

HERAKLES
BY EURIPIDES

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***Introduction:** Herakles is gone to the underworld, where he was sent by Eurystheus to drag to light the triple headed dog Cerberus. Lykos, king of Thebes, certain that the enterprise will prove fatal to the hero, seizes on his three sons, together with their mother Megara, and grandfather Amphitryon, in order to allay his fears of their popularity and influence by killing them.*

[The scene is at Thebes, before the Palace of Herakles.]

AMPHITRYON, MEGARA, CHORUS

Amphitryon

Who among mortals does not know the one who shared his
bed with Zeus, the Argive Amphitryon? Alkaios was his sire,
From Perseus sprung, and Herakles his son.
He held his seat in Thebes, where from the earth
Up rose the dragon race, of which race [*genos*] only a few 5
Ares spared: their great descendants in the city [*polis*]
Of Kadmos flourished: Creon, of their line,
Son of Menoikeus, was king of this land.
And Creon was father of Megara here
To her the sons of Thebes attuned their reeds 10
And wedding hymns, when to my house
The illustrious Herakles with festive joy
Led her his bride. But leaving Thebes, my residence,
And this Megara, and the alliance formed through her, my son desired
To fix his seat at Argus, and in the city walls [*polis*] 15
Raised by the Cyclopes¹: exiled from there I fled, having killed
Elektryon.² To alleviate my misfortunes,
and wishing to inhabit his fatherland,
high rewards he offered to Eurystheus,
to civilize the earth, whether he was prompted by 20
the goads of Hera, or by necessity.
The other toils he achieved with hard labor ;
But for the last, to Hades' dreary abode
Through the dark jaws of Tainaros he went,
To drag the triple-headed dog to light: from there he has not returned. 25
Yet in Thebes remains the story of times of old,
that Lykos once, wedded to Dirke,

¹ The Cyclopes were the builders of the walls of Mycenae and Tiryns. They built the walls with unhewn stones so large that two mules yoked could not move the smallest of them.

² Mestor and Elektryon were sons of Perseus.

held his awful reign over the seven towers of Thebes,
 before the sons of Zeus, Amphion and his brother Zethos,
 the so-called white colts, were monarchs [verb of *turannos*]
 of the land. 30

His son, who bears his father's name,
 (no Theban, but coming from Euboea),
 killed Creon, and having killed him now rules the land,
 having fallen on this city when it was sick with strife [*stasis*].
 We, to Creon's blood allied, because of this, it seems 35
 draw our greatest miseries: for, while my son,
 is in the innermost part of the earth below,
 this king, the potent Lykos, wishes to destroy
 the sons of Herakles, to slay his wife,
 And, that by murder may be quenched, 40
 Me too, a weak old man, (if somehow I can
 be numbered among men); lest, when they become men
 they should achieve vengeance [*dikē*], for their mother's family.
 I (for my son left me in his house,
 to guard his children when down the earth's 45
 dark steep he took his way),
 To save them from impending ruin, here
 Sit, with their mother, at this altar, raised to Zeus, the high savior [*sōtēr*],
 which my son erected as a generous monument
 Of his victorious spear, when his strong arm subdued the Minyai.³ 50
 Wanting all things, food and drink, and clothing,
 We keep these seats in this sanctuary, on the bare uncovered ground
 we make our beds; for our house closed shut
 Against us, here we sit at a loss for safety [*sōtēria*].
 Of my friends [*philoī*], I see some who were not such; 55
 and they, who are indeed my true friends, are powerless to help.
 Among men such is the influence of calamity
 Which never may he know, whoever wished
 Even the least good to me; it proves false friends [*philoī*].

Megara

O venerable man, who once destroyed the Taphian towers,⁴ 60
 the leader of the famous Theban force,
 what darkness hides the councils of the gods from mortal eyes!
 To me no joy devolves from all my father's fortune:
 who once was blessed with all the pride of wealth [*olbos*];
 he once ruled, which inflamed the long spears 65
 To rage against the bosom of the great;
 He once had children : me he gave in marriage to your son,

³ The Thebans had been paying tribute to Erginos, king of the Minyai.

⁴ Amphitryon, to avenge the death of the sons of Elektryon, had carried on the war against the Taphians, called also Teleboans, and demolished their towns.

to be the illustrious wife of Herakles.
 These blessings in his death vanished at once;
 now you, old man, and I are about to die; 70
 and these too, the sons of Herakles, whom, beneath my wings
 I preserve [*sōzein*] like the parent bird that puts her young under her.
 These in turn question me, 'O Mother, tell us,
 Where on earth has our father gone?
 What is he doing? when will he return?' Helpless in their youth 75
 they ask for their parent: to divert their minds, I speak
 The words of comfort, and admiring see,
 whenever the gates resound, their ready feet
 start forward, to fall at their father's knees.
 But now what hope or means of safety [*sōtēria*] 80
 do you deem easy, venerable man? for I look to you.
 For neither from this land by secret flight can we escape;
 each avenue is held by guards too strong for us;
 nor in our friends [*philoî*] do we have hope in salvation [*sōtēria*]
 if your thoughts suggest anything, 85
 Propose it; let not instant death overtake us.

Amphitryon

Daughter, it is no easy or slight task
 To advise earnestly without ordeal [*ponos*]:
 Since we are weak, let us just delay.

Megara

Have you need of more pain, or do you so love life? 90

Amphitryon

I rejoice in heaven's sweet light, and cherish hope.

Megara

And I: yet vain is hope, old man, where hope must fail.

Amphitryon

In their delays ills [*kaka*] find a remedy.

Megara

The time in delay is painful, and afflicts me.

Amphitryon

Some prosperous course may yet be opened, daughter, 95
 for you and me to escape these present evils [*kaka*]:
 My son, your husband, may perhaps yet return.
 But remain calm, and from your children's eyes
 Dry those flowing tears; calm them with stories,

A soothing, but a wretched fallacy. 100
 For even the sufferings of mortals waste away,
 and the blasts of storms do not keep their strength always
 The fortunate are not fortunate to the end [*telos*];
 Everything changes and is different from before.
 The best [*aristos*] man is the one who always 105
 trusts in hope; the coward gives up.

CHORUS OF OLD MEN OF THEBES

Leaning on my staff I come, *strophe*
 to the high roofed halls and the old-man's home
 Like the swan, foretelling ill
 I come to pour the mournful songs. 110
 Nothing except words [*epea*] is left me now;
 A lifeless vision of the night I seem,
 The phantom of a dream
 Though these words tremble, yet friendly shall they flow.
 Unhappy orphans, for you are without a father's guardian power 115
 You poor old man, and you afflicted woman,
 How is your heart with bitter anguish pained
 For your lost husband is kept in Hades' house!

Do not hurry my feeble frame, *antistrophe*
 As up the craggy steep 120
 Faintly and slowly on I creep
 like the colt drawing the heavy cart:
 And, as I go with infirm step,
 gently lead this heavy burden;
 Support me by the robe and by the hand; 125
 I, an old man, will support an old man,
 Just as a young man, when I grasped the youthful spear and shield;
 I was there together in the toils [*ponos*] of my agemates
 and brought no disgrace on my fatherland.

epode
 Behold these boys; how stern their brow, 130
 Their father's spirit
 flashing from their eyes;
 They too his hapless fortune know,
 As they his manly grace retain.
 O Greece, if bereft of these, 135
 what firm allies,
 you will lose.

But, I see the monarch of this land,
 Lykos, advancing to this house. He's here.

LYKOS, AMPHITRYON, MEGARA, CHORUS.

Lykos

If I might ask the father and the wife 140
 Of Herakles, (and of course I may, since
 I am your master, find out what I want to know),
 In what confiding do you seek to prolong your life?
 What hope presents itself? Why do you expect not to die?
 Do you think that from the realms of Hades, where he lies, 145
 The sire of these will come? Thus you raise your grief,
 Since you must die so unbecomingly -
 you, who many an empty boast has spread through Greece,
 that Zeus once shared thy bed, and gave this strange son birth:
 and you, who you are called the wife of the bravest [*aristos*] man! 150
 Yet by your husband what illustrious deed has been achieved,
 if he destroyed and slew the marsh-bred Hydra,
 or Nemean beast, which in his nets he caught,
 saying he grasped it in his arms, and strangled it?
 On this presume you to contend with me? Is it for this 155
 the sons of Herakles ought not to die?
 Who, with no merit, held the reputation of daring courage,
 that with beasts he fought, in naught besides his prowess proved:
 his left hand never knew to raise the shield;
 Never came near the spear, but held the bow, 160
 a coward's weapon, and was always ready for flight;
 no proof of manhood, none of daring courage is the bow,
 best shown by him, who, remaining steadfast, dares to face
 the rapid spear and the furrowed wounds it cuts.
 Think not, old man, what now I do takes rise from insolence, 165
 but caution : well I know I slew
 her father Creon, and possess his throne:
 I therefore have no use for these boys to grow up,
 and leave them to revenge [take *dikē* on] my deeds.

Amphitryon

May Zeus protect his son, for that to Zeus 170
 belongs: it shall be my part to refute with my words
 his ignorance about you, Herakles; for never
 will I bear to hear you defamed. And first
 The charge of cowardice (shame on the tongue
 That brought so vile a charge!) will I disprove, 175
 And call the gods to witness. Let me ask
 The thunder, and the flaming car of Zeus,
 ascending in which he, in the giant sons
 of Earth his winged arrows deep infixing,
 And shared the glorious triumph of the gods. 180

To Pholoë go, O you basest [superlative of *kakos*] of kings,
 and ask the four-hoofed monsters of the centaur race [*genos*],
 What man they judge the bravest:
 whom would they name, but my son?
 Ask the Euboean Dirke,⁵ which nurtured you: 185
 it would not sound your praise, for you have done
 nothing noble [*esthlon*] to which your country might bear witness.
 But wisdom's prime invention, the arrow-bearing quiver,
 you blame: hear me now, and become wise [*sophos*]:
 the man arrayed in arms is to his arms a slave, 190
 and, if stationed near the weak-hearted,
 through their cowardice he perishes;
 or if he should break his spear, what has he to protect him
 from the carnage, his valor thus disarmed?
 But he who grasps the skillful-aiming bow 195
 has in his hand the one best thing: even if he sends
 a thousand arrows against the breast of others,
 himself from death defends; and, his stand held distant,
 pours his vengeance on his foes,
 Who fall by unseen wounds, himself secure, 200
 Nor to their arms exposed: for in the fight
 This is especially wise [*sophon*], to annoy
 The enemies, saving [*sōzein*] your own body.
 These are my arguments, in refutation of yours
 concerning the points you made. 205
 But why do you wish to kill these boys?
 What have they done to you? Yet I consider you wise [*sophos*]
 in this one thing
 that, being the coward [*kakos*] you are, you fear the offspring
 of the brave [*aristos*]. Yet this on us is hard,
 that we must die on account of your cowardice, 210
 when you should suffer at the hands of us, your betters,
 Were Zeus with righteous [*dikaios*] thought attentive to us.
 If you wish to hold the scepter of this land,
 Permit us to leave this country as exiles.
 You should do nothing with violence [*bia*], or you shall
 suffer violence [*bia*] 215
 when the god shall change the direction of the winds.
 O Theban land, (for on you as well
 I will pour my just reproaches),
 is this how you defend Herakles and his sons?
 Yet he advanced alone against all the Minyai in arms, 220
 And let the eye of Thebes see freedom.
 Nor, Greece, do you deserve my praise, nor ever will I keep
 silent at your baseness [superlative of *kakos*] to my son:

⁵ Lykos was a Euboean.

you should, in aid of these poor boys, come bringing
 fire, spears, arms, in return for their father's toils 225
 of clearing sea and land from its monsters.
 But, O children, neither the state [*polis*] of Thebes,
 Nor Greece will defend you. To me, a friend [*philos*] but a weak one,
 you turn, but I am nothing but a sounding tongue:
 For the strength I once had has left me, 230
 trembling with age, my languid nerves without vigor.
 If I now were young, and there were might in this body,
 I would grasp the spear and stain those blond locks
 with blood so that I might see you flee beyond
 the bounds of the Atlantic, in fear of my lance. 235

Chorus

Are not the good [*agathoi*], though slow to opprobrious words,
 often provoked by wrongs to give them vent?

Lykos

Speak against me whatever proud words you want,
 My actions will be harsh to you in return for your words.
 Go, woodsmen, some to Helikon, some to the valleys of Parnassus; 240
 having gone there cut the trunks of oak,
 and bear them to the city [*polis*];
 pile them you each way this altar round, set them on fire,
 And burn those wretches there; that they may know
 Their Creon dead no longer rules in these realms, 245
 but I am now the lord of Thebes.
 And you, old men, who dare oppose me
 and my will, do not groan for the sons of Herakles alone
 but also for the ruin that will fall
 On your own house; you will remember then 250
 That you are slaves to my despotic power [*turannis*].

Chorus

You, offspring of the earth, whom Ares of old
 Sowed, when the dragon's furious jaws he bared,
 Will not each raise the staff that his right hand
 Supports, and dash it against this man's bleeding head, 255
 Who, not a Theban, over my land and people
 Most basely [*superlative of kakos*] rules, alien though he be?

Yet never will you rejoice being despot over me,
 nor will you possess what my hand earned with toil
 Go back from where you came, commit your 260
 outrage [*hubris*] there; while I live, never will you kill
 The sons of Herakles; for not so far
 lies he concealed beneath the earth that he forsakes his sons.

Since you hold sway here in this land, having destroyed it,
 he who has helped it does not receive his worthy due. 265
 Much I avail my friends [*philoî*] by all the zeal
 I show the dead, when friends [*philoî*] are wanted most.
 O my right hand, how you long to grasp the spear!
 But the desire is lost in weakness.
 Else I would stop you from calling me a slave 270
 with glory [*kleos*] might we then inhabit this our Thebes,
 in which you now delight. For the city [*polis*] does not think well
 which shakes with base sedition [*stasis*] and ill counsels;
 else it would not have acquired you as despot.

Megara

Old men, I praise [verb of *ainos*] you; for on account of
 friends [*philoî*] 275
 friends [*philoî*] must have a just [*dikaia*] resentment.
 Yet in our cause let not your anger rise against your despots,
 don't suffer anything. And you, Amphitryon,
 hear now my opinion, if I seem to speak anything worthwhile.
 I love my children; how can I but love them, 280
 Whom I brought forth, and cherished with fond care?
 And to die I think is terrible; yet him,
 who strives against necessity, I deem but ill advised.
 But we, since we must die, we should not die
 consumed by fire, letting our enemies [*ekhthroi*] laugh at us: 285
 to me death is a better evil [*kakon*];
 and to the honor of our house we owe much.
 The glory [*kleos*] of the powerful spear is yours;
 let not that glory be tarnished by your death through fear.
 My well-famed [with good *kleos*] husband needs no witness 290
 that he would not wish to save [*sōzein*] his sons,
 if they gain a poor reputation from it. For the well-born
 suffer from the disgrace of their children;
 nor shall I refuse to emulate my noble husband.
 See now how much I esteem your hope. 295
 Do you think that from the realms below your son will come?
 Who of the dead has come back again from Hades?
 Or do you think that this one [Lykos] will relent to words?
 Not at all. One must flee a boorish enemy [*ekhthros*]
 to the wise, whose minds are trained well, we submit, 300
 For there a modest [*aidōs*] gentleness we find.
 My mind suggests, if we prevail to save
 My sons by exile, what a wretched state
 Is safety [*sōtēria*] with distressful poverty
 Since from the face of such a guest [*xenos*] each friend [*philos*]
 will turn, 305
 nor longer than a single day behold him with a pleasant eye.

Then dare to die with us, since death awaits you anyway.
 We call forth, old man, the nobleness of your soul,
 He, who strives against the fortunes sent by the gods,

strives but to show his foolishness; 310
 for the necessary ill will come; no one can stop it.

Chorus

If, while my arm retained its vigorous force,
 This insult [*hubris*] had been offered, I with ease would have repelled it;
 But now I am nothing. It is yours then, Amphitryon, to look to it,
 How best to drive back the impending ill. 315

Amphitryon

Not abject fear, nor fond desire of life keeps me
 from death, but I wish for my son
 To save [*sōzein*] his sons - it seems I am in love with the impossible.
 See, the neck is ready for your sword,
 kill me, hurl me from the rock: 320
 Grant me one favor [*kharis*], lord, I beg you;
 Kill me, and kill her, the wretched mother, first
 so that we not behold the children's death, the unhallowed sight;
 nor, while their warm blood flows, hear them call on their mother,
 and on me their father's father : for the rest, if you are eager 325
 do it. We have no power to rescue us from death.

Megara

I am your suppliant too; to grace [*kharis*] add grace [*kharis*],
 And merit thanks for both: permit me, king,
 Opening the doors, which now are shut against us,
 To array [verb of *kosmos*] my children in the dress of death; 330
 giving them at least a scanty portion from their father's house.

Lykos

Well, so be it. Attendants, open the house.
 Go in, array [verb of *kosmos*] yourselves; I begrudge you not your robes.
 When you are dressed with such attire [*kosmos*] as suits you,
 I will come, and send you to the dark realms below. 335

Megara

Come then, my sons, let your unhappy steps
 Attend your mother to your father's house over which others
 have power and have seized his wealth; the name as yet remains with us.

Amphitryon

In vain, O Zeus, did I share my wife with you.

In vain am I called together with you the father of this son; 340
 You are less a friend [*philos*] than you seem to be.
 Mortal as I am, in virtue [*aretē*] I surpass you, a mighty god;
 for I have not betrayed the sons of Herakles.
 Well did you know to come by stealth to my marriage-bed,
 to invade a bed not yours, no leave obtained; 345
 But you do not know to save [*sōzein*] your friends [*philoī*].
 You are an ignorant god or you are by nature not just [*dikaios*].

Chorus

The lament for Linos after the *strophe*
 song for success Phoebus sings,
 drawing his golden plectrum 350
 over the beautiful voiced seven string lyre [*kithara*].
 But I sing of the one who went below the earth
 Whether I call him the son of Zeus
 Or child of Amphitryon
 I wish to sing a crown of his 355
 toils through eulogy,
 the striving for excellence [*aretē*] of his labors [*ponoi*]
 are a glory to the dead.

First the sacred forest of Zeus he cleared
 And he slew the lion 360
 When over his manly limbs the victor wore
 The tawny beast's shaggy hide,
 Terrific with its yawning jaws upon his head.

Next with many a shaft winged *antistrophe*
 from his fatal bow, he slew the savage 365
 mountain band of Centaurs
 and laid the bleeding monsters low,
 The lovely rapids of Peneus knew him
 and large stretches of uncultivated plains,
 Pelion abodes and 370
 neighboring Omole's deep caves;
 pouring out from where with pine torches
 in their hand, the Thessalian land
 their cavalry tames.

The spotted hind, that reared with pride 375
 the golden antlers of its head,
 And wasted Oene's groves,
 he chased, he seized, he bound,
 A trophy to the huntress goddess.

The horrid Hydra's hundred heads,
Hell-hound of Lerna, armed with flames, 420
he cut off each one.

Coated with whose venom
His shafts killed the triple-bodied Geryon,
the herdsman of Erytheia.

He won prizes in many other races *antistrophe* 426
And glorious conquest crowned his brow;

But now, his last of toils [*ponoi*], he sailed to Hades'
realms below: Unhappy, from that mournful shore,
Never, ah! never to come back again.

Far from his house each faithless friend [*philoï*] is fled. 430
The boat of Charon his sons awaits,
along that godless, unjust [without *dikē*] road
from which one never return.

Your house looks to your hands, 435
though you are not here.

If I had the strength of my youth
and could shake my spear in battle
with my fellow Theban agemates,
I would stand forward and protect your sons
with courage, but youth and strength 440
are withered here and I have them no longer.

Chorus

But I see them wearing
the robes of death,
the sons of the once great Herakles,
and his much-loved [*philē*] wife, 445

Leading her children coupled at her side
By the same chain of fate, and the old father of Herakles;
I am wretched,

I am not able to hold back the tears
pouring yet from my old eyes. 450

MEGARA and her sons, AMPHITRYON, CHORUS

Megara

Come now: what priest, what butcher of the afflicted,
What bloody murderer of my wretched life [*psukhē*]
leads these ready victims to the home Hades?
Alas, my sons, ill-matched beneath the yoke,
The old, the young, the mothers, are we led to death. 455
O miserable fate, that awaits me and my sons,
whom never shall my eyes again behold!

I brought you forth, I nurtured you, to be insulted [*hubris*],
 scorned and murdered by your foes [*ekhthroi*].
 Alas, much have my hopes of glory failed me, 460
 which I hope due to your father's words.
 To you [speaking to one of her sons], your father now gone
 would have assigned Argos,
 you would have had the seat of proud Eurystheus,
 the rich and productive fields of Pelasgia,
 throwing over your head the robe of the beast, 465
 the lion's skin, in which he himself was armed.
 And you [another son] were to be leader of chariot-loving Thebes
 enriched with your mother's realms
 since you once persuaded your father to do so;
 and in thy hand in jest he placed 470
 his protective and cunningly wrought club.
 On you [the third son] Oikhalia's towers, subdued once
 by his far-wounding bow, he promised to bestow:
 thus his three sons with three empires [*turannis*].
 your father would have lifted you up, planning 475
 great things for your manhood.
 And I for your brides chose
 The most illustrious, and formed alliances at Athens,
 at Sparta, and at Thebes, so that, anchored thus,
 your honorable lives might bid defiance to each rising storm.
 These hopes are vanished: fortune, ever changing in her course 480
 now gives the Fates instead of brides to you;
 to me, wretched me, I have tears for a nuptial bath;
 your grandfather here prepares the wedding feast,
 considering Hades your father-in-law: the alliance now is bitter.
 Oh me! which shall I first, which last 485
 Clasp to my bosom? which with fondness kiss,
 And which embrace? Or, like the yellow-winged bee,
 shall I collect the griefs of each, and bring them all
 Into one store, and there condense the tear?
 O you most loved [most *philos*], if any voice is heard 490
 among the dead in Hades, to you, Herakles, I speak,
 Your father dies, your sons, and I too perish,
 once by mortals called happy because of you:
 hurry, come, aid us, and let your shade appear to me.
 Your coming is enough, even if you come as a dream. 495
 For they are evil [*kakoi*] who would slay your sons.

Amphitryon

Perform whatever to the infernal powers is due, woman
 I, O Zeus, stretching my hands to heaven,
 I call you: if you intend to help these children,
 defend them now; your aid soon will not avail them at all. 500

how often have I invoked you, but I labor [*ponos*] in vain.
 Of necessity, then, it seems we must die.
 O old men, brief are the affairs of life;
 pass then its course in sweet tranquility,
 nor grieve yourselves from morning to night: 505
 time knows not to preserve [*sōzein*] hope;
 but, rushes on with its own concerns, and flies away
 Look at me, conspicuous once among men,
 and doer of well-known deeds; but in one day fortune
 taken it from me, just like a feather in the breeze. 510
 Neither great wealth [*olbos*], nor reputation is known to be
 secure and lasting for anyone. Farewell, for now, my agemates,
 you see your friend [*philos*] for the very last time.

Megara

Look!

O venerable man, do I spy my dearest [most *philos*] or what do I see?

Amphitryon

I do not know, daughter; I am speechless. 515

Megara

Yes, it is he, who we had heard was held beneath the earth,
 unless we see some dream in the clear light of day.
 What am I saying? What sort of dream do I see so anxiously?
 This is none other than your son, old man.
 Come, children, hang upon your father's robes 520
 Go to him, quickly go; don't linger:
 Not Zeus himself could be a better savior [*sōtēr*] for you.

HERAKLES, MEGARA, SONS, AMPHITRYON, CHORUS.

Herakles

I greet you, fair house! My pillared hearth, hail!
 With pleasure, reascending to the light, I see you again.
 Well, what may this mean? Before the house I see my sons, 525
 their heads wrapped in the dress of death;
 and, amid a crowd of men, my wife;
 my father, too, in tears at some misfortune.
 Near them will I stand and ask the cause.
 Tell me, wife, what new affliction has befallen my house? 530

Megara

O most dear [most *philos*] of men! O light coming to your father
 you have come, you are safe [*sōzein*], returning to your friends [*philoī*]
 in their time of need.

Herakles

What are you saying? Into what kind of disturbance have I come, father?

Megara

We are perishing. - Pardon me, old man,
If first I snatch the words that should be yours. 535
The female is more pitiful than the male,
and he was about to kill my children, and I was destroyed.

Herakles

By Apollo, what sort of story begins like this?

Megara

Dead are my brothers, and my aged father.

Herakles

How was this done? by whom? what hostile spear? 540

Megara

By Lykos, potent monarch of this land.

Herakles

Opposed by the arms of all or was the land afflicted?

Megara

By faction [*stasis*]; now he holds power over the seven gates
of Thebes.

Herakles:

What terror reached you and my old father's age?

Megara

He intends to kill you father and me and your sons. 545

Herakles

What? Did he fear the orphan weakness of my sons?

Megara

Lest at some time they should avenge Creon's death.

Herakles

But why this dress [*kosmos*], which suits the infernal powers?

Megara

We wear these coverings in preparation for our deaths.

Herakles: Should you by force [*bia*] have died? Wretched me! 550

Megara

We were bereft of friends [*philoî*]: we heard you were dead.

Herakles

From what were your minds overwhelmed with this despair?

Megara

The heralds of Eurystheus brought these tidings.

Herakles

Why then did you leave my house [*oikos*] and household gods?

Megara: We were forced [*bia*]; your father was dragged from
his bed. 555

Herakles:

Did not shame [*aidōs*] check such rude affront to age?

Megara

Shame [*aidōs*]? Lykos lives far from that goddess.

Herakles:

Were we so destitute of friends [*philoî*] while I was away?

Megara

Who is a friend [*philos*] to the unfortunate?

Herakles

Are thus my battles with the Minyai slighted? 560

Megara

Misfortune, as I said, has no friend [*philos*].

Herakles:

Will you not cast these coverings of Hades from your heads,
and look upon the light, your eyes rejoicing with that
sweet exchange from the dark gloom below?

I (for this work requires my hands) 565

will first go and utterly destroy the house
of this new tyrant [*turannos*], ripping his unholy head
and hurl it to the hungry dogs as prey; however many Thebans
requite my good service with evil,

this victorious club shall punish; 570

those that fly, my winged shafts shall reach,
until all Ismenos is choked with the dead

and Dirke rolls her silver tide with blood discolored.
 Whom should I protect more than my wife,
 my father, and my sons? Farewell, my labors [*ponoi*]: 575
 in vain I have I achieved them for others more than these;
 yet I must die in their defense, since for their father
 They were to die. Or shall we say it is good
 that I met the Hydra in battle, and the lion
 sent by Eurystheus, but to keep my sons from death 580
 I will not labor ardently? Ah! may I then be called
 The glorious-conquering Herakles no more.

Chorus

Just [*dikaia*] it is for the father to guard his sons,
 His aged father, and wedded wife.

Amphitryon

It is for you, my son, to be a friend [*philos*] to friends [*philo*] 585
 and to hate your enemies [*ekhthra*]. But don't act too hastily.

Herakles:

In what way do I act faster than I should, father?

Amphitryon

The king has many allies who are poor,
 but extolled as rich [*olbios*], and so appearing:
 these have raised seditious tumults [*stasis*], and destroyed
 the city [*polis*], 590
 to plunder their neighbors; all their own wealth
 wasted away in foul intemperance and sloth.
 You were seen coming here: be cautious then,
 lest by this band you perish in ambush.

Herakles:

I do not care if the whole city [*polis*] saw me. 595
 But seeing a bird in an inauspicious place,
 I knew some ordeal [*ponos*] had befallen my house,
 and so my entrance was with studied secrecy.

Amphitryon

Excellent! Go then, and address Hestia,
 look upon your paternal home. 600
 The tyrant soon will come with intent
 to slay your wife, your sons, and to murder me.
 For you waiting there, everything will come
 With safety gained; but don't arouse
 The city [*polis*], son, till this deed be well achieved. 605

Herakles

I will this, for you have spoken well. I will go in the house
After this tedious absence, having come up from the sunless courts
Of Hades' queen below; and first I will salute
With reverent awe the gods beneath my roof.

Amphitryon

Did you indeed to Hades' house descend, son?

610

Herakles

And dragged the triple-headed dog to light.

Amphitryon

Subdued with a fight, or by the goddess given?

Herakles

With a fight: I was lucky enough to see the mysteries.

Amphitryon

And is the beast in Eurystheus' house?

Herakles

Hermion in the grove of Chthonia holds him.

615

Amphitryon

Knows not Eurystheus your return to light?

Herakles

He knows it not: my zeal first led me here.

Amphitryon

Why the delay in your stay under the earth?

Herakles

To rescue Theseus from Hades, father.

Amphitryon

Where is he? Has he gone to his native land?

620

Herakles

To Athens he is gone, with joy escaped those gloomy shades.
But come, my sons, attend your father into his house.
You enter now with fairer expectations
than you left it. Take courage then,
no longer pour this stream of tears.

625

And you, my wife, gather your presence of mind [*psukhē*];
 tremble no more, nor hang upon my robes;
 I have no wings, nor will I flee my friends [*philoī*].
 Ah, they hold me yet, still hanging upon my robes.
 How close you came to death! 630
 I will lead you, taking you in my hands
 like a ship that tows little boats behind it. For I do not refuse
 the care of my sons. This feeling is common to all mortals
 Both the better off and those who have nothing love
 their children: there may be differences in property; 635
 some abound, some have want, but for their children all have
 equal love.

Chorus

Youth is dear [*philon*] to me *strophe*
 But age lies on my head a burden
 Heavier than all the rocks of Aetna,
 over my eyes 640
 a darkness conceals the light.
 Not for the wealth [*olbos*]
 of Asia's tyrant [*turannos*],
 Not for a house full of gold,
 Would I trade youth: 645
 it is the best in prosperity [*olbos*],
 but also beautiful in poverty.
 This cumbrous, sad, funereal age
 I hate: would that it would flow
 out with the waves 650
 and never come to the
 homes and cities [*polis*] of mortals,
 but let it be carried off always
 on wings through the air!
 If the gods were wise *antistrophe*
 and understood men 656
 they would bring a second youth,
 as a visible mark on those who
 display excellence [*aretē*],
 and dying, would come 660
 back to the light of the sun again
 to run a double course
 Not so the base: their youthful hour,
 Once fled, should be recalled no more:
 and in this way you might know the bad [*kakoi*] 665
 from the good [*agathoi*] men
 like stars appearing through clouds,
 give the sailors their direction.
 But now no distinctive mark is given

to the useful and to the base [*kakoi*]. 670
 All are driven down one rolling age,
 exalting wealth alone.

I will not leave off from the Graces [*Kharites*] *strophe*
 mingled with the Muses,
 the sweetest union. 675

May I not live without the Muses,
 but may I always be garlanded.
 Still as an old man I sing
 the song of Memory [*Mnēmē*]
 Still the victory song 680

of Herakles I sing,
 as long as Bromios is a giver of wine
 and the tortoise shell lyre of seven tones
 and Libyan reed play the tune,
 I shall not cease from 685
 the Muses who made me dance!

The Delian maidens sing a paeon *antistrophe*
 around the temple's splendid gate
 for the beautiful son of Leto
 and the beautiful choruses whirl in dancing. 690

Paeans at your gates
 I will sing like a swan
 a gray-haired singer
 with aging jaws,
 for this is good for hymns. 695

Surpassing all in his excellence [*aretē*],
 the noble son of Zeus,
 with great toil has made
 life tranquil for mortals
 having destroyed the horrible beasts. 700

LYKOS, AMPHITRYON, CHORUS

Lykos

At length, Amphitryon, you have come out from the house.
 Tedious the time you spend to array [*kosmos*] yourselves
 In the dark robes and ornaments of death.
 But hurry, call forth the children and the wife
 Of Herakles to appear before the house: now I claim the terms, 705
 That unreluctant you submit to die.

Amphitryon

In my afflictions, king, you pursue me with rigorous speed,
 and in death add insult [*hubris*] to wrong?

It is necessary for you, if you are in power, to be more moderate
in haste.

Since you impose a necessity that we die, 710
we must submit, and what seems best to you must be done.

Lykos

Where is Megara? Where the children of Alkmene's son?

Amphitryon

I think, if from the doors I guess aright.

Lykos

What is it? What proof do you have of what you think?

Amphitryon

She sits as a suppliant before her hallowed gods 715

Lykos

As a suppliant she sits in vain to save [*sōzein*] her life.

Amphitryon

And calls in vain her husband who has died.

Lykos

He is not here and never will he come.

Amphitryon

Never, unless some god restores him to us.

Lykos

Go to her then, and lead her from the house. 720

Amphitryon

Then I would be an accomplice to her murder.

Lykos

Then I will, Since such is your thought,
I, who have no vain fears, will bring them forth,
the mother and the sons. You, my attendants, follow;
that, relieved from all our toils [*ponos*], with pleasure we may rest. 725

AMPHITRYON, CHORUS

Amphitryon

Go, then, if you must go! The rest, perhaps,
will be a care to someone else. Since you committed evil,
look for evil in return. Old men, for good

he goes, and rushes on the net
 Staked round with swords, the all-evil [all *kakos*] thinking 730
 to kill those inside. I will go, and see his corpse
 fall: an enemy [*ekhthros*] dying holds some pleasure ,
 When vengeance [*dikē*] catches up to him for his deeds.

Chorus

A reversal of evils [*kaka*]! *strophe*
 The once great king 735
 turns his life back to Hades
 O justice [*dikē*], and the
 back-flowing river of the gods.

At last you have arrived where
 with death you will pay the penalty [*dikē*] 740
 for committing outrageous wrongs [*hubris*]
 on your betters

Joy have thrown out tears,
 he has come back, the lord of this land,
 a thing which earlier I had no hope in my mind [*phrēn*] 745
 of experiencing [*paskhein*].
 But, old men, let us see if
 the matters inside the house
 are happening as I want them to.

Lykos [*within*]
 Ah me! Ah me!

Chorus

The music arising inside the house *antistrophe*
 is dear [*philos*] to my ears 751
 Death is not far off: he cries, he cries,
 The proud king groans, the prelude to his death.

Lykos [*within*]
 O land of Thebes, I am destroyed by a trick.

Chorus

Then die. Bear then this retribution, 755
 punishment [*dikē*] for thy deeds.
 What mortal man shall by lawlessness [no *nomoi*]
 dare to violate the gods, and foolishly say that
 they have no power?
 Old men, the unholy man is no longer. 760
 There is silence in the house: let us turn to dances [*khoroī*]
 My friends [*philoī*] have succeeded as I hoped.

| | | |
|---|--------------------|-------------------|
| Let there be dances - dances [<i>khoroï</i>] and feasts throughout the holy citadel of Thebes There has been a change from tears, and A change of fortune bids the exulting song arise, For low the mighty tyrant lies. The our earlier king has come, leaving the banks of Acheron Hope has come beyond expectations! | <i>strophe</i> | 765 |
| The gods, the gods take care of the unjust [the not <i>dikaïos</i>] and listen to the reverent. Gold and good fortune carry away mortals from their senses [<i>phrēn</i>] bringing along unjust [not <i>dikē</i>] power No man dares to look at the change of time. Having given up law [<i>nomos</i>] in favor of lawlessness he shatters the black chariot of prosperity [<i>olbos</i>]. | <i>antistrophe</i> | 775 780 |
| O Ismenos, come bearing crowns And, Thebes, through all seven-gated city may festive dance and song resound Hurry, lovely Dirke, from your silver spring: and come, daughters of Asopos, leaving your father's water; bring the Nymphs as fellow singers for the victorious contest [<i>agōn</i>] of Herakles. O wooded rock of Pythia and the homes of the Helikonian Muses Give to my town the joy-resounding song; where the race [<i>genos</i>] of sown men appeared, a band with shields of bronze, whose children's children still inhabit this land a blessed light to Thebes! | <i>strophe</i> | 785 790 795 |
| O marriage bed shared by two One a mortal, the other Zeus, who came to the bed of the bride descended from Perseus. How true you marriage already long ago, O Zeus, appeared to be beyond all doubt. | <i>antistrophe</i> | 800 |

Time has shown the brilliant strength of Herakles. 805
 Who has come out of the earth leaving the dark home and Hades' bedroom.
 You are a better king [*turannos*] to me than the baseness of that lord, 810
 which now the contest of sword-bearing struggles [*agōnes*] makes apparent to the beholder
 if what is just [*dikaion*] is still pleasing to the gods.

IRIS, LYSSA, CHORUS

Chorus

Ah me! Look! 815
 Have we come to the same violence of fear, old men, what sort of apparition do I see above the house?
 Flee, flee, my friends; to your slow steps add speed; get out of the way.
 O lord Apollo, 820
 Avert whatever ill this omen bodes.

Iris

Take heart, old men, beholding her, Lyssa, the progeny of Night, and me, Iris, the servant of the gods.
 No evil to the town [*polis*] do we bring, but war against the house of one man, 825
 whom fame reports the son of Zeus and your Alkmene. While he was finishing his bitter struggles [*athlos*],
 necessity protected [*sōzein*] him nor would his father Zeus ever allow me, or Hera, to do him ill.
 Since he has finished Eurystheus' mandates, 830
 Hera wills that he bathe his hands afresh in blood, his children's blood; and I assent.
 Hurry, and relentlessly seize his heart, unwedded daughter of black Night,
 Drive madness on this man, and child-murdering 835
 confusion in his mind [*phrēn*]. Make his feet leap and let him float in blood, until over the waves
 Of Acheron he wafts that beauteous band Of sons, which like a garland wreath around him,
 Slain by his hand : so let him know the rage of Hera, 840
 and learn mine. The gods indeed will be nothing and mortals considered great, if he does not pay this penalty [*dikē*].

Lyssa

Illustrious is my lineage, sprung from Night

My mother, and the blood of Ouranos;
 And this my office, never to be admired by friends [*philoî*], 845
 I have no joy coming to dear [*philoî*] mortals.
 But I wish to warn you and Hera, before I see you
 Rush headlong on this wrong, if you will obey my words.
 This man, into whose house you send me, is not
 unknown to fame [without *sēma*], either on earth or among the gods. 850
 The earth untrod by human step, the monster-teeming sea,
 he tamed, and he alone restored the honors of the gods,
 which were by impious men trod under foot.
 Thus I cannot advise you to plan these great evils.

Iris

Don't you admonish the schemes of Hera and me. 855

Lyssa

I am directing you to the better path instead of the evil [*kakos*] one.

Iris

The wife of Zeus did not send you here to be balanced [*sōphrōn*].

Lyssa

I call you, Helios to witness, that I do what I wish not to do.
 But if indeed the will of Hera I must execute and yours, with speed;
 I will go: neither the vexed sea, that roars beneath its waves, 860
 The rocking earthquake, or the thunder's rage and blasts of winds,
 are like the violence which I drives into the breast of Herakles:
 I will rend these solid walls, I will desolate his house,
 but first I will slay his sons, and he that kills them shall not know
 They are his sons that fall beneath his hands, until he leaves off
 from my rage [*lyssa*]. 865

And see, now at the doors he shakes his locks, and rolls
 In silence his distorted Gorgon eyes,
 his breathing is not balanced [*sōphrōn*]: like a bull
 Dreadful in the assault he roars, and calls the Stygian Furies,
 he howls with noisy fury, like dogs rushing on the hunt. 870
 I will dance you even more quickly and I will play the reed of terror.
 But to Olympus, radiant Iris, speed your noble feet;
 while I into this house of Herakles will hasten unseen.

Chorus

Lament, O Thebes; cut down is
 the flower of the city [*polis*], 875
 the offspring of Zeus.
 Unhappy Greece, mourn, for you have lost
 the patron of mankind; he now dances to the reeds
 of murderous frenzy [*lyssa*].

The Gorgon progeny of Night, Lyssa, 880
 With mournful rage ascends her car,
 With hissing serpents wreathes her horrid hair,
 And glares pernicious lightening from her eyes.
 Quickly the *daimōn* changes good fortune
 Soon the children will breathe their last at the hands of their father. 885

Amphitryon: [*within*]
 Oh horror!

Chorus
 Zeus, your offspring [*genos*] is now without offspring;
 unjust [not *dikē*] retribution has spread out
 flesh eating frenzy [*lyssa*] with evils [*kaka*].

Amphitryon
 [*within*] Oh roofs!

Chorus
 Now begins the dreadful dance without drums,
 without the grace [*kharis*] of the thyrsos of Bromios. 890

Amphitryon
 [*within*] Oh house!

Chorus
 Blood will be poured for a libation
 not the wine of Dionysus.

Amphitryon
 [*within*] Flee, children, get out!

Chorus
 Hostile, hostile is the song played on the reeds, 895
 The chase is the hunt for children.
 For Lyssa will not in vain
 rave [*bakkheuein*]⁶ in this house.

Amphitryon [*within*]
 Woe, woe.

Chorus
 Oh no, how I groan for the old man 900

⁶ This verb derives from the name Bacchus, a name from the god Dionysus. Notice how in this drama it can mean either a divine raving - or a maddened frenzy.

his father, and the mother who gave birth
and brought up her children in vain.
Behold, behold,
The wild storm shakes the house,
the roof is falling in!

905

Amphitryon

Ah, ah, what, child of Zeus, are you doing to the house?
Pallas, you are sending hellish ruin on the house
as you once did upon Enkelados.

*MESSENGER, CHORUS***Messenger**

O Thebans white with age -

910

Chorus

What is this shout that calls us?

Messenger

Within the house are deeds that will not be forgotten.

Chorus

will bring no other prophet [*mantis*] -

Messenger

The boys are dead.

Chorus

Ah, let me weep their fate

Messenger

Let your tears flow, there is much cause for tears.

Chorus

Horrible murder, horrible the father's hands.

915

Messenger

What we have suffered [*paskhein*] is beyond the power of words.

Chorus

How was this mournful ruin [*atē*] of the sons,
this ruin [*atē*] from the father? Tell in what way
from the gods these furious evils [*kaka*]
rushed on the house.
How did destruction end her bloody work?

920

Messenger

Before the altar of high Zeus the holy [*hieros*] rites
 Were now prepared to purify the ground of the house
 Where Herakles killed the tyrant and thrown his corpse.
 His sons had formed a beauteous cluster round, 925
 His father, and Megara: the basket was taken in a circle
 around the altar, and we said nothing unholy.
 Ready to bear the torch in his right hand,⁷ Alkmene's son,
 and plunge it in the water basin, he stood
 silent: as long as he paused, his children's eyes 930
 were fixed upon him. But then he was no longer the same,
 but wildly his distorted eyeballs glared,
 Their nerves all bulged with blood,
 and down his beard dropped foam:
 then with a horrid laugh he cried, - 935
 "Why, father, do I perform the sacrifice before I have slain Eurystheus,
 twice to kindle this purifying flame, and twice the toil [*ponos*]?
 These efforts could be a single labor for my hands.
 Whenever I bring Eurystheus' head here,
 in addition to those now dead, then I will purify my hands. 940
 Now pour it on the ground, and cast each hallowed vase aside!
 Who will bring me my bow? And who my other weapon?
 I am going against Mycenae: I need to take
 crowbars and picks: from their deep base I will heave
 The well compacted ramparts, though by 945
 Cyclopean hands built.' Then issuing forth, he said
 His car was there, though there he had no car;
 He said he mounted, and, as if he lashed
 His coursers forward, waved his hand; a sight
 Ridiculous, yet dreadful. We stood there 950
 Each darting a glance at the other, and one asks,
 "Is our lord playing with us, or is he mad?"
 Then he wandered up and down through the house:
 stopping in the middle of the men's quarters, he said it was
 the town of Nisus, though he waked inside his house. 955
 Then stretched along the pavement, as if there
 the banquet was prepared: after some short stay, he continued on,
 and the hall he called the wood-fringed Isthmus;
 there, having stripped his body of clothes,
 he wrested with nothing, and declared 960
 He had obtained a glorious victory,
 But over unreal foes. Then he shouted dreadful threats
 Against Eurystheus, for he thought himself now at Mycenae.
 But his father here touched his strong hand, and thus addressed him:

⁷ This was the ceremony of hallowing the purifying water: the sacrificer took a lighted brand from the altar and plunged it into the water.

“O son, what are you suffering [*paskhein*]? What kind of journey 965
 is this? Has not the blood of those, who you just now killed,
 caused you this frenzy [*bakkheuein*]? But he, who thought
 The father of Eurystheus, struck with fear, came as a suppliant to him,
 thrust him off, and from his quiver draws his shafts
 Prepared against his sons, thinking that he was slaying 970
 those of Eurystheus; they, wild with fright,
 Ran in different directions; one, to hide in the robes
 Of his unhappy mother; one to the shade of a pillar;
 the other flew under the altar, like a bird.
 Their mother cries, “What are you doing? You are their father!
 975
 Are you killing your sons?” The elder man, the attendants cry aloud.
 But he, as his son around the pillar winds,
 With dreadful steps turns opposite to meet him,
 And strikes him to the heart: backwards he fell,
 And stained with his blood the marble column as he died. 980
 And Herakles shouted with triumph and said this:
 “One of Eurystheus’ young lies here in death
 By me, paying for his father’s hatred [*ekhthra*].”
 Then he stretched his bow against another son:
 beneath the altar this one lay and hoped to lie concealed. 985
 The unhappy boy sprang toward his father’s knees,
 preventing the blow and threw his arms around his neck,
 and cried,
 “O dearest [*most philos*] father, listen, do not kill me,
 I am your, your child, you are not killing one of Eurystheus’.”
 But he grimly rolled his Gorgon-glaring eye. 990
 And, as the boy pressed too close to let the arrow fly,
 as one smites iron on the anvil, on his golden tresses
 He dashed the fatal club, and crushed the bone.
 Having destroyed the second son, he goes to add
 the third victim to these two; but the unhappy mother 995
 Had earlier taken the boy within the house,
 And closed the doors. As though he stormed the walls
 Raised by the Cyclops, he assaulted, rent,
 And burst the shattered posts, then with one shaft
 Transfixed his wife and son; from there 1000
 he rushed to slay his elderly father:
 but now an image came: Pallas, conspicuous
 to the sight, her crested helm waved above her
 against the breast of Herakles she hurled a stone,
 which checked his murderous rage, and laid him 1005
 Stretched, in a torpid slumber: on the ground
 He fell against a pillar’s shattered mass,
 Crushed in the ruin of the house beneath
 Its base; we helped his father bound him fast,
 with cords and confined him to the pillar, closely chained, 1010

That, when his sleep leaves him, he may do
 No farther deed of horror: there he lies,
 Wretched, having slain his sons and wife,
 Not in a blessed [*eudaimōn*] repose; I know of no mortal
 who is more wretched in his ordeals [*athlos*]. 1015

Chorus

There was a murder which Argolid rock held,
 committed by the daughters of Danaos
 famous yet unbelievable to Greece
 but this surpasses and goes beyond the evils [*kaka*]
 done then, this deed of the wretched son of Zeus. 1020

It is said that Procne killed her only child
 sacrificing him to the Muses,
 but you killed three children, O destructive one,
 by begetting them you assisted the frenzied [*lyssa*] fates.

With what groaning or lament 1025
 or song of the dead or dance of Hades
 shall I mourn?

Alas, alas,
 look, the great doors
 of the high-gated house are opening. 1030

Oh my,
 look, the wretched children lie
 before the unhappy father,
 sleeping a terrible sleep after the murder of his children.

The chains are around him, the supports 1035
 bound with many knots
 around the body of Herakles,
 fixed to the column of the house.

Like some bird lamenting the fledgling labors of its young,
 the aged father comes with slow feet 1040
 following bitter steps he is here.

AMPHITRYON, CHORUS.

Amphitryon

Hush, aged citizens of Thebes,
 Be silent; will you not permit him, lulled to sleep,
 to lose the memory of his evils [*kaka*]?

Chorus

I groan for you with tears, old sir, 1045
 and for your children and the one who had glorious victory.

Amphitryon

Move farther away
Remove: no noise, no cry
that may disturb his deep repose,
and raise him from his bed.

1050

Chorus

Ah, this slaughter -

Amphitryon

Ah, you are only hurting me more.

Chorus

- poured out, heaped up!

Amphitryon

Will you not keep still in your lament, old men?
Or else he may burst his bonds,
and rising in his rage destroy the city [*polis*],
destroy his father, and break down this house?

1055

Chorus

That cannot, cannot be.

Amphitryon

Be silent: How he breathes will I observe.
Hush; let me listen.

1060

Chorus

Is he sleeping?

Amphitryon

Yes, he sleeps a ruinous sleep, who slew his children,
slew his wife, destroyed beneath his whizzing shafts.

Chorus

Now wail.

Amphitryon

I wail the ruin of his sons.

1065

Chorus

And I, ah me! lament your son, old man.

Amphitryon

Silence, I pray you, silence:
see, he stirs, he turns himself:

I will hide myself away,
and lie concealed in darkness. 1070

Chorus

Be not afraid; night hangs upon the eyelids of your son.

Amphitryon

Behold, behold: oppressed by all these ills [*kaka*],
It grieves me not to leave
the light of life.
But should he kill me, his father, 1075
on these ills [*kaka*] he would heap ills [*kaka*],
and to these Furies add a parent's blood.

Chorus

Better for you to have died when rising in vengeance
for the murdered brothers of your wife,
you sacked the famous citadel of the Taphians. 1080

Amphitryon

Flee, flee, my aged friends, far from the house,
get away: flee the raging man
who is now awake;
soon adding another murder on murder 1085
he will rave [*bakkheuein*] through the streets of Thebes.

Chorus

Why with such fury is your hate, O Zeus, inflamed against
your son? Why have you brought him into a sea of troubles [*kaka*]?

Herakles

Ah! I breathe, I see, what I should see,
the air, the earth, and these rays of the sun. 1090

As on tumultuous waves and tempests my mind [*phrēn*]
whirls and heaves. My breath is hot,
Deep, and irregular, not right in its rhythm.
Look, why am I like a moored ship,
With cords around my youthful chest and arms, 1095
Why to this shattered pillar am I bound?

And I have corpses lying nearby.
My winged arrows are scattered on the ground, and my bow
which before would hang by my side
To guard [*sōzein*] me, by me they too were guarded [*sōzein*]. 1100
Have I returned to Hades, and measure back
The gloomy course appointed by Eurystheus?
But neither the rock of Sisyphus I see,
Nor Hades, nor the scepter of the daughter of Demeter.

I am astounded, and where I am I have no idea. 1105
 Is any of my friends [*philoī*] near, or far off,
 who will dispel this cloud that darkens over my senses?
 For I know nothing clearly of what is usual.

Amphitryon

My aged friends, shall I go near my ills [*kaka*]?

Chorus

I will go with you, nor in misfortune forsake you. 1110

Herakles

My father, why these tears? Why do you hide
 your eyes? Why keep distant from your beloved [*philos*] son?

Amphitryon

My son! for you are mine, even committing evil deeds.

Herakles

What have I done, thus to cause your tears?

Amphitryon

That, which even if a god should learn about, he would mourn. 1115

Herakles:

Your phrase is great, but speaks not what the cause.

Amphitryon

You yourself see it, if now you are in command of your mind [*phrēn*].

Herakles

Say what new ill is marked upon my life.

Amphitryon

If you are no longer a bacchant of Hades, I would tell you.

Herakles

Oh no, distrust and darkness yet are in your words. 1120

Amphitryon

I looking to see if your senses yet are sound.

Herakles

I don't remember [*mnēmē*] being frenzied [*bakkheuein*] in my mind [*phrēn*].

Amphitryon

My aged friends, shall I unbind my son?

Herakles

And say who bound me and disgraced me so.

Amphitryon

Know this much of your miseries [*kaka*]: let the rest go.

1125

Herakles

I will be silent to learn what I wish to.

Amphitryon

O Zeus, from Hera's seat do you see this?

Herakles:

Have we again suffered [*paskhein*] hostility from her?

Amphitryon

Let the goddess be, and support your own ills.

Herakles

I am ruined. What misfortune will you tell me?

1130

Amphitryon

Look here, behold the bodies of your sons.

Herakles

Ah me unhappy, what wretched sight is this?

Amphitryon

Against your weak sons this war you waged.

Herakles:

Of what war do you speak? Who has destroyed them?

Amphitryon

You, and your bow, and some cause [*aitios*] from the gods.

1135

Herakles:

What are you saying? Have I done this dreadful deed?

Amphitryon

You were in a frenzy. You ask for terrible answers.

Herakles

And am I also the murderer of my wife?

Amphitryon

All are the actions of your hand alone.

Herakles:

Ah me! A cloud of sorrow hangs around me. 1140

Amphitryon

And for this I groan over your fortune.

Herakles:

And in my frenzy I shattered my house?

Amphitryon

Only one thing I know: in all things you are wretched.

Herakles:

Where did this ruin-working frenzy seize me?

Amphitryon

There, at the altar's purifying flames. 1145

Herakles

Wretch that I am, why should I spare my life [*psukhē*],
 stained with the slaughter of my dear, dear [*philos*] sons?
 Should I not rather cast me from the height of some steep rock,
 or plunge my sword into my heart
 to be the avenger [*dikastēs*] of my children's blood, 1150
 or give this body to the flames, to purge away
 The guilt that stains my hated life?

But to prevent my deadly purposes,
 See, Theseus comes, my kinsman and my friend [*philos*].
 I shall be seen; and stand as a detested child-murderer, 1155
 in the sight of those guests [*xenoi*] he holds most dear [*philos*].
 What shall I do? In what dark solitude conceal my evils [*kaka*]?

O had I wings, or could I sink beneath the sheltering earth!
 But let me hide my head, close muffled in my robes.
 For I am ashamed of these foul deeds [*kaka*]; 1160
 nor, splattered with this guilty blood
 do I wish to pollute [make *kakos*] the innocent.

THESEUS, AMPHITRYON, HERAKLES, CHORUS.

Theseus

I have come with others, those who on Asopos' banks
 Their station hold, the armed youth of the Athenian land,
 Bearing this allied spear to aid your son, reverend sir. 1165
 For the report has come to the city [*polis*] of Erekhtheus

That having seized the scepter of this land,
 Lykos with war assaults you: to repay
 With grateful zeal what to my friend Herakles is due,
 Who freed [*sōzein*] me from the realms below, I come, 1170
 If I may do anything, or this confederate force may be of use.
 Alas ! why is this ground thus covered with the dead?
 Are my intentions thus frustrated? Have I, for these recent ills,
 arrived too late? Who killed these boys?
 Whose wife do I behold lying here? 1175
 For children do not fight in battle lines with the spear,
 But I have found some fresh calamity [*kakon*].

Amphitryon

O lord of the olive bearing mount.

Theseus

Why do you address me with this mournful voice?

Amphitryon

We have suffered [*paskhein*] dreadful sufferings [*pathos*] at the hands
 of the gods. 1180

Theseus

What boys are these, over whom your sorrows flow?

Amphitryon

My wretched son's: their father he;
 his hands with their blood stained.

Theseus

Turn your voice to happier words.

Amphitryon

You command what I wish. 1185

Theseus

O, you have told me dreadful things.

Amphitryon

At once we are ruined, ruined.

Theseus:

What are you saying? What has he done?

Amphitryon

By frenzy's potion whirled, drugged with the hundred-headed Hydra's
 venom.

Theseus

This is an ordeal [*agōn*] sent by Hera. But who is he, that sits
among the dead ?

Amphitryon

This is my son, much laboring [*ponos*], 1190
who went with his giant-slaying spear to fight
on the Phlegraeon plain along with the gods.

Theseus

Ah, what mortal ever was born 1195
to greater woe [with a bad *daimōn*]?

Amphitryon

You would never know any mortal man
more exercised in toils, more exposed to dangers.

Theseus

But why does he hide his wretched head in his robes?

Amphitryon

He feels shame [*aidōs*] to behold your face,
his friend, his relative, 1200
amid the blood of his slaughtered children.

Theseus

I came to mourn with him: uncover him.

Amphitryon

Remove, my son, this covering from your eyes;
Throw it aside, show your face to the sun.
A fellow struggler, a counterweight to your tears, is here. 1205

I beseech you, low at your knees I fall,
and grasp your hand and beard, a suppliant,
while down my aged cheek flow tears.

My son, restrain the wild lion's rage [*thūmos*], 1210
Which impelled you to unholy, bloody deeds,
wishing to add evils [*kaka*] to evils, child.

Theseus

Come now: to you, whose wretched seat
Is on the ground, I speak: show to your friends [*philoī*] your face. 1215
No darkness has a cloud so black,
Which can conceal the misery of your troubles [*kaka*].
Why do you wave your hand at me, to signify terror?
As though you words would bring pollution on me?

I'm not concerned about sharing in your misfortune,
for once I had good fortune with you. Memory will recall
the time when from the gloomy dead your hand brought me
to the light. 1220

I hate those who let the impression of a friend's [*philos*]
kind deeds [*kharis*] fade from their heart; and they, who wish to share
His prosperous gale, but will not sail with unfortunate friends [*philoï*]. 1225
Stand up, unveil your wretched head
And look upon us. Whoever of mortals is noble,
he bears the calamities sent by the gods and does not refuse.

Herakles

Theseus, have you seen this agony [*agōn*] of my sons?

Theseus

I heard, I saw the ills [*kaka*] you have pointed out to me. 1230

Herakles

Why then have you unveiled me to the sun

Theseus

Why not? Can mortal man pollute the gods?

Herakles

Flee, unhappy man, my polluting guilt.

Theseus

There is no stain of guilt for friends [*philoï*] from friends [*philoï*].

Herakles

I thank you. I am not ashamed that I helped you once. 1235

Theseus

And I, for being treated [*paskhein*] well, now pity you.

Herakles

I am pitiable: I have slain my sons.

Theseus

You, for your grace [*kharis*] in others' ills, I mourn.

Herakles

Whom have you known with greater troubles?

Theseus

Your vast misfortunes reach from earth to heaven. 1240

Herakles

I therefore am prepared, and fixed to die.

Theseus

And do you think your threats are a care to the *daimones*?

Herakles

The gods regard not me, nor I the gods.

Theseus

Hold your tongue; lest speaking great things you
suffer [*paskhein*] greater.

Herakles

I now am full of troubles [*kaka*], and can contain no more.

1245

Theseus

What will you do? Where does your rage transport you?

Herakles

Dead, the very place from where I came, I go under the earth.

Theseus

This is the language of an ordinary person.

Herakles

You, being free from misfortunes free, cannot counsel me.

Theseus

Does the much enduring Herakles say this?

1250

Herakles

He had not suffered so much; there is a limit to endurance.

Theseus

The benefactor, the great friend [*philos*] to mortals?

Herakles

They do not at all avail me; Hera triumphs here.

Theseus

Greece will not allow you to die so rashly.

Herakles:

Now hear me, so that I may refute with arguments
All your advice: I will prove to you,

1255

That neither now, nor in times past, has my life been any kind of life.
 My father was one, who, having slain my mother's aged father,
 With the pollution of that blood upon him,
 Wedded Alkmene, and my birth from her I draw. 1260
 When the foundations of a race [*genos*] are not well laid,
 all that arises from it must be unfortunate.
 Then Zeus, whoever Zeus may be, begot me, with the hate
 of Hera ever hostile. (You, old man, don't be grieved at my words,
 for I consider you, not Zeus, my father.) 1265
 While I was still at the breast, two hideous serpents,
 sent by Hera to destroy me, rolled their spires
 within my cradle. When my age advanced
 To youth's fresh bloom, why should I speak of the toils
 I then suffered? What lions, what dire forms 1270
 of triple Typhons, or what giants, what of monstrous
 banded in the Centaurs' war, did I not subdue?
 The Hydra, rayed around with heads
 still sprouting from the sword, I slew.
 These, and a thousand other toils [*ponoi*] endured, 1275
 to the dark regions of the dead I went,
 to drag the three-headed dog to light, the one that guards
 the gate of Hades, at the command of stern Eurystheus.
 This last bloody labor [*ponos*] I dared (Wretch that I am!),
 the murder of my sons; I have crowned my house with ills. 1280
 I have come to this point of necessity, at my beloved [*philos*]
 Thebes I cannot dwell. Where would I stay?
 To what temple, what assembly of my friends
 Can I go? My disaster [*atē*] is unapproachable.

Should I go to Argos? How, since I am banished from my
 homeland? 1285
 Should I seek refuge in another state [*polis*], then,
 where malignant eyes would scowl on me when known,
 and tongues goad me with bitter reproaches:
 'Is this not the son of Zeus, who once killed his sons
 and wife?' Then chase me out with curses on my head. 1290
 And to the man, who once was called blessed,
 mournful is the change; but to him, who has always
 had it bad, grieves nothing, as though he were born to misfortune.
 I think I have come to this point of misfortune:
 The earth will cry aloud, forbidding me 1295
 To touch her soil; and the sea will not let me pass,
 Nor any spring from where rivers flow. Thus like Ixion's,
 on the whirling wheel in chains, will be my state.
 And this would be best [*aristos*], that no Greek might behold me,
 With whom in better days I have been happy [*olbios*]. 1300
 Why therefore should I live? What profit [*kerdos*] were it

To gain a useless and unholy life?
 Let the proud wife of Zeus in triumph dance,
 And shake the pavement of the Olympian house.
 Her will she has accomplished: she has torn 1305
 From his firm base the noblest man of Greece,
 rending him to pieces. To such a goddess
 who would pay his vows? That for a woman,
 jealous of the bed of Zeus, has crushed the innocent [not *aitios*],
 whose deeds were glorious, and benevolent to Greece? 1310

Theseus

This ordeal [*agōn*] from none other *daimōn* proceeds
 Than from the wife of Zeus. You perceive this well.
 To counsel others is an easier task than to suffer [*paskhein*] evils:
 yet none of mortal men escape unhurt by fortune,
 nor do the gods, unless the stories of the singers are false. 1315
 Have they not committed adultery, to which no law [*nomos*]
 assents? Have they not bound with chains
 Their fathers in pursuit of power [*turannis*]? Yet they hold
 Their homes [*oikoi*] on Olympus, even thought they err [*hamartanein*].
 What will you say, if you, a mortal born, too proudly 1320
 should contend against adverse fortune, but not so the gods?
 Retire from Thebes, in accordance with the law [*nomos*];
 follow together with me to the towers of Pallas.
 There your hands from this pollution will I cleanse,
 and give you a home, and no small share of my wealth. 1325
 What presents from my country I received for saving [*sōzein*]
 their death-devoted youth by killing the Cretan bull,
 these I will give to you. Through all the land to me
 are hallowed fields allotted; these, for the rest of your life,
 shall be called after your name by mortals; 1330
 and when you die, going to the halls of Hades
 With solemn rites and stately monuments
 the whole Athenian city [*polis*] will honor you.
 This beautiful crown of good fame [*kleos*] will my citizens win
 from the Greeks, that they helped a noble [*esthlos*] man. 1335
 And I will return this favor [*kharis*] to you for that
 of my salvation [*sōtēria*]; for now you have need of friends [*philoī*],
 [He has no need of friends [*philoī*] when the gods honor him
 for the help of the god is enough for whatever he wishes.]

Herakles

Ah me! all this is beside my ills [*kaka*]. 1340
 I think not of the gods, as having committed
 adultery, which is not right [*themis*], nor as oppressed with chains:
 I have never thought this worthy, nor ever will
 believe that one lords it over the others.

The god, who is indeed a god, needs nothing: 1345
 These are the wretched stories of the bards.
 I have considered, though oppressed with griefs [*kaka*],
 whether I would be a coward by quitting life.
 For whoever does not sustain misfortune,
 Will not sustain the attack of human weapons. 1350
 No; I will rise superior to my fate, and go to your city [*polis*];
 for your bounteous gifts receive my thanks [*kharis*].
 But I endured a thousand rugged toils [*ponoi*]
 which I never refused, nor from my eyes,
 ever dropped a tear; and never did I think 1355
 That I should come to this, and pour my griefs out in tears.
 But now, it seems, I must be a slave to fortune.

Well let it be so. You see my exile, old man;
 you see my hands stained with my children's blood.
 Give them a tomb and all the honors of the dead 1360
 weeping over them (since the law [*nomos*] forbids me).
 Recline them on their mother's breast, and give
 This sad communion to her arms, which I unhappily
 destroyed, not willingly. When you have hidden their bodies in the
 earth,
 Dwell in this city [*polis*]; wretched though you may be. 1365
 Strengthen your soul [*psukhē*] to bear my miseries [*kaka*].

Alas, my sons! The author of your life, your father,
 has destroyed you: not at all did you benefit from my honors
 which my arms with toil acquired, the glory [good *kleos*]
 of your father, that noblest of possessions. 1370

You, my pitiable wife, I likewise have destroyed,
 ill recompense for your faithful keeping [*sōzein*] of my marital bed,
 And all your long domestic vigilance:
 For you my sorrows flow, and for my sons, and for myself:
 how wretched are my deeds that rend me 1375
 from my children and my wife! Mournful is this last
 embrace. Where are my weapons, my mournful associates?
 Should I bear them still or cast them from me? What shall I resolve?
 If at my side they hang, will they not say,
 "With us you killed your wife, your children; when you hold us 1380
 your hold your children's murderers." If I were to carry them yet,
 what shall I answer? But stripped of my arms,
 with which I have achieved great deeds throughout Greece,
 will I die shamefully exposing myself to my enemies [*ekhthroi*]?
 They must not then be left behind, but be wretchedly kept [*sōzein*]. 1385
 I must ask one thing, Theseus: help me take
 this monster dog of hell to Argos

lest, if I go alone, my sorrows for my sons overwhelm me.
O land of Kadmeians, citizens of Thebes,
cut your hair, mourn together, go to the tomb
of my sons. Speaking as one lament together all the dead,
and me: one ruin on us all is fallen,
Crushed by one cruel stroke of Hera's rage.

1390

Theseus

Rise up, wretched man; enough tears have flowed.

Herakles

I cannot; torpid are my stiffened joints.

1395

Theseus

Misfortunes cast the strongest to the ground.

Herakles:

Would that I were stone, insensible of evils [*kaka*]!

Theseus

Stop: give your hand to your helping friend [*philos*].

Herakles

But don't let the blood defile your clothes.

Theseus

Lose not a thought on that; I am not ashamed.

1400

Herakles:

Bereft of my sons, I have a son in you.

Theseus

Put your arm around my neck, and I will guide your steps.

Herakles: A friendly [*philion*] pair, but one a complete wretch.
O reverend man, a friend [*philos*] like this man one must have.

Amphitryon

Blessed in her sons is the land that gave him birth.

1405

Herakles

Theseus, turn me back, that I may see my sons.

Theseus

Is that dear sight a charm to ease your pain?

Herakles

I wish it, leaning on my father's breast.

Amphitryon

Lean here, my son: that wish is dear [*phila*] to me.

Theseus

Do you thus have no memory [*mnēmē*] of your labors [*ponoi*]? 1410

Herakles

All I have endured of hardship [*kaka*] is less than this.

Theseus

If someone sees you acting like a woman, he would not praise you.

Herakles

Do I live so abject in your eyes? I didn't seem so before.

Theseus

Very much so. Being sick, you are not the famous Herakles.

Herakles

What sort of man were you when you were in
trouble [*kaka*] in the regions below the earth? 1415

Theseus

I was the least of all men in courage.

Herakles:

Then how can you say that I am debased in my troubles [*kaka*]?

Theseus

Let's go.

Herakles

Farewell, aged sir.

Amphitryon

And to you, my son, farewell.

Herakles

Entomb my children, as I told you.

Amphitryon

And me, my son, who shall entomb me?

Herakles

I will.

Amphitryon

When will you come?

Herakles

When you have buried my children.

1420

Amphitryon.

But how ?

Herakles

I will have them brought from Thebes to Athens.

But my ill-starred sons lay in the earth:

for me, who on my house brought ruin with shame,

I will follow Theseus like a boat towed in his wake.

Unwise is he, who prefers wealth or power

to the rich treasure of a good [*agathos*] friend [*philos*].

1425

Chorus

We go in pity and grief,

Losing in you our greatest friend [*philos*].

