

HERAKLES

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CHARACTERS

AMPHITRYON Herakles' foster father

MEGARA Herakles' wife

CHORUS of Theban Elders

LYKOS the usurping power in Thebes

HERAKLES son of Zeus and Alkmene, foster son of Amphitryon

IRIS messenger of the gods

MADNESS

MESSENGER

THESEUS ruler of Athens

HERAKLES' THREE SONS

Followers of Lykos and of Theseus

Line numbers in the right-hand margin of the text refer to the English translation only, and the Notes on the text at p. 93 are keyed to these lines. The bracketed line numbers in the running head lines refer to the Greek text.

HERAKLES

Outside of HERAKLES' house. Seated at the altar of ZEUS the RESCUER, AMPHITRYON, MEGARA, and her THREE SONS by HERAKLES.

AMPHITRYON Say the name Amphitryon of Argos
And the whole world snaps to. I'm the very man—
That same Amphitryon who shared his wife with Zeus.
You'll recognize my father, Alkaïos,
And Perseus, my grandfather—another household name.
And as for my son, can there be anyone
Alive who hasn't heard of Herakles?
I've settled here in Thebes.

Thebes, where dragonteeth
Were broadcast and sprouted full-grown fighters
Berserk to kill each other.

Ares kept a few back
From the slaughter and they put down roots—their
children's

Children grew up here in this city Kadmos
Built from the ground up. And from them
Sprung Kreon, the son of Menoikeus—
Kreon, who *was* our king;

and the father

10

Of Megara here . . .

Once the whole city
Turned out to celebrate her wedding,
Singing and playing pipes as Herakles
Led her through the streets—home to his father's house.
But my son left home. Left me and Megara
And all his in-laws here in Thebes. He wanted
To take back dear old Argos, a city so huge
You'd think the Cyclopes planned it—

20

those high-built walls
Shadowed me when I had to flee to Thebes
For striking down Elektryon. Well—for me,
To brighten an exile's grief, and take back
Home ground, he had to make a deal.
He struck a tough bargain with Eurystheus:
Tame the old powers, make the whole world safe—
And Eurystheus would let him and me go home.

Who knows

30

If Hera's hatred or Necessity itself
Made him shake hands on such a price?
He pushed through to the end—now, one labor's left:
To force his way through the jaws of Tainaron
And bring back from the underworld
Its three-headed watchdog.

But Hades

Swallowed him like light.

He still hasn't come back . . .

There's an old story among the Thebans:
Old King Lykos, who was married to our Queen Dirke,
Once held power here. This was before Zethus
And Amphion controlled the city's seven gates.
Twins sired by Zeus, they were nicknamed the white
colts.

40

But Lykos' son, who was named after his father
—Kadmos didn't breed him; he came from Euboea—
Ambushed the city. Civil war had broken out.
But I'll cut the story short: Lykos killed Kreon.
And killing made Lykos boss.

Now our blood ties

To Kreon have become a noose.

Because my son is
Down in the dark depths of the earth, Lykos—

That hero, new strongman of Thebes—plans to murder

us: 50

Herakles' little boys. His father. His wife—
 Murder on top of murder, like using
 Fire to put out fire: Me, I'm just a blathering
 Old nuisance. I scarcely count. But these boys—
 If they grow to men, they'll pay back blood with blood.

When Herakles went down to the blackness
 Underground, he left me behind—to play nursemaid
 To these boys. Now all I can do is kneel
 With their mother before this altar—
 And pray to Zeus the Rescuer . . . this altar, 60
 A reminder of what my son's spear can do;
 That he set up to celebrate his great victory
 Over the Minyans.

But us, we're worse than beggars—
 No food; nothing to drink; no clothes. We're camped
 Out here on the bare hard ground. Locked out
 Of our own house. Destitute. Doomed.

And as for friends—
 Well, most won't lift a finger. And those that will
 Have no power. When bad luck catches up to you,
 You learn that friendship won't stand up to misfortune.
 No matter how two-faced my worst friends' smiles, 70
 I wouldn't wish on them this trial of friendship.

MEGARA So, old man—remember when you commanded
 Our Theban spearmen? You razed the city
 Of the Taphians. But the gods work out our fates
 In ways too crooked and devious for human eyes.
 My father was acclaimed great. His greatness
 Was my luck—I wasn't brought up wanting.
 My father was rich and had the power
 To protect us from his rivals' spears;
 But power and wealth make for greed;

and spear 80

Lifted against spear is the way to power.

My father
 Had us children as a further blessing—
 And as for me—my luck, and his will, granted me

Your Herakles.

But now that's over. Dead. Flown.
 And you and I, old man—we're done for;
 And along with us, these three chicks of ours,
 Huddling and nestling under their mother's wing.
 They can't help themselves, they keep asking
 After him: "Mother, where's our father gone?
 What's he doing? When will he come home?"
 They don't understand, they're just too young . . .
 The way lost children stumble blind at night,
 They call out, "Father? Father?"

90

I keep
 Putting them off. Distracting them with chatter.
 But when they'd hear the door latch creak, they'd all
 scramble up
 And run to hug their father's knees.

So, old man—
 What are our chances? I'm counting on you
 To rescue us. The borders are sealed tight,
 Guards everywhere, patrols bottling up
 Every road. Our friends have let us down.
 If you've got a plan, let's hear it.

100

We all know
 What will happen if we keep on standing here.

AMPHITRYON My girl, I don't know what to say. Our troubles
 Call for hard thought, not casual chatter.
 When you're weak, what can you do but wait?

MEGARA Wait for something worse? Do you love your life that
 much?

AMPHITRYON I'm still alive, aren't I? Even that gives me hope.

MEGARA I love being alive too. But it's hopeless to hope for what
 can't be.

AMPHITRYON By playing for time, hard times can be cured.

MEGARA The time spent waiting is worse than being tortured.

110

AMPHITRYON Look. The wind can change course. The storm
 Blows over, and our troubles melt like mist.

Trust to Herakles. He still may come
 To rescue us—me, his old father, you, his wife.
 Try to stay calm. The tears welling up
 In your boys' eyes, brush them away;
 Tell them a story that will make their crying stop,
 No matter how much a lie the story seems to you.
 The wind blowing against us, that makes us
 Desperate now, won't always be this strong—
 It'll blow itself out. Good luck too
 Blows hot and cold. Everything changes;
 Things look as if they'll never end and then—
 Before we know it—they too are swept away.
 We have to keep on. That's what courage is.
 Only if we lose heart can they call us cowards.

120

Enter CHORUS.

CHORUS To this high-roofed house
 We come like ghosts,
 Apparitions leaning on our staffs,
 Our voices ghost-voices
 Whispering round an old man's bed.
 The dying swan whose song is sad
 Can't match ours for misery.
 What good is our good will
 When things go from bad to worse?
 You boys have lost your father.
 Old man, you've lost your son.
 And you, unhappy wife,
 Our words can't touch your grief:
 Your man is locked away
 Down in the house of death.

130

140

Keep moving. Heavy step
 By step lift your tired feet
 The way a horse pulls the weight
 Of a chariot up a rocky slope.
 If anyone needs your help,
 Give him a steadying hand
 The way when we were younger,
 Fighting with our spears,

We drove off the enemy
For the glory of our country. 150

Look at those boys' eyes
Gleaming like their father's:
Fierce. Stony. A stare
That hardens one to stone.
Yes. And they've inherited
Their father's rotten luck.
Along with his good looks.

Greece, what defenders you lose
If you lose these boys! 160

Look—it's the headman, Lykos,
Strutting toward the house.

Enter LYKOS, with FOLLOWERS.

LYKOS You, who claim you're Herakles' father,
And you, his wife—allow me a few questions,
Won't you? I thought you might. Let's face it:
I'm in charge here. I'll ask whatever I want.

Still nursing your hopes? A snap of my fingers—
And you're done.

Or are you cracked
Enough to think that these boys' father,
Who's dead—will suddenly show his face? 170
Aren't you ashamed of your stupid blubbering?
And all because you're about to die . . .

you,
Who bragged all over Greece about pimping
Your wife to Zeus—and you, who boasted
That your husband was a hero. What's so glorious
About killing some slimy marsh snake?

Or that Nemean Lion—
He claimed he strangled it with his bare hands . . .
But everybody knows he trapped it in a net.
Your case has more holes than a net,
If that's all the evidence you've got.

He's a nobody— 180

He made his reputation by slaughtering
 Dumb beasts. Let's see him with a shield
 On that brawny left arm, parrying a spearthrust.
 But he uses a bow—handy for retreat.
 A bow's for cowards. A man with real guts
 Stands his ground, face to face, when a spear
 Comes hurtling through the ranks.

So—killing
 His sons isn't cruelty, but shrewd policy.
 We all know who killed Kreon. We all know
 Who took away his throne. I'm not about
 To let these cubs grow up and bare their fangs.

190

AMPHITRYON Zeus, Herakles is your son, too. Use your power
 To defend him!

My part's to speak out
 Against such stinking lies—
 with the Gods
 As my witnesses, Son, I'll make him eat his words;
 I'll show him up for the liar that he is:

You're unspeakable, to call my son coward!
 But maybe Zeus' thunderbolts don't impress you?
 Or Zeus' chariot that my son drove into battle
 When the gods fought against those giants,
 The monstrous children of the earth?

200

Stuck between their ribs,
 The arrows of Herakles taught that gang a thing or two.
 And afterwards, my son took his place among
 The other gods to sing the victory song!
 Or go to Pholoe, you dirty tyrant,
 And ask the Centaurs—those four-legged savages—
 Who they think is the bravest man on earth:
 Herakles. My son. That's how they'll answer.

Herakles,
 Whose courage you talk down—

but since you think
 He's such a phony, why don't you go back
 To your hometown, Dirphys in Euboea—
 And ask what your own people think of you?
 Who calls you brave—let alone a hero?

210

There's no place in all Euboea
That could talk up one brave deed you've done.

And as for sneering at that thinking-man's invention,
The bow—

let me put you straight.

Your infantryman

Is a slave, hauling around his spear and shield.

He's at the mercy of his fellow soldiers

In the ranks. If the man next to him

220

Holds back or breaks rank because he's scared,

He's dead—

and because someone else turned coward.

And if your spear shaft breaks—your sole weapon

Against death—you might as well be standing naked.

But let's say you've got a bow—and you're a good shot.

First, you can shoot arrows all day, as many arrows

As you want: you can *always* defend yourself.

And second—you can fight at long range.

Your enemy

Can't spot you. While their taking heavy

Casualties, the wounds from your arrows

230

Are all the enemy can see. And you—you're snug

As a baby. They can't strike back.

In war,

That's the best strategy. To train your firepower

On whoever's in range while you keep

Your own head down.

So that's that. I've put

The record straight. For every claim you made,

The truth is really just the opposite.

And these boys—why murder them? What have
They done to you?

Of course, you're smart in one thing:

Since you're a coward, you fear a real man's children.

240

But that we should have to die to prove your cowardice—

That's the worst. Our swords would be at your throat—

We, who are your betters—

if Zeus' mind were just.

But if power over Thebes is your game,

Send us into exile. You leave us unharmed,
No one will harm you. Just like that—
God can turn the wind against you.

And you, city of Kadmos! Don't think you'll get off
Without my curses.

Is this how you show gratitude
To Herakles and his sons? Herakles, who
Single-handedly routed the whole Minyan army,
And made you Thebans free to hold up your heads again?
In fact, all Greece ought to be ashamed:
I can't keep quiet!

250

Greece should be on the march,
Campaigning with all she's got to protect these boys!
She owes it to Herakles! His labors cleared the earth and
seas

Of monsters: For us, he made things safe.
But look at them, boys—these Thebans don't lift a finger.
Nor do the other Greeks.

And me, what can I do?
I'm useless as the rattling of my tongue.
I'm winded. Utterly spent. Just look at me,
I'm trembling!

260

If only I were young and strong again,
My spear would bloody those blond curls of his.
I'd drive the coward beyond the bounds of Atlas—
Past land's end—trying to dodge my spear!

CHORUS Whether his words come easily or not
An honest man always can find inside
Himself a reservoir of authentic speech.

LYKOS Go on, keep babbling! Pile up and up your tower
Of words.

But to pay you back, I'll do more than talk.
You there, go to Helikon—and you, to Parnassos.
Tell the crews there to cut down a stand of oak
And bring the logs here.

270

To keep our friends
Cozy and warm, we'll pile wood around the altar.
And once the flames get roaring, we'll have

A roast—

the whole lot of them—

that should teach you

The dead have no power here. From now on,
I'm the one who calls the shots.

(*To Chorus.*) You

burned-out old fools!

For taking their part, you'll weep for more
Than Herakles' sons.

I'll give you something real

280

To cry about: Your own houses torn down
Around your ears. That should teach you
Who's in charge here. And who's a slave.

CHORUS Ares tore the teeth from the dragon's jaws
And planted them like seeds. We sprouted up,
Earth's sons, Thebans who don't scrape or bow
To murderers like you.

These staffs we lean on

Make good clubs. You control the young men,
But watch out! You're a stranger here—

I'll hand you your head. You can't push us around.

290

I've worked myself to the bone. But all I've worked for
Won't go to you—you, an outsider!

Go back where

You came from. Do your dirty work there.

As long as I'm alive, you won't harm a hair

On these boys' heads. Herakles left his sons—

But he hasn't gone so far under the earth

That we forget what we owe him.

He saved

Our country.

You destroyed it. Took over.

Cheated him of the honor that he's due.

Call me an agitator,

but friendship commands

300

That I help Herakles—now, when he needs it most.

If only my right hand was strong enough

To grip my spear again.

But I'm spent.

If I were younger, you wouldn't get away

With calling me slave!

Instead of your filthy pleasures,
We'd live honorably here in Thebes.
But our city was torn apart by civil war.
Thebes went mad and took bad counsel.
Otherwise, you'd never have come to power.

MEGARA Thank you for standing up for us. Old friends
Are the truest friends. But be careful your anger
Doesn't put you in danger too.

310

Amphitryon,
For what it's worth, hear me out.

I love these boys—
How could I not? My labors gave them breath
And nurture.

I'm afraid of dying. Of death.
But it's hopeless to fight against our fate.
We have to face the fact: We die.

But to be burned
Alive—the butt of our enemy's jokes:
To me, that's worse than death.
We have a code to live up to, our family honor
Must be preserved. You made your name
As a great soldier. It's unthinkable
For you to die a coward's death.

320

And no one
Needs to remind me that these boys' father
Wouldn't lift a finger to save his sons
If it meant disgracing our family name.
I'm like him in that:

If your heart is good
And true, when you see your sons disgraced,
It breaks you.

So think about it—
What are you pinning your hopes on?
Do you really believe that your son will return
From the earth's depths?

330

Who, of all the dead,
Has ever come home from Hades?
Or do you imagine all our talk will persuade

Lykos to feel sorry for us?

Maybe

If your enemy's a man of conscience
And honor, you can touch his heart
And he'll show you mercy.

But this man

Is a savage.

It even occurred to me,
What if we begged to have these children
Sent into exile? But isn't that worse?
To save their lives, only to make them
Beggars?

340

And when it comes to exiles,
You know the old saying: "Your host's smile
Turns to a frown in a single day."
We have to face up to death—it's coming anyway.
Old friend, I challenge you: Face it with us.
I know how brave you are at heart.
When the gods trap you in their schemes,
To fight against them shows spirit—
But it's hopeless.

350

Fate itself nets us in.
What must happen happens. We can't escape.

CHORUS If only I had my old fighting strength back,
I'd shove his threats back down his throat.
But I'm old. Done in. Good for nothing.

Amphitryon,

It's up to you to fight clear of this trap.

AMPHITRYON I'm no coward. It's not longing for life
That keeps me from facing death.

But these boys—

They're the sons of my son.

I want

To save them. But what I want can't be.

360

Go ahead. Cut my throat. Stab me.
Or throw me off a cliff.

But do us one favor:
Murder us before you murder these boys.

Abandoned us, your own people, You don't
 Lift a hand to help. Either you're blind
 To the troubles of human beings.
 Or you're heart's hard. Without justice.

390

Exit AMPHITRYON into house.

CHORUS When victory's all we know,
 Our songs are full of joy.
 But then they turn to grief:
 We know hatred.
 Strife. Death.
 And both our joy and grief
 Blend in Apollo's notes
 So pure they break our hearts . . .
 With his golden pick he plucks
 Taut strings that quaver
 Deep in the inner ear
 Hearing beneath that sound
 The deads' toneless music
 Welling from underground.

400

I've learned to sing in praise
 Of my friend lost
 In darkness. My song
 A wreath for his labors—
 For everything he suffered.

410

A life lived in all our faculties
 Is happiness; and the glory
 Of the dead. Like Herakles, whether
 We're children of gods or men,
 Each moment takes our measure:
 We live the best way we can.

First, he killed the lion prowling
 In Zeus' wood. He cloaked
 Himself in its tough hide,
 Used its jaws as a hood.
 Golden hair, tawny mane,
 Who could tell beast from man?

420

Next he drew his bow,
 Arrow after arrow killing
 A centaur in its mountain pasture.
 They trampled down furrows
 Until crops wouldn't grow,
 Tore up pines and brandished
 Them like spears, or set 430
 The pitch on fire: Whole towns
 Torched, driven into hiding!
 Peneios, the river god, who
 Peered up from his swirling waters,
 Mount Pelion's valleys
 And Homole's grassy slopes
 Witnessed the devastation:
 Backs and rumps of horses,
 Sharp hooves, swift runners,
 Appetites of wild creatures— 440
 Faces just like ours.
 Look: They were monsters,
 Half animal, half human,
 Rampaging over
 Thessaly, instinct
 At war with reason.
 So Herakles took aim:
 His bow shot straight.

He had to hunt down
 The stag with golden horns 450
 And dappled hide that drove
 The farmers from their fields
 And battered the countryside,
 Killer on impulse. Beast mind.
 High on the mountain shrine
 Its blood stained his hand
 When he slit its throat
 In sacrifice to Artemis, cruel
 Goddess of the hunt.

Unbridled in the barn 460
 Diomedes's mares neighed for more
 Than oats. Their teeth snapped
 And tore, devouring

Their master's guests.
 Herakles had his work cut out
 To curb such appetites.
 To the bit and chariot
 He broke their spirits,
 Teeth champing iron
 Instead of human guts.

470

Like a man obsessed
 He kept on going, under orders
 From Mycenae's king
 Who set him labor
 After labor. So Herakles
 Pushed past all common
 Human limit, crossing
 Silver-flowing Hebros
 Whirlpooling toward the sea.
 He reached the tall
 Headland near a river
 Called Anauros where
 Springs from underground
 Lured travelers to rest:
 Pure water. Pure pleasure.
 But the place hid a monster:
 Kyknos, who loved slaughter,
 And beheaded his own guests.
 Herakles took aim:
 The springs boiled and gushed.

480

490

Then he traveled to where
 The horses of the Sun,
 Panting, lathered, end
 Their daylong run,
 Sky turning bloody when
 Light sinks in the West.
 There in the garden
 Of Singing Maidens
 Pure as their song,
 He plucked the golden apples
 From the flashing bough.
 But the apples cost blood.
 He had to shoot the coiling

500

Dragon whose scales, flaming red,
Smouldered round the tree.

In hidden coves and cays
He hunted pirates down
And made the open sea safe
For sailors at their oars.

He came to Atlas' mansion,
And stretching out his arms, balanced
Heaven on his back: His strength
Was more than human to bear
Up under the weight
Of the gods' immaculate
Halls glittering with starlight.

510

He recruited troops
From every town in Greece
And crossed the black sea's
Storming waves, mind fraught
As the great rivers that
Pour into a delta marsh
Teeming with birds and fish.
But the abundance in his head
Was his own violence
Trained on the Amazons
Fierce as the god of war,
Ready to fight fire with fire.
Their cavalry went down
Before Herakles' club, blood
Staining their shining robes.
The Greeks stripped their corpses
Knocked sprawling in the dirt—
And back in Mycenae,
As if it were the pelt
Of a wild beast, Herakles
Hung up for all to see
The dead queen's golden belt.

520

530

He faced down Lerna's hydra
Barking and howling,
Its murderous teeth snapping

540

In all its thousand heads
 That he chopped off and seared
 To ash. And on the tips
 Of his arrows he smeared
 Her slobber so lethal
 He brought down Geryon,
 The triple-bodied herdsman,
 With a single shaft.

He ran whatever course
 Fate set him—and he won.
 But the crown of all his labors
 Is common to everyone:
 The end of endeavor,
 Of all we hold most dear.
 He sailed into the harbor
 Of sighs and tears, of airless
 Hades where our sails go slack.
 Hero, slave, everyone
 But the gods disembark.
 And no one crosses back.

550

560

His house is ruined.
 He's been abandoned
 By his friends. His children
 Are queued up for Charon's boat
 That ferries us one way.
 Don't talk to me of gods;
 Or Justice; Wrong or Right.
 Only your strong hands,
 Herakles, can set
 Things straight. You alone
 Can rescue them. But you're gone.

570

When I was young and strong
 I knew what a spear was for!
 All of us when we were young
 And fighting in the ranks
 Would have stood by these children.
 But I'm useless. Broken down.
 The old days' glory is done—

And I'm done with them.
 Only those who are young
 And strong can be truly happy.

580

Enter MEGARA, AMPHITRYON, and the THREE BOYS.

There they are, dressed in funeral robes,
 The sons of Herakles who once dazzled
 The whole world with his strength.

See his wife

Dragging her boys by the hand,
 Balking like colts against their traces.
 And here comes Herakles' poor
 Father, as broken down as we are.
 It's true that as we get older
 Our spirits get heavier from the weight
 Of all we suffer: My eyes are blurry.
 I can't keep blinking these tears away.

590

MEGARA Where's the priest and his knife? We're ready
 To be butchered—though the butcher calls it sacrifice.
 Here the victims are—now lead us off to Hades.
 We make a mismatched team under one yoke:
 Old and young, children and their mother—
 All pulling together toward our deaths.

I gave you boys life, nursed you, reared you.
 And for what? So that those who hate us
 Can humiliate us for their pleasure
 Before they cut us down?

600

Now I'm looking

At your faces for the last time . . .

I had high hopes

For you—

but those are done. Hopes I built

On your father's promises.

Your father.

Who's now dead . . .

He planned to give you
 Argos and all her rich farmland. Eurystheus' palace

And his power were to be yours. Remember
How your father draped the lion skin
He wore as armor over your shoulders?

610

And you were to rule Thebes and all her chariots—
The plains round the city that my father
Passed on to me were your inheritance:

You behaved

Like your father's son when you asked for Thebes
The way other children ask for toys:
And he gave it to you. Remember the huge
Carved club he used to carry? He'd put it
In your right hand and pretend that it was yours.

And he promised you Oechalia
That he took with his well-aimed arrows.

620

Your father's care for you boys was as great
As his strength: For three sons, he intended
To raise up three kingdoms.

And I was to choose

For each of you a wife from Athens, Thebes or Sparta—
To moor you the way a ship's stern hawsers do
So you'd ride out all storms safe and happy.
But the winds have shifted round on us:
Fortune's given you your own deaths for brides.
And my tears have become the lustral water
For the ritual bath . . .

630

more pain to bear.

Your old grandfather gives the marriage feast
For Hades—which makes death your bitter in-law.
If I hug you first,

which should I hug last?

Do I kiss this one?

Or hold you close?

You've seen how a bee goes flower to flower
And gathers nectar for the hive—

if only I could gather

All the sorrow that we suffer
And condense it into a single drop
That I could weep for us all . . .

Herakles,

640

Love, if any words from here
 Ever make their way below, listen to me now:
 Your father and your boys are about to die—
 And I'm to die too. All Greece once called me
 Blessed because of you.

So help us. Come.
 Even if it's just your shadow.

Or come
 As a dream. That's all you need to do—
 These men are such cowards—to stop them
 From slaughtering your sons.

AMPHITRYON

My girl, keep praying
 To the gods below while I raise up my hands
 To the sky:

Zeus, help these children now!
 If you intend to help at all. One moment more—
 And it will be over.

But I'm wasting my breath.
 I've prayed and prayed—
 and nothing happens.

We can't avoid death. We have to die.
 And as for life, old friends, what does it amount to?
 The best we can hope for is to fend off pain
 Between dawn and dark.

Time could care less
 About our hopes. It rushes off on its
 Own business—and it's gone.

Just look at me,
 The prime example: Who didn't sing
 My praises or call me famous or applaud me
 For accomplishing great things?

Wealth. Reputation—
 The wind blows them away just like a feather:
 All you've worked for is wrecked in a single day.
 The wind keeps shifting. Nobody's secure . . .
 We were all boys together, grew up with one another.
 So take a long, last look at your old friend.

HERAKLES *appears in the wings.*

MEGARA It can't be. Who could believe it? Father,
Is that Herakles? My own dear husband?

670

AMPHITRYON My girl, I can't say. I'm speechless.

MEGARA It *is* Herakles. They told us he'd gone down
Forever under the earth—

unless he's come back

As a dream flickering in the sun.

But I'm not dreaming—

or seeing things

My aching mind makes more real than day:

It's Herakles, your son!

Boys, run to him!

Hold tight to his coat. Never let him loose!

Hurry now! He's come to rescue us:

He'll be more help to us than Zeus!

680

HERAKLES *moves on stage.*

HERAKLES

There it is—

My own roof—and the gate before my house!

Just sunlight on my face and hands

Gives me such pleasure—

I made it back home. Alive.

Bless these old walls!

There my boys are—

Before the gate.

What?

What's all this?

They look to be dressed—for their own funerals.

Heads crowned with wreaths.

And my wife—

Out of doors?—surrounded by that crowd of men!

And there's my father—

in tears!

Tell me what's happened here?

690

What's come over this house?

MEGARA

My love, my husband . . .

AMPHITRYON My boy, welcome as sunlight to these old eyes!

MEGARA You're alive—and now you've come—in time to rescue
us!

HERAKLES Will someone tell me what's happened here?
Father? What is all this?

MEGARA Murder, that's what.
They want to murder us!
Forgive me, old man,
For speaking out before you. A woman
Feels her troubles more readily than a man.
They were about to kill my boys. And me.

HERAKLES Great God Apollo! What will you tell me next?

700

MEGARA My brothers and my old father—they're all dead!

HERAKLES How? What happened? Or was it someone's spear?

MEGARA Lykos killed them. He's the power now in Thebes.

HERAKLES Was it a fair fight, spear against spear? Or the waste of
civil war?

MEGARA Civil war. He lords it over us, the upstart, and our seven
gates.

HERAKLES But what frightened you and the old man so?

MEGARA He planned to murder us: Me, your father, and your
boys.

HERAKLES Kill them? What made him fear my orphaned sons?

MEGARA That one day they'd revenge my father's death.

HERAKLES Why are my children dressed up like the dead?

710

MEGARA We put on funeral robes . . . to get ready for our own
deaths.

HERAKLES He was about to murder you? That breaks me!

MEGARA Our friends abandoned us. We were told that you were
dead.

HERAKLES But why did you lose heart that I'd come back?

MEGARA Eurystheus' heralds kept telling us you were dead.

HERAKLES Why did you leave our home? Locked out of our own
gates?

MEGARA He forced us. Dragged your father out of his bed.

HERAKLES No respect for age? Where's his sense of shame?

MEGARA Lykos feel shame? The only goddess he knows is force.

HERAKLES My friends while I was gone—were they so scarce?

720

MEGARA Friends? If your luck goes bad, you have no friends.

HERAKLES All I suffered in the Minyan wars, they shrug that off?

MEGARA I'll say it again: bad fortune has no friends.

HERAKLES Those wreaths of death—

tear them off your heads!

Look up into the sunlight—look!

After death's

Darkness, feel how the sun comes back to warm us!

My work's cut out. Now let me go about it.

With this hand I'll tear down around his ears

The pillars of this upstart tyrant's house.

Then chop off

His perverted head and throw it to the dogs

730

To gnaw.

This victorious club

Will make the rounds of Thebes and pay its respects

To the ones who turned traitors—

despite all I suffered

For them!

Or I'll fill the air with arrows

Raining like a cloudburst round their heads
 Until Ismenos overflows with corpses
 And Dirke's pure waters boil with blood.

A man's first obligation is to defend
 His wife and children, his old father.
 My labors and all I suffered—

the madness of it!

740

I let down those whom I ought to die for—
 After all, they were about to die for me.
 Killing lions and hydras for Eurystheus
 And not toiling for my own sons' threatened
 Lives—

that's honor and glory for you!

Had *that* been the outcome of all my labors,
 Who now would call me Herakles the Conqueror?

CHORUS It's only right that a man should stand up for his sons,
 His old father, and his wife who's his faithful mate.

AMPHITRYON Son, it's always been your way to love your friends
 And hate your enemies. But don't move too fast.

750

HERAKLES Am I rushing into something, Father?

AMPHITRYON Lykos and his gang—a bunch of lazy,
 Big-spending climbers, who went bankrupt
 While trying to pass themselves off as wealthy—
 Raised the riots that brought Thebes down:
 They wanted to rob their neighbors
 And fill their pockets.

You were seen

Entering the city, so don't be caught offguard:
 Your enemies will come swarming soon enough.

760

HERAKLES I could care less if the whole city saw me!
 But a bird settled on an ill-omened perch—
 I knew right then there was trouble,
 So I slipped undetected into Thebes.

AMPHITRYON Well done. Now go in and greet your household gods—
 Let your fathers' house welcome you face to face.

Soon Lykos will arrive to haul us off
 To slaughter—your wife, your sons, and me.
 If you wait inside, he'll fall into your hands—
 And no risks.

Don't stir up things in Thebes
 Until you set things straight in your own house.

770

HERAKLES I'll do as you say—I'll go inside.
 Just feel that warmth. After all I went through
 In the earth's sunless depths, I won't forget
 To thank the gods who protect our home.

AMPHITRYON Son, I'm eager to hear—did you really go down to
 Hades?

HERAKLES Yes: I dragged up to the light his three-headed watchdog.

AMPHITRYON Did you fight? Or was he a gift from the goddess?

HERAKLES I had to fight. The Mysteries I witnessed gave me
 strength.

AMPHITRYON Where's the monster now? At Eurystheus' house?

780

HERAKLES At Hermione. In the earth goddess's sacred grove.

AMPHITRYON Does Eurystheus know you've returned from the earth's
 depths?

HERAKLES No. I came here first to see how things stood.

AMPHITRYON What kept you such a long time underground?

HERAKLES I stayed to rescue Theseus from Hades.

AMPHITRYON Where's he now? Returned to his homeland?

HERAKLES In Athens, glad to have escaped the underworld.

Boys, let's go in. Go with your father
 Into our house. You're happier, aren't you,
 Going in than when you were coming out.

790

Don't be frightened any longer. Dry your tears.
And you, my wife, take heart—stop trembling.
You can stop clutching my coat—

I don't have wings;

I'm not going to run from those I love.

Well!

They won't let me loose—

they cling

To my coat tighter. How close you came

To the razor's edge.

Here, take my hands—

I'll be the ship that tows the smaller boats

Into harbor.

How could I not want

To take care of these boys? Human beings

Are alike in this:

Whether we're powerful

Or not, whether our luck is good or bad,

We love our children—

some of us are rich,

Some poor—

but all of us love our children.

Exit HERAKLES, AMPHITRYON, MEGARA, and the BOYS.

CHORUS Old age weighs me

Down worse than Etna's

Stones. It's drawn like a curtain

Between me and the sun.

Gold bars that fill palaces,

An Eastern king's wealth,

Won't buy me back my youth.

What I long for most—

To come again full flower

In body, heart and soul—

All the spoils of power

And privilege can't restore.

This side of the grave,

Whether we lock our gate

Or sleep out in the street,

Youth is what we crave.

I hate old age, its feet

810

820

That stink of death creeping
 Closer every hour.
 Whirl it off like trash
 Spinning in the storm.
 Let the waves capsize it,
 Drown it in the deep.
 Banish it from the city.
 Keep it far from my home.

'The gods' ways aren't our ways: 830
 Who knows what they think
 Of what we think is wise?
 But if they thought as
 We do, they'd grant a second
 Youth to a life of virtue.
 Having run their race
 To death, the good would catch
 Their breath and double
 Back to sunlight while
 The wicked and mean 840
 Live out their single span.
 We could tell good from bad
 As clearly as when a cloud
 Shifts to reveal the stars
 To sharp-eyed sailors.
 But the gods' ways aren't ours:
 Between good and bad action,
 They don't draw a clear line.
 And time, as the years roll on,
 Does not lay things bare 850
 Or blind us with the truth.
 A bad man rakes it in
 While a good man stays poor.
 Age walks on their faces.
 Wealth outlives them both.

Song is what I live for.
 Song that joins together
 The Graces and the Muses,
 Each interwoven gesture
 The currents of a river. 860
 To me, music is water

I couldn't live without.
 Even though I'm old
 And my muse is Memory,
 What life is left to me
 I'll use to sing her praise—
 She taught me to weave
 A song for Herakles
 To crown his victor's brow.
 As long as Bakkhos keeps on
 Splashing out wine
 And my hands stay strong
 To pluck the lyre's strings
 Or play the shrilling pipe,
 I'll keep on with my song:
 The Muses who set me dancing
 Still guide my crippled feet.

870

The girls of Delos sing
 Their victory song
 At the temple gate
 Of bright-voiced Apollo,
 Son of Leto.
 They dance in a circle,
 White feet so beautiful
 That an old graybeard like me
 Feels rising in his throat,
 Here before your gate,
 A song the dying swan
 Might sing—but still a song
 Of praise for the son
 Of Zeus: Though his birth
 Was divine, his deeds
 Surpass that high beginning:
 As he strove to rid the earth
 Of monsters, wild beasts,
 Of shapes that glide and prow
 When the house goes still,
 Through fear and struggle
 He became our double—
 His labors made him
 Human, open to it all;
 But he also had to kill,

880

890

900

Rage like a wild animal.
That we mortals have the chance
To lead a tranquil life
We owe to his violence.

Enter LYKOS, with FOLLOWERS. Reenter AMPHITRYON.

LYKOS So Amphitryon—you aren't a moment
Too soon. You took your own sweet time
In getting dressed for death.

Go on:

Tell the wife and sons of Herakles
To come here too—and without any fuss—
That's the deal we struck when you agreed to die.

910

AMPHITRYON You drive me hard in my misery.
My son is dead—isn't that grief enough?
You're the power here; we all bow to you.
Why press us so hard? You command us
To die:

Now.

And so we will die:
What you order us to do, we must obey.

LYKOS Where's Megara—and those cubs of Alkmene's dead son?

AMPHITRYON As near as I can make out—I suppose—

920

LYKOS What do you mean, you "suppose"? Tell me what you
know.

AMPHITRYON She's kneeling before the hearth-goddess's altar to pray—

LYKOS For what? Praying won't save her life . . .

AMPHITRYON A hopeless prayer. For her dead husband to return.

LYKOS He's not here now. And he'll never come.

AMPHITRYON Never . . . unless some god raises him from the dead.

LYKOS Go inside the house and bring her out.

AMPHITRYON That would make me an accomplice to her murder.

LYKOS Well, well . . . such scruples!

But no fears hold me back
From dragging out this mother and her sons.
Guards, follow me in.

930

The pleasure
Of ending this “labor” will be all mine.

Exit LYKOS and FOLLOWERS.

AMPHITRYON Well, go ahead—when fate commands, you too obey.
Someone else will bring your labor to an end.
What you did was evil—expect evil in return.
Justice, my friends, this is justice—

a net thrown
Over his head, swords hidden in the mesh . . .
There he goes, the coward—

itching to murder us
While he’s the one being led to slaughter.
I’ll go in and watch him bleed.

Nothing could be sweeter.
He’ll pay the just price—blood for blood.

940

Exit AMPHITRYON.

CHORUS The gods demand reprisal: Evil
Turns back on the man who commits evil.
The river of Lykos’ life flows backwards
To death.

You’ll pay with your own blood
For all the blood you shed.

For lording it
Over your betters, your time comes to suffer.
Each step brings you closer to the fate
You planned for others.

I’d lost all hope
That he’d return—my eyes smart with tears,
I’m so glad to see our king.

950

Come on, old friends,
Let’s look inside the house—

I want to see
If it all happens the way we’d hoped.

LYKOS (from inside Herakles' house) Help! Help!

CHORUS From inside the house the first note sounds sweet.
Another note, another— and the tune's soon over.

LYKOS (as before) Country of Kadmos! They've laid an
ambush!
They're murdering me!

CHORUS Yes, blood for blood,
Murder for murder. For what you owe,
You're paying the full price.

Who was the liar
Who claimed the gods have no power? 960
It had to be a human being. Only flesh and blood
Could spread such a senseless story.
A lawless man. A scoffer.

Old friends,
Our enemy—and all his evil—is wiped away.
The house has gone silent. Joy makes me want to dance.
Our friends won out! Just as I'd hoped!

After grief and pain, when
Good fortune starts to shine,
Every rut in every street
Brimms over with light. 970
The dancers' flashing feet
Make us join their dancing
And tears that flowed down
Inspire in us new songs.
Take to the streets, celebrate
This change of fortune!
Dancing, singing, feasting—
The whole town seems divine!
The upstart eats dirt—
And power flashes 980
From the brow
Of our rightful king
Who set sail over Acheron.
I'd given up all hope
That he'd return

From death's chill harbor.
But hope reversed despair.

The gods watch over
The races that we run,
The unjust and the just
In breakneck competition—
Gold and Good Fortune,
Power and Lawlessness
Are the horses we lash
Into a lather to pull
Our chariot faster
Than Law gaining on us hard,
Coming up on the outside.
Yoked to his ambitions,
What driver looks ahead
To the homeward stretch?
Whipped on by his own will,
He hurtles forward
In the black chariot
Of worldly success:
Spoke and axle snap—
He's thrown head over heels
Into drifting dust.

990

1000

River Ismenos, put on
Your whirlpooling crowns!
All the gleaming streets
Flowing out like rivers
To our city's seven gates
Join in the dancing
Of Dirke's rippling flow
And of Asopos' daughters
Whose heads toss like waves
Above their father's waters
Running cool, bright fingers
Through their streaming hair.
Join in the victory song
Of our own Herakles!
Rocky woods of Delphi,
Muses on Mount Helikon,
Make your voices echo off

1010

1020

These walls of stone
 Where our ancestors sown
 From dragon teeth sprang up
 Armored in bronze and hand on
 Our country to their children's
 Children whose eyes burn
 With the saving light of dawn.

1030

Think of the bed that a god
 And a human being shared,
 The divine and mortal
 Both longing to embrace
 The same bride, Alkmene,
 Granddaughter of Perseus.
 I doubted at first that Zeus
 Took part—but the years
 Don't lie: They shine down,
 Zeus, on Herakles your son,
 And reveal his strength
 To be superhuman.
 In Pluto's prison
 He broke the chains of death
 And came back to the sun
 From the depths underground.
 Power that settles
 On the chosen man
 Proves that Herakles
 Is worthier than
 That low-class climber.
 Put a sword in his hand,
 Make him stand and fight—
 And you'll find out fast
 Whether the gods still favor
 A cause they think is just.

1040

1050

IRIS and MADNESS appear above the roof.

Up there! Look!

Do you feel the same stroke

Of terror?

Old friends—are those phantoms

Hovering above the house?

1060

Let's get clear of this!

Come on, old bones! Move it! On the double!
Healing Apollo, don't let them near us! Keep them off!

IRIS Don't be spooked by us, old men. This is Lyssa—

Her nickname's Madness—the child of Night.

And I—I am Iris. I serve the gods.

We don't mean to hurt you or the city.

Just one man's house is lined up in our sights:

The one known as the son of Zeus . . . and Alkmene.

As long as his labors made his life bitter,

Necessity shielded him;

1070

and Zeus himself

Held Hera and me off.

But he's carried out

Eurystheus' orders, so Hera's dreamed up

Another labor;

and I'm in on it:

To stain

Herakles' hands with the blood of his own kin

And weigh him down under the guilt of murdering

His sons.

Virgin daughter of black-shrouded Night,

Madness, you have no children:

Don't let your heart

Go out to him.

Wind it up tighter

And tighter in your breast until it lets loose

1080

Such fits of madness the soles of his feet

Burn and tingle to leap after his sons!

Let the sails of murder swell so full

He jams the tiller with his bloody hands

And ferries his own children over Acheron—

His children, the crown of all his labors.

It's time he learnt the depths of Hera's rage.

And my rage, too.

We gods are done for,

And human beings might as well take over

If he gets off without paying our price.

1090

MADNESS The gods wince at the sight of me

For the office I perform—

but I'm noble at heart:

My mother is Night, my father Heaven.

I take no pleasure in afflicting human beings
I count as friends.

And I don't want to see
You and Hera stumble—so hear me out:
Herakles' fame reaches from here to the gods
—It's *his* house you're sending me against.
He brought the wild powers of the earth to heel
And leveled the waves of the storming sea.
Single-handedly, he raised up the honors of the gods
That the arrogance of human beings knocked aside.
Take my advice and give up this plan: It's monstrous!

1100

IRIS Spare us. Hera's and my schemes don't need your
counsel.

MADNESS I'm trying to set you on the straight road: You've gone
astray.

IRIS The wife of Zeus didn't send you to show how temperate
you are.

MADNESS As the Sun is my witness, I'm doing what I don't wish to
do.

But if that's how it has to be, if necessity binds me
To do what you and Herá ask, I'll plunge ahead
The way a pack of hunting dogs bark and snap
To be unleashed:

When I enter Herakles' heart
And make it beat louder and louder in his ears,
Breakers pounding on a reef, or the ground
Shaking and cracking wide, or lightning slashing
Through gasping clouds, won't match my rage:
I'll smash through his roof and rampage room to room,
Slaughtering his sons.

1110

And the murderer won't know
That his hands are stained by the blood of children
He bred from his own flesh—until in his breast the storm
Of my frenzy blows itself out.

Look there: Like a runner jumping
The starting line, he's off—

then stops, starts, head

1120

Tossing, pupils bulging while the whites of his eyes
Roll up;

his breath pants hard, his head lowers
Like a bull about to charge:

Hear his snorts
And bellows, as if he called to the demons
Howling among screeching spirits of the dead—
I'll make you dance even faster to my notes
Of terror!

Run along now, Iris. Your path of honor
Takes you soaring back to Olympus.

My job
Is to slip unseen into Herakles' house.

Exit IRIS and MADNESS.

CHORUS City of Thebes, grieve:
Can't you hear those notes
Piercing as arrows,
Venemous as snakes?
Such music makes me weep
For the son of Zeus, Greece's
Best defender, the flower
Of all manhood cut down
By the ache in his mind.
Lost to himself, we lose
Him too, his spirit rent
By those crazing notes.
Or else he hears a chariot
Gaining from behind:
The daughter of Night
Whips her horses on,
Hair writhing and hissing
Like a hundred snakes,
Gorgon-gaze turning
Human beings to stone.

1130

1140

The god blinks—
and the wind
Of fortune swings around.

1150

The god blinks—
and a man
Massacres his sons.

AMPHITRYON (within the house) Oh, unbearable!

CHORUS Zeus, your son
Is being trampled down
As though he weren't your child.
And Herakles' sons, too,
Will be lost to him.
Vengeance
Slashes his mind to bits;
Madness breathes in his face
And makes him wild . . .

1160

AMPHITRYON (within) Wretched house!

CHORUS The dances are beginning—
Listen—not the dances
Of the god of wine
Joyously brandishing
His ivy-covered staff;
But pulsing in the mind
A silent drumming . . .

AMPHITRYON (within) The walls, the roof!

CHORUS What is that throbbing?
Not the pleasant ache
Of grapes crushed to wine
For the wine god's oblations—
But a pounding in the head
That drives us to the edge . . .

1170

AMPHITRYON (within) Children! Stay away! Run!

CHORUS The pipe keeps shrieking
Notes of ruin. Driven
Wild by the chase, he hunts
You down. Madness dancing

Drunken through the house
Won't dance for nothing . . .

1180

AMPHITRYON (within) Stop! Don't . . . such suffering!

CHORUS Poor old man, your troubles
Break my heart—grief won't stop
Howling! Weep for Herakles' father
And the wife and mother
Who bore him sons for this!
Look! A whirlwind shakes the house!
The roof is caving in!

AMPHITRYON (within) Wise Athena, child of Zeus
Who sprung full-blown from his head,
Why are you doing this?
You've smashed this man's house
The way you smashed the giant
Who attacked Mount Olympus.
You've sent a shockwave
Shuddering from heaven down
To Hades' darkest pit!

1190

Enter MESSENGER.

MESSENGER White-haired old men—

CHORUS Why do you cry out
Like that?

MESSENGER Inside the house . . . horrible.

CHORUS No need
For an oracle. I can guess . . .

MESSENGER The boys—they're dead.

1200

CHORUS Ahh . . . AHHHH . . .

MESSENGER Grieve for them. Believe me—there's reason to grieve.

CHORUS Murdered—by the hands of their own father!
Could a man be that savage?

MESSENGER

I'm tongue-tied:

The words won't come—

for what we've suffered here . . .

CHORUS Tell us however you can—

about his boys—

Cut down by his own hands . . .

Come on, now. Speak.

What happened when the gods smashed the house?

And the poor madman's sons—

how did they die?

MESSENGER

The victims . . . to be sacrificed . . . had been placed

1210

Before Zeus' altar. Herakles had thrown

The body of the king out of doors.

The house was ready to be purified.

There stood his boys—fine-looking youngsters—

And Megara and the old man.

The basket,

With the sacrificial knife and barley,

Had already been carried round the altar.

We kept silent, observing the holy hush.

And then . . .

reaching out his hand . . .

to take the torch

And plunge it in the lustral water—

1220

Herakles stood frozen in his tracks:

Dead silent. Suspended. Not there.

His boys

Kept staring at him—

his face contorts:

He looks . . . deranged. The whites of his eyeballs

Rolling up. Veins gorged and bloodshot.

Foaming at the mouth, slobber dripping down

His beard.

His laughter was twisted,

Out of control:

"So father," he says, "why waste time

With sacrifices and cleansing fire?

I might as well kill Eurystheus first 1230
 And save the trouble of doing it all again.
 When I cut off Eurystheus' head
 And bring it back here, then I'll wipe
 My hands of blood.

Pour out that water!
 Throw down those baskets!

My bow—
 Bring it here! And my club!
 I'm off to storm Mycenae.
 We need crowbars and pickaxes. Those Cyclopes
 Are good builders, every stone squared to
 The red chalk line and tamped down by masons'
hammers!

But iron will pry up the cornerstones 1240
 And smash those high-built walls to bits!"
 Then he was off, talking like he had a chariot:
 He jumps up into it, his fingers gripping air
 The way a charioteer grips the rail,
 His free hand lashing down to whip his horses on.
 We didn't know whether to laugh . . . or shy away
 In fear.

Finally, someone whispers:
 "Is the chief fooling around—
or off his head?"

He was pacing wildly back and forth
 All through the house—
he rushes into the main hall 1250
 And shouts, "I'm here in Nisus' city!—"

Right there
 In his own home!

He lies down on the floor, still dressed
 For sacrifice, and begins to make a feast.
 He was at that only a moment before
 He shouts, "I'm nearing the woods of Corinth!"
 Like an athlete at the games there, he stripped down
 And began a wrestling match—

only he wrestles
 With the air or with clouds of dust as he
 Tumbles in the ring.

Acting as his own herald,
 He quiets the crowd and calls out: 1260

“The winner of the crown—glorious Herakles!”
 Next, he was in Mycenae, cursing out
 Eurystheus; his father clings to his massive hand
 And says, “Son, what’s got into you?
 All this make-believe traveling . . .

Surely,
 The blood of these upstarts hasn’t made you come
 Unglued?”

By now the old man was trembling,
 But Herakles thought Eurystheus’ father
 Clung to his hand and begged his mercy.
 He shoves the old man off, strings his bow
 And nocks an arrow, ready to shoot down
 His three little boys:

1270

He thought they were
 Eurystheus’ sons!

The children got so scared
 They rushed around this way and that,
 One ducking under his mother’s skirt,
 One crouching down in the shadow of a pillar,
 The last huddling like a bird beneath the altar.
 Their mother cries out: “You’re their father—
 Are you going to kill your own flesh and blood?”
 The old man and the whole crowd of us
 Started shouting—

1280

he chased his son around
 The pillar, spins the boy about, and shoots him
 Through the heart. The arrow knocks him backwards
 Against the pillar where he gasps and collapses,
 Staining the stone with blood.

Herakles
 Crows his own triumph: “One down, Eurystheus!
 Your fledgling here has paid the price for all your hate.”
 The next boy was cowering down by the altar’s
 Lowest step, hoping he was hidden.
 But when he sees his father swing round
 With his bow to take aim, he throws himself down
 Before his father’s knees. He lifts up his hand
 In appeal to his father’s beard and neck
 And cries out: “I’m your son, Father—yours—
 Not Eurystheus’!

1290

Herakles’ eyes

1330

1310

1320

71

There's nothing you'd call blessed about such sleep:
No human being could be more miserable.

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS The memory of bloodshed stains the mind.
It's like a film blurring everything we see.
Greece can't forget the blood Danaos' daughters
Shed at Argos: Infamous slaughter. 1330
But this latest labor of Zeus' son surpasses
That butchery . . .

Or I could tell you
How Prokne murdered her only son—
Poets try to blot the blood with song
But such violence stains even the Muses' minds.
Prokne had only the one boy—
while you, Herakles,
Driven on by Madness
—father, destroyer—
Murdered all three.

I can't find the tune
To grieve for what you've done. The steps of the dance,
The words of the song that would placate 1340
The dead,
and help us bear our grief,
just won't come . . .

Look: They've thrown back the bolts. The great doors
Are creaking open . . .

*The doors open and reveal the bodies of MEGARA and the
CHILDREN, with AMPHITRYON mourning them; HERAKLES,
asleep, is tied to a broken pillar.*

And there . . . are the children.
Only look at them!
They lie at their father's feet;
their father—
Asleep . . . resting from the labor of slaughtering
His sons:

A terrible sleep so heavy headed
He can't feel the rope's knots tying down his body
To the broken pillar of his home.

his soft moaning
Like a bird mourning her unfledged young.

1350

CHORUS Old friend,
I can't keep back my tears:
For you. The children.
And for him—who wore the victor's crown.

CHORUS It's terrible . . . so much 'blood . . .

CHORUS . . . rises to engulf him.

1360

AMPHITRYON Can't you grieve in silence, old friends?
If he wakes,
He'll break free of these ropes and go rampaging again.
He'll destroy us all:
The city. His father.
His own home.

CHORUS I can't . . . I can't keep from crying.

AMPHITRYON *Quiet! I need to lean down to hear his breathing.*

CHORUS Is he sleeping?

AMPHITRYON He's asleep, all right.
If you can call this heavy-bodied slackness
Sleep . . . for a man who's killed his wife and children
With his bowstring's deadly hum.

CHORUS Go on, then—grieve.

CHORUS

1370

CHORUS

CHORUS Old friend.

CHORUS

AMPHITRYON

1380

CHORUS

AMPHITRYON

1390

CHORUS Zeus, why should you hate Herakles so fiercely
 When he's your own son?
 He'll drown in such rough seas
 Of suffering and pain.

HERAKLES *wakes.*

HERAKLES

Huhhhh . . .

I'm still alive. I'm seeing—what I should see.
 Clear sky. The ground. These shafts of sun.
 Like arrows. My head's aswim . . .

and my mind's

All choppy like the sea after a storm.
 My breath swells high and hard into my aching lungs.
 Not flowing easy, the way it should.

What?

Moored like a ship? Ropes around my chest and arms—
 me?—

1400

Herakles?

Anchored fast to this cracked stonework—
 And next to me:
 Bodies. All dead.

There's my bow . . . and arrows
 Scattered on the ground . . .

which have always stood by me . . .
 The way a fellow soldier would . . .

Weapons that have
 Protected me the way I've protected them.
 Have I gone back down to the underworld?
 Run that race for Eurystheus over again?
 But I don't see Sisyphus hunched at his boulder.
 Or the god of death. Or the scepter of
 Demeter's child . . . Persephone . . . the god's wife.
 I'm out to sea with all this—

1410

I'm lying here,
 Helpless . . . at a loss to say where I am.
 Where could Herakles be. helpless?

Hey! Friends!
 Where are you? Is there anyone around
 Who can cure me of this murkiness in my brain?
 Everything's a jumble. Nothing's the way it should be.

AMPHITRYON This cuts me to the heart . . . Old friends, should I go to him?

CHORUS You won't go alone—I'll stand by you in your trouble.

HERAKLES Father—why are you hiding your eyes? You're crying!
Don't stand so far off—I'm your son, Father—yours.

1420

AMPHITRYON Yes. No matter how desperate things are—you're still my child.

HERAKLES What's happened to me? Have *I* done something—to make you weep?

AMPHITRYON Even a god—if he cared enough to know—would grieve.

HERAKLES That terrible? But you still haven't told me.

AMPHITRYON There. It's in front of you. If your mind's clear enough to see.

HERAKLES Tell me! You act like things are changed—for the worst!

AMPHITRYON If your mind's not drunk—on death—then I'll tell you.

HERAKLES My mind? What's the riddle? What are you hiding?

AMPHITRYON I'm still not sure—if your mind's completely sound.

HERAKLES But I don't remember—any uproar in my mind.

1430

AMPHITRYON Old men, should I untie my son—or not?

HERAKLES Untie me. I won't let this pass. Whoever shamed me . . .

AMPHITRYON (untying him) . . . What you've done is burden enough.
The rest, let go.

HERAKLES So silence is all the answer that I'll get?

AMPHITRYON Zeus! Do you see what misery Hera's sent down on us
from heaven?

HERAKLES Is it Hera's spite, then, that struck me down?

AMPHITRYON Let the goddess alone. Bear up under your own bitter life.

HERAKLES My life—is ruined then. You're about to tell me something terrible.

AMPHITRYON There. Look at them. The bodies—of children.

HERAKLES I can't bear to think of what I'm seeing!

1440

AMPHITRYON They weren't enemies—these children—when war broke out against them.

HERAKLES War? Who did this? Who—destroyed them?

AMPHITRYON You. Your bow and arrows. And the god who lent a hand.

HERAKLES You're saying I killed them? You—my own father—messenger of this horror?

AMPHITRYON You were—driven mad. To answer you this way destroys me.

HERAKLES And my wife—was I the one—responsible?

AMPHITRYON All of this . . . by one hand. Yours.

HERAKLES I can't bear up under all this. I'm swallowed up by clouds of pain.

AMPHITRYON So now you know why I was weeping . . .

HERAKLES And I tore down my house in my madness?

1450

AMPHITRYON I only know this: Everything you had is changed to grief.

HERAKLES Where did I go mad? Where did my soul betray me?

AMPHITRYON There. By the altar. As you purified your hands with fire.

HERAKLES For murdering my sons—my dear little boys—I should
Take my own life. Be judge and jury

For my childrens' blood.

Hurl myself from
A sheer cliff. Stab a sword deep into my side.
Or set myself on fire and burn away
The shame that will make everyone turn
Their backs on me.

THESEUS approaches in the wings.

There's—Theseus!
My kinsman and my friend: He's in the way
Of my plans to kill myself.

1460

He'll see my shame:
My childrens' blood will defile the eyes
Of my dearest friend.

What can I do?
Wings can't fly high enough, there's no place
Deep enough for me to hide my shame.
I can't bear the sight of my own shadow!
I'll hide my head in darkness. Away from the sun.
I won't let my blood-guilt stain the innocent.

*HERAKLES covers his head. THESEUS comes forward, with
FOLLOWERS.*

THESEUS Sir, I've come from Athens. My troops are posted
Down by the banks of the Asopos. I'm here
To offer your son a crack allied force:
A rumor reached us that Lykos had overthrown
The government and was pressing you—hard.
Old friend, whatever my hand or my spearmen
Can do, we're here to do it.

1470

Herakles
Brought me back from the underworld—
alive.

For that, I owe him a helping hand.
What's this?

Bodies—scattered about the ground.
It looks like we've come too late—your troubles
Have outmarched us.

1480

These boys—who killed them?
That woman sprawled there—whose wife was she?

Children don't stand in the ranks of spearmen:
This looks out of bounds—some new atrocity.

AMPHITRYON Lord of the hilltop olive tree—

THESEUS Are you all right?
Your voice—sounds broken—with grief.

AMPHITRYON We've been destroyed! Destroyed by the gods' hands . . .

THESEUS These boys you're crying over—who are they?

AMPHITRYON Their father is my son: He bred them.
He murdered them. Their blood is on his hands.

1490

THESEUS What you say—can't be!

AMPHITRYON I only wish it weren't!

THESEUS It's unspeakable—what you just told me!

AMPHITRYON Our whole lives are swept away. Like trash.

THESEUS What happened? How did he do—what he did?

AMPHITRYON Madness like a wave shipwrecked his mind . . .
With arrows dipped in the venom of hydra's blood.

THESEUS Hera's hand is behind all this.

But who is it
Lying there beside the bodies?

AMPHITRYON My son—
My son who performed so many labors.
Who stood shoulder to shoulder with the gods
And bloodied his spear against the giants
On the Plains of Phlegra . . .

1500

THESEUS Was any human being
Ever cursed with a fate worse than this?

AMPHITRYON There's nobody alive who's faced
Greater trials or suffered worse torments.

THESEUS Why is he hiding his head under his cloak?

AMPHITRYON Shame to meet your eye.

Shame before his kin and friends.

Shame at the blood of his butchered sons.

THESEUS I'll take my share in his pain. Someone uncover him.

AMPHITRYON Child! Uncover your face, hold up your head
To the sun:

1510

Against your grief,

friendship

Like a wrestler throws its weight.

Son, my old eyes

Can't keep from tears—I'm begging you

By your beard, your knees, your hand:

Don't let this rage

Run away with you—don't play the lion

Hungry for your own blood.

This race to death

Only swells the flood: There's been enough grief and
pain.

THESEUS You—huddled there—you think you're destroyed—
But look up:

We're your friends. Show us your face.

There's no cloud black enough that can hide this horror
From the sun.

1520

Why are you waving me away—

Warning me off from all this bloodshed?

Are you afraid your words will strike me down

With contagion?

But I can bear it if your suffering

Falls on me—you stood by me once:

You led me

From the underworld back into the sunlight.

I hate fair-weather friends—whose gratitude

Goes stale. Who'll take their share of a friend's good luck,

But won't sail with him when his luck turns sour.

Stand up and face us. Uncover your head.

1530

The gods shake the dice—

and we have to endure

Whatever Heaven sends. To face up to fate
Without flinching;

That's courage in a man.

THESEUS *uncovers HERAKLES' head.*

HERAKLES Theseus—have you seen what I did to my own children?

THESEUS They told me. . . . The suffering you point to—I see it
well enough.

HERAKLES So . . . why have you exposed my head to the sun?

THESEUS You're human . . . nothing human can stain what is
divine.

HERAKLES Steer clear of me. Run from my infection!

THESEUS No vengeful spirit of the dead can taint the love between
friends.

HERAKLES I have no friends. . . . But I'll never regret having been
yours. 1540

THESEUS You helped me when I needed it—now I'm here to stand
by you.

HERAKLES Stand by me? A man who butchered his own sons?

THESEUS Now that trouble drags you down—yes, my tears are for
you.

HERAKLES Can any man alive have done anything this terrible?

THESEUS Misfortune like yours reaches from the earth . . . clear up
to heaven.

HERAKLES So *now* you understand—I want to die.

THESEUS Do you think the gods care one bit about your threats?

HERAKLES The gods follow their own stubborn course . . . as I will
toward the gods.

THESEUS Watch what you say—boasting will only get you in
deeper!

HERAKLES My hold's so filled with grief there's no place to stow 1550
more.

THESEUS What? If you're thinking of . . . Where is your rage driving
you?

HERAKLES To death. Back where I just came from—back to the
underworld.

THESEUS Now you're talking like any ordinary man.

HERAKLES And you—who aren't suffering—who are you to give
advice?

THESEUS Is this Herakles talking? Herakles, who's endured so
much?

HERAKLES But never this much! I've been pushed to the wall.

THESEUS You!—who made the world safe. Great friend to all hu-
man beings!

HERAKLES What good do they do me? Hera's the one who lords it
over us.

THESEUS Don't be a fool. Greece won't let you die such a pointless
death.

HERAKLES Hear me out. What I have to say will show up 1560
Your advice. My life has been a botch,
First to last:

I take after my father—
Who killed my mother's father—and disregarding
Such a blood-curse, married Alkmene who gave birth . . .
To me.

When the foundation's laid so badly
That the whole house tilts, the sons
Inherit . . . grief.

Zeus (whoever Zeus is!)

Bred me as a target for Hera's hate.
Don't be angry with me, old man:

You've acted

The way a true father would—more than this Zeus! 1570
When I was still nursing at my mother's breast,
The wife of Zeus sent gorgon-eyed snakes into
My cradle to poison me.

When I grew up,
My arms and legs were sheathed in muscle
Tight-woven as a herdsman's cloak—

but why go over

All those labors I endured?

Lions;

Many-headed monsters with three bodies;
Giants; charging hordes of sharp-hooved centaurs—
I wiped them out. Slaughtered them all.

Even that bitch

The hydra, two heads sprouting back for each one 1580
I lopped off—I killed her too . . .

my labors

Stretched in front of me, horizonless
As the night sea—

until I reached the dark world

Of the dead:

At Eurystheus' orders,
I brought back from the gates of Hades
The three-headed watchdog snapping and snarling' . . .
But my final labor—

blood on blood—

oh, I triumphed—

Was to butcher my own boys!—

and set

The capstone on my house of slaughter.
My fate's come to this—the law says I have 1590
To leave: My own dear Thebes can't stand
The sight of me!

If I stayed, what temple
Would let me enter? When they saw me coming,
Even my friends would cross the street.
A life as cursed and bloody as mine
—Just who will dare to speak to me?
Well, you say, there's Argos—isn't Argos

Home ground?

But Argos exiled me.

So how about some other city?

But there, they'd all look at me slyly

1600

Out of the corners of their eyes—

and they'd whisper,

“Isn't that him? the child-killer?”

their tongues

Like doors slammed shut against me . . .

Gossiping the way people do behind locked doors:

“So that's Zeus' bastard! the one who murdered

His wife and sons! What's he hanging around here for?

Someone should tell him to clear off!”

I counted myself

Happy once—and to find out that my happiness

Would come down to this:

Blood. Death.

1610

I can't bear to think of it.

That man's lucky

Who's known misery since his birth. His pain

Drags after him, familiar as the sun.

I've come to the end of everything—

My fate's unspeakable:

The earth cries out

Against me, forbidding me to touch the ground,

Rivers and waves shrink away from me,

Hissing, “Don't come near!”

I'm no better than Ixion,

Chained forever to a wheel of fire.

The best fate I can envision is that no Greek

1620

Who ever knew me when my luck was good

Should ever have to see my face again:

A life like that—what good is it.

I hate it:

Useless; bloody; cursed.

And all so that Zeus' wife—

The glorious Hera—can take pleasure in her hate:

Dancing on Olympus, her sandals ringing loud

While her feet pound the gleaming floor.

She's got what she schemed for—

she's smashed

To pieces, foundation and all, the pillar

That held up Greece:

Who would stoop so low as

1630

To pray to such a goddess?

Driven by

Petty jealousy—because this Zeus crept

Into a mortal woman's bed . . .

And so

She's destroyed the one man all Greece looked on

As a friend—

though that man was blameless

And did nothing to deserve such hate.

CHORUS It's Hera who's behind all this. No other god
But the wife of Zeus. You're absolutely right in that.

THESEUS Listen to me:

What's the point of killing yourself?

Human beings have to suffer. So be patient.

1640

Bear up. Show your true strength.

Fate lets no one off,

Not even the gods—

if the poets haven't lied.

Don't the gods trample on lawful love when

They sneak off on the sly?

And haven't they thrown

Their own fathers into chains for the sake

Of gaining power?

But there they are,

Still living on Olympus—

managing just fine

Despite their crimes.

Do you think you're better

Than the gods—you, who are only human?

If they endure their fates without crying out,

1650

Why shouldn't you?

So leave Thebes.

Live up to the law—and come with me

To Athena's city.

I'll purify your hands

Of blood. And give you a home and a share

Of everything that's mine.

All the gifts

My people gave me for killing the Minotaur
And saving the fourteen young people
That beast would have devoured,

I'll give over to you.

Throughout my country, fields and pastures

Have been reserved for me—all these

1660

I'll cede to you and you'll hold them in your name

As long as you live.

And when you die

And descend to Hades, Athens will raise up

Stone monuments to your memory and make sacrifices

In your honor.

The honor that Athens wins

In serving you

will be our city's crown of fame

And make us renowned through all of Greece.

I owe this to you: You saved my life.

Now that you need a friend, I can pay back

What I owe.

But if a god makes up his mind

1670

To reach out to a mortal man, he needs

No human friends:

The god's help is enough.

HERAKLES My troubles . . . what have they got to do with all your
talk?

I can't believe the gods shrug off unlawful love affairs.

Or wrap chains around each others' hands—

I've never believed that—and I can't be persuaded.

No god—

if he is a god—

lords it over another.

A god is self-contained. Perfect. Needing nothing.

He's his own atmosphere. And his own world.

All this talk:

It's only poets mouthing lies . . .

1680

I've thought it over—my head feels muffled

In dark clouds—

but to kill myself—

To blink or flinch away from what fate deals: