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SF PERUSALS

50 Fabulous Classical Monologues for Men

Newly Adapted by

Freyda Thomas and Jan Silverman



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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FREYDA THOMAS

Freyda Thomas has a B.A. and an M.A. in French from Penn State, and an M.F.A. in writing from California Institute of the Arts. One of America's most well-known and oft-produced adapters of the classics, she has seen her work displayed on and off-Broadway, and at some of the most well-known regional theatres in the country, including the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Northlight Theatre and A.C.T. in San Francisco, which recently produced her 5th adaptation, *The Gamester*. It was a finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Women's International Playwriting Award in 2000, had its world premiere at Chicago's Northlight Theatre and was produced by the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis in 2003. It is published by Dramatists Play Service, Inc.

The Learned Ladies, Molière's sendup on Women's Lib, was her first adaptation. It had its world premiere off-Broadway in 1991, starring Jean Stapleton, followed by an A.C.T. production in 1993 and a production at Florida Studio Theatre in 1994. In 1996 her translation/adaptation of Molière's *Tartuffe* (*Tartuffe: Born Again*), featuring the infamous religious hypocrite as a televangelist, had its world premiere on Broadway, starring John Glover. Both Molière plays are published by Samuel French, Inc. She is also the co-author of *The Mistress of the Inn*, an adaptation of Goldoni's *Mirandolina*, which had its world premiere at Virginia Museum Theatre in 1984. Her new Molière adaptation, *School for Trophy Wives*, a Hollywood romp, and *Splitting Heirs*, a farce inspired by Regnard's *Le Legataire Universel*, are available for production consideration. Several monologues from her works, and works-in-progress, are included in this book.

JAN SILVERMAN

Jan Silverman has a B.A. in English from Muhlenberg College, an M.A. in Theater from the University of Pittsburgh and an M.F.A. in directing from Temple University. She taught acting, directing and classical text analysis for 27 years at her last alma mater, where she also headed the graduate directing program. She also served the College Board as a member of the Advisory Committee on the Arts from 1978 - 1983. Many well-known actors honed their talents under her guidance, including Tom Sizemore and Marylouise Burke. She is the author of *Just So!,* a dramatization of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, published by NPC Publications.

In her long and varied career, she has directed over 70 productions, including several of her favorite Shakespeare plays (*As You Like It, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*), and a number of new plays in New York (Ensemble Studio Theater, The Village Gate, and Alice's Fourth Floor) and in Philadelphia (Philadelphia Festival Theater for New Plays and the Philadelphia Theater Company.) Two productions which she directed at Temple are her particular favorites: one was *Tartuffe: Born Again*, by Freyda Thomas. The other was *The House of Blue Leaves*, in which, long ago, Ms. Thomas played Bunny Flingus.

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A GUIDE TO PERFORMING A CLASSICAL MONOLOGUE

Actors performing the classics face a challenge, but more important, they receive a great gift—the words themselves. In classical text, the words are the full expression of the innermost thoughts and feelings of the characters, so do not be afraid of them! Rather than regarding rhythm, rhyme and "poetic" images as stumbling blocks, recognize them for what they are: windows that open directly into your character's heart and mind.

When Romeo says, "What light through yonder window breaks/ It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," he is not just talking pretty! He is giving the audience his inner experience—love is a vision of light to him. When Juliet, later, confesses her love for him, saying "My bounty is as boundless as the sea," she feels those powerful tides and leaping waves in her very core, in a physical, immediate way.

A metaphor has its roots in the character's inner life and experience. In *The Miser*, the title character, Argan, reacts to the theft of his strongbox, thus: "Assassin! Murderer! I've been assassinated…My throat's been cut. My money is gone…That's it, I'm a dead man…Oh, my poor, poor money, my helpmeet, my companion, my friend!" In *Medea*, Jason, a great sea-going warrior, tells his rebellious wife, "As for myself, I am relieved to be/Rid of the tempest you've brought down on me/I've grabbed the tiller." The images that characters use are constructed of the stuff that makes up the landscape of their minds. To get a look at that landscape, take the image in the text and trace it back to its source. This makes for useful character analysis.

The verse form of classical text in English is iambic pentameter—that is, each line is composed of 10 syllables, with alternating stresses on each even-numbered syllable. Iambic pentameter was first used by Christopher Marlowe and then fully developed by Shakespeare; it is the rhythm that best suits the natural cadences of spoken English. As the speaker, you need to be aware of the rhythm but not driven by it. What drives the line, always, is its meaning, its action, its intention to affect and change the character hearing it, or in the case of these monologues, which you will be using as audition pieces or classwork, the audience. Regard the rhythm as the drum-beat in a musical line, or better yet, the heart-beat of the character. It's illuminating and also a lot of fun to search out irregularities in the rhythm of a line—they are clues to finding moments of disturbance and excitement in the speaker.

Rhyming lines, especially rhymed couplets, often frighten actors because of their overt artificiality (the lines, not the actors!). Actors want to sound "real," and dread the sing-song quality that rhyme can produce. But rhyme instantly appeals to the ears of the audience—rhymes are there to be heard, not hidden, and a wise actor will not dodge them but relish them. Again, the rhymes do not drive the speech—meaning and

action still prevail—and in most cases, the rhyme will take care of itself if treated with a modicum of respect. Speaking in rhymed couplets is not as far removed from the new millennium as you think. Listen to rap for a taste of modern rhymed couplets!

Awareness of punctuation is key in understanding how to handle verse, and especially rhyme. Lines you are speaking should be stopped only by periods, exclamation points, colons or question marks. A comma, or lack of final punctuation, requires the speaker to drive through to the next line, until the thought itself ends. Remember, the length of the line and the length of the thought are often not the same, and you must go with the thought. Especially in the case of the verse monologues in this book, which are much more conversational than the norm, you must speak to the punctuation. With the following exception:

American actors in particular must guard against a tendency to drop inflection and vocal energy at the ends of lines—nothing will kill the sparkle of the language, and indeed, obscure its meaning, faster than that. Even a line that has no period at the end of it needs a sustained inflection at the end. A sustained or rising inflection is an invitation to the audience's ears that says, "Listen—there's more to come!" A British actor will tend say: "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your *ears!*" because of the speech patterns in England, whereas an American will tend to say, ""Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your *ears*," because Americans tend to drop the energy of the line as they come to the end of it. A little bit of practice with a tape recorder or a friend or teacher, will help you overcome that habit!

Some rhymes are more important than others within the text, and you need to become aware of the varying functions of rhyme. Often, the writer is using the rhyme to make an important point stand out, clinch an argument or set up a laugh. In these cases, you need to give extra clarity and a vocal lift to the end of the first line in the couplet so that the moment is brought home at the end of the second line. Naturally, there is no need to hit the audience over the head. You just want to be generous to their ears and give them a little help—"let your discretion be your tutor." Consider the following examples:

From *The Learned Ladies*:

And I for one applaud the time she chose a
Moment to forget Kant and Spinoza.

From *Tartuffe: Born Again*:

Right now, I said, I'll show you all the poss'ble
Ways of beating Satan with the gospel!

From *School for Trophy Wives*:

[Eve:] Oh, Chris, you know my lawyer says no.
[Chris:] Where did you leave her?
[Eve:] On a farm near Fresno.

In the first example, the "a" at the end needs to be upheld just slightly, with a clear connection to "chose." If you allow it to spill over to the next

line, becoming a part of “Moment,” you will squander the fun for the audience. In the second example, sustain the inflection on “poss’ble,” so that it doesn’t get lost in the phrase “poss’ble Ways,” of which it is clearly a part. The adjustment is subtle, but the difference it makes is enormous. In the third example, the word “says” must be stronger than the “no” that follows it in order to deliver the laugh on “Fresno.” In each case, your delivery will make all the difference between a crisp, funny moment and one that doesn’t quite happen.

Classical language often presents such a rich banquet of words that the audience’s ears can be overwhelmed. To make it easy for them to grasp the content of the speech, locate the operative, or key, words and find ways to stress (but not distress!) them. Operative words are literally those that operate, that run, the line. They are usually nouns and verbs, though not always. A good test is to imagine that you have to send a telegram, with every word costing 10 dollars: with your limited budget, you must keep the words you include to a bare minimum. Which words would you choose? Those are your operatives.

Beginning actors sometimes tend to treat all operatives within a line the same, hammering them out. Please don’t! Think of each operative word’s meaning, its sound, its texture, its length, its feel. Your ways of making them distinct should be as varied as the words themselves.

The language of any play is a primary element of its world. Iambic pentameter gives a certain size and emotional resonance to the play’s events. Rhyme lends a playful quality and often seems best suited to comedy although Racine used rhymes in his very successful 17th century tragedies, several of which are represented in this book. You, the actor, must live in the play’s world and commit to it. Your prime objective is to tell the truth about your character, whatever the play. The style of the text, whether prose, blank verse, or rhymed couplets, is simply a part of that truth.

– Jan Silverman

FOR PATRICK QUINN,
LATE PRESIDENT OF ACTORS' EQUITY ASSOCIATION,
WHO DEDICATED HIS LIFE
TO THE BETTERMENT
OF HIS FELLOW ACTORS

YOUNG MEN'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES

*From **Life is a Dream**, by Calderon*

Adapted by Jan Silverman

(Depending on one's approach, this might also be played as a comedic piece, since Segismundo is ultimately rescued and treated like royalty.)

SEGISMUNDO.

This life I lead is vile! A prisoner,
Chained to the wall, alone. I'm like a dog!
Great heaven, why? Why am I treated so?
It must have been a crime, a dreadful crime
That brought such punishment upon me. God!
What was my sin? I've always been locked up.
Was it just being born? It must have been.
Man's greatest crime is just that: He exists.
Bah, that's no answer. Everyone was born.
So what's my special sin? And why do others
Get boons and blessings never shown to me?
A little bird is born—hatched from its egg—
And lovely are the plumes that do appear
Upon its wings and body. And as soon
As that bird learns to fly, it spreads those wings
And soars, flinging itself across the sky,
And never thinks again of those who fed
And cared for it. I have so much more feeling
In my heart than any bird. So tell me,
Why do I have so much less liberty?
A beast is born, without the gift of speech,
But gorgeous fur, his birthright, covers him.
He grows to be a cruel predator,
With fangs and claws, a killer natural-born.

My instincts and my sensibilities
Are so much higher, so much more refined—
Why do I have so much less liberty?
A fish is hatched, a thing of slime and seaweed,
To flash its scales, to dive and leap and play,
Swimming through an infinity of ocean.
It has no thoughts, no visions in its head
As I do, yet it has its liberty.
Even a stream, a river, has the joy
Of winding like a silver snake among
The open fields and banks of brilliant flowers
Flowing, always flowing, to the sea. And I
With voice and spirit, brain and heart—
Oh, will I never have my liberty?
I have to stop. My heart is thundering
Like a volcano, pouring out hot lava
In my chest. I'd like to rip it out!
What law of God condemns me to this cell,
And keeps me from the liberty enjoyed
By every bird and river, beast and fish?

*From **Life is a Dream**, by Calderon*

Adapted by Jan Silverman

(Segismundo is rescued. As with the previous monologue, this could be considered and performed in a comedic style.)

SEGISMUNDO

What do I see here? What is happening?
It's marvelous, and terrifying too.
It can't be real, and yet my eyes are open,
I'm not asleep—I'm not! I'm really here.
Can it be me, in this magnificence,
Surrounded by the splendor of a palace?
In silks and laces, treated with respect
And honor by obliging courtiers?
Can it be me, awak'ning in a bed
Of softest down, then served with lovely food,
And bathed, and dressed, attended by so many?
I know I can't be dreaming—I'm awake!
But am I—am I still me, Segismundo?
Sweet heavens, what has happened to me? God—
Is this all in my head? Well, if it is,
No matter. I won't question such sweet gifts.
If you, my lords, desire to wait on me,
Why not? Please, go ahead. I'm loving it!

From ***Agamemnon****, by Aeschylus*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(This is an opening speech, establishing the backstory: what has happened, what may happen, and what is happening. Everyone is waiting for the signal as to whether the city of Troy has been taken, especially Queen Clytemnestra, who has plans for sending her husband Agamemnon to his death on his return. Although the Watchman is probably old, it could be played by someone of younger years as well.)

WATCHMAN.

O gods, I pray you, take me from this place!—
Nay, not to join you on Olympus Mount,
But elsewhere than this curséd palace roof.
Awake this livelong year as I stand watch
And memorize the stars upon the Heav'ns.
'Tis midnight, for their aspect shows me well—
I know the season of them. What to do
Up here but study them? My woeful lot.
Wait for the light. Watch for the signal fire.
'Twill come from there and cry out—Troy is taken!
The she-man waits to hear it. Clytemnestra,
She is a queen! She bids me keep the watch,
So here I lie and dream. The balm of sleep
O'ertakes me…(*He dozes, then wakes.*) nay, I'll sing to stay awake!
(*He does.*) Awake to tears of woe at evildoings
From that low palace. Ruminate on that!
Think not on—what!? A light breaks through the black!
All Argos shines, the queen bolts from her bed
And shouts a joyous welcome to the blaze—
'Tis fallen! We have won the day! He comes
Anon, my king—I'll take his hand in mine
And speak no word of what his house has seen.*

**preparation for his murder*

From ***Agamemnon****, by Aeschylus*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Aegisthus, along with his lover, Clytemnestra, have plotted and pulled off the murder of Agamemnon, the hero king who has just returned from the successful sacking of Troy. Now Aegisthus must defend his actions to the people and bring them round to accepting him as King. With this speech, we get to hear exactly how Aegisthus' father, Thyestes, came to eat his own children at a banquet hosted by Agamemnon's father, Atreus. Politics as usual in ancient Greece.)

AEGISTHUS.

I stand before you here, today, my people,
To tell you that the gods have stood with me
In righting earthly wrongs. This man lies here,
Bathed in a river of corrupted blood.
This…Agamemnon, by my hand, is slain
For deeds most foul, committed by his father.
Once king of these fair lands, that selfsame lord
Fell into deep dispute with good Thyestes.
Brother set against his own, for what?
For power. For the throne. That man, my father,
Was banished, exiled from the land in shame.
Yet homeward he returned with this true oath:
To ne'er defile the land with his own blood.
And this man's father, to this declaration,
Proclaimed a day of royal celebration,
Great festal cheer. A banquet, so it was,
With platters sizzling, brought before my father,
Who ate with gratitude and gusto—yes!
I dare to name the foul and evil deed—
His children! Slaughtered by their noble uncle.
O, what a curse befell our house that day,
For when my father learned what he had done,
Without foreknowledge, thus he spake these words:
"The house of Pleisthenes be ever curs'd,
As truly as I spurn this damnéd feast!"
I was but a small babe when't came to pass,

Sent far from here, to watch my father's grief,
And grew to manhood, waiting for the day
When I would bring this curse to life—and death.
With malice did I plot and plan this hour,
And now 'tis done and Justice has been served!

From ***Prometheus Bound****, by Aeschylus*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Prometheus, in a mood of generosity, gave fire to humans and is being punished by Zeus for his arrogance. He has just been chained to a rock by the guards assigned with the task and is left alone on stage.)

PROMETHEUS.

Have they all gone? Then no one stands about
To hear me? Silence. (*Cry of agony.*) O, you seas and rivers,
Great wingéd birds that howl, eye of the sun
And mother earth, look you upon this god,
Chained to a rock by yet another god,
Ten thousand years to come! Why must this be?
Because I gave them fire, these mortal men!
The greatest teacher, noble fire, I grabbed
From that forbidden stalk. And now they roam
This orb and I am as one blind, attach'd
To this place, this…thing, counting endless days.
What's that!? What sound, what scent floats toward me now?
'Tis God? Or man? Or both? Who gazes on
My misery? I am the enemy
Of Zeus! Despised by all who trod his court,
Because I dared to love those mortal men!
Why keep me here? O, send me far below,
Beneath the earth, 'neath Hades to that place—
Tartaros—leave me not for all to mock
And I to watch their cruel celebrations!
Ah, well, old Zeus, great ruler, you forget
I have the second sight, a prophet's vision.
The day will come you will have need of me,
Oh yes, when the unnamed will test your might
And you will seek my counsel. Speak with honey,
Soothing balm, or speak with veiléd threat,
When they have brought you down, you'll come to me
As I will come to you to make our peace!

*From **Prometheus Bound**, by Aeschylus*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Prometheus has just bewailed his fate, and is chained to a rock, when his prayer for a sympathetic ear is answered. Okeanus arrives, in a car driven by a gryphon, a sort of ancient cab driver, the four-legged kind with wings. What poor Prometheus gets, in place of an "Awww, poor baby," is advice.)

OKEANUS.

Prometheus, look upon me. I came here
From long and distant places on the wings
Of my true noble steed.* Come not to speak
In dense and flowered phrases, nor to weep,
But help. I come to give you this advice:
Know you yourself. Adapt your soul to moods
Yet new to you. This lot has come to you
As Zeus, new king on high has come to all,
And hearing your complaint will not amend
His present judgment. You know 'tis too true.
Let go of rage as you must clutch the rock
And seek a remedy for all your pain.
Humility has not made visit yet,
And you would add fresh insult to your cause.
Let me but for a moment be your teacher.
A monarch reigns who gives account to none.
It is but what it is. What use to rail?
Find silence in this place, not petulance,
While I go unto him and speak for you,
But do not add fresh insult to my speech
With cries for Justice—he, I well believe,
Will grant my wish and free you from these chains.

**the gryphon*

From ***Antigone,*** *by Sophocles*

Adapted by Jan Silverman

(Haemon, the son of Creon, begs his father not to put Antigone to death for trying to bury her dead brother. **NOTE:** *See the Guard's speech from the same play for further background.)*

HAEMON.

Oh Father, please! I don't presume to have
Your wisdom, and I haven't any right
To question your authority, but listen–
Let me speak. I'm saying this for you!
I walk along the streets, and hear the people
Murmuring. They won't speak to your face,
For they're afraid. But they don't notice me.
And I must tell you that the citizens
Mourn for Antigone! They honor her,
And say that she does not deserve to die
For such a noble deed. The burial rites
That all of us perform are sacred here
In Thebes, and no one should be asked
To let a loved one's soul be doomed to roam
Eternally, with never any rest—
The rest bestowed by burial in a grave.
That's what they're saying. Everyone. Your name
Is precious to me, and your reputation
For wisdom and for justice is at stake!
And what can be more pleasing to a son
Than knowing that his father is belov'd?
But if you execute Antigone
They all will hate you! Find another way.
It isn't wisdom to decide that you
And only you are wise. 'Tis naught but pride
And arrogance, and only leads to shame.
No one should be afraid to bend a little!
Great trees sway with the winds so they won't break,
Even while rigid ones are snapped in two!
And if a seaman won't adjust his sails
The gale blows him off course and sinks his ship!

Please, Father, tame your rage, and find a place
Of quiet in your heart. No one is wise
At every moment. We all need each other—
We're only human. Listen to advice!

From ***Antigone,*** *by Sophocles*

Adapted by Jan Silverman

(Creon, the new ruler in Thebes, is trying to restore order to the city, after the end of a bloody civil war, fought between Eteocles and Polyneices (sons of former king Oedipus.) Both sons have died in battle. Creon, for political reasons, has decided that Eteocles was a hero and Polyneices a traitor, and his corpse must be left to rot, unburied, on a hillside. This edict transcends earthly law, since an unburied person's soul would never rest, but would suffer eternally. Antigone, the sister of both dead brothers, defies Creon's order and buries her brother, digging a hole in the ground with her hands. A Guard, who caught her in the act, describes how it happened.)

GUARD.

All right, so this is how it all went down:
Your warning still was ringing in our ears
When we returned to that accurséd hill.
We brushed the dirt away, and left the body
Oozing blood and muck in that hot sun.
The stench was sickening. We moved upwind
But kept it in plain sight, and swore together
That we'd keep watch, and no one could come near,
To dare to bury Polyneices' corpse.
But with the dust and wind, and all the heat
That shimmered in the filthy air, our view
Became obscured. And then we heard the scream,
So full of rage and pain—it sounded like
A wounded beast, but no, it was this girl.
We saw her clawing, scrabbling on the ground,
And pouring piles of dust upon the corpse,
Sobbing, and calling loud upon the gods
To witness what was done to her poor brother.
We had her there, red-handed. So we seized her
And charged her with both crimes, and brought her in.
And from then on, she didn't say a word.
I pitied her a lot—so young and frail.
But I was glad it wasn't me in trouble.

From ***Oedipus The King,*** *By Sophocles*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Oedipus has unwittingly fulfilled the prophecy that he would kill his father and wed his mother. The city in which he rules is cursed with a plague that threatens to destroy it. This priest, who can be played by an actor of any age, begs the king to discover the cause, which of course will set Oedipus on his path of self-destruction.)

PRIEST.

O, Sire, you are our father and our king!
Tell us your heart is moved to see us here
In supplication, sitting 'round the altars,
The young, the agéd, everywhere you look
Throughout the town, there at the shrine of Pallas,
Ismenus' grove, look well there with thine eyes.
Our city cannot lift its noble head,
So tempest-tossed it is. What mystery
Has brought such ruin? Why this curséd plague,
Where Hades swallows us with sighs and moans,
And empties houses, corpses sent below?
We know you are a man and not a god,
But judging you to be unparalleled
Among that race of mortals, we must turn
To you to soothe the angry heavens. Sire,
O honored lord, give ear to heaven's voice,
Or man's, but bring this knowledge to your soul
And save our city! What can be the curse
That brings us to this abject misery?
Shall we set in the memory book: "His reign
Was pestilence and death?" Once you were brave
And noble, did the work of ten such men.
Be equal to yourself! If you will rule,
Then do so with the living, not the dead.
What use a kingdom with no people in it?

*From **Hecuba**, by Euripides*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Odysseus explains to Hecuba why he must sacrifice her daughter Polyxena to the Greeks, although he is torn by this decision.)

ODYSSEUS.

If you'll permit me, Madam Hecuba,
You are hysterical. You twist the facts.
I am not, as you might suppose, your foe.
My good advice to you was kindly meant.
In fact, I owe my fate to you alone,
Which I do heartily admit, and stand
Both ready and prepared to honor this
Great debt by saving your life. Yes, indeed,
I would not say the contrary. But note,
I said your life, and not your daughter's life.
That is a different matter altogether.
I promised that when we had captured Troy
Your daughter would be given as a prize
To our most gallant warrior. There it is.
My solemn oath which I am forced to keep.
And too, there is a principle at stake.
One which, if 'tis neglected, leads to doom,
Fells governments, destroys entire cities,
Because their most courageous men receive
No honor greater than to give their lives.
Achilles merits honor more than most.
A soldier and a man who died in glory
For his land. What tribute could be worse
Than giving honor to your friend in life,
And then neglecting him in death? And too,
War may erupt again and citizens
Called up to serve. Would we give up our lives,
Observing that the dead go so dishonored?
No. Give me in my life but what I need,
No more than that. But when you speak of death,
Then give me honor, for we two must dwell
Together for eternity. And honor
Is the bedfellow I'll take with me.

*From **Electra**, by Euripides*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Orestes, who has recently returned to his home to see his sister, Electra, living in squalor with an old but honest farmer, ponders man's judgment.)

ORESTES.

Alas, why can we not look at a man
And see his worth? This one is nobler than
Another, yet 'tis not nobility
That forms a character. Do we not see
The hero sire a coward? One well-born
Gives rise to mongrels who would rather scorn
The voice of wisdom than repeat its prayer.
Best not to search for worth exactly there.
And from the lowest hovel comes a soul
Who lives in purest honor, plays the role
Of sage with naught but ignorance for tools,
Yet we condemn him. Why? We are but fools.
What test can we then use? Wealth? That, I find
Most often shows us poverty of mind.
Then poverty? The empty belly leads
A man to ponder naught but simple needs.
He who shows bravery today may cower
Tomorrow, in the face of evil power.
We toss our judgments vainly in the wind
Of friend and foe. But 'tis ourselves who've sinned.
Look at this man. A farmer, nameless face,
No family to defend him in this place,
Yet, he is, more than others, touched by grace.
A manner that bespeaks nobility,
He should be crownèd for his constancy.
But, shall we make him leader of the town?
Nay, never. For he soon will be brought down
By one, who, long on muscle, short on brains
Wins popular support. He entertains,
Gets our attention with his noisy bark,
He's better as a statue in the park.
A slab of stone for time to wear away.
True courage comes from character, I say.

*From **Medea**, by Euripides*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Medea's soon-to-be ex tells Medea what he has in store for her.)

JASON.

A shrew! There is the truth of it. And I
Know well how vain the task to justify
The circumstances of your situation.
You might have stayed, secure within this nation
And kept your home, if you had kept your tongue.
Alas, your temper shows you have unstrung
Your reason, since you chose to vilify
My name by sland'rous gossip. Do I lie?
"My husband Jason is a worthless man."
To put yourself in exile was your plan?
In fact, you are most fortunate the king
Has chosen clemency. He wished to bring
The ax upon your neck, but as my wife
He most benevolently spared your life,
For our dear children's sake. My own decision
Is to be kind to you and make provision
For you and them, for exile can be hard.
And, being noble, I have such regard
For you and my two sons that I will do
What's in my power to bring peace to you.
As for myself, I am relieved to be
Rid of the tempest you've brought down on me.
I've grabbed the tiller. I've no obligation
Left. You think 'twas you who saved my nation
By the saving of my life? Not so.
It was the gods. It was the gods! You know
You did it out of love-no, 'twas obsession
That caused you to commit that intercession
And profit from it-yes! Did you not get
Much more than you received? Do you regret
The time you spent upon this isle of Greece?
You learned to live by law, to live in peace,
Instead of brute barbarian force. You were

Respected. Or perhaps you would prefer
A life of sheer obscurity-away
From good society? Did I not pay
You back by showing you a better life?
And now I have the chance to take a wife,
The daughter of a king! 'Tis destiny
That moves its hand and takes a hold of me.
It's clever and it's wise for me to wed.
It doesn't mean I've tired of your bed,
Or you or our own sons. 'Tis well for them
That I have come upon this stratagem.
Why can we not be friends and let things pass?
Medea, please be wise. Don't show your class
With harping, shrewish rage. We'll all live well,
Our children most of all. For their sake, quell
Your thoughts of love for me. Think of them first.
'Tis jealousy that puts you on your worst
Behavior. Why do women think like this?
When love is in the bed, then life is bliss,
And when 'tis gone, the torture they create
Drives men to madness. How is it that Fate
Made women vessels for the procreation
Of our children? Down with fornication!
I beg the gods, please be the alchemist
And women everywhere cease to exist!

From ***Phedre,*** *by Jean Racine*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(In this scene, young Hippolytus, who has just been named king on the death of his father, confesses to his captive, the young and beautiful Aricia, that he is in love with her. This will produce a host of sticky problems, since Phedre, his newly widowed stepmother, is in love with him.)

HIPPOLYTUS.

I hate you? Who says such a thing, madame?
Hate you? Is that how I've been represented?
A cold, proud king from some cruel monster born?
What monster, having seen your face could hate?
What ogre would wish more than just to kneel
And gaze upon the loveliness it saw?
Please pardon me. I've gone too far. Emotion
Dwarfs my reason'd mind. I must continue
To share this secret I can keep no longer.
You see before you the most wretched prince
Whose pride, once rash, revolted from such flame
As love produces. How I laughed and scorned
Its victims. Prisoners in chains, I said,
Shipwrecked at sea, while I stood on the shore,
Observing as they drown'd in passion's storms.
Now, suddenly am I caught upon a wave
And cast upon the jagged rocks of shame.
No creature more astonished than myself.
The cold, proud king brought to his knees by one
Whose sweetness has turned sour his reserve,
And left but joy and hope laid o'er his heart.
For six months I have lived in desperation.
Shame followed me, a shaft that split in two
My soul. I fought to rid myself of it,
Of you and of my heart. I shunned your presence,
Yet, in your absence, neared myself to you.
My self is lost. All that was so familiar
Is foreign to me-weapons, war, the conqueror
Is bored with conquest-chariots stand still,

My horses graze the fields in mute attendance
As I stand here before you. Do you blush
To hear this tale of passion that your eyes
Have caused? My heart is yours, once wild, now tamed
And captive on its most adorèd leash.
I speak this foreign language awkwardly,
Yet beg you, do not shun these sweetest vows,
So ill-expressed, indeed, which but for you
I never would have dared to form at all.

From ***L'Aiglon (The Eaglet),*** *by Edmund Rostand*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(It is 20 years since the era of Napoleon. The Duke has just been assured by his captors that he's not a prisoner of the new regime. He offers his own explanation.)

DUKE.

Well put, monsieur. I'm not a prisoner, but—
Now there's a word, that "but." That has great value.
I'm not a prisoner, *but* there are those guards
Who follow at my heels. *But* I am not
Imprisoned, am I? No! I come and go,
I take a stroll across the park. You see
The eyes that peer at me behind each leaf?
But, I am free as air, unless, of course
You seek a private audience with me.
Then ears appear from every single nook
Or hedge or tree. But prisoner? Never! Nay!
I mount my horse in freedom, don't I? Yea.
Three others mount and ride with me, of course,
But, never in the world am I imprisoned.
Send me a letter if you wish. I'll read
With keen appreciation, as do those
Who read it first, and censor certain words
And phrases that might indicate that I
Am prisoner to this great regime. They must
Protect me from the very thought! And so,
I'm not a prisoner, *but* I must be watched
And followed, censored, chained and isolated.
Such glorious freedom they have given me.
How can I ever thank you for this life?

*From **Heracles**, by Euripides*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(In this scene, Lycus has usurped the throne of Thebes from Heracles, who is spending a little time in Hades. Lycus plans to assassinate Heracles' wife, Megara, her three sons and Heracles' father, Amphytrion, to protect his position. They have been begging for mercy, but he ain't giving an inch.)

LYCUS.

You there, old man, and you, the wife of him [1]
Called Heracles. I have a question: hear me.[2]
I am the power in this place. Whatever
I desire to do is done– why try
To stave off death? What rescue will come now?
Your hero of a husband, risen from
The depths of Hades, sword in hand to fight [3]
And save you from the fate you must now face?
You are to die – why suffer and seek pity?
All Hellas rang with your vainglorious boasts [4]
That Zeus was partner to your son's corruption,[5]
And noble were you, wed to Heracles,
That noble man. What noble deeds did he?
Why should I spare the sons of Heracles,
The coward? Fighting beasts – what signifies
The killing of a hydra or a lion? [6]
Did once he put a shield upon his arm
And raise a sword to fight in any battle?
A bow – a coward's tool! – no manly force[7]
Can come from such a weapon. Now you'll see
The price you'll pay for his unmanly acts.
You and your sons will die. I took the throne
And must protect my interests from all those
Who may mature, take up their arms and seek
Revenge against my power and position.

1 Old man: Amphitryon (am FIH tree uhn), Megara's father-in-law.
2 Heracles: (HERr uh kleez) part mortal, part god, the son of Zeus and Alcmene.
3 Hades: (HAY deez) The name of the god (Zeus' brother).
4 Hellas (HELL uhs)ancient Greece.
5 Zeus: The supreme god of the Greek pantheon.
6 Hydra: A serpent with nine heads.
7 Force: A magic bow that hit the mark every time it was aimed.

*From **Andromache**, by Jean Racine*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Andromache and her baby son have been taken prisoner in the battle of Troy. Her husband's murderer and her captor, Pyrrhus, has fallen in love with her. She can't stand the sight of him. He keeps threatening to kill her baby unless she gives him a tumble—always a sure fire way to win a woman's heart.)

PYRRHUS.

This anger of yours—does it ever cool!?
Must it endure till I am called the fool
By all the city? Ah, the lovesick youth
Who cannot bear to see the naked truth
Within the eyes that damn him. Prisoner
She is, but he's the prisoner of her—
Her punishments that never end. I know
The anguish I have caused you. You must throw
It in my face with every look your eyes
Bestow on me, the man you most despise.
A hundred times a day I shall repent
And suffer agonies as you lament
The carnage that was brought by me to Troy,
But look at me—I spared you and your boy!
I'm riddled with regrets, consumed by fires
Like those I set in Troy. Yet my desires
Are looked upon by you as provocation.
Can you not see them as a consolation
For all that you have suffered!? Don't you see
How with your icy heart you punish me!?
When will it be enough? When will you say,
"I'll let you join me, from this day, today!"
Give me a little hope, I swear, and then
I'll give your baby back to you again.
I'll raise him, teach him to be wise and strong,
And when he's grown, he can avenge the wrong
Done to his country. Troy will rise once more,
With your son as its chosen god of war.
He'll sit upon the throne as Troy's new king,
All this, if you'll but end my suffering.

*From **Britannicus**, by Jean Racine*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Nero—remember him?—is king of Rome. His mother, Agrippina, put him on the throne and is said to be running things while her puppet son fiddles. Now there are rumors that she is maneuvering Britannicus to take Nero's place. It's the classic pushy mother-wimpy son relationship.)

NERO.

Of course I don't forget that it's to you
I owe my throne, the empire. Everything you do
Is for my good, is that not right, dear mother?
And yet there are those rumors that another
Motive moves you. Oh, I don't complain.
Are you to blame if everything I gain
You gain as well? But, careful, dear, a schism
Could open—the result of nepotism?
So here's the issue we must clarify:
Who's running things around here—you or I?
Believe me, mother, I don't want the power,
And you enjoy it. But it is not our
Decision—*that* belongs to Rome. And they
Would have a man—not woman—to obey.
And they are sick of hearing Nero speak
The words that came from your mouth! Oh, I'm weak,
I let you bully me. They sneer, "She crowned him,
But if the truth be told, she should have drowned him."
I warn you: they are going to make a fuss
Over this business with Britannicus!
You're priming him to take the throne away,
But th'Roman populace will have its say.

From ***Berenice,*** *by Jean Racine*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(Not Racine's most popular play. Antiochus is in love with Berenice, she's dumped him for the flashy Titus, who rode into town and conquered everything, including her. But she doesn't want to lose her friend either. Antiochus has just learned that Titus plans to marry her, so his love is totally thwarted. Of course there will be a snag, since this speech happens in Act I. This is the same Titus, by the way, that we saw in Shakespeare—and on the screen with Anthony Hopkins.)

ANTIOCHUS.

You want to know wherefore the mystery.
You are the queen, you have commanded me.
Remember this, as I reveal to you
My full intention and its source. It's true,
I'm leaving. This is our last conversation.
Please, do not look on me with reprobation,
I beg you, rather think on days gone by,
In that far country, when you heard me sigh
And speak in passion's voice of my affection,
Which you did welcome. But then the direction
Of your glance turned from me when **he** came,
Great prince. I do not need to speak his name,
Yet you will sigh to hear it. Titus. He,
Decked out in armor, claiming victory,
Conquered Judea, then he conquered you.
Remember then what you asked me to do:
Be silent. Tell him not, but stay with us.
This did I do, however torturous,
These five long years, for to myself I swore
That come what may, I'd love you ever more.
Through all his battles, I stayed by his side.
I prayed that I might bleed as I had cried
So that my courage might move you to tears.
The sheer futility of five long years!
And all you learned was of your lover's glory,
And naught of me! I'm tired of this story.

I waited until now to know my fate:
He plans to marry you. Go. Celebrate,
Think not on me, just let me slip away,
Content in my unhappiness today,
For I have finally set this burden down.
Hail to my queen. Good fortune to her crown.

From ***Alcestis****, by Euripides*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(In this lesser Euripides play, Alcestis, wife of Admetus, agrees to sacrifice her life so that her husband may live. When Admetus' father shows up with condolences, the son is less than grateful.)

ADMETUS.

You come with gifts and garments!? Kindly words
Of praise for she who is no longer!? Ask
That she be dressed in this false finery,
Stained by a coward's hands? You are too late.
Where were you when I was about to die?
Where were you when she, in full bloom of youth
Stepped forward and said, "I will die for him?"
Will *die* for him! You could have saved her life!
How many years do you count on this earth?
How many did she gather unto her?
Oh, you cannot have given seed to me.
Nor can your wife, whom I have e'er called mother,
Have carried in her womb the babe I was—
I surely was the offspring of some slave
Who gave me to you and your wife to nurse.
I tell you this: I am no son of yours!
You would not, in the autumn of your years
Come forward to prevent this dreadful thing,
To stand for her upon the funeral pyre.
Did you not think me worthy as a son?
Did I show disrespect for your old age?
This is my great reward for my devotion?
The loss of my most perfect mate? She is
My father and my mother, for she did
What you would not. Well, here is my advice:
Go from this place, beget more children quickly,
No time to waste. You'll need them very soon
To care for you and, when your time arrives,
To lay you out in proper ceremony,
For I will never do it. See these hands?
They will not bury you. You're dead already
To me. And, old man, I am dead to you.

*From **Britannicus**, by Jean Racine*

Adapted by Freyda Thomas

(This Racine play is about Nero, his mother, Agrippina and Nero's brother, Britannicus. Nero thinks his mother wants to put Britannicus on the throne in his place. He decides to put Britannicus to death. His tutor begs him to consider the consequences.)

BURRUS.

I beg you, Sire, consider well this course
You contemplate. Is it not a great source
Of satisfaction that the public good
Is due to you alone? 'Tis as it should
Be, in effect, for this is but your choice,
You are the Emperor. It is your voice
They heed. You're blameless, will be ever so;
Your path is royal. Onward you can go
In virtue. But the flatterers will try
To lead you from that honored way. Comply,
And you will have to bathe your arms in blood!
Britannicus, the corpse, will bring a flood
Of venomous assault from his allies,
Who will engage defenders—is this wise?
They too will die and more will take their place.
And then, what does your life become? A race
To stay ahead of those who come. At last,
When everyone fears you, and you are cast
Upon the murky waters of suspicion,
And fear itself becomes your own condition,
For you will fear them all—whom can you trust?
Will there be one soul you'll regard as just
And wise? Surrounded by your enemies,
Where is your peaceful reign and life of ease
That marked your early years? Remember, Sire,
The people loved you well, and did admire
Your kindly heart. Think on your actions then.
There was a time when in the senate men
Were pressing you to put someone to death,
And you berated them. "Is not his breath

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