Seven Tragedies of Sophocles

The Women of Trachis

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The Women of Trachis

(Dramatis Personae)

Deianeira

Nurse

Hyllus

Chorus of Trachinian Women

Messenger

Lichas

Herakles

Old Man
Deianeira

There is an ancient saying current among mankind that it is impossible to understand a person's life, to judge it good or bad, before that person dies; my own life, though, I know, even before I depart this world, has been unlucky and burdensome; when still I lived in my father Oeneus' house in Pleuron, I conceived the bitterest dread of marriage of any Aetolian woman there. My suitor was a river god, one Achelous I mean, who would wear three shapes to ask for me from father, now appearing as a bull, now coiled and swift, a snake, and now in human form, bull fronted, while from his bearded cheeks gushed springs of water from his river's stream. Anticipating such a one as husband, I prayed always in my misery for death to come before I myself should come to such a union. There came at the last, however, to my delight he famous son of Alkmene and of Zeus; and Herakles did close in battle with this thing to free me for himself. The way the contest went I cannot clearly tell. I do not know. If any watched that spectacle untouched by fear then he might tell. For I was struck insensible with dread, in case my beauty won me nothing but a prize of grief. But Zeus of battles disposed the outcome well, if well indeed it was. For ever since I've lived he chosen bride of Herakles I nourish constantly an anxious fear for him; successive nights induce and then dispel successive and imaginary threats. We have made children, whom he has only seen infrequently, as might some cropping farmer see his farthest field, at most at sowing and at harvest time. This style of life was ever sending him away from home, and then returning him, as he served the man he served. And precisely now when he has risen clear of trials such as these, I am afflicted with the sharpest of anxieties. For from the time he killed lord Iphitus the strong, we have lived as exiles here in Trachis, a stranger's guests, but no one knows where he is gone, though I am well aware of how his loss brings bitter pangs of grief to me. I am almost certain some disaster has befallen him; For he has been away so long and not a word of news,
no not for fifteen long and anxious months. There is some terrible disaster - witness the plaque he left inscribed for me on his departure, and how often pray the gods this gift proves free of grief.

Nurse  My Lady, Deianeira, I have often seen your tears and grief, as you lament the loss and departure of lord Herakles; now though, if it is right for a slave to give advice to free born folk, and for me to tell you what to do - how is it that, endowed as you are with such a wealthy crop of sons, you do not send one to seek your husband? Hyllus, especially, seems fit to take this task upon himself of finding out his father's fate. And see, he himself comes rushing to the house on cue; so that if my advice seems opportune to you, you now may utilise both that advice and the man himself.

Dei.  My child, my son, dependable advice can even fall with luck from humble mouths; this woman is a slave and yet her words are worthy of the free.  

Hyllus  Then tell me, mother, what she said, if I may hear.  

Dei.  That you should be ashamed not to have sought your father's whereabouts and him so long away.  

Hyl.  But I do know, if one can trust the latest news.  

Dei.  Then where on earth have you heard he is?  

Hyl.  They say for all of last year's length he served a Lycian woman as her slave.  

Dei.  If he bore that, no news should shock.  

Hyl.  Word is he has escaped that fate at least.  

Dei.  What story now of where he is? Alive or dead?  

Hyl.  They say he is waging war, or planning war against Euboea, Eurytus' island state.  

Dei.  Do you know, my son, that he left trustworthy oracles about that land?  

Hyl.  What kind of oracles? I did not know.  

Dei.  That either he shall there meet his death, or, successful in this enterprise, he shall win for evermore a life of happiness. And so, my son, go help him since his life hangs in the balance so. Our safety and our lives depend on his salvation, for if he perishes we too shall fall and be destroyed.  

Hyl.  I shall go, my mother, and had I known the substance of these prophecies, had gone
long since; my father's constant fortune,
though, forbids we fear or dread too much,
but now I have this knowledge, I shall leave
no stone unturned to learn the total truth.

Dei. Go, then, my son! However late the seeker finds
good fortune, yet that fortune brings reward.

Chorus

str. a Helios, Helios, bright Night's bright child,
born at the death of stars in her dawning rest,
I beg you tell us where he dwells
Alkmene son, where is he,
Sun, ablaze with pulsing light,
t sea on the straits or on the flanking shores?
Speak, most powerful of seeing eyes!

ant. a Spear won bride, Deianeira, I hear,
hankers long in her heart for her man,
like some bird that is reft of its mate,
unassuaged her tearful need to see him,
nurturing dread for the man she remembers so well,
piining, her marriage bed unmanned a reminder
of him, expecting the worst in her grief.

str. b In endless serried ranks the south wind, north
wind drive unwearied warring waves across the broad
sea's face - just so I see the son of Cadmus, storm
tossed his life like the Cretan sea,
now dashed, now raised aloft, although some god
ever keeps him safe from Hades' halls.

ant. b With all respect I must deplore this outburst, lady.
I do not think it right for you to fret fair hope away.
All powerful Zeus has not disposed a painless life
for mere mortal humankind.
Both joy and pain are seasonal, as are
the turnings of the stars.

ep. Star spangled night does not
forever threaten us, nor pain,
nor wealth, but each is suddenly gone
away, so yet to another may come
visitation of joy or of grief.
I bid you, my queen to hold fast
to this truth in your hopes. Has Zeus been ever careless of his sons?

Dei. You have heard of my distress and so are here, as I might guess, but yet are still in ignorance, I trust, of how my heart is fractured by my grief. Young things develop in their own familiar environments, untroubled by the harsh bright sun, by rain or the storming wind, but, far removed from pain, live out a life of joy, until such time as they are titled wives, not maidens, victims then of nightmare cares, fear filled for their men, their children both. Such a one would understand the weight of care I bear, a witness to her own experience. I have suffered many pains in time now past; now though I shall reveal unprecedented agony. When Herakles began his recent expedition, and left his home, he left within the house an ancient stone inscribed with signs the which he never before had taken on himself to show to me, describing many of his former wars, to which he'd gone to win, no fear of death. This time, however, as one condemned, he said what share of his wealth I might take as settlement, what portion of their father's land his sons might share, divided as his legacy, and set a period of time, one year three months, at the end of which, he said, when gone a year and more, he would be dead within that time, or, should he then outrun this threat, his life remaining he would live in undiluted joy. Such things, he said, were fated by the gods to prophecy the end of grief for Herakles, as once before twin doves had sung beside Dodona's ancient oak. And now is precisely the time for these things to come to pass, the requisite interval elapsed. So from sleep's sweet depths I am roused in alarm, am filled with anguish and fear, my friends, that I might stay bereft of him who is of all mankind the very best of men.

Ch. Keep respectful silence now; for I see a messenger at speed, and garlanded as one who brings good news.
Messenger

My lady, Deianeira, I shall be the first of messengers
to free you from your pain. Alkmene's son I know lives still and is victorious and from the battle drives his prizes as prime offerings to grace our native gods.

Dei.

What is this news you bring to me, old man?

Me.

I say your man that is envied much by other men will soon come home, alight with strength and victory.

Dei.

Your news came from a stranger or a citizen?

Me.

The herald Lichas now shouts loud the news to crowds of men in the summer oxen land; on hearing him I hurried here to be the first to bring this news to you, to win some profit and advantage from your hand.

Dei.

Why then is he not here when the news is so good?

Me.

It is by no means easy for him, my queen. For the entire population has surrounded him, to question him and so he cannot get away. Each one of them, eager to satisfy his curiosity, refuses to let him go until he's heard his fill. Against his will he stays with them at their behest, but you will plainly see him very soon.

Dei.

Lord Zeus, that keeps uncropped the sacred fields of Oeta, you have granted us our heart's desire at last. Sing praises, friends, you women from within the house and you from far afield, of how, against all hope, this message dawns to our delight.

Chorus

Lift high rejoicing's song within the festal house, you bridal maids, and let the men folk's cry share praise songs to hymn Apollo of the shining quiver, our defence; raise too a shout of praise for his sister Artemis, virgin girls, proclaim her deity, deer hunter, Ortygian, twin torches in her hand, praise too her neighbours, the Nymphs. Aloft I soar, nor shall reject the flute as master of my soul. Witness how already the ivy weaves its spell, whirling my steps in
Bacchic dances.
Praise him, praise him!
See, lady, see, my dear one,
here before your eyes
the news stands clear.

Dei. Yes, I can see them now... my watchfulness
has been rewarded by the sight of this procession;
I formally welcome the herald who has come
at last - as long as it is good news you bring.

Lichas

Our homecoming is fortunate, my lady and
your words befit the prize achieved. For a man's
success should win him noble words of welcome.

Dei. My dearest friend, first tell me what I first would know:
is it a living Herakles that I shall welcome here?

Lic. I left him hale and hearty, in the best of health
and strength and quite unburdened by disease.

Dei. Where was he, home or still in foreign lands?

Lic. There is a headland in Euboea where he defines
a shrine and offerings of fruit for Cenaean Zeus.

Dei. To honour pledges made or through some oracle?

Lic. Yes, pledges made when intent on wasting with his spear
the country of these women whom you witness here.

Dei. And they, who are they, by the gods and who their kin?
For they are pitiful, unless my feelings are deceived.

Lic. Our leader chose them as prizes for himself and for
the gods, when he had sacked the town of Eurytus.

Dei. So his designs against this city caused so long
an unexpected absence of so many countless days?

Lic. No, rather he was held in Lydia for the most
part of that time, as he says himself, not free,
but bought and paid for - no shame attached to that,
my lady, though, when it was clearly Zeus' work.
One year complete he filled as a slave to Omphale,
barbarian queen, according to his own account
The shame of this indignity so preyed on him
he laid an oath upon himself and swore he would
enslave the man who was the author of his plight,
and along with him enslave his wife and child.
Nor did he fail that oath, but when blood guilt
was purged, he raised a foreign host to march against
Eurytus' city. For he alone of all mankind, he said,
had shared in causing all his troubled times.
When Herakles had visited Iphitus' hearth and home, as an old guest friend, his host heaped much abuse on him, his heart ill spirited, declaring that, although he had unerring shafts, he would lose in any competition with his sons in archery, was, he said, a free man's ruined slave and at a feast when his guest was drunk with wine had thrown him out. Enraged at this lord Herakles, when once his enemy had come to Tyrins hill, to hunt for wandering horses there, did seize Iphitus, unawares, his mind and eyes at odds, and hurled him from a lofty eminence of rock. Enraged in turn at this crime Olympian Zeus, the father of all, dispatched his son to slavery, could not endure the crime, because this man alone of all mankind he had fashioned to kill by guile. For if he had retaliated face to face, lord Zeus would have condoned a justice done; for even the gods have no love of arrogance. Those men whose speech was harshly insolent have gone, each one, to live in Hades' halls, their town enslaved; these women here are come to you from happiness to a life unenviable; such was your husband's wish, which I, his trusted servant, now fulfil. Be sure that he himself will come when he has finished holy sacrifice to Zeus in thanks for victory, and this is the sweetest news to hear to top off long and splendid eulogies.

Ch. My lady, now your present joy is manifest: the proof, these women present, and his news.

Dei. How could I not be filled with joy on hearing of my husband's splendid deeds, and rightly so? Delight must run in concert with his victory. Yet those who are clear of sight can feel anxiety in case success should some day be deceived. For a dreadful sense of pity comes upon me, my friends, on seeing these dismal fugitives, homes, fathers lost to them in this strange land, who once perhaps were daughters, free born, of gentlemen, but now embrace a life of slavery. Zeus, arbiter of war, may I never see you come against the children of my body in this way, or if you must, let me at least be dead by then.
This is my dread when I see these victims here.
you poor, poor thing, whatever is your name?
A maid or mother? Not a mother, by your looks,
but lacking that experience, and of noble birth.
Speak, Lichas, who in the world is this foreign girl?
Who was her mother and who fathered her?
I feel pity most of all for her on seeing her distress,
since alone of all of them she comprehends her fate.

Li. How do I know? Why ask me? It may well be
her line is not among the meanest in that place.

Dei. Is she of the royal line, a child of Eurytus?
Li. I do not know. I have not questioned her at length.
Dei. Have you heard her name from her companions?
Li. No, all I had to do I did in silence.
Dei. Tell me at least your name, poor child, yourself.
I feel it deeply to be in ignorance of who you are.

Li. If she should loosen up her tongue for you,
it will not match with what she did before,
since she has spoken not at all, nor briefly nor
at length, but always in her misery weeps,
laments the weight of her distress from the time
she left her wind swept home; her present fate
is harsh for her, and so demands our pity.

Dei. Then let her be and let her go inside to find
some sweet relief, that she might not achieve
more than her present suffering because of me.
Enough is enough. But let us all go now inside
the house, so you may hasten where
you will, while I set all to rights within.

Mes. First stand still briefly here, and learn
from someone else just who it is you lead
inside, of whom you have heard nothing that
you ought as yet. For I know all there is to know.

Dei. What do you mean by checking my departure?
Me. Remain and learn! You profited well from what
I had to say before, as, at least, it seemed to me.

Dei. Shall I call them all back here again, or will
you rather speak out only to me and these?
Me. I'm free to tell you people, but leave them be.

Dei. Well they have gone, and so reveal your news.
Me. This man spoke nothing but a pack of lies
just now, all, all untrue, so either he is false
or was not here before a worthy messenger.
Dei. What's that? Explain to me all you know.  
For your words have utterly confused me.  

Me. I heard this fellow when he spoke before,  
in front of many witnesses, when he declared  
that Herakles had slaughtered Eurytus  
and sacked the lofty walls of Oechalia for this  
girl's sake, that Love alone of all the gods  
induced these acts of war and not the bonded  
servitude to Omphale in Lydia, nor yet  
the plummeting death of Iphitus. He failed  
to persuade the father of the child to give  
her up to be his secret concubine, and so  
he readied some trifling pretext, some excuse,  
and marched upon her father's land, in which  
this Eurytus, he said, did lord it from the throne,  
and him he killed, the lord her father, and sacked  
the town. And now you see that he has come  
and sends her to this house with full intent,  
my lady, and not to be a slave - do not think that -  
nor is that likely, given he is fired with lust.  
I thought it right, therefore, my queen, to tell  
you all that I by chance had learned from him.  
And many Trachinian men heard this with me,  
together, in the middle of the gathering place,  
so they can find him out. If my words cause pain,  
I am distressed, but still those words are true.  

Dei. Where do I stand, poor creature that I am?  
What is this hidden plague that I have brought  
beneath my roof? Ill starred my fate! And has  
she then no name, as her escort swore to me?  

Me. Distinguished, rather, both by name and birth,  
hers father and begetter Eurytus, in days gone by.  
Her name is Iole, about whose parentage Lichas  
said naught, since, supposedly, he'd made no search.  

Ch. I censure most of all those villains who perform  
foul, secret deeds that do dishonour them.  

Dei. What must I do, my friends? For I am now  
confounded by this present information.  

Ch. Go, now, and put the man to question so that he,  
constrained by you, may tell the truth, perhaps.  

Dei. Yes, I will go - for your advice is sound.  

Me. Shall I await you here? What should I do?  

Dei. Remain, for he emerges from the house,  
on business of his own, not called by me.
Li. What message, then, my queen, for Herakles? Instruct me, since you see me now upon my way.
Dei. But why the rush to dash away so soon, before he two of us have had a chance to speak?
Li. I am still here, if you desire to question me.
Dei. And will you tell me nothing but the very truth?
Li. Great Zeus be my witness, so long as I know.
Dei. Who is this female whom you brought? 400
Li. A woman of Euboea - her line I cannot say.
Me. You there! Look here! Who is it listens here?
Li. And who are you to put the question so?
Me. Just answer what I ask, if you can understand.
Li. My queen, the lady Deianeira, Oeneus' child, and wife to Herakles - unless my very eyes deceive me - and my mistress in this place.
Me. Precisely what I wished to hear from you... She is your queen and lady, then?
Li. Of course.
Me. Well, what just punishment, therefore, do you deserve, if you were found to do her harm?
Li. What harm? What is this web you weave?
Me. No web at all! You are the villain here!
Li. I go! I was fool to give you heed so long!
Me. No, not until you answer one short thing.
Li. Ask, if you must, since you reject discretion.
Me. This prisoner of war that you brought home... you know the one I mean?
Li. Of course, and so?
Me. Despite your present vacant gaze, did you not say before you brought Eurytus' child, one Iole? 410
Li. Amongst whom did I say this? What man can come bear witness he heard this from me?
Me. Why, many citizens! A crowd did hear these things in Trachis' public place of gathering and speech.
Li. Oh yes, they claimed they did, but there is a difference between opinion and firm established fact.
Me. Opinion? Do you deny you swore on oath you brought this girl as bride for Herakles?
Li. I, bring a bride? By all the gods, my lady, tell me who on earth this stranger is.
Me. A man who heard from you in person how for love of her a city was destroyed; not Lydia but an obvious lust for her laid waste the town.
Li. My lady, let this idiot remove himself. It does a man of sense no good to chatter with a fool.

Dei. No, please, by Zeus, whose thunderbolt makes flash above the steep and wooded slopes of Oeta, don’t hold back the truth. For she to whom you speak is not mean spirited, nor ignorant of how the human heart’s affections shift and change. Whoever, like some pugilist, would choose, to bandy blows, yes, toe to toe with Eros, who, wilful, even rules the gods and, I confess, rules me - and also other women such as me... Therefore, I would be mad were I to censure him, my man, struck down by this disease, or her, this other woman, his accomplice in a thing which brings no shame, nor does me harm, no harm at all... but, if you lied, instructed by my man, the lesson that you learned was base; while if you schooled yourself in this, in order to be kind, you will, in fact be proven the reverse! Tell me the truth - a name for telling lies clings like an incubus upon the free born man. For your mendacity most certainly will out - you spoke to many who in turn will speak to me. And if you are afraid, your fear is vain, since not to know of this, why that would cause me hurt. To know, what harm in that? For has not Herakles had union with many others, more than most? Not one of these thus far has borne one word of harsh reproach from me; and nor shall she, however much she moulds herself to love, since I felt deepest pity when I saw the child, because her beauty has destroyed her life, and all unwilling and unhappy she has sacked, enslaved her native land - but let that flow as it must flow; and as for you, be false to whom so else you like, but always speak the truth to me.

Ch. Believe her. She speaks well. In time to come you’ll find no fault with her and gratitude from me.

Li. Dear Lady, since I see your thoughts to be humane, and not invested with intolerance, I shall reveal the total truth in its entirety. The matter stands as this man here declares. A dread desire to possess this girl did overtake lord Herakles, and so, through her, Oechalia,
her home, is taken and sacked by the spear. 
And Herakles did not require that I conceal 
or yet deny these things - for I must respect 
his words - but I did fear to grieve your heart, 
with painful news, my lady, and so the fault 
was mine, if you would properly apportion blame. 
Since now you have been made aware of all 
of this, both for his sake and equally your own, 
bear with the girl and choose to keep firm faith 
with the words you spoke regarding her before. 
His hands have otherwise always won first prize 
but he has been quite bested by his love for her. 

Dei.  My mind is quite made up to do precisely that, 
and not to add yet further pain on top of pain 
by fighting with the gods. But let us go inside 
the house that you might take my messages 
to him, with gifts to take to match in turn 
his gifts. For you should not return without 
due gifts, when you came so richly endowed.

Chorus 

str.  The mighty Cyprian goddess ever wins the prize of victory. 
Her power over gods I pass by, 
her deception of Zeus mention not, 
nor of Hades, night dark, 
nor of Poseidon, earthquake lord. 
But for the bed of this bride, 
who were the well matched opponents, 
who launched themselves into a welter of dust 
and of blows?

ant.  Achelous, strong river in spate with the quadruped shape 
of horned bull, 
from Oeniadæ, while Zeus's son came out of Thebes, 
Bacchic home, with bow strung taught, 
spear brandished aloft and his club 
in his hand; together in combat they joined, 
intent in their lust for a wife. 
And only the Cyprian, bringer of joy to the bed, was there 
as the judge.

ep.  Then the fist to fist racket and the twang of the bow, 
random clatter of horns, 
as both grappled for holds,
destructive the clash of head upon head,
loud both their grunting and groans.
She, delicate fair, watches on
from afar, a hill for her seat,
awaiting the victor who wins her as bride. [And the battle raged on*,
as I said,] while the bride, the cause of this strife,
is piteous and patient and waits;
And then from her mother is gone,
a calf that is snatched from the cow.

Dei. My friends, our meddlesome guest is intent before
he leaves on bidding farewell to the prisoner girls.
I have come out of doors, all unseen, to see you,
to tell what my hands have conceived and devised,
and win some pity for my pain, and sympathy.
I have received, adrift in my house, a maiden or,
should I say, a woman now, a piece of baneful ship
borne baggage, bound to dash my peace of mind.
And now the two of us are waiting underneath
a single sheet for his attentions - such wages has
the faithful, noble Herakles sent to me, who kept
his house secure for him for such a length of time.
I do not know that I can feel enraged at him, despite
the fact he suffers often from this same complaint;
could any woman, though, cohabit with another so,
and share with her the business of the marriage bed?
I see her youthful beauty flourishing, while mine
is fading. Male eyes are like to pluck the bloom
of youth, but turn their tread away from age.
I am fearful for myself, should Herakles, my man
in name, become a younger woman's prize.
Yet, as I said, it is not right for a woman of sense
to grow angry now, and I will tell you how
that I might win some remedy to ease my pain.
I once received now long ago a gift from a beast
of the elder time, concealed it was within an urn
of bronze, which, but a child, I took from the blood
of shaggy breasted Nessus when he died, Nessus who
for money ferried passengers in his arms across
the deeply flowing stream of Evenus, and made
no use of oars to carry them, nor use of sail.
Me too he carried on his shoulders when first
my father sent me as a bride to go in company

* This translates Jebb's emendation. Hover, even so the line seems unsatisfactory.
with Herakles. Then in the river's midst he laid lewd hands on me and so I screamed out loud. At once the son of Zeus spun round about, let fly a feathered shaft which pierced the Centaur's chest, embedded in his lungs. And as he breathed his last the Centaur spoke, "Child, daughter of aged Oeneus, attend, because you are my final passenger; if your hands collect the clotted blood from out my wounds, where the beast of Lerna's swamp had tinged the arrow with black, poisonous gall, this stuff will prove for you a potent charm, to own the heart and soul of Herakles, so he will never look upon and love another woman more than you." I took his words to heart and on his death I hid the mixture carefully within the house and have now drenched this gown, applied the charm to it, according to his final words; all now is done. Rash thoughts of wickedness I presently disown and ever shall, as also daring women earn my hate, but if I can overcome this girl by means of drugs and potions served to Herakles, the groundwork is laid, plotted - unless it seems my actions are in fact too rash... if so I shall desist...

Ch. If your plan of action gives you confidence, why then I think that you have plotted well.

Dei. My hopes are high and confident enough, although the stratagem is still untried.

Ch. The deed must prove itself. For you can have no proof at all, unless you test the plan itself.

Dei. We shall find out soon enough. For I see the herald at the door and he will soon depart. But keep my secret safe. So long as shameful deeds are hid, one might oneself remain shame free.

Li. Pray, tell me, child of Oineus, what I must do. For I have already wasted time enough and more.

Dei. I have been busy, Lichas, on my preparations, while you were speaking to the stranger girls inside, so you might take this full length robe as a gift for my husband from my hand. And when you give it say no other's mortal flesh before has ever been enfolded in this robe, nor should the light of the sun behold it, nor the sacred temple ground, nor light of altar fire, until he himself displays it manifest to the gods,
as he stands to sacrifice a bull upon the sacred day.
For I had made a vow that, if ever I should see
him safe come home, or hear such news, I would
in duty bound equip my man for sacrifice in such
a robe, new dressed before the altar of the gods.
And you will authenticate my message with
a token he will recognise, sealed with this ring.
Now go and take care first that you do not
desire exceed your duties in your herald's task;
ensure, therefore, you gain a double rather than
a single benefit, and be rewarded by the both of us.

Li. If I fulfil my role as herald, Hermes' task, I shall
not ever fail in what you have prescribed for me,
but I shall bring this casket to his notice as it is,
and deliver truly all that you have said to me.

Dei. Make haste, then! For you are well aware
of how things stand inside the house.
Li. I do indeed and I shall tell him all is well.
Dei. And you know I welcomed the stranger girl
with kindness - and received her well.
Li. So much so my heart did shake with joy.
Dei. What else to tell? I am afraid to say
how much I love the man, until I know
myself if I am loved in turn by him.

Chorus

Inhabitants of the land flanked by crags and thermal pools,
a place of safe navel haven,
hard by the heights of Oeta and the Malian Gulf,
land locked, and golden shafted Artemis' cape,
a meeting place for the Greeks
in famous council at the gates -

soon you will hear the sweet
homecoming voice of the pipe as it rises,
resounding a note not unpleasing, like a lyre whose tune
honours the gods.
For the son of Zeus and Alcmena speeds
homeward bound with the prizes
his prowess complete has obtained.

Quite stateless and lost to us,
we thought him at sea, fifteen months
we waited and no news came;
his loving wife was distraught, and ever wept sore at heart, poor piteous, pitiful wretch; but Ares now, stung to rage, unravels her days of care.

ant. b  Let him come, let him speed the banked oars of his ship, so he raises this town, abandons now the island altar, where, men say, he makes a sacrifice; Let him come, all desire, imbued with the robe's seeming charm of persuasion.

Dei.  My friends, I fear all I have just now done may prove to have been intemperate.
Ch.  What is the matter, Deianeira, my child?
Dei.  I do not know, but am afraid my good intentions may cause some heavy crime.
Ch.  Because of the gifts you sent to Herakles?
Dei.  Just so - and my advice to anyone else: never be prompted to act by blind zeal. 670
Ch.  Reveal, if you can, the reason for your dread.
Dei.  A thing has happened, friends, that if I did reveal it, would cause unprecedented shock. The flock of white sheep's wool with which I spread the remedy upon the enfolding robe just now, has disintegrated in the house, consumed itself, spontaneously rotted down on top of a piece of stone. That you may know how everything befell, I will extend my narrative. For of those tasks the beastly Centaur formerly did teach to me, the bitter arrow in his side, not one have I neglected, but have kept them safe as inscriptions, indelible, on tablets of bronze. And these were the commands I fulfilled: that I should keep this drug in a secret spot, away from any naked flame or the sun's heat until the time I was ready to smear it in place. And this I did, but, when the task was at hand, I made the application secretly in the house with a tuft of soft wool plucked from our flock of sheep, then folded the gift out of the sun.
in a strongly bound box as you saw.

On going back inside I noticed something strange, unspeakable, beyond the mind of man to grasp. For I had happened to throw out the flock of wool, which I'd used to smear the drug, into the midst of the sun's full glare of light and, as it warmed, all indistinct it melted, crumbled into the earth, in form like the dust one might see flowing down from the saw's teeth as it cuts through the wood. It lay where it fell, just so, and, from the earth where it lay, foam clotted and sprang, as when wine, fertile blue grey fruit of Dionysus' vine is poured at the harvest onto the ground.

And so I cannot focus now my wretched mind, but see that I have done some dreadful deed. Why ever should the dying beast have shown good will to me when I had caused his death? It cannot be! He spell bound me - his wish o kill his killer, all of which I realised too late, when the knowledge could be no use to me. For I alone, poor wretch, unless I am much mistaken in my mind, will cause his death; the fatal arrow, I know, caused even Cheiron, he divine, much pain and every beast it strikes it kills, and this same black envenomed blood, that flowed from Nessus' wounds, of course, will also murder him, I think... and yet... my mind is made up that if he is brought low then I shall also share that fate with him; For a naturally proud and noble woman to live with her reputation soiled is insupportable...

Ch. Dreadful deeds must bring dread in their train; one should not, though, lose hope too soon.

Dei. In counsels intrinsically bad there is no hope o bring a person any semblance of ease.

Ch. Unwitting criminals inspire a milder rage; reaction such as that is proper in your case.

Dei. Such words do not befit the criminal, but one whose house is free of guilt.

Ch. It would be better now to hold your peace, unless you would disclose your feelings to your son; for he is here, who went before to find his sire.
Hyllus
My mother, I would wish one fate of three
had overtaken you - that you were dead, or, if alive,
be called some other's mother, never mine, or that
a better disposition had been yours than this you have...

Dei.
Why should I be so much a cause of pain to you, my son?

Hyl.
Know this, your husband, yes, my father, on
this day - why - you have foully murdered him.

Dei.
What is this dreadful story that you bring?

Hyl.
A story that cannot but come to be. For who
is there that can undo what men have seen?

Dei.
I do not understand, my son! On whose evidence
do you declare that I have done so terrible a crime?

Hyl.
I was myself eye witness to my father's dreadful fate
and did not hear it second hand from anyone.

Dei.
Where did you meet him, come, stand by his side?

Hyl.
If you insist on hearing it, then I must tell you all.
When he had sacked the famous town of Eurytus,
he left with all the arms and booty won by victory.
There is a headland, Cape Cenaeum, washed by sea,
Euboea's very tip and my father dedicated altars there
to Zeus paternal, established in a sacred, leafy grove,
and here it was I saw him, overjoyed myself with love.
His herald Lichas, also setting out from home, did come
upon him here upon the point of making sacrifice,
and Lichas brought your gift, the fatal robe, and this,
according to your precepts, he put on, then slew
an offering of a dozen bulls, immaculate first fruits
of victory, but all in all upon that day he brought
one hundred mingled beasts, a hecatomb, for sacrifice.
And first, his heart alight with joy, unhappy man,
delighting in your gifted robe, he made to pray;
but when the flame, by blood and resin fed,
began to blaze and feed upon the sacred offerings,
sweat welled from every pore and the robe,
clung close to his sides, as by a craftsman glued
throughout each joint. Convulsive biting pain attacked
his bones; as of some fatal and envenomed snake
the poison then began to eat away his flesh.
And now he shouted out for wretched Lichas, a man
quite innocent and unconnected with your crime,
to ask induced by what devices he had brought the robe;
and he, abject, in total ignorance, declared the gift
was yours alone, and was as it had been dispatched.
As soon as Herakles had heard these words, a pain,
that rent and pierced his lungs assailed him -
and grasping the herald by the supple ankle joint
he hurled him down against a jutting sea-washed rock;
like gruel his brains were forced through the hair,
as, head smashed, blood too oozed from the wound.
The people all raised voices shrill with grief,
both for the one afflicted and the man now dead;
and not one man did dare approach the warrior.
Wrenched now down to the ground and now aloft,
he howled and shrieked; the crags about resounded,
and all of Locris' mountains and Euboea's capes.
When he grew weary from throwing his wretched self
so often on the ground, he cursed aloud in agony
his ill starred and ill mated marriage bed,
his union with you, his treaty made with Oineus,
that brought destruction such as this upon his life,
and then he lifted up his tortured gaze
to pierce the swirling altar smoke and saw
my tears amid the host and cried aloud,
"My child, come near, do not avoid my pain,
not even if it means that you must share my death;
but lift me up and set me down where no
man's eye shall be a witness to my misery,
and if there is compassion in your heart, then speed
me from this land that I might die elsewhere."
On these brief instructions, we placed him in the heart
of the ship and made hard work of bringing him back home,
convulsed, consumed with pain, and soon you will see him
still living just, or yet just now deceased - I cannot tell...
So, mother, you are proven guilty of plots and crime
against, my father. May Justice and the Fury pay
you back with retribution dire - if Right allows such pleas,
as Right will indeed, since you have trod her down,
have killed the very best of heroes on the earth,
the like of whom no man will ever see again.

Ch. Why creep away in silence? Do you not realise
that by your silence you but confirm his charge?

Hyl. Oh, let her creep away! And, as she creeps away,
may propitious breezes drive her from my sight.
For why should she keep in emptiness the dignity
that suits a mother - when her acts deny her mother!
yes, let her creep away, good riddance! May she win
herself the ecstasy the was my father's gift from her.
Observe, my friends, how all at once the word oracular of god has come upon us, divine the wisdom spoken long ago, declaring when the twelfth month of year twelve was ended it would bring a cessation of toils for Herakles, the son of Zeus. And that is surely come to pass - for how can a man on the point of death take up another weighty servitude? For the Centaur's guileful fated gift miasmic has brought the mist of death before his eyes, adhesive venom, Death spawned, smooth serpent fed, attacked the lungs - how then can he survive to set his eyes upon another day than this, clutched close in the monster's dread embrace? For the deceptive, dark haired and deadly barbs of the Centaur have found him out to torture every sense.

Quite innocent of this, the wretched woman, anticipating great disasters soon upon the house from this new match did send this remedy, that stemmed from an alien mind in conversation dire - she grieves for these as fatal now, and sheds the soft and welling flow of packed and eager tears. Advancing fate reveals the great catastrophe, born of guile.

A spring of tears erupts. A plague invades his body now to make us pity him, unlike and yet more fierce than any hostile curse, past aimed at famous Herakles. I grieve the black shaft of the champion spear, which won and swiftly brought with martial might that bride from Oechalia's steeps; And Aphrodite, Cyprian and silent minister is proven agent of this fate.

Unless I am mistaken I heard just now a cry of grief resounding through the house! But what did I hear?
Semi-Chorus B

The sound is clear, grief stricken and shrill
inside the house which suffers new disaster.

Ch.

And see,
how sadly and with knitted brow
this aged woman comes with news...

Nurse

My children, the gift we sent to Herakles
has brought in train no meagre crop of ills.

Ch.

What is this news you bring, old woman?

Nu.

My lady Deianeira has gone down that last
and final journey with determined tread.

Ch.

You mean she's dead?

Nu.

That is what I said.

Ch.

The poor child is dead?

Nu.

That is what I said.

Kommos

Ch.

She is lost and gone, poor thing... Please, tell me how she died.

Nu.

Unprecedented, shocking even...

Ch.

How did she meet her fate?

Nu.

She did it with a sword, herself...

Ch.

What passion, sicknesses
of mind could snatch her off by the sharp blade's edge?
How force herself alone to summon death on top of death?

Nu.

With a stroke of the blade that generates grief.

Ch.

You saw this unsexed violation then yourself?

Nu.

I did... I stood, as if beside her in the ranks.

Ch.

How steel herself to face the steel?

Nu.

With no hand but her own hand she did this thing.

Ch.

Quite unbelievable...

Nu.

But true.

Ch.

This new match has spawned,
has spawned a monstrous Fury
within this house.

Nu.

Yes, monstrous... and more... and if you had stood there by
her side, as witness to the act, you would have pitied more.

Ch.

What woman's hand could dare accomplish such as this?

Nu.

One brave enough, as you will learn and so attest.
When she departed on her own into the house,
she saw her son prepare a stretcher in the yard, so he
could go to meet his father on his homeward way,
and then she hid herself from prying eyes, and cried aloud as she fell prostrate before the altars there, and wept that from now on neglected they would be, and cried when she laid hands on any of the things domestic she had used, poor lady, in the past; and if in her distracted wandering in the house her eye fell on any of the slaves she loved, she burst into tears again at the sight of them, invoked herself her own wretched fate, and that of the house so soon to pass to another's rule. When she had done with this, I saw her all at once rush headlong to Herakles', the master's, room. And then I shadowed her to keep a secret watch on her, and saw this wife spread shroud like sheets upon the bed of Herakles, and, when this task was done, she leapt up into the bed and sat there in the midst of it and shed warm floods of heart wrenched tears and said, “My marriage bed and bridal chamber mine, farewell for ever now, since nevermore again will your embrace receive me here to rest. ”Then with these words she loosed her robe with violent hand, at the point where the golden brooch was pinned above her breasts, and so she laid completely bare all her left side and arm. And then I ran with all my strength to tell her son just what it was his mother planned, but in the time it took for me to rush to him, and for us both to hurry back, I saw that she had penetrated through her ribs with a double-edged sword, slicing through her liver to the heart. Her son saw this and cried aloud. He knew his rage it was had forced this desperate act, had learned too late from those within, how she unwillingly had worked the Centaur's will. And the it was his turn, this wretched son, to run the gamut of regret and grief, to weep for her, press kisses on her lips, distracted hurl himself down by her side, cry bitterly that he flung accusations at her vile and false, complaining that he was an orphan now, his life bereft of father and his mother both. That is the situation here. And so, if any man makes calculation of the day that is to come,
or of the next, he is a fool. Tomorrow is not yet, until we have survived the hazard of today.

**Ch.**

**str. a**

What shall be first object of my grief,
which is the greater cause of grief?
In my pain this is hard to tell.

**ant. a**

We have one case before us in the house,
and one to wait upon in dread;
dread and fear of dread are kin.

**str. b**

I wish some windswift breeze might rise,
approach this hearth to favour me
and carry me off from this place, my home,
that I might not die of dread at the sight,
first sight, of Zeus' mighty son,
Lord Herakles,
since men say that his homeward path
is racked with ineluctable bouts of pain,
a thing of untold wonder.

**ant. b**

Close by that cry of grief, not far...
my sharp nightingale note forestalled.
This approach is made by foreign, alien men.
How do they carry their burden? As men
in grief for one loved they approach,
their progress is soundless and slow.
Our lord is carried home in silence...
What then to think? Is he dead,
or does he merely sleep?

**Hyl.**

Oh, how I grieve and grieve for you,
my father! How I grieve in wretchedness!
What will become of me? What shall I do?

**Old Man**

Be silent, child, do not awake
the fearsome pain that maddens him;
he is but hanging on to life... so bite your lips,
restrain yourself.

**Hyl.**

What say you, sir? He lives?

**O.M.**

Do not arouse him from his bonds of sleep,
or you will rouse, incite again
the dreadful pestilence
that plagues him, child...
Hyl. but boundless is
my weight of grief! I am heartsick and mad.

Herakles Lord Zeus,
What is this place? Whose guest am I,
laid low by agonies that grant me no
respite? Oh, I am in such pain!
Again this curse bites deep...

O.M. Did I not well know the greater benefit it was
for you to hold your peace, and not to shake
the balm of sleep from his head
and from his eyes? 990

Hyl. I cannot hold myself
in check when I am witness to this pain.

Her. Cenaean crags, on which I built
my altars... a fine reward you won
me, wretched, for my pieties, Lord Zeus!
Such disgrace you have put on me, disgrace!
I would that I, so wretched now, had never laid
my eyes on you, to witness thus myself
this inexorable bloom of madness.
Where is the conjurer or cunning quack,
apart from Zeus, can soothe this plague?
A phenomenon unlikely he! 1000

str. a Ah, ah!
Let me be, let me be, poor wretch that I am, to sleep,
let me be to sleep my last sleep.

str. b Why touch me so? Why move me so?
You are destroying, yes, destroying me!
Whatever it was that slept, you have roused it now!
It has crept up again to batten on me... Where are you now,
to help, most unjust of all, Greek men I purged of many plagues
at sea, in all the forests, wearing out my wretched tale
of weary days; and now, when I am stricken so with this disease,
does no man bring me healing fire or sword to give me aid? 1010

ant. a Ah, ah!
Will no one come who is willing to sever the head
from this wretched corpse? Ah, ah...
O.M. Young son of Herakles, this task is become too great
for my feeble strength to sustain... help lift with me... for your
young strength is fitter far to save him...

Hyl. I will help,
but have no means myself, or from elsewhere, to render him
oblivious to pain - such is the will of Zeus.

Her. My son, where are you now? Help lift me, lift me now
str. c to ease the pressure and the pain! Agh, agh... my fate!

ant. b The cruel spasms leap at me again, again
to tear at me,
this savage and implacable disease.
O Pallas, lady Pallas, it is tormenting me again... my son,
take pity on your father, draw your sword, no blame to bear...
thrust hard beneath the collar bone to heal this pain with which
your damned mother makes me rage... oh, that I might see her fall
herself, as she has made me fall, destroyed me... O sweet Death,

ant. c you, brother of Zeus, give me peace, give me peace,
destroy my pain with a fate that is swift and sure.

Ch. I shudder, friends, when I hear of this man's fate,
our lord, such a hero, driven by such ill luck.

Her. In time past I have in very truth struggled hard
and harshly with these shoulders and these hands,
but never yet has either Zeus's wife, great Hera,
or Eurystheus, my mortal enemy inflicted such
a hurt as has this two-faced child of Oineus who tied
a woven hunting net of the Furies, garment like,
upon my back and by this I am myself destroyed.
Adhering to my flanks it has consumed my flesh
within, feeds greedily, symbiotic, on my lungs
and breathing tubes, has sucked away my fresh
life blood already, and is wreaking harm on all
my corpse... that is bound in bonds unspeakable.
No warrior spear, no earth born company
of Giants, no strength of beastly Centaur band
nor animal wild, no place in Greece, nor alien
land I came to cleanse has done such work on me;
my wife, a woman soft in soul, no man's strength hers,
has brought me down, and had no use for sword.
My son, be my son indeed and true to your birth
and honour a father's name before a mother's now.
Deliver her from the house and into my hands yourself, your mother, that I may clearly see what pains you more, the sight of my disgrace and hurt, or the sight of her just and savage punishment. Go, child, be bold! And pity me, so pitiful, and in so many ways, who has cried aloud and weeps like any virgin girl - which no single man could say he ever saw me do before this day, who used always to follow my ill-starred route without complaint, but now I am proven a craven woman and no man. Approach and stand beside your father, boy, that you may understand the kinds of agonies and torments I endure - for I shall show you what is hidden here... See, all of you, behold my body's wretched state, observe me in my misery, how pitiful I am become. Oh, no, the pain, no, no! Another bout of this curse scalds yet again, it flashes through my side - nor seems this foul and all consuming plague prepared to grant me respite as I wrestle with the pain... Lord Hades, take me! Thunderbolt of Zeus, strike, strike! Heft, lord, your bolt of fire and hurl it down, my father... for it feasts on me again, again, flares, kindles into rage... My hands, my hands, strong back and heart, and arms, dear arms, are you the same as once before subdued the lion of Nemea, the herdsmen's bane, by force, a beast no other man could close with nor confront, and the Hydra too, and that bi-form host of Centaurs wild, surpassing in strength and lawless arrogance, and the Erymanthian boar, and subterranean Cerberus, three headed hound of hell, unsurpassable, Echidna's offspring dire, the dragon too that watched the golden apples of the sun in earth's remotest parts. These and other countless perils have I known, but none till now has triumphed over me. And now, disjoint and shattered in this way, my wretched self is sacked by madness blind, yes, I, man born of mother, flawless in repute, yes, I, man called the son of star-lord Zeus! But know this very well: although I am no more, incapable of creeping even, I shall lay heavy hands...
on her who did these things. I wish that she might come that she might learn and tell to all that even as I died I punished the guilty as I did in life.

Ch.
Sad land of Greece, such grief I see shall be yours, if you are to be deprived of such a man as this.

Hyl.
Since, father, you offered me the right of reply, keep silent now, despite your pain, and listen to me. For I shall ask of you no more than what is just. Entrust yourself to me, and do not nurse a heart as angry as your pain... or else you may not learn how wrong your reasons are for rage and joy alike.

Her.
Say what you will and then shut up. For in my pain I cannot understand the riddle of your words.

Hy.
I have come to tell you of my mother's present case, and how her fatal error was quite without intent.

Her.
Complete and utter scoundrel! You dare so much as name your mother, your father's murderess, to me?

Hyl.
Her case is such I cannot properly hold my peace.

Her.
At least that is true of her former indiscretions...

Hyl.
And of what she has undergone on this day too...

Her.
Then speak, but take good care... do not betray your sire!

Hyl.
I shall tell you then that she is newly dead, cut down.

Her.
By whom? Your words astound and disappoint me.

Hyl.
She killed herself, no other agent was involved.

Her.
She has anticipated then the death she owed to me.

Hyl.
Her intent was good. She blundered fatally. That is all.

Her.
And what good did she intend, you fool, in killing me?

Hyl.
On seeing your new bride within, she thought to win you back with a charm of love, but was deceived.

Her.
In all of Trachis who could deal in such a drug?

Hyl.
The Centaur Nessus long ago persuaded her to kindle with this substance your desire for her.

Her.
Then I am gone, as good as dead, poor wretch I am, gone, gone, no more the light of day for me... At last I understand the nature of my fate.

Go now, my son... for your father is no more, call all your brothers to my side, and call as well my wretched mother, Alcumena, bride in vain of Zeus, that all of you might learn from my last breath of the god delivered oracles I know.

Hyl.
Your mother is no longer here, but has gone instead to keep her home in Tiryns on the coast,
and, of your children, some she took to live with her, while others, you will find, now dwell in Thebes; but as many of us as are here, my father, we will hear your will and serve your every need.

**Her.**

Hear then your task: your time is come to show that you are worthy of your father's name. Long since my father sent to me a prophecy: I would not die at the hands of one who breathed, but of one dead, long gone to Hades' halls. And so this beast, this Centaur that is dead, has filched my life, according to the prophecy. And I will show how modern oracles confirm these other ancient messages, which I wrote down when visiting Dodona, where the Selli live upon the mountain slopes and sleep upon the ground, where I wrote down the words I had from Zeus's oak of many tongues, which said that at this time, precisely now, I should survive to find relief from all my heavy toil - I read prosperity, although its meaning was that I should die. For no more harm can come to men once dead. And since the meaning of these signs is clear, my son, you must again align yourself with me, must not await more sharp voiced screams, must willingly submit to work for me, aware of that most noble rule, a son's obedience.

**Hyl.**

Why, father, though I dread the end to which our conversation leads, I shall obey your will.

**Her.**

First place your own right hand in mine.

**Hyl.**

What need have you for such a binding pledge?

**Her.**

Your hand and quickly now, refuse me not!

**Hyl.**

I extend my hand and shall not question you again.

**Her.**

Swear by the head of Zeus who fathered me!

**Hyl.**

Swear what? Will this also be revealed to me?

**Her.**

To complete the task I shall describe to you.

**Hyl.**

I swear and Zeus be witness to my oath!

**Her.**

Beg punishment should you betray your word.

**Hyl.**

I shall, although I shall obey and need no threat.

**Her.**

You know the peak of Oeta, sacred to Zeus.

**Hyl.**

I do, since often have I stood beside the altar there.

**Her.**

You must with your own hand transport my corpse up there, with whatever help you wish from friends, then fell much timber from oaks, deep rooted, with logs cut also from
the sturdy strength of wild olives, and place my corpse upon this pyre, ignite it with a brightly burning torch of pine. And let no tear of grief assail you there, but do your work dry-eyed, ungrieving, if you are indeed my son. And if you fail, then I shall wait for you beneath the earth, as will my heavy curse for evermore.

Hyl. My father, what is this that you ask? A dreadful task...
Her. And yet it must be done! If not, then be no more my son, be called some other's son, not mine.
Hyl. But think again what it is you ask me to do... become my father's murderer, become defiled with blood!
Her. No, no, no! Rather one to heal my suffering, become the only one to ease my burden of grief.
Hyl. How will cremation heal your body's pain?
Her. If you shrink from that, at least perform the rest.
Hyl. I shall not grudge your carriage there.
Her. And the stacking of the pyre according to my word?
Hyl. As far as I may without polluting my own hands. The rest I will do. You will not be failed by me.
Her. Thank you for that, but grant me in addition one small further plea to supplement these other services.
Hyl. Why, even if the task is large, it will be done.
Her. You know the girl, the child of Eurytus?
Hyl. The girl you mean is Iole, I think...
Her. Quite so - and this is the scope of my request: if, when I am dead, you would in duty keep yourself in mind of an oath to your father owed, take her to be your wife, obey your sire in this; and let no other man take her in place of you, this girl that once did sleep down at my side, but you yourself, my son, contract this match. Obey! The debt I owe to your obedience in things of great weight soon is lost by a minor default.
Hyl. Oh, gods, it is not good to rage at one so sick at heart, but who could endure to see him so deranged?
Her. Your words betray unwillingness to do my will.
Hyl. When she alone is guilty of my mother's death, sole cause of what you also now endure, what man alive would choose this course, unless sick too and mad with guilt? Far better too for me to die, my father, than live with those I hate the most!
Her. This man, it seems, will not respect my death bed wish. The curse of the gods awaits, be sure, the man who will rebel against my last command.
Hyl. You soon will manifest the madness in your words...
Her. Yes, yes, you will provoke my sleeping plague!
Hyl. My cowardice holds me helpless, quite unable to act...
Her. You do not think it right to heed your father's plea.
Hyl. Then, father, shall I learn to do impieties?
Her. It cannot be impiety to gratify a father's heart.
Hyl. Your orders then to do this thing are just.
Her. They are... to witness which I call upon the gods.
Hyl. Then I will obey, shall not refuse, but show
to the gods you ordered this... I would not wish
to be thought a criminal through doing your will.

Her. Good sense at last! So swiftly now once more,
my son, pray render me swift service, and place
me on the pyre before the rending pains and agony
attack. Come, take the weight and lift me up;
this is the very end of pain, this hero's final hour.

Hyl. There is nothing to prevent our gratifying you,
since your orders and compulsion are clear.

Her. Come, now, my stubborn soul,
before this pain awakes, and clamp
my stone sealed lips with a bite of steel.
Not a sound, no screams! I would
my enforced end triumphs in dignity.

Hyl. Friends, lift him up and grant to me
forgiveness, pray, for what I do,
and condemnation of the gods, aware
of the crimes they are committing here
they gave him birth, were hallowed as
his parents, yet observe such suffering.
No man can see what is fated to be,
but these events are a shame to gods
and tragic for us,
most deadly and hard for this man,
of all mankind who bears this destiny.

And you, young woman, stay not at the house.
You have observed deaths deadly and strange,
much suffering, unprecedented pain;
there was none of these things not of Zeus.