



## Preface to *The Children of Heracles*



This play is less well known than the other three in this volume, and also treats a mythological episode which is much less familiar to the average reader than, for example, the stories of Troy or the Argonautic expedition. It may therefore be useful to provide a brief summary before making any further comments.

During his lifetime, the great hero Heracles was for a long time enslaved to the Argive king Eurystheus, in whose service he performed his famous labours. When this play begins, Heracles is long dead, but his young children, together with his mother Alcmena and his nephew Iolaus (by now an old man), are still being persecuted by the tyrannical Eurystheus. Although they seek refuge in many different cities, the Argive king always catches up with them and threatens the hospitable cities with war unless they drive out the refugees. In this play they have found their way to Athens, where it seems that they will be safe; but despite the goodwill of the Athenian king Demophon (son of Theseus), the Argives put pressure on the Athenians to expel them; and a prophecy warns Demophon that they will lose the imminent conflict unless a virgin dies as a sacrificial victim. One of Heracles' daughters, who is not identified in the play, but in other accounts was called Macaria, undertakes to die for the good of the others. In the ensuing battle the Athenians are victorious, reinforced by the forces of Heracles' son Hyllus, and unexpectedly aided by the strength of Iolaus, who is miraculously rejuvenated. In the closing scene, the captive Eurystheus is brought on and denounced by the vengeful Alcmena, who is eager to destroy her enemy, though the Athenians have spared

Eurystheus prophesies as he prepares to die: his name in Attic soil, and will protect the Athenians in his tomb, though remaining bitterly opposed to the line of the living. There is some damage to our texts of the end of the play, but most recent discussions conclude that only a few lines have been lost.

This is in many ways a harder play than most for the modern audience: despite some striking scenes, we do not find here characters with whom we can readily sympathize, and the situation may seem artificial, the religious atmosphere archaic. The patriotic treatment of Athens as a place of refuge, with her people ready to defend those in need, doubtless appealed to the original audience, but may seem merely self-congratulatory to us. Nevertheless, this means that the play tells us more about the Athenian conception of their own mythical past, and of the special qualities of their country, than plays which focus on the misfortunes and crimes of Thebes, or on the exploits of a non-Athenian hero. Like the funeral speech of Pericles in Thucydides' *History*, *The Children of Heracles* offers the Athenians an idealized picture of themselves, remote but doubtless uplifting in time of war. It has even been suggested that the reference in Eurystheus' final speech to the invasion of Attica by 'these children's descendants' (1034ff.) may allude to the invasions by the Spartans and their allies during the period when Euripides was writing; the general prophecy could include a particular contemporary allusion.

In any case, in this play Athenian generosity is manifest, and involves no sacrifice or transgression by the city itself: it is Macaria who must die for victory, and it is Alcmena who will exact revenge. In later dramas there is more room for disagreement about the rights and wrongs, and for concern at the consequences of war: it might reasonably be argued that the *Suppliant Women*, a play with a rather similar plot, paints a bleaker picture of the cost of war; and several of Euripides'

later works suggest a degree of disillusionment with rational democratic decision-making.

The play also allows us to see something of the tragedians' stock-in-trade, for in Greek tragedy, as in Shakespeare (and indeed in Homer), there are certain 'typical scenes' or 'story-patterns' which the dramatist may use to structure his plot. Several tragedies can be classed together as 'suppliant-plays': in these, the convention is that the helpless suppliants flee across Greece, find a possible refuge and must make an effort to win hospitality there. When the pursuers arrive, conflict of some sort ensues, and often suffering for the protector; but the rights of the suppliant will normally be vindicated. The medieval custom of seeking sanctuary on holy ground is an obvious parallel. This pattern forms the basis of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, amongst others. Naturally Athens is often the place of refuge, but not always: the *Suppliant Women* of Aeschylus has the refugees seeking a home in Argos. Although the myths were many and various, the dramatists naturally turned often to legends and situations which offered particular opportunities for powerful speeches or emotional appeals. Another recurring feature which we find especially in Euripides is the noble self-sacrifice of a young man or woman, exemplified by Macaria in this play, by Creon's son Menoecus in the *Phoenician Women*, and by Iphigenia (after initial reluctance) in the *Iphigения at Aulis*: in each case the victim is formally slain for the good of the community. The death of Alceus plays a variation on this theme: there, the death is for an individual's benefit, and is in any case reversed.

Unlike the *Medea* and the *Hippolytus*, *The Children of Heracles* seems to ask no hard questions about the gods. The play dramatizes a reversal of fortunes: from being powerless and persecuted the family of Heracles rise to a position of security and strength; Athenian virtue and piety serve to bring this about. Earlier in the play Alcmena had expressed doubts about Zeus' concern for her (718–19), but these comments are brief and bitter, belied by events. If there are darker notes struck at the end of the play, these arise from human passions (Alcmena's

revenge): the gods have played their part, and their part for the Heraclids is shown not only through the military victory but through the accompanying miracle of rejuvenation (rebirth).

Greek drama, unlike modern theatre or cinema, never attempted to put battle-scenes or large crowds on stage. Consequently, in this play decisive incidents, such as the Athenian assembly, the questioning of the oracles, the sacrifice and the battle, are all described at second-hand. Rather than dismissing this practice as a sign of inferior drama, we should learn to appreciate what Euripides does give us: powerful emotions, hard-hitting rhetorical contests and unexpected twists in the plot (the need for sacrifice, the arrival of Hyllus, the determination of Iolaus to enter battle, the appearance of Eurystheus, a captive yet defiant). *The Children of Heracles* is not as terrifying a play as the *Medea*, but it is fully worthy of Euripides in its ingenuity of plot and the vigour of its language.

## Characters

IOLAUS, *loyal old friend of Heracles*

HERALD, *servant of Eurystheus*

CHORUS of old men of Marathon

DEMOPHON, *king of Athens*

ACAMAS, *brother of Demophon*

MAIDEN, *daughter of Heracles*

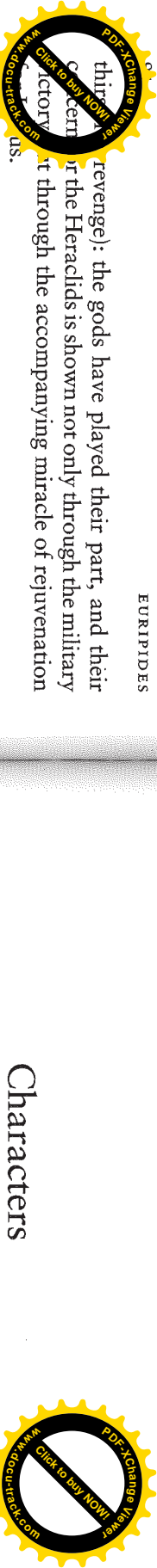
SERVANT of Hyllus, *eldest son of Heracles*

ALCMENE, *mother of Heracles*

MESSENGER

EURYSTHEUS, *king of Argos*

*A group of young children, the sons of Heracles*





[The scene is the altar of the god Zeus at Marathon. Seated on the steps are the young sons of the hero Heracles, now dead, and their protector, IOLAUS, nephew of the hero and himself now an old man.]

IOLAUS: For many years now this is what I have observed: one man is just to his neighbours, another thinks solely of his own profit and, useless to his fellow citizens, shows himself intractable in business dealings and loyal only to himself. It's experience has taught me this lesson. I had the chance to spend my days untroubled in Argos but out of respect for my own conscience and loyalty to kinsmen I alone shared in most of the labours of Heracles while he was among us. [He raises his arms protectively over the silent children.] And now that he has his home in the sky, I have taken his children here under my wing, giving them the protection I stand in need of myself.

When their father had left the earth, Eurystheus' first wish was to kill us. We fled, forfeiting our city but saving our lives. We wander, exiles, from one city to another, driven each time across the frontier. For, to crown our other sufferings, Eurystheus has seen fit to inflict this outrage upon us: wherever he learns we have settled he sends heralds, demanding that we be extradited and denied asylum, asserting that it is no trifling matter to make a friend or foe of Argos and pointing out how powerful a king he is. Now, when they see the weakness of my position and the tender years of the children, deprived of a father, they yield to the authority of the stronger party and deny us access to their land.



ision has been to share the children's exile, to know that they know; I cannot bring myself to betray them, so invite some man's barbed words: 'Look at how helps his kinsman's children, now that their father is dead!' Since every part of Greece is barred to us, we have come to Marathon and its three surrounding towns and here at the altars of the gods we sit as suppliants,<sup>1</sup> dependent on their aid. This land, they say, is governed by Theseus' two sons, who received it by lot as kinsmen of Pandion and are related to these children. This is why we have made this journey to the boundaries of famous Athens. Two people of advanced years are in charge of this flight: I am looking after these lads, a task that weighs heavily on my mind, while Alcmene keeps safe in this temple the daughters of her son, guarding them with protecting arms; shame prevents us from exposing young girls to public view by letting them sit here on the altar steps. Hyllus and his older brothers are searching the land for some place where we can build a fortification to serve as our home, should we be ejected forcibly from Marathon. [*He suddenly catches sight of Eurystheus' HERALD approaching and starts beckoning furiously to the children.*] Children, children, over here! Grab my clothes! I see him there, Eurystheus' herald, making for us, the man who hounds us and turns us into fugitives, denied shelter in every land. [*He addresses the HERALD directly:*]

You loathsome creature, how I wish you would die, you and the man who sent you, to pay for all those times that mouth of yours has delivered its wicked tidings to their father as well!

HERALD: No doubt you think you've found a fine place of sanctuary here to rest and a city that will call your enemies her own – what folly! The man does not exist who will prefer the useless power you have to that wielded by Eurystheus. On your way! Why do you make this trouble? You must leave this place for Argos, where the penalty of death by stoning awaits you.

IOLAUS: We shall not; this altar of the god will give us protection

enough, and the land where we have come is subordinate none.

HERALD [*with menace*]: Do you mean to create difficulties for me?

IOLAUS: You shall never take me or these children by force and lead us off!

HERALD [*seizing two of the children*]: You'll learn; it looks as if your powers of prophecy in this case leave a lot to be desired.

IOLAUS: No! You'll never succeed, not while I live!

HERALD: Get out of here! Whether you like it or not, I shall treat them as Eurystheus' property, as indeed they are, and carry them off.<sup>2</sup>

IOLAUS: O men of Athens,<sup>3</sup> dwellers in this land from earliest days,<sup>4</sup> give us your help! We are suppliants of Zeus of the Agora,<sup>5</sup> yet violence is being used on us and our holy branches are defiled, disgracing your city and dishonouring the gods! [*In the accompanying struggle IOLAUS is knocked to the ground. The CHORUS now enters at speed. They are old men of Marathon, similar in age to IOLAUS.*]

CHORUS: What is this? Why the cry for help near to the altar? What trouble shall we see next?

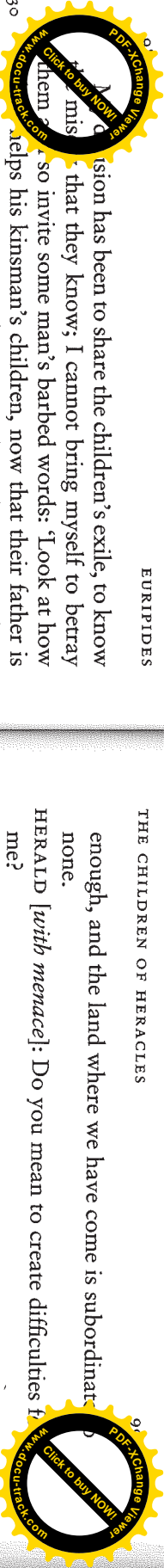
[*Strophe*]: Look at him there, stretched out on the ground, the helpless old man! My poor friend, who was it caused you to fall so miserably on the ground like this?

IOLAUS: The man before you, sirs. He is treating your gods with contempt, seeking to drag me by force from the steps of Zeus' altar.

CHORUS: What is your homeland, old friend? What brings you here to the folk who inhabit the Four Towns? Did you take ship from over the strait, leaving behind the shore of Euboea? IOLAUS: Mine is no islander's life, friends; we have come to your land from Mycenae.<sup>6</sup>

CHORUS: And by what name did the people of Mycenae call you, old fellow?

IOLAUS: I imagine you have heard of Heracles' helper and comrade, Iolaus. My name is not unknown to men.





EURIPIDES

100 CHORUS: We know it well from long ago. But whose children are they, these young lads you have in your care? Tell us.

101 IOLAUS: They are the sons of Heracles, my friends, and have come here to throw themselves on Athens' mercy and on yours.

CHORUS [*Anistrophe!*]: What is it that you need? Tell us, do you want to discuss something with our people?

IOLAUS: We ask not to be handed over or to be dragged off to Argos in defiance of your country's gods.

102 HERALD: But this will not be tolerated by your masters; you belong to them and yet they find you here.

CHORUS: It is right to show respect to the gods' suppliants, sir, wrong that they should be forced by violence to abandon their shrines. Justice is a holy maid; she will forbid this.

HERALD: Then send them away from your land. They belong to Eurystheus. I will then refrain from any violence.

CHORUS: It is an offence against the gods for a city to turn away strangers who beg for help as suppliants.

103 HERALD: It's also a good thing to keep one's feet clear of trouble and to accept good advice when offered.

CHORUS: Should you not have spoken first to the ruler of this land and shown respect for its independence before you ventured on this course, seeking to drag away strangers in open defiance of the gods?

HERALD: Who is king of this land and city?

CHORUS: Demophon, son of Theseus, child of a noble father.

HERALD: Then it is with him that this case would best be argued; further talking is pointless.

[*The KING now enters hurriedly, accompanied by ACAMAS, with their attendants.*]

CHORUS: But here he comes in person, in haste, and Acamas, his brother, to hear this dispute.

120 DEMOPHON: Since you outstripped us younger men, for all your years, in answering the cry for help from this altar of Zeus, tell me, what has happened to make this crowd gather?

CHORUS: These children who sit here as suppliants, my lord, with their wreaths hung around the altar as you see, are the

THE CHILDREN OF HERACLES

sons of Heracles. This man is their father's loyal friend and helper, Iolaus.

DEMOPHON: Why these cries for help, then?

CHORUS [*Pointing to the HERALD!*]: This man was trying to take them away from the altar here by force and made them cry for help. Then he tripped up the old man, a pitiful sight that made me weep.

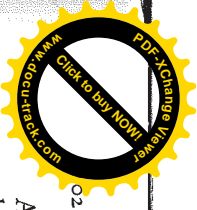
130 DEMOPHON: Well, the clothes he wears, the shape of his cloak are a Greek's, but he is behaving like a barbarian. [*Addressing the HERALD directly!*]: It's time for you to answer my questions and let's have no delay! What brings you here? What land have you come from?

HERALD: Argos is my home, to answer your question. My purpose in coming and my master's name I will tell you now.

King Eurystheus sends me here from Mycenae to fetch these people. And I have come, sir, with many a valid point to make in speech and action alike. I, an Argive myself, am taking off as my prisoners these Argives, runaways from my land and sentenced to death by Argive law. As citizens of that city we are entitled to enforce judgments against our own folk. We have come to the altars of many other people and taken our stand on the self-same arguments without anyone daring to bring troubles on his own head. No, they came here, either recognizing some folly in you, or else prepared to hazard everything on one desperate throw, to win or lose. They would hardly expect you, provided you're in your right senses, when they have trodden up and down the length of Greece, to be the only one to shed foolish tears of pity at their misfortunes.

140 Come, weigh the advantages on either side: whether you grant them a home in your land or let us take them away; where will your interest lie? Here are the kinds of benefits we can bring you: the fighting-force of Argos and all Eurystheus' might – these you gain for Athens. But if, through paying attention to their tearful appeals, you grow tender-hearted, then the matter becomes one of armed conflict. You must not suppose we will give them up without trial of the spear. And what pretexts will you offer to explain your being at war with





Argos? What territory have we taken from you? Have you been cheated by us in any way? What allies will you be defending? For whose sake will they have given their lives in battle, those Athenians you will have to bury? Abuse from your fellow citizens will be your reward, if, to oblige an old relic, a living corpse, so to speak, and these children, you propose to get into such deep water! You will say this gesture will give you grounds for hope,<sup>8</sup> if nothing else; that scarcely matches up to what we offer you now. When these boys reach manhood, if this is what gives you confidence, they'll make poor opposition for Argive men-at-arms! Before that day comes, there's plenty of time for you to be crushed in war.

No, take my advice: make no concession but simply let me take what is mine and then enjoy the friendship of Mycenae; do not fall into your customary trap of siding with the weak when strength is yours for the choosing.<sup>9</sup>

CHORUS-LEADER: No one can judge a case or discriminate in argument until he has heard clearly what both sides have to say.

IOLAUS: My royal lord, in your land I enjoy the right to speak and to listen in turn, without any man intervening to cast me out, as happened in other states in the past. Between this man and us there is no common ground. Now that we are exiles from our own country, cut off henceforth from Argos by the decision of their votes, how can he justify calling us Mycenaeans and making us his prisoners, when it was they who drove us from that land? Argives we are no more. [To the HERALD:] Or do you claim that anyone exiled from Argos should be banished from all Greece? Well, Athens' doors are not barred; her people will not let any fear of Argos make them drive from their land the sons of Heracles. You may have succeeded in driving these children from Trachis or some Achaean hill-town, relying, as you did, not on any principle of justice but on the same kind of boastful claims for Argos as you now make, and ignoring their status as suppliants at the altar. But things are different here. If you succeed and they decide in favour of your arguments, then I no longer recognize Athens as a free state. But the spirit and quality of

her people are things I do know. Death will not do for in the eyes of brave men life counts for less than loss of honour.

As far as Athens is concerned, these words are enough; praise that goes beyond the mark creates ill-feeling and well I know how often I have been angered by extravagant compliments. But I want also to tell you that, as ruler of this land, you have no choice but to protect these boys.

Pirtheus was Pelops' son and the father of Aethra, who gave birth to your father, Theseus. Now I will trace back for you the family of these youngsters: Heracles was son of Zeus and Alcmena and she was born to Pelops' daughter; sons, then, of cousins were these lads' father and your own. Their bloodline, Demophon, is, therefore, close to yours.<sup>10</sup> But family ties apart, let me tell you the obligation that requires you to befriend these boys. I tell you that once I sailed with their father as his shield-bearer to fetch for Theseus the griddle that cost so many lives; and from the murky recesses of Hades he brought your father back safe to this world.<sup>11</sup> All Greece can testify to this. In return for that these boys ask this of you: do not give them up or deny them the sanctuary of Athens, mocking your own country's gods by letting others drag them away! [The children extend their arms in appeal to DEMOPHON.] This act would bring disgrace on you, disgrace, too, on your city, if homeless suppliants, your own kin – oh, what they have suffered! look at them, look! – were dragged away by violent hands. Oh, I beg you most humbly, these hands I clasp together are my suppliant boughs,<sup>12</sup> do not refuse to take under your protection the sons of Heracles! Show yourself to be their kinsman and friend, their father, brother, master even; any fate is better than becoming Argive property!

CHORUS-LEADER: My lord, this tale of woe makes me pity them. Never have I seen nobility so crushed by circumstance. The sons of so great a father do not merit such misfortune.

DEMOPHON: In three ways, Iolaus, my conscience compels me not to reject your appeal. There is, firstly, Zeus, at whose altar you sit, surrounded by these young fledglings. There is





blood and the old debt that requires they should also be in the kindness I had from their father. Thirdly, I will give you my own good name and here I must take special notice of my own name. If I allow a stranger's hands to despoil this altar by force, men will think I am living in a country that is not free and betraying suppliants through fear of Argives. Hanging would appal me less than this! No, I may wish you had arrived in happier circumstances but rest assured: no one will wrest you or these young ones from this altar. [*Turning to the herald*:] And you, sir, return to Argos and tell Eurystheus this. Tell him, besides, that if he brings an action against these strangers in our courts, he shall meet with justice.<sup>13</sup> But never will you take them away by force.

HERALD: Not if it is a just action and my arguments win the day?  
 DEMOPHON: Where is the justice in leading off suppliants against their will?

HERALD: Then the disgrace in this would be mine; your name is untarnished.

DEMOPHON: Hardly, if I allow you to drag them off.  
 HERALD: You need only send them beyond your borders and we will take charge of them then.

DEMOPHON: What a fool you are, presuming to outwit a god!<sup>14</sup>  
 HERALD: It seems your country is the place where criminals should run for help.

DEMOPHON: All men alike find sanctuary where gods have their dwelling.

HERALD: I doubt if Mycenae's citizens will share these sentiments.

DEMOPHON: Do I lack sovereignty, then, in my own land?

HERALD: Not if you behave sensibly and let no harm come to Argos' people.

DEMOPHON: Then Argos be harmed! I will not offend against the gods.

HERALD: It is not my wish that you engage in war with Argives.  
 DEMOPHON: Nor is it mine; but I will not abandon these children.

HERALD: Yet they are mine and I will take them away from here.

DEMOPHON: Then you will find your return to Argos a difficult one.

HERALD: I'll find that out right now when I try.

[*He attempts to seize the children. DEMOPHON raises his staff to prevent him.*]

DEMOPHON: Lay a finger on them and you'll regret it at once! 270

CHORUS-LEADER: No, sir, in heaven's name, don't dare to strike a herald!

DEMOPHON: I shall, unless the herald learns to know his place!  
 CHORUS-LEADER [*to the herald*]: Go on your way! And you, my lord, do not touch him!

HERALD: I am going; one man offers feeble opposition in a fight. But I will return with Ares<sup>15</sup> at my back, all of Argos' spearmen mailed in bronze. A force of ten thousand men waits for me, their shields at the ready, and my royal master, Eurystheus, to lead them in person. He is waiting on the edge of the land where Alcaethous ruled,<sup>16</sup> expecting word from here. When he hears of your outrageous conduct, he will appear with the sun's fury against you and your people, against your land and its crops. How useless they would be, all those fighting men we have in Argos, if we fail to make you pay for this!

DEMOPHON: Go and hang yourself! This Argos of yours does not make me afraid! [*The herald leaves with DEMOPHON'S words ringing in his ears.*] You intended to bring shame on me by dragging these children away from here, but it was not to be! This city of mine is not subject to Argives but free.

CHORUS: It is time to take thought before the Argives' army draws near to our borders; Mycenae's men-at-arms are keen for the fray and after this their appetite for war will be still sharper than before. It is the custom of heralds to exaggerate events, yes, twofold in the telling. Imagine the tale he will unfold to his royal master: My treatment was outrageous! My life hung in the balance!

IOLAUS: The finest gift a child can have is a noble and virtuous father; for nobility of birth weathers adversity more strongly than common blood. We had plumbed misfortune's depths but in these men we have found friends and kinsmen, the only







townsfolk throughout the length and breadth of Greece to champion these youngsters. Give them your right hands, children, give them, and you, sirs, do likewise to them and come close! My boys, we have put our friends to the test; and if ever you do return to your homeland, if ever you inherit your father's house and privileges, think of these men as your saviours and friends for evermore. Never raise your spears in hatred against this land – this you must remember – but think of Athens as your dearest of all friends. They are worth your reverence; they saved us from the mighty land and army of the Argives, shouldering the burden of their enmity, and overlooked our state as homeless beggars, neither giving us up nor driving us from their land. In life or death, when that hour comes, I will sing your praises, my young friend, extolling you at Theseus' side and filling his heart with joy, as I describe how kindly you welcomed and protected the children of Heracles, how nobly you maintain your father's good name throughout Greece, how you have shown yourself no disgrace to your father's noble stock. Not many men are like this; you would find one man in a thousand, perhaps, who could stand comparison with his father.

CHORUS: This land has always wanted to support the weak if justice is on their side. That is why it has endured troubles past numbering for those it has befriended, and now, too, I see this contest of strength drawing near.

DEMOPHON: You have spoken well, old friend, and I am confident that these boys will fulfil your wishes; they will not forget their debt of gratitude. I will muster my citizens and give them their battle stations to meet the Mycenaean's army with a strong force. First I will despatch scouts to meet the danger of a surprise attack (no Argive is slow to answer the battle-cry) and I will gather the prophets together and perform sacrifices. As for you, leave the altar of Zeus and go into the palace, taking these boys with you. You will have servants to look after your needs, though I am away. Go inside, old friend.

IOLAUS: I will not leave the altar. We will remain here and offer our suppliant prayers for the city's success. When you have

completed this trial in triumph, we will withdraw to your palace. The gods who favour us with their support, my lord, are a match for those of Argos.<sup>17</sup> Their champion is Hera, wife of Zeus, but on our side we have Athena. And this, I maintain, contributes to success, having the support of stronger gods. Defeat is something Pallas will not accept.

[DEMOPHON leaves the stage.]

CHORUS [Strophe]: You may utter your loud boasts, stranger coming from Argos, but no more attention do you get from other men. Your rantings will cause no fear in my heart. I pray that Athens the great, city of lovely dancing-grounds, may escape this fate! You are a fool, as is Argos' tyrant lord, the son of Schenelus.

[Antistrophe:] You come to a city of other men, one not inferior to Argos, and, stranger though you are, try to drag away by force homeless suppliants of the gods who have come to my land. You make no concession to our king and have nothing else to say in justification. What right-minded men anywhere could sanction this?

[Epeode:] My desire is for peace. To you, misguided king, I say that, if you come to this city, you will find that experience belies expectation. You are not alone in possessing swords or shields encased in bronze. You may thirst for war but do not, I pray, ravage with your spear the city where the Graces have their happy home.<sup>18</sup> Hold your hand!

[DEMOPHON re-enters with head lowered.]

IOLAUS: My son, you come with anxiety in your eyes. What does this mean? Some new manoeuvre by the enemy to tell of? Do they hold back or are they here? What intelligence have you received? You will certainly not say that the herald was lying to us. That king has enjoyed good fortune in the past and he will take the field against you, I have no doubt, his heart swollen with arrogance against Athens. But Zeus chastises those whose pride of heart knows no bounds.

DEMOPHON: They are here, the Argive army and Eurystheus, their king. My own eyes have seen them. A man who claims true expertise in generalship should not study the enemy



the eyes of messengers. Now, as yet he has not sent down here into the plain but prefers to keep watch from his position on a rocky brow, judging (I give you guess-  
 (are) how best to bring his men down from there to our borders and then establish a secure foothold in our territory. Meanwhile all my own preparations are well made. Athens is armed, the victims for the knife stand ready to fall before the customary gods and the city reeks with sacrifices made by priests.<sup>19</sup> I have gathered together in one place all the chanters of oracles and questioned them on secret lore, both what they have divulged and what withheld from men.

In other matters many differences exist in the oracles, but there is one clear judgement on which all agree: they order me to sacrifice to the daughter of Demeter a virgin girl whose father is of noble blood; this will make our enemy turn and flee and bring my city out of danger. Now, you have seen for yourself the strength of my commitment to you; but I will not kill a daughter of mine or compel any Athenian father to this act against his will. What man, if given the choice, would be so insane as to surrender his beloved children? This very moment my people are to be seen meeting in angry groups, some saying I was right to protect suppliant strangers, others accusing me of folly. If I do carry out this action, then civil war descends on Athens. Think, then, on this, and help me devise a plan for saving you and this land together, without my incurring the disapproval of my people. I do not rule them as some eastern despot his subjects; I must act justly to be treated justly.

CHORUS-LEADER: Surely this cannot be: strangers request our help and Athens is eager to comply but the gods say no?

IONIAUS: Children, we are like sailors who have escaped the savage fury of the storm and found dry land within their grasp only to have the winds sweep them from the coastline back to sea again. So we, thinking ourselves saved when we had now gained the shore, are thrust away from this land. It is hard! O cruel hope, why did you fill my heart with joy then, when you had no thought of realizing your favours? I cannot find fault with this man's actions, of course, if he is not

prepared to sacrifice an Athenian child, and even our present situation raises no complaint from me. If it is the gods that I suffer in this way, this does not lessen my gratitude to you.

But you, children, what am I to do with you? Where are we to turn? What god has been denied the tribute of our suppliant garlands? What country have we not gone to in search of protection? We shall die, children, yes, we shall be given up. And for myself, I do not care if I must die, unless in dying I give some pleasure to my enemies; it is you I weep for, children, you I pity, and Alcmene, your father's aged mother. Poor lady, what little joy for your long years on earth! What misery for me, too – so many hard tasks completed and all for nothing! It was fated, then, fated that we should fall into an enemy's hands and end our days in shame and wretchedness! [Turning suddenly to DEMOPHON:] There is yet a way they may be saved; not all hope is lost. You must help me do something. Hand me over to the Argives in their place, my lord. This removes you from danger and I will ensure the children's safety. I have no need to cling to my life; let it go. It would please Eurystheus particularly to lay his hands on Heracles' comrade-in-arms and subject him to mockery. The man is without finer feeling. A cultured man should pray to have cultured men as his enemies, not barbarians in temperament. One would then receive full measure of respect and fair treatment.

CHORUS-LEADER: Old friend, do not now lay blame at Athens' door; it might be untrue to allege we had betrayed strangers but as a criticism it would still do us harm.

DEMOPHON: Your proposal shows a noble heart but it is impossible. It is not to seize you that the king leads his army here. What use would an old man's death be to Eurystheus? No, it is these young boys he wishes dead. Young men of noble blood growing to manhood with the memory of outrage done to their father make their enemies afraid. All this he has to guard against. But if there is some other plan you know, one that fits our situation better, reveal it. For myself, the oracles I have heard leave me perplexed and full of fear.

[A young MAIDEN now enters from the temple. She is one of Heracles' daughters.]<sup>120</sup>

480 MAIDEN: Sirs, do not think me presumptuous for coming out here; this I ask of you first. What most becomes a woman is keeping silent, knowing her place and staying quietly in the home. I came outside when I heard your cries of grief, Iolaus, not appointed to represent the family but, since I was a fit messenger and very much concerned for my brothers here and myself, wishing to learn if some fresh disaster, crowning our old misfortunes, is causing you pain.

IOLAUS: My dear daughter, there is no child of Heracles I can more justly praise than you and so it has always been. Our course, I thought, was set fair but now it has swung back again to desperate straits. [*He gestures towards DEMOPHON.*] This man tells us that the chanters of oracles prescribe that no bull or calf but a virgin of noble blood must be sacrificed to Demeter's daughter, if we and Athens are to survive. This has reduced us to helplessness. He says he will not sacrifice his own children or anyone else's. His message for me is not expressed clearly but it is clear enough: unless we devise some solution to this problem, we must find some other land; his wish is to keep this country safe.

MAIDEN: This condition, then, binds us as regards our safety? IOLAUS: It does; though we must also be successful in the rest.

500 MAIDEN: Then fear no more Argive spears wielded in anger. I am myself ready to die, good old man, and to take my stand at the sacrifice; I need no order. For what will I say, if Athens sees fit to risk great danger on our behalf, while we who have burdened others with our troubles shrink from meeting death when we might have given them life? It is unthinkable! We would invite mockery besides, if we who sat here as suppliants of the gods, uttering cries of woe, showed ourselves to be cowards, we the children sprung from such a father as ours. Where is such behaviour seen among honourable men? It would, I think, be a finer thing if this city were captured (and heaven forbid that!), while I should fall into the enemy's hands and, for all my father's noble birth, suffer ignominy before facing death that will come to me anyway.

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Then am I to be driven from this land to a life of wandering?

And will I not feel shame when someone says, 'Why have you come here with your suppliants' branches, you who are so in love with your own lives? Leave our land! Cowards will get no help from us! Again, suppose these boys lose their lives and I keep mine (many before now have betrayed loved ones this way), not even then am I confident of happiness. For who will want to take for his wife a girl without male kin or to father children by me? Is it not better to die than meet this fate so undeserved? It would be more appropriate for a woman of less distinguished family than myself.

Consider where this body of mine must meet its end. Put garlands on me, if this is your wish; begin the rite. Win victory over your enemies! This life I offer willingly, with no reluctance; I freely promise to die for these, my brothers, and myself. Through not loving my own life I have made the finest discovery: how to die and not forfeit one's good name.

CHORUS-LEADER: I am amazed. Words defeat me when I hear the magnanimity of this young woman who is willing to die for her brothers. Who in the world could speak or act more nobly than this?

IOLAUS: My dear child, you are your father's true-born daughter without doubt! You show the god-like spirit of Heracles living on in his offspring! My pride when I hear you speak matches the sorrow I feel at what you must suffer. But let me tell you a fairer way for this to be done. [*Turning to servants.*] You must summon here all this girl's sisters and they should then draw lots to decide who is to die for her family. It is not right that you should die before lots have been drawn.

MAIDEN: I will not let my death depend on such a whim. That way my life is taken, not given. No more of that, old man. No, if you accept this offer, if you wish my wholehearted support, this life of mine I give for these boys but give freely, not under compulsion.

IOLAUS: O my dear girl! These words are nobler yet than those you spoke before, though they were unsurpassed. Each word you utter shows more courage, more generosity of spirit than

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the last. I do not, of course, prescribe or forbid your death. Yet you will help your brothers live if you die.

MAIDEN: This is wise. You must not fear pollution from this death of mine. No, since I go to face the terrible knife, let me give my life freely, if I am daughter to the man I claim as my father. Attend me there, good old man! I want your arms to catch me when I die and wrap my body in my dress.

IOLAUS: I could not stand by and watch your death.

MAIDEN: Then ask the king to arrange that women, not men, are holding me as I die.

DEMOPHON: You have my word, you brave, unhappy girl! Indeed my reputation would suffer for many reasons if your passing did not meet with all the proper marks of respect, but chiefly because of your own fearlessness and for justice's sake. Of all women I have set eyes on you are the most courageous.

If there are any last words you wish to speak to these boys and the old man, say them now, before you take your leave.

[Exit.]

MAIDEN [embracing IOLAUS]: Goodbye, old friend, goodbye!<sup>21</sup> Please be the teacher of these boys and raise them to be like you, shrewd in every case, no more than that; this will serve them well. Try with all your heart to keep them safe from death. We are your children and your hands reared us. You see me now offering up the blossom of my marriage hopes as I proceed to give my life for them. And you, my brothers, assembled here before me, all happiness be yours! I pray that you enjoy all the blessings that will now be denied to my life. Honour this old man and my father's mother inside the temple here, old Alcmene; honour, too, these our Athenian friends. And if the day ever comes when the gods grant you release from your sufferings and safe passage to your homeland, do not forget the one who saved you or your obligation to give her burial! A glorious end is but my due; I did not fail you in the hour of need but gave my life that our family might survive. This is my treasure, this will be my return instead of children and surrendering my virginity – if there is any life below the earth.<sup>22</sup> I hope there is not! For if we mortals on the verge of death will not escape even there

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the thoughts that torment us, I do not know where one is to turn. Is death not regarded as the greatest cure for suffering?

IOLAUS: There is no woman, none on this earth, to match you in courage. Be assured, in death as in life you will have from us undying tribute of honour. And now goodbye! Piety forbids that I speak ill of the goddess who has claim on your life, Demeter's daughter. [The DAUGHTER OF HERACLES now leaves.] Oh, boys, this is the end of me! Such pain in my heart, my legs can barely support me!<sup>23</sup> Take hold of me, children, cover my head with my cloak and set me down on a chair! This day's doings bring me no joy but it means our deaths if the oracle is not fulfilled. That is a still greater calamity; yet what suffering is here! [*He collapses on the ground.*]

CHORUS [*Strophe*]: No man, I say, enjoys happiness or endures sorrow in this life except by heaven's will; nor does the same house always stand firm in fortune's favour, but different fates attend it, one after the other. One man is dashed from high to low estate; another, without honour, fate makes prosperous. What is ordained no man may escape; no subtlety of thought will enable him to keep it at bay. Whoever strives to do this will spend his days in idle and unending toil.

[*Antistrophe*]: So, Iolaus, do not lie prostrate or torment your heart with excess of pain but submit to heaven's will. In dying for her brothers and country this unhappy girl wins renown as her share in death; the name she will inherit from men will be one of glory. It is through trials and tribulations that virtue's crown is won. This action of hers is worthy of her father, worthy of her birth. Whatever reverence you feel for nobility when they die, I share it with you.

[*Enter a SERVANT of Hyllus, Heracles' eldest son.*]  
SERVANT: Children, good day to you. Where is old Iolaus? Has your grandmother left her place of sanctuary here?

IOLAUS: Here I am, so far as you can say I'm here.  
SERVANT [suddenly noticing him on the ground]: Why are you lying there? Why the downcast looks?

IOLAUS: I am in the grip of sorrow at the fate of this family.

SERVANT: Get up; lift up your head.

IOLAUS: I am an old man; my strength is finished.

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I am here with news of great joy for you.

IOLAUS: Where was it we met? I don't remember. I work for Hyllus; don't you recognize me when you see me?

IO LAUS: O my good friend, does this mean you are here to save us from harm?

SERVANT: Aye, just that; what's more, this day's fortune has caused the sun to shine on you.

IO LAUS [*moving in excitement to the door of the temple and calling* ALCMENE]: Alcmenae, mother of a great hero, come out and listen to this man's words; they'll give you joy! All this while you've been worrying over the children's return, wasting away with the fear they may not come back.

[ALCMENE *enters in a state of confusion*.]

ALCMENE: What does it mean, Iolaus, this shouting that fills the whole temple? It's not some herald from Argos here again, is it, treating you with violence? My strength may be feeble, stranger, but this you should know: there is no way you will take these children while I yet live! Why, if you do, I no longer wish to be known as the mother of Heracles. Lay a hand on them and you'll have the pair of us to deal with, two old folk – little honour for you there!

IO LAUS: No need for alarm, madam. Don't be afraid. It is no herald from Argos, no unwelcome news we have here.

ALCMENE: Then why did you raise a hue and cry to make me think the worst?

IO LAUS: To make you leave the temple and come out here.

ALCMENE: I know nothing of that. Well, who is this fellow?

IO LAUS: He brings word that your son's son has come.

ALCMENE: O welcome, friend, with this message of yours! But if he has crossed over into this land, why isn't he here? Where is he now? What can have happened to prevent him from appearing here at your side to fill my heart with joy?

SERVANT: He is making camp and marshalling the troops he has brought.

ALCMENE: What you say now no longer concerns us.<sup>24</sup>

IO LAUS: It does; it is our place now to ask questions.

SERVANT: What is it you wish to learn of recent events?

IO LAUS: What size of allied force does he bring with him?

SERVANT: Many men; I can't tell you the actual number.

IO LAUS: The Athenian commanders know, I imagine.

SERVANT: They know all right; he is now on the left wing of their force.

IO LAUS: What? They're armed already, waiting for the order?

SERVANT: Yes, and the beasts for sacrifice have been brought up well in front of the lines.

IO LAUS: Just how much ground is there between them and the Argive spears?

SERVANT: Enough to give a plain view of their commander.

IO LAUS: What is he doing? Seeing to the disposition of the enemy ranks, no doubt?

SERVANT: That was our guess; the words eluded our ears. Anyway, I'm on my way; I wouldn't like my master to cross swords with the enemy without me in my proper place at his side.

IO LAUS: And I'll come along with you; we are of one mind in this, wanting to help our friends by standing shoulder to shoulder, as it is right we should.

SERVANT: That was a foolish thing for someone like you to say. It hardly becomes you.

IO LAUS: And the same goes for failing to share the labours of battle with my friends.

SERVANT: The strength you had once, sir, is yours no more.

IO LAUS: I'll take them on just the same, not one man less of them!

SERVANT: The weight you put in the scale will hardly tip the balance for your friends.

IO LAUS: Not one of my enemies will be able to look me in the eye.

SERVANT: It isn't looks that wound in battle but a sturdy arm.

IO LAUS: Can I, too, not strike through a shield?

SERVANT: You may strike, but before you struck home you'd fall over yourself.

IO LAUS: Don't try to keep me from action. I'm all set to fight.

SERVANT: Fighting is something you're incapable of; the will is there, no doubt.

IOLAUS: I'm not staying here; be sure of that, whatever you say next.

SERVANT: How do you mean to appear as a man-at-arms without any armour?

IOLAUS: There's armour inside the temple here, taken in battle;<sup>25</sup> that's what I'll use. I'll return it, if I'm spared; if I'm not, the god won't ask for it back. Go inside, take down a suit of infantryman's armour from the pegs and bring it to me here double quick! This is a shameful turn of events, that some should fight while others stand back out of cowardice; it is making a housewife out of me!

700 [The servant goes into the temple, shaking his head.]

CHORUS: Your spirit has not been subdued by time; it flourishes, though your strength is gone. Why do you labour in vain at a task that will bring harm to you and little benefit to our city? Resist what your heart tells you and have regard for your years; do not attempt what is impossible. Youth once gone is a prize you will never capture again.

ALCMENE [now breaking her silence in exasperation]: You're out of your wits, proposing to leave me here defenceless with my grandchildren – why?

IOLAUS: Fighting is the business of men; your office is to look after these children.

ALCMENE: And what if you are killed? How will I survive?

IOLAUS: You will be cared for by your son's children, those of them who are spared.

ALCMENE: But if, heaven forbid, something does happen to them, what then?

IOLAUS: These new friends will not betray you; have no fear!

ALCMENE: Yes, this is all that gives me hope; I've nothing else to sustain me.

IOLAUS: And Zeus has regard for your sufferings, I have no doubt.

ALCMENE: Ah, Zeus! I will not speak ill of him but none knows better than he if he gives me the respect he owes me.

720 [The servant comes out of the temple with armour.]<sup>26</sup>

SERVANT: Here you are now, look: armour, a whole set of it! Cover yourself in this and lose no time! The battle is at hand

and Ares reserves his deepest hate for the sluggard! If it's one armour's weight that alarms you, set out unarmed for now and put all the gear on once you've reached the lines. I'll carry it meanwhile.

IOLAUS: Good idea. Bring the armour and have it ready for me to use. But put a spear in my hand and support me by the left elbow as you guide my steps.

SERVANT: Must I take the warrior in hand, then, and lead him like a boy to school?

IOLAUS: I must not stumble as I make the journey for good luck's sake.<sup>27</sup>

SERVANT: If only this stomach for the fight were matched by strength!

IOLAUS: Let's get on – if I miss the battle it will be the end of me.

SERVANT: You're the one who's holding us up, not I; you're deluding yourself with this effort.

IOLAUS: Look how well I'm setting the pace – don't you see?

SERVANT: What I see is speed more imagined than real.

IOLAUS: You'll change your tune once you see me there . . .

SERVANT: And what deeds will I witness? I hope fortune may be smiling on you!

IOLAUS: . . . striking home through some enemy's shield!

SERVANT: If we ever arrive in time; that's my worry.

730 [IOLAUS and the servant have by now almost made their exit. The old man suddenly disengages himself and turns back to make a final speech.]

IOLAUS: O my trusty arm, if only you could lend me now the help you gave when you sacked Sparta at Hercules' side – oh, you were young and strong then, how well I remember!<sup>28</sup> How I would make Eurystheus turn and run! He has not the heart to face the spears' onsets. Wealth has in it a feature that misleads the onlooker: the assumption of courage; for we suppose the prosperous man is wise in all things.

[IOLAUS leaves with the servant. ALCMENE remains.]

CHORUS<sup>29</sup> [Strophe]: O Earth, and Moon that shines the night long, O you radiant beams sent by the god to light our mortal world, deliver your message to me! Proclaim it loud in the

heavens, to the throne where sits our sovereign lord,<sup>30</sup> and in the dwelling of grey-eyed Athena. In defence of the land of our forefathers, of the homes where we give welcome to suppliants, we are ready to cut through the danger with grey steel.

[*Antistrophe:*] That a city as prosperous as Mycenae, so celebrated for the valour of its warriors, should harbour ill-will against our land, this is a fearful thing; but disgrace follows, citizens, if we hand over suppliant strangers at the bidding of Argos. Zeus is our ally, we have no fear, Zeus justly bestows his favour on us; never will we think gods less powerful than men.

770 [Strophe:] Lady divine,<sup>31</sup> as yours is this land's soil and city, as you are its mother, mistress and protectress, direct elsewhere the one who flouts justice by leading here from Argos his spear-shaking host! Our deeds merit better than this – to be driven from our own homes!

780 [*Antistrophe:*] For in your honour the unceasing rite of sacrifice is richly paid, while the music of boys' voices and dancers with their songs keep in memory the waning day of the month. And on the windy hill shouts of joy ring out as girls' feet move the night long in rhythmic dance.

[Enter a MESSENGER.]

MESSENGER: Madam, I bring you news that will not take long to hear and will fill you with joy: we have defeated the enemy and a trophy is being set up with full armour taken from your foes.

790 ALCMENE: Dearest of men, this day has raised your fortunes; this message has won you your freedom. There is one misgiving from which you do not yet set me free: the fear I have that my loved ones may not be alive.

MESSENGER: But they are and there's not a man in the whole army who doesn't sing their praises!

ALCMENE: And the old man, Iolaus, is he safe? Tell me!

MESSENGER: Most certainly; in fact, his contribution to the victory was outstanding, thanks to the gods.

ALCMENE: What's that? You don't mean he managed to achieve anything in the battle?

MESSENGER: He's an old man no more – changed back to a young man again!

ALCMENE: That's miraculous news! But first I want to hear you tell how our friends so happily won the day.

800 MESSENGER: All this I'll make clear to you in a single speech. When we had taken up our positions, armed lines of warriors extended fully and facing one another, Hyllus stepped down from his four-horse chariot and took up a position midway between the two lines of spears. Then he spoke: 'You who have brought your army here from Argos, why should we not let this land and Mycenae return to the ways of peace? You will render no disservice to Mycenae in taking from her a single life. Come, then, fight with me man to man.<sup>32</sup> Kill me and you may take and lead away the children of Heracles; die at my hands and you must surrender to me enjoyment of my father's ancestral privileges and house.'

810 The troops thought he had spoken well. They approved his plan to prevent the conflict and the courage he had shown. But Eurystheus would not be shamed into combat with that young hero, not by the men who heard the challenge or by the craven spirit he was displaying as a commander of soldiers. No, he was an utter coward. And did a man of this stamp come to make slaves of Heracles' children?

820 Now Hyllus withdrew back into our ranks and the priests, realizing that there was to be no agreement reached by single combat, commenced the sacrificing. There was no shirking of the task; at once they started to slit the oxen's throats, spilling their blood to win the gods' favour. Some men began to mount chariots, others to move their bodies close together behind their shields. The Athenian king was giving orders to his soldiers, reminding them of what was expected of men of good stock: 'Fellow citizens, now is the hour to defend the soil that gave you birth and nurture!' The other, in turn, was entreating his allies not to bring shame upon Argos and Mycenae.

830 When the shrill note sounded out from the Tuscan trumpet, giving the signal for the two sides to close in battle, can you imagine the thunderous din of clashing shields, of voices

840 raised in a babel of screams and groans? At first the Argive spearmen broke our ranks with the pressure of their advance but then they in turn gave ground. The battle now grew fierce as men fought face to face with legs interlocked and casualties began to rise. Shouts of encouragement vied with one another: 'Men of Athens!' 'You who farm the land of Argos – keep your city free from disgrace!' Then straining every sinew and labouring hard and long, we at last turned those Argive spearmen in flight. It was then that old Iolaus saw Hyllus setting off at speed, and, stretching out his hand, begged him to give him a place in his chariot. He seized hold of the reins and set off in pursuit of Eurystheus' team. What happened next I could only tell from others' description, as I witnessed no more than this.

850 As he sped past the holy hill of Athena Pallenis, divine maiden, he saw Eurystheus' chariot and prayed to Hebe and Zeus that, for a single day, he might recover his youth and take revenge upon his enemies. Now you are privileged to hear of a miracle.<sup>33</sup> Over the horses' yoke two stars appeared that concealed the chariot in a murky cloud. Those experienced in such matters said they were your son and Hebe. But from that dense gloom stepped Iolaus, displaying the sturdy arms of a young athlete. At the cliffs of Sciron, like the hero he is, he captured Eurystheus' chariot and team. He bound his wrists with firm ropes and returns, leading as his glorious victory-prize the captain-general so favoured once by fortune. This fate of Eurystheus proclaims to all mankind a lesson of utmost clarity: envy no man his apparent prosperity until you see him in his grave; fortune can desert him in a single day.

860 CHORUS-LEADER: O Zeus, turner of the battle-tide, now I may look upon a day that is liberated from a terrible fear!

870 ALCMENE: Zeus, after many a day you took note of my sufferings; but for what you have done here you have my gratitude. Before this day I did not think my son enjoyed a place among the gods but now I know for certain that he does.<sup>34</sup> [*Stretching her arms out to the children:*] Children, now you will be free of your troubles, now free of Eurystheus who will come to a sorry end! Now you will see your father's city and inherit his

landed estates, now offer sacrifice to your ancestral gods that you were denied when as wandering outcasts you lived a life of wretchedness. [*Turning to the MESSENGER:*] But what cunning thought lies behind Iolaus' decision to spare Eurystheus' life? Speak! There is nothing clever, in my judgement, in failing to exact revenge when your enemy is in your grasp. MESSENGER: It was out of respect for you; he wanted you to feast your eyes on Eurystheus in the hour of your victory, when he had become yours to do with as you pleased! Mind you, Eurystheus put up a fight; it took an effort to make him bow his neck to what must be. He had no wish to come before you and take his punishment. [*Taking his leave:*] Accept my good wishes, madam, and be kind enough to remember what you said at the start of my speech, that you would make me a free man. In such a case as this a lady like your worship should honour her promises.

900 CHORUS [*Strophe:*] A pleasant thing to me is dancing,<sup>35</sup> when the flute's clear notes charm the ear and songs are heard; pleasant, too, is Aphrodite when in gracious vein; and to see prosperity smile on friends hitherto unblest, that, too, is cause for joy. Manifold is the offspring of Fate, giver of fulfilment, and of Time, son of Creation.

[*Antistrophe:*] You have a righteous path, Athens; never must you lose hold of this, and that means honouring the gods. The man who denies this rides close to madness, as these proofs make plain. To each age the gods send their message that none can doubt, time and again curbing the arrogance of wicked men.

910 [*Strophe:*] Your son has passed into heaven, old mother. I shun the tale that he descended to Hades' halls, his body wasted in the awful flame of the fire;<sup>36</sup> in the palace of gold he lies in Hebe's lovely arms. Hymenaeus,<sup>37</sup> two children of Zeus were honoured by you, daughter and son.

[*Antistrophe:*] Many a time men's lives are bound up with one another; these boys' father, men say, once received Athena's help and now they have been saved by the city and people of that goddess; she cut short the insolent pride of that man whose violent spirit turned away from justice. May I



always be free from such arrogance and insatiable ambition!  
[*The SERVANT again enters. He is followed by EURYSTHEUS bound as a prisoner.*]

930 SERVANT: My lady, your own eyes will tell you but I'll say it just the same. Here we come, bringing this man, Eurystheus, before you, a sight you didn't expect to see and no less a surprise for him. He boasted he would never fall into your hands when he began his march from Mycenae, battle-hardened spearmen behind him, to sack the city of Athens, his heart swelling with unrighteous pride. But the god cast his vote otherwise and caused a reversal of fortune.

Hyllus and the noble Iolaus were raising a statue in honour of Zeus the Giver of Victory to mark the day of triumph but they told me to bring this man to you, wishing to give you joy. To see an enemy's prosperity transformed to misery, that is true pleasure.<sup>38</sup>

940 ALCMENE [*turning on EURYSTHEUS*]: You loathsome creature, is this you here? Has Justice caught you in her net at last? Now first of all turn your face towards me and have the nerve to look your enemies in the eye; for now you are the conquered and conqueror no more. Are you the man – I wish to know – who saw fit in his wickedness to heap indignities on my son, wherever he may be, sending him off with orders to destroy hydras and lions? I will not speak of the other horrors you devised for him; the tale would be long in the telling. There is no insult you spared him, none; you even made him descend alive to Hades. But these cruelties did not satisfy your effort; from every part of Greece you hounded us, these children and myself, though we sat as the gods' suppliants, some of us elderly, some still children.

950 Then you came here and found a city of free men, men you could not intimidate. Now you must die a coward's death. And yet you will be truly thankful for it: so numerous are your offences you ought to taste death many times over.

960 SERVANT: The law will not permit this; you may not put this man to death.

ALCMENE: Then was it for nothing that we took him prisoner from the battle? What law stands in the way of his death?

SERVANT: The rulers of this land are opposed to it.  
ALCMENE: Are they, indeed? Do they find it dishonourable to kill their enemies?

SERVANT: They do, if the enemy has been taken alive in battle.<sup>39</sup>

ALCMENE: Did Hyllus subscribe to these sentiments?

SERVANT: It is hardly right that he should go against Athenian wishes.

ALCMENE: It is right, however, that this man should forfeit his life and never again see the sunlight.

970 SERVANT: Wrong was done to him then for the first time when he was denied a death in battle.

ALCMENE: Is it no longer right that a man should suffer punishment?

SERVANT: You will find no one here ready to end his life.

ALCMENE: I shall do it; and yet I can say that I am 'someone'.

SERVANT: You will not lack criticism, believe me, if you do this.

ALCMENE: Athens is a city I love; no one will deny me this. But now that this man has fallen into my hands, no one on earth will take him from me. So let them criticize me, all who want to, calling me 'impudent' and 'that woman who is more arrogant than a woman should be'; this is a business I mean to see through.<sup>980</sup>

CHORUS-LEADER: It is a fearful thing, my lady, I know full well, the hatred for this man that possesses you, and yet I can understand it.

990 EURYSTHEUS: Rest assured, madam, you will get no flattery from me, not a single word of pleading for my life, if it means I must be thought a coward.<sup>40</sup> This bitter quarrel of ours was not something I entered lightly. I knew I was your cousin by birth and so kinsman to Heracles, your son. But Hera – it made no difference whether I wished it or not, as she is a goddess – forced me to endure this sickness and so I became your son's enemy. Knowing this was a contest I would have to fight out to the end, I set myself to devise one dangerous trial after another. I would share my thoughts with each passing night and found her hours a fertile mate in my desire to scatter and destroy my enemies and live the rest of my days without fear. For I knew your son to be no ordinary man but

one of true heroic stamp. He may have been my enemy but I recognize his worth; I can give him only praise.

Once rid of him, exposed as I was to the hatred of these children and conscious of an inherited enemy, was I not right to leave no stone unturned as I resorted to executions, expulsions and scheming? These were the means to make my position secure. Now, if you found yourself in my predicament, would you not react by persecuting the angry lions, your enemy's offspring? Oh no, you would have shown tolerance and allowed them a home in Argos! This strains credulity, I think.

Well, now that I have escaped death in battle, despite my best efforts, the laws of Greece impose pollution, if I am killed, on the one who spills my blood. Athens has shown her restraint in sparing me; she honours the gods far more than she respects your hatred of me. You have had your say and heard my response; from this day, if I die, you must call me by two names: the victim whose blood demands vengeance and the hero of noble heart.<sup>41</sup> This, then, is what I feel: I do not wish for death but to quit life would cause me no pain.

CHORUS-LEADER: I would offer a little advice, Alcmena: let this man go; it is the will of Athens.

1020 ALCMENE: What if he dies and I still accede to the city's wishes?

CHORUS-LEADER: That would be the ideal solution. How can this be achieved?

ALCMENE: It is an easy lesson to teach: I will kill him then hand over his corpse to the friends who come for him. As far as his person is concerned, I will not go against Athens' wishes and he by his death will give me the revenge I seek.

EURYSTHEUS: Then kill me; I do not ask for mercy. But as for the people of this city, who spared my life and were ashamed to kill a captive, I mean to present them with a gift: an ancient oracle of Loxias<sup>42</sup> that will confer on them in days to come blessings greater than you now imagine. When I am dead you will bury me where fate prescribes,<sup>43</sup> before the shrine of Pallene's holy Maid.<sup>44</sup> There will I lie under your soil, a guest in perpetual residence, extending goodwill to you and protection to your city but bitterly opposed to these children's

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descendants, whenever in betrayal of this day's kindness I march in strength against your land.<sup>45</sup> Such is the nature of these strangers whose lives you have saved today.

Why, then, knowing what I do, did I come here in defiance of the god's oracle? I thought that Hera was more powerful than any oracle and would not betray me. Do not permit libations or blood of sacrifice to drip on my tomb. I will make their homecoming a sorry one to pay for this. The benefit you will gain from me will be twofold: in my death I will confer blessings on you but injury on them.

ALCMENE [*turning angrily to the Athenians*]: Well, why are you wasting time, after hearing words like these? If it is to bring salvation for your city and your children's children, kill the man! He points out the safest course. He is an enemy and yet he benefits you by his death. [*To servants, standing by:*] You men, take him away and kill him! Then his body is to be thrown to the dogs. [*Rounding finally on EURYSTHEUS himself:*] Don't expect you will ever live to drive me from my father's land again!

CHORUS:<sup>46</sup> This meets my approval. [*To servants:*] On your way, men! No guilt shall fall on the king's head from actions of ours.

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