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Dramatic Publishing

Atalanta

A Full-Length Play

By

THOMAS J. HATTON



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(ATALANTA)

ISBN 0-87129-764-7

ATALANTA
A Full-Length Play
For Seven Men, Seven Women, Extras*

CHARACTERS

Oeneus	.....	King of Calydon
Althea	.....	his wife
Agatha	.....	his mother-in-law
Serendipity	.....	his daughter
Meleager	.....	his son
Hercules	[ ]	..... Greek heroes
Theseus		
Jason	[]	
Demetrius	.....	a poet
Atalanta	.....	a Greek maiden
Cassandra	[ ]	..... followers of Atalanta
Deinera		
Clio	[]	
Herald	.....	secretary to Oeneus

TIME: The Present

PLACE: The little island of Calydon

*Other women followers of Atalanta.

ACT ONE
SCENE ONE

SCENE: The Royal Throne Room of Oeneus, King of the little island of Calydon. It is ten o'clock on a Thursday morning, the customary day and hour at which Oeneus conducts public business.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: The stage is empty except for the **HERALD**, a middle-aged man, who sits at his table writing with a quill pen on a scroll. A trumpet sounds off **R. OENEUS**, **ALTHEA** and **AGATHA** enter **R. OENEUS** is a short, balding man of some forty-five years. He wears a toga trimmed in purple and a laurel wreath in his hair. He is somewhat overshadowed by **ALTHEA** who, although about the same age as he, is still a beauty and — unfortunately — somewhat taller than he. Both are overshadowed by **AGATHA**, a large Wagnerian-type woman with steel gray hair and the disposition of a tiger tank. The women wear gold-trimmed robes. The three cross to their thrones, talking, as the **HERALD** springs to attention.

OENEUS. I do hope court business won't take too long today. I'm just itching to get back to my latest model catapult. It's a Hellenic XZ-300 used by the Thebans at Marathon.

ALTHEA. Ony, you have simply got to stop spending so

much time with those silly catapult models and spend more time ruling this kingdom. Don't you realize that we're in the midst of a crisis?

OENEUS. What crisis is that? Are the Parthians kicking up things again?

AGATHA. No, no, Odius. It's that monstrous creature that's ramping all about destroying the crops and ripping up peasants with its tusks. It's the boar that the Goddess Artemis has plagued us with. (By this time the three have taken their seats. ALTHEA sits on Oeneus' right, AGATHA on his left. When the royalty is seated, the HERALD also sits and returns to his scrolls.)

OENEUS. Mother, how many times do I have to tell you? My name is Oeneus, not Odius.

AGATHA. It'll be mud if you don't do something about that pig. The price of bread and wine is going to go out of sight this fall. Nobody is willing to work the land – and I can't blame them.

ALTHEA. Oh, if only you hadn't gotten the goddess angry.

OENEUS. How did I know she would take offense? It was an honest oversight. Somehow her name got left off the list of dieties when I made my sacrifice, that's all. That's the trouble with polytheism – it's such a bureaucracy. Now, if we only had just one or two gods to worry about . . .

ALTHEA. Well, you'd better worry about Artemis and her pig. The people are beginning to murmur.

OENEUS. For your information, love, I have worried about them. In fact, I've taken steps.

AGATHA. We know. You took about a thousand quick ones to the rear when you met the boar yourself. Disgraceful conduct.

OENEUS. I was just making a strategic retreat to get my catapult. But I really am working on the problem. In fact, it's the first order of business today.

AGATHA. What are you going to do? Pass a law making it illegal to stab people with boar tusks and expect the pig to abide by it?

OENEUS. No, mother. Some time ago I sent messengers all over creation describing our little problem and offering a grand prize to any hero who would come here and rid us of Mr. Porkchops. And today's the day all the contenders have assembled.

ALTHEA. You offered a grand prize? What kind of grand prize do we have to offer?

AGATHA. Don't you know that our economy is on deficit spending right now? Who's joined this contest anyhow?

OENEUS. Well, let's see. Herald, give me the list of entrants.

HERALD. Yes, sire. (He crosses and hands OENEUS a scroll. OENEUS glances at it and hands it back. The HERALD returns to his seat.)

OENEUS. Some of the best. Hercules, Theseus, Jason . . .

AGATHA. Oh, that's just marvelous. One of them is just likely to kill that thing. Do you know what he'll do when he discovers he's been taken?

ALTHEA. I'm afraid he'll be twice as bad as the boar.

OENEUS. But, my love, we do have a grand prize – and a legitimate one.

ALTHEA. What in the world do we have to offer to men like those? We can't even afford heroes union scale.

OENEUS. Now that's where you're wrong. We have a wonderful grand prize right here in Calydon. To the man who kills the boar I'm giving the hand of the Princess Serendipity.

ALTHEA. Dippy? You're going to give him Dippy?

OENEUS. And half the kingdom – the poorer half, of course.

ALTHEA. But Dippy's a mere girl. Who'd be interested in her?

OENEUS. My dear, Dippy is eighteen years old – a little underdeveloped, perhaps, but still definitely eighteen. It's

time she's married, and this is a perfect chance to get rid of a boar and a daughter all at once. And we'd have to give up half the kingdom as a dowry for her sooner or later anyway.

ALTHEA. You know, you might have something there.

AGATHA. I don't like it. It sounds sensible. We're always in big trouble when Odius sounds sensible.

ALTHEA. But how does Dippy feel about all this?

OENEUS. To tell you the truth, I haven't mentioned the matter to her. Thought it might be better as a surprise. But Dippy will go along with it – she's always been a dutiful daughter.

AGATHA. Sometimes I wish the girl had a little more backbone.

ALTHEA. Now, mother. You know, I think this plan just might work. It sounds to me like Ony has come up with a good idea.

AGATHA. If he has, it'll be the first time. But I suppose even he deserves a chance. Lead on, Odius. Let's see how you're going to blow this one.

OENEUS. Thank you, mother. Your confidence in me is touching. (To HERALD.) Let the applicants for the royal boar hunt be announced.

(The HERALD steps R and reads off the names of the applicants. As each applicant's name is read, he enters R, crosses to the thrones, kneels before OENEUS, then rises and steps back to form a line facing the audience UC. HERCULES, THESEUS and JASON are large, athletic men. HERCULES wears a lion's skin and carries a club. THESEUS and JASON wear Grecian armor and carry spears. DEMETRIUS is a slight, artistic-looking young man. He wears a toga and carries a light bow.)

HERALD. The noble Hercules, son of Zeus, slayer of lions,

conqueror of the hydra, cleaner of the Aegean Stables, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The noble Theseus, Prince of Athens, slayer of the Minotaur, conqueror of the Amazons, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The noble Jason, son of Aeson, commander of the Argonauts, winner of the Golden Fleece, et cetera, et cetera. Demetrius, son of Homer, court poet.

OENEUS (as DEMETRIUS advances). Poet? Poet? What's a poet doing here?

DEMETRIUS. Your Majesty, I have decided to forsake the muses for Mars. I have put aside my pen and taken up the sword.

OENEUS. But you don't even have an *et cetera* to your name.

DEMETRIUS. A man has to start some place, your Majesty. Your heralds said the contest was open to anyone.

OENEUS. Well, it's your funeral. If you think you can beat out these all-stars here . . . next, Herald.

HERALD. Meleager, son of Oeneus.

ALTHEA. Mel?

(MELEAGER enters and kneels. He is a young man of roughly twenty-two, dressed like THESEUS and JASON.)

OENEUS. Now come on, Meleager. You can't take part in this contest. You're my son.

MELEAGER. The rules say nothing about relatives of the sponsor being excluded, father. As your son, I feel it is my duty to uphold the honor of Calydon. We should be able to solve our problems without calling in outsiders. Besides, I want to inherit all of your kingdom, not just half of it.

OENEUS. But you're supposed to be in Athens, at school.

MELEAGER. It's semester break.

AGATHA. Odius, you can't let him go out after that monster. It's too dangerous.

OENEUS. Now, look here, Meleager. You know the prize in this contest is the hand of the Princess Serendipity. Now I don't know what they've been teaching you up there in Athens, but here in Calydon we frown on brothers and sisters getting married.

MELEAGER. Oh, for heavens sake, father. I wouldn't want to marry Dippy. I just want to keep the honor of Calydon intact – not to mention the kingdom.

ALTHEA. Ony, you're not going to let him risk his life. He's not a fighter – he's a student.

MELEAGER. Mother, I'm a four-letter man at college. I'm on the first string at discus throwing.

OENEUS. Really, Althea, I don't see how I can stop the boy. There's nothing in the rules. Besides, he has a nice point about keeping the kingdom intact.

AGATHA. Well, I don't like it. This idea of yours is starting to turn out like all the others.

OENEUS. Let's get on with the introduction of the heroes. Herald . . .

HERALD. There's only one more, your Majesty. (He raises his voice.) Atalanta, the fair, slayer of satyrs.

(MELEAGER joins the other contestants. ATALANTA enters and kneels. She is a pretty, athletic-looking girl of about twenty. She wears a white tunic, a short white skirt and sandals. She wears a bow and quiver of arrows over her shoulders.)

OENEUS. But . . . but you're a girl.

ATALANTA (rising). Yes, your Majesty.

OENEUS. But are you sure you're in the right hall? This is the convocation of heroes for the boar hunt.

ALTHEA. Young lady, the meeting of my Royal Urn Decorating Society is this afternoon in the Acropolis South.

AGATHA. That's the big building with all the pillars just

across the courtyard.

ATALANTA. Oh, I know that, your Majesty. I'm in the right place. I've come to take part in the boar hunt. You see I've brought my bow.

OENEUS. But come on now. That's impossible. I mean, you're a girl, a maiden. Maidens don't compete with heroes on boar hunts. It's . . . it's . . . unmaidenly.

ATALANTA. I didn't read anything in the rules about the competition being limited to men.

OENEUS. Let me see those rules. Does anyone have a copy of those confounded rules?

HERALD. Right here, your Majesty. (He hands OENEUS a scroll from the table.)

OENEUS (reading scroll). . . . "Will give half the kingdom to anyone who removes said boar . . . contest open to anyone . . ."

ATALANTA. You see, your Majesty. Sex isn't even mentioned.

OENEUS. Of course sex isn't mentioned. Sex isn't a nice word. But I never thought a girl would be interested in boar hunting. This is dangerous business, you know.

ATALANTA. I know that. I'm willing to take my chances. I know how to fight, and I'm not afraid to. I've already killed two satyrs. It's time women had a chance to prove that we can compete with men on an equal footing. You men have to learn that we are more than just homemakers and sex objects. I'm entering this contest for the honor of womanhood.

OENEUS. Why didn't I write those rules more carefully?

ALTHEA. But listen, my dear. The grand prize is the hand of the Princess Serendipity and half the kingdom. Surely you don't want that?

ATALANTA. Only the last part – half the kingdom. I want to establish a kingdom – a queendom – of women where

we can be free to run our own lives without interference from men.

OENEUS. Well, I just don't know . . .

THESEUS (stepping forward). Your Majesty, may I speak?

OENEUS. Of course, Theseus. Maybe you can say something sensible.

THESEUS. Your Majesty, I represent the Heroes Union, Hellenic Local 280. Hercules and Jason are members, too. Up to this time we have kept quiet, but now I feel we must register a complaint. Your Majesty, we have come here in good faith expecting this to be a regulation contest run according to the guidelines set down by our union. Well, it's been anything but that. First we get scabs like this fellow over here — (He points to DEMETRIUS.) — taking part. Then we find out that the son of the sponsor is going to be a contestant. And now you're going to let a girl compete. I've never heard of a contest in which girls competed with men. I don't even think there's anything in our by-laws about it, but I'm sure it's a direct violation of the spirit of the H.F.H. — the Hellenic Federation of Heroes. What do you say, fellows?

HERCULES. It's un-Greek.

JASON. I think it's obscene.

DEMETRIUS. I think it's unfair, too, your Majesty.

OENEUS. Well, there you have it, maiden. I'm sorry, but you can't buck the union.

ATALANTA. But you can't go back on your word. Your rules say the contest is open to anyone. These heroes knew that when they came here.

HERCULES. "Anyone" doesn't include women, as far as the union is concerned.

ATALANTA. I kind of thought this might happen. Well, I've got a union, too. (She shouts off R.) Come on in, girls. I need you!

(CASSANDRA, DEINERA and CLIO [and the other followers of ATALANTA] enter R. They are young women dressed in conventional long white dresses. They carry signs reading, "Equal Rights," "Women Are People, Too," "Give Us A Chance," etc. They form a line parading around the stage chanting, "Rights, rights, give us our rights! Rights, rights, give us our rights!")

OENEUS (rising from throne). Now wait a minute! Stop this! This is outrageous! Guards! Help! (The women ignore him. They make three turns of the stage and then form a line opposite the heroes near the stage R exit. They lean on their signs chanting, "Rights, rights, rights!" ATALANTA silences them with a wave of her hand.)

ATALANTA. There's my union, your Majesty. And there's a hundred more outside. If you keep me out of this contest, we'll picket your palace till the day you die. We'll hold rallies in your royal courtyard. And we'll boycott the Royal Urn Making Society. We'll be twice as bad as the boar. Won't we, girls?

GIRLS. Right! Hurrah! (Etc.)

CLIO. Tell it like it is, Atalanta!

DEINERA. Down with the male chauvinist boars!

CASSANDRA. Up against the wall!

OENEUS. Now wait a minute. Let's not be vindictive about this.

AGATHA. I knew it was too much to expect sense from you, Odius. You've got yourself in a fine mess this time.

OENEUS. But maidens, listen to reason. If the heroes union gets down on me, I'm in real trouble.

ATALANTA. You'll get worse from us.

GIRLS (pounding signs on the floor). Rights, rights, rights, rights!

OENEUS. I don't know what to do. I've always gotten along with the union, but I can't have this.

MELEAGER. Father, may I make a suggestion?

OENEUS. I wish somebody would.

MELEAGER. Perhaps if the heroes could see the prize for which they are competing, it might make them decide to stay in the contest in spite of the irregularities.

JASON. Yeah, that's a good idea. Where is this princess we're going to fight for? All I've seen is a line drawing. She didn't look too bad, but if she turns out to be worse than her picture, I just might withdraw no matter what. After all, I've got an Argo to outfit for a voyage.

THESEUS and HERCULES. Yeah, let's see her. (Etc.)

OENEUS. Well, all right. Herald, summon the Princess Serendipity. She's been waiting in the private antechamber. I thought you boys would want to see her sooner or later.

(The HERALD crosses L, exits and returns with SERENDIPITY. She is a pretty girl with long blond hair and fine features. She wears a floor-length white gown and a chaplet of flowers in her hair. She walks demurely with downcast eyes.)

HERALD. The Princess Serendipity.

OENEUS. Dippy, come up here and stand by us. I've got a surprise for you.

SERENDIPITY. Yes, father. (She crosses and mounts dias.)

OENEUS. One of these fine heroes is going to be your husband. Isn't that great?

SERENDIPITY. Whatever you say, father. Which one?

OENEUS. Well, we're having a contest, and the one that kills that nasty old boar that's been giving us so much trouble will get your hand in marriage.

ALTHEA. Won't that be exciting, Dippy? We can work out all the details together.

SERENDIPITY (unenthusiastically). Yes, mother.

OENEUS. Uh, yes, exciting. Well, there she is, fellows.

Isn't that worth killing a boar for?

HERCULES. Not bad, not bad.

JASON. Could we have the princess turn around?

OENEUS. Turn around, Dippy. (She obeys.) Back's just as good as the front, right, boys?

ATALANTA. Sire, I protest. You're treating the princess like a bolt of dry goods. And she's your own daughter!

AGATHA. The girl's right, Odius. This is disgraceful.

GIRLS. Boo! Shame! (Etc.)

OENEUS. Oh, nonsense! These fine fellows have come a considerable distance to help us out. They deserve a look at the reward. Besides, Dippy doesn't mind. Do you, Dippy?

SERENDIPITY. No, father, not if it will help the kingdom.

ATALANTA. Well, you should mind. Stand up for your dignity, girl.

GIRLS. Hurrah! Right on! (Etc.)

OENEUS. Quiet, all of you! I've a good mind to send you all to the royal kitchen and make you clean the dishes after we've eaten the boar one of these heroes will kill.

ATALANTA. You just try it.

OENEUS. Don't tempt me. Now, gentlemen, are you in the contest or not?

THESEUS. Is she going to be in it?

ATALANTA. You can't keep me out.

OENEUS. By Zeus, I can if I want to. It's my contest. I can make the rules any way I want.

GIRLS (pounding signs). Rights! Rights! Rights!

OENEUS. Now cut that out!

MELEAGER. Father, may I speak again?

OENEUS. Why not? We seem to be rather short on decorum this morning.

MELEAGER. Well, I don't see what you're all making such a fuss for. I mean, if the boar is as bad as you claim, and these heroes are as good as they claim, a girl doesn't stand

a chance of winning the prize anyway . . .

ATALANTA. I have as good a chance as anybody.

MELEAGER. . . . so why not let her compete? All she'll do is make a fool of herself.

ATALANTA. I will not.

OENEUS. By Mars, that sounds sensible.

ATALANTA. It is not sensible.

OENEUS. What do you say, fellows? After all, this silly girl could cause me a lot of trouble.

THESEUS. Well, I don't know. What do you think, men?

(THESEUS, JASON and HERCULES go into a huddle.

DEMETRIUS tries to join it but is forcibly excluded.)

Your Majesty, considering what Prince Meleager has just said, and considering the — uh — prize at hand, we have decided that we will remain in the contest. We must state, however, that this is a special concession to your Highness and that our action is in no way meant to establish a precedent. Right, men?

JASON and HERCULES. Right.

OENEUS. Well, thank heavens that's settled. Now, why don't you all just run along and sign the entry papers? Then I'll have the military boys brief you on the boar. Go on now before somebody thinks of some other fool objections. Show them out, Herald. (Exit HERALD, JASON, THESEUS, HERCULES, DEMETRIUS, MELEAGER, ATALANTA and her followers R.) Ye gods, what a bunch of quibblers. You'd think they were buying a used chariot rather than entering an heroic contest.

ALTHEA. It's your own fault, Ony. You should have made the rules explicit. "Open only to union heroes." That would have prevented all the trouble.

OENEUS. Well, I'm not experienced at this sort of thing. How did I know that every character who can lift a spear would want a crack at the pig? Where did that fool girl come from anyway?