THE COMPLETE PLAYS
Also by Lajos Walder

Tyrtaeus: A Tragedy
Vase of Pompeii: A Play
Below Zero: A Play
Lajos Walder

THE COMPLETE PLAYS

Translated from the Hungarian
by Agnes Walder

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CONTENTS

Translator’s Preface / 7

* 

Tyrtaeus: A Tragedy / 11
Translator’s Afterword to Tyrtaeus / 107

* 

Vase of Pompeii: A Play / 119
Translator’s Afterword to Vase of Pompeii / 181

* 

Below Zero: A Play / 187
Translator’s Afterword to Below Zero / 261
From your children to your children’s children

“That’s why poets so often resort to writing plays.”
—Joseph Brodsky
Lajos Walder (1913-1945), my father—poet, playwright and attorney-at-law, whose Hungarian pseudonym was ‘Vándor’ (‘Wanderer’)—was well known as a poet in Budapest in the 1930s; yet he was never known as a playwright. He wrote his plays in the harshest of circumstances and in secret in the early 1940s while intermittently serving in a Jewish forced labor battalion. He wrote them without the slightest chance of having them staged or printed, since by then the works of Jewish artists could, by law, no longer be performed or published in Hungary. Today, we are left with the wistful thought that, in those terrible times, he may have at least lived with the hope that one day his plays might find a home in print and on stage. Indeed, throughout the years of organizing and translating my father’s plays, this thought has been my abiding inspiration.

Not only were my father’s plays completely unknown in his native Hungary, but even as manuscripts they had no physical presence in that country for twenty-eight years. In 1961, my grandmother Ida Walder brought out my father’s unpublished manuscripts to our family, who had emigrated to Sydney, Australia, in 1957. In 1989, I returned to Hungary for the launch of the posthumous publication of a volume of my father’s selected poems, entitled A Poet Lived Here Amongst You. At that time, I took with me copies of the plays in order to show them to the late Géza Hegedüs, renowned literary critic and professor of drama at the University of Budapest. A year later, in 1990, two of my father’s three extant plays, Tyrtaeus and Vase of Pompeii, were published in their original Hungarian under the title Pompeji. His third play, Below Zero, was planned for a later publication in Hungary.

In his foreword to Pompeji, Géza Hegedüs wrote: “In aesthetic value and nuance, the plays differ from the grotesque tartness
of Walder’s tragi-comic poems, but they are comparable to them in being the uniquely beautiful creations of an original mind.” (My father's complete poems in English were published by Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc. in 2015, under the title Become a Message: Poems. That volume also contains a detailed synopsis of my father’s brief life, which tragically ended on the day of his liberation from the Gunskirchen concentration camp on May 4, 1945.)

In the early post-war years in Hungary, my mother tried repeatedly to have my father’s plays staged. She knew several directors and actors personally—many of them from my father’s erstwhile literary circle. One particularly close friend of my father's was a highly gifted actor and director. Season after season, he promised my mother that he would see to it that the plays—starting with Tyrtaeus—were performed, but this never eventuated. Finally, when my mother tried to pin him down on a firm date, he said that he would have Tyrtaeus put on, on the condition that he himself be named as the playwright. Following this betrayal, my mother did not try to bring attention to the plays again, especially once communist censorship was in place, which made the eventual success of her endeavors highly unlikely.

We don’t know the order in which the plays were written. My beloved mother, died in Sydney in 1973. In my conversations with her about my father’s work, the sequence in which the plays had been created somehow never came up. My uncle Imre Walder (the other person closest to my father and his literary legacy) was not present when my father composed the plays. The labor battalion my uncle had been assigned to was sent to the Russian front in early 1942, and by the time he returned to Hungary from Russian captivity, my father was no longer alive. Incidentally, the typewritten original of Vase of Pompeii bears a copyright stamp in Hungarian and in French. The date on the stamp is February 10, 1944. Nazi Germany invaded Hungary on 19 March 1944. Plans for the annihilation of the Hungarian Jews were already in place by then.
My father was a certified attorney, who had completed his articles just prior to the official institution of the Jewish laws, which barred Jews from practicing in the professions. Indeed, he made ample use of his knowledge of the law in all three of his plays.

From 1942 onward, we only have a handful of poems from my father. With the future so highly uncertain, and forced labor increasingly robbing him of time, he must have made the decision to give the plays priority. Under the circumstances, he was probably looking for a broader expression of his philosophical beliefs than poetry would have allowed him. He had been familiar with the works of Aldous Huxley, Louis Aragon and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who had begun as poets and continued in prose; he loved the theater and was influenced by Oscar Wilde and the progressive George Bernard Shaw, as well as by German and French playwrights, such as Victorien Sardou; he was equally aware of the works of the Austrian poet and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the Belgian dramatist Maurice Maeterlinck. Given the strong emphasis on Greek and Latin education in pre-war Hungary, moreover, my father was widely conversant with classical Greek and Roman authors as well as the French classics, especially with the works of Jean Racine. His plays are densely packed with insights so pertinent that they seem universally valid even today.

His “was the most credible voice to express the times between the two world wars,” Géza Hegedüs has written about my father’s poetry. The same holds true for his plays, and in particular for *Tyrtaeus*. Now—well over seventy years after they were written—*Tyrtaeus, Vase of Pompeii, and Below Zero* are brand-new plays for the English stage.

In the long battle for recognition of my father’s remarkable literary talent, I have often thought of Max Brod. Our stories are not at all parallel. But if Max Brod had heeded the wish of his best friend, Franz Kafka, to have all of his works destroyed after his death, world literature would be that much poorer. Similar thoughts have driven me regarding my father’s legacy.
TYRTAEUS

A Tragedy
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

TYRTAEUS  a poet who is lame.
THE FIVE SPARTAN EPHORS:
    EUPATOR
    NOSOS
    PHYLO
    TINOS
    PATON
LEUKOS  Spartan youth trainer.
SPARTAN FIGHTERS:
    PHARON
    DYONOS
    MARCONA
    LARGOS
PHOTINA  a woman of Sparta
SPARTAN YOUTH
LUKIANOS “the whip”
OINOS  standing guard
DEMETRIOS
TEKNON  a blond little boy, looking younger than twelve
THYGENOS
PHYGON
JASON
GYNO  has a flute on him for the line-up
AMINA  an old Spartan midwife
FOUR MESSENEAN PRISONERS
TWO SPARTAN WOMEN
THREE SPARTAN VETERANS
A SPARTAN SPY
A SPARTAN RUNNER
TWO SPARTAN HERALDS
SPARTAN GUARD AT THE OPENING OF THE TENT
SPARTAN SOLDIERS, WOMEN, OLD PEOPLE, CHILDREN,
YOUTHS, TORCHBEARERS AND PALLBEARERS

The scene of the tragedy is Sparta, during the final development of the
Messenean wars, approximately 2500 years ago.
ACT I

SCENE 1

A clearing in the woods, on a rocky mountain top. Olive trees in the background. Upstage right is dominated by an enormous boulder. Oinos, one of the boys, is standing guard on top of it. Downstage left a life-size straw dummy stands in front of a fig tree; near the dummy, a few stones on the ground. As the curtain goes up, a spear penetrates the thigh of the straw dummy. It has just been thrown by the boy Thygenos, who is standing opposite the straw dummy. Several other boys stand downstage right with their trainer Leukos in the lead.

LEUKOS: Thygenos, how many times have I told you to aim at his eye. If he gets it there, he’s finished, whereas in his thigh it’s just a wound instead of blindness or death. Try again.

THYGENOS: I can’t do it, Sir. My arm’s shaking. I must’ve thrown it fifty times already.

LEUKOS: Who do you think you are—a babbling Athenian, or some wretched Messenean bastard—that you dare open your mouth to me when your task is to throw the spear. Come forward Lukianos. Give him five good lashes. Did I say five? That’s not enough. Let him have three for missing the target, three for being tired and three for babbling. How many is that, Lukianos?

LUKIANOS: (His face is scratched, guffawing, he comes forward, holding a bundle of sticks in his hand) I am the whip, Sir. I don’t know how to count. I strike until you tell me to stop.

LEUKOS: Bend over, Thygenos. Strike him on the buttocks, Lukianos. (Lukianos strikes him six times) Stop! So, Thygenos, you got three for being tired, three for missing the target, and there’s three more to come. Do you want me to let them go? (Thygenos involuntarily quivers, but remains silent) Answer me, Thygenos! Should I let the rest go? (Thygenos doesn’t speak) Just say the word and you won’t have to endure the last three. (Thygenos doesn’t speak) Think about it Thygenos—three more, as painful as the
other six. *(Thygenos doesn’t speak)* Ask me to let them go, then maybe ... just maybe ... *(Thygenos doesn’t speak)* So don’t talk, just plead with your hands ... *(Thygenos doesn’t move)* I can see that you can barely stand the pain. The next three will be like rubbing salt in your wounds. Just say ‘no more’ ...

THYGENOS: The punishment was nine, Sir. There are three more left.

LEUKOS: A Spartan answer, Thygenos. You might have a tendency to babble, and you might be poor at throwing the spear—but you’re clear about discipline. Still, a person who’s really disciplined shouldn’t babble. A Spartan must give a Spartan answer. Sparse words for sparse words. Too many words are always followed by action. A beating for babbling. You got three for being tired, three for missing the target, and you’ll get another three because you yourself said that there were three more left. If you hadn’t said a word, I’d have let the last three go. Strike him, Lukianos. *(Lukianos strikes him three times)*

LEUKOS: Enough! Stand up, Thygenos, stand up and laugh. And keep on laughing. Because if you laugh, no one will be able to spread the word that Thygenos cried after just nine blows. Jason, put oil on his back. And at night cover it with herbs.

THYGENOS: *(Straightening up with difficulty)* Sir, I need neither oil nor grass. Hand me the spear. Let me have it. I know I can hit the target now. *(He collapses)*

LEUKOS: Lukianos, take him to the creek and plunge him in the water. He’ll come to.

LUKIANOS: *(Awkwardly)* I’d go, Sir, but I have a complaint. Yesterday, as approached Teknon with manly love *(he caresses his scratched face stupidly)* he wouldn’t obey.

LEUKOS: Did you hear my command? Go right now. Take him to the creek. When he comes to, you can leave him there. In the meantime, I’ll hear it from Teknon. *(Lukianos throws Thygenos onto his shoulder without showing any emotion and goes out stage left)*

TEKNON: *(Terrified, he comes forward)* Sir, I don’t even know what
he’s accusing me of ... I’ve only been in the boys’ tent for two days ... I was with my mother before ...

LEUKOS: Your self-defense got off to a bad start. A Spartan man can never refer to a woman. If you now bring up your mother as an excuse for your disobedience, one day you could just as easily leave your watch for a harlot. As a youth who has completed his twelfth year you’ve arrived in the boys’ tent, so that in accordance with our ancient custom you could commence your communal upbringing. From now on, it’s as if your mother no longer existed for you. Sparta fills her place. And your father is the whip and the bundle of sticks that’ll teach you to love and honor your mother: Sparta. Do you understand, Teknon?

TEKNON: Yes, Sir, I do.

LEUKOS: Your hair is far too long, your skin is girlish, and your physique is scrawny. Well, given a few years, you’ll realize who your real mother is: the one who gave birth to your scrawniness, or the one who molded you into an athlete. Do you understand that, Teknon?

TEKNON: Yes, Sir. I do.

LEUKOS: You appear to understand a great deal, Teknon. It seems as though your mother not only let your hair grow long, but had often told you that you are clever—cleverer than anyone else’s son—since you understand things that you have yet to learn. Do you understand, Teknon?

TEKNON: Yes, Sir. I do.

LEUKOS: Only the son of a slut can be so clever. The son of a slut who’s passed onto her child everything she’s learned from men. Because only a man can be truly wise. A wench can never gain wisdom. Do you understand that, Teknon?

TEKNON: (Rebellious with rage) Yes, Sir, I do understand. But if you say another nasty word about my mother ... (He pulls out the spear from the leg of the straw dummy and aims it at Leukos) I’ll ... (Indicating that he’ll throw the spear at Leukos)

LEUKOS: (Surprised, with a sudden, violent anger, he darts over to him) What will you do, you scrawny frog? (He controls himself) What did you say, Teknon? That you’ll throw the spear at me if I
continue to foul-mouth your mother? Why, I could twist it out of your hand with no more than a flick. But then all these boys would say: It’s easy for him to deal with a child. So I won’t do it. But neither will I take back my words. To you, Teknon, your mother is not a slut but a respectable Spartan dame who taught her child to defend her in any circumstance; even if it was contrary to the interests of Sparta. Because, dear boys, I have been placed here by the community of Sparta to raise you, sons who have sprung from the loins of Spartan fathers, to be worthy of them. And who could ever contemplate a son so wicked that rather than taking the example of his fighting father, he sneaks around the broad buttocks of his mother. Evil feelings and intentions hide in one who cannot break away from his mother when his body is already engulfed by the waves of manliness. Such a person, prompted perhaps by animal instinct, hopes to discover womanliness in his mother.

DEMETRIOS: That’s disgusting.

LEUKOS: You chose the right word. Short and Spartan. It’s disgusting. But if it was only that! Good sons, you know that one day you’ll become fighters, because Sparta needs fighters perhaps even more than it needs the gods themselves. That’s the reason that we athletes were singled out to communally raise each and every youth of Sparta to become worthy of their fathers. Public confidence has chosen us for this honorable office—the ephors and council of elders; in short, all those who want to ensure that the affairs of Sparta are looked after by us in the best possible manner. Our authority extends to turning all of you with uniform strictness, and irrespective of whose sons you are or what your personal inclinations may be, into loyal fighters for the fatherland. And that is what I’m doing. Because it’s not captains we need, but troops who will be obedient in every way and in all circumstances. Blind obedience, therefore, is of the highest merit. Then, an over-excited little monkey comes forward, thinks lovingly of the warm lap of his mother, and when his trainer, in the interest of Sparta, publicly reprimands him—reprimands him, mind you, but doesn’t hit him—because it is true, boys, that
I have never personally hit any of you with my superior strength—I just decide on the punishment and choose one of you to enforce it—as I was saying, such a hyped up monkey comes forward and aims a spear right at the heart of his trainer, and in so doing boasts of the greatest sin, which is insubordination. Raise the spear high, Teknon, my boy, let everyone see your shame. I said nasty things about your mother, so let the flame of your revenge hold it high. If your rage had been sincere, you would not have waited for anything, you would have thrown the spear at me that instant. But as things stand, you seem like a lying and weak braggart before these noble, decent, good sons of Sparta. No doubt, you, who place such value on babbling, were glad to hear the flow of my words, hoping that they might turn into something pleasant for you and that I might end up retreating before your sharp spear. Then you, an arrogant adolescent who’s just defeated his trainer and regardless of your newcomer status, would instantly become a leader among your peers. Have you grown tired, dear Teknon? Hold the spear higher still. Oh, we have no need of leaders here, only of the kind of soldier who, shoulder to shoulder with another and with many hundreds of others, using identical weapons and identical courage, will charge at the enemy. The fiery ones, those who ignite too fast or burn out too soon, are not needed here. Even among the leaders, the first priority is to be as obedient as the common soldier, who in turn can pledge obedience to them. Hold the spear higher, Teknon, my lad, because this is your opportunity to prove that you’re not just a namby-pamby woman’s babbling milksop, but a youngster who’s so blinded and stubborn that, even to the detriment of Sparta, having stabbed a true and loyal trainer, would obtain satisfaction for his own presumed truth. Just higher still with the spear, dear Teknon, because I want to tell you again that your mother is a whoring bitch—a baser hussy has never existed in all of Sparta, but I am your trainer, who has been entrusted by the community of Sparta, by the noble fathers, the honorable ephors and the wise council of elders, to turn you into the kind of fighter who has neither mother nor father—who
has no one, and who, in spite of being sighted, obeys blindly when Sparta's salvation is at stake. Your mother is a whoring bitch, but I am your trainer, Teknon, and if the strength of your spirit is greater than that of your body, then hold the spear higher still and throw it at me. (He crosses his arms over his chest, and with feet wide apart, turns his back to the boy. Teknon first stares intently at his back, then slowly lowers the spear, which finally drops from his hand. When the spear hits the ground, the boys, who have been frozen throughout, begin to move)

DEMETRIOS: Look at the braggart. Oh, my commander, you did well to turn your back on such scum of the earth, who is not even worthy of a glimpse from you. I want to be the one to mete out twenty-five lashes to him.

LEUKOS: (In a slightly languid, victorious and fawning voice) I'd be disappointed in you, Demetrios, if you'd so easily share the punishment of the worthy with the worthless. Punishment itself is already half the reward, since the trainer metes it out to those whom he considers worthy of improvement. And the endurance of punishment is practically a virtue, since the only ones who take it bravely, are the ones who, having recognized their sin, want to improve themselves. Should I be sharing the punishment of noble Spartan youths with such a worthless fellow? Oh no, Demetrios, his punishment will be that we find him unworthy of it, unworthy of the cane.

PHYGON: (Darts forward rapturously and stops in front of Leukos) Sir, whip me!

LEUKOS: Why, Phygon, when you are the kind of example whom every youth can gladly consider his ideal. Did you perhaps make a mistake?

PHYGON: Oh no, my Lord. I merge night with day to discipline myself. But I want you to reward me with a punishment so that I may obtain the virtue of enduring it.

LEUKOS: You're a fine boy, Phygon, but punishment is not the same if we take advantage of it.

PHYGON: (He grabs hold of the bunch of sticks left there by Lukianos) Then I'll whip myself. (Whips himself mercilessly) Now, my Lord,
you will have to punish me because I whipped myself contrary to your wishes.

LEUKOS: You’re over-eager, Phygon. And I won’t punish you, though it’s a fault that can easily make the person, and eagerness itself, seem ridiculous.

DEMETRIOS: Phygon, I admire you so much.

SEVERAL BOYS: We can never be worthy of you.

LEUKOS: Get back into line, Teknon. Demetrios will teach you the exercises.

DEMETRIOS: You put him in good hands, my Lord. He’ll get more beating than food.

LEUKOS: Be fair, not forceful. This boy might not be such bad material after all. With him, you’ll get further with brains than with force.

DEMETRIOS: I don’t understand you, my Lord, but I’ll do as if I did. And instead of his bum, I’ll beat discipline into his head.

LEUKOS: (Laughing) You are a cunning fellow, Demetrios. It’s no accident that I made you the leader of the group. Cunning is a leader’s virtue. With the right words, you’ll even get him to do what Lukianos couldn’t get from him by force. At least now I know why his face was so badly scratched this morning. (They laugh) So, let’s see what you stole for the soup today.

DEMETRIOS: A skinny piglet, but we almost came to grief.

LEUKOS: Take care, Demetrios, that they don’t catch you. The punishment can be extremely severe. A youth like you cannot endure fifty lashes. It would kill you.

DEMETRIOS: It’s a curious thing, Sir, that stealing is allowed, but if the thief gets caught, he might as well commend himself to the mercy of the gods. Why is that?

LEUKOS: Stealing is a pleasant pastime, isn’t it, Demetrios? To take from another what he has worked hard for, feels good. But since the punishment of a thief, if caught, is severe, this pleasant pastime is also extremely dangerous. Elsewhere, thieves are the most cowardly, but with us, only the bravest steal, because one must have enormous courage to stake one’s life on a few apples or some bad poultry. We Spartans revolve in constant danger;
therefore, we have to live dangerously, so we can train ourselves for the dangers that lurk all around us. You can hardly fulfill the imperative to live dangerously more thoroughly than by risking your life to obtain everything that goes into your daily soup. This state makes you so alert that in a split-second you’re ready to overthrow anyone who threatens your life. Stealing is allowed, and it is not shameful, but the clumsy thief goes under. He could pay with his life for a chook.

DEMETRIOS: I still have goose bumps on my back, that’s how close I was to being caught yesterday.

OINOS: (Thus far he’s been silently standing guard on the boulder—enthusiastically now, as one who finally has something to report) My Lord, my Lord, our fighters are bringing captives this way. They have just passed the running tracks. They are coming this way.

LEUKOS: Captives! At last we’ve got some captives again. It looks as though the affairs of Sparta are turning for the better.

JASON: Their number could be a thousand, Oinos.

OINOS: A thousand, how many is that, my Lord … because I only see five?

LEUKOS: There’ll be more, Oinos. Wait, I’m coming up. (He starts to climb up the cliff)

PHYGON: (Picks up a nearby stone and turns in the direction of Leukos with deadly excitement) My Lord, I’ll crush their heads with this very stone. I’ll gouge their eyes out with my nails. Because their cheeks are like the jowls of horses, and they have the hearts of wolves. They devour babies.

JASON: (With profound respect) How do you know that, Phygon?

PHYGON: That’s what they say. Oh, beloved Sparta! Awful Huns have ambushed our beautiful fatherland.

DEMETRIOS: Calm down, Phygon, Sparta will be triumphant.

OINOS: (Downwards to the approaching Leukos) I know how to count to ten … but they’re only five … and their cheeks are not like the jowls of horses.

PHYGON: (Screaming) But they are, if I say so, and they number a thousand!

JASON: Perhaps you know, how many is—a thousand?
PHYGON: (Screaming) Their number is a thousand. You stupid doubters. Sparta never takes less than a thousand prisoners.

JASON: (Conciliatorily) If Phygon says so, it’s good enough for us.

LEUKOS: (On top of the cliff, he looks around) Perhaps the light has dazzled my eyes. I can’t see them.

OINOS: There ... over there ... my Lord. That large cliff where we practice jumping is hiding them just now. Their number is only five, and their cheeks are not like the jowls of horses.

PHYGON: (Screaming) Their number is a thousand, and they have the hearts of wolves. They devour babies. My Lord, with this very stone ... 

LEUKOS: (Bored with it) You’ll crush even a thousand, I know. Aha! I can see them now. For sure, there are only five coming this way. But their number could even be a thousand. Spread the news that we have captured thousands and thousands of prisoners. It will give new strength to the population ...

PHYGON: I’ll spread the news everywhere. Thousands and thousands of new prisoners have arrived in Sparta. (Goes out upstage stage right, behind the cliff)

OINOS: (Yells after him) Don’t you even want to see them? They are only five, and they look like men, not horses.

LEUKOS: Quiet, Oinos! (To the boys) You do know how prisoners are dealt with? They are to be tortured and tormented.

OINOS: These ones can barely stand on their feet, and they don’t look like horses.

LEUKOS: One more word out of you, Oinos, and you’ll get ten lashes. (He continues talking to the boys) Whoever gives them water or food brings the death penalty upon himself. We do not fatten the enemy who threatens our lives. And no one is allowed to talk to them or fraternize with them, because only cowards get taken prisoners. The courageous ones fight to the death. Talking with these cowards is a sin twice over. In former times, we never took prisoners. We did not chase after the fleeing enemy. But these days we must replenish the slaves because so many of the rascals have escaped. These ones would also escape if they could. So treat
them mercilessly. Here they come, move back all of you, lest they should breathe on you. (Runs down from the cliff and pushes his way through the boys who are backing to the right. He stands at the head of them and raises his arm in a Nazi salute. From upstage left, Pharón and Dyono arrive with the five prisoners of war, including Tyrtæus) Greetings, Pharón and Dyono, noble fighters! Greetings to you and victory to Sparta!

DYONOS: (To the prisoners, some of whom have terrible wounds) Men! ... Whoa, we’re stopping here. (The prisoners collapse on the ground with the exception of Tyrtæus who is waiting for something ...) TEKNON: Terrible ... what shocking wounds. JASON: I can’t understand ... he calls them men. OINOS: And they look like men, not horses.

DEMETRIOS: (He doesn’t believe his eyes) One ... two ... three ... four ... five.

LEUKOS: Greetings to you, noble fighters.

DYONOS: (To the boys, who are creeping forward) Back off kids. (To the prisoners) We’ll rest here. You can have half an hour. (This time, with a slow sigh, Tyrtæus also lowers himself)

LEUKOS: (A little indignant) Greetings to you, noble fighters.

PHARÓN: Never mind that. Just give us something to eat instead.

LEUKOS: Your talk is out of line. Victory to Sparta.

PHARÓN: Idle phrases. Instead of feeding our bellies. Greetings and victory! We’ve heard it all before.

LEUKOS: (Shocked) I don’t believe it. Could this be Spartan discipline?

PHARÓN: (With an outburst) We rotted in mud. Okay. There were no rags to cover our wounds. Okay. We filled our bellies with grass. Okay. Instead of attacking, we are retreating. Okay. Sooner or later we’ll die like animals. Okay. And now this one, here behind the frontlines, demands discipline from us ...

DYONOS: Very well. At least bring water. For them as well ...

LEUKOS: (Infuriated) Think of our articles of war. Whosoever gives water to the prisoners betrays Sparta.

PHARÓN: What are you preaching about. Our orders are to get
them to headquarters alive, parade them through Sparta so that the population can be inspired at the sight of them.

TEKNON: I wish they had jowls like horses, then I could detest them. As it is, I can only feel sorrow. I could cry.

DYONOS: Because you’re a decent kid.

LEUKOS: (Hissing) Put some sense into him, Demetrios. (Demetrios punches his fist into Teknon’s face. Tyrtaeus shivers involuntarily)

PHARON: That’s how it’s meant to be. Whosoever is decent must be punched decently in the head.

LEUKOS: (Alluding to the boys) At least show them a good example.

PHARON: (Furious) You do it. I’ve been fighting for three years without a break. Change places with me. And I’ll teach the kids to know that when a fighter asks for water, they should bring it immediately.

DYONOS: (Pulls the ear of Demetrios, who stands next to him) Hey kid, bring water. Did you hear me? We have our orders, and without water we won’t get very far.

1st PRISONER: (Pointing to Teknon) You, blond little one. Be merciful and strike me through the heart.

LEUKOS: (Grasping the psychological effect) All of you, spit on them. Do you hear me, Jason.

JASON: My Lord, I can’t spit. My mouth is dry.

2nd PRISONER: Water!

LEUKOS: Gyno, let’s hear the line-up. (Gyno blows a signal on his flute, and the boys slowly stand in line)

DYONOS: What about the water?

LEUKOS: You can get it yourselves—traitors!

DYONOS: (Suddenly furious) You’re telling me that ... You ... I ... (He wants to attack him, but is restrained by Pharon)

PHARON: (After Dyonos has come to his senses) You want to start with them? Those homebound sages, who know everything better ... That an attack from the wing should’ve been done in such and such a way, and the frontal attack just so. How we should’ve taken advantage of a certain path or occupied a particular height,
and, mainly, how to win, win, always win! Because they know just how to do it. And why wouldn't they know, when they have excellent connections everywhere. And that is the truth. How else could they have managed to stay at home ...

LEUKOS: My work is more important ...

PHARON: You pathetic coward, you’ve just uttered the loafer’s slogan. Yeah, you would gladly go, wouldn’t you, if your work here wasn’t even more important than fighting? But you cannot go, by the gods, you can’t, because no less than the salvation of the fatherland rests in your hands. (To the boys) Right turn, forward march. Go and hide your master well. Though I swear upon the gods that pretty soon even you will be needed out there, because it is no longer about victory but about survival.

LEUKOS: (To the boys) Go to the cliff. I’ll be making my report.

PHARON: Why don’t you do that? Do that! Just one more thing: In the meantime, I’ll stuff my face, and then perhaps discipline will come back to me. And then, you’ll believe you that a Spartan soldier, who serves at the front, could speak in a way other than what’s prescribed. Hey, Chief, isn’t it true that even you couldn’t believe it? As you said, it’s inconceivable from the mouth of a Spartan soldier! (In the meantime, following a sign from Leukos, the boys reluctantly start marching off) It would be a disgrace of such proportions that to speak of it would be a worse sin than to have committed it.

DYONOS: (Grinning) You do have a tongue!

PHARON: (After they’re gone) Believe it or not, I hate his kind more than I hate the enemy. Because I know about his kind, who they are, what they are doing and why. Whereas with the enemy, I only know what they’re doing—not who they are and why they’re doing it. Believe me, when I think that his kind will also drop dead, I’m sometimes glad that we are losing this war.

2nd PRISONER: Give us water. Water. We too believe in the same gods.

PHARON: You hear that, Dyonos? At least the enemy refers to our common gods, whereas such a loafing rascal would even disavow his own kind in the name of discipline—which means
nothing other than blindly serving his own safety.

TYRTAEUS: Bring water, otherwise my companions will perish.

DYONOS: Shut up, lame one. How dare you ask for water from a Spartan? You think I haven’t heard you cursing Sparta all the way? You didn’t even keep it to a whisper. That we are merciless and evil.

TYRTAEUS: I’m not asking for myself, but for my companions.

PHARON: Don’t be such a busybody. Aren’t you thirsty? Maybe you’re not even tired, that’s how come you’re always speaking on behalf of your mates. Lame as you are, you did better than all of them on two good legs. You didn’t walk like a captive. You walked as though you were going home. You’re very suspicious lame one, very suspicious.

TYRTAEUS: Your suspicion is justified. I hate Sparta and that hatred compels me not to accept any favorable treatment from you. Bring water for my companions. Because they won’t reach the goal without water. I (in a prophetic voice) will get there, even without water.

DYONOS: (A touch terrified) Just you wait, I’ll get the water, but you won’t get a sip of it. Why couldn’t such a brazen one be stabbed to death on the way?!

PHARON: Let it be, Dyonos. We finally managed to round up five wounded men, whom we’ve ceremoniously proclaimed to be prisoners of war. Now, all of Sparta awaits them for great victory celebrations. All five of them have to get there. They are so precious that if one of them dies, we’ll have to carry him.

TYRTAEUS: Did you hear that, Dyonos. It’s quite straightforward.

DYONOS: Damn this rotten world in which a Spartan has gotten to the stage of needing to worry about the physical wellbeing of the enemy.

TYRTAEUS: Such talk cools my palate. But the others need water. Bring them some.

PHARON: There’s bound to be a creek nearby. Go towards the olive trees. Here, you can put some into my helmet as well. (He hands Dyonos his own helmet)
DYONOS: (Grumbles) All right. All right. Though you could also be going. (He goes out upstage, between the olive trees)
TYRTAEUS: Your helmet still sparkles, your shield is immaculate, your spear is without a spot of rust and you grease your sandal straps daily, in accordance with regulations. But where has your toughness gone, that toughness which is known throughout the world as Spartan.
PHARON: Am I not tough, lame one? Here, feel these muscles. TYRTAEUS: Your arms, your heart and your lungs are still the same. That’s why you can still endure the suffering. But the stuff that made you tough inside is missing.
PHARON: Nothing’s missing. You’re lying! My belief in a Spartan victory is unshakeable. If I could just fill my stomach again, I swear I’ll cut down a hundred of your kind.
TYRTAEUS: And if you can’t fill your stomach?
PHARON: Then I don’t know what will happen. (He points to his stomach) Because this emptiness must be filled, otherwise my spine will snap in two.
TYRTAEUS: Apart from filling your belly, doesn’t your life mean anything to you?
PHARON: What do you mean?
TYRTAEUS: Do you have a family?
PHARON: I don’t have anyone.
TYRTAEUS: If you don’t even have food, then what ties you to Sparta? Why are you fighting for it, why are you starving?
PHARON: Because I’m a Spartan.
TYRTAEUS: And what does being a Spartan mean to you?
PHARON: Well ... that ...
TYRTAEUS: You don’t know, do you? Then why are you doing this? Why don’t you desert them? There’s plenty of food on the other side. Abandon the flag!
PHARON: What flag?
TYRTAEUS: The Spartan flag.
PHARON: That I will not do. I’d rather keel over from hunger.
TYRTAEUS: I get it. Though you have no one, though you don’t know what ties you to Sparta, or why you’re fighting and starv-
ing; though you can’t feel what it means to be a Spartan—you’d still rather keel over from hunger than abandon it. Don’t you see how hopeless this is, or how barren and aimless your life is? It doesn’t even mean enough for you to escape starving to death.

PHARON: It’s so hard to understand. Can it all be: ‘no’, ‘haven’t’ and ‘nothing’? No, that cannot be. If you had seen how beautiful it was when a thousand divisions goose-stepped at the parade, in front of the leader. A thousand times fifteen men. The crests of their helmets were shining. Their bellies were full; shoulder was taut against shoulder. And the earth thundered. Yes, now I do know what being a Spartan means to me.

TYRTAEUS: (Realistically) And what remains of the thousand divisions?

PHARON: Not even a hundred perhaps.

TYRTAEUS: And your belly?

PHARON: Empty.

TYRTAEUS: But your helmet still gleams. That’s all that’s left of it. Believe me, everything you told me is just appearance! And how much you are all to be pitied that you’d sacrifice your lives for such a dazzle. Strictly speaking, you are not even human beings, because you bear the burden of your awful obsession as if it were natural. Who is the demon who forced upon you the kind of command against which you can’t rebel, because it seeped into your blood and is spreading like poison throughout your body. How can I explain this to you? How can I depict the lie—when you don’t even know the truth you believe in. One can fight against something, but how does one apprehend nothing? What can I do to wake you up? Should I speak of freedom, or justice, or truth, when it doesn’t mean more to you than to prompt you to ask: what for? Oh, if only there were scientists among you, or poets or sculptors …

PHARON: What for?

TYRTAEUS: To teach you about all the things that represent the meaning of life. I told you before that I hate you. But only now do I realize how much you are to be pitied. A people who live in ignorance under the command of a lying tyrant—a people who
have sunk into delusion—an uneducated lot who haven’t yet found a teacher.

PHARON: If I didn’t know that you're the enemy, I’d have to think that you were born a Spartan. You talk of betrayal with such fervor that it smacks of betrayal against yourself. You want me to betray Sparta so that I can improve my lot? With you, one really can’t tell whether your outstretched arm will hit you on the head or support you under the arm. (Jumps up) What’s that? Did you hear that noise?


PHARON: Pssst! Quiet. (Jumps across the stage and grabs someone from behind the cliff) By the gods, anyone as stealthy as this can only have base intentions! (He drags Teknon out) It’s you! And why did you come back?

TEKNON: (Carrying a basket in one hand) Please, my Lord, no noise. If they catch me, they’ll whip me. Though I don’t even mind if they whipped me to death for this. I stole some cheese and bread for you from the boys’ tent.

PHARON: (Roughly) Did you bring it for me or for them?

TEKNON: (Simply) I brought it for all who are called men.

PHARON: Just what do you mean?

TEKNON: My Lord, you and your comrade are men. (Alluding to Dyenos) Didn’t your comrade call out before: “Men! Whoa … men … we’re stopping here.”

PHARON: Now I get it.

TEKNON: I just want to ask you to eat quickly because there are many on their way here.

PHARON: You rustled this up, you be the one to share it around.

TEKNON: The first portions of the cheese belong to you and your comrade. (He’s cutting up the cheese) I’ll break the bread into seven pieces. (He is breaking up the bread) You go on and eat and I’ll be on watch. Okay?

TYRTAeus: Would you tell your name to a slave?

TEKNON: My name is Teknon. My mother taught me that slaves are also human beings.

TYRTAeus: Does such a mother still exist in Sparta. Then all is
Tyrtaeus: Act I: Scene 2

not lost. (Dyonos arrives upon the last sentence. He is carrying two hel-
mets filled with water)
DYONOS: We’ll drink to that. Though I’ve already drunk myself
to bits. Did you leave me something from the feast? Look at that.
The lame one is also eating the bread of Sparta. There, have some
water. Go on. Drink. If you can give away your beliefs for a piece
of cheese.
TYRTAEUS: I accept nothing from the enemy. But I’ll eat the
bread of one who says that slaves are also human beings.

SCENE 2

The tent of ephor Eupator. Large empty walls made of cloth. Downstage
right is a bed made of straw. Center stage there are a few logs of wood
leaning together. Stage left side near the entrance is a cresset. Upstage
center on the wall of the tent hangs something like a map. Eupator is
standing alone when Phygon bursts in.

PHYGON: They are bringing prisoners to Sparta. There are
thousands and thousands of them. They have the jowls of horses
and the hearts of wolves.
EUPATATOR: Calm down, young Spartan and tell me the circum-
stances.
PHYGON: Isn’t it enough, my Lord? That so many were cap-
tured? Leukos told me to spread the news. (He is about to rush off)
EUPATATOR: Stay where you are! Who saw them?
PHYGON: I did, my Lord.
EUPATATOR: Only you ...?
PHYGON: Others as well. But none with the same feelings ...
EUPATATOR: Are you different from the others?
PHYGON: I’m the same as the others on the outside, but
inside ...