

EURIPIDES'
"SUPPLIANT WOMEN"

Ικέτιδες

c 423BCE

Translated by

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Dramatis Personae:

Aethra

(*Mother of Theseus*)

Theseus

(*King of Athens*)

Adrastus

(*King of Argos*)

Evadne

(*Wife of Capaneus, one of the Seven*)

Iphis

(*Evadne's father*)

Athena

(*Goddess*)

Theban Herald

Athenian Herald

(*silent*)

Argive Herald

(*former servant of Capaneus*)

Chorus 1

(*of the mothers of the Seven*)

Chorus 2

(*of the sons of the Seven*)

Various Attendants

(*to the mothers and to Theseus – silent*)

Servant

(to Iphis – silent)

Before the temple of Demeter and Persephone, at Eleusis, Attica.

An altar to the right of the temple.

Further to the right is a rock upon which Evadne will stand when she first appears (Line 980)

Aethra is by the altar, praying.

Kneeling all around her is the Chorus of the mothers of the Seven men who had died fighting against Thebes. They are holding olive branches, from which hang white ribbons of cotton wool, signifying they are suppliants.

Aethra is dressed in ceremonial white, the mothers and their attendants in mourning black. The latter also have their hair shorn. Around this chorus stand their attendants.

At the steps to the temple Adrastus lies prostrate, his head covered by his cloak.

He is surrounded by what will become the second chorus, the sons of the Seven.

All except the sons are middle aged with grey hair.

Aethra:

Demeter!

Lady of the hearths of Eleusis!

And you, too, servants of the temple.

Give me your blessing,

Give my son Theseus your blessing,

Give this city, Athens, your blessing and

Give the land of Pitheas, my father, your blessing!

It was there, in the plush halls of Pitheas' palace that I, Aethra, was raised and made the wife of Aegeus, Pandion, obeying Apollo's oracles.

I ask for these blessings because I see before me these old women who have left their homes at Argos and came here to fall at my knees with suppliant branches, driven by their unbearable suffering.

They have lost their brave sons!

Killed before the gates of Cadmus.

Seven noble men led by Adrastos, the King of Argos, when he wanted to take for his exiled son-in-law, Polynices, his due heritage from the estate of Polynices' father, Oedipus.

They want to bury their brave sons!

Killed by the spear of war, they remain here, unburied, a shame against the laws of the gods. Those in power of this land will not grant permission to these mothers to perform the burial rites of their slaughtered sons.

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Indicating the prostrate Adrastos

And there lies Adrastos, his face soaked with tears, his heart lamenting the loss of all the men he led to this unfortunate expedition.

He is here to share with me the burden of helping these women in their hour of need.

He has asked me to beg my son, to try and persuade my son to restore the bodies of these men to their mothers, either by speech or by spear, so that they may bury them according to the laws.

He says only my son and the city of Athens could accomplish this.

I have only just arrived here, to this shrine, to Eleusis, to offer sacrifices so as to ensure the abundance of the earth's crop. Eleusis is first land to see the sheafs of the fruitful corn shimmer above its soil. I stand here and wait.

Here at the doubly holy sanctuary of Demeter and her daughter, I stand holding these green branches, symbols not of force but of supplication and in sympathy with these here mothers, childless and grey with age and in reverence for their ribbons of prayer.

I have sent a herald to the palace of my son, Theseus, to ask him to come here and either banish these poor women and their misery from the city or else lighten the burden of our obligation by performing some pious act that would please the gods. Wise women must always let men act on their behalf for all their needs.

42

Chorus:

Lady, I fall before your knees!

I beg you, I, an old woman, with aged lips beg you, my lady:

Save our sons!

Chorus:

And I, too, beg you, my lady:

Don't let their dead bodies be torn apart by the wild mountain beasts!

50

Chorus:

Look at me, my lady!
Look how I tear at my aged cheeks with my own nails!

Chorus:

My tears drench my face!

Chorus:

What am I to do?

Chorus:

I could not dress my own son's body for the burial house, nor see a mound of earth raised over his grave.

Chorus:

You, too, great Lady, have blessed your marriage bed by bearing a son, so let me now have some share of your love for that son.

Chorus:

Show some pity for the weighty grief I feel for the death of my own luckless son!

60

Chorus:

Move your son's heart. Persuade him to go to the river Ismenus and bring into our hands the corpses of the young men, longing for their burial.

Chorus:

I have come here, dear Lady, to these fire loving altars of the goddess, not as a pilgrim but as one who is forced to fall on her knees and pray a just prayer.

Chorus:

You have the power to relieve our misery, dear Lady -

Chorus:

- through your noble son.

Chorus:

Through an ocean of misery, I beg your son now, to place into my own hands the body of my own son.

70

Chorus:

Let me embrace his unfortunate limbs.

The attendants begin to groan, cry, beat their breasts and scratch their cheeks in mourning.

Chorus:

Ah!

A new wave of tears!

A new wave of groans!

A new wave of pain!

Chorus:

Pain follows pain!

Tears follow tears!

Hands tearing at the breasts!

Chorus:

There, the hands of our attendants beat out the sound of misery!

Companions to our misery,

Companions to our pains,

Take up the dance that Hades loves!

Chorus:

Tear the blood out of your white cheeks

Tear it out with your nails!

This is the way the living honour the dead!

Chorus:

A sweet delight,

An unquenchable delight

Fills my lamenting tears.

80

Chorus:

A relentless waterfall

Pouring forth from a steep ravine.

Chorus:

It's in a woman's blood to cry with pain when her children die.
To lament, to wail and to groan, when her children die!
It's in a woman's blood!

Chorus:

Hades, take me!
Hades, take me that I may forget this pain!

Theseus: *From within as he's approaching*

What is all this wailing? This beating of breasts? This groaning?
What are all these loud dirges?
All this noise! It seems to be coming from this temple here.
What could be happening?

90

I am so afraid for my mother. I hope she hasn't come to some grief.
She's been away from the house too long. I'm looking for her.

Enter Theseus with attendants

What is going on here?

What odd things I see here!

There's my old mother, sitting by the altar, surrounded by all these
foreign women.

And what misery I see on their faces! Tears fall fast to the ground.
Bitter tears.

They have their hair shorn and their clothes! These are not the
clothes people wear at festivals.

What is going on?

Mother, what is it? What is this?

I fear something dreadful has happened.

Mother tell me! It is your duty to tell me and mine to listen to you.

100

Aethra:

Thesseeus, my son! These are the mothers of the seven warriors who
died by Cadmus' gates.

Like guards, they have circled me, with their suppliant branches.

Theseus:

And this man, there?

That man who's groaning with sorrow, who is he?

Aethra:

That is Adrastus. I am told he is the king of the Argives.

Theseus:

And what about those boys next to him? Are they his sons?

Aethra:

No, they are the sons of the warriors killed in that battle.

Theseus:

So, why are they here? Are they suppliants?

Aethra:

My son, I know why but I'd better let them tell their own story from here on.

110

Theseus: *To Adrastus*

You there!

You, with your head buried in your cloak.

I'm addressing you. Stop your mournful sighs and talk to me.

No work is finished if the tongue does not speak of it.

Adrastus: *Slowly uncovers his head, rises to his feet and speaks*

Lord Theseus! Gracious in victory! King of Athens!

I have come as a suppliant to you and to your city.

Theseus:

Tell me then, what is it that you are after? What do you need?

Adrastus:

Do you know of the disastrous expedition that I led?

Theseus:

Yes, I do. Your passage through Greece was not a quiet one.

Adrastus:

During that expedition, I have lost the finest men of Argos.

Theseus:

That is the work of war for you. Heartless.

120

Adrastus:

I went to the city to ask for the bodies of those men.

Theseus:

By sending heralds of Hermes, the god who relays messages during battle?

Did you ask for them so that you may burry them?

Adrastus:

Yes, Theseus but their killers refused.

Theseus:

But your request was a sacred one. What did they say to you?

Adrastus:

What did they say to me? Their victory has damaged them.

Theseus:

And so, why have you come to me, for advice or for something else?

Adrastus:

King Theseus, I want you to try and bring back to me the sons of Argos.

Theseus:

But what about this brave Argos of yours? Where is it now? Or is it all merely the hot air of boasting?

Adrastus:

We have fallen and destroyed by the war. That's why we have come to you, Theseus.

Theseus:

Was this something you decided on your own or was it the decision of the whole city?

130

Adrastus:

All of Danau's descendants beg you to help us bury our dead.

Theseus:

But why did you raise up seven companies of men to march against
Thebes, Adrastus?

Adrastus:

As a favour to my sons-in-law, Theseus.

Theseus:

Which ones? To which Argives did you give your daughters?

Adrastus:

No, I gave them to no Argives. These marriage ties were not made to
native men.

Theseus:

So you gave your Argive daughters to foreigners?

Adrastus:

Yes, Theseus. They were foreign men. Thebans. Tydeus and
Polyneices.

Theseus:

What made you do a thing like that?

Adrastus:

I was tricked, Theseus. Tricked by Apollo's oracles!

Theseus:

What did Apollo say about these marriages?

140

Adrastus:

He said, "Marry your daughters to a boar and a lion."

Theseus:

What did you make of that oracle?

Adrastus:

One night two exiles appeared at my door...

Theseus:

Two of them? Who were they?

Adrastus:

These men fought against each other. They were Tydeus and Polyneices.

Theseus:

Yet, even though you thought that these men were beasts, you still gave your daughters to them?

Adrastus:

Yes, they were beasts, all right. The way they fought each other! So I thought that this was what the oracle meant. These were the beasts to whom the oracle said I should marry my daughters.

Theseus:

But why did they leave their countries to come to you?

Adrastus:

Tydeus was exiled because he had spilled kindred blood.

Theseus:

What about the other son of Oedipus? Why did he leave Thebes?

150

Adrastus:

He wanted to avoid killing his brother. A curse made by Oedipus.

Theseus:

A prudent act this one. Go into self exile so as to avoid shedding the blood of your brother.

Adrastus:

But, unfortunately, those who had stayed behind wronged those who had left.

Theseus:

You mean, Polyneices had robbed Tydeus of his inheritance?

Adrastus:

And that's why I had marched against Thebes. To punish this crime. Polyneices' crime and that's where I was destroyed.

Theseus:

But, before you started on this expedition, did you consult the seers and with the flames of burnt offerings?

Adrastus:

Ah! Now you're asking me difficult questions. That's exactly where I failed.

Theseus:

Obviously, then, you went to war without the blessings of the gods!

Adrastus:

Worse than that, I went off to war against the wishes of a seer. Amphiaraus himself. The only god fearing man amongst the seven generals!

Theseus:

You ignored sacred advice so easily?

160

Adrastus:

Yes, Theseus! I was maddened by the shouts of young men!

Theseus:

Boldness and not wisdom has sent you to war, Adrastus. The heart and not the head.

Adrastus: *Kneels as he addresses Theseus.*

Yes, Theseus. I was the very same thing that has destroyed many generals.

But now, Theseus, bravest of all the Greeks, king of Athens I, an old man, a king also who saw prosperity himself, must shame himself and fall upon the ground and beg you! With my arms clasping your knees, Theseus, I must yield to my ill Fate and beg you to take pity! Take pity on my own misery and on the misery of these women, these mothers whose sons have been slaughtered in battle. Bring back the bodies of these men!

170

The loss of their children has aged them and now, even though they can hardly move their aged limbs, they've come here to place their feet upon this foreign soil.

They have not come to Demeter's sacred mysteries as suppliants,

Theseus! They have come to bury their slaughtered sons, Theseus, though it is their sons who should, instead, be burring them! It is their sons who should be conducting the funerals of these women!

Adrastus rises to his feet.

It is wise for the wealthy to look at the poor. Wise too, for the poor to look at the wealthy with adulation so that they, too, might strive for wealth; and equally as wise for the fortunate to look at the pains suffered by the unfortunate.

180

Life is a misfortune. In this ocean of misfortune, joy is sparse and in short supply.

What I say is sad indeed but what can I do? A bitter heart makes the lips bitter.

The poet who wants to sing joyful songs must know joy himself. If his soul is in pain, he has neither the ability nor the right to make happy the hearts of others.

You have every right to ask, "but why leave behind the land of Pelops, to come and burden Athens with this task?" and it would be my duty to answer you.

Sparta is a wild and devious country and the other countries are small and weak. Athens though could well take up this task.

190

Athens takes pity on the pitiable and is lead by you, a good and strong leader. Many cities have been destroyed because they lacked such a leader.

Chorus:

I agree with Adrastus, Theseus. Take pity on my misfortunes.

Theseus:

I had the same discussion with others and my opinion is still the same.

Someone once said that the life of mortals has more ill fortune than good. I disagree.

The reverse is true. There is more good fortune than bad in our lives.

200

Otherwise, we wouldn't be alive in the first place.

I thank the god who has put order into our disordered and wild lives. That god has put reason into our thoughts and words into mouths, so that we can understand each other. Then he has given us the fruit of the soil to eat and with that fruit he gave us the heavenly rain drops

that nourishes that fruit and quenches the thirst of our bellies.
As well as all that, the same god, has taught us how to set up
fortresses against the Winter's attacks of icy cold and the sun's blaze
of Summer.

He taught us how to sail the oceans and make trade with other
nations so that each nation can obtain what it lacks.

210

Things that are dark to the human mind are brought to light by seers
who examine the flows of flames, the ways of entrails and the flight of
birds.

Since the god has armed our lives with all these blessings are we not
being too demanding when we say want even more?

But our arrogance and our pride makes us think we are mightier and
wiser than the god.

And you, Adrastus! You, obviously are one of that lot. The thoughtless
lot!

You have accepted Apollo's oracle and gave your daughters to
foreigners, thinking that it is the gods who give daughters to
marriage, instead of fathers.

222

You have mingled the blood of your noble house with foul blood and
so you've ruined it. What wise man does this? What wise man
mingles the just with the unjust? Wise men bring to their houses men
who are blessed.

Gods do not distinguish between the destinies of mortals. If mingled,
the sinner and the innocent will be punished as one.

And you have disobeyed the gods by ignoring the words of the seers
and pushed on with your expedition. You have taken all Argos to that
war and you have driven your own city to its destruction.

232

Instead of listening to the will of the gods you have listened to the
will of young men who love nothing more than to be honoured in
battle, to create mindlessly more and more battles with no regard for
the safety of the poor, innocent folk, sending them all to an
undeserved destruction. Young men! One wants to be a general,
another to take hold of all power, no matter what devastation he
causes in the process and yet another to seize all the wealth, no
matter what pains he causes to the majority of the his people.

239

Adrastus, there are three groups of people. There are the rich who
are never satisfied because their wealth is never enough for them –
these citizens are totally useless for the city. Then there are the poor

who, because their daily bread is never enough, are dangerous because they are deceived by the tongues of crooked politicians and by their own envy and so they aim the arrows of their hatred towards the rich.

And then, between these two, there is a third. This one is between them. It's there to keep the order, it's there to keep the city safe. So, now, after all you've done, after this all this, you ask me to become your ally?

What good reason is there for that? How should I put it to my own people?

Leave!

Good bye!

You have acted unwisely and I am under no obligation to shoulder the consequences of your unwise acts.

Go!

250

Chorus:

Theseus, it's true.

He has made a mistake but that's the way of young men. Forgive him now.

Chorus:

We have come, my Lord, to you, as someone who can mend such mistakes.

Adrastus:

My Lord, I did not come to you to ask you to be the judge of my deeds or to punish me for any errors I might have committed. No, I have come to ask for your help but if you decide not to grant it, then, so be it. What else am I to do but accept your will?

To the Chorus

Come, dear ladies. Leave your suppliant's leaves there and come, let us leave.

260

Let the gods be our witness. Let Demeter herself, the torch carrying goddess, and let the sun's light also bear witness to the fact that the prayers of our suppliant priestesses have not been answered.

But, oh, my Lord!

Think of this: You and I are related! Our blood runs back to common ancestors.

Your mother was Pittheus' daughter –Pittheus, the son of Pelops and

all of us here, all of us are from Pelops' land!
The blood which flows in our veins, Theseus, is the same as that
which flows in yours. And so, what will you do now? Will you betray
this tie of blood?
Will you send away from your land old women who've received
nothing of what they are owed?
No, you can't!
The beast finds its safety behind its rock, the slave finds it at the altar
of the gods and the city, when the storms of winter hit a city it will
find its shelter in another.
No mortal's prosperity is eternal.

The suppliant women, slowly approach Theseus

271

Chorus:
Poor woman!

Chorus:
Leave Persephone's sacred ground and go to him! Go and grasp his
knees!

Chorus:
Beg of him!

Chorus:
Ask him to bring to you the corpses of your fallen sons!
Chorus: *Loud cry of distress*
Ah!

Chorus: *Loud cry of distress*
Ah!

Chorus:
The sons who have fallen beneath the walls of Cadmus' city!

Chorus: *Loud cry of distress*
Ah!

Chorus: *In a fainting spell*
Hold me! Ah, the pain! Lift up my poor aged hands!
Ah!

Chorus: *At Theseus*

By your beard, old friend! Theseus, I beg you!

Chorus:

Dear friend, all the eyes of Greece hold you in glory!
I hold your knees in supplication, my Lord!

Chorus:

I hold your hand, my Lord and beg for pity!

Chorus:

Pity!

180

Chorus:

I beg for pity!

Chorus:

My heart begs for my son!

Chorus:

My legs wander for my son!

Chorus:

Lord Theseus!

Young Lord!

Don't let our sons lie unburied, above the ground, here in the land of Cadmus, to please the beasts of the wild.

Chorus:

Heed the tears on my cheeks, my Lord!

Heed my aged knees upon which I fall to beg you for the burial of my sons!

Aethra covers her face with her robe and releases a loud lament which makes Theseus turn towards her.

Theseus:

Mother, why the tears?

Why cover your eyes with your finely woven robe?

Is it the sad sound of these laments?

Yes, I, too felt its pain somewhat but now, raise your aged head and stop your tears. You're sitting by the altar of Demeter. Show reverence to the goddess.

291

Aethra:

Ah!

Theseus:

No, mother!

Don't cry because of the fate of these women!

Aethra:

Ah, poor, poor women!

Theseus:

Mother, you are not one of them! You do not share their fate.

Aethra:

My son, shall I say something which will give you and our city some honour?

Theseus:

Yes, do. Women can offer much wise council.

Aethra:

But, I'm a little hesitant to utter what it's in my mind.

Theseus:

That's a shame, mother. Keeping wise words from your dear son!

Aethra:

No, I won't stay silent now so as to have this silence punish me some time in the future. Nor will I hold back something that needs to be said through fear that speech making is unbecoming to women.

300

It is this my son: First of all, my boy, while in all other matters you are behaving correctly, you mustn't make the mistake of ignoring the will of the gods because dishonouring the gods will bring you disaster.

Secondly, if you were not asked to show courage in defence of someone who has suffered a wrong, I would stay silent but this deed

you are asked to perform, my son, will bring you great honour. It is a deed that I recommend highly and without any hesitation.

Perform it!

Use what force is necessary to make these cruel men change their ways. They have prohibited the proper burial ceremonies to be conducted over the bodies of the dead.

310

This is an insult to all the Greeks. It is a violation of the laws of the heavens, laws respected highly by all of Hellas. With no respect for the laws, there is no respect for the communities of men.

And then, if you will not act upon this, people will say that it was due to cowardice on your behalf. That you have failed to deliver the garland of glory to our city through lack of courage. They will say that you have once shown courage by fighting a wild boar but you now show cowardice when you need to fight against spears and helmets. Courage in the face of a trifling errant but cowardice in the face of a noble task.

You are my son, Theseus, so you should not act like that.

320

Have you not noticed how your country behaves when she's mocked and disparaged? She turns at her mockers and shows them a fierce face.

Ready to fight them.

Because your city is nourished by battle. Not like those other cities who live in dull quietude. The eyes of their men too, are dull, cowardly.

Hurry then my son!

Corpses and grief-stricken women need your help. Go to them!

When the cause is virtuous I do not fear for your life.

330

I can see that the Cadmians have prospered so far but the dice of their fortune will soon fall differently.

The gods can overturn everything.

Chorus:

Dear friend!

Your words are a delight for his ears and mine also.

This is a joy doubly felt.

Theseus:

Mother, everything I have said to Adrastus here, is true.

I have expressed my views about his mistakes and how they have

brought about his downfall.

339

But you're right. It's not in my character to run away from dangerous tasks and by my many deeds of virtue in the past, I have already exhibited to the Greeks my willingness to punish those who perform evil deeds.

No, it is not possible for me to refuse a task simply because it's difficult. What would my enemies say if they found out that the person who has asked me to perform it was you, mother, the very person who bore me and the very person whose heart trembles for my safety?

I will do this, mother. I will go and persuade the Thebans to release the corpses of the fallen men. I will try using words first but if words fail to persuade them, then I will use force. The gods will not go against us for such a purpose.

350

I also want the city to vote on this and I am sure they will agree with me, not only because I wish it but because they, too want it even more than I do.

In any case, I have made the citizens of this city its rulers, by giving them freedom and the equal rights to vote as they wish.

As proof of what I will be pleading with them, I shall take Adrastus along to the assembly and once I have convinced them I'll select a group of young, Athenian men and bring them back here. Then, from the army camp, I'll send a messenger over to Creon asking him for the bodies of the dead men.

359

Turning to the Chorus

So, you old ladies, remove the sacred branches of supplication from my mother so that I may take her to our paternal home.

Mother, give me your hand.

It would be a miserable son who would not appreciate the gifts he has received from his parents and who would not do the same for his own children.

From the hands of his children he will receive what his own hands had given to his parents.

The Chorus take away their suppliant branches.

Exit Theseus, Aethra and Adrastus.

Chorus:

Have you heard, Argos?

Have you heard, Argos, land where my fathers walked?
Have you heard, Argos, land of the many horses?
Have you heard the words of our god fearing King?

Chorus:

A King, great in the eyes of Pelasgia and Argos!

370

Chorus:

May the King bring us the blood soaked bodies of our sons!

Chorus:

The peak of a mother's sorrow and her deepest consolation.

Chorus:

Argos, the land of the river Inachus, will owe our King eternal
gratitude for that holy deed.

Chorus:

What will Athens do for us?

Will she make us her friends and help us with the burial of our sons?

Chorus:

Come, goddess!

Come Pallas Athena!

Help us, protect us!

Chorus:

Protect the laws of mortals from pollution.

379

Chorus:

Goddess, you honour justice and you always punish injustice.
You come to the rescue of the suffering.

Enter Theseus with armed guards, followed by a Herald and Adrastus.

Theseus: *To the Herald*

Herald, you have always served me and the city well by carrying our
messages wherever we tell you.

Now, you must cross the eddies of the rivers Asopus and Ismenus
and head for that arrogant King of the Cadmeans. When you find him,

tell him this:

"Theseus, your neighbour, asks this favour from you: bury the dead soldiers. It is his belief that this is the correct thing for you to do. In exchange, the whole race of the Erechtheids will become your friends and allies."

If the Cadmeans agree to this, thank them and come straight back home but if they refuse to take heed of this message then give them another. Tell them to prepare themselves for a visit from my men, armed with spears and shields.

391

Pointing into the distance within

Our army is there, by the springs of Calichoros; and it's ready and waiting for the orders to march. The Athenians were quick to agree to this battle when they heard my request.

He sees the Theban Herald approaching within

Wait a minute!

Perhaps this man coming might save you the journey. He looks like a messenger from the Cadmeans but I can't be sure.

Enter Theban Herald

399

Theban Herald:

Who rules this land?

Who will receive the message I have from Creon, ruler of the land of Cadmus since the day when Polyneices had killed Eteocles, his brother, outside our seven gates?

Theseus:

Hold it stranger!

You began your speech with the wrong word. There is no "ruler" here. This city is free of such men. It is ruled by the citizens themselves, rich and poor alike and it is they who hold the various offices of the State, in annual turns. Rich and poor are equal here.

Theban Herald:

Ha! And your words – they're like a lucky throw of the dice for me!

410

My city, the city that has sent me here, is ruled by one man and one man only, not by a whole herd of them. It is a city which allows no one to trick its people with sweet words, trick them into doing now one thing, now another – into doing things that suit his own

purposes. It doesn't have men whose first speeches are received well but then they destroy everything. And then, what do they do, these men? They lie to hide all the damage they've caused and with those lies they escape justice!

How can a mindless herd rule a city properly? It can't!
Wisdom cannot be obtained by haste but by patience, by time.

420

Take a poor farmer for example. Even if he is wise, how is he going to be able to apply himself to the city's affairs when he's so burdened by the hard work on his farm?

And then, it's a bitter thing to see, men of base birth enter a city, make some fine speeches to the people and then with those speeches become even more prominent than the nobles!

Theseus:

Oh, what an eloquent herald we have here! What a profusion of irrelevant little words!

All right then, my man. You've started this debate so let's perform it.
You said your piece now hear mine:

There's no heavier burden for a city to bear than a monarch.

430

To begin with, a city like that has no laws that are equal to all of its citizens. It can't. It is a place where one man holds all the laws of the city in his own hands and dictates them as he wants. What then of equality?

Written laws, however, give this equal treatment to all, rich and poor. If a poor man is insulted by a rich one, then that poor man has every right to use the same words against that rich man.

The poor can win against the rich if justice is on his side.

The essence of freedom is in these words: "He who has a good idea for the city let him bring it before its citizens."

440

You see? This way, he who has a good idea for the city will gain praise. The others are free to stay silent.

Is there a greater exhibition of fairness than this?

No, where the people hold the power, they can watch with great enjoyment the youth of their city thrive.

Not so when there is a single ruler. He hates that. The moment he sees someone who stands out in some way, he becomes afraid of losing his crown and so he kill him.

So how could a city possibly flourish like that? How could it grow in strength when someone goes about culling its bright youth like a

farmer goes about cutting off the highest tips of his wheat during Spring?

450

Why would anyone want to bother with wealth and livelihood for his boys if it will all end up in the ruler's hands? Or his girls. Why bother raising sweet daughters in your house if they, too, will end up with the ruler, whenever he wants them, leaving you with tears of sorrow? I'd rather die than have my daughters dragged against their will into a wedding bed!

So, these are the arrows I shot at your argument.

But now tell us, herald, what is the message you have for this city? Your speech would have cost you dearly had you not been sent here by your city to deliver us that message.

460

The job of the messengers is to deliver their message and then leave. Tell Creon that the next time he wants to send a messenger here, to send one far less chatty than you.

Chorus:

Ha! The uncouth always insult the gods even when the gods present them with gifts!

Chorus:

They think the gifts will last for ever!

Theban Herald: *To Theseus*

Very well, I'll give you the message but about the other matter, we'll agree to disagree.

The message is this: I and all the other Cadmeans ask that Adrastus stays outside this city but since he's here, you must break those sacred suppliant boughs and send him away before Dawn.

470

And don't try to take the corpses by force. Argos and the Argives are none of your concern.

Do as I say and you'll be able to navigate your city through the tempest. Disobey and all of us -us, you and your allies- will have to face its monstrous deluge.

Think about it carefully. Forget the feeble excuses and boasts about your "free city" and forget your anger against my speech.

And forget hope!

480

Hope tricks people. Do not trust it! It raises an anger among them,

among their cities, against each other. Hope brings cities to war. And when the subject of war is discussed and voted upon by the people, not one of them thinks that he might die in it. It will always be someone else –he hopes! But if Hades suddenly appeared before his eyes, just when he's about to cast his vote for war, then Greece would not be destroyed by the madness of spears and shields.

And yet, people know which is the better choice of speeches. They all know the difference between good and evil. They all know that Peace is far better than War.

They know very well that the Muses love Peace and the Avenging Spirits hate her.

490

Peace finds joy in the sight of beautiful children and glory in prosperity.

But we, foolish mortals, reject all these good things and begin wars. We turn the weaker man into a slave and so we have one man making a slave out of another and one city subjugating another city! And you!

Will you help the men of an enemy army, men who have been killed? Will you give a proper burial to men whose own insolence has brought them to their destruction?

Well then, in your opinion, it was wrong that Capaneus' body was turned into smoke by the thunderbolt. Capaneus, the man who leaned his ladders up against our city's gates and swore that whether the gods wanted it or not, he would raze the city to the ground! Is that what you think?

500

And do you also think that the gaping earth should not have swallowed up the seer, along with his chariot and its four horses together? Nor that the other generals should lie by the gates, their skulls crushed to dust by the huge boulders?

Then Theseus, say that you are wiser than Zeus! Say that, or else admit that the gods are right to slaughter the ungodly!

Wise, indeed!

Wise men, Theseus love first their children, then their parents and then their country, which they should try and make greater rather than destroy.

The unwise, the insolent leader, like the young sailor will make mistakes. The wise knows when to do nothing because even that, even doing nothing when nothing is called for, can also be a brave thing.

Forethought is also bravery.

511

Chorus:

Zeus has punished them enough. There was no need for you to deliver this insulting speech!

Adrastus: *To the Herald*

Vile creature!

Theseus:

Hold your tongue, Adrastus!

You're talking out of turn. The message was delivered to me, not you, so let me give him my reply.

Let me talk to your first point.

Since when is Creon my ruler or since when is he mightier in force than I am? Since when can he force Athens to do his bidding?

No stream flows up the mountain and we won't be allowed to be ordered about this way.

520

Now, I have not come to Thebes with these Argives to cause war and I am not the one who has caused it in the first place and so far as the bodies of the dead soldiers goes, I do not seek to bring more battles and more deaths to your city. I seek only to do what is right by the law of all the Greeks: To bury them with honour.

What impropriety do you see in this deed?

If the Argives have caused you any harm, well, they are now dead.

You have won the war and have gained the glory that accompanies such a victory and they have received the shame that accompanies its loss. Justice has found its rightful place.

531

Now let the dead be buried beneath the soil and the let each element go back to where it come from before it reached the day's light: Let the spirit raise back into the ether and the body back into the earth. Our bodies are our own only for as long as life lives in it. After that, they must go back to the one who nourishes them: Earth. Don't think that you're causing harm only to Argos by not burying their dead men. No, that is wrong. The whole of Greece will be angry if people deprive the dead of their proper burial.

540

If a law like yours is ever written then we will see brave men turned into cowards.

Here you are, in front of me, delivering horrible threats to me, yet

you're afraid to bury the dead! Why? What are you afraid of? That they will shake off the soil and take over your land –from inside the grave?

Or are you afraid that deep beneath the soil they will give birth to children who will avenge them?

You have uttered stupid and idle words to express stupid and idle fears.,

549

Stupid mortals! They should know the true source of their misery. Our whole life is one big struggle. For some of us, the blessings of a good fortune had come in the past; for others it will come in the future and for the rest of us that good fortune is now. The gods only have good fortune always because they are always thanked and honoured by the unfortunate, hoping to gain some reversal of their ill luck and they are thanked and glorified by the fortunate fearing death.

Those who understand this will endure their misfortune with no anger and by doing nothing to hurt anyone else or the city.

Well then, Herald. What will you do?

Will you do the proper thing and give us the bodies of the slain men, to bury according to the laws of the gods?

560

Because if you don't then what will take place is obvious: I shall come around myself and bury them by force. I will not let it happen that the whole of Hellas will hear that heaven's ancient law was disregarded by me and by the city of Pandion.

Chorus: *To the Herald*

Courage, my man.

If you protect the light of our Lady Justice from being extinguished, then no man may accuse you of anything improper.

Theban Herald:

Shall I say something brief in response?

Theseus:

Say whatever you want. You haven't been too silent so far.

Theban Herald:

You will never take the bodies of the Argives from our land!

Theseus:

Well, then, let me say something brief to you, in return.

570

Theban Herald:

Go ahead. I won't rob you of your turn.

Theseus:

I will. I will take the bodies of those men away from the land of Asopus and I will bury them!

Theban Herald:

You'll need to do that with spears and shields!

Theseus:

I have fought more difficult battles than this one.

Theban Herald:

So you were born and raised to take on all enemies, ey?

Theseus:

All those who are insolent, yes. I have no quarrel with the good folk.

Theban Herald:

You and your city, Theseus, are seem to be always busy.

Theseus:

Athens fights many battles. That's why she's a glorious city!

Theban Herald:

Come then, Theseus. Come to the city born of a dragon's spear.

Come and find out what it feels like to be hurled into the dust.

Theseus:

A dragon? How tough can a dragon be?

580

Theban Herald:

You will find out and learn. You are still young enough.

Theseus:

Tough words do not get me angry.

Go! Leave this land and take your tough words with you. We are getting nowhere like this!

Exit Theban Herald.

Theseus: *to his men*

And now, men, we must begin.!

You, men, with the light arms and the spears, begin the march.

You, charioteers, place the bit into the your horse's frothing mouths and set off for Cadmus' land.

I will take my sharp sword and head off to his seven gates. I will deliver my own message to him.

590

Adrastus, stay here. Do not to follow me and mingle your fortunes with mine.

I, a fresh general, will lead a fresh army for a fresh war to meet my own destiny.

I ask for one thing only: That all the gods who serve Justice be my allies.

All these things, together, bring about victory.

Bravery means nothing if it is not aided by the gods.

Exit Theseus and his men, including the Athenian Herald.

Chorus:

Ah!

Chorus:

Ah!

Chorus:

Pitiful mothers of pitiful generals!

Chorus:

An ashen fear sits heavily upon my heart...

600

Chorus:

What? What was that strange thing you said?

Chorus:

...A fear that the army of Pallas Athena will put to the test!

Chorus:
Test? How? By the clash of spears or by the exchange of words?

Chorus:
Exchange of words?
May that be the will of the gods and may that happen!

Chorus:
But if not?
If the spears clash and the blood is spilled...

Chorus:
If murder, war takes hold of our city...

Chorus:
If breasts heave out heavy sighs...

Chorus:
Wails of loss...

Chorus:
What then of us?

Chorus:
What will they say of us who are the cause of it?

Chorus:
Ah!

Chorus:
Ah!

Chorus:
Perhaps, the man who saw the face of Victory will now see the evil
face of Fate!

Chorus:
A happy consolation fills my soul.

610

Chorus:

You speak as if you think the gods are just!

Chorus:

Who else decides the fates of men?

Chorus:

Men and gods differ greatly when it comes to justice.

Chorus:

Past fears have blurred your judgment.

What comes is this: Vengeance calls for judgment as does one murder
for

another and the gods who hold all sway come to give respite to the
suffering mortals.

Chorus:

If only!

If only we could go to Thebes!

Chorus:

Ah, Thebes, the land of the high towers!

Chorus:

Yes, and leave behind us this fountain, the fountain of the goddess
Callichorus!

620

Chorus:

If some god had given you wings to fly over to the city of the twin
rivers you could know the fate of our dear friends.

Chorus:

Fate!

What does Fate have in store for this land's noble king?

What is his destiny?

Chorus:

Let us invoke the gods we have invoked before!

Chorus:

They are our first harbour in times of fear.

Chorus:
Oh, Zeus!
Father of our ancestors. Lord of our mother, Io, the heifer...

Chorus:
...daughter of the river Inachus.

630

Chorus:
Come, Zeus, be this city's benevolent ally.

Chorus:
Be our saviour!

Chorus:
Bring them back, Zeus!
Bring back your darling men!
The defenders of your city, Argos!
Men who were insulted by the Thebans!

Chorus:
Bring them back, Zeus!
To receive the proper burial of fire.

Enter the Argive Herald

Argive Herald:
Ladies, I have much good news to report!
I was one of those taken prisoner in the battle near Dirce's fountain,
the battle that cost the seven captains their lives but I have escaped
and so, here I am to tell you of Theseus' great victory!
But to cut a long story short, let me first tell you that I was the
servant of Capaneus, the captain whom Zeus burnt to ashes with his
fiery thunderbolt.

641

Chorus:
Dear friend!
How wonderful it is to see you back home and to hear your news
about Theseus!

Now make truly complete the pleasure of your message by telling us that the Athenian army is also safe!

Argive Herald:

The Athenian army is safe and it has accomplished all that Adrastus wanted to achieve when he had marched with his Argive army from Inachus to fight Thebes.

Chorus:

How did it happen, Herald, that Aegeus' son and his men come to raise a trophy of victory to Zeus?

Chorus:

Please tell us, Herald. You were there, we were not.

Chorus:

It will please us greatly if we hear the full story from you.

650

Argive Herald:

The bright rays of the sun which are the true measure of the day, had just touched the earth. I placed myself on a tower near the Elektran Gate, from where I could see clearly for quite a distance.

I could see the army grouped into three divisions. The light armed division was spread along the slopes of what they tell me is called the Hill of Ismenus. At the head of the right wing was the king himself - Aegeus' noble son- along with his personal guard, the ancient race that had settled in Kekropia.

660

The left wing was taken up by Paralus. He and his spear men stood hard by the Spring of Ares.

On the edges of the army stood the cavalry, split into two equal divisions. The chariots were stationed just in front of the sacred tomb of Amphion.

The Cadmian army stood in front of the city walls, behind them, the corpses of the dead men, for whom they were to fight.

The four-horse chariots of the armies faced each other.

Then Theseus' herald cried out so they could all hear:

"Soldiers, be still!"

670

Men of Cadmus, listen to me and listen to me well!

We have come here to take the bodies of the dead who must be

buried. We want to do this because this is the law of all the Greeks and we want to observe that law. We have no wish to shed blood!" Creon made no answer to this but simply sat silently near his weapons.

Then the battle began by the drivers of the chariots.

The opposing chariots drove through each other's lines, bringing their warrior passengers up into line with each other and these men fought, sword against sword, the drivers wheeling back and forth to come to their aid.

680

Then Phorbas, the chief of the Athenian cavalry and, on the other side, all the chiefs of Cadmus' cavalry, saw the clash of the chariots and they both joined in the battle. And the battle wavered this way and that, the Athenians holding the upper hand one minute and the Thebans the next. I saw the whole thing. This is not second hand report because I was right there, on the very spot where the chariots and the cavalry were battling it out and I saw with my own eyes all the awful horrors that took place.

But where should I begin? Which horror do I speak of first?

There was the great cloud of dust, raising all the way up to the heavens and the cavalry, rushing about now this way, now that, like giant ocean waves. Then there were the men who were tangled up in the straps of their horses, dragged about and smashed against rough rocks.

690

Blood gushing out everywhere like great rivers when men were thrown about here and there, some against rocks, others headlong onto the earth, others giving out their last breath upon their crumbled chariots.

The moment Creon saw that his cavalry was winning, he picked up a shield and charged forward before his Thebans had time to weaken their resolve.

Theseus, though wasted no time. He raised his shiny weapons and charged forth as well. Then the battle raged all over the field.

700

They killed and they got killed and the shouts of encouragement and command echoed as they passed from one mouth to the next:

"Get them!"

"Kill them!"

"Drive your spears forward, men! Drive it into the Athenians!"

But the descendants of the dragons' teeth fought valiantly. They have managed to force or left wing to retreat while theirs was beaten back

our right wing. The battle was hanging in the balance.
That's when our general's bravery shone brightly.
Not only did he keep an eye on those who had the upper hand but he ran over to help those who were struggling.

710

His command echoed across the battlefield:
"Smash those spears men! Kill these men, descendants of dragon's teeth! Kill them or else our Athens is destroyed!"
And that raised the spirits of the Athenian men.
Then Theseus picked up his Epidaurian weapon, a fearsome club and started swinging it to his left and to his right, breaking skulls and necks, making helmets fly.
The Thebans had no chance. Not even one to turn and run away.
I jumped up and down with joy, shouted in glee and clapped my hands.

720

Theseus and our men charged for the gates of the city where the poor folk, the young as well as the old were wailing and running to the temples terrified and though Theseus could have easily entered the city, he stopped short of that.
He stopped outside the gates and said, "I have not come to lay low the city but to ask for the corpses of the dead."
That's the sort of general people should always elect. A brave man in time of danger but a man also who will not tolerate the insolence of people who, in time of prosperity lose the joy that comes with it and, instead, try to climb to the highest rung of the ladder.

731

Chorus:

Ah!

Now I believe in the gods!

Now, that my eyes have seen this unexpected day, this day when the Thebans were punished I feel the weight of my grief lighten.

Adrastus:

Zeus!

Tell me Zeus, why is it that mortals boast wisdom?

Wisdom is with you, Zeus! Mortals do whatever you decide!

We thought that our Argos was impenetrable, that we were great in number, young and strong. Eteocles made us a fair offer. Moderate, agreeable requests and terms.

740

But we refused and that refusal brought us our ruin.
Then it was the turn of the foolish mortals of the city of Cadmus.
Foolish men. They were once prosperous but, just like a poor man
who suddenly sees wealth in his hands they, too, became insolent
and by that insolence, were ruined.
Stupid mortals!
Like those bow men who pull the bow string too far back and
overshoot the mark.
Disaster strikes you justly.
You give a deaf ear to the counsel of your friends and instead, give
way to the force of the circumstance.
Whole cities do the same.
To bring their misfortunes to their end, they forego speech and grab
the sword. Blood! They choose blood, instead of words!

750

Bah!
Why think of such things now?
Tell me, herald, how did you make your way here safely? Then I'll
ask you some more questions.

Argive Herald:
The moment the city burst into an uproar of spears, I ran out through
the gates where our army was entering.

Adrastus:
And what of the corpses, the cause of the war?
Did you bring them back with you?

Argive Herald:
Yes, the corpses of those who led the seven illustrious divisions.

Adrastus:
What do you mean? What about the corpses of the rest of the
soldiers?

Argive Herald:
They have been buried. In the valleys of Cithaeron.

Adrastus:
On this side or the other, and who did the burying?

Argive Herald:

This side. Theseus buried them. In the village. In Eleutherae, under
the shade of the huge rock.

Adrastus:

And those corpses he didn't bury? Where did you leave those?

760

Argive Herald:

Near by, Adrastus. All your efforts have come to a good conclusion.

Adrastus:

It must have been bitter work for the slaves to remove those corpses
from the slaughter.

Argive Herald:

Slaves? We allowed no slave to do this work!

Adrastus:

Ah!

Look how honorably Theseus has treated these men!

Argive Herald:

That's certainly what you would have said if you were there while he
was looking after them.

Adrastus:

And did he wash the wounds of the poor men himself?

Argive Herald:

Not only that but he also made up their biers for them. Spread the
sheets over their bodies.

Adrastus:

What a dreadful task, that would be! Shocking!

Argive Herald:

Shocking? Why? Such misfortunes can happen to any mortal.

Adrastus: *Distressed*

Ah!

Ah!
If only I had died with those men!

The chorus is shocked and react to Adrastus' words

770

Argive Herald:

No point in crying, Adrastus. Look at the old ladies. You've made them cry as well.

Adrastus:

These old ladies, they are my teachers in sorrow.

Ah!

I lift my hands to farewell my dead friends!

I cry for them! I mourn their loss!

I sing the song of Hades for them!

I now weep alone, left behind, miserable me!

Life's breath! It's the only thing that man cannot recover once he loses it!

For all else there is a remedy.

Exit Argive Herald

Chorus:

Joy and sadness in the one event!

Glory for the city and double honour for its generals, yet what is for us?

780

Chorus:

A bitter task!

We must look upon the bodies of our dead sons!

Chorus:

Yet a fair one, if, after the most unbearable pain of all, this unexpected task does happen.

Chorus:

How I wish!

How I wish, Cronos, the god of Time, the father of all our days kept me unwed to this very day!

Chorus:

Why did I think it would be such a terrible thing if I had never married and never bore any children?

Chorus:

Terrible indeed!

Now I feel the terror!

Now that I must feel the terror of losing my dear sons!

Chorus:

Ah!

Our sons!

Enter Theseus and his soldiers, carrying the biers with the bodies of the fallen men.

Chorus:

Ah!

The bodies of the fallen men!

Chorus:

Ah!

How I wish!

How I wish I could join them in their death!

Chorus:

How I wish I could join them in their journey to Hades!

Adrastus:

Mothers!

Mothers of these men!

Groan!

Cry!

Wail!

Listen to my sighs and let out yours in turn!

801

Chorus:

My son, my son, my son!

Chorus:
My son!
What a bitter word for a mother to utter when her son is dead!

Chorus:
My son!
Let me speak to you even in death!

Adrastus:
Ah! No!

Chorus:
Ah!
My son!

Chorus:
Ah, son of mine!

Adrastus:
Ah!

Chorus:
Ah!
Unbearable the sight!
Unbearable the pain!

Adrastus:
Unbearable the suffering!

Chorus:
Ah!
How heavy this burden!

Adrastus:
Ah!
Turn your eyes at my suffering, Argos!

Chorus:
Turn your eyes at mine, also, good city!
No more children for this miserable wretch!

811

Adrastus:

Ah!

Bring them closer!

Bring them here!

The bodies are brought before Adrastus

Ah!

The blood!

Look at the blood on their bodies!

Our poor sons!

Unjustly slaughtered by unworthy men!

Their death decided the battle.

Chorus:

Let me take him into my arms!

Let me hold my son!

Adrastus:

You have, you have a sorrow that...

Chorus:

A sorrow too heavy to bear!

Adrastus:

Ah!

The sorrow!

Chorus:

And that of their mothers!

820

Adrastus:

Hear me, you poor mothers!

Hear me!

Chorus:

Your sorrows are ours too!

Adrastus:

How I wish the Theban soldiers had smashed me to the dust, to die with these men!

Chorus:
And I!
How I wish I was never taken to a man's bed!

Adrastus:
Oh, mothers!
Unhappy mothers!
Look at this ocean of misery!

Chorus:
We have torn our flesh with our finger nails!

Chorus:
We have covered our hair with ash!

Adrastus:
Ah!
Ah!
How I wish the earth had swallowed me up!
How I wish the wind had split me asunder!
How I wish Zeus hurled his thunderbolt upon my head!

832

Chorus: *To Adrastus*
The weddings you have seen were bitter!

Chorus:
Apollo's prophesy was bitter!

Chorus:
The grim Spirits of Vengeance have left the house of Oedipus!

Chorus:
They have left his house and came to us!

838

Theseus:
I meant to ask you before, Adrastus; when you came to meet the men and mourn their death but I thought I had better let it pass until later. So let me ask you now, Adrastus. What has made these men so brave? What is the source of their bravery? Explain this to the young sons of our own citizens, since you know and are such a wise man. I saw

them with my own eyes, the daring deeds by which they had hoped to capture Thebes.

But I won't ask you to relate to me this one thing, a thing that would make me a laughing stock and it is this: Who stood against each of them? Whose spear killed them in the end?

850

Retelling all this would be idle chatter for both, the teller as well as the hearer. How could anyone tell? When all the spears are flying across one's eyes, how could he discern with any certainty, which hero was which?

Not only could I not ask such a question but I also couldn't believe anyone who dared suggest that they could tell me who these men were.

When a man stands face-to-face with an enemy, he can see little beyond what he needs to see.

Adrastus:

Then listen, Theseus because what are asking me to do is very much what I would like to do any way. You are asking me to give praise to these men, these dear friends of mine and I shall do so, by being truthful and just towards them.

I have seen with my own eyes, the deeds they performed, deeds with which they hoped to conquer Thebes.

860

Look here, at this man! This is Capaneus. Burnt by Zeus' violent thunder bolt.

All his wealth did not make him arrogant or boastful. He had the modesty of a poor man. He hated those who shunned the simple sufficiency in things and always boasted about their greed and their gluttony. Happiness, he used to say, was not in the volume of food one has in his belly. Happiness is in eating modestly.

To his, who were few in number, friends, he was true and loyal. All of them, whether they were near him or away abroad. Honest, affable, moderate to everyone: his friends as well as his family. He uttered no undisciplined words to anyone.

871

This one, the second man I'll speak of is Eteocles.

He excelled in other things.

Here was a poor young man who held many high offices in Argos. He shunned money. His friends would offer it to him but he'd stay away from it. Money, he'd say, gold, would enslave his character and always keep it in a yoke. He'd never take it into his house.

He hated those who did the wrong by his city but not the city itself.
It's not the city's fault if its governor causes it to gain a bad
reputation.

881

The third one, here, is Hippomedon. This one hated the easy life. The sweet Muses could not seduce him. Too strong for them. All his life, he lived out, in the countryside, with Nature. He let Nature harden his body and resolve. Hard, clean, Nature's work turned him into a brave man: He hunted, he rode horses and he bent the bow's string. His dream was to offer his city a well trained body.

889

Ah! Here's Parthanopeus. Atalanta's son. Unequal in beauty. Born in Arcadia. Came down to the streams of Inachus as a lad and there he was raised. In Argos. He became a true Argive. Behaved like all good immigrants should. He hurt no one and made no enemies of anyone in the city. Hated squabbling. Squabbling, whether by immigrants or locals is the biggest reason for them becoming unbearable.

Served in the Argive army and fought for Argos, just like all those born in Argos.

He joined in the city's fortunes. Felt joy when it prospered and sad when succumbed to misfortune.

Loved by many -men and women- but he was careful not to offend anyone.

901

Ah! Tydeus!

Worthy of big lofty but fewer words.

Tydeus was no brilliant orator but an excellent, resourceful warrior, excellent skills on the battlefield. Not quite as clever as his brother, Meleager but in battle, he was praised just as highly for his use of the spear.

Just as ambitious a soul for glory as that of his brother but Tydeus always preferred action to words.

909

From what I've told you about these men, Theseus, you'd understand why they dared fight and die before the towers of Thebes. Good birth, good upbringing, instils honour and he who lives honorably, won't tolerate shame.

Courage, Theseus, is something that can be taught. Even a little boy can be taught to say things and hear things that he cannot comprehend but what he is taught he keeps until he is old.

That's way, all children must taught to be virtuous.

Chorus:

Ah, my son!

I have carried you in my womb and I have raised you into a man so that you may suffer!

920

Chorus:

Hades has robbed me of all my joy!

Hades has taken from me the fruit of my labours!

Chorus:

Hades has robbed me of my son!

Who will look after me, in my old age now?

Theseus:

And here is Amphiaraus, the noble son of Oecles!

The gods themselves have praised him openly by taking him alive, along with his four-horse chariot, down to the depths of the earth.

And Polyneices, Oedipus' son!

Him I praise personally and honestly.

He was my guest when, as a voluntary exile, left Cadmus' city to come to Argos.

But, Adrastus, about these men. Do you know what I would like to do?

933

Adrastus:

I only know one thing, Theseus: To heed your words!.

Theseus:

Now, Capaneus, who was struck by Zeus' thunder bolt...

Adrastus:

A sacred corpse. Do you think we should bury him elsewhere, away from the others?

Theseus:

Yes. The other corpses I shall cremate on one single pyre.

Adrastus:

I see.

And Capaneus' tomb? Where will you build it?

Theseus:
Right here, beside this temple.

Adrastus:
We will let the servants work on this task.

940

Theseus:
Yes. I, myself, will take care of these.
Come then let us carry the bodies away!

Adrastus:
Come, unhappy mothers. Come closer to your sons!

Theseus: *Tries to stop him*
No, that's not a good idea, Adrastus.

Adrastus:
Why not, Theseus? Shouldn't mothers be allowed to touch the bodies of their own sons?

Theseus:
No, Adrastus. The sight of these men, so deformed by death, would kill the poor women.

Adrastus:
I agree, Theseus. The blood and the wounds on these men is a heavy sight.

Theseus:
So why add to their grief?

Adrastus:
I agree with you.
Women, Theseus is right. You must stay here and bare your pain with patience.
Then, you may collect their bones once we have committed their bodies to the pyre.

950

To the corpses
Poor men! Sons of mortals! Why must you pick up spears and

slaughter each other?
No more! Stop! End the wars and keep your cities and your citizens in peace.
Life is short. We should see it through quietly and with as little pain as possible.

Exit Theseus, Adrastus and the men carrying the corpses with the dignity of a funeral procession.

Chorus:
No longer am I the mother of a beautiful sons!
No longer am I the mother of beautiful children!

Chorus:
No longer can I share the joy of the rest of the women of Argos who are the mothers of beautiful sons.

Chorus:
Artemis, goddess of childbirth!
Where are your sweet words?
Where is your sweet consolation to the childless?

960

Chorus:
My life is misery!

Chorus:
Like a dark cloud, spun about by the blasts of howling winds!

Chorus:
Once we were the mothers of the noblest sons of Argos!
Seven unlucky mothers of seven glorious sons!

Chorus:
Old age now takes us, childless, miserable creatures.

Chorus:
I stand too far from the living and too far from the dead.
My Fate has me away from both.

971

Chorus:

What's left for me at home now?
Memories of my son are stored there.
Tears of grief!

Chorus:
My shorn hair, the tresses of mourning.
Tresses that cannot bear a garland.

Chorus:
The libations for the departed dead.

Chorus:
And the songs!
The songs that Apollo, the god with the golden hair will not allow.

Chorus:
Dawn will always find me weeping.
And the robe will rest drenched upon my breasts.

Suddenly, smoke drifts gently from within, USL, behind the rock.

980

Chorus: *Indicating within, SL.*
Ah!
Look there!
I see a sacred tomb.

Chorus:
It is the last home of our dead Capaneus.

Chorus:
And there, look!
Beyond the temple. The holy pyres that Theseus has lit for the other men.
Evadne is suddenly seen standing on the rock beside the temple. She is dressed splendidly, as if a bride.

Chorus:
Ah!
And there, near the temple, the famous Evadne, daughter of King Iphis and the glorious wife of Capaneus, who was struck by Zeus' fire.

Chorus:

But why is she standing on that high rock, next to the holy temple of
the goddess?

Why did she take that path?

990

Evadne:

What a brilliant light Apollo's chariot spread across the sky!
The Moon goddess, too! How bright her light as her steeds galloped
across the dark night! She held a speeding torch that night! That
night when the whole of Argos celebrated my wedding! The whole of
Argos sang the sweet wedding songs! The whole of Argos raised my
joy as high as tall towers.

The joy of my groom, as well!

1000

My great, my noble Capaneus, of the bronze weapons!

Oh, husband!

I have rushed here, into the blazing flames of your pyre.

Rushed like a frenzied woman, my husband, to join you within your
bitter tomb, to end the burdens of my bitter life.

When the gods take away those you love, it is best you die also.

That death is the sweetest.

Chorus:

There, Evadne! You are standing near that pyre.

Chorus:

Funeral pyres are Zeus' treasure vaults.

1010

Chorus:

There!

On that pyre, lies your husband's body, Evadne!

Slain by Zeus' own thunderbolt!

Evadne:

I can see it!

Now I can see the end of my journey!

Fate has guided my steps.

Here, by leaping from this rock onto the pyre, I shall gain the glory
owed to my home.

1020

I shall join my own body with that of my dear husband inside the glow of these flames. My flesh shall burn next to his and together, we shall enter Persephone's marriage chamber in the Underworld. Capaneus!

I will never abandon you to the halls of Hades, beneath the earth! Come, light the wedding torch, let the marriage begin! Let the Fate of the children of our Argos be good, in their marriage! Let the husband's heart be filled with loyalty for his wife and let his soul mingle with hers.

1031

Chorus: *Indicating within*
Evadne, look!
Your father, old Iphis, is coming this way.

Chorus:

Poor man, he is about to hear the dreadful news.
News he never expected to hear. News that will hurt him a great deal.

Enter Iphis with two servants

Iphis:
O, you poor, poor women!
And I poor, old wretch!
I have come here, dragging two loads of despair.
I must find the body of my son, Eteocles, who was killed by a Cadmean spear. I must put it on a ship and take it back home with me. And I must also find my daughter, Capaneus' wife, who has suddenly disappeared from her home. The poor woman desperately wants to die with her husband.

1041

At first we had her guarded very closely, watching out that she didn't leave the house but then, when this disaster hit us, I've loosened the watch a little and so she ran off.

We are fairly certain though that she must be somewhere around these parts.

Please tell me if you have seen her recently.

Evadne:

No need to ask them, father. Look over here.
I am here, standing upon this rock, father, hovering over Capaneus' pyre, like a bird in grief.

Iphis:

Darling child!

What dreadful wind has brought there? Why take on that journey?
What made you run away from my home to come here?

1050

Evadne:

I'd rather not tell you, father but it would only make you angry.

Iphis:

I am your father, child! Is it not fair for a father to know such things?

Evadne:

But you will judge me unfairly, father.

Iphis:

And your dress, Evadne! Why are you dressed so formally?

Evadne:

Why? The formality, father seeks some sort of glory.

Iphis:

Child, you don't look like a woman in mourning for her dead husband.

Evadne:

Yes, father. These clothes have an unusual purpose.

Iphis:

But you are standing next to your husband's pyre, next to his tomb!

Evadne:

Yes, father because this is my path to a glorious victory.

1060

Iphis:

Victory, child? What victory? I demand you tell me more!

Evadne:

A victory, father, over all of the women beneath the gaze of the sun.

Iphis:

In what way do you want to be better than them, Evadne? In wisdom or in Athena's skills with the cloth?

Evadne:

No, father. In virtue.

I want to lie next to my husband, in Hades.

Iphis:

What are you saying, child? What sort of sick riddles are these?

Evadne:

Father, I shall jump into my dead husband's pyre.

Iphis:

Darling, no! Don't let the ears of the world hear such words!

Evadne:

But that's exactly what I want to do, father! I want the whole of Argos to know about it!

Iphis:

No, no, no! I do not approve of you doing this!

Evadne:

It's all the same, father, whether you do or you don't.

You will not be able to catch me as I jump from here.

Watch me, father. This might be bitter for you but to share in my husband's pyre is wonderful for me and for my husband.

Evadne jumps

1072

Chorus:

Ah!

Chorus:

Ah!

What a horrible thing to do, woman!

Iphis:

Ah!

And there! There ends my miserable life, Argive women!
There it ends!

Chorus:
Ah! Poor man!
What cruel treatment grief you've suffered, old man!

Chorus:
How can you cope with such a sight, you poor, unfortunate man?

Iphis:
Unfortunate? Where is a man more unfortunate than me?

Chorus:
Unfortunate man!
You are now sharing Oedipus' Fortune!

Chorus:
You, old sir, and my city as well!
Unfortunate, both!

1080

Iphis:
Ah!
How I wish!
How I wish that mortals could live their youth twice and twice their old age, too!
When we make mistakes in our homes, we think about them again and the second time around, we correct them; but not with life.
If we could live as youths twice and twice as old men, we could also correct the mistakes we made in our first life, during our second.
I used to see people around me have children and it made me wish to have children of my own but it was that very wish that has destroyed me. But if I had suffered this present destruction back then, and if by being a father like all the others, had learnt what a terrible thing it is to lose your children, I would have never had to endure this evil destruction!

1091

But, I did have a child. A brave son, who had made me a proud father but now I have lost him!
Ah! So be it!
But what now? What's next for this poor old man?

Should I go back home? That empty home? That desolate home?
Should I go back to an empty life?
Or, should I go to live in my son's home, a home I used to smile every
time I visited, back in the days when my daughter was alive?
But no, she, too is dead now.

Ah!

How she used to pull my cheeks down to her lips! How she used to
take my head between her two hands! What is sweeter for an old
man than a daughter's love?

1102

The hearts of sons are stronger but their caresses are not as
heartening.

Come, servant!

Quickly, take me home and hide me there! Hide me there in that dark
place where I can waste my old body away with starvation and there
die!

What good would it do me to hold by child's bones in my hands?
Damn you, old age! Unbeatable old age! Who can wrestle with you
and win? How I loathe you!

And all those who try and drag out their lives! I loathe them too. They
try to prolong their lives, to turn the stream of their river away from
its course, with all sorts of drugs and magic potions and spells!
Useless to the earth, they should just die and leave their place to the
young!

Exit Iphis with servant.

*A moment later enters Theseus with his retinue and the sons of the
seven dead, who are carrying urns of ashes.*

Chorus:

Ah, look!

Chorus:

They are bringing the ashes of our dead sons!

Chorus:

Girls help me!

Help hold this weak woman up!

Chorus:

Oh!

The grief!
The grief for my lost son has taken my strength away!

1120

Chorus:

I have seen so many years and I have felt so much pain but what greater pain is there for mortals than to see their children dead?

Son 1:

Old mother, here, here is my father's body!
I have gathered it from the pyre.
All I hold dear, old mother, is in here.
Such a light weight, such a heavy grief!

Chorus:

Oh, my son, my son!
You bring tears to the mother of her slain darling!
Just a little dust! That's all that remains from the bodies of those glorious men from Mycenae!

1131

Son 2:

You are left without a child, old mother and I am left without my dear father!
I shall live in his empty house, old mother and I shall live like an orphan, without his father's loving arms around him.

Chorus:

Oh, my son!
What is left of all the pains I endured for your birth, my son?
Is this my thanks for all my sleepless nights?
What now of all the loving kisses I've put upon your sweet face?

Son 3:

He's gone, old mother, gone for ever!
Oh, father, father, father!
They have all gone for ever!

1139

Chorus:

The wind now holds them. Ashes from the pyre.

Chorus:
They have wings now.

Chorus:
They have taken the path to Hades' dark world.

Son 4:
Father!
Father, do you hear my groans?

Son 5:
Father!
Will the day ever come when I will pick up my shield and rush to
avenge your death?

Chorus:
Oh, may that day come, my son, when you can avenge the death of
your father!

Son 6:
Let the heavens make it possible that my father's death be avenged
some day.

Chorus:
Evil that will not rest!
Enough now the pain!

Chorus:
Enough the groans!
Enough the grief that eats at my soul!

Son 7:
One day, father!
One day the sparkling waters of the Asopus river will welcome your
son, all dressed in his bronze war gear, as a General of the Argives!

1151
Chorus:
A General and an avenger of your dead father.

Son 1:

Father, father, father!

Even now I can see you before my eyes!

Chorus:

Yes, I can see him too! He is kissing your cheek sweetly!

Son 3:

But your words, father!

Your soothing words have been taken by the wind. They have gone!

Chorus:

He has left behind two grief-stricken people. Your mother and you, a boy who will be grieving for his father all of his life.

Son 4:

Ah!

This grief is so heavy!

Son 5:

I cannot bear this pain!

Chorus:

Give me the ashes. Let me take my son to my breast!

1160

Son 6:

My tears roll at the sound of those words, old mother!

Son 7:

They tear apart my heart, old mother!

Chorus: *To the urn*

Oh, my son!

You have gone, my son!

Chorus:

I will never see you again, my son!

Chorus:

My darling, son!

Chorus:

A mother's sweetest sight!

Theseus:

Adrastus, women of Argos, the boys in front of you hold, in their arms, the ashes of their glorious fathers, whose bodies I have rescued.

Let them keep those ashes, as a gift from me and from the citizens of Athens but you must remember this deed well. Remember what I have personally done for you and always be thankful for it. Tell these boys to be thankful also and to always honour this city and remember what it has done for them. These boys, as well as their children's children.

Zeus and the rest of the heavens are witnesses to this deed. You will be returning home as worthy recipients of a great gift from us.

Adrastus:

Theseus, we acknowledge your good deed to the land and the people of Argos with great and undying gratitude. We needed a benefactor and you came to us as one.

We will treat you with equal nobility.

1180

Theseus:

Well then, is there anything more I can for you?

Adrastus:

No, Theseus. We bid you and wish you fare well! You and your city deserve it.

Theseus:

We shall, Adrastus and may you also fare well!

Athena appears from above

Athena:

Theseus!

Listen to the words of the goddess Athena! Listen well to my words!

Listen to what you must do for the benefit of your city.

Don't simply give those bones to these boys, to take away to Argos, without first obtaining some recompense for your labours and for the labours of your city, in rescuing those bones.

Demand of them an oath which must be sworn by this man here, Adrastus. He is their king and has the authority to swear this oath on behalf of all the children of Danaus.

1190

And this is the oath that he must swear:

That the Argives will never raise a hostile army against this land and if some other country does so, the Argives will use their own forces to stop that country from attacking it.

That the Argives must pray that their land will be destroyed utterly if they break this oath and march against Athens.

Now listen to where you must perform the sacrifice for this oath.

You have, in your house, a tripod, with bronze legs. It is the one that Heracles had asked you to dedicate to the Pythian's shrine, at Delphi, after he had devastated the city of Troy and before he had set off on another mission.

1201

Over this tripod, cut the throats of three sheep. Then, on the inside walls, in the hollow of the tripod's belly, inscribe the oath. When you've done this, give the tripod to the god who rules the shrine, to keep for the eyes of the whole of Greece, as a witness and a reminder of the oath.

Then bury the knife with which you have slaughtered the sheep and spilt their blood over the tripod. Bury it deep into the bowels of the earth, near by the pyre where the bodies of seven chiefs burned.

If ever your city is being attacked by the Argives, display this knife and the sight of it will send your attackers into disarray and fill their journey back home with utter sorrow.

1210

Once you have completed all these tasks, let the bodies be escorted out of the country.

Then dedicate to the gods as a sanctuary, all the land where the pyre was built and the bodies burnt by the purifying fire. That spot where the three roads that lead to the Isthmus meet.

Those were my words to you Theseus.

To the sons of the Argive heroes, I address these words:

When you become men, you will destroy the city of Ismenus and thus exact justice for your murdered fathers. You, Aegialeus, Adrastus' own son, will take your father's place and become a young general. Tydeus' son, Diomedes, will come from Aetolia and join you and you will both lead an army. And as soon as your beards have taken hold over your cheeks, you two must lead that army, an army of the sons of Danaus, against the towers of the seven-gated Thebes.

1221

You will charge at them like powerful lion cubs and they will receive from you the bitter destruction of their city.

This cannot be avoided.

And throughout the whole of Greece you will become so famous that songs will be sung about you for many generations and they will name you "The Successors," the sons of the seven. All this, with the help of the Heavens.

Theseus:

Lady Athena, I shall do as you say and hope that you correct my every error.

Indicating Adrastus. I will bind this man with an oath.

Athena, be our guide because when you are with us, the city cannot go wrong and will stay safe for ever.

Exit Athena

1232

Chorus:

Come, Adrastus. Let us go and take this oath before this man and the citizens of Athens. The difficult deeds they have accomplished for us have earned them our honour.

Exit All
END OF
EURIPIDES'
"SUPPLIANT WOMEN"