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THE HERACLES OF EURIPIDES

Translation with Introduction,
Notes, and Essay

Michael R. Halleran

The Heracles of Euripides

**Translated with
Introduction, Notes, and
Interpretative Essay**

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Preface

The *Heracles* of Euripides is an extraordinary play, innovative in its treatment of the myth, bold in its dramatic structure, and filled with affecting human pathos. Heracles was the greatest hero of the Greek world. After completing manifold adventures, after doing battle with beasts, Amazons, and the Giants, and returning even from the underworld, he eventually underwent an apotheosis and joined the gods on Mount Olympus. Euripides focuses on one specific section of this long and variegated myth: Heracles' return from the underworld, the rescue of his family, the subsequent fit of divinely-caused madness, which leads him to kill his wife and children, and the eventual rescue of Heracles by his friend Theseus. The play tells a tale of horror: a man murdering his wife and children. The greatest hero of Greece is brought to the lowest and most pitiful position. Euripides here, as in other plays, most notably in *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, raises the issue of divine justice. This madness is sent by the gods; the audience sees Iris and Lyssa arrive to cause the ruin of a seemingly blameless man. But suffering and apparent divine malevolence are not the only striking features of this drama. We also witness the moving friendship of Theseus, who takes great risks to save Heracles.

As was the standard practice for plays of the period, the *Heracles* was written for a single performance at a religious festival and did not have an extended "run". The text of the play was preserved and copies of it were made and sold. Eventually it was collected in a complete edition of Euripides' plays and it survives primarily in a manuscript of the fourteenth century. In the long course of transmission various errors were introduced into the text and the job of the textual critic is to determine as precisely as possible the actual words of the poet. It is fortunate that an excellent text of Euripides' *Heracles* has been produced recently by James Diggle (*Euripidis Fabulae* vol. 2 [Oxford 1981]), on which my translation is based, with only occasional exceptions. The *Heracles* presents in many ways a difficult text. In interpreting it I have benefited not only from Diggle's splendid edition, but from the work of other scholars, most notably the commentary of G. Bond (*Euripides: Heracles* [Oxford 1981]), the text and commentary of Wilamowitz (*Euripides: Herakles*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. [Ber-

lin 1895], and of L. Parmentier and H. Grégoire (*Euripide. Tome 3. Héraclès, Les Suppliantes, Ion* [Paris 1950]). I have also found very useful two extensive reviews of Bond's work: D. Mastronarde, "Review Article: Euripides' *Heracles*," *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical Views* 2 (1983) 93-116, and R. Renehan, "Review Article: A New Commentary on Euripides," *Classical Philology* 80 (1985) 143-75.

Translation is the carrying across of expressions and ideas from one language to another. Of the many aspects of language not all can be conveyed at once successfully. Ultimately translation is a type of interpretation, and there are almost as many styles of interpretation as there are interpreters. In translating the *Heracles* I have attempted to be true to its expression and structure. To the extent that it is possible I have followed the colometry of the Greek text and have done little to alter the idioms and metaphors of the original, trying to preserve the movement as well as the texture of the poetry. I have made no attempt to reproduce the rhythm of the verse of the dialogue (a six-beat iambic line, called the iambic trimeter) or of the lyrics. In translating the lyric sections closely, I have found that they maintain some of their lyric quality. In short, I have tried to present Euripides' play to the reader accurately and with as few barriers as possible.

A number of lines found in the manuscripts are not, in all probability, originally by Euripides but are the result of interpolation. These lines are translated here and are indicated by square brackets.

There are basically two systems for transliterating Greek proper names, one which reproduces transliterations directly from the Greek, another, the traditional one, which derives the English spellings from the Latinized forms of the names. I have opted for the traditional spellings.

The *Heracles* not only was written in a different language but was part of a different culture, whose shared beliefs, customs, and symbols are often unfamiliar to us. In writing the notes I have intended to bridge this cultural gap. The identities of persons and places have been given, as have explanations of customs or ideas which were clear to the original audience but confusing or opaque to us. I have tried to let the translation "speak for itself" and accordingly have used the notes only occasionally to annotate the nuance of a word or phrase. Since no stage directions accompany the ancient text, stage actions must be inferred from the play itself and from an understanding of the conventions of the ancient Greek theater. I have indicated only those actions which seem clear from the text, although doubtless there were others in the original performance. Stage directions are indicated in italics in the text and at times elaborated in the notes.

The introduction has three sections, offering sketches of Euripides and his age, the circumstances of the original production, and the

background of the myth. An interpretative essay follows the work itself. Suggestions for further reading will be found at the end of the book.

My interest in the *Heracles* is of long standing, and I am pleased to have had the opportunity to produce this translation with notes, introduction and essay. I am also pleased to have the chance to express my gratitude to those who aided me in my work. First, I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement I received from the Classics Department and my colleagues at the University of Washington. Particularly I wish to thank my colleagues Mary Whitlock Blundell and James J. Clauss for reading the manuscript and making numerous useful suggestions. My greatest debt, as always, is owed to my wife Erin. She discussed with me all aspects of the play and this project and read the entire manuscript, improving it with her fine ear and good sense. Above all she has encouraged and sustained me in my endeavor. To Erin and to Rebecca and Thomas this work is lovingly dedicated.

University of Washington
Seattle

In this revised editon I have corrected typographical and other errors and made a few dozen changes. My thanks to Mary Whitlock Blundell (again) and Terence McKiernan for bringing some of the errors to my attention.

Seattle
September 1992

The Heracles of Euripides

CHARACTERS

AMPHITRYON, Heracles' mortal father

MEGARA, Heracles' wife

CHORUS of Theban elders

LYCUS, usurper of power in Thebes

HERACLES

IRIS, messenger of the gods

LYSSA, Madness personified

MESSENGER

THESEUS, king of Athens

HERACLES' AND MEGARA'S THREE SONS

LYCUS' ATTENDANTS

Setting: Outside the palace of Heracles in Thebes, Amphitryon, Megara, and her three sons by Heracles sit as suppliants on the steps of the altar of Zeus Soter (Zeus the Rescuer), seeking to escape death at the hands of Lycus, the recent usurper in Thebes. In typical Euripidean fashion, the play begins with a speech which conveys the basic background information to the audience and helps to establish the play's mood.

Amphitryon

What mortal does not know of the man who shared his marriage
bed with Zeus,

Amphitryon of Argos,¹ whom Alcaeus, Perseus' son,
Once begot, me, the father of Heracles?

I took Thebes here as my home, where the earth-born
Crop of Spartoi² grew up, whose race Ares³

5

¹ Argos was an important city in the eastern Peloponnese (see map).

² Cadmus, the legendary founder of Thebes, killed a serpent and, following the goddess Athena's advice, sowed half of its teeth. From these teeth sprouted up the Spartoi (the "sown men"), who fought one another (incited, according to some accounts, by Cadmus throwing a rock among them) until only five remained. The prominent families of Thebes claimed to be descended from these. They should not be confused with the Spartans, inhabitants of Sparta.

³ Ares, the Greek god of war, is perhaps used here metaphorically for battle, but he was the father of the serpent whose teeth were sown.

Saved in small number, and these populated the city of Cadmus
 With their children's children. From these came
 Menoeceus' son Creon, a ruler of this land.
 Creon was the father of Megara here,
 Whom all the Cadmeans¹ once celebrated 10
 With flute and song, when the famous Heracles
 Led her as wife to my house.
 But my son, leaving behind Thebes, where I had resettled,
 Megara and his in-laws,
 Was eager to dwell in the Argive fortifications, 15
 The Cyclopean city,² from which I'm in exile since I killed
 Electryon.³ And trying to ease my misfortunes
 And wishing to dwell in his fatherland,
 He pays to Eurystheus⁴ a great price for the return—
 Taming the earth—whether subdued by Hera 20
 And her goads or by necessity.
 And he's finished toiling with the other labors,
 But for the last one he's gone through the mouth of Taenarum⁵
 To Hades, so he might bring back to the light
 The three-bodied dog;⁶ and from there he has not returned. 25
 There is an old story among the Cadmeans
 That there used to be a certain Lycus, Dirce's husband,
 Who ruled this seven-gated city⁷
 Before the white-horse ones, Amphion and Zethus,⁸
 Offspring of Zeus, became the rulers of the land. 30

¹The Cadmeans, taking their name from Cadmus, were the early inhabitants of Thebes; in this play and elsewhere the name is used virtually as a synonym for "Thebans".

²"The Cyclopean city" refers to Mycenae (see map) with its famous fortifications, the city in the Peloponnese which gave its name to the Bronze Age culture of the Greeks. Here and elsewhere in Greek tragedy, Mycenae and Argos are used interchangeably to refer to the same place, in part because of their geographical proximity.

³Amphitryon unintentionally killed Electryon, Alcmena's father. Blood-guilt commonly provides a motive for exile in Greek myths.

⁴Eurystheus was Heracles' mortal persecutor. The two were cousins: Electryon, Alcmena's father, was half-brother of Eurystheus' father, Sthenelus.

⁵Taenarum was a cape in the southernmost Peloponnese (see map), thought to be an entrance to the underworld, Hades.

⁶The three-bodied dog was Cerberus, the watchdog of the underworld. Capturing him was Heracles' final labor.

⁷Thebes was often referred to by its most salient feature, its seven gates.

⁸Amphion and Zethus, sons of Zeus and the mortal Antiope were in many accounts the founders of Thebes. The precise significance of the epithet "whitehorse ones" is uncertain.

Euripides' *Heracles* is an extraordinary play, innovative in its treatment of the myth, bold in its dramatic structure, and filled with affective human pathos. The play tells a tale of horror: Heracles, the greatest hero of the Greeks, is maddened by the gods to murder his wife and children. But this suffering and divine malevolence are leavened by the friendship between Heracles and Theseus, which allows the hero to survive this final and most painful labor. The *Heracles* raises profound questions about the gods and mortal values in a capricious and harsh world.

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