

Anna, my sister, you share my guilty conscience.

Soon, you will lay my ashes to rest.

Do not inscribe, "Here lies Sychaeus's Elissa"

on my tombstone, but this epitaph:

AENEAS PROVIDED THE MOTIVE AND WEAPON,

BUT DIDO'S DEATH WAS BY HER OWN HAND.

HEROIDES VIII: HERMIONE TO ORESTES

Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menelaus, was originally betrothed to Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. During the Trojan War, however, her father promised her to the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus, also called Pyrrhus. It is during this marriage that she writes to Orestes.

[two spurious lines omitted]

Achilles's son Pyrrhus, as self-willed as his father,

keeps me shut away against all moral norms.

I've done all I could, refused to be in detention;

my woman's hands could do no more than that.

"What are you doing, Pyrrhus? I'm not without a defender;

I have in fact a master of my own."

He was deaf as the sea when I shrieked out, "Orestes!"

and dragged me disheveled into his house.

It couldn't have been worse if Sparta had been taken

and I were enslaved by barbarians.

Andromache was not as abused by the victorious Achaeans

when Danaan fire destroyed wealthy Troy.

But you, Orestes, if you care for me, if you have any pity,

lay claim to what's yours with no timid hand!

You would fight if anyone rustled your cattle,

but drag your feet when someone steals your wife?

When it comes to this, you should be like Menelaus,

whose stolen spouse was a cause for war.

Had he just snored away in his deserted palace, my mother

would still be in her marriage to Paris.

You don't have to launch a thousand ships, don't have to

raise an army—just get yourself here!

Not that I'm not worth being redeemed by a battle,

and it's good for a husband to fight for his wife.

And we have the same grandfather in Pelopian Atreus.
If we weren't married, you would still be my kin.
Help your wife, husband, help your sisterly cousin—
you are pressed to duty by a double bond.

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Tyndareus, sage counselor, arranged our marriage,
a grandfather ruling a grandchild's fate.
My father, unaware, had promised me to Aeacus's son,
but a grandfather outweighs a father in this.
When I was wed to you, the marriage harmed no one;
if I marry Pyrrhus, you will be hurt by me.
And my father Menelaus will be indulgent to us:
he himself succumbed to the winged god.
What he allowed himself he will grant his son-in-law,
and my beloved mother will be precedent.
You are to me what my father is to my mother,
Pyrrhus now playing the Trojan stranger's part.
Let him boast endlessly of his father's achievements:
you, too, can point to a parent's brave deeds.
Tantalus's son commanded everyone, including Achilles,
one a soldier, one a commander in chief.
You trace your ancestry back through Pelops's father;
go all the way back and you are fifth from Jove.

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And you are courageous. Your weapons may have been hateful,
but what could you do? Your father gave them to you.
I wish fortune had given your courage a better outlet,
but it was dictated, not a matter of choice.
You rose to the occasion, and Aegisthus's jugular bloodied
the house your father's blood had stained before.
Now Aeacus's son assails your good reputation
and yet has the nerve to look me in the eye.
I explode, heart and soul swollen with passion,
my breast burning with anger within.
Has anyone within Hermione's hearing insulted Orestes,
and I have no strength, no sword at hand?

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Sure, I can weep and, in weeping, pour forth my anger,
tears flowing over my bosom like a stream.
Tears are all I have left, and I let them flow always.
My cheeks are squalid from their perpetual stream.

Is there some curse on our house through the generations
that we Tantalid women are apt to be raped?
I'll not bring up the lies the swan told on the river
or complain about Zeus in feathered disguise.
But where the Isthmus divides the seas, Hippodameia
was carried off in a foreign chariot,

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[two spurious lines omitted]

and Helen was stolen across the water by Paris,
rousing an Argive army to get her back.
I scarcely remember the details, but I do remember
all of the grief, the anxiety and fear.
My grandfather wept, as did the Twins and aunt Phoebe,
and Leda prayed to the gods and to her own Jove.
I tore my hair, not yet very long, and cried to my mother,
"Are you going without me, leaving me behind?"
for her husband was away. Lest I be thought no Pelopian,
I've been left for Pyrrhus as an easy prey!

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If only Achilles had escaped the bow of Apollo!
Pyrrhus's father would condemn his crimes.
It wouldn't have ever, nor would it now please Achilles
for a husband to weep for his stolen wife.
What have I done to turn the heavens against me?
Which star shall I complain is my foe?
When I was little, I had no mother, and I had a warrior father.
Though neither was dead, I was without them both.
When I was little, you weren't there, O my mother,
to hear the babbling of your baby girl.
I never put my little arms around your neck, and never
sat as a sweet bundle upon your lap.

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You weren't there to raise me, and when I was to marry
 no mother helped me prepare the nuptial bed.
 I went to meet you when you came back, and I'm not lying,
 I didn't recognize my own mother's face.
 I knew you were Helen because of your great beauty,
 but you had to ask who your daughter was. 100

I've had one stroke of luck: being married to Orestes,
 but I'll lose him too if he doesn't fight for what's his.
 Pyrrhus holds me captive though my father returns a victor—
 this is my reward for the fall of Troy!
 When Titan drives his radiant steed through the heavens
 I am still wretched but somewhat free.
 But when the dark of night sends me wailing to my chamber
 and I fall lamenting on my bitter bed,
 then weeping overwhelms me rather than slumber,
 and I shrink from my bedmate as from a foe. 110
 I am often so distressed I forget with whom I am sleeping
 and unconsciously touch the Scyrian's limbs.
 But when I realize the sin, I draw away from the contact
 and feel that I have polluted my hand.
 Instead of "Neoptolemus," I often come out with "Orestes,"
 and treasure the mistake as a good omen.

By our unhappy lineage and by its Father,
 who shakes land and sea and His realms above,
 by the bones of your father—my uncle—which are indebted
 to your bravery that they lie entombed avenged— 120
 I swear that I will either die young or live as a Tantalid
 married to a man from Tantalus sprung!

HEROIDES IX: DEIANIRA TO HERCULES

Deianira has accidentally poisoned Hercules, her husband, fearing that he is going to marry his latest lover. She recounts the events that led to her mistake in a letter to Hercules.

I'm pleased that Oechalia has been added to our titles,
 but lament that the winner yields to the won.
 A sudden off-color rumor reaches Pelasgian cities,
 which must now be disproved through your deeds.
 He who couldn't be broken by Juno or the long chain of labors?
 They say Iole's put a yoke on his neck.
 Eurystheus would love this, the Thunderer's sister would love this.
 Your life's ruin makes your stepmother smile.

But *he* is not smiling, who was such a "masterful lover"
 that he needed more than one night locking limbs. 10
 Venus harms you more than Juno! Juno lifts you up by oppressing.
 The other holds her humble foot on your neck.

Don't forget that earth was brought to peace by your protection,
 where sky-blue Nereus skirts far-reaching soils.
 The land's peace owes itself to you, and so do the safe seas.
 Your merits fill both houses of the sun.
 The heaven that will hold you has already been held by you;
 the stars of Atlas twinkled on Hercules's back.

Are you trying to be famous for shamefulfulness,
 sealing your deeds with this foul, final stamp? 20
 Is it you, they say, strangled twin serpents in clenched fists,
 soft in the cradle, already worthy of Jove?
 You began things better than you are ending.
 This man is not the same as that boy.