

TRACHINIAE

Deianeira: There is an age-old saying that one cannot judge a man, either for good or bad, until he dies. But even before I reach Hades I know that my life has been full of misfortune and sadness. Dwelling in my father Oineus' halls in Pleuron, I dreaded marriage more than any other Aitolian woman. My suitor was a river – Achelous, who importuned my father in three different guises, now a bull, now a sinuous serpent, now a man with an ox's head, spring water drizzling down from his dark beard. When receiving this wooer I desperately prayed that I might die and avoid being wed to him.

Later on, the famed son of Zeus and Alkmene visited me – a happy event for me as he challenged Achelous to a fight and so ransomed me. What sort of fight it was I could not say as I don't know. Whoever had the courage to watch it, though, he could tell you. I myself was petrified that my beauty would prove my undoing. Finally, Zeus, the Battle-God, ensured a happy outcome. Or was it? After marrying Herakles I am now assailed by fear after fear in my anxiety about him. Each night brings a new pain, banishing its predecessor. I bore children but he, like a husbandman ploughing a distant farrow and, coming close only a sowing- or harvest-time, sees them rarely. At such times he would come, he would go, like one indentured to some master.

But now that he has completed his labours, my fears increase even more. Since he fought and killed Iphitos, we have been living here in Trachis like exiles, subject to a foreign master. Where Herakles is no-one knows, but his absence adds to my bitter pangs. I am almost certain something has happened to him. It's been some time – fifteen months, in fact – that he's been missing. He must be in some danger. He left me a letter – how often have I prayed that it doesn't betoken more misfortune!

Nurse: Queen Deianeira, constantly I see you weeping and groaning over Herakles' departure. But now, if a servant may teach her betters, I must say something. You have children, so why do you not send someone in search of him (Hyllus in particular would be an excellent choice)? Thus you may receive good news of him. Some swift messenger approaches the palace – if my advice seems good, take my words to heart and listen to him.

Deiraneira: Child, child, even the humble may give good counsel. This woman is a slave, yet she speaks like one freeborn.

Hyllos: What does she say? Tell me, mother. May I hear?

Deiraneira: Your father has been absent long, and your ignorance of his state shames you.

Hyllos: I am not ignorant of his state. Not if we may credit others' tales.

Deiraneira: And where on earth does he dwell according to report?

Hyllos: They say that since his labours have been completed he has for some time been slave to a Lydian woman.

Deiraneira: Anything is possible if he has deigned to do that.

Hyllos: But she let him go, I hear.

Deiraneira: Where is he said to be now? Is he alive or dead?

Hyllos: Erybos, in Euboia, where he's fighting a war, or on the point of it.

Deiraneira: Child, did you know he left me reliable oracles about that city?

Hyllos: What oracles, mother? I know of none.

Deiraneira: That he would end his life or else, having completed this task, he would thereafter live a life of tranquility. At this crisis in his life, will you not go to his aid? If he survives, we are saved, but his death will be the end of us too.

Hyllos: I shall, mother. I'd be with him now had I heard men talk of these oracles. But now that I know, I shall leave no stone unturned until I learn the whole truth.

Deiraneira: Go, child. If you prosper in your quest, it will advantage us.

Chorus: Bright Sun, begot of night when fast she fades,
Then lulled to sleep again by her dark shades,
Where dwells Alkmene's boy? On Ocean's strand?
Betwixt the continents and safe on land?
Sad thoughts beset our queen, poor wretched dove,
In sleep still weeping for her long-lost love;
Alone, she seems a widow, not wife,
As she anticipates a fearful life.
As battling winds churn up the foaming seas,
Thus painful labours strike at Herakles –
A heavy load, a Cretan Sea of strife,
And yet it seems some god extends his life.
Though honouring your distress, we think it good
That you should not reject the likelihood
Of happy outcome. Zeus, the lord of all,
Contrives that onto man some pain will fall.
And thus this cycle – anguish and delight –
Like Arktos spinning in the starry height.
Nor spangled night nor cares nor wealth remain
For long – each man his loss, each man his gain!
Hold onto hope, dear queen, and you will find
That never would Lord Zeus neglect mankind.

Deiraneira: You have learnt, it seems, of my distress. But unless you experience it, you can never know how it eats away at me. I am helpless! Young shoots grow in their own spot and neither heat nor rain nor wind may harm them. A pleasing and untroubled life they lead, but once a maid may take the name of "woman", dark cares beset her and she lives in fear for her husband and children. Suffer like cares and you will see how heavy is my burden. Much suffering have I undergone and bewailed but I'll now tell you one grief that tops all others. When Lord Herakles left home the last time, he left a note on an old writing-tablet which he did not dare to explain to me before going to perform his many labours – he had always up till then planned action, not his own death. But now, when, as one already dead, he told me what portion of our estate I should receive and how he would apportion his land among our children, he calculated that once he had been gone fifteen months, he would then either be dead or else live a trouble-free life from that time onwards. Such a destiny he claimed would bring to an end the Labours of Herakles – it had been ratified at Dodona by the two dove-priestesses at the ancient oak. And the day of reckoning now jibes with the present time. That is why my peaceful sleep has been interrupted, ladies; my heart knocks with fear = must I live my life out bereft of that best of men?

Chorus: Hush now. I see someone coming – he's garlanded, so he brings good news.

Messenger: Queen Deianeira, let me be the first messenger to dispel your fears.
Alkmena's son lives and is bringing to his native gods the firstfruits of his martial victory.
Deianeira: What are you saying, old man?

Messenger: The husband you long for is on his way here, a glorious conqueror.

Deianeira: Did you hear this from a local or a foreigner?

Messenger: Lichas, the herald, announced the news to all in the summer pasture. I heard him and took off so as to be the first to tell it you and receive some remuneration for my welcome words.

Deianeira: If he is thriving, then why is he not here?

Messenger: Lady, that is difficult for him. Everyone in Melia has him surrounded and assails him with questions. He can't leave. No-one will let him leave till he tells him what he wants to hear. He is there against his will, but you'll see him soon enough.

Deianeira: Zeus, guardian of Oita's wild pastures, at last you grant me joy. Ladies, announce to all the house, and to everyone outside the palace too, that we are now rejoicing in the light of this unexpected news.

Chorus: O maidens of the household, raise your cry;

Men, on Apollo, our protector, call.

You girls, advance your paeon to the sky

That it on Huntress Artemis may fall,

Torch-bearer, and the Nymphs with whom she plays.

The flute would win me now, I'm light as air,

The Bacchic ivy has me in a daze.

I dance! Dear queen, hear tidings passing fair.

Deianeira: I see the delegation, sweet ladies, it hasn't escaped my eyes. I greet its herald, here at last. Have you welcome news?

Lichas: It's good to have got here, lady, and your greeting accords with our commission. A man who does someone a favour deserves kind words.

Deianeira: Dearest of men, first tell me what I must know first – shall I see Herakles alive?

Lichas: Well, I left him alive, vigorous, blooming, free of any illness.

Deianeira: In what country? Here or abroad?

Lichas: There is a promontory in Euboia where is establishing an altar on which to dedicate firstfruits to Kenaian Zeus.

Deianeira: Are the offerings votive or oracular?

Lichas: Votive. He conquered and laid waste the country of these women you see here.

Deianeira: Good heavens, who are they? WHOSE are they? Unless I miss the mark, their state is pitiful.

Lichas: They're his. When he'd conquered Eurytos, he took them prisoner as offerings to the gods.

Deianeira: Such a long time to be at war against one city!

Lichas: No. The majority of the time he says he was held captive by the Lydians. No need, lady, to be upset by the report – Zeus initiated it. The rest of the year he spent as alien Omphale's hireling, he says, and the shame this engendered ate at him so deeply that he swore he would enslave the man responsible, along with his wife and child. No vain oath – true to his word, he mustered a foreign army and marched to Eurytos' city. He it was, according to Herakles, who was solely responsible for this humiliation. It had so

happened that when Herakles visited this man's home, being an old friend, Eurytos insulted him openly, his wicked heart full of rancour. He said that, though the possessor of unerring weapons, he was a marksman inferior to Eurytos' children and ventured the opinion that he was little better than a slave. Then in a drunken rage at supper he kicked him out. So angry was Herakles at all this that, when Iphitos came to a hill in Tiryns, tracking down some wild horses and not looking where he was going, he threw him from the top of a cliff. Lord Zeus, Olympian father of all mankind, was incensed at this and sold him into slavery, because he had assassinated Iphitos, alone of all men, by guile. If he had acted openly, he would have pardoned him for his fair mastery – not even gods can tolerate arrogance. All those who uttered arrogant words now dwell in Hades while their city is full of slaves. These women you see here, once rich but now living a wretched existence, are approaching you – your husband ordered this meeting and I have faithfully arranged it. Be assured that when he has offered Father Zeus sacrifice for his success, he will be here. That is the best news of all these happy tidings.

Chorus: Lady, such joy is yours, now you know the full story, past and present.

Deianeira: How could I not rejoice, as indeed I should, at my husband's victory? Joy and success should go hand in hand. Yet those who rejoice could well have fears that the lucky man may balk one day. Friends, I am filled with pity at the sight of these poor wretches, strangers in a strange land, orphans – once perhaps freeborn but now no better than slaves.

Zeus, Conferrer of Victory, may you never visit such a fate on my kin, or, if you do, let it be after my death. Such a fear these women inspire in me.

Poor wretch, what is your history? Are you a maid or a mother? Your appearance relegates you to the most miserable of states, yet you seem high-born. Lichas, who is this foreign lady's father? Who her mother? Tell me. I pity her most of all – she alone seems to understand her plight.

Lichas: How should I know? Why ask me? Perhaps she and her companions are not from the lowest stratum of society.

Deianeira: Are they royalty? Kin to Eurytos?

Lichas: I don't know. They weren't questioned long.

Deianeira: Did you not get a name from one of them?

Lichas: No. My job was to hold my peace.

Deianeira: Tell me of yourself, poor creature. It would be a shame not to know who you really are.

Lichas: She'll not speak – she hasn't uttered a word so far. The poor thing merely weeps for her wretched lot. She's done nothing else since she left her wind-blown homeland.

Considering her situation, she has good reason.

Deianeira: Leave her be, then. Let her go inside, treat her with all kindness – I would not add to her burden. Let them all in – I'll leave you to your work, while I see to the domestic arrangements.

Messenger: Stay out here awhile – I must tell you, privately, of their history. You are still unaware of something which you must hear.

Deianeira: What is it? Why this delay?

Messenger: Stay and hear. What I told you before was to your advantage – this will be too.

Deianeira: Shall I call them back, or do you want to talk to us alone?

Messenger: You may hear all – let the others go in, though.

Deianeira: There! They've gone. Speak.

Messenger: What this fellow has just said is incorrect – either he's lying now or he was before.

Deianeira: What are you saying? Tell me honestly what is in your mind. I don't understand your implication.

Messenger: I and several witnesses heard this man say that this girl was the cause of Herakles' killing of Eurytos and taking of high-walled Oichalia. Eros was the only deity to lure him to these exploits, not his indenture to Omphale in Lydia. Iphitos' precipitous death, too, was also Eros' doing. But now he sings a different tune.

When he could not persuade her father to give him his daughter for his mistress, he dreamt up some petty charge and marched against the city where her father, Eurytos, ruled, subsequently killing him and sacking the city. Now, as you see, lady, before his own arrival he has sent the lady here. He has thought it all out – she's not in bondage, don't think that. That's hardly likely, considering he's mad for her.

So I thought it best to tell you all I know, lady. I can prove my tale's true – many others have heard the same thing at the market-place in Trachis. It grieves me to give you such unwelcome news, yet it IS the truth.

Deianeira: O God! What am I to do? What insidiousness is here, this torture I'm playing hostess to? Is she nameless as the herald who brought her swore she was?

Messenger: She's called Iole, and she's Eurytos' daughter. He told you nothing of her origins because he had never asked.

Chorus: Perish all sinners, but most of all the practisers of deception, a foul thing indeed.

Deianeira: What should I do, friends? These words terrify me.

Chorus: Go and ask the man. He'll possibly tell you in detail if you insist.

Deianeira: I shall. You counsel well.

Messenger: Shall we wait here? Or...?

Deianeira: Wait! See, he's coming from the palace, and unbidden – my messengers didn't summon him.

Lichas: Lady, what should I tell Herakles? As you see, I'm on my way.

Deianeira: You took your time getting here and now you're flying off with nothing more to say?

Lichas: I'm still here – ask me something!

Deianeira: Can you promise me the truth?

Lichas: By Father Zeus, yes, if I have all the facts.

Lichas: Who, then, is the lady you brought here?

Lichas: She's from Euboia. I don't know her parentage.

Messenger: Here, you! Who do you think you're talking to?

Lichas: What do you mean by that?

Messenger: Tell me what I ask – it would be best.

Lichas: To great Deianeira, Oineus' daughter, wife of Herakles, unless my eyes deceive me, and my mistress.

Messenger: That's what I wanted to hear. Your mistress, you say?

Lichas: Yes.

Messenger: Well, then, what should we do to you, if you prove unloyal to her?

Lichas: Unloyal? What are you cooking up?

Messenger: Nothing. It's you who are cooking up something.

Lichas: I'm off. I'm a fool to have listened to you this long.

Messenger: Not till you've answered me one brief question.

Lichas: Tell me what you want. You're not a mute!

Messenger: The captive you brought here – you know her?

Lichas: Yes. Your question?

Messenger: You pretend not to know her, but did you not say she is Iole, Eurytos' daughter?

Lichas: In whose presence? Who (and from where) will swear he heard me say this?

Messenger: A great number of these citizens. In the market-place in Trachis great crowds of people heard you say it.

Lichas: Yes, they say they did. But giving an opinion and making a precise statement are two different things.

Messenger: What opinion? Did you not swear that you were bringing Herakles' WIFE?

Lichas: His wife? By the gods, dear lady, who is this alien?

Messenger: He is the man who stood here and heard you say that a whole city was razed for love of this girl – not Lydia, but love!

Lichas: Lady, stop this man's mouth. Bandyng words with a sick man hardly befits a wise one.

Deiraneira: By Zeus' lightning above Oita's glen, don't lie to me! You are speaking to no lackey, nor to one who is unaware that man's fancies may change sometimes. It's folly to challenge Eros – he controls the gods whenever he likes. And me also. So why not others? If I were to find fault with my husband for catching His sickness, or with her, his partner in something which is no shame to her, nor painful to me, I would be mad. But if you are lying after learning of him, the knowledge you gain is not pure. But if our knowledge comes from your own self, the good name you seek will turn out bad. Tell me the whole truth: it's a dreadful shame for a freeborn man to earn the name of liar. You won't escape detection. There are many to whom you have spoken who will speak to me.

Your fear is groundless – ignorance of the truth would grieve me sorely. What's the danger in learning the truth? This Herakles took countless other women to his bed, did he not? I've yet to sour or castigate any of them. Not even this one – she must have burned with a fierce love. No, I pitied her on sight – destroyed by her beauty and an unwitting destroyer of her own land. But cast all that to the winds. I order you to tell your tall tales to others – the truth to me, always.

Chorus: Take my advice and in future time this lady will not trouble you. We too shall be grateful.

Lichas: Dear lady, you are a mortal, with mortal thoughts, and not lacking in good sense, so I'll tell you everything, the whole truth. It's just as he says. A powerful desire for this woman ran through Herakles, and it was for her that her native Oichalia was put to the sword. But Herakles –this must be said – did not tell me to hide the truth, he never denied it himself either. No, lady, it was I. Lest my words grieve your heart, I did wrong, if you can call it a wrong. Since you now know all, for your husband's sake and your own, be content with this woman's presence here and keep true to the first thoughts you had of her. All Herakles' bold deeds were as nothing next to his love for that woman.

Deianeira: That is what I intend to do – I will not expose myself to affliction and fight a pointless battle with the gods. Let us go in and you may tell her what I said and make

exchange of gifts. You mustn't return empty-handed, you who arrived with such a great retinue.

Chorus: The might of Aphrodite triumphs still;
Of her beguiling we have had our fill –
Hades and Zeus and he who shakes the ground,
Poseidon. Now there came the battle-sound
Of two new rivals, slain with a maiden's eyes,
As cheek by jowl they struggled for the prize.
One, in a bull's stout form, from Oiniadai,
Bold Achelous, then, bow shoulder-high
And cudgel held in hand, from Bacchus' town
Came Zeus-born Herakles of high renown.
For love they clashed in combat, river and man,
Their only judge the lovely Cyprian.
A clatter of darts as arms on haunches close,
While groaning mouths receive ferocious blows.
Upon the bank the fair one, in her plight,
Awaits the outcome of the suitors' fight,
A rivals' object and a piteous bride,
A calf soon taken from her mother's side.

Deianeira: Friends, while the stranger was in the house uttering parting words to his captive maids, I stole out to tell you what I have devised and to share my grief with you. I have taken in a girl (no, no longer that, a married woman!) as a seaman takes on board his freight, a piece of baggage that gnaws at my heart. And here we live, two people under one blanket – like man and wife! These are my wages, this is my reward from my good and faithful Herakles after all this time! I cannot be and one is all too often given to this sickness, but what woman could share a home and a husband with her? Her bloom is advancing, mine is on the wane, the one pleasing to the eye, the other somewhat less so. I fear that Herakles, though still known as my husband, will yet be this younger woman's MAN. But, as I said, a sensible woman shouldn't harbour wrath – let me tell you how I plan to be rid of this affliction.

I had an ancient gift, secreted in a bronze casket, from an old creature. While still a child, I had it of shaggy Nessus as he lay dying of a wound, he who ferried hired men across the bottomless Evenos river, using neither oar nor sail. He carried me on his shoulders when, at my father's command, I was first traveling with Herakles as his wife; halfway through the journey Nessus assaulted me – I cried out and Herakles turned and released a winged arrow which pierced the creature's ribs. With his dying breath he said: "Child of old Oineos, this will be of great benefit to you thanks to your crossing this river with me, destined to be my last fare. Take the congealed blood from my wound (the Lernaian serpent dropped the venom of its black bile in it) and this will act as a charm with Herakles – he shall love no woman but you from then on" I took this to heart, friends, and kept it safe after his death. I dipped the tunic in the substance, treating it as he told me while he lived. It's ready now.

I don't wish to have reckless thoughts (indeed I hate reckless women) but if I may destroy this maid with love-spells performed on Herakles, my plans are complete, as long as my act will not be considered a rash one. If it is, I'll desist.

Chrosus: If you trust our opinion, we think your plan far from evil.

Deianeira: I do. The plan could well work but it has yet to be put into action.

Chorus: You must act in order to know for sure. If you don't try, you'll never find out, only guess.

Deianeira: We'll soon know – I see Lichas coming from within. He'll be going soon. We must keep this to ourselves. Even if this is shameful, shame shall not be your if you keep my secret.

Lichas: Child of Oineos, what are your orders for me? I have stayed too long.

Deianeira: Lichas, I was working on these orders while you were talking with the girls within. Give this long and finely-woven garment to my husband, a present at my hands. Then tell him that no man before him must don the garment, that it must not see the light of day nor our sacred enclosure nor the ancestral hearth until he stands in full view of all and presents it to the eyes of the gods when the sacrificial bulls are slaughtered. I pray that, when I see or hear of his safe return home, he will put on the robe and, clothed in a brand-new garment, once more make sacrifice to the gods. You will take him a token, set in my signet-ring, which he will recognize.

Go, but remember – do no more than your commission dictates, and be assured that his thanks and mine together will be a double for a single act.

Lichas: I'll be steadfast in my role as Hermes and not fail you. I'll show him the casket, just as you say, and pass on your assurances.

Deianeira: Go now. You see how things stand in the palace.

Lichas: I do. I shall tell him all is well.

Deianeira: You saw how I welcomed the foreign lady, how hospitable I was.

Lichas: Indeed. It touched my heart.

Deianeira: What more then can you say? I am afraid you may tell him of my longing before it's clear HE longs for ME.

Chorus: You denizens of Oita's rocky strand
And you who dwell along the Malian lake,
Where Artemis the Golden treads the sand
And at Pylae the Hellenes council take,
Alkmene's son, the Zeus-born Herakles,
Returns with countless spoils of his success.
A year we waited – was he on the seas?
We had no tidings, we could only guess.
O let him come! And may his ship not stall
Until he's here, far from that island home,
His passion sharpened by the Centaur's gall
With which that gown is dyed. O let him come!

Deianeira: Ladies, how I dread that all that I've just done exceeds the bounds.

Chorus: What's this, Deianeira, Oineos' child?

Deianeira: I don't know. Yet it worries me that disaster may result from my hopeful plans.

Chorus: Is this something to do with Herakles' gift?

Deianeira: Yes. It is unadvisable for anyone to act rashly when the outcome is uncertain.

Chorus: Tell us, if you can, the cause of this dread.

Deianeira: Something has happened. If I tell you of it, it will astound you, ladies. The tuft of sheep's wool with which I rubbed the garment has vanished from sight, eaten away! Not the work of anyone in the palace, it's merely consumed ITSELF! I'll tell you the whole story, so you'll know all that has occurred.

I neglected not one of the precepts the Centaur gave me as he lay dying, the arrow-point digging deep into his chest. No, I kept them indelibly written on a bronze writing-tablet, and I put the poison in a secret place, untouched by fire, far from the warm rays of the sun so that I might apply it in pristine condition. All this I did. Then came the time for the deed to be done – cloistered in the palace, I dipped in the poison a hank of wool taken from one of our flock, then packed it up in a casket, as you see, hidden from sunlight.

But when I went back inside I saw an unbelievable sight, something impossible to explain. It seems I had thrown out the hank of wool, thus exposing it to the sun's rays, and as it warmed the whole thing had melted away and crumbled into the earth, and now resembled nothing more than sawdust. There it lies. From the ground there., a thick froth is bubbling, resembling the rich moisture that drips from the dark fruit of the vine.

O God, I don't know what to think. I have done a terrible thing. Why would the beast, at his death, do me a kindness by offering that of which he perished? No, he wanted revenge on his killer and therefore hoodwinked me. Too late I have learnt the truth. Unless I'm mistaken, I shall be my husband's killer, I alone. I am aware that the arrow slew even the immortal Cheiron – that it destroys every creature it touches. The black poison gushing from the Centaur's wound – why could it not also destroy Herakles? Such is my reasoning. But if he deceived me, surely he could also kill me too. It's intolerable for a woman who respects her noble birth to live with a stained reputation.

Chorus: One has to fear dreadful deeds, yet mustn't trust their expectations before the event.

Deianeira: No hope exists to lend me courage – not after my wicked deed.

Chorus: When one has erred unwittingly, one's anger softens –as must yours.

Deianeira: The innocent may say that, but not the corrupt.

Chorus: Say no more, unless it's to your son. Here he is, back from his search.

Hyllos: O mother, I wish you were dead...or someone else's mother...or somehow a better person than you are

Deianeira: What is it, child, that makes you hate me so?

Hyllos: Your husband, my own father – this very day you have killed him.

Deianeira: O child, no, what is this you say?

Hyllos: Something that cannot be unsaid – who could undo what's already done?

Deianeira: What, child? Who told you of this piteous act?

Hyllos: I saw it with my own eyes – a sight hard to bear. There was no need to hear it of another.

Deianeira: Where did you find him?

Hyllos: If you wish, I'll tell all. When he came to famed Eurytos, he sacked it and took away spoils as evidence of his conquest. There is a sea-washed headland, Kenaion, in Euboia. Here he established a sepulcher among the foliage in holy ground, dedicating it to Father Zeus. And that is where I first saw him, to my great delight. Our servant Lichas came from the palace as he was about to offer a large number of sacrifices, and in his hands was the deadly robe – your present. He put it on, as per your instructions, and then

sacrificed twelve immaculate bulls, the firstfruits of his spoils. But altogether he brought to the altar one hundred beasts. The poor man graciously offered up prayers, happy and content with the robe he wore. But when the flame sprang up from the flesh of the beasts and the piney wood, he began to sweat and the robe wrapped itself around his chest and limbs, as though moulded there by some artisan. A spasmodic itching attacked him. The a poison like that of a foul and venomous snake began to consume him. And he called for the luckless Lichas, who was in no way responsible for your offence, and asked him what treachery had led to the gift of the robe. He knew nothing and answered, poor man, that the gift was sent by you alone. When he learned this, a wrenching convulsion seized hold of his frame, and he took the man by his ankle and cast him against a rock on the shoreline. Grey matter spattered through his hair – blood and pieces of his skull were scattered everywhere. Everyone there let out a cry both for the victim and against the violent act of his killer. Nobody dared stand up to him, since his convulsions sent him running, leaping, shouting, shrieking. The mountainous headlands of Lokri, the peaks of Euboea resounded from rock to rock. Over and over the poor wretch threw himself to the ground and bellowed, finally sinking down with exhaustion to curse his luckless marriage to you, wretch, and that of Oineos which was destined to destroy him. Then, turning his eyes from the prevailing smoke, he picked me out from the throng as I stood weeping – he stared at me and called out: “Boy, come here, don’t leave me to my plight – die with me if you must. Take me away from here, put me where no-one may see me. Have pity on me, transport me from this land as quickly as you can, don’t let me die here.

“ These were his orders, and so we placed him in a boat and sailed here – a grievous voyage as the air was rent with his pained groaning. You’ll see him soon -if not alive, then new-dead. And that’s the crime of which you are convicted. May avenging Justice and the Furies punish you. This is my prayer, if right is on my side. And it is – you have proved it by killing the best man this country has ever seen.

Chorus: Why steal away? In doing so you are admitting your guilt.

Hyllos: Let her! And a fair wind follow her! What point is there in cultivating the pride of motherhood when she has not acted like a mother? Let her go and good riddance! May she enjoy all the happiness she has given him.

Chorus: O children, hear the ancient words ring out;

“Twelve years of servitude are gone,” they shout.

“The son of Zeus is free of labour now.”

And surely this is right and just. For how

Can one who’s dead work still? The Centaur’s gore,

With venom mingled from the serpent’s core,

Infests his frame. How will he ever know

Another day when Hydra tortures so?

Black, fiery, bloody and deceptive goads

Plague him. The harm a news espousal bodes

The poor queen senses, yet her act proceeds

Out of another’s brain, whence come the seeds

Of violence. Surely she must groan and weep

In that the Fates deceitful ruin reap.

Alas! Poor man, he’s riddled with disease..

Whose sufferings are more piteous than these?

Curse the black lance which won the novice bride
In steep Oichalia – now here at our side.
It's Cypris, sure, on whom the blame must fall,
Our goddess, mute protectress of us all.

Am I dreaming or do I hear a wail of grief from within?

What am I saying?

Someone IS yelling – I can't make it out but it's pitiful. More ill news in the house, it seems.

An old woman, with sad countenance, is coming out to tell us the news.

Nurse: Children, Herakles' robe has spawned a multitude of calamities.

Chorus: What news is this you tell, old woman?

Nurse: Without moving a foot, Deianeira has taken that last journey of all.

Chorus: To her death?

Nurse: Yes.

Chorus: The poor lady is dead?

Nurse: Yes, as I said.

Chorus: Poor wretch! How did she die?

Nurse: Dreadfully.

Chorus: Tell me the fate she met, lady.

Nurse: Suicide.

Chorus: What passion ruled her? Or what madness?

Nurse: A sharp-edged knife did for her.

Chorus: How could she pursue a further death all alone?

Nurse: The death-stroke of a weapon...

Chorus: You saw this outrage?

Nurse: I did – I was by her side.

Chorus: What was it? How did she do it? Tell me.

Nurse: With her own hands.

Chorus: What?

Nurse: Is it not obvious?

Chorus: This new bride has brought a massive curse on the house.

Nurse: Massive indeed! If you had been there to witness it, you would have wept copiously.

Chorus: And a woman's hand accomplished this?

Nurse: A terrible deed! You shall hear, confirming what I say. When she entered the palace alone and saw her son in the courtyard making up a bed, ready to meet his father on his return, she hid herself from view, prostrated herself before the altar and shrieked aloud that she would soon be desolate, weeping as she touched the utensils she had used in earlier days. Careering back and forth, she tried to find any of her beloved servants, weeping when she did, railing at her fate, invoking a household now childless.

She ceased, and now I saw her gazing at Herakles' chamber. I kept a covert eye on her as she scattered the sheets on the bed. After this she leapt onto the marriage-bed, broke into scalding tears and said: "My bridal bed, where I lost my maidenhead, farewell forever – you'll see Herakles' consort no more."

With these words she impetuously opened her robe, which was adorned at the breast with a golden brooch, exposing her entire left side and her arm. At full speed I rushed to her

son and told him what she was up to. Back we sped only to see her with a dagger plunged in her ribs below the heart. Seeing this Hyllus groaned, realizing, poor child, that his anger had driven her to this deed, and learning too late from others in the palace that the Centaur is the cause of all this – she herself was innocent.

Then the poor wretch, continuing to grieve, fell to kissing her lips, lying at her side, protesting that he had accused her unjustly, weeping that he was now orphaned by both father and mother. That is what has occurred within. It's a fool who counts on two days together, let alone more – we must steer our course through today before facing tomorrow.

Chorus: Two tragedies! Where am I to begin?

The first one or the one that's just occurred?

What of our hopes? Or of the sight within?

(Both painful) Would this palace now were stirred

By some chance wind which could bear me away

That I may die before I have to see

The son of Zeus – they say he comes today

In grave distress – a shocking prodigy!

He comes with people of an alien race,

(A shrill-voiced nightingale, aloud I weep!)

In mute solicitude, with leaden pace.

Is our lord dead? Or does he merely sleep?

Hyllos: O father, I see your pain and feel it. What am I to do?

Old Man: Silence, child, don't raise your father to frenzy – his agony is savage. His hold on life is precarious. Hold your tongue.

Hyllus: What are you saying, old man? He's alive?

Old Man: Don't wake him, don't disturb him, don't exacerbate the dreadful plague which wracks him constantly, child.

Hyllos: My grief for your plight is heavy indeed. I'm lost in it.

Herakles: Zeus, where am I now? What men are these who watch me prostrate with this relentless agony? O! Misery! Once more the pain bites! O!

Old Man: Did you not hear me? He must be left to lie in peace. Don't banish the sleep from his brain and his eyelids.

Hyllos: I can't bear to see the misery.

Herakles: Kenaian altar, this is my reward for all my sacrifices! This is how you treat me! I should not have had to witness this – the heights of mad ruin! What shaman, what healer, can cast a spell and abort this sickness unless Zeus intervenes? Such a miracle I yearn to see – yet it's far off indeed.

Ah! Leave me to take my rest – my final rest. I am doomed. Don't touch me! You'll kill me, you'll reawaken the pain – it's just subsided. It fixes on me again! Ah! Here it comes. O you men of Greece, the wickedest possible, what are you? I slaved for you, killing myself by degrees, clearing the seas and the forests of criminals, and now you have no fire, no easeful sword to end this sickness? Cut off my wretched head, I beg you.

Old Man: Child of Herakles, this is beyond my power. You must assist me. You can help him better than I.

Hyllos: I hold him, yes, but neither I nor anyone else can cure his pain. That is Zeus' domain.

Herakles: Child, where are you? Come, come, comfort me. O God! It wracks me again – foul, savage plague. It's killing me. Pallas, it bites dreadfully. Boy, have pity on your father, take your sword (I'll not reproach you for it) and strike me here, at the neck. Stop the pain, the pain your impious mother inflicted in her anger. If only I could see her dead, right here, as she has killed me. Sweet Hades, Zeus' brother, put me to rest, destroy me, and quickly.

Chorus: Ladies, I shudder to hear the suffering of so mighty a lord.

Herakles: So many labours have I sweated through, but never did Zeus' consort nor the hateful Eurystheus impose upon me such a subtle web of ruin as the wily daughter of Oineus has laid over my shoulders. It has finished me. It clings tightly to my flesh, it sucks my lungs dry. It has already drained my dark blood, my whole body is shriveled up, brought to nothing by this unspeakable vise. The spearsmen of the plain didn't do this, nor the earthborn army of giants, no mighty beast, not Greece, not any barbarian land, no country where I performed my labours – no, it was a woman, yes, a female, unassisted, has destroyed me and she didn't need a knife to do it.

Son, be truly my own son, my flesh-and-blood, and no longer honour the name of mother. Bring her out and hand her over to me yourself – I wish to see which of us you pity more – me in my pain or her when she is justly killed for her crime. Go, boy, do it! Pity me, as so many do – wailing like some young girl (a thing not one man has ever seen me do before. No, I performed all my labours in stoic silence). I am reduced now to the status of a woman!

Come now, stay close and hear all the sufferings I have undergone. I will lift the veil and reveal all. See what I'm reduced to, my wretched state. The pain burns into me once more, plunging into my frame, the foul sickness eats me away – it gives me no respite. Lord Hades, take me! Zeus, strike me with your lightning-bolt. Shake your thunderbolt, lord, father, strike me! The plague gorges on me again, it's at its height now. Hands, back, chest, dear arms, how well you served me when you struck and slew that denizen of Nemea and scourge of sheep, the lion, horrid, inexorable, and the Lernaean hydra, the savage band of centaurs, wanton, lawless, powerful, the Erymanthian beast, the three-headed hound of Hades, a daunting monster, the dangerous snake of Echidna, the serpent which guards the golden apples at the edge of the world. Countless other trials I essayed, victor in one and all. Now here I am, feeble, in rags, attacked by blind ruin, the son of an illustrious mother, my father (it is said) Zeus Himself. But know this: pathetic as I now am, I will deal with the guilty one. Let her but come here and I will show the world that, living or dead, I can punish impiety.

Chorus: Poor Greece, the sorrow you will feel at the loss of such a man as this!

Hyllos: Father, since you have given me leave to answer, be quiet and listen to me, sick though you are. I have the right to ask these questions. Hear me, try to control your rancour at the nagging pain. You are unaware, in your zeal for revenge, that you are misguided.

Herakles: Enough of what YOU want! I am sick, your artful words mean nothing to me.

Hyllos: I am here to tell you of my mother – she acted unintentionally.

Herakles: Villain, you would talk to me of that woman who killed your father?

Hyllos: Yes, I must speak of her.

Herakles: Not of her past crimes.

Hyllos: Yes, and of what she has done today – you will agree when you hear.

Herakles: Speak, but watch you don't betray a wicked nature.

Hyllos: I shall. She is new-dead.

Herakles: At whose hands? Great news, though told by a villain.

Hyllos: Her own, none else's.

Herakles: O no! Mine should have done it.

Hyllos: If you knew all, your anger would abate.

Herakles: You hint at something terrible. Say what you know.

Hyllos: It was all a mistake – she meant all for the good.

Herakles: You blackguard, killing your father was GOOD?

Hyllos: When she saw the new bride within, she planned a love-charm for you, but it all miscarried.

Herakles: And who in Trachis practices such sorcery?

Hyllos: Nessos the Centaur once persuaded her to use such a charm to kindle in you a great passion.

Herakles: O no! This is the end. I am dead, dead, my light is fading. I see my fate clearly. Come, child, your father is no more. Call all your siblings to me, and Alkmene, Zeus' wife (though fruitless), let them hear my final words, the oracles I have heard.

Hyllos: Your mother is not here – she dwells in coastal Tiryns, and of the children some she is fostering there, others dwell in Thebes. We who are here, father, are at your disposal.

Herakles: Listen then. You are to prove to me what sort of a man my son truly is. My father once predicted that no living soul would kill me – no, someone dwelling in Hades would be my slayer. And now the Centaur, as was divinely prophesied, has done for me – a living being slain by a dead one. But I will tell you new prophecies, similar to the ancient ones – I wrote them down while I was with the vagrant mountain-people, THE Selloi. They were taken from my father's polyglot oak-tree, and they said that this is the

very time when my appointed labours will cease. I thought I would prosper but instead it meant only my death, since the dead have no labours. Since the prophesy has clearly been fulfilled, child, you must once more be my ally. Don't delay, don't provoke me to angry words, listen to me and comply – to obey one's father is the best advice.

Hyllos: Father, I shudder at what you say, yet will obey.

Herakles: First, give me your right hand.

Hyllos: As a pledge? For what?

Herakles: Give it. Don't disobey.

Hyllos: There, you have it. I'll not let you down.

Herakles: Swear to Zeus on your father's head.

Hyllos: To what? I'll do it.

Herakles: What I tell you to do.

Hyllos: Zeus be my witness, I shall.

Herakles: If you cross me, on your head be it.

Hyllos: Have no fear! I'll do it. I promise.

Herakles: Do you know Zeus' highest peak, Mount Oita?

Hyllos: Yes, I often sacrificed there.

Herakles: Then take my body, you and what friends you may choose, cut up the wood of a mighty, deep-rooted oak, along with that of the wild olive-tree, place my body on the heap, take a torch of pitch and set it afire. No tear of grief – do this in silence – notwithstanding that it is I whom you grieve. If you do not, I shall haunt you from the nether world, endlessly and pitilessly cursing.

Hyllos: Father, what are you saying? Such a task!

Herakles: It must be done. If it is not, call yourself another's son.

Hyllos: Father, you are asking me to be the instrument of the murder of the man who begot me.

Herakles: No, to be the sole healer of my woes.

Hyllos: But how can I heal you by cremating your body?

Herakles: If you are afraid to do that, do the rest – the preparations.

Hyllos: No-one will refuse the office of carrying you.

Herakles: And of building the pyre?

Hyllos: I myself will not have a part in that. The rest will I do – I'll not complain of my lot.

Herakles: That will suffice. Now one brief favour to add to these large ones...

Hyllos:...will be granted, however large.

Herakles: You know Eurytos' daughter?

Hyllos: I assume you mean Iole.

Herakles: I do. This is what I ask, child: if you respect your father and keep his oaths in your memory, don't disobey him but, once he is dead, marry her. Let no other save you have her that was once mine. No, child, she must be yours. To comply to large requests and then to spurn a small one reduces to naught your former services.

Hyllos: O God! It's wrong to defy a sick man, but who could bear hearing such a request?

Herakles: You'll do nothing I tell you?

Hyllos: Who could marry the sole cause of my mother's death and of your present condition? Who! Unless the avenging deities have affected him? I'd rather die than share my life with such a bitter enemy.

Herakles: No respect for a dying man? God's curses on you if you disobey!

Hyllos: It must be the sickness speaking.

Herakles: You'll inflame it, rouse it from sleep.

Hyllos: I'm helpless on all sides.

Herakles: Of course – you think it wrong to listen to your own father.

Hyllos: Are you advocating impiety, father?

Herakles: No, not impiety. Not when this will gladden my heart.

Hyllos: Am I duty-bound to obey you?

Herakles: You are, and I call upon the gods as witnesses.

Hyllos: Then I'll do it and not refuse. I call the gods to witness. I would never earn your displeasure by disobedience, father.

Herakles: A good conclusion! Fulfil your promise quickly – no more convulsions or stinging pains. Lay me on the pyre. Hurry, raise me up. My final rest, free at last of all trouble.

Hyllos: Nothing will hinder our preparations, father, since you have commanded us.

Herakles: Come now, before my sickness is roused again. Stubborn soul of mine, bridle yourself with steel, keep silence. The deed is hard to perform but it will bring joy at last.

Hyllos: Lift him, servants. Grant me your forgiveness, while you recognize the gods' great unkindness in these deeds. They engendered us, they are called our progenitors, yet they look on as these sufferings continue.

Don't linger within, ladies. Look at these noble people, dead, know these new woes. Zeus controls it all.