

Fragment of a Greek Tragedy

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CHORUS: O suitably-attired-in-leather-boots
Head of a traveller, wherefore seeking whom
Whence by what way how purposed art thou come
To this well-nightingaled vicinity?
My object in inquiring is to know.
But if you happen to be deaf and dumb
And do not understand a word I say,
Then wave your hand, to signify as much.

ALCMAEON: I journeyed hither a Boeotian road.

CHORUS: Sailing on horseback, or with feet for oars?

ALCMAEON: Plying with speed my partnership of legs.

CHORUS: Beneath a shining or a rainy Zeus?

ALCMAEON: Mud's sister, not himself, adorns my shoes.

CHORUS: To learn your name would not displease me much.

ALCMAEON: Not all that men desire do they obtain.

CHORUS: Might I then hear at what thy presence shoots.

ALCMAEON: A shepherd's questioned mouth informed me that--

CHORUS: What? for I know not yet what you will say.

ALCMAEON: Nor will you ever, if you interrupt.

CHORUS: Proceed, and I will hold my speechless tongue.

ALCMAEON: This house was Eriphyle's, no one else's.

CHORUS: Nor did he shame his throat with shameful lies.

ALCMAEON: May I then enter, passing through the door?

CHORUS: Go chase into the house a lucky foot.

And, O my son, be, on the one hand, good,

And do not, on the other hand, be bad;

For that is much the safest plan.

ALCMAEON: I go into the house with heels and speed.

CHORUS

Strophe

In speculation

I would not willingly acquire a name

For ill-digested thought;

But after pondering much

To this conclusion I at last have come:

LIFE IS UNCERTAIN.

This truth I have written deep
In my reflective midriff
On tablets not of wax,
Nor with a pen did I inscribe it there,
For many reasons: LIFE, I say, IS NOT
A STRANGER TO UNCERTAINTY.
Not from the flight of omen-yelling fowls
This fact did I discover,
Nor did the Delphine tripod bark it out,
Nor yet Dodona.
Its native ingenuity sufficed
My self-taught diaphragm.

Antistrophe

Why should I mention
The Inachean daughter, loved of Zeus?
Her whom of old the gods,
More provident than kind,
Provided with four hoofs, two horns, one tail,
A gift not asked for,
And sent her forth to learn
The unfamiliar science
Of how to chew the cud.
She therefore, all about the Argive fields,
Went cropping pale green grass and nettle-tops,
Nor did they disagree with her.
But yet, howe'er nutritious, such repasts
I do not hanker after:
Never may Cypris for her seat select
My dappled liver!
Why should I mention Io? Why indeed?
I have no notion why.

Epode

But now does my boding heart,
Unhired, unaccompanied, sing
A strain not meet for the dance.
Yes even the palace appears
To my yoke of circular eyes
(The right, nor omit I the left)
Like a slaughterhouse, so to speak,

Garnished with woolly deaths
And many shipwrecks of cows.
I therefore in a Cissian strain lament:
And to the rapid
Loud, linen-tattering thumps upon my chest
Resounds in concert
The battering of my unlucky head.

ERIPHYLE (within): O, I am smitten with a hatchet's jaw;
And that in deed and not in word alone.

CHORUS: I thought I heard a sound within the house
Unlike the voice of one that jumps for joy.

ERIPHYLE: He splits my skull, not in a friendly way,
Once more: he purposes to kill me dead.

CHORUS: I would not be reputed rash, but yet I doubt if all be gay within
the house.

ERIPHYLE: O! O! another stroke! that makes the third.
He stabs me to the heart against my wish.

CHORUS: If that be so, thy state of health is poor;
But thine arithmetic is quite correct.