

Classic Poetry Series

Aeschylus

- poems -

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Lament For The Two Brothers Slain By Each Other's Hand

Now do our eyes behold
The tidings which were told:
Twin fallen kings, twin perished hopes to mourn,
The slayer, the slain,
The entangled doom forlorn
And ruinous end of twain.
Say, is not sorrow, is not sorrow's sum
On home and hearthstone come?
Oh, waft with sighs the sail from shore,
Oh, smite the bosom, cadencing the oar
That rows beyond the rueful stream for aye
To the far strand,
The ship of souls, the dark,
The unreturning bark
Whereon light never falls nor foot of Day,
Even to the bourne of all, to the unbeholden land.

Aeschylus

Prometheus Amid Hurricane And Earthquake

Earth is rocking in space!
And the thunders crash up with a roar upon roar,
And the eddying lightnings flash fire in my face,
And the whirlwinds are whirling the dust round and round--
And the blasts of the winds universal leap free
And blow each other upon each, with a passion of sound,
And æther goes mingling in storm with the sea!
Such a curse on my head, in a manifest dread,
From the hand of your Zeus has been hurtled along!
O my mother's fair glory! O Æther, enringing
All eyes with the sweet common light of thy bringing,
Dost see how I suffer this wrong?

Aeschylus

Song Of The Furies

Up and lead the dance of Fate!
Lift the song that mortals hate!
Tell what rights are ours on earth,
Over all of human birth.
Swift of foot to avenge are we!
He whose hands are clean and pure,
Naught our wrath to dread hath he;
Calm his cloudless days endure.
But the man that seeks to hide
Like him (1), his gore-bedewèd hands,
Witnesses to them that died,
The blood avengers at his side,
The Furies' troop forever stands.

O'er our victim come begin!
Come, the incantation sing,
Frantic all and maddening,
To the heart a brand of fire,
The Furies' hymn,
That which claims the senses dim,
Tuneless to the gentle lyre,
Withering the soul within.

The pride of all of human birth,
All glorious in the eye of day,
Dishonored slowly melts away,
Trod down and trampled to the earth,
Whene'er our dark-stoled troop advances,
Whene'er our feet lead on the dismal dances.

For light our footsteps are,
And perfect is our might,
Awful remembrances of guilt and crime,
Implacable to mortal prayer,
Far from the gods, unhonored, and heaven's light,
We hold our voiceless dwellings dread,
All unapproached by living or by dead.

What mortal feels not awe,
Nor trembles at our name,
Hearing our fate-appointed power sublime,
Fixed by the eternal law.
For old our office, and our fame,
Might never yet of its due honors fail,
Though 'neath the earth our realm in unsunned regions pale.

Aeschylus

The Battle Of Salamis

The night was passing, and the Grecian host
By no means sought to issue forth unseen.
But when indeed the day with her white steeds
Held all the earth, resplendent to behold,
First from the Greeks the loud-resounding din
Of song triumphant came; and shrill at once
Echo responded from the island rock.
Then upon all barbarians terror fell,
Thus disappointed; for not as for flight
The Hellenes sang the holy pæan then,
But setting forth to battle valiantly.
The bugle with its note inflamed them all;
And straightway with the dip of plashing oars
They smote the deep sea water at command,
And quickly all were plainly to be seen.
Their right wing first in orderly array
Led on, and second all the armament
Followed them forth; and meanwhile there was heard
A mighty shout: "Come, O ye sons of Greeks,
Make free your country, make your children free,
Your wives, and fanes of your ancestral gods,
And your sires' tombs! For all we now contend!"
And from our side the rush of Persian speech
Replied. No longer might the crisis wait.
At once ship smote on ship with brazen beak;
A vessel of the Greeks began the attack,
Crushing the stem of a Phoenician ship.
Each on a different vessel turned its prow.
At first the current of the Persian host
Withstood; but when within the strait the throng
Of ships was gathered, and they could not aid
Each other, but by their own brazen bows
Were struck, they shattered all our naval host.
The Grecian vessels not unskillfully
Were smiting round about; the hulls of ships
Were overset; the sea was hid from sight,
Covered with wreckage and the death of men;
The reefs and headlands were with corpses filled,
And in disordered flight each ship was rowed,
As many as were of the Persian host.
But they, like tunnies or some shoal of fish,
With broken oars and fragments of the wrecks
Struck us and clove us; and at once a cry
Of lamentation filled the briny sea,
Till the black darkness' eye did rescue us.
The number of our griefs, not though ten days
I talked together, could I fully tell;
But this know well, that never in one day
Perished so great a multitude of men.

Aeschylus

The Beacon Fires

A GLEAM -- a gleam -- from Ida's height,
By the Fire-god sent, it came;
From watch to watch it leapt, that light,
As a rider rode the flame!
It shot through the startled sky,
And the torch of that blazing glory
Old Lemnos caught on high,
On its holy promontory,
And sent it on, the jocund sign,
To Athos, Mount of Jove divine.
Wildly the while, it rose from the isle,
So that the might of the journeying Light
Skimmed over the back of the gleaming brine!
Farther and faster speeds it on,
Till the watch that keeps Macistus steep
See it burst like a blazing Sun!
Doth Macistus sleep
On his tower-clad steep?
No! rapid and red doth the wild fire sweep;
It flashes afar on the wayward stream
Of the wild Euripus, the rushing beam!
It rouses the light on Messapion's height,
And they feed its breath with the withered heath.
But it may not stay!
And away -- away --
It bounds in its freshening might.

Silent and soon,
Like a broadened moon,
It passes in sheen, Asopus green,
And bursts on Cithaeron gray!
The warder wakes to the Signal-rays,
And it swoops from the hill with a broader blaze.
On, on the fiery Glory rode;
Thy lonely lake, Gorgopis, glowed!
To Megara's Mount it came;
They feed it again
And it streams amain--
A giant beard of Flame!
The headland cliffs that darkly down
O'er the Saronic waters frown,
Are passed with the Swift One's lurid stride,
And the huge rock glares on the glaring tide.
With mightier march and fiercer power
It gained Arachne's neighboring tower;
Thence on our Argive roof its rest it won,
Of Ida's fire the long-descended Son!
Bright Harbinger of glory and of joy!
So first and last with equal honor crowned,
In solemn feasts the race-torch circles round. --
And these my heralds! -- this my SIGN OF PEACE;
Lo! while we breathe, the victor lords of Greece

Stalk, in stern tumult, through the halls of Troy!

Aeschylus

The Sacrifice Of Iphigenia

Now long and long from wintry Strymon blew
The weary, hungry, anchor-straining blasts,
The winds that wandering seamen dearly rue,
Nor spared the cables worn and groaning masts;
And, lingering on, in indolent delay,
Slow wasted all the strength of Greece away.
But when the shrill-voiced prophet 'gan proclaim
That remedy more dismal and more dread
Than the drear weather blackening overhead,
And spoke in Artemis' most awful name,
The sons of Atreus, 'mid their armed peers,
Their sceptres dashed to earth, and each broke out in tears,
And thus the elder king began to say:
"Dire doom! to disobey the gods' commands!
More dire, my child, mine house's pride, to slay,
Dabbling in virgin blood a father's hands.
Alas! alas! which way to fly?
As base deserter quit the host,
The pride and strength of our great league all lost?
Should I the storm-appeasing rite deny,
Will not their wrathfullest wrath rage up and swell?
Exact the virgin's blood?--oh, would 't were o'er and well!"

So, 'neath Necessity's stern yoke he passed,
And his lost soul, with impious impulse veering,
Surrendered to the accursed unholy blast,
Warped to the dire extreme of human daring.
The frenzy of affliction still
Maddens, dire counselor, man's soul to ill.

So he endured to be the priest
In that child-slaughtering rite unblest,
The first full offering of that host
In fatal war for a bad woman lost.

The prayers, the mute appeal to her hard sire,
Her youth, her virgin beauty,
Naught heeded they, the chiefs for war on fire.
So to the ministers of that dire duty
(First having prayed) the father gave the sign,
Like some soft kid, to lift her to the shrine.

There lay she prone,
Her graceful garments round her thrown;
But first her beauteous mouth around
Their violent bonds they wound,
With their rude inarticulate might,
Lest her dread curse the fatal house should smite.
But she her saffron robe to earth let fall:
The shaft of pity from her eye
Transpierced that awful priesthood--one and all.
Lovely as in a picture stood she by

As she would speak. Thus at her father's feasts
The virgin, 'mid the reveling guests,
Was wont with her chaste voice to supplicate
For her dear father an auspicious fate.

I saw no more! to speak more is not mine;
Not unfulfilled was Calchas' lore divine.
Eternal justice still will bring
Wisdom out of suffering.
So to the fond desire farewell,
The inevitable future to foretell;
'Tis but our woe to antedate;
Joint knit with joint, expands the full-formed fate.
Yet at the end of these dark days
May prospering weal return at length;
Thus in his spirit prays
He of the Apian land the sole remaining strength.

Aeschylus