaven's heights
That innocent Argia was wandering vainly and wearily
Over the field. Meeting with the lunar chariot she turned
Her gaze towards it and spoke in a gentle voice: 'Cynthia,
Grant me a small favour if you have any regard for Juno.
You did indeed triply lengthen Hercules' single night at
Jupiter's bidding, shameless one – but let me leave aside
Old complaints. See, here is an opportunity to serve me.
You observe the darkness through which Argia, a scion
Of Inachus, and my favourite worshipper sadly wanders,
Unable to find her husband's body in the intense gloom,
While your rays languish behind cloud. Reveal your
Horns, I pray, and pass nearer to earth in your orbit than
Is your habit. And send Sleep, who nods here from your
Chariot as he handles the dewy reins, to those Theban
Sentries.' She was scarce done before the moon goddess
Displayed her full orb, cleaving the cloud. The shadows
Took fright, the stars lost their lustre; and even Saturnia
Herself could barely endure the brightness. Now light
Flooded the plain, Argia recognised her husband's cloak,
Her own handiwork, although the fabric was obscured,
The purple cloth dimmed by blood. Invoking the gods,
Believing this to be all that was left of his beloved body,
She found his corpse well nigh trampled into the dust.
Mind, sight and voice fled, and grief stilled her tears.
Then she pressed her whole body to him, kissed his face,
Seeking the absent spirit there, then squeezing the blood
From his hair and clothes to treasure. Presently her power
Of speech returned: 'Is it thus I find you, my husband,
A leader in war who set out for a kingdom rightfully his,
The son-in-law of mighty Adrastus? Is this the triumph
I hoped to see? Lift your eyes to me that see no longer.
Argia has come to your Thebes. Come then, lead me
To your city, show me your father's house, return our
Hospitality? Ah, what am I saying? Thrown on the bare
Earth, here is your portion of your native land. Why is

There conflict still? Truly, your brother rules no more.
Are none of your kind moved to weep for you? Where
Is your mother, where is the renowned Antigone? Your
Death grieves me alone, in defeat I alone remember you.
I thought: "Why go? Why demand a sceptre denied you?
You hold Argos, and will reign in your father-in-law's
Palace; here you shall have long-lasting honour, here
An undivided rule." But how should I complain? It was
I who sent you to war, I who pleaded with my sorrowful
Father, only that I might now embrace you thus. But it is
Well, you gods; I thank you, Fortune. The long-held hope
Of my journey is fulfilled, and I have found his body yet
Whole. Oh, but how deep is this gaping wound! Did a
Brother do this? Where, I ask, does that foul thief lie?
I should outdo the carrion birds if I had the power to
Approach him, and take precedent over the wild beasts.
Is there truly a pyre for the murderer? But you too, my
Husband, your country shall not see you robbed of fire.
You too shall burn, and win tears not to be won by kings.
Bereaved loyalty shall endure forever, serving your tomb.
Our son shall be witness to my sorrow, and Thessander,
My little 'Polynices', must warm my bed in your place.

BkXII:349-408 Antigone meets her on the same mission

Behold, the wretched Antigone endures like grief and bears
Another torch for the dead. She had barely won the freedom
She sought to leave the city, as the king declared he feared
Her intentions, so that guards accompanied her constantly:
The watches had been shortened, more numerous fires lit.
So, excusing herself before her brother and the gods for her
Delay, she waited till the grim sentries yielded to sleep for
A while, and then rushed from the city with an angry cry,
Like the roar of a virgin lioness, that terrifies the country
Round about, free of its mother now, raging at last in fury.
She went quickly, knowing the cruel field and the place
Where her brother lay in the dust. Menoetes, unoccupied,

Saw her come towards them, and checked his dear foster
 Child's lament, but the sound reached the maiden's ears
 And, by the light of their torches and the stars, she saw
 Argia clothed all in black, her hair trailing and her face
 Stained with clots of blood. 'Whose body do you seek'
 She cried, 'and who are you that dare this in my night?'
 Argia was silent and veiled her own face and the corpse,
 Seized by sudden fear, for a moment forgetting her sorrow.
 All the more did Antigone persist, rebuking her for her
 Suspicious silence, urging either of them to speak, but
 Both remained mute. At last Argia, still clasping the body
 In her arms, unveiled her face and spoke: 'If you too come
 To seek a corpse as I did in the stale blood of battle, if you
 Too go in fear of Creon's harsh decree then I can trust you
 And explain myself. If you grieve (and I see the signs there
 Indeed of tears and lament) join with me in faith, yes, join
 With me. I am the daughter of King Adrastus (oh, alas,
 Is anyone by?) here though kingdoms forbid it, to raise
 A pyre to my dear Polynices.' The Theban girl, amazed,
 Trembled, interrupting the speaker: 'Can you then fear me
 The sharer (oh, blind fortune!) in your sorrows, fear me?
 Mine too are the limbs you clasp, the corpse you weep for.
 I yield place to you, hold him. Ah, for shame, a sister's piety
 Is but a poor thing! Yours has prior claim.' And here both
 Collapsed in a mutual embrace of the corpse, both readily
 Mingling hair and tears, dividing his limbs between them;
 Then returning to his face, they lamented in turn, hanging
 Alternately on his beloved neck. Now as one recalled her
 Brother, and the other her husband, and each began again
 To speak of Thebes and Argos, Argia recalled at length
 The whole sad story: 'I swear to you by our private sacred
 And mutual sorrow, by the dead we share, and by the stars
 That witness, that though a wandering exile it was not his
 Lost power that he craved, nor his native soil, nor his dear
 Mother's breast, but you alone, and night and day he spoke
 Of Antigone. I was less to him and easier to leave behind.
 But you, perhaps from some high tower, saw him before

The duel, handing out standards to the Argive companies,
And he looked up at you from the very heart of that array,
Saluted you with his sword, the crest of his nodding helm:
I was far away. But what god drove him to such extremity
Of madness? Did his family beg him in vain? Did he deny
You when you pleaded?' Antigone began to explain those
Workings of sad fate, but the loyal companion admonished
Both: 'Come, better to finish what you have begun! Now
The stars grow pale, troubled by approaching day: complete
Your labours. There will be time for tears when the pyre is lit.'

BkXII:409-463 The brothers' bodies are burned together

Not far away a roar proclaimed the shores of the Ismenos,
Still flowing turbidly, discoloured with blood. There, though
Lacking strength, the two women carried the mangled body,
Sharing the effort, to which their companion, little stronger,
Joined his aid. Thus the still-smoking corpse of Phaethon,
Hyperion's son, was bathed by his sisters in the warm waters
Of the River Po; and he was scarce entombed when, turned
To poplar-trees, their sad grove stood weeping by its shore.
After the two had cleansed away the blood in the waves,
And the limbs in death had returned to beauty, after their
Last kisses, the sorrowing women sought the means of fire.
But the pyres around were quenched and the ashes cold,
Extinguished in the muddy trenches. Yet whether by chance
Or by the will of the gods, that to which fierce Eteocles' limbs
Had been consigned still stood. Was Fortune preparing one
More place of portent, or had the Fury preserved this fire
For mischief? Here, equally zealous, they observed a single
Thin flame still flickering among the blackened logs, both
Rejoicing despite their tears. They had no knowledge yet
Of whose pyre it was, but they prayed that whoever it might
Might be would admit another, in peace and mercy, to share
The final fire and, as shades, let their ashes mingle together.
Behold the brothers, joined once more! As soon as those
Consuming flames touched their limbs, the pile of timber

Quaked, the newcomer was almost banished from the pyre.
The fire, divided at the summit flared in alternating tips
Of broken light. Each mass of flame menaced, and tried
To out-leap, the other. The logs themselves shifted weight
And rolled apart. Antigone, terrified, cried: 'We are lost,
We have stirred the wrath of the dead. It was his brother's
Pyre. Who else would be so savage as to repel the advent
Of another shade? See, I recognise this piece of his shield,
And this charred belt. It is his brother's. See how the flame
Withdraws from, yet rushes at, the other? It lives, their
Monstrous hate, it lives! War has done nothing. Ah, you
Wretches, you fight, but has not Creon already conquered?
Eteocles, your kingdom is lost. Why then this fury? Cease
Your menaces! And you Polynices, an exile everywhere,
Ever denied justice, yield now. This your wife, your sister
Beg, or must we plunge into the savage flames to part you?'
She had barely finished when a sudden tremor shook
The plain and the high city towers, and widened the cleft
In the discordant fire. The sentries slumber was disturbed;
Sleep himself sent troubled images. At once the soldiers
Ran in, ringing the place with their encircling weapons.
The old man was afraid, but the two women beside the pyre
Openly admitted to the act, to flouting Creon's cruel decree,
Lamenting loudly, but free of care, seeing that Polynices'
Corpse had been totally consumed. Now they were eager
For harsh self-sacrifice, and their desire for death seethed
Bravely within them. They contested who had stolen his
Body, a brother's, a husband's, and each won credence
In turn. 'I stole the corpse'. 'I dragged him to the fire.'
'Affection made me do so.' 'It was love.' Both demanded
Savage punishment and rejoiced to be bound in chains.
Gone was the mutual respect in those alternating cries.
You might have thought all anger and hatred, so loudly
Did they shout, urging their captors towards the king.

BkXII:464-518 The Argive women reach Athens

Meanwhile far away at the walls of Athens Juno led
Forward the distraught Argive women (Pallas being
Now benign) and, distraught herself, sought the city's
Favour towards the sorrowing troop, lending dignity
To their tears. She herself gave them olive branches
And the ribbons of suppliants, and told them to lower
Their eyes and veil them with their mantles, holding
Up the urns of their dead, empty of ashes. Athenians
Poured from their homes filling the streets, or climbed
To the rooftops, asking where this swarm of grieving
Women, all clustered together, had appeared from.
Though not yet knowing the cause of their distress,
The people already groaned in sympathy. Now Juno
Mingled with both groups, saying whence they came
And whose deaths they mourned and their request,
And the women themselves spoke denouncing Thebes
And Creon's cruel decree to all and sundry. Those
Nightingales of Thrace with Philomela's mutilated
Call complain no more loudly as they sing out from
Their foreign perches against the dual marriage bed
And Tereus' injustice. In the midst of the city was
An altar, but not one dedicated to any deity of power;
Gentle Mercy had her shrine there and misery made it
Sacred. She never lacked fresh suppliants, and never
Denigrated requests with refusal, all who asked were
Heard. They were allowed to visit by day and night,
And propitiated the goddess solely with their troubles.
Her rites were frugal; no burnt incense or deep measure
Of blood was allowed: the altar was moist with tears,
And above it hung sad offerings of shorn tresses, or
Clothing left there when luck changed. A gentle grove
Surrounded it, with revered emblems of worship, laurels
And branches of suppliant olive both twined with wool.
There was no effigy, no divine form there cast in bronze;
For Mercy delights to live in minds and hearts. The place

Was always full of the fearful, ever bristling with crowds
Of the needy, only to the fortunate was her altar unknown.
They say the children of Hercules founded the shrine,
Being saved in battle after their father's death. The tale
Falls short of the truth: we may rightly believe the gods
Themselves, to whom Athens always proved hospitable,
Hallowed the place, and just as they established the rule
Of law, and granted us fresh humanity, and sacred rites,
And those seeds that descended hence into empty lands,
So they sanctified a common refuge for troubled souls,
Far from all rage and threat and monarchy, a righteous
Altar, from which the vicissitudes of Fortune receded.
All those defeated in war, or exiled from their country,
Deposed from their thrones, or charged with crimes in
Error, gathered there and sued for peace. Later that
Hospitable place was to overcome Oedipus' Furies,
And conceal the Theban's relics, and remove the guilt
For his mother's death from the unfortunate Orestes.
There the anguished throng of Lerna gathered, crowds
Of Athenians showing them the way, and all the mass
Of former unfortunates yielded their places to them.
They were scarcely there before their cares were eased,
And their hearts had rest; like those cranes driven to flight
From their native land by the northerly winds who cross
The sea to Pharos, filling the sky more widely with their
Glad sound, happy, beneath cloudless skies, to have left
The snows they scorn, and ease their chill along the Nile.

BkXII:519-586 Evadne petitions Theseus

Now the joyful cheers and shouts of the crowd, raised
To the sky above, and the glad sound of the trumpets
Announced the return of Theseus to his native city,
In his laurelled chariot after fierce battles with Scythian
Amazons, his warfare done. Before their leader were led
The spoils, chariot-loads of virgins the image of harsh Mars,
Wagons piled with helms, horses bereaved of their riders,

Shattered axes with which those women felled the forests
And pierced the frozen Sea of Azov; they bore light quivers,
Belts glittering with gems, shields stained with the blood
Of their owners. The women themselves showed no fear,
Nor acknowledged their gender, and nor did they lament in
The common manner, scorning to plead only seeking out
The shrine of virgin Minerva. The populace's first desire
Was to view the victor, drawn by four snow-white horses.
Hippolyte too attracted their eyes, now charming in aspect,
And ready to accept the marriage bond. The Athenian
Women muttered among themselves, wondering that she
Had broken with the austere custom of her country, in that
Her hair was groomed and her breast covered by her mantle;
That she would mingle her own barbarian blood with that
Of mighty Athens, and bear children to a man once her foe.
The sad daughters of Pelops walked from the altar, where
They had been sitting, to admire the passage of the triumph.
They thought of their defeated men folk, and when Theseus
Slowed his chariot and from its proud height enquired as to
Their petition, and invited their plea with kindly attention,
Evadne, the wife of Capaneus, chose to speak before the rest:
'Warrior son of Aegeus, to whom Fortune offers opportunity
Of great and unexpected glory from our disaster, we are of
No foreign stock, nor guilty of heinous crime: Argos is our
Home, where our husbands were brave kings – would it had
Been otherwise! For what point was there in sending seven
Battalions to set Agenor's Thebes to rights? But we are not
Here to complain of those men's deaths. Such are the chances
Of battle, and the fortunes of war. They fell in fight, but they
Were no Cyclopes raised in Sicilian caves or by the bi-formed
Centaur of Mount Ossa. I shall not speak of race or famous
Ancestry. They were of human blood, great Theseus, men
Created beneath the same stars, to the same manner of life,
The same nurture, as you yourselves. Creon denies them their
Funeral pyres, and bars them from the threshold of the Stygian
Gate, as though he had fathered the Furies or Charon, ferryman
Of the Lethe, leaving them poised between heaven and Erebus.

Ah, primal Nature! Where are the gods in this, where the hurler
 Of that unjust lightning-bolt? Where will you stand, Athens?
 Now a seventh dawn rises, steering her frightened horses far
 From them where they lie. The light of every starry ray slants
 Away from them in horror. The wild beasts and the very birds
 Themselves loathe the foul flesh on their approach and that
 Battlefield breathing corruption, tainting the breeze, the sky.
 What remains of them might you suppose? Make him permit
 Us to gather the naked bones, the blood-stained rotting flesh.
 Hurry, honoured sons of Cecrops! You must be our champion
 Before Thracians and Macedonians grieve as we do, or others
 Elsewhere who hold funeral rites and immolate by burning.
 Or what limit shall there be to savagery? True, we made war,
 But those in hate are fallen; death has buried the bitterness
 Of wrath. You too, or so the stories of your noble deeds relate,
 Would not throw Sinis or the vile Cercyon to savage monsters,
 And would rather have cremated and not drowned fierce Scyron.
 Did not the Thracian River Don too, from whence you bring back
 These spoils, see the smoke of Amazonian pyres? But be worthy
 Of this triumph, grant earth and sky and Erebus a deed, if it was
 Truly you who freed your native Marathon of the bull, and Crete
 Of the Minotaur, if aged Hecale who sheltered you did not shed
 Her tears in vain. So may you never fight a battle without Pallas
 Aiding you nor divine Hercules envying your matching exploits,
 And may your mother see you ever triumphant in your chariot,
 And may unconquered Athens never need to make a plea like ours.'

BkXII:587-676 Theseus sets out for Thebes

She spoke and all echoed her words and stretched out their hands
 In clamorous entreaty. The heroic son of Neptune, reddened, stirred
 By righteous anger, moved by their tears, exclaiming: 'What Fury
 Has induced such strange behaviour in a king? The Greek hearts
 I left behind, when I departed for Scythia and snowy Pontus, were
 Not such: whence this new frenzy? Fell Creon, did you think Theseus
 Defeated there? Well, I am here, and not weary of blood, believe me:
 This spear still thirsts for that of the wicked. No delay. Loyal Phegeus,

Wheel your horse and ride for the Tyrian towers. Proclaim my words:
'Flames for the Danaï or war for Thebes.' So saying, making little of
His recent battles and the journey, he urged on his men, reviving their
Flagging strength. So a bull when he has regained his brides and his
Pastures, and the fight is behind him, hearing the woods resound with
The bellowing of another contender, prepares himself again, though
His head and back rain streams of blood, and pawing the meadow
Conceals his pain, and hides his wounds with the dust. Minerva too
Shook her shield, stirring Libyan terror, making the Medusa guarding
Her breast quiver, its snakes immediately rearing up, their whole
Swarm gazing towards Thebes. The Athenian army was not yet ready
To march, but already Dircean Thebes trembled at the trumpets' sound.
Now the warriors assembled eager for the fight, not only those soldiers
From the Caucasian triumph but untrained recruits from every region
Roused to arms. They gathered willingly to their leader's standard,
These were the men that fought for chill Brauron, Monychian fields,
Piraeus, unfailing harbour for anxious sailors, and Marathon not yet
Famed for victory over the Persians. The homes of Icarius and Celeus,
Hosts to their country's gods, Bacchus and Ceres, sent men to fight,
Green Melaenae, and Aegaleos dense with forests, and Parnes kind
To the vine, and Lycabessos, more generous still to the oil-rich olive.
Fierce warriors from Alae were there, and the ploughboys of fragrant
Hymettus, and those of Acharnae who first twined bare wands with ivy.
They left Sunium behind, visible afar to vessels from the east, where
Theseus' Cretan ship with its black sail deceived Aegeus, whose fall
Gave a name to the shifting waves. Salamis saw one race of farmers
Hang up their ploughs and seek grim battle; Ceres' Eleusis another;
And Callirhoe those whom she entwined nine times in her meandering
Streams; and the Ilissos too, that witnessed the rape of Orithyia and hid
Boreas, her Getic lover, along his banks. The Acropolis itself, where
The deities held their great dispute, resolved when a new species of
Tree, the olive, sprang from the contested plateau and cast its long
Shadow on the sea; that rocky hill too was emptied for the warfare.
Hippolyte wished to go, so as to lead her Thracian squadrons against
Cadmus' walls, but the promise of her pregnant womb now certain
Held her back, and her husband asked her to forgo thoughts of war,
And hang her quiver, its service complete, in the marriage chamber.

When Theseus saw the troops, eager for battle and glittering with
Shining steel, giving brief embraces and hasty kisses to their loving
Children, he spoke to them from his high chariot: 'Soldiers, you who
Shall with me defend the laws of the lands and the earth's covenants,
Consider the justice of our enterprise. It is clear that the judgement
Of gods and men, Nature, our ruler, and the hosts of silent Avernus
Are on our side; on the other are the ranks of the avenging Furies.
Active for Thebes, the snake-haired Sisters lead out their standards.
March quickly now, and trust in our great cause.' He spoke, then
Hurled his spear to initiate their swift passage. So, when Jupiter
At the Hyperborean pole high among the clouds shakes the skies
At the start of winter, Aeolia's cave is opened, the chill tempest
Restless from long idleness take heart, and the windswept Bear
Whistles: then sea and mountains roar, there is conflict amongst
The viewless clouds, and thunder and wild lightning hold revel.
Now the trampled earth groaned, a weight of hooves transmuted
The green fields, and the soil pulverised by countless squadrons
Of cavalry and foot, blew outwards. Yet the glitter of arms still
Shone through the smothering dust, and cleft the air far off,
As spears flashed through the thick cloud. They recruited night's
Silent darkness to their cause too. There was fierce competition
Among the warriors as to who might first announce, from some
Low hill, that Thebes, the objective of their swift columns, was
In sight, and whose lance might be the first to lodge in its wall.
Nearing the place, Neptunian Theseus grasped his vast shield
Depicting armies. On his boss it reveals the origins of his own
Glory, the hundred cities and hundred winding walls of Crete,
Himself in the depths of the monstrous labyrinth grasping
The shaggy neck of the struggling Minotaur, alternately binding
Hands and knotty arms about him, his head averted to escape
The horns. Men are terrified when he goes to war defended
By that savage scene; they see Theseus twice, his hands twice
Bloody with destruction, and he himself recalls his past deeds,
Viewing his band of comrades again, the once dreaded entrance,
And the maid of Cnossos, Ariadne, pale, as the thread gives out.

BkXII:677-729 Creon accepts battle

Meanwhile Savage Creon was arranging the death of Adrastus' Widowed daughter Argia and that of Antigone. Their wrists were Manacled behind their backs but, being proud and eager to die, Disappointing the bloodthirsty king, they were both stretching Their necks out towards the swords, when Phegeus arrived there Carrying Theseus' message. He came in peace, bearing innocuous Olive branches but loud and angry, over-mindful of his commander, Emphasising that Theseus was already nearby, his troops spread Over the intervening country, he threatened war, and stirred war. Creon stood there in perplexity, anxiety rising within him: thus he Wavered, and his earlier threats and anger ebbed. Then he braced Himself and with a false and sorrowful smile said: 'Was that no Small lesson we taught defeated Mycenae? Yet see, here others Come to assault our walls. Well then, let them come: but let them Not complain after the battle: there is one law for the vanquished.' He spoke, but could see that the horizon was dark with clouds Of dust and the Theban mountains losing their outline. Turning Pale, he nevertheless ordered the people to arms, and demanded His own weapons. Then to his dismay he thought he saw the Furies Appear, suddenly, in the heart of the palace; Menoeceus weeping; And the Argive corpses set on pyres while all rejoiced. What a day Of battle now came, when the victory won by Thebes, at such cost In blood, was lost! The Thebans grasped the spoils hung so recently In their ancestral shrines, defending themselves with broken shields, Dinted helmets, and spears still caked with blood. None, brave to See, rode his steed, or marched gallantly with sword or quiver. Faith In the fortifications fled, and the walls were exposed on every side. The gates required new defences, their former enemy had destroyed Them, and the battlements were shattered where Capaneus toppled Them, and while the soldiers, wounded, weak, planted no last kisses On wives' and children's cheeks; the old were dazed and prayer-less. Meanwhile Theseus, seeing a brilliant sun burst through the clouds, Its rays glittering on the armour, leapt onto that plain whose corpses Lay unburied below the walls. Breathing air tainted by foul vapours Beneath his dust-stained helm, he groaned, and righteous battle-anger

Flared. Now either the Theban king chose not to fight a second battle
Over the very bodies of the dead, or else in his wickedness he sought
Virgin soil to drink the blood, lest he fail to grant earth full measure
Of the cruel slaughter. Now, Bellona roused two peoples to one-sided
Battle: the shouting and the trumpets' clamour unequal. The Thebans
Stood slackly, their swords languishing, and their spear-straps loose
In their hands. They gave ground, withdrew their squadrons, their old
Wounds still bleeding. The Athenian generals too doused their ardour,
Their threat receding, their courage ebbing, with clear victory assured,
Just as the roar of the winds diminishes when no forest obstructs their
Fury or the wild breakers sink to silence far from the sounding shore.

BkXII:730-796 Theseus slays Creon

Now Neptunian Theseus brandished his spear of Marathonian oak
On high, its cruel shadow falling on the foe, the flame of its point
Filling the grim battlefield, as though Mars whipped on his Thracian
Chariot bearing death and rout on swift wheels from Haemus' peak,
Such that pale terror drove the panicked scions of Agenor in retreat.
Theseus wearied of slaying fugitives, his hand scorned easy prey,
While his men's courage exhausted itself in furious ignoble carnage.
Anger feeds mighty lions, but only wolves and degenerate dogs love
Lifeless flesh flung at their feet. Nevertheless Theseus slew Olenius
And Lamyrus, the one as he snatched arrows from his quiver, while
The other savagely grasped a heavy rock; and killed Alcetus' three
Sons who trusted in their ancestral triple strength. Theseus slew
Them each in turn from a distance with as many spears: Phyleus
Took the blade in his chest; Helops bit down on it with his teeth;
While Iapyx felt it pass through his shoulder. Now Theseus headed
For Haemon high in his four-horse chariot, and whirled his deadly
Weapon. Haemon swerved his frightened team. Reaching its mark,
After its long flight, the spear pierced two of the horses, and would
Have transfixed a third if the point had not struck the pole between.
Yet amidst the squadrons it was Creon, only Creon that he sought
With fearful shouts and oaths: his is the name that Theseus called.
Then he caught sight of him on the other flank urging on his men
With cries, threatening them with the worst, in vain. His troops

Melted away, while Theseus' men let him be, as ordered, trusting
In the gods and their general's weapons. Creon grasping his, now
Recalled them. Feeling their equal hatred, he roused himself in
Fatal anger, and with a final fury, driven by thoughts of death,
Cried out: 'You are not fighting now with shield-bearing women,
Here are no virginal arms. This is the raw conflict of men. It was
We who put mighty Tydeus and ravening Hippomedon to death,
And dispatched Capaneus to the shades. What mad foolishness
Counselled you to war, oh perverse man? See you not where they
Lie, those you would avenge?' So saying he planted a javelin
In the rim of Theseus' shield, all in vain. That grim son of Aegeus
Mocked speech and throw alike, and readied a mighty launch of
His steel-tripped oaken spear, first with proud words thundering:
'You Argive ghosts, to whom I dedicate this offering, open wide
The gates of Tartarus: make ready you vengeful Furies, for behold
Creon comes!' With that, the quivering shaft cleft the air, to strike
Where delicate links of chain with their complex weave formed
The close-knit mail. Creon's impious blood spurted from their
Thousand openings: he fell, his eyes already wandering in death.
A grim-faced Theseus stood beside him and grasping the armour
Cried: 'Now will you grant the flames due your dead foes? Now
Will you bury the vanquished? Go! Dark is your punishment, but
You at least are sure of a tomb at last.' In a now-friendly confusion
The standard-bearers met, and the warriors clasped hands. A truce
Was struck in the midst of the battlefield; Theseus became a guest.
They begged him to enter the walls and honour their houses. He
Without demur entered the enemy city as victor. Ogygian brides
And mothers rejoiced, as Bacchus' worshippers beside the Ganges,
Won to his warlike wand, intoxicated, celebrate unwarlike revels.
See, in the shadow of Dirce's heights, the Pelasgian women shouted
Fit to shake the stars, hastening like those wild Thyiads summoned
To Bacchic wars; you would think they were calling for some vast
Crime, or had committed one. Mourning now rejoiced and fresh
Tears exulted. Emotion drove them here and there; should they first
Seek out magnanimous Theseus, or Creon's corpse, or their loved
Ones? The sadness of the bereaved led them towards the bodies.

BkXII:797-819 Statius' Envoi

Even though some god were to free my breath in a thousand voices,
There is no worthy effort of mine that could do justice to such a host
Of pyres for generals and common folk alike, nor such a chorus of
Lament; nor could I relate with what bravery Evadne threw herself
Into the flames consuming her beloved, seeking to touch the lightning
In that mighty breast; nor how Deipyle, Tydeus' luckless wife, excused
His savage deed as she bent to kiss the corpse; nor how Argia told her
Sister of the cruel guards; nor with what grief Atalanta the Erymanthian
Mother of Arcadian Parthenopaeus mourned for her son, whose beauty
Remained though the life was fled, he for whom both armies wept alike.
Scarcely could Apollo's presence, bringing fresh inspiration, complete
The task, while my barque, on the wide ocean, has earned harbour now.
My Thebaid on whom for twelve years I've spent all my waking effort,
Will you survive, and be read when your author is long gone? Already,
In truth, your fame has spread a generous path before you, and begun
To reveal you, a new arrival, to those to come. Already magnanimous
Domitian, our Caesar, has deigned to acknowledge you, and the learned
Youth of Italy memorise you and recite you. Live on, I pray; but do not
Try to compete with the divine Aeneid, rather follow always in its steps
And adore it from afar. Soon every envy spreading mist before you will
Vanish and, when I am gone, you'll receive such honour as is deserved.

End of Book XII and the Thebaid