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SPECIMENS OF GREEK TRAGEDY

Translated By

GOLDWIN SMITH, D.C.L.

AESCHYLUS AND SOPHOCLES

1893

PREFACE.

Greek drama, forerunner of ours, had its origin in the festival of Dionysus, god of wine, which was celebrated with dance, song, and recitative. The recitative, being in character, was improved into the Drama, the chief author of the improvement, tradition says, being Thespis. But the dance and song were retained, and became the Chorus, that peculiar feature of the Greek play. This seems to be the general account of the matter, and especially of the combination of the lyric with the dramatic element, so far as we can see through the mist of an unrecorded age.

Thirlwall, still perhaps the soundest and most judicious, though not the most vivid or enthusiastic, historian of Greece, traces the origin of the Drama to "the great choral compositions uniting the attractions of music and action to those of a lofty poetry, which formed the favourite entertainment of the Dorian cities." This, he says, appears to have been the germ out of which, by the introduction of a new element, the recitation of a performer who assumed a character and perhaps from the first shifted

his mask, so as to exhibit the outlines of a simple story in a few scenes parted by the intervening song of the Chorus, Thespis and his successors unfolded the Attic Tragedy. Of the further development of the Drama in the age of Pericles, Thirlwall says:—

"The drama was the branch of literature which peculiarly signalled the age of Pericles; and it belongs to the political, no less than to the literary, history of these times, and deserves to be considered in both points of view. The steps by which it was brought through a series of innovations to the form which it presents in its earliest extant remains, are still a subject of controversy among antiquarians; and even the poetical character of the authors by whom these changes were effected, and of their works, is involved in great uncertainty. We have reason to believe that it was no want of merit, or of absolute worth, which caused them to be neglected and forgotten, but only the superior attraction of the form which the drama finally assumed. Of Phrynichus in particular, the immediate predecessor of Aeschylus, we are led to conceive a very favourable opinion, both by the manner in which he is mentioned by the ancients who were acquainted with his poems, and by the effect which it is recorded to have produced upon his audience. It is clear that Aeschylus, who found him in undisputed possession of the public favour, regarded him as a worthy rival, and was in part stimulated by emulation to unfold the capacities of their common art by a variety of new inventions. These, however, were so important as to entitle their author to be considered as the father of Attic tragedy. This title he would have deserved, if he had only introduced the dialogue, which distinguished his drama from that of the preceding poets, who had told the story of each piece in a series of monologues. So long as this was the case, the lyrical part must have created the chief interest; and the difference between the Attic tragedy and the choral songs which were exhibited in a similar manner in the Dorian cities was perhaps not so striking as their agreement. The innovation made by Aeschylus altered the whole character of the poem; raised the purely dramatic portion from a subordinate to the principal rank, and expanded it into a richly varied and well organised composition. With him, it would seem, and as a natural consequence of this great change, arose the usage, which to us appears so singular, of exhibiting what was sometimes called a trilogy, which comprised three distinct tragedies at the same time."

Grote says:—

"The tragic drama belonged essentially to the festivals in honour of the god Dionysus; being originally a chorus sung in his honour, to which were successively superadded: First, an iambic monologue; next, a dialogue with two actors; lastly, a regular plot with three actors, and a chorus itself interwoven into the scene. Its subjects were from the beginning, and always continued to be, persons either divine or heroic above the level of historical life, and borrowed from what was called the mythical past. 'The Persae' of Aeschylus, indeed, forms a splendid exception; but the two analogous dramas of his contemporary, Phrynichus, 'The Phoenissae,' and 'The Capture of Miletus,' were not successful enough to invite subsequent tragedians to meddle with contemporary events. To three serious dramas, or a trilogy—at first connected together by a sequence of subject more or less loose, but afterwards unconnected and on distinct subjects, through an innovation introduced by Sophocles, if not before—the tragic poet added a fourth or satyrical drama; the characters of which were satyrs, the companions of the god Dionysus, and other historic or mythical persons exhibited in farce. He thus made up a total of four dramas, or a tetralogy, which he got up and brought forward to contend for the prize at the festival. The expense of training the chorus and actors was chiefly furnished by the choregi,—wealthy citizens, of whom one was named for each of the ten tribes, and whose honour and vanity were greatly interested in obtaining a prize. At first these exhibitions took place on a temporary stage, with nothing but wooden supports and scaffolding; but shortly after the year 500 B.C., on an occasion when the poets Aeschylus and Pratinas were contending for the prize, this stage gave way during the ceremony, and lamentable mischief was the result. After that misfortune, a permanent theatre of stone was provided. To what extent the project was realised before the invasion of Xerxes we do not accurately know; but after his destructive occupation of Athens, the theatre, if any existed previously, would have to be rebuilt or renovated, along with other injured portions of the city."

Curtius says:—

"Thespis was the founder of Attic tragedy. He had introduced a preliminary system of order into the alternation of recitative and song, into the business of the actor, and into the management of dress and stage. Solon was said to have disliked the art of Thespis, regarding as dangerous the violent excitement of feelings by means of phantastic representation; the Tyrants, on the other hand, encouraged this new popular diversion; it suited their policy that the poor should be entertained at the expense of the rich; the competition of rival tragic choirs was introduced; and the stage near the black poplar on the market-place became a centre of the festive merry-makings in Attica."

Curtius thinks that Pisistratus, as a popular usurper and opponent of the aristocracy, encouraged the worship of the popular god Dionysus with the Tragic Chorus, and he gives Pisistratus the credit of this glorious innovation. A similar policy was ascribed to Cleisthenes of Sicyon by Herodotus (v. 67).

The Chorus thus remaining wedded to the Drama, parts the action with lyric pieces more or less connected with it, and expressive of the feelings which it excites. In Aeschylus and Sophocles the connection is generally close; less close in Euripides. The Chorus also occasionally joins in the dialogue, moralising or sympathising, and sometimes, it must be owned, in a rather commonplace and insipid strain. In "The Eumenides" of Aeschylus, the chorus of Furies takes part as a character in the drama; in "The Suppliants" it plays the principal part.

The Drama came to perfection with Athenian art generally, and with Athens herself in the period which followed the Persian war. The performance of plays at the Dionysiac festival was an important event in Athenian life. The whole city was gathered in the great open-air theatre consecrated to Dionysus, whose priest occupied the seat of honour. All the free men, at least, were gathered there; and when we talk about the intellectual superiority of the Athenian people, we must bear in mind that a condition of Athenian culture was the delegation of industry to the slave. That audience was probably the liveliest, most quick-witted, most appreciative, and most critical that the world ever saw. Prizes were given to the authors of the best pieces. Each tragedian exhibited three pieces, which at first formed a connected series, though afterwards this rule was disregarded. After the three tragic pieces was performed a satyric drama, to relieve the mind from the strain of tragedy, and perhaps also as a conventional tribute to the jollity of the god of wine. In the Elizabethan Drama the tragic and comic are blended as they are in life.

The subjects were taken usually from mythology, especially from the circle of legends relating to the siege of Troy, to the tragic history of the house of Atreus, the equally tragic history of the house of Laius, and the adventures of Hercules. The subject of "The Persae" of Aeschylus is a contemporary event, but this, as Grote says, was an exception. Heroic action and suffering, the awful force of destiny and of the will of heaven, are the general themes of Aeschylus and Sophocles; passion, especially feminine passion, is more frequently the theme of Euripides. Romantic love, the staple of the modern drama and novel, was hardly known to the Greeks, whose romantic affection was friendship, such as that of Orestes and Pylades, or Achilles and Patroclus. The only approach to romantic love in the extant drama is the love of Haemon and Antigone in the "Antigone" of Sophocles; and even here it is subordinate to the conflict between state law and law divine, which is the key-note of the piece; while the lovers do not meet upon the scene. The sterner and fiercer passions, on the whole, predominate, though Euripides has given us touching pictures of conjugal, fraternal, and sisterly love. In the "Oedipus Coloneus" of Sophocles also, filial love and the gentler feelings play a part in harmony with the closing scene of the old man's unhappy life. In the "Philoctetes," Sophocles introduces, as an element of tragedy, physical pain, though it is combined with moral suffering.

A popular entertainment was of course adapted to the tastes of the people. Debate, both political and forensic, was almost the daily bread of the people of Athens. The Athenian loved smart repartee and display of the power of fencing with words. The thrust and parry of wit in the single-line dialogues (*stichomythia*) pleased them more than it pleases us. Rhetoric had a practical interest when not only the victory of a man's opinions in the political assembly, but his life and property before the popular tribunal, might depend on his tongue. The Drama was also used in the absence of a press for political or social teaching, and for the insinuation of political or social opinions. In reading these passages we must throw ourselves back twenty-three centuries, into an age when political and social observation was new, like politics and civilised society themselves, and ideas familiar to us now were fresh and struggling for expression. The remark may be extended to the political philosophy which struggles for expression in the speeches of Thucydides.

The trio of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has been compared with that of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Beaumont and Fletcher, and with that of Corneille, Racine, and Voltaire. The parallel will hardly hold good except as an illustration of the course of youth, perfection, and decay through which every art or product of imagination seems to run, unlike science, which continually advances. The epoch of the Athenian three, like that of the Elizabethan three, like that of the great Spanish dramatists, was one of national achievement, and their drama was thoroughly national; whereas the French drama was the highly artificial entertainment of an exclusive Court.

Aeschylus (B.C. 525-456) was the heroic poet of Athens. He had fought certainly at Marathon, and, we may be pretty sure, at Salamis, so that the narrative of the battle of Salamis in "The Persae" is probably that of an eye-witness; and that he had fought at Marathon, not that he had won the prize in drama, was the inscription which he desired for his tomb. He is of the old school of thought and sentiment, full of reverence for religion and for eternal law. The growing scepticism had not touched him. His morality is lofty and austere. In politics he was a conservative, of the party of Cimon, opposed to the radically democratic party of Pericles; and his drama, especially the Oresteian trilogy, teems with conservative sentiment and allusion. His characters are of heroic cast. He deals superbly with the moral forces and destiny; though it may be that more philosophy has been found in him, especially by his German commentators, than is there, and that obscurity arising from his imperfect command of

language has sometimes been mistaken for depth. His "Agamemnon" is generally deemed the masterpiece of Greek tragedy. His language is stately and swelling, in keeping with the heroic part of his characters; sometimes it is too swelling, and even bombastic. Though he is the greatest of all, art in him had not arrived at technical perfection. He reminds us sometimes of the Aeginetan marbles, rather than the frieze of the Parthenon.

In Sophocles (B.C. 495-405) the dramatic art has arrived at technical perfection. His drama is regarded as the literary counterpart of the Parthenon. Its calm and statuesque excellence exactly met the requirements of the taste which we call classic, and seems to correspond with the character of the dramatist, which was notably gentle, and with his form, which was typically beautiful. His characters are less heroic, and nearer to common humanity than those of Aeschylus. He appeals more to pity. His art is more subtle, especially in the treatment, for which he is famous, of the irony of fate. In politics, social sentiment, and religion, while he is more of the generation of Pericles than Aeschylus, he is still conservative and orthodox. If he belongs to democracy, it is a democracy still kept within moral bounds, and owning a master in its great chief, with whom he seems to have been personally connected. Nor does he ever court popularity by bringing the personages of the heroic age down to the common level. He, as well as Aeschylus, is dear to Aristophanes, the satiric poet of conservatism, while Euripides is hateful.

Euripides (B.C. 480-406) perhaps slightly resembles Voltaire in this, that he belongs to a different historic zone from his two predecessors, from Sophocles as well as from Aeschylus, in political and social sentiment, though not in date. He belongs to a full-blown democracy, and is evidently the dramatic poet of the people. To please the people he lays dignity and stateliness aside, brings heroic characters down to a common level, and introduces characters which are unheroic. He gives the people plenty of passion, especially of feminine passion, without being nice as to its sources, or rejecting such stories as those of Phaedra and Medea, which would have been alien to the taste, not only of Aeschylus, but of Sophocles. He gives them plenty of politics, plenty of rhetoric, plenty of discussion, political and moral, plenty of speculation, which in those days was novel, now and then a little scepticism. His "Alcestis" is melodrama verging on sentimental comedy, and heralding the sentimental comedy of Menander known to us in the versions of Terence. The chord of pathos he can touch well. His degradation, as the old school thought it, of the drama of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and what they deemed his pandering to vulgar taste, brought upon him the bitter satire of Aristophanes. Yet he did not win many prizes. Perhaps the vast theatre and the grand choric accompaniments harmonised ill with his unheroic style. He is clearly connected with the Sophists, and with the generation the morality of which had been unsettled by the violence of faction and the fury of the Peloponnesian war. Still there is no reason for saying that he preached moral scepticism or impiety. Probably he did not intend to preach anything, but to please his popular audience and to win the prize. The line quoted against him, "My lips have sworn, but my mind is unsworn," read in its place, has nothing in it immoral. Perhaps he had his moods: he was religious when he wrote "The Bacchae." As little ground is there for dubbing him a woman-hater. If he has his Phaedra and Medea, he has also his Alcestis and Electra. He seems to have prided himself on his choric odes. Some of them have beauty in themselves, but they are little relevant to the play.

A full and critical account of the plays will not be expected in the Preface to a series of extracts; it will be found in such literary histories as that of Professor Mahaffy. Nor can it be necessary to dilate on the merit of the pieces selected. The sublime agony of Prometheus Bound, the majesty of wickedness in Clytaemnestra, the martial grandeur of the siege of Thebes, or of the battle of Salamis, in Aeschylus; the awful doom of Oedipus, his mysterious end, the heroic despair of Ajax, the martyrdom of Antigone to duty, in Sophocles; the passion of Phaedra and Medea, the conjugal self-sacrifice of Alcestis, the narratives of the deaths of Polyxena and the slaughter of Pentheus by the Bacchae, in Euripides, speak for themselves, if the translation is at all faithful, and find their best comment in the reader's natural appreciation.

The number of those who do not read the originals will be increased by the dropping of Greek from the academical course. To give them something like an equivalent for the original in English is the object of a translation. As prose can never be an equivalent for poetry, and as the thoughts and diction of poetry are alien to prose, it is necessary to run the risks of a translation in verse. To translate as far as possible line for line, is requisite in the case of the Greek dramatists, if we would not lose the form and balance which are of the essence of Greek art. It is necessary also to preserve as much as possible the simplicity of diction, and to avoid words and phrases suggestive of very modern ideas. After all, it is difficult, with a material so motley and irregular as the English language, to produce anything like the pure marble of the Greek. There are translations of Greek tragedies or parts of them by writers of high poetic reputation, which are no doubt poetry, but are not Greek art.

The lyric portions of the Greek Drama are admired and even enthusiastically praised by literary judges whose verdict we shall not presume to dispute. To translation, however, the choric odes hardly

lend themselves. Their dithyrambic character, their high-flown language, strained metaphors, tortuous constructions, and frequent, perhaps studied, obscurity, render it almost impossible to reproduce them in the forms of our poetry. Nor perhaps when they are strictly analysed will much be found, in many of them at least, of the material whereof modern poetry is made. They are, in fact, the libretto of a chant accompanied by dancing, and must have owed much to the melody and movement. In attempting to render the grand choric odes of the "Agamemnon," moreover, the translator is perplexed by corruptions of the text and by the various interpretations of commentators, who, though they all agree as to the moral pregnancy and sublimity of the passage, frequently differ as to its precise meaning. A metrical translation of these odes in English is apt to remind us of the metrical versions of the Hebrew Psalms. A part of one chorus in Aeschylus, which forms a distinct picture, has been given in rhythmical prose; three choruses of Sophocles and two of Euripides have, not without misgiving, been rendered in verse.

The spelling of proper names is in a state of somewhat chaotic transition which makes it difficult to take a definite course. The precisians themselves are not consistent: they still speak of Troy, Athens, Plato, and Aristotle. In the versions themselves the Greek forms have been preferred, though a pedantic extreme has been avoided. In the Preface and Introduction the forms familiar to the English reader have been used.

For Aeschylus and Euripides, the editions of Paley in the *Bibliotheca Classica* have been used; for Sophocles, that of Mr. Lewis Campbell.

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AESCHYLUS

PROMETHEUS BOUND.

Prometheus, the good Titan, has been raising mankind from the condition of primeval brutes by teaching them the arts of civilisation. At last he steals fire from heaven for their use. By this he incurs the wrath of Zeus, who, having deposed his father Chronos, has become king of the gods. As a punishment Prometheus is condemned by Zeus to be chained to a rock in the Caucasus, with an eagle always feeding on his breast. But Prometheus knows the secret of a mysterious marriage which is destined in time to take place, and by the offspring of which Zeus in his turn is to be dethroned. Strong in his consciousness of this, he defies Zeus, who by the agency of Hermes tries in vain to wrest the secret from him. The persons of the drama, besides Prometheus, are Hephaestus, better known by his Latin name of Vulcan, Might and Force personified, Hermes the messenger of Heaven, and the wandering Io. The chorus consists of sea-nymphs, who sympathise with the suffering Prometheus. This drama is a sublime enigma. Aeschylus was conservative and deeply religious. How could he write a play the hero of which is a benefactor of man struggling against the tyranny of the king of the gods, and the sequel of which found a fit and congenial composer in Shelley, whose sentiment and manner the "Prometheus Bound" wonderfully anticipates and perhaps helped to form? Again, how could the Athenians, in an age when their piety had not yet given way to scepticism, have endured such dramatic treatment of the chief of the gods? It is almost as if a Mystery Play had been presented in the Middle Ages with Satan for the hero and the First Person of the Trinity in the character of an oppressor. Perhaps the position of Zeus in the drama as a usurper may, in some degree, have softened the religious effect.

* * * * *

Prometheus is brought in by the Spirits of Might and Force, Hephaestus accompanying them.

LINES 1-113.

SCENE: *The Caucasus.*

MIGHT.

Unto earth's utmost boundary we have come,
To Scythia's realm, th' untrodden wilderness.
Hephaestus, now it is thy part to do
The Almighty Father's bidding, and to bind
This arch-deceiver to yon lowering cliff
With bonds of everlasting adamant.
Thy attribute, all-fabricating fire,
He stole and gave to man. Such is the crime
For which he pays the penalty to Heaven,
That he may learn henceforth meekly to bear
The rule of Zeus and less befriend mankind.

HEPHAESTUS.

Spirits of Might and Force, by you the word
Of Zeus has been fulfilled; your task is done.
But I—to bind a god, one of my kin,
To a storm-beaten cliff, my heart abhors.
And yet this must I do, for woe is him
That does not what the Almighty Sire commands.
Thou high-aspiring son of Themis sage,
Unwilling is the hand that rivets thee
Indissolubly to this lonely rock,
Where thou shalt see no face and hear no voice
Of man, but, scorched by the sun's burning ray,
Change thy fair hue for dark, and long for night
With starry kirtle to close up the day,
And for the morn to melt the frosts of night,
Still racked with tortures endlessly renewed,
And which to end redeemer none is born.
Such is the guerdon of thy love for man.

A god thyself, thou gav'st, despite the gods,
To mortals more than is a mortal's due.
And therefore must thou keep this dreary rock,
Erect, with frame unbending, reft of sleep,
And many a bootless wail of agony
Shalt utter. Change of mind in Zeus is none,
Ruthless the rule when power is newly won.

MIGHT.

To work! A truce to these weak wails of ruth.
Whom the gods hate why dost thou not abhor—
Him that betrayed thy attribute to man?

HEPHAESTUS.

Great force have kindred and companionship.

MIGHT.

True, but to disobey the Almighty Sire
How canst thou dare? Fearest thou not this more?

HEPHAESTUS.

Relentless still and pitiless art thou.

MIGHT.

Thy wailings are no medicines for his woes;
Then waste no pains on that which profits naught.

HEPHAESTUS.

O thrice accurs'd this master-craft of mine!

MIGHT.

Why dost thou curse it? Simple truth to say,
Thy art is no way guilty of these ills.

HEPHAESTUS.

Would it had fallen to any lot but mine.

MIGHT.

The one thing to the gods themselves denied
[Footnote: In this passage I have retained the old reading eprachthae
with the interpretation of the Scholiast.]
Is sovereignty, for Zeus alone is free.

HEPHAESTUS.

Too well I know it, and gainsay it not.

MIGHT.

Be quick, then, and make fast this sinner's chain,
Lest the Almighty see thee loitering.

HEPHAESTUS.

Here are the fetters for his arms; behold them.

MIGHT.

Grasp him, and with thy hammer round his arms
Strike and strike hard and clench them to the rock.

HEPHAESTUS.

The work goes on apace and tarries not.

MIGHT.

Strike harder, clench, leave nothing loose; his craft,
E'en in extremity, can find a way.

HEPHAESTUS.

This arm is fixed past any power to loose.

MIGHT.

Clench now the other firmly; let him know
That all his cunning is no match for Zeus.

HEPHAESTUS.

Fault with my work can no one find save he.

MIGHT.

Drive then the ruthless spike of adamant
Right through the sinner's breast and see it holds.

HEPHAESTUS.

Alas, Prometheus! I bemoan thy pains.

MIGHT.

Thou loiterest, moaning for the foe of Zeus;
One day thou mayest be moaning for thyself.

HEPHAESTUS.

Thou see'st a sight most piteous to behold.

MIGHT.

I see yon sinner meeting his desert.
Proceed, make fast the fetters round his sides.

HEPHAESTUS.

Needs must I do it, press me not too hard.

MIGHT.

Press thee I will, and shout into thine ear.
Go down and clench the gyves about his legs.

HEPHAESTUS.

That work with little labour has been done.

MIGHT.

Now let thy hammer all the bonds make fast;
The overseer of this thy work is stern.

HEPHAESTUS.

Thy speech is ruthless as thy looks are grim.

MIGHT.

Be thou soft-hearted an thou wilt, but spare
To flout my sternness and my strong resolve.

HEPHAESTUS.

Let us be gone; the gyves are on his legs.

MIGHT.

There revel in thy insolence, there rob
Gods of their attributes to give to man.
Can mortal man in aught thy durance ease?
Ill chosen was the name that thou hast borne.
Foresight it means, but thou dost foresight need
To set thy limbs free from his handiwork.

PROMETHEUS.

O glorious firmament; O swift-winged winds,
Ye rivers and ye gleaming ocean waves
Innumerable, and thou great Mother Earth,
Thou, too, O sun, with thy all-seeing eye,
Look how a god is treated by the gods!
See the pains that I must bear,
Even to the thousandth year!
Such the chains that heaven's new king
Forges for my torturing.
Ah me! Ah me! my present woe
Does but the pangs to come foreshow,
Pangs that an end will never know.

Yet hold! The darkness of futurity
Is to my eye not dark, nor can aught come
That I do not foresee. Our destiny
We all must bear as lightly as we may,
Since none may wrestle with necessity.
And yet to speak or not to speak alike
Is miserable. High service done to man—
For this I bear the adamant chain.
I to its elemental fountain tracked,
In fern-pith stored and bore by stealth away,
Fire, source and teacher of all arts to men.
Such mine offence, whereof the penalty
I pay, thus chained in face of earth and heaven.

* * * * *

THE SIN OF PROMETHEUS.

LINES 444-533.

PROMETHEUS.

Think not it is from pride or wantonness
That I forbear to speak; my heart is wrung
With looking on these ignominious bonds.
Who was it that to these new deities
Their attributes apportioned? Who but I?
Of that no more; to you as well as me
The tale is known; but list while I recount
How vile was man's estate, how void was man
Of reason, till I gave him mind and sense.

Not that I would upbraid the race of men:
I would but show my own benevolence.
Eyesight they had, yet nothing saw aright;
Ears, and yet heard not; but like forms in dreams,
For ages lived a life confused, nor bricks
Nor woodwork had to build them sunny homes,
But dwelt beneath the ground, as do the tribes
Diminutive of ants, in sunless caves.
Nor had they signs to mark the season's change,
Coming of winter or of flowery spring
Or of boon summer; but at random wrought
In all things, till I taught them to discern
The risings and the settings of the stars;
The use of numbers, crown of sciences,
Was my invention; mine were letters too,
The implement of mind in all its works.
First I trained beasts to draw beneath the yoke,
The collar to endure, the rider bear,
And thus relieve man of his heaviest toils.
First taught the steed, obedient to the rein,
To draw the chariot, wealth's proud appanage.
Nor, before me, did any launch the barque
With its white wings to rove the ocean wave.
These blessings, hapless that I am, have I
Devised for man, and yet device have none
Myself to liberate from these fell bonds.

CHORUS.

Sad is thy lot, to thy unwisdom due.
Now, like a bad physician that himself
Has into sickness fallen, thou dost despair
And hast no medicine for thine own disease.

PROMETHEUS.

Hear what remains, and thou wilt wonder more
At all the feats of my inventive mind.
Greatest of all was this; when they fell sick
Men had no help, no medicine edible,
Potion or ointment, but for lack of cure
Wasted away and perished, till my skill
Taught them to mix the juice of sovran herbs,
With which they now ward off all maladies.
Of divination many ways I traced,
Laid down the rules for telling which of dreams
Would be fulfilled, and of foreboding sounds
The mystery unfolded. Then I taught
What sights are ominous to wayfarers.
I showed which of the birds that wing the heavens
Were lucky, which unlucky, and what were
Their loves and hatreds and foregatherings.
Then what the flesh of victims signified,
Of its appearances which pleased the gods,
How shaped, how streaked each part behoved to be,
And the burnt offerings on the altar laid,
Thighs wrapped in fat and chine. I read the signs
Of sacrificial flames unread before.
More yet I did; the wealth that lurks for man
In earth's dark womb,—gold, silver, iron, brass,—
Who was it brought all this to light but I?
All others lie who would the honour claim.
In one short sentence a long tale is told
Alone Prometheus gave all arts to man.

CHORUS.

Take heed; be not to mortals overkind,
But to thyself in this dire strait unkind.
Good hope have I, one day to see thee stand
Free from those bonds and mate the power of Zeus.

PROMETHEUS.

Not yet that consummation fate ordains.
A thousand years of agony must pass
Before my tortured frame puts off this chain.
For skill is weak matched with necessity.

CHORUS.

Who, then, is pilot of necessity?

PROMETHEUS.

Fates three, and the unchanged Erinnyes.

CHORUS.

And have these powers the mastery over Zeus?

PROMETHEUS.

Not Zeus himself can baffle destiny.

CHORUS.

What is his destiny but endless rule?

PROMETHEUS.

I may not tell thee; importune me not.

CHORUS.

Dread is the secret that thou hidest thus.

PROMETHEUS.

Think of some other question; this to tell
The time is not yet ripe; deep in my breast
The secret must be buried; thus alone
May I from chains and tortures be set free.

* * * * *

PROMETHEUS DEFIES ZEUS.

LINES 928-1114.

PROMETHEUS.

Yet, yet shall Zeus, for all his proud self-will,
Be humbled. On a wedlock he is bent
Whereof the fateful offspring shall one day
Hurl him from sovereignty to nothingness,
And so fulfil the curse old Chronos spake,
When from his immemorial throne he fell.
And this his doom how to escape not one
Of all the gods can rede him saving I.
But to me all is known. Then let him sit
Triumphant while his thunders roll through heaven,

And his hand grasps the flaming thunderbolt;
All his artillery shall not save its lord
From utter shame and ruin bottomless.
Such the antagonist himself arrays
Against himself, dread and invincible,
One who a fiercer than the lightning's flame,
A louder than the thunder's peal shall find,
And wrest the truncheon that makes earth to quake,
Poseidon's trident, from its wielder's hand.
Wrecked on misfortune's rock, he then shall know
How high it is to reign, to serve how low.

CHORUS.

Thy wish is father to thy prophecy.

PROMETHEUS.

My wish is one with destiny's decree.

CHORUS.

Think'st thou that Zeus will e'er his master find?

PROMETHEUS.

Ay! and a load harder than mine to bear.

CHORUS.

Dost thou not fear to cast such words at Zeus?

PROMETHEUS.

What should I fear when I must never die?

CHORUS.

But Zeus may yet enhance thine agony.

PROMETHEUS.

Prepared for all, his malice I defy.

CHORUS.

'Tis wise to bow to the inevitable.

PROMETHEUS.

Cringe, if thou wilt, sue, bend the knee to power.
Little reck I of Zeus. Then let him work
His tyrant will for his allotted span.
Not long shall he be monarch of the gods.
But lo! the Almighty's henchman I behold,
That errands bears for this new dynasty;
His lacqueyship must some new fiat bring.

(Enter HERMES.)

HERMES.

Thou of the crafty soul and bitter tongue,
Sinner, that did'st betray to mortal man
The attributes of gods, stealer of fire,
The Father bids thee tell what wedlock this
That thou dost boast shall hurl him from his throne.

Speak plain, Prometheus, and take heed that I
Have not a second journey, for such shifts,
As well thou seest, turn not the heart of Zeus.

PROMETHEUS.

High are the words and full of majesty
For him that runs the errands of the gods.
New are ye, new to rule, and deem your tower
Of puissance proof against calamity.
Yet therefrom two lords I have seen cast out;
A third, him that now reigns, cast out shall see
Most quickly and most foully. Think'st thou I
Will crouch before these gods of yesterday?
Far, far from me that thought of shame. Do thou
The way thou camest measure back with speed,
For to thy question I give answer none.

HERMES.

It was by such self-will before displayed,
That thou did'st pluck these woes upon thy head.

PROMETHEUS.

My woes, how great so e'er, I would not change
For servitude like thine; of that be sure.

HERMES.

Better, thou think'st, be bondsman to this rock
Than be the faithful pursuivant of Zeus.

PROMETHEUS.

'Tis meet the scorner should be met with scorn.

HERMES.

Thou seem'st to revel in thy present lot.

PROMETHEUS.

Revel! I would that I could see my foes
Thus revelling, of whom I count thee one.

HERMES.

Layest thou the blame on me of thy mischance?

PROMETHEUS.

I hate, without exception, all the gods
Who my good deeds with injury requite.

HERMES.

Thy words bespeak no common sickness thine.

PROMETHEUS.

If hating foes be sickness, I am sick.

HERMES.

Thou wert past bearing wert thou prosperous.

PROMETHEUS.

Alas!

HERMES.

Zeus knows not how to say Alas!

PROMETHEUS.

Time in its course can teach us anything.

HERMES.

Yet thee it has not taught to rule thy tongue.

PROMETHEUS..

No, else I had not parleyed with a slave.

HERMES.

It seems thou wilt not tell what Zeus demands.

PROMETHEUS.

Were I his debtor I the debt would pay.

HERMES.

As though I were a child thou twittest me.

PROMETHEUS.

Art thou not sillier than a silly child,
To think that I will tell thee what thou ask'st?
No torture does Zeus know, he has no rack
By which he can my secret wrest from me,
Till from these cruel bonds I am released.
Let him hurl lightnings with his red right hand,
Let him with whirling snow and earthquake shock,
Confound and wreck this universal frame,
Never shall he constrain me to reveal
The child of fate that hurls him from his throne.

HERMES.

Look, will this insolence amend thy lot?

PROMETHEUS.

I have well looked, and fixed is my resolve.

HERMES.

Bow thy proud soul, insensate wretch, and do
What wisdom bids in thine extremity.

PROMETHEUS.

Waste no more words, thou dost but chide the sea;
Dream not that I can be o'erawed by Zeus,
That I will from my manhood derogate
And sue to him that from my soul I hate,
With womanish uplifting of my hands,
For liberation from these fetters.—Never!

HERMES.

Methinks I spend my eloquence in vain,
For all my prayers nor melt nor move thy heart.
Like a raw colt that pulls against the reins,
Taking the bit between his teeth, art thou.
And yet thy mettle will but weakness prove;
For dogged resolution by itself,
With wisdom unallied, is impotence.
See if thou wilt not to my words give ear,
What stormy billows of resistless woe
Will overwhelm thee. First the Almighty Sire
Will with his thunder cleave this beetling rock,
And bury thee beneath its shattered base,
Within its stony arms enfolding thee;
And many an age shall pass ere thou return
To daylight. Then the winged hound of Zeus,
The ravening eagle with devouring maw,
Shall deeply trench thy quivering flesh and come,
Day after day, an uninvited guest,
To feast upon thy ulcerated heart.
Of this thy agony expect no end
Until some god appears to take on him
Thy load of suffering, and for thee descend
To the dark depths of the dread under-world.
Advise thee then, and deem not that my words
Are feigned, for I in bitter earnest speak.
The lips of the Almighty cannot lie;
Each word they utter surely is fulfilled.
Use then thy forecast and be circumspect,
Nor o'er good counsel let self-will prevail.

CHORUS.

As seems to us, Hermes has spoken well,
In that he redes thee put away self-will,
And take far-sighted prudence to thy heart.
Give ear; for one so wise to err were shame.

PROMETHEUS.

Well known beforehand was to me
The purport of this embassy.
His foe am I, he is my foe,
And I his worst can undergo.
Then let his forked lightnings flash,
Heaven with his pealing thunder crash:
Let him the wild winds loose and make
Earth to her deep foundation shake;
Bid the swoll'n waves, by tempest driven,
Mount up and drench the stars of heaven;
And let my helpless form be hurled
Headlong to the dark under-world
Midst raging wreck of earth and sky.—
There ends his power, I cannot die.
HERMES.

Madness it is inspires thy thought.
Thy words are words of one distraught.
What here is wanting that can be
Sure token of insanity?
But now, ye ocean nymphs whose eyes
Weep for yon sinner's agonies,
Go hence, the heavens begin to lower,
Go hence, or with its awful stour

The thunder will your souls o'erpower.

CHORUS.

Go hence; good Hermes, change thy rede
And I will to thy words give heed.
But ne'er to me such counsel name
As e'en to think upon were shame,
Whate'er Prometheus may betide,
Be mine to suffer at his side.
Of all foul things abhorred by me
The most abhorred is perfidy.

HERMES.

Lay then to heart what now I say,
And think not in destruction's day
On fortune's spite the blame to throw,
Or say that Zeus has wrought your woe.
When thou hast rushed into the net
Of doom for fate by folly set,
Thou wilt thy just reward have met.

PROMETHEUS.

Now the dread hour has come: earth reels,
Through heaven the crashing thunder peals,
Forked lightnings blaze about the sky,
The sand in clouds is whirled on high;
From east, from west, from south, from north,
The winds in mad career rush forth,
And elemental battle join;
The welkin mingles with the brine;
Upon me comes in flood and fire
The blast of the Almighty's ire.
Look, holy mother, on this sight;
Look on it, Aether, source of light,
See justice overborne by might.

THE PERSIANS

Xerxes has led the hosts of Asia on the fatal expedition against Hellas. His mother, Atossa, remaining at Susa, has a fatal dream, which she recounts to the chorus of aged Persians.

* * * * *

ATOSSA'S DREAM.

LINES 178-216.

ATOSSA.

By dreams I have been haunted every night,
Since with his armament my son went forth
To smite the land of the Ionians.
Yet never dream has come so startling clear
As last night's vision; let me tell it thee:—
Methought two women, beauteously attired,
The robes of one in Persian fashion wrought.
Those of her mate in Dorian, met my view.
In stature they surpassed all womankind;

Peerless their forms; sisters they were in blood.
The heritage and dwelling-place of one
Was Hellas, of the other Asia.
Between these two methought a strife arose,
Which when my son perceived, he checked their wrath
And calmed them, and beneath his chariot's yoke
He led them both, and o'er their necks the rein
He stretched. Then of her trappings one seemed proud
And to the bit her mouth obedient lent.
But her companion, like a restive steed,
The harness broke, and, heeding not the bit,
O'erthrew the car and snapped the yoke in twain.
My son falls, and his sire Darius comes
To aid and comfort him, whom when he sees,
Xerxes his garments rends in sign of woe.
Such was my dream. When morning came I rose,
And first the night's pollution purged away
With purifying waters, then I sought
The altar, with my sacrificial train
To lay the gift, which turns the wrath divine,
Of honeyed meal before the powers who save.
Behold an eagle flying in affright
To Phoebus' shrine; fear struck me mute, my friends.
Then lo! a falcon on the eagle swoops,
Assails him with his wings and tears his head
With angry talons, while the mightier bird
Cowers unresisting. Awful 'twas to see,
Awful it is for you to hear. My son,
If well he fares, will boundless glory win,
If ill—yet he no reckoning owes the state;
Let him but live and he is master here.

* * * * *

SALAMIS.

The battle narrated by a Persian coming from the scene.

LINES 251-473.

MESSENGER.

Alas! ye cities all of Asia,
Alas! thou Persia, treasure-house of wealth,
How at one stroke has your prosperity
Been overthrown and Persia's glory lost!
Ill-luck has he that evil tidings brings,
Yet needs must I my tale of woe unfold.
Persians, our host has perished utterly.

* * * * *

ATOSSA.

O'erwhelming sorrow has long held me mute.
Disaster such as this transcends all thought,
Bars all enquiry, chokes all utterance.
And yet we mortals must misfortune bear
When heaven ordains. Then, though thy heart be
wrung,
Calm thee and tell us all, that we may know
Who of our warriors lives, whom we must mourn
Among our chiefs, as having by his death
Left void the station of his high command.

MESSENGER.

Xerxes himself lives and beholds the sun.

ATOSSA.

Thy word is sunshine to my sorrowing house;
A cheerful day after a dismal night.

MESSENGER.

Artembares, that led ten thousand horse,
Lies slain upon the rough Silenian shore;
And Dadaces, that led a thousand more,
Pierced by a spear plunged headlong from his barque;
And Tenagon, Bactria's true son and pride,
Lies on the wave-washed beach of Ajax' Isle.
Lileus, Arsames, Argestes too,
Round the dove-haunted island drifting, struck
Its girdling rocks on fell disaster's day.
Matallus, that from Chrysa came, has fallen,
He that dark horsemen thrice ten thousand led;
The flowing beard that graced his cheek in gore
Steeped unto crimson turned its russet hue.
Arabian Magos, Bactrian Artames,
Die in a strange land, never to return;
And Tharybis, of five times fifty sail
Commander, Lyrna's son, with his fair face
By foul mischance of war has been laid low.
While, bravest of the brave, Syennesis,
Cilicia's admiral, who to the foe
Most trouble gave, has met a glorious doom.

ATOSSA.

Alas! this overtops the height of woe;
For Persia naught remains but shame and wail.
But now take up thy story, let me hear
What was the number of the Hellenic fleet,
That thus it dared our Persian armament
In battle with encountering prows to brave.

MESSENGER.

Know that if numbers could have gained the day
Victory was ours, for the Hellenic fleet
Counted in all but thrice a hundred sail,
Of which were ten for swiftness set apart.
But with a thousand galleys Xerxes came—
His muster-roll I know—whereof the ships
For swiftness picked two hundred were and seven.
Think you herein ours was the weaker side?
Some deity against us turned the scale,
And brought confusion on our armament,
The powers of Heaven for Pallas' city fight.

ATOSSA.

Has Athens then escaped the avenger's hand?

MESSENGER.

Her walls are scatheless while her men remain.

ATOSSA.

Recount then how began the naval fight.

MESSENGER.

Lady, the origin of all our woes
Was the appearance of some evil power.
A man of Hellas from the Athenian fleet
Came forth unto thy son, King Xerxes, said
That, when the darkling shades of night came on,
His countrymen would flee, leaping aboard
Their ships, each as he might, to save their lives.
Which when King Xerxes heard, suspecting not
The Hellene's treachery nor the spite of heaven,
He gives this order to his admirals:—
As soon as daylight faded from the earth,
And darkness overspread the face of heaven,
In three divisions our main force to range,
Barring each outlet and each water-way,
And with the rest to circle Ajax' Isle;
All being warned that if the Hellenes found
A part unguarded and escaped their doom,
Each with his head should pay the penalty.
This fiat he with heart uplift sent forth,
As little knowing what the gods ordained.
Obedient to the word, our seamen all
Prepared their evening meal, then every man
In order to the rowlock lashed his oar.
Soon as the light of evening died away
And night came on, each man who plied the oar
Went to his ship with all the men-at-arms,
And the word passed along the lines of war.
Then they put forth, each in his place assigned,
And through the live-long night the captains kept
Our weary seamen toiling at the oar.
So passed the hours of darkness, yet the fleet
Of Hellas showed no sign of stealthy flight.
But when the white steeds of returning day
Suffused the land and sea with orient light,
From the Hellenic fleet the hymn of war
Pealed forth in unison, and echo loud
Rang out in answer from the rocky isle.
Amazement on the host of Asia fell
And consternation, for no thought of flight
Was in that solemn chant, but courage high,
Desire of battle, hope of victory.
Then did the trumpet, thrilling, fire all hearts.
The word was given, and with concordant sweep
Their dashing oars at once upturned the brine,
And soon their whole armada was in sight.
The right wing first came forth in fair array,
The whole fleet followed and the shout was raised
Through all the lines, "On, sons of Hellas, on;
On, for the freedom of your fatherland,
Your wives, your children, your forefathers' graves,
The temples of your gods; all are at stake."
In answer rang on our side, loud and wide,
The Persian war-cry. Time to lose was none.
At once, encountering with their brazen beaks
The squadrons met. A ship of Hellas first
Charged a Phoenician galley and stove in
Her stern-works; general then the onset grew.
At first the prowess of our Persian host
Made head, but, crowded in the narrow strait,
Our galleys, powerless mutual aid to lend,
Dashed on their consorts with their brazen beaks,
And swept each other's banks of oars away.
Meanwhile the watchful foe, surrounding them,

Charged on the rout; ship after ship went down
Before him, and the sea was lost to sight
Beneath the drifting wrecks and floating dead.
Then all resistance ended, and our ships
Plied one and all their oars in panic flight.
The foe, as 'twere a haul of tunny fish,
With splintered oars and fragments of the wreck
Assailed and slaughtered them; the waters rang
With mingled cries of death and victory,
Till night's dark veil descending closed the scene.
The sum of our disasters, though I spoke
For ten long days, I never could unfold.
Know in a word, so vast a multitude
Has never fallen in one disastrous day.

ATOSSA.

Alas! a huge wave of calamity
Has broken on our universal realm.

MESSENGER.

Thou art but half way through this tale of woe,
For a disaster on our army fell
Which twice outweighed all this that I have told.

ATOSSA.

Can fortune's spite what thou hast told surpass?
Go on, recount this new calamity
Which in thy estimation outweighs all.

MESSENGER.

The very flower of all our Persian host,
The trusted pillars of our monarchy,
Have met a piteous and a shameful end.

ATOSSA.

Ah! woe is me for this dire history.
Recount, then, how our noblest warriors fell.

MESSENGER.

An isle there is in face of Salamis,
Small and without a haven, on whose strand
Dance-loving Pan his measure often treads.
Thither the King despatched these chosen bands
That when from sinking ships crews swam ashore,
They of their foes might make an easy prey,
And their friends rescue from a watery grave,
Ill the event foreseeing. For when heaven
Gave the Hellenes victory on the sea,
At once their bodies they in armour sheathed,
Leaped from their galleys forth, and all the isle
With arms encircled. Outlet for escape
Our hopeless bands had none. A ceaseless storm
Of stones was rained upon them, and the shafts,
Whistling from many a bowstring, scattered death.
At last, combining in one charge, the foe
Fell on them, stabbed them, hacked them limb from limb,
Nor stayed the butchery till the last was slain.
Xerxes, when he such utter ruin saw
From the high throne where, on an eminence
Hard by the sea, he overlooked the scene,

Sent forth a piercing cry and rent his clothes;
Then gave his troops the order to retreat
And headlong took to flight. Now thou dost know
The harvest and the aftermath of woe.

THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES.

The unnatural brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, are competitors for the lordship of Thebes. Eteocles is in possession. Polynices, having married the daughter of Adrastus, King of Argos, leads an army, raised by the help of his father-in-law, against Thebes.

In this army there are seven champions. The Argive army is drawn out in array against the city in seven divisions, each division facing one of the seven gates of Thebes, and with a champion at its head. The champions are described to Eteocles by a Theban, who has been sent to watch the movements of the enemy. Under the name of Amphiaraus lurks a description of Aristides "the just," the head of the conservative party to which Aeschylus belonged, whose conscientiousness and moderation are obliquely contrasted with the revolutionary violence of the ultra-democratic party headed by Themistocles. The chorus consists of Theban maidens.

* * * * *

THE CHAMPIONS.

LINES 370-673.

MESSENGER.

The order of our foemen you shall hear,
And at which gate each champion has his post.
Tydeus stands ready at the Proetian gate,
Fuming, for still the seer forbids to ford
Ismenus, since the omens are not fair.
Thereat the chieftain, mad with warlike rage
As is a snake with heat at noonday, raves;
And on the prudent seer Oeclides heaps
Taunts of faint-heartedness and craven fear.
While thus he storms, wild on his helmet waves,
The shaggy crest threefold, and on his shield
The brazen bells ring out a fearful note.
Upon that shield a proud device he wears,
A firmament all luminous with stars,
While in the centre shines the moon full-orbed,
Empress of constellations, eye of night.
Thus in his boastful panoply he stalks
Along the river panting for the fray,
As a proud charger at the trumpet sound
Frets, paws the earth, and flecks his bit with foam.
Think whom thou hast to cope with this dread chief,
Who of that gate unbarred shall warder be.

ETEOCLES.

My spirit quails at no proud panoply.
Escutcheons wound not, nor will waving crests
Or clashing bells bite without thrust of spear.
This night of which thou tellest on his shield,
Albeit it blaze with all the stars of heaven,
May to the bearer's self prove ominous;
For if death's night should fall upon his eyes
His boastfulness will turn to prophecy,
And his device will have foreshown his doom.

To cope with Tydeus and that post to guard,
I send the gallant son of Astacus,
Whose noble blood is loyal to the rule
Of honour and abhors vainglorious words,
Whose chivalry fears nothing but reproach,
Sprung from that remnant of the Earth-born race,
Which the sword spared, a true son of the soil,
Melanippus. Ares' hand the die will cast,
But nature sends our soldier to the field
To drive the invader from his mother-land.

CHORUS.

Heaven shield our country's champion with its might,
Him who will combat for the right,
And guard our warriors all from perils of the fight.

MESSENGER.

Good fortune on thy chosen warder wait.
Before the Electran gate stands Capaneus,
Whose giant frame o'ertops e'en Tydeus' self.
His vaunts are more than mortal, and he hurls
Against our towers threats which may heaven fend.
Be it the will of heaven or not, he vows
That he will storm this town, nor Zeus himself
With red right hand shall scare him from his prey.
Of lightnings or of thunderbolts he recks
No more than of the rays of noonday sun.
For his device he bears a naked man
With burning torch in hand, whose legend says
In golden letters, "I will fire this town."
Bethink thee whom thou hast this chief to mate,
Who without quailing will his vaunts withstand.

ETEOCLES.

Why, here we have gain added unto gain.
When pride and folly in the heart abide,
The tongue fails not their presence to betray.
Capaneus threatens what his hand would do,
Scorning the gods, and with unchastened lips,
Madly exulting, vents against high heaven
And heaven's high king his swelling blasphemies.
Surely I trust that on his impious head
The lightning shall be launched more fiery far
Than are the rays of any noonday sun.
To meet him with his braggart menaces
Stout Polyphontus goes, a gallant soul,
Who well can hold the post, so Artemis
And all protecting gods his arm will aid.
Tell us whose lot is at another gate.

CHORUS.

Perish the man who would lay low our towers;
Smite him with lightning, kindly powers,
Ere he can storm our home and spoil our virgin bowers.

MESSENGER.

Hear, then, who has his post at the next gate.
Eteocles is his name, him the third lot,
Forth from the brazen helmet leaping, set
To lead his band against the Eastern gate.

There to and fro he wheels his fiery steeds,
That pant in their caparisons to charge
The portal, and with snorting nostrils proud
Make uncouth music through their mouth-pieces.
Nor lowly the device upon his shield:
A man-at-arms is on a ladder seen
Scaling the wall of a beleaguered town,
And underneath the vaunting legend dares
Ares himself to beat back the assault.
Against this champion you must bid go forth
One that can save our town from slavery.

ETEOCLES.

He goes—is gone, with victory on his helm;
A chief whose boasting is in deeds, not words,
Megareus, of earth-born lineage, Creon's son.
Him shall no snortings of impetuous steeds
Scare from the gate, but either with his blood
He will repay the earth that gave him life,
Or both the warriors and the town to boot
Bear off and with the spoils adorn his home.
Give us some more vainglory; stint not speech.

CHORUS.

Good luck with him that guards my city go,
Ill luck with the o'erweening foe.
High is their boast; may Zeus, the avenger, lay them low.

MESSENGER.

At the fourth gate, where stands Athene's fane
Of Onke hight, another chief appears,
Towering with giant bulk—Hippomedon.
Broad as a threshing-floor his buckler is,
And terror seized me as he whirled it round.
Nor was it any common craftsman's hand
That wrought the emblem which that buckler bears,
A Typhon vomiting with fiery mouth,
Black clouds of smoke, the wavering mate of fire.
And all around his hollow buckler's rim
A coil of twining snakes is riveted.
Loud is his battle-cry. By Ares fired
He like a Maenad storms and raves for fight.
Against this champion's onset guard thee well;
Already rout is threatened at the gate.

ETEOCLES.

The deity herself that has her fane
Hard by the gates, abhorring insolence,
Will ward this deadly serpent from her brood.
But as our man, valiant Hyperbius,
The son of Oenops, to the lists has gone,
Ready at need to brave the risks of war,
In form, in spirit, and in arms alike
Reproachless. Hermes well has matched the pair.
For as each champion is the other's foe,
So are the gods that on their shields they bear:
Hippomedon has Typhon breathing fire,
But on the buckler of Hyperbius
Is Zeus the unconquered, thunderbolt in hand;
And who e'er knew the arm of Zeus to fail?
Such are the patron deities of whom

The weaker are the foe's, the mightier ours.
So will it fare with those they patronise,
If Zeus o'er Typhon has the mastery;
For Zeus, the saviour, on Hyperbius' shield
Blazoned, will save his liegeman in the fight.

CHORUS.

The foe of Zeus bearing that form of hate,
By gods and mortals reprobate,
The hell fiend soon, I trust, shall fall before the gate.

MESSENGER.

So may it be, now to the fifth I come
Whose station is at the Borraean gates,
Hard by the tomb that holds Amphion's dust.
This champion swears by what he higher deems
Than god and dearer than his eyes, his spear,
That he will Cadmus' city storm and sack
In heaven's despite. So vows the wood nymph's son,
That fair-faced stripling, scarcely yet a man,
For on his cheek still blooms the down of youth.
Marshal his mood and fierce his countenance,
And all unlike the maiden name he bears.
Nor does he lack his share of boastfulness,
For on the shield that with its brazen round
His body fenced, he bore our city's shame,
The rav'ning Sphynx, in burnished effigy
Empaled, and grasping in her felon claws
The limbs of a Cadmean citizen;
Which on the bearer drew a shower of darts.
Battle to huckster is not his intent,
Nor to have marched so far and marched in vain.
His name Parthenopaeus, Arcady
His home, Argos his nurse, whom to requite
He threatens that from which heaven save our towers.

ETEOCLES.

Yes, only let their thoughts be paid them home
[Footnote: Two lines in this speech appear to have been lost.]
By the just gods, they with their impious vaunts
Will be consumed and perish utterly.
To cope with thy Arcadian goes a man
Modest in speech but nowise slack in deed,
Actor, his brother of whom last I spake,
Who will not let a tongue without an arm
Within our gates rave to our overthrow,
Nor entrance give the foe, who on his shield
To flout us bears the hated effigy.
His Sphynx, midst rattling darts, will hardly thank
Him that advanced her to our battlements.—
Heaven grant that as I say the event may be.

CHORUS.

Thy tidings pierce my fluttering breast, and fright
Makes all my tresses rise upright
At that fell foeman's vaunt; may heaven confound his spite.

MESSENGER.

Five were accursed; one righteous man succeeds
The seer Amphiaraus, good and brave.

His post is at the Homoloian gate.
Here he reproaches heaps on Tydeus' head,
Calling him murderer and the public bane,
Leader of Argos in all evil ways,
The Furies' pursuivant, henchman of death,
That has Adrastus to his ruin trained.
Thy brother too, stained by his father's fate,
Great Polynices, with accusing face
Turned heavenward, he upbraids and thus he speaks:
"Certes a deed it is to please the gods,
Fair to recount and glorious to hand down,
Thus thy own city to lay low and raze
Her temples with an alien soldiery.
What stream can wash away a mother's curse?
How shall thy country, captive to a foe
By thee set on, requite thee with her love?
For me, this hostile land must be my tomb
And be enriched with my prophetic bones.
Forward! I look for no inglorious grave."
Thus spake the seer as he before him threw
His glittering shield. On it was no device.
Foremost to be, not seem, was still his aim.
His soul is as a plough-land deep and rich,
From which a harvest of good counsels grows.
Against him send some worthy opposite.
He most is to be feared who fears the gods.

ETEOCLES.

Woe worth the day that links the righteous man
To the dark fortunes of iniquity.
In all the world is nothing so malign,
Of fruit so poisonous, as an evil friend.
One day shall ye behold the pious man,
Going on ship-board with an impious crew,
Sink amid sinners reprobate of heaven.
Another day shall ye behold the just,
In an outlawed and godless commonwealth,
Snared like their fellows in the net of doom
And struck by the avenging rod of heaven.
And so this seer, this son of Oecleës,
A wise, just, blameless, and god-fearing man,
A famous prophet, to an impious host
Against his better judgment misallied
And drawn to march with them whose bourne is hell,
With them must perish; such the stern decree.
Hardly, I think, he will assault the gate;
Not that his heart will faint or arm will fail,
But that he knows he on this field must die,
Unless Apollo's oracle prove false,
Which if he tells not, prudence seals his lips.
Yet shall our champion be stout Lasthenes,
A churlish gate-ward to intruders he,
An aged head upon a youthful frame.
Quick is his eye and nimble is his hand
From the shield's cover to dart forth the spear.
But who shall win the gods alone can tell.

CHORUS.

O hear our righteous prayer, ye heavenly powers,
The ruin be the foe's, not ours,
And may the thunder smite him who would storm our towers.

MESSENGER.

The chief whose post is at the seventh gate
Is thine own brother; hear his direful prayers,
His imprecations on our commonwealth.
He prays that he may mount our battlements,
Be there proclaimed our king, shout victory,
Meet thee, and slay thee, and insult thee slain,
Or, living, drive thee forth a banished man,
Disgracing thee as thou hast him disgraced.
With such fell words and adjurations dire
Of his paternal gods to hear his prayer,
Strong Polynices makes the field resound.
A shield he bears, fair-shaped and newly-wrought,
Whereon a twofold emblem is empaled:
A lady with a stately mien leads on
The golden likeness of a man-at-arms,
The legend says that Justice is her name
And she is bringing back a banished man
To claim his native city and his home.
[Footnote: Four lines, probably spurious, if not interpolated, are
here omitted.]

ETEOCLES.

O madness of the wicked, heaven-abhorred!
O hapless race of Oedipus my sire,
Alas! a father's curse is here fulfilled.
But now away with tears, away with wails,
Lest a worse cause of lamentation come.
For Polynices, all too truly named,
[Footnote: The last part of the name means *strife*.]
Soon shall he know what his device portends,
And whether golden letters on his shield,
Vaunt as they may, shall bring the boaster home.
Perchance if Justice, virgin child of Zeus,
Were in his thoughts and deeds, so it might be;
But neither when he issued from the womb,
Nor in his childhood's days, nor in his youth,
Nor since the beard has gathered on his chin,
Has Justice e'er vouchsafed a word to him.
Nor now, when on his native soil he treads
In enmity, is Justice at his side.
Nor could the deity deserve her name
If she could be a miscreant's paramour.
Herein I put my trust, and will myself
Accept this combat; better right has none;
Chieftains alike we meet, brethren we are
And deadly enemies. My armour, ho!

AGAMEMNON.

The only complete specimen of a trilogy extant is the "Oresteia" of Aeschylus, comprising the "Agamemnon," the "Choephoroe" (Mourners), and the "Eumenides" (Furies). In this series are presented the murder of Agamemnon on his return from the conquest of Troy, by his queen, Clytemnestra, and her paramour, Aegisthus; the slaying of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by the avenger of blood, Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, at the bidding of Apollo; the pursuit of Orestes as a matricide by the Furies; and his final acquittal and restoration by the favour of Apollo and Athene. The trilogy is full of political sentiment and allusion. The last piece, "Eumenides," has a distinct political purpose. In the murder of Agamemnon in his home, after his return from his victory over the Asiatic enemies of Hellas, by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, the audience could hardly fail to see a parallel to the persecution of Cimon, the hero of the conservative party to which Aeschylus belonged, after his

victories over the Persians, by the leaders of the democratic party, Pericles and Ephialtes.

* * * * *

THE FALL OF TROY ANNOUNCED AT MYCENAE, WHERE AGAMEMNON'S PALACE IS, BY BEACON FIRES.

LINES 1-39.

THE WATCHMAN.

Grant me, oh gods, deliverance from this toil,
This year-long watch, which, couched upon the roof
Of the Atridae, dog-like I have kept,
Scanning the nightly gatherings of the stars,
Those radiant potentates, that throned on high,
Lead on the changing seasons for mankind.
And now I still am looking for the sign,
The beacon light which is to flash from Troy
The tidings of the city's fall, for so
Ordains the will of our man-hearted queen.
Broken my rest, my couch is drenched with dew,
And by no pleasant dream is visited.
In place of slumber fear waits on me there,
So that my eyes can never close in sleep;
And if to sing or whistle I essay,
In hope to charm away my drowsiness,
Straightway I fall to weeping for this house,
That into evil hands of late has fallen.
Would but the light, that happy tidings bears,
Shine through the dark to end our sufferings.
(Beacon light appears,)
Offspring of night, all hail! A glorious day
Thou dost to Argos bring, with many a dance
And song in honour of this victory.
Joy! joy!
I go to call on Agamemnon's queen
To leave her couch, and forthwith in her halls
Bid the glad voice of jubilation rise
To greet this beacon fire. If true it be
That Troy is taken, as the light proclaims,
My watch the highest throw of fortune's dice
Has cast, and with my lords all must be well.
No more I say, a heavy curb is laid
Upon my lips; these walls, if they had voice,
Would tell their secret; as for me, I speak
To those who know, to others I am mute.

* * * * *

THE SACRIFICE OF IPHIGENIA.

The chorus recounts the sacrifice of Iphigenia, one of the train of horrors connected with the doom of the house of Atreus.

LINES 177-240.

CHORUS.

Wind-bound and suffering dearth, the Achaean fleet
O'er against Calchis lay.
On Aulis' tide-washed shore,
While from the Strymon gales,
Bearing delay and famine on their wing,
Bane of the mariner,
Wasting both hull and rope,
Were wearing out the flower of Argive youth.

Then did the seer proclaim
For that unwelcome wind
A new and cruel cure
In name of Artemis.
Which, hearing, the Atridae with their staves
Smote on the ground and wept.

Then spake the elder King:
"To disobey were dire,
Yet dire it is to slay
My child, the pride and beauty of my home,
And at the altar stain
A father's hand with blood of virgin sacrifice.
Which way is not despair?
How can I prove disloyal to the host,
And this alliance lose?
If for this sacrifice of virgin life,
The wind to lay, heaven calls
So sternly, I obey."

Fate's yoke when he had donned,
Over his spirit came
A dark, unholy change;
Thenceforth he doffed all pity and remorse.
From the heart of man delusion strong,
Parent of evil, casts out virtuous fear.
Unmoved, he slew his child a war to aid
Waged for a woman's wrong
Upon the fleet's behalf.
Her prayers, her calling on her father's name,
Her virgin youth,
Those royal warriors held of no account.
Prayer said, her father bade the ministers
Lift her that, fainting, in her robes sank down
Upon the altar, as it were a kid,
And guard upon her beauteous lips to set
Of forceful silence, lest
A curse might issue from them on the house.
Letting her saffron veil fall on the ground,
She smote each minister of sacrifice
With piteous glances, mute
As is a picture, and in vain essayed
To speak. She many a time
In hospitable hall
Had sung, and with her innocent, chaste voice
Wished to her sire health and prosperity.
What then ensued I saw not nor recount.
The seer's behest was done.

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THE MEETING OF AGAMEMNON AND CLYTAEMNESTRA.

LINES 828-947.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Friends, aged citizens of Argos here,
I will not shrink from speaking of my love,
Since years wear off a woman's bashfulness.
Myself alone can tell the life I led
While my lord lay before the walls of Troy.
Sad, passing sad, the lot of woman left
Lorn of her consort in the lonely home,
And hearing day by day reports of ill;
Every new comer bringing evil news,

And the last worse than him that went before.
Had my lord met all wounds that rumour gave,
His body had been but one net of wounds;
Had he, as oft as rumour blew him, died,
He must have been a three-lived Geryon,
And thrice put on a shroud of funeral earth
Above him, reckoning not the earth below,
Thrice dead, and in three several graves interred.
Driven to despair mid all these dark reports,
By hanging oft I sought to end my days,
And was by others saved and forced to live.
Hence is it that thy child, pledge of our love,
Orestes, is not here to greet his sire,
As had been meet. Let not that trouble thee.
Strophios the Phocian took the boy in trust,
Thine ancient friend in arms, forewarning us
That troublous times might come, should aught befall
My lord, and the unbridled multitude
O'erthrow the senate, as mankind are wont
To trample on the fallen. 'Tis truth I tell.
The very fountains of my tears are dry,
Sorrow no drop hath left, my eyes are sore
Through my night watchings for the beacon light
That should bring news of thee, but brought it not.
A gnat's light whirring broke the dream of thee
That in an hour compressed an age of woe.
Now all this past, from carking sorrow free,
I hail my lord, the watchdog of our fold,
The ship's main stay, the pillar that upbears
A lofty roof, dear as an only child,
Welcome as land to seamen tossed at sea,
As cheerful day after the stormiest night,
As well-spring to the thirsty traveller.
Sweet after careful stress is careless ease.
Such is my salutation to my lord,
Which should not draw on us the evil eye.
Enough we've borne already. Now, beloved,
Step from thy chariot; yet not on the earth
Shall Ilium's glorious conqueror set his foot.
Haste, haste, ye handmaidens, to whom the charge
Was given to spread the ground with tapestry,
And make a purple pathway for my lord,
Whom justice brings to his unlooked for home.
For aught beside, care, lovingly awake,
The gods so willing, shall good order take.

AGAMEMNON.

Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,
Thy speech is as my absence, long drawn out.
Well measured praise from other lips must come;
I pray thee stint thy woman's blandishments,
Nor, like some proud barbarian's minion vile,
Crawl to my feet with abject flatteries.
I would not have thy draperies on me draw
The evil eye; to gods such state belongs,
Not mortals; for a mortal thus to tread
On broidery were to tempt the wrath of heaven.
Pay to me honours human, not divine.
Foot-cloths or broidery need I none to tell
What fame will voice aloud. Discretion still
Is the best gift of heaven, and he alone
Is truly blest who prospers to the end.
Let but this fortune hold, I've naught to fear.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yet herein yield to her that loves thee well.

AGAMEMNON.

Know that I will not swerve from my resolve.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Is it some vow, vowed in an hour of fear?

AGAMEMNON.

I well knew my own mind when thus I spoke.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Had Priam conquered, what would he have done?

AGAMEMNON.

He, certes, would have trod on tapestry.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Be not affrighted by the tongues of men.

AGAMEMNON.

Yet is the people's voice a mighty power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Who shrinks from envy dares not to be great.

AGAMEMNON

To love contention is not womanly.

CLYTAEMNESTRA

Yet the victorious can afford defeat.

AGAMEMNON.

Dost thou, too, prize defeat as victory?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Defeat or victory, yield thee at my prayer.

AGAMEMNON.

So be it, an thou wilt. Let some one loose
My sandals, lest if, proudly shod with these,
I tread a path so costly, I may draw,
Presumptuous, from above the evil eye.
Great shame it were our substance thus to waste,
Trampling on costly web with sandaled feet.
Of that enough. Now take this stranger in
(*Pointing to Cassandra.*)
In kindly wise; who gently use their power
Shall merit mercy in the eye of heaven.
Misfortune, not misdoing, makes the slave.
This damsel, choicest flower of all we won,
The army's gift to me, have I brought home.

Now let me, since my will has bent to thine,
Walk over purple to my royal hall.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

There is a sea, there is a boundless sea,
And in its depths is gendered purple dye
Of costliest kind for vestments numberless.
Of this, the gods be thanked, our palace holds
Abundance, want or stint is there unknown.
Purple enow would I have gladly given
To trample in the mire, had oracles
Enjoined to pay such ransom for thy life.
With thee unto the leafless trunk has come
A leafy shelter from the dog-star's heat;
Since thy return to thy beloved hearth,
Our wintry frost shall yield to summer's sun,
And coolness, in the heat that turns the grape,
Reign in the house whose head is there once more.
Zeus, father in whose hands all issues are,
Give issue to thy counsels and my prayer.

* * * * *

CASSANDRA'S PROPHECY.

LINES 1149-1391.

CASSANDRA.

Now shall my oracle no more peer forth
As from her virgin veil a bashful bride;
It shall grow clearer as the sky is cleared
By the brisk wind, and like a sunlit wave
Shall mount the billows of calamity.
No more in riddles will I prophesy.
Follow and bear me witness as I hunt,
Upon the trail of immemorial crime.
Within this house a company abides,
Singing in unison no mirthful strain,
A band of revellers that, to fire its heart,
Hath quaffed, not wine, but blood of murdered men,
The Furies that shall never quit these gates.
A hymn they sing, within the haunted hall,
Of the primeval curse, and tell in turn
What loathly vengeance paid a brother's shame.
[Footnote: Alluding to the banquet of Thyestes.]
Say, does my arrow miss or hit the mark?
Am I a begging, babbling soothsayer?
Bear witness on thy oath how well I know,
Untaught, the sinful record of this house.

CHORUS.

What virtue hath an oath's solemnity
To make wrong right? Amazement fills my soul
To hear a stranger from beyond the sea
Thus hit the truth as though thou hadst been here.

CASSANDRA.

Apollo bade me be a prophetess.

CHORUS.

Was the god smitten with a mortal love?

CASSANDRA.

Shame ever to this hour hath sealed my lips.

CHORUS.

Prosperity is always delicate.

CASSANDRA.

A wooer he who well could touch my heart.

CHORUS.

Were children then begotten of your love?

CASSANDRA.

I broke my plighted troth to Loxias.

CHORUS.

When thou already hadst received the gift?

CASSANDRA.

Yea; I foretold my country all its woes.

CHORUS.

How was it Loxias failed to punish thee?

CASSANDRA.

My punishment was ne'er to be believed.

CHORUS.

To us what thou foreshow'st seems all too true.

CASSANDRA.

Once more prophetic pangs come over me.
Mark ye those children on the palace there,
In aspect like the spectral shapes of dreams?
Meseems they by a kinsman's sword were slain.
See, in their hands they bear a loathsome feast,
The piteous flesh of which their father ate.
Vengeance is coming, yonder in the lair
A lion lurks, a coward skulking beast,
Plotting against my late returned lord.
My lord, I say, for slavery is my doom.
The army's chief that o'erthrew Ilium
Knows little what yon shameless paramour,
After her long and so fair-seeming speech,
Is bent to do in an accursed hour,
Like a fell fiend lurking in ambush there.
O crime of crimes, a woman slays her mate,—
What can I call her? The most poisonous snake;
A Scylla, with her lair among the rocks,
Lying in wait for luckless mariners;
Death's dam, against her kin implacably
Breathing her venom. What a shout she raised
Of exultation, as for battle won!
She feigns rejoicing at her lord's return.
Believe or disbelieve me; naught I care
That which must come, must come. Thou soon shalt see

And rue the truth of this my prophecy.

CHORUS.

Thyestes, feasted with his children's flesh,
Shuddering, I understood, and am appalled
At hearing all so painted to the life.
But for the rest, I wander from the course.

CASSANDRA.

I say thou shalt see Agamemnon die.

CHORUS.

Hush, hapless maid, speak no ill-omened words.

CASSANDRA.

Place for well-omened words this work has none.

CHORUS.

Not if it come to pass, which heaven forbend.

CASSANDRA.

While thou art praying they prepare to smite.

CHORUS.

Where is the man to do so foul a deed?

CASSANDRA.

Ill hast thou understood my prophecy.

CHORUS.

By whom and how thy words have not revealed.

CASSANDRA.

And yet I know too well thy country's tongue.

CHORUS.

So do our prophets, yet their words are dark.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, me! how fierce the fire, it fills my veins.
Spare me, Apollo, god of Lycia, spare.
Yon lioness that, since her royal mate
Departed, with a caitiff wolf has lain,
Will slay me, and as one that poison brews
Will in the caldron cast her jealousy,
And while she whets the knife to slay her lord
Say she takes vengeance for his lawless love.
Why do I bear on me these mockeries,
This prophet's wand, this fillet round my neck?
Go, lead the way to death; I follow soon;
Go, and adorn some other curse than me.
Behold Apollo's self is stripping me
Of my prophetic garb, and in that garb
Already has he, with unpitying eyes,
Seen me and mine the foeman's laughing-stock.

I had to bear the name of tramp, be spurned
As a poor famished beggar on the street.
And now the prophet to unprophet me
Has led me into this decoy of death,
Where for the altars of my sire, the block
Of butchery soon must my hot life-blood drink.
Yet shall we not fall unavenged of heaven.
Another minister of justice comes,
His sire's avenger on the womb that bore him.
A wanderer banished from his native land,
He shall return to put the coping stone
On murder's pile; for so the gods have sworn,
And his fall'n father's hand shall beckon him.
But why should I, forlorn, bemoan my fate,
Since I have seen Ilium, my fatherland,
Faring as it has fared, and they who dwelt
Therein so worsted in the court of heaven?
Be it accomplished, to my doom I go.
Hear me, ye gates of death, sure be the stroke,
That easily with no long agony
My blood may flow, and the last sleep be mine.

CHORUS.

O maiden, thrice unhappy, yet inspired,
If truly, as thy long address imports,
Thou dost foresee thy fate, what bids thee go
As goes a doomed steer to the sacrifice?

CASSANDRA.

Friends, there is no escaping by delay.

CHORUS.

And yet of times to die the last is best.

CASSANDRA.

The day has come; naught shall I gain by flight.

CHORUS.

Great-hearted maiden, strong is thy resolve.

CASSANDRA.

Not on the happy is such praise bestowed.

CHORUS.

Yet to die gloriously is happiness.

CASSANDRA.

Father, alas, for thee and thy brave sons!

CHORUS.

How now? What fearful object meets thine eye?

CASSANDRA.

Ah, me! Ah, me!

CHORUS.

What means thy shriek? What phantom dost thou see?

CASSANDRA.

There is a smell of murder from that house.

CHORUS.

Nay, 'tis the smell of household sacrifice.

CASSANDRA.

It is the odour of a charnel-house.

CHORUS.

No savour that of Syrian frankincense.

CASSANDRA.

I go my own and Agamemnon's dirge
To chant within the halls. Good-bye to life.
Strangers, alas!
Not like a foolish bird scared at the bush
Am I. Bear witness, when I am no more,
When for my woman's blood a woman dies,
And for a man ill-wed a man is slain;
With my last breath I crave of ye this boon.

CHORUS.

I weep to see thee going to thy doom.

CASSANDRA.

Once more I fain would speak; not to renew
Weak wailings, but to call on yonder sun
And bid him bring the avenger to requite
The cruel murderess of a poor weak slave.
Alas! for man, if in his prosperous hour,
Fate faintly limns the shape of happiness,
Soon comes the sponge and wipes the picture out;
And sad is the beginning, worse the end.

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CASSANDRA'S PROPHECY FULFILLED.

The doorway of the palace opens and reveals Clytaemnestra within the portal standing over the corpse of Agamemnon. She has slain him with an axe in the bath, having entangled him in a sleeveless robe.

LINES 1343-1554.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Much did I say before to serve the time
Which now to contradict I think no shame.
How else could hate encircle with its toils
The enemy that was a seeming friend,
So that the prey might not o'erleap the net?
Old is the quarrel; over my revenge
Long have I brooded, now it comes at last.
Here where I stand the deed of death was done,
And I so managed, I deny it not,
That he could neither fly nor fend the blow.
As he had been a fish I round him cast,

Like a close net, a rich but deadly robe.
Twice did I strike, twice did he groan, then sank;
And as he lay another stroke I gave,
To make the lucky number, and commend
His soul to Hades, guardian of the dead.
So did his angry spirit pass away,
While over me he threw a jet of blood,
Which gladdened me as doth the rain from heaven
The corn-field in the swelling of the ear.
Elders of Argos, hear! This have I done,
And in this glory, take it as ye will.
To pour a glad libation on the corpse,
Did piety permit, were more than just.
He mixed a bowl of curses for the house,
And what he mixed himself came home to drink.

CHORUS.

Amazement fills us at thy hardihood
That thus dost triumph o'er thy murdered lord.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Ye think to deal with a weak woman's heart,
But I, with soul unquailing, to your face
Tell you, approve or damn me as you may,
Here Agamemnon lies, my lord that was,
A corpse that is, the work of this right hand,
Its righteous work. There is no more to say.

CHORUS.

Lady, what baleful herb
Of earth or potion dire
Drawn from the flowing ocean, hadst thou drunk,
That on thee thou hast brought the public curse?
Thou hast cast off, cut off;
Thyself will be cast out,
A thing of loathing to our citizens.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yea, thy award to me is banishment,
And execration, and the people's curse.
But no such measure didst thou mete this man
When recklessly, as it had been a beast,
While in his pastures sheep were numberless,
He sacrificed his child, the dearest child
That I had borne, to charm the Thracian gales.
Him from the land to drive for his foul deed
Thy justice moved thee not. But now I come
Before the bar, the judge is merciless.
I warn thee that thy threats are launched at one
Who, if thou canst in equal combat win,
Will yield; but, should heaven otherwise ordain,
Thou may'st too late be put to wisdom's school.

CHORUS.

High, lady, is thy heart,
And haughty is thy speech;
Thy soul with murder is intoxicate;
Upon thy brow is the red stain of blood
Unexpiated. Yet
Wilt thou, of aid bereft,

As thou hast struck, feel the avenging blow.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Hear while once more my solemn oath I pledge.
By the accomplished vengeance of my child,
By those dread powers whose sacrifice lies there,
I look not to see fear within my halls,
While on the hearth Aegisthus lights the fire
And to his mate is true as he is now.
With him for shield I shall not be afraid.
Low lies the man that did betray my love,
That toy of each Chryseis in the camp;
And with him lies this captive soothsayer,
His faithful leman and his sea-mate too.
For what they did the pair have dearly paid.
One there ye see, the other like a swan,
When she had sung her dying melody,
Fell in her paramour's embrace and lent
Fresh relish to my feast of happiness.

CHORUS.

Would that a death, painless, not lingering,
Would on me bring the everlasting sleep,
Since my kind guard,
That for a woman's sake so much
Braved, by a woman's hand has met his end.
O Helen, thou for whom beneath Troy's wall
Myriads were doomed to die,
At last through thee the gout
Of blood which in this house
Was uneffaced, fresh murder has begot.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Pray not for death to come
In ire at this my deed,
With Helen be not wroth
Because her murderous face
Many a bold Danaan slew
And woe unmeasured brought.

CHORUS.

Fiend, that dost haunt the hall
Of the Tantalidae,
And in a woman showed
A man's strength to my bane,
See how upon the dead,
Perched like a raven dire,
She chants her impious strain.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Now speakest thou aright,
Calling upon the fiend
That raveneth this race.
From him proceeds that lust
Congenital of blood
That ever craves fresh gore.

CHORUS.

A demon dire and fell
Thou to this house

Would'st in dark strain assign.
Ah, me! All comes from Zeus,
Of all things source and cause,
Without whom naught befalls
Mankind. Of all this train
Of woes, what was there not by heaven decreed?
How shall I wail thee, king,
How vent my loyal grief?
In this fell spider's web thou liest low,
Expiring by a stroke
Accursed as no freeman ought to lie,
By treachery struck down
With its two-handed axe.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Charge not on me this deed.
Imagine not that I
Am Agamemnon's queen.
Like to the dead man's wife
The fiend that vengeance takes
For Atreus' ghastly feast
Here hath repaid the debt,
A man for infants slain.

CHORUS.

Oh, whither can I turn,
In vain my mind I task.
The house thus wrecked, despair lies every way.
I shudder at this pouring rain of blood,
No more by drops it falls.
Fate for some other murderous deed
On a new whetstone sharpens her knife's edge.
Would earth had swallowed me
Ere in the silver vessel of the bath
I saw my king laid low.
Who will his funeral rites
Perform? Wilt thou be able unabashed,
Having thy husband slain,
To wail for him, and to his injured shade
Requital for such wrong
By unloved service pay?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Not unto thee belongs
This care. 'Twas we that slew,
And we will bury him.
Not from his house shall go
His mourning train.
By the swift-flowing stream
Of lamentation his loved child,
Iphigenia, shall her father meet,
Embrace and fondly kiss.

THE CHOEPHOROË

Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon, has been living beneath the hated domination of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, the murderer and murderess of her father. Her brother Orestes, the avenger of blood

and the hope of her house, has been living in banishment, while she has been looking and longing for his return. At length he returns with his faithful comrade Pylades, and intimates his presence by placing a lock of his hair as his offering on Agamemnon's tomb. Electra announces the discovery to the Chorus of Trojan women, who bear her libation for her to the tomb of her father, and from whom the play is named.

* * * * *

ORESTES DISCOVERS HIMSELF TO ELECTRA.

LINES 158-274.

ELECTRA.

My father's grave has drunk the holy wine;
Now lend your ears to the strange news I bring.

CHORUS.

Speak on, my heart thrills with expectancy.

ELECTRA.

I found this lock of hair upon the tomb.

CHORUS.

Who was it, man or maid, that laid it there?

ELECTRA.

This to divine were not so difficult.

CHORUS.

Old as I am on thy young lips I hang.

ELECTRA.

From what head could the lock be cut but mine?

CHORUS.

They that should offer mourning locks are foes.

ELECTRA.

This lock of hair is wondrous like in hue.

CHORUS.

Like to whose hair? 'Tis this I long to learn.

ELECTRA.

Like, passing like, to hers that speaks to thee.

CHORUS.

Think'st thou Orestes sent it secretly?

ELECTRA.

The lock in hue is like no hair but his.

CHORUS.

But how could he adventure to come here?

ELECTRA.

Perchance he sent the offering to his sire.

CHORUS.

This will not staunch the fountain of my woes,
If he is ne'er to set foot in our land.

ELECTRA.

Not less through me a tide of passion rolled,
And as it were an arrow pierced my breast,
While from my eyes coursed down my thirsty cheeks
The gushing tears, till sorrow's fount was dry,
As on this lock I looked. No citizen
Of ours could own it saving one alone;
Nor was it shred by her the murderess
That but usurps a mother's hallowed name,
To us, her children, so unmotherly.
Surely to say what I would fain believe,
That this fair offering from Orestes comes
Dearest of men, I dare not, yet I hope.
Oh, would it had a voice to speak to me,
And so to end distraction in my soul;
That I might cast it scornfully away,
If it were taken from a hated head.
If from a head I love, that it might pay
With me sad homage to my father's tomb.

CHORUS.

The heavenly powers on whom we call well know
With what a sea, like storm-tossed mariners,
We battle; yet, if destiny be kind,
From a small seed a mighty tree may spring.

ELECTRA.

Then, for a second sign, foot-prints I find
Like to my own in shape and measurement.
For there were two imprints, one of his own,
The other of a fellow-traveller's foot;
And those of his own foot, compared with mine,
In their whole shape exactly correspond.
I am all anguish and bewilderment.

ORESTES (*suddenly entering*).

Pray for whatever else thy soul desires,
And may a like fulfilment crown the prayer.

ELECTRA.

What prayer of mine now have the gods fulfilled?

ORESTES.

Whom thou didst yearn to see is now before thee.

ELECTRA.

Whom I did yearn to see? What was his name?

ORESTES.

Orestes, by thy craving lips pronounced.

ELECTRA.

In what respect, then, has my prayer been heard?

ORESTES.

The bearer of that name beloved am I.

ELECTRA.

Stranger, is this some trick thou playest on me?

ORESTES.

An 'twere, I should conspire against myself.

ELECTRA.

Sure thou art sporting with my misery.

ORESTES.

Sporting with thine were sporting with my own.

ELECTRA.

And is it to Orestes' self I speak?

ORESTES.

Orestes' self, whom seeing thou dost doubt
Thine eyesight, though a lock of hair or prints
Of feet that tallied with thine own could raise
My apparition in thy fluttering heart.
Apply the lock which tallies with thy hair
To this my head from which it was cut off.
Look on this robe, the work of thine own hand,
And trace the figures which thy shuttle wrought.
But calm thee, let not joy distract thy soul,
For near of kin we know is far from kind.

ELECTRA.

O hope and darling of my father's house,
Seed of redemption, watered with my tears,
Trust thy right arm; it shall win back thy home.
Thou art the fourfold object of my love:
Electra has no father left but thee;
No mother—hateful she who bears that name;
Thou art to me in my lost sister's place;
The brother thou that dost my name uphold;
Only let might and justice and the king
Of gods and men be with thee in the fight.

ORESTES.

Zeus, Zeus, look down on what is passing here,
Take pity on the eagle's brood, whose sire,
Trapped in the coils of a most deadly snake,
Was stung to death and left his orphan brood
A prey to hunger. For no strength have they
To bring the quarry home, as did their sire.
In me and my Electra here thou seest
Two eaglets of their sire alike bereft,
And outcasts both from what was once their home.

ELECTRA.

High honour did our father pay to thee,
Rich gifts he gave thy shrine; his offspring gone,
Who will be left to heap thy altars more?
Thy race of eagles lost, thou wilt have none
To be the herald of thy will to man.
This royal stock blasted, thou wilt have none
To tend thy shrine on days of sacrifice.
Watch o'er us, and the house that now seems fallen
Past hope, may to its ancient greatness rise.

CHORUS.

My children, of your line sole trust and stay,
Be silent lest your words be overheard,
And borne by some loose babbler to the ear
Of those in power, whom soon I hope to see
Laid smouldering on the pitchy funeral pile.

ORESTES.

My trust is in Apollo's oracle
That bade me set forth on this enterprise,
With high command and threats of dire disease
To gripe my vitals if I failed to wreak
Vengeance upon my father's murderers,
Enjoining me to slay as they had slain,
Taking no fine as quittance for his blood.
For this was I to answer with my life.
And as I would escape the penalties
[Footnote: This passage is corrupt or dislocated, and perplexes the
commentators. I have tried to give the general sense.]
That injured and neglected ghosts demand;
As fell diseases that with cankering maw
Eat the distempered flesh from off the bones,
Madness and panic fears that haunt by night;
Then banishment from human intercourse;
From the libation, from the loving cup,
And from the altar, whence a father's wrath
Unseen should drive the recreant; at the last
Death without honour and without a friend.—
Think ye that I such oracles could slight?
And if I did, the deed must still be done;
For many motives join to set me on:
The gods command, my murdered father calls
For vengeance, and my desperate need impels;
All bid me save our famous citizens,
Troy's glorious conquerors, from the base yoke
Of yonder pair of women; for his heart
Is womanish, if not, we soon will know.

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CLYTAEMNESTRA PLEADS TO HER SON ORESTES FOR HER LIFE IN VAIN.

LINES 860-916.

SERVANT.

Alas! my lord is slain, my lord is slain,
My lord is slain; Aegisthus is no more.
Haste and unbar the woman's chamber, haste;
Be stirring, or your aid will come too late.
What, ho! what, ho!
I shout unto the sleeping or the deaf.
Whither has Clytaemnestra gone? What does she?
Now is the queen on peril's sharpest edge,

And like to fall by the avenger's sword.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

How now? What means this shouting in the house?

SERVANT.

It means that dead men kill and live men die.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Ah me! Too well I can thy riddle guess;
By treason as we slew, we shall be slain.
Fetch me the axe, which well this hand can wield,
And we will strike for death or victory,
For to this mortal issue have we come.

ORESTES.

'Tis thee I seek; thy leman has enough.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Ah me! Aegisthus, then, my love, is slain.

ORESTES.

Thy love is he? Then shalt thou share his tomb,
And be his faithful consort to the end.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Oh, stay thy hand, my child, and spare this breast,
On which so often thou didst slumbering lie
And suck with baby lips the milk of life.

ORESTES.

Say, Pylades, shall nature's plea be heard?

PYLADES.

Half of Apollo's best has been fulfilled;
Think on the other half and on thine oath.
Better defy the world than brave the gods.

ORESTES.

Thou hast well spoken, and I do assent.

(*To CLYTAEMNESTRA.*)

Come in; I'll lay thee at thy leman's side.
He to my father living was preferred,
And now in death his partner thou shalt be,
The guerdon due to thy adulterous love.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

I nursed thee; let me at thy side grow old.

ORESTES.

What, dwell with thee, my father's murderess?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Blame destiny, my son, for what I did.

ORESTES.

Blame destiny for what I now must do.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Hast thou no reverence for a mother's prayer?

ORESTES.

That mother ruthlessly cast off her child.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Not cast thee off; but sent thee to a friend.

ORESTES.

Twice was I sold, although a freeman born.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

What was the price that I received for thee?

ORESTES.

To tell thee in plain words I am ashamed.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Tell it, but tell thy sire's transgression too.

ORESTES.

Home-keeping wives should not the toilers chide.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

'Tis sad for wives to lie without their mates.

ORESTES.

Yet wives are fed by those that sweat abroad.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

It seems, my child, thou wilt thy mother slay.

ORESTES.

Not on my head but thine thy blood will be.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Strike, and a mother's Furies follow thee.

ORESTES.

A father's will, if I withhold the blow.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Deaf as the grave is he to whom I wail.

ORESTES.

As died my father thou art doomed to die.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

My womb too truly has a serpent borne.

ORESTES.

No lying prophet was thy dream of fear.
Unnatural was thy deed, so be thy doom.

THE EUMENIDES

The ancient Council of the Areopagus, like other primeval councils, was at once political and judicial. It was the venerable stronghold of the old Athenian and conservative party to which Aeschylus belonged, and was at this time being attacked by the radical party under Pericles and Ephialtes. To save it from its enemies by awakening national sentiment on its behalf, Aeschylus presents it as the high court of justice selected on account of its supreme moral authority to try the grand mythical case of Orestes arraigned by the Furies for matricide. There is also a good word for the diplomatic connection between Argos, represented by Orestes, and Athens. Orestes by Apollo's advice has appealed to the Areopagus. The court consists of Athenian citizens. Athene in person presides. The Furies appear as the accusers. They form the Chorus, which in this case plays a part in the drama. Apollo appears as a witness for his accused votary, and as responsible for the act which he had commanded. The result is the acquittal of Orestes by the presiding goddess. The proceedings are opened by Athene.

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LINES 536-747.

ATHENE.

Herald, proclaim good order through the host,
Then let the loud Tyrrhenian trumpet's blast
Thrill forth its warning to the multitude.
'Tis meet that while the judges take their seats
All citizens keep silence and give ear
To that which now and for all time to come
I have ordained, that justice may be done.

CHORUS OF FURIES.

(Seeing APOLLO approach.)

Rule, Lord Apollo, o'er thy own domain.
What portion hast thou in this cause of ours?

APOLLO.

First, as a witness in this cause I come,
To say this man with me took sanctuary,
And that I cleansed him of the stain of blood.
Next, as a party to this cause I come,
Since I was the prime mover of the deed.
Call on the cause, then, and let right be done.

ATHENE.

The cause is called, and the word rests with you.

(To the FURIES.)

Let the accuser first be heard and lay

The cause before the court, for so is best.

CHORUS.

Many we are, yet brief our speech shall be;
Do thou to questions plain, plain answer give;
And tell us first, didst thou thy mother slay?

ORESTES.

I slew my mother, and deny it not.

CHORUS.

One bout, then, of our wrestling match is won.

ORESTES.

Too soon thou boastest; not yet am I thrown.

CHORUS.

Now must thou tell us how the deed was done.

ORESTES.

I drew my sword and smote her that she died.

CHORUS.

Who was it counselled thee, and set thee on?

ORESTES.

His oracle that is my witness here.

CHORUS.

Sayest thou the prophet counselled matricide?

ORESTES.

He did, and so far I repent me not.

CHORUS.

Thou wilt when in the judgment thou art cast.

ORESTES.

No fear have I; aid from the dead will come.

CHORUS.

Aid from the dead to thee, a matricide?

ORESTES.

My mother bore a double taint of crime.

CHORUS.

How doubly? let the judges understand.

ORESTES.

She slew her consort and my sire in one.

CHORUS.

Her death has made her peace, but thou still liv'st.

ORESTES.

Why did ye not pursue her while she lived?

CHORUS.

Because she was not kin to him she slew.

ORESTES.

Am I of kin, then, to my mother's blood?

CHORUS.

Wretch, wast thou not beneath her girdle borne,
And dar'st thou to forswear thy mother's blood?

ORESTES.

Apollo, now stand forth and testify.
Say, was my mother rightly slain or not?
The deed itself is not by us denied;
Whether't was rightly done or not, judge thou,
That I may plead thy sentence to this court.

APOLLO.

I will before this high Athenian court
Bear witness true: the prophet cannot lie;
For never in my seat of prophecy
Spoke I of man, of woman, or of state,
Aught else than the Olympian father bade.
I pray you, mark the force of this my plea,
And yield obedience to the will of Zeus,
For Zeus is mightier than a judge's oath.

CHORUS.

Zeus, as thou sayest, inspired this oracle
Which bade Orestes, for his father's death
Take vengeance, reckless of a mother's claim.

APOLLO.

'Twas different when a noble warrior fell,
One that the heaven-entrusted sceptre swayed,
Slain by a woman's hand, not with the bow,
As slays the fierce far-darting Amazon,
But in such wise as Pallas and the court
Impanelled to decide this cause shall hear.—
As from the war he happily returned
She met him with perfidious flatteries.
Then in his bath, as to the laver's edge
He came, she, like a canopy, outspread
A robe and smote him tangled in its folds.
By such foul practice died a man of all
Worshipped, the puissant leader of our host.
Such was his murderess; well the tale may touch
The hearts of those who shall pass judgment here.

CHORUS.

Zeus, then, it seems, is on the father's side,
Yet Zeus his aged father put in bonds.
How squares that story with thy present plea?
I pray the court to hark to his reply.

APOLLO.

O hateful brood, abhorred of all the gods,
He who is bound may be unbound again.
There's many a way to set a captive free;
But when the dust has drunk the blood of man,
Death knows no cure or resurrection.
For death my father hath no remedy,
All else he with his will omnipotent
Sorts as him lists, exhaustless in his power.

CHORUS.

Suppose yon wretch acquitted on thy plea,
Can he, polluted with a mother's blood,
At Argos dwell and in his father's home?
What public altar can he use, what guild
Of kinsmen will admit him to their rite?

APOLLO.

With this, too, will I deal, and mark me well,
The mother is not parent to the child,
But only fosters that she hath conceived.
The male is the true parent, and his mate
But holds the germ, so it 'scape blight, in trust.
This can I prove by puissant argument.
A father sans a mother there may be.
There stands the daughter of Olympian Zeus,
She ne'er was nurtured in the darkling womb,
Yet could no god in heaven beget her peer.
Pallas, as always my endeavour is
Thy city and thy people to exalt,
So I have sent this suppliant to thy hearth,
That he might be thy ever faithful friend,
And thou might'st count him as a sure ally,
Him and his race hereafter, and this bond
Unbroken through all ages might endure.

ATHENE.

The pleadings now are ended, and I call
Upon the panel for a righteous vote.

CHORUS.

On our side the last arrow has been shot;
We wait but for the verdict of the court.

ATHENE.

What order can I take that will content ye?

CHORUS.

Ye all have heard the pleadings in this cause;
Now in your hearts let justice rule the vote.

ATHENE.

Ye men of Athens, hear what is ordained

For this first trial of a homicide.
So long as Aegeus' nation shall endure
Upon this hill shall Justice hold her seat.
Here Theseus' foes, the Amazons, did camp
In days of old; here they a fortress built
In rivalry to this new-founded town;
Here sacrificed to Ares, whence the name
Of Ares' Hill; and here, by day and night,
Indwelling reverence and the fear of wrong
Shall keep my people from unrighteousness,
So they abstain from innovation rash.
Foul the clear fountain with impurities,
And of its waters thou canst drink no more.
Hold fast the golden mean, from anarchy
And from a despot's rule alike removed;
Nor cast all awe out of the commonwealth,
For who is righteous that is void of awe?
What now is founded if ye will revere,
Your land and state shall such a bulwark have
As hath no nation in the universe
From Pelops' realm to Scythia's utmost wild.
This counsel I establish incorrupt,
August, high-souled, and ever vigilant
To guard the public weal while others sleep.
Such is my counsel to my citizens
For times to come. Now let the judges rise.
Their ballots take, and a true verdict give
According to their oath; no more I say.

CHORUS.

(One FURY speaking for the rest.)

I warn ye to respect this company,
Whom else your land may find sore visitants.

APOLLO.

I warn ye to respect the oracles
Of Zeus and mine, nor dare to make them void.

CHORUS.

Bloodshedding falls not within thy domain;
Thy holy shrine will holy be no more.

APOLLO.

Was then my sire misled in that from blood
He cleansed Ixion, first of homicides?

CHORUS.

Say what thou wilt of justice, if we miss,
We shall return in wrath to haunt the land.

APOLLO.

Both by the new and by the ancient gods
Thou art despised: the victory will be mine.

CHORUS.

'Twas thou that didst in Pheres' house cajole
The fates to grant a mortal endless life.

APOLLO.

Was it not well to do good unto him
That honoured me, and at his utmost need?

CHORUS.

Thou didst, subverting all the rule of eld,
Beguile with wine those ancient deities.

APOLLO.

And thou wilt soon, barred of thy cruel will,
Spit forth thy venom, yet not harm thy foe.

CHORUS.

Since thy pert youth doth spurn my reverend age.
I wait the issue of this cause in doubt
Whether to lay my curse upon this land.

ATHENE.

To me it falls at last to give my vote,
And I my vote will for Orestes give;
No mother bore me, to the male I cleave
In all things saving that I wedlock shun
With my whole heart, and am my father's child.
Therefore, a woman's fate that slew her lord,
The guardian of her home, concerns me not.
Now, if there be a tie, Orestes wins.
Judges, to whom that office is assigned,
Be quick, turn out the ballots from the urns.

ORESTES.

Phoebus, kind god, what will the verdict be?

CHORUS.

O Night, my sable mother, now look down.

ORESTES.

For me salvation or despair is nigh.

CHORUS.

For us, fresh veneration or disgrace.

APOLLO.

Ye men of Athens, truly count the votes,
Strictly observing justice in the tale,
For want of caution here will work much woe,
While a great house may by one vote be saved.

ATHENE.

(*To ORESTES.*)

Thou art acquitted of blood-guiltiness,
For equal are the numbers of the votes.

ORESTES.

O Pallas, thou hast saved a royal house!

I was an exile; thou hast brought me home.
And now shall every son of Hellas say,
He is once more an Argive, once more holds.
His father's state, for which my gratitude
Is due to Pallas and to Loxias,
And, lastly, to the all-preserving Zeus,
Who, taking pity on my father's fate,
Saved me from these my mother's advocates.
Now to my home I go; but first I swear
To thee and thine an everlasting oath,
That never from my land shall chieftain come
To lift against this land his martial spear.
Ourselves, though then we in our graves shall be,
Will on the breakers of our covenant
Send such disaster, such perplexity,
Such faintness, and such evil auguries,
That they shall surely rue their enterprise;
But if my people keep the covenant,
And ever true allies to thine remain,
My spirit shall fight with them from the tomb.
Now fare ye well, thou and thy citizens;
Still in war's wrestle may your foemen fall,
And ever on your spears sit victory.

SOPHOCLES

OEDIPUS THE KING.

Oedipus is the son of Laius, King of Thebes, and Queen Jocasta. It had been prophesied of him, before his birth, that he would kill his father and lie with his mother. To avert this, when born, he is devoted by his mother to death by exposure on a mountain. But he is saved and taken to Polybus, King of Corinth, who adopts him, and whose son he believes himself to be. Having heard of the prophecy concerning himself, he leaves Corinth to avoid its fulfilment; but on his road falls in with Laius, has a quarrel with his attendants, and kills him. He then goes to Thebes, delivers the Thebans from the Sphinx, by guessing her riddle, is rewarded with the kingdom, and marries the widowed Queen Jocasta, his own mother, who bears children to him. The gods, offended by the presence of murder and incest, send a plague on Thebes. Oedipus sends his brother-in-law, Creon, to consult the oracle at Delphi respecting the visitation. The oracle bids the Thebans expel the murderer of Laius. This leads to an inquiry after the murderer, and through successive disclosures, in the management of which the poet exerts his art, to the revelation of the dreadful secret. It is a story of overmastering fate.

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THE PLAGUE.

The plague sent by the angry gods is raging at Thebes. The people are gathered in supplication round the altars before the palace of Oedipus, who comes forth to them.

LINES 1-77.

OEDIPUS.

My children, progeny of Cadmus old,
Why in this posture do I find you here,
With wool-wreathed branches in your suppliant hands?
The city is with breath of incense filled,
Filled with sad chant, and voices of lament,
Whereof the truth to learn from other lips
Deeming not right, myself am present here,
That Oedipus, the world-renowned, am hight.
Say, reverend sir, since thee it well beseems
To speak for all, what moves this company,
Fear or desire? Know that I fain would aid
With all my power. Hard-hearted I must be
If pity for such suppliants touched me not.

THE PRIEST.

Oedipus, puissant ruler of our land,
Behold us prostrate at thy altars here,
And mark our ages; some are callow boys,
Others are priests laden with years, as I
Am priest of Zeus; others are chosen youths.
The rest, with suppliant emblems in their hands,
Sit in the mart, or at the temples twain
Of Pallas' or Ismenus' prescient hearth.
The city, as thou dost perceive, is tossed
On the o'er-mastering billows, and no more
Can lift her head above the murderous surge.
Her foodful fruits all withering in the germ,
Her flocks and herds expiring on the lea,
Her births abortive, while the fiery fiend
Of deadly pestilence has swooped on her,
Making the homes of Cadmus desolate,
And gluts dark Hades with the wail of death.
An equal of the gods, I and these youths
That here sit on this earth, account thee not;
But we account thee first of men to deal
With visitation or cross accident.
A stranger thou didst bring to us release
From tribute to that cruel songstress paid.
Advantage from our guidance thou hadst none,
'Twas by the inspiration of a god
As we believe that thou didst redeem our State.
Now, Oedipus, thou whom we all revere,
We bow before thee, and implore thy grace
To find some succour for us if thou canst
By heavenly teaching or through human aid.
In men, who by experience have been tried,
We find the happiest fruits of policy.
Come, best of men, lift up our city's head!
Look to thy own renown; thy zeal once shown
Has earned for thee a patriot saviour's name.
Let us not think of thee as of a prince
That raised us up to let us fall again;
But make our restoration firm and sure.
'Twas under happy omens that thou then
Didst succour us; what then thou wast, be now.
Our king thou art; if king thou wilt remain,
Reign o'er a peopled realm, not o'er a waste.
Naught is the bravest ship without her crew,
The strongest fort without its garrison.

OEDIPUS.

Poor children, little needs to tell me that
For which ye come to pray; too well I know

Ye all are sick. And, sick as ye may be,
There is not one whose sickness equals mine.
The grief of each of you touches himself,
And touches none beside: your sovereign's heart
Bears your griefs, and the city's and his own.
Not from a slumber have ye wakened me,
Trust me, I many an anxious tear have shed,
And many a path have tried in wandering thought.
Such remedy as, scanning all, I find
I have applied. Creon, Menoeceus' son
And my Queen's brother, to the Pythian shrine
Of Phoebus I have sent to ask what act
Or word of mine this city will redeem.
And now, as anxiously I mete the time,
My soul is troubled, for, to my surprise,
He has been absent longer than he ought.
But when he comes, a caitiff I shall be
If I do not all that the god ordains.

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THE DAWN OF DISCOVERY.

Oedipus, having learned from the oracle that the cause of the wrath of the gods and of the plague is the presence of the murderer of Laius in the land, sends for the blind prophet, Tiresias, to tell him who is the murderer. Tiresias, knowing the secret, is reluctant to reveal it, and an altercation ensues, Oedipus suspecting that Tiresias has been set on by Creon, the Queen's brother, who he thinks is intriguing to supplant him in the monarchy.

LINES 300-462.

OEDIPUS.

Tiresias, thou whose thought embraces all,
Revealed or unrevealed, in heaven or earth,
In how sad plight our city is, thy mind,
If not thy eye, discerns. Prophet, in thee
Resides our sole hope of deliverance.
Phoebus, if thou hast not the tidings heard,
Has to our envoys answered, that the plague
Will never leave this city till we find
The murderers of the late King Laius,
And slay them or expel them from the land.
Then, if a way thou know'st, by augury
Or divination, put forth all thy power,
Save this our commonwealth, thyself and me;
Put from us the pollution of this blood.
To thee alone we look; what gifts one has
To use for good is of all toil the best.

TIRESIAS.

Ah! what an ill possession knowledge is
When ignorance were gain. This well I know,
And yet forgot, else had I not come here.

OEDIPUS.

What ails thee that thou bring'st this face of gloom?

TIRESIAS.

Let me go home, for each of us will bear
His burden easiest if so thou dost.

OEDIPUS.

Whatever thou dost know, the voice of right
And call of patriot duty bids thee speak.

TIRESIAS.

Speech is not always opportune; in thee
It is not; thy mistake I would not share.

OEDIPUS.

Oh, by the gods, I pray thee stand not mute!
We all as suppliants kneel in heart to thee.

TIRESIAS.

Then are ye all misguided. As for me,
I tell not that which told would hurt us both.

OEDIPUS.

How! dost thou know and yet refuse to tell?
Wilt thou prove traitor and undo the State?

TIRESIAS.

I will not bring down woe on thee and me.
Press me no more; thy questioning is vain.

OEDIPUS.

O vilest of mankind, for thou would'st move
A stone to righteous wrath, wilt thou not speak
But still stand there unmoved and obdurate?

TIRESIAS.

Thou dost reprove my heart, yet near thine own
Is something that the censor wots not of.

OEDIPUS.

Whose wrath would not be kindled when he heard
Language so hateful to a patriot's ear?

TIRESIAS.

Even if I keep silence, it must come.

OEDIPUS.

That which must come why not disclose to me?

TIRESIAS.

I will speak no word more; then, if thou wilt,
Freely give vent to thy most savage wrath.

OEDIPUS.

Freely my anger shall give utterance
To what I think: I think that in thy mind
This murder was engendered, was thy act
Save the mere blow, and hadst thou not been blind,
I should have deemed thee the sole murderer.

TIRESIAS.

Ha! Then I call upon thee to be true
To thy own proclamation, and henceforth
Abstain from intercourse with these or me,
As he that brings on us the curse of blood.

OEDIPUS.

Hast thou the impudence such calumny
To vent, and dream'st thou of impunity?

TIRESIAS.

I fear thee not; truth's power is on my side.

OEDIPUS.

Whence did it come to thee? not from thy art.

TIRESIAS.

From thee that made me speak against my will.

OEDIPUS.

Speak how? Repeat thy words that I may know.

TIRESIAS.

Didst thou not understand or tempt'st thou me?

OEDIPUS.

Fully I did not. Say it once again.

TIRESIAS.

I say the murderer whom thou seek'st is thou.

OEDIPUS.

Unpunished twice thy slanders shall not go.

TIRESIAS.

Shall I say more, further to fire thy wrath?

OEDIPUS.

All that thou wilt; 'twill be of none effect.

TIRESIAS.

I say that thou dost with thy next of kin
Fouly consort, not knowing where thou art.

OEDIPUS.

And think'st thou still unscathed to say these things?

TIRESIAS.

I do, if there is any strength in truth.

OEDIPUS.

In truth is strength, but that strength is not thine;
Thou in eyes, ears, and mind alike art blind.

TIRESIAS.

And thou art wretched, casting in my teeth
What all men presently will cast in thine.

OEDIPUS.

Thy lot is utter darkness; neither I
Nor any one who sees, can fear thy wrath.

TIRESIAS.

Not mine is chastisement; Apollo's might
Sufficient is, and will bring all to pass.

OEDIPUS.

Is this contrivance Creon's or thine own?

TIRESIAS.

Thyself, not Creon, is thy enemy.

OEDIPUS.

O wealth, O sovereignty, O art of arts
That givest victory in the race of life,
How are ye still by envious malice dogged!
This place of power, which now I hold, by me
Unsought, was by the city's will bestowed.
Yet the thrice-loyal Creon, my fast friend,
Seeks now to oust me by foul practices,
Using for tool this knavish soothsayer,
This lying mountebank, whose greedy palm
Has eyes, while in his science he is blind.
Show me the proofs of thy prophetic gift.
Why, when the riddling Sphinx was here, didst thou
Fail by thy skill to save the commonwealth?
The riddle was not such as all can read,
But gave thy art fair opportunity,
Yet neither inspiration served thee then,
Nor omens, but I, skillless Oedipus,
Out of my ignorance confounded her,
By my own wit, unhelped by auguries;
I, whom thou now conspirest to depose,
Hoping that thou wilt stand by Creon's throne.
These pious efforts, trust me, will be rued
By thee and him that sets thee on; thy years
Are thy defence from instant chastisement.

CHORUS.

To us, Lord Oedipus, alike thy word
And the seer's seem the utterance of your wrath.
Wrath here is out of place, what we would seek
Is a right reading of the oracle.

TIRESIAS

High is thy throne, yet must thou stoop so low
As to endure free speech; that power is mine.
I to my god am servant, not to thee,
And therefore, ask not Creon's patronage.
I tell thee who with blindness tauntest me,
Sight though thou hast thou seest not what thou art,
Nor where thou hast been dwelling, nor with whom.

Know'st thou thy birth? No, nor that thou art loathed
By thine own kin, the living and the dead.
One day thy sire's and mother's awful curse,
With double scourge, will whip thee from this land.
Dark then shall be those eyes which now are light,
And with thy cries what place shall not resound,
What glen of wide Cithaeron shall not ring,
As soon as thou dost learn into what port
Of marriage swelling sails have wafted thee?
Much is in store beside to bring thee down
Unto thy children's level and thy own.
Then trample upon Creon and my gift
Of prophecy. Of all mankind is none
Whom ruin more complete awaits than thee.

OEDIPUS.

Who can endure this caitiff's insolence?
Go to perdition on the instant; pack,
And of thy presence let this house be rid.

TIRESIAS.

I had not come except at thy command.

OEDIPUS.

I knew not then what folly thou would'st talk,
Else should I scarce have called thee to my house.

TIRESIAS.

Such it appears in thy conceit, am I,
A fool; yet to thy parents I seemed wise.

OEDIPUS.

My parents, hold there! Tell me who were they.

TIRESIAS.

This day shall bring thee parents and despair.

OEDIPUS.

Riddles again; still utterances dark.

TIRESIAS.

In guessing riddles art thou not supreme?

OEDIPUS.

Welcome the taunt which to my greatness points.

TIRESIAS.

And yet that day of greatness ruined thee.

OEDIPUS.

I reck not if it saved the commonwealth.

TIRESIAS.

I will be gone. Boy, lead me to my home.

OEDIPUS.

Yea, let him lead thee; thy intrusion here
Troubles us; thy departure were relief.

TIRESIAS.

I go, but first will my deliverance make
Maugre thy frown, which can do me no harm.
I tell thee that the man whom thou dost seek
With proclamations and with threat'nings dire,
The man who murdered Laius, is here;
In name a foreigner, a native born
In fact, as will to his small joy appear.
For he who now has sight will go forth blind,
He who is rich will go forth penniless,
Groping his way to dwell in a strange land;
Brother of his own offspring he has been,
As all the world shall know, husband of her
That brought him forth, with incest stained, and stained
With parricide. Get thee into thy house,
There think upon my words, and if I lie
Say I have lost the gift of prophecy.

* * * * *

DISCOVERY.

A messenger from Corinth announces to Oedipus the death of his reputed father, Polybus, king of Corinth, and incidentally reveals to him in part the history of his birth. Jocasta, the queen of Oedipus and his real mother, is on the scene when the messenger arrives; upon her the fatal secret dawns at once.

LINES 924-1085.

MESSENGER.

Strangers, I pray ye tell me if ye can
Where is the palace of King Oedipus;
Or better, where is Oedipus himself.

CHORUS.

This is the palace, in it is the king,
And there the mother of his children stands.

MESSENGER.

Blessed may she be, be all around her blessed,
If she indeed his honoured consort is.

JOCASTA.

Blessed be thou too, O stranger; such return
Thy courtesy demands; but let me know
Wherefore thou comest, what thou hast to tell.

MESSENGER.

Good news to thee, lady, and to thy lord.

JOCASTA.

What is the news, whence is thy embassy?

MESSENGER.

From Corinth, and the tidings on my lips
May please, must please, and yet perchance may pain.

JOCASTA.

What can it be that has this double power?

MESSENGER.

The denizens of yonder Isthmian land
Will make thy lord their king, as rumour goes.

JOCASTA.

What? Is old Polybus their king no more?

MESSENGER.

His lease of power has ended in his grave.

JOCASTA.

What say'st thou, that King Polybus is dead?

MESSENGER.

If I speak false let death be my reward.

JOCASTA.

Fly, fly, my handmaid, bear unto your lord
This news without delay. O oracles,
Where are ye? Oedipus in exile lives
Lest he should slay this prince, and lo, this prince,
Untouched by him, in course of nature dies.

OEDIPUS (*entering*).

Jocasta, dearest partner of my life,
Why from the palace hast thou summoned me?

JOCASTA.

Hear this man's tidings, and by them be taught
To what have come those reverend oracles.

OEDIPUS.

Who is the man? What is the news he brings?

JOCASTA.

He comes from Corinth, and the news he brings
Is that thy father, Polybus, is dead.

OEDIPUS.

What say'st thou, stranger? Tell it me thyself.

MESSENGER.

If it is this thou first wouldst surely know,
Then surely know that Polybus is gone.

OEDIPUS.

Died he of sickness or through treachery?

MESSENGER.

A touch will lay the aged form to sleep.

OEDIPUS.

He died, poor king, by sickness it would seem.

MESSENGER.

By sickness added to his length of years.

OEDIPUS.

Fie on it, wife! why should we ever waste
One thought on that prophetic Pythian shrine,
Or on the notes of birds whose boding cry
Foretold that I should be a parricide?
Beneath the ground my father lies, and I
Am guiltless of his blood, unless his heart
Broke at my loss, and thus through me he died.
These prophecies that trouble us are naught,
Are buried in the grave of Polybus.

JOCASTA.

Said I not from the first it would be so?

OEDIPUS.

Thou didst, but I was led astray by fear.

JOCASTA.

Henceforth dismiss these bugbears from thy soul.

OEDIPUS.

The incest—have I not still that to dread?

JOCASTA.

Why should man fear whose life is but the sport
Of chance, to whom the future is all dark?
'Tis best to live at hazard as one may.
For that predicted incest, dread it not,
For many a man has in a dream ere this
Lain with his mother. He who takes no thought
Of such hobgoblins, lives the easiest life.

OEDIPUS.

All thou hast said would have my full assent
Were not my mother still alive; but now,
Though thou say'st well, I cannot choose but fear.

JOCASTA.

A light of hope shines from your father's grave.

OEDIPUS.

Yes, but my mother lives, and fear with her.

MESSENGER.

What, lady, is the cause of your alarm?

OEDIPUS.

'Tis Merope, the Queen of Polybus.

MESSENGER.

And what is there in her to breed your fears?

OEDIPUS.

A dreadful ordinance of destiny.

MESSENGER.

Is it a mystery? May it be told?

OEDIPUS.

It may be told. The god before my birth
Foreshowed that with my mother I should lie,
And shed with my own hands my father's blood.
For which cause I have long my dwelling made
Far off from Corinth. Happily, 'tis true,
Yet to behold a parent's face is sweet.

MESSENGER.

Was this the fear that drove thee from that land?

OEDIPUS.

This, and the dreadful thought of parricide.

MESSENGER.

Why do I not at once, as here I am
Wishing thy good, relieve thee of that fear?

OEDIPUS.

Thou wouldst not fail to reap my gratitude.

MESSENGER.

'Twas to that end I came, that to thy home
When thou hadst come I might the gainer be.

OEDIPUS.

Home, while my mother lives, I will not go.

MESSENGER.

My son, 'tis plain thou know'st not what thou dost.

OEDIPUS.

How? By the gods, old man, explain to me!

MESSENGER.

If thou on her account dost shun thy home.

OEDIPUS.

I fear the god's prediction may prove true.

MESSENGER.

Touching the stain of incest, wouldst thou say?

OEDIPUS.

'Tis this, old man, I dread unceasingly.

MESSENGER.

Knowest thou not that thy alarms are vain?

OEDIPUS.

How vain, if of these parents I was born?

MESSENGER.

Polybus was no relative of thine.

OEDIPUS.

What say'st thou? Was not Polybus my sire?

MESSENGER.

As much thy sire as I am, and no more.

OEDIPUS.

Can father and not father be the same?

MESSENGER.

Neither did I beget thee nor did he.

OEDIPUS.

Then for what reason did he call me son?

MESSENGER.

Thou wast a gift to him, and from this hand.

OEDIPUS.

And could he take a foundling to his heart?

MESSENGER.

It was the yearning of a childless man.

OEDIPUS.

Was I thine own, or was I bought by thee?

MESSENGER.

I found thee in Cithaeron's bosky glade.

OEDIPUS.

What was it brought thee to this neighbourhood?

MESSENGER.

I kept the flocks that fed upon these hills.

OEDIPUS.

Wast thou a shepherd wandering for hire?

MESSENGER.

Poor as I was, O King, I saved thy life.

OEDIPUS.

In what so evil plight then was I found?

MESSENGER.

Thy insteps to that question can reply.

OEDIPUS.

Alack! what evil memory is this?

MESSENGER.

Thy feet were pierced through when I rescued thee.

OEDIPUS.

A hapless babe, foul swaddling clothes had I.

MESSENGER.

Thy name is thy misfortune's monument.

OEDIPUS.

Was it my mother's or my father's act?

MESSENGER.

I know not; he who gave me thee may tell.

OEDIPUS.

Was I received, then, and not found by thee?

MESSENGER.

Another shepherd put thee in my hands.

OEDIPUS.

Who was he? Canst thou point him out to me?

MESSENGER.

A serving-man of Laius he was called.

OEDIPUS.

That Laius who was ruler of this land?

MESSENGER.

The same; the man I mean his herdsman was.

OEDIPUS.

Is he alive? can he be seen by me?

MESSENGER.

You that this land inhabit best can tell.

OEDIPUS.

Does any one of you who stand around
The herdsman know of whom this stranger speaks?
Either afield or here has he been seen?
Speak out! 'tis time that all should be revealed.

CHORUS.

I ween it is no other than the hind
Of whom thou wast in quest some time ago;
But Queen Jocasta could most likely tell.

OEDIPUS.

Wife, dost thou know the man for whom erewhile
We sent? Is it of him that this man speaks?

JOCASTA.

Why ask? what matters it of whom he spoke?
Let not such follies dwell upon thy mind.

OEDIPUS.

Think not to hinder me, with such a clue,
From searching out the secret of my birth.

JOCASTA.

For Heaven's sake, for the sake of thy own life,
Desist! That I am stricken is enough.

OEDIPUS.

Fear not; though I be proved through three descents
Three times a slave, thy birth will take no stain.

JOCASTA.

Hear me, I do implore thee! Search no more.

OEDIPUS.

I will not stop till all has been revealed!

JOCASTA.

She that entreats thee has thy good at heart.

OEDIPUS.

Good it may be, yet does it please me ill.

JOCASTA.

Unhappy man! what thou art, never know.

OEDIPUS.

Go, some one; fetch the herdsman with all speed,
And let this lady vaunt her pedigree.

JOCASTA.

Alack! alack! Wretch, by no other name
Can I now call thee or shall call thee more!
(JOCASTA *rushes off the scene.*)

CHORUS.

O King, why has the lady rushed away
In this wild burst of grief? I sorely fear
Her silence prefaces a storm of woe.

OEDIPUS.

Let her storm on! resolved am I to find
The stem that bore me, lowly though it be.
She, very like, puffed with a woman's pride,
May feel ashamed of my ignoble birth.
For me, I do esteem me Fortune's child,
Nor blush to hold me of her favour born.
She is my mother; and my father, Time,
Whose months have on to greatness borne his child.
With such a parentage I fear no change
That should forbid me to search out my birth.

* * * * *

THE CATASTROPHE.

Jocasta, in despair, hangs herself. Oedipus puts out his own eyes. The scene is described by a second messenger, who has witnessed it.

LINES 1223-1296.

MESSENGER.

O reverend priests and elders of this land,
What are ye doomed to hear? what to behold?
What sorrow will be yours if loyally
Ye love the royal house of Labdacus?
Ister or Phasis were too scant a stream,
To wash the bloodstains of this roof away,
Such horrors does it hide, and presently
Will show beneath the sun; horrors self-caused,
And self-caused woes are of all woes the worst.

CHORUS.

That which we knew already topped the height
Of misery. What hast thou more to tell?

MESSENGER.

What fewest words serve to impart is this,
Jocasta the illustrious is no more.

CHORUS.

Alas, poor Queen! How was it that she died?

MESSENGER.

By her own hand. That which is worst of all,
The sight of what was done, your eyes are spared;
But to your ears, so far as memory serves,
I will recount her most disastrous end.
When, in a storm of passion, hence she passed
To yonder house, straight to her marriage-bed,
Tearing her hair with both her hands, she flew.
She slammed the door behind her; then she cries
To Laius, that had long been in his grave,
Calling to mind the seed that they had raised
To murder its begetter, while his mate,

Was left to her own child's incestuous arms.
She cursed the bed which to a husband bore
A husband and gave children to a child.
Thereon she slew herself, I wot not how,
For, with loud outcries Oedipus rushed in,
And on his movements all our eyes were turned,
So that we could not mark Jocasta's end.
He, raving, shouted to us for a sword,
And asked where was his wife that was no wife,
But his own mother and his children's, too.
Then, in his frenzy, some mysterious power,
For it was none of us, showed him the way.
With a wild yell, as though one led him on,
He charged the doorway, from their sockets tore
The bolts, and headlong dashed into the room.
There we beheld Jocasta hanging dead,
Her neck entangled in the fatal noose.
This the King seeing, gave a fearful yell,
And loosed the rope; the corpse fell to the ground.
What then ensued was fearful to behold:
The golden buckles wherewith she was dight
He from her garment plucked, and, lifting them
On high, he smote the pupils of his eyes,
Crying aloud that they should look no more
Upon his suffering or his crimes, but dark
Henceforth betray their duty seeing those
Whom they ought not, not seeing those they ought.
Chanting this strain, once and again he smote,
With hand uplift, his eyeballs, till the blood
Ran from his wounded eyes down to his chin,
Not in slow-oozing drops of clotted gore,
But in a pelting shower of crimson hue.
Such is the wreck, not of a single life,
But of a husband's and a wife's in one.
The grandeur of this house in happier hours
Was grandeur worthy of the name. To-day
Sorrow and desolation, death and shame,
All evils for which man has names are here.

CHORUS.

Rests now the victim from this agony?

MESSENGER.

He calls to us to open wide the door
And let all Thebes behold the parricide.
His mother's—names too horrible he used,
Vowing he'll doom himself to banishment,
Nor live beneath the curse himself called down.
But some support and guidance he will need,
For he is stricken past man's strength to bear.
Thyself will see it, for behold, the gates
Open and will a spectacle disclose
That might the bitterest foe to pity move!

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THE PARTING.

Oedipus bewails his calamities. A scene follows between him and Creon, his wife's brother, whom he had accused of treasonably plotting against him in concert with Tiresias.

LINES 1369-1514.

OEDIPUS.

That what is done is not done for the best,
Forbear to preach; thy counsel is in vain.
Could I have looked upon my father's face,
Meeting him yonder in the underworld,
Or on my hapless mother's, when to both
I had done wrongs worse than the worst of deaths?
Perchance you'll say to see my progeny
Were sweet! when I remembered whence they sprung.
Never, believe me, to their father's eyes;
Nor to see city, tower, or temple more,
From which, of all men most unfortunate,
When I had lived the noblest life in Thebes,
I did myself cut off, adjuring all
To drive the sinner out by heaven declared
Accursed and of the blood of Laius.
When I had thus proclaimed my infamy,
Could I meet, eye to eye, those citizens?
It might not be. Nay, were there any means
Of cutting off the source of hearing, too,
I would have closed all avenues of sense,
And made this wretched frame both blind and deaf.
The mind has peace that dwells apart from ills.
Why, O Cithaeron, didst thou cherish me,
Not end my life at once, that so my kind
Had never learned the secret of my birth?
O Polybus, and Corinth, and that home
By me paternal deemed, how foul beneath
Was that which ye brought up so outward fair!
I stand a villain, and of villains born.
O meeting of three ways, and lonely glen,
And copse, and narrow pass at the cross-roads,
That from my father's veins drank, by my hand,
The blood which filled my own, remember ye,
What ye beheld me do, and what I did
Thereafter in this land? Marriage ill-starred,
Thou gavest me birth, and then of me gave birth
To a fresh offspring, and before the sun
Showed fathers, brothers, children, parricides,
Brides, wives, and mothers in unnatural train,
With all things most abhorred among mankind.
But what is foul to do is foul to hear,
Therefore, at once bury me out of sight;
Put me to death, cast me into the sea,
That never eye of man may see me more.
Come, lay your hands upon my wretched frame,
Do as I pray ye, fearing naught, my load
Of woe no mortal can support but I.

(Enter CREON.)

CHORUS.

At the right time thy wish to execute
And give thee counsel, Creon comes, now left
In place of thee sole guardian of our State.

OEDIPUS.

Alas! To him what can I find to say,
What plea of justice, since my conscience cries
That he has met foul treatment at my hands?

CREON.

I came not, Oedipus, to mock thy fall,
Nor to upbraid thee with unkindness past.

But ye, that stand around, if human hearts
Ye do not reverence, reverence yonder sun
Whose fire feeds all things, and expose no more
Unveiled to view this horror, which nor earth
Nor heaven's sweet rains nor sunlight can endure.
Bear him within; let there be no delay.
The sorrows of a household, piety
Reserves for kindred eyes and ears alone.

OEDIPUS.

Since thou my expectation hast belied,
Proving thyself as good as I am bad,
Grant what I ask, for thy behoof I speak.

CREON.

What is this thing that thou wouldst have me do?

OEDIPUS.

Cast me, and instantly, out of this land,
Beyond the pale of human intercourse.

CREON.

Already had I done this, but I first
Desired to ask the counsel of the god.

OEDIPUS.

The god had fully made his counsel known,
Which was to slay the impious parricide.

CREON.

So did we hold, yet in our present case
Better we deemed it to be circumspect.

OEDIPUS.

Wilt thou enquire about a wretch like me?

CREON.

Thyself by this hast learned to trust the gods.

OEDIPUS.

I do conjure thee, and enjoin on thee,
Her that within there lies, as seems thee fit,
Lay in the ground. To thee that care belongs.
But me, let never this my fatherland
Be so dishonoured as to hold alive.
Upon the mountains let my dwelling be,
Upon my own Cithaeron, which my sire
And mother chose as my appointed tomb,
And so let those who sought it take my life.
And yet past doubt it is that I was proof
'Gainst death in all its forms; if I were saved,
It must have been for some fell destiny.
But be my own lot what it may, my care
Is for my children, Creon. For the boys
I'd have thee take no thought; as they are men,
Where'er they be they'll find a livelihood.
But for my girls now lorn and desolate,

My girls, apart from whom was never set
Their father's table, who still had their share
Of everything on which his hand was laid,
I crave thy care. And first let me embrace
My darlings and unite my tears to theirs.
Pray, good my lord,
Consent, kind heart. To hold them in my arms
Would be to feel them mine as when I saw—
What shall I say?

(ANTIGONE and ISMENE, OEDIPUS' daughters, are brought upon the scene.)

Is it my darlings' weeping that I hear?
Do my ears tell me true? Has Creon sent
My best beloved in mercy to their sire?
Say I aright?

CREON.

Thou say'st aright. 'Tis I that, knowing well
Thy heart's desire, have granted thee this boon.

OEDIPUS.

Fortune befriend thee for their presence here,
Heaven guard thee better than it guarded me.
Daughters, where are ye? Come unto these arms,
These arms that issued from one womb with you,
Which on the father that begot you brought
This darkness for the light he had before.
Blindly, my children, and unwittingly,
Offspring I got in an incestuous bed.
See you I cannot, but I weep for you,
When I bethink me of the bitter life
That ye must live, marks for the scorn of men.
To what assembly, to what festival,
Will ye e'er go and not be driven home
In tears, excluded from the spectacle?
And when your marriageable hour has come,
Where will be found the man so venturesome
To take upon him the reproach that falls
Upon my parents and from them on you?
What stain is lacking when your father slew
His father, her that bore him took to wife
'Gainst nature's law, and had you born to him
From the same womb from which himself was born?
In face of such reproaches who will wed?
No one will dare. Daughters, to waste away
Lonely and childless is your certain doom.
Son of Menoeceus, thou alone art left
As father to these children, in one day
Bereft of both their parents; let them not
Go forth to roam famished and desolate,
Nor let them be confounded with my crimes.
Have pity on them, seeing them so young,
Deprived of all saving thy charity.
Reach forth thy hand in token of assent.
Children, were ye of age to understand,
I had much counsel giv'n ye; but now pray
That you may dwell where it is best to dwell,
And yours may be a happier lot than mine.

OEDIPUS AT COLONUS.

After the day of horrors the blind Oedipus is cast forth from Thebes, and becomes a wanderer over the face of the earth, guided and tended by his faithful daughter, Antigone. He comes at last to Colonus, a rural district near Athens, and one of the holy places of Attica. Here he is destined to end his life, to be buried, and by the presence of his remains to confer a blessing on the country which has given him a last resting-place and a tomb. The dark cloud of involuntary guilt, which has hitherto overshadowed him, lifts at the end, and is succeeded by a calm evening light.

* * * * *

OEDIPUS AND ANTIGONE ARRIVE AT COLONUS AND ENTER THE CONSECRATED GROUND.

LINES 1-110

OEDIPUS.

Child of a blind old man, Antigone,
Unto what land, whose city, have we come?
Who is there for this day to entertain
With scanty fare the wanderer, Oedipus,
Who asks but little and still less receives,
Yet with his dole is fain to be content—
For time and suffering and a noble heart
Have taught me how to bear adversity.
But, daughter, if thou seest a resting-place,
Either in common ground or hallowed grove,
There guide me to a seat, that we may ask
What place is this: strangers, we come to learn
Of citizens and what they bid us do.

ANTIGONE.

Oedipus, my unhappy sire, the towers
That fence the city round far off appear.
This seems a holy place; 'tis full of pine,
Of laurel, and of vine under whose leaves
Trills her sweet notes full many a nightingale.
Here rest thee on this unhewn seat of rock;
The journey for thy aged feet was long.

OEDIPUS.

Guide thy old father safely to the seat.

ANTIGONE.

It is a lesson taught me long ago.

OEDIPUS.

Where is it we have halted? canst thou tell?

ANTIGONE.

Athens I know; this spot is strange to me.

OEDIPUS.

That it was Athens every traveller said.

ANTIGONE.

Wouldst thou that I go ask what place it is?

OEDIPUS.

Yea, daughter, if it is inhabited.

ANTIGONE.

Inhabited it is; but I may spare
My pains, for close at hand I see a man.

OEDIPUS.

Bends he his steps in our direction, child?

ANTIGONE.

Yes, and is now at hand.

(Enter STRANGER.)

Whate'er is meet
For thee to say, speak; he is at thy side.

OEDIPUS.

O stranger, listen to this maid who sees
Both for herself and me, since our good luck
Hath sent thee to inform our ignorance.

STRANGER.

Ere thou dost question further, leave that place;
'Tis holy ground whereon thou mayest not tread.

OEDIPUS.

What, then, is the indwelling deity?

STRANGER.

I tell thee it is hallowed; it belongs
To the dread Daughters of the Earth and Night.

OEDIPUS.

What is their name? With reverence I would ask.

STRANGER.

With us, the Eumenides, of sleepless eye;
But different names seem good in different lands.

OEDIPUS.

May they receive the suppliant to their grace,
For I intend no more to leave this ground.

STRANGER.

What means this?

OEDIPUS.

'Tis the token of my doom.

STRANGER.

Myself I dare not thrust thee out until
On my report the State my act approves.

OEDIPUS.

To a poor wanderer, friend, be not unkind,
But what I humbly ask thee deign to tell.

STRANGER.

Speak on, and no unkind refusal fear.

OEDIPUS.

What is the place, then, upon which we stand?

STRANGER.

Thou shalt know all that I can tell. The place
Around is holy, dread Posidon here
Is present, present here the lord of fire,
Titan Prometheus. What thou standest on
Is of this region hight the Brazen Way,
The prop of Athens, while these neighbouring fields
Boast of Colonus, that famed charioteer,
As their first settler; and their denizens
Are proud to bear their founder's sainted name.
Such claims to pious reverence hath this place,
Stranger, which they who dwell here feel the more.

OEDIPUS.

There are then people who inhabit it?

STRANGER.

Yes, people named after their patron god.

OEDIPUS.

Has it a king or do the commons rule?

STRANGER.

The King of yonder city is its lord.

OEDIPUS.

And who now fills the seat of royalty?

STRANGER.

Theseus, the son of Aegeus, is his name.

OEDIPUS.

Would one of you my envoy be to him?

STRANGER.

To tell him aught, or bid him come to thee?

OEDIPUS.

To show him how small cost may bring great gain.

STRANGER.

And wherein can the blind advantage him?

OEDIPUS.

My eyes are blind, but when I speak I see.

STRANGER.

Attend my words if thou'rt an honest man,
And honest though ill-starred thou seemst to me.
Stir not from off this spot where thou dost stand,
Till to this township's rural denizens
I have recounted all. They will decide
Whether thou may'st remain or must depart.

(Exit STRANGER.)

OEDIPUS.

My daughter, has the stranger gone from us?

ANTIGONE.

He has, my father; all is still around.
Thou mayst speak freely for I only hear.

OEDIPUS.

Dread goddesses, of awful countenance,
Since in your holy precincts first I rest,
Be merciful to Phoebus and to me;
For Phoebus, when he all my woes foretold,
Promised me peace at last, then to be mine
When at my wandering's limit I should find
A shrine and hostel of the powers of awe.
Here of my misery was to be the goal,
And I was to bring blessings to my hosts,
And curses upon them that drove me out.
Tokens of this he pledged his word to send,
An earthquake, lightning, or a thunder peal.
Sure then I am that auguries from you,
Who cannot lie, my wandering feet have led
Unto this grove. How should the wayfarer
Else have on you first lighted, like himself,
Untasting of the wine-cup, and have found
This sacred seat unhewn? O goddesses,
Fulfil Apollo's oracles, and grant
Some termination of this weary life,
Unless my sum of pain seems incomplete,
When long unbroken sufferings I have borne.
O daughters dear of immemorial night,
Athens, of cities most illustrious,
That art to the great Pallas dedicate,
Take pity on this ghost of Oedipus;
Once I was not the thing that now I am.

* * * * *

THE PRAISES OF COLONUS AND ATHENS.

LINES 668-719.

CHORUS.

Of this land of chivalry
Thou the garden here dost see,
White Colonus, in whose glade,
Underneath the greenwood shade,
Her loved haunt, the nightingale
Poureth oft her luscious wail.

Glossy-dark the ivy creeps;
Flourishes along the steeps
With berries store, scorched by no ray,
Rent by no storm, the sacred bay.
Here loves the jolly god to rove
With merry nymphs that round him move.
Here many a flower, heaven-watered, blows,
Worthy to bind immortal brows.
Narcissus waves its clusters gay,
And crocus gleams with golden ray.
Nor do the springs that feed thy flow,
Cephisus, intermission know:
Day after day their crystal stream
Makes the rich loam with plenty teem.
Nor do the muses keep afar,
Nor Aphrodite's golden car.
Here grows, what neither Asia's coast
Nor Pelops' Dorian Isle can boast,
The tree that Nature's bounty rears,
The tree that mocks the foeman's spears,
That nowhere blooms so fair and free
And rich—our own grey olive tree,
Of which no chieftain, old or young,
Shall rob the land from which it sprung.
Blue-eyed Athene is its guard,
And Morian Zeus its sleepless ward.
And loftier still the note of praise
That by the grace of heaven we raise
To this our motherland, for she
Is Queen of steeds, Queen of the sea.
Poseidon, son of Saturn, thou
Didst set this crown upon her brow,
When first upon Athenian course
Thou taughtst to curb the fiery horse.
The dashing oar our seamen ply,
Light o'er the wave our galleys fly,
Keeping the sea-nymphs company.

* * * * *

LENGTH OF DAYS.

LINES 1211-1238.

CHORUS.

Little wisdom hath the man
That would over-live his span.
Length of days brings many a moan
When life's prime is past and gone;
But of pleasures, never a one.
Then all alike from dole to save,
Comes the dark and cheerless grave.

Not to be is happiest;
Next with speed to part is best.
Bloodshed, battle, hatred, strife,
Youth with all these ills is rife.
Then comes the last, the dreariest stage,
Sour, companionless old age.

* * * * *

THE END OF OEDIPUS.

LINES 1579-1667.

MESSENGER. (*To the* CHORUS.)

Brief is the speech, my fellow-citizens,
Needed to tell that Oedipus is dead;
But a brief speech will not suffice to give
A full account of all that there befell.

CHORUS.

His life of sorrow then has found its end.

MESSENGER.

He is where he will never sorrow more.

CHORUS.

Died he by act of heaven and painlessly?

MESSENGER.

Herein consists the wonder of my tale.
When from this place he went, as thou didst see,
No longer guided by a friendly hand,
But himself acting as the guide of all,
Having arrived at the descending stair,
With brazen steps fast rooted in the earth,
He halted upon one of many paths,
Hard by the basin wherein treasured lie
Pledges of Theseus and Pirithous.
Midway from this to the Thorician rock,
The hollow pear-tree and the marble tomb,
He took his seat and disarrayed himself
Of his soiled weeds; then to his daughters called
Water to bring that he might cleanse himself.
They to a knoll that rose above the fane
Of boon Demeter, hastening, did with speed
That which their sire commanded,—bathed his limbs,
And in new garments seemly him arrayed.
When thus his heart's desire had been fulfilled,
And none of his behests remained undone,
Thunder beneath the earth was heard, whereat
The maidens quaked, and on their father's knees
They laid them down and wept, nor ceased to beat
Their breasts and to pour forth the long-drawn wail.
He, hearing all at once their bitter cry,
Folded his hands over their heads, and said,
"Daughters, this day your father is no more,
For now my course is ended and your life
Of travel sore in tending me is done.
Hard was that life, my daughters, well I know,
And yet a single word makes up for all.
Love did ye never meet at any hand
Greater than his, of whom henceforth bereft,
Ye must drag out whate'er remains of life."
Thus folded each in other's last embrace,
They sobbed and wailed. When they at last had done
Their weeping and their cry arose no more,
A silence followed; all at once a voice
Called him, and made the hair of each of us
That heard it stand on end with sudden fear.
Repeatedly it called, that mystic voice,
"Oedipus, linger thou no more," it said,
"Thine hour is come; too long is thy delay."
He, hearing the celestial summons, called

For our King Theseus to draw near to him;
And when the King drew near, he said, "Dear Prince,
Pledge to my daughters troth by your right hand,
As they will pledge their troth to thee, and swear
That thou wilt not desert them, but whate'er
Thou mayst do thou wilt do it for their good."
Theseus, with noble soul, calm and unmoved,
Swore to fulfil his stranger friend's request.
Which being ended, straightway Oedipus,
With his blind hands touching his daughters, said,
"Children, ye now must bear up gallantly
And from this spot depart, nor seek to see
Or hear that which may not be seen or heard.
Tarry no longer; what is now to come
Theseus alone may lawfully behold."
These words of his all that were present heard.
So we departed, and with streaming eyes
Walked by the maidens. Having gone some way
We turned, looked back, and saw that Oedipus
Had vanished, nor did trace of him appear,
While the King stood alone, holding his hand
Before his eyes as though some awful form,
Some overpowering vision had appeared.
And no long time had passed, when he was seen
Falling upon his knees and worshipping
At once the Earth and all the Olympian gods.
But in what way Oedipus left this life
Theseus alone of human kind can tell.
There flashed from heaven no lightning in that hour
To strike him dead; there came not from the sea
A tempest with its blast to sweep him off.
Some envoy from the gods was sent to him,
Or opening earth engulfed him painlessly.
The old man died without disease or pang
To make us grieve for him; by miracle,
If ever man so died. Thinkst thou I dream?
I know not how to show thee that I wake.

ANTIGONE.

Eteocles and Polynices, the unnatural brothers, having fallen by each other's hands, Creon is King of Thebes. To Eteocles, who had died in defence of the city, he awards honourable burial; Polynices, who had fallen in attacking the city, he dooms to lie unburied, a great dishonour and calamity in Hellenic opinion. Antigone resolves to disregard the ordinance, and pay the funeral rites to her brother Polynices. The conflict between the law of the State and the divine law which Antigone obeys is the moral key-note of the play. Ismene is Antigone's weaker sister and serves as a foil to her. Antigone is betrothed to Haemon, a son of Creon.

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THE TWO SISTERS.

LINES 1-99.

ANTIGONE.

Ismene, sister mine in blood and heart,
All woes that had their source in Oedipus
Zeus will bring on us yet before we die.
Nothing there is disastrous or accursed,

No blot of shame, no brand of infamy,
Which in our list of ills I reckon not.
What is this proclamation that I hear
The general has put forth to all the host?
Say, canst thou tell, or art thou ignorant
That those we hate are threat'ning those we love?

ISMENE.

To me, Antigone, no word has come
Either of joyful tidings or of bad
Since we of our two brothers were bereft,
Slain in one day, each by the other's hand.
Last night the Argive army marched away;
This much I know, and I know nothing more
To add to or abate our misery.

ANTIGONE.

Of that I was assured, and called thee forth
Before the gate to speak to thee apart.

ISMENE.

What is it? Something ferments in thy soul.

ANTIGONE.

Creon to one of our two brothers grants,
But to the other he denies, a grave.
Eteocles, as they tell me, he has laid
With all due form and reverence in the tomb,
There to be ranked among the honoured dead.
But Polynices' miserable corpse,
It seems, by strict injunction he forbids
All citizens to bury or to mourn;
Ordering that it be left without a grave,
Unwailed, a welcome prey to ravening birds.
This proclamation Creon, worthy man—
Look thou, look both of us alike—puts forth.
'Tis said he hither comes to publish it,
To all who know it not, nor deems the thing
Of small concern; for whoso disobeys
His penalty is to be stoned to death.
So stands the matter; it will now be seen
Whether thy soul is worthy of thy race.

ISMENE.

How, daring maid, can I in such a case,
Whether to loose or bind, assistance lend?

ANTIGONE.

Wilt thou take part and aid me? Ponder well.

ISMENE.

In what adventure? What is in thy mind?

ANTIGONE.

Will thy arm help me to uplift the corpse?

ISMENE.

How! Wouldst thou brave the law and bury him?

ANTIGONE.

Bury thy brother and mine own I would.
Do as thou wilt, my duty shall not fail.

ISMENE.

In face of Creon's edict? Art thou mad?

ANTIGONE.

Has he the right to part me from mine own?

ISMENE.

Sister, alack! think how our father fell,
O'erwhelmed with hatred and with infamy
Through sins which his own act had brought to light,
His eyes bereft of sight by his own hand;
How she that was his wife and mother too
Perished, self-strangled with a twisted cord,
And lastly our two brothers in one day
With fratricidal hands most ruefully
Upon each other brought a common doom.
Now only we are left, and worst of all
Our fate will be, if, in contempt of law,
Our ruler's will and order we defy.
Think first that we are women, and too weak
Battle to do against the strength of men;
And next, that we are subject unto power,
And must in harder things than this obey.
For my share then, I will entreat the dead
To pardon what I do unwillingly,
And bow to the command of those in power.
High vaulting virtue overleaps itself.

ANTIGONE.

I urge thee not; nay, didst thou wish to aid,
My heart would not accept thy partnership.
Hold to thy own opinion; him I mean
To bury; death were honour in that cause.
I in the tomb shall lie with those I love,
A glorious criminal. Longer will last
The praise of those below than those above.
There I shall ever dwell. Then, if thou wilt,
Treat as of no account the claim of heaven.

ISMENE.

I lack not piety, but lack the force
To fly in face of public ordinance.

ANTIGONE.

Cling to thy specious pretext while I go
To heap the earth upon a brother's grave.

ISMENE.

Too daring sister, how I quake for thee.

ANTIGONE.

Quake not for me, steer thine own course aright.

ISMENE.

At least disclose to none this thy design;
I too will keep it locked within my breast.

ANTIGONE.

Avaunt! reveal it! I shall hate thee more
If thou dost not proclaim it to the world.

ISMENE.

Hot is thy blood, but chill thy enterprise.

ANTIGONE.

I shall please those whom I am bound to please.

ISMENE.

Hadst thou the power, but desperate is thy aim.

ANTIGONE.

When my power fails I have but to desist.

ISMENE.

Where we must fail, not to attempt is wise.

ANTIGONE.

Such talk will make thee hateful unto me,
And by the dead man righteously abhorred.
Then leave me with my folly to endure
This dreadful penalty. Come what come may,
Nothing will rob me of a noble death.

ISMENE.

Art thou resolved? Go, then, and be assured
That though misguided thou art well beloved.

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SISTERLY LOVE DEFIES THE LAW.

Antigone is caught by the guard paying funeral rites to the corpse of Polynices, and is brought before Creon.

LINES 384-581.

GUARD.

Behold the guilty one, caught in the act
Of burial. Where is Creon to be found?

CHORUS.

Hither he comes returning from the house.

CREON (*entering*).

What makes my presence here so opportune?

GUARD.

My prince, let mortal man nothing forswear,
For resolution yields to afterthought.
Little I looked hither to come again,
So pelted with the hailstorm of thy threats.
But the good fortune that surpasses hope
Is of all pleasant things the pleasantest;
And so I come in spite of all my oaths,
And bring with me this maiden, who was caught
Decking the grave. This time no lot was cast;
The prize is mine of right, and mine alone.
And now, my prince, take and examine her
Thyself, as seems thee good. I claim my due,
From all these troubles to be let go free.

CREON.

Where, in what manner, was your prisoner found?

GUARD.

'Twas she that gave him burial; all is told.

CREON.

Art thou assured of that thou dost report?

GUARD.

I saw this maiden burying the corpse
Which thou forbid'st to bury. Is that plain?

CREON.

By whom was she espied, and how entrapped?

GUARD.

Thus did it happen: When we reached our post,
Confounded by thy dreadful menaces,
We swept away with care each particle
Of dust, and having laid the carcase bare,
Then sat us down beneath the sheltering slope
Of a hillside, where we escaped the stench,
Each stirring up his fellow to the task,
And cursing him who should be slack in it.
So went we on until the sun's bright orb
Had reached the mid-arch of the firmament,
And its full heat was felt, when suddenly
A whirlwind, raising swirls of dust heaven-high,
Swept o'er the plain, stripping the wood of leaves,
Wherewith it filled the air. We with closed eyes
And lips sat bowing to the wrath of heaven.
When this had passed away, after some time,
Appeared this maiden, uttering piercing wails;
Like to the plaintive notes of a lorn bird,
That finds her nest robbed of its callow brood,
Her wailings were, when she beheld the corpse
Once more uncovered; and right bitterly
Cursed she the man whose hand had done the deed.
Straightway a handful of dry dust she brings,
Then thrice uplifting high a brazen urn,
Pours a three-fold libation on the corpse.
We at the sight, start up and quickly seize
The maiden, who was not a whit dismayed.
We charged her with what she before had done,
And what was doing. Nor denied she aught,
But made me feel sorrow and joy at once.

Oneself to have escaped calamity
Is cause for joy; to bring a friend to harm
Fills one with sorrow. But in my account
Of all things mine own safety is the first.

CREON.

(To ANTIGONE.)

Thou, that dost stand with eyes bent on the ground,
Dost thou plead guilty or deny the fact?

ANTIGONE.

Deny I do not, but avow my deed.

CREON.

(To the GUARD.)

Thou standst acquitted of a heinous charge,
And mayest betake thee hence whither thou wilt.

(To ANTIGONE.)

But thou, answer, and briefly, didst thou know
The proclamation made against this act?

ANTIGONE.

I did; how should I not? The words were plain.

CREON.

Yet didst thou dare to violate the law?

ANTIGONE.

The proclamation went not forth from Zeus,
Or Justice, partner of the gods below,
Who had ordained these canons for mankind;
Nor deemed I proclamations had such power
That thereby mortal man could contravene
Heaven's law unwritten and unchangeable.
That law was not the child of yesterday,
Nor knoweth man the source from which it came.
I was not minded for what men might say
To break that law and brave the wrath divine.
That death would come I know, as come it must
Without thy proclamation, and to die
Before my hour I count it so much gain.
For when a life is full of wretchedness
As mine has been, is it not gain to die?
Little I care if I such doom must meet;
But I care much not uninterred to leave
His corpse that was of the same mother born.
One pains me sore, the other pains me not;
And if to thee I seem to play the fool
To me it seems that to a fool I play it.

CHORUS.

She shows the savage spirit of her sire,
And to misfortune is untaught to bend.

CREON.

Know that the most self-willed most often fall.
Iron that hath been tempered by the fire
To a surpassing hardness, when it breaks,
We often see shattered most thoroughly;
And a small bit suffices to subdue
The fiery steed. High thoughts beseem not those
Who owe subjection to another's will.
This maid before displayed her insolence
In overstepping what the laws ordained;
And now again displays it, glorying
And laughing in our face over her crime.
It is not I that am the man, but she
If she can thus usurp and go unscathed.
Be she my sister's child or child of one
Nearer in blood than all around our hearth,
She shall not the last penalty escape,
Nor shall her sister. For she, too, I hold,
Conspired to bring about this burial.
Summon her hither. Just now in the house
I saw her raving like a maid possessed.
When wickedness is gendered in the dark
The heart is apt its secret to betray.
But not less hateful is the shamelessness
Which, of foul acts convicted, calls them fair.

ANTIGONE.

To lead me to my death, is that enough?

CREON.

It is enough. This done, I ask no more.

ANTIGONE.

Then why delay, when of thy words to me
Not one gives pleasure or will ever give?
Nor are mine less displeasing unto thee.
And yet what greater glory could be mine,
Than, burying my own brother, I have won?
Well know I, all here present would applaud
But that their tongues by fear of thee are tied.
Sovereigns in many things are fortunate,
And they alone are free in act and speech.

CREON.

So thinkest thou; of other Thebans, none.

ANTIGONE.

So think they too, but they must cringe to thee.

CREON.

Art not ashamed to brave the public voice?

ANTIGONE.

It is no shame to pay our kin their due.

CREON.

Was not he kin that fell upon our side?

ANTIGONE.

His father and his mother both were mine.

CREON.

How then do service which offends his shade?

ANTIGONE.

The dead man will not second thy complaint.

CREON.

He will if he is levell'd with the vile.

ANTIGONE.

It was a brother, not a slave, that fell.

CREON.

Assailing what the other died to save.

ANTIGONE.

The powers below ask these observances.

CREON.

The good ask not like treatment with the bad.

ANTIGONE.

Who knows but this may be deemed right below?

CREON.

Hatred expires not when the hated dies.

ANTIGONE.

Not hate but love to share my nature is.

CREON.

Go, then, below and love, if love thou wilt,
But while I live no woman shall reign here.

CHORUS.

(ISMENE *entering*)

Ismene, lo! before the gate appears,
A sister's grief o'erflowing in her tears;
The cloud of sorrow gathered on her face
Bedews her roseate cheek and mars its grace.

CREON.

(*To ISMENE.*)

And thou, too, in my home a lurking snake?
Didst drain my heart's blood, while I little thought
That I was cherishing two traitress fiends?
Wast thou a party to this burial,
Or wilt thou swear that thou art innocent?

ISMENE.

I did take part, if she will say I did,
And am content to bear my share of blame.

ANTIGONE.

That equity forbids; neither wert thou
Willing to act, nor I to act with thee.

ISMENE.

Yet would I not refuse mid thy distress,
Sister, to sail in the same barque with thee.

ANTIGONE.

Whose was the deed, the dead and Hades know.
I love not one whose friendship ends in words.

ISMENE.

Sister, deny me not the privilege
Of sharing both thy piety and death.

ANTIGONE.

Share not my death, nor claim the work in which
Thou hadst no hand; that I die is enough.

ISMENE.

What can life be to me, bereft of thee?

ANTIGONE.

Ask Creon, he is nearest thee in love.

ISMENE.

Why dost thou gird at me thus fruitlessly?

ANTIGONE.

My laugh is bitter when I laugh at thee.

ISMENE.

What can I do to aid thee even now?

ANTIGONE.

What, save thyself! I grudge not thy escape.

ISMENE.

Alack! and must I let thee die alone?

ANTIGONE.

Yes; for thy choice was life, and mine was death.

ISMENE.

But not unspoken was my mind to thee.

ANTIGONE.

Thy course was here approved, but mine below.

ISMENE.

Yet was the fault of both of us the same.

ANTIGONE.

Be of good cheer, thou livest; but my soul
Is with the dead, to whom my care is due.

CREON.

Of these two sisters, one, it seems to me,
Has lost her wits, and one was witless born.

ISMENE.

O Prince, the reason that is born in us
Abides not in the wretched, but departs.

CREON.

From thee it fled when thou didst share her crime.

ISMENE.

Without this maiden what can life be worth?

CREON.

Say not "this maiden," for she is no more.

ISMENE.

Wilt thou slay her that is thy son's betrothed?

CREON.

We shall find other fields enough to plough,

ISMENE.

Thou wilt not find such unison of hearts.

CREON.

I do not want a bad wife for my son.

ANTIGONE.

Dear Haemon, how thy father slights thy love.

CREON.

Thou and thy marriage are a weariness.

ISMENE.

Wilt thou bereave thy child of his betrothed?

CREON.

Hades it is that shall these nuptials bar.

ISMENE.

It is resolved, it seems, that she shall die.

CREON.

There I agree with thee. No more delay.
Slaves, take her in, and henceforth let these maids
Be women, and no more be left at large.
The stoutest hearts are apt to think of flight,
When they perceive that death is drawing near.

* * * * *

THE CONTEST BETWEEN LOVE AND FILIAL DUTY.

LINES 631-780.

CREON.

Soon shall we know, my son, past prophecy
Whether, apprised of that our fixed decree,
Thou com'st in wrath upon thy bride's account
Or all we do is pleasing unto thee.

HAEMON.

My father, I am thine; thy wisdom guides
My steps aright and I will follow it;
No marriage can be dearer to my heart
Than is the blessing of thy governance.

CREON.

Be this, my son, implanted in thy breast,
Still to thy father's judgment to defer.
This is the reason for which men desire
To rear obedient offspring in their homes,
Who may confront their father's enemy,
And with him render service to his friends.
The father of unprofitable sons—
What does he else but for himself beget
Trouble and exultation for his foes?
Never, my Haemon, for a woman's love
Let go thy better judgment. Thou must know
That cold and comfortless is the embrace
Of a bad partner in the marriage bed.
What sore is worse than ill-requited love?
Then cast away this maiden from thy heart,
And let her nuptial bower in Hades be,
Since I have openly convicted her
Of breaking law, by all beside obeyed.
My public act I will not falsify,

The maid shall die; howe'er she may descant
On sacred kinship. If at home I give
Disorder license, where will order reign?
Whoever governs his own house aright
Will be a worthy member of the State.
The bold transgressor that defies the law,
Or thinks to override authority,
Need look for no encouragement from me
The lawful ruler's word must be obeyed,
Just or unjust, in great things and in small.
Who does this, I will warrant him a man
Fit to command alike and to obey,
And one who in the battle's storm will stand
Bravely and staunchly at his comrade's side.
There is no greater curse than anarchy;
It works the overthrow of commonwealths,
Lays homes in ruin, in the battle-field
Puts armies to the rout, while victory

And safety are the meed of discipline.
So must we stand by that which is decreed,
And not to an usurping woman yield.
Fall if we must, a man shall deal the blow:
'Twere shame to think a woman vanquished us.

CHORUS.

If age our judgment dims not, thou hast dealt
Rightly with all things which thy speech concerns.

HAEMON.

Father, the favour of the gods bestows
Wisdom, most precious of all precious gifts.
That thou hast not the right upon thy side
I cannot, if I could I would not, show.
Yet may another's argument be fair.
Nature hath set me to keep watch for thee
Over the words, acts, censures of the world.
The common man, awed by thy presence, shrinks
From uttering what he knows will please thee not.
I hear beneath the cloud of secrecy
How the whole city for this maiden mourns.
She, who the least deserves it, dies, they say,
A cruel death for a most noble deed,
The rescue of her brother's mangled corpse
From being left unburied on the field,
A prey to ravening dogs and carrion birds.
Has she not merited a crown of gold?
Such murmurs darkling spread among the crowd.
Father, I hold no treasure half so dear
As thy well-being; greater joy or pride
Is none than sons have in an honoured sire,
Or than a sire has in an honoured son.
Keep not one changeless temper in thy breast,
Nor fancy that thou art infallible.
Whoever dreams that he alone is wise,
Or is in speech or spirit singular,
Will, when unmasked, betray his emptiness.
Wise though a man may be, it is no shame
To have an open mind and flexible.
Thou seest by the winter torrent's side
The trees that bend go with their limbs unscathed,
While those that bend not perish root and branch.
And so the sailor who keeps taut the sheet,
And stiffly battles with the tempest's force,
Is apt thenceforth to float keel uppermost.
Bend, then, and give thy spirit room to change.
If from the lips of a young counsellor
Wisdom can come, I say it were far best
If we could all be born omniscient,
But as omniscience is not given to man,
'Tis well to good advisers to give ear.

CHORUS.

Prince, it beseems ye both, if either says
Aught apt, to listen; both have argued well.

CREON.

And shall our hoary hairs be put to school,
And shall we take instruction from this boy?

HAEMON.

In naught that is not right. Young as I am,
Thou shouldst my reasons weigh, not count my years.

CREON.

Does reason bid thee second anarchy?

HAEMON.

I would not ask e'en justice for the bad.

CREON.

Is not yon maiden sick of that disease?

HAEMON.

Not so avers the common voice of Thebes.

CREON.

Shall I my duty from the commons learn?

HAEMON.

Seest thou how youthful is that sentiment?

CREON.

Am I to govern by another's will?

HAEMON.

That is no state which owns one man for lord.

CREON.

Is not the state the ruler's property?

HAEMON.

Thou wouldst reign well over a desert land.

CREON.

The boy, it seems, will fight for yonder maid.

HAEMON.

If thou'rt the maid; it is for thee I care.

CREON.

Villain, why art thou wrangling with thy sire?

HAEMON.

Because thou errest from the path of right.

CREON.

Err I in claiming reverence for my state?

HAEMON

Reverence upon religion tramples not.

CREON.

O caitiff soul, thrall of a woman's face!

HAEMON

Thou wilt not see me by aught base enthralled.

CREON.

Yet is thy whole discourse a plea for her.

HAEMON.

For thee and me, and for the gods below.

CREON.

This maid shall never be thy living bride.

HAEMON.

Then will she die, and will not die alone.

CREON.

Hast thou the effrontery thus to threaten me?

HAEMON.

To gainsay folly, call'st thou that a threat?

CREON.

Thou'lt rue thy preaching, void thyself of sense.

HAEMON.

I'd say thou dotest, wert thou not my sire.

CREON.

Slave of a woman, do not gird at me!

HAEMON.

Wouldst thou have all the talking to thyself?

CREON.

Indeed! By heaven above, thou shalt repent!
Thus censuring first and then reviling me.
Bring out that hateful thing that she may die
Forthwith, and here before her lover's eyes.

HAEMON.

Never before my eyes, believe it not;
A witness of her death I will not be,
Nor shalt thou look upon my face again.
Rave at the friends who will thy raving brook.

(Exit HAEMON.)

CHORUS.

O Prince, the youth has rushed away in wrath,
And at his years anguish is violent.

CREON.

Let him go vent his overweening pride;
These maidens twain shall not escape from death.

CHORUS.

What? Is it thy resolve that both shall die?

CREON.

Not she that took no part. Thou hast well said.

CHORUS.

What is to be the manner of her death?

CREON.

I will convey her to a lonely place,
And shut her in a rock-hewn prison-house,
With food sufficient, for religion's sake,
Whereby we from pollution save the State.
There unto Hades, her sole deity,
Pattering her prayers, she will drive death away,
Or at the last be taught how vain it is
To spend devotion on the shades below.

* * * * *

THE POWER OF LOVE.

LINES 781-800.

CHORUS.

Unconquered love, against whose might
Wealth's golden mansion hath no ward,
That in the maiden's dimpled cheek by night
Keapest thy guard;
The ocean wave to bear thy tread is taught;
The rural homestead, gods, and men are brought
Alike thy power to own; who feels it is distraught.
'Tis thou that upright hearts and pure dost lead
From virtue's ways to ways of sin.
'Tis thou whose influence in our Thebes does breed
Strife among kin.
O'er all prevails the charm of beauty's eyes,
Charm that with Law Supreme in empire vies,
For Aphrodite's power all rebel force defies.

* * * * *

ANTIGONE IS SENT TO HER DEATH.

LINES 882-928.

CREON.

Be sure, of wails and dirges before death,
If leave were given, we ne'er should have an end.
Lead her away and in the rocky vault
Forthwith immure her, as my order was.
There leave her by herself, either to die,
Or linger on in that sepulchral cell.
We of this maiden's blood are clear, and yet
She will no longer dwell with those above.

ANTIGONE.

O tomb, my bridal bower, O rock-hewn cell,
My home that art to be, whither I go
To meet my kin, of whom Persephone
In her dark mansion holds a multitude.
Last of the train and most unfortunate,
I now must die before my destined hour.
And yet my hope is sure that by my sire,
By thee, beloved mother, and by thee,
Dearest of brothers, welcomed I shall be.
This hand washed every corpse and decked it out
For sepulture; this hand upon each grave
Libations poured; and, Polynices, now
In tending thy remains I meet this doom.
Yet wisdom will approve my honouring thee:
Had I a mother been and lost a child,
Had I been wed and had my husband died,
I would not thus have braved the public ire.
What is my principle, perchance you ask?
My husband lost, I might have wed again,
I might in time have borne a second child;
But, with both sire and mother in the grave,
Hope of a second brother there is none.
Upon this principle I honoured thee,
Dearest of brothers; but to Creon seemed
A sinner and the worst of criminals.
And now he hales me to the place of death.
From marriage and of bridal hymn cut off,
Cut off from joys of love and motherhood,
And reft of friends, poor maiden as I am,
I must go down into a living grave.
And yet what law divine have I transgressed?
How could I look for succour to the gods?
Whither for comfort go, when piety
Is thus requited with the pains of sin?
If this is righteous in the eye of heaven,
I'll own the justice of my chastisement;
But if the sin be on the other side,
May they but bear that which they lay on me.

* * * * *

THE CATASTROPHE.

Creon, having been brought to repentance by the denunciations of the prophet Tiresias, sets out to bury the corpse of Polynices, and release Antigone from the cave of death. The issue is recounted by a messenger to the Queen Eurydice.

LINES 1155-1243.**MESSENGER.**

Ye, that by Cadmus and Amphion's shrine
Do dwell, no mortal's life before its end
Will be by me pronounced blessed or unblessed.
Fortune is ever casting down the high,
Fortune is ever lifting up the low;
And none can prophesy what change may come.
Creon I deemed an enviable man:
He from our enemy had saved our state,
And, vested with a monarch's power supreme,
Ruled happy in the promise of his heir.
Now all is gone, for when a man has lost
The things that make life sweet, he lives in truth

No more, but is an animated corpse.
Have in your house what store of wealth you will,
Dwell in the state of sumptuous royalty,
Where joy is absent, I account the rest
Less than a shadow of a wreath of smoke.

CHORUS.

What evil has befallen our royal house?

MESSENGER.

Dead are some, others guilty of their death.

CHORUS.

Who is the murdered, who the murderer, say.

MESSENGER.

Haemon is dead, unnaturally slain.

CHORUS.

Slain by whose hand, his father's or his own?

MESSENGER.

His own, stung by his sire's cruel deed.

CHORUS.

O seer, thy prophesy has come too true.

MESSENGER.

So stands the case, whereon deliberate.

(Enter EURYDICE.)

CHORUS.

Yonder is the ill-starred Eurydice,
The Queen of Creon; from the house she comes
By chance, or brought by tidings of her son.

EURYDICE.

Citizens all, I overheard your words,
As from our portal I was setting forth
To pay my vows to Pallas at her fane.
Just as I drew the bolts that hold the door,
Sounds of disaster to our family
Smote on my ear. Affrighted, I fell back
In my attendants' arms and swooned away.
Repeat what then ye said; I am well schooled
In misery, and can bear to hear the worst.

MESSENGER.

Good lady, I was witness of the scene,
And nothing will suppress in my report.
Why tell a flattering tale, when soon the lie
Must be exposed? Plain truth is ever best.
I went as an attendant with the King
To yon high level where, a prey to dogs,
The uncared-for corpse of Polynices lay.

The corpse, with prayers put up to Hecate
And Pluto to look kindly on the dead,
We reverently washed, wrapped the remains
In fresh-plucked boughs, and burned them on a pyre.
Then on the dead we heaped his native earth.
Next to the maiden's bridal bower of death,
Within the hollowed rock, we took our way.
One of us hears afar a wailing shrill
Come from the spot where lay the unhallowed cell.
And running, tells to Creon what he heard.
To Creon's ear, as he drew nigh, was borne
A sound confused of weeping, and he cried
In bitterness, "Unhappy that I am,
Will my heart prove a prophet? Have I come
The most disastrous journey of my life?
Sure it is my son's voice that greets my ear.
Attendants, hasten to the cave of death,
Tear up the stones, creep to the chamber's mouth,
Tell me if Haemon's voice indeed I hear,
Or is it some illusion of my sense?"
We as our master in his anguish bade,
Looked in, and in the inmost cell we saw
The maiden hanging from the roof and dead,
A noose of shredded linen round her neck;
The youth, his arms folded around her waist,
Bewailing his lost bride, his marriage hour
Turned to despair, his father's cruelty.
Seeing him, Creon, with a bitter cry,
Moved towards him, and in anguish shrieked to him,
"My son, what hast thou done? what frantic thought
Possessed thy mind, how wast thou thus distraught?
Come forth, I do entreat thee, son, come forth."
Haemon, for answer, with eyes flashing rage,
Looked mute abhorrence, drew his two-edged sword,
And would have struck his father; but the King
Fled and escaped. Then on himself he turned
His wrath, and without more, into his breast
Drove to the hilt his sword, and conscious still,
Clung round the maiden with his failing arms,
While, swiftly welling from his wound, the blood
Spread over her pale cheek its crimson shower.
There lies he dead, with arms around the dead,
His marriage feast held in the world below,
Teaching by sad example that the worst
Of human evils is a mind distraught.

AJAX

Ajax and Ulysses were competitors for the arms of Achilles. The prize was awarded to Ulysses. Ajax, deeming himself wronged, sallies forth from his tent one night to take vengeance on those who had wronged him, especially Ulysses and the two sons of Atreus. Athene, ever watchful for her favourite Hellenes, smites Ajax with mental blindness, so that instead of falling on his enemies, he falls on the flocks and herds of the camp. Restored to his right mind, and finding how he has dishonoured himself, he falls upon his sword.

* * * * *

THE HERO'S MADNESS.

Tecmessa, a captive with whom Ajax lives as his wife, tells the Chorus of Salaminian mariners what

has befallen their chieftain.

LINES 284-330.

TECMESSA.

Thou shalt hear all as one that shares our lot.
It was the dead of night, and now no more
The camp fires shone, when Ajax took his sword,
Uncalled, and was in act to leave the tent,
And I reproved him. "Ajax," I exclaimed,
"What errand is it upon which you go
Unbidden, summoned by no messenger,
No trumpet call; the host is all asleep?"
Brief was his answer in a well-known strain:
"Peace, woman; silence best beseems thy sex."
I said no more. He sallied forth alone.
What may have there befallen I cannot say.
Back to the tent he came, leading along
As captives bulls and herdsmen's dogs and sheep,
Of which a part he strangled, others felled
And cleft in twain; others again he lashed,
Treating those beasts like human prisoners.
Then rushing out, he with some phantom talked,
Launching against the sons of Atreus now,
Now 'gainst Ulysses, ravings void of sense,
Boasting how he had paid their insults home.
Then once more rushing back into the tent,
By slow degrees to his right mind he came.
But when he saw the tent with carnage heaped,
Crying aloud, he smote his head, and then
Flung himself down amid the gory wreck,
And with clenched fingers grasped and tore his hair.
So a long time he sat and spoke no word.
At last, with imprecations terrible
If I refused, he bade me tell him all,
What had befallen and how it came about.
And I, my friends, o'erwhelmed with terror, told
All that I knew of that which he had done.
Thereat he uttered piercing cries of grief,
Such as had never come from him before,
For in loud lamentations to indulge
He ever held a craven weakling's part,
And, stifling outcries, moaned not loud but deep,
Like the deep roaring of a wounded bull.
But in this plight, prostrate and desperate,
Refusing food and drink, my hero lies
Amidst the mangled bodies, motionless.
That he is brooding on some fell design,
His wails and exclamations plainly show.
But, O kind friends, 'twas to this end I came,
Enter the tent and aid me if ye can;
The words of friends are desperate sorrow's cure.

* * * * *

REMORSE.

Ajax bewails his own fall. Tecmessa tries to comfort him, and turn him from violent courses.

LINES 430-595.

CHORUS.

I know not how, in case so desperate,
To bid thee speak, or bid thee to refrain.

AJAX.

Alas! who would have thought my name would prove
[Footnote: There is a play upon the name [Greek: Aias], the first syllable of which is an ejaculation of sorrow unreproduceable in English.]

So correspondent to the bearer's state?
Once and again that syllable of woe,
Being with woe o'erwhelmed, I may repeat.
My father once, from this Idaean land,
Crowned with the prize of valour by the host,
And full of glory, to his home returned;
While I, his son, coming to this same land
Of Troy with prowess no whit less than his,
After achievements not less glorious,
Meet from the Argives scorn and contumely.
And yet of this much am I well assured,
That had Achilles living been the judge
To whom his arm and valours prize should go,
Mine, and mine only, would those arms have been.
But now the Atridae to a cunning knave,
My exploits misprized, have surrendered them.
And had not strong delusion warped my sense,
And clouded o'er my vision, never more
Would they have an unrighteous sentence given.
But that stern-eyed, resistless child of Zeus,
Just as I put forth my avenging hand,
Brought madness on me, made me miss my aim,
And dye my sword with blood of slaughtered kine.
They have escaped, and they will mock at me,
Through no default of mine. When deity
Blasts the strong arm, weakness may strength defy.
What now am I to do, since of the gods
I am abhorred, of the Hellenic host
Hated, to Troy and all this land a foe?
Shall I to their own quarrel leave the Kings,
Unmoor, and homeward cross the Aegean wave?
How can I face my father Telamon?
How can he bear to look upon the son
Who comes to him disgraced, without the prize,
When glory's wreath has circled his own brow?
That may not be. Then shall I fling myself
Alone upon the Trojan battlements,
And having done some deed of valour, fall?
That might to the two Kings some joy afford.
That, too, is naught. On something I must think
Whereby I to my agéd sire may prove
That from his loins sprung no unworthy son;
For vile it is to crave for longer life,
When longer life brings no release from ill.
How can addition to the sum of days,
When all is but a respite, joy bestow?
I would not give a doit for any man
Who lets his heart be fired with idle hopes.
To live with honour, or with honour die,
Alone becomes the noble. I have done.

CHORUS.

None, Ajax, will pretend that these thy words
Are not thy own, or come not from thy heart;
But now control thyself. Discard these thoughts,
And let the counsels of thy friends prevail.

TECMESSA.

Ajax, my lord and master, man knows not
Aught sadder than a bondsman's helplessness.
I, that a freeman for my father had,
First of the Phrygian race in wealth and power,
Am now a slave. So have the gods decreed,
And thy strong arm determined. Of thy bed
Thus made the partner, I am true to thee,
And do implore thee by our household Zeus,
And by the couch which we together press,
Be not so cruel as to leave thy mate
In thralldom, and a prey to slanderous tongues.
Know, when thou diest, thy protection gone,
The Argives will that self-same day drag off
Me and thy helpless child to slavery.
Then will some slave-master speak bitter words,
Voiding his bile on us: 'Behold the mate
Of Ajax, once the hero of our host,
Fallen from her pride of place to menial toil.'
So will they say. For me, where fate may drive
I drift; but shame will be on thee and thine.
Think of thy father, in his drear old age
Bereft of thee; think of thy mother, too,
With her grey head, who puts up many a prayer
That she may welcome home her son alive.
Have pity on thy child, who will be left
In infancy, uncherished, and the ward
Of unkind guardians; lay to heart the woes
Which loss of thee would bring on him and me.
For I have nothing left to which to look
But thee; thy spear has laid my city low,
While, by another doom, my parents both
Have gone to dwell in the abodes of death.
What country can Tecmessa have but thee?
What staff of life? thou art my all in all.
Be mindful of thy mate; to taste love's joy
Is to owe something to the claim of love.
Affection still should be affection's meed;
When kindness leaves no trace upon the soul,
That soul is void of true nobility.

CHORUS.

Ajax, I would thy heart could beat with mine,
For if it could, her words would win thy praise.

AJAX.

Praise in full measure shall she have from me,
If she has sense to do what I command.

TECMESSA.

Whatever thou commandest, I will do.

AJAX.

Bring me my boy that I may look on him.

TECMESSA.

The truth to tell, I sent him hence in fear.

AJAX.

In fear of what? Of all this wretchedness?

TECMESSA.

Fear that if thou shouldst meet him, he might die.

AJAX.

That would have well beseemed my destiny.

TECMESSA.

My care prevented that calamity.

AJAX.

I do commend thy foresight heartily.

TECMESSA.

What can I do herein to serve thee more?

AJAX.

Let me behold the boy and speak to him.

TECMESSA.

He is at hand in the attendant's care.

AJAX.

Let him come hither, then, without delay.

TECMESSA.

My child, thy father calls. Whoe'er thou art
His infant steps that guidest, bring him here.

AJAX.

Is the child out of hearing or at hand?

TECMESSA.

Behold, the servant leading him is near.

(Enter Attendant with EURYSACES.)

AJAX.

Give me the boy; he will not be afraid
To look upon this bloody slaughter-house,
If verily he is his father's son.
At once we must in his sire's rugged ways
Train the young colt and mould him like to me.
Boy, mayst thou be more lucky than thy sire,
Else his true son, and thou'lt be not amiss.
Already have I cause to envy thee,
In that thou knowest nothing of these woes;
For blessed are the days of ignorance,
When joy and grief are both untasted still.
But when the time is come, see that thou show
My enemies what blood is in thy veins.
Till then, sweet airs breathe on thine infancy.
Be happy, boy, and cheer thy mother's heart.
I ween the Achaeans live not that on thee
Will dare to trample, e'en when I am gone,
So good a warden shall I leave for thee

In Teucer, who shall tend thee well, though now
He is far off, upon the foeman's trail.
And now, my warriors, that have sailed with me,
I crave one service at your loving hands,
And pray ye will of Teucer crave the same:
Bear to my home the boy, that Telamon
And Eriboea may their grandson see,
And he may be the prop of their old age.
My arms, no judges, nor my honour's foe
Shall ere set up as prizes for the host.
My shield, Eurysaces, my son, take thou,
[Footnote: Signifying "him of the broad shield."]
Thy namesake, by its well-knit handles wield
The impenetrable orb of seven-fold hide.
My other arms shall share their master's grave.
And now, Tecmessa, take the boy again;
Shut up the tent, and let us have no wails
Here at the door; women are made of tears.
Shut up the tent, I say; never wise leech
Did patter spells when steel was the sole cure.

CHORUS.

I tremble as I hear thy heated words,
The sharpness of thy speech disquiets me.

TECMESSA.

Ajax, my lord, what dost thou meditate?

AJAX.

Question me not. 'Tis good to be discreet.

TECMESSA.

Fear overwhelms my soul. Oh, by the gods,
And by thy child, I pray desert us not.

AJAX.

Thou art importunate. Dost thou not know
That I no more am debtor to the gods?

TECMESSA.

Hush! Be not impious.

AJAX.

Speak not to the deaf.

TECMESSA.

Wilt thou not yield?

AJAX.

Thou pratest overmuch.

TECMESSA.

My lord, I quake.

AJAX.

Shut up the tent at once.

TECMESSA.
I do conjure thee.

AJAX.

Small must be thy sense,
If thou dost think to put this heart to school.

* * * * *

THE RESOLVE.

Ajax pretends to be softened, and to be going forth only for the harmless purpose of purification in a running stream, though he is really going to his death.

LINES 646-692.

AJAX.

Time in its long, immeasurable course,
Turns ever dark to light, and light to dark,
And nothing is past hope; the solemn oath
Is broken, and the stubborn heart gives way.
I, that was hard as tempered steel erewhile,
Am softened now by yonder woman's plaint.
I cannot bear to leave her desolate,
Or my boy fatherless among his foes.
I'll go to the fresh baths which lie beside
Yon cliff, that, having washed pollution off,
I may the goddess' heavy wrath avert.
I'll seek me out a solitary spot,
And there I'll hide this sword, this hateful sword,
Burying it where it shall be seen no more;
Let night and Hades be its armoury,
For ever since I took it as a gift
From Hector, our most mortal enemy,
Our Argive hearts have ne'er been kind to me.
True is the word, the gifts of enemies
Are no gifts, and they bring more loss than gain.
So for the future we shall learn to bow
To heaven's good will, and reverence the Kings;
Theirs is the power, submission is our part.
Whatever is most dread and masterful
Yields to authority: the winter's snow
In time makes way for summer crowned with fruits;
In time the weary round of night gives place
To the white steeds that bring returning day;
In time the blustering tempest leaves at rest
The roaring sea; in time profoundest sleep
Loosens its bond, and lets the sleeper wake;
Why should not time bring wisdom to us too?
By all means shall it. I have lately learned
That we should hate our enemy as one
Who yet may be a friend, and so far serve
Our friend as one that may to-morrow be
A friend no more, since, to the general,
Friendship is but a doubtful anchorage.
But for these matters all is ordered well.
Go in, Tecmessa, duly offer up
Thy prayers that my desire may be fulfilled.
And you, my comrades, honour equally
My wishes, and bid Teucer, when he comes,
Be a good friend to you and think of me.
Now go I forth upon my destined way.
Do ye my bidding, and ye soon may hear

That I have shuffled off this coil of ills.

* * * * *

THE LAST SPEECH OF AJAX.

LINES 815-865.

AJAX.

The sword is set where it may best strike home,
If leisure were to dally with such thoughts,
The sword that Hector gave, the bitterest foe
And worst that I did ever treat withal;
And it is planted in the soil of Troy,
That hostile soil, fresh whetted for its work.
Carefully have I fixed it where it stands,
That quickly I may die, and painlessly.
So far all's well; in what comes now, O Zeus,
On thee for aid, and with good right, I call.
'Tis no great favour that I crave of thee:
Let some one bear to Teucer the ill news,
That he may be the first to lift my corpse
From off the sword, fresh streaming with my blood.
Let me not, by some foeman first espied,
Be cast a prey to carrion fowl and dogs.
This, Zeus, I ask of thee, and I invoke
Hermes, who leads the dead, that at one bound
Pierced through, and with no lingering agony
I may be laid in my eternal sleep.
Last on the dread Erinnyes I call,
That ever-virgin sisterhood, who see
All that is done among mankind, to mark
How the Atridae have my ruin wrought.
Come, ye swift powers of retribution, come,
And flesh you on the whole Achaean host.
Thou sun, whose chariot traverses the sky,
When on my native land thou lookest down,
Draw for a while thy glittering rein, and tell
The story of my madness and my doom
To my grey-headed father, and to her
That bare me, and that when she hears this news
Will make the city echo with her wail.
But to no purpose are these weak laments;
The thing must now be done, and done with speed.
O death, O death, come and thy office do;
Long, where I go, our fellowship will be.
O thou glad daylight, which I now behold,
O sun, that ridest in the firmament,
I greet you, and shall greet you never more.
O light, O sacred soil of my own land,
O my ancestral home, my Salamis,
Famed Athens and my old Athenian mates,
Rivers and springs and plains of Troy, farewell;
Farewell all things in which I lived my life;
'Tis the last word of Ajax to you all,
When next I speak 'twill be to those below.

ELECTRA.

The subject of the "Electra" of Sophocles is the same as that of the "Choëphoroe" (the Libation-bearers) of Aeschylus. It is the return of Orestes from exile to take vengeance on Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, for their murder of his father, Agamemnon. Electra plays the same part which she plays in the "Choëphoroe," while her sister, Chrysothemis, plays that of gentleness and comparative weakness. Orestes, in this play, returns with a fictitious story of his death which throws Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra off their guard.

* * * * *

THE SNARE.

The Paedagogos (tutor or governor) of Orestes, to circumvent Clytaemnestra, tells her a fictitious story of her son's death by a fall in a chariot-race. Electra is on the scene.

LINES 660-822.

PAEDAGOGOS.

Good ladies, tell a stranger in your land,
Does King Aegisthus in this mansion dwell?

CHORUS.

He does, my friend; thou hast conjectured right.

PAEDAGOGOS.

Shall I conjecture right if I take this
To be his Queen? She has a queenly look.

CHORUS.

Thou'rt right again; the Queen indeed she is.

PAEDAGOGOS.

Hail, royal lady. From a friend I bring
News good for thee and for Aegisthus too.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Thy words are pleasing to mine ear; but first
I must inquire of thee, who sent thee here?

PAEDAGOGOS.

The Phocian Phanoteus, on errand grave.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Say what it is; for as the name is dear
Of him that sent thee, glad will be thy news.

PAEDAGOGOS.

Orestes is no more: that is the sum.

ELECTRA.

Alas! alas! I am undone this day.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

What? what? repeat it; listen not to her.

PAEDAGOGOS.

Again, I say, Orestes is no more.

ELECTRA.

It is my death-blow; I am lost, am lost.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Look to thyself, girl. Stranger, tell me true,
In what way was it that he met his doom?

PAEDAGOGOS.

To this end was I sent; thou shalt hear all.
To those great games, the pride of Hellas, came
Orestes, fain to win the Delphic prize.
There, when he heard the herald with loud voice
Proclaim the race, which is the first event,
He entered, dazzling, and admired of all;
And shooting swift from starting-post to goal,
Bore off the prize of glorious victory.
Briefly to speak, exploits so marvellous,
Such proofs of prowess, never did I see.
Know that in every foot-race that as wont
The presidents proclaimed, he, midst the cheers
Of gratulating crowds, bore off the prize;
While heralds loud proclaimed the victor's name,
Argive Orestes, Agamemnon's son,
Heir to the glory of that conqueror.
So far he prospered; but when heaven decrees
That man shall fall, man's might is vain to save.
Another day, when in the early morn,
The chariot race was held upon the course,
Orestes came with many a charioteer.
One an Achaean, one a Spartan, was;
Two with their cars from distant Lybia came;
Orestes with his steeds of Thessaly
The fifth, the sixth was an Aetolian,
With bright bay steeds; then a Magnesian,
Then with white steeds an Aeneanian came;
Athens, the god-built city, sent the ninth;
In the tenth chariot a Boeotian rode.
Taking their stand, each where his lot was drawn,
And as the masters of the games ordained,
At trumpet's sound they started, and at once,
All shouting to their steeds, they shook the reins
To urge them onwards, while the course was filled
With din of rattling chariots; rose the dust
In clouds, the racers, mingled in a throng,
Plied, each of them, the goad unsparingly,
To clear the press of cars and snorting steeds,
So close, they felt the horses' breath behind,
And all the whirling wheels were flecked with foam.
Orestes showed his skill once and again,
Grazing the pillar at the course's end,
The near horse well in hand, his mate let go.
So far had all the chariots safely run;
But now the hard-mouthed Aeneanian steeds
O'erpowered their driver, and in wheeling round,
Just as, the sixth stretch past, the seventh began,
Dashed front to front on the Barcaean car.
Disaster on disaster came: now one
And now another car was overturned
And shattered; Crisa's plain was filled with wreck.
The skilful charioteer whom Athens sent
Then drew aside, slackened his pace and gave
The surge of wild confusion room to pass.

Last of the train Orestes drove, his steeds
Holding in hand, and trusting to the end;
But seeing only the Athenian left,
With piercing shouts, urging his team to speed,
He made for him, and side by side the pair
Drove onward, yoke even with yoke, now one
And now the other leading by a head.
Through all the courses but the last that youth
Ill-starred stood safely in an upright car.
But at the last, slackening his left-hand rein,
As his horse turned the goal, he unawares
The pillar struck and broke his axle-tree.
Out of the car he rolled, still in the reins
Entangled, while his horses, as he fell,
Rushed wildly through the middle of the course.
The whole assembly, when they saw him fall,
Raised a loud cry of horror at the fate
Of him that was the hero of the games,
Seeing him dragged along the ground, his feet
Anon flung skyward; till some charioteers,
With much ado, stopping the headlong steeds,
Released him, but so mangled that no friend
The gory and disfigured corpse would know.
They laid him on the funeral pyre, and now
Have Phocian envoys in a narrow urn
Brought the poor ashes of that mighty frame
For sepulture in his ancestral tomb.
Such is my story. Sad enough for those
Who hear; for those who saw most piteous
Of all the sights that e'er these eyes beheld.

CHORUS.

Alas, alas! it seems the noble stock
Of our old Kings is wholly rooted out.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

What shall I call this, Zeus? Is it good luck,
Or gain with sorrow blended? Sad it is
That I should owe my safety to my dole.

PAEDAGOGOS.

Why art thou downcast, lady, at my words?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Strong is a mother's love; no injury
Can make her hate the offspring of her womb.

PAEDAGOGOS.

My errand then is bootless, as it seems.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Bootless it is not, and it could not be,
If thou hast brought me certain evidence
That he is dead, who, owing life to me,
Rebelled against the breast that suckled him;
Who, when self-banished, he had left the land
Looked on my face no more; who, charging me
With his sire's murder, threatened vengeance dire,
So that sweet sleep neither by night nor day
Could fold my weary sense, but every hour

Passed in the shadow of impending death.
Now—since this day doth end my fears from him,
And from this maid, whose presence in my home,
Draining the very life-blood of my heart,
Was to me yet more baneful—now at last
Rid of their menaces, we dwell in peace.

ELECTRA.

Alas, alas! well may we wail for thee,
Orestes, when thy mother can exult
Over her child's poor ashes. Is this well?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Not well for thee, with him 'tis well enough.

ELECTRA.

Hear, Nemesis, the prayer of him that's gone.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

The right prayer she had heard and ratified.

ELECTRA.

Thy tongue is free, fortune is on thy side.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Thou and Orestes soon will put us down.

ELECTRA.

We put thee down? We are put down ourselves.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Stranger, thy mission would be blessed indeed
If thou could silence yonder termagant.

PAEDAGOGOS.

If I am no more needed, let me go.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, it would shame my hospitality
And his that sent thee, thus to let thee go.
Come in with me, and leave this damsel here,
To mourn her friend's disasters and her own.

(Exeunt PAEDAGOGOS and CLYTAEMNESTRA.)

ELECTRA.

How say ye? Does yon wretched woman seem
Deeply to mourn and bitterly bewail
The son that has so miserably died?
She goes off mocking us. Woe worth the day!
Dearest Orestes, I have died in thee.
For thou hast carried with thee to the grave
The only hope that in my heart yet lived,
The hope that thou wouldst some day come to venge
Thy sire and me. Now whither can I turn?
I am left desolate, deprived of thee,

As of my father. Once more I become
The slave of those whom I do hate like death,
My father's murderers. What a lot is mine!
But with those murderers I will dwell no more
Under one roof; an outcast at this gate
I'll fling me down, and pine away my life.
Let those within, then, if my grief offends,
Kill me at once. Welcome would be the blow;
Life is a burden, death would be a boon.

* * * * *

THE SISTERS.

Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, having found the offering of Orestes on his father's tomb, brings what she deems glad tidings to Electra, who meets her with the announcement that the Pedagogos has just brought certain news of their brother's death. Electra, now reduced to despair, proposes to Chrysothemis that they should themselves attempt to slay Aegisthus.

LINES 871-1057.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Joy, dearest sister, has impelled my steps
To haste with no regard for dignity,
[Footnote: Composure in gait and manner was the rule for Hellenic women.]
I bring to thee glad tidings and relief
From all the miseries thou hast undergone.

ELECTRA.

Whence canst thou any aid or comfort draw
For my misfortunes which are past all cure?

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Orestes has come home. Doubt not my word.
As sure as now thou seest me, he is here.

ELECTRA.

Hast thou gone mad, unhappy one, that thus
Thou mockest at my miseries and thy own?

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

By our ancestral hearth I swear to thee
I say not this in mockery; he is here.

ELECTRA.

O misery, from what mortal hast thou heard
This story that has gained thy fond belief?

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

It is no hearsay: mine own eyes have seen
The certain proofs of that which I believe.

ELECTRA.

What is the token? What has met thy gaze
To fire thy silly heart with fevered hope?

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Only give ear to what I have to tell,
Then call me mad, or not mad, as thou wilt.

ELECTRA.

Speak on, if thou hast pleasure in the tale.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

All that I saw, I will recount to thee.
When to our old ancestral tomb I came,
I saw a stream of milk fresh running down,
From the mound's summit, and our father's grave
Crowned with a wreath of all the flowers that grow.
The sight amazed me and I looked around,
Fearing lest some intruder might be near.
But when I saw that all around was still,
I drew near to the tomb, and on its edge
I found a lock of hair, freshly cut off.
When I beheld that lock, into my soul
Rushed a familiar image, and meseemed
Orestes must have laid that token there.
I took it up, I opened not my lips,
But in my eyes the tears of joy o'erflowed.
That from one hand alone this gift could come
Is now, as then it was, my sure belief.
Who else could lay it there save you or me?
That 'twas not I, is certain, and no less
That 'twas not you, when scarcely you have leave
To go forth to the temples of the gods;
While, for our mother, she has little mind
To do such things, nor could she go unseen.
It is Orestes that his homage pays.
Be of good cheer, my sister; destiny
Unkind to-day, to-morrow may be kind.
So far it has been adverse, but this hour,
Perchance, may prove the dawn of happiness.

ELECTRA.

I pity as I hear thy foolish talk.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Why? Is not what I say sweet to thine ear?

ELECTRA.

Thou know'st not what thou dost or where thou art.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Not know the thing which my own eyes beheld?

ELECTRA.

He's dead, poor foolish heart. These proofs of thine
Are good for nothing. Look for him no more.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Unhappy me; who was it told thee this?

ELECTRA.

One that was present when he met his end.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Amazement fills my soul! Where is this man?

ELECTRA.

Within there, and our mother's welcome guest.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Thy words o'erwhelm me. Who, then, could have laid
Affection's offerings on our father's grave?

ELECTRA.

That some one brought them as memorials
Of dead Orestes, likeliest seems to me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Unhappy that I am! And full of joy
I hastened with these tidings, ignorant
Of our dark fate. I left the cup of grief
Full, and I come to see it overflow.

ELECTRA.

So stands it now, but do what I advise,
And thou mayest lighten yet this load of woe.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

How? Can I bring the dead to life again?

ELECTRA.

I meant not that, nor was so void of sense.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

What wouldst thou have, that is within my power?

ELECTRA.

I'd have thee bravely do what I enjoin.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

So it be helpful, I will not refuse.

ELECTRA.

Look, without effort nothing will go well.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

'Tis true, and I will aid with all my might.

ELECTRA.

Hear now my resolution. Thou dost know
That we are friendless now; the friend we had
Hades has ta'en and left us desolate.
While I still heard that our Orestes lived,
And all was well with him, the hope remained
That he would come, and venge our murdered sire.
But now that he is gone I look to thee

To lend thy sister aid in taking off
Aegisthus; frankly such is my intent.
Where will thy sufferance end? what hope is left
For thee to look to? woe on woe is thine.
Of thy sire's wealth thou'rt disinherited,
And to this hour hast been condemned to pine
In cold companionless virginity.
Nor deem that thou shalt ever be a bride;
Aegisthus is not so devoid of sense
As to permit a shoot from thee or me
To spring which to his certain bane would grow.
But if thy soul can rise to my resolve,
First to thy sire and brother there below
Thou wilt discharge the debt of piety;
Next a free woman thou wilt be once more,
As thou wast born, and find a worthy mate,
For lover's eyes look to the good and brave.
Then seest thou not what glory thou wilt win
For both of us, embracing my design?
What citizen or foreigner will fail
Whene'er we pass, to pay his meed of praise?
"Look at yon pair of sisters; these are they
That from its fall redeemed their father's house,
That setting their own lives upon the die,
Their enemies, in power uplifted, slew.
To these we all should loving homage pay,
These ever honour at our festivals
And our assemblies for their bravery."
Such things the public voice will say of us,
In life or death our fame will never end.
Consent, dear sister; for thy father strike,
Strike for thy brother, rescue me from woe,
Redeem thyself. Those who are nobly born
Honour forbids to live the butt of scorn.

CHORUS.

Foresight in matters such as these is good,
For those who give and those who take advice.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Before she spoke, ladies, had not her mind
Been quite perverted, she would have held fast
The caution which she utterly lets go.
What puts it in thy heart, this desperate deed
Thyself to dare, and call on me to aid?
Dost thou not know that thou a woman art?
And that our enemies are mightier far?
While their good fortune waxes day by day,
Ours wanes as fast and leaves us destitute.
Who then that strikes at one so powerful
Can fail to pluck down ruin on himself?
Beware, lest to our ills we add more ill,
If these thy resolutions get abroad.
Little would all that glory profit us,
If we should die an ignominious death.
And death is not the worst that may befall;
It is worse still to long for death in vain.
I do conjure thee, ere thou ruin us
Beyond redemption, and cut off our race,
To moderate thy wrath; what thou hast said
I will regard as unsaid, null and void.
Do thou at last get thee some sober sense,
And yield to power as thou art powerless.

CHORUS.

Take her advice; there is not among men
A better thing than foresight and good sense.

ELECTRA.

All thou hast said I did anticipate;
What I proposed I knew thou wouldst reject.
Alone, with my own hand, I'll do the deed;
My resolution shall not come to naught.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

What now thou art, would thou hadst been the day
Thy father died: thou wouldst have ruled the hour.

ELECTRA.

In heart I was the same, but not in sense.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Strive still to keep the sense that then thou hadst.

ELECTRA.

Thy preaching shows I shall not have thy aid,

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

No, for the enterprise is desperate.

ELECTRA.

Thy sense I envy, but thy spirit scorn.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Thy blame or praise to me is all the same.

ELECTRA.

Praise from these lips thou needest never fear.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

That will be seen hereafter: time is long.

ELECTRA.

Get thee away, in thee there is no help.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Help is in me, knowledge in thee is not.

ELECTRA.

Go, if thou wilt, and tell our mother all.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Hate if I must, not so far goes my hate.

ELECTRA.

It goes so far as to dishonour me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Not to dishonour but to care for thee.

ELECTRA.

And is my justice to be led by thine?

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Learn to be wise, and thou shalt lead us both.

ELECTRA.

'Tis pity when good talkers go astray.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Thou hast exactly hit thy own disease.

ELECTRA.

What! have I not, then, justice on my side?

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Justice itself may sometimes lead us wrong.

ELECTRA.

Let me not live where justice may be wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Do it and thou wilt see that I was right.

ELECTRA.

Do it I will, and reckless of thy frown.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

Thou wilt: and is no room for counsel left?

ELECTRA.

Base counsel is a thing my soul abhors.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

It seems that we shall never be agreed.

ELECTRA.

Of that I was convinced a while ago.

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

I will begone: thy spirit will not brook
My counsel, nor can I thy ways approve.

ELECTRA.

Go then, but never shall I follow thee,
Entreat me as thou mayst, of that be sure:
Fools only look for that which none can find.
[Footnote: As no help or sympathy can be found in Chrysothemis.]

CHRYSOTHEMIS.

If thou dost seem unto thyself so wise
Hug thine own wisdom, soon in danger's hour
Thou wilt confess that I have counselled right.

(*Exit* CHRYSOTHEMIS.)

* * * * *

THE RECOGNITION.

Orestes enters with the urn which, it is pretended, contains his ashes. His recognition ensues.

LINES 1097-1231.

ORESTES.

Say, ladies, have we been informed aright,
And has our journey led us to our mark?

CHORUS.

What is thy journey's mark? Whom dost thou seek?

ORESTES.

I fain would learn where King Aegisthus dwells.

CHORUS.

Thou hast not been misled, this is the place.
ORESTES.

Would one of you announce to those within.
In courteous wise that strangers twain are here?

CHORUS.

That will this maid if kinship gives a claim.

ORESTES.

Go, lady, then, and tell them in the house
That Phocian envoys for Aegisthus look.

ELECTRA.

Alas! ye bear I ween the certain proofs
Of that which has already reached our ears.

ORESTES.

I know not what that is; old Strophius
Has charged me of Orestes news to bring.

ELECTRA.

Stranger, what is it? fear comes over me.

ORESTES.

He is no more, and here behold we bear
His poor remains, gathered in this small urn.

ELECTRA.

Alas! for me all doubt is over now;

Here is the sorrow present to my touch.

ORESTES.

If for Orestes thou hast cause to mourn
Know that whate'er is left of him is here.

ELECTRA.

Friend, if that urn indeed Orestes holds,
Give it, I do conjure thee, to my hands,
That I may weep my own calamities,
And those of our whole race, with this dear dust.

ORESTES.

Whoever she may be, give her the urn;
Her wish approves her not an enemy
But a good friend, perchance one near in blood.

ELECTRA.

Dearest of all memorials to my heart,
Relic of my Orestes, what a change
From those fond hopes with which I sent thee forth!
Full of bright promise wast thou then, and now
I see thee here reduced to nothingness.
Would I myself had died before the hour
When from the murderous hands that sought thy life
I snatched and sent thee to a foreign shore,
So hadst thou met thy end at once and slept
In thy forefather's tomb. Instead whereof
Thou hast died miserably far from home,
An exile, with no sister at thy side.
I was not there with loving hand to wash
Thy corpse, to lay thee out, or gather up,
As nature bade, the relics of the pyre.
Strange hands those rites performed; and thou art here,
A little dust clipt in a narrow urn.
Unhappy me! how bootless were the pains
Which many a day I spent in nursing thee,
A labour that I loved, for thou wert not
Thy mother's darling more than thou wert mine.
No menial hands tended thy infancy,
But I thy sister, joying in that name.
Now all has vanished in a single day,
And thou art gone, and like a storm hast swept
All off with thee. My father is no more,
Thy sister dies in thee, thyself art dust.
Our enemies exult, and, mad with joy,
Is that unnatural mother, whom to smite
With thine own hand thou oft didst promise me,
By secret messages which destiny,
Unkind to both of us, now brings to naught,
Sending me here, instead of that loved form,
Cold ashes and an ineffectual shade.

Ah me! ah me!
Poor form.
Alas! alas!
Sent to the saddest bourne.
Ah me! ah me!
Dearest of brothers, thou hast ruined me,
Ruined thy sister, brother of my love.

Receive me now in that abode of thine,

That, dust to dust, I may abide with thee
Forever there below. When thou wast here,
All things were common to us; now I crave
To be thy mate in death and share thy tomb,
For there I see they do not sorrow more.

CHORUS.

Electra, think; a mortal was thy sire.
Orestes was a mortal; calm thy grief
For loss is common to mortality.

ORESTES.

What can I say? words to my bursting heart
Are wanting. I can check my tongue no more.

ELECTRA.

What is it troubles thee? What means thy speech?

ORESTES.

Can what I see be fair Electra's face?

ELECTRA.

Her face it is, and in most piteous plight.

ORESTES.

My heart is wrung by looking on such woe.

ELECTRA.

Can one unknown to thee thy pity move?

ORESTES.

O beauteous wreck, by heaven and man disowned!

ELECTRA.

The picture limned in those sad words is mine.

ORESTES.

Woe for thy cheerless and unwedded life.

ELECTRA.

Why dost thou gaze on me thus mournfully?

ORESTES.

It seems that of my woes I knew but half.

ELECTRA.

What have I said to breathe this thought in thee?

ORESTES.

'Tis bred by sight of sorrow's effigy.

ELECTRA.

What thou dost see is of my griefs the least.

ORESTES.

What can be worse than what I now behold?

ELECTRA.

What can be worse? Life with the murderers.

ORESTES.

Murderers of whom? Thy tale of crime unfold.

ELECTRA.

My father's murderers, and their slave am I.

ORESTES.

What tyrant has imposed on thee this yoke?

ELECTRA.

My mother, little worthy of that name.

ORESTES.

And how? By persecution or by force?

ELECTRA.

By persecution, force, and all that's vile.

ORESTES.

And hast thou none to save thee from her hands?

ELECTRA.

One such I had, and thou hast brought his dust.

ORESTES.

Unhappy maid, my soul does pity thee.

ELECTRA.

Only in thee have I such pity found.

ORESTES.

I also am a partner of thy woe.

ELECTRA.

Art thou some kinsman come I know not whence?

ORESTES.

That thou shalt hear, provided these are friends.

ELECTRA.

And friends they are, thou mayest confide in them.

ORESTES.

Give back that urn, and I will tell thee all.

ELECTRA.

Nay, I conjure thee; let me keep it still.

ORESTES.

Do as I say and thou wilt not repent.

ELECTRA.

O grant my prayer, and rob not this poor heart.

ORESTES.

I must not leave it with thee.

ELECTRA.

Woe is me,
Orestes, if I may not tend thy dust.

ORESTES.

Peace, maiden, peace! thou hast no cause to mourn.

ELECTRA.

No cause to mourn, who have a brother lost?

ORESTES.

To speak of brothers lost is not for thee.

ELECTRA.
Have I not then the mourner's privilege?

ORESTES.

Naught hast thou lost, and hast no part in this.

ELECTRA.

I have, if this contains my brother's dust.

ORESTES.

It does not, save in name and in pretence.

ELECTRA.

Where, then, does my ill-starred Orestes lie?

ORESTES.

Nowhere; for he who lives can have no grave.

ELECTRA.

What dost thou say, young man?

ORESTES.

I tell thee truth.

ELECTRA.

How! does he live?

ORESTES.

Sure as I live he lives.

ELECTRA.

And art thou he?

ORESTES.

Look on this signet ring,
Our father's once, and tell me if I lie.

ELECTRA.

Light of my life, most dear.

ORESTES.

Most dear indeed.

ELECTRA.

Is it that voice I hear?

ORESTES.

It is that voice.

ELECTRA.

And do these arms enfold thee?

ORESTES.

Ay, forever.

ELECTRA.

(To the CHORUS.)

My countrywomen and companions dear,
Behold Orestes that erewhile was dead.
Dead by device now by device alive.

CHORUS.

Maiden, we do behold him; at the sight,
The tears of joy are gathering in our eyes.

THE TRACHINIAE.

Deianira, the wife of Hercules, fears that she has lost her husband's love, and that it has been transferred to the beautiful captive Iole, whom he has brought back with him on his return in triumph from the storming of Oechalia. She bethinks her of a love-charm which she has long had among her treasures. It is the blood of Nessus, the Centaur, who, having offered her violence, and received his death-wound from Hercules in her defence, had perfidiously persuaded her that his blood would win back her husband's love. The blood, being infected with the poison of the Lernsean Hydra, in which the arrows of Hercules were dipped, proves the deadly instrument of the Centaur's posthumous vengeance. Deianira sends a robe sprinkled with it as a gift to Hercules, who, having put on the robe to offer his triumphal sacrifice, expires in fiery torments.

The play is called from the Trachinian women who form the Chorus.

* * * * *

THE LOVE-CHARM.

Deianira imparts the secret of her device to the Chorus, and puts the fatal robe into the hands of Lichas, the Herald who has brought Iole to the house, that he may carry it to Hercules.

LINES 531-632.

DEIANIRA.

Good friends, while yonder stranger, ere he part,
Is talking to the captive maids within,
I come forth secretly to speak to you.
What I devise I would to you confide,
And for my trouble I crave your sympathy.
That maid, a maid no more I guess, but wed,
I have received on board my barque, a bale
Of mockery and of outrage for my heart;
And now we twain beneath one quilt must lie,
And share the same embrace. Thus Heracles,
That excellent and faithful spouse of mine,
Repay the long-tried guardian of his home.
To play the angry wife I know not how,
So oft has he been sick of this disease.
But with this wench to dwell in partnership
As second wife, what woman could endure?
My youthful beauty now is on the wane,
While hers is growing, and the lover's eye
Turns from the withering to the blooming flower.
Heracles will, I fear, be mine in name,
In deed, the husband of a younger wife.
But, as I said, no wife not void of sense
Will show her wrath. The talisman, my friends,
That is to work the cure ye now shall hear.
I hold safe treasured in a brazen urn
The keepsake which a Centaur gave of old.
From shaggy Nessus when I was a maid
I had it, 'twas his dying legacy.
He over deep Evenus stream was wont
In his own arms to carry passengers,
Not using oars nor sails to ferry them.
And when, from my paternal home sent forth,
A bride I journeyed with my Heracles,
Bearing me on his back, in the midstream
He laid rash hands on me. I shrieked aloud.
The son of Zeus turned him and quick let fly
A shaft that, hurtling through the Centaur's chest,
Transfixed him. Feeling that his end was come,
The monster said to me, "Old Oeneus' child,
As thou art my last fare, hearken to me:
Thou shall have cause to thank thy ferryman.
If thou wilt bear away this clotted blood
That marks the spot whereon the arrow steeped
In the Lernaean Hydra's venom fell;
In it thou'lt ever find a spell to bind
The heart of Heracles, and to prevent
His loving any woman in thy stead."
Of this love-charm, my friends, bethinking me,
As, kept with care, it in my closet lay,
I steeped a robe in it, adding whate'er
The Centaur bade, and now my work is done.
Black arts I know not nor desire to know,

And all who practise such abominate;
But if so be, we can with this love-charm
Win from yon maid the heart of Heracles,
The means are found, unless my plan to thee
Seems ill-advised; if so, I give it o'er.

CHORUS.

Nay, if in any plan we could confide,
Thine, in our judgment, is not ill-advised.

DEIANIRA.

So far I can confide as judgment serves,
For no trial of the charm has yet been made.

CHORUS.

Then make one; knowledge that thou seemst to have
Thou hast not, till experience set its seal.

DEIANIRA.

All doubts will soon be cleared; here Lichas comes
Forth from the house, and soon he will be here.
Only, my friends, keep ye my counsel well;
Sin in the dark and thou shalt not be sham'd.

LICHAS.

Daughter of Oeneus, what are thy commands?
Too long already have we been delayed.

DEIANIRA.

To speed thy going I was taking thought,
While thou wert talking to the stranger maid.
Bear this well-woven garment to my lord,
An offering from his Deianira's hand.
Enjoin him straightly that before himself
No man be suffered to put on this robe,
And that it be exposed to no sun's ray,
No sacred altar's fire, no blazing hearth,
Until himself before the gods shall stand
Dight in it on the day of sacrifice.
I registered a vow that when I saw
Or heard of his home-coming, in this robe
I would attire him, that before the gods
Freshly in fresh array he might appear.
For token bear with thee this signet ring,
Which, when he sees it, he will recognise.
Set forth; first keep the law of messengers,
Which bids them not beyond their mission go.
Then what is now my husband's single debt,
If thou canst, double by my gratitude.

LICHAS.

Fear not, if I am Hermes' liegeman true,
That I shall fail thy bidding to perform,
To place this casket in thy husband's hands,
And therewith thy assurances repeat.

DEIANIRA.

Proceed then on thy road; thou canst report

To my good lord that all is well at home.

LICHAS.

I know and shall report that all is well.

DEIANIRA.

Thyself didst witness in how gentle wise
We did receive and welcome yonder maid.

LICHAS.

The sight astonished and delighted me.

DEIANIRA.

Then all thou hast to say is said. I fear
That thou wilt tell of my fond love for him
Ere thou canst tell of his fond love for me.

* * * * *

THE CENTAUR'S REVENGE.

Deianira recounts to the Chorus an alarming and portentous incident.
Then Hyllus, the son of Hercules, comes and announces the catastrophe.

LINES 663-820.

DEIANIRA.

Maidens, I greatly fear that I have gone,
In what I did, beyond the line of right.

CHORUS.

Daughter of Oeneus, say whence comes thy fear?

DEIANIRA.

I know not; but I tremble lest my act,
Done with fair hope, should end with foul mischance.

CHORUS.

Thou dost not mean thy gift to Heracles?

DEIANIRA.

Tis so, and I would counsel every one
Not to go fast, unless their way is sure.

CHORUS.

Tell, if thou may'st, what causes thy alarm.

DEIANIRA.

A thing has happened, maidens, which when told
Will fill your minds with awe and wonderment.
The tuft of wool, fresh shorn and bright, wherewith
I spread the ointment on that robe of state,
By no one of my household train destroyed,
But self-consumed, has vanished out of sight.
And on the pavement melted quite away.
That thou may'st know the whole, let me proceed.

Of all the Centaur in his agony,
Pierced by the deadly arrow, bade me do,
I naught forgot, but treasured every word,
As if inscribed on brass indelibly;
What he prescribed and I performed was this,
That I should keep this unguent closely shut
Beyond the reach of sun-heat or of fire,
Until the time had come for using it.
And so I did; but now, the occasion ripe,
I in my secret chamber laid it on,
With wool shorn from a sheep of our own flock;
And letting not the sunlight touch my gift,
Folded it in a casket, as ye know.
Entering the house again, I saw a sight
Passing the wit of man to understand:
The tuft of wool with which I had laid on
The unguent, I by chance had thrown aside
Into the sunshine, where, as it grew warm,
It crumbled all away, and on the ground
Lay scattered, as when wood is being sawn
We see the dust fall from the biting saw.
So did it look; and after, from the earth
Where it had lain, a clotted foam broke forth,
As when in mellow Autumn the rich juice
Of Bacchic vine is spilled upon the ground.
My mind distraught knows not which way to turn,
But something dreadful have I surely done.
How should the Centaur, in his agony,
Have sought to serve her that had caused his death?
He could not. To avenge him on the hand
That sped the shaft he cozened me, and I
See his fell purpose when it is too late.
I, if my boding soul deceive me not,
Alone shall be my hero's murderess.
That by which Nessus died was Chiron's bane,
Immortal though he was, all animals
Struck by it die; and shall not the dark blood,
That, poisoned by it, flowed from Nessus' wound,
Be fatal to my lord? Surely it will.
But if my lord miscarry, my resolve
Is fixed to keep him company in death.
A life of infamy she cannot bear
That would be true to her nobility.

CHORUS.

Shudder we must where is much cause for fear,
Yet let us hope till the event decides.

DEIANIRA.

Hope, where the act is guilty, there is none,
Or none that can bring comfort to the breast.

CHORUS.

But against those that sin unwittingly,
Anger is mild, and will be mild to thee.

DEIANIRA.

Ay, so say those that of the guilt are clear,
And have no heavy burden on their hearts.

CHORUS.

What more thou art in act to say withhold,
Unless thou wouldst unbosom to thy son.
He went to seek his sire and now is here.

(*Enter HYLLUS.*)

HYLLUS.

Mother! I would that of three wishes one
Could be fulfilled: I would that thou wert not,
Or that another were thy son than I,
Or that my mother had a better mind.

DEIANIRA.

What in thy mother thus thy horror moves?

HYLLUS.

Know that thy husband, rather should I say
My father, dies this day murdered by thee.

DEIANIRA.

Alas! my son, what word has passed thy lips?

HYLLUS.

A word too sure of its accomplishment.
The event once born can never be annulled.

DEIANIRA.

What dost thou say, my son? whence didst thou learn
That I had done a deed so horrible?

HYLLUS.

Learn it I did not from another's lips:
These eyes beheld my father's piteous fate.

DEIANIRA.

Where didst thou into his loved presence come?

HYLLUS.

Hear and I'll tell thee all. As having stormed
The famous town of Eurytus, he marched,
With spoils and trophies of his victory.
At the Cenean headland he arrived,
Euboea's point, and there set out for Zeus
Altars ancestral and a precinct green.
Here met I him whom I had longed to see.
As he stood ready for the sacrifice
Comes his own herald Lichas from his home,
And brings thy gift, that robe imbrued with death,
Which he, fulfilling thy behest, put on,
And therein clad, was offering sacrifice,
Twelve steers unblemished, while of beasts in all
He to the altars led a hecatomb.
At first, unhappy one, with jocund heart
He prayed, rejoicing in his brave attire;
But when from the good oak logs and the flesh
Of victims slain, the bloody flame leaped forth.
A sweat broke out on him, and to his sides

The garment clave, enfolding every joint
As by a workman fitted, while his bones
Were racked with shooting pains, and as it seemed
A deadly serpent's venom fed on him.
Then did he loud on hapless Lichas call,
Him who was nowise party to thy crime,
And bade him say what wretch had set him on
To bring the robe. The herald knowing naught,
Said as thou badst him, that it was thy gift.
Whereupon Heracles, his heartstrings grasped
By agonising pains that pierced him through,
Seized Lichas by the ankle, hurled him down
From the cliff's edge upon a wave-washed rock
That jutted from the sea, shattered his skull,
So that his brains streamed mingled with his blood.
At the two sights, of frenzy and of death,
A universal cry of horror rose,
Nor was there one who dared approach my sire;
He in convulsions now sprang up, now fell
With yells which made the neighbouring cliffs, the crags
Of Locris and Euboea's headland ring.
Oft did he cast himself upon the ground,
Long did he utter lamentations loud,
Cursing his marriage, swearing that his tie
To Oeneus had brought ruin on his life.
When he gave o'er, with eye upturned with pain,
Glancing from out the smoke, me, in the crowd,
Weeping he saw, and called me to his side.
"My son," he murmured, "shrink not from thy sire,
Not though it be thy doom to die with him.
Bear me away and lay me, if thou may'st,
Where none may look upon my agony.
If that would pain thee from this hated coast
Ship me at least, and let me not die here."
Obedient to his wish, with much ado
We laid him in the hold and hither brought
Convulsed and bellowing. Ye will see him soon,
Lingering upon life's verge or newly dead.
Mother, of these dark crimes thou stand'st convict,
For which may heaven's high justice deal with thee
And the Erinnyes, if that prayer is meet
For a son's lips; and thou hast made it meet
By murdering, of all dwellers upon earth,
The noblest man, whose peer thou ne'er shalt see.

CHORUS.

(To DEIANIRA who leaves the scene.)

Canst thou depart in silence and not see
That silence pleads on the accuser's side?

HYLLUS.

Let her go where she will. Fair be the wind
That bears out of my sight that hated barque.
A mother's name is but a hollow sound
When all her doings are unmotherly.
May joy go with her, and such happiness
Be hers, as she has made my sire to feel.

PHILOCTETES.

Philoctetes is the possessor of the bow and arrows of Hercules, without which Troy, which has now been besieged for ten years, cannot be taken. Suffering from an ulcer caused by the bite of the Hydra, and becoming intolerable by his yells of anguish to the Hellenic camp, he has been put ashore by Ulysses on the lonely island of Lemnos, and there left for the ten years, whence he has conceived a deadly hatred of Ulysses and the Hellenic host. His bow and arrows being indispensable, the crafty Ulysses undertakes the task of inveigling him, and goes to Lemnos for that purpose, taking with him Neoptolemus, the young and generous son of Achilles, as a decoy. Neoptolemus, at the instance of Ulysses, filches from Philoctetes the bow and arrows, but being overcome by his nobler nature restores them. Here is now a crisis worthy of the intervention of a god. Hercules descends upon the scene, bids Philoctetes go to Troy with his bow, and promises to send Aesculapius to heal him of his sickness.

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THE DECOY.

Ulysses explains the plan of action to Neoptolemus, and labours to bend him to his purpose.

LINES 1-134.

ULYSSES.

This is the shore of Lemnos' lonely isle,
By man untrodden, where, O worthy son
Of great Achilles, by our Hellas deemed
Her mightiest chief, Neoptolemus, erewhile
The Melian son of Poeas I cast forth,
The Princes having so commanded me,
Since in his foot he had a wasting sore,
And would not let us sacrifice or pour
Libations undisturbed, but filled the camp
With lamentations wild and blasphemous,
Yelling in agony. Yet why dilate,
On what has happened? We will stint our words;
He may espy my presence, and my plan
Of capturing him be ruined utterly.
Now must thy part be done; look round and see
Where is a rocky cave with double mouth,
So formed that in the winter twice the sun
Falls on the sitter, and in summer time
The breeze wafts slumber through two apertures.
A little way below, on the left hand,
Thou'lt find a spring, if it is running still.
Approach, and signal to me silently
Whether he is near by or is gone forth,
That I may then impart the rest to thee,
And we may jointly execute my plan.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

My work, Ulysses, has been quickly done.
Methinks I see the cave of which you speak.

ULYSSES.

Is it above us, tell me, or below?

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Above us here, and sound of step is none.

ULYSSES.

See that he is not sleeping in his lair.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

I look, and none in the retreat appears.

ULYSSES.

And is there naught to show that man dwells there?

NEOPTOLEMUS.

A bed of leaves, as though one couched thereon.

ULYSSES.

Is all else bare? Is there no garniture?

NEOPTOLEMUS.

There is a wooden cup, the handiwork
Of some rough workman, and these kindling-sticks.

ULYSSES.

Thy inventory shows that he is here.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Faugh! here are rags left in the sun to dry,
Full of the running of some putrid sore.

ULYSSES.

'Tis plain enough that here his dwelling is.
Himself, too, must be near; for how could one,
Lame with an ancient ulcer, travel far?
He has gone forth either for provender,
Or to bring home some herb which soothes his pain.
Send thy attendant to explore the coast,
Lest unawares I should fall in with him:
All Hellas were not such a prize as I.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

The attendant is despatched; watch will be kept.
Go on and tell me what thou dost desire.

ULYSSES.

Son of Achilles, what thou cam'st to do.
Thou must do bravely, not with hand alone,
But with thy heart, and if I ask aught new
Blench not; it is to aid me thou art here.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

What wouldst thou have me do?

ULYSSES.

Beguile the mind
Of Philoctetes by thy wily words.
When he asks who thou art, and whence, reply
Achilles' son; no lie is needed here.
But say thou'rt sailing homeward, having left
The Achaean host in mortal enmity,
Since, when their prayers had drawn thee from thy home,
They having no hope else of taking Troy,

They did refuse the arms Achilles bore
To the right heir, when he demanded them,
And gave them to Ulysses, heaping all
The foul reproaches that thou wilt on me,
For they'll not hurt me. If thou dost this not,
Thou wilt bring woe on the whole Argive host,
For if we fail yon archer's bow to win,
Thou ne'er shalt conquer the Dardanian land.
That thou canst safely and with confidence
Approach him, while I cannot, this will prove:
Thou didst not sail constrained by any oath,
Nor by compulsion, nor in the first fleet;
But I can nothing of all this deny.
Me if, still master of his arms, he sees,
I am undone, and shall undo thee too.
Thy task, then, is out of his hands to steal
By subtlety, the unconquerable bow.
Well do I know thy nature is not formed
For falsehood, nor for treacherous device,
But still success is sweet; stretch but a point,
To-morrow we'll return to righteousness.
For a small part of one brief day consent
To play the knave, then to the end of life
Be virtue's paragon and cynosure.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Son of Laertes, what my ears abhor
To hear, my hand abhors to execute.
So was it, as they tell me, with my sire.
To take the man by force and not by guile
I am prepared: he is alone and lame,
While we are many: he would strive in vain.
Commissioned as I am to second thee,
I must be loyal, but would rather lose
With honour, than dishonourably win.

ULYSSES.

Son of a glorious sire, myself in youth
Was ready with my hand, and slow of tongue.
Experience has taught me that the tongue
Is a man's leading member, not his hand.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

What is it thou dost bid me do but lie?

ULYSSES.

I bid thee Philoctetes circumvent.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Will not persuasion work as well as guile?

ULYSSES.

He will not yield, and force him thou canst not.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Has he such might as to defy us all?

ULYSSES.

He has the unerring arrows winged with death.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Is it not safe e'en to encounter him?

ULYSSES.

Only if thou canst snare him as I say.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Seems it not shameful to thee thus to lie?

ULYSSES.

No, if the lie alone can do our work.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

How look him in the face and say such things?

ULYSSES.

With gain in view our scruples must give way.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Suppose him brought to Troy, what gain to me?

ULYSSES.

Troy can be taken only by his bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

I, then, am not to be her conqueror.

ULYSSES.

Not by thyself, nor without thee the bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

If so it be, the bow must be secured.

ULYSSES.

Secure it and a double meed is thine.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Prove this to me, and I will do thy will.

ULYSSES.

Thou wilt be hailed at once as wise and brave.

NEOPTOLEMUS.

Well, I will do it; all my qualms are gone.

ULYSSES.

Canst thou remember what erewhile I taught?

NEOPTOLEMUS.

That can I, since my word has once been passed.

ULYSSES.

Then bide thou here, and wait for his approach:
I will withdraw, lest I should meet his eye.
Our sentinels shall to the ship return,
And if ye seem to me to tarry long,
I will despatch the same man back again,
Having disguised him as a shipmaster,
That unsuspect he may my bidding do.
My son, in riddles he will speak to thee,
And see that thou dost read his riddle right.
I'll to the ship and leave the rest to thee.
May Hermes, god of cunning, help his own,
And may Athene, Queen of victory
And cities, save her votary once more.

* * * * *

THE HERO BETRAYED.

Neoptolemus, having filched the bow of Philoctetes, Philoctetes prays him to restore it.

LINES 927-962.

PHILOCTETES

O pest, O bane, O of all villainy
Vile masterpiece, what hast thou done to me?
How am I duped? Wretch, hast thou no regard
For the unfortunate, the suppliant?
Thou tak'st my life when thou dost take my bow.
Give it me back, good youth, I do entreat.
O by thy gods, rob me not of my life.
Alas! he answers not, but as resolved
Upon denial, turns away his face.
O havens, headlands, lairs of mountain beasts,
That my companions here have been, O cliffs
Steep-faced, since other audience have I none,
In your familiar presence I complain
Of the wrong done me by Achilles' son.
Home he did swear to take me, not to Troy.
Against his plighted faith the sacred bow
Of Heracles, the son of Zeus, he steals,
And means to show it to the Argive host.
He fancies that he over strength prevails,
Not seeing that I am a corpse, a shade,
A ghost. Were I myself, he had not gained
The day, nor would now save by treachery.
I am entrapped. Ah me! what can I do?
Yet be thyself and give me back my bow.
Say that thou wilt. He speaks not; I am lost.
O rock, with twofold doorway, I return
To thee disarmed, bereft of sustenance.
Deserted, I shall wither in that cell,
No longer slaying bird or sylvan beast
With yonder bow. Myself shall with my flesh
Now feed the creatures upon which I fed,
And be by my own quarry hunted down.
Thus shall I sadly render blood for blood,
And all through one that seemed to know no wrong.
Curse thee I will not till all hope is fled
Of thy repentance; then accursed die.

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