



*Women
of Trakhis*

INTRODUCTION

"YOU'VE SEEN NOTHING THAT IS NOT ZEUS"

In Sophocles' *Women of Trakhis*, Deianeira is an ordinary woman married to Herakles, a canny and violent enforcer who carries the ideal of Greek manhood to its logical (and superhuman) conclusion. To cope with her anxiety about his labors and escapades, yet keep his affection and preserve her marriage, she tolerates his conduct. But ultimately her actions—given her predicament, plus the nature and history of her husband, the most feared and storied hero of the ancient world—destroy not only her but Herakles as well.

By the time Sophocles wrote this play, Herakles had become a widely worshipped cult figure. (As the son of Zeus and Alkmene—the mortal wife of Amphytrion of Thebes—Herakles displayed his strength and resourcefulness at an early age: he strangled two snakes sent by Zeus' revengeful goddess wife Hera to kill him in his cradle.) His reputation as a savior and benefactor of humankind swelled over centuries. Mythmakers invented countless improbable monsters and obstacles for him to overcome. But egomania and vengefulness were also part of the legend. In *Women of Trakhis*, Sophocles undermines reverential accounts of the hero's selfless service to his fellow Greeks by

taking equal notice of his crimes and his brutal, deceitful, selfish acts. When Herakles finally appears, he is writhing in a robe smeared with clinging, burning, penetrating acid, yet Sophocles makes it difficult for an audience to feel sorry for him.

Deianeira is a shadowy or absent figure in the earliest versions of the Herakles myth. By making her the driving force, Sophocles succeeds in dramatizing the destructive side of his culture's fascination with hero cults and especially with Herakles himself. He creates in Deianeira one of the most sympathetic and realistic female characters in Greek drama, and presents a Herakles who, though blessed with immense strength and resourcefulness, is also egomaniacal and cruel.

As the play begins, Deianeira explains to the chorus of Trakhinian women how painful it is loving "the best" man alive. "People have a saying that goes way back," she explains. "*You don't know your own life, / whether it's good or evil—not / until it's over. Mine I know now. / It's unlucky and it's harsh*" (1-5). Deianeira has missed Herakles. She resents his latest fifteen-month absence. But until now—when she is confronted by Iole, an attractive and aristocratic young slave whom Herakles has sent ahead to become his third wife—she has tolerated his sexual conquests and his neglect. Sophocles renders, with striking realism, Deianeira's struggle to reconcile passion, devotion, and jealousy as she reacts to the girl's sudden arrival at her house. Pondering how to deal with the threat posed by Iole, Deianeira remembers a "love charm" given her by Nessus, a centaur who was attempting to rape her when Herakles pierced his chest with a poison-soaked arrow. Dying, Nessus promised that the gore from his wound, if carefully preserved, could be

used to keep Herakles "from seeing and loving" anyone but her. Deianeira, having saved the gore all these years, will now rub it into a robe and have a messenger take it to Herakles as a homecoming gift. In so doing, she inflicts on him a horrible, unquenchable agony. This epitome of warrior culture is rendered helpless at the hands of a "frail woman, / born with no male strength" (1192-93). "She beat me—only she," says Herakles. "And didn't even need a sword" (1094-95). When Deianeira hears from her son Hyllos what her love potion has done to her husband, whose passion she craves and fears, she plunges a shortened sword into her heart.

Deianeira insists she has never resented her husband's other women, whose number she claims exceeds those of any other mortal. But imagining that she will sleep "under the same blanket" with Herakles and his new bride is more than she can bear. Sophocles could easily have given Iole a chance to speak for herself, thus enlivening the drama with a face-off between the two women. He chose instead to show Herakles' lover as visibly nubile but utterly intimidated, seemingly incapable of speech. In this play, as in most versions of the myth, Iole is brought to Trakhis against her will. Iole's silence and Deianeira's instinctive pity for her allows the audience to focus on the conflict between the loyal wife and the husband wedded to his own legend. The drama thus takes off on a collision course of conflicting passions, Deianeira's to keep her husband's love, and Herakles' to make his latest conquest permanent.

To fifth-century Greeks, the word *heros* (its singular form) had a meaning quite distinct from our own. We think of heroes as people who place themselves at considerable risk to

accomplish something dangerous or courageous, often for the common good. The ancient Greeks, however, assumed an unusual capacity for anger and violence to be a common attribute of a *heros*, whether in myth or real life. Simply stated, the difference between our own and ancient Greek attitudes toward heroes is that we want heroic violence to be sanctioned in moral terms. A Greek *heros*' destructive conduct, however, could be appreciated as an impressive, even divine attribute. Consider Kleomedes, an Olympic boxing champion who won his title between the battles of Marathon and Salamis. Enraged and maddened because his title was stripped after his blows caused the death of his final opponent, Kleomedes pulled down the pillars of a school building, killing all the pupils inside. To escape the wrath of the dead children's families, he hid in a large trunk in the Temple of Athena but disappeared before they broke open the lid. When consulted by the townspeople about what to do next, the oracle at Delphi sardonically advised, "Honor him as a hero." To modern readers, a hero's heartless fury marks him as immoral; to the ancient Greeks, a *heros*' anger—a most privileged word and concept in Greek culture—could make him immortal.

Zeus will grant the Herakles of the *Trakhis* immortality. But before this apotheosis, the dying Herakles will evaluate his life experience. In a highly charged conversation with his son Hyllos, Herakles recounts how much it cost him to keep Greece safe from savage tribes of beasts (natural and supernatural), to perform other nasty 'Herculean' tasks for twelve years—and how little peace he has earned. As evidence of the Olympian gods' abandonment, Herakles complains that they did not

protect him from Deianeira's lethal gift, nor did they allow him to take revenge on her.

Hyllos patiently explains to Herakles why Deianeira does not deserve his father's wrath:

Hyllos You wouldn't hate her—if you knew.

Herakles Wouldn't hate her? If I knew what?

Hyllos Her good intentions hurt you—that's the truth.

Herakles Her "good intention" to kill me?

Hyllos When she saw the woman who's in our house,
she used love medicine to keep you. It went wrong.

[...]

Herakles O what a miserable creature I am!

I'm finished. Finished! For me

there will be no more sunlight. (1286–1298)

Herakles neither takes responsibility for Deianeira's jealous reaction to Iole's arrival nor expresses regret for his wife's suicide. He's obsessed with his own shame at being destroyed by a woman. Herakles then attempts to impose a set of 'labors' on his son—a series of deathbed commands he forces Hyllos to promise, and swear to Zeus, that he'll carry out. The first command orders Hyllos to transport his father to Mount Oita and burn him alive on a pyre of olive limbs. When Hyllos refuses (which the Greek audience would have attributed to the religious prohibition against kin murder), Herakles proceeds to negotiate. He agrees to let Hyllos build the pyre but find someone else—who turns out, in another play by Sophocles, to be Philoktetes—to light it. He then orders Hyllos to marry Iole.

Horried, but compelled by his divine oath to Zeus, Hyllos agrees. As a crew assembles to carry the mighty hero to the mountain, Hyllos speaks a few final, rebellious words:

Lift him up, friends. Forgive me
for what I am about to do.
But look at the cruelty of what
the ruthless gods have done
to us—the gods whom we call
our fathers, whose children we are—
and yet how coolly they watch us suffer.
No one foresees the future,
but our present is awash with grief
that shames even the gods, and pain
beyond anything we can know
strikes this man who now meets his doom.
Women, don't cower in the house.
Come with us. You've just seen death
and devastating calamity, but
you've seen nothing that is not Zeus. (1435–1450)

Hyllos expresses grief for his father's pain, but not for losing him. By condemning the cruelty of the gods—shouldn't they treat mortals as their children, Hyllos asks, since mortals revere them as fathers?—he implies distress at his own father's treatment of him. He concludes by blaming Zeus for the calamity that has struck his entire family. This might not have seemed blasphemous or impious to Sophocles' audience; the gods' cruelty and capriciousness were universally acknowledged and

accepted. But Hyllos' invocation of Zeus, and this father-god's indifference to suffering, reminds us that Zeus was in fact Herakles' father. In time, the advent of more compassionate deities caused the demise of Zeus and the other Olympians. The *Trakhis* was one of many works written in Sophocles' Athens that eventually eroded uncritical acceptance of the arrogance and violence endemic to heroic culture itself.

At the end of his life, Sophocles wrote *Oedipus at Kolonos*, setting the play on the last day of the life of aged Oedipus, a hero who possessed anger more righteous than Herakles' and whose solemn reception by the gods granted him an honor in death that had been withheld during his prime. Sophocles himself became after death a different breed of *heros* altogether, revered for receiving into Athens and very likely his own house a cult whose mission was to heal the sick.

—RB

Women of Trakhis

Translated by Robert Bagg

CHARACTERS

DEIANEIRA, Herakles' wife
SERVANT, a woman of Deianeira's household
HYLLOS, eldest son of Herakles and Deianeira
CHORUS of young Trakhinian women
LEADER of the Chorus
MESSENGER from Trakhis
LIKHAS, personal herald to Herakles
Captive Women of Oechalia
Iole, daughter of Eurytus
HERAKLES, heroic worker of miracles
OLD MAN, senior aide to Herakles
Soldiers serving Herakles

The play opens at Trakhis, in front of the house in which DEIANEIRA has been living. Its size and façade are impressive, but less than royal. DEIANEIRA and her female SERVANT enter the stage from the house.

DEIANEIRA

People have a saying that goes way back:
*You don't know your own life,
whether it's good or evil—not
until it's over. Mine I know now.*

It's unlucky and it's harsh.

I know this long before

I'll go down to Hades.

When I was still a girl, living

with my father in Pleuron,

marriage terrified me—like it

10

terrified no other girl in Aetolia—

because a river lusted for me, a river

named Achelous. He kept asking

Father if he could marry me,

each time in a different shape: first

a bull, next a glittering snake,

then an ox-head rising from a man's trunk,

water sloshing from his rank beard.

When I imagined marrying that creature

I was so miserable! I'd want to die

20

before I got near a bed like his.

Then, just in time, joy arrived!

The amazing son of Zeus and Alkmene

battled him and saved me. Exactly

how he won this fight I can't

tell you, because I don't know. If someone

feeling less panic than I felt was watching,

he could tell you. I sat there numb, sure

my beauty would destroy me.

But Zeus the battle god blessed the outcome—

30

if what happened was really a blessing.

Ever since Herakles won me for his bed

I've nursed one fear after another.

There's been no end to my anxiety.

Each night I imagine some new threat

which the next night's threat scares away.

Of course we had children. He sees them, sometimes,

the way a farmer tends a back field, twice

a year—sowing his seed, reaping the harvest.

That was his life: no sooner home than he's

40

back on the road, always working for this one man.

Now that he's put his labors behind him,

I'm more afraid than ever.

From the time

Herakles killed that brave fighter Iphitus,

we've been uprooted, so we live

among strangers here in Trakhis.

Where Herakles is now, nobody knows. He's gone.

That's all I know. And that I ache for him.

No herald's brought news for fifteen months.

I'm all but sure he's mired in more trouble.

50

Then there's this tablet he left me.

I've prayed so often to the gods

that it wasn't meant to bring me grief.

The female SERVANT who has been listening to DEIANEIRA worry out loud approaches and interrupts her mistress.

SERVANT

Deianeira, my lady, so many times I've quietly
 watched while you've wept, suffering with you
 since Herakles has been gone. But now
 I've got to say—if a slave may advise
 a freeborn person—what you should do.
 Since you're so blessed with sons,
 why not send one to find your husband?
 Hyllos your eldest is the one to send—
 if he thinks news of his father's well-being
 matters to us.

60

Here he comes now,
 jogging up the path. If my advice
 makes any sense, why not take it?

*Enter HYLLOS, breathing hard from sport or the hunt. DEIANEIRA stops him
 as he runs past. SERVANT goes indoors.*

DEIANEIRA

Hyllos, my son, sometimes even a slave
 knows just what to say. She wasn't
 born free but speaks as if she were.

HYLLOS

Her words, Mother? May I hear them?

DEIANEIRA

Your father's been gone for so long. She thinks
 it's shameful you haven't tried to find him.

70

HYLLOS

But I *do* know where he is. If you can
 believe what people have been saying.

DEIANEIRA

Then why not tell me, Son. Where he's living.

HYLLOS

He slaved during last year's plowing season
 —seed to harvest—for a Lydian woman.

DEIANEIRA

If he has sunk that low, we can expect
 to hear much worse said about him.

HYLLOS

He's gotten clear of it now. So I hear.

DEIANEIRA

Do people say where he is? Alive, dead, what?

80

HYLLOS

They say he's attacking Euboean
 territory—the kingdom of Eurytus—
 or getting ready to attack.

DEIANEIRA

Did you know, Son, that Herakles left me
 prophecies—ones I trust—about that very place?

HYLLOS

What prophecies, Mother? They're news to me.

DEIANEIRA

They say that he'll either be killed, or if
successful in the battle he takes on—
then he'll have peace for the rest of his days.
With his life hanging in the balance, Son,
won't you go help him? Our own survival
depends on his. If he dies, so do we.

90

HYLLOS

Of course I'll go, Mother. If I had known
how dangerous these prophecies were,
I'd be there now. But I never saw
much reason to worry. Father's luck was
never the kind that would make me anxious.
Now that I'm better informed, I will do
whatever it takes to find out the truth.

DEIANEIRA

Then go now, Son.
When you've searched out the truth, no matter how
late, it always works to your advantage.

100

*HYLLOS exits stage left on the road out of town. CHORUS enters from the
town, singing.*

CHORUS

O Sun! The Night
pulsing with stars
gives birth to you
the moment she
reddens into death.
You set, O Sun,
fire to her sky
as she lays you
to rest. O Sungod—
where, tell us where,
is Herakles,

Alkmene's child?
Master of flaming light,
find Herakles!

Is he edging
through the straits
of the Black Sea?

Or making landfall
where continents meet?
Speak to us, you who see
what no man sees.

110

120

Deianeira's heart
aches for this man.
Once a prize won in battle,
she's restless as a bird
who's lost its mate.
She can't still her desire

or stop her tears. 130
 Sleepless, ravaged
 by fears for the husband
 who's gone, she wastes away,
 alone on a manless bed,
 imagining her own
 miserable fate.

Just as you watch
 waves surge and foam
 over the open sea
 under tireless winds— 140
 Northwind, Southwind—
 so the troubles of a life
 wild as the sea off Crete
 plunge Herakles under,
 then lift him to greatness—
 because always some god,
 when Death sucks him down,
 pulls him back into life.

Lady, I respect you,
 but not your despair. 150
 I don't think it's right
 for you to let hope die.
 Zeus makes sorrow a part
 of whatever he gives us.
 Grief and joy
 come circling back

to all of us,
 circling as the Bear
 retraces her steps
 on the starpaths. 160

For the night pulsing with stars
 slows for no man, nor does wealth,
 nor does pain—they all
 speed through us, then they're
 gone to some other man
 who'll know joy and its loss.
 Now I ask you, Queen Deianeira,
 to ask this of yourself:
 When has Zeus ever been
 indifferent to one of his sons? 170

DEIANEIRA

You're here, I suppose, because you know my troubles.
 But you cannot know the worry eating
 my heart out. I hope you'll never
 learn it by suffering what I've suffered.
 As young girls we thrive in our own safe place,
 where the Sungod's heat doesn't oppress us,
 nor the rain nor the wind. You glory there
 in your innocent life—until you marry.
 Then panic attacks you night after night—
 you fear for your husband, your children. 180
 Wives know the misery I feel now
 when they face what I've had to face.

I've wept—so much—long before this.
 But now I must tell you something far worse.
 When Herakles embarked on his last journey
 he left behind a message carved on wood.
 Never before—and he went to fight often—
 had he explained its meaning to me.
 Always sure that he'd win,
 he never believed he would die. 190
 But this time he seemed to expect his own death.
 He told me how much of his wealth
 would be my widow's share, which lands
 would go to each of his children—but
 this time he fixed the date of his own death.
 When he'd been out of the country fifteen
 months, that would be his time to die.
 But if he survived after that,
 there'd be no further trouble in his life.

The gods ordained this destiny, he said— 200
 ordained that Herakles' own labors
 would cause it. So it will happen
 just as the ancient oak at Dodona's
 shrine told him it would, when its leaves
 rustled and whispered to its sibyls.
 Today's the day that prophecy falls due.
 I wake in terror from a long sweet sleep, friends,
 fearing I must live on without the man
 who is—of all men living—the best.

LEADER

Shush. Let go of those mysteries for now. 220
 A man wearing laurel flowers
 is walking toward us, a sure sign
 he brings news we can celebrate.

Enter MESSENGER.

MESSENGER

Queen Deianeira, let me
 be the first to reassure you.
 Herakles is alive. He's won,
 and from that battle he's sent home
 trophies to please our native gods.

DEIANEIRA

Old man, what's this news you've just brought me? 230

MESSENGER

That your lord, loved by so many,
 will be restored to your house
 in all his victorious might.

DEIANEIRA

Who told you this, a stranger or a villager?

MESSENGER

Down in the meadow where oxen graze all summer,
 a herald named Likhas is telling everyone.

I heard it from him and hurried here,
hoping that you'd be generous
if I was the first to tell you.

DEIANEIRA

Why doesn't Likhas bring the news himself
if fortune's been so good to Herakles?

240

MESSENGER

It's not so easy for him, ma'am. The whole
town of Malia crushes around him,
asking questions. He's stuck there—everyone
intent on learning what interests them.
They won't let him go till each hears his fill.
That ruckus holds him there unwillingly,
but I'm sure you'll see him in person soon.

DEIANEIRA

O Zeus,
who keeps the highlands of Mount Oita green,
you've given us some joy at last! Sing out
your gladness at this news, you women
in the house and come from town, brilliant news
beyond all hope, that dawns on me, on us!

250

CHORUS

Let the house
that awaits
its bridegroom

sing out in joy
triumphant
from its hearth!

Let shouts from the men
in one great voice
go to the god Apollo
whose keen bright
arrows protect us!

260

Join them, girls,
sing the anthem
to Artemis, his sister, let
your voices carry
to her hunting deer
in fields where quail fly!
Sing to the goddess
whose torches blaze
in both her hands, sing
to her neighbors
the nymphs!

270

I'm soaring!
I won't deny you,
flute, king of my soul!
Ivy is working
green magic
through my body—
Haiaia! Eiaiaia!—

280

ivy whirls me
into the flashing
dance of Bakkhos!
Praise Bakkhos
who heals us!

Look over there,
beloved lady.
What I am singing
your eyes can see!

290

DEIANEIRA

I see them, girls. My eyes
have been scanning the horizon.

Enter LIKHAS leading several of the Captive Women up the path. The group includes the strikingly young and sensual Iole.

You've come a long way, Likhas. We're glad you're here,
if it's true that your news will make us glad.

LIKHAS

Our coming is good news—and the facts I bring
will justify your welcome. When a man's been
lucky, he should be greeted as a friend.

DEIANEIRA

Then tell me, friend, what I most want to hear.
Will I see Herakles come home alive?

300

LIKHAS

Not only was he alive when I left him,
he was robust. Not sick in any way.

DEIANEIRA

Where is he? Home, or still on foreign soil?

LIKHAS

A headland juts west from Euboea. Herakles
is on it making sacrifices to Zeus.
He builds altars and offers to the gods
some of the wealth he's won by making war.

DEIANEIRA

To keep a vow? Or was an oracle involved?

LIKHAS

A vow. He keeps the vow he made
when he conquered a country
and stripped it of these women here.

310

DEIANEIRA notices the Captive Women entering under guard.

DEIANEIRA

These women—who are they? Who owns them?
I feel so sorry for them. Or am I wrong
to think that they'll be slaves?

LIKHAS

He picked them out when he raided Eurytus' city.
 Splendid prizes for himself. And the gods.

DEIANEIRA

Was it that raid against a city—which
 lasted longer than anyone predicted?
 So long I lost all track of the days? 320

LIKHAS

No. He was in Lydia most of that time—
 not a free man, he told us, but enslaved.
 You won't take offense at the word "enslaved,"
 lady, when you hear the reason Zeus willed it.
 Herakles was bought by a foreign queen
 named Omphale for a full year. He admits it.
 He was so mortified by this disgrace
 he vowed to make the man who had caused it,
 as well as his wife and daughter, slaves themselves.
 Not idle words. When he'd done a year's 330
 penance for this crime, he hired
 an army to lay siege to that man's
 city—making Eurytus pay dearly,
 the man most to blame for his troubles.

Herakles was an old comrade of this Eurytus,
 and had sought refuge—in friendship—under his roof.
 But Eurytus abused Herakles, lashing him
 with vicious words meant to wound him:

"Your arrows never miss, do they Herakles?
 How come my sons beat you in competition? 340
 What's more, you're now a mere slave who grovels
 when a free man barks at you." When Herakles
 got drunk on wine at a feast, Eurytus kicked him
 out of the house. Herakles was enraged.
 So one day, when Eurytus' son scrambles
 high up Mount Tiryns tracking some lost horses,
 he drops his guard while his eyes search
 the vast plain below him. Herakles grabs
 the preoccupied lad and throws him
 off a sky-high cliff to his death. 350
 This murder disgusted our real king,
 Olympian Zeus, father of us all,
 who had Herakles sold
 as a slave to another country.
 With no parole allowed, since he'd
 killed Iphitus by deceit—the only
 man Herakles ever killed that way.
 Had he killed his man fairly,
 Zeus would have pardoned him.
 Gods don't appreciate insolence 360
 any more than we do.

Now all those men
 he killed, so full of themselves, bursting
 with arrogant and bitter things to say—
 they're down in Hades, their town's enslaved.
 Their women I've brought here trade their lives
 of ease for a much less pleasant existence.

Your husband ordered this, so I loyally
 carry it out. Once he has sacrificed to Zeus,
 the god who fathered him, in thanks for his
 victory, you can be sure he'll come to you. 370
 Of all my news, this last must please you most.

LEADER

It's certain you'll be happy, Queen. Half your joy
 has arrived, and the rest is on the way.

DEIANEIRA

Why shouldn't news of my husband's success
 make me happy? Such good fortune must
 always be celebrated. But a cautious mind
 will feel apprehension for any man
 who has so much luck. He could lose it all.

DEIANEIRA looks at the Captive Women.

My friends, I feel a strange pity,
 looking at these sorry captives— 380
 exiles who've lost their fathers and their homes.
 Once they were daughters of free men.
 Now they'll be slaves for the rest of their lives.
 Zeus, decider of battles, grant
 me this: don't ever punish my children
 the way you are punishing these girls.
 But if it must happen, do it when I'm gone.
 That's how much looking at them scares me.

DEIANEIRA approaches Iole.

You poor girl! Who are you? Are you married?
 Have you a child? You look so innocent. 390
 And so wellborn. Who is her father, Likhas?
 Her mother—who is she? Out with it!
 I pity her more than the other women
 because she seems to know what to expect.

LIKHAS

Why ask me? How should I know? Could be
 her father's not the poorest man in his kingdom.

DEIANEIRA

Is she royal? Did Eurytus have a daughter?

LIKHAS

I don't know. Sorry. I didn't ask many questions.

DEIANEIRA

Didn't her friends ever mention her name?

LIKHAS

No, ma'am. I had a job to do. No time for chat. 400

DEIANEIRA again approaches Iole.

DEIANEIRA

You tell me then, poor girl. It upsets me
 that I don't even know your name.

LIKHAS

It won't be like her if she speaks. She hasn't
spoken a word. She's done nothing but cry
miserable tears the whole way here
from her windswept home, devastated
by what the Goddess of Luck
has done to her. Let's respect that.

DEIANEIRA

Let her be. Let her go inside if she wishes.
I won't add to the pain she's been through.
She's had enough. Let's all go in—so you
can make an early start on your journey
while I see to some things in my house.

410

*LIKHAS and Captive Women start to go inside; the MESSENGER edges closer
to DEIANEIRA as she follows them inside.*

MESSENGER

(to DEIANEIRA)

Don't go inside just yet. Let all these folk
move out of earshot, so I can tell you
some things you haven't heard. Things I know.

DEIANEIRA

What things? Why are you keeping me here?

MESSENGER

Stay and hear me out. You valued what I told you
before. You'll value what I tell you now.

DEIANEIRA

Shall we call everyone back? Or do you want
to speak only to me and these women?

420

*LIKHAS pauses in the doorway as he notices that the MESSENGER has taken
DEIANEIRA aside.*

MESSENGER

I can speak freely to you—and these women.
Don't bother the others.

*DEIANEIRA waves for LIKHAS to go inside. He and the Captive Women
disappear into the house.*

DEIANEIRA

They're gone. Go ahead.

MESSENGER

None of what that man just told you is true.
Either he was lying to you here, or
lying to the rest of us a while back.

DEIANEIRA

What are you saying? Collect
your thoughts. Speak distinctly.
So far your words just puzzle me.

MESSENGER

I heard that man say—in front of witnesses—
that the girl was the real reason Herakles

430

crushed Eurytus and his city Oechalia.
 It was Love, that god alone, who made him fight—
 not his bondage to Omphale in Lydia.
 It had nothing to do with Iphitus' death.
 Likhas has pushed the true story aside
 so he can tell you a much different one.

Now, when Herakles couldn't persuade
 her father to let him bed this young girl
 in secret, he blew up a minor insult 440
 as a pretext to make war on her country—
 then killed Eurytus and plundered his city.
 Please try to see that it's no accident
 he sends her to this house. She won't be a slave.
 That's not likely to happen, when his heart's
 burning for her.

I vowed, Queen, to tell you
 everything I've heard from that man.
 Many others heard him say it, along with me—
 Trakhinian men gathered in the market—
 who'll back me up and convict him. 450
 If what I say hurts, I'm sorry.
 But I've told you the straight truth.

DEIANEIRA

I'm in shock. What is happening to me?
 Who is this secret rival I give houseroom?
 I'm so stupid! She doesn't have a name,
 as Likhas swore to me? No name? A girl
 with such striking looks and royal bearing?

MESSENGER

She has a name. Her father is Eurytus
 and her name is Iole. If Likhas
 can't tell you her name or her family's, 460
 it must be—as he says—because he never asked.

LEADER

(to DEIANEIRA)

Treachery to those who trust you
 seems to me the worst kind of evil.

DEIANEIRA

What should I do, friends? That last piece
 of news leaves me dumbfounded.

LEADER

Bring Likhas back. Question him. Maybe he'll
 tell you the truth if you force him to talk.

DEIANEIRA

That's good advice. Exactly what I'll do.

MESSENGER

Should I stay? What would you like *me* to do?

DEIANEIRA

Wait here. Likhas is coming without my asking. 470

Enter LIKHAS.

LIKHAS

Lady, have you a message for Herakles?

If you do, instruct me. As you see, I'm off.

DEIANEIRA

You're leaving in a big hurry—for someone who took so long getting here—and before we've had time to finish our conversation.

LIKHAS

If there's something you want to ask, I'll oblige.

DEIANEIRA

Can I trust you to tell me the truth?

LIKHAS

You can—if I know it. Zeus will know if I lie.

DEIANEIRA

Who is that woman you've brought here?

LIKHAS

She's from Euboea. From what clan I can't say.

480

MESSENGER

You! Look at me. Who are you talking to?

LIKHAS

Who are *you*? Why ask *me* such a question?

MESSENGER

You understand me well enough to answer.

LIKHAS

I'm talking to Queen Deianeira—unless I'm blind. Herakles' wife, Oeneus' daughter. My Queen.

MESSENGER

Your Queen. That's what I hoped you'd say. So what does that make you?

LIKHAS

Her loyal servant.

MESSENGER

Right. What's the penalty for disloyalty?

LIKHAS

Disloyal how? What word game are you playing?

490

MESSENGER

If someone's playing games with words, you are.

LIKHAS

I'm a fool to put up with this. I'm gone.

MESSENGER

No! Not till you answer one brief question.

LIKHAS

Ask it. You don't seem bashful in the least.

MESSENGER

That girl slave you brought here—you know the one?

LIKHAS

I know the one. What about her?

MESSENGER

Didn't you tell us that this captive—the one
your eyes keep trying to avoid—
is Iole, Eurytus' daughter?

LIKHAS

Said that to whom? Where's the witness
who swears to have heard me say that?

500

MESSENGER

You said it to the whole town in the main square—
many Trakhinians heard you say it.

LIKHAS

Right. It's something I'd heard secondhand.
That's not the same as swearing it was true.

MESSENGER

Secondhand, eh? You swore on oath
you brought this girl to be Herakles' wife!

LIKHAS

Me? Bringing him a wife? For god's sake, Queen,
please tell me who this stranger is?

MESSENGER

I'm the man who heard you say that a city
was leveled out of lust for her—no Lydian woman
destroyed it—it was desire for that girl.

510

LIKHAS

Lady, get rid of him. It's undignified
for a sane person to conduct a ludicrous
quarrel with a man sick in the mind.

DEIANEIRA

By Zeus!—whose lightning scorches mountain glens,
don't cheat me of the truth! Tell it to me!

You won't find me a spiteful woman, or
one ignorant of what people are like.

I know the things that pleasure men can change.

520

Someone who picks a fight and trades blows
with Eros the love god is so foolish.

Eros rules even the gods, and he rules me
just as he rules any woman like me.

I would be mad if I blamed my husband
because he's lovesick—mad to blame that girl,
who has done nothing shameful, nor harmed me.

I can't think like that.

But if you were taught

to lie by him, you learned a vulgar lesson.
 If you're a self-taught liar, you'll always seem
 treacherous when you're trying to be kind.
 Tell me the truth, all of it. To be called a liar
 is the worst reproach a free man can suffer.
 Don't think I won't find it all out. Many men
 heard you, and they'll tell me what you said.

530

DEIANEIRA pauses. LIKHAS says nothing.

You're worried you'll hurt me? You fear the wrong thing.
 Not knowing the truth—that could damage me. What's
 so terrible about finding out? Herakles
 has been to bed with so many women—
 more than any man living. Never once
 has one of these women—ever—heard me speak
 a harsh or jealous word. Nor will
she, even if she returns all
 the affection he feels for her.
 I pitied her as soon as I saw her
 because her beauty has ruined her life.
 And though she never willed it, her beauty
 has looted and enslaved her fatherland.
 But wind and water blow all this away.
 Deceive somebody else. Tell me the truth.

540

550

LEADER

(to LIKHAS)

You're hearing good advice. Follow it. You'll
 never have cause to complain of this woman.

And all of us will be grateful to you.

LIKHAS

So be it, Queen. Men are weak. You grasp that.
 I see that you think like a sane woman.
 I'll tell it to you plainly, hiding nothing.
 That fellow has it right. The girl touched off
 lust in Herakles that devoured his soul.
 For her sake he drove his spear straight through
 the desolate heart of her city, Oechalia.
 And to be fair to the man, he never asked me
 to hide these facts. I was afraid to wound you,
 so the fault's mine—if it's truly a fault.
 Now that you know the whole story—
 for your own good as well as his—keep your promise
 to treat her with kindness. For the man who has
 proven himself stronger in every battle
 has been beaten by his love for this girl.

560

DEIANEIRA

I haven't changed my mind. I'll keep my word.
 Trust me, it would only make my sickness
 worse—to wage hopeless war against the gods.
 But we should both go inside. I'll give you
 messages to take back, and fitting gifts.
 The gifts we've just received should be repaid.
 I don't want you to leave empty-handed,
 since you came here with such precious goods.

570

DEIANEIRA, LIKHAS, and the MESSENGER enter the house.

CHORUS

Huge are the victories
 the power of the love
 goddess always wins!
 I won't pause to tell 580
 how she tamed gods,
 beguiling Hades,
 lord of the dark,
 Zeus, son of Kronos,
 and Poseidon
 the earthshaker—
 but when our lady's hand
 was there for the winning,
 who were the rivals
 that met in battle, 590
 trading blows in the dust?

One was a big Rivergod,
 who took the monstrous
 body of a spike-horned
 four-legged bull—he
 was Achelous, from Oeneus.
 His rival from Thebes,
 city Bakkhos adores,
 came armed with a double
 torsioned bow, spears, 600
 and one huge club—he
 was Herakles, son of Zeus.
 Bride-hungry males,

they battered each other.
 Aphrodite, the goddess
 who brings joy to our beds,
 was there as the sole referee.

Then came the thud
 of pounding fists,
 a bow twanging, 610
 horn cracking bone!
 Legs grappled torsos,
 a forehead struck
 murderous blows—
 harsh groans of pain
 bellowed from both,

while she in her fragile
 beauty sat in plain view
 on a hillside nearby,
 soon to be claimed 620
 by her husband-to-be.

So the battle roared on,
 the bride, the dazzling prize,
 helpless in her anguish,
 till suddenly she's pulled
 like a calf from its mother.

Enter DEIANEIRA.

DEIANEIRA

My friends, while our guest inside says good-bye
to the captives, I've stepped out here unseen
to tell you what my hands have done, and ask
your sympathy for my troubles.

A virgin, 630

though I think she's been bedded by now,
has invaded my house like cargo stowed
on a ship—merchandise sure to drive
my own peace of mind on the rocks.
Now we both will sleep under one blanket
and share his lovemaking. That's my reward
from Herakles—the man I said was true
and loyal—my repayment for guarding
his home through all these grinding months.
Though I can't feel anger toward a man
so stricken by this sickness. 640

But what woman

could live with *her*, inside the same marriage!
I see her youth bloom, while mine fades.
Men's eyes adore fresh young blossoms.
But they shun flowers turning dry.
That's my fear—that Herakles, whom I call
my husband, is now this young woman's *man*.

I've said anger is ugly in a woman of sense,
and I'll tell you, friends, my hope for its cure.
Years ago, a strange beast gave me something
that I've kept in a bronze urn. I got this gift,
when I was a girl, from that hairy-chested 650

creature Nessus—it was his own blood
that I scraped from the wound that killed him.
He was a centaur who took people over
the river Evenus, not rowing or sailing,
but swimming them across in his arms.
He carried me on his back when Father
sent me to marry Herakles. Out in midstream
he fondled me with his lewd hands. I yelled. 660
Herakles looked back and saw us. He whistled
an arrow through Nessus' chest into his lungs.
As Nessus' life dimmed, the centaur whispered,

"You listen to me, Oeneus' daughter!
Take at least this much profit from being
the last passenger I will ever carry.
If you scrape up some blood from my wound,
just where the arrow soaked in black bile hit—
bile leeches from the Hydra of Lerna—
you'll have something to charm Herakles' soul. 670
It will keep him from seeing and loving
any other woman but you."

I remembered

this charm, my friends, because after he died,
I hid it in my house—and now I've dampened
this robe with that gore, doing exactly
what the centaur told me to do. It's ready.

May I never know anything
about rash acts of malice. Keep me
from ever learning what they are.

I detest women guilty of such things. 680
 But if I can defeat that girl by using
 a love-spell that works only on Herakles,
 I have the means. Unless you think
 I'm being reckless. If so, I'll stop now.

LEADER

Don't! If you think this drug might work,
 there is surely no harm in using it.

DEIANEIRA

I'm at least this much confident: there's a good
 chance it will work, though it's untested.

LEADER

You test something in action. To test it
 in your mind does no good at all. 690

DEIANEIRA

We won't have to wait long. I see him
 coming out, eager to leave. You won't give
 me away, will you? What's done out of sight,
 even if it's shameful, won't expose me to shame.

Enter LIKHAS from the house.

LIKHAS

Your orders, lady? Is there more I can do,
 daughter of Oeneus? I should be on my way.

DEIANEIRA

I was getting this ready, Likhas,
 while you said good-bye to the slaves.

DEIANEIRA (or a servant who has carried it onstage) hands LIKHAS a wooden box holding the robe.

Take this flowing handmade robe—my own
 design—as a gift to my absent master. 700
 When you hand it to him, make certain he,
 nobody else, is the first to wear it. Be sure
 to keep it in a dark place—no sunlight—
 don't take it near grounds that are sacred,
 or near an altar fire. Wait till he's standing
 in plain sight before everyone. Give it to him
 on a day he's killing bulls for the gods.

I made this vow: that on the day Herakles
 came safely home, I'd wrap him in this robe,
 and show him to the gods, radiant 710
 at their altar in his bright new clothes.

So he'll have proof it's from me, take this ring.
 He'll know my sign. It's carved into the seal.
 It's time you left. Remember the first rule
 of messengers—they shouldn't interfere.
 Do this well, and you'll earn thanks from us both.

LIKHAS

Well, if I'm any good at Hermes' craft
there's no chance I'll ever fail you.
Count on my handing him this box intact,
adding only your words, to prove it's yours.

720

DEIANEIRA

You should be on your way, now that you've
found out how things stand in this house.

LIKHAS

I'll report all is going well here.

DEIANEIRA

You saw me greet the young stranger.
Will you tell him how I welcomed her?

LIKHAS

It was a gracious welcome. I was amazed.

DEIANEIRA

There's nothing more, then, for you to tell him,
is there? Don't tell him how much I want him
until we know whether he still wants me.

DEIANEIRA reenters the house as CHORUS sings.

CHORUS

All of you living
near the hot springs

730

between harbor and high rock
and on the heights of Oita—
all of you living
by the waters
of the landlocked
Malian Sea,
on shores sacred
to the Virgin Goddess
armed with arrows of gold—
shores where the Greeks met
in their storied conclave
at the grand shrine of Pylos.

740

Soon the vibrant-voiced
flute rises in your midst,
not resonant with grief,
but musical as a lyre
delighting the gods.
The son born to Zeus
and Alkmene
hurries to his home,
bearing all that his courage won.

750

We had lost Herakles
from our city
while he wandered the seas—
we heard nothing for twelve months
while the wife he treasures
waited in tears.
Now the Wargod,

enraged at last, 760
 chases away
 her days of hardship.

Let Herakles come home!
 Let him come home!
 Let there be no missed beat
 in the pulse of the oars
 of the ship sailing here
 till it lands in our port,
 leaving astern the island
 where he built altars for the gods. 770

Let him come home fired by love,
 melting with lust, feeling
 the power which burns in the robe,
 put there by the Goddess
 of Yes—charming Persuasion.

DEIANEIRA returns from the house.

DEIANEIRA

Women, I'm scared. I think I've done
 something extremely dangerous.

LEADER

Deianeira! Child of Oeneus! What's happened?

DEIANEIRA

I'm not sure. But I'm terrified
 I'll be blamed for a savage crime— 780
 while trying to do something lovely.

LEADER

It's not your gift to Herakles, is it?

DEIANEIRA

It is. Never act on impulse
 if you can't see clearly what will happen!

LEADER

What makes you so upset? Please tell us.

DEIANEIRA

Something weird has just happened, sisters,
 so strange you could never imagine it.
 A ball of white fleece, with which I was rubbing
 chrisms into the ceremonial robe,
 has disappeared. The wool ate itself up— 790
 nothing in my house consumed it—it just
 crumbled away to nothing on a stone slab.
 But so you'll understand exactly
 how it happened, I'll tell you step by step.

I followed the instructions given me
 by the centaur, neglecting no detail.
 What he told me writhing in pain, the arrow

still in his chest, I remember like words
 hammered forever on a bronze tablet.
 I did what he told me to do—no more:
 keep the drug far from fire, hide it deep
 in the house where the hot sun can't touch it—
 keep it fresh till the moment it's smeared on.
 That's what I did! Now, when the time came
 to go into action, I rubbed it in secret
 there in my dark house, using some wool tufts
 that I pulled from one of our own sheep.
 Then I folded the robe up and packed it
 safely in a box. Sunlight never touched it.

800

But as I went back in, I saw something
 strange beyond words—and human comprehension.
 I happened to toss the damp tuft of wool
 I was using into a patch of bright sunlight.
 As it warmed up, it shriveled, dissolving
 to powder fast as trees turn to sawdust
 when men cut them down. So it lay there, right
 where it fell. From the ground white gobs
 foamed up, like the rich juice of Bakkhos' blue-
 green grapes, poured—still fermenting—on the earth.

810

I'm stunned. I don't know what I should do now.
 All I know is . . . I've done something awful.

820

Why should that dying monster have had
 any possible motive for doing me

a kindness? I'm the one who got him killed!
 No, he used *me* to kill the man who shot him.
 I see this clearly, now that it's too late.
 It's *me*, nobody else—unless I've lost
 my mind—who's going to kill Herakles!
 I know the arrow that hit Nessus maimed
 even Chiron, who was a god—so its
 poison kills every creature it touches.
 The same black venom oozed from Nessus' wound.
 Won't it kill my lord too? I know it will.
 And if he dies, so will I, both of us
 swept to our doom. What woman who values
 her goodness could survive such disgrace?

830

LEADER

You're right to be alarmed by what's happened.
 But don't assume the worst until it strikes.

DEIANEIRA

A person who's made a fatal mistake
 has no use for that kind of wishful thinking.

840

LEADER

Men are forgiving when it's not your fault!
 Their anger softens. So it will toward you.

DEIANEIRA

You can say that because it's not your life!
 What if this menace pounded on your door?

LEADER

Better hold your tongue. Your son will hear you.
He's home from trying to find his father.

Enter HYLLOS.

HYLLOS

Mother! I wish any one of three things
had happened: that I'd found you dead;
or if you were living, you'd be somebody
else's mother. Or you'd somehow be changed, 850
so a kinder spirit lived in your body.

DEIANEIRA

Son, what did I do to make you hate me?

HYLLOS

Today you murdered your husband. My father!

DEIANEIRA

I'm stunned by what comes out of your mouth, child.

HYLLOS

The words I've spoken will be proven true.
Who can undo what's already been done?

DEIANEIRA

What did you say? On whose authority
do you charge me with this horrendous crime?

HYLLOS

I didn't hear it from anybody.
I've seen Father dying with my own eyes. 860

DEIANEIRA

Where did you find him? Were you with him?

HYLLOS

You listen while I tell you everything.
After he looted the famous city
of Eurytus, Herakles headed home,
loaded down with the spoils of victory.
At Cape Ceneae, a headland off Euboea
where the sea crashes in, he dedicated altars
and a grove of trees to his father, Zeus.
When I saw him, I felt such love!

He'd just begun a great solemn sacrifice, 870
when his own herald, Likhas, arrived from home,
bringing your gift, the lethal robe, which he
put on, just as you planned he would. Then he
began slaughtering bulls, twelve flawless bulls,
the first he'd looted, but there must have been
a hundred animals herded toward the knife.

There he was, doomed already, serenely
praying, thrilled with his gorgeous attire.
But just as the blood-drenched fire blazed up
through the bulls and the resin-soaked pine logs, 880

sweat broke out on his body! The robe clung
to his ribs as if a craftsman glued it there.
Pain tore at his bones—and then the venom
sank its fangs into him, gorging on his flesh.

He yelled for doomed Likhas, who was in no
way guilty, demanding what treachery
inspired him to bring that robe. But Likhas,
totally ignorant, said he had the gift
from no one but you, that he delivered it
just as you sent it. Hearing that, his master—
a slashing pain clawing at his lungs—caught
Likhas by his ankle joint and launched him
at the sea-pounded rocks below. His brains
oozed white through his hair where the skull
broke open, then blood darkened it.

890

The people

cried out in awestruck grief, seeing one man
gone mad, another dead—but no one dared
go near him. Pain wrestled him down, then forced him
to leap up, shrieking wild sounds that echoed
off the headlands of Locris and the capes of Euboea.

900

When he was worn out from throwing himself
so many times screaming on the ground,
cursing and cursing his catastrophic
marriage to you, miserable woman,
and his alliance with your father, Oeneus—
yelled that it ruined his life—at that instant,
half-hidden in swirling altar smoke, he looked up,

his fierce eyes rolling, and saw me weeping
in the crowd. "Come here, Son," he called to me.
"Don't turn your back on me now—even
if you must share the death I am dying.
Lift me up, take me somewhere men can't watch.
If you can pity me at all, take me away
so I'll die anywhere but in this place."

910

We did as he asked, carried him aboard,
and landed him—it wasn't easy—with him
suffering and groaning. You'll see him soon now,
still breathing, or just dead.

Those, Mother, are
the plot and the acts of which you're guilty.
May Vengeance and the Furies destroy you.
And if they do crush you, I will rejoice.
And to exult is just. You've made it
just, killing the best man who ever lived.
You'll never see a man like him, ever.

920

DEIANEIRA turns and walks toward the house without a word.

LEADER

Why are you walking quietly away? Don't
you see? Your silence proves him right!

HYLLOS

Let her go.
Let a fair wind blow her away.
Why call her "Mother"

if there's no mother
 left in the woman? Let her go— 930
 good-bye and good luck to her.
 Let the same joy
 she gave Father
 seize her.

HYLLOS enters the house.

CHORUS

O sisters—see how suddenly
 the sacred promise of the oracle,
 spoken so long ago, strikes home.
 It promised us the twelfth year
 would end the long harsh work 940
 of Herakles, a true son of Zeus.
 At last the oracle comes true.
 For how can a dead man work,
 once he has gone to the grave?

If death darkens his face
 as the centaur's poison
 pierces his sides, poison fathered
 by Death and nourished
 by the jewel-skinned
 serpent, how can he live
 to see tomorrow's sun? 950
 Locked in the Hydra's
 writhing grip, the black-

haired centaur's
 treacherous words
 erupt at last—lashing Herakles
 with burning, surging pain.

Our Queen knew nothing of this,
 but a marriage loomed
 that threatened her home.
 She saw it coming. 960
 Her hand seized the cure.
 But the virulent hatred
 of a strange beast—spoken at their one
 fatal encounter—now brings tears
 pouring from her eyes.
 And doom comes on,
 doom comes on, making
 ever more clear this huge
 calamity caused by guile.

Our tears burn as this plague 970
 invades him, a crueler blow
 than any his enemies
 ever brought down
 on this glorious hero
 Herakles.

O dark
 steel-tipped spear, keen
 for battle, did you
 capture that bride

from the heights
of Oechalia? 980

No! The love goddess,
Aphrodite, without
saying a word,
made it happen.

SERVANT
(*offstage*)
No! No!

SEMI-CHORUS 1
Do I imagine it?
Or is it the cry
of somebody grieving?

SEMI-CHORUS 2
No vague noise—
it's anguish inside. 990
More trouble
for this house.

LEADER
See how slowly, her face dark,
an old woman comes toward us,
bringing us news.

Enter SERVANT from the house.

SERVANT
Daughters, we are still harvesting evil
from the gift that she sent to Herakles.

LEADER
Old woman, do you bring worse news?

SERVANT
Deianeira has left on her last journey.
Gone without taking one step. 1000

LEADER
You mean death, don't you?

SERVANT
You heard me say it.

LEADER
Dead? That poor woman?

SERVANT
You've heard it twice.

LEADER
Wretched woman! How did she die?

SERVANT
The act itself was ruthless.

LEADER

Tell us what happened!

SERVANT

She stabbed herself.

LEADER

What rash fury,
what sick frenzy, made her do it? *How*
did she manage to make her death
follow his—and do it herself?

SERVANT

One thrust of a steel blade was enough.

LEADER

Then you saw *her* . . . kill *herself*? Poor woman! 1010

SERVANT

I saw it. I was there.

LEADER

What happened! How did it happen? Say it!

SERVANT

Her hand did what her mind chose.

LEADER

What are you saying?

SERVANT

The simple truth.

LEADER

The first-born child
of that new bride
is an avenging Fury—
scourging this house!

SERVANT

Now you see it. If you had seen the act itself,
you would have pitied her even more. 1020

LEADER

(pausing a beat)

How could a *woman* dare . . . do such a thing?
With her own hand?

SERVANT

Yes. It stunned me.
You must know what she did.
So you can tell the others.

When she came in alone,
and saw her son preparing a stretcher
in the courtyard—so he could go meet
his father—she hid, hoping no one could find her,
collapsing on the sacred altars, screaming
they'd be abandoned. When she touched
ordinary things that had been part of her life,

she wept. Aimlessly roaming, room to room,
 she saw the faces of servants she cherished.
 This brought on more tears, more grief
 at her own and her household's destruction.
 Strangers, she said, would soon take over
 her house. After she'd stopped all that,
 I saw her burst into Herakles' bedroom.
 Through an open doorway I watched.
 She spread blankets on her lord's bed,
 jumped onto it, huddled there, tears
 welling from her eyes, and cried out:
 "Our room! Bed where we loved! Good-bye
 forever! Since you will never again
 feel me lie down." That's all she said.

1030

She ripped her robe open, viciously, just
 where a gold brooch was pinned over her breasts,
 leaving her left arm and whole ribcage naked.
 I ran—fast as I could—to find her son
 and warn him what she meant to do. Before we
 got back, she'd driven a sword through her heart.

1040

When he saw her, her son roared, because
 he knew, *he knew*, that his own rage
 had made her do it. He'd found out
 too late from the servants that she hadn't
 known what she was doing when she
 followed the centaur's instructions.
 Her young son, now so miserable,

1050

mourned her passionately. Kneeling at her side,
 he kissed and kissed her lips, then stretched out
 sobbing on the ground next to her bed,
 confessing he was wrong to attack her,
 weeping that he'd been orphaned for life,
 his mother and his father, both of them, dead.
 All this has just happened. He is rash
 who makes plans for tomorrow, makes any
 plans at all—tomorrow doesn't exist
 until we have survived today.

1060

LEADER

Who should I mourn first?
 Whose death brings more grief?
 I don't know.

CHORUS

There is one sorrow in this house,
 we wait for another to arrive—
 anxiety and grief are blood brothers.

1070

LEADER

May a blast of wind
 blow through our house
 to drive me out of this land,
 so I won't die of terror
 when I see him, the once
 great son of Zeus.

CHORUS

He's coming home, they tell us,
a fire in his bones nothing can cure,
an unspeakable miracle of pain. 1080

LEADER

He isn't far away,
he's near, the man I grieve
in my ear-piercing
nightingale's voice.
Strangers are bearing him here,
but how do they carry him?
They seem to suffer his pain,
as they would for a friend.

*HERAKLES, unconscious, accompanied by the OLD MAN, is carried in by his
Soldiers on a stretcher.*

They walk on sad silent feet. 1090
Oh they bring him in silence!
Should I think he is dead?
Or think he is sleeping?

Enter HYLLOS from the house.

HYLLOS

Father, to see you like this
hurts me so much! Father,
what can I do?

OLD MAN

Don't talk. You'll only stir up spasms
that'll enrage him. He breathes, but he's still
unconscious. Keep your mouth shut.

HYLLOS

You're saying he's alive, old man? 1100

OLD MAN

Don't wake him! Don't start him
again on that crazed lashing out.

HYLLOS

I'm the one losing my mind
under the weight of his pain.

HERAKLES wakes.

HERAKLES

O Zeus, what country are we in?
Who are these men staring at me?
I'm worn out by this torture.
God it hurts! Like rats gorging on my flesh.

OLD MAN

You see, I was right. Better to keep still
than to chase sleep from his mind and eyes. 1110

HYLLOS

No! How can I stand here while he suffers?

HERAKLES

You—Cenaeon Rock on the coast
where I built my altars—is *this* how
you thank me for those sacrifices?
O Zeus! To what weakness that Rock
brought me! What wretched weakness.

I wish I'd never seen that place—
the place that made these eyes

boil over with madness,
madness nothing can soothe.

1120

Where is the spellbinder, the shrewd doctor,
who can cure this disease? Only Zeus.
Will the healer visit my bed?

I'd be amazed if he did.

Aiiie!

Let me be. So unlucky! Let me die.

(to HYLLOS and the OLD MAN)

Don't touch me.

Don't turn me over.

That will kill me! Kill me!

If any of my pains slept,
you woke them up.

It grinds me—

O this plague
keeps coming back!

1130

Where are you now, you Greeks,
my coldhearted countrymen?

I wore myself out clearing
Greece of marauders—

sea monsters, forest brutes.

Now, when I'm struck down,

where is the man willing

to save me with the mercy

of fire and steel? Come—cut

this head from my neck—

1140

one solid blow will do it.

O Zeus, I am miserable.

OLD MAN

Help me with him—you are his son!

He's more than I can handle. Your strength
can lift him much better than mine.

HYLLOS

I'm holding him. But I don't know how—

does anyone know how?—

to deaden his flesh to this torture.

This is what Zeus wants him to feel.

HERAKLES

Where are you, Son?

1150

Lift me up. Hold me here,

under here. Here it comes—

this beast none of us can beat down,

lunging at me, sinking its teeth.
 Goddess Athena, it hits me now, again.
 Honor your father, Son. Take a sword,
 no one will blame you, and drive it
 through me—below my collarbone.
 That will numb the screaming pain
 your heartless mother tears from me.

1160

I want to see her quieted just like that—
 screaming, the same way I'll go down.
 Sweet Hades, Zeus' brother,
 let me rest, take my life, take it
 with one swift stroke of peace.

LEADER

Friends, I hear our lord suffer and I shiver.
 Such a great man—and so much pain.

HERAKLES

I have done blazing work with my hands,
 I've shouldered ugly burdens on this back,
 but no task given me
 by Zeus' wife, or that hated
 Eurystheus, equaled
 what Oeneus' daughter—
 Deianeira! Deianeira!
 so lovely, so treacherous—
 forced on me: this net
 of the Furies

1170

woven around my death!
 It's plastered to my body, it
 eats through to my guts.

1180

It's always in me—sucking
 my lungs dry, leeching the fresh
 blood from my veins—so my whole
 body's wasted, crushed
 by these flesh-eating shackles.

No fighting soldier,
 no army of giants
 sprung from the earth,
 no shock of wild beasts,
 hurt me like this—not my own Greece,
 not barbarous shores, no land
 I came to save. No, a frail woman,
 born with no male strength,
 she beat me—only she.
 And didn't even need a sword.

1190

Son, prove you are my son in fact.
 Show me you're my son, and not hers.
 Bring her out here, the woman who bore you.
 Take her in your hands and put her in mine.
 When she suffers what she deserves,
 I'll know what causes you more pain—
 my own broken body, or hers.

1200

Go do it, Son. Don't cringe. Do it.
 Show me some pity. Others will say
 I have earned it. Look at me,
 weeping and bawling like a girl. No man living
 can say he saw me act like this, no!
 I went wherever fortune sent me, without
 a murmur. Now this hard man
 finds out he's a woman.

1210

Come here, stand by your father,
 look how Fate mauls me. I will
 open my robe. Look, all of you,
 on this sorry body. See how
 disgusting and shocking my life is!

HERAKLES rips open the blood-soaked robe that's bonded to his chest.

Aiiiii!
 That raw, flaming pain
 is back, roaring through me,
 forcing me to fight it again,
 so hungry for my flesh.

1220

Hades, welcome me!
 Zeus, drive your lightning
 into my brain.
 The beast is at me again,
 it's famished and it's raging.

My hands, O you hands,
 my shoulders, chest, arms—
 how frail you are!
 Once you did all that I asked.
 You are the lethal weapons
 that strangled the lion prowling
 the plains of Nemea—
 no man could get near
 that cattle-raiding cat—but you could!
 You tamed the flailing Hydra of Lerna
 and that monstrous herd, those centaurs—
 men fused to horses, a breed
 violent, lawless, brutally strong.
 You mastered the wild boar
 of Erymanthus, and the three-headed bitch
 Hades kept in his dark realm, a terror
 that cowed all comers,
 the whelp of Echidna the Dreaded.
 You whipped the serpent who stood guard
 over the golden apples at the ends of the earth.

1230

1240

These struggles—and a thousand more—
 have tested me. No man can boast
 he has beaten my strength.
 But now, with my bones
 unhinged and my flesh shredded,
 I lose to an invisible raider—
 I, son of a mother so noble,
 I, whose father they call Zeus,
 god of the star-filled sky.

1250

Be sure of this one thing—though I'm nothing,
though I can't walk a step—she, she who did this
will feel my stony hand, even now, even now.
Let her come here. She'll show the world
that in my death, as in my life, I punish evil.

LEADER

What a disaster. There's nothing
but mourning ahead for Greece
if she must lose this man.

1260

HYLLOS

Father, let me speak while you're quiet.
I know your pain's unbearable, but listen.
I ask for no more than you owe me.
Take my advice. Be calm. Cool your anger.
If you rage, you will never learn why
your hunger for vengeance is wrong.
Why your hatred has no cause.

HERAKLES

Say your piece, then be still. I'm in too
much pain to make sense of your riddles.

1270

HYLLOS

I want to tell you how my Mother is.
And that she never willed the wrong she did.

HERAKLES

You worthless son! You're brave to use
her name in my presence, the mother
who murdered—me—your father.

HYLLOS

There's something else about her you must know.

HERAKLES

Tell me her past crimes. Speak of them.

HYLLOS

Her acts today will speak to you.
When you've heard them, judge her.

HERAKLES

Go on.
But don't disgrace yourself or betray me.

1280

HYLLOS

She is dead. Killed just now.

HERAKLES

Who killed her? Incredible! You couldn't
have given me more hateful news.

HYLLOS

She killed herself. With her own hand. No one else's.

HERAKLES

(raising his right arm)

It should have been *this* hand. She deserved this hand!

HYLLOS

You wouldn't hate her—if you knew.

HERAKLES

Wouldn't hate her? If I knew what?

HYLLOS

Her good intentions hurt you—that's the truth.

HERAKLES

Her "good intention" to kill me?

HYLLOS

When she saw the woman who's in our house,
she used love medicine to keep you. It went wrong.

1290

HERAKLES

And who in Trakhis has a drug so potent?

HYLLOS

Years back, the centaur Nessus
gave it to her—told her this drug
would make your passion burn again.

HERAKLES

O what a miserable creature I am!

I'm finished. Finished! For me
there will be no more sunlight.

This is my ruin. I know where I am.

Your father's life is over, Son.

1300

Gather all of my children here.

Bring unlucky Alkmene too—her coupling
with Zeus, *my* father, came to nothing—
so all of you can learn, from my
dying mouth, what oracles I possess.

HYLLOS

Your mother is not here. She's at Tiryns
on the seacoast, where she's been living.

She's taken some of your children, to raise
them there. Your other children are in Thebes.

Those of us left—we'll do what you ask.

1310

Tell me your wishes. I'll carry them out.

HERAKLES

Listen to my orders. Here is your chance
to show what you're made of.

To prove you're my son.

I learned long ago from my father

I would be killed by no creature who breathes—
but only by a dead beast from Hades. So
that centaur killed me—the dead kill the living—
just as the voice of Zeus had sworn to me.

Now hear how one old prophecy 1320
 makes sense of an even older one,
 the one I brought home from the grove
 of the Selloi—mountain people who still
 sleep on the ground—a prophecy
 made by an oak tree of my father's,
 an oak which spoke every language.
 This oak whispered to me
 that at the very hour
 through which we now live,
 I would be set free at last 1330
 from my life of hard labor.
 I thought that meant
 good times would come,
 but those words meant
 no more than this:
 that I would die now.
 The dead do no work.

Son, since those old words are coming true,
 you must help me. Don't obstruct me, don't
 force me to use harsh words. Help me willingly— 1340
 because you've learned the best law there is:
 fathers must always be obeyed.

HYLLOS

Father, I am alarmed at where your talk
 is taking us, but I'll do all you ask.

HERAKLES

First, put your right hand in mine.

HYLLOS

Why are you forcing me to pledge this way?

HERAKLES

Give me your hand—now! Don't refuse me.

HYLLOS

(*reaching out to his father*)

Here, take my hand. I can't refuse you.

HERAKLES

Swear by the head of Zeus, my father. Swear.

HYLLOS

Swear to do what? What am I promising to do? 1350

HERAKLES

You're promising *me* to do what I ask.

HYLLOS

I promise you. I swear this before Zeus.

HERAKLES

Ask Zeus to crush you if you break your word.

HYLLOS

I so pray. Zeus won't punish me. I'll keep my word.

HERAKLES

You know Mount Oita, whose peak is sacred to Zeus?

HYLLOS

Yes. I've gone there often to sacrifice.

HERAKLES

Carry me there, with your own hands,

helped by what friends you need.

Cut down a great oak, cut wild olive limbs.

Bed my body down on these branches.

Then set them on fire with a flaming pine torch.

1360

No tears. Don't sing hymns of mourning.

No, do not weep. Do it this way

because you are my son.

If you fail, I'll wait in Hades

to curse you through eternity.

HYLLOS

Father! What are you asking? You force me to do this?

HERAKLES

I ask you to do what must be done. If you can't

do it—go be some other man's son. You're not mine.

HYLLOS

Father, why this? You're asking me

to be your killer, to curse myself with your blood.

1370

HERAKLES

I don't ask that. I ask you to heal me,
to be the one healer who can cure my pain.

HYLLOS

How does setting fire to your body cure it?

HERAKLES

If burning me appalls you, do the rest.

HYLLOS

I'll take you there—I can at least do that.

HERAKLES

And will you build the pyre just as I asked?

HYLLOS

I will, but not with my own hands. Others will build it.

I'll do everything else. You can trust me.

HERAKLES

That will be more than enough.

You do a great thing for me, Son.

But there's one small thing more I ask.

1380

HYLLOS

Ask it. I'll do it. Nothing is too great.

HERAKLES

Do you know the girl whose father was Eurytus?

HYLLOS

You mean Iole.

HERAKLES

You know her. This is what I charge you
to do, my son. When I'm dead, if you would
honor the oath you swore to Zeus,
make her your wife. Do not disobey me.
No other man must marry this woman
who shared my bed. No one but you, Son.
Marry her. Agree to it. You obeyed me
on the great things. If you fight me
on this minor one, you will lose
all the respect you have earned.

1390

HYLLOS

How can I rage at a sick man? But who
could stand what this sickness does to his mind?

HERAKLES

You refuse to do what I ask.

HYLLOS

She caused my mother's death and your disease.
How could any man choose her—
unless the Furies left him insane?

1400

She's my worst enemy.

How could I live with her?

Better to die.

HERAKLES

I'm dying, and he scorns my prayer.

You can be sure, my son, that the gods' curse
will hound your defiance of my wishes.

HYLLOS

No, you are going to show us
how cursed you already are.

HERAKLES

You! You are waking up my rage!

1410

HYLLOS

There's nothing I can do. There's no way out.

HERAKLES

Because you've chosen not to hear your father.

HYLLOS

Should I listen, and learn blasphemy from you?

HERAKLES

It isn't blasphemy for a son
to make his dying father glad.

HYLLOS

Do you command me as your son?
Do you make it my duty to you?

HERAKLES

Son, I command you. May the gods judge me.

HYLLOS

Then I'll do it. Can the gods condemn me
if I do this out of loyalty to my father?
The gods know—it is you who have willed this.

1420

HERAKLES

In the end, Son, you do what's right.
Now make good on your words.
Put me on the pyre before the pain comes
searing back. Lift me up. The only cure
for Herakles' pain is Herakles' death.

HYLLOS

You'll have your wish.
Nothing stands in its way.
Your will prevails.

HERAKLES

Now you, my own hard-bitten soul—
before my sickness attacks again—
clamp my mouth shut like a steel bit

1430

so not one scream escapes your stony grip.
Do this harsh work as though it gives you joy.

*The Soldiers lift the stretcher and carry it toward the mountain with the
CHORUS and then HYLLOS following in a cortege.*

HYLLOS

Lift him up, friends. Forgive me
for what I am about to do.
But look at the cruelty of what
the ruthless gods have done
to us—the gods whom we call
our fathers, whose children we are—
and yet how coolly they watch us suffer.
No one foresees the future,
but our present is awash with grief
that shames even the gods, and pain
beyond anything we can know
strikes this man who now meets his doom.
Women, don't cower in the house.
Come with us. You've just seen death
and devastating calamity, but
you've seen nothing that is not Zeus.

1440

1450

*HYLLOS and the Soldiers lift and carry the hero offstage toward the
mountain.*