

# 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, 10  
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; 20  
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 30  
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, 40  
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, 50  
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. 60
- 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. 70
- 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 80  
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.	90
<b>Dei.</b>	Go, then, my son! However late the seeker finds good fortune, yet that fortune brings reward.	
<b>Chorus</b>		
<b>str. a</b>	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!	100
<b>ant. a</b>	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, pining, her marriage bed unmanned a reminder of him, expecting the worst in her grief.	110
<b>str. b</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.	120
<b>ant. b</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.	130
<b>ep.</b>	Star spangled night does not forever threaten us, nor pain, nor wealth, but each is suddenly gone away, so yet to another may come visitations 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? 140

**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. 150  
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. 160  
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 170  
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. 180

**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, 190  
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 200  
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, 210  
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 220

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. 230

**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 Cenean Zeus.

**Dei.** To honour pledges made or through some oracle?

**Lic.** Yes, pledges made when intent on wasting with his spear 240  
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, 250  
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, 260  
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, 270  
 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. 280  
 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. 290  
**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, 300  
 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? 310  
 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. 320  
 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 330  
 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 340  
 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. 350

**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 360  
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. 370  
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,  
her father and begetter Eurytus, in days gone by. 380  
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? 390

**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 410  
 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 420  
 before you brought Eurytus' child, one Iole?

**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 430  
 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. 440  
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; 450  
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? 460  
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 470  
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.	480
<b>Dei.</b>	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.	490
<b>Chorus</b>		
<b>str.</b>	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?	500
<b>ant.</b>	Achelous, strong river in spate with the quadruped shape of horned bull, from Oeniadae, 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.	510
<b>ep.</b>	Then the fist to fist racket and the twang of the bow, random clatter of horns, as both grappled for holds,	520

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. 530

**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 540  
 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 550  
 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 560  
 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

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# 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; 570  
 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, 580  
 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, 590  
 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, 600  
 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. 610  
 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 620  
 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 630  
 how much I love the man, until I know  
 myself if I am loved in turn by him.

**Chorus**

**str. a** 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 -

**ant. a** soon you will hear the sweet 640  
 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.

**str. b** Quite stateless and lost to us,  
 we thought him at sea, fifteen months  
 we waited and no news came;

his loving wife was distraught, 650  
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, 660  
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. 680

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 690

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. 700  
 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, 710  
 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; 720  
 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. 730  
**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. 740

**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, 750  
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 760  
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 770  
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; 780  
 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 790  
 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, 800  
 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, 810  
 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 she was my father's gift from her. 820

**Ch.** Observe, my friends, how all at once the word  
**str. A** 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? 830  
**ant.a** 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. 840

**str. B** 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, 850  
born of guile.

**ant. B** 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 steep;  
And Aphrodite, Cyprian and silent minister 860  
is proven agent of this fate.

### **Semi-Chorus A**

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...

870

### 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?

Speak, woman...

880

**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?

890

**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,

900

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 910  
 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, 920  
 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 930  
 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 940  
 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.** What shall be first object of my grief,  
**str. a** 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. 950

**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, 960  
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? 970

**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 980  
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 990  
and from his eyes?

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

**Her.** Cenean 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, 1000  
apart from Zeus, can soothe this plague?  
A phenomenon unlikely he!

**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, 1010  
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?

**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, 1020  
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. 1030  
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. 1040

**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,  
nor Eurystheus, my mortal enemy inflicted such  
a hurt as has this two-faced child of Oineus who tied 1050  
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 1060  
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 1070  
 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. 1080  
 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, 1090  
 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 1100  
 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 1110  
 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 1120  
 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. 1130

**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.** Your anger would be turned, should you learn all.

**Her.** Disturbing words to open with... now speak your mind.

**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? 1140

**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. 1150

**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, 1160  
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 1170  
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. 1180

**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. 1190

**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 1200  
 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? 1210  
**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.  
**Her.** The rest I will do. You will not be failed by me.  
**Hyl.** 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... 1220  
**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, 1230  
 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. 1250

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. 1260  
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, 1270  
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.