

Excerpt from Euripides' *Herakles* (lines 1189-1426)

The action up until now: The goddess Hera has sent Madness upon Herakles. Madness has driven Herakles to kill his wife and his children. He mistook them for his enemies, being under the influence of Madness. Herakles is just coming out of the frenzied state he was in, and beginning to realise what he has done. He is contemplating suicide. Suddenly, Theseus of Athens appears on the scene. After a discussion with Herakles' father Amphitryon, Theseus learns what has happened. At this moment, Herakles is lying in among his dead family members, ashamed of his actions, not wanting Theseus to see his face.

I have included some lines here of the discussion between Theseus and Amphitryon, that will lead into the essential discussion between Herakles and Theseus.

Theseus

What do you mean? What has he done?

Amphitryon

Slain them in a wild fit of frenzy with arrows dipped in the venom of the hundred-headed hydra.

Theseus

This is Hera's work; but who lies there among the dead, old man?

Amphitryon

My son, my own enduring son, that marched with gods to Phlegra's plain, there to battle with giants and slay them, warrior that he was.

Theseus

Ah, ah! whose fortune was ever so cursed as his?

Amphitryon

Never will you find another mortal that has suffered more or been driven harder.

Theseus

Why does he veil his head, poor wretch, in his robe?

Amphitryon

He is ashamed to meet your eye; his kinsman's kind intent and his children's blood make him abashed.

Theseus

But I come to sympathize; uncover him.

Amphitryon

My son, remove that mantle from your eyes, throw it from you, show your face to the sun. As a counterweight, fighting along with my tears, I entreat you as a suppliant, as I grasp your beard, your knees, your hands, and let fall the tear from my old eyes. O my child! restrain your savage lion-like temper, for you are rushing forth on an unholy course of bloodshed, eager to join woe to woe, child.

Theseus

Enough! To you I call who are huddled there in your misery, show to your friends your face; for no darkness is black enough to hide your sad mischance. Why do you wave your hand at me, signifying murder? Is it that I may not be polluted by speaking with you? If I share your misfortune, what is that to me? For once I had good fortune with you. I must refer to the time when you brought me safe from the dead to the light of life. I hate a friend whose gratitude grows old; one who is ready to enjoy his friends' prosperity but unwilling to sail in the same ship with them when they are unfortunate. Arise, unveil your head, poor wretch, and look on me. The gallant soul endures such blows as heaven deals and does not refuse them.

Heracles

O Theseus, did you see this struggle with my children?

Theseus

I heard of it, and now I see the horrors you mean.

Heracles

Why then have you unveiled my head to the sun?

Theseus

Why have I? You, a mortal, can not pollute what is of the gods.

Heracles

Try to escape, luckless wretch, from my unholy taint.

Theseus

The avenging fiend does not go forth from friend to friend.

Heracles

For this I thank you; I do not regret the service I did you.¹

¹ The "service" that Herakles is speaking about here is his rescue of Theseus from the Underworld. One version of the myth (according to Plutarch) says that Theseus and his companion Pirithuous were bound to chairs in the Underworld when they went to attempt to capture Persephone as a bride for Pirithuous. When Herakles was on his 12th labour, to fetch the three-headed dog Cerberus, he was able to free Theseus from the chair. Theseus says that he is happy to repay the service here.

Theseus

While I, for kindness then received, now show my pity for you.

Heracles

Ah yes! I am piteous, a murderer of my sons.

Theseus

I weep for you in your changed fortunes.

Heracles

Did you ever find another more afflicted?

Theseus

Your misfortunes reach from earth to heaven.

Heracles

Therefore I am resolved on death.

Theseus

Do you suppose the gods attend to your threats?

Heracles

The god has been remorseless to me; so I will be the same to the gods.

Theseus

Hush! lest your presumption add to your sufferings.

Heracles

My ship is freighted full with sorrow; there is no room to stow anything further.

Theseus

What will you do? Where is your fury drifting you?

Heracles

I will die and return to that world below from which I have just come.

Theseus

Such language is fit for any common fellow.

Heracles

Ah! yours is the advice of one outside sorrow.

Theseus

Are these indeed the words of Heracles, the much-enduring?

Heracles

Though never so much as this. Endurance must have a limit.

Theseus

Is this the benefactor and great friend to mortals?

Heracles

Mortals bring no help to me; no! Hera has her way.

Theseus

Never would Hellas allow you to die through sheer perversity.

Heracles

Hear me a moment, that I may enter the contest with words in answer to your admonitions; and I will unfold to you why life now as well as formerly has been unbearable to me. First I am the son of a man who incurred the guilt of blood, before he married my mother Alcmena, by slaying her aged father. Now when the foundation is badly laid at birth, it is necessary for the race to be cursed with woe; and Zeus, whoever this Zeus may be, begot me as an enemy to Hera; yet do not be vexed, old man; for you rather than Zeus I regard as my father. Then while I was being suckled, that bedfellow of Zeus foisted into my cradle fearsome snakes to cause my death. After I took on a cloak of youthful flesh, of all the toils I then endured what need to tell? what did I not destroy, whether lions, or triple-bodied Typhons, or giants or the battle against the hosts of four-legged Centaurs? or how when I had killed the hydra, that monster with a ring of heads with power to grow again, I passed through a herd of countless other toils besides and came to the dead to fetch to the light at the bidding of Eurystheus the three-headed hound, hell's porter. Last, ah, woe is me! I have dared this labor, to crown the sorrows of my house with my children's murder. I have come to this point of necessity; no longer may I dwell in Thebes, the city that I love; for suppose I stay, to what temple or gathering of friends shall I go? For mine is no curse that invites greetings. Shall I go to Argos? how can I, when I am an exile from my country? Well, is there a single other city I can rush to? Am I then to be looked at askance as a marked man, held by cruel stabbing tongues: "Is not this the son of Zeus that once murdered children and wife? Plague take him from the land!" Now to one who was once called happy, such changes are a grievous thing; though he who is always unfortunate feels no such pain, for sorrow is his birthright.

This, I think, is the piteous pass I shall one day come to; for earth will cry out forbidding me to touch her, the sea and the river-springs will refuse me a crossing, and I shall become like Ixion who revolves in chains upon that wheel. And so this is best, that I should be seen by no one of the Hellenes, among whom in happier days I lived in bliss. What right have I to live? what profit can I have in the possession of a useless, impious life? So let that noble wife of Zeus dance, beating her foot in its shoe; for now has she worked her heart's desire in utterly confounding the first of Hellas' sons. Who would pray to such a goddess? Her jealousy of Zeus for his love of a woman has destroyed the benefactors of Hellas, guiltless though they were.

Theseus

I cannot counsel you, rather than to go on suffering. There is not a man alive that has wholly escaped misfortune's taint, nor any god either, if what poets sing is true. Have they not intermarried in ways that law forbids? Have they not thrown fathers into ignominious chains to gain the sovereign power? Still they inhabit Olympus and brave the issue of their crimes. And yet what shall you say in your defense, if you, a child of man, take your fate excessively hard, while they, as gods, do not? No, then, leave Thebes in compliance with the law, and come with me to the city of Pallas. There, when I have purified you of your pollution, I will give you homes and the half of all I have. Yes, I will give you all those presents I received from the citizens for saving their fourteen children, when I slew the bull of Crete; for I have plots of land assigned me throughout the country; these shall henceforth be called after you by men, while you live; and at your death, when you have gone to Hades' halls, the whole city of Athens shall exalt your honor with sacrifices and a monument of stone. For it is a noble crown of a good reputation for citizens to win from Hellas, by helping a man of worth. This is the return that I will make you for saving me, for now you are in need of friends. But when the gods honor a man, he has no need of friends; for the god's aid, when he chooses to give it, is enough.

Heracles

Alas! this is quite beside the question of my troubles. For my part, I do not believe that the gods indulge in unholy unions; and as for putting bonds on hands, I have never thought that worthy of belief, nor will I now be so persuaded, nor again that one god is naturally lord and master of another. For the deity, if he be really such, has no wants; these are miserable tales of the poets. But I, for all my piteous plight, reflected whether I should let myself be branded as a coward for giving up my life. For whoever does not withstand disasters will never be able to withstand even a man's weapon. I will be steadfast in living; I will go to your city, with grateful thanks for all you offer me. He weeps. But I have tasted of countless troubles, as is well known; never yet did I faint at any or shed a single tear; no, nor did I ever think that I should come to this, to let the tear-drop fall. But now, it seems, I must be fortune's slave.

Well, let it pass; my old father, you see me go forth to exile, and in me you see my own children's murderer. Give them burial, and lay them out in death with the tribute of a tear, for the law forbids my doing so. Rest their heads upon their mother's bosom and fold them in her arms, sad fellowship, which I, alas! unwittingly did slay. And when you have buried these dead, live on here still, in bitterness maybe, but still constrain your soul to share my sorrows. O children! he who begot you, your own father, has been your destroyer, and you have had no profit of my triumphs, all my restless toil to win for you by force a fair name, a glorious advantage from a father. You too, unhappy wife, this hand has slain, a poor return to make you for preserving the honor of my bed so safely, for all the weary watch you long have kept within my house. Alas for you, my wife, my sons! alas for me, how sad my lot, cut off from wife and child! Ah! these kisses, bitter-sweet! these weapons which it is pain to own! I am not sure whether to keep or let them go; dangling at my side they thus will say, "With us you destroyed children and wife; we are your children's slayers, and you keep us." Shall I carry them after that? what answer

can I make? Yet, am I to strip myself of these weapons, the comrades of my glorious career in Hellas, and put myself in the power of my foes, to die a death of shame? No! I must not let them go, but keep them, though it grieves me. In one thing, Theseus, help my misery; come to Argos and help me to manage the conveyance of the wretched dog; lest, if I go all alone, my sorrow for my sons may do me some hurt.

O land of Cadmus, and all you people of Thebes! cut off your hair, and mourn with me; go to my children's burial, and with one dirge lament us all, the dead and me; for on all of us has Hera inflicted the same cruel blow of destruction.

Theseus

Rise, unhappy man! you have had your fill of tears.

Heracles

I cannot rise; my limbs are rooted here.

Theseus

Yes, even the strong are overthrown by misfortunes.

Heracles

Ah! Would I could become a stone upon this spot, oblivious of trouble.

Theseus

Peace! give your hand to a friend and helper.

Heracles

No, let me not wipe off the blood upon your robe.

Theseus

Wipe it off and spare not; I will not refuse you.

Heracles

Bereft of my own sons, I find you as a son to me.

Theseus

Throw your arm about my neck; I will be your guide.

Heracles

A pair of friends indeed, but one a man of sorrows. Ah, aged father, this is the kind of man to make a friend.

Amphitryon

Blessed in her sons, the country that gave him birth!

Heracles

Theseus, turn me back again to see my children.

Theseus

What for? Do you think to find a drug in this to soothe your soul?

Heracles

I long to do so, and would embrace my father.

Amphitryon

Here am I, my son; your wish is no less dear to me.

Theseus

Have you so short a memory for your troubles?

Heracles

All that I endured before was easier to bear than this.

Theseus

If anyone sees you play the woman, they will scoff.

Heracles

Have I by living grown so abject in your sight? It was not so once, I think.

Theseus

Yes, too much so; in your sickness you are not the glorious Heracles.

Heracles

What about you? What kind of hero were you when in trouble in the world below?

Theseus

I was worse than anyone as far as courage went.

Heracles

How then can you say of me, that I am abased by my troubles?

Theseus

Forward!

Heracles

Farewell, my aged father!

Amphitryon

Farewell to you, my son!

Heracles

Bury my children as I said.

Amphitryon

But who will bury me, my son?

Heracles

I will.

Amphitryon

When will you come?

Heracles

After you have buried my children.

Amphitryon

How?

Heracles

I will fetch you from Thebes to Athens. But carry my children within, a grievous burden to the earth. And I, after ruining my house by deeds of shame, will follow as a little boat in the wake of Theseus, totally destroyed. Whoever prefers wealth or might to the possession of good friends, thinks wrongly. Theseus and his attendants lead Heracles away.

Euripides. *The Complete Greek Drama*, edited by Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. in two volumes. 1. Heracles, translated by E. P. Coleridge. New York. Random House. 1938.