

SOPHOKLES'



## WOMEN OF TRACHIS

*Translated by Rachel Kitzinger and Eamon Grennan*



## WOMEN OF TRACHIS

[At the back of the stage stands the house where Deianeira and Herakles have been living in Trachis. One of the two other entrances onto the stage is from the direction of the town; the other is in the direction of Mount Oita, a mountain sacred to Zeus near Trachis.]

Deianeira enters from the house, followed by Nurse who stands aside.  
Deianeira speaks to the audience.

(Asterisks at particular lines indicate a note in the Notes section.)

Deianeira

You've all heard the old saying:	I
<i>There's no knowing a man's life—</i>	
<i>has it been good? has it been bad?—</i>	
<i>till he's dead.</i>	*
But I'm not dead	
and I can say <i>now</i>	
my life is unhappy. It's a burden to me.	
Listen.	

When I was young  
 still living in my father's house— 10  
 Oineus' house, in Pleuron—  
 \*  
 I shuddered with fear more than any girl in Aitolia  
 at the thought of marriage. Why?  
 My suitor was a *river*, the river Acheloos! \*  
 A shape-shifting monster!  
 He came to ask for me from my father:  
 one minute he was a sleek-shouldered bull;  
 the next—all twists and turns—a shimmering snake;  
 then a man-body with the face of an ox,  
 clear water gushing from his bushy beard. 20  
 At the thought of marrying him  
 I felt nothing but misery, and I prayed I'd die  
 before I'd have to lie in his bed.  
 For a long time he wooed me like that.  
 Then, at last, I was released:  
 the renowned son of Zeus and Alkmene \*  
 came to our house, and I welcomed him,  
 and he wrestled my river-suitor and set me free.  
 I can't describe the battle between them.  
 Someone who watched without flinching 30  
 could do that . . .  
 I saw nothing, knew nothing.  
 I just sat in a trance—  
 terrified my beauty would be my grief.  
 But Zeus ordains the end of every battle,  
 and this one he brought to a happy end . . .  
 if in truth it *was* happy.  
 For ever since he chose me as his bride  
 and made me partner in his bed,  
 I've felt fear, fear for Herakles. 40  
 One night brings trouble, the next drives it out,  
 only to bring more trouble in its place.

Yes, we did have children.  
 But—like a farmer who only visits some  
 distant field of his,  
 once at seeding time, once at harvest—  
 he'd see them only once in a while.  
 For the life he lived  
 had him always coming and going, leaving, returning—  
 always in service to one man or another. 50  
 And now, just when he's done with all *those* labors,  
 now I feel more worry, more dread than ever.  
 You see . . .  
 after he'd killed Iphitos, \*  
 we all had to move here to Trachis  
 and make our home in a stranger's house.  
**[turns to Nurse]**  
 But then he left again! Who knows for where?  
 All I know is he left—and left me  
 to suffer bitter pangs for him.  
 I'm almost certain he's in trouble. 60  
 Ten . . . no . . . *fifteen* months he's been gone.  
 Without a word!  
 What else could it be but some catastrophe?  
**[She shows the Nurse a letter in the form of a scroll.]** \*  
 When he left, he left this message.  
 I'm sure that's what it's about.  
 He gave it, and I took it.  
 But again and again I pray to the gods  
 taking it doesn't mean more pain.

Nurse \*

Mistress Deianeira, I've seen you so often  
 weep heart-scalding tears 70  
 each time Herakles headed off

on yet another labor.  
 But this time—if a slave's thoughts  
 may counsel one who's free—  
 I have to say something.  
 How is it, with so many sons,  
 you don't send one of them to look for your husband?  
 Especially Hyllos:  
 reason says he's best suited for the task,  
 if he's got any feeling at all for his father's name, 80  
 his glowing reputation.

**[Enter Hyllos from the direction of the town, running towards the palace.]**

But look, here he is, and just in time!  
 Dashing back like that to the house!  
 If you think I'm right,  
 do make use of him, and of my words too.

**[Deianeira calls to Hyllos. She manages to divert his attention from whatever he was hurrying to do.]**

**Deianeira**

Hyllos! Son!

**[He comes to her.]**

I've just learned that even someone lowborn  
 can be lucky and speak good sense.  
 Slave as she is, this woman here \*  
 has said what a free person might. 90

**Hyllos**

Can you tell me what she said, Mother?

**Deianeira**

She says that with your father gone so long  
—and given his reputation—  
you shame us [**he stares, perplexed**]  
by not trying to find out where he is.

**Hyllos**

But I know already—  
if I can trust the stories I hear.

**Deianeira**

You've heard where he is?

**Hyllos**

They say he's been a slave all this year.  
Owned by a Lydian woman, ploughing her fields. 100\*

**Deianeira**

Well, if he could put up with *that*,  
we can believe anything.

**Hyllos**

But now he's freed from that at least.  
Or so I'm told.

**Deianeira**

So where do they say he's living now?  
Or is he lying dead somewhere?

**Hyllos**

In Euboia they say,  
attacking Eurytos' city—or about to.

**Deianeira**

The city of Eurytos!  
Did you know he left prophecies with me  
about that very place? Ones we can trust. 110

**Hyllos**

What prophecies, Mother?  
This is new to me.

**Deianeira**

That either he'll die there or—  
once he's survived this last contest—  
the rest of his life will be happy.  
So now, with his future so much in the balance,  
go and help him, child, won't you?  
Either he's saved his own life—so we're safe too—  
or else we all go down together. 120

**Hyllos**

I'll go, Mother. Of course I will.  
I'd have been with him long ago



if I'd known of these prophesies.  
But the lucky shape of Father's life  
never let us fear for his safety,  
nor worry too much for him.  
Knowing what I know now, though,  
I'll do all I can to find out what's happened to him.

### Deianeira

Go then, my son.  
Even if you learn good news late, 130  
it can still be to your advantage.

**[Hyllos exits in the direction of the town; the Nurse returns into the house. Deianeira watches and listens as the chorus of young women enters from the direction of the town, dancing and singing.]**

### CHORUS

✱

O you whom shimmering Night  
brings forth from her plundered womb  
and day's end lays to blazing rest—  
you, Sun, you I call to:  
where is Alkmene's son?  
Where is he?  
Enlighten me now  
you who blaze in flares of light.  
Eastwards is it by the Black Sea straits, 140  
or there, there  
where two land-masses meet in the west.  
Is it there he rests  
from his heavy labors?  
Say O Sun—  
yours the strongest sight of all.



come and go  
 go and come 180  
 turn and turn about  
 like the roundabout path of the Great Bear. \*

For not shimmering night,  
 not wealth, not mortal calamity  
 stays still for anyone:  
 but all of a sudden  
 grief or joy  
 comes to one, runs from another—  
 the one rejoices  
 the other mourns his loss. 190  
 So you too, royal Lady,  
 must cling to hope:  
 Who has ever seen Zeus  
 be careless  
 of his own children?

### Deianeira

You've come—I imagine—because you've learned of my trouble.  
 May you never know through your own suffering  
 the agony destroying me.  
 Now you know nothing of it:  
 All young things are fostered in a place of their own 200  
 where no wind, no rain, no burning sun  
 disturbs them; there they grow  
 free of trouble, full of delight.  
 The life of a young girl is just like that  
 until that moment when, instead of *girl*,  
 she's called *woman*  
 and bears a woman's share of worry in the night:  
 fear for her husband or for her children.

Only then—  
 a woman with her own trials— 210  
 can she know the troubles that weigh me down.  
 Yes, I've shed tears over many things  
 but let me speak now of one thing  
 that's never happened before.  
**[She looks at the scroll she holds in her hand.]**  
 When Herakles was last leaving home  
 he left behind this scroll with a cryptic message—  
 something he'd never dared talk about  
 when he left on his other labors.  
 Those times he'd leave like a man  
 setting off on a mission 220  
 not as one about to die.  
 But this time—  
 as if he were soon to leave this world—  
 he told me what property I should take  
 as my marriage portion and how his ancestral lands  
 should be divided among his sons.  
 And he said that when he'd been gone  
 a year and three months  
 then he'd either die or  
 should he survive beyond that time 230  
 he'd live out his whole life free from pain.  
 This, he insisted, was the end  
 the gods had set for all his labors.  
 And this, he said,  
 was what Dodona's ancient oak had uttered  
 through its two prophetic Doves. \*  
 And now—that time is here.  
 This is what's coming. Nothing can stop it.  
 It must end as it was foretold.  
 And so, friends, 240  
 I wake in terror from balm-sweet sleep,

full of dread that I must go on now,  
bereft of the best of men.

**Chorus Leader**

Quiet now! There's a man approaching.  
That garland he wears, it's a sign of good news.

**[An old country man enters, the Messenger, from the direction of the town.]**

**Messenger**

Lady Deianeira, let me be first  
with the news that will lighten your dread.  
Know he lives! The son of Alkmene lives!  
He has prevailed, and takes  
from the spoils of battle  
offerings for the gods of the land. 250

**Deianeira**

What *story* is this, old man?

**Messenger**

Your longed-for husband—a man much envied—  
will soon be here,  
here at your house, and seen  
as the conquering hero he truly is.

**Deianeira**

Who told you this? Citizen or stranger?

## Messenger

The herald Lichas  
tells this story to a crowd of men  
in the meadow over there  
where oxen graze in summer.  
Soon as I heard him, I came straight here,  
so I might be first with the news,  
to win your gratitude . . . and be rewarded.

## Deianeira

And Lichas, why—if his luck is good—  
why is he not here himself?

## Messenger

He's not at ease there, my Lady,  
surrounded by all the men of Malis,  
who hold him there with their questions.  
Each one has his own question, wants his own answer  
and won't let go till he's satisfied.  
So—against his will and bending to theirs—  
Lichas remains there with them.  
But he'll be here soon, and you'll see him.

## Deianeira

Oh Zeus, you who hold dominion  
in the unploughed meadow of Mount Oita,  
you have given me—though after so long—  
given me joy. Women, raise your voices—  
you within the house and you outside—  
for a vision rises from this report  
bright beyond hope, and we rejoice.

## CHORUS

\*

Let the house all shout  
cries of joy: ululations  
sung at the hearth  
of this house that soon  
will celebrate a marriage!

And let the men too  
raise together  
their chant to Apollo  
the great Protector,  
his quiver bright-shining. 290

All together girls  
girls all together,  
lift a loud paian, your paian \*  
to Artemis his sister  
torch-bearer  
born on Ortygia \*  
huntress of deer  
and to the Nymphs  
always beside her. 300

Now I rise up:  
nor will I be deaf  
to the *aulos*, the *aulos* \*  
master of my heart!

*Euoi* \*  
how it shakes me—  
*Euoi euoi!*—  
the ivy! the ivy

in its bacchic whirl!  
*Io io*—Paian the Healer!

310

Dear woman now see  
a sight so clear  
shining right here  
before your eyes.

**[Lichas enters from the direction of the town; a group of bedraggled-looking women follow behind him.]**

**Deianeira**

Yes, I see it, dear women.  
I'm all eyes; I haven't missed it.  
And though he's been a long time coming,  
I bid this herald welcome.

**[Deianeira turns to Lichas.]**

Welcome indeed,  
if you bring welcome news.

320

**Lichas**

Yes, Lady, our coming is good indeed,  
as your welcome, too, is fitting  
for all that's been accomplished.  
It's only right a man's success  
should reap a harvest of good words.

**Deianeira**

Dearest of men, tell me first my first desire:  
Will I welcome Herakles home alive?



**Lichas**

So, at least, I left him: strong, thriving, full of life;  
not sick nor slowed by any wound.

**Deianeira**

Where? Here—in this land—  
or in a stranger's country? 330

**Lichas**

He's on a promontory in Euboea,  
marking sites for altars  
and choosing offerings to Zeus of Kenaia: \*  
the spoils of war due to the god.

**Deianeira**

So vows he made will be fulfilled?  
Or is it because of some prophecy?

**Lichas**

Because of certain vows he made, yes—  
when by sheer force of his spear  
he was sacking the land of these women. 340

**[He gestures to the group of women behind him. Deianeira walks over and looks at each of them, then turns to Lichas.]**

**Deianeira**

These women . . . in god's name . . . who *are* they?  
Whose are they?

They seem—unless their misfortunes deceive me—  
to deserve our pity.

**Lichas**

*He* took them, my Lady,  
when he plundered the city of Eurytos.  
He chose them . . . for . . . himself . . .  
And . . . as a gift for the gods.

**Deianeira**

Was it to attack *this* city he was gone  
for days beyond counting?

350

**Lichas**

No. Most of the time—as he says himself—  
he was detained in Lydia. Not—so he says—  
as a free man but sold into service.  
You mustn't resent this account, Lady,  
for it seems Zeus was responsible.  
Herakles was sold to Omphale, a foreign queen,  
and served her—he says so—for a full year.  
And this bitter insult so soured him  
he took an oath and swore to himself  
that—no matter what—he'd enslave  
the man who had caused this suffering,  
and enslave too his wife and child.  
And it was not a vain vow:  
for when he was free again  
and rid of the stain of slavery,  
he raised a fighting force of mercenaries  
and laid siege to the city of Eurytos.

360

Because he claimed that of all mortal men  
 only *he* was responsible for what he'd suffered.  
 How so? 370  
 Well, when Herakles had come as a guest  
 to his hearth—come as an old friend and ally—  
 Eurytos slandered him in talk,  
 abused him with malicious intent,  
 declared that in any contest of archery—  
 even though Herakles' quiver  
 was brimful of arrows that never miss—  
 he'd be left in the dust by Eurytos' own sons.  
 And on top of that he called him "slavish boor!"  
 Then, at a feast, when Herakles had drunk too much, 380  
 Eurytos threw him out of his house.  
 Of course Herakles was enraged, and so,  
 when Iphitos, Eurytos' son, came some time later  
 to the hills of Tiryns  
 in search of his straying horses,  
 Herakles took him by surprise there:  
 when Iphitos was looking  
 one way with his eyes, another with his mind,  
 Herakles hurled him down from  
 the summit of a towering cliff. 390  
*That* enraged Lord Zeus—Olympian Zeus,  
 Father of all—so he sent Herakles  
 to be sold into slavery. The god, you see,  
 would not tolerate this deed.  
 For, alone of his victims, Herakles  
 killed Iphitos with trickery.  
 Had he defended himself openly,  
 Zeus would have looked on with sympathy,  
 since Herakles would then have acted justly.  
 For not even the gods take kindly 400  
 to violent abuse, which is why

those brazen-tongued men of Oichalia  
are all now in Hades and their city enslaved.

And so these women you see before you, my Lady,  
have exchanged a life of prosperity  
for a life no man could envy  
and come to you like this.  
This is what your husband commanded.  
And I, in all loyalty, fulfill his command.

He himself—when he's made offerings  
to his father Zeus for the sacking of that city—  
he will come, be sure of it. And *this*—  
among all the good things I have spoken—  
*this* must be sweetest to your ears. 410

### **Chorus Leader**

Now, Queen: because of what you see  
and all you've learned from this herald,  
here is joy, joy bright-shining.

### **Deianeira**

Of course his words gladden my heart.  
Of course I rejoice at my husband's success.  
Of course my feelings must match his deed. 420  
But if one thinks at all, it's only natural  
to worry for a man who enjoys success, worry  
one time or another he may trip and fall:  
just look at these poor women.  
The sight of them fills me with pity.  
Strangers in a strange land,

homeless wanderers without fathers.  
 Once, no doubt, the daughters of free men.  
 Now they must live a life of slavery.  
 Oh Zeus, lord of the turning tides of battle, 430  
 may I never see you turn on *my* children like this,  
 and, if ever you *do*, may I never live to see it.  
 That's the fear I feel when I see these women.  
**[She looks at Iole and walks over to her.]**  
 And *you*, poor girl, who are you?  
 Are you unmarried? Are you a mother?  
 By your appearance, it seems all this  
 is new to you; it seems you're nobly born.  
 Lichas, whose daughter is she?  
 Who is her mother? Who the father?  
 Tell me—who gave her life? 440  
 For, of all these women, her I pity most—  
 She alone seems to understand her own feelings.

**Lichas [dismissively]**

What do *I* know? Why ask *me*?  
 It's possible her family is . . .  
 not among the lowest there.

**Deianeira**

Is it possible she's from the ruling family?  
 Does Eurytos have a child?

**Lichas [interrupting]**

I don't know.  
 Truth is, I didn't ask many questions.

**Deianeira**

Not even her name?  
Wouldn't one of these women have told you?

450

**Lichas**

That least of all!  
I did what I had to do in silence.

**Deianeira [turns to Iole]**

Then, poor girl, tell me yourself.  
It pains me not to know who you are.

**Lichas**

She won't loosen her tongue—  
not if she stays as she's been.  
Since we started out, she's revealed nothing.  
Nothing big, nothing small. Nothing.  
Since she left behind her wind-swept homeland,  
she's been weeping: crushed, poor thing, under her misfortune.  
I know it's a bad state she's fallen into,  
but it asks for tolerance and understanding.

460

**Deianeira**

Leave her be, then.  
Let her enter the house as she wishes.  
Let me not add to her misfortunes.  
She's borne enough already.  
Now let us all go in—  
[to Lichas] You may go wherever you need to.  
I will take care of what's needed in the house.

470

[Lichas and the captured women move towards the house. The Messenger, who has been listening to Lichas with bemusement, signals to Deianeira, moving between her and the departing women.]

**Messenger**

Lady, first linger a little here alone.  
Let the others go in as you've directed.  
You may learn then  
who it is you take into your house.  
I know what you need to know,  
what you haven't heard yet.  
I know . . . everything!

**Deianeira**

What's this about? Why stop me like this?

**Messenger**

Stay and listen to me.  
What I told you before wasn't useless, was it? 480  
What I say now won't be either, or so I believe.

**Deianeira**

Should we call those women back again?  
Or do you want to speak to me  
and these women here [gesturing to the chorus]?

**Messenger**

I'll speak to you and these women.  
Let the others stay where they are.

**Deianeira**

Well, they're gone now. Tell your story.

**Messenger**

In what he said to you just now, this man  
didn't speak straight, nor tell the whole truth.  
Either he's wrong now, 490  
or he was, earlier, no honest reporter of what he knew.

**Deianeira**

What do you mean?  
I don't understand you.  
Tell me what you're thinking. Be clear.

**Messenger**

I myself heard this man, Lichas,  
say before many witnesses  
that Herakles seized Eurytos and high-towered Oichalia  
just to have that young girl  
**[pointing to the door that Iole has now entered].**  
Then, Lichas said, Eros—Eros alone of the gods—  
bewitched him into launching that attack. 500  
It wasn't what happened in Lydia,  
nor his slavish servitude to Omphale,  
nor hurling Iphitos to his death.  
Just now, though, for you here  
this man changed his whole story:  
he simply wiped Eros out of it.

Fact is, when Herakles couldn't persuade Eurytos  
to give him his daughter for his secret pleasure,



he gives some petty excuse as his motive,  
then attacks her homeland and sacks her city. 510  
And now, as you see, he's on his way home  
and has sent her to this house deliberately—  
*not* as a slave. Oh no, Lady, don't imagine that!  
Is that likely—is it—if he's burning with desire?

I thought it only right, Mistress, to reveal  
all I happened to learn from that herald.  
And a great many men of Trachis  
—in the middle of the agora there—  
**[gestures to the entrance in the direction of the town]**  
heard what I heard. They can provide proof.  
What I say may not warm your heart . . . 520  
I'm sorry for that. But  
I've spoken nothing but the truth.

**Deianeira [to herself]**

*Oiy . . . misery!* What's happening to me?  
What suffering have I brought under my roof,  
not knowing what I was doing?  
*Oh my grief!* Unhappiest of women!  
**[to the Messenger]**  
Is she nameless then, as he swore,  
that man who brought her here into this house?  
This girl whose beauty is a burning flame,  
whose very presence shines like the sun? 530

**Messenger**

She was the daughter of Eurytos.  
Iole was her name.  
Lichas, of course, couldn't tell you that  
since, as he said, he "asked no questions."

**Chorus Leader**

May evildoers be destroyed—  
especially those who lie  
whose job it is to speak the truth.

**Deianeira**

Women, what can I do? I cannot speak.  
This story roaring in my ears,  
it strikes me dumb.

540

**Chorus Leader**

Go to Lichas.  
Perhaps if you questioned him with force—  
interrogated him—he'd give a clear account.

**Deianeira**

You're right. Yes. I'll go.

**Messenger**

Should I wait here? What should I do?

**Deianeira**

No, stay!  
[Deianeira points to Lichas, as he enters from the house.]  
Look, he's quitting the house without my summoning him.

**Lichas**

I'm going, Lady. What should I tell Herakles?  
Instruct me. I'm leaving right now.

**Deianeira**

Oh how you rush off! 550  
And you were so slow in coming.  
Now you're going before . . .  
before we can continue our talk.

**Lichas**

True, but if you want to ask me something,  
here I am, at your service.

**Deianeira**

But are you to be trusted?  
Will you tell me the truth?

**Lichas**

As great Zeus is my witness!  
At least about such things as I know.

**Deianeira**

Well then— 560  
who is that woman you brought here?

**Lichas**

A woman of Euboia.  
Of what family I can't say.

[The Messenger interrupts.]

**Messenger**

*You!* Look at me!  
Who do you think you're talking to?

**Lichas**

And what do *you* mean by asking such a question?

**Messenger**

Answer, if you've any wit at all!

**Lichas**

To Queen Deianeira, if my eyes don't deceive me.  
Daughter of Oineus, wife to Herakles, and my mistress.

**Messenger**

Just what I wanted to hear.  
So this woman *is* your mistress?

570

**Lichas**

She is, and rightly so.

**Messenger**

Well then, if that's the case, what penalty  
should you pay for not doing right by her?

**Lichas**

How not right? What are you hinting at?

**Messenger**

No hints, no hidden meanings.  
You're the master of *that*.

**Lichas**

I'm going. I was a fool to listen so long.

**Messenger**

No. Not before you've answered one little question.

**Lichas**

Ask away. It's clear you're not going to be quiet. 580

**Messenger**

That captive woman you led into the house . . .  
you know the one I mean?

**Lichas**

I do. Your point?

**Messenger**

Didn't you say before that she was Iole,  
Eurytos' daughter? The one you brought here  
but now look at as if you didn't know her?

**Lichas**

To whom did I say such a thing?  
Who will swear it?  
Where will he come from?

**Messenger**

From the town. Many will swear it. A great crowd  
heard you say it in the agora of Trachis. 590

**Lichas**

Yes . . . well . . . they *claimed* to hear.  
But there's a difference  
between reporting an *impression*  
and giving an accurate account.

**Messenger**

What *impression*? Didn't you speak under oath?  
Didn't you say  
you were bringing that young woman here,  
as wife to Herakles?

**Lichas**

*His wife*? Dear Mistress, by all the gods—  
who is this fellow? 600

## Messenger

One who was there, and heard you say  
it was *desire*—desire for Iole—  
caused that city's destruction.  
It wasn't the Lydian queen did that, but eros—  
the passion of Herakles—obvious to all.

## Lichas

Mistress, bid this fellow stand aside.  
Argue with a lunatic!  
Who in his right mind would do that?

## Deianeira

I beg you in the name of Zeus 610  
who flings the lightning bolt  
across the high valleys of Mount Oita:  
don't deceive me by hiding this story.  
It's not a spiteful, craven woman  
you tell your tale to, no, nor to one  
ignorant of the human condition:  
I know it's not in our nature  
for the same things always to keep us happy,  
nor for the same people to be happy always.  
So whoever—like a boxer with raised fists— 620  
stands up against Eros is a fool.  
Eros bends even the gods to his will,  
and he does me too.  
So why not another woman like me?  
I am mad indeed if I fault my husband  
when he's in the grip of this sickness.  
Or fault this woman who, along with him,

has done nothing shameful, no wrong  
against me. No, it's not like that.  
But if Herakles taught you to lie, 630  
you've not been well instructed.  
And if you taught yourself this lesson,  
you will simply look bad when you want to look good.

Come now, tell me the whole truth.  
If a free man is called a liar,  
he'll never outlive the shame of it.  
And if you think you won't be found out,  
you're wrong:  
many men heard you tell your story  
and they'll tell me everything. 640  
But if it's fear you're feeling,  
you've no reason for that.  
It's *not* knowing that would hurt me.  
What's so terrible about knowing?  
Hasn't Herakles—just one man—slept with many other women?  
And not one of them has ever heard—  
at least not from me—  
a bad word. Not one word of reproach.  
Nor would this woman,  
even if he should melt away 650  
with love for her. Because the truth is  
I felt great pity for her when I first saw her.  
Her beauty has wrecked her life  
and—ill-fated as she is—  
she has, against her will,  
destroyed and enslaved her own homeland.  
But let all this go, blow away on the wind.  
What I'm telling you is  
you may do hurt to someone else,  
but to me you must never lie. 660



### Chorus Leader

She speaks good sense. Listen to her.  
If you do, you'll have no reason  
to find fault with her later.  
And from me you'll earn thanks.

### Lichas

Dear Mistress,  
now I will tell you the whole truth,  
since now I know you're a woman of sense—  
a mortal woman who is of this world.  
I'll hide nothing. It's as he says.

Not long back a ferocious passion for this girl  
pierced Herakles through and through. 670  
Because of her  
with his spear he overthrew then sacked  
her father's city, Oichalia.  
But I must speak, too, on his behalf:  
he never told me to conceal all this,  
nor ever denied it. On my own, Mistress,  
I spoke those words; I on my own made that mistake—  
if indeed you see it as a mistake:  
I did it to shield your heart from hurt. 680

And now—  
since at last you know the whole story—  
now do what's good for you  
and at the same time good for him.  
Good for both of you.  
Put up with this girl. Stay true  
to those words you spoke about her.

Keep in mind that in all else  
 the strength of Herakles prevails,  
 but in *this*—in his passion for this girl—  
 he was utterly undone. 690

### Deianeira

So, we are of one mind in this.  
 I'll do as you say. I will not sicken myself  
 in a losing battle against the gods.  
 Come, let's go in, so you can take with you  
 a message for Herakles. Gifts too,  
 to match those you arrived with.  
 You came leading a rich procession  
 and shouldn't leave here empty-handed.

[Messenger exits to the town; Lichas and Deianeira go into the house.]

### CHORUS

A mighty force 700  
 ever-victorious  
 is Kypris Aphrodite. \*  
 Her dealings with the gods  
 I pass over  
 and won't repeat  
 how she tricked  
 the son of Kronos  
 night-shrouded Hades  
 earth-shaker Poseidon.  
 But who were they 710  
 who came seeking  
 this girl as a bride?

Who were they  
contended as rivals  
struck blow after blow  
dust choking the air?

On one side the river  
big-horned bull-powerful  
all bulging muscle:  
Acheloos of Oiniadai.

720\*

On the other side  
from Bacchic Thebes  
stood the son of Zeus  
high-brandishing  
his tightened bow  
his club his spear.

\*

To the center they came  
clashing together  
yearning for her bed.

And there too alone  
at the heart of the fray

730

Kypris Aphrodite  
who blesses the marriage bed  
and in her hand  
the staff of judgment.

Then there sounded  
the loud clamor of battle—  
blows arrows bull's horns  
clanging together.  
Strangleholds with death-dealing  
smashing of foreheads:  
loud groans  
from both combatants.

740

But apart on a hillside  
bright in the distance  
the girl in her beauty  
sat and waited  
for the one who would mate her.

Like a mother  
I show you her face:  
the bride-to-be  
the one they fought for.  
She sits alone (*oh pity her!*)  
awaiting the outcome.  
And like a young heifer  
suddenly astray  
she's far from her mother  
alone, all alone.

\*

750

**[Deianeira enters, carrying a wooden casket.]**

**Deianeira**

While Lichas is in the house  
bidding farewell to the captive girls,  
I've come out, unseen, to tell you  
what I've contrived with my own hands.  
And also what I suffer—for I need your comfort.

760

I've taken into my house a girl—  
no, no longer, I think, an innocent girl,  
but a woman with experience of men.  
Like a merchant seaman taking on cargo  
I've taken in this freight that abuses my heart.  
And now we two women under the same blanket  
wait for one embrace.  
Day after day I've kept his house for him

770

and he repays me with this? Herakles?  
The man they say is trustworthy and good?  
But I can't be angry with him,  
stricken as he is with this disease.  
But then . . . live in the same house with her?  
How could I? What woman could?  
Share the same bed, the same man?

I see her youth,  
how alive it is, while mine is fading. 780  
A man's eye loves to seize  
the flower in bloom  
but turns away from the dying blossom.  
So here's what I fear: that they'll call  
Herakles my husband but this girl's lover.

But I've said it before: it isn't good  
for a sensible woman to nurse her anger.  
So let me tell you the way I've found  
to free myself from pain.

Long ago 790  
I received from Nessos, an ancient Centaur,  
a gift hidden now in a vessel of bronze. \*  
I was still a young girl when I got it  
from the shaggy-breasted beast as he lay dying.  
With my own hands  
I drew it from his mortal wound.

He used to carry men for a fee  
across the deep waters of the Evenos. \*  
He didn't row or sail them over  
but carried them in his arms. 800  
Me, too, he bore on his shoulders,  
when I followed Herakles the first time—

sent by my father as his wife.  
But, in the middle of the river,  
Nessos touches me lewdly with his hands.  
I cry out.  
At once the son of Zeus swings round  
and with *his* hands he sends an arrow  
whizzing through the Centaur's shaggy breast  
into his lungs.  
As he lay dying, the beast said to me:  
"Child of old Oineus,  
since you are the last I carried across,  
you will benefit this much  
from my ferrying—if you obey me:  
take with your hands  
the clotted blood from around my wound  
—where my blood is dyed black  
by the arrow's poison  
once drawn from the Hydra of Lerna.  
And this will be a charm over Herakles' heart:  
no woman instead of you,  
when he lays eyes on her,  
will he ever love more."

810

820\*

I thought just now of this gift  
(well-hidden since Nessos died)  
and I've used it to dye this tunic.  
I rubbed it in exactly as he told me  
before he died. And now it's ready.

May I never learn—nor even consider—  
wrong, reckless acts: I hate women who do.  
But if somehow with this potion,  
these spells over Herakles,

830

I might prevail over this girl,  
then I've made it ready—  
but if it seems I act too rashly  
I'll stop right now. [**She puts down the casket.**]

**Chorus Leader**

Well, if there is reason  
to be confident about such actions,  
it seems to us your plan's not a bad one. 840

**Deianeira**

I'm confident enough  
to *think* my plan will work,  
but I haven't yet *tested* it.

**Chorus Leader**

Well, if you act you must know. \*

Even if you've reason to think it will work,  
you wouldn't be secure  
without putting it to the test.

**Deianeira**

We'll know soon enough. [**Deianeira picks up the casket.**]  
I see Lichas at the door. He'll be away in no time.  
Only, please, shelter me with your silence. 850  
Even if one does something  
that puts honor at risk,  
one won't sink in the world's esteem  
if it's done in darkness.

[Lichas enters from the house.]

Lichas

What are your orders, child of Oineus?  
Tell me. I'm already late.

Deianeira

Yes, I've been getting things ready for you, Lichas,  
while you were inside speaking to the strangers.  
So now you may take this tunic  
woven by my own hands: take it with you 860  
to Herakles, a gift to him from me. **[Deianeira gives him the casket.]**  
And when you give it to him, make clear  
no man must put it on or have it touch his skin  
before *he* does. The light of the sun  
must not see it, nor any fire blazing  
on any hearth or in any sacred precinct—  
not till my husband stands revealed  
and displays it to the gods on that day  
he slaughters bulls for them in the open air.  
For I made this vow: 870  
if ever I should see him  
back safe in this house,  
or hear for certain of his return,  
I would dress him in this tunic  
and show him shining to the gods:  
a new celebrant in new raiment.  
And take with you, as a sign of this vow,  
something my husband will know right away:  
the wax impression of my signet ring.  
**[She seals the casket with wax and her signet ring.]**  
So now be on your way, 880



and remember a messenger's first rule:  
*never meddle*. Make sure  
my gratitude to you is added to his,  
so one favor becomes two.

**Lichas**

I will. If I'm well practiced  
in the art of the messenger—the craft of Hermes—  
I won't fail you; I'll carry this casket  
and deliver it just as it is.  
And I'll add to it, as guarantee,  
the words you've spoken.

\*

890

**Deianeira**

Please go now. You understand  
how things are in this house.  
You know the state of it.

**Lichas**

Yes, I know, and will say all is well.

**Deianeira**

And you know too—you saw it yourself—  
how I received the foreign girl with kindness.

**Lichas**

Yes. I was amazed and pleased—  
a heart-warming sight.

**Deianeira**

So then, what else could you say?

**[to herself as he leaves]**

*Though I'm afraid you may speak too soon of my longing for him, 900  
before you know if he desires me too.*

**[Lichas leaves in the direction of the town. Deianeira exits into the house.]**

**CHORUS**

O you who live  
by those ship-harboring inlets  
and the warm springs running  
from the rocky crags of Mount Oita  
and by the mountain-surrounded Bay of Malis  
and by the shore  
sacred to Artemis of the golden shaft  
the Gates where assemblies of Greeks grew famous: \*

Soon the lovely sound of the *aulos* 910\*  
will rise to you once more—not harsh not doleful  
but like the Muse's heavenly lyre:  
for the son of Zeus and Alkmene hurries home  
carrying trophies his courage has won!

Away for a year  
abroad on the sea  
while we waited here  
enduring his absence  
knowing nothing  
while his unhappy wife 920

forever shedding tears  
wore away her heart.  
But now Ares aroused  
brought release  
from days of labor.

May he come!  
May he come!  
May his many-oared ship  
bear him on and not stop  
till he reaches this town. 930  
May he leave the hearth  
on the island over there—  
where they say  
he offers sacrifice.  
May he come lightly  
come full of desire  
seduced  
by that beast's beguilement  
seeped into his shirt:  
bewitching persuasion. 940

**[Enter Deianeira from the house in agitation.]**

**Deianeira**

Oh women, what have I just done?  
I fear it's gone too far!

**Chorus Leader**

What is it, Deianeira, child of Oineus?

**Deianeira**

I'm not yet certain, but I despair  
when I think the good I hoped to do  
will soon be seen as a great wrong.

**Chorus Leader**

Is it your gift to Herakles?

**Deianeira**

Yes. I'd never advise anyone now  
to rush eagerly—blindly—into any action.

**Chorus Leader**

Tell us, if you can, why you're afraid. 950

**Deianeira**

Because something's happened  
that will shock and astonish you.  
The thing I used just now to anoint the tunic—  
a scrap of woolly fleece from a white sheep—  
it's vanished!  
Not eaten up by anything in the house!  
It devoured itself!  
It wasted away into little shreds  
spilling over the edge of the rock where I left it.  
Here's the whole story, exactly what happened. 960

What that beast, the Centaur, long ago  
—in agony from the bitter barb in his side—

told me to do, I did.

I followed every instruction, left nothing out,  
as if his words were inscribed on bronze,  
impossible to erase.

Here's what he told me and here's what I did:

I kept this potion deep within the house.

It was not to be exposed to fire,  
nor warmed by the sun, nor touched  
till I was ready to rub it on something. 970

I followed these instructions exactly.

But now, needing to act,

I rubbed it on the tunic with a tuft of wool  
plucked from one of our sheep.

In the house, in my room, in secret I did it.

Then—out of sight of the sun—I folded the gift  
and placed it in the casket I showed you.

But just now, when I went outside, I see something  
impossible to put into words or understand. 980

I happen to toss that tuft of wool  
into a beam of sunlight, and as it grows warm  
it starts to flow, it loses its shape.

Then it crumbles into the earth—

like something you'd see a saw spew out  
from a length of wood it was cutting.

It was just lying there, where it had fallen,  
when from the earth beneath it

clots of foam came frothing up—  
like the foam of the rich wine 990

fermented from the gray-blue grapes

of Dionysos' vine when poured onto the earth. \*

So now I'm in agony; I don't know what to think.

But I see I've done something awful.

For why in the world would the dying beast  
 have offered *me* a kindness?  
 Wasn't *I* the reason he was dying?  
 It's not possible. No. He bewitched me  
 because he wanted to destroy *him*—  
 the one who wounded him. 1000  
 I'm coming to understand this too late  
 when it's no longer of any use.  
 For, if I'm not deceived, I alone—  
 oh, misery—will destroy him.  
 I know this now. That same arrow  
 that struck Nessos  
 caused great harm even to the god Chiron. \*  
 Whatever monster it touches it destroys—  
 destroys every one of them.  
 How will it not destroy Herakles too, 1010  
 that poison seeping from the beast he wounded,  
 that black poison mingled with his blood?  
 This at least is what I think.  
 And so it is decided: the same blow  
 that fells him will strike me down too.  
 For if a woman who puts being good  
 above all else hears people speak ill of her,  
 she cannot bear to live.

### **Chorus Leader**

Of course you're terrified  
 to see such strange, such frightening things. 1020  
 But you mustn't be too hasty  
 to judge their outcome.

**Deianeira**

But the plan I made was no good.  
Now nothing can reassure me or give me hope.

**Chorus Leader**

But the anger of others is softened towards those  
who in all innocence have stumbled and fallen.  
And so it should be for you.

**Deianeira**

A woman who's helped create a disaster  
could never say that. You may say it,  
because you're not burdened by troubles of your own. 1030

**[Enter Hyllos from the direction of the town, agitated.]**

**Chorus Leader**

Better keep quiet now; say no more—  
unless you want your son to hear you.  
He's here.

**Hyllos**

Oh Mother . . .  
would I could choose one of three things:  
either that you were no longer alive;  
or, if you were,  
that someone else would call you "Mother."

Or that you could swap your heart and mind  
for a better mind, a better heart.

1040

**Deianeira**

What have I done, child, to make you hate me?

**Hyllos**

My father—your husband—you’ve killed him!

**Deianeira**

[cry of horror] What is it you’re telling me, child?  
What story is this?

**Hyllos**

A story that has to find its end.  
If something comes into the light of day,  
nothing can make it not be there.

**Deianeira**

What do you mean, child?  
Who told you this story:  
that I have done a deed I could never want?

1050

**Hyllos**

No one told me, I saw it with my own eyes.  
My father’s monstrous misfortune!



## Deianeira

Where did you come near him?  
Where was it you stood by my husband's side?

## Hyllos

If you must know, here's the whole story.  
Having sacked the famous city of Eurytos,  
Herakles marched on, hauling with him  
the spoils of victory: the enemy's weapons  
and the best of all they took from the city.  
There is a sea-washed headland in Euboa— 1060  
Cape Kenaion—where he marked off altars  
and a tree-shaded sacred space  
to his father Zeus. There I saw him first,  
and my longing turned to joy.

As he's about to perform his rich sacrifice,  
his herald Lichas arrives from home  
bearing your gift—the fatal tunic.  
Having put it on exactly as you instructed,  
he sets about slaughtering twelve bulls.  
Perfect they were, the prize beasts of the spoils. 1070  
He intended to sacrifice a hundred beasts in all,  
cattle and sheep all mixed together.

At first, poor man, he was  
in a good mood as he prayed,  
enjoying the tunic with its glittering ornaments.  
But as the flames  
from the pinesap and the sacrificial victims  
flared bloodred,  
sweat beads stood out on his skin—and the shirt

clings to his sides, fixed there 1080  
as if by a carpenter's hand—mantling every joint.  
A biting spasm then shook his bones  
and a deadly poison—as if from some  
vicious serpent—began to feast on him.  
Then he shouted at poor Lichas—a man  
in no way responsible for the bad *you'd* done:  
“What cunning plan is this, to bring me this tunic?”  
Then ill-fated Lichas—who knew nothing—  
replied it was your gift, yours alone,  
just as you'd sent it. When Herakles heard this 1090  
and another spasm  
shot through him, throttled his lungs, he grabs Lichas  
by the foot—just at the anklebone—  
and hurls him against a sea-washed rock.  
White scraps of brain splatter his hair,  
his skull splinters, blood sprays out.

Then from the crowd—from the awed silence  
that descended—a great wail rose,  
a cry of grief for the one wracked by pain,  
the other smashed to bits. 1100  
No one dared go near Herakles.  
His convulsions flung him shouting and shrieking,  
down to the ground, up into the air.  
The surrounding rocks echoed with his cries—  
the hilly headlands of Lokris,  
the rocky shore of Euboia—  
till the poor man grew exhausted  
from flinging himself on the earth  
and from his howling cries.  
Again and again he cried out 1110  
at the ruinous union with you—wretched woman!—

and the marriage alliance with Oineus  
that had ruined his life.

Then looking up from the murk of smoke,  
his eyes rolling back in his head, he saw me  
in the crowd, tears flowing fast from my eyes.  
Holding me in his gaze, he calls out to me:  
“Son, come! Don’t run from my catastrophe—  
not even if you must die with me.

Lift me up, take me away.

1120

Best, take me where no man will see me.  
But at least—if you have any pity in you—  
take me from this place! Now, right now!  
Do not let me die here!”

These were his commands.

So we put him in a boat, sailed him here.

No easy task—with the roaring he made  
each time a spasm convulsed him.

But any moment now you’ll see him—  
still alive or, in these last moments, dead.

1130

This, Mother, is what you’ve plotted  
against my father. This your guilty act.

May the Fury and avenging Justice make you pay—  
if it’s right for me to pray for that.

\*

And it is right:

you yourself have given me the right  
by killing the greatest man on earth—  
a man like no other you’ll ever see.

**[Deianeira starts to exit into the house without speaking; the Chorus  
Leader calls after her.]**

**Chorus Leader**

Why do you leave in silence?

Don't you know your silence accuses you,  
just as *he* does?

1140

**[She keeps going without any response and exits into the house.]**

**Hyllos**

Let her go!

May a fair wind take her out of my sight!

Why should I tend the dignity of the name "mother"  
if she does nothing a mother would?

Let her go! Good riddance! Farewell!

May the joy she's given my father  
be hers too!

**[Hyllos exits into the house to ready a bed for Herakles.]**

**CHORUS**

See, friends,  
How sudden it's upon us:  
the gods' prediction  
long ago foretold!

1150

It said  
when twelve ploughing seasons  
had come and gone  
in the same number of years  
the yoke of his labors  
would then be lifted  
from Zeus' own son.

And so—sure as a vessel 1160  
come to port in fair wind—  
it's come to pass.  
For how could a man  
who sees light no longer  
still bend though dead  
beneath the load  
of his labors?

For if the Centaur's deadly web of deceit  
clings vise-like to his sides  
while the stinging poison 1170  
death-spawned and born of a shimmering serpent  
seeps into his skin,  
how could this man live  
to see the light beyond today?  
The soot-haired Centaur's  
lying words cast killing darts  
piercing him all over—  
his flesh bubbles and bursts.  
How then can he live?

And none of this 1180  
she feared, this misery-ridden woman,  
when she saw the huge harm  
of a new marriage  
rushing headlong at her house  
and tried herself to remedy it.  
But through a fatal exchange  
the false mind of another  
played its part too.  
And, see, she laments,  
and sheds in despair 1190  
the dew of her tears.

And the coming doom reveals  
the awful ruin  
of that deceit.

A stream of tears  
pours out spills over:  
the sickness spreads.

**[cry of despair]**

No suffering so piteous  
was ever inflicted  
never by enemies  
on his famous body.

1200

**[cry of despair]**

You dark spear point  
in the van of battle!  
Swiftly you bore her  
with the thrust of your spear-tip  
the new-made bride  
from high Oichalia.  
And the silent overseer  
—*Kypris Aphrodite!*—  
is revealed:  
the doer of these deeds.

1210

**[A cry comes from within the house.]**

**Chorus Leader**

Am I wrong? or is that  
a piteous cry from the house?  
That wailing? Someone crying out.  
A cry of anguish.  
Something terrible is happening!

**[Enter Nurse from the house.]**

Do you see this old woman?  
Her downcast face! Her clouded brow!  
She's come to tell us something.

**Nurse**

Oh girls, that gift sent to Herakles  
kindled no small calamity.

1220

**Chorus Leader**

What's happened, old woman?  
What are you saying?

**Nurse**

Without taking a step  
Deianeira has made her last journey.

**Chorus Leader**

Surely not dead?

**Nurse**

Yes.

**Chorus Leader**

She's dead?

**Nurse**

Again yes!

**Chorus Leader**

Poor miserable woman, how did she die?

**Nurse**

A cruel deed!

**CHORUS [singing]**

\*

Tell us . . . oh tell us  
what death did she meet?

1230

**Nurse [speaking]**

Run through by a double-edged sword . . .

**CHORUS [singing]**

What impulse what illness  
cut her down  
with the dark point of that terrible weapon?  
How did she contrive this other death—  
death piled on death?  
How, being alone, did she find a way?  
One cut  
from the sorrow-steeped blade?  
Are you sure?  
Did you see this violent act?

1240

**Nurse [speaking]**

I saw it. I was right there.



**CHORUS [singing]**

Who did it?  
Tell us.

**Nurse [speaking]**

She, by herself, with her own hands.

**CHORUS [singing]**

What do you mean?

**Nurse [speaking]**

It's plain as day.

**CHORUS [singing]**

That new-made bride has given birth  
and brought forth a great Fury  
in this house!

1250

**Nurse**

True. And had you been beside her  
and seen what she did,  
you'd have pitied her all the more.

**Chorus Leader**

But could a woman's hand  
dare such a deed?

## Nurse

Yes, it could, strange as it seems.  
Hear me now:  
you can be witnesses to what I've seen.

When she went alone into the house  
and in the courtyard saw her son 1260  
readying a soft-matted bier to take to his father,  
she hid herself where no one could see her,  
in the women's quarters.

There she fell wailing before the altars  
crying out they'd all be deserted now.  
And she wept, poor woman, as one by one  
she touched those simple things  
she'd always used around the house.  
Now here, now there  
she wandered through the rooms 1270  
and if she saw anyone—any maid or servant  
dear to her—she'd burst into tears at the sight of them.  
In despair she cried out for her own fate  
and for the household hearths  
left empty now forever.

When she'd done with her lament,  
I see her rush into Herakles' bed-chamber.  
Still hidden in the shadows,  
I see her throw covers on her husband's bed  
and spread them out. Then she throws herself 1280  
upon them, in the middle of the bed,  
and weeping hot tears, cries out:  
"Oh bed, oh my marriage: Farewell!  
Farewell now forever. Never  
will you welcome me, his bedfellow, again."

That was all she said. Then with urgent hand  
she loosens her robe, undoing the gold pin  
that fastens it above her breast,  
and bares her left side and left arm.

I ran then, fast as I could, 1290  
to tell her son what she intended.

But in the time I raced there and back,  
she stabbed herself with the two-edged sword \*  
through her side, her liver, her stomach.

Her son, when he saw her, cried out in anguish.

He knew, poor thing,  
that in his anger he'd driven her to this.

He had learned, you see—too late—  
from people in the house  
that she'd done what she did 1300  
without meaning to,  
led on by that beast, the Centaur.

Then the poor boy could not stop  
weeping and lamenting over her,  
couldn't stop kissing her.  
Stretched out by her side, he lay beside her  
and groaned again and again  
that he'd hurled accusations  
—empty, awful accusations—at her.

And he wept aloud 1310  
that now he'd lose both of them  
and have to live alone—with no father, no mother.

That's how it is now within the house.  
And that man who thinks he can reckon on life  
for two days—let alone more—is a fool.  
For there is no tomorrow  
till you've survived today.

[Nurse exits into the house.]

CHORUS

What first to wail—what woe?  
And what, after that, what woe?  
Hard in my misery to know. 1320

The things within now we all see  
and what's to come we wait to see—  
now and future all one.

Would a favoring breeze would blow,  
blow by the house  
and take me away—  
so I won't die of fear  
the moment I see  
Zeus' great hero-son bound for the house  
bound in pain he can't escape. 1330  
Oh, unspeakable sight!

[A procession of men accompanied by a doctor enters from the direction of the town, carrying Herakles on a bier.]

Near he was near  
when I keened for him now  
like a nightingale  
with mournful clear voice.  
And now here it is—  
this procession of strangers.  
How do they bear him?  
As if a loved one.

Each silent heavy step 1340  
 laden with care.  
*Aiiiii*, the silence!  
 He makes no sound.  
 What should we think?  
 Dead?  
 Or has sleep overcome him?

**[Hyllos enters from the house and runs up to the approaching procession.]**

**Hyllos [chanting]** \*

**[cry of grief]**  
 I weep for you, Father, for your suffering I weep.  
**[another cry of grief]**  
 What's to become of me? What will I do?

**Doctor [chanting]**

Quiet, child! Don't waken  
 the wild pain raging 1350  
 in your fury-minded father.  
 He's barely alive. Be quiet. Bite your tongue. . . .

**Hyllos [chanting]**

What are you saying, old man?  
 Is he alive?

**Doctor [chanting]**

Don't wake him, he's sunk in sleep.  
 Don't rouse the rabid sickness that strikes him,

again and again strikes him.  
Child, don't excite it.

**Hyllos [chanting, more frantic]**

But a great weight crushes me.  
This misery drives me mad.

**Herakles [chanting]**

Oh Zeus! Where am I? Who are these people? 1360  
I'm tortured by this relentless pain!

**[cry of pain]**

Such agony eating me alive!  
Monstrous, abominable!

**[groan]**

**Doctor [to Hyllos, chanting]**

Now see how it's best to be quiet?  
Not chase sleep  
from his eyes, his mind?

**Hyllos [chanting]**

Yes, but to do so is not in me.  
At the sight of such horror  
I can't hold my tongue.

**Herakles [singing]**

✱

O, altars I built on rocky Kenaia! 1370  
Would I'd never laid eyes on you!  
Ah misery!  
What return you've earned me

for the sacrifices I made—such sacrifices!

What misery! Zeus!

What humiliation, what outrage  
to feel this madness blossom  
no spell can mend!

What magic, what medicine, what physician  
will repair this ruin?

1380

None but Zeus.

It would be a wonder to see him  
even far off.

**[Hyllos tries to ease his father's torment.]**

*EE . . .*

Leave me! Let me sleep! Leave me be!

Doomed! In torment!

Where do you touch me?

How lay me down?

You'll kill me, kill me!

You've wakened what was sleeping!

It tightens its grip.

1390

This thing comes again!

**[cry of pain]**

Who are you, you Greeks! Most unjust!

For you I destroyed myself

\*

cleansing your seas, clearing your forests  
of all that was bad in them.

And now

will no one bring fire or lift a sword  
to relieve my pain?

*EE . . .* **[writhing on the ground]**

Will no one come—no one—

to strike off my head?

1400

To free me, release me from this loathed life?

**[cry of despair]**

**Doctor [chanting, as he stoops to try to calm Herakles]**

Son of Herakles,  
this calls for stronger hands than mine.  
Help me.

**Hyllos [chanting, as he cradles Herakles' head]**

I lay my hands on him,  
but there's nowhere . . . no way . . .  
to give him a life without pain.  
That is in the hands of Zeus.

**Herakles [singing]**

My son, where are you?  
Take hold of me here. 1410  
Raise me up! **[cry of pain]** Oh god!  
Again it springs at me, leaps to destroy me—  
this abominable thing.  
This vicious sickness no one can heal.  
*Io io* Athena! Again  
this savage thing tears me to bits.  
Oh my son! Pity your creator!  
Draw your innocent sword!  
Strike this head from my shoulders!  
Heal this agony 1420  
your godless mother has caused  
driving me to rage!  
Oh may I see *her* writhing on the ground like *me*,  
like *me* may *she* be destroyed.  
Come Death, come sweet Death!  
Brother of Zeus,  
lay me to rest, to rest!



End my misery,  
swift-winged Death.

**Chorus Leader**

Friends, I shudder when I hear the king  
suffer like this. 1430  
Such a man struck by such disaster!

**[Herakles, the pain abating, raises himself to a near-sitting position  
with the doctor and Hyllos on either side of him.]**

**Herakles**

Ah! Many are the labors hot and hard  
—hard even to speak of—  
I've done with my hands, my broad back.  
But not even Zeus' wife or hated Eurystheus \*  
ever subjected me to the like of this:  
this woven net of Furies \*  
Oineus' two-faced daughter  
has tangled me in. 1440  
Fast-grappled to my sides, it eats away  
every last layer of flesh:  
destroys me, dwells in me, drains my lungs  
of every moist breath, has drunk up already  
my fresh-flowing blood.  
Fettered by this monstrous shackle  
my body wastes away to nothing.  
No battlefield spears, no army of earthborn Giants;  
no strength of savage beast; no land at all—  
not Greece, not any foreign land, not anywhere 1450  
I came and cleansed of monsters—  
ever did this to me. It was a *woman*—

no *manly* woman, no sword in her hand—  
 a woman alone who has overthrown me.  
**[Herakles takes hold of Hyllos' wrist.]**  
 My son, be a true-born son to your *father*,  
 don't respect more the name of *mother*.  
 With your own hands take her from the house.  
 Bring her here to me, the mother who bore you.  
 Give her into my hands. Then I may be sure  
 the sight of my ruined body makes you 1460  
 grieve more for me than you'll grieve for her  
 when she suffers at this righteous hand.  
**[Hyllos gets up and moves away, agitated at what he is hearing.]**  
 Come, son! Be bold! Pity me! I deserve pity!  
 I who weep and wail like a girl.  
 No one can say they've ever seen me like this.  
 Even in the grip of disaster  
 I never as much as whimpered.  
 But now, for a thing like this—*this!*—  
 I become a woman in all men's eyes.

Come close now. Stand here by your father. 1470  
 Look, look at this racked body.  
 Off with these coverings. **[He tears them off.]**  
 Behold, all of you, this miserable body!  
 My wretchedness . . . see! . . . the pity of it!  
**[Herakles cries out in pain.]**  
 This lacerating spasm sets fire to me, pierces every pore.  
 This desperate, brute, devouring disease  
 gives me no peace, no rest!  
                     Ah, Lord Hades, take me in!  
                     Strike me, bolt of Zeus!  
                     Lord, send it down! 1480  
 Father, cast your thunderbolt!  
 Now this thing feasts on me again;  
 like a flower blossoming, it bursts open inside me.

O hands, hands, back, shoulders, chest . . . O beloved arms!  
 You limbs that once conquered  
 the lion of Nemea, scourge of herdsmen,  
 a beast unassailable, unapproachable,  
 subdued it with your strength!  
 And the Hydra of Lerna.  
 And the double-natured galloping man-horses 1490\*  
 —a ferocious host of them—  
 lawless, violent, strong beyond measure.  
 The Erymanthian beast too,  
 and the monster offspring of dread Echidna, \*  
 that three-headed mastiff of Hades  
 none can do battle with.  
 And the serpent-guard of the golden apples  
 at the end of the world.  
 Other labors too—thousands of them!  
 And no one ever set a trophy up 1500  
 in triumph over me.

But now this, this!

All disjointed, torn to bits, I lie in ruins—  
 overthrown by a destroyer I cannot see.  
 I, child of a peerless mother,  
 I the son of Zeus who lives among the stars.  
 But, if nothing else, be sure of this:  
 even if I'm nothing, even if I cannot move a limb,  
 I will, even as I am,  
 lay my hands on the woman who did this.  
 Only let her come! 1510  
 I'll teach her so she'll tell the world  
 that I—alive or dead—I  
 compel *evil* to pay its due.

[He falls silent.]

### **Chorus Leader**

Alas, poor Greece!  
On the horizon I see only grief  
when she is left without this man.

### **Hyllos**

Your silence, Father, gives me leave to answer you,  
and though you're ill, listen to me please.  
I will ask for what is right, what is just.  
Give yourself over to me. 1520  
Let go the anger that gnaws at you.  
If you don't, you cannot learn  
how empty it is,  
the satisfaction you desire,  
and empty too  
the very source of your grievance.

### **Herakles**

Say what you have to say, then be silent.  
I'm sick. I understand nothing.  
What have you been hinting at all this time?

### **Hyllos**

I will speak of my mother. 1530  
I will explain the state she's in now  
and those mistakes she made in ignorance.

### **Herakles**

Vile thing! Again, in my hearing,  
you speak of *her*, your father-murdering mother!!?

**Hyllos**

Yes, her. Given her state now,  
it's not right to stay silent.

**Herakles**

Indeed it's not—  
given the wrong she's done already!

**Hyllos**

And not—even you will say—  
given what she's done today.

1540

**Herakles**

Speak! But be careful:  
don't show yourself a vile traitor.

**Hyllos**

I will speak.  
She's dead. Killed. Just now.

[Herakles pauses for a moment.]

**Herakles**

A weird thing your dark words have prophesied.  
Who did it?

**Hyllos**

She herself. No one else.

**Herakles**

[cry of anger]

Before she could die by *my* hand, as she should?

**Hyllos**

Your fury—even *that*—would fade  
if you knew everything.

1550

**Herakles**

A strange way to start.  
Say what you mean.

**Hyllos**

Here's the whole story:  
She had intended to do good  
but was mistaken, completely mistaken.

**Herakles**

Good!? Vile boy!  
Good!? To kill your father?

**Hyllos**

It was a love charm she intended to give you  
when she saw your new bride beneath her roof,  
but all went wrong.

1560

**Herakles**

And who is so powerful a sorcerer  
among the men of Trachis?

**Hyllos**

No. It was Nessos the Centaur.  
Long ago he persuaded her  
she could—with this potion—  
arouse wild desire in you.

**[Herakles is silent for a moment, then utters a cry of despair.]**

**Herakles**

Oh unhappy! Long-suffering! I'm destroyed!  
Mine no longer the light of day.

**[cry of despair]**

I see clearly now where I stand in the scheme of things.

From this moment you have no father.

1570

Go, child.

Summon all my children, your brothers and sisters,  
and summon poor Alkmene,  
whose coupling with Zeus was all in vain.

Summon them

so you may hear my final words,  
about the prophecies I know.

**Hyllos**

I must now tell you this:

your mother is not here.

She's gone to Tiryns by the sea

1580

and made her home there.  
And she's taken some of your children  
with her, to raise them herself.  
Others now live in Thebes.  
But those of us here, Father,  
we will hear what we must do  
and serve you.

### Herakles

Hear then what you must do—  
now is the moment you'll show  
if you're a man who can be called my son. 1590  
Long ago my father Zeus  
made known to me I would not die  
at the hands of any living person  
but a dweller in Hades. \*

And so this savage Centaur,  
dead as he is, has ended my life  
just as that older prophecy foretold.  
And now—to go along with that one—  
hear the prophecy recently revealed to me.  
I wrote it down when I visited Dodona 1600\*  
and the grove of the Selloi,  
priests who sleep on the ground  
there in the mountains. I heard it  
from my father's oak of many tongues.  
It said that now, in this living moment,  
I would be released from all my labors.  
I thought that meant I would prosper.  
But no, it meant I would die, nothing else.  
For aren't the dead beyond labor?

So, since what was predicted is—clear as day— 1610  
happening now, you, child, must help me



in this struggle.  
Don't let any hesitation of yours  
embitter my tongue.  
Yield to me. Work with me.  
Discover the best law of all:  
obey your father.

**Hyllos**

Father, I fear where our talk is leading us,  
but I will obey you.

**Herakles**

First, give me your right hand. 1620

**Hyllos**

Why demand this pledge from me?

**Herakles**

Do it. Don't disobey me.

**Hyllos**

Here is my hand . . .  
I won't argue.

**Herakles**

Swear on the head of my father Zeus.

**Hyllos**

Swear what? That I'll do what? Tell me.

**Herakles**

That you will perform the task I'll describe.

**Hyllos**

As Zeus is my witness, I swear it.

**Herakles**

And pray you will suffer if you sidestep your oath.

**Hyllos**

That won't happen: I'll do as you demand.

1630

Still, I pray I'll suffer if I sidestep my oath.

**Herakles**

Well then.

You know the high peak of Zeus' Mount Oita?

**Hyllos**

Yes. I've often stood there to offer sacrifice.

**Herakles**

You must carry me there.

With your own hands, then, and with chosen friends

build a great pyre  
from the wood of the deep-rooted oak you've cut down  
along with branches from male wild olive trees.  
Place my body on it. Then 1640  
take torches of pine wood and set all on fire.  
Let me see no tears, hear no wailing.  
If you are my son, do it tearless and mute.  
If you don't, I will be, from the world below,  
an everlasting curse weighing you down.

**Hyllos**

**[cry of despair]**

Father! What have you said?  
What are you doing to me?

**Herakles**

What must be done.  
Otherwise be son to some other man.  
Be called my son no longer. 1650

**Hyllos**

**[cry of despair]**

Oh, what you ask of me, Father!  
To be your killer? *Your* blood on *my* hands?

**Herakles**

No! To be healer of my troubles.  
Sole physician to my sickness.

**Hyllos**

How would I heal your body if I set it on fire?

**Herakles**

If you're afraid to do that, at least do the rest.

**Hyllos**

This I won't refuse: I'll carry you there.

**Herakles**

And build the pyre as I described?

**Hyllos**

Yes. I'll do all the rest: everything—  
short of lighting it with my own hand.  
Whatever I do you'll find no fault in it.

1660

**Herakles**

That will be enough—even that.  
But grant me one small favor more  
beyond the big ones you've granted already.

\*

**Hyllos**

No matter how big, it will be done.

**Herakles**

Well then . . .  
you know the young girl, Eurytos' daughter.

**Hyllos**

Iole? You mean Iole?

**Herakles**

Yes. This, son, is my command.  
If you want to show your reverence, 1670  
remember the oath you swore to your father.  
When I am dead, make that girl your wife.  
**[Hyllos turns away.]**  
Don't disobey me, your father.  
Don't let another man have her  
—this woman who lay by *my* side.  
Take charge of her bed yourself.  
**[Hyllos continues to walk away from Herakles.]**  
Obey me. For even if you trust me in great things,  
to disobey in something small like this  
will wipe out all the favors you've done.

**Hyllos [groaning but turning back to face Herakles]**

It's not good to be angry with a sick man, 1680  
but who could bear the sight  
of one who thinks such thoughts?

### Herakles

You've no intention of doing what I ask?

### Hyllos

Who could?

Marry the woman who of all people  
shares responsibility with my mother herself  
for her death?

*And for the way you yourself are now?*

Who could do that, if not crazed

by vengeful spirits? Better for me

1690

to die with you, Father,

than share a life, *a house*, with her,

the one I hate most in the world.

### Herakles [to himself]

Although I am dying, it seems this man  
refuses to give me my due.

**[turning to Hyllos and shouting]**

Know then

the curse of the gods awaits you

for disobeying my command!

### Hyllos

**[cry of despair]**

Soon, it seems, you'll let all see how sick you are.

### Herakles

Yes, for you're waking the pain that sleeps in me.

1700

**Hyllos**

I've nowhere to turn! Nowhere to go!

**[Iole appears from inside the house and stands silently at the door.]**

**Herakles**

No—for you think it right to disobey your creator.

**Hyllos [approaching Herakles]**

But, Father, must I learn to practice impiety?

**Herakles**

Impiety? No.

Not if what you do will gladden my heart.

**Hyllos**

Then *in all justice* you order me to do this?

**Herakles**

I do. I call on the gods to bear me witness.

**Hyllos**

Then I'll do it. I won't refuse.

\*

But I'll show the gods the deed is yours.

Obedience to *you*, Father,

1710

could never put me in the wrong.

## Herakles

At last a just conclusion.  
Now add to it the gift of swiftness  
and place me on the pyre  
before the pain pierces me again  
and rips me to bits.

[urgently]

Come, hurry, lift me up.  
This in truth is my rest—  
my rest from hard labor.  
Here the man I am  
meets his last end.

1720

## Hyllos

Nothing prevents my doing what you ask, Father,  
since you command and compel it.

## Herakles [chanting]

Now, come now  
before you rouse  
this sickness again.  
Oh stubborn spirit!  
Set in this mouth  
a steel bit—  
turn it to stone  
to silence any cry.  
Bring this unwanted  
labor to an end  
as if it were  
in truth a pleasure.

1730



**Hyllos [chanting]**

You who attend him  
raise him up.

Show how deeply  
you feel with me  
for all of this.

1740

For you see how little  
the gods feel  
for what's happened here.

Our creators they are,  
and we call them our fathers.

But they look on  
indifferent  
to suffering like this.

No one can see  
what is to come.

1750

But what's here before us  
stirs *us* to pity  
and on *them* pours shame,  
but for *this man*, of all men,  
who endures his own ruin,  
it's the greatest agony.

**[Attendants pick up Herakles' stretcher. Hyllos, the Doctor, and the attendants move off towards Mount Oita, the exit not yet used in the play. Iole watches from the doorway of the house. The Chorus Leader addresses her.]**

**Chorus Leader [to Iole]**

\*

Girl, do not be left here,  
here at the house.  
Great and strange

are the deaths you've witnessed.  
So many sufferings  
never heard of before.  
And in all this there's nothing  
that is not Zeus.

1760

**[Iole moves slowly, tentatively, to follow Hyllos.]**

## NOTES

l. 4: “*till he’s dead*”: The idea that a person’s life cannot be judged happy or unhappy until it is over is attributed in the first book of Herodotos’ *Histories* to Solon, the Athenian statesman who lived in the sixth and early fifth centuries BCE. It was probably folk wisdom dating to a much earlier time.

ll. 11–12: Pleuron, Deianeira’s home, is a town in southwest Aitolia, near the river Acheloos. Aitolia is an area of Greece west of Attica, north of the Peloponnese, and south of Thessaly.

l. 14: Rivers in Greek mythology are often personified as gods and often, like water, have the power to change shape.

l. 26: Alkmene is the mortal mother of Herakles.

l. 54: Iphitos is the son of Eurytos, the ruler of the town of Oichalia on the island of Euboia, just east of Trachis. Iphitos’ sister, Iole, appears later in the play. Herakles and his family are exiled to Trachis, a town in Aitolia about two hundred miles north of their home. Exile was a common punishment for murder; in this version of the Herakles myth, it is the murder of Iphitos that has caused his family’s exile to Trachis.

After l. 63ff.: The Greek word we have translated as “message” refers to a wax tablet: wax surfaces on two boards of wood that fold together. Writing is incised into the wax. In the stage directions we have called it a scroll, since the word *tablet* has other implications for a twenty-first-century audience. The message contains a prophecy, information about which is slowly revealed at lines 110ff., 216ff., 1151ff., and 1605ff. Here, at line 61ff., we learn that Deianeira has received a message from Herakles fifteen months prior to the day the play takes place. She has read the message but only hints here that it may predict a catastrophe for Herakles. At line 110ff., Deianeira reveals that the prophecy mentions Oichalia and predicts that something to do with that place will be decisive for Herakles’ future. At line 216ff., she focuses not on the place but on the time when the prophecy will be relevant and repeats that he will either die or live free of trouble at that time. At line 1151ff., the chorus tells us that the prophecy was spoken twelve years prior to the time of the event it predicts, so ten years and nine months prior to Herakles’ mentioning it first to Deianeira. At line 1598ff., he tells us that this prophecy, which he received at Dodona, is more recent than an earlier one he had received, saying that he would not die at the hand of a living being (ll. 1592–93). The slow and incomplete revelations of the contents of the prophecies contribute to the way the play dramatizes how impossible it is for humans to have a complete understanding of events and make decisions based on full knowledge. Many scholars also feel that the various revelations of the first oracle discussed in this note are not consistent with one another; this confusion, if it exists, may be another way that Sophokles conveys the limitations in human understanding.

After l. 68: The Nurse is a slave who probably left Pleuron with Deianeira when she married and may have been her primary caregiver as she was growing up.

l. 89: As with the captive women and Iole later in the play, the Nurse most likely became a slave when her city was invaded and conquered. Awareness that anyone's status as a free person could change to enslaved person as the cost of defeat in war may have added to the general sense of life's insecurity that Deianeira expresses in her opening lines. For a brief account of ancient slavery, see <https://slaveryinjustice.wordpress.com/slavery-in-ancient-greece/>.

l. 100: The Lydian woman is Omphale. In addition to his family's exile, Herakles was sold to her as a slave in punishment for killing Eurytos' son, Iphitos. This part of the story of Herakles can be found in other literary sources that predate Sophokles' play, as can the sacking of Oichalia, which Hyllos mentions at l. 108.

After l. 131: The chorus is made up of twelve or fifteen (depending on the date of the play, which is unknown) male singers and dancers representing young, unmarried girls of Trachis. Their singing and dancing are accompanied by the *aulos*, a wind instrument whose sound most resembles that of the oboe, among contemporary Western instruments. Their songs alternate with the scenes (episodes) in which actors interact. The Chorus Leader speaks the lines that the chorus exchanges with the actors in the episodes.

l. 166: A number of Greek cities claimed Herakles as native son, most prominently Argos and Tiryns in the Peloponnese and Thebes in Boiotia.

l. 182: The Great Bear is the constellation also known as the Big Dipper.

l. 236: At Dodona, an important site of prophecy in Greece, Zeus' priestesses, who interpreted the oracles delivered through the rustling of the oak leaves, were called "Doves." Their name may be a corruption of a word for "old women," the grey color and

haunting song of doves making them a good representation of the priestesses.

l. 258: A herald is an official, attached to a military leader or a ruler or a governmental body, who makes public declarations and conveys official messages, much like the press secretary of the US president if he or she had to travel around the United States with the president's messages rather than calling a press conference.

l. 268: Malis is the area around Trachis, including the Bay or Gulf of Malia and its shores and the town of Thermopylae ("Warm Gates"), where the Spartans fought to the death against the invading Persian army in 480 BCE.

After l. 281: This song occurs in the middle of a scene, at a moment of high emotion at the news of Herakles' imminent return. All the other choral songs occur at the end of scenes and mark a transition from one scene to the next. There are also formal features that distinguish it from the other songs. Singing occurs at other moments in the play to convey intense emotion: for example, when the chorus sings in response to the Nurse's announcement of Deianeira's suicide and when Herakles sings to convey his despair and pain.

l. 294: A paian is a hymn of appeal or thanksgiving to Apollo, the Healer. It was also used more generally as a song of celebration or victory but occasionally also of mourning or distress.

l. 297: Ortygia is another name for the island of Delos where Leto gave birth to Apollo and Artemis.

l. 303: The *aulos* is a reed instrument with two pipes that can be played independently and simultaneously by a single musician (see also note after l. 131). To hear what the *aulos* may have sounded like, see the recording of a production of Euripides' *Herakles* at

Barnard College, in which a musician trained on a reconstruction of an *aulos* accompanies the chorus: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM4sYJ7hdqg>.

l. 305: The cry *euoi* is associated with the worship of the god Dionysos, as are the ivy and the “bacchic whirl” in lines 308–9.

l. 334: Kenaia is a promontory on the island of Euboea that projects westward into the Gulf of Malia. Zeus Kenaïos had a sanctuary nearby. It is the place from which Herakles would set sail to reach Trachis.

l. 702: The island of Kypris (Cyprus) is sacred to the goddess Aphrodite. Kypris (Aphrodite) is one of her cult names.

l. 720: Oiniadai is a town on the banks of the river Acheloos and is the major site of the river god’s worship.

l. 722: Thebes is, in some traditions, Herakles’ birthplace but is also sacred to the god Dionysos (Bakkhos) as the home of Dionysos’ mother, Semele, and the first town in Greece to recognize Dionysos as a god (see Euripides’ *Bakkhai*). By associating Herakles with Dionysos, Sophokles may be evoking Herakles’ reputation in myth as someone subject to mania and drunkenness.

l. 749: “Like a mother”: Many editors dispute the authenticity of the word *mother* here because the chorus is made up of young unwed women, young enough to be Deianeira’s daughters. The most common emendation offered by editors for “mother” is “spectator,” which requires the change of only one letter of the Greek word for mother. In our opinion, it is not beyond the poetic imagination of the chorus to feel for Deianeira’s situation as a mother would. Though not mothers themselves, they have all experienced a mother’s love, and it is not uncommon for tragic characters to

evoke perspectives they have not experienced directly. At lines 767–68, Deianeira, for example, imagines her grief is like the cargo a seaman takes onto his boat, although she has never been a seaman.

l. 791: The Centaurs were creatures whose forms were half-man, half-horse. On the whole, Centaurs are depicted as lustful and wild.

l. 798: The Evenos river runs from north to south through Aitolia. Herakles and Deianeira had to cross it when they left Pleuron, Deianeira's home, to travel to Herakles' home in the Argolid.

l. 820: The killing of the Hydra, a many-headed, snake-like water monster, was one of Herakles' labors, which mainly involve ridding the world of monsters that were seen as a threat to the civilized world. Herakles extracted the venom from the Hydra and used it to make his arrows more deadly. The association of Nessos with the Hydra's poison, in addition to Nessos' assault of Deianeira, allows the killing of Nessos to be seen as another of Herakles' acts to protect civilization.

l. 844: We have tried to capture the intentional ambiguity of this line in the Greek: Is the Chorus Leader saying "you must know before you act" or "you can only know by acting"?

l. 886: The god Hermes was the patron of heralds. In Homer, Hermes is often sent by Zeus to carry messages to other gods or to mortals. He carried the herald's staff (two snakes intertwined), which is also carried by human heralds. His patronage of heralds is also due to his function as the keeper and transgressor of boundaries. Herald's often carry messages across boundaries—geographical or personal. Lichas, for example, is one of the three characters in the play—the others being Hyllos and Iole—who crosses the divide



between Deianeira's and Herakles' worlds. Since Hermes is also a trickster god, it is possible that his connection to heralds signals the fear of heralds' possible unreliability.

l. 909: "The Gates where assemblies of Greeks grew famous" is a reference to the meetings of the Amphictyonic League, an association of tribes from many parts of Greece that administered the oracle at Delphi. "The Gates" is a translation of the name of one of the places where the league met and is used, more generally, of the meetings themselves.

l. 910: The *aulos* is here associated, perhaps ironically, not with tragic song but with the joyous sound of the lyre. It is more usually the instrument that accompanies laments. Its sound is also associated with the god Dionysos and ecstatic states: here, the chorus's joy at the imminent return of Herakles but soon, the state of intense pain Herakles is in when he arrives.

l. 992: The simile of wine poured onto the earth alludes to the pouring of libations, a common practice at many ceremonial and religious occasions. The event Deianeira is describing, however, is the opposite of a libation, as this foam seems to be rising out of the earth and the Underworld, as a reaction to the poison seeping down, unlike the foam of the wine poured from above in a libation to the Olympian gods.

l. 1007: Chiron was a Centaur who, atypically of his kind, was a wise teacher and a healer. He was a friend of Herakles and was accidentally wounded by one of Herakles' arrows when Herakles was fighting other Centaurs (see note on l. 1490). Chiron could not be healed and could not, as the son of Kronos and so a god, die. He exchanged his life for Prometheus', allowing Prometheus to live and himself to be free of his pain by dying.

l. 1133: The Furies, or Erinyes, are implacable goddesses of vengeance and, more generally, personifications of curses.

After l. 1228: The contrast here between the chorus's singing and the Nurse's speaking highlights the chorus's shock at the news of Deianeira's suicide (see note after l. 281).

l. 1293: Suicide by the sword is generally associated with men; hanging is the method most commonly used by women. (See the Introduction for the possible implications of Deianeira's use of the sword to commit suicide.)

After l. 1346: Hyllos and the Doctor are chanting these lines in a rhythm that is often used in laments.

After l. 1369: Herakles' singing conveys the intensity of his feeling and, combined with Hyllos' and the doctor's chanting, makes this moment of Herakles' entrance particularly powerful.

ll. 1393–95: Although the mythic tradition presents Herakles as a civilizing force, cleansing the world of monsters and outlaws, it also pictures him as someone whose excessive strength and appetite can be destructive to his family and friends. This kind of duality is not uncommon for figures who are the subjects of hero cults, as Herakles was. (See the Introduction for further discussion of the ambiguity of Herakles' character.)

ll. 1436–37: Zeus' wife, Hera, is hostile to Herakles from the moment of his birth, as she is to many of Zeus' children by human women. In the mythic tradition, Herakles' labors are imposed on him by Eurystheus, a king of Argos; they either serve as expiation for Herakles' murder of his own wife Megara and their three children in a fit of madness inspired by Hera or as a way for Herakles to restore his father from exile to the throne of Argos.

l. 1438: Herakles calls the shirt that is devouring his flesh a “net of Furies,” perhaps viewing it as a curse by which Deianeira has captured and destroyed him. The language recalls the murder of Agamemnon by his wife in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.

l. 1490: “The double-natured galloping man-horses” are the Centaurs, with whom Herakles engaged in a battle, killing many of them (see note on l. 1007).

ll. 1494–95: Herakles here refers to the labor that required him to capture the three-headed dog Cerberus, who guards the entrance to the Underworld.

ll. 1594–96: Although most critics do not question Herakles’ assumption that the oracle predicted his death at the hands of Nessos, it is important to realize that it may be referring to Deianeira, who has also predeceased Herakles. (See the Introduction for further discussion of the implications of Herakles’ assumption about the oracle.)

l. 1600: Dodona is a site in northwest Greece of an oracle of Zeus (see note on l. 64ff.). The Selloi were a tribe living near Dodona who provided priests for Zeus’ oracle in its early stages. Later the oracles were interpreted by priestesses called “Doves” (see note on l. 236).

l. 1662: In the mythic tradition, it is Philoktetes (or his father) who lights the pyre. Herakles gives him his bow in gratitude. In Sophokles’ play, *Philoktetes*, which was probably written after *Women of Trachis*, Herakles appears as a *deus ex machina* to persuade Philoktetes to take the bow to Troy, where it is needed to conquer the city, and be healed there of his festering leg wound. In *Philoktetes*, it is clear that Herakles has been saved from the pyre and deified by his father Zeus. In this play, there is no mention of Herakles’

apotheosis, although critics have found hints of it at several points in the play. Sophokles leaves it to each member of the audience to imagine whether or not Herakles dies on the pyre and what the consequences of each possible end are for the play. (See the Introduction for further discussion about the question of the apotheosis.)

l. 1708: The Spartans claim the descendants of Hyllos and Iole, the Heraclidae, as the founders of their royal family. At the time *Women of Trachis* was written (the date is unknown), Athens may already have been anticipating their war with the Spartans (the Peloponnesian War) that ended in Athenian defeat. How this historical circumstance may have affected the audience's view of this moment in the play is interesting to consider.

After l. 1756: Both the text of these final lines and their attribution to a speaker are uncertain because of variations in the surviving manuscripts of the play and thus are matters of disagreement among scholars:

1. *Who speaks these final lines?* Many editors attribute these lines to Hyllos, arguing that although the final lines of the surviving tragedies are spoken by the chorus, in this play, the chorus has been silent for three hundred lines, and it would be jarring to have them speak again at the end of the play (although they are on stage and, by convention, might be expected to speak).

We feel that these words should be spoken by the chorus of young women, bringing a female voice back into the play at its end and maintaining what seems to be a consistent convention across extant tragedies of allowing the chorus to signal the end of the play.

2. *Who is the “girl” to whom they are addressed?* If Hyllos is the speaker, the “girl” is probably the chorus addressed in the singular—strange but possible. If the chorus speaks these lines, the “girl” may be themselves or Iole. We have chosen to have the chorus address Iole.

Although there is no indication that Iole has entered the stage from the house and although characters’ entrances and exits are almost always marked by a comment from someone on stage, as a silent character throughout the play, Iole’s role is already unusual. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, of which there are echoes in *Women of Trachis*, Cassandra enters the stage and remains silently there without being acknowledged for 150 lines. It seems perfectly possible that a silent character’s entrance may go unannounced. Moreover, Iole is the only character to whom the singular address “girl” is fitting. In addition, she is the only character of whom it can rightly be said that she has witnessed “great and strange deaths.” This phrase is usually understood to refer to Deianeira’s death, which in fact no one has witnessed, although Iole, unlike the chorus, was at least in the house when she died there. But Iole has also witnessed the destruction of her family and her city.

3. *Is the girl being told not to be “left here, / here at the house” or not to be left away from the house (the readings of the manuscripts differ)?* If the girl is being told not to be left away from the house, the end of the play reinforces the separation of the male and female worlds we have seen throughout: the men depart for Mount Oita, and Iole (and the chorus) return to the house, the realm of the female. If she is being told not to be left in the house, and we see her start to depart with Hyllos and Herakles up to Mount Oita, the final moment of the play perhaps offers a different possibility for the way Iole and Hyllos will shape their future. (See the Introduction for a further discussion of this possibility.)

