

The Women of Trachis

Sophocles



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Argument

THE CENTAUR NESSUS, in dying by the arrow of Heracles, which had been dipped in the venom of the Hydra, persuaded the bride Deanira, whose beauty was the cause of his death, to keep some of the blood from the wound as a love-charm for her husband. Many years afterwards, when Heracles was returning from his last exploit of sacking Oechalia, in Euboea, he sent before him, by his herald Lichas, Iole, the king's daughter, whom he had espoused. Deanira, when she had discovered this, commissioned Lichas when he returned to present his master with a robe, which she had anointed with the charm, — hoping by this means to regain her lord's affection. But the poison of the Hydra did its work, and Heracles died in agony, Deanira having already killed herself on ascertaining what she had done. The action takes place in Trachis, near the Mahae Gulf, where Heracles and Deanira, by permission of Ceyx, the king of the country, have been living in exile. At the close of the drama, Heracles, while yet alive, is carried towards his pyre on Mount Oeta.

DĒANIRA. Men say,— 'twas old experience gave the word,
— 'No lot of mortal, ere he die, can once
Be known for good or evil.' But I know,
Before I come to the dark dwelling-place,
Mine is a lot, adverse and hard and sore.
Who yet at Pleuron, in my father's home,
Of all Aetolian women had most cause
To fear my bridal. For a river-god,
Swift Achelôüs, was my suitor there
And sought me from my father in three forms;
Now in his own bull-likeness, now a serpent
Of coiling sheen, and now with manlike build
But bovine front, while from the shadowy beard
Sprang fountain-waters in perpetual spray.
Looking for such a husband, I, poor girl!
Still prayed that Death might find me, ere I knew

That nuptial. — Later, to my glad relief,
Zeus' and Alcmena's glorious offspring came,
And closed with him in conflict, and released
My heart from torment. How the fight was won
I could not tell. If any were who saw
Unshaken of dread foreboding, such may speak.
But I sate quailing with an anguished fear,
Lest beauty might procure me nought but pain,
Till He that rules the issue of all strife,
Gave fortunate end — if fortunate! For since,
Assigned by that day's conquest, I have known
The couch of Heracles, my life is spent
In one continual terror for his fate.
Night brings him, and, ere morning, some fresh toil
Drives him afar. And I have borne him seed;
Which he, like some strange husbandman that farms
A distant field, finds but at sowing time
And once in harvest. Such a weary life
Still tossed him to and fro, — no sooner home
But forth again, serving I know not whom.
And when his glorious head had risen beyond
These labours, came the strongest of my fear.
For since he quelled the might of Iphitus,
We here in Trachis dwell, far from our home,
Dependent on a stranger, but where he
Is gone, none knoweth. Only this I know,
His going pierced my heart with pangs for him,
And now I am all but sure he bears some woe.
These fifteen months he hath sent me not one word.
And I have cause for fear. Ere he set forth
He left a scroll with me, whose dark intent
I oft pray Heaven may bring no sorrow down.

ATTENDANT: Queen Dêanira, many a time ere now
Have I beheld thee with all tearful moan

Bewailing the departure of thy lord.
But, if it be permitted that a slave
Should tender counsel to the free, my voice
May venture this: — Of thy strong band of sons
Why is not one commissioned to explore
For Heracles? and why not Hyllus first,
Whom most it would beseem to show regard
For tidings of his father's happiness?
Ah! here I see him bounding home, with feet
Apt for employment! If you count me wise,
He and my words attend upon your will.

ATTENDANT: Enter HYLLUS.

ATTENDANT: DÊ. Dear child, dear boy! even from the lowliest head
Wise counsel may come forth. This woman here,
Though a bond-maiden, hath a free-born tongue.

HYL: What word is spoken, mother? May I know?

HYL: DÊ. That, with thy father lost to us so long,
'Tis shame thou dost not learn his dwelling-place.

HYL: Yea, I have learnt, if one may trust report.
DÊ. Where art thou told his seat is fixed, my son?

HYL: HYL. 'Tis said that through the length of this past year
He wrought as bondman to a Lydian girl.

HYL: DÊ. Hath he borne that? Then nothing can be strange!
Well, that is over, I am told. He is free.
DÊ. Where is he rumoured, then, alive or dead?

HYL: In rich Euboea, besieging, as they tell,
The town of Eurytus, or offering siege.

HYL: DÊ. Child, hast thou heard what holy oracles
He left with me, touching that very land?

HYL: What were they, mother, for I never knew?

HYL: DÊ. That either he must end his being there,
Or, this one feat performed, his following time
Should grace his life with fair prosperity.
Wilt thou not then, my child, when he is held
In such a crisis of uncertain peril,
Run to his aid? — since we must perish with him,
Or owe our lasting safety to his life.

HYL: I will go, mother. Had I heard this voice
Of prophecy, long since I had been there.
Fear is unwonted for our father's lot.
But now I know, my strength shall all be spent
To learn the course of these affairs in full.

HYL: DÊ. Go then, my son. Though late, to learn and do
What wisdom bids, hath certainty of gain.
[Exit HYLLUS. DÊANIRA withdraws]

HYL: CHORUS (entering and turning towards the East).

HYL: Born of the starry night in her undoing, I 1
Lulled in her bosom at thy parting glow,
O Sun! I bid thee show,
What journey is Alcmena's child pursuing?
What region holds him now,
'Mong winding channels of the deep,
Or Asian plains, or rugged Western steep?
Declare it, thou
Peerless in vision of thy flashing ray
That lightens on the world with each new day.

HYL: Sad Dêanira, bride of battle-wooing, I 2 [104-143]
Ne'er lets her tearful eyelids close in rest,
But in love-longing breast,
Like some lorn bird its desolation rueing,
Of her great husband's way
Still mindful, worn with harrowing fear
Lest some new danger for him should be near,
By night and day

Pines on her widowed couch of ceaseless thought,
With dread of evil destiny distraught:[Enter DÊANIRA.

HYL: For many as are billows of the SouthII 1
Blowing unweariedly, or Northern gale,
One going and another coming on
Incessantly, baffling the gazer's eye,
Such Cretan ocean of unending toil
Cradles our Cadmus-born, and swells his fame.
But still some power doth his foot recall
From stumbling down to Hades' darkling hall.

HYL: Wherefore, in censure of thy mood, I bringII 2
Glad, though opposing, counsel. Let not hope
Grow weary. Never hath a painless life
Been cast on mortals by the power supreme
Of the All-disposer, Cronos' son. But joy
And sorrow visit in perpetual round
All mortals, even as circleth still on high
The constellation of the Northern sky.

HYL: What lasteth in the world? Not starry night,III
Nor wealth, nor tribulation; but is gone
All suddenly, while to another soul
The joy or the privation passeth on.
These hopes I bid thee also, O my Queen!
Hold fast continually, for who hath seen
Zeus so forgetful of his own?
How can his providence forsake his son?

HYL: DÊ. I see you have been told of my distress,
And that hath brought you. But my inward woe,
Be it evermore unknown to you, as now!
[144-179] Such the fair garden of untrammelled ease
Where the young life grows safely. No fierce heat,
No rain, no wind disturbs it, but unharmed
It rises amid airs of peace and joy,

Till maiden turn to matron, and the night
Inherit her dark share of anxious thought,
Haunted with fears for husband or for child.
Then, imaged through her own calamity,
Some one may guess the burden of my life.
Full many have been the sorrows I have wept,
But one above the rest I tell to-day.
When my great husband parted last from home,
He left within the house an ancient scroll
Inscribed with characters of mystic note,
Which Heracles had never heretofore,
In former labours, cared to let me see, —
As bound for bright achievement, not for death.
But now, as though his life had end, he told
What marriage-portion I must keep, what shares
He left his sons out of their father's ground:
And set a time, when fifteen moons were spent,
Counted from his departure, that even then
Or he must die, or if that date were out
And he had run beyond it, he should live
Thenceforth a painless and untroubled life.
Such by Heaven's fiat was the promised end
Of Heracles' long labours, as he said;
So once the ancient oak-tree had proclaimed
In high Dodona through the sacred Doves.
Of which prediction on this present hour
In destined order of accomplishment
The veritable issue doth depend.
And I, dear friends, while taking rest, will oft
Start from sweet slumbers with a sudden fear,
Scared by the thought, my life may be bereft
Of the best husband in the world of men.

HYL: CH. Hush! For I see approaching one in haste,
Garlanded, as if laden with good news.

HYL: [180-212]

Enter Messenger.

MESSENGER: Queen Dêanira, mine shall be the tongue
To free thee first from fear. Alcmena's child
Is living, be assured, and triumphing,
And bringing to our Gods the fruits of war.

MESSENGER: DÊ. What mean'st thou, aged sir, by what thou sayest?

MESS: That soon thy husband, envied all around,
Will come, distinguished with victorious might.

MESS: DÊ. What citizen or stranger told thee this?

MESS: Your herald Lichas, where the oxen graze
The summer meadow, cries this to a crowd.
I, hearing, flew off hither, that being first
To bring thee word thereof, I might be sure
To win reward and gratitude from thee.

MESS: DÊ. And how is he not here, if all be well?

MESS: Crossed by no light impediment, my Queen.
For all the Maliac people, gathering round,
Throng him with question, that he cannot move.
But he must still the travail of each soul,
And none will be dismissed unsatisfied.
Such willing audience he unwillingly
Harangues, but soon himself will come in sight.

MESS: DÊ. O Zeus! who rulest Oeta's virgin wold,
At last, though late, thou hast vouchsafed us joy.
Lift up your voices, O my women! ye
Within the halls, and ye beyond the gate!
For now we reap the gladness of a ray,
That dawns unhopèd for in this rumour's sound.

CHORUS: With a shout by the hearth let the palace roof ring
From those that are dreaming of bridal, and ye,
Young men, let your voices in harmony sing
To the God of the quiver, the Lord of the free!

And the Paean withal from the maiden band
To Artemis, huntress of many a land,
Let it rise o'er the glad roof tree,
[213-243] To Phoebus' own sister, with fire in each hand,
And the Nymphs that her co-mates be!
My spirit soars. O sovereign of my soul!
I will accept the thrilling flute's control.[They dance
The ivy-crownèd thyrsus, see!
With Bacchic fire is kindling me,
And turns my emulous tread
Where'er the mazy dance may lead.
Euoi! Euoi!
O Paean! send us joy.
See, dearest Queen, behold!
Before thy gaze the event will now unfold.

CHORUS: DÊ. Think not mine eye hath kept such careless guard,
Dear maids, that I could miss this moving train.
Herald, I bid thee hail, although so late
Appearing, if thou bringest health with thee!

CHORUS: Enter LICHAS, with Captive Women.

LICHAS: A happy welcome on a happy way,
As prosperous our achievement. Meet it is
Good words should greet bright actions, mistress mine!

LICHAS: DÊ. Kind friend, first tell me what I first would know —
Shall I receive my Heracles alive?

LICH: I left him certainly alive and strong:
Blooming in health, not with disease oppressed.

LICH: DÊ. In Greece, or in some barbarous country? Tell!

LICH: Euboea's island hath a promontory,
Where to Cenean Zeus he consecrates
Rich altars and the tribute of the ground.

LICH: DÊ. Moved by an oracle, or from some vow?

LICH: So vowed he when he conquered with the spear
The country of these women whom you see.

LICH: DÊ. And who, by Heaven, are they? Who was their sire?
Their case is piteous, or eludes my thought.

LICH: [244-280] LICH. He took them for the service of the Gods
And his own house, when high Oechalia fell.

LICH: DÊ. Was't then before that city he was kept
Those endless ages of uncounted time?

LICH: Not so. The greater while he was detained
Among the Lydians, sold, as he declares,
To bondage. Nor be jealous of the word,
Since Heaven, my Queen, was author of the deed.
Enthrallèd so to Asian Omphalè,
He, as himself avers, fulfilled his year.
The felt reproach whereof so chafed his soul,
He bound fierce curses on himself and sware
That, — children, wife and all, — he yet would bring
In captive chains the mover of this harm.
Nor did this perish like an idle word,
But, when the stain was off him, straight he drew
Allied battalions to assault the town
Of Eurytus, whom, sole of earthly powers,
He had noted as the source of his annoy,
Because, having received him in his hall
A guest of ancient days, he burst on him
With outrage of loud voice and villanous mind,
Saying, 'with his hand upon the unerring bow,
Oechalia's princes could o'ershoot his skill;
And born to bondage, he must quail beneath
His overlord'; lastly, to crown this cry,
When at a banquet he was filled with wine,
He flung him out of door. Whereat being wroth,
When Iphitus to the Tirynthian height
Followed the track where his brood-mares had strayed,

He, while the thought and eye of the man by chance
Were sundered, threw him from the tower-crowned cliff.
In anger for which deed the Olympian King,
Father of Gods and men, delivered him
To be a bond-slave, nor could brook the offence,
That of all lives he vanquished, this alone
Should have been ta'en by guile. For had he wrought
In open quittance of outrageous wrong,
Even Zeus had granted that his cause was just.
The braggart hath no favour even in Heaven.
[281-316] Whence they, o'erweening with their evil tongue,
Are now all dwellers in the house of death,
Their ancient city a captive; — but these women
Whom thou beholdest, from their blest estate
Brought suddenly to taste of piteous woe,
Come to thy care. This task thy wedded lord
Ordained, and I, his faithful minister,
Seek to perform. But, for his noble self,
When with pure hands he hath done sacrifice
To his Great Father for the victory given,
Look for his coming, lady. This last word
Of all my happy speech is far most sweet.

LICH: CH. Now surety of delight is thine, my Queen,
Part by report and part before thine eye.

LICH: DÊ. Yea, now I learn this triumph of my lord,
Joy reigns without a rival in my breast.
This needs must run with that in fellowship.
Yet wise consideration even of good
Is flecked with fear of what reverse may come.
And I, dear friends, when I behold these maids,
Am visited with sadness deep and strange.
Poor friendless beings, in a foreign land
Wandering forlorn in homeless orphanhood!
Erewhile, free daughters of a freeborn race,

Now, snared in strong captivity for life.
O Zeus of battles, breaker of the war,
Ne'er may I see thee turn against my seed
So cruelly; or, if thou meanest so,
Let me be spared that sorrow by my death!
Such fear in me the sight of these hath wrought.
Who art thou, of all damsels most distressed?
Single or child-bearing? Thy looks would say,
A maid, of no mean lineage. Lichas, tell,
Who is the stranger-nymph? Who gave her birth?
Who was her sire? Mine eye hath pitied her
O'er all, as she o'er all hath sense of woe.

LICH: What know I? Why should'st thou demand? Perchance
Not lowest in the list of souls there born.

LICH: DÊ. How if a princess, offspring of their King?

[317-348] **LICH.** I cannot tell. I did not question far.

DÊ. Have none of her companions breathed her name?
I brought them silently. I did not hear.

LICH: DÊ. Yet speak it to us of thyself, poor maid!
'Tis sorrow not to know thee who thou art.

LICH: She'll ne'er untie her tongue, if she maintain
An even tenor, since nor more nor less
Would she disclose; but, poor unfortunate!
With agonizing sobs and tears she mourns
This crushing sorrow, from the day she left
Her wind-swept home. Her case is cruel, sure, —
And claims a privilege from all who feel.

LICH: DÊ. Well, let her go, and pass beneath the roof
In peace, as she desires; nor let fresh pain
From me be added to her previous woe.
She hath enough already. Come, away!
Let's all within at once, that thou mayest speed
Thy journey, and I may order all things here.

[Exit LICHAS, with Captives, into the house. DÊANIRA is about to follow them

LICH: Re-enter Messenger.

MESS: Pause first there on the threshold, till you learn
(Apart from those) who 'tis you take within,
And more besides that you yet know not of,
Which deeply imports your knowing. Of all this
I throughly am informed.

MESS: DÊ. What cause hast thou
Thus to arrest my going?

MESS: Stand, and hear.
Not idle was my former speech, nor this.

MESS: DÊ. Say, must we call them back in presence here,
Or would'st thou tell thy news to these and me?

MESS: To thee and these I may, but let those be.
DÊ. Well, they are gone. Let words declare thy drift.

MESS: That man, in all that he hath lately said,
Hath sinned against the truth: or now he's false,
Or else unfaithful in his first report.

MESS: [349-384] DÊ. What? Tell me thy full meaning clearly forth.
That thou hast uttered is all mystery.

MESS: I heard this herald say, while many thronged
To hearken, that this maiden was the cause,
Why lofty-towered Oechalia and her lord
Fell before Heracles, whom Love alone
Of heavenly powers had warmed to this emprise,
And not the Lydian thralldom or the tasks
Of rigorous Omphalè, nor that wild fate
Of rock-thrown Iphitus. Now he thrusts aside
The Love-god, contradicting his first tale.
When he that was her sire could not be brought
To yield the maid for Heracles to hold

In love unrecognized, he framed erelong
A feud about some trifle, and set forth
In arms against this damsel's fatherland
(Where Eurytus, the herald said, was king)
And slew the chief her father; yea, and sacked
Their city. Now returning, as you see,
He sends her hither to his halls, no slave,
Nor unregarded, lady, — dream not so!
Since all his heart is kindled with desire.
I, O my Queen! thought meet to show thee all
The tale I chanced to gather from his mouth,
Which many heard as well as I, i' the midst
Of Trachis' market-place, and can confirm
My witness. I am pained if my plain speech
Sound harshly, but the honest truth I tell.

MESS: DÊ. Ah me! Where am I? Whither am I fallen?
What hidden woe have I unwarily
Taken beneath my roof? O misery!
Was she unknown, as he that brought her sware?

MESS: Nay, most distinguished both in birth and mien;
Called in her day of freedom Iolè,
Eurytus' daughter, — of whose parentage,
Forsooth as ignorant, he ne'er would speak.

MESS: CH. I curse not all the wicked, but the man
Whose secret practices deform his life.

MESS: [385-413] DÊ. Say, maidens, how must I proceed? The words
Now spoken have bewildered all my mind.

MESS: CH. Go in and question Lichas, who perchance
Will tell the truth if you but tax him home.

MESS: DÊ. I will; you counsel reasonably.

MESS: And I,
Shall I bide here till thou com'st forth? Or how?

MESS: DÊ. Remain. For see, without my sending for him,
He issueth from the palace of himself.

MESS: Enter LICHAS.

LICH: What message must I carry to my lord?
Tell me, my Queen. I am going, as thou seest.

LICH: DÊ. So slow in coming, and so quickly flown,
Ere one have time to talk with thee anew!

LICH: What wouldst thou ask me? I am bent to hear.
DÊ. And art thou bent on truth in the reply?
By Heaven! in all that I have knowledge of.
DÊ. Then tell me, who is she thou brought'st with thee?
An islander. I cannot trace her stock.

MESS: Look hither, man. Who is't to whom thou speakest?

LICH: Why such a question? What is thine intent?

MESS: Nay, start not, but make answer if thou knowest.

LICH: To Dêanira, Oeneus' queenly child,
Heracles' wife, — if these mine eyes be true, —
My mistress.

MESS: Ay, that is the very word
I longed to hear thee speak. Thy mistress, sayest?

LICH: To whom I am bound.

MESS: Hold there! What punishment
Wilt thou accept, if thou art found to be
Faithless to her?

LICH: I faithless! What dark speech
Hast thou contrived?

MESS: Not I at all. 'Tis thou
Dost wrap thy thoughts i' the dark.

MESS: [414-448] **LICH.** Well, I will go.
'Tis folly to have heard thee for so long.

MESS: You go not till you answer one word more.

LICH: One, or a thousand! You'll not stint, I see.

MESS: Thou knowest the captive maid thou leddest home?

LICH: I do. But wherefore ask?

MESS: Did you not say
That she, on whom you look with ignorant eye,
Was Iolè, the daughter of the King,
Committed to your charge?

LICH: Where? Among whom?
What witness of such words will bear thee out?

MESS: Many and sound. A goodly company
In Trachis' market-place heard thee speak this.

LICH: Ay.
I said 'twas rumoured. But I could not give
My vague impression for advised report.

MESS: Impression, quotha! Did you not on oath
Proclaim your captive for your master's bride?

LICH: My master's bride! Dear lady, by the Gods,
Who is the stranger? for I know him not.

MESS: One who was present where he heard thee tell,
How that whole city was subdued and taken,
Not for the bondage to the Lydian girl,
But through the longing passion for this maid.

LICH: Dear lady, let the fellow be removed.
To prate with madmen is mere foolishness.

LICH: DÊ. Nay, I entreat thee by His name, whose fire
Lightens down Oeta's topmost glen, be not
A niggard of the truth. Thou tell'st thy tale
To no weak woman, but to one who knows
Mankind are never constant to one joy.
Whoso would buffet Love, aspires in vain.
For Love leads even Immortals at his will,
And me. Then how not others, like to me?

'Twere madness, sure, in me to blame my lord
When this hath caught him, or the woman there,
His innocent accomplice in a thing,
No shame to either, and no harm to me.
[449-490] It is not so. But if from him thou learnest
The lore of falsehood, it were best unlearn't;
Or if the instruction comes of thine own thought,
Such would-be kindness doth not prove thee kind.
Then tell me all the truth. To one free-born
The name of liar is a hateful lot.
And thou canst not be hid. Thy news was heard
By many, who will tell me. If thou fearest,
Thou hast no cause — for doubtfulness is pain,
But to know all, what harm? His loves ere now
Were they not manifold? And none hath borne
Reproach or evil word from me. She shall not,
Though his new passion were as strong as death;
Since most mine eye hath pitied her, because
Her beauty was the ruin of her life,
And all unweeting, she her own bright land,
Poor hapless one! hath ravaged and enslaved. —
Let that be as it must. But for thy part,
Though false to others, be still true to me.

LICH: CH. 'Tis fairly said. Comply. Thou ne'er wilt blame
Her faithfulness, and thou wilt earn our loves.

LICH: Yea, dear my Queen, now I have seen thee hold
Thy mortal wishes within mortal bound
So meekly, I will freely tell thee all.
It is as he avers. This maiden's love,
Piercing through Heracles, was the sole cause,
Why her Oechalia, land of plenteous woe,
Was made the conquest of his spear. And he —
For I dare so far clear him — never bade
Concealment or denial. But myself,

Fearing the word might wound thy queenly heart,
Sinned, if thou count such tenderness a sin.
But now that all is known, for both your sakes,
His, and thine own no less, look favouringly
Upon the woman, and confirm the word
Thou here hast spoken in regard to her: —
For he, whose might is in all else supreme,
Is wholly overmastered by her love.

LICH: DÊ. Yea, so my mind is bent. I will do so.
[491-519] I will not, in a bootless strife 'gainst Heaven,
Augment my misery with self-sought ill.
Come, go we in, that thou may'st bear from me
Such message as is meet, and also carry
Gifts, such as are befitting to return
For gifts new-given. Thou ought'st not to depart
Unladen, having brought so much with thee. [Exeunt

CHORUS: Victorious in her might, I 1
The Queen of soft delight
Still ranges onward with triumphant sway.
What she from Kronos' son
And strong Poseidon won,
And Pluto, King of Night, I durst not say.
But who, to earn this bride,
Came forth in sinewy pride
To strive, or e'er the nuptial might be known
With fearless heart I tell
What heroes wrestled well,
With showering blows, and dust in clouds upthrown.

CHORUS: One was a river bold, I 2
Horn-crowned, with tramp fourfold,
Bull Achelôüs, Acarnania's Fear;
And one from Bacchus' town,
Own son of Zeus, came down,
With brandished mace, bent bow, and barbèd spear.

Who then in battle brunt,
Together, front to front,
Hurled, eager both to win the beauteous prize;
And Cypris 'mid the fray
Alone, that dreadful day,
Sate umpire, holding promise in her eyes.

CHORUS: Then clashed the fist, then clanged the bow;II
Then horns gave crashing blow for blow,
Whilst, as they clung,
[520-555] The twining hip throw both essay
And hurtling foreheads' fearful play,
And groans from each were wrung.

CHORUS: But the tender fair one far away
Sate watching with an eye of piteous cheer
(A mother's heart will heed the thing I say,)
Till won by him who freed her from her fear.
Sudden she leaves her mother's gentle side,
Borne through the waste, our hero's tender bride.

CHORUS: Enter DÉANIRA.

CHORUS: DÉ. Dear friends, while yonder herald in the house
Holds converse with the captives ere he go,
I have stol'n forth to you, partly to tell
The craft my hand hath compassed, and in part,
To crave your pity for my wretchedness.
For I have taken to my hearth a maid, —
And yet, methinks, no maiden any more,
Like some fond shipmaster, taking on board
A cargo fraught with treason to my heart.
And now we two are closed in one embrace
Beneath one coverlet. Such generous meed
For faith in guarding home this dreary while
Hath the kind Heracles our trusty spouse,
Sent in return! Yet, oft as he hath caught

This same distemperature, I know not how
To harbour indignation against him.
But who that is a woman could endure
To dwell with her, both married to one man?
One bloom is still advancing, one doth fade.
The budding flower is cropped, the full-blown head
Is left to wither, while love passeth by
Unheeding. Wherefore I am sore afraid
He will be called my husband, but her mate,
For she is younger. Yet no prudent wife
Would take this angrily, as I have said.
But, dear ones, I will tell you of a way,
Whereof I have bethought me, to prevent
This heart-break. I had hidden of long time
[555-591] In a bronze urn the ancient Centaur's gift,
Which I, when a mere girl, culled from the wound
Of hairy-breasted Nessus in his death.
He o'er Evenus' rolling depths, for hire,
Ferried wayfarers on his arm, not plying
Or rowing-boat, or canvas-wingèd bark.
Who, when with Heracles, a new-made bride,
I followed by my father's sending forth,
Shouldering me too, in the mid-stream, annoyed
With wanton touch. And I cried out; and he,
Zeus' son, turned suddenly, and from his bow
Sent a wing'd shaft, that whizzed into his chest
To the lungs. Then the weird Thing, with dying voice
Spake to me:— 'Child of aged Oeneüs,
Since thou wert my last burden, thou shalt win
Some profit from mine act, if thou wilt do
What now I bid thee. With a careful hand
Collect and bear away the clotted gore
That clogs my wound, e'en where the monster snake
Had dyed the arrow with dark tinct of gall;

And thou shalt have this as a charm of soul
For Heracles, that never through the eye
Shall he receive another love than thine.⁷
Whereof bethinking me, for since his death
I kept it in a closet locked with care,
I have applied it to this robe, with such
Addition as his living voice ordained. —
The thing is done. No criminal attempts
Could e'er be mine. Far be they from my thought,
As I abhor the woman who conceives them!
But if by any means through gentle spells
And bonds on Heracles' affection, we
May triumph o'er this maiden in his heart,
My scheme is perfected. Unless you deem
Mine action wild. If so, I will desist.

CHORUS: CH. If any ground of confidence approve
Thine act, we cannot check thy counsel here.

CHORUS: DÊ. My confidence is grounded on belief,
Though unconfirmed as yet by actual proof.

CHORUS: [592-627] CH. Well, do it and try. Assurance cannot come
Till action bring experience after it.

CHORUS: DÊ. The truth will soon be known. The man e'en now
Is coming forth, and quickly will be there.
Screen ye but well my counsel. Doubtful deeds,
Wrapt close, will not deliver us to shame.

CHORUS: Enter LICHAS.

LICH: Daughter of Oeneus, tell me thy commands.
Already time rebukes our tardiness.

LICH: DÊ. Even that hath been my care, Lichas, while thou
Wert talking to the stranger-maids within,
That thou shouldst take for me this finewoven web,
A present from these fingers to my lord.
And when thou giv'st it, say that none of men

Must wear it on his shoulders before him;
And neither light of sun may look upon it,
Nor holy temple-court, nor household flame,
Till he in open station 'fore the Gods
Display it on a day when bulls are slaughtered.
So once I vowed, that should I ever see
Or hear his safe return, I would enfold
His glorious person in this robe, and show
To all the Gods in doing sacrifice
Him a fresh worshipper in fresh array. —
The truth hereof he will with ease descry
Betokened on this treasure-guarding seal. —
Now go, and be advised, of this in chief,
To act within thine office; then of this,
To bear thee so, that from his thanks and mine
Meeting in one, a twofold grace may spring.

LICH: If this my Hermes-craft be firm and sure,
Then never will I fail thee, O my Queen!
But I will show the casket as it is
To whom I bear it, and in faithfulness
Add all the words thou sendest in fit place.

LICH: DÊ. Go, then, at once. Thou hast full cognizance
How things within the palace are preserved?

LICH: I know, and will declare. There is no flaw.

LICH: [628-662] DÊ. Methinks thou knowest too, for thou hast seen,
My kind reception of the stranger-maid?

LICH: I saw, and was amazed with heart-struck joy.

LICH: DÊ. What more is there to tell? — Too rash, I fear,
Were thy report of longing on my part,
Till we can learn if we be longed for there.[Exeunt severally]

CHORUS: O ye that haunt the strand I 1
Where ships in quiet land
Near Oeta's height and the warm rock-drawn well,

And ye round Melis' inland gulf who dwell,
Worshipping her who wields the golden wand, —
(There Hellas' wisest meet in council strong):
Soon shall the flute arise
With sound of glad surprise,
Thrilling your sense with no unwelcome song,
But tones that to the harp of Heavenly Muse belong.

CHORUS: Zeus' and Alcmena's son, — I 2
All deeds of glory done, —
Speeds now triumphant to his home, whom we
Twelve weary months of blind expectancy
Lost in vast distance, from our country gone.
While, sadly languishing, his loving wife,
Still flowing down with tears,
Pined with unnumbered fears.
But Ares, lately stung to furious strife,
Frees him for ever from the toilsome life.

CHORUS: O let him come to-day! II
Ne'er may his vessel stay,
But glide with feathery sweep of many an oar,
Till from his altar by yon island shore
Even to our town he wind his prosperous way,
In mien returning mild,
And inly reconciled,
With that anointing in his heart ingrained,
Which the dark Centaur's wizard lips ordained.

CHORUS: [663-695]

Enter DÊANIRA.

CHORUS: DÊ. O how I fear, my friends, lest all too far
I have ventured in my action of to-day!

CHORUS: CH. What ails thee, Dêanira, Oeneus' child?

CHORUS: DÊ. I know not, but am haunted by a dread,
Lest quickly I be found to have performed

A mighty mischief, through bright hopes betrayed.

CHORUS: CH. Thou dost not mean thy gift to Heracles?

CHORUS: DÊ. Indeed I do. Now I perceive how fond
Is eagerness, where actions are obscure.

CHORUS: CH. Tell, if it may be told, thy cause of fear.

CHORUS: DÊ. A thing is come to pass, which should I tell,
Will strike you with strange wonder when you learn.

For, O my friends, the stuff wherewith I dressed
That robe, a flock of soft and milkwhite wool,
Is shrivelled out of sight, not gnawn by tooth
Of any creature here, but, self-consumed,
Frittered and wasting on the courtyard-stones.
To let you know the circumstance at full,
I will speak on. Of all the Centaur-Thing,
When labouring in his side with the fell point
O' the shaft, enjoined me, I had nothing lost,
But his vaticination in my heart
Remained indelible, as though engraved
With pen of iron upon brass. 'Twas thus: —
I was to keep this unguent closely hid
In dark recesses, where no heat of fire
Or warming ray might reach it, till with fresh
Anointing I addressed it to an end.
So I had done. And now this was to do,
Within my chamber covertly I spread
The ointment with piece of wool, a tuft
Pulled from a home-bred sheep; and, as ye saw,
I folded up my gift and packed it close
In hollow casket from the glaring sun.
But, entering in, a fact encounters me
Past human wit to fathom with surmise.
For, as it happened, I had tossed aside
The bit of wool I worked with, carelessly,

[696-733] Into the open daylight, 'mid the blaze
Of Helios' beam. And, as it kindled warm,
It fell away to nothing, crumbled small,
Like dust in severing wood by sawyers strewn.
So, on the point of vanishing, it lay.
But, from the place where it had lain, brake forth
A frothy scum in clots of seething foam,
Like the rich draught in purple vintage poured
From Bacchus' vine upon the thirsty ground.
And I, unhappy, know not toward what thought
To turn me, but I see mine act is dire.
For wherefore should the Centaur, for what end,
Show kindness to the cause for whom he died?
That cannot be. But seeking to destroy
His slayer, he cajoled me. This I learn
Too late, by sad experience, for no good.
And, if I err not now, my hapless fate
Is all alone to be his murderess.
For, well I know, the shaft that made the wound
Gave pain to Cheiron, who was more than man;
And wheresoe'er it falls, it ravageth
All the wild creatures of the world. And now
This gory venom blackly spreading bane
From Nessus' angry wound, must it not cause
The death of Heracles? I think it must.
Yet my resolve is firm, if aught harm him,
My death shall follow in the self-same hour.
She cannot bear to live in evil fame,
Who cares to have a nature pure from ill.

CHORUS: CH. Horrid mischance must needs occasion fear.
But Hope is not condemned before the event.

CHORUS: DÊ. In ill-advised proceeding not even Hope
Remains to minister a cheerful mind.

CHORUS: CH. Yet to have erred unwittingly abates
The fire of wrath; and thou art in this case.

CHORUS: DÊ. So speaks not he who hath a share of sin,
But who is clear of all offence at home.

CHORUS: CH. 'Twere well to say no more, unless thou hast aught
To impart to thine own son: for he is here,
Who went erewhile to find his father forth.

CHORUS: [734-766]
HYLLUS (re-entering).

CHORUS: O mother, mother! I would to heaven one of three things were
true:

Either that thou wert dead, or, living, wert
No mother to me, or hadst gained a mind
Furnished with better thoughts than thou hast now!

CHORUS: DÊ. My son! what canst thou so mislike in me?

HYL: I tell thee thou this day hast been the death
Of him that was thy husband and my sire.

HYL: DÊ. What word hath passed thy lips? my child, my child!

HYL: A word that must be verified. For who
Can make the accomplished fact as things undone?

HYL: DÊ. Alas, my son! what saidst thou? Who hath told
That I have wrought a deed so full of woe?

HYL: HYL. 'Twas I myself that saw with these mine eyes
My father's heavy state: — no hearsay word.

HYL: DÊ. And where didst thou come near him and stand by?

HYL: Art thou to hear it? On, then, with my tale!
When after sacking Eurytus' great city
He marched in triumph with first-fruits of war, —
There is a headland, last of long Euboea,
Surf-beat Cœnæum, — where to his father Zeus
He dedicates high altars and a grove.
There first I saw him, gladdened from desire.

And when he now addressed him to the work
Of various sacrifice, the herald Lichas
Arrived from home, bearing thy fatal gift,
The deadly robe: wherewith invested straight,
As thou hadst given charge, he sacrificed
The firstlings of the spoil, twelve bulls entire,
Each after each. But the full count he brought
Was a clear hundred of all kinds of head.
Then the all-hapless one commenced his prayer
In solemn gladness for the bright array.
But presently, when from the holy things,
And from the richness of the oak-tree core,
[766-802] There issued flame mingled with blood, a sweat
Rose on his flesh, and close to every limb
Clung, like stone-drapery from the craftsman's hand,
The garment, glued unto his side. Then came
The tearing pangs within his bones, and then
The poison feasted like the venom'd tooth
Of murderous basilisk. — When this began,
He shouted on poor Lichas, none to blame
For thy sole crime, 'What guile is here, thou knave?
What was thy fraud in fetching me this robe?'
He, all-unknowing, in an evil hour
Declared his message, that the gift was thine.
Whereat the hero, while the shooting spasm
Had fastened on the lungs, seized him by the foot
Where the ankle turns i' the socket, and, with a thought,
Hurl'd on a surf-vex'd reef that showed i' the sea:
And rained the grey pulp from the hair, the brain
Being scattered with the blood. Then the great throng
Saddened their festival with piteous wail
For one in death and one in agony.
And none had courage to approach my sire, —
Convulsed upon the ground, then tossed i' the air

With horrid yells and crying, till the cliffs
Echoed round, the mountain-promontories
Of Locris, and Euboea's rugged shore.
Wearied at length with flinging on the earth,
And shrieking oft with lamentable cry,
Cursing the fatal marriage with thyself
The all-wretched, and the bond to Oeneus' house,
That prize that was the poisoner of his peace,
He lifted a wild glance above the smoke
That hung around, and 'midst the crowd of men
Saw me in tears, and looked on me and said,
'O son, come near; fly not from my distress,
Though thou shouldst be consumèd in my death,
But lift and bear me forth; and, if thou mayest,
Set me where no one of mankind shall see me.
But if thy heart withhold thee, yet convey me
Out of this land as quickly as ye may.
Let me not die where I am now.' We then,
[803-833] Thus urgently commanded, laid him down
Within our bark, and hardly to this shore
Rowed him convulsed and roaring. — Presently,
He will appear, alive or lately dead.
Such, mother, is the crime thou hast devised
And done against our sire, wherefore let Right
And Vengeance punish thee! — May I pray so?
I may: for thou absolv'st me by thy deed,
Thou that hast slain the noblest of the Earth,
Thy spouse, whose like thou ne'er wilt see again. [Exit DÊANIRA.]

HYL: CH. Why steal'st thou forth in silence? Know'st thou not
Thy silence argues thine accuser's plea?

HYL: Let her go off. Would that a sudden flood
Might sweep her far and swiftly from mine eye!
Why fondle vainly the fair-sounding name
Of mother, when her acts are all unmotherly?

Let her begone for me: and may she find
Such joy as she hath rendered to my sire! [Exit HYLLUS]

CHORUS: See where falls the doom, of old I 1
By the unerring Voice foretold, —
‘When twelve troublous years have rolled,
Then shall end your long desire:
Toil on toil no more shall tire
The offspring of the Eternal Sire.’
Lo! the destined Hour is come!
Lo! it hath brought its burden home.
For when the eyes have looked their last
How should sore labour vex again?
How, when the powers of will and thought are past,
Should life be any more enthralled to pain?

CHORUS: And if Nessus’ withering shroud, I 2
Wrought by destiny and craft,
Steep him in a poisonous cloud.
Steaming from the venom’d shaft,
[834-870]
Which to Death in hideous lair
The many-wreathed Hydra bare,
How shall he another day
Feel the glad warmth of Helios’ ray? —
Enfolded by the Monster-Thing
Of Lerna, while the cruel sting
Of the shagg’d Centaur’s murderous-guileful tongue
Breaks forth withal to do him painful wrong.

CHORUS: And she, poor innocent, who saw II 1
Checkless advancing to the gate
A mighty harm unto her state, —
This rash young bridal without fear of law, —
Gave not her will to aught that caused this woe,
But since it came through that strange mind’s conceiving, —
That ruined her in meeting, — deeply grieving,

She mourns with dewy tears in tenderest flow.
The approaching hour appeareth great with woe:
Some guile-born misery doth Fate foreshow.

CHORUS: The springs of sorrow are unbound, II 2
And such an agony disclose,
As never from the hands of foes
To afflict the life of Heracles was found.
O dark with battle-stains, world-champion spear,
That from Oechalia's highland leddest then
This bride that followed swiftly in thy train,
How fatally overshadowing was thy fear!
But these wild sorrows all too clearly come
From Love's dread minister, disguised and dumb.

CHORUS: CH. 1. Am I a fool, or do I truly hear
Lament new-rising from our master's home?
Tell!

CHORUS: CH. 2. Clearly from within a wailing voice
Peals piteously. The house hath some fresh woe.

CHORUS: CH. 3. Mark!
How strangely, with what cloud upon her brow,
Yon aged matron with her tidings moves!

CHORUS: [871-902]
Enter Nurse.

NURSE: Ah! mighty, O my daughters! was the grief
Sprung from the gift to Heracles conveyed!

LEADER OF CH: What new thing is befallen? Why speak'st thou so?

NUR: Our Queen hath found her latest journey's end.
Even now she is gone, without the help of feet.

NUR: CH. Not dead?
You know the whole.

CH. Dead! hapless Queen!
The truth hath twice been told.

NUR: CH. O tell us how!

What was her death, poor victim of dire woe?

NUR: Most ruthless was the deed.

NUR: CH. Say, woman, say!

What was the sudden end?

NUR: Herself she slew.

NUR: CH. What rage, what madness, clutched

The mischief-working brand?

How could her single thought

Contrive the accomplishment of death on death?

NUR: Chill iron stopped the sources of her breath.

CH. And thou, poor helpless crone, didst see this done?

Yea, I stood near and saw.

CH. How was it? Tell!

With her own hand this violence was given.

CH. What do I hear?

The certainty of truth.

NUR: CH. A child is come,

From this new bridal that hath rushed within,

A fresh-born Fury of woe!

NUR: Too true. But hadst thou been at hand to see

Her action, pity would have wrung thy soul.

NUR: CH. Could this be ventured by a woman's hand?

NUR: Ay, and in dreadful wise, as thou shalt hear.

When all alone she had gone within the gate,

And passing through the court beheld her boy

Spreading the couch that should receive his sire,

[902-946] Ere he returned to meet him, — out of sight

She hid herself, and fell at the altar's foot,

And loudly cried that she was left forlorn;

And, taking in her touch each household thing

That formerly she used, poor lady, wept

O'er all; and then went ranging through the rooms,

Where, if there caught her eye the well-loved form
Of any of her household, she would gaze
And weep aloud, accusing her own fate
And her abandoned lot, childless henceforth!
When this was ended, suddenly I see her
Fly to the hero's room of genial rest.
With unsuspected gaze o'ershadowed near,
I watched, and saw her casting on the bed
The finest sheets of all. When that was done,
She leapt upon the couch where they had lain
And sat there in the midst. And the hot flood
Burst from her eyes before she spake:— 'Farewell,
My bridal bed, for never more shalt thou
Give me the comfort I have known thee give.'
Then with tight fingers she undid her robe,
Where the brooch lay before the breast, and bared
All her left arm and side. I, with what speed
Strength ministered, ran forth to tell her son
The act she was preparing. But meanwhile,
Ere we could come again, the fatal blow
Fell, and we saw the wound. And he, her boy,
Seeing, wept aloud. For now the hapless youth
Knew that himself had done this in his wrath,
Told all too late i' the house, how she had wrought
Most innocently, from the Centaur's wit.
So now the unhappy one, with passionate words
And cries and wild embracings of the dead,
Groaned forth that he had slain her with false breath
Of evil accusation, and was left
Orphaned of both, his mother and his sire.
Such is the state within. What fool is he
That counts one day, or two, or more to come?
To-morrow is not, till the present day
In fair prosperity have passed away.[Exit

NUR: [947-975]

CHORUS: Which shall come first in my wail,I 1
Which shall be last to prevail,
Is a doubt that will never be done.

CHORUS: Trouble at home may be seen,I 2
Trouble is looked for with teen;
And to have and to look for are one.

CHORUS: Would some fair windII 1
But waft me forth to roam
Far from the native region of my home,
Ere death me find, oppressed with wild affright
Even at the sudden sight
Of him, the valiant son of Zeus most High!
Before the house, they tell, he fareth nigh,
A wonder beyond thought,
With torment unapproachable distraught.

CHORUS: Hark! ...II 2
The cause then of my cry
Was coming all too nigh:
(Doth the clear nightingale lament for nought?)
Some step of stranger folk is this way brought.
As for a friend they love
Heavy and slow with noiseless feet they move.
Which way? which way? Ah me! behold him come.
His pallid lips are dumb.
Dead, or at rest in sleep? What shall I say?
[HERACLES is brought in on a litter, accompanied by HYLLUS and an Old Man

HYL: Oh, woe is me!
My father, piteous woe for thee!
Oh, whither shall I turn my thought! Ah me!

OLD M: Hush! speak not, O my child,
Lest torment fierce and wild
Rekindle in thy father's rugged breast,

And break this rest

[976-1003] Where now his life is held at point to fall.
With firm lips clenched refrain thy voice through all.

HYL: Yet tell me, doth he live,
Old sir?

OLD M: Wake not the slumberer,
Nor kindle and revive
The terrible recurrent power of pain,
My son!

HYL: My foolish words are done,
But my full heart sinks 'neath the heavy strain.

HERACLES: O Father, who are these?
What countrymen? Where am I? What far land
Holds me in pain that ceaseth not? Ah me!
Again that pest is rending me. Pain, pain!

OLD M: Now thou may'st know
'Twas better to have lurked in silent shade
And not thus widely throw
The slumber from his eyelids and his head.

HYL: I could not brook
All speechless on his misery to look.

HER: O altar on the Euboean strand,
High-heaped with offerings from my hand,
What meed for lavish gifts bestowed
From thy new sanctuary hath flowed!
Father of Gods! thy cruel power
Hath foiled me with an evil blight.
Ah! would mine eyes had closed in night
Ere madness in a fatal hour
Had burst upon them with a blaze,
No help or soothing once allays!

HER: What hand to heal, what voice to charm,
Can e'er dispel this hideous harm?
Whose skill save thine,
Monarch Divine?
Mine eyes, if such I saw,
Would hail him from afar with trembling awe.
[1004-1040] Ah! ah!
O vex me not, touch me not, leave me to rest,
To sleep my last sleep on Earth's gentle breast.
You touch me, you press me, you turn me again,
You break me, you kill me! O pain! O pain!
You have kindled the pang that had slumbered still.
It comes, it hath seized me with tyrannous will!

HER: Where are ye, men, whom over Hellas wide
This arm hath freed, and o'er the ocean-tide,
And through rough brakes, from every monstrous thing?
Yet now in mine affliction none will bring
A sword to aid, a fire to quell this fire,
O most unrighteous! nor to my desire
Will come and quench the hateful life I hold
With mortal stroke! Ah! is there none so bold?

OLD M: Son of our hero, this hath mounted past
My feeble force to cope with. Take him thou!
Fresher thine eye and more the hope thou hast
Than mine to save him.

HYL: I support him now
Thus with mine arm: but neither fleshly vest
Nor inmost spirit can I lull to rest
From torture. None may dream
To wield this power, save he, the King supreme.

HER: Son!
Where art thou to lift me and hold me aright?
It tears me, it kills me, it rushes in might,
This cruel, devouring, unconquered pain

Shoots forth to consume me. Again! again!
O Fate! O Athena! — O son, at my word
Have pity and slay me with merciful sword!

HER: Pity thy father, boy; with sharp relief
Smite on my breast, and heal the wrathful grief
Wherewith thy mother, God-abandoned wife,
Hath wrought this ruin on her husband's life.
O may I see her falling, even so
As she hath thrown me, to like depth of woe!
[1041-1080] Sweet Hades, with swift death,
Brother of Zeus, release my suffering breath!

HER: CH. Horror hath caught me as I hear this, woe,
Racking our mighty one with mightier pain.

HER: Many hot toils and hard beyond report,
With sturdy thews and sinews I have borne,
But no such labour hath the Thunderer's wife
Or sour Eurystheus ever given, as this,
Which Oeneus' daughter of the treacherous eye
Hath fastened on my back, this amply-woven
Net of the Furies, that is breaking me.
For, glued unto my side, it hath devoured
My flesh to the bone, and lodging in the lungs
It drains the vital channels, and hath drunk
The fresh life-blood, and ruins all my frame,
Foiled in the tangle of a viewless bond.
Yet me nor War-host, nor Earth's giant brood,
Nor Centaur's monstrous violence could subdue,
Nor Hellas, nor the Stranger, nor all lands
Where I have gone, cleansing the world from harms.
But a soft woman without manhood's strain
Alone and weaponless hath conquered me.
Son, let me know thee mine true-born, nor rate
Thy mother's claim beyond thy sire's, but bring
Thyself from out the chambers to my hand

Her body that hath borne thee, that my heart
May be assured, if lesser than my pain
It will distress thee to behold her limbs
With righteous torment agonized and torn.
Nay, shrink not, son, but pity me, whom all
May pity — me, who, like a tender girl,
Am heard to weep aloud! This none could say
He knew in me of old; for, murmuring not,
I went with evil fortune, silent still.
Now, such a foe hath found the woman in me!
Ay, but come near; stand by me, and behold
What cause I have for crying. Look but here!
Here is the mystery unveiled. O see!
Ye people, gaze on this poor quivering flesh,
Look with compassion on my misery!
[1081-1117] Ah me!

Ah! ah! Again!
Even now the hot convulsion of disease
Shoots through my side, and will not let me rest
From this fierce exercise of wearing woe.
Take me, O King of Night!
O sudden thunderstroke.
Smite me! O sire, transfix me with the dart
Of thy swift lightning! Yet again that fang
Is tearing; it hath blossomed forth anew,
It soars up to the height!

HER: O breast and back,
O shrivelling arms and hands, ye are the same
That crushed the dweller of the Néméan wild,
The lion unapproachable and rude,
The oxherd's plague, and Hydra of the lake
Of Lerna, and the twi-form prancing throng
Of Centaurs, — insolent, unsociable,
Lawless, ungovernable: — the tuskèd pest

Of Erymanthine glades; then underground
Pluto's three-headed cur — a perilous fear,
Born from the monster-worm; and, on the verge
Of Earth, the dragon, guarding fruits of gold.
These toils and others countless I have tried,
And none hath triumphed o'er me. But to-day,
Jointless and riven to tatters, I am wrecked
Thus utterly by imperceptible woe;
I, proudly named Alcmena's child, and His
Who reigns in highest heaven, the King supreme!
Ay, but even yet, I tell ye, even from here,
Where I am nothingness and cannot move,
She who hath done this deed shall feel my power.
Let her come near, that, mastered by my might,
She may have this to tell the world, that, dying,
As living, I gave punishment to wrong.

HER: CH. O Hellas, how I grieve for thy distress!
How thou wilt mourn in losing him we see!

HYL: My father, since thy silence gives me leave,
Still hear me patiently, though in thy pain!
For my request is just. Lend me thy mind
[1117-1149] Less wrathfully distempered than 'tis now;
Else thou canst never know, where thou art keen
With vain resentment and with vain desire

HER: Speak what thou wilt and cease, for I in pain
Catch not the sense of thy mysterious talk

HYL: I come to tell thee of my mother's case,
And her involuntary unconscious fault.

HER: Base villain! hast thou breathed thy mother's name,
Thy father's murderess, in my hearing too!

HYL: Her state requires not silence, but full speech.

HER: Her faults in former time might well be told.

HYL: So might her fault to day, couldst thou but know.

HER: Speak, but beware base words disgrace thee not.

HYL: List! She is dead even now with new-given wound.

HER: By whom? Thy words flash wonder through my woe.

HYL: Her own hand slaughtered her, no foreign stroke.

HER: Wretch! to have reft this office from my hands.

HYL: Even your rash spirit were softened, if you knew.

HER: This bodes some knavery. But declare thy thought!

HYL: She erred with good intent. The whole is said.

HER: Good, O thou villain, to destroy thy sire!

HYL: When she perceived that marriage in her home,
She erred, supposing to enchain thy love.

HER: Hath Trachis a magician of such might?

HYL: Long since the Centaur Nessus moved her mind
To work this charm for heightening thy desire.

HER: O horror, thou art here! I am no more.

My day is darkened, boy! Undone, undone!

I see our plight too plainly. woe is me!

Come, O my son! — thou hast no more a father, —

Call to me all the brethren of thy blood,

And poor Alcmena, wedded all in vain

[1149-1185] Unto the Highest, that ye may hear me tell

With my last breath what prophecies I know.

HYL: Thy mother is not here, but by the shore

Of Tiryns hath obtained a dwelling-place;

And of thy sons, some she hath with her there,

And some inhabit Thebè's citadel.

But we who are with thee, sire, if there be aught

That may by us be done, will hear, and do.

HER: Then hearken thou unto this task, and show
If worthily thou art reputed mine.

Now is time to prove thee. My great father
Forewarned me long ago that I should die
By none who lived and breathed, but from the will
Of one now dwelling in the house of death.
And so this Centaur, as the voice Divine
Then prophesied, in death hath slain me living.
And in agreement with that ancient word
I now interpret newer oracles
Which I wrote down on going within the grove
Of the hill-roving and earth-couching Selli, —
Dictated to me by the mystic tongue
Innumerable, of my Father's sacred tree;
Declaring that my ever instant toils
Should in the time that new hath being and life
End and release me. And I look'd for joy.
But the true meaning plainly was my death. —
No labour is appointed for the dead. —
Then, since all argues one event, my son,
Once more thou must befriend me, and not wait
For my voice goading thee, but of thyself
Submit and second my resolve, and know
Filial obedience for thy noblest rule.

HYL: I will obey thee, father, though my heart
Sinks heavily in approaching such a theme.

HER: Before aught else, lay thy right hand in mine.

HYL: Why so intent on this assurance, sire?

HER: Give it at once and be not froward, boy.

HYL: There is my hand: I will gainsay thee nought.

HER: Swear by the head of him who gave me life.

[1186-1221] **HYL:** Tell me the oath, and I will utter it.
Swear thou wilt do the thing I bid thee do.

HYL: I swear, and make Zeus witness of my troth.

HER: But if you swerve, pray that the curse may come.

HYL: It will not come for swerving: — but I pray.

HER: Now, dost thou know on Oeta's topmost height
The crag of Zeus?

HYL: I know it, and full oft
Have stood there sacrificing.

HER: Then even there,
With thine own hand uplifting this my body,
Taking what friends thou wilt, and having lopped
Much wood from the deep-rooted oak and rough
Wild olive, lay me on the gathered pile,
And burn all with the touch of pine-wood flame.
Let not a tear of mourning dim thine eye;
But silent, with dry gaze, if thou art mine,
Perform it. Else my curse awaits thee still
To weigh thee down when I am lost in night.

HYL: How cruel, O my father, is thy tongue!

HYL: HER. 'Tis peremptory. Else, if thou refuse,
Be called another's and be no more mine.

HYL: Alas that thou shouldst challenge me to this,
To be thy murderer, guilty of thy blood!

HER: Not I, in sooth: but healer of my pain,
And sole preserver from a life of woe.

HYL: How can it heal to burn thee on the pyre?

HER: If this act frighten thee, perform the rest.

HYL: Mine arms shall not refuse to carry thee.

HER: And wilt thou gather the appointed wood?

HYL: So my hand fire it not. In all but this,
Not scanting labour, I will do my part.

HER: Enough. 'Tis well. And having thus much given
Add one small kindness to a list so full.

HYL: How great soe'er it were, it should be done.

HER: The maid of Eurytus thou knowest, I ween.

HYL: Of Iolè thou speak'st, or I mistake.

HER: Of her. This then is all I urge, my son.

[1222-1258] When I am dead, if thou wouldst show thy duty,

Think of thine oath to me, and, on my word,

Make her thy wife: nor let another man

Take her, but only thou; since she hath lain

So near this heart. Obey me, O my boy!

And be thyself the maker of this bond.

To spurn at trifles after great things given,

Were to confound the meed already won.

HYL: Oh, anger is not right, when men are ill!

But who could bear to see thee in this mind?

HER: You murmur, as you meant to disobey.

HYL: How can I do it, when my mother's death

And thy sad state sprang solely from this girl?

Who, not possessed with furies, could choose this?

Far better, father, for me too to die,

Than to live still with my worst enemy.

HER: This youth withdraws his reverence in my death.

But, if thou yield'st not to thy father's best,

The curse from Heaven shall dog thy footsteps still.

HYL: Ah! thou wilt tell me that thy pain is come.

HER: Yea, for thou wak'st the torment that had slept.

HYL: Ay me! how cross and doubtful is my way!

HER: Because you will reject your father's word.

HYL: Must I be taught impiety from thee?

HER: It is not impious to content my heart.

HYL: Then you require this with an absolute will?

HER: And bid Heaven witness to my strong command.

HYL: Then I will do it, for the act is thine.
I will not cast it off. Obeying thee,
My sire, the Gods will ne'er reprove my deed.

HER: Thou endest fairly. Now, then, O my son,
Add the performance swiftly, that, before
Some spasm or furious onset of my pain
Have seized me, ye may place me on the pyre.
Come, loiter not, but lift me. Now my end
Is near, the last cessation of my woe.

HYL: Since thy command is urgent, O my sire!
We tarry not, but bear thee to the pyre.

HYL: [1259-1278] **HER.** Stubborn heart, ere yet again
Wakes the fierce rebound of pain,
While the evil holds aloof,
Thou, with bit of diamond proof,
Curb thy cry, with forcèd will
Seeming to do gladly still!

HYL: Lift him, men, and hate not me
For the evil deeds ye see,
Since the Heavens' relentless sway
Recks not of the righteous way.
He who gave life and doth claim
From his seed a Father's name
Can behold this hour of blame.
Though the future none can tell,
Yet the present is not well:
Sore for him who bears the blow,
Sad for us who feel his woe,
Shameful to the Gods, we throw.

HYL: **CH.** Maidens from the palace-hall,
Come ye forth, too, at our call!
Mighty deaths beyond belief,
Many an unknown form of grief,
Ye have seen to-day; and nought

But the power of Zeus hath wrought.