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Corinne Ondine Pache

Trinity University, cpache@trinity.edu

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HERAKLES AND THE IDEA OF THE HERO

By Corinne Pache

The son of a divine father, Zeus, and a mortal mother, Alkmene, Herakles is often described by ancient sources as the greatest of the Greek heroes. When we think of Herakles (or Hercules, as the Romans called him) in the modern world, we remember primarily his labors, and perhaps a few other legends surrounding him, such as the one about how his supernatural strength allowed him, even as a baby, to strangle the two massive snakes sent to kill him in the cradle by the ever-jealous goddess Hera. The ancient Greeks also thought of Herakles primarily in terms of his extraordinary strength and courage, the qualities he displays in his completion of the twelve labors. Yet for the ancient Greeks, Herakles was a contradictory, even paradoxical figure: a being at once mortal and divine, protector and destroyer, conqueror and slave; an ideal ruler and drunken reveler, a hyper masculine male who sometimes wears the clothing of a woman.

Already in Homer's *Odyssey*, Herakles is portrayed as the preeminent hero of the past, against whom even the great Achilles and Odysseus measure themselves. Yet Homer does not shy away from the more troubling aspects of Herakles; in the *Odyssey*, the hero is described as "the strong-hearted son of Zeus, the mortal Herakles, guilty of monstrous deeds, who killed Iphitus when he was a guest in his house" (*Odyssey* 21.25-27); while in the *Iliad*, he is the "savagely" Herakles, who shoots his arrows at the gods during his attack on the Underworld (*Iliad* 5.392-404). The first is a shocking transgression against the divinely sanctioned institution of hospitality, while the other is a direct attack on the gods themselves.

As the son of the most powerful of the gods, Herakles is by definition the greatest of heroes, and both his achievements and his sufferings are, in consequence, greater than those of any other hero. The principal cause of Herakles' sufferings is

Zeus' wife, Hera, who is characteristically and perhaps understandably keen to punish the offspring that results from Zeus' adulterous one-night stand with the Theban Alkmene. Her intimate connection to the greatness of Herakles, a greatness that arises from his torments, is visible in the hero's name, which combines the name of the goddess, Hera, with the Greek term *kleos*, which means "glory," yielding a name that signifies "the glory of Hera" or "glorious through Hera." The goddess and the hero thus exist in a relationship of productive antagonism: Hera finds many ways to torment the hero, but in doing so she spurs him to accomplish the great deeds through which Herakles gains his subsequent glory. The suffering she inflicts, as only a goddess can, make him the greatest of heroes.

Euripides' *Herakles Mainomenos* ("mad" or "crazed Herakles") was first produced in Athens in 416 BCE. The historical context of the play is of paramount importance. After suffering a humiliating defeat against the Spartan forces at the Battle of Mantinea two years earlier in 418 BCE, the Athenians began to fall under the spell of the aristocrat

Alkibiades, who advocated against a peace treaty with the Spartans and later convinced the Athenians to invade Sicily in 415 BCE, a doomed imperial endeavor that would eventually lead to Athens' devastating loss in the Peloponnesian War.

While Euripides draws on the traditional myth concerning Herakles, he makes one change to the narrative that thoroughly transforms the significance of the story. In many of our other sources, Hera causes Herakles' madness before the labors, which then can be seen as a way of atoning for the hero's murder of his wife and children. By inverting the chronology of these events and by having Herakles kill his family after he returns from his labors, Euripides changes the nature of the link between the labors and the murders, and offers a radical twist on the narrative of the returning hero. In the first half of the play, Herakles arrives home to find his family threatened by the new ruler, Lykos. He saves them, but his triumphant return and his happy reunion with his family are soon marred by Hera, who sends Lyssa, "Madness," to overcome the hero. Under the influence of this divinely sent madness,

Herakles savagely slaughters his wife and children. The same skill at killing that previously allowed him to save them now causes him to destroy them. Herakles emerges from his madness with no memory of his horrific actions, and is driven to despair by the discovery that he has killed those who matter to him the most.

The audience at the Theater of Dionysos in Athens in 416 BCE, probably mostly men and most of them veterans, must have seen in the play a reflection of the extraordinary challenges that coming home can represent for returning war veterans. Euripides makes this connection explicit by describing Herakles as having brought “war that is no war” to his children (*apolemon ... polemon*, 1133). Yet the play is also a powerful meditation on the struggle to hope in the face of a nearly overwhelming existential despair. As Amphytrion puts it at the beginning of the play, “the bravest man is the one who trusts in hope, while helplessness belongs to the cowardly man” (105-106). Amphytrion and the chorus of old men have to face old age and mortality, while the end of the play focuses on Herakles’ acceptance of his fate and renunciation of the

suicidal thoughts that plague him when he returns to himself and recognizes the terrible things he has done.

But how can Herakles be thought of as a hero after he kills his own family? The contradictions we find in Herakles are in fact typical of most Greek heroes, who embody in their actions a similar tension between civilization and savagery. Herakles can be understood as a hero of civilization, who rids the earth of natural threats and monsters, but he does so through acts of the sheerest savagery: through violence and slaughter. Like other heroes such as Achilles or Odysseus, Herakles can thus be thought of as a “man of pain,” in both the active and passive senses: someone who can inflict pain on others—for good or bad—but also someone who himself, and necessarily, experiences a great deal of pain. Like many other ancient heroes, Herakles undergoes great sufferings, and, ultimately, the very qualities that allow him to accomplish his storied deeds are the same ones that can prove deadly for the people whom he is charged with protecting: his community and his family. While ostensibly about a great hero of

the past, *Herakles Mainomenos* remains today, as it was for its ancient audience, a play that creates a space in which to think about war and its aftermath, about how the violence of war changes irrevocably both those

who do the actual fighting and those who, having remained behind, may believe themselves—falsely and tragically—beyond its reach.



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