

## HERACLEIDAE

Iolaus:

I've long thought a just man can lend a hand  
To neighbours, though he's been forced to withstand  
Calamity himself. A man whose heart  
Is fixed on gaining wealth cannot impart  
Aid to his city. He is pitiless  
To other people, and he shows excess  
Of self-love. By familiarity  
I've learned this, not by words expressed to me.  
Through honour and blood-ties I've shared much more  
With Heracles the labours that he bore                      10  
Than any man. I could have peacefully  
Lived out my life in Argos. Now, since he  
Now dwells in Heaven, these sons of his below  
My wings I keep in sanctuary, although  
I, too, need safety. When their father went  
From Earth, Eurystheus had the firm intent  
To kill us, but he failed. Although we lost  
Our city, we still lived. And yet we crossed  
From one town to another, extradited.  
Apart from woes with which we were thus blighted, 20  
He sent out heralds wherever we went  
To find a home, attempting to prevent  
Our settling. To be an enemy  
Or friend of Argos was, they said to me,  
No trivial thing and he was prosperous.  
Seeing that we were mostly powerless,

The children being small, and orphans, too,  
They kept us exiled. With these children who  
Are banished here am I, banished as well.  
I share with them their wretched homeless hell. 30  
I won't abandon them because I fear  
That folks will say, "Look at these children here!  
They're orphans, yet this man seems to decline  
Protecting them, though he is of their line."  
Thrust from the rest of Greece, now here we sit  
In Marathon and the land that borders it  
And ask the god for aid. For people tell  
That on the plain of Marathon there dwell  
Theseus' two sons. It's now their property  
Because with Pandion's posterity 40  
They drew lots, and these boys of Heracles  
Are relatives of these two. So to these  
Borders of Athens have we come. A pair  
Of old folks are in charge, for I take care  
Of these two boys, Alcmene ministering  
To Heracles's girls, enveloping  
Them in her arms because it would have been  
Shameful if by the crowds they had been seen  
Beside the altar. Hyllus, alongside  
His older brothers, hopes they can decide 50  
Upon a stronghold that we may command  
In case we are deported from this land. (enter Herald)  
Here, grasp my cloak, boys! Look there – don't you see  
Eurystheus' herald? He would speak with me.

He's dogged us, banished us hither and yon  
And made us wanderers. My curse upon  
You, and also the fellow who has sent  
Such dreadful trouble and such discontent  
On noble Heracles!

That this will happen.

Herald:

Leave! These children, too,

You'll see that I'll send packing, whether you

Like it or not, for they're the property

Of Eurystheus.

Iolaus:

Athenians from antiquity,

Help us! Our suppliant wreaths have been defaced –

The city and the gods have been disgraced. [enter Chorus]

Chorus:

What trouble does that wailing bode? I've found

A feeble old man stretched upon the ground.

[to the man] How did this happen, sir?

Iolaus:

This man dragged me

Down from the altar steps sadistically. 80

Whence did you come, sir? From Euboea's strand?

Iolaus:

No islander, I'm from the Greek mainland.

We're from Mycenae.

Chorus:

And what is your name?

Iolaus:

I'm Iolaus, not unknown to fame:

I aided Heracles – you know of me,

I'm sure.

Chorus:

I do indeed. Whose progeny

Are these that you are leading by the hand?

Iolaus:

Heracles. We are suppliants in this land.

And why have you come here, old man? Would they

Address the people?

Iolaus:

Not to be dragged away 90

To Argos is their wish.

Herald:

Your rulers who

Have found you here know that this will not do.

Chorus:

We must respect those who seek sanctuary.

These folk should not be forced to leave, for we

Must honour Justice, and we won't allow

This godlessness.

Herald:

Send them away right now

And I won't lay a hand on them, for they

Belong to Eurystheus.

Chorus:

It's wrong, I say,

To banish suppliants.

Herald:

Much better, though,

Is keeping far away from any woe 100

And have a better plan.

Chorus:

Before being bold

In this unholy act, you should have told  
This land's king.

Herald:

So tell me who rules this land.

Chorus:

The son of noble Theseus holds command –  
Demophon.

Herald:

So I must primarily  
Before this man wrangle and make my plea.  
My former words were wasted. [enter Demophon]

Chorus:

Here's the king,  
With Acamas, his brother, hurrying  
To hear your words.

Demophon:

[to the Chorus Leader] Good sir, old as you are,  
You have outstripped much younger men by far 110  
In helping at the altar. Tell me, then,  
What tragedy has caused so many men  
To gather?

Chorus:

Heracles' sons, as you see,  
Are at the altar, seeking sanctuary.  
Their father's loyal comrade is here, too –  
Iolaus.

Demophon:

But why all this hullabaloo  
Of grief?

Chorus:

    This man tried to take them away  
From sanctuary. They cried out in dismay.  
He knocked the old man to the ground, and I  
In pity could do nothing else but cry.                      120

Demophon:

His clothes are Greek, yet in barbarity  
He acted. [to the Herald] Quick! Where are you from? Tell me!

Herald:

I'm Argive, though I'll tell you why I went  
From there and by whom I was hither sent.  
Mycenae's king, Eurystheus, has sent me  
To fetch these children. Many a just plea  
I have for this. These people here have run  
Away from Argos: each and every one  
Must die according Argive decree,                      130  
Because it is appropriate that we  
Pass laws against our own. For overseas  
We've often gone and honoured these decrees  
And none has stood against us. Ah, but they  
Think you're a fool or, maybe, in dismay  
Are risking everything that they might see  
Whether you will or will not prove to be  
Brainless. For if you are in your right mind,  
To them you wouldn't feel foolishly kind,  
I think, alone of all the Greeks. If you  
Let them stay here, what profit would be due              140  
To you? However, if you let me take  
Them back to Argos, then you stand to make

Much gain - an army great and vigorous,  
Just like the troops that fight the foe for us.  
But if you hear their pleas and lamentation,  
Then it becomes a case of confrontation.  
You can't suppose we'll let this matter rest  
Without cold steel. What lands would you contest,  
What booty, that you'd lose, going to war  
With us? What allies were you fighting for,           150  
Will you then say when burying your dead?  
For there'll be nothing good that will be said  
About you by your people if you take  
Exemption to us for an old man's sake,  
A man as good as dead, a nullity,  
Or take the children's part. If you don't see  
Your true advantage, you can only rest  
Upon hope, which is fancy at the best.  
Against the Argives, these young boys, once they  
Are men, won't match up to our fine array           160  
Of troops, and therefore this you should ignore.  
Besides, you may be slaughtered long before.  
Give me what's mine and thereby you will make  
Us allies. Do not make the same mistake  
Athenians often make, but choose among  
Your friends never the weak, always the strong.  
Chorus:  
Until both sides are heard intelligibly,  
One cannot judge a speech or rule a plea.  
Iolaus:  
My lord, this is the law here. Therefore I

Possess the right to hear and to reply  
 In turn, and no-one may thrust me away  
 Until I've finished what I have to say,  
 As they have elsewhere. He's not our affair,  
 This man! In Argos we now have no share  
 But have been exiled from our native land.  
 And therefore he has no right to command  
 Us to depart, for we are aliens now.  
 Or do you think that it is right somehow  
 That exile thence is inextricably  
 Exile from Greece? Not Athens, certainly!                      180  
 They will not oust these children out of fear  
 Of Argives. We are not in Trachis here  
 Or any other town in Greece, where they  
 Are used to sending little ones away,  
 Though they are at the shrine. No lawful plea  
 Was this but merely prating endlessly  
 Of Argos' worth. I think that Athens, then,  
 Is free no longer. I well know these men –  
 They value, more than life, integrity.  
 I've spoken to you all sufficiently.                              190  
 Excessive praise will bring unhappiness,  
 For I have been displeased with such excess  
 Given to me. As leader of this city  
 It is your duty, sir, to show some pity  
 And save these children. Pittheus, whom you see,  
 Is King Pelops' and Aethra's progeny,  
 Grandson of Theseus. I'll tell you of these  
 Children's ancestors – firstly, Heracles

Was Zeus's and Alcmene's son, and she  
Was Pelops' daughter, and, accordingly, 200  
Your fathers are the sons of men who are  
First cousins. You are all related far  
Beyond this tie of blood. For Heracles  
I sailed with Theseus once across the seas  
To fetch Hippolyta's girdle. For this he  
Presented him with fair Antiope.  
And in this project many people laid  
Their lives down, and he brought from Hades' shade  
Your father. All of Greece knows this is true.  
For this his children here are asking you 210  
For recompense and not summarily  
To be dragged off. This is particularly  
A shameful thing for you. We feel the wrong  
That has been perpetrated on the throng  
Of suppliants, nomads, kinsmen. Can't you see  
They're being dragged away in misery?  
I beg of you! I grasp you by the chin!  
Don't scorn to take these noble children in  
A hug and be their kinsman, master, friend,  
For everything is better in the end 220  
Than ceding to the Argives.

Chorus:

Misery!

I pity their sad plight. Nobility  
Crushed by mischance – ah, now I see it all.  
Of noble lineage, these children fall  
Into misfortune undeservedly.

Demophon:

Three paths of worry are compelling me  
To listen to these words you had to say:  
First, Zeus, at whose shrine you and this array  
Of fledglings sit; then, consanguinity  
And the old debt that these young ones should be 230  
Looked after fairly for their father's sake;  
And, last of all, the thing that I must take  
Most seriously – fear of ignominy,  
For if I should allow this shrine to be  
Robbed by a foreigner, people will say  
That this land over which I now hold sway  
Is not free, and that I've shown faithlessness  
To suppliants through my own cravenness  
About the Argives. These are virtually  
Enough important issues to force me 240  
To hang myself. I wish that you'd come here  
A happier suppliant, but have no fear  
Of banishment! [to the Herald] And you – be on your way  
To Argos! Tell Eurystheus what I say!  
If he indicts these folk, he shall receive  
His just deserts. So tell him that! Now leave!

Herald:

Not even if my cause is just and I  
Gain victory in my plea?

Demophon:

Just? Just? You try

To nab a suppliant!

Herald:

That may be wrong,  
But *you're* not injured.

Demophon:

Disgrace would belong            250  
To me indeed if I should let you take  
These children hence.

Herald:

Well then, for Heaven's sake,  
Take them out to your boundaries, and then  
We'll lead them off.

Demophon:

It's only foolish men  
Who hope to trick the gods.

Herald:

It seems to me  
That here a felon can find sanctuary.

Demophon:

Not only felons can, but anyone.

Herald:

But this may not be the opinion  
Of Mycenaeans.

Demophon:

I'm the master, though,  
Of matters in this land.

Herald:

That may be so,            260  
But if you're sensible, you'll not outrage  
The gods.

Demophon:

I won't.

Herald:

I won't have you engage

In war with Argos!

Demophon:

I will not do so,

But I will not allow these folk to go.

Herald:

They're mine, so I will take them nonetheless.

Demophon:

Your journey, then, will cause you much distress.

Herald:

We'll see about that!

Demophon:

Well, you'll have to pay

The price if you but touch them.

Chorus:

Don't, I pray,

Dare strike a herald!

Demophon:

I will, certainly,

If he does not acquire propriety.

270

Chorus:

[to the Herald] Away! [to Demophon] Don't touch him, sir!

Herald:

Alright!

A single man puts up a feeble fight:

Thousands of men, though, will accompany me

When I return – a massive panoply,

Led By Eurystheus, who's waiting to hear  
The news I have to tell him. They are near  
In Megara, by your southern boundary,  
And once he hears of your effrontery  
He'll devastate your city and your land,  
And that's precisely why we've always planned 280  
To have a mass of soldiers.

Demophon:

Go away!

Your Argos doesn't fill me with dismay.  
You were not destined to discredit me  
And take these suppliants from sanctuary  
In Athens. For this city I command  
Is not subject to Argos but free land.

Chorus:

Let's think ahead before their troops get here –  
Their strength is such as to arouse some fear,  
And more so now, since heralds all are thus,  
Concocting stories twice as mountainous 290  
As is the truth. What tale do you suppose,  
What grotesque story will he tell to those  
Who sent him? That we used him monstrously  
And he preserved his life but narrowly?

Iolaus:

A brave and noble father's child is blessed,  
But I won't praise a man who is possessed  
Of lust and sin – he gains gratification  
For his own self but brings humiliation  
To those he has begot. Nobility

Is able to repel adversity 300

Better than base birth. When we underwent  
The most calamitous predicament,  
We found kinsmen and friends, who through all Greece  
Alone brought to these children here some peace  
By championing them. Children, come here  
And give these people your right hands. Draw near,  
My friends, and give them yours. Children, these men  
Have guaranteed their friendship to you. When,  
Or if, you get back home and once more see

Your kinsmen and reclaim your patrimony, 310

Remember that the rulers of this land  
Will always be your friends and saviours, and  
Never attack them, for they'll always be  
Your greatest friends of all. Your fealty  
To Athens she deserves – she rescued you  
From mighty Argos' troops, remaining true,  
Though we're but wandering beggars. Yes, they kept  
Us safe from the Argives, though they could have swept  
Us from this land. [to Demophon] My friend, your praises I

Will trumpet everywhere, and when I die 320

Your praises I'll extol while standing near  
To Theseus, whom I hope to fill with cheer  
While telling him that your consideration  
Once saved these children and your reputation  
Is great throughout the whole of Greece, while you  
Still keep alive his reputation, too.  
You equal him in your nobility.  
Of very few can this be said – maybe

Just one.

Chorus:

We always aid weak men who plead  
An honest case and so, for friends in need, 330  
We've suffered countless toils, and now I see  
That once again we face this drudgery.

Demophon:

Well said, old sir, and I am confident  
These children's deeds will prove equivalent  
To what you've said. I'm sure you will recall  
Our favour to you. I shall marshal all  
The citizens to meet the mighty host  
Of Mycenaeans. Scouts then I will post  
In order that the citizens will know  
Of their approach (and they are far from slow). 340  
I'll call the seers and make an offering  
But you must leave Lord Zeus's shrine and bring  
These children to the palace. There are men  
Who'll help you even if I'm gone. Go, then.

Iolaus:

I will not leave. As suppliants we'll stay  
Before the shrine and for good fortune pray.  
But then, when Athens is victorious,  
We'll go. The gods who are supporting us  
Are no worse than the gods who are allied  
To the Argives. Hera is not on our side 350  
But Queen Athena is: accordingly  
We'll be successful, as it seems to me –  
She will not brook defeat.

Chorus:

Proud words indeed,  
Argive! But we will give you no more heed  
For that. You will not fill our hearts with fear.  
Not for a long time may this happen here,  
I pray! You, like the son of Sthenelus,  
The Argive tyrant, are ridiculous!  
We are your equals here, and yet you tried  
To drive off wanderers here to abide 360  
As suppliants, not yielding to the king  
Or urging justice. How can such a thing  
Be fair to men of sense? I for my part  
Love peace, but I will tell you from my heart,  
You fool, you'll not succeed. Not only you  
Possess a spear and shield – others do, too!  
Oh no, lover of wars, don't throw your spear  
Into the turmoil of the city here,  
A city full of graciousness, but stay  
Your warrior's hand. Do not attempt a fray! [enter Demophon] 370

Iolaus:

My son, why do you have that look of woe?  
Do you have something new about the foe?  
Are they still tarrying or are they here?  
You won't prove false the herald's words, I fear.  
Eurystheus has been happy previously:  
He'll be here and he'll show no modesty.  
He'll have to face Lord Zeus, whose discipline  
Is meted on men bloated with the sin  
Of pride.

Demophon:

They're here. I was there personally,  
For I believe that he who claims to be 380  
His troops' true leader should not scrutinize  
The enemy through his own heralds' eyes.  
But he's not yet in Attica – no, he  
Is sitting on a rocky promontory,  
Considering the route whereby he'll bring  
His troops within the region bordering  
Our land, encamping in security.  
For my part all is satisfactorily  
Prepared: the city's armed, the victims stand  
In readiness to do the gods' command. 390  
I've gathered all the chanters in one spot  
And checked their words, some clear and others not  
Yet known, in order that we all may see  
How Athens may continue to be free.  
They vary greatly but on one thing they  
Are of the same opinion – to slay  
The enemy and keep us all secure,  
I have to sacrifice a girl who's pure  
To the daughter of Demeter – she must be  
Of noble stock – to rout the enemy. 400  
Though keen to aid you all, I will not kill  
My child or force someone against his will  
To do the same. Who would so foolishly  
Slaughter the child he loves exceedingly?  
Now you'll see crowds, some saying that it's just  
To succour beggars, others that I must

Be mad. If I do what I'm bid, there'll be  
A civil war right here. Accordingly,  
See how we may be saved, as well as our land,  
And in the people's eyes I still may stand 410  
Upright. For here there is no monarchy  
Like theirs, and if I act trustworthily  
I will be fairly treated.

Chorus:

Is this city  
Forbidden, then, to act out of sheer pity,  
Protecting strangers seeking sanctuary,  
Though she is keen to offer remedy?

Iolaus:

Children, we are like sailors who've got clear  
Of a wild sea-storm, and dry land is near,  
But then are driven to the deep once more:  
For once we were already on the shore, 420  
But now again we're thrust into the blast.  
Foul hope, you gave me pleasure in the past,  
So why not bring your favour to its end?  
No, Demophon's position I'd defend –  
How could he not be disinclined to kill  
His citizens' progeny against their will?  
I'm even thankful for our present case,  
For it is the gods' will that I should face  
This fate, not his. My children, I don't know  
What I should do with you? Where should we go? 430  
What shrines have we not wreathed? What land have we  
Not gone to, seeking some security?

We'll be surrendered, children. All is lost.

I don't care if I die but at the cost

Of pleasure to my enemies, but you

I pity, and your old grandmother, too.

I see now that it's fate that we must face

Death at our foe's hands in pain and disgrace.

[to Demophon] My hope has not been lost entirely

For them, so here's how you may succour me - 440

Surrender me instead, but pay great heed

That you are not in danger. I don't need

To live, and therefore let's put that aside.

Eurystheus would be happy to deride

Heracles' comrade by kidnapping me.

He's unrefined. Men of nobility

Hope that their foes are noble, too, not men

Bereft of courtesy. For only then

Do they receive due pity and fair play

From them.

Chorus:

Oh no, old friend, you cannot lay 450

The blame on Athens, who has not betrayed

Strangers – this accusation would have made

Me feel insulted.

Demophon:

Nobly said, and yet

Impossible: he is not here to get

To you, but them. Our enemies feel dread

Of well-born offspring when they move ahead

To manhood and recall the injury

Done to their father. Unfortunately

Eurystheus thinks like this. However, should

You have another plan, it may be good, 460

So tell it me, for I have heard the seers

And I am filled with helplessness and fears. [enter a daughter of Heracles]

Daughter:

Don't think me bold in coming here to you.

I know that silence is a woman's due,

And modesty and staying quietly

Indoors, but since I heard your agony,

Iolaus, here I am. Though you may say

I count for little, I am in some way

Fit to hear this, and since I greatly care

About my kin, I'm asking you to share 470

What's gnawing at your mind.

Iolaus:

For a long time now,

My child, I have been upheld in my vow

That of your siblings you're by far the best.

All has gone well, but now we are distressed

And past all help. I'm told by this man here

That it's been said by every single seer

That I must offer to Demeter's daughter

No bull, no calf – no, I'm supposed to slaughter

A noble maid to save us all. Now see

The problem – Demophon tells us that he 480

Won't sacrifice his own dear child and none

Who is the progeny of anyone

Else, and now he tells us, cryptically,

That we must free ourselves from tragedy  
Or go elsewhere because he has professed  
His country's good is his main interest.

Daughter:

Is it this prophecy that hinders us?

Iolaus:

It is, since otherwise we're prosperous.

Daughter:

Then fear no more the Argive enemy's spear,

For of my own accord I'm ready here 490

To be a victim. For what shall we say,

When we, who lean on others, run away

While Athens takes great risks for us and we

Are able to provide security?

It must not be the case, for if we sit

And groan as Zeus's suppliants, then it

Would show us to be cowards, although we

Are mighty Heracles's progeny.

How can these things be fitting in the eyes

Of noble men? It's better, I surmise, 500

If we were occupied (may it not be!),

That I'd be captured by the enemy,

The daughter of a warrior of great fame,

Deceasing in dishonour all the same!

Shall I accept banishment, then, from here,

A vagabond wandering far and near?

And shall I not be overcome with shame

If someone later says to me, "You came

As suppliant to us and yet you lack

Courage! We do not help base folk! Go back!”? 510

However, even if these men should die

And I’d continue to live after, I

Would be unhappy (many folk indeed

Have proved false to their comrades in their need

Of hope for happiness). Who’d wish to be

Wed to a maiden with no family?

Who’d wish to have my children? Better to die

Than undergo so many things that I

Do not deserve! That’s fitter for one who

Has a less noble lineage than I do. 520

Lead me to where I must be killed! Wreathe me

And, if you wish, begin the ceremony!

Defeat the foe. I of my own accord

Prefer to die. Myself I will afford

For kin and for myself, since now I find

That I’ll gloriously leave my life behind.

Chorus:

The maiden has resolved herself to die

To aid her brothers! What can I reply?

There are no nobler words that can be said

By any now or in the years ahead. 530

Iolaus:

You are your father’s daughter certainly –

Your words bring no embarrassment to me,

Although your sacrifice brings me distress.

These things, though, can be done, as I’ll profess,

With greater justice, for you must take pause –

Which of your sisters is the one who draws

The lot must die, for it is quite unwise

For you to be the victim otherwise.

Daughter:

I won't consider it, old man. No, I

Refuse this game of chance. For once I die, 540

What value is there, then? You won't compel

My death.

Iolaus:

This speech was spoken very well –

Indeed your words have moved me even more

Than that most noble speech you made before.

I neither bid your death nor veto it.

However, if you die you benefit

Your brothers

Daughter:

You most wisely extricate

Yourself. Don't fear that you'll participate

In staining of my blood – I'll set you free

From any stain. But come, old man, with me, 550

For it is in your arms I wish to die.

Yes, come with me! I want you to stand by

And dress my corpse. I'm going to the slaughter,

If I can claim that I'm Heracles' daughter.

Iolaus:

I don't believe that I could bear the sight

Of your demise.

Daughter:

Ask this man for the right

To die with women, then.

Demophon:

Sad maid, I will,  
For it would be a most disgraceful ill  
For me if you weren't buried properly,  
For I surely respect your bravery 560  
And the fair-mindedness of your request;  
You are the bravest, lady, and the best  
I've ever met. So, if you wish it so,  
To your brothers say farewell before you go,  
And to the old man, too.

Daughter:

Old man, adieu!  
Please educate these boys and see that you  
Make them wise men like you, and zealously  
Try to protect them from demise. For we  
Are yours, nurtured by you. You see that I  
Am offering my girlhood, doomed to die 570  
For them. My brothers, who attend me here,  
May you have happiness and all the cheer  
That I will lack! Honour this aged sir,  
As well as my grandmother – honour her,  
Your hosts as well. And if all of your pain  
Is lifted and you may go home again,  
Recall what kind of burial you ought  
To have in honour of the girl who bought  
Your lives with hers. A burial indeed  
With every honour is the one you need: 580  
I'll die to aid your kin. These words of mine  
I'll have as treasures, since I must resign

Children and maidenhood – if there should be  
Life underneath the earth (though it's my plea  
That there is not). If, on the point of death,  
We mortals are allowed still to have breath  
And suffer cares, we're lost, for it is sure,  
Men think, that death is trouble's greatest cure.

Iolaus:

Know that in life and death we will hold you  
In honour, bravest of all maids. Adieu! 590  
I may not utter ill of the goddess,  
For whom you hold a great devotedness. [exit Daughter]  
My children, I'm destroyed. With misery  
My limbs are melting. Come, take hold of me  
And set me down upon the altar here!  
Cover my head! For I do not feel cheer  
At what's occurred. And if it should turn out  
The oracle is wrong, there is no doubt  
My life's in ruins. A calamity  
Is here already, plain for all to see. 600

Chorus:

Man solely by the gods is cursed or blessed,  
And the same house does not forever rest  
Upon good fortune. One fate or another  
Dogs us. One worthy mortal it will smother  
In low estate, another it will bless  
And thereby raise him up to happiness.  
Nobody can avoid its blows by skill –  
He who would do so always suffers ill.  
Don't grieve the laws of Heaven or fall prostrate,

For that sad girl obtained a glorious fate, 610

Dying for her own siblings and our land,

And the renown awaiting her is grand.

Heroic goodness entails drudgery.

She is her father's daughter certainly

And worthy of his eminent descent.

And if you show that you are reverent

To a courageous girl who's chosen to

Offer her life, I'll be of help to you. [enter a servant]

Servant:

Hail, children! Your grandmother – where is she,

And the old man? – they've left the sanctuary. 620

Iolaus:

I'm here, for what is worth my being here.

Servant:

Why are you lying down? What do you fear?

Iolaus:

I've been rapt in a family tragedy.

Servant:

Then rouse yourself! Look up!

Iolaus:

No, look at me –

I'm old and weak.

Servant:

But I've great news!

Iolaus:

But who

Are you? I have forgotten where we two

Have met.

Servant:

I'm Hyllus' slave. Do you not know

Me by my face?

Iolaus:

My dearest comrade, so

You've all arrived safe and unscathed somehow?

Servant:

We have, and what is more, at least for now, 630

We have good fortune.

Iolaus:

Come, Alcmene, who

Are mother to a noble son! For you

Must hear these welcome words. Since long ago

You've been in anguish, hankering to know

Whether these men will ever come back again. [enter Alcmene]

Alcmene:

Why is this temple filled with shouts of men,

Iolaus? Is this Argive herald here

To injure you once more? I'm weak, I fear,

But while I live they will not take from me

These children, or may I no longer be 640

Heracles's mother! For if you should lay

A hand upon these children, you will pay

The price to us two aged folks.

Iolaus:

Don't fear,

Old woman, for no herald has come here

In anger.

Alcmene:

Well then, why this fearful shout?

Iolaus:

It was to call to you and bring you out

To meet this man.

Alcmene:

I do not comprehend.

Who is he?

Iolaus:

He desires you to lend

An ear to him – your grandson has returned.

Alcmene;

For bringing me this news, sir, you have earned 650

My blessing. If he's back, though, where is he?

What's stopping him from coming here to me?

Iolaus:

He's busy settling and marshalling

The army he has brought.

Alcmene:

This is a thing

Of no concern to us.

Iolaus:

It is indeed,

For I must see to this.

Servant:

What do you need

To learn?

Iolaus:

How large a force does he possess?

Servant:

It's large. How large, though, I would have to guess.

Iolaus:

And do our leaders know this?

Servant:

Yes. What's more,

They're on our left wing.

Iolaus:

Are thy ready for 660

Armed bathe, then?

Servant:

Yes, all the units are,

Each with its sacrificial beast.

Iolaus:

How far

Are they?

Servant:

Well, close enough that one may see

Their general quite clearly.

Iolaus:

What is he

Doing? Is he drawing up his troops?

Servant:

That's what

We think he's doing, although we cannot

Hear clearly. I have no desire to see

My masters closing on the enemy

Without my help. I'll go.

Iolaus:

I'll go with you.

We both believe, I think, that it's our due 670

To help our friends.

Servant:

It's unlike you to say

Such rot.

Iolaus:

Unlike me, too, to shun the fray

And fail my friends.

Servant:

Your strength is gone, my friend.

Iolaus:

Yet I'll fight as before - I must defend

My allies.

Servant:

But your aid will be but slight.

Iolaus:

The enemy will not endure the sight

Of me.

Servant:

The sight of you won't help at all

Without your action.

Iolaus:

What? Will they not fall

When through their shields my weapon's blow will burst?

Servant:

Perhaps, but you may topple over first. 680

Iolaus:

I'm ready to act, so don't stand in my way.

Servant:

You are too feeble, however you may  
Wish to.

Iolaus:

    Say on, but I will hear no more.

Servant:

You have no hoplite armour.

Iolaus:

                                There's a store  
Of captured weapons near the shrine. If I  
Survive, I'll give them back, but if I die,  
The god won't ask for them. Go in and get  
A suit of armour from the wall and let  
Me don it! Quick! It causes me disgrace  
Merely to sit at home while others face         690  
The enemy. [exit servant]

Chorus:

                        Time has not yet laid low  
Your noble spirit – it is young, although  
Your body's very weak. Why do you strain  
And struggle on, although it's all in vain  
For you and Athens? For you should subdue  
Your impulse – it's impossible for you  
To fight. Your youthful days won't reappear.

Alcmene:

You're mad! Do you intend to leave me here  
With my grandchildren?

Iolaus:

                                Yes indeed, I do –  
Defense is men's concern, while it's for you         700

To care for them.

Alcmene:

But if you meet your end,

How shall I live?

Iolaus:

Your grandsons will attend

To those still here.

Alcmene:

But what if they die, too

(May Heaven forbid!)?

Iolaus:

They won't surrender you,

Fear not!

Alcmene:

So much for me!

Iolaus:

I must suppose

That Zeus is still concerned about your woes.

Alcmene:

Well, Zeus knows well that I will not speak ill

About his conduct with myself, but still

He knows if it was apt. [enter Servant]

Iolaus:

Here, as you see,

Is a full suit of armour. Instantly 710

Don it! The fray is near – Ares feels hate

For sluggards most. But if you fear its weight,

Leave it for now! Don it when in the file

Of warriors! I'll carry it meanwhile.

Iolaus:

Well said! Do so! And now hand me the spear!

Support me by my forearm as you steer

My steps!

Servant:

What, lead a warrior like a tot?

Iolaus:

Yes, for it is crucial I should not

Stumble - an evil omen!

Servant:

Would that you

Could manage everything you wish to do! 720

Iolaus:

Quick!

Servant:

But you're slow.

Iolaus:

I'm hurrying, can't you see?

Servant:

I see no speed, but only fantasy!

Iolaus:

You'll change your tune once you have seen me there...

Servant:

But doing what? I'd like to think you'd fare

Successfully.

Iolaus:

I'll strike one of the foe

Straight through his shield.

Servant:

But we are very slow.

Shall we get there at all?

Iolaus:

Right arm of mine,

As I recall, upon the battle-line

When young and in Heracles's company

You vanquished Sparta. Would you could aid me 730

Like that again! Eurystheus, you must know,

Can't bring himself to stand up to a foe.

There is further injustice about those

Who own much wealth: these people, we suppose,

Are brave and capable.

Chorus:

O gleaming light,

Of Heaven, O Moon who stays aloft all night,

O Earth, cry out to all the gods on high!

Reach out to Zeus and Athena in the sky!

To save our land we soon will cut away

The path of danger with the iron-grey 740

Of steel, and thus we'll save our homes since we

Have brought these suppliants to sanctuary.

Mycenae, so warlike and prosperous,

Has nursed a dreadful enmity of us,

But we'd be cowards if we were to hand

Over these folks at Argos's command.

Zeus is my ally, so I have no fear,

Because his gratitude to me is clear.

I'll never say that there's less probity

In heavenly gods than in humanity. 750

This your city, Athena, and your land –  
You are its mother and its mistress and  
Its guardian. Therefore drive out from here  
The man who wrongly threatens us with the spear.  
We're valiant and don't deserve to be  
Cast out. Right here is the solemnity  
Of splendid sacrifice. We don't forget  
The final day of every month nor yet  
The choral chants and young men's songs. We hear  
Upon a windy hill loud shouts of cheer                      760  
While maidens dance all night. [enter a messenger]

Messenger:

Lady, I bring

You a report that is most ravishing  
To hear, though briefly told. The enemy  
Is conquered, and the palms of victory  
With all their armour are now being raised.

Alcmene:

Dear friend, you'll certainly be praised  
And you'll be free. But one thing still I fear,  
For I'm concerned that those whom I hold dear  
May not yet live.

Messenger:

Oh yes, they surely do,

With great renown!

Alcmene:

And iolaus, too?                      770

Messenger:

Oh yes, and from the gods his destiny

Is good.

Alcmene:

What? From some deed of bravery?

Messenger:

The man has turned from old to young again!

Alcmene:

Remarkable! But tell me – were our men

Successful?

Messenger:

Briefly, once our lines were placed

And all the hoplites of both armies faced

Each other, Hyllus from his chariot leapt

And in between the armies' ranks he stepped.

He said, "General of Argos, why can't we

Give up the land and live in harmony? 780

And therefore we will not be enemies,

Nor will Mycenae lose its companies

Of men. In single combat let us fight,

And if you kill me, you will have the right

To take these folks, but if I should succeed

And you are killed instead, then you must cede

All my ancestral rights and honours." Then

Murmurs of gratitude came from all the men

For their escape from all the agony

Of battle and for Hyllus' bravery. 790

Eurystheus, though, felt no respect at all

For those who heard the speech nor any pall

Of shame that he was cowardly although

The general. How could a man who's so

Yellow come to enslave the progeny  
Of Heracles? Then Hyllus, after he  
Had spoken, went back to the ranks. Then, when  
The seers knew that not just a brace of men  
Would settle peace, began at once to slay  
The beasts, and streams of blood without delay   800  
Flowed from their necks. Now, while the infantry  
Began to set their shields, the cavalry  
Mounted their chariots, and the man who led  
The troops of the Athenians then said  
What was required - a valiant exhortation:  
"You fellow-citizens, protect your nation,  
For it befits you." But the enemy  
Leader constrained his allies fervently  
That they should not disgrace the lands that they  
Were fighting for. However, when the fray           810  
Was signalled by the trumpet's high-pitched blare,  
What a great roar of shields do you think was there,  
Mixed with the sounds of groans and cries of pain?  
At first they broke our ranks, but back again  
They went, and then the fight was hand-to-hand  
And many soldiers tumbled to the sand.  
Loud cries were heard - "Athenians [or you who  
Sow on the fields of Argos], will not you  
Keep off disgrace?" By bending all our might,  
We finally put the Argive troops to flight.           820  
Iolaus. Seeing Hyllus speeding there,  
Stretched out his hand, entreating him to bear  
Him on his chariot. Once he was on,

He took the reins and followed hard upon  
Eurystheus. This / saw – now I'll tell you  
What was thereafter seen by others who  
Were present. Near Athena's deme he prayed  
To Zeus and Hebe that he may be made  
A young man once again for just one day  
So that he might be vigorous in the fray,                   830  
Exacting retribution. Then and there  
Above the chariot yoke there stood a pair  
Of stars that screened it in a dark-black cloud,  
And those who are sagacious have allowed  
That they are Hebe and your progeny,  
Heracles, and through this dark obscurity  
He showed his strong arms and his youthful frame.

And then old Iolaus won his fame  
By capturing the chariot expertly  
Not far from the Scionian promontory.                   840

He bound his foe's hands and returned to us  
With his first fruits of war, most glorious  
To see – that very general brought down,  
Once fortunate, now under Fortune's frown.  
We must not envy lucky men, for they  
Find Fortune's smile may last only one day.

Chorus:

Zeus makes our enemies flee. Now I can see  
That of the dread of fear I'll soon be free.

Alcmene:

O Zeus, you looked but lately on my grief,  
Yet I feel gratitude in my relief.                   850

I did not think my son lived in the sky  
In company with all the gods, but I  
Am sure now that what I have learned is true.  
Your troubles, children, have now fled from you,  
Free from that wretched man. Now you will see  
Your father's city and his property  
You'll have. To your ancestral gods you'll pray  
And sacrifice. No longer will you stray  
From town to town. Was Iolaus wise  
In sparing that vile man? For we surmise                      860  
That from your enemies you must exact  
Some punishment.

Messenger:

                    Well, Iolaus' act  
Was in respect for you that you might see  
Him cowering at your authority.  
He did not wish to come to you once more  
While he was yet alive and pay the score.  
Farewell, old woman, and remember me,  
And keep the promise that you'd set me free  
When with these splendid tidings I came here,  
For noble people's tongues should be sincere. [[exit Messenger] 870

Chorus:

I love to dance and hear the high-pitched trill  
Of flutes. Quen Aphrodite makes us thrill  
As well. But it's delightful, too, to see  
One's comrades who once lived in poverty  
Gain riches. Fate and Age, Time's child, grant us  
Many things. Dear Athens, you are virtuous.

Hold steady, and don't leave the course that you  
 Now hold! Revere the gods! Those people who  
 Do not agree with this may go mad. We  
 Have had plain proof of this: Zeus certainly 880  
 Has made it clear. He takes away the pride  
 Of the unjust. Your son now sits beside  
 The gods, old woman. What some folk have said  
 I'll not believe – that he among the dead  
 Of Hades lies, his corpse consumed by flame.  
 He's shared fair Hebe's bed since first he came  
 Into that hall of gold. O Hymen, two  
 Of Zeus's children have now honoured you.  
 So many things agree: just as they say  
 Athena helped their father, so, too, they 890  
 Were saved by Athens. The effrontery,  
 The violence and sheer iniquity  
 Of Eurystheus she has checked. And therefore may  
 My spirit and my soul not fade away! [enter a servant]  
 Servant:  
 My Lady, here's Eurystheus, someone you  
 Did not expect – this stroke of fortune, too,  
 He didn't want. For he had never thought  
 That, having waged his war, he would be brought  
 Before you. No, with his immense conceit,  
 He sneered at justice and attacked the seat 900  
 Of Athens. But his hopes have been subdued  
 By Zeus. A statue, with our gratitude  
 To him, is being set up by the stout  
 Iolaus and Hyllus. To bring him out

I was instructed. This will cause delight  
For you, for there is no more pleasant sight  
Than when one's foe falls from prosperity  
And then experiences tragedy.

Alcmene:

Has Justice captured you, then, at long last,  
You hateful creature? Steel yourself and cast        910

Your eyes at me, your foe! No longer do  
You govern us – no, now *we* govern *you*.

Do you believe it's right that you have done  
So many dreadful things that my poor son  
Has suffered and sent him away to kill  
Hydras and lions? I omit the ill

You further wrought on him, for that would take  
Too long. What further mischief did you make?  
You took him down to Hades' mansions, too.

Besides this, you were happy to pursue        920

Me and these children, who from everywhere  
In Greece sought altars, looking for gods' care,  
Though some are babes, some past maturity.

But you have found Athenians, who are free  
And do not fear you. You must suffer pain  
When we dispatch you – even that's a gain  
For you, since we would be quite justified  
In killing you more often for this tide  
Of griefs you've caused.

Servant:

Don't kill this man!

Alcmene:

Why not?

Is it for nothing that we now have got

The man incarcerated?

Servant:

Yes, indeed

It is for nothing, lady, if you heed

Your wish to kill him.

Alcmene:

Is there a decree

Forbidding it?

Servant:

Yes, it is contrary

To what's thought by the rulers of this land.

Alcmene:

What does this mean? I do not understand.

Do men here not find glory when they slay

Their enemies?

Servant:

Not enemies that they

Capture alive in battle.

Alcmene:

What about

Hyllus? Does he approve of this?

Servant:

No doubt! 940

Should he oppose the law?

Alcmene:

He should not see

The light of day.

Servant:

Ah, but his penalty

Is not to die.

Alcmene:

But shouldn't he die now?

Servant:

There's no-one who can kill the man, so how?

Alcmene:

I shall, for I aver that I'm someone!

Servant:

You'd be denounced if you should see it done.

Alcmene:

I love this city – none can say me nay –

But there's no-one who'll take this man away

From me. So call me reckless or too proud,

Since I'm a woman, but I say out loud 950

'I'll kill the man.'

Chorus:

Your wrath is very great

But just, old woman. I appreciate

Your feelings.

Eurystheus:

I'll not beg that I might live,

For wheedling like that is bound to give

To me the name of coward. For this brawl

Was not my choice in any way at all.

I knew that I was kin to you and your

Son Heracles. But whether I wished to or

Did not, Hera inflicted this disease

On me. Then when I fought with Heracles, 960

I lay awake concocting countless ways

To kill my foes so that, through all my days

Ahead, I'd fear no-one. I know your son

Was a true man: although my foe, he's one

Whom people will revere. But now that he

Is dead, I, who have earned the enmity

Of these young ones, am set to do my best

To exile or give them eternal rest,

And that would rescue me. Now you may claim

That, had your situation been the same 970

As mine was, you would not have tried to hound

That lion and let his young cubs run around

Freely in Argos. But there's none who will

Believe you. Therefore, since they did not kill

Me in the field, when I was eagerly

Anticipating death, the Greek decree

Would find my killer guilty now. The fact

Remains that here it's an unholy act –

Good judgment since they set a higher fee

Upon the god than their hatred of me! 980

Though I don't want to leave this world, yet I

Won't mourn my fate if I am forced to die.

Chorus:

The city has decided, and so free

The man!

Alcmene:

But what if he were killed, yet we

Complied with Athens?

Chorus:

Well, that would be best.

But how?

Alcmene:

To you I'll make it manifest.

I'll kill him and then give his corpse to those

Related to him who come to dispose

Of it. In this I will be innocent,

But for his death I'll bear the punishment. 990

Eurystheus:

Then kill me! To the city I will give

A gift since she freed me and let me live –

Apollo's oracle from long ago,

Which will do greater good than you can know.

You will inter me in the very place

Where I was meant to lie – before the face

Of Queen Athena. I forevermore

Shall lie here, someone from a foreign shore

Who will protect the city, though I'll be

A foe of Heracles's progeny 1000

When they come and expose their faithlessness,

Repudiating all your kindness

With a great army. Now, then, you can see

The kind of friends you offered sanctuary!

In that case, you may ask why I came here

And for Apollo's words I had no fear.

Well, I believed Hera much greater yet

Than oracles and therefore would not let

Me down. Libations, though, I do not need

Nor victims' blood, and therefore don't concede 1010

To have them poured upon my tomb, for I

Will mar their coming home. After I die

You'll have a double benefit from me –

Profit for you and, for the progeny

Of Heracles, great harm. Why then delay

To kill this man, now you have heard him say

All this, and save your own posterity?

For he has shown us fine security,

Although he is a foe. Take him away,

You servants, to the place where we must slay 1020

And bury him! And don't send me once more

To live in exile on some alien shore!

Chorus:

Take him away! This seems so right to me.

Our leaders now remain pollution-free.



