

The First Panhongkongaia

Nausicaa

By Leo

Dramatis Personae

Nausicaa

Telemachos

Commander Kebriones

Maid

Messenger

Servants

Chorus

INTRODUCTION

CHORUS

Our sorrows started when the best part of our men
joined the Atreides to avenge the fateful blow that Paris chose that horny hoe
over his own city and his land. And when he brought her back to Troy,
- his charm and looks bewitched so - soon she
knew that she settled for the lesser man, and wanted long before return to
where
she now again must sit, in Menelaus' mighty grip.

From our brothers and husbands dear, a thousand or more Odysseus took
away,
they perished during battle slay,
or in the Ocean's mighty wave, not one of them is here and safe. That time we
lost the best of our men, never to return again. Our island is small and frail,
the life is hard
and now we wail these fisherman and herdsman dear, and each one of them
we greatly lack,
either on the fishing deck or in the field or with the sheep, fighting for our
daily keep.

During his long span away, the best young men of the town were back then as
'The Suitors' known, they tried to get life to restart, pushing Odysseus' old
wife hard to marry one of them and then

we all could restart life again. But she kept waiting and with luck, her man came back and then the saplings of our island he would cut: he and his son all shot them dead, with bow and arrow to the head.

Then, after a long while, our famous lord somehow did die, in a cave next to the strand his ashes lie to guard the coast and our land. After he was dead, his son Telemachos followed as our head, and swiftly then, taking a good ship with him, he left for the world's outer rim to ask Nausicaa for her hand, the princess that helped his father land. Listening to Odysseus' mighty song the love of our young king arose for such a courageous woman fair, without her he thought he would despair and thus left us a year ago, when he returns we do not know.

This island is in a dire state, for opposite the narrow strait, we face a new danger now, a people coming from afar, took our meadow and homestead there, too few we were to fight with sword and spear to ward them off - it seems that our luck has missed since thirty years ago Odysseus for the first time left, he who now roams in Hades land after a long life well spent.

These barbarians came from the North and settled there on our porch and make themselves at home where we once our backyard used to see. When our lord returns we may decide whether we would then abide the old law of war's hospitality, to kick a foe out of our nest, to see who wields the weapons best, to fight in a way that we see fit and once for all of them get rid.

But what is this? I see Telemachos' ship on the horizon, towards the setting sun. He might finally be coming back!

SCENE ONE

The harbour of Ithaka. Telemachos and Nausicaa alight their ship.

TELEMACHOS

Dearest Nausicaa, finally we are home! This beautiful island is all ours to be content and happy forever. Can you feel the wind? Smell the air? See how the sunrays glitter on the waves? Here, look at the town! It is beautiful, but not as beautiful as you. It is special to me, but not as special as you.

NAUSICAA

(to herself)

I finally arrived. But was this also my final journey? The trip on the sea was not as bad as I thought.

TELEMACHOS

Look at my people! They will be your people soon, too! There are fishermen in the harbour, all are joyful and happy!

NAUSICAA

Dear groom-to-be, thank you for showing me all this! I see a pretty island, and it is as your father Odysseus described it to me long ago when he came to me as a shipwreck while I was washing my clothes on the seaside. Really, just as he said, there's an old tree by the right side of the pier. Ah, and there! Just as he said again! A yellow-painted building on a small hill, shining in the sunlight. Everything he said is true!

TELEMACHOS

Yes, and there are so many more things that we can explore together. I grew up here, I can show you everything. But we should not rush, we have a whole lifetime ahead. Let us just unpack now, and we can start our life together step by step.

NAUSICAA

Darling, you are right. I would be happy to go to the Palace and get settled in together with the maids I brought from Scheria, where the Phaeacians live in everlasting joy under the guidance of my dearest father and my wise mother.

TELEMACHOS

(shouts to the townspeople)

Dear folk, after a whole year travelling, I am finally back. But not alone. From the corners of the world, I brought back the beautiful Nausicaa. She will be my consort and our eternal star. Our wedding celebration will be in three days, so let us feast and be happy!

VILLAGER ONE

I hope she can turn our luck around!

VILLAGER TWO

Telemachos is so happy! Should we tell him of the troubles that have befallen on us since he left one year ago?

VILLAGER THREE

Look, how beautiful they are together! Him and his wife!

VILLAGER ONE

Hopefully he won't go around and collect a tax for the wedding celebration. I'm sure that there is not enough food in the palace to make a huge feast at the moment.

VILLAGER TWO

Ah, stop bickering! This might be the biggest party that we will have in our lives, there's no point to count each corn of wheat and each drop of oil now.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Telemachos, a word. I feel that you just came back at the right time. As you might have seen, the situation on the mainland...

TELEMACHOS

Wait a second, dear Kebriones. Always so stern. Do we have to talk now?

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

I would highly advise that we do.

TELEMACHOS

Ah, unfortunate. One moment, please. Darling! The commander here wants to talk to me, I am sure about a trifling detail of organisational matters that cannot be solved without my attention. Would you mind going to the palace first? My old housekeeper will welcome you and your servants...

Nausicaa exits.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

When your ship pulled into the harbour, did you notice the situation on the mainland?

TELEMACHOS

What? Do you mean how beautiful the sun glitters on the top of these hills?
Of course I noticed!

Commander Kebriones takes his arm.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Look, there! Do you see the black smoke rising from the town on the other side of the channel?

TELEMACHOS

I see it, but it is surely only a friendly harvest fire.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

And look there, do you see these refugees unloading their boats in the harbour?

TELEMACHOS

I see them, but I thought they were traders unloading their wares for sale.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

And there, if you are quiet, you can hear war-drums and trumpets sounding over the channel from the other side.

TELEMACHOS

I heard them before, but I thought it must be a wedding celebration.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Well, you must get these weddings out of your mind. The noose is tightening around our neck as we speak.

TELEMACHOS

You have guarded this island for years, dear Kebriones. Now, guard it a few days more. After everything is over, we can concentrate on this new situation.

Telemachos walks off.

SCENE TWO

In separate rooms, Telemachos and Nausicaa cannot sleep on the night before their wedding, and are thinking about many things in their mind.

NAUSICAA

I do love him. The moment he jumped off his ship, he looked like the firstborn son of a king. I wanted to leave my home, where nothing ever changes. I waited for so long, and another man would not come...

TELEMACHOS

As I am finally home, I cannot recognize it anymore. How could my father call it still home after twenty long years away? The joyful life has stopped, and the terror does not halt even before a wedding.

NAUSICAA

I saw Telemachos looking worried when he came up to the palace after talking to this commander. He tried to hide it, but he was not good at concealing his emotion.

TELEMACHOS

I hope Nausicaa does not get scared. Her home is remote and protected, and apparently I cannot offer her safety even on my own soil.

NAUSICAA

Hopefully he doesn't think about me too much. I can handle it, even if we have to flee and go somewhere else.

TELEMACHOS

Hopefully she did not notice that I was worried. Whatever happens, we must offer her a big celebration, that's the least I can do.

Telemachos falls asleep, and a maid enters Nausicaa's room.

MAID

I heard you talking to yourself, lady. I also can't fall asleep.

NAUSICAA

Yes, I am excited about tomorrow's celebration. How do you like it in our new home?

MAID

It is not what I am used to. The island is smaller than the one at home, and the people look poor and not as happy. At home, your father ruled all things in perfect harmony. But here, even on the short way up to the palace, I noticed

some terrible things. There was a young boy in tattered clothes, looking through the rubbish for things to eat. Do you think he was playing a game, dressing up like this? If not, why is nobody helping him? Then, in the palace, I saw an old lady hitting a servant for forgetting something. Why did she do this, when we know that violence is never the answer to any problem? Your father would hold a lengthy meeting, starting with libations to the gods and a sacrifice of many animals. Then, the conflicting parties would talk for a few hours, and after all of this, the dispute would be settled and gifts would be exchanged. Many lifelong friendships have formed like this. Here, these things just go by unnoticed. How many cruelties are happening behind these walls without us ever knowing?

NAUSICAA

I also saw what you saw. You know, Odysseus told me that the world outside our home is like this, all dirty and dangerous. And still he wanted to come back to this place.. What is a perfect life worth if nobody knows you exist? Even though I knew nothing else than our Scheria, I felt trapped and over-sheltered. I think we have been living in a bubble for too long, dear friend.

MAID

A bard once told me that the gods envy us humans because of the dangers we face. Each breath can be our last one, so it receives a higher meaning. Maybe it's the same when living here... Should we feel happy when we see the poor boy, because we are living in the palace and he doesn't even have shoes?

NAUSICAA

Don't talk about the gods like this! We don't know what they have in store for us yet.

A longer pause.

MAID

I want to go to that boy tomorrow.

NAUSICAA

Why?

MAID

He reminds me of my little brother. I miss him.

NAUSICAA

Well, don't worry about it too much. Your brother was a smart boy as far as I remember.

MAID

Why, I even miss him more now.

NAUSICAA

But think a bit. When your brother grows older, my father, like me, will realize his intellectual talents. Then, he will employ him to work in our palace, and he will learn how to read and write letters. Then, when a shipwreck reaches our home, your brother will think sharply and write a beautiful letter to you. After handing the shipwreck a cup or a ring as a present, he will tell him that he should pass the letter to you, if he happens to come by Ithaka on his further travels. He will also tell him that you will reward him with another cup or ring once he delivers the message. Wouldn't you do this for a shipwreck carrying a letter from your brother?

MAID

Of course I would, if he really had a letter from my brother.

NAUSICAA

Well see! You don't need to miss him. If a chance comes, you will hear from him again in only a few years. Until then, I think we can look out after the young boy.

SCENE THREE

The next morning in the covered courtyard of the palace, all are in preparation for the wedding.

SERVANT ONE

My dear, if you could bring your attention to this archway here. Traditionally, we would cover it in purple roses. But I have recently heard that lilies are very fashionable in Crete. Do you think you would like lilies or roses?

SERVANT TWO

And regarding the drinks. We have large kraters for mixing the wine with all the things we need to make it tasty, like water, peppercorn, salt, cloves or flour. This one here depicts Helen and Paris, a very modern drawing. See how lifelike Paris' face looks? But it may be a bit scandalous to place it in such a prominent position in the room, after all the things that have recently happened... See, we also have a mixing jug with a painting of Hera and Zeus, maybe that's better?

NAUSICAA

Is that a good omen, sir? I don't want a husband as unfaithful as Zeus.

SERVANT THREE

How many people do we invite, Prince? Our stocks are a bit depleted, from the ongoing war and loss of men.

SERVANT TWO

(talking over him)

What about Hades and Persephone? They are a loving couple.

TELEMACHOS

They are the king and queen of the underworld. Don't you have anything else?

SERVANT TWO

We do have many wine mixing jugs to choose from. Let me see... Medea and Jason?

TELEMACHOS

Are you serious? She killed his children!

SERVANT TWO

My bad, my bad. Lord Agamemnon and Clytemnestra?

NAUSICAA

That's not much better. She and her lover murdered him as soon as he returned from Troy.

SERVANT TWO

Well, we have another one with Helen, this time sitting next to Lord Menelaus.

TELEMACHOS

I visited these two not long ago. They hate each other now, and she drinks tranquilizing tea to stop her from self-loathing and bitterness when he is around.

NAUSICAA

It seems that our culture truly has no positive image of marriage..

SERVANT TWO

I take this as another no. Maybe a nature scene then. These always go well. Here is a krater with some nice dolphins jumping through the waves.

NAUSICAA

Let's take the dolphins. I always liked those.

SERVANT TWO

Ooh, I just saw one last one, it was hidden here in the corner, which we could take as a loving couple. This one here has a beautiful painting of King Oedipus and his mother... At least he was happy as long as they didn't know that he married his mom...

Messenger arrives, with torn clothes and singed hair.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

What is going on? Has something happened?

MESSENGER

I come from the outlying island which lies between us and the mainland, where I was stationed with a small garrison of our men. We only kept one guard during the night, as we did not see these barbarians use boats yet, and thought that we would be well aware of any invasion plans long ahead. The sky was cloudy, and the stars did not offer us much light to see. Then, we heard the sounds of paddles, and the creaking of wood. One of our men lit up a torch, and ran to the coast. He could see flames dancing on the water. There was a single small vessel, commandeered with great skill by these barbarians. We all lit up torches, ran to the shore and shouted at the small vessel, which was still drifting in close proximity to us. They shouted something back, but we could not understand the language. When they finally left, we were on high alert. After a long time, we saw many small lights on the water, which kept getting larger and larger. We suddenly realized that we were facing a

full-on invasion, and the lights outnumbered our meagre force ten to one. This island is good for nothing except herding goats on the rocky slopes, so we ran up to the herd and drove them into our ships, a hundred heads exactly. All our men and animals are now safe, but the island is lost, and without using our full force we cannot dare to recapture it.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

This is bad news indeed. If the barbarians know how to use boats and commandeer the sea, our defences are a lot weaker than we thought. We still have a formidable naval power, and our men are certainly more experienced with the terrain. But they are greatly outnumbering us, and are decisive and fast to act.

TELEMACHOS

These goats that you mentioned... Where are they now?

MESSENGER

They are in a pen not far away from the harbour.

TELEMACHOS

As bad as this sounds, it might come in handy. We don't have enough pasture on this island to feed all these extra goats. I say we slaughter them for the wedding party tomorrow.

SERVANT THREE

That seems like a good idea. We can save our stocks by this. I would not be able to meet the quotas if I had to feed a few hundred people using only what's in the granary. These goats are truly a gift from the gods.

TELEMACHOS

Commander, after the report from that soldier, when do you think will they attack us here?

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Capturing that small island is one thing, but our main town has strong defences. We have a wall, a gatehouse, large stocks of weapons and still command fifty ships with able men. I don't think they would attack us directly, and without a sea blockage they cannot starve us out. I say that we are relatively safe for now, but we need to take immediate action for letting this not get out of hand. We need to send messengers to our allies: Pylos,

Sparta, Crete, Corinth, Thebes. They all need to know that is happening here. Then we can unite our forces and launch a joint attack.

TELEMACHOS

Good, good. You see, dear Nausicaa? There is nothing that stands in between us and our perfect wedding.

NAUSICAA

In times of crises, what stronger foundation can we build on than personal relationships?

TELEMACHOS

Beautifully spoken!

NAUSICAA

On this matter... I heard that the resourceful Odysseus, after he died, was burned with a great heap and together with many sacrifices and the shore of this island. Before we get married, I would like to visit this place and pay libations to him, to ask for his blessing on our union. I feel that his soul could be reached with the blood of a hundred goats, if I offered them as a hecatomb, their blood pouring out onto the sand and later burning their entrails to appease Zeus, Athena and Poseidon to aid us in the coming tests.

TELEMACHOS

Darling, these goats are a gift from the gods for our wedding celebration. We should enjoy this special time in our lives. My father, being a humble and god-fearing man, sacrificed to the gods many times. I am sure he will bless our marriage, even without the sacrifice of a hundred goats to his name.

NAUSICAA

Dear Lord, when I met him for the first time, he was a shipwreck and desperate. When he approached me, naked, while I was only together with my maids and without any protection, I wanted to run away and hide. He looked horrible, if not for the intelligent twinkle that I saw in his eyes. But then I resisted my first instincts, and after being washed and clothed with one of my sheets, he looked like a King, strong, pleasant and wise. He told me that day: "Nausicaa, I was reborn again because of you". From this man I want to receive a blessing, and being so close to his grave, I cannot dare that I may not be able to sacrifice to his soul.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

I, as a military man, am free from any emotional attachments to the goats. However, I see them as a means to strengthen our position in the hard times to come. They are already fat from the long summer season. See this one, it must weigh over one hundred pounds. I say we keep them in our pens, where they could provide us food over the coming months in case of need.

TELEMACHOS

This speech is full of sense and reason. I don't want to be known as a person who will not listen to his most capable advisor. But see, if we could divide this herd here evenly? Half to the pen, and half for the wedding feast? Our people will need some encouragement when they hear that the invader is on our doorstep.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Let it be so.

TELEMACHOS

Nausicaa, dear, we may find a pigeon or sparrow that you can sacrifice. The resourceful Odysseus would have done the same.

NAUSICAA

Dear Telemachos, when I met him first, he had his mind fixed on coming home to his wife, and I helped him achieve his goals with everything I could. And now, I want to ask his immortal soul to help me achieve my wishes as well. When I first saw you, of course you reminded me of him. The same hair, the same build, even though you are a bit taller and leaner. You are young, smart and beautiful, not like him, an old soldier with a wounded soul. If you cannot give me a hundred goats, maybe one will suffice. I can sacrifice it alone during the evening. Dead souls shy away from sunlight, but at night even the blood of a single animal may bring my biddings down to the land of Hades. Then, we will light a small fire to burn the entrails and the fat, and appease the gods to look mildly on our future.

TELEMACHOS

I don't want you to go out alone during the night. Not in this danger. I will come with you to perform the sacrifice.

NAUSICAA

No! In my family, it is a sacred tradition to do sacrifices before the wedding, and only women are allowed to join. Let me do this for my own purification, together with my maid.

TELEMACHOS

I cannot see that this is a good idea. But I understand that you have to do what is so clearly outlined in your mind, darling. I know a place in the palace, on the tower and high above the walls. From there, I am able to see the beach and will know of any dangers.

NAUSICAA

Yes, watch over me from above. I will feel more safe.

TELEMACHOS

I am still worrying... Well, if you will sacrifice one goat, we will keep ninety-nine here. You can bring your maid to the beach, and ask for a good omen for our future.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Keep in mind the story of this soldier. Only yesterday night, a single boat was roaming around the outlying island, in close proximity to the shore. If you light a fire to perform the sacrifice, I am fearing for your safety.

TELEMACHOS

See how many days they took to attack that small island? And now, they will be even more careful, because they fear our revenge and know that we are on high alert. They would not dare venture so close to our town. I say, we can let her do the sacrifice tonight, and then keep to safety and the city walls after this.

SCENE FOUR

The evening, at the gate of the palace. Servants are loading a single goat onto an oxen cart.

TELEMACHOS

You seem certain that you want to go alone. It is quite easy to find. You take the path down to the town. Halfway, you will see a crossing. Take the left, and follow it for half an hour. Then, you will see a large oak tree which has been split by lightning into two. The burial mound is nearby on the shore.

NAUSICAA

Thank you, dear.

SERVANT ONE

What is this boy doing here in the palace? Hush, away with you!

MAID

(worried)

No, I invited him in for some bread and cheese. It's the boy I saw on the first day here. I think of him as my little brother in disguise. I call him little brother, and now he follows me around.

TELEMACHOS

That is cute and all. Nausicaa, take care. I will see you tomorrow for the wedding.

Nausicaa and maid exit.

CHORUS

Catering to a late man's soul is never able to make whole
what here is lacking from the start, a strong bridegroom's stern heart.
She will now go and appease the dead, who are not even angry yet.
The scapegoat will shed its blood, but in vain it will drip into the mud,
another life before they see, their unity was really key.

STROPHE

We should not forget, also his journey was not easy, travelling over the great
expanse,
with nothing more than hollow words as guide,
he brought all his sailors back alive and won himself a foreign bride.
During his bride-trip away, he could not know the dangers grown,
that are welcoming him now at home.
After two generations lost to war, we were glad to have a prince of peace,
that with steady hand and tactfulness increase
the foundations of our life, the things that make us whole and rife.

ANTISTROPHE

The eternal gods may cast the dice on each person's precious life.

Some souls are made for lukewarm spring,
when girls and boys go out and sing,
others are made for bitter war, with winter-like and frosty core.
A soul not born in the right time, expecting dance and play and wine,
and then waking up to see the truth, there is no joy left in my youth,
just war, famine and slow decay, this is what we see today.

STROPHE

And yet their union may still flourish, a slow start but yet unperished,
building future brick by brick, through the good times and the sick.

ANTISTROPHE

Two kindled fires deeply burning, one with love and one with need,
the love is fast and quick to burn out, the other one just plants a seed
of desire for the world and all its wonders and adventures yet to see,
being trapped too long away, and now finally come free.

SCENE FIVE

On the way to the beach.

NAUSICAA

We have been walking for quite a while now, and it is getting dark. Ah, I think
that is the crossing that Telemachos was talking about.

MAID

Yes, that must be it. Let's go left. Come, goaty! See, Nausicaa, our goat is
afraid of the dark!

NAUSICAA

I am scared too. See how the world around is becoming alive. This is the
shadow of a small bush, but it looks like a wolf to me. Now it is dancing with
foxes and boars on the grass. The sounds of the forest make me shudder.

MAID

I think this is the oak tree that we should look out for. Yes, it is really split in
the middle. A strong trunk growing for some time on a good spot, and then
Lord Zeus thought: "Well, let us part what is whole. From one tree I am
making two".

NAUSICAA

And look! Both parts of the oak are still living, but now growing away from each other. Still, they are one tree, if they want it or not. I think they cannot escape each other.

MAID

Maybe Zeus wanted to teach them a lesson?

NAUSICAA

Maybe he wanted to hit a bird that has angered him. And after striking his target, the lightning bolt flew down to Earth and hit this tree by chance. See, here is the burial mound of Odysseus. It is smaller than I thought. He didn't die long ago, and yet there are hardly any flowers left on the heap. Only a few stems of brunt wood, and a few bones from the sacrificial animals.

MAID

If he didn't die a long time ago, our prayer might reach him easier in the underworld. My mother told me it takes some time for some souls to pass through the fog, especially after a tragic life.

NAUSICAA

Now, let us not delay why we came here.

She holds the knife on the goat's throat.

Odysseus, whom I met only briefly, guide me in my marriage to your son. I come to your grave because I felt uneasy, being far away from home, and seeing the dangers of the world for the first time. You've seen your fair share of these dangers during your adventures, but always kept your guidance and wish to return home, even though you received many tempting offers from princesses on bountiful islands far away, wanting you to stay with them. I, on the other hand, will remain here. After a short trip, I have already seen enough of the world, and found my luck with Telemachos, who will be a wise and strong partner to me in all my affairs. Give me your blessing and good wishes, and I will be forever happy here.

She cuts the goat's throat. The blood drips on the sand.

MAID

Beautifully spoken. How do we know that he heard us?

NAUSICAA

I don't hope his soul is trapped between our world and the afterlife. If he is lucky, he passed the river of the dead already, and is free from the temptations of animal blood.

MAID

What will we do if other souls come to drink? Fallen soldiers, unhonourable pirates who neither received a proper burying nor the fare for Charon, the ferryman.

NAUSICAA

This beach is desolate. If we are lucky, no man has ever died on this spot.

MAID

I hope my mother doesn't come up to greet me. She was still alive when we parted, but she could have had an accident and died already. If she came up, I could not deny her the blood which we poured out for your wedding's sake.

NAUSICAA

See! It is quite well known that if you wait for some time after you sacrifice an animal, and then nothing happens, your sacrifice is accepted. Let us now make a big fire, and burn the entrails in the name of Zeus, Athena, Poseidon and Hades. After that, we can go back to the town.

MAID

I am a bit worried of making such a big fire. It may shine too brightly over the waves, and attract unwanted attention.

NAUSICAA

My father once told me that a sacrifice pleasing to the gods must have the right temperature. Hot smoke rises up, and the gods are sitting on their thrones high on Mount Olympus. A small fire will not transport the fragrant smoke high enough, and the gods will never notice the efforts we took to appease them.

SCENE SIX

Telemachos stands on the tower of the palace, overlooking the island.

TELEMACHOS

I can see Nausicaa on the beach. I hope she is not disappointed that we gave her only one goat to sacrifice. But on the other hand, we really had good arguments to keeping most of them here. These goats are crucially important to our defenses. After all, once we are married and we have defeated our enemies, there is enough time to do all things properly together. She will sit on the throne of honour, have many maids and receive the most beautiful presents from friends coming to our island near and far.

Ah, I see her coming towards the beach in the twilight. It became dark faster than expected. I hope she hurries.

Now, she cuts the throat of the goat. They make a fire for the entrails. Standard procedure. I hope the fire doesn't shine too bright over the sea, it seems to be very bright and big. She places the entrails on the fire. I can almost imagine the smell, bitter to us, but pleasing to the gods.

This night is truly odd. It became dark so fast, and now lights up again. Is this Sirius, the brightest star, making its rounds on the water? Or is the sun rising again already? No! It seems to be a torch on the water, approaching the beach in quick speed! Commander! Commander! Come fast!

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

Is this a boat riding the waves and carrying that light towards the beach?
Could it be that our enemies are approaching already?

TELEMACHOS

I see only one light. It must be a single scout, looking for weaknesses in our defences.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

They will see her sacrificial fire. If these barbarians act as yesterday, they will come closer to the beach and finally notice that there are two women on the shore alone.

TELEMACHOS

We have to run to the beach, and warn them or help them fight off this scout. I fear for my fiancée's life.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

It will take some time to reach the spot, even if you run fast.

TELEMACHOS

Let me wake up a few guards and hurry down. I am already wearing my sword, and I will grab another spear from the armoury. You can stay here on the lookout. If more boats approach, you can sound a general alarm.

Telemachos runs off.

COMMANDER KEBRIONES

How strange to light a big fire at night on the beach, when you know that enemies are nearby. But then, these are mere women, lacking my tactical knowledge and experience in all matters of warfare. Wait, I think I see something else. The boat comes closer to the beach. I hope Telemachos hurries. Now it is so close, the girls must surely see its torch glowing over the waves. Are they so bewitched by their own sacrifice? Did they look into the fire for so long, their eyes becoming ignorant to all fainter lights?

The boat is almost at the shore now. I think I can hear a man shouting something. Why are they not running away? Maybe they are trying to trick him. One of the men is jumping off the craft and swimming towards the beach. He comes out of the water, walking slowly. He looks truly barbaric, long hair and soaked clothes. In the dancing light of the torch that he is holding, his face must appear distorted and scary, like an old shipwreck. He is now standing on the beach, and does not seem to threaten them. It seems one of the women is approaching him now, holding a bright torch herself. I can see Nausicaa's dress and her hair waving in the wind. She is throwing her torch into the water, and I can only see her in the shine of the fire on the beach. Now, she is walking into the water, and swimming towards the enemy's boat. The man also extinguishes his torch in the ocean, and both disappear into darkness.

The Dionysia

Dramatis Personae

Elvirukles (An Athenian philosopher)

Leodora (A Spartan playwright)

Naomelina (A historian from Boeotia)

Testikles (A juggler from Thessaly)

Guard

Chorus

Leader of the Chorus

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

ELVIRUKLES

The wine is going sour and black flies circle the pitas
I've waited here, inside the walls of Eleuthera,
For four long days but still, they don't show up
The best playwrights Greece has born,
Mayhap the crowned plague has taken them
Mayhap they are detained in quarantine
And while the sun is setting
And Hypnos begins to weave his tapestry of dreams
Oh how I miss the Dyonisia of yore
That time, when Naomelina whipped her slave
for laughing at her tragedy,
and when Testikles had too much wine
and fought a goat in the name of Ares and got knocked out
Alas! Old memories don't help nostalgia
But on the road, I see a pilgrim
she carries a brick and a chicken
HelloLeodora! What took you so long?

EnterLeodora.

LEODORA

Alas! Elvirukles, I bring grave news

by order of the king, The festival is to be no more
For the crowned plague had swept through Sparta
And king Leonidas banned all comedy in fear for state security
Now the citizens are forced to stay indoors,
and not to wear fancy clothes
And the only shows allowed are tragic dramas
of Oedipus killing his father and sleeping with his own mother
Oh what a tragedy, Elvirukles!

ELVIRUKLES

Oh, this is too much! I'd rather be a slave in Egypt
than a free man in Sparta! Oh, what a tragedy indeed!
But come inside, I'm hungry, let's eat the chicken together.

LEODORA

No, Elvirukles, I am fasting,
I have made my pilgrimage to these sacred lands
For twelve long days,
And I must pray at the altar of Dionysus,
Before the festival begins
But where is Naomelina and where is Testikles?
They should have been here long ago...

SCENE TWO

NAOMELINA

It ain't so bad but not as good as it had used to be
I heard old Dionysia was grand
With drama, mirth, and wine abound but now
there is no mirth and the wine is bland
so barely anyone comes,
The road was long but at long last,
the walls of Eleuthera before me
Quick, guard, unlock the gates, I am late for the Dionysia!

GUARD

No foreigners allowed, by order of the senate, Sod off!

NAOMELINA

No one told me about that, I walked six days from Boeotia
I have brought much mirth and wine and a play to entertain the crowd
let me in, you brute, or there'll be no peace for you.

GUARD

No foreign comedy is to be performed inside these walls, such is the law.

NAOMELINA

I am a historian, I do not bring comedy,
I shall perform my tragedy and win the olive branch

GUARD

No tragedy allowed as well inside these walls. Perform it here or sod off!

Enter Testikles, visibly tipsy.

TESTIKLES

I am sick and tired of tragedies
that make me weep at night,
I hope the others brought comedies
and we shall have a good time,
Alas, I have already drunk the wine and eaten all the food
I'm parched and hope they have got more,
And here's Naomelina talking to the guards,
she always writes tragedies, but everyone always laughs

NAOMELINA

O, Testikles, I am so glad you've come,
All plays are banned in Eleuthera and foreigners unwelcome,
Malakas guards would not allow us through
What are we to do?

TESTIKLES

O what grave news, what foul mockery,
I've travelled ten long days by foot,
Alas, I was robbed on the road
by brigands who fled after stealing my food and wine!
But I still have my play to win the olive branch,
A comedy fit to make even the gods laugh,
And I will perform it even if all doors are barred!

(to the guard)

Guard, open the gate!

NAOMELINA

(to herself)

The olive branch! It shall be mine, you cheap comedian!

GUARD

You shall not pass, no foreigners allowed.

All comedy and tragedy is banned by order of the senate

TESTIKLES

There must be something we can do for you to let us through

I am sure there's some way

for us to get inside, some loophole in the law.

GUARD

Well, it's been a long watch and I am pretty hungry,

I'd trade a hearty dinner,

For a passage inside for both of you.

TESTIKLES

Alas, the brigands robbed me of my food, and wine.

GUARD

Well, it's been a long watch and I would like a rest,

I let one of you in as long as the other stays

and stands to guard the gate instead of me

so take my spear and I will take a nap.

Guard leaves. Testikles takes his place.

NAOMELINA

Open the gate, Testikles, we are already late for the festival!

TESTIKLES

But foreign comedies are not allowed in here.

NAOMELINA

You jest, I never write comedies! Now let me through,

so I can let the others know we have arrived.

TESTIKLES

Now I am a great admirer of your plays, my dear,
I always thought your witticisms were superb
Allow me to see them, for old times' sake

NAOMELINA

Don't flatter me, just let me through!

TESTIKLES

Why are you so evasive?
Do you have something to hide?

NAOMELINA

It's not that, my tragedies, they are too grand
to entertain the peasants in an open field!
Old Testikles, why won't you let me through?

TESTIKLES

All is clear, you want to smuggle through your plays!
Did you come to Eleuthera in search of fair competition,
Or just to fill your purse?
Why don't you admit it and won't we be friends again?
But fine, I will allow your tragedy if you let me see it!

NAOMELINA

O fie! What greed for my plays! You want to see it!
You're just jealous,
Because I've written more masterpieces
Than all you bores combined

TESTIKLES

Your mouth is more rotten than
all the fishmongers of Agora put together!

They continue bickering until the sun goes down.

SCENE THREE

LEODORA

Elvirucles, come with me to the altar of Dionysus,
The crowned plague is an ill omen,
And the festival will not begin until the gods are pleased
I will offer my tears and the blood of this chicken as a sacrifice

ELVIRUKLES

Leodora, stay!
We should wait for Naomelina and Testikles
Do not be fooled by the superstitious slaves.
There is no such thing called a crowned plague...
Just the simple cold, and a runny nose,
There is no crowned plague in Sparta,
This is just another ruse and fallacy...
And even if there was,
How can the fate of the festivity and Greek arts,
Rest upon a disease that strikes only Spartans?

LEODORA

How can you deny the deaths of so many?
Just yesterday my best friend Panaxes
lost his life in incurable pain.

ELVIRUKLES

Very tragic indeed!
That fact is the simple cold, Leodora!
Oh let me die by heatstroke,
Let the shredded hay and the droppings of cows
be my destiny,
If I also believe in crowned plagues...
Now this chicken has only one leg,
I hope is not a bad omen to a comedy show
Now I have lost hope and appetite,
Fine, Leodora, let's take it to the shrine for sacrifice
and may the gods provide the people with another show

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

The sun is rising as Elvirukles and Leodora arrive at the altar, where a priest is waiting.

ELVIRUKLES

(To Leodora)

Leodora, you never told me the altar would be a night's walk from my place,
(to himself)

God, I'm famished, Why did I blindly trust an uneducated Spartan?

Why not a knowledgeable Athenian like myself?

The chicken looks famished more than I do, what awful sacrifice!

God, I'll make amends by sacrificing my only tools of comedy
a writing quill and a mask.

The priest is not even dressed for the sacrificial ceremony

He wears the ragged cloak of a trader!

We will insult the mighty gods, with his puny sacrificial offering.

There is no crowned plague in the world,

And no plague could be worse than the dreaded plague of bad comedy.

(to the priest)

O venerable priest of Dionysus, I have brought you a chicken
and a comedian from Sparta as a sacrifice to Dionysus.

LEODORA

(aghast)

Have you gone mad, Elvirukles?

PRIEST

A chicken with one leg is surely an ill omen

And how could a comedian be a worthy sacrifice?

He looks proper starved, Dionysus will surely think he is a cat.

ELVIRUKLES

Ha-ha! ha-ha-ha! By Dionysus, Spartans have no sense of humor.

Oh, I'm both hungry and tired, let's sacrifice the chicken.

Let there be no more tragedies, Only comedies!

I thus dedicate this sacrifice to Dionysus, the god of comedy.

Elvirukles unleashes a mighty fart. Leodora and the priest are appalled, but both are glad to proceed with the sacrifice.

SCENE TWO

The sun is up. Testicles and Naomelina are still arguing, both drunk.

TESTIKLES

You poor, obstinate woman!

NAOMELINA

To hell with your jagged insults –
always critical and hating proper tragedy,
let me through!

TESTIKLES

I shall not let you pass until you have revealed your play to me!

Testikles collapses face down into the ground, drunk. Enter Guard.

GUARD

The wooden walls of Eleuthera fail
before such drunken spiel!
The sun rises high and none of you,
have passed through the gate
The greatest tragedy of modern times

NAOMELINA

I see a connoisseur of proper drama,
Why don't we drag this fallen juggler to the festival?
Let him be the comedy of the day?
I still have wine and food, and my play to win the contest.

GUARD

Now my watch is over I will gladly follow,
Let there be mirth, wine and good comedy!

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE

The Priest, Leodora and Elvirukles at the altar.

LEODORA

(striking the chicken on the head with the brick)

Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
Nourish my prayer and plays till they ripen
Pour some blood! Pour some blood...

to Dionysus, O, bringer of mirth
Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
Nourish my prayer and plays till they ripen
Maybe tears feed this holy altar

Elvirukles offers a prayer and cuts off the chicken head, in prayer he throws it away while praying that the plague will never reach the Greek lands. He wants to eat the chicken but finds out that it has run away.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Look at this chicken; it has no head yet it walks
pecking its feed like nothing has happened

CHORUS

Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
The crowned plague demands blood!
Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
May Dionysus protect us from bad comedy!

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Without the head,
let's see how long the chicken lasts

CHORUS

Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
State security demands blood!
Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
May Dionysus give us good tragedy!

Leodora begins to weep.

SCENE TWO

Naomelina and Guard arrive at Elvirukles' house, dragging Testikles by his legs. Testikles and Naomelina are arguing vehemently.

NAOMELINA

But that was your three hundredth line of dialog!
And there were no entrances or exits at all!
There's this elephant in one place humming like a bee
and Nonsense keeps coming out of its mouth!

I cannot understand if your work has improved or worsened,
This act's omens are dismal, wordy, and boring.

TESTIKLES

There are no omens in a comedy,
those are just guiding words that the chorus picks up.

Enter Elvirukles and Leodora.

NAOMELINA

Look ahead, it's Elvirukles and Leodora,
They are covered in blood
So apparently they are to stage a real tragedy
Elvirukles, why is Leodora covered in blood?

ELVIRUKLES

She was determined to make a proper sacrifice.
she got drenched in the blood of a one-legged chicken,
demanding the gods' blessings
and condemning her offerings on bad comedy.

NAOMELINA

Did you say a one-legged chicken?
That's uncanny! A fell disease is advancing towards our land.
It scythes our limbs and slaughters our best minds.
And I know very well that our lands are infected.

LEODORA

But what happened to Testikles?

The guard strikes Testikles like the latter was the chicken.

TESTIKLES

But that time... That giraffe... etc.

LEADER OF THE CHORUS

Look at this man; he still has his head,
yet he cannot walk,
lying on the ground like nothing has happened.

CHORUS

Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
The crowd demands blood!
Pour some blood! Pour some blood!
The crowd demands blood!

They begin to tear Testikles up.

GUARD

No foreign comedies or tragedies allowed inside these walls! Begone!

More guards run in, disperse the chorus and lead the four playwrights outside of the city walls.

ELVIRUKLES

Our plays will go stale without any laughter from the crowd,
now they're throwing us out of town
And even in this comic circumstance, there's still not enough mirth and wine
but only tears.
Indeed I hate the tragic mask more than life itself.

SCENE THREE

The four playwrights are outside the city walls, seated on the ground. A small crowd surrounds them.

LEODORA

Look at this audience; though blind and in rags
they still find humor in the tragic circumstance
And they listen to our words
as if they were the oracles of Apollo himself

NAOMELINA

We are blessed, Elvirukles.
Our words have spread far and wide in the countryside.

ELVIRUKLES

No doubt, Naomelina, that's why we should write a comedy right away!

TESTIKLES

But how can we pick out a proper subject for a comedy?

LEODORA

You are right, Testikles. We need a good subject for our play.
Something that will make the audience laugh and cry at the same time.
Something like...

TESTIKLES

Something like a one-legged chicken, who runs without a head!

LEODORA

Something like a man who has his head, but cannot walk!

GUARD

(yelling from the walls)

No foreign comedies or tragedies allowed!

NAOMELINA

Do not despair, old men,
the gods have sent us a sign,
Despite the crowned plague
and bans of mirth and merriment
A chicken walks without a head,
And Dionysia is here at last.

“the moon snails”
or
“polynices”

By
Elvira Rex

Dramatis Personae

POLYNICES, son of Oedipus and heir to the throne of Thebes

TYDEUS, his ally

ERIPHYLE, wife of AMPHIARAOS and sister of ADRASTUS

CHORUS OF MOON SNAILS (predatory sea snails of the genus Polinices)

ETEOCLES, brother of POLYNICES and usurper of the throne of Thebes

AMPHIARAOS, seer and king of Argos

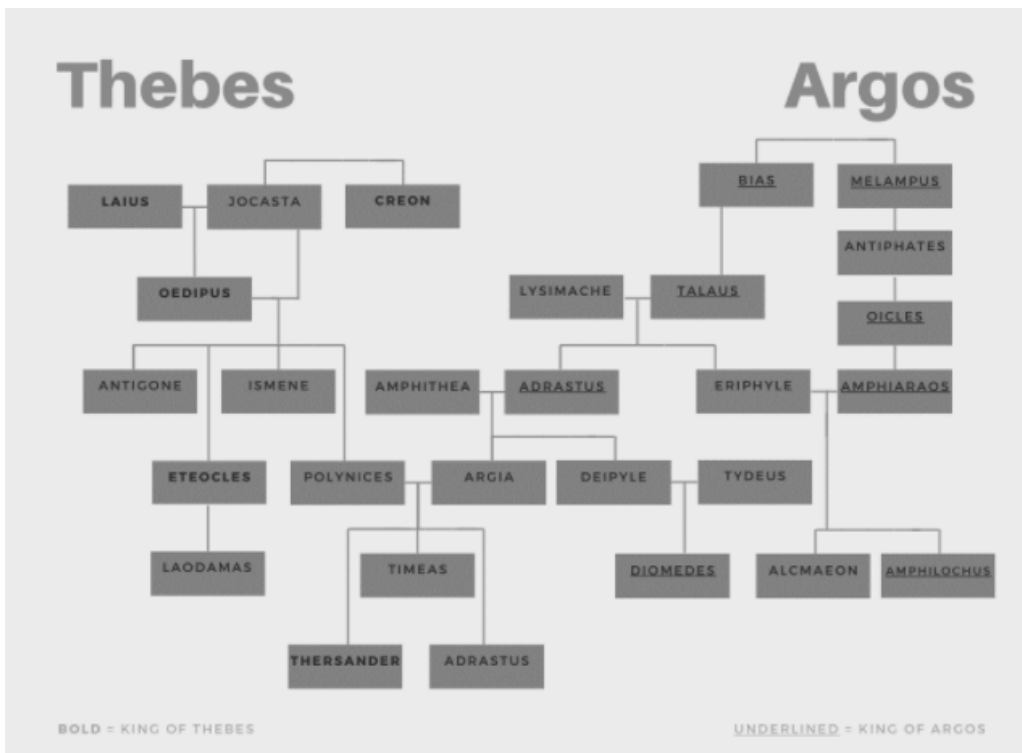
ADRASTUS, king of Argos

ARGIA, wife of POLYNICES and daughter of ADRASTUS

THERSANDER, son of POLYNICES and ARGIA

ALCMEON, son of AMPHIARAOS and ERIPHYLE

FAMILY TREE



Adrastus's Palace at Argos, terrace by the sea at night. The CHORUS OF MOON SNAILS is gathered at the beach, looking on. There is a full moon. POLYNICES enters talking to TYDEUS.

POLYNICES

Alas, I cannot but stand idle and gaze out at the sea! See how it taunts with its untiring stir – the frenzy of all the creatures in it scabbling over one another to get a better look at the Moon! O how bright she is! White-armed Selene the Moon Goddess is parading this night in her full regalia, her gleaming crown near blinding. How she drapes her mantle of light making everything lovely as herself! There she stands surveying all, as in turn, everything strains to contemplate her on her silver chariot. It hangs motionless, as if her beautiful silver horses had been transfixed. (Why, it strikes me now these be altogether more sluggish beasts than horses.)

CHORUS OF MOON SNAILS

Gather around, brothers and sisters, and hear how this man, though mortal, heeds the plight of the Moon and the Ocean, our mother and father. The gods, though they have sealed his fate in death, have no doubt given him gifts of perception and judgement equal only to theirs, and made him wise beyond his years.
O but we may learn from him yet!

POLYNICES

I daresay she relishes the light reflected back to her off a million eyes. I'd

bargain she remains so still thither and keeps clouds at bay, so that she may bathe in the adoration of her subjects. Vain woman! All of you are alike. Care you not for our fates, as

long as we deliver the adoration due, which we have no power to withhold? This I know too well: that within beauty lies power, but yield the reins to vanity, and the power is lost.

CHORUS

He speaks truth to the Moon but she does not heed him.
She knows of his fate: he will soon wield a woman's vanity
as a double-handed sword.

Victory won of such heavily wrought iron shall taste sweet
before it tastes of iron.

POLYNICES

It is plain that Poseidon, Lord of the Seas, and white-armed
Selene are allied this night - allied against me, perhaps. The
Moon rouses the Sea into a whirling frenzy and the
animated Sea taunts me, torments me in my impotence.
Why, boisterous Poseidon, do you seek to pain me thus? Is
it because your brother Zeus, Lord of Olympos, decreed
that there would be war in Thebes, and I have not yet acted
on his command? Would that I could set off this instant, set
sail with the finest fleet the likes of which Argos has ever
seen!

It brings black bile to my tongue to think that my traitor
brother Eteocles remains King of Thebes. The agreement
which we both promised to abide by before my unlawful
exile so many years past, established that we would share
rule of our homeland on alternating years. Alas

that I was weak and compliant even then! When the first
year drew nigh, Eteocles conspired to break that oath, taken
before the Gods, and exile me in ignominy.

I, rightful ruler born of the purest lineage, descendent of the
Gods themselves, was reduced to wander Greece with not a
friend or possession to my noble name – a fate worse than
death.

I at last found my way to the land of Argos, where I met you, esteemed Tydeus, and where King Adrastus graciously took us in and offered us his daughters as wives.

TYDEUS

Verily, all you say is as true as the Moon is bright. We have dwelt in this fine city, in gracious Adrastus's Palace by the sea for many a year now. As prophecy foretold, he was to yoke his daughters to foreigners, a boar and a lion – you, righteous Polynices of Thebes, son of Oedipus, the lion; and I, relentless Tydeus of Calydon, son of Oeneus, the boar. And so it was done, and by Argia and Deipyle we have produced sons.

But we have not been idle in the ways of justice and vengeance.

POLYNICES

No, not idle, my dearest friend. But unlike Argos, which, howsoever great, is a kingdom for too many generations divided and partitioned like a sacrificial heifer, it is imperative Thebes and its rulers shall not remain likewise any longer.

Thebes shall have but one king: Polynices.

CHORUS

By Zeus's will, Polynices will not be king

of Thebes! Alack, but his son Thersander will take the throne in years to come and rule a united Thebes, rule wisely as his father would have done. O, but he does so resemble a king in his speech and virtuous manner! The Fates are vicious and unfeeling but mortals cannot overrule their authority.

POLYNICES

Our noble host and benefactor, King Adrastus, promised to help restore our kingdoms to us, and to that end we have worked assiduously to build a formidable army. Our attack on Thebes is imminent. Seven Theban gates will be assailed by seven Argive Lords. Capaneus, Eteoclus, Hippomedon, Parthenopaeus, you, great Tydeus, and myself, makes six. The great seer King Amphiaraos is yet to join our ranks, but, the Gods willing, he shall be persuaded before the night's close.

TYDEUS

Dearest, unhappy friend, it will be my honour to fight and, if the Gods will it, meet my destruction by your side at the Gates of Thebes. I believe your cause to be just and necessary, and the signs are unambiguous that Zeus who shakes the heavens has decreed this war shall take place. I am not a fool that I would defy the will of our Father in Olympos. I know your mind as if it were mine own, friend, but put aside your misgivings and let me nevertheless put to you this scheme: allow me to travel to Thebes as your messenger, hold counsel with the usurper Eteocles and entreat him to return you to your rightful throne. If, as you suspect, he will not admit me, I shall challenge and vanquish

his strongest, most skilled warriors of renown in one-to-one battle.

POLYNICES

Cunning Tydeus, hearken to my words as I share with you my sentiments as you valiantly have yours. This stratagem of yours, two-pronged as the awesome spear of Hades, whom we will meet before long in the underworld, pleases and displeases me in equal measure.

If you adopt the second part of this scheme and you contrive to face Thebes's defenders in single combat, by Athena you shall hew every one and no exception. It strikes me you shall pluck all glory before the war commences! I only pray that you grant enough Theban champions the breath in their breasts and strength in their arms for the Argives to reap, so that we, too, may prove our mettle in the eyes of the Gods. You have countless times proven your skill in war, earning the fame and reverence of a hero of unsurpassable strength and deftness, and, I am told, the special favour of grey-eyed Athena. Under her Aegis, her wisdom guiding your every stroke true, you cannot but attain victory.

As for the first part of your scheme, your words ring noble but, by Hermes the harbinger, you shall have no chance to speak any into Eteocles's ear, much less to have them penetrate his black heart. You might rather assist King Sisyphus in his struggle to drive his boulder up the hill or apply healing salve to the Titan Prometheus's wounds. Nevertheless, I concede and permit the course of action you have designed, albeit somewhat misguided. I revere you for your loyalty and initiative. Begone, friend,

and may Hermes with his winged sandals of gold and far-seeing Athena conspire together for your happy return!

Tydeus bows and leaves.

Alas, though my heart is alight and my whole body aches for the strain and glory of battle, the time to set sail still has not arrived. My great sword, wrought of the finest bronze and gold, has felt the toil of the whetstone too many a futile time, and it stands, oiled and glistening in all its splendour, yearning daily for blood. It yearns for the moment it will make a river of my brother's entrails and send his spirit to roam, lost, as he did mine.

Alas, but now I am alone, I can say it – 'tis a good leader's part to share good news and not overburden his men with doom. For this I know: if my father's curse be fulfilled, I am also to be destroyed.

I visited my father Oedipus at Colonus, where he dwells, blind and disfigured, living out his remaining days in humiliation. O what pain to witness! O what a rich inheritance of agony and shame! There did I beseech him to support my just claim to the throne of Thebes. The Erinyes have not the strength of feeling with which my father responded to my entreaty! He delivered a litany of hateful speech and cursed me and my brother both to die by each other's hand at Thebes, and for my righteous enterprise to fail. I pleaded with my unhappy sister Antigone to bury me by the proper rites if it were to come to that.

Whether the Gods favoured my depraved father and his curse, only the Fates can tell. If, as he proclaimed, Eteocles and I are to destroy one another in battle, then so be it. I shall welcome such an end. My thirst for battle redoubles. If all the

Argives fall at the Gates of Thebes, they will no doubt attain glory and be welcomed into Hades as heroes. I cannot deny them that either. To continue to live in exile and disgrace as a refugee is no option. My son Thersander will rule as king of Thebes if I do not.

CHORUS

That he will! That he will!

Thersander will be king!

Amidst the clang of battle, the roar louder than the sea in storm, The Seven Against Thebes will perish, all but one. Cadmus's great city will suffer great loss and so will his line: Eteocles and Polynices will die together in one fell swoop of Fate as Oedipus foretold. Creon will be regent.

In years to come, Adrastus and the Epigoni, the offspring of the Seven, will return to Thebes and be victorious, establishing Thersander as rightful king.

Would that it could be achieved with less bloodshed and heartache! But Zeus has decreed it be so.

POLYNICES

To this end, the final piece of my own scheme I will enact
now.

Polynices produces a necklace and a robe from a chest.

CHORUS

O mother, brothers, sisters and cousins of the sea! Feast
your eyes on these garlands

of unequal beauty!

O how the Moon's watchful light has shifted from us, her
children, to attend to these lovely ornaments!

O exquisite allure! O dread and peril!

These are undoubtedly the Necklace and Robe of
Harmonia, of which we know history and presage.

*Polynices looks up at the Moon and laughs, turns back to look at the necklace and
robe in his hands.*

POLYNICES

Ah, even the immortal Moon is not free of the enchantment
these adornments hold! I feel their magic working on me
even as I stand here, my back to Selene's heavenly
loveliness, for it is now surpassed.

The necklace must truly be the most intricate work of gold-
and silver-smithery ever wrought by man or God. Two
serpents intertwine in a sensuous dance among a dizzying
sea of whirls and precious stones. It all appears in motion,
or my mortal eyes are perplexed by such artistry.

And the robe, 'tis such a vast creation a woman could
disappear entirely in it! Note the matching silver and gold
embroidery all around, of spirals and serpents, amethyst

and opal! 'Tis said Haephaestus the God of the Forge crafted these himself, and that it would make any woman who dons them youthful and lovely as golden-tressed Aphrodite his bride.

CHORUS

'Tis truth you speak, Polynices, but not complete. The riches before you were

wrought by Haephaestus master of metalcraft and are indeed the finest of all their kind. But beware, for Haephaestus wrought them of fury and vengeance! Aphrodite, lovelier than the Sun, has ever possessed a fickle heart, which wandered not once into the bed of Ares God of the battle-cry. She bore of one such union a most lovely daughter named Harmonia. When news reached lame Haephaestus of his wife's treachery and the resulting issue, he cursed the same's entire lineage for all eternity. He set to work fashioning a necklace and a robe, the epitome of craftsmanship and beauty, instilled with hate. When Harmonia was to wed King Cadmus of Thebes, this was the Master Craftsman's wicked gift to her. The curse lives on in you, Polynices of the House of Cadmus! Cast off this lovely apparel ere it propels your doom also!

POLYNICES

It pains me to part with these divine gifts – they have belonged for so long to my kin. My anguished mother, Jocasta, in gay years long past, wore this necklace and this robe, and wagging tongues claim that ill-fated Oedipus first beheld her in such pageantry, it being to blame for the carnal depravity that begat me and my siblings. Gazing upon it now, I can well believe it. A lesser man might cast these riches into the hearth or the ocean, but I, Polynices son of Oedipus who defeated the

Sphinx in a battle of wits, undertake to put these godly favours to more profitable use.

Witness, O Moon, how I wield woman's vanity so that I may meet my fate.

CHORUS

These are shapely offerings full of peril, who shall receive them now?

Can the cunning Polynices confer the curse on another mortal lineage?

POLYNICES puts the robe and necklace back in the chest and closes it. Enter ERIPHYLE.

ERIPHYLE

Honoured Polynices, prithee tell what pressing business it is that brings me to the house of my brother Adrastus at this hour, before Eos (Dawn) has risen, her finger-tips of rose bringing warmth to all she touches? I yearn for her caress and her mantle of light, or at least a safeguard against her sister Selene's icy touch. I feel it bitterly this night, as she traipses through the sky in her most garish finery, demanding acclamation. It would seem she has roped in the Aurae too, skittish breeze nymphs all, to torment me, drawing them away from the House of their father Oceanus as you have summoned me back to the House of mine.

POLYNICES

Sweet Eriphyle, I would not disturb your rest and ask for your welcome presence here this night if it were not for an enterprise of the highest portent. After much thought, I have come to the conclusion that I cannot do without your

aid in a most critical matter. You, most revered lady, are simply *vital* for my happiness and dignity.

ERIPHYLE

O how these words agitate me! Or perhaps 'tis the Moon's doing.

Alas, my obsequious friend, but I am a faithful wife to my husband, the great seer King Amphiaraos, your would-be ally. Although your words taste sweet, they do not ring true.

POLYNICES

Faithful Eriphyle, your devotedness does you justice. It is true that every man in Argos has heard tale of your former loveliness, how it once inspired poems and stirred noble men to die at one another's hand for yours. Although I confess the wish to behold what remains of your once magnificent virtues with mine own eyes was one reason I called you hither, the primary one was the husband of which you speak.

But first, may I be allowed the honour of presenting you with these most gratifying gifts?

POLYNICES opens the chest and displays the robe and necklace.

ERIPHYLE gasps and stares in awe.

These wonderful heirlooms were wrought at the hand of Haephaestus in Olympos and offered as favours to my forebears many years since. They are indubitably the finest known to mortals and immortals alike. See how the night's limpid light glints off them? The Moon might put on as dazzling a show as she will - these adornments will always dominate the approbation of mortal men.

It is said whosoever wears this necklace

and this robe will regain their youth and beauty and remain as such, surpassing all women. When you don these, lovely Eriphyle, all will come to be as in the carefree days of your youth.

ERIPHYLE

By Aphrodite and all the Gods in Olympos, 'tis truly the most beautiful sight my eyes have ever fallen upon! As you have astutely perceived, I do yearn for how things were in days past, when I could still conquer the hearts of men and have them do my bidding, with beauty and virtue as my only currency. You do me a great honour indeed, generous Polynices, with these choice offerings. But before I am to receive them as is my desire, you must needs tell me what it is you wish for in return. One thing age has taught me is that, barring in the service of beauty and love, nothing is without a price.

POLYNICES

You shall possess the charms of lovely Aphrodite as you already do the wisdom of fair Athena, sweet Eriphyle, daughter of Talaus. But the night is cold and, as you say, the icy-fingered Moon and the lively Aurae are at play at your breast so that I spy you quivering as a lady of such fine rank should never have to endure. Your dress is too delicate for a night such as this. I prithee, then, don the sumptuous robe I offer you unreservedly so that you may find warmth as well as loveliness, whilst I tell you of my intent.

Why not don the necklace too, and complete the harmonious ensemble Haephaestus intended, giving me much pleasure into the bargain?

A shivering ERIPHYLE eyes the robe suspiciously, then puts it on. Then the necklace.

CHORUS

There is a bitter bite in the air as under the sea, as in the place where they meet, from which vantage point we observe these mortal events.

No doubt the Moon, Poseidon and the various nymphs of the air are conspiring this night to facilitate ingenious Polynices's plot!

The soft, heavy pleats of the Robe of Harmonia appear to envelop Eriphyle at first, so that she seems to have been consumed by it. Observe, brothers and sisters, that we may gain proficiency in the skill and use it against our prey!

Now she fastens the Necklace of Harmonia around her slender neck, sealing her fate as she joins the clasps. Could we, beasts of the sea, craft collars as fine and as fruitful as this scheming Polynices uses? We may then conquer and propagate as his kin will.

O how lovely she is! Radiant Eriphyle is transformed! The creatures of the sea scabble now in the surf to catch a closer glimpse of this spectacular apparition! The Moon shies away, jealous of her brilliance! A new queen of beauty emerges this night: Eriphyle! Eriphyle! Eriphyle! She cannot but gaze down at the water, mesmerised by the figure she sees reflected there.

POLYNICES

Ah me! I was not prepared for the vision before my eyes!
Fair Aphrodite with her golden tresses in all her Olympian finery

could not possibly hope to match the beauty I now see in front of me.

It was my wish to ask a favour of you, fairest Eriphyle, but now words fail me.

CHORUS

Just as artful Haephaestus crafted Harmonia's doom and that of her kin by stoking her vanity,

So does exiled Polynices craft Eriphyle's and that of her kin
by brandishing hers!

ERIPHYLE

O pray ask, most generous friend, for now that I perceive
the full worth of your gift, it strikes me there can be no cost
too high!
I am wont to offer up anything your heart desires.
O speak, cherished benefactor!

POLYNICES

As you wish, fair Eriphyle.
I shall be forthright: I have need for your husband
Amphiaraos in the ranks of the Seven against Thebes.
Without his strength we are lost.
I know this to be true: that on the auspicious day of your
wedding, you extracted from noble Amphiaraos an oath
that on matters in which he and your brother Adrastus were
at odds, your husband would defer to your judgement.
Now, King Adrastus stands beside me as ally, will sail to
Thebes with me and storm the Seven Gates. King
Amphiaraos will not. It is thus, although it pains me to ask,
your ruling that will decide whether your husband joins me
in glorious

battle or stays behind, condemning the Argives to defeat. I
must needs request that you persuade him to offer me the
support of his powerful arm and intrepid battalions.
Your valiant husband will no doubt honour his oath,
whatever his misgivings, when it is you, fairest Eriphyle,
who asks, no less for your newfound loveliness.

CHORUS

He speaks of wise Amphiaraos, a seer of great renown,
great-grandson of famed Melampus king of old.
Amphiaraos consults the stars and the tides, keeps counsel
with us creatures of the surf - thus there are no surprises for
him ahead. When his duplicitous wife, falling prey to
vanity and trickery as she is, requests his alliance with
brave Polynices, he will needs comply. He knows it will
mean his life, as well as that of Polynices the instigator, but
the Fates have writ it and he will reluctantly go to his
doom. He plots to extract a promise from his son Alcmaeon
that he will kill his mother for her corruption and so bring
about due punishment.
All this and more will come to be,
Of Eriphyle's vanity.

ERIPHYLE

Alas! He whom I thought of as an ally has revealed his
allegiance! Alack! This newfound loveliness I thought a
gift is but a scourge!
Would that I had not met you in this House under the
ever-vigilant Moon, wicked Polynices!
Would that I had not laid eyes upon these fine robes and
this finest necklace, or
upon my cursed image wearing them!
Would that I had the strength or the inclination to turn these
evil gifts away or throw them into the deep!
Would that I could end my own life, and with it the tale of
unspeakable woe that will unfold if I do not!
Alas, I cannot! Ah, vanity!
In youth, the Gods gave me beauty, making that their only
gift, and so I learnt to live with it. Ere long, mercilessly,
they took their gift away, and without it I was lost and
wholly at the mercy of the whims of men. What lesson was
I to learn of that?
Yes, I see now that the Gods have plotted to make me what
you see before you, a spoilt, then deprived, immoral
creature. But if I were not so, I would not be Eriphyle.

I will do your bidding, hateful Polynices. I shall contrive to bring about the demise of my husband and certainly my own.

My lord Amphiaraios, the great seer, has no doubt understood this betrayal would come, perhaps presaged his own downfall and mine.

When he plunges into Hades below for my corruption, the corruption that has been wrought into my very essence, how my sons will abhor me! How I abhor me! How I abhor you, dread Polynices, for confronting me with that corruption!

Everything is blackness now, and yet my beauty is still radiant. I depart now for the House of Amphiaraios, which I shall bring down in a beautiful blaze.

ERIPHYLE exits.

CHORUS

O woe! O indescribable anguish!

Outcast Polynices is triumphant in his scheme, yet this triumph seals his annihilation! Rejoice and lament!

The Seven will march against Thebes and all but one will perish. Adrastus, the Six Widows and the boyish Epigoni will mourn their unburied kin. Argia and Thersander her son will be among that number. For too long will the spirit of steadfast Polynices roam spoiled and tarnished before it is granted rest worthy of his blood.

We have learnt much of Polynices's unwitting tutelage, but wisdom extracts too dear a toll. O pity! O overwhelming sorrow! Our favoured Polynices, lovelorn of the Gods, shall wane anon.

Alas! We shall not again engage with the troubles of mortal men, but we will ever honour our hero in our nature and name.

THE END

The Hades Elixir

By Naomi Xu Elegant

Dramatis Personae

The King
Pithikos
Clitagora
The Queen
Democrides
Guard One
Guard Two

THE KING and PITHIKOS lounge in a great hall. The king's birthday feast has just ended and everyone has gone to bed. Fruit and empty plates and cups are scattered across a long table.

THE KING

Clitagora! Another flagon of wine!

[to PITHIKOS]

That girl's useless.

PITHIKOS

She's hot, though.

THE KING

Hmph. What did you think of the food?

PITHIKOS

The figs were excellent.

THE KING

Imported from Rhodes this morning.

PITHIKOS

How is that possible? The boat takes weeks.

THE KING

Does it?
[shouting]
Clitagora! My wine!

PITHIKOS
Why don't you fire her? Nubile servant girls aren't exactly hard to come by.

THE KING
No, but ones named Clitagora are.

PITHIKOS
How does your wife feel about her?

THE KING
Can't say. Never asked.
[SHOUTING]
Are you fermenting the grapes yourself, woman?
[to PITHIKOS]
Unbelievable.

PITHIKOS
Did you enjoy Aristophanes' performance this evening?

THE KING
It was alright. I think he's past his prime.

PITHIKOS
Have you told him so?

THE KING
Gods, no. You know how writers are. So sensitive. Besides, I can't blame him. I'm sure he had a lot of biting political satire that he had to cut out for fear of offending me.

PITHIKOS
He knows you're a tolerant king.

THE KING
Of course, of course. But a tolerant king is like a manly playwright. There are inherent limits to how much of that virtue the subject can possess.

PITHIKOS

I'll cheers to that.

THE KING

I'm sure you would, if we had anything to drink.

[shouting]

Clitagora! We are thirsty!

PITHIKOS

You know what I noticed tonight? During the performance?

THE KING

Tell me.

PITHIKOS

Democrides was nodding off.

THE KING

What? I gave him one of the best seats!

PITHIKOS

He was making a show of it. Snoring into his spanakopita, getting laughs out of his dinner companions. Disrespectful, if you ask me. Bordering on treason, I dare say.

THE KING

Spanakopita? Has that been invented yet?

PITHIKOS

You know, I'm not sure. I just wanted to alliterate. Snoring into his honey-drizzled olives, then.

THE KING

Mm. I love that dish. Honey from Thassos and olives from Crete. Shipped in this morning with the grapes.

PITHIKOS

Thassos, really? And Crete? That's quite a distance. And aren't all these islands in completely different directions? What kind of boats are you using?

THE KING

It's my thirtieth birthday, Pithikos. No expenses spared. It could very well be my last.

PITHIKOS

You mean because of the assassination plots against you?

THE KING

What? I was making a joke about my extreme old age. What plots?

PITHIKOS

I've heard whisperings that Democrides -

CLITAGORA enters, holding two glasses and a flagon of wine.

CLITAGORA

Your wine, King.

THE KING

Zeus almighty, finally! What were you doing back there? The damn harvest?

CLITAGORA

My apologies, King.

THE KING

It's alright, it's alright. Just pour us a glass. And have one yourself.

CLITAGORA

You are most kind, but I must decline.

THE KING

Clitagora! It's my birthday. And I'm the King! No one refuses the King.

THE KING takes a big gulp of wine without waiting for PITHIKOS to drink.

THE KING

Delicious. What is that? A Cabernet?

CLITAGORA

No, my King. Greece will not plant its first Cabernet Sauvignon vineyard until 1963.

These are from the back garden.

THE KING

Of course. Pithikos, what do you think of the wine? Oof, I'm feeling a little dizzy.

PITHIKOS

I haven't sampled it yet, your majesty.

THE KING

What? Why not? It's perfectly ... eurgh ... my tummy's a bit achey ...

CLITAGORA

King? Are you alright?

THE KING

Feewing a widdwe bitty ouchie ... ughhh

PITHIKOS

Why are you devolving into baby speech? Is this one of your bits?

CLITAGORA

It's a side effect.

PITHIKOS

A side effect of what? Too much Aristophanes?

THE KING

Kingy heady hurty ...

THE KING collapses, falling out of his chair and onto the ground, groaning and writhing.

PITHIKOS

King! King!

THE KING

Piffikos ...

PITHIKOS

Wench! What have you done?

[shouting]

Guards! Guards, help!

CLITAGORA
I've done nothing.

PITHIKOS
You'll be stoned for this!

CLITAGORA
I am innocent. I am a mere tool. Hades moves through me.

PITHIKOS
Guards! We've got a crazy bitch on the loose!

CLITAGORA
I am a vessel for his inexorable will.

PITHIKOS
Whose what? Did Democrides put you up to this?

THE KING
Mister King feewy sweepy ... me so sweepy ...

PITHIKOS
Sweepy? What is he saying? What is that?

CLITAGORA
He's saying sleepy.

PITHIKOS
Why? Will he live?

CLITAGORA
Oh, he'll live. But he'll never recover his glorious powers of speech.

PITHIKOS
No ...

CLITAGORA
He's going to speak in that baby voice forever.

PITHIKOS

A fate worse than death ...

CLITAGORA

There will be no need for bloodshed and coups d'etat. Every word he utters will be his own undoing.

THE KING

Clitagowa meanie ...

PITHIKOS

You're going to Hades for this.

CLITAGORA

I welcome the cool embrace of death. I will walk through Elysium knowing I have fulfilled my life's purpose on this mortal plane.

THE KING

Me scawwed of deff ...

PITHIKOS

We're all scared of death! That doesn't mean we admit to it in public! Man up!

CLITAGORA

You see? You've already lost all respect for him.

PITHIKOS

I'm not - no - GUARDS!

CLITAGORA

Call for them all you want. They won't be able to answer you. At least not in their old voices...

PITHIKOS

No ... you didn't ...

CLITAGORA

Why do you think I was so delayed? They all wanted a sip of wine. I wasn't even planning on sharing the Hades elixir with them, but there they were, harassing me as

usual. Not anymore. It's difficult to grope and jeer at the servant girl when you have the vocal capabilities and motor control of an infant.

PITHIKOS

You're really calling it the Hades elixir?

CLITAGORA

Do you have a better suggestion?

PITHIKOS

Baby formula.

CLITAGORA

Pathetic.

PITHIKOS

Ooh, no, booby juice.

THE KING

Booby juice!

PITHIKOS

See? He likes it.

CLITAGORA

You disgust me.

PITHIKOS

Mommy milky.

CLITAGORA

Enough.

THE KING

Mommy miwwky.

PITHIKOS

Poseidon's balls, he can't even say milky properly. This is a travesty. It was only a few hours ago that he was waxing lyrical about the dramatic convention of parabasis

as exemplified in the early work of Aristophanes, to Aristophanes himself, while also slapping a banquet floozy on her ample buttocks.

[choking back sobs]
He was a true master.

CLITAGORA

You're such a shameless little's king's pet. No wonder your parents named you monkey.

PITHIKOS

There must be a cure.

CLITAGORA

There is no cure.

The doors burst open and THE QUEEN enters, flanked by TWO GUARDS and DEMOCRIDES.

THE QUEEN

What in Hera's name is going on here?

DEMOCRIDES

I told you they were up to something.

CLITAGORA

Your most divine and sexy-in-an-ageless-classy-way grace!

PITHIKOS

Oh, Karen! Thank Zeus you're alright. Guards, apprehend this scheming harridan. She has poisoned the king and your fellow guards. She must die.

THE QUEEN

You will refer to me by my royal title when you address me, Pithikos. Tell me what has happened here.

PITHIKOS

I'm sorry, Karen - I mean, your most divine and sexy-in-an-ageless-classy-way grace. What happened is the girl tricked the King into drinking a wine laced with - with the most terrible - she calls it the Hades elixir - and he -

THE QUEEN

Where is the King? Is he alive?

PITHIKOS

In a way. He is there on the floor. Behind the banquet table.

DEMOCRIDES goes to look.

DEMOCRIDES

Why is he sucking his thumb?

PITHIKOS

It's the Hades elixir. It renders a man ... infantile.

THE KING

Hewwo Democwides.

DEMOCRIDES

Mother of Kronos. You'd better look away, Karen. It's pretty rough.

[shouting]

Someone fetch a diaper!

THE KING

Can I has some milky?

THE QUEEN

Guard - seize that woman.

GUARD 1 grabs CLITAGORA.

PITHIKOS

Oh, thank Zeus.

THE QUEEN

And that man.

PITHIKOS

Wait, what the -

GUARD 2 grabs PITHIKOS.

THE QUEEN

I've long suspected you of coveting more power than you deserve, Pithikos. But I have tolerated you all these years because I knew how much my husband cared about you, how he saw you as a true bro of his, to use his lexicon. But today you let him down. And on his birthday, no less. You sicken me.

PITHIKOS

Your most divine and sexy-in-an-ageless-classy-way grace - I'm innocent, it was her, it was all her! Clitagora seduced your husband, curried his favor, tricked him and poisoned him - she admitted it to me - she's working for some crazy cult! She wants to destroy the King and everything he's built! His whole legacy, in ashes.

THE QUEEN

Save it for the trial, Socrates.

PITHIKOS

I'll bet you my best horse that Democrides is behind all this. He fell asleep during Aristophanes' performance tonight.

THE QUEEN

So? The play was boring. Aristophanes is past his prime. Everyone knows that.

PITHIKOS

Democrides cannot be trusted.

DEMOCRIDES

I'm right here, man.

CLITAGORA

My Queen - may I speak?

THE QUEEN

No.

CLITAGORA

I am innocent. Hades moves through me. I am a mere -

PITHIKOS

Apollo's nuts, wrap it up, will you?

CLITAGORA

I am sent here to fulfil my purpose, and I have done so. Democrides is one of us.
Hades moves through him, too.

PITHIKOS

Aha!

THE QUEEN

Democrides? What have you to say for yourself?

DEMOCRIDES

Demmy sweepy.

THE QUEEN

Are you tired, Democrides?

PITHIKOS

Oh, you fucking idiot. He's gone and drunk the wine.

THE QUEEN

Is he inebriated?

PITHIKOS

The Hades elixir was in that cup.

CLITAGORA

Democrides, you utter fool. You are undeserving of your mantle. Hades shuns you.

DEMOCRIDES starts to cry like a baby. Hearing him, THE KING also starts to cry like a baby.

THE QUEEN

Unbelievable.

GUARD ONE

Ahem. Your most divine and sexy-in-an-ageless-classy-way grace. By the power vested in me as a backup King's guard, I hereby pronounce our King no longer fit to rule.

GUARD TWO

By the power vested in me also as a backup King's guard, I second Guard One's pronouncement. The people will riot in the streets if they see what has become of our great King, Nigel, and Democrides, the most esteemed member of our Ecclesia.

THE KING

Waaaaa!

Democrides!
No fair! Me want powwuh!

GUARD ONE

We will now salute our new head of state, Queen Karen.

GUARD 1, GUARD 2 and CLITAGORA bow to the queen. PITHIKOS does too, belatedly.

THE QUEEN

Thank you, guards.

PITHIKOS

Your majesty, please let me know if there's anything I can do for you -

THE QUEEN

Take him away, guards. His trial takes place tomorrow. Procure some hemlock before then.

PITHIKOS

What? I've done nothing!

THE QUEEN

Goodbye, Pithikos.

The GUARDS drag PITHIKOS out of the hall. By now, it is dawn, and the sunlight streams through the windows. THE KING and DEMOCRIDES are curled up together, fast asleep.

THE QUEEN

Not bad for a servant girl from Siracusa.

[THE QUEEN moves closer to CLITAGORA and takes her hands.]

You went a little overboard with all that Hades cult stuff though, don't you think?

CLITAGORA

Perhaps. We can sacrifice a baby goat to him later in case he's offended.

THE QUEEN

Let's do that.

CLITAGORA

Thanks, Karen.

THEY KISS.

THE QUEEN

Let's retire to bed, my crafty consort.

CLITAGORA

That's all I've wanted this whole night.

FIN