

HERACLES

Translated by WILLIAM ARROWSMITH

HERACLES: INTRODUCTION

The Play: Date and Composition

It is not certain when Euripides' *Heracles* was first produced, but metrical considerations suggest a date of around 415 BCE. Presumably Euripides wrote it for the annual competition at the Great Dionysian Festival in Athens. What the other three plays were in Euripides' tetralogy of that year, and how they fared in the dramatic competition, are unknown.

The play is sometimes referred to with a Latin title (derived from a tragedy by Seneca), *Hercules furens* ("Hercules Insane"). Presumably Euripides originally titled it simply *Heracles*, and the further specification was added when it was included in a complete edition of his works (perhaps around the third century BCE) in order to distinguish it from his other plays about Heracles.

The Myth

Heracles, son of Zeus and Alcmene (the wife of Amphitryon), was one of the greatest and most popular heroes throughout the ancient world, a symbol of unconquerably robust masculine vitality and courage. But during his whole life he was harassed by the fierce opposition of the goddess Hera; and the very same uncontrollable strength that enabled him to achieve celebrated triumphs over monsters, criminals, and other enemies of mankind also sometimes led to his committing dreadful excesses and crimes himself. It is this paradoxical combination of heroic greatness and terrible destructiveness that Euripides explores in *Heracles*.

At the beginning of the play, Heracles is away in the underworld performing one of his impossible labors, to bring Hades' monstrous guard dog Cerberus up to the light of day. In the meantime, in Thebes, Heracles' wife Megara and their sons are being threatened with death by the usurping

king of the city, Lycus. Heracles returns in the nick of time to kill Lycus and rescue his family. All seems to have ended well; but suddenly Hera drives him temporarily mad by means of her minions, Madness and Iris, and in his insanity he kills his wife and all his children. When Heracles comes to himself again and recognizes what he has done, he decides to commit suicide; but then Theseus, the king of Athens, unexpectedly arrives, offers him understanding and friendship, and persuades him to remain alive and to come with him to Athens, where he will receive honors.

The general image of Heracles both as a civilizing culture hero and as author of terrible crimes is fundamental to this play and was already very familiar in Euripides' time. Moreover, the story of Heracles' madness had been recounted in different versions by a number of older epic and lyric poets and by at least one recent prose author, Pherecydes of Athens. So Euripides' audience was not likely to have been surprised by some basic aspects of the play. But Euripides also seems to have made three specific innovations in the plot: (1) the figure of the usurper Lycus, whose transparent name ("Wolf") and detailed introduction when he is first mentioned suggest that Euripides may well have invented him (though an earlier Lycus, ancestor or father of this one, was an established figure in Theban mythology); (2) the sequence according to which Heracles murders his children (and also, unusually, his wife Megara) only after he has successfully concluded his labors (perhaps in the original sequence Heracles' labors were his punishment for murdering his sons); and (3) the insertion of Theseus into the story with his offer to Heracles of honors in Athens. These innovations serve to create a series of astonishing reversals of fortune and to focus the spectators' attention both upon the nature of true courage and upon the paradoxical relations between heroism and violence, between grandeur and misery, between men and women and children, and perhaps above all between the cruelty of the gods and the friendship of humans.

Transmission and Reception

Heracles 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). It is not accompanied by ancient commentaries (scholia) that explain various kinds of interpretative difficulties. But evidence that it achieved at least a limited degree of popularity in antiquity is provided by the fact that a couple of ancient papyri bearing parts of its text have been discovered.

The story of Heracles' madness was told by various ancient Greek and Latin authors in texts now lost which may well have been inspired by Euripides, and it seems to have left some traces, though not many, in ancient art. But it was the Roman philosopher and tragedian Seneca's *Hercules furens* that made the story celebrated in world literature, overshadowing until recently Euripides' version. While Seneca's play certainly derives at least in part directly from Euripides' tragedy, scholars disagree on whether Seneca also made use of other versions of the story which might themselves have been ultimately inspired by Euripides.

In modern times *Heracles* has never been among Euripides' most popular plays and has not often been staged. In the Renaissance, Seneca's version of the story was much more influential, and for centuries it provided a compelling model for dramatizing madness. But since the late nineteenth century Euripides' play has moved out from the shadow of Seneca's and has inspired a dramatic monologue by Robert Browning (*Aristophanes' Apology*, 1875) and verse dramas, all titled *Herakles*, by George Cabot Lodge (1908), Frank Wedekind (1917), Archibald MacLeish (1967), and Heiner Müller (1975). Scholars used to be perplexed by the play's two-part construction—a dramatic structure found in many of Euripides' plays—and went to great trouble to find in it elements of overarching dramatic, thematic, and psychological unity. But nowadays its depiction of humans trapped in a chillingly arbitrary and hostile world and sustained only by their love and loyalty for one another strikes many readers as particularly timely and moving.

HERACLES

Characters

AMPHITRYON, father of Heracles

MEGARA, wife of Heracles

CHORUS of old men of Thebes

LYCUS, usurper of the throne of Thebes

HERACLES, hero of Thebes

IRIS, messenger of the gods

MADNESS

MESSENGER

THESEUS, king of Athens

Scene: In front of the palace of Heracles at Thebes. In the foreground is the altar of Zeus the Savior. Amphitryon, Megara, and her three small sons sit on it as suppliants.

AMPHITRYON

What mortal lives who has not
heard this name—

Amphitryon of Argos, who shared
his wife

with Zeus? I am he: son of
Alcaeus

Perseus' son, and father of
Heracles.

5 Here I settled, in this Thebes,
where once the earth
was sown with dragon teeth and

sprouted men;

and Ares saved but few, that
they might people

Cadmus' city with their children's
children.

From these Sown Men Creon was
descended,
son of Menoeceus and our late
king.

10 This lady is Megara, Creon's
daughter,
for whose wedding once all
Thebes shrilled
to pipes and songs as she was led,
a bride,

home to my halls by famous
Heracles.

15 Then my son left home, Thebes,
left Megara and kin,
hoping to recover the plain of
Argos
and those gigantic walls from
which I fled
to Thebes, because I killed
Electryon.

He hoped to win me back my
native land
and so alleviate my grief. And
therefore,
mastered by Hera's goads or by
his fate,
he promised to Eurystheus a vast
price

greatest ill.

For since my son is gone beneath
the earth,

this land's new tyrant, Lycus,
plans to kill

the sons and wife of Heracles—
and me,

40 so old and useless, that I scarcely
count—

blotting murder with murder, lest
these boys,

grown to men, someday revenge
their mother's kin.

My son, when he
descended to the darkness
underground, left me here,
appointing me

45 both nurse and guardian of his
little sons.

Now, to keep these heirs of
Heracles from death,

I have set them and their mother
in supplication

upon this altar to Zeus the Savior,
established by my noble son, a
trophy

50 for the victory of his spear over
the Minyans.

Here we sit, in utter destitution,
lacking food, water, and clothing;
having no beds

but the bare earth beneath our
bodies; sitting

barred from our house, no hope of
being rescued.

55 And of our friends, some prove no
friends at all,

while those still true are powerless
to help.

This is what misfortune means
among mankind;

upon no man who wished me well
at all,

could I wish this acid test of
friends might come.

MEGARA

60 Old man, marshal of our famous Theban arms,
who once destroyed the city of the Taphians,
how dark are all the ways of gods to man!

Prosperity was my inheritance:

I had a father who could boast of wealth,
65 who was a king—such power as makes the long spears
leap with greed against its proud possessor—
a father, blessed with children, who gave me
in glorious marriage to your Heracles.

But now his glory has died and taken wing
70 and you and I, old man, shall soon be dead,
and with us, these small sons of Heracles
whom I ward and nestle underwing like fledglings.

First one, and then another, questions me,
and asks: “Mother, where has Father gone?
What is he doing? When will he come back?”

75 Then, too small to understand, they ask again
for “Father.” I put them off with stories;

but when the hinges creak, they all leap up
to run and throw themselves at their father's feet.
Now is there any hope? What means of rescue
80 do we have, old man? I look to you.
The border is impassable by stealth;
strong sentries have been set on every road;
all hope that friends might rescue us is gone.
85 So tell me now if you have any plan,
for otherwise it's certain we shall die.

AMPHITRYON

My child, I find it hard in such a case
to give advice offhand without hard thought.
We are weak and, being weak, should play for time.°

MEGARA

90 Wait for worse? Do you love life so much?

AMPHITRYON

I love it even now. I love its hopes.

MEGARA

And I. But hope is of things possible.

AMPHITRYON

A cure may come in wearing out the time.

MEGARA

It is the time between that tortures me.

AMPHITRYON

95 Even now, out of our very evils,

for you and me a better wind may blow.
My son, your husband, still may come. Be calm;
dry the living springs of tears that fill
your children's eyes. Console them with stories,
100 those sweet thieves of wretched make-believe.
Human misery must somewhere have a stop:
there is no wind that always blows a storm;
great good fortune comes to failure in the end.
All is change; all yields its place and goes;
105 to persevere, trusting in what hopes he has,
is courage in a man. The coward despairs.

(Enter the Chorus of old men of Thebes from the side.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE

*Leaning on our staffs we come
to the vaulted halls and the old man's bed,
110 our song the dirge of the dying swan,
ourselves mere words, ghosts that walk
in the visions of night,
trembling with age,
but eager to help.
O children, fatherless sons,
115 old man and wretched wife
who mourn your lord in Hades!*

ANTISTROPHE

*Do not falter. Drag your weary feet^o
120 onward like the colt that, yoked and straining,
tugs uphill, on rock, the heavy chariot.*

*If any man should stumble,
grab his hands and clothing;
125 age, support his aged years
as once when you were young
he supported you, his peers
in the toils of war
and you all were no blot on your country's fame.*

EPODE

*130 Look how the children's eyes
flash forth like their father's!
His misfortune has not left them,
nor his loveliness.
O Hellas, Hellas,
135 losing these boys,
what allies you lose!*

(Enter Lycus from the side.)

CHORUS LEADER

No more. Look: I see my country's tyrant,
Lycus, approaching the palace.

LYCUS

*You there,
140 father of Heracles, and you, his wife:
allow me one question. And you must allow it:
I am the power here; I ask what I wish.
How long will you seek to prolong your lives?
What hope have you? What could prevent your death?
145 Or do you think the father of these boys
who lies dead in Hades will still come back?*

How much you exaggerate in mourning for your deaths—
you who filled all Hellas with your silly boasts
that Zeus was partner in your son's conception;
150 and you, that you were wife of the noblest man!
What was so prodigious in your husband's deeds?
Because he killed a Hydra in a marsh?
Or the Nemean lion? They were trapped in nets,
not strangled, as he claims, with his bare hands.
155 Are these your arguments? Because of this,
you say, the sons of Heracles should live—
a man who, coward in everything else,
made his reputation fighting beasts,
who never buckled shield upon his arm,
160 never came near a spear, but held a bow,
the coward's weapon, ready to run away?
The bow is no proof of manly courage;
no, your real man stands firm in the ranks
and dares to face the gash the spear may make.
165 My policy, old man, is not mere cruelty;
call it caution. I am well aware
that I killed Creon, the father of this woman,
and only on this basis rule this land.
It does not suit my wishes that these boys
grow up to take their own revenge on me.

AMPHITRYON

170 Let Zeus defend his interest in his
 son.
For my part, Heracles, I'll have to
 argue,
and prove this man's gross ignorance

of you:
I cannot bear that you should be
abused.
First for that slander (for such I call it
when you are called a coward,
175 Heracles).
I call upon the gods to bear me
witness:
that thunder of Zeus, that chariot in
which
Heracles rode, piercing with winged
shafts
the breasts of those giants spawned by
earth,
180 and raised the victory cry with the
gods!
Go to Pholoë, you coward king, and
ask
the Centaurs, those four-legged
monsters,
what man they judge to be the
bravest,
if not my son, whose courage you call
sham.
185 Go ask Abantian Dirphys which
raised you:
it will not praise you. You have never
done
one brave deed your fatherland could
cite.
You sneer at that wise invention, the
bow.
Listen to me and learn what wisdom

is.

190 Your spearman is the slave of his
weapons:
unless his comrades in the ranks fight
well,^o
then he dies, killed by their
cowardice;
and if his spear, his sole defense, is
smashed,

he has no means of warding
death away.

195 But the man whose hands know how
to aim the bow,
holds the one best weapon: a
thousand arrows shot,
he still has more to guard himself
from death.
He stands far off, shooting at foes
who see
only the wound the unseen arrow
plows,
200 while he himself, his body
unexposed,
lies screened and safe. This is best in
war:
to preserve yourself and to hurt your
foe
without relying overmuch on chance.
Such are my arguments, squarely
opposed
to yours on every point at issue here.
205 What will you achieve by killing
these boys?

How have they hurt you? Yet I grant
you wise
in one respect: being base yourself,
you fear the children of a noble man.
Still, this goes hard with us, that we
must die
210 because of your cowardice—a fate
which you
might better suffer at our better hands,
if the mind of Zeus intended justice
here.
But if the scepter is what you desire,
then let us go as exiles from the land.
215 But beware of force, lest you suffer it,
when the veering wind of god swings
round again.
O country of Cadmus, on you
too
my reproaches fall! Is this then your
help
for the sons of Heracles? For
Heracles,
220 who single-handed fought your
Minyan foe
and made Thebes see once more with
free men's eyes?
No more can I praise Hellas, nor be
still,
finding her so craven toward my son:
with fire, spears, and armor she
should have come
225 to help these boys in gratitude to him,

for all his labors clearing land and
sea.

Poor children, both Thebes and Hellas
fail you.

And so you turn to me, a weak old
man,

nothing more now than a jawing of
words,

230 forsaken by that strength I used to
have,

left only with this trembling husk of
age.

But if my youth and strength could
come again,

I'd take my spear and bloody your
blond hair

until you ran beyond the bounds of
Atlas,

235 trying, coward, to outrun my spear!

CHORUS LEADER

Don't brave men always find good things to say?
They never fail, although their tongue be slow.

LYCUS

Go on, rant, pile up your tower of words!
My actions, not my words, shall answer your abuse.

(To his servants.)

240 Go, some of you, to Helicon, others to Parnassus:
tell the woodsmen there to chop up oaken logs
and haul them to the city. Then pile your wood

around the altar here on every side,
and let it blaze. Burn them all alive
245 until they learn the dead man rules no more;
I, and I alone, am the power here.

(Some of Lycus' servants exit to the side.)

But you old men, for this defiance of yours,
you shall mourn not only the sons of Heracles
250 but also troubles that will afflict your homes,
as each one suffers something, until you learn
that you are only slaves; I am the master.

(To the Chorus.)

CHORUS LEADER^o

O sons of earth, men whom Ares sowed,
teeth he tore from the dragon's savage jaw,
up, up with these staffs that prop our arms
255 and batter the skull of this godless man,
no Theban, but an alien lording it
over our citizens,^o to our great shame!

(To Lycus.)

Never shall you boast that I am your slave,
never will you reap the harvest of my work,
260 all I labored for. Go back whence you came;
rage there. So long as there is life in me,
you shall not kill the sons of Heracles.
He has not gone so deep beneath the earth.
Because you ruined, then usurped, this land,

265

he who gave it help is going without his due.
Am I a meddler, then, because I help
the friend who, being dead, needs help the most?
O right hand, how you ache to hold a spear,
but cannot—your desire founders on your weakness.
270 Else, I would have stopped your mouth that calls me slave,
and helped this Thebes, in which you now exult,
to my credit. But corrupt with evil schemes
and civil strife, this city lost its mind;
for were it sane, it would not live your slave.

MEGARA

275 Old sirs, I thank you. Friends
rightly show
just indignation on their friends'
behalf.
But do not let your rage on our
account
involve your ruin too.
Amphitryon,
hear what I think for what it may
be worth.
280 I love my children. How not love
these boys
born of my labors? And I think
that death
is terrible. And yet how base a
thing it is
when a man will struggle with
necessity!
We have to die. Then do we have
to die

285 being burned alive, mocked by
 those we hate?—
for me a worse disaster than to die.
Our house and birth demand a
 better death.
Upon your helm the victor's glory
 sits,
forbidding that you die a coward's
 death;
290 while my husband needs no
 witnesses to swear
he would not want these sons of
 his to live
as cowards in men's eyes.
 Disgrace that hurts
his sons will break a man of noble
 birth;
and I must imitate my husband
 here.
295 Consider of what stuff your hopes
 are made.
You think your son will come
 from underground?
Who of all the dead comes home
 from Hades?
Or do you think we'll mellow
 Lycus with prayers?
No, you must shun a stupid
 enemy;
300 yield to noble, understanding men
 who, met halfway as friends, will
 compromise.
The thought had come to me that

prayers might win
the children's banishment; but this
is worse,
to preserve them for a life of
beggary.
305 How does the saying go? Hardly
one day
do men look kindly on their
banished friend.

Dare death with us, which
awaits you anyway.

By your great soul, I challenge
you, old friend.
The man who struggles hard
against his fate
310 shows spirit, but the spirit of a
fool.
No man alive can budge necessity.

CHORUS LEADER

I would have stopped the mouth of any man
who threatened you, had I my old strength back.
But now I am nothing. With you it rests,
315 Amphitryon, to avert disaster now.

AMPHITRYON

Not cowardice, not love of life, keeps me
from death, but my hope to save these children.
I am in love, it seems, with what cannot be.

(To Lycus.)

Here, king, here is my throat, ready for your sword;

320 murder me, stab me through, hurl me from a cliff,
but, grant, my lord, to Megara and me just this:
murder us before you kill these children;
spare us from seeing that ghastly sight,
these boys gasping out their lives, crying
325 “Mother!” and “Grandfather!” For the rest,
do your worst. Our hope is gone; we have to die.

MEGARA

And I beg you, grant me this one request,
and so by one act you shall oblige us both.
Let me adorn my children for their death;
330 open those doors which are locked to us
and give them that much share of their father’s house.

LYCUS

I grant it. Attendants, undo the bolts!

(Lycus’ servants open the door of the palace.)

Go in and dress. I do not begrudge you clothes.
But when your dressing for your death is done,
335 then I shall give you to the world below.

(Exit Lycus to the side.)

MEGARA

Come, my sons, follow your poor mother’s steps
into your father’s halls. Other men
possess his wealth; we just possess his name.

(Exit Megara with her children into the palace.)

AMPHITRYON

For nothing, then, O Zeus, you shared my wife!
340 In vain we called you partner in my son!
Your love then was much less than we had thought;
and I, mere man, am nobler than you, great god—
I did not betray the sons of Heracles.
You know well enough to creep into a bed
345 and take what is not yours, what no man gave:
what do you know of saving those you love?
You are a foolish god or were born unjust!

(Exit Amphitryon into the palace.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

*First for joy, the victor's song;
then the dirge; sing aïlinos for Linos!*
350 *So Apollo sings, sweeping with golden pick
his lyre of lovely voice.
And so I sing of him
who went in darkness underground—
be he the son of Zeus,
be he Amphitryon's—*
355 *of him I sing, a dirge of praise,
a crown of song upon his labors.
For of noble deeds the praises are
the glory of the dead.*

MESODE A

*First he cleared the grove of Zeus,
360 and slew the lion in its lair;*

*the tawny hide concealed his back,
oval of those dreadful jaws
 cowled his golden hair.*

ANTISTROPHE A

*Next the Centaurs: slaughtered them,
365 that mountain-ranging savage race,
 laid them low with murderous shafts,
 with winged arrows slew them all.
 Too well the land had known them:
 Peneus' lovely rapids,
 vast plains, unharvested,
370 homesteads under Pelion,
 and the places near Homole,
 whence their cavalry rode forth
 with pine-tree weapons,
 and ruled all Thessaly.*

EPODE A

*375 And next he slew the spotted deer
 whose head grew with golden antlers,
 that robber-beast, that ravager,
 whose hide now gilds Oenoë's shrine,
 for Artemis the huntress.*

STROPHE B

*380 Then mounted to his car
 and mastered with the bit
 Diomedes' mares, that knew
 no bridle, stabled in blood,
 greedy jaws champing flesh,*

385 *foul mares that fed on men!*
 And thence crossed over
 swirling silver, Hebrus' waters,
 on and on, performing labors
 for Mycenae's king.

MESODE B

And there by Pelion's headland,
390 *near the waters of Anaurus,*
 his shafts brought Cycnus down,
 that stranger-slaying monster,
 crude dweller in Amphanae.

ANTISTROPHE B

Thence among the singing maidens,
395 *western halls' Hesperides,*
 plucked by hand among the leaves
 the golden fruit, and slew
 the orchard's dragon guard
 whose tail of amber coiled the trunk
400 *untouchably. He passed beyond the sea*
 and set calm sailing in the lives of men
 whose living is the oar.

EPODE B

Under bellied heaven next,
 he put his hands as props:
405 *there in the halls of Atlas,*
 his manly strength held up
 heaven's starry halls.

STROPHE C

*He passed the swelling sea of black,
and fought the Amazonian force
410 foregathered at Maeotis
where the many rivers meet.
What town of Hellas missed him
as he mustered friends to fight,
to win the warrior women's
gold-encrusted robes, in quest
415 for a girdle's deadly quarry?
And Hellas won the prize, spoils
of a famous barbarian queen,
which now Mycenae keeps.*

MESODE C

*420 He seared each deadly Hydra-head
of Lerna's thousand-headed hound;
in her venom dipped the shaft
that brought three-bodied Geryon down,
herdsman of Erytheia.*

ANTISTROPHE C

*And many races more he ran,
425 and won in all the victor's crown,
whose harbor now is Hades' tears,
the final labor of them all;
there his life is disembarked
in grief. He comes no more.
430 His friends have left his house,
and Charon's ferry waits
to take his children's lives*

on the godless, lawless trip of no return.
To your hands your house still turns,
435 but you are gone!

EPODE C

Could I have my youth once more,
could I shake my spear once more
beside the comrades of my youth,
my courage now would champion
440 your sons. But youth comes back no more
that blessed me once.

(Enter Megara, the children, and Amphytrion from the
palace, dressed in the garments of the dead.)

CHORUS [now chanting]

Look: I see the children coming now,
wearing the garments of the grave,
sons of Heracles who once was great;
445 and there, his wife, drawing her sons
behind her as she comes; and the old man,
father of Heracles. O pitiful sight!
I cannot stop the tears that break
450 from these old eyes.

MEGARA

Where is the priest with sacrificial knife?
Where is the killer of our wretched lives?°
Here the victims stand, ready for Hades.
O my boys, this incongruity of death:
455 beneath one yoke, old men, children, and mothers.
How miserably we die, these children and I!

Upon these faces now I look my last.
I gave you birth and brought you up to be
but mocked and murdered by our enemies.
Ah!

460 How bitterly my hopes for you have failed,
those hopes I founded on your father's words.

(To each child in turn.)

To you your father would have left all Argos:
in Eurystheus' halls you would have ruled
and held the sway over rich Pelasgia.
465 It was upon your head he sometimes threw
the skin of tawny lion that he wore.
You, made king of chariot-loving Thebes,
would have inherited your mother's lands,
because your coaxing won them from your father.
470 Sometimes in play, he put in your right hand
that carven club he kept for self-defense.
To you, he would have left Oechalia,
ravaged once by his far-shooting shafts.
There are three of you, and with three kingdoms
475 your heroic father raised you up on high.
And I was choosing each of you a bride,
from Athens, Thebes, and Sparta, binding our house
by marriage, that having such strong anchors down,
you might in happiness ride out your lives.
480 Now all is gone, and fortune, veering round,
gives each of you your death as though a bride,
and in my tears your bridal shower is,
while your father's father hosts the wedding feast

that makes you all the sons-in-law of death.
485 Which shall I take first, which of you the last,
to lift you up, take in my arms and kiss?
If only I could gather up my tears,
and like the tawny bee from every flower,
distill to one small nectar all my grief!
490 O dearest Heracles, if any voice
of mortals reaches Hades, hear me now!
Your sons, your father, are dying...and I,
who was once called blessed because of you.
Help us, come! Come, even as a ghost;
495 even as a dream, your coming would suffice.
For these are cowards who destroy your sons.

AMPHITRYON

Send on your prayers, my child, to those below,
while I hold out my hands and call to heaven.
We implore you, Zeus, if still you mean to help,
500 help us now before it is too late.
How often have I called! In vain, my labors.
For death is on us like necessity.
Our lives, old friends, are but a little thing,
so let them run as sweetly as you can,
and give no thought to grief from day to night.
505 For time is not concerned to save our hopes,
but hurries on its business, and is gone.
You see in me a man who once had fame,
who did great deeds; but fortune in one day
510 has snatched it from me as though it were a feather.
Great wealth, great reputation! I know no man
with whom they stay. Friends of my youth, farewell.

You look your last on him who loved you well.

(Enter Heracles from the side.)

MEGARA

Look, Father! Is that my beloved? Can it be?

AMPHITRYON

515 I cannot say. I dare not say, my child.

MEGARA

It is he, whom we heard was beneath the earth,
unless some dream comes walking in the light.

A dream? This is no dream my longing makes!

It is he indeed, old man, your son, no other!

520 Run, children, hold tight to your father's robes
and never let him go! Quick, run! He comes
to rescue us and Zeus comes with him.

HERACLES

I greet my hearth! I hail my house and halls!

How gladly I behold the light once more

525 and look on you!

But what is this I see?

My children before the house? With funeral garlands
set on their heads? And here my wife surrounded
by a crowd of men? My father in tears?

What misfortune makes him cry? I'll go and ask
530 what disaster now has come upon my house.

MEGARA^o

O my dearest...

AMPHITRYON

O daylight returning!

MEGARA

You come, alive, in time to rescue us!

HERACLES

Father, what's happened? What trouble does this mean?

MEGARA

Murder. Forgive me, Father, if I snatch
535 and speak the words that you should rightly say.
I am a woman: anguish hurts me more,
and my children were being put to death, and I.

HERACLES

Apollo! What a prelude to your tale!

MEGARA

My aged father is dead. My brothers too.

HERACLES

540 What! How did they die? Who killed them?

MEGARA

Murdered by Lycus, new tyrant of this land.

HERACLES

In open warfare? Or in civil strife?

MEGARA

In civil war. Now he rules our seven gates.

HERACLES

But why should you and my father be afraid?

MEGARA

545 He planned to kill us: your sons, father, and me.

HERACLES

What had he to fear from my orphaned sons?

MEGARA

Lest they take revenge some day for Creon's death.

HERACLES

But why these garments? Why are they dressed for death?

MEGARA

It was for our own deaths we put them on.

HERACLES

550 You would have died by violence? O gods!

MEGARA

We had no friends. We heard that you were dead.

HERACLES

How did you come to give up hope for me?

MEGARA

The heralds of Eurystheus proclaimed you dead.

HERACLES

Why did you abandon my house and hearth?

MEGARA

555 By force. He dragged your father from his bed.

HERACLES

He had no shame, but so dishonored age?

MEGARA

Lycus have shame? He knows of no such goddess.

HERACLES

And were my friends so scarce when I was gone?

MEGARA

In misfortune, what friend remains a friend?

HERACLES

560 They thought so little of my Minyan wars?

MEGARA

Again I say, misfortune has no friends.

HERACLES

Rip from your heads those
wreaths of Hades!

Lift your faces to the light; with
seeing eyes,

take your sweet reprieve from
death and darkness.

565 And I—a task for my own hand
alone—

shall go and raze this upstart
tyrant's house,
cut off that blaspheming head and

give it
to the dogs to feast on. All those
men of Thebes
who took my goodness and
returned me ill—
570 these arms with which I won the
victor's crown
shall slaughter them, with rain of
wingèd shafts
till all Ismenus chokes upon the
corpses
and Dirce's silver waters run with
blood.
Whom should I defend if not my
wife and sons
575 and my old father? Farewell, my
labors!
For wrongly I preferred you to
these here.

They would have died for me,
so I'll risk death

in their defense. Or is this
bravery,
to do Eurystheus' orders and
contend
580 with lions and Hydras, and not to
struggle
for my children's lives? If so,
from this time forth,
call me no more "Heracles the
victor."

CHORUS LEADER

This is right, that a man defend his sons,
his aged father, and his wedded wife.

AMPHITRYON

585 My son, it is like you to love your friends
and hate your foe. But do not act too fast.

HERACLES

How do I act faster than I should?

AMPHITRYON

The king has henchmen, a mob of needy men^o
who pass themselves off for men of wealth.
590 These men, their substance drained away by sloth
and spending, have promoted civil strife
and wrecked the state to plunder from their neighbors.
You were seen coming here. Beware therefore
lest your enemy be stronger than you guess.

HERACLES

595 I do not care if all the city saw me!
But seeing a bird in some foreboding place,
I guessed some trouble had fallen on my house,
and thus forewarned, I entered secretly.

AMPHITRYON

Good. Go now, enter your house and greet your hearth.
600 Look on your father's house; let it behold you.
Shortly the king will come to hale us off
and slaughter us: your wife, your sons, and me.
Wait here, and everything shall come to hand,
with safety too. But let the city go,

605 my son, until you finish matters here.

HERACLES

You advise me well. I will go within.
I owe first greetings to my household gods
because I have come home from sunless caves
of Kore and Hades. I shall not slight them.

AMPHITRYON

610 Did you really descend to Hades, son?

HERACLES

Yes; I brought back the triple-headed dog.

AMPHITRYON

You subdued him? or was he the goddess' gift?

HERACLES

Subdued him. Luck was mine: I had seen the Mysteries.

AMPHITRYON

And is the monster at Eurystheus' house?

HERACLES

615 No, at Hermione, in Demeter's grove.

AMPHITRYON

Does Eurystheus know of your return above?

HERACLES

No, I came here first to learn of you.

AMPHITRYON

Why did you delay so long underground?

HERACLES

I lingered to rescue Theseus from Hades.

AMPHITRYON

620 Where is he now? Gone to his native land?

HERACLES

He went to Athens, rejoicing to be free.

(To his children.)

Follow your father to the house, my sons,
for this, your going in, shall be more fair
than your coming out. Put your fears away,
625 and stop those tears that well up in your eyes.
And you, dear wife, gather your courage up,
tremble no more, and let my garments go.
I have no wings to fly from those I love.
Look:
They will not let me go, but clutch my clothes
630 more tightly still. Were you so close to death?
Here, I'll take your hands and lead you in my wake,
like a ship that tows its cargo boats behind,
for I accept this care and service
of my sons. Here all mankind is equal:
rich and poor alike, they love their children.
635 With wealth distinctions come: some possess it,
some do not. But all mankind loves its children.

*(Exit Heracles with the children, Megara,
and Amphitryon, into the palace.)*

CHORUS [*singing*]

STROPHE A

Youth I long for always.

*But old age lies on my
head,*

*a weight more heavy than Aetna's
rocks;*

640 *darkness hides
the light from my eyes.*

*Had I the wealth of an Asian king,
645 or a palace crammed with gold,
both would I give for youth,
loveliest in wealth,
in poverty, loveliest.*

*But old age I loathe: ugly,
650 murderous. Let the waves take it
so it comes no more to the homes
and cities of men! Let the wind
whirl it away forever!*

ANTISTROPHE A

655 *If the gods were wise and understood men,
second youth would be their gift,
to seal the virtue of a man.*

660 *And so the good would run their course
from death back to the light again.
But evil men should live their lap,
one single life, and run no more.*

By such a sign all men would know
665 the wicked from the good,
as when the clouds are broken
and the sailor sees the stars.
But now the gods have set
between the noble and the base
670 no clear distinction down.
And time and age go wheeling on,
exalting only wealth.

STROPHE B

Never shall I cease from this,
Muses with the Graces joining,
675 loveliness in yoke together.
May I not live without the Muses!
Let my head be always crowned!
May my old age always sing
of Memory, the Muses' mother!
680 Always shall I sing the crown
of Heracles the victor!
So long as these remain—
Dionysus' gift of wine,
the lyre of seven strings,
the shrilling of the pipe—
685 never shall I cease to sing,
Muses who made me dance!

ANTISTROPHE B

Paeans sing the Delian maidens,
a song for Leto's lovely son,
wheeling at the temple gates

690 *the lovely mazes of the dance.*
 So paeans at your gate I'll raise,
 pouring like the dying swan,
 from hoary throat a song of praise.
695 *I have a noble theme of song:*
 He is the son of Zeus!
 But far beyond his birth,
 his courage^o lifts him up,
 whose labors gave to mortals calm,
700 *who cleared away the beasts.*

(Enter Lycus from the side, and Amphitryon from the palace.)

LYCUS

None too soon, Amphitryon, have you appeared.
A long time now you all have spent in dallying
with your robes and ornaments of death.
Go, call the wife and sons of Heracles
705 and bid them show themselves before the house
 according to your promise to die freely.

AMPHITRYON

King, you persecute in me a wretched man,
and by abusing us, you wrong the dead.
King you may be, but tread more gently here.
710 Death is your decree, and we accept it
 as we must. As you decide, then so must we.

LYCUS

Where is Megara? Where are Heracles' children?

AMPHITRYON

To chance a guess from here outside, I think...

LYCUS

Well, what do you think? What is your evidence?

AMPHITRYON

715 ...she is kneeling at the hearth and makes her prayers...

LYCUS

If she asks for life, her prayers are pointless.

AMPHITRYON

...and implores in vain her perished husband to come.

LYCUS

He is not here to help. He will not come.

AMPHITRYON

Not unless some god restore him to us.

LYCUS

720 Go inside and fetch her from the house.

AMPHITRYON

Then I would be accomplice in her death.

LYCUS

Very well then. Since your
scruples forbid,
I, who lack such petty fears, shall
go and fetch
the mother and her sons. Attend
me, guards,

and help me put good riddance
to this chore.

(Exit Lycus, attended by guards, into the palace.)

AMPHITRYON

Go, march in to your fate. Someone, I think,
will do the rest. Expect for what you did
evil in return. How justly, old friends,
into that net whose meshes hide the sword,
730 he goes, the man who would have slaughtered us,
coward that he is! I'll go in and watch
his body fall. This is sweet: to see your foe
perish and pay to justice all he owes.

(Exit Amphitryon into the palace.)

CHORUS [*singing in this interchange, while the Chorus Leader and Lycus
speak in reply*]

STROPHE A

Disaster is reversed!
735 *Our great king's life returns from Hades!*
Justice flows back! O fate of the gods,
returning!

CHORUS LEADER

740 Your time has come. You go now where the price
for outrage on your betters must be paid.

CHORUS

Joy once more! I weep for joy!
The king has come again!

745 *He has come, of whom I had no hope,
my country's king, come back again!*

CHORUS LEADER

Let's look within the house, old friends. Let's see
if someone is doing as I hope he is.

(Within.)

LYCUS

Help! Help!

CHORUS

ANTISTROPHE A

750 *From the house the song begins
I long to hear. That cry
was prelude to his death:
the tyrant's death is near.*

(Within.)

LYCUS

O land of Cadmus! Treachery! I die!

CHORUS LEADER

755 Die: you would have killed. Show your boldness now
as you repay to justice all you owe.

CHORUS

*What lying mortal made that fable,
that mindless tale,
that slander on the blessed?*

Who denied the gods are strong?

CHORUS LEADER

760 *Old friends, the godless man is dead!*
 The house is silent. Turn to the dances!
 Those I love now prosper as I hoped. °

CHORUS

STROPHE B

Let dance and feasting now prevail
 throughout this holy town of Thebes!
765 *Joy and mourning change their places,*
 old disaster turns to dancing!
 Change now rings my change of song!
 The new king's gone to death, the old king rules!
770 *Our king runs home from Hades' harbor!*
 He comes again, he comes, my king and hope,
 of whom my hope despaired.

ANTISTROPHE B

The gods of heaven do prevail:
 they raise the good and scourge the bad.
 Excess of happiness—it drives
775 *men's minds awry; in its train*
 comes on corrupted power.
 No man foresees the final stretch of time.
 Evil lures him to commit injustice,
 until he wrecks at last the somber car
780 *that holds prosperity.*

STROPHE C

*O Ismenus, come with crowns!
Dance and sing: you gleaming streets
of seven-gated Thebes!
Come, O Dirce, lovely fountain.
Leave your father's waters, bring
785 the nymphs, Asopus' daughters!
Come and sing the famous crown
of Heracles the victor!
790 O wooded crag of Delphi,
O Muses' homes on Helicon!
Make my city's walls resound,
echo back the joy of Thebes,
city where the Sown Men rose
795 with shields of bronze, where still
their children's children dwell,
a blessed light to Thebes!*

ANTISTROPHE C

*O marriage-bed two bridegrooms shared!
One was man; the other, Zeus,
800 who entered in the bridal bed
and with Alcmene lay.
How true, O Zeus, that marriage
proves to be! Your part therein,
against all doubt, is proven true!
805 For time at last has clearly shown the strength
of Heracles the hero.
You made your way from Pluto's halls;
you left the dungeon underground.
You are to me a better king
810 than that ignoble lord:*

*comparison made plain
in the struggle of the sword,
if justice still finds favor
among the blessed gods.*

(Enter Madness and Iris above the palace.)

CHORUS LEADER

815 Ah! Ah!

Is the same terror on us all? Look there,
old friends: what phantom hovers on the house?

CHORUS [*singing*]

Fly, fly!

Stir your heavy limbs! Back, away!

820 *Lord Paean, help us! Avert disaster!*

IRIS

Courage, old men. You see here
Madness,
child of Night, and me, servant of
the gods,
Iris. We bring no harm upon your
city.

825 Against one man alone our war is
waged,

him whom men call Alcmene's son
by Zeus.

Until his bitter labors had been
done,

his fate preserved him; nor would
father Zeus

let me or Hera do him any harm.

830 But now Eurystheus' orders have
been done,
Hera plans, by making him destroy
his sons,

to taint him with fresh
murder; and I agree.

Up, then, unmarried child of
blackest Night,
rouse up, harden that relentless
heart,
835 send madness on this man,
confound his mind
and make him kill his sons. Madden
his feet;
drive him, goad him, shake out the
sails of death
and make him speed by his own
deadly hands
his sons, his own life's glory, to
Acheron.
840 Let him learn what Hera's anger is,
and what is mine. For the gods are
nothing,
and men prevail, if this one man
escape.

MADNESS

I was born of noble birth: my mother
is the Night, and my father is the Sky.
845 My functions make me loathsome to the gods, °
nor do I gladly visit men I love.
And I advise both you and Hera now,

lest I see you stumble, to hear me out.

850 This man against whose house you drive me on
has won great fame on earth and with the gods.
He reclaimed the pathless land and raging sea,
and he alone held up the honors of the gods
when they wilted by the deeds of evil men.
I advise you: renounce these wicked plans.

IRIS

855 Hera's schemes and mine need no advice from you.

MADNESS

I show you the better path: you choose the worse.

IRIS

Hera has not sent you down to show your sanity.

MADNESS

O Sun, you be my witness: I act against my will.
But since I must do this for Hera and follow you,
860 like a pack of eager hounds together with their huntsman,
so go I shall: to the heart of Heracles I run,
more fast, more wild than ocean's groaning breakers,
than earthquake, or the lightning's agonizing bolt!
I shall batter through the roof and leap upon the house!
865 But first I'll kill his sons. Killing them, he won't know
he kills what he begot, until my madness leave him.

Look: already, head writhing, he leaps the starting post;
jumps and now stops; his eyeballs bulge, and pupils roll;
his breath comes heaving up, a bull about to charge!
870 And now he bellows up the horrid fates from hell;

soon I'll make you dance still more to terror's pipes!
Soar to Olympus, Iris, on your honored way,
while I now sink, unseen, to the house of Heracles.

(Exit Madness down into the palace. Iris flies away.)

CHORUS [*singing in this lyric interchange, with Amphytryon singing in reply from within the house*]

875 *O city, mourn! Your flower
 is cut down, the son of Zeus.
 O Hellas, mourn! You have lost
 your savior! He dances now
 to the fatal pipes of madness!*

880 *Dreadful, she ◦ has mounted her car;
 she goads her team!
 she drives them hard!
 O Gorgon of Night, O Madness,
 glittering-eyed, your hundred-snaky head!*

885 *Instantly, fortune is reversed by god!
 Instantly, and father murders sons!*

AMPHITRYON

O horror!

CHORUS

*O Zeus, your son has lost his sons!
 Vengeance, mad, implacable, exacts
890 the penalty! Disaster lays him low!*

AMPHITRYON

O my house!

CHORUS

*Now the dance begins! Not here,
Bacchus' drums! No lovely thyrsus here!*

AMPHITRYON

O my home!

CHORUS

For blood, she drives, for blood!
895 *No wine of Dionysus here!*

AMPHITRYON

Fly, children, save yourselves!

CHORUS

*Horrid,
horrid tune of the pipe!
His sons, he hunts them down!
Madness through the house,
madness dancing death!*

AMPHITRYON

900 *O grief!*

CHORUS

*I grieve for those two,
for the old man, for the mother
who bore, who nursed her sons in vain!*

Look, look!
905 *Whirlwind shakes the house, the roof falls!*

Ah!

AMPHITRYON^o

Ah!

*O daughter of Zeus, what are you doing here?
You are sending against this house
ruin that reaches to hell,
as once, Athena, you did against Enceladus!*

(Enter Messenger from the palace.)

MESSENGER [*speaking in this interchange with the Chorus, who sing in reply*]

910 O bodies blanched with age...

CHORUS

Why that cry?

MESSENGER

Horror in the house!

CHORUS

O my prophetic fears!

MESSENGER

The children live no more.

CHORUS

Ah...

MESSENGER

Mourn them, grieve them.

CHORUS

Cruel murder,
915 *O cruel hands of a father!*

MESSENGER

No words could tell the woes that we have suffered.

CHORUS

How did it happen, how this madness,
children killed by a father's hands?
How did disaster strike, madness
920 *hurled from heaven on this house?*
How did those pitiful children die?

MESSENGER

Offerings to Zeus were set before the hearth
to purify the house, for Heracles
had cast the body of the king outside.
925 There the children stood, a lovely chorus,
with Megara and the old man. In holy hush
the basket made the circle of the altar.
And then, as Heracles reached out his hand
to take the torch and dip it in the water,
930 he stood stock-still. There he stood, not moving,
while the children stared. Suddenly he changed:
his eyes rolled and bulged from their sockets,
and the veins stood out, gorged with blood, and froth
began to trickle down his bearded chin.
935 Then he spoke, laughing like a maniac:
“Why hallow fire, Father, to cleanse the house
before I kill Eurystheus? Why double work,

when at one blow I might complete my task?
I'll go and fetch Eurystheus' head, add it
940 to those now killed, then purify my hands.
Empty your water out! Drop those baskets!
Someone fetch my bow. Someone get my club:
I march against Mycenae! Let me have
crowbars and picks: the Cyclopes built well,
945 cramping stone on stone with plumb and mallet,
but with my pick I'll rip them down again."
Then he fancied that his chariot stood there;
he made as though to leap its rails and ride off,
prodding with his hand as though it held a goad.
950 Whether to laugh or shudder, we could not tell.
We stared at one another. Then one man asked,
"Is the master playing, or has he gone...mad?"
Up and down, throughout the house, he went,
and rushing into the men's hall, claimed it was
955 Nisus' city. Then going to his chamber^o
he threw himself to the floor, and acted out
a feast. He walked around a while,^o then said
he was approaching Isthmus' wooded valley.
He unstrapped his buckles and stripped himself bare,
960 and wrestled with no one; then called for silence
and crowned himself the victor of a match
that never was. Then he raged against Eurystheus,
and said he was in Mycenae. His father
caught him by that muscled hand and said:
965 "What do you mean, my son? What is this change
in you? Or has the blood of those you've slain
made you mad?" He thought Eurystheus' father
had come, trembling, to supplicate his hand;

pushed him away, and set his bow and arrows
970 against his sons. He thought he was killing
Eurystheus' children. Trembling with terror,
they rushed here and there; one hid beneath
his mother's robes, one ran to the shadow
of a pillar, and the last crouched like a bird
below the altar. Their mother shrieked:
975 "You are their father! Will you kill your sons?"
And shouts broke from the old man and the slaves.
Around the pillar he pursued his son
in dreadful circles, then stopped in front of him
and shot him in the liver. Backward he fell,
980 dying, and stained the flagstones with his blood.
His father shouted in triumph, exulting,
"Here is the first of Eurystheus' fledglings dead;
his death repays me for his father's hate."
He aimed his bow at the second, who crouched
985 below the altar's base, trying to hide.
The boy leaped first, fell at his father's knees
and held his hand up to his father's chin.
"Dearest Father," he cried, "do not murder me.
You're killing your own son, not Eurystheus'!"
990 But he just stared with stony Gorgon eyes,
found his son too close to draw the bow,
and brought his club down on that golden head,
and smashed the skull, just like a blacksmith
smiting steel. Now that his second son lay dead,
995 he rushed to kill the single victim left.
But before he could do this, the mother
seized her child, ran within and locked the doors.

And, as though these were the Cyclopean walls,
he pried the panels up, ripped out the jambs,
1000 and with one arrow brought down son and wife.
And then he rushed to kill his father too,
but look! a vision came—or so it seemed to us—
Pallas, with plumed helm, brandishing a spear.
She hurled a rock; it struck him on the chest,
1005 stopped short his murderous rage and knocked him
into sleep. He slumped to the floor and hit
his back against a pillar which had fallen there,
snapped in two pieces when the roof collapsed.
1010^o Delivered from the fear that made us run,
1009 we helped the old man lash him down with ropes
against the pillar, lest when he awakes
still greater grief be added to the rest.
He sleeps now, wretched man, no happy sleep,
killer of his wife and sons. I do not know
1015 one man alive more miserable than this.

(Exit Messenger into the palace.)

CHORUS [*singing*]

*The hill of Argos had a murder once
Danaus' daughters did, murder's byword,
unbelievable in Hellas!
But murder here has far outrun,
surpassed by far
1020 that dreadful crime.
And Procne's only son was slain,
murdered by his mother's hands and made,
I say, the Muses' sacrifice.*^o

*She had but that one son,
while you, poor wretch, had three,
all murdered by your madness.*

1025 *What dirge, what song
shall I sing for the dead?
What dance shall I dance for death?*

*(The door of the palace opens revealing Heracles asleep, bound to a
broken pillar, surrounded by the bodies of Megara and the children.)*

*Ah, look!
Look: the great doors
1030 of the palace open wide!
Look there!
Look: the children's corpses
before their wretched father.
How terribly he lies asleep
after his children's slaughter!*

1035 *Ropes around his body,
knotted cords bind Heracles,
cables lash him down
to the pillars of his house.*

(Enter Amphytryon from the palace.)

CHORUS LEADER [*speaking*]

*Here the old man comes, moving along
1040 with heavy steps, mourning in bitterness
like some bird whose unfledged covey is slain.*

AMPHITRYON [*singing*]

*Hush, old men of Cadmus' city,
and let him sleep. Hush:
let him forget his grief.*

CHORUS [*singing*]

1045 *I weep for you, old friend,
for these boys, and for that head
that wore the victor's crown.*

AMPHITRYON

*Stand further off: not a sound,
not a cry. His sleep is deep,
his sleep is calm. Let him lie.*

CHORUS

1050 *So much blood...*

AMPHITRYON

Hush! you will kill me.

CHORUS

...poured out, piled high!

AMPHITRYON

Softly, gently, old friends.
1055 *If he awakes and breaks his bonds,
he will destroy us all:
father, city, and his house.*

CHORUS

I cannot hold my grief.

AMPHITRYON

Hush:

let me hear his breathing.

I'll set my ear to him.

CHORUS

1060 *Does he sleep?*

AMPHITRYON

*He sleeps, but sleeps
as dead men do, because he slew his wife
and slew his sons with twanging bow.*

CHORUS

Grieve then, mourn...

AMPHITRYON

1065 *I mourn, I grieve.*

CHORUS

...mourn for these dead children...

AMPHITRYON

Ah...

CHORUS

...and mourn for your son.

AMPHITRYON

Ah...

CHORUS

Old friend...

AMPHITRYON

*Hush, be still:
he stirs and turns! He wakes! Quick,
1070 let me hide myself inside the house.*

CHORUS

Courage: darkness lies upon his eyes.

AMPHITRYON

*Take care, take care. My grief is such,
I have no fear to leave the light and die.
But if he murders me who begot him,
1075 he shall add a greater grief to these,
and have on him the curse of father's blood.*

CHORUS

*Best for you it would have been
if you had died that very day
you took revenge on those who slew
the kinsmen of your wife, the day
1080 you sacked the city of the Taphians!*

AMPHITRYON

*Run, run, old friends, back from the house,
away! He wakes! Run, run
from his reawakened rage!
Or soon he'll pile murder on murder,
1085 to dance madness through all Thebes!*

CHORUS LEADER

O Zeus, why have you hated him so much,
your own son? Why launched him on this sea of grief?

(Awakening.)

HERACLES

How now?

I do breathe...what I ought to see, I see:

1090 heaven and earth, the gleaming shafts of the sun...

But how strangely my muddled senses swim,
as on a choppy sea...my breath comes warm,
torn up unsteadily from heaving lungs...

And look: I sit here, like a ship lashed tight
1095 with cables binding my chest and arms,
moored to a piece of broken masonry;
and there, close beside me, corpses lie...
and my bow and arrows littered on the ground,
those faithful former comrades of my arms,
1100 that guarded my chest, and I guarded them.

Have I come back to Hades? Have I run
Eurystheus' race again? Hades? But how?

No, for I see no rock of Sisyphus,
no Pluto, no Persephone's scepter.

1105 I am bewildered. Where can I be? I'm helpless.

Help! Is there some friend of mine, near or far,
who will help me in my bewilderment?

For all I took for granted now seems strange...

AMPHITRYON [*now speaking*]

Old friends, shall I approach my affliction?

CHORUS LEADER

1110 Go, and I'll go with you, sharing in your grief.

HERACLES

Why do you cry, Father, and veil your eyes?
Why do you stand off from the son you love?

AMPHITRYON

O my son, for you're my son, even in misfortune.

HERACLES

What is my misfortune that you should weep for it?

AMPHITRYON

1115 Even a god would weep, if he knew it.

HERACLES

A great grief it must be; but still you hide it.

AMPHITRYON

It is there to see, if you are sane to see it.

HERACLES

Tell me if you mean my life is not the same.

AMPHITRYON

Tell me if you are sane; then I shall speak.

HERACLES

1120 O gods, how ominous these questions are!

AMPHITRYON

I wonder even now if you are not mad...

HERACLES

Mad? I cannot remember being mad.

AMPHITRYON

Friends, shall I loose his ropes? What should I do?

HERACLES

Yes. Tell me who bound me! Who disgraced me so?

AMPHITRYON

1125 This trouble you should know. The rest let go.

HERACLES

I say no more. Will you tell me now?

AMPHITRYON

O Zeus, throned next to Hera, do you see?

HERACLES

Is it from there that my sufferings have come?

AMPHITRYON

Let the goddess go. Shoulder your own grief.

HERACLES

1130 I am ruined. Your words will be disaster.

AMPHITRYON

Look. Look at the bodies of these children.

HERACLES

Oh horrible! What awful sight is this?

AMPHITRYON

Your unnatural war against your sons.

HERACLES

War? What war do you mean? Who killed these boys?

AMPHITRYON

1135 You and your bow and some god are all guilty.

HERACLES

What! I did it? O Father, herald of evil!

AMPHITRYON

You were mad. Your questions ask for grief.

HERACLES

And am I too the murderer of my wife?

AMPHITRYON

All this was the work of your hand alone.

HERACLES

1140 O black night of grief which covers me!

AMPHITRYON

It is because of this you see me weep.

HERACLES

Did I ruin all my house in my madness?

AMPHITRYON

I know but this: everything you have is grief.

HERACLES

Where did my madness take me? Where did I die?

AMPHITRYON

1145 By the altar, as you purified your hands.

HERACLES

Why then am I so sparing of this life,
if I was born to kill my dearest sons?
Let me avenge my children's murder:
let me hurl myself down from some sheer rock,
1150 or drive the whetted sword into my side,
or expunge with fire this body's madness
and burn away this guilt which sticks to my life!

But look: Theseus comes, my friend and kinsman,
intruding on my strategies for death.
1155 And seeing me, the taint of murdered sons
shall enter at the eye of my dearest friend.
What shall I do? Where can this grief be hid?
Oh for wings to fly! To plunge beneath the earth!
Here: let my garments^o hide my head in darkness,
1160 in shame, in horror of this deed I did,
and so concealed, I'll shelter him from harm,
and keep pollution from the innocent.

(He covers his head in his clothing.)

(Enter Theseus from the side.)

THESEUS

I come, old man, leading the youth of Athens,

bringing alliance to your son; my men
1165 wait under arms by the stream of Asopus.
A rumor came to Erechtheus' city
that Lycus had seized the scepter of this land
and was engaged in war against your house.
And so, in gratitude to Heracles
1170 who saved me from Hades, I have come,
old man, if you should need a helping hand.
Ah!
What bodies are these scattered on the ground?
Have I arrived too late, preceded here
by some disaster? Who has killed these boys?
1175 That woman lying there, whose wife was she?
Children are not mustered on the field of war:
no, this is some strange new sorrow I find here.

AMPHITRYON [*singing throughout the following interchange with Theseus, who speaks in response*]

O lord of the olive-bearing hill...

THESEUS

Why do you address me in these tones of grief?

AMPHITRYON

1180 *...see what grief the gods have given.*

THESEUS

Whose children are these over whom you mourn?

AMPHITRYON

*O gods, my son begot these boys,
begot them, killed them, his own blood.*

THESEUS

Unsay those words!°

AMPHITRYON

1185

Would that I could!

THESEUS

Oh horrible tale!

AMPHITRYON

We are ruined and lost.

THESEUS

How did it happen? Tell me how.

AMPHITRYON

Dead in the blow of madness,

by arrows dipped in the blood

1190 *of the hundred-headed Hydra...*

THESEUS

This is Hera's war. Who lies there by the bodies?

AMPHITRYON

*My son, my most unhappy son,
who fought with giant-killing spear
beside the gods at Phlegraea.*

THESEUS

1195 What mortal man was ever cursed like this?

AMPHITRYON

*Among all men you would not find
greater toils, greater suffering
than this.*

THESEUS

Why does he hide his head beneath his robes?

AMPHITRYON

*Shame of meeting your eye,
1200 shame before a friend and kinsman,
shame for his murdered sons.*

THESEUS

I come to share his grief. Uncover him.

(To Heracles.)

AMPHITRYON

*My son, drop your robe from your eyes,
1205 show your forehead to the sun.
An equal weight of supplication comes
to counterpoise your grief.
O my son, I implore you,
by your beard, your knees, your hand,
1210 by an old man's tears:
tame that lion of your rage
that roars you on to death,
yoking grief to grief.*

(To Heracles.)

THESEUS

I call on you, huddled there in misery:
1215 lift up your head and show your face to friends.
There is no cloud whose utter blackness
could conceal in night a sorrow like yours.
Why wave me off, warning me of dread?
Are you afraid mere words would pollute me?
1220 What do I care if your misfortunes fall
on me? You were my good fortune once:
you saved me from the dead, brought me back to light.
I loathe a friend whose gratitude grows old,
a friend who shares his friend's prosperity
1225 but will not voyage with him in his grief.
Rise up; uncover that afflicted head
and look on us. This is courage in a man:
to bear unflinchingly what heaven^o sends.

(Heracles uncovers his head.)

HERACLES

Theseus, have you seen this field of fallen sons?

THESEUS

1230 I'd heard. I see the grief to which you point.

HERACLES

How could you then uncloak me to the sun?

THESEUS

No mortal man can stain what is divine.

HERACLES

Away, rash friend! Flee my foul pollution.

THESEUS

Where there is love, no vengeful spirit comes.

HERACLES

1235 I thank you. I helped you once: I don't refuse.

THESEUS

You saved me then, and now I pity you.

HERACLES

A man to be pitied? I slew my children!

THESEUS

I mourn the woes of others for your sake.

HERACLES

Have you ever seen more misery than this?

THESEUS

1240 Your wretchedness towers up and reaches heaven.

HERACLES

And for that reason I'm prepared to die.°

THESEUS

What do you think the gods care for your threats?

HERACLES

Heaven is proud. And I am proud toward heaven.

THESEUS

No more: your presumption will be punished.

HERACLES

1245 My hold is full: there is no room for more.

THESEUS

What will you do? Where does your anger run?

HERACLES

To death: to go back whence I came, beneath the earth.

THESEUS

These are the words of an ordinary man.

HERACLES

Will you, who did not suffer, preach to me?

THESEUS

1250 Is this that Heracles who endured so much?

HERACLES

Not this much. Even endurance has an end.

THESEUS

Mankind's benefactor, man's greatest friend?

HERACLES

What good are men to me? Hera rules.

THESEUS

You die so foolishly? Hellas forbids it.

HERACLES

1255 Listen: let me tell you what makes a mock
at your advice. Let me show you my life:

a life not worth living now, or ever.
Take my father first, a man who killed
my mother's father and, having such a curse,
1260 married Alcmene who gave birth to me.
When a house is built on poor foundations,
then its descendants are the heirs of grief.
Then Zeus—whoever Zeus may be—begot me
for Hera's hatred. Take no offense, old man,
1265 for I count you my father now, not Zeus.
While I was still at suck, she set her snakes
with Gorgon eyes to slither in my crib
and strangle me. And when I grew older
and a belt of muscle bound my body—
1270 why recite all those labors I endured?
All those wars I fought, those beasts I slew,
those lions and triple-bodied Typhons,
Giants, and four-legged Centaur hordes!
I killed the Hydra, that brute whose heads
1275 grew back as soon as lopped. My countless labors done,
I descended down among the sullen dead
to do Eurystheus' bidding and bring to light
the triple-headed hound who guards the gates of hell.
And now my last worst labor has been done:
1280 I slew my children and crowned my house with grief.
And this is how it is: I cannot stay
at Thebes, the town I love. If I remain,
what temple, what assembly of my friends
will have me? My curse is unapproachable.
1285 Go to Argos then? No, I am banished there.
Settle in some other city then,

where notoriety shall pick me out
to be watched and goaded by bitter gibes^o—
“Is this the son of Zeus, who killed his wife
1290 and sons? Away with him! Let him die elsewhere.”
To a man who prospers and is blessed,^o
all change is grief; but the man who lives
akin to trouble minds disaster less.
But to this pitch of grief my life will come:
1295 the earth itself will groan, forbidding me
to touch the ground, rivers and seas cry out
against my crossing over, and I’ll be
like Ixion, bound forever to a wheel.
This is the best, that I be seen no more^o
1300 in Hellas, where I prospered and was great.
Why should I live? What profit have I,
having a life both useless and accursed?
Let the noble wife of Zeus begin the dance,
pounding with her feet Olympus’ gleaming floors!
1305 For she accomplished what her heart desired,
and hurled the greatest man of Hellas down
in utter ruin. Who would offer prayers
to such a goddess? Jealous of Zeus
for a mortal woman’s sake, she has destroyed
1310 Hellas’ greatest friend, though he was guiltless.

CHORUS LEADER^o

No other god is implicated here,
except the wife of Zeus. Rightly you judge.

THESEUS

My advice is this, rather than suffer ill.^o

Fate exempts no man; all humans suffer,
1315 and so the gods too, unless the poets lie.
Do not the gods commit adultery?
Have they not cast their fathers into chains,
in pursuit of power? Yet all the same,
despite their crimes, they live upon Olympus.
1320 How dare you then, mortal that you are,
to protest your fate, when the gods do not?
Obey the law and leave your native Thebes
and follow after me to Pallas' city.
There I shall purify your hands of blood,
1325 give you a home and a share of my wealth.
All those gifts I have because I killed
the Minotaur and saved twice seven youths,
I cede to you. Everywhere throughout my land,
plots of earth have been reserved for me.
1330 These I now assign to you, to bear your name
until you die. And when you go to Hades,
Athens shall raise you up great monuments
of stone, and honor you with sacrifice.
And so my city, helping a noble man,
1335 shall win from Hellas a lovely crown of fame.
This thanks and this return I make you now,
who saved me once. For now you need a friend.
He needs no friends who has the love of gods. °
For when god helps a man, he has help enough.

HERACLES

1340 Ah, all this has no bearing on my grief;
but I do not believe the gods commit
adultery, or bind each other in chains.

I never did believe it; I never shall;
nor that one god is tyrant of the rest.
1345 If god is truly god, he is perfect,
lacking nothing. Those are poets' wretched lies.
Even in my misery I asked myself,
would it not be cowardice to die?
The man who cannot bear up under fate
1350 could never face the weapons of a man.
I shall prevail against death. I shall go
to your city. I accept with thanks your countless gifts.
For countless were the labors I endured;
never yet have I refused, never yet
1355 have I wept, and never did I think
that I should come to this: tears in my eyes.
But now, I see, I must serve necessity.

(To Amphitryon.)

So, now you see me banished, old man;
you see in me the killer of my sons.
1360 Give them to the grave, give them the tribute
of your tears, for the law forbids me this.
Let them lie there in their mother's arms,
united in their grief, as they were then,
before, in wretched ignorance, I killed her.
And when the earth has hidden their remains,
1365 live on in this city here, even though it hurts.
Compel your soul to bear misfortune with me.°

O my sons, the father who gave you life
has slain you all, and never shall you reap
that harvest of my life, all I labored for,

1370 that heritage of fame I toiled to leave you.
You too, poor wife, I killed: unkind return
for having kept the honor of my bed,
for all your weary vigil in my house.
O wretched wife and sons! And wretched me!
1375 In grief I now unyoke myself from you.
O bitter sweetness of this last embrace!

O my weapons, bitter partners of my life!
What shall I do? Let you go, or keep you,
knocking against my ribs and always saying,
1380 “With us you murdered wife and sons. Wearing us,
you wear your children’s killers.” Can I still carry them?
What can I reply? Yet, naked of these weapons,
with which I did the greatest deeds in Hellas,
must I die in shame at my enemies’ hands?
1385 No, they must be kept; but in pain I keep them.
Hold with me, Theseus, in one thing more.
Help me take to Argos the monstrous dog,
lest, alone and desolate of sons, I die.
O land of Cadmus, O people of Thebes,
1390 mourn with me, grieve with me, attend my children
to the grave! And with one voice mourn us all,
the dead and me. For all of us have died,
all struck down by one blow of Hera’s hate.

THESEUS

Rise up, unfortunate friend. Have done with tears.

HERACLES

1395 I cannot rise. My limbs are rooted here.

THESEUS

Yes, necessity breaks even the strong.

HERACLES

Oh to be a stone! To feel no grief!

THESEUS

Enough. Give your hand to your helping friend.

HERACLES

Take care. I may pollute your clothes with blood.

THESEUS

1400 Pollute them then. Spare not. I do not care.

HERACLES

My sons are dead; now you shall be my son.

THESEUS

Place your arm round my neck and I shall lead you.

HERACLES

A yoke of love, but one of us in grief.

O Father, choose a man like this for friend.

AMPHITRYON

1405 The land that gave him birth has noble sons.

HERACLES

Theseus, turn me back. Let me see my sons.

THESEUS

Is this a remedy to ease your grief?

HERACLES

I long for it, and yearn to embrace my father.

AMPHITRYON

My arms embrace you. I want what you want.

THESEUS

1410 Have you forgotten your labors so far?

HERACLES

All those labors I endured were less than these.

THESEUS

If someone sees your weakness, he will not praise you.

HERACLES

Am I so low? You did not think so once.

THESEUS

Once, no. But now where is famous Heracles?

HERACLES

1415 What were you when you were underground?

THESEUS

In courage I was the least of men.

HERACLES

Then will you say my grief degrades me now?

THESEUS

Forward!

HERACLES

Farewell, father!

AMPHITRYON

Farewell, my son.

HERACLES

Bury my children.

AMPHITRYON

Who will bury me?

HERACLES

I.

AMPHITRYON

When will you come?

HERACLES

1420

After you die, dear father.°

AMPHITRYON

How?

HERACLES

I shall have you brought from Thebes to Athens.°

Convey my children in, a grim conveyance,
while I, who have destroyed my house in shame,
am towed in Theseus' wake like some cargo boat.

1425

The man who would prefer great wealth or strength
more than love, more than friends, is diseased of soul.

CHORUS [*chanting*]

*We go in grief, we go in tears,
who lose in you our greatest friend.*

*(Theseus and Heracles leave to one side, the Chorus to the other.
Exit Amphitryon into the palace; the door closes behind him,
concealing the bodies of Megara and the children.)*