

Euripides' *Children of Heracles*  
(Translations by David Kovacs)

Passage 1: *Children of Heracles* 12-47

Iolaus

I keep safe beneath my wings these children of his, though I myself need someone to save **me**. When their father departed from the earth, first Eurystheus determined to kill us. But we escaped from him, and though we lost our city, [15] we saved our lives. Yet we wandered in exile having been banished from one city to another. For in addition to the other troubles Eurystheus plagued us with, he thought it right to commit this outrage against us: he would send heralds wherever on earth he learned we were trying to settle [20] and demand our surrender and keep us out of that land, alleging that the city of Argos was no slight thing to make a friend or foe of and that he himself enjoyed high prosperity. And these men, seeing that my power was weak and that these children were small and had lost their father, [25] honored the mightier side and kept us from the land. With these children who are exiled I too am in exile, and I companion their wretchedness with my own. I shrink from abandoning them for fear someone might say, 'Look, when the children do not have a father, [30] Iolaus does not protect them, though he is their kinsman!' Since we have been banished from all the rest of Greece, we have come to Marathon and the land that borders it and are sitting at the altars of the gods supplicating for help. For it is said that Theseus' two sons [35] dwell in the plain of this land, which they received by the drawing of lots among the descendants of Pandion.<sup>1</sup> Those two are kin to these boys. This is the reason we have come this journey to the borders of glorious Athens. Our flight is generated by a pair of grey-heads, [40] with me giving anxious thought for these boys while Alcmena guards the daughters of her son within the temple, clasping them in her embrace. For shame prevents us from putting young girls before the crowd and standing them at the altar. [45] Hyllus and those of his brothers who are older are seeking where on earth we might establish a stronghold if we are thrust against our will from this land.

**Passage 2: *Children of Heracles* 95-287**

**Chorus**

[95] What is your errand? To win the right to address the city?

**Iolaus**

We ask not to be surrendered, not to be dragged off against the will of your gods to Argos.

**Herald**

But this will not satisfy your owners. [100] They have control of you and have found you here.

**Chorus**

It is right to respect the gods' suppliants, stranger. They should not be made to leave their sanctuaries with violence. For Lady Justice will not be so treated.

**Herald**

[105] Then send these chattel of Eurystheus from your land and I shall not use force.

**Chorus**

It is godless to yield up a suppliant band of strangers.

**Herald**

Yes, but it is a fine thing to keep one's foot clear of trouble [110] and to hit on the superior plan.

**Chorus**

Should you not have respected the freedom of this land by telling its king before showing this boldness rather than forcibly dragging these strangers from the gods' sanctuary?

**Herald**

Who is the ruler of this land and its city?

**Chorus**

[115] Demophon, the nobly sired, the son of Theseus.

**Herald**

It is chiefly before him, then, that I must contend for this plea of mine. Any other words of mine have been spoken to no purpose.

**Chorus**

Look! Here he comes himself in haste, and his brother Acamas with him, to hear these words.

*Enter by Eisodos B Demophon and Acamas.*

**Demophon**

*To the Chorus Leader*

[120] Since, old as you are, you have outstripped younger men in coming to help here at this altar of Zeus, tell me, what misfortune causes this crowd to assemble?

**Chorus**

These, the sons of Heracles, sit as suppliants with their wreaths upon the altar, as you see, my lord, [125] as does also their father's trusty companion Iolaus.

**Demophon**

But why does this event call for cries of woe?

**Chorus**

This man, trying to take them by force from this altar caused them to cry out and has knocked to the ground the old man, which makes me shed a tear in pity.

**Demophon**

[130] And yet the clothing he wears and the shape of his garments is Greek, but these deeds are those of a barbarian hand. But it is your task to tell me, and without delay, from what land it is that you have come hither.

**Herald**

I am an Argive, for that is what you ask me. [135] But I want to tell you my purpose in coming and who it is that has sent me. Eurystheus, king of Mycenae, has sent me here to fetch these children. I have come here, stranger, with many just pleas both to carry out and to urge.

I am an Argive myself, and I seek to take away [140] these Argives who have run away from my own country, persons sentenced by the laws of that country to die. It is proper that we who are the city's inhabitants should pass binding sentences against our own number. We have come to the hearths of many others [145] and have taken our stand on these same principles, and no one has had the hardihood to increase his own troubles. But they have come here either because they espy some folly in you or because out of desperation they are risking their all to see whether <you> will or will not prove to be < [150] such a mad and brainless fool>. For they surely do not expect that while you are in your right mind, you alone of all the Greeks they have approached will take foolish pity on their misfortunes.

Come, make the comparison: what is your profit if you let these men into your country, and what if you let us take them away? [155] From us you stand to gain things such as this: winning for your city an army as powerful as that of Argos and the whole might of Eurystheus. But if you give ear to the pleas and the lamentations of these and grow soft, then the matter becomes one [160] for spears to settle: for you must not suppose that we will let the contest go with no play of cold steel. What then will you say? Of what lands will you allege you have been robbed, of what booty despoiled, that you go to war with Argos? In defense of what allies, on whose behalf [165] will you bury the fallen? Your citizens will have nothing good to say of you if for an old man's sake, a nullity as good as dead, and for these children you put your foot in the mire: [170] if you let go of your true advantage, you will find only hope, and that is a thing that falls far short of cash in hand. Against the Argives in their panoply these boys, when grown to manhood, would be but poor fighters, if it is this prospect that raises your spirits, and there is a long stretch of time before then, when they might well be killed. But take my advice: [175] give me nothing but merely allow me to take what is mine and thereby win Mycenae for an ally. Do not make the mistake you Athenians so often make, taking the weak for your friends when you might have chosen the strong.

**Chorus**

Who can decide a plea or judge a speech [180] until he has heard plainly from both sides?

**Iolaus**

*Rising to his feet*

My lord, since this is the law in your land, I have the right to hear and to speak in reply, and no one shall thrust me away before I am done, as they have elsewhere.

We have nothing to do with this man. [185] For since we no longer have a share in Argos and this has been voted, but are in exile from our native land, how can this man rightfully take us off as Mycenaeans, when they have banished us from the country? We are now foreigners. Or do you think it right that whoever is banished from Argos [190] should be banished from the whole Greek world? Not from Athens, at any rate: they shall not drive Heracles' children out of their land from fear of the Argives! This is not Trachis or some Achaean town, places from which you expelled these children, suppliants though they were and seated at the altar. You did not do this by any lawful plea [195] but by prating of Argos' importance, just as you are doing today. If that happens here and they judge your case the winner, Athens in my judgment is no longer free. But I know the nature and temper of these men. [200] They will be willing to die. For in the eyes of good men a sense of honor is more precious than life.

I have said enough to the city: excessive praise is hateful, and I myself know that I have been displeased at being overpraised. [205] But I want to say to you, my lord, that it is your duty as the city's leader to save these children. Pittheus was son of Pelops, and from his loins came Aethra, and from her was begotten your father Theseus. Now I shall give you these children's lineage. [210] Heracles was the son of Zeus and Alcmena, and she was daughter of Pelops. And so your father and theirs are the sons of full cousins.

This is your standing in kinship with these children, Demophon. But I shall tell you what you are obligated to render these children, apart from the tie of blood. It is my claim [215] that as right-hand man to Heracles I once sailed with Theseus to fetch the girdle, cause of many deaths, <belonging to Hippolyta. Heracles gave him as his reward the fair Antiope><sup>1</sup> and brought your father out of the dark recesses of Hades. All Hellas bears witness to this. [220] For these things his children here ask repayment [, not to be surrendered, not to be dragged off against the will of your gods and banished from the land. For this is a particular shame to you, and an evil in the eyes of the city, for suppliants, wanderers, kinsmen—alas for the pain, [225] look at them, look at them—to be dragged off by force].

*Kneeling before Demophon as a suppliant*

But I beg you and wreathe you in my suppliant grasp, do not—I entreat you by your chin—do not scorn to take the children of Heracles into your embrace. Be to them kinsman, be friend, [230] be father, brother, master: for all else is better than to fall under the power of the Argives.

**Chorus Leader**

My lord, I have listened and I pity these for what has befallen them. Nobility overwhelmed by mischance—this I now see in its full. For these children, [235] born of a noble sire, are suffering undeserved misfortune.

**Demophon**

*Raising Iolaus to his feet*

Three paths of concern compel me, Iolaus, not to reject your words. Most important is Zeus, at whose altar you sit with this assembly of fledglings; [240] second, kinship and the debt long-standing that these children should for their father's sake be well treated at our hands; and last, fear of disgrace, the thing I must be most concerned about. For if I am to allow this altar to be robbed by a foreigner, it will be thought [245] that it is no free land I govern but that I have betrayed suppliants for fear of the Argives. And that is nearly enough to make me hang myself. But while I could wish that you had come in happier plight, still even so have no fear that anyone shall drag you and the children by force from the altar.

*To the Herald*

[250] As for you, go to Argos and report this to Eurystheus, and say in addition that if he makes any charge against these foreigners, he shall receive his due. But you shall never take these children away.

**Herald**

Not even if I have a just cause and am victorious in my plea?

**Demophon**

And how is it just to abduct a suppliant?

**Herald**

[255] Is that not a blot on my name but no harm to you?

**Demophon**

The disgrace is mine if I let you drag these children off.

**Herald**

Put them beyond your border and we will take them from there.

**Demophon**

You are a fool to think you can outwit the god.

**Herald**

This is the place, it seems, for the worthless to flee.

**Demophon**

[260] The gods' sanctuaries are a common defense for all.

**Herald**

Perhaps Mycenae's people will not think so.

**Demophon**

Am I not then the master of things here?

**Herald**

Yes, if you are wise enough not to injure **them**.

**Demophon**

Be injured! I shall not defile the gods.

**Herald**

[265] I am not eager you should have war with Argos.

**Demophon**

No more am I. But these I'll not let go.

**Herald**

I'll take them all the same for they are mine.

**Demophon**

Then you will find the trip to Argos hard.

**Herald**

I'll learn from the event if this is so.

**Demophon**

[270] You touch them to your cost—your present cost!

**Chorus Leader**

In the gods' name, don't dare to strike a herald!

**Demophon**

I will, unless the herald learns some sense.

**Chorus Leader**

Be off! *To Demophon* And you, my lord, do not touch him.

**Herald**

I am going: a single man can put up only a weak fight. [275] But I shall return with a great force of Argive soldiers in full armor. Ten thousand targeteers are waiting for me with Eurystheus their lord as general. He is standing by on the edge of Alcahous' land,<sup>1</sup>awaiting the outcome of events here. [280] When he hears of your insolence, he will appear in his fury to you, your citizens, your land, and its crops. There would be no point in Argos' possessing so great an army of young men if we did not punish you.

**Demophon**

Clear out! I am not afraid of your Argos. [285] It was not destined that you would remove these suppliants from Athens and disgrace me. For the city that I rule is not Argos' subject but free.

**Passage 3: *Children of Heracles* 309-332**

**Iolaus**

My children, we have put our friends to the test. [310] And so if you ever return to your country and live in your ancestral home and <get back again> your patrimony, you must consider <the rulers of this land> for all time as your saviors and friends. Remember never to raise a hostile force against this land, but consider it always your greatest friend. The Athenians are worthy of your reverence [315] seeing that in exchange for us they took the enmity of the great land of Argos and its army, even though they saw that we were wandering beggars [they did not give us up or drive us from the land]. [320] In life <I shall proclaim to everyone your nobility>, and in death, when I die, I shall stand next to Theseus and extoll you in praise and cheer him with this story, that in kindness you took in and defended the children of Heracles and that you enjoy good repute throughout all Hellas [325] and keep your father's reputation and, though born of noble stock, you in no way prove less noble than your father. Of few others can this be said: only one man out of a great multitude can be found who is not inferior to his father.

**Chorus Leader**

It is always the desire of this land [330] to help the weak in a just cause. Therefore she has borne countless toils on behalf of friends, and now too I see that this struggle is upon us.

## Passage 4: *Children of Heracles* 389-602

### Demophon

The Argive army has arrived and Eurystheus its leader. [390] I have seen him myself: a man who claims to be well versed in the art of generalship must not observe the enemy by means of messengers. But he has not yet sent his army into the plain of Attica. Rather, sitting upon a rocky brow, [395] he is deliberating (I will tell you my impressions) by what route he should bring so great an army within the borders of our land and safely encamp it. Where my own part is concerned, all is well prepared: the city is in arms, the sacrificial victims stand [400] in readiness for the gods to whom they are to be sacrificed, and offerings are being made throughout the city by diviners. But I gathered all the chanters of oracles into one place and closely examined their oracles, both public and secret [405] old oracles making for the safety of the city]. On other points these oracles showed many differences. But one thought shines forth from them all: they bid me to sacrifice a maiden to the daughter of Demeter, a maiden daughter of a noble father, to rout the enemy and save the city.

[410] As you see, I am very eager to help you, but I shall not kill my own daughter nor shall I force one of my citizens to do so against his will: and who would be so foolish as to give away of his own will a child he loves beyond all else? [415] Now you will see crowded assemblies being held, with some maintaining that it was right to protect strangers who are suppliants, while others accuse me of folly. If I do as I am bidden, civil war will break out.

[420] Accordingly, consider these facts and join with me in discovering how you yourselves may be saved and this land as well, and how I may not be put in the wrong in the eyes of the citizens. I do not have a monarchy like that of the barbarians: only if I do what is fair will I be fairly treated.

### Chorus Leader

[425] But does the god really forbid this city to protect the strangers, though she is eager to do so and they need her help?

### Iolaus

My children, we are like sailors who have escaped the wild blast of the storm and have the dry land in their grasp, [430] then are driven by winds into the deep again! That is how we are being thrust from this land when we are already at its shores and feeling safe. Ah me! Why did you once give me pleasure, wretched hope, if you did not intend to carry your favor to its end? [435] For, of course, Demophon's position is quite understandable, that he is unwilling to kill the children of his citizens. But I can find words of praise even for what has happened here: if it is the gods' will that I should fare thus, you have not lost the gratitude we owe you.

My children, I do not know what I am to do with you. [440] Where shall we turn? What god's altars have we not garlanded? What land have we not come to as a bulwark? We shall be killed, my children, we shall be given over. I do not care for myself, that I must die, unless my death gives pleasure to my enemies. [445] It is you I weep for, you I pity, my children, and Alcmene your aged grandmother. How unlucky you are in your long life! I too am luckless for having toiled so long in vain. It was fated, fated, I see it now, that we must fall into the hands [450] of our enemy and lose our lives in disgrace and pain!

*To Demophon* But here is what you must help me to do (for I have not completely lost hope for the safety of the children) : hand me over to the Argives, my lord, in place of these children. Do not put yourself in danger, but let these my children [455] be saved. I must not try to save my own life: let it pass. Eurystheus would most like to get hold of me and outrage Heracles' old ally. The man lacks all feeling. Wise men must

pray that they will have a wise man for a foe, not one who is proud and insensate: [460] for in that case a man gets mercy and justice in full measure.

### **Chorus Leader**

Old sir, do not lay this charge against the city. For though it may be false, it is still a painful reproach, that we have betrayed strangers.

### **Demophon**

The suggestion you make is noble but impossible. [465] It is not from desire for you that the king has marched his army here (for what profit does Eurystheus have in the death of an old man?) but to kill these children. Noble offspring are a terror to enemies when they grow to manhood and remember the outrage committed [470] against their father. Eurystheus must consider all these things. But if you know of any other more suitable plan, put it at our disposal, for I have heard the oracles and am helpless and fearful.

### **Maiden**

Strangers, please do not consider my coming out [475] to be overbold: this is the first indulgence I shall ask. I know that for a woman silence is best, and modest behavior, and staying quietly within doors. But since I heard your groans, Iolaus, I have come out. I have not, to be sure, been designated the most important member of the family, [480] but since I am in some way fit to hear this and since I care greatly about my brothers and myself, I wish to ask whether some new misfortune on top of our old troubles is gnawing at your mind.

### **Iolaus**

My child, for a long time now I have been justified [485] in praising you more than any other of the children of Heracles. We thought that our course had gone well, but now we find that it has changed once more into trouble past all help. This man says that the chanters of oracles tell us to sacrifice not a bull or a calf [490] but a maiden of noble parentage to Demeter's daughter if we are to survive and this city likewise. This is our perplexity: the king says that he will not sacrifice either his own children or those of anyone else. And he tells me by hint and indirection that, [495] unless we find a way out of our difficulties, we must find some other land, since he desires to save this country.

### **Maiden**

Is it this prophecy that keeps us from being safe?

### **Iolaus**

Yes, this prophecy. In all else our fortune is good.

### **Maiden**

[500] Then fear no more the Argive enemy's spear. For I am ready, old man, of my own accord and unbidden, to appear for sacrifice and be killed. For what shall we say if this city is willing to run great risks on our behalf, [505] and yet we, who lay toil and struggle on others, run away from death when it lies in our power to save **them**? It must not be so, for it deserves nothing but mockery if we sit and groan as suppliants of the gods and yet, though we are descended from that great man who is our father, [510] show ourselves to be cowards. How can this be fitting in the eyes of men of nobility? Much finer, I suppose, if this city were to be captured (God forbid!) and I were to fall into the hands of the enemy and then when I, daughter of a noble father, have suffered dishonor, go to my death all the same! [515] But shall I then accept exile from this land and be a wanderer? Shall I not feel shame if someone thereafter asks, [Why do you come here with your suppliant branches when you yourselves lack courage? Leave this land: for we do not give help to the base]?

[520] But not even if these men perished and I lived on would I have the hope of happiness (and many ere now have betrayed friends in this hope) : for who would wish to take to wife a girl bereft of family or would desire to beget children with me? [525] Is it not better to die than to win this fate, a fate my birth does not deserve? The other course might more befit someone else who is not as distinguished as I.

Lead me to the place where my body must be killed, and garland me and take the first sacrificial cutting, if it is your will. [530] Defeat the enemy. For my life is at your disposal, and full willingly. I offer to be put to death on my brothers' behalf and on my own. For of course if I am no coward I have made a most splendid discovery, how to die with glory.

**Chorus Leader**

[535] Ah me! What shall I say in response to the proud words of this maiden, who is willing to die for her brothers? What mortal could speak nobler words than these, what mortal could perform them hereafter?

**Iolaus**

My child, you are born of **him**, none other was your father: [540] you are the seed of that divine spirit of Heracles. And your words bring me no disgrace, though your fate gives me pain. Yet I shall tell you how things may be done with greater justice: we must call all your sisters hither [545] and the one that draws the lot must die for the family. It is not right for you to die without drawing lots.

**Maiden**

I shall not die by the chance of the lot. For this death wins no thanks: do not suggest it, old man. Rather, if you approve and desire [550] to make use of my zeal, I give my life willingly to these my brothers, but not under compulsion.

**Iolaus**

Ah! This speech is more noble than the last, and the last was noble indeed. Each brave deed of yours [555] and each noble word surpasses the last. I do not bid you to die, nor yet do I forbid it. But if you die, you benefit your brothers.

**Maiden**

You wisely free yourself. Do not be afraid that you will be partaker of the stain of my blood. Instead, I set you free from it.

[560] But come with me, old man (for I wish to die in your arms) and stand by me and cover my dead body with its garments. Come with me (for I am going to the terror of slaughter) if indeed I am the man's daughter I claim to be.

**Iolaus**

I could not stand by as you are killed.

**Maiden**

[565] Well at least ask this man's permission for me to breathe my last in the hands not of men but of women.

**Demophon**

It shall be as you ask, luckless maiden, since it would be a disgrace to me also if you were not given proper rites. There are many reasons, your bravery [570] and the justice of your request. You are the bravest of all women, the bravest I have ever seen. But, if it is your will, say your last words as a farewell to your brothers and the old man and go.

**Maiden**

Farewell, old man, farewell! Please train up [575] these boys to be such men as yourself, wise for every occasion, not more wise than that: that will suffice. With all your zeal try to save them from death. We are your children, we have been raised by your hands. You see that I am offering my young womanhood [580] and about to die in their place. And you, my brothers who are with me, may you have happiness, and may there befall you all the things my heart shall be cheated of! Treat with honor the old man and also the old woman [585] within the house, Alcmene, my grandmother, and also these your hosts. And if the gods ever grant you a respite from your troubles and a return to your home, remember what manner of burial you ought to give to the woman who saved your lives. A burial with all honors, you know, would be only right. For I did not fail [590] to help you but died on behalf of the family. These deeds I have as treasures to replace children and the days of my maidenhood, if indeed there is any existence beneath the earth. But I pray that there may not be. For if we mortals who are on the point of death are to have cares even in that place, [595] where can we turn? For death, men think, is trouble's greatest cure.

**Iolaus**

But know, o bravest of all women, know that both in life and in death we will hold you in great honor! [600] Farewell! Reverence keeps me from speaking ill of the goddess to whom your body is devoted.