

CHARACTERS

HERMES messenger of the gods

ION servant of Apollo's shrine at Delphi, son of Apollo and Kreousa

CHORUS of Kreousa's female attendants

KREOUSA Ion's mother, Xouthos' wife, daughter of Erechtheus

XOUTHOS Kreousa's husband

TUTOR to Kreousa, retainer of Erechtheus' household

MESSENGER

PYTHIA priestess of the oracle at Delphi

ATHENA patron goddess of Athens

A crowd of people of Delphi

Line numbers in the right-hand margin of the text refer to the English translation only, and the Notes at p. 87 are keyed to these lines. The bracketed line numbers in the running head lines refer to the Greek text.

Dawn. Before the temple of Apollo at Delphi. The temple is decorated with images. To one side is a grove of laurel.

Enter HERMES.

HERMES Atlas! Bronze-backed Titan stooped forever
under the grinding weight of the house of the gods—
Atlas slept with a goddess and fathered Maia,
who slept with almighty Zeus and gave birth to me,
Hermes, the gods' lackey. I've come here to Delphi,
the world's core where Bright Apollo sings to men
what is, and chants forever what is to be.
There is a city—it has had its share of glory—
named for Athena of the golden spear. There shining
Apollo
took Kreousa, King Erechtheus' daughter, in wedlock, 10
raped her in a cave, under Athena's sacred hill.
Athenian lords call that place the Long Rocks.
Her father didn't know. Apollo wanted her
to bear the child, but in secret. When her time came,
she took the newborn to the cave in which Apollo claimed
her,
exposing it there to die in its cradle's wicker shell.
And yet, Kreousa honored ancient tradition.
When Erichthonios was born, pulled from the earth,
Athena twined two snakes around the infant,
placing him in the care of the daughters of Aglauros. 20
To this day, Athenian children wear golden coiled
snakes
at their throat. Thus, Kreousa,
swaddling her baby as best she could,
left him there to die.

My brother Apollo called for me:
*Brother, go to the earthborn children of Athens,
the glorious sacred city. Go to that cave,
get the baby with its swaddling clothes and cradle,*

bring him to my shrine at Delphi, and leave him at the door.

He is my son. I will take care of everything.

30

Apollo Who Speaks Two Ways at Once.

I did what he asked, brought the basket here
and tilted back the lid so the baby could be seen.

When the horses of dawn ran across the sky,
the priestess climbed the steps and found the child
there at the door. Outraged that some town girl
dared to drop her bastard here and pollute the shrine,
she ran to get rid of it, but suddenly,

with Apollo's help, her savagery gave way
to pity. She nursed him, raised him, the temple's child,
and doesn't know Apollo is his father,
or who the mother was that gave him birth.
The boy doesn't know who his parents are.

40

Growing up, he roamed free as a bird
around the sacred nest. As a young man,
the Delphian lords trusted him as steward
of Apollo's golden wealth. His life has been
one song of purity, serving the temple.

As for Kreousa, the boy's mother, she married Xouthos.
It went like this: War broke out between Athens and

Chalkis,

50

Xouthos allied himself with Athens, Athens won,
Kreousa was his reward, though he's not Athenian;
he's Achaean by birth, descendent of Aiolos and Zeus.
Since then, they've planted the garden year after year
and still are childless. So they've come here,
burning for children. Thus Apollo,
never as forgetful as he seems,

controls their fortunes and draws them here.

When Xouthos enters the shrine, the god will give him
his own son, declaring Xouthos the father.

60

His mother will not know he's really hers
until they return to Athens. Thus Apollo's "marriage"
will stay a secret, and the boy will take his rightful
place.

The god will name him Ion. Throughout Greece

he'll be famed as the founder of Ionia.

For now, I'll hide here in the laurel
and learn how things work out. Here he comes,
with his broom, to make the temple shine!
I will be the first of all the gods
to name divine Apollo's son. ION.

70

Exit HERMES.

*Enter ION with temple attendants. He carries a broom
made from laurel, a bow, and arrows. On his head he
wears a garland.*

ION Dawn's gleaming horses raise
the blazing sun above the earth
up through air steeped in fire
where light on light routs
the faint lingering stars
into the sacred dark.

The peaks of Parnassos, untrodden,
flare, smolder, and take for us
this day's charge of sun.
Smoke of desert myrrh
rises to the rooftop,
shrine of bright Apollo.

80

Inside, the priestess sits,
at the sacred tripod,
crying to the Greeks
songs Apollo murmurs in her.

(to temple attendants)

Go to the Kastalian spring,
purify yourselves, bathe
in its bright blessed dew.
When you return, to all
who ask about the oracle,
let your words be pure and kind.

90

With my broom and sacred garlands
 I will purify the entrance,
 as I have done so many years,
 calm the dust with water drops,
 watch for birds that foul
 the offerings, flutter them
 with my bow. No mother, no father
 watches over me. I serve
 Apollo's shrine that nurtures me.

100

Radiant work
 Day after day
 My broom of laurel whisking
 Water kissed
 Reborn
 Where everflowing streams
 Burst from sacred myrtle leaves
 All day
 I toil
 Sweeping clean the sacred shrine
 While the sun's wing soars

110

*O praise and bless
 Apollo Healer Shining One*

No work on earth as sweet
 As work I do for you
 Leto's son
 Where your prophetic voice
 Seers the brilliant air
 My slavish hand
 My glory and fame
 I serve
 Not mortal men
 But undying gods
 My constant work all easy constant joy
 Phoibos Father Bright God
 I praise
 Apollo Helper

120

Nurturing lord
 I call by name
 Phoibos Patron Father

130

*O praise and bless
 Apollo Healer Shining One*

(He puts down the broom.)

Enough of that. Now, a little water
 from the golden jar, to settle the dust.
 Water from the Kastalian spring, chaste
 as these hands that serve the god.
 May I always labor sweetly for him,
 or stop only if good fate comes.
 No! Get away from there!

140

(He takes up his bow.)

Stay clear of the golden roof.
 Fierce, mastering eagle,
 messenger of Zeus, your killing talons
 rule the sky, but I
 will kill you and all the others
 that range down from Parnassos
 to foul and pollute this holy place.
 O red-legged swan
 oaring across the air,
 Apollo tunes his lyre
 to your song. Go home to Delos,
 or I will drown your song in blood.
 My bow sings a different kind of song.
 You may not build your nests here.
 Go have your babies somewhere else,
 by the gentle Alpheios, or the sacred grove
 at the Isthmus. I won't let you poison
 the sacred offerings with your filth.
 I do not want to kill message-bringers
 from the gods, but that is my work,

150

160

my service to Apollo's shrine,
my life's eternal source of food and care.

Enter CHORUS, admiring the temple images.

CHORUS So Athens is *not* the only place! Look!
Images of the gods housed here, too!
There's Apollo, Protector.

Fantastic! The light!
It splits, peering
above the face of Apollo's house.

Look at this.
Herakles, son of Zeus,
grabbing and killing the Hydra
with his golden sword.

And who is *that*
with the blazing torch?
It must be a story we tell at our
weaving:

Iolaos, sharing
Herakles' toils.

Over here! Can't you see it?
Bellerophon riding Pegasos,
killing the fiery Chimaera.
They're all tangled.

How about *this*?
Stone carvings,
dragontailed giants
fighting the gods.

Over there you can see
Athena shaking her shield,
that Gorgon snake-nest,
at the giant Enkelados.

Yes! I see Athena.
She is our goddess.

And here is Zeus, poised to strike
from afar, his lightning
blazing at both ends.

I see it!

And Mimas
burnt to ash
by heaven's fire.

And Dionysos! His wand 200
wrapped in peaceful ivy
kills another giant, son of
earth.
Roaring Bacchos!

(to ION)

You there, may we enter the temple
barefoot as we are?

ION It's not allowed.

CHORUS Will you tell us
something else?

ION What?

CHORUS Does it really exist? Is it really here,
the navel of the earth, inside Apollo's
temple? 210

ION Wreathed in garlands, and on each side are Gorgons.

CHORUS Just as we've heard.

ION If you want an oracle from the god,
offer grain to the fire. But to go inside,
you must sacrifice a sheep.

CHORUS I understand. We won't trespass.
What we see outside is enough;
it delights and charms the eye.

ION Look around as much as you like.

CHORUS Our mistress said
we could look to our hearts' content.

220

ION To what house do you belong?

CHORUS A royal house, one
in Athena's city—
here's our mistress now.

Enter KREOUSA.

ION You must be wellborn, woman, whoever you are,
as your bearing and manners show.
Appearances are usually sound evidence
of a person's birth and standing.
What's wrong? Why are you weeping?
I'm astonished—everyone else rejoices
at the sight of Apollo's shrine,
but you shut your eyes and wet
those noble cheeks with tears.
One look at the god's holy cavern,
and tears flood your eyes.

230

KREOUSA You're a kind and sensitive child.
You're a stranger, yet you ask why I'm sad.
Seeing Apollo's house, I measured back
an old memory. I feel torn
between two places—my body is here,
my mind elsewhere.

240

O why are women
so miserable? And gods so vicious?
What justice can we ever find on earth
when the injustice of the mighty destroys us?

ION Something's hurting you. Does it mean . . .

KREOUSA Nothing. I've taken my shot.
I'll be silent. No need to dwell on it.

ION Who are you? Where are you from?
What name do I call you?

250

KREOUSA Kreousa. Daughter of Erechtheus. My home is Athens.

ION A great city. Noble origins, glorious ancestors. How
lucky you are.

KREOUSA I'm lucky in this, in nothing else.

ION There's a story we've all heard . . .

KREOUSA What do you want to know, stranger?

ION Your grandfather, Erichthonios, was born from
the earth.

KREOUSA Yes. His noble blood hasn't helped me much.

ION Did Athena really pull him from the earth's womb?

KREOUSA Yes, with virgin hands. She did not give birth to him.

ION Just like the pictures of it.

260

KREOUSA She gave him to Kekrops' daughters, to keep him hidden.

ION But they opened up the cradle, looked inside

KREOUSA and bloodied the rocks when they jumped to their death.

ION Yes! And I wonder about another story.

KREOUSA Ask. I have time.

ION Did Erechtheus, your father, really sacrifice your sisters?

KREOUSA For Athens' sake, he had the courage to kill them.

ION You alone were spared?

KREOUSA I was a baby in my mother's arms.

ION And a rift in the earth hides your father?

270

KREOUSA He was killed by Poseidon.

ION And there's a place called the Long Rocks . . .

KREOUSA That! Why do you ask?

ION Apollo honors it. His lightning blazes there.

KREOUSA Honors? It did *me* no good.

ION You hate what the god loves most?

KREOUSA It's nothing. We share a secret, that cave and I.

ION Your husband? Is he Athenian?

KREOUSA No, not a citizen; he's an outlander.

ION Obviously wellborn.

280

KREOUSA Xouthos, born of Aiolos, son of Zeus.

ION Can a foreigner marry an Athenian?

KREOUSA There's a city neighboring Athens—Euboea.

ION The sea marks its boundaries.

KREOUSA My husband helped Athens to sack it.

ION And you were his reward?

KREOUSA His war prize.

ION You're here without him?

KREOUSA With him, but he stopped at the shrine of Trophonios.

ION To look around, or to get an answer?

290

KREOUSA Just one word, from Trophonios and Apollo.

ION About crops? About children?

KREOUSA We're childless, after years of trying.

ION You've never had children? Not even one?

KREOUSA Apollo knows I have no children.

ION Poor woman, lucky in so many ways, unlucky in this.

KREOUSA Who are you? Your mother must be a happy woman.

ION They call me Apollo's servant, and that's what I am.

KREOUSA Were you an offering from some city? Or sold as
a slave?

ION I know one thing: I am Apollo's.

300

KREOUSA Now *I* pity *you*, stranger.

ION Because I don't know who my mother or father is.

KREOUSA And you live here in the temple?

ION No matter where I sleep, this is my home.

KREOUSA How old were you when you came?

ION They say I was a baby.

KREOUSA Who gave you milk?

ION No breast fed me. But I was raised . . .

KREOUSA By whom? Your misfortune sounds like mine.

ION I call Apollo's priestess "mother."

310

KREOUSA How have you survived?

ION The altars feed me, and every stranger who visits the
shrine.

KREOUSA The poor woman who had you! Who was she?

ION A woman treated wrongly, and I'm her son.

KREOUSA You're fed, you're well-dressed . . .

ION I'm Apollo's slave, my clothing comes from him.

KREOUSA You mean you've never tried to find your parents?

ION I have no evidence to go on.

KREOUSA I know a woman who suffered like your mother.

ION Who is she? If only she could share my burden.

320

KREOUSA She's the reason I arrived here before my husband.

ION To do what? Maybe I can help.

KREOUSA To put a secret question to the god.

ION You can tell me. I might help arrange it.

KREOUSA Her story . . . No. I'm ashamed.

ION Shame is a lazy goddess; you'll get no help from her.

KREOUSA With Apollo. My friend says she slept with him.

ION Apollo? With a woman? No.

KREOUSA She had his child, too, and didn't tell her father.

ION Impossible. A man did it but she's ashamed to admit it.

330

KREOUSA She says no, and she has suffered terribly.

ION Suffered? She slept with a god!

KREOUSA She had his child, then exposed it.

ION Did it survive? Where is this child?

KREOUSA No one knows. That's why I'm here, to ask the oracle.

ION If the baby died . . .

KREOUSA She thinks wild beasts killed him.

ION On what evidence?

KREOUSA She went back to find him—he was gone.

ION Were there traces of blood?

340

KREOUSA She says not, and she combed the ground.

ION How long ago was this?

KREOUSA The child would be about your age.

ION The god was unjust. I pity the woman.

KREOUSA She never had another child.

ION But what if Apollo took him, then raised him in secret?

KREOUSIA No right to act alone! He should share that joy.

ION Your story chimes with my own grief.

KREOUSIA O stranger, somewhere an unhappy mother yearns
for you.

ION Don't lead me back to pain I have forgotten.

350

KREOUSIA I'll be silent. Will you help me get an answer?

ION If I can. But there's some trouble with your case.

KREOUSIA Everything she does brings trouble.

ION How can the god reveal what he wants to hide?

KREOUSIA All Greeks share the oracle openly.

ION The god acted shamefully. Don't challenge him now.

KREOUSIA But she suffers painfully for what happened.

ION No one will give you this oracle.
Apollo would punish whoever makes him seem,
even justly, wicked in his own temple.
Forget what you came for. No one should ask
questions that oppose the god. We can offer
blood of lambs, we can read the flight of birds,
but we beg for trouble if we force gods to say
what they're unwilling to say. Twist truth from them,
their blessings will be twisted,
although we gain from what they freely give.

360

CHORUS Different men suffer in many different ways.
Who among humankind ever uncovers
one real happiness in life?

370

KREOUSIA Apollo, twice unjust to that unseen woman.
Unjust here, unjust there, you failed to save

the one you should have saved, your own child.
You won't use your prophetic gift to say
if that child thrives, or is gone with nothing left
to mark his memory. But that's how it must be,
if the god won't speak and I'm stopped from knowing.

There's my husband, Xouthos, coming from
the shrine.

Be silent. Not one word of what we've said—
I might be held at fault for keeping secrets.
The story wouldn't unfold as we would like.
There would be trouble. Trouble, too often
it's all men seem to think we're good for.
Men mix us all together, evil women
with the good. Misfortune is our birthright.

380

Enter XOUTHOS.

XOUTHOS First, I greet Apollo, and offer him
my blessings. Then you, my wife.
Did you worry? I know I'm late.

KREOUSIA It's nothing, it's all right, I'm glad you're here.
Tell me what Trophonius prophesied.
Will we both have children?

390

XOUTHOS He refused to guess at Apollo's will.
But he did say this: I won't go home
childless. And neither will you.

KREOUSIA O Leto, Queen mother of Phoibos, bless our journey.
Let the pieces of our past dealings with your son
soon fall into place.

XOUTHOS So be it. Does anyone here speak for the god?

ION Outside, I speak for Apollo. Inside, Delphi's nobles,
seated by the sacred tripod, will deal with you.

400

XOUTHOS Good. That's all I need to know. I'm going inside.
They say the common sacrifice, made for all like me

who came for oracles, has turned out well,
so I want to get my answer now. Kreousa,
spread laurel around the altars. Pray that I bring
good prophecies from Apollo's house.

XOUTHOS enters the temple.

KREOUSA So be it. After what he's done,
the love that ties me to Apollo
is changed. But if he heals this wound,
I will accept it, because he is a god.

410

Exit KREOUSA.

ION Why does this strange woman talk so wildly
against Apollo? She must really love her friend,
or else she's covering up something
that begs to stay hidden. Anyway,
what is the daughter of Erechtheus to me?
Not a thing. I'll fetch holy water and pour it
into golden bowls. I really must confront Apollo.
What is he *doing*? Rape a girl, then desert her?
Father children secretly, not caring if they live
or die? Don't. Not you. You have such power,
your power ought to serve what's right.
If a man acts badly, the gods punish him.
It's not right for you gods to violate laws
you yourselves have forged. Let's pretend,
for the sake of argument, that you
and Poseidon and great Zeus who rules the heavens
enforced the rape laws against yourselves.
What a price you'd pay! Your temples
would be empty, lifeless, barren.
It's not right to let yourselves go,
swamped by a moment's pleasure.
Or to blame us for copying what you
consider good. You are our teachers.

420

430

Exit ION.

CHORUS Born without labor
Delivered from the summit
From the head of Zeus
By Titan Prometheus

O Athena
We beg you
Come to us

440

Soar down
Blessed Victory
From the golden
Halls of Zeus

To the earth's hearth
The world's navel stone
Let the dance go round
The sacred tripod

Athena O come
Tell Apollo what we want
Artemis untouched girl
Apollo's twin

450

Virgin goddesses
Plead our case our cause
For the ancient house of Erechtheus
Let the oracle be straight and clear
We've waited so long
For the great gift *Children*

Lush endless happiness
Belongs to those who see
Shining in their children
Golden generations yet to come
Sons protecting a house at war
And bringing love in peaceful times

460

Palace? Wealth? Give me instead
Children of my own blood
I hate not having children I detest
Those who think that's good
Let me have moderate blessings
Let me have children

470

O Pan!
 Above your knitted caves
 Near the Long Rocks
 Three spectral daughters
 Dance in wet grass
 Before Athena's shrine

Flute song rises
 From the sunless caves
 Where you play your pipes
 And where a wretched girl
 Exposed Apollo's child
 As blood-feast for birds

That was a bitter wedding
 And I have never heard
 In tales or at my weaving
 Of any happiness
 That ever came to children
 Born of gods and men

Enter ION.

ION Women, still waiting for your mistress?
 The temple is sweet with incense.
 Is Xouthos still inside asking about children?

CHORUS He is. No sign of him yet.
 Wait. I think someone's coming now.
 The door's opening. He's coming out.

XOUTHOS, *leaving the temple, sees ION and approaches him as if to embrace him.*

XOUTHOS Ah lovely boy! What a nice way to begin.

ION I beg your pardon? Please watch what you're doing.

XOUTHOS I want to hold you and kiss you.

ION What? Has some god made you crazy?

XOUTHOS I know what I'm doing. I want to kiss my dearest boy.

XOUTHOS *tries to hug ION, knocking the garland from the boy's head.*

ION I belong to the god. Keep your hands to yourself!

XOUTHOS I claim what's rightfully mine.

ION You'll claim an arrow in your ribs if you don't back off.

XOUTHOS You run from the one who loves you most?

ION I don't negotiate with lunatics.

XOUTHOS Kill me, then. Burn my corpse. Go ahead, kill your father.

ION Father? That's outrageous!

XOUTHOS Let me explain. You have to know the whole story.

ION Story?

XOUTHOS I'm your father, you're my son.

ION Who said that?

XOUTHOS Apollo, who raised you, knowing you were mine.

ION Your version of the facts.

XOUTHOS Apollo's! The oracle told me.

ION Told a riddle and you got it wrong.

[illegible]

ION What did Apollo say?

XOUTHOS The first person I met

ION Met?

XOUTHOS Coming from the temple

ION Was supposed to . . .

XOUTHOS Be my own son.

ION Son, or someone's gift?

XOUTHOS Gift. The gift of my own son.

ION I'm the one you met?

XOUTHOS The one and only child.

ION An odd coincidence.

XOUTHOS Amazing, for both of us.

ION My God! Who is my mother?

XOUTHOS That I can't say.

ION Apollo didn't tell you?

XOUTHOS I was so happy I forgot to ask.

ION Then I was born from the earth—Earth was my mother!

XOUTHOS Son, the earth doesn't have
 children.

ION But how can I be yours?

XOUTHOS Let the god puzzle it out.

ION Why not work it out ourselves?

XOUTHOS That's even better!

ION Perhaps you once had an affair?

XOUTHOS When I was young and foolish.

ION Before you took Kreousa?

XOUTHOS Never since.

ION Maybe you got me then.

XOUTHOS The time fits right.

ION Then how did I *get* here?

XOUTHOS I have no answer to that.

ION Athens is so far away.

XOUTHOS It's a real puzzle.

ION Have you been to Delphi before?

[illegible]

ION Where did you stay?

XOUTHOS With a Delphian, and there
 were girls from Delphi.

ION You were initiated, so to speak?

XOUTHOS

The god was in us all. 530

ION So you were drunk?

XOUTHOS

The pleasures of Dionysos can't be
denied.

ION That's when you fathered me.

XOUTHOS

Now, child, fate has found
you out.

ION But how did I get to the temple?

XOUTHOS

The girl must have
exposed you here.

ION At least I'm no slave.

XOUTHOS

And I'm your father. Accept me.

ION I have no right to doubt the god.

XOUTHOS

That's more like it.

ION What else could I want?

XOUTHOS

Now you see what you need
to see.

ION I am son of the son of Zeus.

XOUTHOS

Yes.

ION You're really my father?

XOUTHOS

If we trust Apollo's word.

(They embrace.)

ION Hello, father.

XOUTHOS

That word is all love.

ION This is the day

XOUTHOS

that fills me with joy. 540

ION Mother, whoever you are, I burn to see you
Even more than before, to press you to me.
But if you're dead, what's left for me to do?

CHORUS We share your happiness but want our mistress
to have the chance for children,
to brighten the house of Erechtheus.

XOUTHOS My son, the god spoke straight. He let me find you
and brought us together. You have the father
you did not know you had. I feel the same desire
to find your mother; I, too, need to know
what sort of woman she was. In time,
maybe together we can find her. 550
Leave this place, leave your homeless life
at Apollo's shrine. Come share my intentions
in Athens. My wealth and power are yours.
You will be rich, noble, not sick
with poverty and namelessness.
Why so silent? Don't stare at the ground.
There's something on your mind.
Don't turn this father's joy to terror. 560

ION Things seen close up are not the same
seen far away. Things in the distance glow and charm.
I'm happy to find my father, but now
I ask myself: What will life be like in Athens?
They say Athenians are earth's children,
all native to their place. I'd be twice afflicted,
the bastard son of a foreign king. Powerless,
I'd be a cipher. But if I join political life

try to be someone, the weak and poor would
hate me.

Capable men who, keeping their own counsel, 570
avoid political life, would take me
for a fool who speaks too quickly
in a city filled with fear.

And public men, acting in Athens' interest,
can use the vote to shut me out.

That is how these things tend to be, father.

Men in power are primed to fight
their rivals.

Besides,

I'd be foreign goods in your own house.
Your wife is barren, she will feel all alone 580
in her grief, estranged from your good luck.
She will hate me, and with good reason,
and you would have to take her side. If not,
your household will be ripped apart. Women
stab their husbands to death and feed them poison.
And yet, I pity your wife, father. She's so wellborn,
she shouldn't suffer, as she grows old,
the disease of childlessness.

And power—

power enthralls. All order on the outside,
but torment inside. Is it happiness 590
to wear out your life glancing left and right,
vulnerable on every side?

I'd rather live as a man in the crowd
than rule as king. A ruler learns to love
the worst of men, and must protect himself
from the best, since they are the ones he fears.
You say that gold wins out, that wealth is pleasure.
But the rich man, counting his gold, guards it, too;
all he hears is gossip and slander.
Such wealth is a task. I prefer a life 600
that's simple, painless, balanced.

Please listen, father. What I had here was good,
time to myself, the dearest thing a man can have.
Nobody bullies me. No wild crowds.

A trivial thing, I know,
but people here don't push each other around.
To the gods I offer prayers, and comfort
to my fellow men, serving those who are happy.
People coming or going, I treat them all the same.
My smile is always fresh. What all men want, 610
but lose in the asking, is mine already
by nature and habit together,
in Apollo's service. Father,
when I think it through, I'm sure
I'm better off here. Let me live by my own lights.
The gift is the same. The joy of great things
looms in small things too.

CHORUS True words, but only if our lady sees,
somewhere in this, joy she can call her own.

(to ION)

XOUTHOS Enough of such talk. You must learn, my son, 620
to be happy. Now, to start things off,
I want a common feast here where I found you,
and proper sacrifice; we should have done so
when you were born. I'll present you
as my special guest—as an onlooker, though,
not as my son—and we will do the same
in Athens. I don't want to hurt my wife.
She's still childless; she would suffer too much.
When the time is right, I will prevail
on her to let you have the throne. 630

And I will name you Ion. It fits the way we met.
Ion, the first I set my eye on when I came out.
So, invite your friends to the feast.
Say your goodbyes, then leave this city of Delphi.

(to CHORUS)

And you, not a word. Absolute silence.
One word of this to my wife and I'll have you killed.

Exit XOUTHOS.

ION I'll go. But one thing's missing.
 Until I find my mother, my life rings hollow.
 O father, if only she were Athenian,
 then I could speak out as I want.
 A foreigner, coming to a pure city,
 might call himself a citizen and think
 he belongs. But his tongue's a slave.
 He doesn't have the right to speak his mind.

640

Exit ION.

CHORUS

Shrieks, cries, I see more, worse,
 to come. Her husband with his own son,
 and she barren, left all alone.

Wrecked harmonies break
 from your prophetic song,
 O Leto's child, Apollo.

650

And what of this boy?
 Raised around the temple,
 who *is* he?

What womb held him? The oracle
 sounds false; I dread to think
 where it will lead.

Strange oracle bearing
 strange things; the boy
 has some cunning and chance.
 Why *that* child, an outsider born
 of other blood? Am I wrong?

660

Friends, do we tell her?
 Stab her with this news?

Her husband—with him
 she shared it all, every hope.

Now, as he learns to be happy,
 she drowns in all that happens,

fading into old age
 while he neglects her.

Did he share? No. He took.
 Took wife, wealth, palace.

670

Outlander from the start.
 Let him *die*. He robs my queen.

May he suffer worse than she.
 Let the gods turn back his prayers
 and his offerings burn barren, unsavored.

She is the one we love.
 The king makes sacrifice and feast—
 a new father for a new son.

Up there! The wine god ramping
 on the mountain crag,
 his pine torch blazing both ends
 for his wild ones to follow,
 their slender feet
 dancing through the night . . .

680

Parnassos! Let the boy die here.
 Don't let him come to Athens.
 Our city doesn't need this foreigner.
 To survive, we only need
 the pure untainted
 bloodline of Erechtheus.

690

Enter KREOUSA with TUTOR. She helps him make his way.

KREOUSA Old man, my father Erechtheus chose you long ago
 to be his children's guardian. Now we'll learn

what Apollo Who Speaks Two Ways has prophesied.
Come along, if you can. It's good to share good news
with a friend. If the prophecy turns ugly,
in your kind eyes I'll find sweet consolation.
You served my father well. Though I'm your queen,
I'll show you every kindness in return.

TUTOR Daughter, your father would be proud.
You're noble, just as he was,
truly one of Earth's children.
But don't let go. Help me up a bit.
We must all *ascend* to prophecy. These old legs
need someone to share their work.
Young help is the perfect cure.

KREOUSA Careful, watch your step.

TUTOR Slow down, child.
My mind works faster than my feet.

KREOUSA Use your stick, lean on it.

TUTOR It's like me, it doesn't see too well.

KREOUSA True, but don't give up.

TUTOR Not willingly, but I can't use what I don't have.

(to CHORUS)

KREOUSA Women! Like sisters we've shared stories
at the loom. Tell me, then, what the oracle
told my husband about children.
Give me good news, and you'll find
I don't forget those who treat me well.

CHORUS O god!

TUTOR A bad beginning.

CHORUS Poor woman!

TUTOR Bad things in store, for all of us.

CHORUS What to do? Death waits for us.

KREOUSA There's fear in this song.

CHORUS Do we speak? Keep silent? What do we do?

KREOUSA Speak. You have something for me.

CHORUS It must be said, though I die twice for telling.
There is for you, dear lady, no child to take
into your arms and hold to your breast.

KREOUSA Then let me die.

TUTOR Dear daughter . . .

KREOUSA Pure pain
shrieks in me.
It must end here.

TUTOR Child.

KREOUSA *Ai Ai*
Grief stabs
my heart.

TUTOR Don't cry out yet.

KREOUSA The grief is here.

TUTOR Not till we know . . .

KREOUSA What's left to know?

TUTOR Whether your husband shares the grief,
or if you suffer alone.

CHORUS Apollo gave *him* a son, old man—
a private joy that cuts her off.

KREOUSA Evil, and worse, worse yet
rips through me with every word.

TUTOR This "son" you mentioned, is he waiting
for a mother, or is he born already?

750

CHORUS Already born, and grown,
Apollo's gift. We saw it all.

KREOUSA What? Unspeakable!
Don't tell me that.
It scalds my ears.

TUTOR Tell me clearly now, precisely,
what the oracle said, and who the child is.

CHORUS The first one seen, the first your husband met,
leaving the shrine—he was the son, the god's gift.

KREOUSA No! And *my* child?
I'll be barren, bereft,
childless, alone in my house.

760

TUTOR What happened then? Whom did he meet?
Did he see anyone when he came out?

CHORUS Remember, my queen, the young man
sweeping the temple? He is the child.

KREOUSA If I could soar from this earth, this Greece,
through the light-steeped air
to far fields of western stars . . .
O friends, I'm torn too much by grief.

770

TUTOR His name. What name did his father give him?
Has the oracle revealed that, too?

CHORUS Ion. Because he was the first one seen.

TUTOR And the mother?

CHORUS That I can't say.

I do know they've gone to make a birthday offering
in the sacred tent. Your husband took the boy, in
secret.

He plans a sacrifice and public feast for his new son.

TUTOR We've been betrayed, both of us, by your husband.
He has designed events to serve himself
and force us from your father's ancient house.
My love for you outsteps my old regard for him.
The facts speak for themselves: He came to Athens
a foreigner, full of promise; by marrying you,
he took up your inheritance. But soon he began
to sleep with other women, begetting children,
and all in secret. In *secret*, because he sees
you can't have children, and he won't share that
affliction.

780

So he takes to bed some slave girl, who bears
his child,
who he then gives over to a friend in Delphi.
Nameless, bred in hiding, the boy grows up
like a sacred beast on holy ground until, finally,
your husband persuades you to come to Delphi
because you're still childless. By now, the boy
is grown.

790

It's not the god who lied, it's your husband,
patient all these years while he spun his web.
If we expose his treachery here, he'll simply
blame the god. But if he makes it back to Athens,
he'll contrive to bring his son to power.
And that name! A travesty of origins—
"Ion." The first he set his eye on!
There's no "first" here, just an old conspiracy.

800

CHORUS I hate clever men whose talents
disguise vicious intent.
I'll take my friends from simple honest men,
not from those too clever to be good.

TUTOR The worst for you is still to come,
 when a slave's man-child, a nameless no man's child,
 is made master of your house. Your husband
 had another choice, bad though it was—
 he could have said *We need a son, of a freeborn*
woman.

810

You're barren; I can save the house. If you refused,
 he could have married one of his own kind.
 Now you must act. Act as any woman should.
 Kill your husband. Sword, poison, deceit, anything.
 Kill the youngster, too. But do it now,
 before they murder you. Bitter enemies
 can never share the same house.
 I'll share the work, and the bloodshed.
 I'll go now where they're feasting.
 Live or die, I'll repay all the kindness
 you have shown me. A slave's disgrace
 lies only in his name. In virtue
 he can stand equal to a freeborn man.

820

CHORUS We, too, will share with you what happens,
 either death or a decent life.

KREOUSA Silent still, Kreousa?
 Stop now and say no more?
 Or flood down light
 on that dark bed?
 What holds you back? Match
 your husband's shame with your own?

830

My husband, traitor, robs me
 of house, robs me of children,
 hope's human shape, that hope
 now gone. Why silent about
 that other marriage, silent
 about that wept-for child?

By Zeus' starry throne, by Athena,
 mistress of our citadel who reigns

at the sacred shore of Triton's lake,
 I will not hide my marriage,
 but heal myself and tell,
 as tears flood my eyes and my soul breaks,
 how men and gods betrayed me,
 disgraced me in their beds.

840

From seven strings
 strung between the bull's bright horns,
 you pluck soft songs,
 O Leto's child, Apollo.
 To sunlight's jury I cry
 my charge against you:

850

Bright God,
 you came to me, sunburst
 in your hair, in the fields
 where I was plucking
 soft yellow petals
 that fluttered to my lap
 and sang back dawn's bright gold.

Your hand grabbed and locked
 this pale wrist, dragged me
 to the cave bed, while I
 shrieked *Mother*. There you worked
 Aphrodite's shameless grace.

860

In misery, I bore you a son.
 With a mother's terror,
 I put him back, left him
 to die on our dark bed,
 where you yoked me to darkness.
 Ah, I wept, alone. Now the child
 is gone, a feast for vultures,
 my son and yours.

870

You

Lord of song
 you all the while
 sing self-praise, you
 chant the future

before the golden throne
at the earth's core.

Into your ear
I scream these words:

Vile coward lover,
you forced me to be your wife,
now you give my husband a son
and my house to house him.
You owe *him* nothing. Our child,
mine and yours, you left to die,
prey for birds, stripped
of cradle clothes his mother made.
Dejos, where your mother
labored you into life,
hates you. And the laurel
sprung up there
beside the feathery, bloodroot palm—
the laurel hates you,
seed of highest Zeus.

CHORUS The treasure hoard of evil opens.
It would make the whole world weep.

TUTOR Daughter, your face fills me with pity.
I feel I'm going mad—no sooner
do you clear my mind of recent trouble
than another wave of words shocks me,
surging away from evils we've just known
toward more wretched painful ones to come.
So, now, voice your charge against Apollo.
Who is the child? Where did you bury him?
Go over it for me once again.

KREOUSA I feel shame, but I will speak.

TUTOR I know how to share your sorrow.

KREOUSA Listen. There is a cave, on the north slope
of the acropolis, called the Long Rocks.

TUTOR I know it. Near Pan's shrine and altar.

KREOUSA I struggled there, it was dreadful.

TUTOR Say it. I'll grieve with you.

KREOUSA The Bright God forced himself on me. My miserable
wedding.

TUTOR I was right when I thought . . .

KREOUSA You guessed?

TUTOR Your hidden illness. The sighs and groans.

KREOUSA Now I can reveal my secret.

TUTOR But how did you hide Apollo's "marriage"?

KREOUSA Can you bear to hear it? I had his child.

TUTOR Where? Did you labor all alone?

KREOUSA All alone, in the cave that watched him rape me.

TUTOR Where's the child? Child! You have a child!

KREOUSA He's dead, exposed to wild beasts.

TUTOR Dead? Apollo did nothing to help?

KREOUSA Nothing. The child grew up in Hades' house.

TUTOR But who exposed him? Surely not you.

KREOUSA Yes. I swaddled him, and I left him.

TUTOR Who else knew? Who went with you?

KREOUSA Misery, secrecy—they never forget what's hidden.

930

TUTOR Your own child, how could you just leave it in
the cave?

KREOUSA How? With a torrent of words and pity.

TUTOR Ah, god,
cold-hearted what you did, but Apollo did worse.

KREOUSA You should have seen him, his tiny hands reaching
out . . .

TUTOR Hungry for your breast.

KREOUSA That place was his, and I denied it. How I wronged
him.

TUTOR You must have somehow hoped . . .

KREOUSA that Apollo would save his own son.

TUTOR Our noble house—a storm breaks!

940

KREOUSA Why hide your head and weep?

TUTOR You and your father's name are doomed.

KREOUSA For mortals, life is change; nothing remains itself.

TUTOR No more pity, daughter, not now. Put aside this loss.

KREOUSA But what must I do? Events paralyze me.

TUTOR Pay back the god who first did you wrong.

KREOUSA I'm only a woman. He's a god!

TUTOR Burn down his shrine, oracle of the twisted god!

KREOUSA I'm afraid. I suffer enough.

TUTOR Then do what's possible. Kill your husband.

950

KREOUSA But he was, once, a good man to me.

TUTOR Then kill the child who stands against you.

KREOUSA Is that possible? How? It's something I would do.

TUTOR Your servants have weapons.

KREOUSA Let's go. Where do we get at him?

TUTOR Inside the sacred tent where he celebrates with friends.

KREOUSA Too much in the open. Besides, slaves are weak.

TUTOR And you're playing the coward. How would you do
it, then?

KREOUSA I do have a plan, insidious, workable.

TUTOR I'm with you.

960

KREOUSA Then listen. You know about the war of the giants.

TUTOR Earth's children fought the gods on the great plain

KREOUSA and Earth produced the awful Gorgon

TUTOR to help her children fight against the gods.

KREOUSA And Zeus' daughter, Pallas Athena, killed the monster.

TUTOR I heard that story long ago.

KREOUSA How Athena skinned it, made it into a breastplate,

TUTOR her armor, called the aegis

KREOUSA because the eager Gorgon struck against the gods.

TUTOR What did it look like?

970

KREOUSA A breastplate linked with rings and rings of snakes.

TUTOR What has this to do with revenge?

KREOUSA You know Erichthonios?

TUTOR Your ancestor, sprung from earth.

KREOUSA When he was newborn Athena gave him . . .

TUTOR What? Say it, get it out!

KREOUSA two drops of blood from the Gorgon.

TUTOR Which have some power against men?

KREOUSA One kills, the other cures.

TUTOR But how could a baby keep . . .

980

KREOUSA In a gold bracelet, passed down father to son.

TUTOR Till Erechtheus died and passed it on to you?

KREOUSA (*revealing the bracelet*)
I still keep it on my wrist.

TUTOR A double gift from the goddess.

KREOUSA One drop seeped from the hollow veins.

TUTOR What power does it have?

KREOUSA Repels disease, nurtures life.

TUTOR And the heartblood's second drop?

KREOUSA Kills. Poison from the Gorgon snakes.

TUTOR Do you mix them or keep them separate?

990

KREOUSA Always separate. Good and evil do not mix.

TUTOR O child, dearest girl, you have all you need!

KREOUSA With this the boy dies. You will kill him.

TUTOR You say where and how, I will do it.

KREOUSA In Athens, when he comes to my house.

TUTOR It won't work. And you criticized my plans.

KREOUSA I think I see the problem.

TUTOR Even if you're not the one who kills him, you'll
be blamed.

KREOUSA The old story of the wicked stepmother.

TUTOR Kill him here, now, where you can deny it all.

1000

KREOUSA Yes, and savor the bloodshed sooner.

TUTOR And you can keep your husband's secret to yourself.

KREOUSA (*giving him the bracelet*)

You know what to do? Take from my wrist
Athena's ancient golden handiwork and go where
my husband
makes his secret sacrifice. When they finish eating,
and are about to pour libations for the gods,

put a drop of poison into the boy's cup.
His cup. No one else's. Keep it apart, just for him,
who wants to rule my house. Once he drinks it,
he will never come to glorious Athens.
He will die here, rooted to this ground.

1010

TUTOR Hurry back to where you're staying
while I manage everything here.

(Exit KREOUSIA.)

Old as I am, blood still runs fast enough in me—
that much I have in common with the boy.
I'm on the side of kings, if I can hunt the enemy
and share the murder that drives the boy from
our house!
When fortune favors us, the right thing is to be good.
No law or custom holds us back when we
kill enemies who would kill us if they could.

1020

(Exit TUTOR.)

CHORUS Crossroads Queen, who guides all things
that loom out on roads by night,
Demeter's daughter, Queen of Returns,
guide through this noonday light
the brimming cup,
death's portion caught
from the Gorgon's slashed throat.
Guide our queen's plot,
keep foreigners out,
let our city be ruled
only by the children
of the noble house of Erechtheus!

1030

If the boy's death goes unfulfilled,
the moment's lost. If her sum
of hope and purpose fails, she dies,
throat snapped by a cord

or heart pierced.
Agony
poured upon her suffering,
but death is change
at last complete.
Never in the sun's light
could she bear to see
others in her father's house.

1040

Hymns sung to Dionysos,
dawn on the twentieth day,
torchlight rivering down
from Athens to Eleusis.
There celebrants
dance round the spring.
Imagine Ion there,
spying on the mysteries!
The shimmering sweep of stars,
the dancing moon,
and fifty water spirits dancing
by the everflowing river running down to sea—
all hymn
golden-crowned Persephone
and Demeter
terrible fruitful mother!
Apollo's beggar
hopes to rule there
claiming everything we've worked for as his own.

1050

1060

O Singers
tell how women reign
more pious than unjust men.
Change your jangling songs
that cry *unlawful* and *unholy*
at a woman's love, a woman's bed.
Sing a new and grimmer tale:
tell what men do to us.
The son of Zeus, oblivious,
childless with our queen

1070

turns
toward some other,
shares another's bed
and finds a bastard child.

Enter MESSENGER.

MESSENGER You women, where can I find the queen,
daughter of Erechtheus?
I've run all over town looking for her.

1080

CHORUS You're one of us. Tell us what happened.

MESSENGER We're hunted, our queen most of all.
The men of Delphi say they'll stone her to death.

CHORUS What are you saying? Have they found us out,
our plot to murder the boy, everything?

MESSENGER Exactly. And you'll be punished, too.

CHORUS How did they know?

MESSENGER Apollo uncovered it. He saw right edging out wrong
and refused to be defiled.

CHORUS Tell us how he knew.
Tell it all, we beg you.
Knowing will make it easier to die.

1090

MESSENGER When our queen's husband left the temple with
his son,
thankful for the first sight of the newborn boy, he went
to make sacrifice to the birth gods, up on Parnassos,
splashing blood on the twin crags of Dionysos that
gleam by day
and flicker with torches at night. *Wait here and set up
the tent,*
the father told the son. *If the sacrifice takes too long,*

start the feast without me. He rounded up some calves
and left, while the boy went straight to work.

1100

He erected the frame—roofpoles, guylines, all that—
then dressed the tentskin over the bones. Not a tent,
really,
but a billowing, broadbacked pavilion, measured off
exactly,
“from the middle point,” as the wise men say.

Foursquare,
a hundred feet to a side, huge enough to house all
of Delphi.
Most of all he wanted the walls cambered just right,
to hold off noon's burst of sun, and sundown's sharp
spilled radiance. Then he brought out sacred tapestries,
from the temple's secret hoard. Dazzling,
fabulous bolts of cloth that Herakles, son of Zeus,
seized in his war with the Amazons then offered to
Apollo.

1110

Draped high over the roofpoles, they made a second
heaven,
a celestial cover, up there, where heaven musters
all its stars
in the circle of sky, while the horses of the sun,
chasing day's last light, drag the Evening Star behind.
There it shines! And night in its chariot rides forth,
dark-gowned, striding slow, the stars holding close.
And there, the Pleiades, good companions, ford the sky.
And Orion with his sword, poised midstride forever.
And the Great Bear, curling its golden tail round the
polestar.

1120

And high in heaven's festive weave, the white full moon
fractions the year, carves the months with blades of light,
till the breeding Hyades, clear sign that steers the sailor,
are chased away, with all the other stars, by dawn's light.
He hauled out other stuff, strange Asian things to drape
the walls.
Odd scenes, Greek ships locking hulls with the Persian
fleet.

for plotting to kill the god's servant, for conspiring
to pollute
the precinct with blood. The whole city's after her now.
Childless,
already miserable, she races farther down misery's
long road.
She came to Apollo yearning with desire for children.
But now
she has destroyed herself, her own body, her hope
for children.

1180

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS No way out. No way to turn death
back, fly free from it.
All too clear. Snakeblood poison
mixed with wine that flows
from the grapes of Dionysos—
shining too clear
our own wretched lives
like any sacrificial thing,
and my queen stoned to death . . .

If I could fly unharmed through falling stones
or hide within the shadow-folds of earth
or race off in a chariot swift as wind
or sail fast and sure to open sea . . .

1190

No help, no hiding,
unless a god steals us away.
O queen, what waits
for you now? Will we suffer
the evil consequence
of the evil we have planned?

Enter KREOUSA.

KREOUSA They're after me. I'll be slaughtered like a beast
for sacrifice. Condemned by the vote. Betrayed.

1200

CHORUS We've been told the whole fateful story.

KREOUSA I got out just in time and somehow made it
through their lines. But now where do I hide?

CHORUS The altar, of course.

KREOUSA What good is that?

CHORUS It's unholy to kill a suppliant.

KREOUSA I am condemned by law.

CHORUS They have to lay hands on you first.

KREOUSA They're close
behind,
and they have swords.

CHORUS Quick, sit by the altar flame.
If they kill you there, your blood will be a curse
on all their heads. We must bear whatever comes.

1210

(KREOUSA moves to the altar, sits, and wraps her arms
around it.)
Enter ION, followed by a crowd.

ION Fireblooded dragon snake spawned
by the bull-shaped river god,
you tried to kill me, your nature
vile as those drops of Gorgon's blood.
Grab her! I'll pitch her off Parnassos,
the rocks will comb her hair while she hoops
and tumbles down. Some god smiles on me.
Before I went to Athens to become
my stepmother's victim, I measured up
your vicious hatred here, among allies.
If I'd gone to that home of yours,
you would have caught me in your trap

1220

then cast me down to Hades' house.
 But nothing will save you now, no altar,
 no temple of Apollo. I have no pity
 for you. I pity myself, and my mother.
 Though not here in the flesh,
 her name is never far from me.
 Look! Look at the monster,
 weaving lies with other lies,
 who cowers at the altar,
 as if that will set her free and clear.

1230

KREOUSA I'm warning you. Don't kill me, not here.
 For my sake, and for the god whose ground this is.

ION What could you and the Bright One have in common?

KREOUSA I give my body into the god's keeping.

ION You tried to poison Apollo's child.

KREOUSA No longer Apollo's. You are your father's son.

ION I've just become my father's son, I've always been
 Apollo's.

KREOUSA You're not what you once were. But now, I am
 Apollo's.

1240

ION You are sacrilege! Everything I did was holy.

KREOUSA You became my enemy, so I tried to kill you.

ION I didn't bring war to Athens.

KREOUSA You'd have torched the house of Erechtheus.

ION With a burning brand, I suppose?

KREOUSA You'd have lived in my house, taken it by force.

ION My father gave me the land he won.

KREOUSA What has the son of Aiolos to do with Athens?

ION He saved your city with a sword, not with words.

KREOUSA Allies don't lay claim to every city they help.

1250

ION You'd kill me for fear of what I *might* do!

KREOUSA To save myself, before you killed me first.

ION You're jealous. My father found me, and you have
 no child.

KREOUSA Do you steal homes from those who have no children?

ION Do I get no share? Nothing from my father?

KREOUSA Nothing but a sword and shield. That much is yours.

ION Get away from the altar, it's holy ground.

KREOUSA Go preach to your mother, wherever she is.

ION You'll pay the price for trying to kill me.

KREOUSA Butcher me, if you want, but you will do it here.

1260

ION At Apollo's altar? Is that your pleasure?

KREOUSA To torture Apollo as he once tortured me.

ION No!

All's terror if the gods make vile laws—
 their unconsidered acts outrage good sense!
 To let a criminal sit here at the altar.
 You should drive them off! No stained hands
 touch this holy shrine. Keep and protect

only those who suffer, falsely charged.
 Don't give refuge equally
 to both the godless and the good.

1270

(*He is about to grab KREOUSA when the temple doors open.*)

The PYTHIA enters, carrying a wicker cradle.)

PYTHIA Stop. Look at me, my son.
 I stand outside the temple, leaving the sacred tripod
 entrusted to me by Apollo's law.
 I am the Bright One's prophetess, selected by all
 the Delphians.

ION Dear mother.

PYTHIA I like that name, though it's only a name.

ION You've heard how she plotted to kill me?

PYTHIA I have heard. But being savage, you act wrongly.

ION Why not pay back killers in kind?

1280

PYTHIA Stepmothers against stepsons—always the same story.

ION And still true. *This* stepmother . . .

PYTHIA No more. You must leave the shrine and head for
 home.

ION What are you telling me?

PYTHIA Go to Athens, under good omens, your hands clean
 of blood.

ION A man is clean who kills his enemies.

PYTHIA You're wrong. But there's a story you need to hear.

ION You know I'll listen.

PYTHIA (*Holding up the wicker cradle.*)
 What do you see?

ION I see an old cradle, with little garlands.

1290

PYTHIA I found you in it when you were a baby.

ION What? I can hardly believe this.

PYTHIA I kept these things in silence. Now I tell their story.

ION Why did you hide it from me for so long?

PYTHIA Apollo wanted you to serve him at the shrine.

ION And now he doesn't need me? I want more proof
 than this.

PYTHIA He gave you a father, so it's time for you to leave.

ION And you saved all these things?

PYTHIA The god's words are slanted light, they spoke in me.

ION What words? Tell me!

1300

PYTHIA To save this thing I found, until the ripened time.

ION To harm or profit me?

PYTHIA Hidden inside are your swaddling clothes.

ION My mother! A clue to the story.

PYTHIA It's what the god wants now.

ION An incredible day—one new thing after another.

PYTHIA Take it: Now work to find the one who bore you.

ION How? I'll have to look everywhere—all over Asia,
Europe . . .

PYTHIA That's for you to figure out. I nursed you,
my son, for the Bright One's sake. Without words,
he told me what to take, what to save,
though I never learned why. No mortal knew
I kept these things, or where I hid them.
I give these things back to you. Goodbye
forever. I give you a mother's embrace.

Look for her here. Ask yourself first
if some unmarried girl from Delphi left you;
if not, see if it was a girl from elsewhere.
You know now all the god and I can tell.
He, too, has a share in this.

ION O gods, not this. My heart streams back
to where my mother made her secret marriage,
had me, sold me, secretly, never fed me
at her breast, but gave me up
to a nameless life, slave to the shrine.
The god is good, but some shadow
of what he does weighs hard on me.
She and I, mother and mother's son,
lost from each other. An infant's joy,
a mother's loving comforting arms, lost
to me, those happy times lost to us both.

The cradle, Apollo, I offer up to you,
that I be saved from knowing what I don't want
to know. If my mother was in fact a slave,
let silence cover all. "O Bright God,
I offer to your temple all these things . . ."
What am I *doing*? I'm fighting the god's will.
He saved these scraps of my mother's past.
I can't escape this. My fate lies right here.
(*opening the basket*)
Sacred garlands, little nest, what have you kept

1310

1320

1330

1340

hidden, wrapped up for me these many years?
Look! The wrappings around the shell look new,
cleanly plaited, nothing has rotted away.
Time has left no stain. Have you
come down, untouched, all these years?

KREOUSA A sign from the heavens, beyond my wildest hopes.

ION Quiet, you.

KREOUSA I won't be quiet. Don't preach to me,
for I see the shell where once I put you.
You are my child. You were just a baby,
babbling when I left you there
by the Long Rocks, near the caves of Kekrops.
I'll leave the altar, even if it means I'll die.

1350

(*She lets go of the altar and rushes to embrace ION.*)

ION Grab her! Some god has made her crazy.
She's left the god's image. Tie her up!

KREOUSA Kill me, go ahead. Don't stop. I *will*
hold on to you, and these hidden signs of you.

(*ION backs away.*)

ION Too strange. You, too, want to stake a claim.

KREOUSA Claim what's mine. Love owns what it finds.

ION Me? Love? You tried to kill me.

1360

KREOUSA I love you, my son. What more can a mother want?

ION Stop lying. I've got you now.

KREOUSA That's what I came for.

ION All right. This cradle, is anything in it?

KREOUSA The swaddling clothes I once wrapped you in.

ION Let's hear you name them, sight unseen.

KREOUSA If I'm wrong, I'm yours to kill.

ION Speak. Your boldness chills me.

KREOUSA Once, as a child, I wove a little thing.

ION Like what? All girls weave.

1370

KREOUSA Mine was unfinished, my first try.

ION I'm no fool. What was it like?

KREOUSA Gorgons woven dead center of the cloth.

ION O Zeus! What fate hunts me down?

KREOUSA Fringed with snakes, like Athena's aegis.

ION Look!
This is it, found like perfect prophecy.

KREOUSA Soft echo of my girlhood after all these years.

ION You were lucky once. Is there anything else?

KREOUSA Snakes. A golden clasp. Athena's gift
that retells the tale of Erichthonios,
a reminder the children of our race still wear.

1380

ION What is it used for?

KREOUSA Worn around the neck of a newborn, my son.

ION Here it is. I long to know a third thing . . .

KREOUSA A tiny garland of olive leaves, from the tree
Athena first brought to our city on the rock.
I put it around your head. Still green and blooming,
isn't it? Born of that first and purest olive!

ION (*embracing* KREOUSA)

Dearest mother, I see you, I touch your cheek—
pure joy.

1390

KREOUSA O child, to this mother's eye
brighter than the sun itself
(may the Bright God forgive me)
I never dreamed I'd find you
but thought you shared the earth
and darkness with Persephone.

ION Dear mother, I was dead once, now in your arms
I'm alive again.

KREOUSA To heaven's bright unfolding,
my joy sings,
shouts high and far.
Joy I never imagined—
Where does it come from?

1400

ION I'm yours, mother. I can't imagine anything but that.

KREOUSA And yet I'm shaking with fear.

ION That holding me, you don't really *hold* me?

KREOUSA I exposed my hopes
long ago.
O priestess, what hands brought
my own son to Apollo's house?
What arms placed him in yours?

1410

ION The gods did it. But as things come round,
may new happiness match our old despair.

KREOUSA Child, I moaned and cried
as you were born. I wept
and pushed you out of reach.
Now my breath
warms your cheek,
the most perfect pleasure gods can give.

ION Your song is one we both can sing.

KREOUSA No more, no more childless house,
the hearth is lit,
the land has its kings,
the house of Erechtheus thrives,
blinks awake from night
and gazes toward the high bright sun.

1420

ION Mother, he's here, too, my father. Let him
share the pleasure that I've given you.

KREOUSA Child,
what are you saying? No.
Keep my secret.

1430

ION Secret?

KREOUSA Someone else. Your father was someone else.

ION God! You weren't married. What does that make *me*?

KREOUSA No torchlight streamed me to my bed,
No wedding hymns or dance
swept me kindly
to your birth.

ION *Ai* So I'm lowborn. But, mother, then who . . .

KREOUSA By the goddess who slew the Gorgon

ION Please talk sense!

1440

KREOUSA And who broods over the city's crag
where the sacred olive grows

ION Mother, no more lies. Talk straight.

KREOUSA Where nightingales sing on the rocks
the Bright God

ION Bright God?

KREOUSA Took me
to that secret bed.

ION Apollo? The story's changing. This is wonderful.

KREOUSA When nine months came full cycle, I labored
and bore you, Apollo's secret child.

1450

ION I love what I'm hearing, if it's the truth.

KREOUSA Girlish things, my loom's
vague wanderings,
they had to do a mother's work.
I never put you to my breast,
never washed you with these hands,
I left you there
in a desolate cave,
blood-feast for birds,
a gift to death.

1460

ION A strange, awful thing for you to dare, mother.

KREOUSA All tangled in my fear,
I threw your life away,
killed you against my will.

ION I tried to kill you, too.

KREOUSA Strange and terrible then, strange
and terrible now.
Stormwinds lash us, bad luck
churns on every side,
then the winds change
and the sea lies calm.
Let it stay that way. The past
blew hard against us, but now
let's hope to run full sail before the wind.

1470

CHORUS Here's proof: Let no one ever think, not ever,
that anything lies utterly past hope.

ION All these switchbacks of luck and circumstance.
One minute we suffer, the next we're healed.
Is luck some goddess who brought us to the point
where you would kill me, and I'd kill you?
My god!
The sunlight's bright embrace today helps us
make sense of all that's happened. I've found you,
mother, dearest of all things to me; I'm glad
my origins were better than I thought,
but I still want to know the whole truth.

1480

(Drawing her aside so that no one else will hear.)

I promise,

I'll bury all of it in darkness,
just tell me who my father really is.
Maybe, as young girls do, you fell
into a secret love? No need to blame me
on a god, to save me from shame
by saying that Apollo did it
when it was no god at all.

1490

KREOUSA By Warrior Athena, Victory Bringer,
who fought with Zeus against the earthborn giants,

I swear your father was no mortal man,
but Apollo, your patron, the god of slanted light.

ION How could he give his own son to another father
and say I was Xouthos' natural child?

1500

KREOUSA Not "natural," *given*, conferred,
though sprung from the god himself,
given as one friend might give
his friend a son to provide an heir.

ION Is the god telling the truth? Or does his oracle lie?
The questions trouble me, and for good reason.

KREOUSA Listen, here's what I think. Apollo did right by you,
placing you in a well-born family. As adopted son,
you're the rightful heir. But if the god declared himself
your father, imagine what you'd have lost! So, you see,
he only wanted to help. Because I hid
our marriage and because I tried to kill you,
no one would ever believe you were mine and his.
He had no choice: He gave you to another father!

1510

ION No, that doesn't work. I want the truth spelled out.
I will go inside his house and ask point-blank.
Am I the son of mortal man
or of the God of Twisted Light?

ION *turns to enter the temple but is stopped in his tracks
by the arrival of ATHENA from above.*

Up there! Where the incense rises,
a god's face where the sun should be!
Run, mother. We must not look on things divine
unless the right time has come for us to see.

1520

ATHENA Do not run from me. I am not your enemy.
I bring you good will, here, and in Athens,
the town that bears my name. From there I come,

sped down the road by Apollo. He thought it best
not to reveal himself to you, lest he be blamed,
in public, for all that's happened.
He sent me here to tell you this:

(to ION)

You are her son, born of father Apollo.
He gives you to others whom he has chosen
not by blood, but to place you in a royal house.
He planned to wait until you got back to Athens
before revealing the truth of these things,
that you were their son—hers and Apollo's.
But all the god preferred to leave unsaid
has burst into the open; so Apollo had to intervene,
and save you both when you contrived
to kill each other. Now to fulfill the oracle
and bring things to a close, I have come here.
So listen:

(to KREOUSA)

Take this child home and make him prince
of Kekrops' land, for he's descended from Erechtheus.
And it is just that he rule my city, my earth.
And he shall be famous throughout Greece,
and four sons shall spring from one root,
whose names will become the Four Tribes
clustered around the crag which is our home:
GELEON HOPLES ARGADES AIGIKORES
At the fated time their sons shall settle
island cities of the Kyklades, and coastal towns
to strengthen Athens, and also along the twin shores
of Asia and Europe. They will be named IONIANS,
rooted in his name, and they will be famous.
Xouthos and you together will have sons:
Doros, father of the Dorians, whose city
will be famed in song; and Achaïos,
who shall rule the land of Pelops all the way
to Rhion on the coast, and his name shall be the name

borne by a great people—the proud Achaeans.
Apollo has worked it all out perfectly.
First he gave you good health in your pregnancy,
so that no one would suspect the secret.
Then he told Hermes to take the child, still dressed
in the clothes you swaddled him in, and bring him here,
where the god nurtured his son and did not let him die.

Absolute silence! Breathe not a word
of how you got your child. Let Xouthos cherish
his sweet illusion. Go, but keep this good news
to yourselves. Farewell. Be happy.
After all your troubles, I bring you news:
Your fate, filled with the god, is blessed.

ION Athena, daughter of almighty Zeus, I cannot
not believe what you say. But I accept, I believe,
I am the son of her and the God of Various Light.
Even before, this was not unbelievable.

KREOUSA Hear me, too. I did not praise Apollo,
but I will praise him now, for he gives me back
the child he once ignored.

(She touches the temple doors.)

These golden doors,
once hateful, leering, smile now.

(She embraces the door knocker.)

I say goodbye
and cling to the god's bright doors
that close him in.

ATHENA I commend your change from blame to praise of the god.
For the gods always work in their own good time,
and, in the end, they use what power they have.

KREOUSA (to ION)

My child, let's go home.

ATHENA

Go, and I will follow.

KREOUSA Our safe conduct on the road.

ATHENA

I love my city.

KREOUSA Come claim your rightful power.

ION

For me, a worthy
possession.ATHENA, ION, KREOUSA *leave the theater, followed by*
CHORUS.

CHORUS Goodbye, Apollo, Son of Leto and Zeus.

Now we have learned to give the gods their due
and to take heart when we're driven by disaster.

In the end, the good get what's good.

The bad, by nature, get what's bad.

1590

NOTES ON THE TEXT
GLOSSARY