



The Phoenician Women, by Euripides
Recension/translation by David Travis

First Messenger

Messenger

Your son instructed seven captains
To station their companies at the seven gates –
Their task to match the enemy man for man. [1095]
He designated his reserves: horsemen and infantry,
To reinforce the walls' defense.

We waited on the towers; and then the Argive army was on the move,
Their white shields swarming down the hill, [1100]
And then, as they neared the ditches, they broke into a run,
Charging headlong against us.

A deafening roar rang out to split the sky – the battle-cry of ten thousand men –
The call of trumpets bursting from their ranks and from our walls...
At first we fought them off with bows and slings and javelins,
Raining down arrows and crushing stones, preventing their approach.
We were winning – then your son and Tydeus screamed out to their troops: [1145]
Rallying them to charge the gates.

“If we wait we will be ripped to pieces!” they shouted.
“Attack as one and we’ll prevail!”
Their soldiers heard that call and took courage; and all at once –
Infantry, cavalry, chariots – every son of Argos attacked...
Hundreds fell, their bloody heads laid open, [1150]
On our side too, men tumbling from the battlements like acrobats,
Breathing their lifeblood into the earth at the foot of the walls.

Then Atalanta's son, Arcadian by birth,
Hurls himself like a hurricane at the gate, [1155]
Shouting for axes and torches to raze the town;

But Periklymenos stopped his mouth – that son of the ocean-god
Heaved a massive coping stone from the parapet – a wagon-load –
And it shattered his yellow-haired head [1160]
And crashed through the seams of his skull.
His handsome face is veiled now in a curtain of blood.

He will never return to his beautiful mother.
Eteokles saw that these gates were secure,
And I followed him on to the next. [1165]

It was there that Tydeus had taken his stand
Surrounded by rows of Aetolian marksmen



Who hurled a cloud of javelins so thick against the tower face
That our men had abandoned their posts on the battlements.
But your son called them back, like a hunter to his hounds [1170]
He stopped their panic and rallied them back to their posts.
We rushed to another gate – and oh, how can I describe the fury of Kapaneus?
He came running against the wall with a long scaling ladder
Boasting that nothing will stop him from taking the city –
Not even the holy fire of Zeus. [1175]
Beneath a hail of stones and arrows, he climbed the ladder,
Crouched beneath his shield, screaming threats, step by step, rung by rung, [1180]
But just as he reached the top, just as he was climbing over,
Zeus struck him with lightning!
The air around us shook with the impact, the earth resounded -
Everyone ducked for cover; and...
We saw his body spinning, burning – legs and arms flung apart,
His hair streaming high, his blood raining down... Falling in flames... [1185]
His blackened corpse crashed into the ground....

When Adrastus saw that Zeus was against him,
He pulled his forces back beyond the ditches.
That was when we charged, [1190]
Driving our chariots into their ranks,
Behind them, our horsemen and infantry, spilling out of the gates,
Sprinting, spears levelled at the heart of the Argives.
We smashed into them. It was a massacre.
Men were dying all around me, cut down,
Hurled headlong from chariots, wheels careening, and the sound... [1195]
The dead lie in heaps. Corpse on corpse...
So for today at least the gates have held.
Who knows what the future may bring?