

HERACLES

Amphitryon:

What mortal has not heard about that one
Who shared his wife with Zeus – Alcaeus' son,
Grandson of Perseus and the father, too,
Of Heracles? He lived in Thebes, where grew
A crop of earth-born giants seeded by
Ares with a dragon's teeth. That man am I!
Of these Ares saved but a scanty band
And their descendants occupied this land.
Creon, Menoeceus' son, was one, and he
Became king and one of his progeny
Was Megara. All Thebans celebrated
Her wedding with glad lutes when she was mated
To famous Heracles. Now he, my son,
Left Thebes, where I was still a citizen,
Leaving his wife and all her kin behind,
And went to Argolis that he might find
A home there, that walled town constructed by
The Cyclopes, but from that town was I
Exiled for slaying Electryon; so he,
Wishing to mitigate my misery
And find for me a home in his own nation,
Offered Eurystheus a large valuation
For my recall, vowing that he would free
The earth of savage creatures. Possibly
Hera had forced his hand or he was fated.
With all his other labours terminated,

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He passed through Taenarum and thereby made
His way to Hades so that from the shade
He might drag Cerberus, that three-framed hound,
And he has not returned. A legend found 30
In Thebes says that Lycus in days of old
Wed Dirce and became the king, we're told;
This was before Zethus and Amphion,
The sons of Zeus, who proudly rode upon
Their milk-white steeds, ruled in the land. His son,
Another Lycus but an alien
From Euboea, slew Creon and appropriated
The government which was debilitated
By great dissension. So this coupling
With Creon's kin would prove an evil thing. 40
Now Hades holds my son. This recent king
Lycus is desperate for slaughtering
His children, wife and me (if I should rate
In my old age to merit such a fate),
For he's afraid that these boys will some day,
When grown to manhood, make the killer pay
For slaughter of their uncle's kin. Left by
My son to rear his children, here am I,
While he's below in Hades' gloomy pall
Of utter darkness. I have asked them all 50
As suppliants to stand before the shrine
Of Zeus the Saviour. That brave son of mine
Set up this monument that it might be
A plaque to celebrate his victory
Over the Minyae. Although in need

When he'll return!" All this in their dismay
They ask of me. I have no explanation
And so I offer them some mitigation,
Inventing tales. Still when I hear outside
A creaking at the door, my eyes grow wide –
"Can it be he?" I think. Immediately
The children rise, thinking that finally
They will embrace their father. But, old friend,
Is there some hope that you can recommend? 90
For we can never sneak away unseen
Beyond the boundaries of this land – there's been
Too strict a watch set up in every place,
Nor are we able to expect a trace
Of help from friends. Tell me your plan, for I
Fear that, without one, we shall surely die.

Chorus:

To this man's lodgings have I made my way,
Singing a dirge like some old bird grown grey,
Though I am but a voice, of fancy bred
Of dreams that come by night when one's abed. 100
I'm weak in age, yet meaning kindness.
Hail, orphans! Hail, old friend! In your distress
I hail you, lady, too, for Heracles
You wail, for he is lying in Hades.
Don't tire like an overburdened nag
That climbs a rocky hill and tries to drag
A heavy cart! If any one of you
Should falter, grab the hand or cloak of who
Is next to you. The old should help the old,

For once upon a time you all were bold, 110

Comrades in arms to save your country. See

How these young children's eyes flash steadfastly

Just like their father's eyes! They have not met

With any infelicity, nor yet

Are they denied good looks. If they are lost

To you, o Grecian land, that loss will cost

You dearly. Ah, the ruler of this land

Approaches. [enter Lycus]

Lycus:

One thing I must understand

Of both of you, and as your ruler I

Possess the right. So, how long will you try 120

To stay alive? What prospect can you see

To save yourselves from death, what remedy?

[to Amphitryon] Do you believe these children's father, who

Lies dead in Hades, will return to you?

At your approaching death unworthily

You show your sorrow after thoughtlessly

Boasting that you have shared a marriage-bed

With Zeus and shared his children. [to Megara] You have said

That Heracles was peerless: after all,

What fine exploit of his can you recall? 130

The hydra in the marsh? That other one,

The monster from Nemea? That was done

By snaring it, but then he said that he

Had strangled that wild beast bare-handedly.

And this you hope will save you from your death?

Well, I believe that you should save your breath!

He's famed for killing beasts – elsewhere he's nought,
Who never buckled on a shield or fought
Against a spearsman. But his bow he'd string,
A coward's weapon, ever hankering 140
To run away. No manly bravery
Is manifested by one's archery.
No, he's a man who keeps his post to fight
And steadily confronts the spear that might
Plough through his flesh. Old man, my policy
Is caution and not reckless cruelty.
This woman's father Creon I cut down
And now am in possession of the crown.
These children must not grow up to requite
What I have done.

Amphitryon:

Let Zeus defend his fight 150
To his own son, for I will verify
This tyrant's unenlightenment, for I
Will not allow Lord Heracles to be
Ill spoken of. Well, then, primarily
He was no coward – that is quite outside
The pale of speech – therefore I will provide
Clear proof of this. Lord Zeus's bolt I call
Upon, his chariot, too, where he pierced all
The Giants to the heart and then, along
With all the other gods, sang out a song 160
Of triumph. You should go to Pholoe,
You craven king, and ask the company
Of Centaurs whom they judge the bravest one
Of all mankind. Will they not say my son,

Though you will not? Dirphys, your native place,
 Would not, if asked about you, ever grace
 You with its praise, for not one gallant act
 Have you performed for her. Let's add the fact
 That you demean the bow: listen to me,
 And maybe you'll learn some sagacity – 170
 The front-line soldier finds himself in thrall
 To his weapons and is liable to fall
 In battle if his fellows should display
 That they are cowards. Or perhaps he may
 Shatter his spear, and he is helpless then
 With just one weapon. But if all the men
 Have armed themselves with trusty bows, although
 They fight with just one weapon, even so
 They are the best, for once a man has shot
 Limitless arrows from his bow, he's got 180
 Yet more to save himself from death, for he
 Is at a distance from the enemy
 And wounds them with his unseen shafts, despite
 Their watchfulness, by keeping out of sight,
 The wisest course in battle – "harm the foe
 But keep yourself secure." All this, I know,
 Is totally opposed to what you said.
 Next point, why do you want these children dead?
 What have they done to you? And yet I see
 Your chicken terror of the progeny 190
 Of a great man is wise. And yet for us
 That cowardice you show is onerous,
 For we must die for it, a destiny,
 If Zeus had looked upon us favourably,

That should have been imposed by braver men,
Ourselves, upon yourselves. But yet again,
If you are keen exhaustively to reign,
Let us go into exile; and abstain
From violence, for it would cause you woe,
When Fortune's breezes hover to and fro. 200
O Thebes, hear my reproach – is this how you
Treat Heracles, and his descendants, too?
Alone he faced the Minyans in fight,
Allowing Thebes freely to see the light.
I can't praise Greece nor anymore stay mum.
No, she betrayed my son! She should have come
To aid these chicks with fire and weaponry,
For Heracles has purged both land and sea.
Yet neither Thebes nor Greece agrees to lend
You aid, my boys. Greece seems a feeble friend, 210
While I am empty sound and nothing more.
As to the vigour that I had before,
My limbs are palsied with senility
And all my strength has turned to atrophy.
Were I still young and powerful, I would
Have taken up my spear so that I could
Have sprayed his flaxen locks with blood, thereby
Causing the coward that he is to fly
Beyond Atlas's bounds.

Chorus:

Is it not so

That brave men may speak fairly, although slow 220
To start?

Lycus:

You may say what you will of me
In your exalted fashion, but you'll see
My deeds will make you rue what you've just said.
[to his servants] Go, some to Helicon! Others must head
To Parnassus's glens. The woodsmen there
Must cut me logs of oak, and when you bear
Them hither, pile a stack of wood around
The altar, light a fire on that mound
And burn them all! Thus they will understand
That it is not the dead who rule this land. 230
No, I am king at present. [to the Chorus] As for you,
Old men, since you repudiate my view,
Not only for his sons shall you lament
But also for your own predicament,
For you are merely slaves while I am he
Who is your monarch.

Chorus:

O you progeny
Of earth, whom Ares sowed in days long past
When from the dragon's jaws its teeth he cast,
Hold up the staves you're holding and dash out
This villain's brains, this fellow who, without 240
Being a Theban, lords it shamefully
Over the youths. My lord he'll never be!
Nor shall he reap the harvest of what I
Have laboured for. You brazen fellow, hie
Back to your native land! For while I may
Look on the light of day, you'll never slay
These boys. Their father's not so far below
The earth. This land is devastated, though

You are her governor, while he, her friend,
Has missed his due reward. But do I tend 250
To take too much upon myself since I
Assist those whom I love after they die?
O you right hand of mine, you clearly long
To grasp a spear once more, but you're not strong
Enough. [to Lycus] But if I still were strong, I would
Have stopped you calling me a slave and could
Have ruled the city most successfully.
But now she's yours: wrapped in disharmony
And bad advice a city must be mad,
Or she would not have borne the king she's had. 260

Megara:

Thank you, old men. For it is only just
That they feel virtuous wrath - indeed they must –
In favour of their loved ones. But, I pray,
Don't vent your anger on this king! It may
Be your undoing! Heed, Amphitryon,
If you see aught in my opinion!
I love my children, for it would be rare
Not to love those I happily would bear.
I count death as a dreadful destiny
But he who strives against necessity 270
I deem an idiot. Since we must go
Beneath the earth to Hades, let's do so
Without being burnt to death, a mockery
For all our enemies, which seems to be
An evil worse than death. We owe our kin
Much benefit. And you have always been
A warrior with everlasting fame –

Thus you must not die with a coward's name.
My husband's reputation proves that he
Would not assent to save his progeny 280
From death by letting them incur the stain
Of cowardice. The noble, too, sustain
Shame through their children. So in the same way
I must act like my husband. Let me say
Something about your hopes! Do you suppose
Your son will come back from the dead? Of those
Who died have any done so?? Do not try
To ease his temper! No, better to fly
From one so brutish! One should yield to men
Of breeding and of wisdom, because then, 290
Appealing to their sense of decency,
You might achieve some kind of harmony.
It's true that I'd already thought, indeed,
That for the children we should try to plead
For exile, yet this, too, is misery,
Combining liberty with penury –
A host will smile upon a banished friend,
It's said, for just one day and there's an end.
So die with us, for that's your destiny:
I challenge you by your nobility, 300
Because whoever struggles to defend
Himself from what the gods have thought to send
Doubtless shows zeal, but zeal that has the smack
Of folly, for there is no turning back
From what must be.
Chorus:

If someone slighted you,

To stop him was an easy thing to do
When I was strong. But now I'm nought, and so
You must somehow try to avert your woe.

Amphitryon:

It is not cowardice nor hankering
For life that stops me from acknowledging 310
My imminent death. No, it's my wish to save
My children, though no doubt the thing I crave
Will come to nothing after all. Now see
I'm ready, so do what you like to me!
Take up your sword and pierce my neck, then fling
Me from the rock, but I ask just one thing -
Slay Megara and me before you slay
The children, king, in order that we may
Not see them as they die, a hideous sight
As they gasp out their lives and call in fright 320
To Megara and the father of Heracles;
And for the rest do anything you please! –
We can't fight death.

Megara:

A second favour, lord,
I beg – though you're one man, you may afford
Us with a double boon. Let's go inside!
Unlock the doors so that I may provide
These children with their funeral robes and dress
Them for the funeral rites – a graciousness
That is the very least they should receive
From their own father's house.

Lycus:

I give you leave 330

For that. Go in and dress! I won't deny
A right like that, but when you're dressed, then I
Will send you down to Hades. [exit Lycus]

Megara:

Children, go!

Follow your wretched mother's steps! Although
Others now own your father's goods, yet we
Still own his name. [exit Megara and her children]

Amphitryon:

Lord Zeus, explain to me

What is the point to suffer you to share
My wife! Why did I broadcast everywhere
That you're my son's half-father? For to me
You've been less friendly than I thought you'd be. 340
Though you're a great god, I in every way
Outdistance you. For I did not betray
Heracles' children, while you stealthily
Took someone else's wife, not asking me
For my permission. You've no skilfulness
In keeping friends! You're full of senselessness,
Or else you are unjust. [exit]

Chorus:

Phoebus, once he

Has sounded out a happy melody,
Mourns beauteous Linus, with a key of gold
Striking his lyre, but I will unfold 350
A song of praise, crowning the toil of one
Who's gone beneath the earth – Lord Zeus's son,
Or else Amphitryon's. For there is fame
Among the dead for deeds of noble name.

He killed a lion in Zeus's grove and donned
Its skin upon his back, his hair of blond
Hid by its tawny jaws. And then one day
With murderous bow he hunted down his prey,
The mountain-ranging Centaurs, a wild race,
And with his winged arrows in the chase 360
He slew them. The fair river Peneus knew
Him well, and those far barren meadows, too,
And Pelion and the caves of Homole,
Whence, on the way to conquer Thessaly,
The Centaurs, armed with pine-trees, galloped on.
He slew the dappled deer, that preyed upon
The country-folk, with horns of gold, for he
Honoured Queen Artemis of Oenoe.
And next, upon a chariot, he subdued
The steeds of Diomedes, too, whose food 370
Was from the gory troughs, the flesh of men,
Which they devoured with hideous joy, and then
He crossed the silver river Hebrus and
Performed a labour at the royal command
Of Agamemnon.; and he also slew,
Beside Anaurus' waters, Cycnus, who
Murdered his guests, Amphanae's savage wretch.
Then he went to the west that he might fetch
The golden fruit of the Hesperides
Owned by those minstrel maids, for on the trees 380
They grew there. When the tawny dragon he
Had slain, though spirals twisted dreadfully
Around it as a guard, he made his way
To Ocean's lairs so that he might allay

The winds for sailors. After that, he went
To Atlas to uphold the firmament,
And then the heavenly mansions in the sky
With his almighty hand he raised up high.
And then he crossed the heaving Euxine Sea
And round Maeotis faced the company 390
Of mounted Amazons who flourished there,
Circled by many streams. And that was where
He gathered all his friends from all about
The country so that they might smuggle out
Their queen's gold girdle, such a deadly quest.
So now Greece has these trophies and they rest
In safety in Mycenae. Then he slew
Lerna's vile hound by casting it into
The flames – it was a many-headed thing,
And murderous to boot – then plastering 400
Its venom on his darts, and with these he
Dispatched Erytheia's monstrosity,
A shepherd with three bodies. There were more
Such glorious achievements, quite a score!
And now his toils are over, he has spanned
The Styx and gone to Hades' tear-soaked land,
Nor has he yet returned. You've lost your friend;
Your children are about to meet their end
And Charon's boat is waiting now to bear
Them down to Hades' gloomy mansions, where 410
There's no returning, where no god's decree
Or human rights were ever meant to be.
Your house looks for your sturdy arms to steer
It from all danger, but you are not here,

Lord Heracles! Had I been hale and strong,
Able to brandish weaponry along
With all my Theban comrades, I'd now be
A champion for your sons, but look at me!
My happy youth is gone, and I'm left here. [enter Megara, Amphitryon and the children]
The sons of Heracles are drawing near! 420
They wear the robes that mark the end of life.
The once-great Heracles's loving wife
Is pulling them along. Here's Heracles'
Old father! I no longer can stem these
Sad tears of mine.

Megara:

Who is there here to slay
These children and to take my life away?
They're ready now to go. Oh, how bizarre
A company of offerings we are! –
Old, young and mothers. Ah, what misery!
My children, these sad eyes will never see
You more! I reared you for our foes to kill
In their disparagement. [to one son] Ye gods, how ill 430
My hopes for what your father planned to give
To you – Argos! And he'd have had you live
In Eurystheus' halls, and you'd have had command
Of all the fruits in the Argolic land.
And you would wear the lion's skin which he
Had won in battle. [to another son] He'd have had you be
The king of Thebes, the city which gained fame
For chariots, and my broad lands he'd name
As your inheritance, for they indeed
Had been the very lands for which you'd plead. 440

And he'd pretend to give you in your hand
His club, his sure defence. [to a third son] To you the land
Of Oechalia he vowed, the land which he
Had once disabled with his archery.
With these three principalities he would
Exalt you all, content with your manhood.
And I looked for three brides for all the three
Of you to link you satisfactorily
To Athens, Thebes and Sparta, that you might
Embark on happiness while anchored tight. 450
Now all that's gone, for Fortune's breeze has sped
Away from you and given you instead
To brides of death. Therefore my tears shall be
The marriage-bath; for thinking foolishly
A plague on me! The feast is taken on
For celebration by Amphytrion,
A father's cares, for Hades now must be
The father of the brides. Ah, misery!
Whom first to clasp, whom last? On whom bestow
A kiss or hold close to my bosom? Oh, 460
Would that I, like the bee with russet wing,
Could gather all my sighs, commingling
Them all together, and thus shed them all
At once! My dearest Heracles, I call
On you, if mortal voices can be heard
In Hades' gloomy halls – I give you word
Your sons and father soon will die, and I,
Who once was counted blessed in days gone by
Because of you, am doomed as well. Come here
And rescue us, if only as a mere 470

Phantom, for even as a dream you'd be
Sufficient, for these thugs are cowardly.

Amphitryon:

Lady, you must prepare the funeral rites,
But, Zeus, I lift my hands up to the heights
Of Heaven – save these children, if in fact
It's your intention, for soon any act
Of yours will not avail! My toil's in vain,
For you are often called on – thus it's plain
That death is certain. Life's delights are few,
My aged friends, and so take heed that you 480
Enjoy its joys as gladly as you may
Without a thought of sorrow every day.
For time gives little heed to hopes and, when
It finishes its own affairs, why then
It flies away. I've made my mark amid
My fellows by the famous deeds I did,
But like a feather, in one single day
By Fortune I've been wafted clean away.
I don't know anyone whose wealth and high
Repute is fixed and sure; therefore goodbye 490
Forever, comrades!

Megara [seeing Heracles approaching]:

Old friend, do I see

My dearest one?

Amphitryon:

Daughter, I'm equally

Amazed.

Megara:

Is this the man who went, we hear,

Beneath the earth? Or does some day-dream jeer
At us? What did I say?? What dreams are these
To cause my eyes to see such mysteries?
This is your son, old man. Children, come here!
Cling to his robe! Quick! For there's no-one near
To help, save Zeus. [enter Heracles]

Heracles:

All hail, my home, to you!

How glad I am to come into your view! 500

What's this that causes me to catch my breath?

I see my children in the robes of death

With chaplets on their heads, my wife among

A throng of men. My father weeps! What wrong

Has hit the house?

Megara:

O my dear husband...

Amphitryon:

...who

May give me hope!

Megara:

But is it really you,

Alive and well? For just in time you've come

To save your kin.

Heracles:

What pandemonium

Is this?

Megara:

We're ruined! Old friend, pardon me

For saying what you've earned the liberty 510

To say yourself, but women are more prone

To grief than men, and these boys are my own
Dear sons who faced their death, and I as well
Was doomed.

Heracles:

Ah, such a prelude do you tell!

Megara:

My brothers and my father died.

Heracles:

But why?

What did he do? By whose spear did he die?

Megara:

It was the spear of Lycus, our new king.

Heracles:

In fight? Or was the country suffering

From some affliction?

Megara:

Yes, there was discord.

Of seven-gated Thebes he now is lord. 520

Heracles:

What panic fell on you?

Megara:

He planned to slay

My father, me and mine.

Heracles:

What's that you say?

What did he fear from them?

Megara:

He feared that they

May plan vengeance for Creon's death some day.

Heracles:

And why have they got on this sombre dress
More suited to the dead?

Megara:

In readiness

For death.

Heracles:

A death enforced?

Megara:

Oh yes, that's true –

Devoid of friends, they had been told that you
Were dead.

Heracles:

By whom?

Megara:

It was reported by

Eurystheus' messengers.

Heracles:

But tell me why 530

You left!

Megara:

We had no choice, for forcibly

He dragged your father from his bed.

Heracles:

Had he

No shame to treat an aged person so?

Megara:

Ah, shame indeed! He and the goddess go
Their separate ways.

Heracles:

And are my friends so rare

Now I'm not here?

Megara:

But who has friends when there

Is ill luck in his life?

Heracles:

Do they make light

Of the ill luck I suffered in my fight

Against the Minyans?

Megara:

Again I say

Ill luck lacks friends.

Heracles:

But come now, cast away 540

Those chaplets of death and look up at the light –

Instead of darkness, you'll welcome the sight

Of the bright sun. In the meantime, since there

Is work that I must do, I'll firstly tear

The villain's halls apart, then I'll behead

The man and throw him to the dog to shred

In pieces. Every Theban who I find

Has played the traitor, though I've been so kind

To him, I'll club to death. The rest I'll kill

With arrows from my bow, with whom I'll fill 550

Ismenus whose clear streams will run with gore.

For who else is there whom I'd labour for

Than wife and sons and father? So, goodbye,

My labours, for it was in vain that I

Performed you, shunning kin. I ought to die

Defending those I love since it was I

Who caused my father's doom. Alright, I slew

A hydra and a lion at the due
Commands of King Eurystheus! Was that fine
If I refused to save these sons of mine 560
From death? Though Heracles has been before
Called victor, he's not called that anymore.

Chorus:

Parents should help their kin.

Amphitryon:

My son, you're right

To show your love for your dear ones and slight
Your foes, but please beware of hastiness!

Heracles:

But, father, am I showing an excess
Of haste?

Amphitryon:

Son, many allies has the king,
Men who are poor but go round trumpeting
Their so-called opulence. They overthrow
The state by sowing discord with a view 570
To plundering their neighbours. They have spent
Their wealth through lethargy. No, when you went
Into the city you were seen: therefore
Take care that you don't start a private war
And thus be slaughtered unexpectedly!

Heracles:

I do not care if everyone sees me.
But in an inauspicious spot I spied
A bird whence I discovered that a tide
Of troubles hit my house so made my way
In secret here.

Amphitryon:

That's good! So go and pay 580
Your thanks to your goddess and let them see
You in the house! For Lycus presently
Will come to drag your wife and sons away
And slaughter them, and me, too, he will slay.
But if you stay here, where you're safe, you will
Achieve whatever you desire. But still
Don't go into the city now, my son,
And rouse the citizens until you've done
Full preparation!

Heracles:

I will not do so,
For your advice is good. Now I will go 590
Into my house. After the sunless lair
Of Hades and the queen of Hell, I'll dare
Not fail to greet the gods there.

Amphitryon:

Is it true,
My son, the house of Hades welcomed you?

Heracles:

It did, and thus I brought into the light
That monster hound.

Amphitryon:

Did you slay him in fight
Or did the goddess give you him?

Heracles:

I slew
Him fairly, having been admitted to
The Eleusinian mysteries before

I went to Hades.

Amphitryon:

Does Eurystheus store

600

The beast?

Heracles:

The city of Hermione

Now has him, in Demeter's sanctuary.

Amphitryon:

And is Eurystheus not aware that you

Have come back to the upper world?

Heracles:

That's true,

He isn't. For I came here first to know

Your news.

Amphitryon:

But why were you so long below

The earth?

Heracles:

Father, some time I lingered there,

Trying to bring Lord Theseus back.

Amphitryon:

But where

Is he? Back in his native land?

Heracles:

He went

Away to Athens, more than just content

610

To leave the lower world. Sons, come with me

Into the house! I think that you will be

Happier when you see me entering

Than you were when you saw me exiting.

Take heart! No tears! Dear wife, release your fear!
Let go my robe! – I cannot fly from here.
From those I love I do not wish to flee.
They're holding on, clinging incessantly!
The razor's edge of danger now is gone.
Alright, in that case I must lead them on, 630
As ships tow little boats. I won't condemn
My children, for I must look after them.
Mankind adores its children, poverty
And wealth alike. Ah, youth is dear to me!
Old age, however, hangs over my head,
A burden that is heavier than lead
Or Etna, casting gloom upon my eyes.
O Asia's regal wealth, don't tantalize
And tempt me to exchange my happy youth
For houses stored with gold, because, in truth, 630
One's youth is fair in wealth or poverty.
Old age is deadly, though, and shadowy.
I hate it. Let it be engulfed and drowned
Beneath the waves! Would it had never found
Its way but ever drifted in the skies!
And had the gods shown that they all were wise,
They would have granted to all mortal men
A double youth, that they'd come back again
From death and start afresh: the bad ones, though,
Would have but one, and thereby we would know 640
The good men from the bad, as those who plough
The seas in ships are able to know how
Many stars are in the sky. But they've not set
Any bounds between the two, and so time yet

Increases wealth. There is a union
 Of the Graces and the Muses – they are one,
 It seems to me. So never may I be
 Compelled to suffer in the company
 Of boors who have received no education,
 But may I ever be allowed a station 650
 Among the crowned. Of bygone memories
 The aged singer sings: of Heracles'
 Triumphs, I still sing, whether Bacchus is near
 Or else the seven-stringed lyre we may hear
 Or Libyan pipes. I'll sing the Muses' praise
 And dance for them. The maids of Delos raise
 Their song of joy while they are circling
 The gates that front the temple, honouring
 Leto's fair son, who dances gracefully:
 With my old lips I sing resonantly, 660
 Swan-like, around your palace – here's a theme
 For singing, for he represents the cream
 Of high nobility: he's Zeus's son,
 And we must sing of deeds that he has done,
 His labours and his acts of bravery,
 His bringing to mankind tranquillity
 By slaying gruesome beasts. [enter Amphitryon and Lycus]
 Lycus:
 At last you're here,
 Amphitryon! You've donned your funeral gear
 At last! Summon the kin of Heracles!
 Amphitryon:
 You plague me too much for my miseries, 670
 My lord, and vex me over and above

The loss of my dear son, whom I so love.

You should have been more moderate, though you

Are lord of me. But since my death is due,

I must yield to what you wish to be done.

Lycus:

Where are the children of Alcmena's son?

Where's Megara?

Amphitryon:

From what I can make out

By looking through the gate –

Lycus:

What's she about?

What's going on out there? What do you see?

Amphitryon:

She is a suppliant at the sanctuary. 680

Lycus:

Her hopes are vain.

Amphitryon:

Her husband cannot hear

Her call to him.

Lycus:

Indeed, he's nowhere near

And he will never come here certainly.

Amphitryon:

No, not unless a god should possibly

Bring him back from the dead.

Lycus:

Then off you go

And bring him here!

Amphitryon:

And yet, by doing so,
I would be an accomplice in a case
Of murder.

Lycus:

Since I have no fear to face,
Therefore, I'll bring them here. So follow me,
You servants, so that we may joyfully 690
Put pay at last to this irksome affair. [exit Lycus]

Amphitryon:

Go, meet your fate! Let other folk take care
Of all the rest, expecting to requite
Your evil deeds. The time's precisely right
For him – the villain makes his way inside,
Hoping to kill, but hidden swords abide
To meet him. I am going in to see
Him die. It's fine to watch one's enemy
Pay the full price for sin. [exit Amphitryon]

Chorus:

Evil has gone,
For the great man we once relied upon 700
Is back from Hell – alive! Welcome, redress!
Welcome, immortal even-handedness!
Villain, you'll meet your well-earned destiny –
Your death through which you'll pay the penalty
For slandering your betters. Tears of bliss
I weep, for I had never hoped for this –
Our prince is back. Let us investigate
And see if someone now has met the fate
I've wished for.

Lycus [within]: Ah!

Chorus:

How sweet a sound to hear,
That opening note! His death is very near. 710

Lycus [within]:

Ah, treachery!

Chorus:

You murderer, withstand
This penalty which your foul deeds demand
In turn! Blaspheming man, with empty head
You called the gods all weaklings – now you're dead!
That's right, old friends, our godless enemy
Is now no more. The house stands silently.
Let's dance! For fortune smiles on us today.
In holy Thebes dances and feasts hold sway.
Tears change to song, for the new king is dead,
Our former monarch ruling in his stead. 720
He's come here from the port of Acheron
Beyond all hope we could depend upon.
The gods take care what's both wrong and right –
Gold and good luck make mortals' sense take flight,
Making them use their strength tyrannically.
For there's no man who ever dared to see
Future calamities that Time may bring:
He disregards the law, determining
To break it. Thebes, start the terpsichory!
Ismenus, wreath yourself! Come here, Dirce, 730
Fair fountain! Ocean nymphs, come solemnize,
Along with us, Lord Heracles's prize!
Parnassus, with your forests all about,
And Helicon, come hither now and shout

Your joy in Thebes, where earth-born people sprang,
 A warrior-host with shields of brass that rang,
 Who now are passing on their legacy,
 A light to Thebes, to their posterity.
 Marriage, all hail! Two bridegrooms shared – the one
 Was Zeus, the other was Amphitryon: 740
 They wed Alcmene – many years ago
 This has been proved, and time has come to show
 The strength of Heracles. For he's arisen
 From caverns where Lord Pluto keeps his prison.
 He is a worthier lord, it seems to me,
 Than that base tyrant, whose just destiny
 Will surely be determined in his fight
 With warriors. [enter Panic and Iris] Look there – a ghastly sight!
 Panic is here. What phantom do I see
 That looms above the house? Immediately 750
 Begone! O saviour prince, take them away!
 Iris:
 Old men, have courage! Conquer your dismay!
 For this is Panic, dark Night's progeny,
 And I am Iris, who am known to be
 The handmaid of the gods, and our intent
 Is not to harm Thebes – no, our warfare's meant
 For just one man, and that man is the son
 Of Zeus and Alcmene. His labours done,
 Destiny kept him safe: Lord Zeus forbade
 Our causing harm to him, and Hera had 760
 The same command. Now Hera wants to brand
 Him guilty of slaying with his own hand
 His children, and with Hera I agree.

Come, then, unmarried maid, the progeny
Of dark Night, use your ruthless heart to cast
Upon that murderer a frenzied blast!
Confound his mind and drive him on to slay
His children, goad him on his frantic way!
Shake out his sails of death, and then when he
Conveys across the Styx his progeny, 770
He'll know how fiercely Hera's wrath can rise
Against him – mine as well - , for otherwise,
If he's unpunished, all the gods will be
As nothing while mankind's authority
Will grow.

Panic:

I am the daughter of dark Night,
And, sprung from Ouranos, I hold the right
Of my nobility, but I'll not turn
These rights against my friends and make them burn
With my great wrath, nor do I wish to go
To visit in the homes of men. And so 780
I wish to counsel Hera, and you, too,
If you will listen to my words. For you
Are sending me against a man whose name
In heaven and earth alike has earned him fame.
Taming the wilds and raging oceans, he,
And he alone, restored the dignity
Of all the gods. I counsel you, therefore,
Don't wish misfortune on him!

Iris:

I abhor

Your counsel!

Panic:

I would turn your steps away
From sin towards integrity.

Iris:

I say

790

That it was not to practice acumen
That Hera sent you here.

Panic:

Helios, then,

Witness that I will act unwillingly!
But if it is compulsory for me
Shall smack of the headlong
To serve the two of you, as in full cry
The hounds follow the huntsman, then will I
Agree; no ocean, groaning fearsomely,
Nor 'quake nor bolt with blasts of agony
Shall show the headlong rush that I will make
At Heracles: into his house I'll break.
I'll slay his children, and he will not know
That he's the murderer till I let go
Of his delirium. Violently
His head he tosses. See how savagely
He rolls his eyes, unspeaking, side to side;
Meanwhile his panting breath he cannot hide.
He bellows like a fearful bull about
To charge and to Hell's spirits he yells out.
You'll dance yet further soon because a note
Of terror I'll pipe in your ear! Now float
Away to Heaven, Iris, while I steal
Into the halls of Heracles!

800

Chorus:

Reveal

810

Your grief! For Heracles, Lord Zeus's son,
The flower of our city, is undone,
Cut down, and Greece will suffer heavy woe:
Her patron, as he dances to and fro
In frenzied madness, will be quelled. Now she,
The queen of sorrowing and misery,
Goads on her steeds, the Gorgon of the night,
About her stony eyes a dreadful sight –
A hundred hissing snakes! The god has cast
Good fortune down – soon they will breathe their last. 820

Amphitryon [within]:

Ahh!

Chorus:

Ceaseless, unjust, mad revenge will throw
Your childless son, O Zeus, upon great woe.

Amphitryon [within]:

My house!

Chorus:

No cymbal clash is welcome here!
No Bacchic thyrsus giving us the cheer!

Amphitryon [within]:

My house!

Chorus:

This dance is where no wine is spilled:
Oh no indeed – with blood these halls are filled.

Amphitryon [within]:

Fly, children!

Chorus:

That's the chant of death, the sound
Of pipes. See how he hunts them like a hound –
And Panic never holds her revel rout
In vain.

Amphitryon [within]:

Ah, misery!

Chorus:

My grief I shout – 830

That poor man who begot those boys, and she
Who gave birth to them both so fruitlessly!
A tempest rocks the house – the roof is falling.

Heracles [within]:

Oh, child of Zeus, Pallas, this is appalling!
You're casting Hell's confusion onto us,
As you did to the huge Enceladus! [enter Messenger]

Messenger:

Old man!

Chorus:

Wherefore this loud address to me?

Messenger:

All's dreadful in the house!

Chorus:

No prophecy

You need to tell me that.

Messenger:

The boys are dead!

Chorus:

Oh, horrible!

Messenger:

Yes, weep! Tears must be shed. 840

Chorus:

How could their father bring himself to slay
His own dear children?

Messenger:

I've no words to say

How we are suffering!

Chorus:

Yet clearly tell

How Heracles has brought us to this hell!
Reveal to me how Heaven's deities
Have sent upon this house such miseries!

Messenger:

Victims were set in place to purify
The house because the king was slaughtered by
Lord Heracles. There stood a coterie
Of father, wife and his fair progeny. 850
The basket then was being passed around:
In holy silence we made not a sound.
When Heracles, though, was about to dip
His torch in holy water, while his lip
Uttered no sound, he stopped. Then, with a look
At him, his sons were wondering why he took
So long. His eyes rolled – he was agitated,
His eyeballs bloodshot, while foam emanated
Out of his mouth and tangled with his beard.
When he began to speak, he sounded weird 860
And laughed a madman's laugh and then said, "Why
Should I take up the flame to purify
The house before I've slain Eurystheus? For
I would be purifying one time more.

I must, unaided, settle everything,
And after that, the moment that I bring
His head, I'll cleanse my hands for those I've killed
Already. You must have the water spilled.
Throw down the baskets, then give me my bow
And club, for to Mycenae I will go. 870
With crow-bars and pick-axes I'll go there
And smash their walls which with a mason's square
And eastern plumb-lines oh-so-cleverly
The Cyclopes once built." Then frantically
He looked out for the chariot he thought
Was there but was illusory and sought
To mount it, while believing that he had
A goad within his grip. "Is he, then, mad?"
The servants said, "or does he wish to cheer
Us up?" And so amusement and cold fear 880
Mingled within them. Pacing thus, he sped
To the men's chamber. "Here's Nisus," he said.
And then he threw himself upon the floor,
Prepared to feast, but after some time more
He started to say that he was on his way
To where the valleys of the Isthmus lay.
He took his clothes off and, once this was done,
He wrestled in a duel with – no-one!
And shortly he proclaimed his victory
Then fancied he was in illusory 890
Mycenae, where horrendous threats he rasped
To Eurystheus. At this point his father grasped
Him by the arm and said to him, "My son,
What's this? Are you aware what you have done?"

Could it be that you have been sent insane
Because of those you recently have slain?”
But he supposed his father was indeed
Eurystheus’ father in an abject need
To touch his hand, then, thrusting him aside,
He started to commit infanticide – 900
His own sons! – with his bow, assuming they
Had been Eurystheus’ sons he hoped to slay.
They darted here and there, one scurrying
Up to his mother’s skirts, one scrambling
To hide beside a pillar, while a third
Cowered beneath the altar like a bird.
And then to Heracles their mother cried,
“You fathered these young boys, you homicide!
What do you think you’re doing?” Then, likewise,
His father joined the servants in their cries. 910
But Heracles was hunting round and round
The pillar with his bow, and when he found
The child, he shot him. On his back he fell,
And round the stone his blood began to well.
Then Heracles yelled out with boasting cries
And, in his fancied triumph, said, “Here lies
One of Eurystheus’ brood, dead at my feet.”
And then he raised his weapon to repeat
His gruesome work. The child had thought to hide
Beneath the altar, but the poor boy cried 920
Out loud, crouching before his father’s knees,
Stretching his hand to reach his beard: “Oh, please
Don’t kill me, dearest father! It is me
You’re after, not Eurystheus’ progeny!”

But Heracles, with a savage Gorgon-glare,
Because he saw the boy was standing where
He could not use his archer's skill, instead
Raised high his massive club above his head:
Just like a blacksmith when he's hammering,
He smashed his skull. Then, after murdering 930
Two boys, he went upon a hunt once more
To slaughter his third victim, but before
He could do that, the wretched mother caught
The child up in her loving arms and brought
Him in the house and shut the door. But yet,
Believing them Mycenae's walls, he set
To prizing open all the doors, and so
Their posts come down as well. Thus he laid low
Both wife and child. Then madly off he veered
To slay his father, but there then appeared 940
Pallas, or so it seemed to us. She wore
A plumed helmet and shook the spear she bore.
And then she hurled a rock against his breast,
Thus nipping in the bud his frenzied quest
For blood. He fell asleep, striking his back
Against a post which fell down with a crack.
The roof fell in. We rallied from our flight
And with the old man's aid we bound him tight
To the post so that upon awakening
He'd be restrained from yet more damaging. 950
And there he sleeps, poor wretch. There let him rest,
Although it is a sleep that can't be blessed,
Since he has slain his kin. I, for my part,
Can think of nobody so sick at heart. [exit Messenger]

Chorus:

The murder most famed and notorious
Was until now performed by Danaus'
Daughters in Argos, but now Heracles
Has outstripped those former atrocities.
I could now mention Procne, she who slew
Itys, her only child, and offered to 960
To the Muses, but you, Heracles, have slain
All your three sons, slain them in an insane
Fury. What groans, what wails, what funeral dirge,
What unrelenting death-dance should I urge
You to? The palace-gates are open wide.
Near them is Heracles, asleep and tied
Fast to two broke pillars. All around
His frame are bonds and cords, for he is bound
With many knots about the pillar. See
His aged father, wailing piteously, 970
Just like a mother-bird who's sorrowing
For her young brood. He runs with faltering
Footsteps as he treks on distressingly.

Amphitryon:

Let him sleep on, you aged progeny
Of Thebes! Let him forget his grief!

Amphitryon;

For you,

Old friend, I weep, and for your children, too,
And Heracles.

Amphitryon:

Please move further away
Lest you should rouse him from his sleep, I pray!

Chorus:

The blood!

Amphitryon:

You'll ruin me!

Chorus:

The blood! Oh, see –

It's rising up! Friends, weep more quietly 980

Lest he awake and break his bonds and smash

The city, for the palace then will crash.

He'll kill me, too.

Chorus:

I can't!

Amphitryon:

Hush! With my ear

Close to his mouth, I'll see if I can hear

His breathing.

Chorus:

Well, then, is he sleeping?

Amphitryon:

Yes,

But it's a deadly sleep, and comfortless

From all the guilt since, with his twanging bow,

He killed his wife and children.

Chorus:

Mourn the woe!

Amphitryon:

I do.

Chorus:

The children's death –

Amphitryon:

Ah!

Chorus:

It's the end

Of your son's life.

Amphitryon:

A tragic day!

Chorus:

Old friend – 990

Amphitryon:

Quiet! He's waking up. Oh, I must go

And hide myself beneath the roof.

Chorus:

Oh, no!

Have courage, sir! Ah, look, the dark of night

Still binds his eyes! Death does not cause me fright –

Oh, no, what worries me is something worse,

That he may kill me, stirring up the curse

Of all the Furies.

Chorus:

Better would it be

If you had met your final destiny

That day when you were eager to requite

Your wife for her slain brothers, thus to fight 1000

Against the Taphians.

Amphitryon:

Old friends, away!

For in his waking violence he may

Pile up fresh slaughter, ranging all about

The streets of Thebes in a delirious rout.

Chorus:

O Zeus, why show your son such enmity

And plunge him in such dire calamity?

Heracles:

I am alive! I breathe! I see what I

Am meant to see! I see the earth, the sky,

The sun's strong beams! Yet how my senses reel!

Such strange turmoil! My fevered breath I feel 1010

In quick, spasmodic gasps! Why am I tied

With cables like a sailing ship beside

A broken post, near bodies of the dead?

Why are my bow and arrows widely spread

Across the floor, my trusty weapons? – we

Have kept each other safe. Ah, could it be

That I'm in Hell again? No, that's not true –

I can't see Sisyphus nor, Pluto, you,

Even the sceptre of Persephone.

Where am I? What is happening to me? 1020

Ho, there! Which of my friends is near to cure

Me of my ignorance? For I'm not sure

Of what I once have known.

Amphitryon:

Friends, shall I go

To look upon the scene of all my woe?

Chorus:

Yes. We'll go with you, for you'll need someone

Beside you.

Heracles:

Father, I'm your loving son –

Why stand so far from me? Why should you cry?

Father, tell me what's happened here and why

You hide your eyes from me!

Amphitryon:

My child indeed,

Despite my misery!

Heracles:

What is your need 1030

To weep?

Amphitryon:

The gods themselves would weep were they

To learn of it.

Heracles:

A telling thing to say,

But you've not told it.

Amphitryon:

But it must be plain

If you by now are sensible again.

Heracles:

Fill in your sketch with anything that's new

For me.

Amphitryon:

I will explain as long as you

Are not as mad as any fiend of Hell.

Heracles:

Ah, those dark hints of yours appear to tell

Of dreadful deeds.

Amphitryon:

I doubt if you have all

Your senses back again.

Heracles:

I don't recall 1040

My being mad.

Amphitryon:

My friends, what shall I do?

Shall I release him?

Heracles:

Yes!! And tell me who

It was who bound me! For I'm feeling so

Ashamed.

Amphitryon:

Just be content with what you know!

Forget the rest!

Heracles:

It's not enough to stay

Silent – what I must learn you have to say.

Amphitryon:

Lord Zeus, these deeds proceeded from the throne

Of Hera.

Heracles:

What's that? Has Queen Hera thrown

Her enmity at me?

Amphitryon:

You must dismiss

Queen Hera. Concentrate instead on this, 1050

Your own concerns!

Heracles:

I'm finished! For I dread

The news you have.

Amphitryon:

Here lie your children, dead.

Heracles:

Horror!

Amphitryon:

 You've fought a perverse war, my son,
Against your boys.

Heracles:

 A war? But who has done
This deed?

Amphitryon:

 You! Or some god.

Heracles:

 What's that you said?
What have I done? Speak, messenger of dread!

Amphitryon:

Sad to relate, my son, you were insane.

Heracles:

And, father, is it I as well who've slain
My wife?

Amphitryon:

 It is, and you alone.

Heracles:

 A cloud
Of grief envelops me.

Amphitryon:

 I weep out loud
For you.

Heracles:

 And in a frenzy did I tear
My house down?

Amphitryon:

 I of this am not aware,

But you are devastated utterly.

Heracles:

Whence did the madness come, destroying me?

Amphitryon:

When you were at the altar purifying

Yourself with fire.

Heracles:

Why did I shrink from dying

After I'd killed my darling boys? Should I

Not leap from some sheer rock or seek to die

Upon my sword, thus making some return

For what I did? Or maybe I should burn 1070

My body, which she drove to lunacy,

And thereby turn away the infamy

Awaiting me. Ah, Theseus now I spy,

My friend and kinsman, and he'll see that I

Have slain my children. I shall stand revealed.

What should I do? My destiny is sealed.

Can I escape my grief? Shall I take flight

Or plunge beneath the earth? The dark of night

Must veil my head! The evil that I've done

Makes me ashamed. I'll not harm anyone 1080

Who's innocent, for I have done such wrong. [enter Theseus]

Theseus [to Amphitryon]:

Hither I've come from Athens with a throng

Of soldiers that we might assist your son,

Old friend. Where the streams of the Asopus run

We've camped. For we were given to understand

That Lycus now is monarch of this land,

And you have fought him as your enemy,

And therefore, for the former charity
Of Heracles, who saved me from the shade
Of Hades, if you have need of such aid, 1090
I'm here. Ha! Corpses! Am I, then, too late
In coming here to find out such fresh fate?
Who slew these boys? Whose wife is this I see?
Boys are not soldiers – therefore it must be
Some strange mischance.

Amphitryon:

Who lives upon that hill

Of olive-trees, Lord Theseus?

Theseus:

What an ill

Greeting!

Theseus:

Whose are these children?

Amphitryon:

Heracles',

Who was the agent of these butcheries.

Theseus:

Amphitryon, speak but auspiciously!

Amphitryon:

Oh, would that you could hear such words from me! 1100

Theseus:

What dreadful words!

Amphitryon:

Fortune has flown away

And we are ruined.

Theseus:

What is that you say?

What has he done?

Amphitryon:

With frenzied mind he's slain

Them all, his arrows dipped deep in the bane
Of the hundred-headed Hydra.

Theseus:

This was done

By Hera! But who's lying here?

Amphitryon:

My son,

Who marched with gods in Phlegra, there to fight
And slaughter giants, he of peerless might.

Theseus:

How cursed he is!

Amphitryon:

Ah, you will never find

A man who's suffered more.

Theseus:

Why does he wind 1110

His cloak about his head?

Amphitryon:

Shame, sir. For he,

Now faced with his own kinsman's decency
And his dead sons, feels such humiliation.

Theseus:

But I am here to show commiseration.

Uncover him!

Amphitryon:

Remove your cloak and throw

It from you so that you may clearly show

The sun your face, my son! It's hard to fight
Against one's tears when in a sorry plight.
I beg you by your beard and by your knees
And by your hands, my son, to govern these 1120
Outbursts of yours! For godlessly you go
Upon a bloody path, thus adding woe
To woe.

Theseus:

 You, huddled in your misery,
I summon. Show yourself, man! Let us see
Your face! No darkness can conceal what you
Are feeling. What are you trying to do
With these gesticulations? Could it be
That you attempt to show your sins to me
But fear to taint me? Oh, no, Heracles!
If I should suffer all your miseries 1130
It wouldn't matter. I found happiness
The day you brought me from the gloominess
Of Hades to the light. I hate a man
Whose gratitude grows old, someone who can
Take pleasure in his friends' prosperity
But when they're visited with misery
Won't sail in the same ship with them. Arise!
Unveil your head, poor wretch, and turn your eyes
On me! A gallant soul bears the dismay
That Heaven sends and does not turn away 1140
From it.

Heracles:

 Did you, then, see my children die,
Theseus?

Theseus:

I heard of it, sir, but now I

See what you've done.

Heracles:

Why, therefore, to the light

Did you unveil my head?

Theseus:

Well, you can't blight

What Heaven owns.

Heracles:

Please leave, my friend! Defend

Yourself from taint!

Theseus:

Vengeance from friend to friend

Won't travel.

Heracles:

Thank you, sir. I do not rue

The service that I once performed for you.

Theseus:

While I, in turn, due to the charity

You showed me, now show you my sympathy. 1150

Heracles:

For slaughtering my sons??

Theseus:

Yes, Heracles.

I'm weeping for your recent miseries.

Heracles:

Is any ill luck heavier than mine?

Theseus:

Yours, Heracles, spreads out in one long line

From earth to heaven.

Heracles:

And for that reason I

Have single-mindedly resolved to die.

Theseus:

Do you suppose the gods attend to you?

Heracles:

They're cruel: therefore I'll be cruel, too.

Theseus:

Be careful, sir, lest your effrontery

May make them bring you yet more misery! 1160

Heracles:

My ship is freighted full of sorrow: there

Is no room for more sorrow anywhere.

Theseus:

What will you do? Where will your sorrow lead?

Heracles:

When I have slain myself, I will proceed

Back to the world below.

Theseus:

Such language can

Be spoken only by a common man.

Heracles:

Your words are the advice of someone who

Does not know grief.

Theseus:

Oh, no, they came from you,

The much-enduring Heracles.

Heracles:

Although

I've never until now endured such woe. 1170

Endurance must have limits.

Theseus:

Is this he

Who was a great friend to humanity?

Heracles:

Men are no help to me – Hera holds sway!

Theseus:

Our land would never let you die this way –

Through sheer perversity.

Heracles:

Hear me, that I

May join our contest with my own reply!

My life right now, as well as formerly,

Has always been unbearable to me.

Before my father wed my mother, he

Incurred a blood-stained culpability - 1180

He slew her father. Well, then, when a race

Is badly hit, its issue all must face

A wretched life. The god whom we all know

As Zeus begot me as a deadly foe

To Hera. Old man, feel no jealousy!

For there's no doubt I'd rather have you be

My father than Lord Zeus. While I was still

An infant, Zeus's partner tried to kill

Me in my cradle with fierce snakes, and when

I bloomed into a youth, the toils I then 1190

Endured were much too numerous to tell.

For triple-bodied Typhons I would quell,

Lions and giants, and the Centaurs, too;

Once I had killed the Hydra, then I slew
The beast whose many heads would grow once more,
And after that I journeyed through a score
Of toils, including going down below,
Because Eurystheus ordered me to go
Thither to bring back that three-headed cur,
That Cerberus, Hades's janitor. 1200

This last deed, though, has crowned the miseries
Of all the house, for I have slaughtered these
Dear sons of mine. No longer may I dwell
In Thebes, the city that I love so well,
For if I were to stay, what friends or shrine
Should I seek out? You see, this curse of mine
Invites no greetings. Argos, then, maybe?
No – from my country I'm a deportee.
Where else? Shall I be snubbed, then, everywhere
By cruel, stabbing gossip? – "Oh, look there! 1210
The son of Zeus who slew his sons and wife!
Plague take him!" I once had a happy life,
So these reverses are a grievous thing;
The ever-luckless people feel no sting
For sorrow is their birthright. Finally
This piteous pass will be imposed on me.
The earth will scorn my touch, I'll be denied
The crossing of a stream or ocean's tide.
And I'll become another Ixion
As I revolve in manacles upon
That wheel. It's better that I am not seen
By any of the Greeks, with whom I've been
A happy man. What right have I to live?

What profit can a life of evil give
To me? Let Hera dance with joy, for she
Has worked her will, confounding utterly
The first of Greece's sons. Whoever would
Pray to a deity like that? No good
Can come of it. The envy she displayed
When Lord Zeus with a mortal woman made 1230
Love in their bed has driven her to slay
A benefactor who in every way
Is innocent.

Chorus:

Indeed, sir, you are right –
She is the only reason for this blight.

Theseus:

You must not, sir, continue suffering.
No mortal can escape misfortune's sting,
Nor any god, should we trust poetry –
For did they not commit adultery
And fetter fathers so that they might gain
Power? Yet they continue to maintain 1240
Their sinful life in Heaven. How will you
Excuse yourself? You are a mortal who
Thinks harshly of his own iniquities,
Although there is no god above who sees
Some wrong in his own sin. Accordingly,
Don't go to Thebes, thus heeding her decree,
And come to Athens, where I'll purify
You of the stain of your misdeeds, and I
Will give you homes and half my property.
Yes, I will give you what was offered me 1250

When I had slain the bull of Crete, thereby
Rescuing fourteen children – these gifts I
Got from the grateful citizens. All through
The country I own tracts, and after you
They shall be named while you yet live, and when
You're dead and go to Heaven's mansions, then
With sacrifices and a monument
Of stone all Greece will show how reverent
They are to you – a worthy celebration
To honour one of such a noble station. 1260
These are the thanks I give for saving me.
For you now friends are a priority,
But, honoured by the gods, one has no need
Of friends, but aid from Heaven is indeed
Enough.

Heracles:

That is beside the point for me –
Myself, I don't believe adultery
Is practiced by the gods, nor with a chain
Do they imprison others, nor, again,
Do I believe there's no equality
Among the heavenly ones. The deity, 1270
If he be such, lacks nothing. These are mere
Pathetic tales of poets that we hear.
But I thought that, for all my great distress,
I would be branded by faint-heartedness
For giving up my life. Who can't withstand
Ill luck pales at a gun in a foe's hand.
I'll be steadfast in living, and I'll go
To Athens with you, who have helped me so.

I've suffered much, as everybody knows,
Yet never swooned nor wept for all those woes, 1280
Yet here I weep – a thing I never thought
Would happen. So it seems that I've been caught
In Fortune's net. Old father, here you see
An exile, agent of the butchery
Of his own children. Bury them and shed
A reverent tear, for I'm prohibited
To do so. But, before they're laid to rest,
Lay their dear heads upon their other's breast,
A sombre burden, children I have slain
Unwittingly. But, father, please remain 1290
After the burial! Although you may
Find that it's onerous, I beg you, stay
And steel yourself to share my misery!
O children, you have been destroyed by me,
Your father. You earned nothing from my fame –
My restless toil to give you a fair name
All went for nought. You, too, unhappy wife,
Through my unwitting hand have lost your life,
A poor return for all your loyalty
To me and caring for our family 1300
In my long absences. How sad my lot,
From wife and from the children I begot
Cut off! These honeyed kisses are a bane
To me! My weapons cause me so much pain!
Shall I retain them or throw them away?
As they hang by my side, they'll surely say,
"With us you killed your children and your wife,
And yet you keep us still!" What sort of life

Will I have if I keep them? What reply
 Am I to make? But, all the same, am I 1310
 To cast aside what aided my career
 Of glory, thus succumbing to the fear
 Of enemies and dying finally
 Of shame? Oh, no, they have to stay with me,
 Although it grieves me. Theseus, in one thing,
 I beg you, help me in my sorrowing!
 Come with me! Help me to collect the pay
 I earned for taking that foul hound away!
 For if I go alone, the misery
 I'm feeling for my slain sons may cause me 1320
 To harm myself. Cut of your hair, you men
 Of Thebes! Share my laments with me, and then
 Attend the rites! With just one dirge lament
 Me, too! For Hera has gained her intent
 Of cruel slaughter.
 Theseus:
 Rise, unhappy one!
 You've had your fill of tears.
 Heracles:
 It can't be done!
 I'm rooted to the spot.
 Theseus:
 Yes, even those
 Of mighty strength are overcome with woes.
 Heracles:
 Would I could be a stone here, totally
 Untroubled!
 Theseus:

Silence! Give your hand to me, 1330

Your friend and helper!

Heracles:

No, for I must not

Allow myself to leave a single spot

Of blood upon your robe.

Theseus:

But if you do,

I shall not care.

Heracles:

I've lost my sons, but you

Are now a son to me.

Theseus:

Come, you must throw

Your arm around my neck and, as we go,

I'll be your guide.

Heracles:

A pair of friends indeed,

Though one's a wretch. But you're the friend I need.

Amphitryon:

His land has brought us splendid progeny.

Heracles:

Lord Theseus, turn me back! I want to see 1340

My sons once more.

Theseus:

Why? Do you think you'll find

Some drug thereby to soothe your troubled mind?

Heracles:

I wish to see them. And I would embrace

My father.

Amphitryon:

Here we are, son, face to face:

I would embrace you, too.

Theseus:

Don't you recall

The glorious deeds you have performed?

Heracles:

Ah, all

I bore before was easier to bear

Than this.

Theseus:

"This fellow," people will declare,

"Is womanish!" if they should see you now.

Heracles:

Am I so base? It was not so, I vow,

1350

Before.

Theseus:

Yes, too much so! For this disease

Does not befit the famous Heracles.

Heracles:

And you? What kind of hero were you when

You were in Hades?

Theseus:

Ah, the worst of men

For courage!

Heracles:

How, then, can you say of me

That I'm made abject by my misery?

Theseus:

Forward!

Heracles:

Father, farewell!

Amphitryon:

Farewell to you,

My son!

Heracles:

Bury my children!

Amphitryon:

Yes, but who

Will bury me?

Heracles:

I!

Amphitryon:

But when will that be?

Heracles:

As soon as you've performed their obsequy. 1360

Amphitryon:

How?

Heracles:

I'll take you to Athens. But now go
And take my boys inside, a grievous woe
To the earth. Since I am ruined totally,
Wrecking my house with deeds of infamy,
I'll follow, like a tugboat, in the wake
Of Theseus. That man makes a grave mistake
Who has a preference for property
And dominance above the company
Of friends.

Chorus:

With grief and many a bitter tear

We go, deprived of all we hold most dear.

