

# THE CHILDREN OF HERACLES

*Translated by* MARK GRIFFITH

# THE CHILDREN OF HERACLES: INTRODUCTION

## *The Play: Date and Composition*

The date of *The Children of Heracles* (*Hêrakleidai*, *Heraclidae*) is uncertain. However, the metrical character of the verse is similar to that of *Medea* and Euripides' other early plays, suggesting that he most likely wrote the play in the late 430s or early 420s, perhaps ca. 430. It is not known with what other plays it was first staged nor how it fared in the dramatic competition that year.

On the basis of various apparent inconsistencies in the play (see below), some modern scholars have suggested that the version of it we have was revised in antiquity by someone other than Euripides, or that the text has suffered substantial damage in transmission. Moreover, five quotations that are attributed to this play by other ancient authors are not found in the text that has reached us via medieval manuscripts. The question of the integrity of the play as we have it remains open.

## *The Myth*

After Heracles died (or became a god and was taken up to heaven), his son Hyllus and his other children were left without a stable home or male head of the family to protect them. Iolaus, who had been Heracles' comrade-in-arms in many of his labors, did his best to look after them, but they found themselves helpless against the continuing persecution of Eurystheus, king of Argos/Mycenae. Eurystheus had also persecuted Heracles during his lifetime, and now he wished to eliminate all of Heracles' descendants. As Heracles' children fled from one city to the next all over Greece, Eurystheus threatened to attack each of the cities with Argos' powerful army, and so none of them was willing to offer the children protection or a

new home—except (in some versions, including this one) eventually Athens, which was ruled at the time by Theseus’ two sons, Demophon and Acamas. In Euripides’ play, we see how the Athenians successfully repelled the Argive attack, in part through the voluntary self-sacrifice of one of Heracles’ daughters, and Eurystheus was captured and executed; so Heracles’ children survived to found a future dynasty of “Dorian” rulers (the so-called Heraclids) in many regions of Greece. There are various oddities in Euripides’ play as transmitted that have troubled scholars—for example, after the daughter of Heracles who offers to be sacrificed leaves the stage there is no further reference either to her or to her death, and at the end the chorus that so strongly opposed the killing of Eurystheus ends up simply agreeing to it.

The account of Athens’ acceptance of the children of Heracles as suppliants is not attested before the fifth century BCE, when it is mentioned by various historians. It quickly became a symbol of Athenian pride and self-congratulation, and is often referred to by the Attic orators, especially in their speeches at commemorations of the Athenian soldiers who had fallen in combat. It may well have been invented in Athens as anti-Peloponnesian propaganda during Euripides’ lifetime, though probably not by Euripides himself. The theme of Athens’ acceptance of foreign suppliants and its military and religious protection of them against their enemies was very popular among fifth-century Athenian audiences. Some years later, Euripides himself treated an analogous legend in his *Suppliant Women* (written ca. 423 BCE); broadly similar episodes also serve as the basis for Euripides’ lost *Erechtheus* (written about the same time as his *Suppliant Women*) and Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Iolaus (like Heracles) was a Theban hero, and it was part of Theban local legend that he was rejuvenated in Attica, the region containing Athens. So too, Euripides’ account of the death of Eurystheus may have been based on tradition. On the other hand, the self-sacrifice of a maiden to save the rest of the group is a typically Euripidean motif and may well have been his invention. Other tragedies about the subject were apparently very rare. Aeschylus is known to have written a *Children of Heracles* but next to nothing is known about the play.

### *Transmission and Reception*

*The Children of Heracles* has never been one of Euripides' most popular plays. It survived antiquity only by the accident of being among the so-called alphabetic plays (see "Introduction to Euripides," p. 3), and it is transmitted only by a single manuscript (and its copies) and is not accompanied by the ancient commentaries (scholia) that explain various kinds of interpretative difficulties. Further evidence that it was not very popular in antiquity is that no papyri bearing any parts of its text have been discovered. Two south Italian vases of the late fifth century BCE seem to illustrate the opening of *The Children of Heracles*; other ancient pictorial representations have also been assigned to this play by some modern scholars, but their attribution is very uncertain.

So too, the influence of the play on modern literature and art has been negligible, and only recently has the play begun to be adapted and performed.

# THE CHILDREN OF HERACLES

## *Characters*

IOLAUS, friend and kinsman of Heracles

HERALD of Eurystheus, king of Argos

CHORUS of old men of Marathon

DEMOPHON, king of Athens

ACAMAS, his brother (silent character)

MAIDEN, daughter of Heracles

SERVANT of Heracles' son Hyllus

ALCMENE, mother of Heracles

MESSENGER

EURYSTHEUS, king of Argos

*Scene: A temple of Zeus at Marathon, on the northeast coast of Attica. In front of the temple, an altar, at which old Iolaus and the young sons of Heracles have taken refuge as suppliants.*

IOLAUS

Since long ago I've been  
convinced of this:  
an honest man exists for those  
around him,  
while the one whose mind is  
merely bent on profit  
is useless to his city and  
dangerous to deal with,  
good only to himself.

5 This I know from experience,

not books.

I myself could have lived  
quietly in Argos,  
but from concern and family  
duty I was  
the one man who shared with  
Heracles  
in his many labors, while he was  
still with us.

And now that he dwells in  
heaven, I keep his children

here under my wing and try to  
protect them—

10     though needing protection  
myself.

For when their father left the  
earth behind,

Eurystheus hoped at first to kill  
us all:

but we escaped. So we have lost  
our city

15     but kept our lives. We wander  
now in exile,

fleeing from one town's  
boundaries to another's.

For, on top of our other  
miseries, Eurystheus  
saw fit to inflict one further  
outrage on us:

whenever he heard we'd settled  
ourselves somewhere,

20     he sent heralds to demand we be  
extradited

and debarred from the land.

He'd point out

that Argos was no small city, as  
friend or foe,

and that he himself was  
prosperous and successful.

And they, looking at the  
feebleness on my part

and at the children here, so  
small and without a father,

they ended up paying respect to  
the stronger power—

25 so everyone has barred us from  
their land.

For myself, I'm a fellow exile  
with the exiled children,

a fellow sufferer with these  
sufferers,

because I refuse to betray them,  
lest people might say,

“Look! Now that the children's  
father's not alive,

Iolaus has stopped protecting  
them,

30 even though he's a member of  
their family.”

With no place of our own in  
all of Greece,

we've come to Marathon and its  
neighboring lands;

we're sitting here, suppliants at  
the gods' altars,

asking for their help. For it is

said  
35 that Theseus' two sons live in  
this Attic plain;  
of Pandion's descendants, they  
were the ones  
to whom this land was allotted

—  
and they are related to these  
children here.

That is why we've come to the  
borders of famed Athens.

40 Two aged commanders have  
planned and led this flight:

the boys here are my concern,  
while Alcmene  
is looking after her son's  
daughters inside the temple,  
clasping them in her arms. We  
think it better  
for young girls not to appear in  
public,  
and to keep vigil instead at the  
altars.

45 Hyllus, and those of his brothers  
who are old enough,  
are looking for some place on  
earth, a stronghold,  
where we can settle if we're  
forced out from this land.

*(The Herald enters from the side.)*

Children, children, here, hold on to my



robes!

I see Eurystheus' herald coming for us,  
50 the one who pursues us, making us live  
as exiles,

depriving us of any place  
to rest.

*(To the Herald.)*

You scum, to hell with you and the man who sent you!  
How many times did this same mouth of yours  
deliver cruel messages to these boys' noble father!

HERALD

55 So you think the position you've taken up here's a good one,  
and that you've come to a city which will be your ally—  
but you're wrong. There's no one on earth who'll choose  
your useless powers in preference to Eurystheus.  
Get moving! Why trouble yourself like this?  
You must pick yourself up and set off for Argos,  
60 where the sentence of death by stoning awaits you.

IOLAUS

On the contrary, the god's altar will protect me  
and this free country in which we have set foot.

HERALD

Do you want to make work for these hands of mine?

IOLAUS

Not by force will you drag me or them away with you.

HERALD

You will soon see.

*(Seizing one of the children.)*

65                                      You were not much of a prophet there,  
after all!

IOLAUS

As long as I live, this will not happen.

*(They struggle; Iolaus is thrown to the ground.)*

HERALD

Out of my way! However much you object,  
I'm going to take them, since I think they belong to Eurystheus.

IOLAUS

70                                      All you who live in Athens, longtime residents,  
help us! We're here as suppliants of Zeus,  
the Guardian of the Meeting Place, and yet  
we're being attacked and our garlands desecrated,  
an insult to the city and an affront to the gods!

*(Enter the Chorus from the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing throughout their interchange with Iolaus and the Herald,  
who speak in response*]

*Hey! What's this shouting, raised from near the altar?  
What mishap will it reveal to us? Quickly now!*

STROPHE

75                                      Look at that weak old man  
sprawled on the earth! Poor fellow!°

*(To Iolaus.)*

*Who is it that has thrown you so cruelly to the ground?*

IOLAUS

This is the one, strangers, who is dishonoring your gods  
by dragging me forcibly from the precinct of Zeus.

CHORUS

80     *And you, old man, from what land have you come  
to the people of the Four Towns? Was it from  
over the water, with oars, that you arrived here,  
leaving the shore of Euboea?*

IOLAUS

It is no islander's life that I live, strangers:  
85     we've come here to your country from Mycenae.

CHORUS

*By what name did they call you, old man,  
the people of Mycenae?*

IOLAUS

I'm sure you know of Heracles' companion,  
Iolaus. My deeds are not unheralded.

CHORUS

90     *I do know, from hearing in time past. But, tell me,  
whose are the young boys you are guarding in your arms?*

IOLAUS

These are Heracles' children, strangers; they have come

as suppliants to you and to your city.

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE

95     *For what purpose? Please explain: are they anxious  
to be allowed to speak with the city?*

IOLAUS

They're anxious not to be extradited, or violently  
dragged from your gods and forced to go to Argos.

HERALD

But this will in no way satisfy your masters,  
100     who've found you here and have you in their power.

CHORUS

*It is reasonable to respect the gods' suppliants, stranger,  
and not to defile the seats of the deities with violent hands. °  
Lady Justice will not be treated so.*

HERALD

105     Just send these ones who belong to Eurystheus out  
of the country, and I won't raise my hand in violence at all.

CHORUS

*It's impious for a city to surrender  
a suppliant group of strangers.*

HERALD

But it is also good to keep one's foot out of trouble,  
110     by adopting the more judicious alternative. °

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CHORUS LEADER

So, if you had any respect for a free country, shouldn't you  
have spoken to the king of this land first, before  
behaving so boldly and forcibly dragging the strangers  
away from the gods' sanctuary?

HERALD

Who is the lord of this country and city?

CHORUS LEADER

115     The child of a noble father, Demophon, son of Theseus.

HERALD

Then the dispute about this case should be directed  
to him: all else has been but wasted breath.

*(Enter Demophon and Acamas from the side.)*

CHORUS LEADER

But here he comes now in haste, together with  
his brother Acamas, to hear these arguments.

DEMOPHON

120     Since, old as you are, you got here before us younger men,  
in coming to the rescue here at Zeus' altar, tell us,  
what's happening to bring together such a crowd?

CHORUS LEADER

These are the children of Heracles, my lord,  
who, as you see, have put wreaths on the altar

125

and are sitting here as suppliants; and with them  
is their father's trusty companion, Iolaus.

DEMOPHON

So why did this business have need for yelling?

CHORUS LEADER

That man there caused the shouting, by trying to take them  
forcibly from the altar here; he knocked  
the old man off his feet; we wept in pity to see it.

DEMOPHON

130 Well, his clothes and style are Greek, but these actions  
are those of a barbarian.

*(To the Herald.)*

It's up to you  
to tell me, then, and without wasting time,  
what country's boundaries did you leave to come here?

HERALD

I am an Argive; that answers your  
question;  
135 and I'm quite prepared to say for what,  
and from whom, I've come.  
Eurystheus, king of Mycenae, has sent  
me here  
to fetch these children. I came with  
ample justice  
to my cause, stranger, both for words  
and actions.

140 I am an Argive myself and I'm

taking with me  
these Argives, runaways from my own  
country,  
who have been condemned to death by  
that land's decrees.  
We who live in the city are entitled to  
pass  
judgments on each other that are  
binding.  
We've come to the hearths of many  
others too,  
145 and taken our stand on these same  
arguments;  
and none was so rash as to bring on  
himself new troubles.  
But in you either they thought they saw  
some stupidity  
and so came here, or else they're  
gambling  
on a risk to get out of their desperate  
situation,  
whether or not it will succeed.°  
150 For they cannot expect that you in your  
right mind  
will be the only person in all Greece  
of all the places that they've visited,  
to take pity on their hopeless  
predicament.  
Just weigh one alternative against the  
other: how  
will you benefit from allowing them  
into your country,  
155 or from letting us take them away? You

stand to gain  
from our side the great army of Argos  
and Eurystheus'  
whole strength thus added to this city  
of yours.  
But if you pay heed to their words and  
lamentations,  
and grow soft, the affair turns into a  
spear contest;  
160 for do not imagine that we'll give up  
this struggle  
to recover them without recourse to  
steel.

Why then will you say that you're  
waging war on Argos?  
What lands have you lost? Of what  
have you been robbed?  
Who are the allies, what cause, in  
whose defense  
165 you'll be burying the bodies of those  
men of yours who fall?  
Bad will be your reputation with the  
citizens,

if, for the sake of an old  
man, at death's door,

a complete nothing, to put it in a word,  
and of these children, you step deep  
into trouble.  
At best, you can say just that you'll  
find some hope<sup>o</sup>—  
170 and this far inferior to the present one.  
For even fully grown and armed, these  
children



would hardly match the Argives (if  
that's what  
now gives you heart and keeps your  
spirits high);  
and long's the time in between, in  
which you all  
may well be quite destroyed.

So do as I suggest:

175 by giving nothing, just allowing me  
to take what's mine, win for yourself Mycenae.  
That way you'll not suffer what you Athenians so often do;  
that is, when you could choose stronger people  
as friends, accepting weaker ones instead.

CHORUS LEADER

Who'd form a verdict, or decide a dispute, before  
180 he's clearly heard the stories from both sides?

IOLAUS

My lord, since in your country this rule applies,  
it is my right to speak and hear in turn,  
and nobody will push me away first,  
as they have done everywhere else.  
Between this man and us there's nothing in common. °  
185 Since, by decree, we are no longer part  
of Argos, but are in exile from our country,  
how could this man legitimately take us  
as Mycenaeans, seeing that they themselves  
expelled us from that land? So we are foreigners.  
190 Or do you claim that anyone exiled from Argos  
is exiled too from all Greek territories?

Well, not from Athens! Never in fear of Argos  
will they drive Heracles' children from their land.  
This is no Trachis, no Achaean city  
from which, without justice but with impressive speeches  
195 about Argos, like the ones you're giving now,  
you'd drive out suppliants seated at the altar.  
If that happens here, and they approve your arguments,  
then no more shall I call their city "free."  
But I know the Athenians' character, their nature:  
200 they'll be prepared to die. Among good men  
honor is regarded higher than staying alive.

*(To Demophon.)*

Enough about the city; it brings resentment  
to praise too strongly, as I know myself  
from often being weighed down by too much praise.  
205 But you personally are obliged, as I'll explain.  
to protect these children, as leader of this country.  
Pittheus was Pelops' son, then from Pittheus  
came Aethra, and from her your father, Theseus.  
Now their family tree I'll trace back over for you:  
210 Heracles was son of Zeus and Alcmene  
and she was born from Pelops' daughter. So  
your father and theirs are sons of first cousins.  
So that is how your birth connection stands  
to these children, Demophon; and I'll tell you too  
215 what, apart from blood ties, you owe them. I can say  
that once, when I was their father's right-hand man,  
I was a fellow voyager with Theseus,  
in pursuit of the Girdle that caused so much bloodshed.°

Later, it was Heracles who brought your father back  
from out of the gloomy recesses of Hades.°

The whole of Greece is witness to those acts.

220 Now in return these children ask of you  
this favor—that they not be extradited,  
not be dragged from your gods and driven from this land.  
So for you personally, it's a disgrace,  
and likewise for the city, if suppliants,  
wanderers, relatives—alas, just look at them, look!  
225 are miserably dragged off from here by force.

I entreat you, as I wreathe you in my arms  
and touch your beard: do not disdain to accept  
the children of Heracles into your hands.

Be a true kinsman to them, a true friend,  
230 father, brother—even master; any of these  
is better than falling under the Argives' power.

CHORUS LEADER

I pity them, my lord, when I hear their misfortunes.  
Nobility defeated by bad luck—I see it here  
in truth. These are children of a noble father,  
235 and the fate they're suffering is surely undeserved.

DEMOPHON

A threefold path of circumstance° compels me,  
Iolaus, not to reject these words of yours.°  
The most important—Zeus, at whose altar  
you sit with this, your flock of little fledglings.  
240 Then there's the kinship and the debt I owe their father,  
to treat them well for his sake. And finally  
the disgrace to me, for which I must be most concerned:

for if I allow this altar to be robbed  
violently, by a man from another land,  
it will look as if I'm governing a country  
245 that is not free, betraying these suppliants  
out of fear of Argos. I'd rather hang myself!  
Well, I could have wished you'd come with better fortune,  
but even now, fear not: no one will drag  
you or the children by force from this altar.

*(To the Herald.)*

250 As for you, return to Argos with this news  
and tell Eurystheus also that if he  
has some legitimate complaint against these strangers,  
he'll obtain fair hearing. But you won't take them with you.

HERALD

Not even if it's just, and my claim is stronger?

DEMOPHON

How can it be just to take a suppliant by force?

HERALD

255 A disgrace to me, perhaps, but no harm to you!

DEMOPHON

It's my disgrace, if I let you drag them off.

HERALD

Just banish them from your borders: we'll take them from there.

DEMOPHON

You're stupid if you think you know better than god.

HERALD

This is the place for the wicked to flee to, it seems.

DEMOPHON

260 The gods' sanctuaries are a common refuge for all.

HERALD

The Mycenaeans perhaps will not think so.

DEMOPHON

Am I not the one in charge of matters here?

HERALD

As long as you've got the sense not to injure them.

DEMOPHON

You can all be injured, so long as I don't defile the gods.

HERALD

265 I have no wish for you to have a war with Argos.

DEMOPHON

I'm of the same mind: but I'll not give these people up.

HERALD

But I'll take them none the less, since they're mine to take.

DEMOPHON

Then you will not find it easy to return to Argos.

HERALD

I'll try it out and see—immediately!

DEMOPHON

270 Then at once you'll be sorry that you laid hands on them.

HERALD

In the gods' name, don't you dare strike a herald!

DEMOPHON

I will, unless the herald learns how to conduct himself.

*(To the Herald.)*

CHORUS LEADER

Off with you!

*(To Demophon.)*

And you, my lord, don't touch him!

HERALD

I'm on my way; one man's hands can put up  
275 only a feeble fight. But I'll be back  
with a mighty army of Argive spearmen, all  
in Ares' bronze. Ten thousand warriors await me,  
with King Eurystheus himself their commander;  
he's waiting by the furthest boundaries  
of Alcahous for the outcome of things here.  
Brilliant and powerful, you will see him come,  
280 descending upon you and your citizens,  
this land and its crops, when he hears of your intransigence.  
There'd be no point in having such great numbers  
of fine young men in Argos, if we failed

to punish you.

DEMOPHON

To hell with you! I do not fear your Argos.  
285 You were not going to come here, disgrace me,  
and take these people away with you by force!  
This city of mine's no vassal of Argos, but free.

*(Exit Herald to the side.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*It is time to think, before Argive forces  
reach the border. Keen is the war spirit  
290 among the Mycenaeans, and keener still  
will it be after this even than before.  
For all heralds have the same habit  
of exaggerating things to twice their size.  
Can you imagine all he'll say to the king:  
how terribly he was mistreated, and  
295 how he barely escaped with his life?*

IOLAUS

There's no finer treasure for children than  
to have been born of a noble and good father  
[and to take a wife from a noble family. I don't approve  
300 of a man leaving disgrace for his children for the sake of pleasure,  
if he gives in to desire and shares his bed with those beneath him].<sup>o</sup>  
Good breeding resists ill luck better than ill breeding:  
thus we, despite falling into the depths of adversity,  
305 found these friends and relatives, who alone  
of all the peoples of Greece stood up for us.  
Children, offer them your right hands, yes, go ahead!

*(To the Chorus.)*

And you, give your hands to the children, and draw near.

*(The children and the Chorus clasp hands.)*

Children, we have made proof of our true friends;  
310 and if ever you find the chance to return  
to your homeland, and occupy once more the house  
of your father and recover his prerogatives,<sup>o</sup>  
regard them as your friends and saviors, always;  
and, in memory of this occasion, never raise  
your spears in war against this land: regard it  
315 as the most beloved and trusted city of all.

They deserve all due respect from you, since they  
deflected from us and onto themselves instead  
the hostility of such a mighty land  
and its Pelasgian people; they could see  
that we were wandering beggars, yet they didn't  
surrender us or expel us from their country.

320 For myself, sir, for as long as I shall live  
I'll praise you to the heights, and when I die,  
whenever that may be, in front of Theseus  
I'll keep on praising you, gladdening his heart  
by telling him how nobly you received  
Heracles' children and protected them;  
and how, true to your birth, you are maintaining  
325 your father's glorious name all over Greece.  
You were born of noble stock, but you are proving  
to be in no way inferior to your father.  
Of few others is this true: you could find perhaps



only one among many who's not worse than his father.

CHORUS LEADER

330 This country now and always has been ready  
to help others in difficulties, if the cause is just.  
And so it has undergone countless hardships  
for the sake of friends, and I see here yet another  
struggle approaching now.

DEMOPHON

You have spoken well, old sir, and I am sure  
that things won't be different with these children here:  
the favor will be remembered.  
335 I now will bring together all the citizens  
and marshal them in ranks, so we can meet  
the Mycenaean army with full strength.  
First I'll send out scouts in their direction,  
lest they catch us unawares attacking suddenly  
(for at Argos every man is swift in action).  
340 Then I'll gather the seers, and we'll make the sacrifices.  
As for you, please leave the altar here of Zeus  
and go indoors with the children. There are people  
who'll care for you, even if I am away.  
Please go indoors, old sir.

IOLAUS

I will not leave the altar. We remain here,  
345 sitting<sup>o</sup> as suppliants for the well-being of the city.  
When you are safely delivered from this struggle,  
then we'll go to a house.  
The gods we have as allies aren't inferior,

my lord, to those of Argos. They are protected  
by Hera, wife of Zeus, we by Athena;  
350 and this I see as a basis for success,  
that we in fact have better gods to help us,  
for Pallas won't endure to be defeated.

*(Exit Demophon and Acamas to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*Though you boast loud, others don't  
care more about you,  
355 stranger coming from Argos.  
You will not frighten me with big words;  
may that never happen  
to great Athens and its fine choral dances.  
360 You are out of your mind,  
you and your king at Argos, Sthenelus' son!*

ANTISTROPHE A

*You have come to another city,  
a city no inferior to Argos,  
to drag off by force suppliants of the gods,  
365 wanderers who've found sanctuary in my land;  
this you do as a stranger, without deference  
to kings, and presenting no alternative just claim.  
Is this proper conduct  
among men of good mind?*

EPODE

370 *To me, peace is pleasing;*

*but to you, evil-minded king, I say this:  
if you come against our city  
you will not so easily obtain what you expect!*  
375 *You are not the only one with lance  
and bronze-covered shield of willow.  
You shall never, for all your love of war,  
throw this well-favored city into turmoil*  
380 *with your spear; so hold back!*

*(Enter Demophon from the side.)*

IOLAUS

Young man, why do you come with anxiety in your eyes?  
Have you some news to tell about the enemy?  
Are they waiting—or here already? What have you learned?  
In any case, you won't prove false the herald's words.  
385 Their commander, so successful in the past,  
will come, I'm sure, with big thoughts in his mind  
against Athens. But indeed Zeus is the punisher  
of thoughts that are excessively ambitious.

DEMOPHON

They're here, the Argive force and  
King Eurystheus;  
390 I saw them for myself—for the man  
who claims  
to be an expert at commanding  
armies  
should not use messengers to  
observe the enemy.  
As yet, he has not launched his army  
here

into the plain, but he's stationed on  
the brow  
of a rocky hill, and is spying out  
with care  
395 (or so I guess—of course it's just  
opinion)  
what best formation of troops he  
should employ<sup>o</sup>  
to advance and get established in  
this land.  
But my arrangements all are well  
completed:  
the city's in arms, and sacrificial  
beasts  
stand ready in their places to be  
slaughtered  
400 for each one of the gods to whom  
they're due.  
Burnt offerings conducted by the  
seers  
fill all the city center, to ensure  
rout of the enemy and safety for the  
city.<sup>o</sup>  
And I've brought our oracle-singers  
all together  
into one place, to make careful  
inquiry  
into those ancient sayings, some  
published,  
405 some secret, offering protection for  
this country.<sup>o</sup>  
In most respects there are many  
differences

between the oracles; but there's one  
point  
that stands out just the same in all of  
them:  
they bid me slaughter, for Demeter's  
Daughter,  
a young maiden born of noble  
father.

410     Myself, I've deep concern for  
          your well-being,  
as you can see; but I won't kill my  
          own daughter,  
nor will I compel any one of my  
          citizens  
to such an act against their will—  
          and who  
is so misguided as to hand over

willingly his own most  
precious children?

415     Even now you can see the bitter  
          oppositions,  
with people on one side saying I was  
          right  
to protect the suppliant strangers,  
          while on the other  
they denounce me as a fool. So if I  
          do this now,  
then civil war is already in the  
          works.

420     So now you look, and see if you  
          can help me  
find some way for you all to be  
          saved,

and this land too, without my having  
to fall  
into conflict with my citizens.  
My power's not absolute, as in  
barbarian nations;  
but, if I act justly, I'll get justice in  
return.

CHORUS LEADER

425 Can it really be that though this city's eager  
to help strangers in their need, god won't allow it?

IOLAUS

Children, we're just like sailors who have escaped  
the fury of a storm and gained a grip  
on land, but then are swept back out to sea  
430 by fierce winds. So too we're now being driven  
out from this land, just as we reached the shore  
in seeming safety.

Ah!

Why ever did you cheer me so, cruel hope,  
when you never intended to fulfill your promise?

435 This man's decision is understandable,  
that he's not willing to kill his citizens' children.  
And I can even accept what's happened here  
without complaint: if it's the gods' decree  
that I'm to fare like this, that is no reason  
for my gratitude to you to disappear.

Children, for you there's nothing I can do.

440 Where can we turn? Which god is still unwreathed,  
which country's sheltering walls have we not visited?

We're done for, children; we'll surely be handed over.  
As for myself, I don't care if I must die,  
except that by dying I delight my enemies.  
445 It's for you I weep and feel great pity, children,  
and for your father's mother, old Alcmene—  
how unfortunate you are in your long life!  
(And I, too, wretched, enduring all for nothing!)  
So after all it was fixed: we had to fall  
into our enemy's hands, to end our lives  
450 in shame and misery.

*(To Demophon.)*

But you know how you can help? All hope's not gone  
from my mind, of finding safety for these children:  
give me to the Argives in their place, my lord,  
and let them be saved without your facing danger.  
455 Saving my life's irrelevant; let it go.  
But what Eurystheus most would like to do  
is capture me and so humiliate  
Heracles' comrade. For the man is stupid.  
Intelligent people certainly should wish  
to find someone intelligent as their enemy,  
not one thick and ignorant: greater is  
460 the respect and justice they can expect to find.

CHORUS LEADER

Old sir, don't blame this city for what's happening.  
Reproach against us may be made, we know,  
untrue but no less nasty, that we betrayed  
these strangers seeking our hospitality.

*(To Iolaus.)*

DEMOPHON

Your suggestion's noble, but unworkable.  
It's not in search of you the king is marching  
465 here with his army: what advantage is there  
to Eurystheus if one old man dies? It's these,  
the children, that he wants to kill, because  
enemies are scared when noble sons are born  
and young men remember their father's injuries:  
470 that's what he must have foremost in his mind.  
But if you have some other plan, more suitable,  
then you propose it; myself, I'm at a loss  
after hearing those oracles, and full of fear.

*(Enter a Maiden from the temple.)*

MAIDEN

Strangers, don't think my venturing outside  
is in any way a sign of overboldness:  
475 that is my first request of you.  
For a woman, modest silence and reserve  
are best, and staying quietly indoors.  
But when I heard your groanings, Iolaus,  
I came out, not as the appointed family head,  
480 but, since I'm in some ways appropriate  
for this, and also feel extreme concern  
for these my brothers and sisters—and for myself—  
I want to find out whether perhaps, on top  
of all our previous troubles, now some new  
and freshly added pain gnaws at your heart.



IOLAUS

My child, I have reason to praise you above all  
485 of Heracles' children, and not only now.  
Our family's fortunes,<sup>o</sup> which, it seemed, had made  
good progress, now have fallen back again  
into a hopeless state.  
The king here says the singers of oracles  
have signified that we must sacrifice  
to Demeter's Daughter not a bull or heifer,  
490 but a maiden girl, one who is noble-born,  
if we are to survive and this city too.  
So that's our hopeless state—because he says  
that he himself won't slaughter his own children  
nor anyone else's; and he's telling me  
(not openly, but still it's what he means)  
495 that, if we can't engineer a good solution,  
we'll have to find ourselves some other country,  
since his wish is to save this land from harm.

MAIDEN

Is this what holds us back from being saved?

IOLAUS

It is; in other respects we have been fortunate.

MAIDEN

500 Then fear no more the Argive's hostile spear!  
I myself, old friend, without waiting to be told,  
am ready to die, and to offer myself for slaughter.  
For what are we to say, after the city  
on our behalf agrees to face great danger,

if we ourselves just load our troubles off  
505 onto others and, when we could save ourselves,<sup>o</sup>  
we run in fear from death? No! it would be  
ridiculous indeed for us to sit here wailing  
as suppliants of the gods, and all this time,  
sprung from that father from whom we are sprung,  
510 to show ourselves as cowards. How can this  
look right for honest people? I suppose  
it's better to wait for this city to be captured  
(which I pray may never happen!), and for me  
to fall into our enemies' hands, and then,  
after suffering great indignities and shame,  
yes, me, the daughter of that noble father,  
to end up seeing Hades just the same?  
515 Or am I, driven from this land, to go  
wandering elsewhere? Won't I be ashamed  
if people say: "Why have you come here now  
with suppliant branches, concerned only about your lives?  
Get out of our land! We'll give no help to cowards."

520 And again, even if my brothers and my sisters  
were all to die, myself the sole survivor,  
I'd have no prospect of a happy life  
(though that's why many have betrayed their friends).  
Who will want as wife a lone, deserted girl?  
Who will want to have his children born from me?  
525 Is it not better for me to die right now  
than end up with this fate I don't deserve?  
That other life might be more suitable  
for a girl whose family's less renowned than mine.

Lead me to where this body of mine must die,  
wreathe me with garlands, begin the consecration,

if you are agreed<sup>o</sup>—  
530 and conquer your foes! My life's here at your service,  
ready and willing. I publicly proclaim:  
for my brothers and sisters, and for myself, I die.  
For, by choosing not to cling to life, I've found  
the noblest prize: a death that's full of glory.

CHORUS LEADER

535 Ah! What can I say, as I hear this great speech  
of a maiden who is ready thus to die  
for her brothers and sisters? Who, of all mankind,  
could speak or do things nobler than this girl?

IOLAUS

My child, you are indeed his, no one else's,  
sprung from that hero and his immortal spirit,  
540 true seed of Heracles. I feel no shame  
at these your words, but pain at this misfortune.  
But let me suggest how it can be done more fairly.  
We should summon all your sisters here, and then  
we'll choose by lot the one who is to die  
on behalf of the whole family: it's not right  
545 for you to die without a lottery.

MAIDEN

I shall not die by a lottery's mere chance!  
There is no favor in that; do not suggest it,  
old friend. But, if you'll all accept my gift  
and you're willing to make use of my eagerness,  
550 I give my life for my brothers and my sisters  
voluntarily, not under compulsion.

IOLAUS

Ah!

These words of yours are even more noble  
than the previous ones—and those were fine indeed—  
555 topping courage with courage, and speech with generous speech.  
And yet, of course, I am not telling you,  
nor yet forbidding you, to die, my child—  
though by dying you do indeed benefit them all.

MAIDEN

What you say is sensible: you need not fear  
a share in my pollution—I'll die freely.  
560 Come with me, old friend; it's in your arms that I  
would like to die; stand close by, cover over  
my body with the robes. The slaughter's terror  
is mine to face, and I am going now,  
if I'm my father's daughter, as I claim.

IOLAUS

I couldn't bear to stand there at your death!

MAIDEN

565 Then ask the king here please to let me breathe  
my life out, not in men's arms, but in women's.

DEMOPHON

It will be so, poor maiden. For you not  
to be adorned with honor would disgrace me too—  
for many reasons, but above all because  
of your fearless heart and the justice on your side.  
570 Of all the women that my eyes have seen

you are the most courageous. So now, if you wish,  
to your brothers here say your final words  
and to the old man, and then be on your way.

MAIDEN

Farewell, old friend, farewell! Please teach these boys  
575 to be just like yourself, full of good sense  
in everything—no more: that will suffice.  
And keep on trying to keep them safe from death,  
with all your heart; we really are your children,  
and it is by your hands that we've been raised.  
You see me now give up my own bridal day  
580 to die in place of them. And you, my brothers  
who're gathered here, may the gods bless you: may you  
get those things for which my lifeblood's being shed!°

Honor the old man, and the old lady inside there,  
585 my father's mother, Alcmene, and these friends too.  
And if one day release from suffering  
is found for you by the gods, and final homecoming,  
then remember how your savior should be buried—  
with full splendor, as is deserved. I did not fail  
590 in coming to your help, and I died for this whole family.  
That, in place of children and maidenhood,  
I possess as my treasure,° if there is anything in fact  
to possess below the earth. And yet I pray  
that there is nothing: for if we human beings  
still have worries there when we are dead,  
I don't know where to turn; for death's supposed  
595 to be the greatest cure for miseries.

IOLAUS

But rest assured, you who of all women  
stand out as greatest in courage: while you live,  
you will be held by us in highest honor,  
and so too after you have died. Farewell,  
600 I shrink from uttering the wrong words  
about the goddess to whom your body's dedicated,  
Demeter's Daughter.

*(Exit the Maiden and Demophon to the side.)*

Children, I'm done for; my limbs give way in grief.  
Take me and prop me against the altar here,  
and cover me with this cloak. I take no pleasure  
605 in all these doings; yet, if the oracle  
is not fulfilled, life's over. That ruin  
is more complete, but this one's bitter too.

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*No mortal man, I declare, is prosperous, or unlucky in his fate,  
except through the gods:  
610 and the same house does not stand firm for ever and ever  
in good fortune;  
different fates pursue it, one after another.  
They reduce one man<sup>o</sup> from lofty to low estate,  
And make the penniless wanderer<sup>o</sup> into a success.  
615 It is not allowed to escape what is fated; nobody  
can avert it by his brains,  
and he who is eager to try  
will forever face a futile task.*

ANTISTROPHE

*So, in your case—don't fall down from the blows of the gods, but  
bear up;*

620 *don't overtax your mind with grief.*

*Illustrious the portion of death that the wretched girl has,  
death for the sake of brothers, sisters, and country;  
not inglorious the fame that will greet her from humankind.  
Virtue proceeds through struggle.*

625 *These actions are worthy of her father, and worthy  
of her noble birth; and if you feel  
due reverence for the deaths  
of good people, I share this with you.*

*(Enter Servant from the side.)*

SERVANT

630 Greetings, children! But where is the old man, Iolaus?  
And your father's mother, is she far from this altar?

IOLAUS

We are present, all of us—at least if you can call me present.

SERVANT

Why are you lying there, with your eyes downcast?

IOLAUS

There's come a family worry, cause of distress.

SERVANT

635 Raise yourself now, keep your head up straight.

IOLAUS

I'm an old man; I have no strength in me.

SERVANT

Yet I have come here bringing you great joy.

IOLAUS

Who are you? Where have I met you? I don't remember.

SERVANT

I'm a serf of Hyllus: look, don't you recognize me?

IOLAUS

640      Dearest friend, you've really come to save us both?°

SERVANT

Yes; and what's more, you're assured of success in this.

IOLAUS

Mother of a noble son, Alcmene, I call you!

Come out and hear this man's most welcome news!

Long you've been wearing your life away in anxiety

645      about their return—and now they have arrived.

*(Enter Alcmene from the temple.)*

ALCMENE

Why is this whole building filled with shouting, Iolaus?

Surely it's not some herald here again

from Argos, aiming to manhandle you?

My own strength is weak indeed, stranger,

but this much at least you should know for certain:

650      there's no way that you will take them while I'm alive—



else may I no longer be known as Heracles' mother!  
And if you lay a hand on them, you'll have  
an ugly struggle with this aged pair.

IOLAUS

Take heart, old friend, and do not fear: no herald  
655 has come from Argos bearing hostile words.

ALCMENE

Then why did you raise that shout, announcing fear?

IOLAUS

For you, so you'd come out in front of the temple.

ALCMENE

I do not understand. Who's this man here?

IOLAUS

He brings the message that your grandson's here.

ALCMENE

660 Greetings to you for this message! But why, if he  
has set foot in this country, is he not  
here now? Where is he? What circumstance has kept him  
from appearing with you here to delight my heart?

SERVANT

He's positioning and marshaling the army that he brought.

ALCMENE

665 This discussion now no longer concerns me.

IOLAUS

It does concern you: but it is my job to inquire about it.

SERVANT

So what do you want to know of what has happened?

IOLAUS

How large a force of allies has he brought with him?

SERVANT

Many; beyond this I cannot tell the number.

IOLAUS

670 The Athenian leaders know of this, I suppose?

SERVANT

They know; and he's already stationed on their left wing.

IOLAUS

Then is the army now prepared for action?

SERVANT

Yes, and the sacrifices are ready near the ranks.

IOLAUS

So just how distant are the Argive spears?

SERVANT

675 Near enough that their commander can be clearly seen.

IOLAUS

Doing what? Is he marshaling the enemies' lines?

SERVANT

So we surmised; we couldn't actually hear.  
But I'll go now; I shouldn't like my masters  
to be without me when they clash with the enemy.

IOLAUS

680 And I'll go with you; for I naturally have  
the same concern, to stand by my friends and help them.

SERVANT

It is most unlike you to say something so stupid.

IOLAUS

Unlike me too not to share with friends in battle.

SERVANT

Your strength, sir, is not what it used to be.°

IOLAUS

685 No enemy will withstand the sight of me.

SERVANT

No wound comes from a look, if the hand does nothing.

IOLAUS

What? Might not even I still pierce a shield?

SERVANT

You might, but first you'd be struck down yourself.

IOLAUS

But even so I'll be fighting° no smaller numbers.

SERVANT

690 Slight is the weight you add to your friends' side.

IOLAUS

Yet don't try to hold me back: I'm ready for action.

SERVANT

But you're not capable of action, only maybe of wishing for it.

IOLAUS

Say what you will, but still I shall not stop.

SERVANT

So how will you look as a soldier, without armor?

IOLAUS

695 Inside this building there are some captured weapons,  
which I shall use. If I live, I shall return them;  
and if I die, the god won't ask them back.

So go inside, take a suit of hoplite armor  
down from the pegs, and bring it to me quickly.

700 It's a shameful housekeeping when some are fighting, but others  
are staying behind because of cowardice.

*(Exit the Servant into the temple.)*

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*Time does not yet lay low your  
spirit;*

*it is still young and strong, but your  
body is gone to nothing.*

*Why do you struggle uselessly like  
this?*

705

*It will only hurt you and do*

*little good for our city.*

*Old age should back down and give  
up on the impossible.*

*There's no way for you  
to get your youthful strength back  
again!*

ALCMENE

What's this? Are you out of your mind? Are you about  
710 to leave me alone with my son's children?

IOLAUS

Battle is for men: your duty's to care for these children.

ALCMENE

What? If you die, then how shall I survive?

IOLAUS

Your son's sons—those who are left—will care for you.

ALCMENE

But what if (heaven forbid!) something happens to them?

IOLAUS

715 These friends here won't betray you; don't be afraid.

ALCMENE

That indeed is my hope; I don't have any other.

IOLAUS

Zeus too, I know, cares about your sufferings.

ALCMENE

Ah!

I won't be one to speak bad things of Zeus;  
but only he himself knows if he is doing  
his sacred duty toward me.

*(Enter the Servant again from the temple.)*

SERVANT

720 Here it is, as you see, the full suit of armor;  
you've no time to lose in covering your body with it—  
the battle is near, and Ares especially loathes  
those who hang back. But if you fear the weight  
of the arms, then walk ahead unclad for now,  
and fit yourself out properly once you are  
725 set in the ranks: I shall carry them until then.

IOLAUS

You are right. Please take the armor along for me  
and keep it ready; put the ash spear in my hand,  
and support my left arm as you guide my steps.

SERVANT

So the soldier needs to be tended like a child?

IOLAUS

730 My foot must be sure: it's a bad omen to slip or fall.

SERVANT

If only you were able to do all you're eager to do!

IOLAUS

Hurry! If I'm too late for the battle it will be terrible.

SERVANT

You're the slow one, not I, thinking you're doing something.

IOLAUS

Do you see my feet, how they're hurrying along?

SERVANT

735 I see you imagining more than really speeding.

IOLAUS

That's not what you'll say when you see me there ...

SERVANT

Doing what? Enjoying success? I'd wish for that.

IOLAUS

Piercing one of our enemies right through his shield!

SERVANT

If we ever get there—that's my main concern.

IOLAUS

Ah!

740 O right arm of mine—if only you could be my ally now,  
just as I remember you being in your prime,  
back then when you captured Sparta, with Heracles!

What a total rout of Eurystheus I'd bring about—  
he's a coward when it comes to facing the spear!

745 That's another thing wrong with great prosperity:  
the appearance of courage. For we tend to think  
that a man who's successful is good at everything.

*(Exit Iolaus and Servant to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*Earth and night-long Moon,  
750 and most brilliant beams of the god who lights mankind,  
carry the message for me!  
Shout it out to heaven,  
right up to the ruler's throne  
and into the house of gray-eyed Athena:  
755 I am ready, now that we've accepted these suppliants,  
I am ready, for the land of my fathers and for our homes too,  
to cut through danger with my gray steel.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*Dreadful and strange it is  
760 that a city like Mycenae, so fortunate and much praised  
for its valor of spears,  
hides a rage against my land.  
But cowardly and low it would be,  
O city of ours, to betray our  
765 suppliant visitors at the orders of Argos.  
Zeus is my ally; I feel no fear at all.  
Zeus is just and he favors my undertaking. Never from my part  
will gods be shown inferior to mortals.*

STROPHE B

*770 Yet, O Lady Athena,  
since yours is the soil of this land  
and yours this city,*



*and you are its mother, its mistress, its  
protector,  
send that man elsewhere, we pray,  
who is leading unjustly this way the  
775 spear-force from Argos.  
For my good will and good deeds, I do  
not deserve*

*to be cast out from  
house and home!*

ANTISTROPHE B

*Always you receive from us  
honors of multiple sacrifice,  
a special day of the month,  
never forgotten by us,  
780 songs of young men and choral dances.  
On the windy hillside  
shrill cries of joy echo night-long,  
with the rhythms of girls' feet beating.*

*(Enter a Messenger from the side.)*

MESSENGER

Mistress, the report I bring is most beautiful  
785 for you to hear, and short for me to tell:◦  
We've won! Victory trophies are being set up  
bearing your enemies' captured weaponry.

ALCMENE

My dearest friend, to you this day's a blessing:◦  
for this report I hereby set you free!  
790 But me—from one concern you've not yet freed me:

my fear, whether those I most want are still alive.

MESSENGER

They live—most glorious too in all the army.

ALCMENE

So the old one, Iolaus—he has survived?°

MESSENGER

Indeed—with god’s help—he’s done supremely well.

ALCMENE

795     You mean, he’s accomplished some truly noble deed?

MESSENGER

He’s young again, transformed from being old!

ALCMENE

You speak of a miracle! But first, describe the struggle,  
the battle’s happy outcome for our friends.

MESSENGER

A single speech from me will tell  
you all.

800     When all our troops were drawn  
up against theirs,  
spearmen against spearmen, face  
to face,

Hyllus stepped down from his  
four-horse chariot  
and stood there in the middle,  
between the lines.

Then he called out: “Commander,

you have come  
805 from Argos—but why can't we let  
this land<sup>o</sup>  
of Attica be spared the pain of  
war?  
Mycenae too, why harm your own  
fine city  
by wasting its men's lives?  
Instead, with me  
engage in single combat, one on  
one:  
kill me, and take Heracles'  
children with you—  
810 or die, and cede me my father's  
house and honors.”  
The army roared approval at his  
speech—  
both their own release from toils,  
and his valor;  
but he, Eurystheus, disregarding  
all those listeners  
and unembarrassed by his own  
cowardice,  
commander though he was, could  
not muster  
815 the courage to approach the spears  
of war;  
an abject coward, is that the man  
who came  
to enslave the offspring of mighty  
Heracles?  
So Hyllus returned back into  
our own ranks;

and the seers, when they saw that  
single combat  
820 was not about to bring us  
resolution,  
without delay began the sacrifices,  
cutting sheeps' throats to shed  
propitious blood.°  
Then some stepped into chariots,  
while the infantry  
lined up, their shields adjoining,  
side by side.  
825 And then the Athenian king  
addressed his troops,  
speaking exactly as a noble man  
should speak:  
"My fellow citizens, now for the  
land that bore  
and nurtured us, it's time to stand  
up strong!"  
Meanwhile the other king was  
begging his allies  
not to bring shame on Argos and  
Mycenae.  
830 The signal blared with Etruscan  
trumpet call,  
and both sides joined in battle.  
Can you imagine  
what clattering and clash of  
shields ensued,  
what roars and groans of soldiers  
on all sides?  
At first, the steady thrusts of  
Argive spears

835 broke up our ranks; but then they  
gave ground again.  
The second phase: foot locked  
with foot,  
man against man stood firm. The  
battle raged  
and many fell. Commands were  
heard—just two:<sup>o</sup>  
“Now listen, all of you whose  
home is Athens ...,”  
“Listen, you who tend the soil of  
Argos ...,”  
840 “Protect your city, fight off the  
shame of defeat!”  
And finally, through toil and total  
effort,  
we routed the Argive army, and  
they fled.  
So then old Iolaus, seeing Hyllus  
racing away, stretched out his right  
hand  
845 and formally requested to mount  
his chariot;  
he took the reins and urged the  
horses on  
to overtake Eurystheus’ chariot.  
Now, all I’ve said so far I saw  
myself,  
but what comes next, I only heard  
from others.  
850 As they passed by great Athena’s  
sacred hill  
in Pallene, he spied Eurystheus’

chariot;  
he made a prayer, to Hebe and to  
Zeus,  
for just one day that he be young  
again,  
so he could exact vengeance on his  
enemies.

What happened next is a  
miracle to hear about:

two stars settled above the horses'  
yoke  
855 and cloaked the whole chariot in  
murky cloud—  
your son and Hebe, the experts say  
these were.  
And Iolaus out of this cloudy  
darkness,  
showed forth young arms and  
body, strong again!  
He captured the four-horse chariot  
of Eurystheus,  
860 Iolaus did, in glory, by Sciron's  
cliff;  
he bound his hands in chains; and  
now brings him  
as finest first-fruit offerings for  
our victory,  
their leader, once so prosperous  
and blessed!  
He broadcasts by this present  
outcome, loud  
and clear for all the world to hear,  
and learn:

865 we shouldn't envy those who seem  
to be  
successful, 'til they're dead. Luck  
lasts one day.

CHORUS LEADER

Zeus, Lord of Victory, now for me it's possible  
at last to see the daylight free from fear!

ALCMENE

Yes, Zeus: you were slow to notice all my troubles,  
870 but now I thank you for the things you've done.  
And my son—that he'd gone to live among the gods,  
I doubted it before, but now I know it's true!

Now, children, now you're freed from all your troubles,  
free from accursed Eurystheus. So at last  
875 you'll see your father's city, set your feet  
on land you own by rightful inheritance,  
make sacrifices to your ancestors' gods,  
from whom you were kept away, as foreigners  
wandering abroad in lives of utter misery.

*(To the Messenger.)*

But what was Iolaus' clever plan,  
880 why did he spare Eurystheus and not kill him?  
Please tell; for in my view it's not so clever  
to capture your enemy but then not take full vengeance.

MESSENGER

It was for you, so that with your own eyes  
you could see him grovel, <sup>o</sup> subjected to your hand.

885 Eurystheus did not want this, but by force his captor  
made him comply: he'd rather not, alive,  
come into your presence and pay his penalty.

Farewell, old lady; and be sure to remember  
what you said first, as I began my report,  
890 that you'd give me my freedom. In such matters  
the nobly born should always keep their word.

*(Exit Messenger to the side.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*To me, dances are a delight,  
and the clear-toned beauty of pipes at a feast;  
a delight too is beautiful Aphrodite.  
895 But especially pleasurable it is also  
to see the good fortune of friends  
who previously had not been expecting it.  
Many indeed are the blessings  
that generous Fate brings to birth,  
900 and a human lifespan, child of Time.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*The road you are treading is just,  
city of Athens; never should you give it up,  
showing honor to the gods.  
Anyone who contradicts this about you  
is driving on the verge of craziness—  
905 the proofs of this are being displayed here for all to see.  
Conspicuous is the message that a god conveys,  
ever taking from the proud*



*and thwarting their unjust plans.*

STROPHE B

910 *He is in heaven truly, old lady:  
your son has indeed gone there.  
It is proven, he did not go down  
to the House of Hades  
when his body was consumed by the dreadful flames.*  
915 *He enjoys Hebe's lovely body now, his wife  
in the golden hall of the gods.  
Hymenaeus, god of marriage,  
two children of Zeus you've thus most fitly honored!*

ANTISTROPHE B

920 *Most people get what they are due.  
To these children's father, they say  
Athena was an ally; and now to them,  
that same goddess' city and its people are their saviors,  
checking the insolence of a man whose spirit*  
925 *was violent and unlawful—until punished.  
I pray that my mind  
and my spirit never be so insatiable.*

*(Enter Servant from the side, accompanied by  
soldiers leading captive Eurystheus.)*

SERVANT

Mistress, you see—but I'll announce it  
anyway—  
Eurystheus! Here he is, we've brought  
him to you,  
a sight you barely hoped for, and for

him  
930 an outcome no less unimaginable.  
He never dreamed he'd fall into your  
hands  
when from Mycenae, with thick-massed  
ranks of shields,  
he set out on his arrogant, unjust  
venture,  
to capture and destroy this city, Athens.  
935 But a god reversed things—the opposite  
occurred.  
So Hyllus and noble Iolaus are at work  
erecting a victory trophy,  
Zeus' icon.  
To me they gave instructions, that I  
bring  
this man to you. They want to warm  
your heart:  
no pleasure's greater than to see one's  
enemy,  
940 once fortunate, now ruined and brought  
low!

*(To Eurystheus.)*

ALCMENE

You're here, you scum? Justice has caught you at last?  
So, first of all, turn your head toward me  
and pluck up the nerve to look us in the eyes,  
your enemies. You are in our power now,  
945 you're no longer the boss.  
Are you really that same man—I want to know this!—

the one who decided to torment my son when he  
was alive (wherever he may be now), you villain,  
by sending him off to kill hydras and lions?°

950 But about those evil tricks you planned, I'll say  
no more. It would take too long to tell the story.  
What outrage against him did you not attempt?  
You even sent him—living—down to Hades.  
But that was still not enough for you to dare:  
me and the children, you kept on driving us  
955 away, from all of Greece, though we were suppliants  
of the gods, some of us old, others still just infants.  
But you encountered men and a free city  
that did not fear you. So you must die, abjectly;  
and that's pure profit for you, dying just once  
960 after inflicting so many torments on others.

SERVANT

It's not allowed for you to kill this man.

ALCMENE

If so, we captured him quite pointlessly;  
but what's the law that keeps him now from dying?

SERVANT

This country's leaders think it isn't right.

ALCMENE

965 How so? They don't approve of killing enemies?

SERVANT

Not when they're caught in battle, still alive.

ALCMENE

So that's their view: did Hyllus just accept it?

SERVANT

You think he should reject this country's laws?

ALCMENE

I think Eurystheus should not go on living!

SERVANT

970 He should've died *then*; that was the first injustice!◦

ALCMENE

Well, isn't it still right that he should pay?

SERVANT

There isn't anyone here who would kill him.

ALCMENE

I'm here—and I am someone, that's for sure!

SERVANT

You'll bear much censure if you do this act.

ALCMENE

975 I love this city—that can't be contradicted.  
But since this man is finally in my grasp,  
no one on earth shall ever take him from me.  
That's that! If people want to call me bold,  
a woman with thoughts too great for women's station,  
980 let them say it! But this deed I will perform.

CHORUS LEADER

Terrible, and yet forgivable is the rage  
that grips you against this man. Lady, I understand.

EURYSTHEUS

Lady, know well I shall not sweet-talk you:  
I won't be saying things to save my life  
985 for which I'd earn a charge of cowardice.  
I did not start this feud of my own choice:  
I knew I was your cousin born and bred,  
and kin likewise to Heracles, your son.  
But, like it or not, a divinity compelled me—  
990 Hera, it was—to suffer this disease.  
Then, once I'd taken up hostility  
against him, and I recognized the challenge,  
I grew to be an expert in torments,  
spending my nights devising more, more ways  
995 by which to keep at bay and kill my enemies,  
and not forever share my life with fear.  
I knew he was no cipher, but in truth  
a valiant man, this son of yours, a hero.  
Yes, enemy though he was, I speak well of him,  
for he was noble.  
1000 Then, after he'd departed, what was I to do?  
Hated by all his children here, aware  
of this ancestral enmity, no stone I left  
unturned, to kill, exile, manipulate:  
by acting thus, I kept my interests safe.  
1005 But you, no doubt, faced with my situation,  
would never have expelled or treated badly  
the resentful offspring of that lion, your enemy,

but kindly would have let them live in Argos?

A fine notion—but not to be believed!

So, since they didn't execute me then  
right on the spot, as I indeed desired,

1010 now, by Greek law, to kill me is unholy.

In sparing me, the city showed good sense,  
respecting god much more than hating me.

You've made your speech and heard me in reply;  
and henceforth, since I'm hallowed<sup>o</sup> by the gods,

1015 you have to call me "noble" evermore.

So that is how things stand with me. To die  
is not what I desire; and yet to leave  
this life would not be burdensome at all.

CHORUS LEADER

Alcmene, my advice to you is brief:  
release this man, as the city has decreed.

ALCMENE

1020 What if he dies, yet we obey the city?

CHORUS

That'd be ideal—but how can it occur?

ALCMENE

I'll tell you, simply: after I've killed him  
I'll give his body to his relatives  
who come to fetch it. Thus toward his corpse  
I'll not be violating any rules  
made by the city. But this man will still

1025 by dying pay his penalty to me.

*(To Alcmene.)*

EURYSTHEUS

So, kill me! I do not beg you otherwise.  
But since this city showed such reverence  
and spared my life, I'll grant it now a gift,  
an ancient oracle from Loxias:  
great benefits it'll bring, more than you'd think.

*(To the Chorus.)*

1030 Once I'm dead, it's destined, you shall bury me  
at Pallene in front of Athena's temple,  
the Maiden Goddess'. I shall lie there always  
kindly both to you and to your city,  
a savior and a resident underground.  
But to the future descendants of these people  
I'll be most hostile, if and when they come here  
1035 with a mighty army, betraying the good will  
and gratitude they owe you. (Such is the character  
of these strangers you've defended as your guests!)  
So why, you might ask, if I had learned all this,  
did I still come here, and not stay at the shrine  
respecting quietly<sup>o</sup> the oracle of the god?  
I thought that Hera was more powerful  
than oracles, by far, and she would not betray me.  
1040 Don't let them drip libations or blood offerings  
onto my tomb.<sup>o</sup>  
In return for that, I'll make a grim return  
for those invaders. Double will be your profit  
from me in my death: your own great benefit

and the harm I'll do these Children of Heracles.

*(To the Chorus.)*

ALCMENE

1045 So, why delay? If it's needed to bring salvation  
for the city and your descendants, kill him now,  
since you've heard the words of this oracle.<sup>o</sup>  
He's showing you a path completely safe.  
The man's an enemy, and by his death  
brings blessings and prosperity.

*(To the soldiers.)*

1050 Take him away, attendants, to that place  
and then after you've killed him give his body  
to the dogs!<sup>o</sup>

*(To Eurystheus.)*

And you—don't think you'll live to try again  
to drive me out from my ancestral land!<sup>o</sup>

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*This course seems best. Off you go, attendants;  
for from our side of things  
and for the royal family  
all is and will be pure.*

*(Exit all.)*