

# HERACLES

*Translated by William Arrowsmith*

INTRODUCTION TO *HERACLES*

THE *Heracles* of Euripides is seldom assigned a high place in the corpus of extant tragedy. If no one any longer quite accepts Swinburne's description of the play as a "grotesque abortion," the reason is less real disagreement than a habit of respect for the author, supported by a cautious intuition of the play's extraordinary power. Of caution there should be no question. However dislocated in structure the *Heracles* may be, its dramatic power and technical virtuosity are unmistakable. With the possible exception of the *Bacchae*, there is no play into which Euripides has put more of himself and his mature poetic skills than this one. In scene after scene one senses that sureness of movement and precise control of passion which come only with the dramatist's full mastery of his medium. One thinks first of the staggering brutality and shock which erupts in the madness scene, a brutality made all the more terrible by the tenderness which precedes it; or of the great dirge which celebrates the labors of Heracles, and then the confrontation of that ode with the hero's simple "Farewell, my labors"; or, again, of the exquisite ode in praise of youth and the service of the Muses, poetry tense with the full pressure of the poet's life behind it; and, last of all, that anguished exchange between Theseus and Heracles in which the hero, broken by his suffering, weak, reduced to his final humanity, comes on his greatest heroism, surely one of the most poignant codas in Greek tragedy.

Technically, at least, it is a brilliant performance, boldness of dramatic stroke and vigor of invention everywhere visible, but particularly in the brisk counterpoint of peripetias on which the tragedy turns, wheeling over and over as one action pivots to its opposite, or, juxtaposed against a sudden illumination, is as suddenly shattered and annulled. Through theme after theme, with perfect tact of tempo and placing, the reversals crowd, taking each motif a further turn of the wheel. Thus the first action of the play, slow, conventional, overwhelmed by the weakness of its characters, creates out of

desperation a sudden and time-honored theodicy. The wheel turns, and a violent irruption of the irrational smashes all theodicy; then, in the last swing, both irrational and theodicy are alike undone in the hero's enormous leap to an illusion of order in divinity, an assertion which he maintains squarely in the teeth of his experience. The savior who suddenly turns destroyer is in turn saved from self-destruction by the man he had earlier saved from Hades. The hero is reduced to his humanity as the condition of his heroism. Throughout the tragedy, gathering momentum by contrast, runs the rhythm of its minor terms: first despair, then hope, then again despair, and finally an endurance deeper than either; age and youth, weakness and strength, both pairs resolved in the condition that makes them one. Schematic, brilliant, savagely broken, the *Heracles* is a play of great power and, with the exception of the *Orestes*, the most violent structural tour-de-force in Greek tragedy.

It is this very dislocation, this virtuosity and violence in the play's structure, which more than anything else has injured its reputation and hindered reappraisal. Given Aristotelian standards of judgment (and Aristotle even today affects dramatic criticism at a profound level), the play's dislocation could not but appear either pointless or gratuitous; for at almost every conceivable point the play is in flat contradiction to the principles of the *Poetics*. Thus Heracles has no visible *hamartia*; if he falls, he falls for no flaw of his own nature or failure of judgment, but as the innocent victim of divine brutality. And still worse, the play exhibits not at all that deep, necessitous *propter hoc* connection between its parts, which for Aristotle constituted the right structure of tragedy.<sup>1</sup> With almost one voice both critics and scholars from Aristotle to the present have reported the dislocation of the play as an insuperable blemish. The *Heracles*, they say, is "broken-backed,"<sup>2</sup> a tragedy that "falls so clearly into two parts that we cannot view it as a work of art."<sup>3</sup> But in so saying, they report, I think, as much their own outraged Aristotelianism as the obvious facts of the play's structure.

1. *Poetics* 1452<sup>b</sup>. 20.

2. Gilbert Murray, *Greek Studies*, p. 112.

3. Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 229.

Beyond question the play falls starkly into two discrete but continuous actions, and between these two actions there is neither causal necessity nor even probability: the second action follows but by no means arises out of the first. Through the close of the chorus which celebrates the slaying of Lycus (l. 814), we have one complete action as conventional in movement as it is in subject: a familiar tableau of suppliants, their cruel antagonist, an *agôn* in which the tormentor is slain by the savior, and a closing hymn in praise of the hero and the vindicated justice of the gods. This melodramatic action is shattered by the appearance of Madness and Iris, and the play, in violation of all probability, careens around to commence a wholly new action. Utterly unexpected and without causal ground in the first part of the play, the madness of Heracles and the murder of his wife and children are simply set down in glaring contrast to the preceding action. Against theodicy is put the hideous proof of divine injustice; against the greatness and piety and *aretē* of Heracles in the first action is placed the terrible reward of heroism in the second; against the asserted peace and calm and domestic tenderness which closes the first action is set the utter annihilation of all moral order in the second. The result is a structure in which two apparently autonomous actions are jammed savagely against each other in almost total contradiction, with no attempt to minimize or even modulate the profound formal rift.

That rift is, of course, deliberate; nothing, in fact, has been omitted which might support the effect of total shock in this reversal. Moreover, even a cursory review of the material which Euripides used for his tragedy shows how carefully that material has been ordered to effect, rather than obviate, this dislocation of structure.

Old tradition told of Hera's persecution of Heracles because of her jealousy of Zeus's amour with Heracles' mother, Alcmena. It also told how Heracles, driven mad by Hera, slew his sons and would also have killed his father, Amphitryon, had not Athene intervened and knocked the raging hero unconscious with a stone. For the most part Euripides has retained these traditions, but with this great difference: whereas in the common tradition the great labors of

Heracles were undertaken in penance for the murder of the children, Euripides has transposed the murders to the time just after the completion of the labors, the height of Heracles' career. Because Heracles at the very moment of his fall is at his greatest, the hideousness of Hera's revenge is sharply underscored and its abrupt, tragic senselessness stressed. The dramatist, that is, has ordered his material in such a way as to achieve precisely that dislocation which the play's structure exhibits. Nor is this all. Because Euripides has transposed the labors and the murders, he has been forced to invent a new motive for the labors. This is the motive of filial piety: Heracles undertook his labors in order to win back the country from which Amphitryon had been exiled for the murder of Electryon. Thus at the same time that Euripides freely invents in order to fill the gap caused by the original transposition, he also subtly humanizes his hero in preparation for the conversion which is the heart of the second action.

Tradition also told of Heracles' suicide on Mt. Oeta (cf. Sophocles' *Trachiniae*) and how after death the hero was translated to heaven and given everlasting youth in the person of Hebe. This entire saga is suppressed in the Euripidean version, but the very fact of its suppression informs the *Heracles* throughout, pointing up the direction of the action against what has been excluded. Thus Heracles, far from being deified in Euripides, is humanized<sup>4</sup> as the condition of his heroism. And far from committing suicide, the Euripidean Heracles discovers his greatest nobility in refusing to die and choosing life. If, again in the older tradition, Heracles married Hebe (i.e., youth) and so won everlasting life, in the Euripidean play Hebe is present to the action as nothing more than an impossible anguished reminder of mortal necessity and the haunting image of what in a universe not fatally flawed might have been the reward of human

4. In the humanization of Heracles, Euripides returns to the oldest of all extant Heracles traditions, the Homeric, in which Heracles too had to die. Cf. *Iliad* xviii. 115 ff.: "Not even the great Heracles escaped death, though he was dear to the lord Zeus, the son of Cronus, but the common fate brought him down, and the grievous wrath of Hera." In literature of the historical period this tradition has almost everywhere been eclipsed by the deified Heracles, a version which begins also with Homer (cf. *Odyssey* xi. 601 ff.).

virtue (cf. 637-72). Similarly, the suppression of the deification motif sharpens the courageous endurance of mankind under its necessities in contrast with the happiness of the amoral gods. Deification is replaced by the closest thing to Olympus this world can offer—honored asylum at Athens. For this reason Theseus is introduced as the representative of Athenian humanity to rescue and annex to Athens the greatest Dorian hero.

By deployment of his material Euripides has structured his play into two parallel actions divided by a peripety whose purpose is more to stress the break than to bridge it. If the *Heracles* is broken, the dislocation is at least deliberate, and as such it is clearly consistent with Euripides' practice elsewhere: in the two actions of the *Hecuba*, the double plot of the *Hippolytus*, the episodic *Trojan Women* or *Phoenissae*, the broken *Andromache*, and the dislocated *Electra*. But even more violently than these plays the *Heracles* insists on the irreparable rift in its structure and invites us by its great power to discover what nonetheless makes it one play. It is right that our perception of power in literature should lead us more deeply into the order and disorder created or invoked.

Despite the fact that the first action is entirely free invention, it is important to see how conventional the treatment is. In the shaping of the characters, in their attributes and motives, in the theology and received values to which the action appeals, convention is everywhere visible. Character is essentially static, the action as a whole leached of any really tragic movement. All the emotional stops of a melodramatic situation have been pulled: we move from the despair of the helpless family to the sudden coming of the savior hero to the triumphant final diapason of vindicated divine justice. The characters are only lightly dubbed in, certainly no more so than is necessary to maintain the illusion that these are real people in a situation of unqualified peril. If the action is not quite trite, it is at least customary and predictable, so predictable in fact that it might be regarded as a parody of a standard tragic movement. Certainly no one familiar with Euripides' practice can doubt that the comfortable theodicy which closes the action has been written tongue-in-cheek or is somehow surely riding for a fall. And insensibly the

impression of purely tragic power in the second action, although based on an analogous plot, undercuts the first action and exposes its conventionality.

What is true of the first action as a whole is also true of the Heracles of the first action. The traditional *données* which compose his figure have for the most part been carefully preserved; if Heracles is not here the beefeater of comedy or the ruddy sensualist of the *Alcestis*, he is recognizably the familiar culture-hero of Dorian and Boeotian tradition: strong, courageous, noble, self-sufficient, carrying on his back all the aristocratic *aretē* of the moralized tradition of Pindar. Thus the grossnesses or cruelties or philandering which tradition sometimes ascribed to him (cf. again the *Trachiniae*) have been stripped away. In domestic life he is a devoted son, a loyal husband, and a fond father; in civil life he is the just king, the enemy of *hybris*, the champion of the helpless, and the loyal servant of the gods. His civilizing labors on behalf of mankind are accepted as literal truths, and the curious ambiguity in tradition which made Heracles the son of two fathers, Zeus and Amphitryon, is maintained. His heroism is based upon his strength and is essentially outward, but nonetheless valid, or at least valid enough for the muted reality of the first action.

Against this background, the second action breaks with tragic force and striking transformations, showing first the conquering hero, the *kallinikos*, reduced to tears, helpless, dependent, and in love, stripped of that outward strength which until now had exempted him from normal human necessity, and discovering both his common ground with men and a new internalized moral courage. This Heracles is not merely untraditional; he is almost inconceivable in traditional perspective, and he is tragic where the earlier Heracles was merely noble. The point to be insisted upon here is the distance at every point between the two actions. We have here moved a whole world away from the simple virtues and theodicy of the first action, as the new role and courage of the hero undercut everything the play has created up to now. The world of the given, the reality of "things as they are said to be," withers and is replaced, not by a mere contradiction, but by a new tragic myth invoking

new values and grounded in a sterner reality. What audience, especially a Greek one, could have recognized in that broken, almost domestic, Heracles fighting back his tears, the familiar and austere culture-hero of received tradition?

We have, then, two savagely different actions, one conventional and the other set in a world where tradition is dumb and conduct uncharted, placed harshly in contrast. The peripety which separates them is the dramatist's means of expressing symbolically the fatal disorder of the moral universe, and also the device by which the heroism of the second action is forced up, through an utter transformation of assumed reality. The whole play exhibits, as though on two plateaus, a *conversion* of reality. A story or legend derived from received beliefs—the world of myth and the corpus of “things as they are said to be”—is suddenly in all of its parts, terms, characters, and the values it invokes *converted* under dramatic pressure to another phase of reality. What we get is something like a dramatic mutation of received reality, and the leap the play makes between the phases or plateaus of its two realities is meant to correspond in force and vividness and apparent unpredictability to mutations in the physical world. It is this violence in the conversion of reality that explains the wrenching dislocation of Euripidean drama from an Aristotelian point of view and the lack of apparent connection between the parts of the play. The play pivots on two seemingly incompatible realities, and if it insists on the greater reality of what has been created over what has been received, it does so, not by denying reality to receive reality, but by subtly displacing it in the transfiguration of its terms.

Thus, point for point in the *Heracles*, each of the terms—the qualities, situation, characters—that was appropriate to the Heracles of tradition is transformed and displaced. If in the first action both Zeus and Amphitryon are the fathers of Heracles, in the second action Amphitryon becomes Heracles' “real” father, not by the fact of conception, but by the greater fact of love, *philia*. In the first action Heracles literally descended to a literal Hades; in the second action this literal descent is transfigured in the refusal to die and the

courage which, under an intolerable necessity, perseveres. There is a hint, moreover, that the old Hades of the poets with its Cerberus, Sisyphus, and torments is transformed in the second part into the Hades within, here and now, internalized as Heracles himself declares, “And I am like Ixion, forever chained to a flying wheel.” So too the old labors appear to be replaced by the metaphorical sense of the imposed labors of human life and the cost of civilization, while the goddess Hera, who in legend made Heracles mad, passes almost insensibly into a hovering symbol of all those irrational and random necessities which the Greek and the play call *Tyche*, and which we limply translate as “Fortune” or “necessity.”

All of these conversions replace and dislodge the reality of the first action by transfiguring it at every point. The first action in the light of the second is neither false nor unreal, but inadequate. Through the force of contrast with its own conversion, it comes to seem obsolete, naïve, or even humdrum, much as fresh conviction formed under *peine forte et dure* insensibly makes the conviction it replaces callow or jejune in comparison. Under the changed light of experience and the pattern it imposes, what was once taken for reality comes to seem illusion at best: true while held as true, but with widened experience, discovered inadequate. What we see is less the contradiction between the two opposed realities than the counterpointed relation of their development, the way in which, under the blow of suffering and insight, one reality is made to yield a further one, each geared to its appropriate experience. We begin with a familiar and conventional world, operating from familiar motives among accepted though outmoded values; by the time the play closes, characters, motives, and values have all been pushed to the very frontiers of reality.

But if in this context of conversion the conventional first action is undercut and dislodged by the tragic second action, the first action also helps to inform the second and to anticipate its discoveries. Thus Heracles' desperation after his madness is paralleled by his family's desperation in the first part; what they say and do there is meant to be applied with full force to his situation later. If courage for them

lies in the nobility with which they accept the necessity of death, nobility for Heracles lies in the courage with which he accepts his life as his necessity, for, in Amphitryon's words:

To persevere, trusting in what hopes he has,  
is courage in a man. The coward despairs [ll. 105-6].

If Amphitryon in the first action possesses a "useless" life (l. 42) by virtue of extreme old age and weakness, Heracles later comes to possess the same "useless" life (l. 1302), and so both meet on the grounds of their common condition. Similarly the chorus speaks of its own necessity, old age, as "a weight more heavy than Aetna's rocks, / hiding in darkness / the light of my eyes" (ll. 639-41); that same darkness, not as age but as grief, lies later on the eyes of Heracles (ll. 1140, 1159, 1198, 1104-5, 1216, 1226ff.), the dark night of his soul. And just as the chorus in the first action finds the hope of its life in poetry and perseveres in the Muses' service, so Theseus uncovers Heracles to the sun and shows him the hope in *philia* which enables him to live. So too when Heracles, self-sufficient and independent, leads his children into the palace before his madness, he draws them behind him like little boats in tow (*epholkidas*); but at the end of the play Heracles, broken, in love and dependent, follows in Theseus' wake to Athens like a little boat in tow (*epholkides*). The same implicit counterpoint between the two actions explains in part, I think, the unqualified villainy of Lycus. Balancing the corruption of human power and brutality (*amathia*) in him, comes the abuse of divine power in Hera—a far more heinous abuse, since divine cruelty is a fortiori worse than human brutality. Beyond this, I suspect, we are intended to see correspondence again in the physical death which Lycus meets at Heracles' hands and the spiritual annihilation of Hera which is the consequence of Heracles' great speech on the gods (ll. 1340-46). But throughout the play, in metaphor, in contrast of whole scenes, in visual imagery, the two actions are paralleled at point after point. Below the level of the violent structural dislocation of the play runs a constant crisscross of reference, comment, and contrast throwing single words or themes into sharp relief in continuous qualification of the whole action. In the perception of this

continuous conversion of the play's terms lies the understanding of its movement and unity.

Point by point the deepest motive of the play is to bring Heracles to the place where he shares for the first time common ground with the others, all of whom, like him, are laid under the heavy yoke of necessity but lack that enormous physical strength which has hitherto exempted him. But if he must come to share that yoke with them, if he is reduced to his humanity as the condition of the only heroism that counts, he also comes to know for the first time that other, and redeeming, yoke of love, *philia*, which alone makes necessity endurable. For the *Heracles* is a play which imposes suffering upon men as their tragic condition, but it also discovers a courage equal to that necessity, a courage founded on love. We witness in the play a conversion of heroism whose model is Heracles, and the heart of that conversion lies in the hero's passage in suffering from the outworn courage of outward physical strength to a new internal courage, without exemption now but with the addition of love and perseverance against an intolerable necessity.

Love is the hope, the *elpis*, which permits him to endure, and his discovery of that hope keeps step with his knowledge of anguish. He survives by virtue of love, for love lies close to, if it does not usurp, the instinct for survival. At the close of the play we see Heracles assert the dignity of his grief against the reproaches of a Theseus who, for all his generosity, is still rooted in the old heroism and no longer understands. Having claimed the dignity of his new courage, Heracles can without weakness or loss of tragic stature make plain the wreck of his life and his own dependent helplessness: strong but also weak, in need and in love, a hero at every point.

Heracles comes through suffering, then, to occupy the ground where Megara, Amphitryon, and the chorus stood earlier. Their nobility provides a standard by which to measure his heroism, first challenging it and then being surpassed by it. But nothing in Heracles is diminished because Megara and Amphitryon have set the example he must follow, and know already what he must learn. Their very weakness has set them close to necessity, while Heracles' *aretē* has been so prodigiously developed toward physical strength

that nothing short of the greatest moral courage is required for him to survive his necessity. He rises and keeps on rising to his sufferings with an enormous range of spirit that in the end leaves even the unconventional Theseus far behind him. It is this ability to rise that makes him great as much as the overwhelming anguish of the necessity that confronts him. What counts in the end is not the disparity between Heracles' courage and necessity and the courage of the others, but the fact that they all—Megara, Amphitryon, the chorus, and Heracles—meet on the common ground of their condition and discover both courage and hope in the community of weakness and love.

What, finally, are we to make of Hera and that crucial speech of Heracles on the nature of the gods (ll. 1340-46)? That it was Hera who made Heracles mad was, as we have seen, an essential part of Euripides' legendary material. But the consequence of Heracles' speech is apparently to deny that the actions of the gods could in fact be such as they are dramatized to be. Alternatively Heracles appears to deny the reality of the experience out of which he makes the speech in the first place. For to say that "if god is truly god, then he is perfect, / lacking nothing" is clearly to invalidate Hera's claim to divinity, or to deny his own experience of Hera's hatred.

The sentiment is, to be sure, Euripidean, a familiar refusal to believe the old legends which represent the gods as subject to human passions, and a discountenance of the familiar fifth-century notion that immoral conduct could be sanctioned by an appeal to divine conduct as recounted in poetry. But merely because the lines are Euripidean in thought, their effect for the play should not be glozed away as mere inconsistencies or as an undramatic intrusion of the dramatist *in propria persona*. For to say that divine adultery, tyranny, and misconduct are all "the wretched tales of poets" is a direct and unmistakable challenge not only to the Hera of the play, but to the whole Olympian system.

The consequences of Heracles' words for the play are, I suggest, this: that the story of Hera's action as dramatized is true enough, but the Hera who afflicts Heracles as she does thereby renounces any claim to the kind of divinity which Heracles asserts. This conclusion

is, I think, supported by Euripides' practice elsewhere and also by the language of the play. Like the *Hippolytus* with Aphrodite and the *Bacchae* with Dionysus, the *Heracles* does two things with Hera: it first dramatizes the legend which contains her action as incredible in a goddess,<sup>5</sup> and then, having shown *and* asserted its incredibility, it converts her into a hovering symbol of all the unknown and unknowable forces which compel Heracles and men to suffer tragically and without cause or sense. As Dionysus is a complex symbol for the forces of life, amoral and necessitous, so Hera comprehends all the principles of peripety and change and random necessity. She is not Hera, but "Hera," a name given her for the want of a name, but loosely what the Greeks meant by *Tyche*, the lady of necessity and reversal. In asserting this "Hera" as the consequence of his own speech, Heracles annihilates the old Olympian Hera as a goddess, but also converts her into that demonic and terribly real power of his own necessity. The tragedy of Heracles is both true and real, but it is no longer the traditional story, nor is Heracles the same man, nor Hera the same goddess. And it is to confirm this conversion that Heracles a few lines later (l. 1357) concludes: "And now, I see, I must serve necessity (*tyche*)." So too in his last reference to Hera he hints at the conversion by significantly juxtaposing both *tyche* and the name of Hera, claiming that "we all have been struck down by one *tyche* of Hera" (l. 1393).<sup>6</sup> And, if this were not enough, the play's overwhelming preoccupation with peripety as theme and as dislocation in structure would confirm the conversion. This, I think, is what we should expect, that the conversion of the old legend of Heracles and his old nobility into a new myth should be accompanied by the conversion of his necessity as well. To alter his old heroism without also altering the source of his suffering would be to cripple the conversion at the crucial point. It would obscure, that is, the fact that Heracles, though broken by necessity, still wins the moral victory over the power that ruins him, earning for himself

5. Cf. ll. 1307-10 where Heracles asks: "Who could offer prayers to such a goddess? Jealous of Zeus for a mortal woman's sake, she has destroyed Hellas' greatest friend, though he was guiltless."

6. Cf. ll. 1314, 1349, 1396, as well as the significant disjunction, "mastered by Hera or by necessity" in Amphitryon's speech at l. 20.

and men in a different sense the victory claimed by Amphitryon over Zeus earlier:

And I, mere man, am nobler than you, a great god [l. 342].

He claims a courage more than equal to his condition and can therefore claim the dignity of his grief.

Heracles is no Aristotelian hero, nor is the play an Aristotelian tragedy; yet the *Heracles* is a great tragedy and Heracles himself a great tragic hero. The gulf between Euripides and Aristotle on the issues here is a great and permanent one that deserves to be stressed. For Aristotle a tragic fall is grounded in a consistent and harmonious sense of man's responsibility for his nature and his actions: when the hero falls, he falls for his own failure, and behind the rightness of his fall, working both pity and fear by the precise and relentless nature of its operations, stands the order which society and a god-informed world impose upon the individual. What the law requires the gods require too, and so the Aristotelian play portrays, like an image of human life, the individual torn and suffering between his nature and an objective world-order. In Euripides it is otherwise; here the suffering of the individual under his necessity may have no such rightness, or even none at all, as in the *Heracles*. The world-order of the gods as reflected in "things as they are said to be" is either incredible or an indictment of that order, and if it imposes necessities unjustly upon a man, the very courage with which he endures makes him tragic and gives him the moral victory over his own fate. Similarly with society: for society may be no less corrupt than the "gods" and as unjust in the necessities it imposes. Euripides, that is, preserves the disorder of actual experience, measuring its horror against the unrequited illusion of order which sustains human beings. His image of tragic humanity is earned less in the conflict between the individual's nature and the necessities imposed by a higher order than in the conflict between the individual and his own internalized necessities. In the *Heracles*, at least, it is the very innocence of the hero which condemns the "gods" who make him mad; but because the gods are first rendered incredible and then transformed into a collective symbol for all the random, senseless operations of neces-

ty in human life, the courage with which the hero meets his fate and asserts a moral order beyond his own experience is just as tragic and just as significant as that of Oedipus.

### *Date and Circumstances*

The *Heracles* is undated, and no attempt to date the play to any one year can be regarded as wholly successful. The most favored date is one close to 424-423. It has been held that the heavy emphasis throughout the play upon old age in connection with military service, particularly the bitter first strophe of the second *stasimon* (ll. 637 ff.), represents a direct personal intrusion of the poet on having reached his sixtieth year (when he would have been exempt from further military service). On such a theory the date of the play would be 424-423. Similarly, the disproportionate debate on the bow (ll. 188 ff.) is interpreted as an overt reference to the Athenian success at Sphacteria in 425—a victory due largely to bowmen—or to the disastrous failure to employ archers in the hoplite defeat at Delium in 424. The reference to Delian maidens (ll. 687 ff.) is taken as a remembrance of the establishment of the quinquennial *Deliaes* in Athens in 425.

But no one of these suggestions, nor even their ensemble, can be regarded as decisive. The strongest argument for a later date is one given by stylistic and metrical tests, generally rather accurate for Euripides. These tend to place the play in the group of dramas which directly follow the Archidamian War, or about 418-416.

It is my opinion that the metrical tests are supported in their results by the general political tone of the play, with its sharp emphasis upon factional strife and its concern with the badge of true nobility. Further, the reconciliation between Sparta and Athens which is suggested in Theseus' domiciling of Heracles in Athens would seem to suggest (though it need not) a period in which reconciliation between Athens and Sparta was possible. Such reconciliation was a possibility only, I believe, in the period between the close of the Archidamian War in 421 and the aggressive anti-Spartan policy of Alcibiades which culminated in the Athenian-Argive defeat at



Mantineia in 418. It is only against such a background as this, when all major parties in the Peloponnesian War were attempting abortive realignments, when peace must have appeared to be at least a remote possibility to contemporaries, that the lines of Megara (ll. 474-79) can be made to yield good sense. If so, the death of the children who embody the peaceful hopes of a united Hellas (ll. 135-37) must mean the renewal of conflict. A renewal of conflict must have seemed the certain consequence of Alcibiades' policies in 418, whereas in the years just previous an alliance between Athens and Sparta must have excited real hopes of an enduring peace.

### Text

The basis of this translation is the Oxford text of Gilbert Murray, though it has often been supplemented by others,<sup>1</sup> chiefly the brilliant edition of Leon Parmentier in the Budé series.<sup>2</sup> Upon a few occasions I have also adopted the emendations proposed by Wilamowitz. The notes on the translation are not designed to indicate all departures from the Murray text (nor even to mark the numerous occasions on which I preferred the reading of the manuscripts over modern emendations),<sup>3</sup> but to amplify variations or emendations

1. L. 496: cf. D. S. Robertson, "Euripides, *H.F.* 497 ff.," *C.R.* LII (1938), 50-51.

2. L. 1241: "Then where it touches heaven, I shall strike." I adopt here the emendation of Parmentier and read *kai thein* for *katthanein*. Since Theseus at l. 1246 asks Heracles what he will do and where his passion sweeps him, and Heracles replies in the following line that he will die, it seems plausible that *katthanein* here is a simple copyist's mistake for the less familiar *kai thein*. And, as Parmentier remarks, the line as emended pivots on a play with the word *haptēi* in the preceding line (l. 1240). It is also more likely that Theseus in l. 1242 would take *thein* as a threat against the gods than he would the precise self-directed *katthanein*. See L. Parmentier, *Revue de philologie*, XLIV (1920), 161.

3. L. 1351: *Enkarterēsō thanaton* ("I shall prevail against death"). *Thanaton* is here the reading of the manuscripts and, to some degree, it is supported by the identical phrase at *Andromache* l. 262 (though in each case the contextual meaning is different). Murray, following Wecklein and Wilamowitz, however, has altered *thanaton* to *biotou* (life).

So far as the quality of affirmation is concerned here, however, there is little difference between *thanaton* and *biotou*. Both imply the affirmative decision to bear necessity by living; clarity is unaffected by either reading. Though to prevail against life (in the sense of "persevering") may be more forceful than to prevail against death (in the

whose use appeared to me to bear upon the interpretation of the whole play. Lines which are bracketed indicate probable interpolations.

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 (use of resisting the temptation to die), it seems to me that the imagery of the play decisive for *thanaton*. In Heracles' words here, that is, we have the metaphorical (but also realistic) equivalent of the mythical descent to Hades and the conquest of death it signifies. Heracles has in his sufferings been to Hades and at death's door; he now wrestles with his death as myth once imagined him as wrestling for Cerberus. And just as the chorus once (ll. 655 ff.) hoped that the noble man might receive a double life as a reward of *aretē*, in this line we see the vindication of *aretē* in the internalized *eugeneia* which conquers death.

CHARACTERS

*Amphitryon, father of Heracles*

*Megara, wife of Heracles*

*Chorus of old men of Thebes*

*Lycus, usurper of the throne of Thebes*

*Heracles*

*Iris, messenger of the gods*

*Madness*

*Messenger*

*Theseus, king of Athens*

For Robert and Renée Preyer  
*zeugos ge philion*

HERACLES

SCENE: *Before the palace of Heracles at Thebes. In the foreground is the altar of Zeus. On its steps, in the posture of suppliants, sit the aged Amphitryon, Megara, and her three small sons. Amphitryon rises and speaks the prologue.*

*Amphitryon*

What mortal lives who has not heard this name—  
Amphitryon of Argos, who shared his wife  
with Zeus? I am he: son of Alcaeus  
Perseus' son, but father of Heracles.

Here I settled, in this Thebes, where once the earth  
was sown with dragonteeth and sprouted men;  
and Ares saved a few that they might people  
Cadmus' city with their children's children.  
From these sown men Creon was descended,  
son of Menoeceus and our late king.

This lady is Megara, Creon's daughter,  
for whose wedding once all Thebes shrilled  
to flutes and songs as she was led, a bride,  
home to his father's halls by Heracles.

Then my son left home, left Megara and kin,  
hoping to recover the plain of Argos  
and those gigantic walls from which I fled  
to Thebes, because I killed Electryon.

He hoped to win me back my native land  
and so alleviate my grief. And therefore,  
mastered by Hera or by necessity,

5

10

15

he promised to Eurystheus a vast price  
for our return: to civilize the world.  
When all his other labors had been done,  
he undertook the last: descended down  
to Hades through the jaws of Taenarus  
to hale back up to the light of day  
the triple-bodied dog.

He has not come back.

Here in Thebes the legend goes that once  
a certain Lycus married Dirce, our queen,  
and ruled this city with its seven gates  
before the twins of Zeus, those "white colts,"  
Amphion and Zethus, ruled the land.  
This Lycus' namesake and descendant,  
no native Theban but Euboean-born,  
attacked our city, sick with civil war,  
murdered Creon and usurped his throne.  
And now our marriage-bond with Creon's house  
has proved in fact to be our greatest ill.  
For since my son is gone beneath the earth,  
this upstart tyrant, Lycus, plans to kill  
the wife and sons of Heracles—and me,  
so old and useless, that I scarcely count—  
blotting murder with more, lest these boys  
grown to men, someday revenge their mother's house.

My son, when he descended to the darkness  
underground, left me here, appointing me  
both nurse and guardian of his little sons.  
Now, to keep these heirs of Heracles from death,  
their mother and I in supplication  
kneeled to Zeus the Savior at this altar,  
established by the prowess of my son,  
the trophy of his conquering spear  
and monument of Minyan victory.  
Here we sit, in utter destitution,

lacking food, water, and clothing; having no beds  
but the bare earth beneath our bodies;  
barred from our house, empty of hope.  
And of our friends, some prove no friends at all,  
while those still true are powerless to help.  
This is what misfortune means among mankind;  
upon no man who wished me well at all,  
could I wish this acid test of friends might fall.

*Megara*

Old man, marshal of our famous Theban arms,  
who once destroyed the city of the Taphians,  
how dark are all the ways of god to man!  
Prosperity was my inheritance:  
I had a father who could boast of wealth,  
who had such power as makes the long spears  
leap with greed against its proud possessor—  
a father, blessed with children, who gave me  
in glorious marriage to your Heracles.  
But now his glory is gone down in death,  
and you and I, old man, shall soon be dead,  
and with us, these small sons of Heracles  
whom I ward and nestle underwing.  
First one, then another, bursts in tears,  
and asks: "Mother, where has Father gone?  
What is he doing? When will he come back?"  
Then, too small to understand, they ask again  
for "Father." I put them off with stories;  
but when the hinges creak, they all leap up  
to run and throw themselves at their father's feet.  
Is there any hope? What chance of rescue  
do we have, old man? We look to you.  
The border is impassable by stealth;  
sentries have been set on every road;  
all hope that friends might rescue us is gone.

So tell me now if you have any plan,  
or if you have resigned yourself to death.

*Amphitryon*

My child, I find it hard in such a case  
to give advice offhand without hard thought.  
We are weak, and weakness can only wait.

*Megara*

Wait for worse? Do you love life so much?

*Amphitryon*

I love it even now. I love its hopes.

*Megara*

And I. But hope is of things possible.

*Amphitryon*

A cure may come in wearing out the time.

*Megara*

It is the time between that tortures me.

*Amphitryon*

Even now, out of our very evils,  
for you and me a better wind may blow.  
My son, your husband, still may come. Be calm;  
dry the living springs of tears that fill  
your children's eyes. Console them with stories,  
those sweet thieves of wretched make-believe.  
Human misery must somewhere have a stop:  
there is no wind that always blows a storm;  
great good fortune comes to failure in the end.  
All is change; all yields its place and goes;  
to persevere, trusting in what hopes he has,  
is courage in a man. The coward despairs.

*(Enter the Chorus of old men of Thebes. They walk painfully,  
leaning upon their staffs.)*

*Chorus*

STROPHE

Leaning on our staffs we come  
to the vaulted halls and the old man's bed,  
our song the dirge of the dying swan,  
ourselves mere words, ghosts that walk  
in the visions of night,  
trembling with age,  
trembling to help.  
O children, fatherless sons,  
old man and wretched wife  
who mourn your lord in Hades!

ANTISTROPHE

Do not falter. Drag your weary feet  
onward like the colt that, yoked and slow,  
tugs uphill, on rock, the heavy wain.  
If any man should fall,  
support him with your hands,  
age hold up his years  
as once when he was young  
he supported his peers  
in the toils of war  
and was no blot on his country's fame.

EPODE

Look how the children's eyes  
flash forth like their father's!  
Misfortune has not left them,  
nor has loveliness.  
O Hellas, Hellas,  
losing these boys,  
what allies you lose!  
No more. Look: I see my country's tyrant,  
Lycus, approaching the palace.

*(Enter Lycus with attendants.)*

*Lycus*

You there,  
 father of Heracles, and you, his wife:  
 allow me one question. And you must allow it:  
 I am the power here; I ask what I wish.  
 How long will you seek to prolong your lives?  
 What hope have you? What could prevent your death?  
 Or do you think the father of these boys  
 who lies dead with Hades will still come back?  
 How shabbily you suffer when you both must die—  
 you who filled all Hellas with your hollow boasts  
 that Zeus was partner in your son's conception;  
 and you, that you were wife of the noblest man!  
 What was so prodigious in your husband's deeds?  
 Because he killed a hydra in a marsh?  
 Or the Nemean lion? They were trapped in nets,  
 not strangled, as he claims, with his bare hands.  
 Are these your arguments? Because of this,  
 you say, the sons of Heracles should live—  
 a man who, coward in everything else,  
 made his reputation fighting beasts,  
 who never buckled shield upon his arm,  
 never came near a spear, but held a bow,  
 the coward's weapon, handy to run away?  
 The bow is no proof of manly courage;  
 no, your real man stands firm in the ranks  
 and dares to face the gash the spear may make.  
 My policy, old man, is not mere cruelty;  
 call it caution. I am well aware  
 that I killed Creon and usurped his throne.  
 It does not suit my wishes that these boys  
 go free to take their grown revenge on me.

*Amphitryon*

Let Zeus act to guard his interest in his son.  
 For my part, Heracles, I have but words  
 to prove this man's gross ignorance of you.

I cannot bear that you should be abused.  
 First for his slander, for such I call it  
 when you are called a coward, Heracles. 175  
 I call upon the gods to bear me witness:  
 that thunder of Zeus, his chariot  
 in which you rode, stabbing with winged shafts  
 the breasts of the giant spawn of earth,  
 and raised the victory-cry with the gods! 180  
 Go to Pholoë and see the centaurs,  
 go ask them, those four-legged monsters,  
 what man they judge to be the bravest,  
 if not my son, whose courage you call sham.  
 Go ask Abantian Dirphys which bore you: 185  
 it will not praise you. You have never done  
 one brave deed your fatherland could cite.  
 You sneer at that wise invention, the bow.  
 Listen to me and learn what wisdom is.  
 Your spearsman is the slave of his weapons; 190  
 unless his comrades in the ranks fight well,  
 then he dies, killed by their cowardice;  
 and once his spear, his sole defense, is smashed,  
 he has no means of warding death away.  
 But the man whose hands know how to aim the bow, 195  
 holds the one best weapon: a thousand arrows shot,  
 he still has more to guard himself from death.  
 He stands far off, shooting at foes who see  
 only the wound the unseen arrow plows,  
 while he himself, his body unexposed, 200  
 lies screened and safe. This is best in war:  
 to preserve yourself and to hurt your foe  
 unless he stands secure, beyond your range.  
 Such are my arguments, squarely opposed  
 to yours on every point at issue here.  
 What will you achieve by killing these boys?  
 How have they hurt you? Yet I grant you wise  
 in one respect: being base yourself,

you fear the children of a noble man.  
 Still, this goes hard with us, that we must die  
 to prove your cowardice, a fate which you  
 might better suffer at our better hands,  
 if the mind of Zeus intended justice here.  
 But if the sceptre is what you desire,  
 then let us go as exiles from the land.  
 But beware of force, lest you suffer it,  
 when god swings round again with veering wind.

O country of Cadmus, on you too  
 my reproaches fall! Is this your vigil  
 for the sons of Heracles? For Heracles,  
 who single-handed fought your Minyan foe  
 and made Thebes see once more with free men's eyes?  
 No more can I praise Hellas, nor be still,  
 finding her so craven toward my son:  
 with sword, spear, and fire she should have come  
 to help these boys in gratitude to him,  
 for all his labors clearing land and sea.  
 Poor children, both Thebes and Hellas fail you.  
 And so you turn to me, a weak old man,  
 nothing more now than a jawing of words,  
 forsaken by that strength I used to have,  
 left only with this trembling husk of age.  
 But if my youth and strength could come again,  
 I'd take my spear and bloody your brown hair  
 until you ran beyond the bounds of Atlas,  
 trying, coward, to outrun my spear!

*Chorus*

There is a source of speech in all brave men  
 which does not fail, although the tongue be slow.

*Lycus*

Go on, rant, pile up your tower of words!  
 My actions, not my words, shall answer your abuse.

(Turning to his attendants.)

Go, men, to Helicon and Parnassus:  
 tell the woodsmen there to chop up oaken logs  
 and haul them to the city. Then pile your wood  
 around the altar here on every side,  
 and let it blaze. Burn them all alive  
 until they learn the dead man rules no more;  
 that I, and I alone, am the power here.  
 But you old men, for this defiance,  
 you shall mourn the sons of Heracles  
 and each disaster that devours this house,  
 each separate grief, until you learn  
 you are only slaves; I am the master.

*Chorus*

O sons of earth, men whom Ares sowed,  
 teeth he tore from the dragon's foaming jaw,  
 up, up with these staffs that prop our arms  
 and batter the skull of this godless man,  
 no Theban, but an alien lording it  
 over the younger men, to our great shame!

(To Lycus.)

Never shall you boast that I am your slave,  
 never will you reap the harvest of my work,  
 all I labored for. Go back whence you came;  
 rage there. So long as there is life in me,  
 you shall not kill the sons of Heracles.  
 He has not gone so deep beneath the earth.  
 Because you ruined, then usurped, this land,  
 he who gave it help must go without his due.  
 Am I a meddler, then, because I help  
 the friend who, being dead, needs help the most?  
 O right hand, how you ache to hold a spear,  
 but cannot, want foundering on weakness.  
 Else, I should have stopped your mouth that calls me slave,  
 and ruled this Thebes, in which you now exult,  
 with credit. But corrupt with evil schemes

and civil strife, this city lost its mind;  
for were it sane, it would not live your slave.

*Megara*

Old sirs, I thank you. Friends rightly show  
just indignation on their friends' behalf.  
But do not let your rage on our account  
involve your ruin too. Amphitryon,  
hear what I think for what it may be worth.  
I love my children. How not love these boys  
born of my labors? I am in terror  
of their death. And yet how base a thing it is  
when a man will struggle with necessity!  
We have to die. Then do we have to die  
consumed alive, mocked by those we hate?—  
for me a worse disaster than to die.  
Our house and birth demand a better death.  
Upon your helm the victor's glory sits,  
forbidding that you die a coward's death;  
while my husband needs no witnesses to swear  
he would not want these sons of his to live  
by living cowards. Because it hurts his sons,  
disgraces break a man of noble birth;  
and I must imitate my husband here.  
Consider of what stuff your hopes are made;  
you think your son will come from underground.  
Who of all the dead comes home from Hades?  
Or do you think you'll mellow *him* with prayers?  
No, you must shun a brutal enemy;  
yield to noble, understanding men  
who, met halfway as friends, give mercy freely.  
The thought had come to me that prayers might win  
the children's banishment; but this is worse,  
to preserve them for a life of beggary.  
How does the saying go? Hardly one day  
do men look kindly on their banished friend.

Dare death with us, which awaits you anyway.  
By your great soul, I challenge you, old friend.  
The man who sticks it out against his fate  
shows spirit, but the spirit of a fool.  
No man alive can budge necessity.

310

*Chorus*

I could have stopped the mouth of any man  
who threatened you, had I my old strength back.  
But now I am nothing. With you it rests,  
Amphitryon, to avert disaster now.

315

*Amphitryon*

Not cowardice, not love of life, keep me  
from death, but my hope to save these children.  
I am in love, it seems, with what cannot be.

*(Turning to Lycus.)*

Here, king, here is my throat, ready for your sword;  
murder me, stab me through, hurl me from a cliff,  
but, I beg you, grant us both this one boon.  
Murder us before you kill these children;  
spare us from seeing that ghastly sight,  
these boys gasping out their lives, crying  
"Mother!" and "Grandfather!" For the rest,  
do your worst. Our hope is gone; we have to die.

320

325

*Megara*

I beg you, grant me this one last request,  
and so by one act you shall oblige us both.  
Let me adorn my children for their death;  
open those doors which are locked to us  
and give them that much share of their father's house.

330

*Lycus*

I grant it. Attendants, undo the bolts!

*(Attendants slide open the center doors of the palace.)*

Go in and dress. I do not begrudge you clothes.  
But when your dressing for your death is done,  
then I shall give you to the world below.

(Exit Lycus.)

335

Megara

Come, my sons, follow your poor mother's steps  
into your father's halls. Other men  
possess his wealth; we still possess his name.

(Exit Megara with children.)

Amphitryon

For nothing, then, O Zeus, you shared my wife!  
In vain we called you partner in my son!  
Your love is even less than you pretended;  
and I, mere man, am nobler than you, great god.  
I did not betray the sons of Heracles.  
You knew well enough to creep into my bed  
and take what was not yours, what no man gave:  
what do you know of saving those you love?  
You are a callous god or were born unjust!

340

345

(Exit Amphitryon to palace.)

Chorus

STROPHE I

First for joy, the victor's song;  
then the dirge; sing *ailinos* for Linos!  
So Apollo sings, sweeping with golden pick  
his lyre of lovely voice.  
And so I sing of him  
who went in darkness underground—  
let him be the son of Zeus,  
let him be Amphitryon's—  
of him I sing, a dirge of praise,  
a crown of song upon his labors.  
For of noble deeds the praises are  
the glory of the dead.  
First he cleared the grove of Zeus,

355

and slew the lion in its lair;  
the tawny hide concealed his back,  
oval of those awful jaws  
crowled his golden hair.

360

ANTISTROPHE I

Next the centaurs: slaughtered them,  
that mountain-ranging savage race,  
laid them low with poisoned shafts,  
with winged arrows slew them all.  
Too well the land had known them:  
Peneios' lovely rapids,  
vast plains, unharvested,  
homesteads under Pelion,  
and the places near Homole,  
whence their cavalry rode forth  
with weapons carved of pine,  
and tamed all Thessaly.  
And next he slew the spotted hind  
whose antlers grew of golden horn,  
that robber-hind, that ravager,  
whose horns now gild Oenoë's shrine,  
for Artemis the huntress.

365

370

375

STROPHE 2

Then mounted to his car  
and mastered with the bit  
Diomedes' mares, that knew  
no bridle, stabled in blood,  
greedy jaws champing flesh,  
foul mares that fed on men!  
And thence crossed over  
swirling silver, Hebros' waters,  
on and on, performing labors  
for Mycenae's king.  
And there by Pelion's headland,

380

385



near the waters of Anauros,  
his shafts brought Cycnus down,  
that stranger-slaying monster,  
host of Amphanaia.

## ANTISTROPHE 2

Thence among the singing maidens,  
western halls' Hesperides. 395  
Plucked among the metal leaves  
the golden fruit, and slew  
the orchard's dragon-guard  
whose tail of amber coiled the trunk  
untouchably. He passed below the sea  
and set a calmness in the lives of men  
whose living is the oar.  
Under bellied heaven next,  
he put his hand as prop:  
there in the halls of Atlas,  
his manliness held up 405  
heaven's starry halls.

## STROPHE 3

He passed the swelling sea of black,  
and fought the Amazonian force  
foregathered at Maeotis 410  
where the many rivers meet.  
What town of Hellas missed him  
as he mustered friends to fight,  
to win the warrior women's  
gold-encrusted robes, in quest  
for a girdle's deadly quarry? 415  
And Hellas won the prize, spoils  
of a famous foreign queen,  
which now Mycenae keeps.  
He seared each deadly hydra-head  
of Lerna's thousand-headed hound; 420

in her venom dipped the shaft  
that brought three-bodied Geryon down,  
herdsman of Erytheia.

## ANTISTROPHE 3

And many races more he ran,  
and won in all the victor's crown, 425  
whose harbor now is Hades' tears,  
the final labor of them all;  
there his life is disembarked  
in grief. He comes no more.  
His friends have left his house,  
and Charon's ferry waits 430  
to take his children's lives  
the godless, lawless trip of no return.  
To your hands your house still turns,  
and you are gone! 435  
Could I have my youth once more,  
could I shake my spear once more  
beside the comrades of my youth,  
my courage now would champion  
your sons. But youth comes back no more 440  
that blessed me once.

## EPODE

Look: I see the children coming now,  
wearing the garments of the grave,  
sons of Heracles who once was great;  
and there, his wife, drawing her sons 445  
behind her as she comes; and the old man,  
father of Heracles. O pitiful sight!  
I cannot hold the tears that break  
from these old eyes. 450

*(Enter Megara from the palace. She is followed by the children,  
dressed in the garments of the dead.  
Last comes Amphitryon.)*

*Megara*

Where is the priest with sacrificial knife?  
 Where is the killer of our wretched lives?  
 Here the victims stand, ready for Hades.  
 O my boys, this incongruity of death:  
 beneath one yoke, old man, children and mother.  
 How miserably we die, these children and I!  
 Upon these faces now I look my last.  
 I gave you birth and brought you up to be  
 but mocked and murdered by our enemies.

How bitterly my hopes for you have failed,  
 those hopes I founded on your father's words.

*(She turns to each child in turn.)*

To *you* your father would have left all Argos:  
 in Eurystheus' halls you would have ruled  
 and held the sway over rich Pelasgia.  
 It was upon your head he sometimes threw  
 the skin of tawny lion that he wore.  
*You*, made king of chariot-loving Thebes,  
 would have inherited your mother's lands,  
 because you teased them from your father once.  
 Sometimes in play, he put in your right hand  
 that carven club he kept for self-defense.  
 To *you*, he would have left Oechalia,  
 ravaged once by his far-shooting shafts.  
 There are three of you, and with three kingdoms  
 your heroic father would have raised you up.  
 And I had chosen each of you a bride,  
 from Athens, Thebes, and Sparta, binding our house  
 by marriage, that having such strong anchors down,  
 you might in happiness ride out your lives.  
 Now all is gone, and fortune, veering round,  
 gives each of you your death as though a bride,  
 and in my tears your bridal shower is,  
 while your father's father mourns the feast

that makes you all the sons-in-law of death.  
 Which shall I take first, which of you the last,  
 to lift you up, take in my arms and kiss?  
 If only I could gather up my tears,  
 and like the tawny bee from every flower,  
 distil to one small nectar all my grief!  
 O dearest Heracles, if any voice  
 from here reaches to Hades, hear me now!  
 Your sons, your father, are dying . . . and I,  
 who was once called blessed because of you.  
 Help us, come! Come, even as a ghost;  
 even as a dream, your coming would suffice.  
 For these are cowards who destroy your sons.

*Amphitryon*

Send your prayers, my child, to the world below,  
 while I hold out my hands to heaven.  
 We implore you, Zeus, if still you mean to help,  
 help us now before it is too late.  
 How often have I called! In vain, my labors.  
 For death is on us like necessity.

Our lives, old friends, are but a little while,  
 so let them run as sweetly as you can,  
 and give no thought to grief from day to day.  
 For time is not concerned to keep our hopes,  
 but hurries on its business, and is gone.  
 You see in me a man who once had fame,  
 who did great deeds; but fortune in one day  
 has snatched it from me as though a feather.  
 Great wealth, great reputation! I know no man  
 with whom they stay. Friends of my youth, farewell.  
 You look your last on him who loved you well.

*(Megara suddenly catches sight of Heracles approaching  
 from a distance.)*

*Megara*

Look, Father! My dearest! Can it be?

*Amphitryon*

I cannot say. I dare not say, my child.

515

*Megara*

It is he, whom we heard was under earth,  
unless some dream comes walking in the light.  
A dream? This is no dream my longing makes!  
It is *he*, Father, your son, no other!  
Run, children, fasten to your father's robes  
and never let him go! Quick, run! He comes  
to rescue us and Zeus comes with him.

520

*(Enter Heracles, armed with bow and arrows, his club in  
in his hand. He does not see his family at first,  
but salutes his halls.)*

*Heracles*

I greet my hearth! I hail my house and halls!  
How gladly I behold the light once more  
and look on you!

525

*(He sees his family.)*

What is this I see?  
my children before the house? with garlands  
on their heads? and my wife surrounded  
by a crowd of men? my father in tears?  
What misfortune makes him cry? I'll go and ask  
what disaster now has come upon my house.

530

*Megara*

O my dearest. . . .

*Amphitryon*

O daylight returning!

*Megara*

You come, alive, in time to rescue us!

*Heracles*

Father, what has happened? What does this mean?

*Megara*

Murder. Forgive me, Father, if I snatch  
and speak the words that you should rightly say.  
I am a woman: anguish hurts me more,  
and my children were being put to death. . . .

535

*Heracles*

Apollo! what a prelude to your tale!

*Megara*

My father is dead. My brothers are dead.

*Heracles*

What! How did they die? Who killed them?

540

*Megara*

Murdered by Lycus, the upstart tyrant.

*Heracles*

In revolution? Or civil war?

*Megara*

Civil war. Now he rules our seven gates.

*Heracles*

But why should you and my father be afraid?

*Megara*

He planned to kill us: your sons, father, and me.

545

*Heracles*

What had he to fear from my orphaned sons?

*Megara*

Lest they take revenge some day for Creon's death.

*Heracles*

But why these garments? Why are they dressed for death?

*Megara*

It was for our own deaths we put them on.

*Heracles*  
 You would have died by violence? O gods! 550

*Megara*  
 We had no friends. We heard that you were dead.

*Heracles*  
 How did you come to give up hope for me?

*Megara*  
 The heralds of Eurystheus proclaimed you dead.

*Heracles*  
 Why did you abandon my house and hearth?

*Megara*  
 By force. He dragged your father from his bed. 555

*Heracles*  
 He had no shame, but so dishonored age?

*Megara*  
 Lycus have shame? He knows no such goddess.

*Heracles*  
 And were my friends so scarce when I was gone?

*Megara*  
 In misfortune, what friend remains a friend?

*Heracles*  
 They thought so little of my Minyan wars? 560

*Megara*  
 Again I say, misfortune has no friends.

*Heracles*  
 Rip from your heads those wreaths of Hades!  
 Lift your faces to the light; with seeing eyes,  
 take your sweet reprieve from death and darkness.  
 And I—a task for my one hand alone— 565

shall go and raze this upstart tyrant's house,  
 cut off that blaspheming head and give it  
 to the dogs to paw. All those men of Thebes  
 who took my goodness and returned me ill— 570  
 this bow with which I won the victor's crown  
 shall slaughter them with rain of wingèd shafts  
 till all Ismenus chokes upon the corpses  
 and Dirce's silver waters run with blood.  
 What should I defend if not my wife and sons  
 and my old father? Farewell, my labors! 575  
 for wrongly I preferred you more than these.  
 They would have died for me, and I should die  
 in their defense. Or is this bravery,  
 to do Eurystheus' orders and contend 580  
 with lions and hydras, and not to struggle  
 for my children's lives? From this time forth,  
 call me no more "Heracles the victor."

*Chorus*  
 This is right, that a man defend his sons,  
 his aged father, and his wedded wife.

*Amphitryon*  
 My son, it is like you to love your friends 585  
 and hate your foe. But do not act too fast.

*Heracles*  
 How do I act faster than I should?

*Amphitryon*  
 The king has henchmen, a mob of needy men  
 who pass themselves off for men of wealth.  
 These men, their substance drained away by sloth 590  
 and spending, have promoted civil strife  
 and wrecked the state to mulct their neighbors.  
 You were seen coming here. Beware therefore  
 lest your enemy be stronger than you guess.

*Heracles*

I do not care if all the city saw me!  
But seeing a bird in some foreboding place,  
I guessed some trouble had fallen on my house,  
and thus forewarned, I entered secretly.

*Amphitryon*

Good. Go now, enter your house and greet your hearth.  
Look on your father's house; let it behold you.  
Shortly the king will come to hale us off  
and slaughter us: your wife, your sons, and me.  
Wait here, and everything shall come to hand;  
with safety too. But let the city go,  
my son, until we finish matters here.

*Heracles*

You advise me well. I will go within.  
I owe first greetings to my household gods  
because they brought me home from sunless caves  
of Kore and Hades. I shall not slight them.

*Amphitryon*

Did you really descend to Hades, son?

*Heracles*

Yes; I brought back the triple-headed dog.

*Amphitryon*

You subdued him? or was he the goddess' gift?

*Heracles*

Subdued him. Luck was mine: I saw the mysteries.

*Amphitryon*

And is the monster at Eurystheus' house?

*Heracles*

No, at Hermione, in Demeter's grove.

*Amphitryon*

Does Eurystheus know of your return above?

*Heracles*

No, I came here first to learn of you.

*Amphitryon*

Why did you delay so long underground?

*Heracles*

To save Theseus from Hades, Father.

*Amphitryon*

Where is he now? Gone to his native land? 620

*Heracles*

He went to Athens, rejoicing to be free.  
*(He turns and addresses his children.)*

Follow your father to the house, my sons,  
for this, your going in, shall be more fair  
than your coming out. Put your fears away,  
and stop those tears that well up in your eyes. 625  
And you, dear wife, gather your courage up,  
tremble no more, and let my garments go.  
I have no wings to fly from those I love.

Look:

They will not let me go, but clutch my clothes  
more tightly. How close you came to death! 630

*(He sets down his bow and club and takes  
his children by the hands.)*

Here, I'll take your hands and lead you in my wake,  
like a ship that tows its little boats behind,  
for I accept this care and service  
of my sons. Here all mankind is equal:  
rich and poor alike, they love their children.  
With wealth distinctions come: some possess it, 635  
some do not. All mankind loves its children.

*(Exit Heracles with the children, followed  
by Megara and Amphitryon.)*

*Chorus*

STROPHE I

Youth I long for always.  
 But old age lies on my head,  
 a weight more heavy than Aetna's rocks;  
 darkness hides 640  
 the light of my eyes.  
 Had I the wealth of an Asian king,  
 or a palace crammed with gold, 645  
 both would I give for youth,  
 loveliest in wealth,  
 in poverty, loveliest.  
 But old age I loathe: ugly,  
 murderous. Let the waves take it  
 so it comes no more to the homes  
 and cities of men! Let the wind  
 whirl it away forever!

ANTISTROPHE I

If the gods were wise and understood 655  
 what human wisdom understands,  
 second youth would be their gift,  
 to seal the goodness of a man.  
 And so, conspicuous of life,  
 the good would run their race to death  
 and double back to light again. 660  
 But evil men should live their lap,  
 one single life, and run no more.  
 By such a sign all men would know  
 the wicked from the good, 665  
 as when the clouds are broken  
 and the sailor sees the stars.  
 But now the gods have put  
 between the noble and the base  
 no clear distinction down.  
 And time and age go wheeling on,  
 exalting only wealth.

STROPHE 2

Never shall I cease from this,  
 Muses with the Graces joining,  
 loveliness in yoke together. 675  
 I may not live without the Muses.  
 Let my head be always crowned!  
 May my old age always sing  
 of Memory, the Muses' mother,  
 always shall I sing the crown  
 of Heracles the victor! 680  
 So long as these remain—  
 Dionysus' gift of wine,  
 the lyre of seven strings  
 the shrilling of the flute—  
 never shall I cease to sing, 685  
 Muses who made me dance!

ANTISTROPHE 2

Paeans sing the Delian maidens,  
 a song for Leto's lovely son,  
 wheeling at the temple gates  
 the lovely mazes of the dance. 690  
 So paeans at your gate I raise,  
 pouring like the dying swan,  
 from hoary throat a song of praise.  
 I have a noble theme of song: 695  
 He is the son of Zeus!  
 But far beyond his birth,  
 his courage lifts him up,  
 whose labors gave this mortal calm,  
 who cleared away the beasts. 700

*(Enter Lycus, with attendants. Amphitryon  
 emerges from the palace.)*

*Lycus*

None too soon, Amphitryon, have you appeared.  
 A long time now you've spent in dallying

with your robes and ornaments of death.  
Go, call the wife and sons of Heracles  
and bid them show themselves before the house.  
On those terms, I let you clothe yourselves for death.

704

*Amphitryon*

King, you persecute in me a wretched man,  
and by abusing us, you wrong the dead.  
King you may be, but tread more gently here.  
Death is your decree, and we accept it  
as we must. As you decide, then so must we.

710

*Lycus*

Where is Megara? Where are the children?

*Amphitryon*

To chance a guess from here outside, I think . . .

*Lycus*

Well, what do you think? What makes you think so?

*Amphitryon*

. . . kneels at the hearth and makes her prayers . . .

*Lycus*

If she asks for life, her prayers are pointless.

*Amphitryon*

. . . and implores in vain her husband to come.

*Lycus*

He is not here to help. He will not come.

*Amphitryon*

Not unless some god restore him to us.

*Lycus*

Go inside and fetch her from the house.

720

*Amphitryon*

Then I should be accomplice in her death.

*Lycus*

Very well then. Since your scruples forbid,  
I, who lack such petty fears, shall go and fetch  
the mother and her sons. Attend me, guards,  
and help me put good riddance to this chore.

725

*(Exit Lycus, attended by guards, into the palace.)**Amphitryon*

Go, march in to your fate. Someone, I think,  
will see you in. Expect for what you did  
evil in return. How justly, old friends,  
into that net whose meshes hide the sword,  
he goes, the man who would have slaughtered us,  
coward that he is! I'll go in and watch  
his body fall. This is sweet: to see your foe  
perish and pay to justice all he owes.

730

*(Exit Amphitryon into the palace.)*

## STROPHE I

*Chorus*

Disaster is reversed!  
The tyrant's life turns back to Hades!  
Justice flows back! O fate of the gods,  
returning!

735

Your time has come. You go now where the price  
for outrage on your betters must be paid.

740

Joy once more! Overboard with grief!  
The king has come again!  
He has come, of whom I had no hope,  
my country's king, come back again!

745

Peer within the house, old friends. Let me see  
if what I hope to see is taking place.

*Lycus*

Help! Help!

*(Within.)*

*Chorus*

## ANTISTROPHE I

From within the song begins  
I long to hear. That cry  
was prelude to his death:  
the tyrant's death is near. 750

*Lycus*

O land of Cadmus! Treachery! I die!

*Chorus*

Die: you would have killed. Show your boldness now  
as you repay to justice all you owe. 755

What lying mortal made that fable  
that mindless tale  
that slander on the blessed?

Who denied the gods are strong?

Old friends, the godless man is dead!  
The house is silent. Turn to the dances!  
Those I love now prosper as I hoped. 760

## STROPHE 2

Let dance and feasting now prevail  
throughout this holy town of Thebes!  
Joy and mourning change their places,  
old disaster turns to dancing! 765

Change now rings my change of song!  
The new king runs to death, the old king rules!  
Our king runs home from Hades' harbor!  
He comes again, he comes, my king and hope,  
of whom my hope despaired. 770

## ANTISTROPHE 2

The gods of heaven do prevail:  
they raise the good and scourge the bad.  
Excess of happiness—it drives  
men's minds awry; in its train 775

comes on corrupted power.  
No man foresees the final stretch of time.  
Evil lures him, justice races by,  
until he wrecks at last the somber car  
that holds his happiness. 780

## STROPHE 3

O Ismenus, come with crowns!  
Dance and sing: you gleaming streets  
of seven-gated Thebes!  
Come, O Dirce, lovely river,  
leave your father's waters, bring  
the nymphs, Asopus' daughters! 785  
Come and sing the famous crown  
of Heracles the victor!  
O wooded crag of Delphi,  
O Muses' homes on Helicon!  
make my city's walls resound,  
echo back the joy of Thebes,  
city where the sown men rose  
with shields of bronze, where still  
their children's children dwell,  
a blessed light to Thebes! 790 795

## ANTISTROPHE 3

O marriage-bed two bridegrooms shared!  
One was man; the other, Zeus,  
who entered in the bridal bed  
and with Alcmene lay. 800  
How true, O Zeus, that marriage  
proves to be! Your part therein,  
against all doubt, is proven true!  
For time at last has clearly shown the strength  
of Heracles the hero. 805  
He made his way from Pluto's halls;  
he left the dungeon underground.



He is to me a better king  
 than that ignoble lord:  
 comparison made plain  
 in the struggle of the sword,  
 if justice still finds favor  
 among the blessed gods.

*(A crash of thunder. The figure of Madness, gorgon-faced and holding a goad, appears in a black chariot on the roof of the palace. On the other side of the roof Iris is seen.)*

Ah! Ah!

Is the same terror on us all?

Look, old friends: what phantom hovers on the house?

Fly, fly!

Stir your heavy limbs! Back, away!

Lord Paian, help us! Avert disaster!

*Iris*

Courage, old men. You see there, Madness,  
 child of night, and me, servant of the gods,  
 Iris. We bring no harm upon your city.  
 Against one man alone our war is waged,  
 him whom men call Alcmena's son by Zeus.  
 Until his bitter labors had been done,  
 his fate preserved him; nor would father Zeus  
 let me or Hera do him any harm.  
 But now Eurystheus' orders have been done,  
 Hera plans, by making him destroy his sons,  
 to taint him with fresh murder; and I agree.

Up, then, unmarried child of blackest Night,  
 rouse up, harden that relentless heart,  
 send madness on this man, confound his mind  
 and make him kill his sons. Madden his feet;  
 drive him, goad him, shake out the sails of death  
 and speed his passage over Acheron,  
 where he must take his crown of lovely sons.  
 Let him learn what Hera's anger is,

and what is mine. For the gods are nothing,  
 and men prevail, if this one man escape.

*Madness*

I was born of noble birth: my mother  
 is the Night, and my father, Uranus.  
 My functions make me loathsome to the gods,  
 nor do I gladly visit men I love.

And I advise both you and Hera now,  
 lest I see you stumble, to hear me out.

This man against whose house you drive me on  
 has won great fame on earth and with the gods.  
 He reclaimed the pathless earth and raging sea,  
 and he alone held up the honors of the gods  
 when they wilted at the hands of evil men.

I advise you: renounce these wicked plans.

*Iris*

Hera's scheme and mine need no advice from you.

*Madness*

I would place you on the better path: you choose the worse.

*Iris*

Hera has not sent you down to show your sanity.

*Madness*

O Sun, be my witness: I act against my will.  
 But since I must perform the service you and Hera ask,  
 in full cry, like the hound that bays the huntsman,  
 go I will: to the heart of Heracles I run,  
 more fast, more wild than ocean's groaning breakers go,  
 than earthquake, or the thunder's agonizing crack!  
 I shall batter through the roof and leap upon the house!  
 He shall kill his sons and, killing, shall not know  
 he kills what he begot, until my madness leave him.

Look: already, head writhing, he leaps the starting-post;  
 jumps and now stops; his eyeballs bulge, and pupils roll;

his breath comes heaving up, a bull about to charge!  
 And now he bellows up the horrid fates from hell;  
 he groans and shouts; he dances to the pipes of terror!  
 Soar to Olympus, Iris, on your honored way,  
 while I now sink, unseen, to the house of Heracles.

*(Iris and Madness disappear. As they go, a weird piping of the  
 flute begins, now soft, now loud, broken in rhythm,  
 pitched insanely, and then suddenly still.)*

*Chorus*

O city, mourn! Your flower  
 is cut down, the son of Zeus.  
 O Hellas, mourn! You have lost  
 your savior! He dances now  
 to the fatal flutes of madness!

Madness has mounted her car;  
 she goads her team!  
 she drives for death!  
 O gorgon of Night, O hiss  
 of a hundred snakes! O Madness,  
 whose look makes stones of men!

Instantly, god's fortune is reversed!  
 Instantly, and father murders sons!

*Amphitryon*

O horror!

*(Within.)*

*Chorus*

O Zeus, your son has lost his sons!  
 Vengeance, mad, implacable, exacts  
 the penalty! Disaster lays him low!

*Amphitryon*

O my house!

*Chorus*

Now the dance begins! Not here,  
 the drums! no lovely thyrsos here!

*Amphitryon*

870 O my home!

*Chorus*

For blood, she drives, for blood!  
 No wine of Dionysus here!

895

*Amphitryon*

Fly, children, save yourselves!

*Chorus*

875 Horrid,  
 horrid piping of the flute!  
 His sons, he hunts them down!  
 Madness through the house,  
 madness dancing death!

880

*Amphitryon*

O grief!

900

*Chorus*

885

I grieve for those two,  
 for the old man, for the mother  
 who bore, who nursed her sons in vain!

Look, look!

Whirlwind shakes the house, the roof falls!

905

Ah! on the roof!

O daughter of Zeus, what do you do?

You have brought upon this house  
 ruin that reaches to hell,  
 as once you ruined Enceladus!

890

*Messenger*

O bodies blanched with age. . . .

910

*Chorus*

Why that cry?

*Messenger*

Horror in the house!

*Chorus*  
O my prophetic fears!

*Messenger*  
The children live no more.

*Chorus*  
Ah. . . .

*Messenger*  
Mourn them, grieve them.

*Chorus*  
Cruel murder,  
O cruel hands of a father! 915

*Messenger*  
No words could tell what we have seen.

*Chorus*  
How did it happen, how this madness,  
children killed by a father's hands?  
How did disaster strike, madness  
hurled from heaven on this house? 920  
How did those pitiful children die?

*Messenger*  
Offerings to Zeus were set before the hearth  
to purify the house, for Heracles  
had cast the body of the king outside.  
There the children stood, in lovely cluster, 925  
with Megara and the old man. In holy hush  
the basket made the circle of the hearth.  
And then, as Heracles reached out his hand  
to take the torch and dip it in the water,  
he stood stockstill. There he stood, not moving, 930  
while the children stared. Suddenly he changed:  
his eyes rolled and bulged from their sockets,  
and the veins stood out, gorged with blood, and froth  
began to trickle down his bearded chin.

Then he spoke, laughing like a maniac: 935  
“Why hallow fire, Father, to cleanse the house  
before I kill Eurystheus? Why double work,  
when at one blow I might complete my task?  
I'll go and fetch Eurystheus' head, add it  
to that other corpse, then purify my hands. 940  
Empty your water out! Drop those baskets!  
Someone fetch my bow. Put weapons in my hands:  
I march against Mycenae! Let me have  
crowbars and picks: the Cyclopes built well,  
cramping stone on stone with plumb and mallet, 945  
but with my pick I'll rip them down again.”  
Then he fancied that his chariot stood there;  
he made as though to leap its rails, and rode off,  
prodding with his hand as though it held a goad.  
Whether to laugh or shudder, we could not tell. 950  
We stared at one another. Then one man asked,  
“Is the master playing, or is he . . . mad?”  
Up and down, throughout the house, he drove,  
and riding through the great hall, claimed it was  
Nisus' city, though it was, in fact, his house. 955  
He threw himself to the floor, and acted out  
a feast. He tarried there a while, then said  
he was approaching Isthmus' wooded valley.  
He unstrapped his buckles and stripped himself bare,  
and wrestled with no one; then called for silence 960  
and crowned himself the victor of a match  
that never was. Then raged against Eurystheus,  
and said he'd come to Mycenae. His father  
caught him by that muscled hand and said:  
“What do you mean, my son? What is this journey 965  
that you make? Or has the blood of those you've slain  
made you mad?” He thought Eurystheus' father  
had come, trembling, to supplicate his hand;  
pushed him away, and set his bow and arrows  
against his sons. He thought he was killing 970

Eurystheus' children. Trembling with terror,  
 they rushed here and there; one hid beneath  
 his mother's robes, one ran to the shadow  
 of a pillar, and the last crouched like a bird  
 below the altar. Their mother shrieked:  
 "You are their father! Will you kill your sons?"  
 And shouts broke from the old man and the slaves.  
 Around the pillar he pursued his son  
 in dreadful circles, then caught up with him  
 and pierced him to the heart. Backward he fell,  
 dying, and stained the flagstones with his blood.  
 His father shouted in triumph, exulting,  
 "Here is the first of Eurystheus' youngsters dead;  
 his death repays me for his father's hate."  
 He aimed his bow at the second, who crouched  
 below the altar's base, trying to hide.  
 The boy leaped first, fell at his father's knees  
 and held his hand up to his father's chin.  
 "Dearest Father," he cried, "do not murder me.  
 I am your own son, yours, not Eurystheus'!"  
 But he stared from stony gorgon eyes,  
 found his son too close to draw the bow,  
 and brought his club down on that golden head,  
 and smashed the skull, as though a blacksmith  
 smiting steel. Now that his second son lay dead,  
 he rushed to kill the single victim left.  
 But before he drew the bow, the mother  
 seized her child, ran within and locked the doors.  
 And, as though these were the Cyclopean walls,  
 he pried the panels up, ripped out the jambs,  
 and with one arrow brought down son and wife.  
 And then he rushed to kill his father too,  
 but look! a phantom came—or so it seemed to us—  
 Pallas, with plumed helm, brandishing a spear.  
 She hurled a rock; it struck him on the chest,  
 stopped short his murderous rage and knocked him

into sleep. He slumped to the floor and hit  
 his back against a pillar which had fallen there,  
 snapped in two pieces when the roof collapsed.

Delivered from the fear that made us run,  
 we helped the old man lash him down with ropes  
 against the pillar, lest when he awakes  
 still greater grief be added to the rest.  
 He sleeps now, wretched man, no happy sleep,  
 killer of his wife and sons. I do not know  
 one man alive more miserable than this.

1010

1009

1015

*(Exit messenger.)**Chorus*

The hill of Argos had a murder once  
 Danaus' daughters did, murder's byword,  
 unbelievable in Hellas!

But murder here has far outrun,  
 surpassed by far  
 that ancient crime.

1020

And Procne's noble son was slain,  
 murdered by his mother's hands and made,  
 I say, the Muses' sacrifice.

She had but that one son,  
 while you, poor wretch, had three,  
 all murdered by your madness.

1025

What dirge, what song  
 shall I sing for the dead?

What dance shall I dance for death?

*(The great central doors of the palace slide slowly apart, revealing,  
 in the center court, Heracles asleep, bound to a broken pillar.*

*The bodies of Megara and the children beside him are  
 wheeled on the stage in the eecyclema.)*

Ah, look!

Look: the great doors  
 of the palace slide apart!

1030

Look there!

Look: the children's corpses

975

980

985

990

995

1000

1005

beside their wretched father.  
 How terribly he lies asleep  
 after his children's slaughter!

Ropes around his body,  
 1035 knotted cords bind Heracles,  
 cables lash him down  
 to the pillars of his house.

Here the old man comes, dragging behind  
 with heavy steps, mourning in bitterness  
 1040 like some bird whose unfledged covey is slain.

*Amphitryon*  
 Hush, old men of Cadmus' city,  
 and let him sleep. Hush:  
 let him forget his grief.

*Chorus*  
 I weep for you, old friend,  
 1045 for these boys, and for that head  
 that wore the victor's crown.

*Amphitryon*  
 Stand further off: not a sound,  
 not a cry. His sleep is deep,  
 his sleep is calm. Let him lie.

*Chorus*  
 What murder . . .  
 1050

*Amphitryon*  
 Hush! Be still: you add but grief.

*Chorus*  
 . . . poured out, piled high!

*Amphitryon*  
 Softly, gently, old friends. Mourn  
 in quiet: not a word, not a cry.  
 If he awakes and breaks his bonds,  
 1055

he will destroy us all:  
 father, city, and his house.

*Chorus*  
 I cannot hold my grief.

*Amphitryon*  
 Hush:  
 let me hear his breathing.

*Chorus*  
 Does he sleep?  
 1060

*Amphitryon*  
 He sleeps, but sleeps  
 as dead men do, because he slew his wife  
 and killed his sons with twanging bow.

*Chorus*  
 Grieve then, mourn!

*Amphitryon*  
 I mourn, I grieve.  
 1065

*Chorus*  
 Mourn for these dead children.

*Amphitryon*  
 Ah. . . .

*Chorus*  
 Mourn your son, grieve for him.

*Amphitryon*  
 Ah. . . .

*Chorus*  
 Old friend. . . .

*Amphitryon*  
 Hush, be still:  
 he stirs and turns! He wakes! Quick,  
 let me hide myself in darkness here.  
 1070

*Chorus*

Courage: darkness lies upon his eyes.

*Amphitryon*

Take care, take care. My grief is such,  
I have no fear to leave the light and die.  
But if he murders me who begot him,  
he shall add a greater grief to these,  
and have on him the curse of father's blood.

1074

*Chorus*

Best for you it would have been  
if you had died that very day  
you took revenge on those who slew  
the kinsmen of your wife, the day  
you sacked the city of the Taphians!

1080

*Amphitryon*

Run, run, old friends, back from the house,  
away! He wakes! Run, run  
from his reawakened rage!  
He wakes to pile murder on murder,  
to dance madness through all Thebes!

1085

*Chorus*

O Zeus, why have you hated him so much,  
your own son? Why launched him on this sea of grief?

*Heracles*

How now?  
I do breathe . . . what I ought to see, I see:  
heaven and earth, the gleaming shafts of the sun. . . .  
But how strangely my muddled senses swim,  
as on a choppy sea . . . my breath comes warm,  
torn up unsteadily from heaving lungs. . . .  
And look: I sit here, like a ship lashed tight  
with cables binding my chest and arms,  
moored to a piece of broken masonry;  
and there, close beside me, corpses lie . . .

1090

1095

and my bow and arrows littered on the ground,  
those faithful former comrades of my arms,  
that guarded my chest, and I guarded them.

1100

Have I come back to Hades? Have I run  
Eurystheus' race again? Hades? But how?  
No, for I see no rock of Sisyphus,  
no Pluto, no queen Demeter's sceptre.

I am bewildered. Where could I be helpless?

1105

Help! Is there some friend of mine, near or far,  
who could help me in my bewilderment?  
For all I took for granted now seems strange. . . .

*Amphitryon*

Old friends, shall I approach my affliction?

*Chorus*

Go, and I'll go with you, sharing in your grief.

1110

*Heracles*

Why do you cry, Father, and hide your eyes?  
Why do you stand off from the son you love?

*Amphitryon*

O my son, my son, whatever you have done. . . .

*Heracles*

What have I done that you should weep for it?

*Amphitryon*

Even a god would weep, if he knew it.

1115

*Heracles*

A great grief it must be; but you hide it.

*Amphitryon*

It is there to see, if you could but see it.

*Heracles*

Tell me if you mean my life is not the same.

*Amphitryon*

Tell me if you are sane; then I shall speak.

*Heracles*

O gods, how ominous these questions are!

*Amphitryon*

I wonder even now if you are not mad. . . .

*Heracles*

Mad? I cannot remember being mad.

*Amphitryon*

Friends, shall I loose his ropes? What should I do?

*Heracles*

Tell me who bound me! Who disgraced me so?

*Amphitryon*

Your troubles are enough. Let the others go.

1125

*Heracles*

I say no more. Will you tell me now?

*Amphitryon*

O Zeus, do you see these deeds Hera has done?

*Heracles*

Is it from *her* hate our sufferings come?

*Amphitryon*

Let the goddess go. Shoulder your own grief.

*Heracles*

I am ruined. Your words will be disaster.

1130

(*Amphitryon removes the shrouds from the children's corpses.*)

*Amphitryon*

Look. Look at the bodies of your children.

*Heracles*

Oh horrible! What awful sight is this?

*Amphitryon*

Your unnatural war against your sons.

*Heracles*

War? What war do you mean? Who killed these boys?

*Amphitryon*

You and your bow and some god are all guilty.

1135

*Heracles*

What! I did it? O Father, herald of evil!

*Amphitryon*

You were mad. Your questions asked for grief.

*Heracles*

And it was I who murdered wife as well?

*Amphitryon*

All this was the work of your hand alone.

*Heracles*

O black night of grief which covers me!

1140

*Amphitryon*

It was because of that you saw me weep.

*Heracles*

Did I ruin all my house in my madness?

*Amphitryon*

I know but this: everything you have is grief.

*Heracles*

Where did my madness take me? Where did I die?

*Amphitryon*

By the altar, as you purified your hands.

1145

*Heracles*

Why then am I so sparing of this life,

born the killer of my dearest sons?

Let me avenge my children's murder:

let me hurl myself down from some sheer rock,

or drive the whetted sword against my side,

1150

or expunge with fire this body's madness  
and burn away this guilt which sticks to my life!

(*He glances to the right and sees Theseus approaching.*)

But look: Theseus comes, my friend and kinsman,  
intruding on my strategies for death.  
And seeing me, the taint of murdered sons  
shall enter at the eye of my dearest friend.  
What shall I do? Where can this shame be hid?  
Oh for wings to fly! to plunge beneath the earth!  
Here: let my garments hide my head in darkness,  
in shame, in horror of this deed I did,  
and so concealed, I'll shelter him from harm,  
and keep pollution from the innocent.

(*Enter Theseus, unattended.*)

*Theseus*

I come, old man, leading the youth of Athens,  
bringing alliance to your son; my men  
wait under arms by the stream of Asopos.  
A rumor came to Erechtheus' city  
that Lycus had seized the sceptre of this land  
and was engaged in war against your house.  
And so, in gratitude to Heracles  
who saved me from Hades, I have come,  
old man, if you should need a helping hand.

(*He sees the corpses of the children.*)

Ah!  
What bodies are these scattered on the ground?  
Have I arrived too late, preceded here  
by some disaster? Who killed these boys?  
That woman lying there, whose wife was she?  
Children are not mustered on the field of war:  
no, this is some newer sorrow I find here.

*Amphitryon*

O lord of the olive-bearing hill. . . .

*Theseus*

Why do you speak in those heavy tones of grief?

*Amphitryon*

See what grief the gods have given.

1180

*Theseus*

Whose children are these over whom you mourn?

*Amphitryon*

O gods, my son begot these boys,  
begot them, killed them, his own blood.

*Theseus*

Unsay those words!

*Amphitryon*

Would that I could!

1185

*Theseus*

Oh horrible tale!

*Amphitryon*

We are ruined and lost.

*Theseus*

How did it happen? Tell me how.

*Amphitryon*

Dead in the blow of madness,  
by arrows dipped in the blood  
of the hundred-headed hydra. . . .

1190

*Theseus*

This is Hera's war. Who lies there by the bodies?

*Amphitryon*

My son, my most unhappy son,  
who fought with giant-killing spear  
beside the gods at Phlegraia.

*Theseus*

What mortal man was ever cursed like this?

1195



*Amphitryon*

Among all men you would not find,  
greater wretchedness, greater suffering  
than this.

*Theseus*

Why does he hide his head beneath his robes?

*Amphitryon*

Shame of meeting your eye,  
shame before friends and kin,  
shame for his murdered sons.

1200

*Theseus*

I come to share his grief. Uncover him.

*Amphitryon*

My son, drop your robe from your eyes,  
show your forehead to the sun.  
A friend has come, a rival weight  
to counterpoise your grief.  
O my son, I impore you,  
by your beard, your knees, your hand,  
by an old man's tears:  
tame that lion of your rage  
that roars you on to death,  
yoking grief to grief.

1205

1210

*Theseus*

I call on you, huddled there in misery:  
lift up your head and show your face to friends.  
There is no cloud whose utter blackness  
could conceal in night a sorrow like yours.  
Why wave me off, warning me of blood?  
Are you afraid mere words would pollute me?  
What do I care if your misfortunes fall  
on me? You were my good fortune once:  
you saved me from the dead, brought me back to light.  
I loathe a friend whose gratitude grows old,

1215

1220

a friend who takes his friend's prosperity  
but will not voyage with him in his grief.  
Rise up; uncover that afflicted head  
and look on us. This is courage in a man:  
to bear unflinchingly what heaven sends.

1225

(*He raises Heracles to his feet and uncovers his head.*)

*Heracles*

Theseus, have you seen this field of fallen sons?

*Theseus*

I heard. I see the grief to which you point.

1230

*Heracles*

How could you then uncloak me to the sun?

*Theseus*

No mortal man can stain what is divine.

*Heracles*

Away, rash friend! Flee my foul pollution.

*Theseus*

Where there is love contagion cannot come.

*Heracles*

I thank you. How right I was to help you once.

1235

*Theseus*

You saved me then, and now I pity you.

*Heracles*

A man to be pitied: I slew my children.

*Theseus*

My tears, my gratitude, I mourn your grief.

*Heracles*

Have you ever seen more misery than this?

*Theseus*

Your wretchedness towers up and touches heaven.

1240

*Heracles*

Then where it touches heaven, I shall strike.

*Theseus*

What do you think the gods care for your threats?

*Heracles*

Heaven is proud. And I am proud to heaven.

*Theseus*

No more: your presumption will be punished.

*Heracles*

My hold is full: there is no room for more. 1245

*Theseus*

What will you do? Where does your passion run?

*Heracles*

To death: to go back whence I came, beneath the earth.

*Theseus*

These are the words of an ordinary man.

*Heracles*

Will you, who did not suffer, preach to me?

*Theseus*

Is this that Heracles who endured so much? 1250

*Heracles*

Not so much. Endurance has an end.

*Theseus*

Mankind's benefactor, man's greatest friend?

*Heracles*

What good are men to me? Hera rules.

*Theseus*

You die so mean a death? Hellas forbids it.

*Heracles*

Listen: let me tell you what makes a mock 1255

at your advice. Let me show you my life:  
a life not worth living now, or ever.

Take my father first, a man who killed  
my mother's father and having such a curse,  
married Alcmena who gave birth to me. 1260

When a house is built on poor foundations,  
then its descendants are the heirs of grief.  
Then Zeus—whoever Zeus may be—begot me  
for Hera's hatred. Take no offense, old man,  
for I count you my father now, not Zeus. 1265

While I was still at suck, she set her snakes  
with gorgon eyes to slither in my crib  
and strangle me. And when I grew older  
and a belt of muscle bound my body—  
why recite all those labors I endured? 1270

All those wars I fought, those beasts I slew,  
those lions and triple-bodied Typhons,  
giants, and four-legged Centaur hordes!

I killed the hydra, that hound whose heads  
grew back as soon as lopped. My countless labors done, 1275  
I descended down among the sullen dead  
to do Eurystheus' bidding and bring to light  
the triple-headed hound who guards the gates of hell.

And now my last worst labor has been done:  
I slew my children and crowned my house with grief. 1280

And this is how I stand: I cannot stay  
with those I love at Thebes. If I remain,  
what temple, what assembly of my friends  
will have me? My curse is unapproachable.

Go to Argos then? No, I am banished there. 1285  
Settle in some other city then,  
where notoriety shall pick me out

to be watched and goaded by bitter gibes—  
"Is this the son of Zeus, who killed his wife

and sons? Away with him! Let him die elsewhere.”  
 [To a man who prospers and is blessed,  
 all change is grief; but the man who lives  
 akin to trouble minds disaster less.]  
 But to this pitch of grief my life has come:  
 the earth itself will groan, forbidding me  
 to touch the ground, rivers and seas cry out  
 against my crossing-over, and I am  
 like Ixion, bound forever to a wheel.  
 This is the best, that I be seen no more  
 in Hellas, where I prospered and was great.  
 Why should I live? What profit have I,  
 having a life both useless and accursed?  
 Let the noble wife of Zeus begin the dance,  
 pounding with her feet Olympus' gleaming floors!  
 For she accomplished what her heart desired,  
 and hurled the greatest man of Hellas down  
 in utter ruin. Who could offer prayers  
 to such a goddess? Jealous of Zeus  
 for a mortal woman's sake, she has destroyed  
 Hellas' greatest friend, though he was guiltless.

1290

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*Theseus*

No other god is implicated here,  
 except the wife of Zeus. Rightly you judge.  
 My advice is this: be patient, suffer  
 what you must, and do not yield to grief.  
 Fate exempts no man; all men are flawed,  
 and so the gods, unless the poets lie.  
 Do not the gods commit adultery?  
 Have they not cast their fathers into chains,  
 in pursuit of power? Yet all the same,  
 despite their crimes, they live upon Olympus.  
 How dare you then, mortal that you are,  
 to protest your fate, when the gods do not?  
 Obey the law and leave your native Thebes

1315

1320

and follow after me to Pallas' city.  
 There I shall purify your hands of blood,  
 give you a home and a share of my wealth.  
 All those gifts I have because I killed  
 the Minotaur and saved twice seven youths,  
 I cede to you. Everywhere throughout my land,  
 plots of earth have been reserved for me.  
 These I now assign to you, to bear your name  
 until you die. And when you go to Hades,  
 Athens shall raise you up a monument  
 of stone, and honor you with sacrifice.  
 And so my city, helping a noble man,  
 shall win from Hellas a lovely crown of fame.  
 This thanks and this return I make you now,  
 who saved me once. For now you need a friend.  
 [He needs no friends who has the love of gods.  
 For when god helps a man, he has help enough.]

1325

1330

1335

*Heracles*

Ah, all this has no bearing on my grief;  
 but I do not believe the gods commit  
 adultery, or bind each other in chains.  
 I never did believe it; I never shall;  
 nor that one god is tyrant of the rest.  
 If god is truly god, he is perfect,  
 lacking nothing. These are poets' wretched lies.  
 Even in my misery I asked myself,  
 would it not be cowardice to die?  
 The man who cannot bear up under fate  
 could never face the weapons of a man  
 I shall prevail against death. I shall go  
 to your city. I accept your countless gifts.  
 For countless were the labors I endured;  
 never yet have I refused, never yet  
 have I wept, and never did I think

1340

1345

1350

1355

that I should come to this: tears in my eyes.  
But now, I see, I must serve necessity.

And now you see me banished, old man;  
you see in me the killer of my sons.  
Give them to the grave, give them the tribute  
1360 of your tears, for the law forbids me this.  
Let them lie there in their mother's arms,  
united in their grief, as they were then,  
before, in ignorance, I killed them all.  
And when the earth conceals their small remains,  
live on in this city here, and though it hurt,  
1368 compel your soul to bear misfortune with me.

O my sons, the father who gave you life  
has slain you all, and never shall you reap  
that harvest of my life, all I labored for,  
that heritage of fame I toiled to leave you.  
1370 You too, poor wife, I killed: unkind return  
for having kept the honor of my bed,  
for all your weary vigil in my house.

O wretched wife and sons! Wretched father!  
In grief I now unyoke myself from you.  
1378 O bitter sweetness of this last embrace!

*(He turns from his final farewell to his wife and children  
and picks up his bow and arrows.)*

O my weapons, bitter partners of my life!  
What shall I do? Let you go, or keep you,  
knocking against my ribs and always saying,  
1380 "With us you murdered wife and sons. Wearing us,  
you wear your children's killers." Can that be worn?  
What could I reply? Yet, naked of these arms,  
with which I did the greatest deeds in Hellas,  
must I die in shame at my enemies' hands?  
No, they must be borne; but in pain I bear them.  
1388 Hold with me, Theseus, in one thing more.

Help me take to Argos the monstrous dog,  
lest, alone and desolate of sons, I die.  
O land of Cadmus, O people of Thebes,  
1390 mourn with me, grieve with me, attend my children  
to the grave! And with one voice mourn us all,  
the dead and me. For all of us have died,  
all struck down by one blow of Hera's hate.

*Theseus*

Rise up, unfortunate friend. Have done with tears.

*Heracles*

I cannot rise. My limbs are rooted here.  
1398

*Theseus*

Then necessity breaks even the strong.

*Heracles*

Oh to be a stone! To feel no grief!

*Theseus*

Enough. Give your hand to your helping friend.

*Heracles*

Take care. I may pollute your clothes with blood.

*Theseus*

Pollute them then. Spare not. I do not care.  
1400

*Heracles*

My sons are dead; now you shall be my son.

*Theseus*

Place your hand on my shoulder. I shall lead you.  
1408

*Heracles*

A yoke of love, but one of us in grief.  
O Father, choose a man like this for friend.

*Amphitryon*

The land that gave him birth has noble sons.  
1415

*Heracles*

Theseus, turn me back. Let me see my sons.

*Theseus*

Is this a remedy to ease your grief?

*Heracles*

I long for it, yearn to embrace my father.

*Amphitryon*

My arms are waiting. I too desire it.

*Theseus*

Have you forgotten your labors so far?

1410

*Heracles*

All those labors I endured were less than these.

*Theseus*

If someone sees your weakness, he will not praise you.

*Heracles*

I live: am I so low? You did not think so once.

*Theseus*

Once, no. But where now is famous Heracles?

*Heracles*

What were you when you were underground?

1415

*Theseus*

In courage I was the least of men.

*Heracles*

Then will you say my grief degrades me now?

*Theseus*

Forward!

*Heracles*

Farewell, father!

*Amphitryon*

Farewell, my son.

*Heracles*

Bury my children.

*Amphitryon*

Who will bury me?

*Heracles*

I.

1420

*Amphitryon*

When will you come?

*Heracles*

When you bury them.

*Amphitryon*

How?

*Heracles*

I shall have them brought from Thebes to Athens.  
Take my children out, take them to their graves,  
while I, whose whole house has gone down in grief,  
am towed in Theseus' wake like some little boat.  
The man who would prefer great wealth or strength  
more than love, more than friends, is diseased of soul.

1425

*Chorus*

We go in grief, we go in tears,  
who lose in you our greatest friend.

(*Theseus and Heracles leave by the left. The chorus goes to the right, while Amphitryon slowly follows the eccyclema with the bodies of Megara and the children inside the palace. The great doors close behind them.*)

THE COMPLETE GREEK TRAGEDIES

*Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore*

EURIPIDES • II

THE CYCLOPS

*Translated by William Arrowsmith*

HERACLES

*Translated by William Arrowsmith*

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

*Translated by Witter Bynner*

HELEN

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