

SOPHOCLES'
“WOMEN OF TRACHIS”
(aka Trachiniae)
Written 430BCE

TRANSLATED BY
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Dramatis Personae

Deianeira

(wife to Heracles)

Nurse

Hyllus

(son of Deianeira and Heracles)

Chorus of Women of Trachis

Messenger

Lichas

Elder

Heracles

Friends of Hyllus

In front of Heracles' palace in Trachis, Greece

Enter Deianeira and the Nurse

Deianeira:

There's a saying that has been spinning around the world for many years now, which says that, no mortal can know his Fate – if it is good or bad- before he dies. Yet I know mine very well even before I go down to Hades. I know all about it, all about my Fate: My whole life, all of it, is nothing but an insufferable agony. This is because since the days when I was living in my father's palaces –my father being Oineas of Pleuron- I had to endure a torture so enormous that no other Aetolian woman has ever suffered; and all because of my marriage.

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You see, my suitor was the river Ahelous and he came asking my father for my hand in marriage in three shapes: One of the shapes was a bull, another was a twirling and dashing huge snake and his third shape had a human body but a bull's head, his beard like a giant forest through which water sprung in torrents. The thought of having such a partner made me, poor wretch, pray that I'd die before I slept in his bed. But then, much to my relief and delight, came the giant son of Zeus and Alcmene, Heracles, fought with Ahelous, beat him and freed me.

20

I can't tell you what the battle was like because I just don't know; only those who were there and could cope with the sight could tell you. I couldn't. I stood there dumb struck with fear and praying that my beauty would not bring me some dire consequence. But Zeus had a hand in the outcome and that was a good outcome –or at least I say good because I can't be that certain. You see, ever since I was given to Heracles as his wife, I'm always in some trepidation or other, always worrying about him since his troubles don't stop from one night to the next.

30

We have children but he barely spends any time with them –like a farmer who has taken up some distant field and so only sees it when he sows and when he harvests it. This is the sort of life that either brings my husband here or takes him away to serve his boss. But it is now, now that he has completed and surmounted these labours, it is now that I am worried the most. Because since the time he has

killed the awesome Iphitus, we've been exiled from our own homeland and now live in a friend's house, here in Trachis.

40

But no one knows the whereabouts of my husband Heracles. His absence gives me bitter pain. It's been fifteen months now –that's not a mere blink of an eyelid- yet not a message from him. I feel certain that something awful has happened to him. Surely something dreadful must have happened to him. He's left me with such a strange tablet of writing that I am constantly praying that it is not ominous.

Nurse:

Deianeira, I've often seen you crying bitter tears due to Heracles' absence.

50

But now, if it's forgivable for slaves to counsel their masters, please let me speak my view which I hope will help you. You have so many sons, why have you not sent any of them to bring tidings about your husband? More so than the others, send Hyllus who, will look for him if he truly cares to know whether his father is alive and well, wherever he might be. But here is the man himself, approaching with a fast pace, so, if you think my words are beneficial, use them and use him as well.

Enter Hyllus

61

Deianeira:

My son, my darling child! Even poor folk can utter wise words. Here's a woman who, even though a slave gave me a word befitting a free woman.

Hyllus:

What did she say mother? Can you tell me?

Deianeira:

She asked why is it that since your father is absent for so long you did not search for him? That is a shameful thing.

Hyllus:

But I know already where he is, mother, if one can believe what people say.

Deianeira:

So, where did you hear he is, my son?

70

Hyllus:

They say that during the last year he was a slave to some Lydian woman.

Deianeira:

If this is true then I'll believe anything!

Hyllus:

But I've also heard that he's been released from that woman.

Deianeira:

Where then do they say he is now and is he alive or dead?

Hyllus:

He is gathering an army against Eurytus, a city in Euboa, or, at least he's about to do so, soon.

Deianeira:

Do you know my child that he has left me dependable oracles about that land?

Hyllus:

No, mother. I don't know about these oracles. Tell me.

80

Deianeira:

They say that in that land he'll either meet his death or, if he survives this labour he will spend the rest of his days happy. Since he's in such a critical situation my son, wouldn't you like to go and help him? Our own survival hangs upon his own. If he survives, we survive and if he perishes we perish with him.

Hyllus:

I will go mother. Had I known that these oracles existed and what they had foreseen I would have been there with him a long time ago, though the good fortune which always accompanies him does not ask us to be fearful of anything or to be unduly worried about father. Now though that I know the full matter I will do everything in my power to find out the whole truth about what you've told me.

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Deianeira:

Go my son because it is still better to learn good news even if belatedly.

Exit Hyllus and Nurse

Chorus:

The Sun, the Sun, I beg you! Tell me where is Alcmena's beloved child. Search for him. Blazing Sun,

born from your dying sparkling mother, Night. Tell me where he is. Is he perhaps between some ocean straits, or leaning against two continents? Tell me oh lord of the kingdom of sight.

Chorus:

I'm told that Oeneas' daughter over whom such giants fought is constantly grieving like a sad bird and her tearful eyes and her distress won't let her sleep. Her husband's absence nurtures all sorts of fears in her chest and awful thoughts in her orphaned bed bring to her fears of more grief to come.

110

Chorus:

Because just as one sees the countless waves of the ever-tossing, broad North or South seas come and go, as does the Cretan sea of life, one minute hinders him and the next helps him through the many troubles of life. But some god holds Heracles safe above the chambers of Hades.

120

Chorus:

With great respect, my mistress, for all this I accuse you! I mean you shouldn't lose the hope that you hold now.

Chorus:

Zeus has granted no one a life free of troubles but around everyone runs the path of joy and sadness just as the perennial path of the great Bear runs across the sky.

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Chorus:

Because neither the sparkling night, nor misery, nor wealth stay long but suddenly become no more than ashes and smoke and scatter away.

Chorus:

Each of us has in turn joy then misery. That's why, my lady, I ask you to hold on to these hopes. Because what mortal has ever seen Zeus neglecting his children?

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Deianeira:

I can see that you're here because you've learnt of my suffering, yet I pray you never know yourself the suffering that torture my heart. You're ignorant of it now because where youth lives and feeds nothing can torture it: neither the blaze of the sun, nor the rain, nor the countless breaths of the winds but its life rolls in joy's lap free of worry and woe, until the virgin is a woman. That's when she gets her share of torture, her share of agony, her share of nightly fear about her own children or husband.

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It's only then when one can see clearly his own burdens that he can understand mine.

So I have cried because of much suffering but there is one suffering I knew nothing about before but do so now and I shall tell you.

When my husband left for his last expedition he left me some tablets with writing explaining what he was about to do. This he never did before, being certain of his victory and thus of his return even though he had gone out on many such labours. This time, however, as if feeling that he would not return he thought necessary to leave me directions as to what I should inherit as my dowry and how should his children divide his ancient land.

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As well, he had fixed a time: If, he said he had not come back within fifteen months his Fate would have declared him dead; or if he had passed that critical moment then he would live happy the rest of his days.

170

This Fate was, he said, appointed to him by the Oracle at the Ancient Oak at Dodona through the two priestesses called The Doves.

The fifteen months have just come to their completion and so during the night while my sleep is sweet I suddenly jump with the fear that I will hence have to go on living having been robbed of the greatest man of all.

Chorus:

Stop these ill thoughts now. I can see a man wearing a garland heading this way. He looks as if he has something to tell us.

Enter Messenger

180

Messenger:

My Queen Deianeira, let me be the first to rid you of your fear. Know that the son of Zeus and Alcmena is alive and he has come as a victor, bringing choice gifts from the battle for the gods of the city.

Deianeira:

What was that? What do you mean my good man?

Messenger:

I mean that soon your most beloved husband will appear before your home, a victor in all his might!

Deianeira:

From whom did you learn this good news, a citizen or a stranger?

Messenger:

I've heard it from the herald Lichas who is telling it to all and sundry at the fields where the cows graze during summer. I've rushed here hoping to be the first to tell you and so receive some reward and some good favour.

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Deianeira:

But if Fate does favour him, why isn't he himself here?

Messenger:

It's not easy for him, my Queen. Everyone in Trachis is there, all around him, asking him question after question. He can't even make a single step to escape the crowd since every one of them wants to hear the happy story eagerly for himself. So he's forced to stay there but he'll be here soon enough.

200

Deianeira:

O, Zeus who holds in his hands the holy meadows of Oeta! You are late but still you have delivered us our joy. Women, both inside the house and outside in the court, sing! Sing because now, with these news, we are enjoying the light which dawned for me so unexpectedly!

Chorus:

Let there be songs of rejoicing by the maidens of the house, the future wives, let there be songs around the hearth; and let there also be loud songs by men in praise of the quiver-bearing Apollo, our protector.

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Chorus:

Raise up the song, Apollo's song young virgins! And praise and call upon his sister, Artemis from Ortygia hunter of deer who carries lit torches in both hands! Call also upon her friends and nymphs.

Chorus:

I feel I'm floating on air, Lord of my soul and I can't escape your flute.

220

Chorus:

Ah! Look there! Look how the ivy excites me! Ah! I'm whirling round in a Bacchic madness!

Chorus:

Oh, oh! My dear Queen! Look! Look! You can see it as it is, with your own eyes!

Enter Lichas with Iole and a group of other female captives

Deianeira:

I do see, dear friends, I do see it and my wakeful eyes have not failed to also see a procession.

I welcome the herald who has finally appeared. Welcome, that is if your news is to be welcome.

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Lichas:

Our return is joyful, my Queen and we are worthy of your welcome, considering what we've achieved. Because it is just that whosoever returns victorious should be met with heartfelt words.

Deianeira:

Dearest of all men, first of all I'd like you to tell me if I shall receive Heracles alive.

Lichas:

When I left him he was alive, strong, healthy and suffering from no ailment.

Deianeira:

Where? In what land? His own or in some foreign land? Tell me!

Lichas:

At one of the capes in Euboa where he's making sacrifices of first fruits to Zeus on Mount Ceneaeum.

Deianeira:

Is that because of a vow he had made or because of some prophecy?

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Lichas:

A vow, because he has conquered and destroyed utterly the country of these women here.

Deianeira:

And who are these women and to whom do they belong? They look, pitiful if their sadness doesn't deceive me.

Lichas:

To Heracles. After he had destroyed their city, Eurytus' city, he had picked them out for himself and for the gods.

Deianeira:

Is it around this city of Eurytus, that he had spent all these endless days? Was it to sack this city that he had gone for such a huge length of time?

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Lichas:

No, my Queen. He, himself, says he was captured by the Lydians and held there as a slave for the greater part of the time. And we shouldn't think of a story my lady which was Zeus' will. Heracles told me, my lady, that he was sold to the foreigner Omphale with whom he had served twelve of those months. He was so embittered by this shame that he swore a mighty oath that he would make the man who was responsible for his slavery, a slave himself, together with his wife and children.

260

And so he did. After he had himself purified he gathered a friendly army and attacked Eurytus' city because it was he, Heracles thought who was the man responsible for the torture he had to endure. Now Heracles and Eurytus were old friends so, one day Heracles appeared at Eurytus' house as a guest but Eurytus began to insult Heracles most awfully and showed great malice towards him.

Eurytus told Heracles that even though Heracles possessed these unfailing arrows, he was no match to his sons in archery and insulted him further by reminding him that he had allowed himself to be a slave.

Moreover, once, during dinner, when Eurytus was very drunk, he threw Heracles out of his house.

270

This made Heracles very angry and so when Eurytus' son, Iphitus came out one day to search for his lost horses on the ridge of Tiryns at a moment when Iphitus' mind was wandering, Heracles grabbed him and threw him down onto the meadow below.

And this is why our lord, the Olympian Zeus, the father of all, had sent Heracles to be sold as a slave, not forgiving him because this was the first man Heracles had killed by deceit. Had Heracles fought Iphitus openly and beaten him in a just manner, Zeus would have forgiven him. Gods, just like mortals, will also not endure unjust crime.

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This is why all those arrogant men with their insolent tongues end up in their places down in Hades and their city becomes a slave yard. So, these women here have come to you as slaves though once they were free and happy. It's your husband's orders I'm obeying but he, himself will be here soon after he makes purified offerings to our lord Zeus for the sacking of Eurytus' city.

Surely of all these words I've just uttered these must be the best you've heard.

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Chorus:

There, my Queen! You should delight in what you see before you and in his words!

Deianeira:

But of course I am delighted to hear of my husband's just conquest! My joy should certainly equal his victory. Still, circumspect people are careful not to be overconfident for those who had some success lest their luck one day turns to grief.

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I'm saddened, dear ladies, seeing these poor young women enslaved this way, orphaned, without a home and in a foreign land, girls who once could have been the daughters of free men.

O, Zeus, Lord, giver of victories, I hope I'll never see you direct your anger against my own children in this way but if you do, may I not be alive when you do so. So great is my fear when I look at these young girls.

To one of the girls:

Who are you, you poor child? Are you single or married, with a child, perhaps? By your looks I gather you know nothing of such matters but you must be some noble person.

To Lichas:

310

Lichas, who is this stranger? Who are her parents? Tell me, Lichas because I felt more sorry for her when I first saw her. She seems to be the one most able to understand her plight.

Lichas:

Why would I know, my Queen and why do you ask me? Perhaps she is from a good family. I don't know.

Deianeira:

Would she be from the royal house? Had Eurytus any children?

Lichas:

I don't know, my Queen. I didn't bother to ask too many questions.

Deianeira:

Did you not ask any of her fellow travellers?

Lichas:

No, my Queen. I didn't bother to do anything else other than quietly do what was my duty.

320

Deianeira:

Poor girl, tell me yourself. It would be a pity not to know your name.

Lichas:

She won't be using her tongue my lady if one goes by how she behaved so far. She said neither much nor little but, the poor creature cried and cried ever since she left her windswept city. Her Fate is truly bad and so she deserves pity.

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Deianeira:

Well then, let her go into the palace if she likes. I have no wish to add to her woes which are more than enough already. Now let us all go inside so that I can make the appropriate preparations and you can be on your way.

Enter Messenger

The captives, Lichas and Deianeira all move towards the house but the Messenger holds Deianeira back.

Messenger:

Wait a short while, my Queen till after they all gone so that I can tell you something about your visitors. Something which you haven't been told about and about which I know everything.

Deianeira:

What is it, sir? Let me go!

340

Messenger:

Please listen a moment, my Queen. My first words to you were worth listening, so will these.

Deianeira:

Shall I call the others back or is it to me and to my friends here you want to speak?

Messenger:

No, let the others stay inside. I want to speak to you and to your friends here.

Deianeira:

Well then, they're gone inside, so tell us your story.

Messenger:

My Queen, none of what Lichas had just told you was the truth. Either he lied to you just now or he did so earlier when he had first arrived in Trachis.

Deianeira:

What are you saying? Explain yourself clearly. Tell me everything that's in your mind. I'm finding hard to believe your words.

351

Messenger:

My Queen, I heard this man speak in front of a crowd and he said that it was because of this girl that your husband, Heracles had killed Eurytus and sacked the fortress Orchalis and that if there was any god who had inspired him to do that awful deed then that god was Eros. The stories about the Lydians, his slavery under Omphale or the one about hurling Iphitus over a ridge were all lies. So, here he is now, pushing the real story aside to tell us all this new stuff.

360

No, what happened was that Heracles had failed to persuade her father to give him his daughter to have as a secret love so he made up some ridiculous excuse to attack her city, whose King was her father Eurytus. Heracles, killed him and sacked the city. So, as Lichas told the story, Heracles has sent the girl first before him, not as a slave but with the best of ceremonies, since he's head over heels in love with him.

370

I thought I had better told you everything I've heard Lichas tell the folk back there, my lady. Many of Trachis' men also have heard him, my Queen, talking as he did in the centre of the market place. You can ask any of them if you like. If my story displeases you, my Queen then I can assure you I take no pleasure in it either but still, I tell the truth.

Deianeira:

Ah, poor me! What am I to do now? What disaster have I invited into my house? Lichas swore she has no name; is that true? The one with the sparkling eyes and nature.

380

Messenger:

Her name is Iole, my Queen and she's Eurytus' daughter. Lichas didn't ask her about her origin and so he didn't know –or so he says!

Chorus:

Curse them! Not all the evil doers but those who practice evil in the shadows.

Deianeira:

What must I do now, my friends? I feel dumbstruck by all this!

Chorus:

If you're willing to press him hard enough, go and question Lichas. Perhaps he will be forced to tell the truth.

Deianeira:

I shall do that. Your advice is good.

390

Messenger:

What about us? Shall we wait here or go?

Enter Lichas

Deianeira:

No, wait. Here he is now even though I haven't called him.

Lichas:

Lady, as you can see, I'm about to leave. What would you like me to say to Heracles?

Deianeira:

You're in such a dreadful hurry to leave yet we waited for you for such a long time to appear. Stay a while so we may resume our conversation.

Lichas:

By all means. If you have any further questions, here I am.

Deianeira:

And will you tell me the whole truth?

Lichas:

Let Zeus be my witness, I shall certainly do so!

400

Deianeira:

Who is that girl you brought me?

Lichas:

She's from Euboa, my Lady. I don't know who her parents are.

Messenger:

Hey you! Look at me. This way! Who do you think you're talking to?

Lichas:

And who are you to be asking me questions?

Messenger:

If you've got your wits about you you'll answer my question!

Lichas:

Who am I talking to? I'm talking to my Queen, Lady Deianeira. Oeneas' daughter and Heracles' wife – that's if I can believe my eyes.

Messenger:

Ha! That's what I wanted to hear you say: She is your Lady, right?

Lichas:

Of course she is.

410

Messenger:

Well, then what if you were caught lying to her, what penalty should you pay then?

Lichas:

What do you mean "lying?" What is this trap you're setting up for me?

Messenger:

It's not me who's setting traps but it is you, that is for certain!

Lichas:

I'll be off now. I truly didn't have my wits about me standing here listening to you for so long.

Messenger:

One more little question before you go.

Lichas:

Go on then, you've got a tongue, speak.

Messenger:

That captive girl you've brought us here. You know who I mean.

Lichas:

Of course I do. Why do you ask?

Messenger:

That girl who you pretended you knew nothing about her. Didn't you tell us she's Iole, Eurytus' daughter?

Lichas:

Who did I say that to? Who can come up and testify that I said this in front of anyone?

Messenger:

You said this to many folk – a whole crowd of men in the middle of the market place in Trachis.

425

Lichas:

Sure! But I said that I thought I had heard it being said but not that I knew it to be definitely true.

Messenger:

What do you mean that you "thought" you'd heard it? Didn't you swear that you had brought her as a wife to Heracles?

Lichas:

As wife? My dear Lady, please tell me who is this man?

Messenger:

Me? I was one of the men there in the market and I heard you say that it was because Heracles fell desperately in love with this girl that he sacked her city and not because of the Lydian woman.

Lichas:

My Lady, send this man away! He's a sick man and wise people don't waste words on them.

436

Deianeira:

Lichas! You're not talking to some weak woman nor to some mindless woman who doesn't know that nature's creatures are all the same and seek the same ends.

440

By Zeus, the god whose lightning strikes the holy cliffs of Oeta, hide nothing from me! All mortals gain joy equally and whoever stands before Eros like a boxer does before his opponent is stupid! Eros rules all according to his whim –both, the gods as well as me, so why not another woman? Had I had some complaint about my husband for falling into this ailment I would be mad. The same as with this woman who did me no harm.

450

No ill thoughts have crossed my mind about her either but if he has instructed you to lie to me then this is an unwholesome lesson. If on the other hand, you're lying of your own accord how could anyone believe you when you want to call yourself honest? They will regard you, instead, as a criminal.

Come, now, tell me the truth! Just think what an awful thing it is to call a free citizen a liar, because never believe that there's any way you can hide from the truth.

There were many folk who've heard you and they will bear witness to what you've said. As well, don't be afraid to tell me because it is not knowing the truth that most distresses me.

460

After all, has not this single man, Heracles, slept with many women? Not one of these women heard an evil word from me or has she been reproached. The same with Iole. Not even if Heracles melted by his desire for her because I pitied her the most. Her stunning beauty was the cause of her misfortune and the destruction of her life, as well as that of turning her city into a slave yard, without the poor wretch doing a thing.

But let all this flow down the river. Always speak to me the truth and leave to lies for others.

470

Chorus:

My Queen is right. Listen to her and you won't go wrong; and both she and we will be grateful.

Lichas:

Alright, my Lady. I can see now that you look at humans from a reasonable human's perspective so I will tell you all I know. I will keep nothing back and it will all be the truth.

It is true, my Lady. It is just like this man says. One day an overwhelming passion for Iole came over Heracles and that was why her city, Oechalia, was taken by the spear and destroyed.

480

And, to be really truthful, my Lady and give Heracles what he deserves, he didn't tell me to either reveal this secret to you or deny it but, being afraid that I might upset you by telling you this story, I held it back. If you count this act of mine to be wrong then it was I who is at fault.

But now that you've heard the whole story, my Lady Deianeira, for his sake and hers, show kindness to Iole and follow your own words regarding your attitude towards her. Heracles excelled in all matters to do with strength but he was totally conquered by his desire for this young girl.

490

Deianeira:

But of course I shall. I have no notion of falling for this sickness of fighting pointlessly against the gods. It's alien to me and I shall not do it.

Now let us go into the house so that I can give you my message to Heracles and exchange gifts with those he has sent me. It wouldn't be right for you to leave empty handed after coming all the way with so many slaves.

Exit Lichas and Deianeira

498

Chorus:

Aphrodite wins!

Aphrodite wins always!

I won't speak about the gods and how she tricked Zeus, or Hades, lord of darkness, or Poseidon the god who shakes the earth.

Chorus:

What giants then entered the ring to fight for the hand of this Queen, Deianeira? Dust in clouds and fists in blood and hatred in their faces they met each other?

One was the angry river in the guise of a bull –enormous horns, four legs- Achelous from Oenieadae.

510

Chorus:

The other came from Bacchic Thebes, shaking the spear and his club, his unfailing bow and arrows, the son of Zeus.

Chorus:

Both clashed mightily against each other, wounded by their unbearable desire for Deianeira's bed.

Chorus:

And there she was, the beautiful Aphrodite, protectress of virginity, standing in the centre, an umpire of the mighty clash.

520

Chorus:

Then the fists thumped and the arrows flew, the bull's horns joined the clatter. Legs tightly gripped bodies, head struck head fiercely and groan met groan but Deianeira, the girl with the gorgeous eyes –I tell the story as if I were there- stood by a hillock nearby waiting for her Heracles, her groom.

Chorus:

Yet the face, the eyes, the reason for the thunderous clash, await there full of sadness.

Suddenly, like a wandering calf, she was taken away from her mother.

A short pause.

Enter Deianeira holding a small, sealed casket.

531

Deianeira:

Dear friends, while Lichas is talking with the slaves I sneaked out to tell you about a scheme I have devised and to receive from you some comfort for what I am suffering.

Because just like a ship's captain takes on a load too large for his ship so did I take a burden too large for me. Heracles has brought into my house Iole who is no maiden but a grown woman! Not a worthy reward for my faithfulness to him. All these years, keeping his house and home for him!

540

So now, the two of us, Iole and I, await for his embrace beneath the same sheets. Is this the work of a true and noble husband?

But I can't get angry with a husband who is suffering so badly by this affliction of love. Still would

there be a woman who'd be able to share her husband's bed and marriage with another? There's the youth of the one, ripening into its peak bloom and here's the bloom of the other withering away. The eyes pluck the first but the feet walk away from the other.

550

And so I worry lest Heracles calls me his wife but Iole calls him her man.

Still, I have told you earlier that for a reasonable woman it is not honourable to be angry at someone who suffers from such an affliction.

Let me then tell you what remedy I've devised for my sad predicament.

Nessus, a shaggy haired centaur of the olden times, had once, when I was but a child, given me a precious gift. During the last moments of his life I gathered some of his blood into a cup and kept it as a cure-all. Nessus, you see, used to carry folk across the torrents of Evenus for a fee. He used to carry these folk in his bare arms, using neither oar nor sail.

561

And so, the first day I went out of my father's house as a bride to Heracles, he also carried me. He carried me on his shoulders but as we were crossing the river, he handled me in a shameful manner and I screamed.

Heracles turned and shot a poison arrow at the beast piercing him through the chest and lungs. But the beast managed to tell me in time, "Deianeira, daughter of old Oeneus you are the last I've taken across this river; listen to what profit you can gain if you believe me.

572

Gather the blood that clots around the wound the arrow made. It is the poison of the black gall from the Lernean Hydra. Use this as a charm whenever you think Heracles shows an interest in other women.

This charm will bind his love to you."

579

So, my friends, I've just remembered this gift which I have kept locked in safety and have dyed a fine garment with it just as Nessus told me. So that's now the end of that!

May the gods protect me from ever committing a sinful act nor learn of one and I hate women who commit them but I've done this in order to protect Heracles from this girl with spells and magic directed at him, my husband. If you think the deed is wrong then I shall abandon it.

Chorus:

If you're certain that the magic will work then the act is not wrong.

590

Deianeira:

I certainly believe in the magic but I've never tested it.

Chorus:

Then you must test it. Believing in its power without having tested it is no certainty.

Enter Lichas

Deianeira:

We'll test it soon enough. Here's Lichas, looking as if he's in a hurry. Please keep this a tight secret my friends because even a shameful deed, done in darkness is not shameful

Lichas:

Well then, what do I have to do? Command, my Queen, daughter of Oeneus because I've been delayed here long enough.

600

Deianeira: (*handing him the casket*)

Exactly what I was thinking, Lichas, while you were in the palace talking with the women. Now, give my husband this long piece of cloth which I have weaved with my own hands as a present to him.. Tell him at the same time, that no one else must put it on except himself. Let him hide it from the sun's fire and from the fire of the altar and the hearth until the day he must wear it so as offer a sacrifice of bulls. This was my promised oath: If ever I saw him return to my house alive and well, or if I had learnt of his return I would have dressed him up in this beautiful robe to appear before the gods, a brilliantly dressed man ready for a brilliant sacrifice.

612

And so as to make sure he believes you, take with you this seal ring. He will recognise it.

Go now, Lichas but above all think of this: a messenger must not be distracted from his message and that if the message is delivered you'll have the gratitude of both, Heracles and me.

620

Lichas:

I, the faithful follower of Herme's art, will never be seen failing towards you. I will certainly take this casket from your hands and deliver it to him, delivering also your words so that he may be persuaded.

Deianeira:

Time then for you to leave since you know how things stand here.

Lichas:

I shall go. I know how things stand and I shall explain that all is well here.

Deianeira:

Well, your own eyes have seen how well I've received the new girl.

Lichas:

So much so that my heart felt enormous joy.

Deianeira:

I wonder... is there anything else you should tell him? Perhaps about my love but not until we're certain he needs it.

Exit Lichas and Deianeira

634

Chorus:

You folk who live by the warm springs –springs that gush from the mountain rocks as well as from the rocks near the sea. Springs near the hills of Oeta; and you, folk who live in the gulf of Maliea, near the coast that belonged to Artemis, the maiden of the golden distaff, there where the hordes of the Greeks gather for their meetings, there at Thermopylae.

640

Chorus:

Soon the sweet-voiced flute will echo sounds not sad but, like a lyre, it will sing divine hymns. Because any minute now Heracles, born of Zeus and Alkmene will arrive at the palaces carrying unmatched trophies of victories.

Chorus:

Heracles for whom we have waited for twelve months while he was travelling beyond the distant seas, and about whom we knew nothing.

650

Chorus:

His poor wife, Deianeira, crying all the while, sadness and worry breaking her heart. But now the war god has released him from his fury.

Chorus:

Let him come! Let him come!

Let not the many oared ship stop before it arrives, let it not leave the island's sacrificial fire which he lit.

Let him come! Let him come today, saturated deeply with the potion as the Centaur said.

Enter Deianeira

Deianeira:

I hope dear friends I have not gone too far with my actions.

665

Chorus:

What's the matter Deianeira, Oeneus' child?

Deianeira:

I don't know but something tightens my heart. I'm afraid that while I was hoping to do a good deed I did a very bad one.

671

Chorus:

You can't be worried about the gifts you've sent to your husband?

Deianeira:

It is exactly what I'm worried about. I would never advise anyone to do so readily something about which he's not totally certain.

Chorus:

Tell us, if you can what you are afraid of.

Deianeira:

What happened, dear friends is such that once you hear it you'll think it is an astonishing wonder. You see, the white tuft of wool with which I daubed the potion onto the soft cloth before I shut into the casket, away from sun's light and the fire of the temple, completely vanished all by itself without anyone being involved. The wool became ash and blew with the wind from the stone where I had left it.

But listen now to the details of how it all happened.

680

I remember everything the Centaur has told me when the arrow pierced his side, as if it were deeply etched as on a bronze plate on my memory. I obeyed everyone of those instructions to the letter. I had to keep the potion hidden away from the sun's rays, from fire and from the sun's light and heat. There I should leave it sealed until it was time to use it as it was required. But now, when the need did arise for its use, I took a tuft of wool from our flock here, brought it into the house away from everyone's eyes and daubed Heracles' robe with it.

691

Then I folded the garment carefully and placed it in the casket which you saw. But when I returned back into the house I saw a sight unbelievable by humans. You see the tuft of wool I used to daub the potion of the Centaur's blood onto the robe I had accidentally thrown onto the ground where the sun rays hit it. When it became warm enough from that it had turned into something like the sawdust beneath the blades of a saw.

700

Then there was the other incredible thing: From where the tuft of wool was there appeared a thick, bubbling froth, like when the thick juice of Bacchus' fruit fall onto the ground.

What am I the poor wretch to think of this, other than I've done something terrible? After all, why should Nessus let me profit in any way since I was the cause of his death? It doesn't seem right.

710

What he obviously did was to trick me into killing his own murderer and, alas, I've realised this now, now, when it is too late!

If I am not wrong, I, single-handedly, will have been the cause of my husband's death.

I know that the Centaur's arrow destroyed Chiron even though he was immortal and it destroys whichever beast it touches. So then in the same way the black blood that came from his wound will also kill Heracles if it touches him.

720

This then is what I'm resolved to do: If my husband dies so shall I die in the same manner because it is insufferable for a woman of long-standing virtue to live with a stained reputation.

Chorus:

Of course, it's impossible not to be in dire fear when one commits dangerous acts but we also must not lose hope before the act had been committed.

725

Deianeira:

When the idea was ill-advised then the situation is beyond hope.

Chorus:

But for someone who has committed an error unwillingly, the anger is less. Feel comforted by this.

Deianeira:

Such things may be said by someone who has not practiced the deed but not by him who carries the whole burden of it.

Enter Hyllus

Chorus:

Say no more about it, Deianeira, unless you want your son Hyllus to hear it all. Here he is, the son who went looking for his father.

Hyllus:

Mother! I wish one of three things for you: Either that you were dead... or if alive, then I would be someone else's son or if I were still to be your son then if only you had a better heart.

Deianeira:

What have I done to you my son, that you hate me so much?

Hyllus:

Why? Know this, mother: today you have killed my father – your husband – Heracles!

741

Deianeira:

My God! What are you saying, my son?

Hyllus:

An evil that can't be undone by anyone!

Deianeira:

What are you saying son? Who told you that I've committed such a deed?

Hyllus:

No other man's tongue told me. I saw my father's torture with my own eyes.

Deianeira:

Where did you find him? Were you with him during his suffering?

749

Hyllus:

If you must know the full story then let me tell it to you.

Once he had conquered the city of famous Eurystus he left there with all the trophies of his victory and with the first fruits, to bring them to Mount Ceneaeum which is a cape in Euboea, the one crushed endlessly by the waters of the ocean. There, he marked out a wooded precinct and within it he marked off altars. It's there where I first saw him, a thing which made me very happy because I had truly missed him. Just then, when he's ready to sacrifice the countless victims his house messenger, Lichas, arrived bearing your gift, your deadly robe.

760

He put it on just as you had instructed and then began the slaying of the bulls. The first were twelve unblemished bulls, these being the first fruits of the spoils but then he also brought many more bulls, all in all making the sum one hundred bulls.

The poor wretch first he prayed a joyful prayer, happy in his new robe but then, suddenly the blood-dyed sacred flame burst forth and, fed by the resinous pine trees around him rose up and intensified. His body was covered in sweat and the robe clung to his sides and to his every joint, just like a carpenter's tunic.

770

An excruciating pain came upon him gnawing at his every bone. Finally a bloody poison as if from a hateful snake began to eat his flesh.

Now poor Lichas was not responsible for your crime but my father began shouting at him ordering him to explain what evil scheme did he use to bring him the robe. Lichas, of course told him that there was no such evil scheme and that it was your idea, mother, your idea, alone and he delivered the robe to him according to your own instructions.

780

As my father heard this the awful pain convulsed in his lungs again and so he angrily seized a hold of the messenger's foot, just where the joint plays and hurled him hard against a sea-swept rock. The poor man's brains oozed out of his hair and his head was shattered. The silence then was broken by the cry given out by all the people, horrified at the sight of the death of one man and the sickness of the other. No one, though had the courage to approach my father. One minute he would fall to the ground and the next he would jump in spasms high up in the air screaming so much with pain that the rocks echoed with it all around the promontories of Locris and the peaks of Euboea with it.

789

Finally, when all his strength was spent with all the falling onto the ground and the shouting, he shouted curses to his marriage that united you, you, wretched woman with him and with the family of Oeneus because it had ruined his life.

Then he turned his wild eye from the altar's fire and he saw me. Choked with tears he turned and called me to approach him. "Come near, my son; don't leave me in the throes of my calamity. Stay with me even if it means your life.

800

Take me far from here and hide me where no man's eye can see me. If you feel any sorrow for me then take me far from this place. Don't let me die here," he said.

These were his commands so, obediently, we put him in a boat and with great difficulty and while my father was screaming as the spasms gripped him, we brought him here, to this land. You'll see him soon—either still alive or just recently dead.

This is what you've done to my father deliberately mother! Let justice be known, let the avenging Justice and the furies punish you. If it is just for me to utter it then I utter a curse to you. And of course it is just since you've made it just for me to murder the greatest man on earth, so great that you'll never see another like him!

Exit Deianeira solemnly

Chorus: *(To Deianeira)*

Why leave without replying? Don't you know, your silence shows agreement with your accuser?

815

Hyllus:

Let her leave. I wish the winds would take her completely away from my sight. How could she gain the grand name of mother, she who's so unworthy of it? She does nothing to match that word. Mother! Let her leave and let her enjoy the happiness she gave my father!

Exit Hyllus

Chorus:

You see, friends how quickly the old oracle proved itself: Heracles' last labour would be on the twelfth

month on the twelfth year. And so, Zeus' will has been accomplished for how could a dead man who sees the sun no more, continue with his servitude?

828

Chorus:

The deadly Centaur's sly snare, gnaws at his sides while the spinning snake's child – the poison- soaks them. The snake was the begetter of the poison and Death was its begetter.

Chorus:

Heracles' eyes, glued upon a ghost, more deadly than that of the Lernean, how could he look upon tomorrow's sun?

840

Chorus:

Nessus' deadly sting, the sting of this shaggy-haired beast, digs into his sides and from there the blood –the blood boils!

Chorus:

Poor wretch, Deianeira!

She knew nothing of the tragedy to come.

Chorus:

A new marriage entered fast into her house and there she saw the coming disaster. For some of this disaster was she to blame but for another part it was someone else's mind, during that fatal meeting much of which, ruined now, she surely laments. Surely she shed her tears like the sky sheds the rain.

850

Chorus:

But Fate continues her path approaching a treacherous and great calamity.

Chorus:

The fountain of tears burst!

The evil spread!

The ever-famed Heracles has never felt such pain from his enemies

Such pain that's moved by the mortal wound of the spear.

Chorus:

And all this because you brought us here, to our land this girl from the peaks of Oechalia.

860

Chorus:

And who's to blame for these things? Aphrodite, the Cyprian goddess!

Nurse:(*within*)

Ah me!

Chorus:

Do my ears deceive me or have I heard someone crying in the palace?

Nurse: (*within*)

Ah me!

Chorus:

No, it is true, and these are no soft tears but loud crying. That much is obvious. It's full of sorrow.

Some new calamity has hit the palace.

Enter the Nurse crying

Chorus:

Look! Here's the Nurse. How cloudy her eyes, how sad she looks! She has something to tell us.

871

Nurse:

Dear children! How evil was the gift sent to Heracles!

Chorus:

What new thing do you have to tell us, old lady?

Nurse:

Deianeira! Without moving a foot she has gone to the last of her journeys!

Chorus:

She died?

Nurse:

Yes, she has!

Chorus:

So the poor woman is dead!

Nurse:

Dead!

Chorus:

Poor creature. How did she die?

Nurse:

My lady has died a gruesome death. Gruesome!

880

Chorus:

Tell us woman. How? How did she meet her end?

Nurse:

Took her own life using a double-edged sword!

Chorus:

Why? What madness, what sickness killed her with this sharp and cruel steel? How did she think of such a thing all alone –one death after another using the point of a sharp sword? Did you see the deed? Oh what a waste!

Nurse:

Indeed, I saw it. I was standing next to her.

890

Chorus:

Tell us, who actually did the deed?

Nurse:

She did it herself –struck her own body with her own hand!

Chorus:

But what are you saying old woman?

Nurse:

I'm saying nothing else but the truth.

Chorus:

The truth? Is this really the truth?

Nurse:

It is the truth!

Chorus:

The child, the child of the bride in the palace is Vengeance. Mighty Vengeance!

Nurse:

Vengeance indeed. Had you been nearby to see her action, you would have cause to pity her, poor wretch!

Chorus:

And it was truly with her own hand Deianeira killed herself? But how could a woman's hand do such a horrible thing?

899

Nurse:

With a frightening manner. Listen and you can be my witness.

She entered the palace alone and saw her son preparing a soft bier for his father to whom he was returning and she hid herself so well that no one could find her. Then she began crying in front of the altars, crying that she was left an orphan and crying also for all the things she touched and always loved to use.

910

She ran up and down the palace and if she saw any of her slaves she wept because she loved them all dearly. She cried for herself and for her barren existence.

When she had ended all this she rushed into Heracles' marriage chamber and, hiding myself, I saw her spreading sheets on my master's bed. Then she jumped onto it and lay in the middle of the bed.

920

Hot tears streaming from her eyes, she said, "goodbye my happy marriage bed, goodbye for ever since you'll never have me sleep here again."

Then with a slashing hand she undoes the buckle that held her robe on her left breast side, revealing her left arm and side. I immediately rushed as fast as I could to find Hyllus and tell him what his mother was preparing to do and as we ran back we saw her –alas!- to plunge the two-sided sword into her liver below her heart.

930

As soon as Hyllus saw her he screamed with sorrow because he felt he was the cause of her death. He became aware of the events too late -that his mother had caused his father's death because she was tricked by the Centaur.

Then her lamenting son, began to cover her with kisses falling beside her crying out that it was his

wicked slander that had killed her and weeping and groaning because now he was bereft of both his parents.

So that's how matters stand here. What fool would count on the future? One day, two days or more to come? Nothing can be certain until today has safely ended.

947

Chorus:

Which of the two deaths is the saddest? Which should I lament the most? I, poor wretch, find it hard to decide.

Chorus:

Here, in the palace lies one, the other we await to come.

The one we see is as sad a sight as the one we're waiting to see.

Chorus:

Come wind, come cleansing gust and take me away from here!

Chorus:

Save me from death at once received when I shall see our mighty Zeus born Heracles.

960

Chorus:

He's coming now, they say, tortured by a torture incurable, a sight incomprehensible, unspeakable.

Enter men carrying Heracles on a stretcher. Hyllus and an elder in attendance.

Chorus:

And so the unbearable sight is near now and we cry like the shrill voiced nightingale. Here now they are, a party of strangers carrying him, bringing him home, hushed voices and slow feet, as if they're carrying one of their own.

Chorus:

And he is silent. Is he dead or is he asleep.

971

Hyllus:

Alas, my father! Alas, alas! Alone, without you, my father, I shall be lost.

Elder:

Hush, my son, don't yell and wake your dear father's dreadful pain! He's alive though only just. He's asleep right now so control your lips.

Hyllus:

What was that old sir? Did you say he's alive?

Elder:

Yes, my son, but don't wake him up from the sleep that controls him and his pain, nor wake up the awful torture that comes and goes.

Hyllus:

Yet a dreadful weight of sadness tortures my heart and I am going insane.

Heracles:

O Zeus! Zeus where in the world am I? What men surround my bed, this bed of horrible torture, of endless agony? Oh, what misery! Ah! Again this cursed potion tears into my body!

Elder:

Was I not right to ask for quietness and for not sending sleep away from his head and eyes?

992

Hyllus:

Yes but how could I bear to look upon such a sight?

Heracles:

Cenaeon altars that I've built, is this the reward I get for sacrificing to Zeus? O Zeus! Torture upon torture ever-growing whose end I cannot see. Madness upon madness ever growing madness that cannot be calmed.

1000

Which is the charm and which the practitioner who'll sent this torture to its final bed, if not my father, Zeus? A miracle I'll never see.

The elder tries to comfort Heracles.

Oh! Leave me! Leave this unlucky creature to rest for the last time. Let me, poor wretch, sleep. Where are you touching me? Why lay me that way? You want to kill me!

Ah! You've waken a sleeping evil!

1010

Ah! The pain has returned! It's fully awake! Ah! I'm in its grip.

What manner of mortals are you, Greeks? Where are you from, you evil men for whom I've fought all

manner of beasts –in the oceans and in the forests? I'm now dying because of you yet none of you will bring me fire or a sword to help me against my torture.

Ah! Come someone! Come and cut off my head, end this misery, end this life! Ah! Ah!

1017

Elder: *(to Hyllus)*

Come, my son, come Heracles' son and help me ease his agony. All this – all this is too much for me!

Hyllus: *(puts his arms around Heracles)*

I have my arms around him but this god-delivered torment is not relieved. I cannot help -neither from inside nor outside can I minister any help that would cause his pain to leave him.

Cures such as this can only be administered by Zeus.

Heracles:

Ah, my son, where are you? Here. Hold me from here and lift me...

Oh, God! The shocking dread returns! This evil, unbeatable torments will consume me!

1030

O, Pallas Athena! Pallas, the pain still gnaws at my body.

Come my son, have pity on your father. Draw out your sword and with no fear cut me across the neck, cure the pains that are eating my flesh.

Ah! Such are the pains I wish for your god-hated mother! God-hated, evil woman who has destroyed me in this way.

Oh, sweet Hades! Hades, Zeus' brother, put me to sleep and take me quickly.

Put an end to my torture!

1044

Chorus:

Friends! What shocking Fate tortures our Lord and hero! What ill luck! I shudder at the sight.

Heracles:

Too many the hard labours that my arms and shoulders had endured –too many to mention them all yet neither Hera nor Eurystheus made me endure a thing so dreadful as that which Oeneus' daughter, beautiful and evil both at once, Deianeira, has made me endure.

1051

A robe covered with the blood of the evil centaur –a robe woven you could say by the spirits of Vengeance- a robe that's killing me!

It has stuck upon the sides of my body and, having gone through my flesh is now eating at my entrails –my veins, my lungs. It had sucked out of my heart all of its fresh blood.

Here, in this net of death I am captured though no enemy spears, nor the children of earth-born giants, nor the madness of wild beasts, nor Greeks nor barbarians, nor foreign lands which I cleansed did this to me. Only a woman, a woman! A woman alone, weak, unmanly and without the help of a sword has vanquished me!

1064

Come, my son. Show that you are my own true son and disown your mother now. From now on do not call her your mother. Go and take her and bring her here to me. Put her into my hands so that I can be certain that your suffering is greater when you see my body writhe with pain than when you see hers, suffering justly from the same torture.

Come, my son, have courage and feel pity for your father just as other do. See? I am crying like a little girl and groan, a thing that no one can say has ever seen me do. I have always –without the slightest sigh- followed all of my Fate's labours yet now, here I am, sighing and groaning and crying, behaving like a little girl.

1070

Come, stand by your father. Think! What was the evil that brought me to this?

Pulls away the sheet which covered him

I pull away whatever hides my body so that you can see with your own eyes.

Look at me all of you!

Look at my outraged body! All of you! Look at my pitiful state!

1081

Ah, unhappy Heracles! Ah! Again the evil torture burns me through and through! Again the spasm of the all-consuming pain rushed through my sides leaving me not a moment's rest!

Lord Hades, receive me!

Zeus' lightning rod strike me!

Zeus, my father, hurl upon me your thunderbolt! Hurl it now because again it's eating me, because it's burgeoning because it's torturing me!

1090

Oh my hands, my back and shoulders! My arms whose strength once killed the beast of Nemea a beast that sent a chill of fear through the shepherds' bones; arms whose strength has tamed the Hydra of Lerna, the awful army of monstrous Centaurs, mighty in their strength and arrogance, horses feet. Arms that killed Eurymanthus' beast and the three-headed dog of Hades who lived below the earth, Echidna's scion and the snake that guarded the golden apples in the remotest lands. And I have tasted many thousands of other labours and no one has managed to defeat me and stand a trophy of victory over me.

But now, with nerves shattered and flesh torn to shreds, I am beaten by one hidden enemy. I! I whom they call "son of the most glorious mothers" and say that my father is Zeus who lives in the stars! But you should know this well: Even though my strength is gone and I can barely move, still I shall punish the woman who brought this about.

Let her come here!

Let her tell all that, alive or dead, Heracles always punished the evil doers!

1112

Chorus:

Unhappy Greece! What tears will follow this man's loss!

Hyllus:

Father, since you give me leave to speak, listen to me in silence. I know you are in agony. I need to ask of you only what is just. Trust me and let the anger that consumes your entrails be measured, otherwise you won't be able to understand how mistaken your joy will be and how equally mistaken is the bitterness that consumes you.

1120

Heracles:

Quickly say what you want and be done with it because the way I feel now I can understand nothing of your twisting words.

Hyllus:

I want to speak about my mother. About her present situation and about the evil deed she committed without knowing it.

Heracles:

You evil man! You dare mention your mother's name to me? Your mother who has killed your father?

Hyllus:

Yes, father because such is the situation with her that I cannot be silent.

Heracles:

Oh, no! Of course not, if you consider what she has dared already!

Hyllus:

Or what she has done this very day!

Heracles:

Speak then but beware you don't make a man unworthy to be my son out of yourself!

1130

Hyllus:

Here it is. My mother is no longer alive – she is dead! Killed!

Heracles:

Killed? By whom? What sudden dreadful news is this I hear from you?

Hyllus:

She was not killed by another's hand but by her own. She's gone.

Heracles:

Ah! She should have died before this by my own hand. It would have been just.

Hyllus:

Your heart, too, would change course if you knew the whole truth.

1135

Heracles:

You began your speech with strange words but go on, speak what's in your mind.

Hyllus:

She erred while she was trying to do good.

Heracles:

She killed your father. You call that "good?"

Hyllus:

She erred by sending you what she thought was a lover's potion. She became afraid when she saw all these new wives filling her house.

Heracles:

So who is this great magician we have here in Trachinae?

Hyllus:

Nessus the Centaur. A long time ago he persuaded her that he could inflame your passion towards her with his magic.

Heracles:

Oh, unhappy man! I am lost. Gone! The day's light has gone from me now! Now I know the true weight of my misery! I am lost! I am lost!

Go on my son, go and gather all your siblings and my luckless mother, Alkmene who needlessly became Zeus' wife, bring her to listen to the last words of the oracle I know.

1151

Hyllus:

Your mother is not here. She has gone to live by the shore of Tiryns. As of your children, she has taken some with her and some live in the city of Thebes. Still, the rest of us live here so tell us what you need father and we will obey you.

Heracles:

Now, then is the time for you to show me if you are truly worthy of being called my son. Listen to what you must do.

1161

My father has left me a long time ago, with this prediction, that I shall be killed not by a living man but by someone dead, living in Hades' world. And so it happened. This Centaur has killed me, he, in the underworld, me alive on Earth.

And there are more predictions that are also accomplished like all the old ones and agree with them, ones which I've received from the oak of the many voices at Zeus' Dodonae, that time when I went to the sacred grove of the mountain folk the Selli. I keep these oracles in a safe place.

One such prophecy said that at this time I should have all my labours completed and that I should then be happy. What was meant by "happy" though was that I would be dead –the dead don't have to worry about doing any labours.

Well now, my son, since these prophecies have come to be true you must stand by me and not against me. Do not sharpen my tongue but give me your aid willingly to show that for you, the best law is for the children to obey their parents.

1179

Hyllus:

Father you're frightening me with your talk but yes, I shall obey you.

Heracles:

Well then, first things first: give me your hand.

Hyllus:

What is the reason you need such assurances, father?

Heracles:

Why are you hesitating? Forget your suspicions.

Hyllus:

Here is my hand, father. I will not argue.

Heracles:

Now swear by the head of Zeus my father.

Hyllus:

What? What should I swear by? Will you not explain, father?

Heracles:

You will swear that you will do as I say.

Hyllus:

I swear and let Zeus be my witness!

Heracles:

And if you break this oath you will suffer great tribulations.

1190

Hyllus:

I will suffer no tribulations because I will not break my oath; but I swear to it.

Heracles:

Well then, do you know the highest peak of Oetis, Zeus' peak?

Hyllus:

I know it because I went there many time to make sacrifices.

Heracles:

Lift me up with your own hands and taking as many of your friends, as you want take me there. There, once you've cut enough wood from the deep-rooted oak and the hard-wooded wild olive trees, make a pile of them and place my body upon it. Then light a torch of pine and light the pyre without crying, without losing a tear, without a sigh, holding your tears, a true son of mine. Do as I say or else even in the underworld my curses will lay heavy on you for ever.

Hyllus:

No father! What is this you've made me do? What did you say?

Heracles:

I've told you what you must do. Otherwise call anyone else you want, father and let no one call you my son any more.

1206

Hyllus:

Father, think again! What are you asking me to do? Do you want me to be your god-cursed murderer?

Heracles:

No. Rather to be my healer and my only doctor, the only one who can save me from my torture.

1210

Hyllus:

But would I be healing you by setting your body alight?

Heracles:

Well, if you're afraid of lighting the pyre at least do the rest.

Hyllus:

I shall not refuse the task of taking you there.

Heracles:

And what of the laying of the wood?

Hyllus:

So long as I don't apply my own hand to the fire. I shall do all the rest and you shall have no reason to complain.

Heracles:

That would be more than enough, though I have one more little request above and beyond the other big ones.

Hyllus:

Whatever it is, even a greater one, it shall be done.

Heracles:

You of know Eurytus' daughter.

1220

Hyllus:

I suspect you mean Iole.

Heracles:

The same. This then is what I would like you to do, my son.

If you want to respect the oath you gave me, once I die, take this woman as your wife. See that you don't disobey me on this. No other mortal must take this woman as a wife –she has shared my bed.

You must be the only one she marries. Don't refuse this request because even though you've agreed to all my other bigger requests, if you disagree with the smaller then my gratitude would be cancelled out and lost.

1230

Hyllus:

Who can argue with a man as sick as you are, father but to obey such thinking is intolerable.

Heracles:

Your words make me think you have no intentions of doing anything I've asked of you.

Hyllus:

But Iole is the sole reason for your situation as well as mother's death! Who then –other than a man made sick by the Furies- would want to make her his wife? Father, I'd rather die also than to live with my enemy.

Heracles:

Ah! It looks like this man will not give a dying man his due. The curses of the gods await you if you disobey me!

Hyllus:

Ah! I fear your words stem from the painful sickness that grips you.

Heracles:

Because you have awoken the sickness yourself.

Hyllus:

Oh, poor wretch. What am I to do?

Heracles:

Why do you see it unjust to obey your father?

Hyllus:

But must I learn to behave like an impious man, father?

Heracles:

There's nothing impious in pleasing my heart.

Hyllus:

Then do you truly command me to do this?

Heracles:

Yes, and let all the gods be my witness!

1249

Hyllus:

Well then, I will not disobey you and agree to do it, accepting the gods as my witness that this act is yours. I shall therefore not fear that I will be accused of being a traitor and your disobedient son.

Heracles:

That was well said – at last! But come now, my son. Quick now hurry and put me on the pyre before a new spasm tears at my body. Hurry, lift me, take me to my final rest, to the end of my agony, to the end of Heracles.

Hyllus:

Nothing can now stop us from obeying your every command, father.

Hyllus and his companions lift Heracles onto a stretcher.

Heracles:

Come then lest this wild torture wakes again! O, my hard soul, make my lips two huge stones and fasten them with iron, let no cry escape them. Let this awful work be done as if it were a pleasure for all.

Hyllus:

Come friends, take a hold of the stretcher. Let all men witness the cruelty of the gods, unjustly causing all of what you see. Because even though he is their son they disregard his torture.

What will happen from now on no one knows but as for this it is great sadness for us and a great shame for them. Hardest of all was my father's fate, who suffers this torment.

You, women of Trachis, do not stay here, here in the palaces where you saw these horrible deaths and many great sufferings. All these are the works of Zeus.

Exit all

END OF SOPHOCLES'

"WOMEN OF TRACHIS"

Note: Readers might wish to also read Seneca's "Heracles Oetaeus" Translated by F.J. Miller:

<http://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaHerculesOetaeus.html>

AND

Seneca's "Heracles Furens" Translated by F.J. Miller:

<http://www.theoi.com/Text/SenecaHerculesFurens.html>