Heracles: The spiritual emphasis in Euripides

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The myth of Hercules has been told and retold in many ways throughout antiquity. He stood as an emblematic heroic figure to the Greeks, later to the Romans, and is even recognized as a symbol of bravery in modern times. There is an undeniable appeal about Hercules that has allowed his myth to remain in the forefront of common social knowledge, even when many of his contemporary classical archetypes are hardly known to the mass modern public. Ask a passer-by on the street to recount the story of Atreus and Thyestes, or even just explain who they are, and you will receive mostly blank stares. Hercules, on the other hand, is known in some part by nearly everyone today. His appeal as a heroic hybrid of man and God is undeniable, and his tale has been reinterpreted many times in many formats.

If we ignore the myriad modern versions of Hercules and look back to the primary sources of the myth, we find that the original Greek narratives of Heracles are frequently treated with a religious importance beyond that of other mythic heroes. One of the most well known classical tragedies depicting Heracles' transgression of infanticide against his own children was written by Euripides. Euripides' treatment of this tragedy was written specifically for the Athenian religious celebration of Dionysus. His work is directly connected to the religious ritual and observances of this festival. We find many examples within the text of Euripides' *Heracles* that suggest the play was intended as a sacred work, meant to teach and propagate the Greek polytheistic faith.

When examining the literary content of *Heracles* as a whole, it is certainly best to begin with the play's introduction as a means of gauging where the narration might eventually go. Euripides' religious production begins with a mortal man, Amphitryon, as the narrator: speaking about the great history of how his stepson was conceived by a God and woman. This might seem like a contradiction at first, considering that many other Greek plays often bookend their introduction and conclusion with the appearance or intervention of a God, but it is important to

examine *what* is being said in this instance. Although a mortal introduces the play, it is delivered in a reverent recitation of Heracles' mythological birth. Amphitryon's eulogy constantly references the Heavenly influences that are intertwined into the life of Heracles. He then continues to speak about other important mythological histories that are related to the land of Thebes and his family, all the while being sure to include the influence of the Gods in all that has transpired. "I took Thebes here as my home, where the earth-born crop of Spartoi grew up, whose race Ares saved in small number, and these populated the city of Cadmus with their children's children." (Esposito p.150) This careful recitation of the intricacies of Greek myth is more than just a chance for Euripides to update his audience on the history of what has happened prior to the current events of the play, but it serves as an actual liturgical offering to the various Gods above while opening the play. In a sense, Euripides has written in a prayer for the blessing of everyone involved in the production. This is mirrored by Amphitryon's own actions in the play. After presenting a lengthy reverent oration of what Thebes' patron Gods have done in the past, he then proceeds to beg for heavenly protection for his family in the present. "To prevent Heracles' children's death, I, along with their mother, sit at this altar of Zeus Soter, which my noble offspring set up as a dedication for his victory in war after his defeat of the Minyans." (Esposito p.151) As a sacred performance, it now makes sense why *Heracles* begins with a mortal man as the opening narrator. Amphitryon speaks with the voice of all pious Athenians. He vocalizes the unlimited power of the Gods and his own inability as a man to change his sorrowful situation. He widens the gap between mortal and immortal, terrestrial and spiritual, tangible and ephemeral; he declares the established Greek theology of his day and cements it with his own personal testimony that man is incapable and the Gods are infallible.

We might quickly compare Euripides' inclusion of a reverential on-stage praise-offering to the Gods from the mouth of a mortal man, to a treatment of the Hercules myth by Seneca, nearly three hundred years later. Seneca was an influential statesman during the reign of Nero in Rome. His play, *Hercules Furens*, references a traditional pantheon of gods, but is surprisingly secular in its envisioning of Hercules' tragedy. Seneca's first action as a playwright is to essentially neuter the power of the Gods and remove them from the list of influential players. He introduces the Goddess, Juno, as the opening voice, but she is noticeably frustrated as she has been unable to affect Hercules, no matter how hard she has tried. Although Juno soliloquizes from her position in Heaven, the entire content of her speech is focused on her *inability* as a Goddess in conquering Hercules:

> All the world was not enough for him. He breaks Hell's gate, defeats the king and brings his prizes back to earth. Coming back is easy; the laws of the dark land are broken. With my own eyes I saw him scatter night and boast of conquering Hades to his father – Hade's brother. Why not chain up Jove's equal, Hell's defeated king? Why not drag him in triumph? Why not seize power in his realm? (Wilson p.142)

This is a very frightening scenario for Juno. Hercules not only defeats worldly dangers, but actively invades Hell, a spiritual realm, and is successful. Hades is not a being of limited power; he is Jupiter's brother. This is not so much an act on Seneca's part of elevating Hercules to the level of a Demigod, but rather relegating all of the Gods to a lower plane of reduced power and importance, a plane that is dangerously close to the reach of mortal man.

In Euripides' work, Heracles' return is an uncertainty that causes great sorrow and despair. (Esposito p.153) He is not the proud superhuman of Seneca's tale, but a mortal man of exceptional skill and bravery. Yet despite all of his exploits, his family understands that Heracles is not invincible, and thus there is the possibility that he has failed and will not appear to save them in time. This subdued depiction of Heracles as an imperfect hero places a greater reliance on the intervention of the Gods, both in the salvation of his family, as well as in the eventual madness that overtakes him.

Examine how madness comes in the form of an actual Goddess of insanity in *Heracles*. Prior to her arrival, the play's Chorus has been chanting a traditional call and response eulogy that is integral to Greek theatre but noticeably absent from Seneca's work. Euripides makes a striking statement about the direct involvement of the Gods in men's lives by severing the mundane process of the Chorus' ritualized recitation of the Strophe and Antistrophe and inserting the startling presence of two Goddesses: Iris, Heaven's messenger; and Lyssa, the goddess of madness. If we consider that the Chorus is literally a group of men who congregate together and speak as a single voice in one accord, we can easily recognize their intended symbolism as a representation of all Humanity. They serve as an ambassador for the play's audience; witnessing the events unfolding on stage and actively voicing opinions that would often mirror the general consensus of Greek culture at that time. To see the Chorus driven from the stage in fear of Iris and Lyssa suggests that the viewing audience must also learn to recognize when the hands of the Gods are moving in a mortal's life, and likewise step back to allow the inevitable to occur.

The madness that Lyssa stirs up in Heracles is so abnormal and extreme that it would almost appear comedic if the final result was not the bloody murder of his family. Heracles wildly changes from one persona to another; imagining that he is crouched at the starting line of a race, then snorting like a bull set to charge, and later imagining that he is driving an invisible chariot to the house of his enemy. (Esposito p.181) This unnatural turn of insanity in Heracles is deliberately written by Euripides as an unbelievable occurrence to underpin the fact that it was caused by the Gods. Prior to his heavenly fit of insanity, Heracles' actions do not foreshadow any plausible possibility of madness. He is depicted in a sympathetic manner, embodying the role of a mere mortal with a brave heart that cares about his family, fulfills his oaths and upholds justice. There are no character flaws for Lyssa to exploit and elevate to a level of psychotic extremism. Heracles' madness is so inhuman and out of character that it clearly must have come from Heaven. The madman that Euripides creates is so implacable in his spiritually induced rage that only an equally divine intervention could ever bring an end to the carnage. This is exactly what happens. Athena, in her role as Pallas, suddenly appears before the manic Heracles and puts him to sleep by throwing a rock against his chest.

Seneca's treatment of Hercules' madness is drastically different. There is no sudden appearance of a God to incite his bloodthirsty rage. Instead, his insanity seems to slowly grow from within. In fact, the very first words of Act IV come from the chorus as they describe the appearance of Hercules returning to his home after killing Lycus and his cohorts; tangled hair, arms and hands are still dripping wet with the blood of his recent victims, staggering slowly into the doorway of his own house with the intention of making a holy sacrificial offering to the Gods (Wilson p.164). Did Hercules' madness begin off stage when he slaughtered the despot king of Thebes with his bare hands, cementing his pride and sense of invulnerability in his own heart? Regardless of when madness takes over Hercules, it is important to note that everything he does springs from his own prideful attitude. At no point is there any mention of a Roman God's influence or presence during Hercules' rampage.

Another important aspect of Heracles' significance to Greek audiences is found in his actual name. This is brought into clear focus, when Heracles, upon learning of the atrocities that he has committed against his own family, laments his fate and proposes adjusting his name to a similarly sounding phrase that means "Hera conquers". Thus we discover that there is an additional layer of religious and prophetic symbolism stitched into the very fiber of Heracles'

Greek name. Conversely, the Latin version, Hercules, cannot be divided in this same way. Hera becomes Juno in the Roman pantheon. There is no linguistic play-on-words immediately present in the Latin 'Hercules'. This suggests a possible disconnect from the 'religious' aspects of the original Greek Heracles and signifies an inevitable change in attitude toward secularism concerning mythic figures in Roman culture.

If we analyze Euripides narration of Heracles' tragedy from a literary standpoint only, his work might appear clunky and heavy handed. His use of two Goddesses' spiritual meddling as the impetus behind Heracles' infanticide, as well as the intervention of Athena Pallas as the only plausible way of ending his rampage are quintessential examples of *deus ex machina* (both symbolically and literally). Even contemporary Greek comedians ridiculed the use of this stage device as a way for a playwright to cheat themselves out of an impossible corner that they had written themselves into. But the *mekhane* must not be relegated in our minds to the level of a gimmick or literary trope. The *mekhane* possessed true spiritual significance to the ancient Greek playgoer. They would have recognized it as a signal to the beginning of an actual religious experience that they could actively participate in. But why did Euripides chose to include so many religious overtones about Heracles, a simple mortal hero? The modern man often thinks of Hercules as a muscle bound do-gooder who is more brawn than brain, but this was not how he was viewed in Euripides' time. According to M. S. Silk, in their article *Heracles and Greek Tragedy*, Heracles represented a deeply spiritual archetype that often received more worship and praise than some of the lesser gods of Mt. Olympus.

> Within Greek religion, Heracles is unique in his combination of human and divine properties. The Greeks distinguished between sacrifice to a god and sacrifice to a hero. The rituals were different: blood on the altar for one, blood in the pit for the other. The hero-god, as Pindar aptly called him, uniquely received both types of honor. Herodotus tells us that there were in fact Greeks who maintained a double cult of Heracles, with two temples, one for the divine Olympian, the other for the hero. (Silk p.5)

Thus we begin to better understand why Euripides' treatment of Heracles is wrapped up in so much spiritual spectacle and ritual. Heracles is the patron Hero who can be emulated as a model of valor to strive after while also representing the uncontrollable forces of the Gods. Clearly he received worshiped in both of these roles. More importantly, Heracles represents a reconciliation between mortal men and the eternal Gods. His human failures, flaws and sorrows bind him to the rest of humanity. Because Heracles suffered tragedy, yet was still eventually elevated to dwell in

the heavens, he is able to provide an unrivaled human perspective to the Gods. Heracles experienced things that no immortal being can truly comprehend, which is why he received so much worship and adoration in classical times. In a sense Heracles can be imagined as type of ancient Greek Proto-Christ figure; a being who was both God and Man, and who suffered terrible loss like everyone else, thus granting him authority to intercede on the behalf of the rest of us in heaven. Today's modern idea of Hercules as an overly confident muscle bound do-gooder is drastically different than the deeply religious figure that he represented to ancient Greeks. It is *this* spiritually complex persona that Euripides is showing us in the play, *Heracles*.

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