

Exit Herakles

1
She sent snakes
to his cradle.
He strangled them.

Seven-headed Hydra
she sent. He cut them off.

She sent him Deianeira
who sold him down the river
wrapped in her love.

2
He promised her brother's ghost he'd marry
the youngest sister sight unseen,
not knowing she was his half-sister,
of the same bacchante mother
but fathered by the god of wine and orgies.

He met her at her coming-out party:
a lovely strapping girl bred
to needlework and battlesong,
raised in the horsey set, proud
of bronze breastplates and chariot.

3
After the deflowering,
in typical hero fashion, he promised
to come back and do the right thing.
Her step-father, something of
a horse's ass, wouldn't wait.

She was eating a lot and besides,
she'd be better off with her own
kind: he gave her to the centaur.
Our boy shows up just in the nick,
shoots the groom and all his brothers.

4
Years after she had borne him four sons and a daughter
and they were grown, and her beauty grew inward;
and he had labored the labors his stepmother laid on him,
long after he dehorned the bull-headed,

snake-hipped rivergod Achelous

they came to the river Evenus, flooded with rain.
Lying through his teeth, the centaur Nessus offers
to ferry her across without so much as a drop on her sandal.
Still not known for his wit, our hero pays the fare,
lifts her onto the hybrid creature's broad back,
throws bow and cudgel across and dives in. Coming out,
he hears her. His arrow arrives just in the nick.

5

Nessus swears as he falls that his love far surpassed her husband's.
"I would never have left you alone," he says,
or cheated on you like he does. I'll prove my love,
he whispers, by giving you this charm to keep him true.
Weave this blood now running between your breasts into a shirt.
Once he puts it on, you need never fear a rival again.

6

She didn't do it right away,
but she wasn't getting any younger,
then he started bringing them home.
Still she only wanted to keep him.
She was almost as surprised as he
when the instant he put it on
it burst into flame, clinging like napalm
while his skin bubbled and popped before
dropping sputtering into the sacred river.