INTRODUCTION: HERACLES IN PERSPECTIVE

This is a study of Euripides' *Heracles*, a play which has given rise to a wide range of responses on the part of the critics, from condemnation to admiration.[1] In some ways, of course, the tradition of interpretation of a particular play stays consistent over a long period, because all commentators and critics use previous readings, but their manner of reading is also informed by changes in their cultural environment. At the same time, the study of tragedy, set against the larger framework of the humanities, is continuously enriched by trends in literary criticism.[2] The underestimated subtlety and the critical history of the play justify writing a whole book on *Heracles*. To begin with, this is a play of great significance in examinations of other Euripidean dramas, especially in discussions of themes such as heroic ethics, madness and the role of the gods. But, above all, it is a drama which deserves a full and fresh treatment in its own right because it represents some of Euripides' most spectacular writing, in terms of emotional and intellectual effect, structure, narrative, rhetoric, stagecraft and audience reception.

Most studies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries focused on the unity of the play, either questioning or defending it.[3] Wilamowitz[4] devoted his imposing study of Greek tragedy to

[1] Cf. 'broken backed' (Murray 1946: 112); 'the most tragic of all the dramas of Euripides' (Bates 1930: 105); 'the structure of the play is very simple. Neither the course of events nor the interplay of characters provides anything dramatically notable' (Vellacott 1963: 14); 'an extraordinary play, innovative in its treatment of the myth, bold in its dramatic structure, and filled with affecting human pathos' (Halleran 1988: vii); 'the most underrated of all Greek tragedies' (Walton 1977: xviii); 'one of the greatest Euripidean tragedies' (Reinhardt 2003: 23); 'masterpiece' (Hall 2003: vii).

[2] For these issues, see e.g. Segal 1986a; Michelini 1987: 3–51; Goldhill 1997. For tendencies in Euripidean scholarship, see the collections of essays in Burian 1985; Cropp et al. 2000; Mossman 2003.

[3] See in brief Bond 1981: xvii–xxvi.

[4] Wilamowitz [2]1895.

this particular play, and his approach proved to be influential for at least a couple of generations. The question of unity was essential to Wilamowitz, and one way to defend it was his theory that Heracles does not suddenly go mad but already shows signs of madness on his first appearance on stage. The emerging science of psychology during the nineteenth century probably influenced the 'megalomaniac' theory, according to which the strains of the labours were the cause of Heracles' madness. In Wilamowitz's view, which suppressed Heracles' panhellenic status, the hero in the play was the Dorian hero *par excellence*, whose main characteristic was manly courage.[5]

The unity and structure of the play remained the focus of research for many decades after Wilamowitz's work. The treatment of myth and the arrangement of the plot have been variously examined,[6] and issues such as the eccentricities of the plot or the dramatic ironies became the focus of critical analysis, which showed an increasing interest in generic definition; hence, although *Heracles* is a tragedy, it was credited with elements which distanced it from what was considered 'a true tragedy'.[7] All these approaches have in general treated *Heracles* as a literary work. On the other hand, there were also studies which examined the play as a source for historical information and sought to establish a direct correspondence between the text and contemporary events.[8] A more elaborate approach to the political meaning of the play was made in the eighties, under the impact of studies which emphasized *polis* consciousness and the relation between myth and *polis*,[9] and the focus shifted to an evaluation of some aspects of the play against the background of Athenian democracy.[10]

[5] See Bond 1981: xxxii.
[6] See esp. Kitto [3]1961[first published in 1939]; Grube 1941; Conacher 1967; Burnett 1971; Michelini 1987: 231–42; Barlow 1993; Barlow 1996.
[7] See Michelini 1987: 27 on the approach by Conacher (1967). For generic distinctions with regard to tragedy, cf. Kitto [3]1961. For a recent evaluation of tragedy and genre terminology, see Mastronarde 2000.
[8] Cf. Parmentier and Grégoire 1923: 12–15 on *Heracles*. Cf. more generally Delebecque 1951; Zuntz 1955; Goossens 1962; more recently Vickers 1995.
[9] Cf. the influential work by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988.
[10] Cf. Foley 1985; Michelini 1987.

The presentation of Heracles, the question of his madness, and the role of the gods, have been central issues in every discussion of the play and have often led to contradictory approaches. For example, the Euripidean Heracles has been viewed at one extreme as an essentially flawed figure[11] and at the other as an idealized character.[12] His madness has been taken as divinely imposed[13] but modern categories such as manic depression have also been used to describe it.[14] And although the religious universe of the play seems to consist in vindictive anthropomorphic gods, several critics have argued that Euripides, via Heracles, undermines their divine status, expresses strong disbelief to the point of erasing them, and introduces a new notion of divinity.[15]

Although the play has attracted plenty of critical attention, either in its own right or in discussions of other plays, most studies have focused on individual issues or examined the play from a specific angle. The most interesting of these contributions is the chapter on *Heracles* by Foley,[16] which examines the sacrificial metaphor in the play, showing how the archaic poetic tradition about Heracles is made relevant to Athenian democratic society. Anthropology and literary criticism are here fruitfully combined and illuminate aspects of Euripides' dramatic technique.

My own approach in this book aims at offering a comprehensive reading of the play, which will explore the literary and cultural background as well as the subtleties of Euripides' dramatic technique, by examining it in the contexts of Euripidean dramaturgy, of Greek tragedy more generally and of fifth-century Athenian society. At the same time I try to illuminate some aspects of Heracles as a mythical hero. My aim is to show that Euripides' *Heracles* is an extraordinary play, of great complexity, which raises profound questions about divinity and human values. The discussion offers a fresh evaluation of central themes in the play and of Heracles as a tragic hero, bringing out what makes him so exceptional: the co-existence of

[11] E.g. Burnett 1971. [12] E.g. Yunis 1988. [13] E.g. Bond 1981.
[14] E.g. Barlow 1996. [15] For an overview, see Lawrence 1998. [16] Foley 1985.

both positive and negative aspects in his behaviour, to a degree unmatched by any other figure in Greek tragedy. Of course, both aspects are well known from the literary tradition; but the important thing is the subtle way in which Euripides evokes for his audience different sides of Heracles within a single play. In chapter 1, for example, I use narratological criteria to show how the bold structure of the play hints at the complexity of Heracles. This complexity is corroborated by an examination of the ritual elements which also point in the same direction. Overall, a thorough investigation helps to demonstrate that the figure of Heracles and the play as a whole are more complex than many critics have thought. At this point it will be helpful to give a brief outline of Heracles in tradition, as it is against this background that the presentation of the Euripidean Heracles will be examined.

Heracles was an important figure in literature, art and cult throughout Greek and Roman antiquity and this fascination in him has persisted in many later cultures.[17] An investigation of all the various adaptations of the hero throughout the centuries is in itself a Herculean task.[18] What is important is that so many periods found in Heracles elements which they could appropriate and redefine according to their own ideologies and concerns. An aspect of Heracles which is evident in every examination of him is his fundamental ambivalence,[19] a fact which may explain both the fascination which he has exerted through the centuries and the often contradictory ways in which he has been presented.

Heracles' double-sidedness starts from his own semi-divine self as the son of Zeus. He is both mortal and immortal, and he is also worshipped both as a hero and as a god. The

[17] Cf. esp. Galinsky 1972; Effe 1980; Vollkommer 1988; Boardman et al. 1988 and 1990; Farnell 1921: 910–1000; Jourdain-Annequin 1989; Bonnet and Jourdain-Annequin 1992; Mastrocinque 1993.

[18] The best study of the adaptations of Heracles remains that by Galinsky 1972.

[19] For a concise account of Heracles' ambivalence in both Greece and Rome, see Fitch 1987: 15–20. On Heracles' ambivalent aspects, see also Kirk 1977. Cf. Loraux 1990 and 1995: 116–39, who adds to Heracles' contradictions, as listed by Kirk, that between virile and feminine (on Heracles' similarity with Dionysus in this respect, see Lada-Richards 1999: 18–25).

ambivalence of his status in cult is well summarized in Pindar's reference to him as ἥρως θεός (*Nem.* 3.22). There is the same contradiction in representations of his heroic valour. On the one hand he is the civilizer of mankind, the epitome of excellence. On the other hand, he is the transgressive warrior, a representative of excess. Thus in Homer he is mentioned as a powerful hero and dearest to Zeus (*Il.* 18.115–21), but he is also the godless and abominable man who dared to attack the gods (*Il.* 5.403–4). He is a hero of supreme valour, whom Odysseus admits he could not rival (*Od.* 8.223–5), but he is a flawed hero, who does not hesitate to challenge the gods and to violate the law of hospitality (*Od.* 8.223–5; 21.11–41).

In particular, his murder of his guest Iphitus is one of the darkest episodes in Heracles' life; in this respect it is interesting that in post-Homeric tradition there was also another version introduced, according to which Heracles' murder of Iphitus was the result of madness,[20] like the attack of madness during which the hero killed his family. This version of the story of Iphitus' murder, which uses madness to exonerate Heracles from responsibility, is a telling example of the tendency to cleanse him of his negative aspects, a tendency which was in accord with the gradual moralization and intellectualization of the hero that developed especially from the fifth century onwards.

The idea of Heracles as a culture hero takes shape in Hesiod, and his labours outline his civilizing role in accord with Zeus's beneficent role in the world. On the other hand, attacks on the credibility of his supernatural exploits, especially under Ionian rationalizing influence in the sixth century BC, also challenged the validity of his *arete,* 'virtue' or 'excellence'. This *arete* was also brought into question by the lyric poets, preoccupied with inner experience rather than with exterior exploits. It was especially the gradual 'internalization' of Heracles which led the way to his treatment by the philosophers as an example of virtue. Bacchylides has a prominent role in this process, shown

[20] Schol. Pind. *Isthm.* 4.104g (Dr.) on the account by Herodorus (*FGrH* 32); Apoll. *Bibl.* 2.6.2; Tzetz. *Chil.* II, 36.425.

by his famous portrayal of an emotional Heracles who feels compassion and weeps for the fate of Meleager (5.155–8).

The tension between the positive and the threatening sides of Heracles continues in every period in antiquity. Thus, Stesichorus attempted to suppress Heracles' transgressive aspect, whereas Panyassis revived it.[21] Similarly, the image of an intellectualized Heracles, which is usually associated with the sophist Prodicus[22] and which developed in both philosophy and rhetoric from the fifth century onwards, is quite distinct from Heracles in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, which revives him as the hero who is second to none in might, but whose *arete*, based on physical strength, seems out of context, and who is eventually removed from the epic by being left behind by the Argo when he has gone to look for Hylas (1.1257–1362). In general, the notion that Heracles' power was excessive is evident in attempts to suppress it. Thus Pisander called Heracles 'the justest of homicides' (fr. 10 Bernabé, *PEG*), for his violence was directed against evil-doers.

Pindar too,[23] for whom Heracles became the ideal ethical hero, constantly stressed that Heracles was doing a service to mankind in ridding it of evil creatures who violated human and divine laws (e.g. *Nem.* 1.62–6; *Ol.* 10.34), and he also rejected the stories of Heracles' hubristic attacks on the gods (*Ol.* 9.30–41). Even in favourable approaches to Heracles, there is a tendency to define his *arete* not in terms of his physical strength but in terms of his spiritual qualities. Thus Isocrates praises Heracles not for his external achievements, but for qualities such as his wisdom or justice (5.109–14). Accordingly, although his labours are of course important, it is at the same time recognized that there are other challenges that the hero can face, challenges which have nothing to do with fights against monsters, but with circumstances in human life. *Heracles* is a

[21] See Galinsky 1972: 20–1, 25.
[22] Prodicus' famous fable 'The Choice of Heracles', where the hero prefers the hard path of virtue to the easy path of vice, and undertakes the labours out of free choice rather than under constraint, is paraphrased in Xen. *Mem.* 2.1.21–34. On this see Kuntz 1994.
[23] On the tendency to justify Heracles' violence in Pisander, Stesichorus and Pindar, see Gentili 1977.

prime and early example of the process whereby Heracles finds himself confronted by circumstances more difficult than his labours.

Heracles is the most popular character of satyr-play after Silenus and the satyrs themselves, and his predominant role is that of fighting evil-doers. Satyr-drama, with its fairy-tale like settings and characters, was the most suitable for accommodating Heracles, who often transgressed the borders between civilization and wildness as well as between humanity and bestiality. The excess of his behaviour, whether good or bad, was suitable for comedy, too. It is usually his insatiable appetite and excessive drinking, which mingle with his traditional role as the mighty hero and the punisher of the wicked, that make Heracles comic. Thus in Aristophanes' *Birds* he is determined to throttle whoever objects to the gods, only to change his mind at the smell of food (1574–90).

Compared to the frequency of Heracles' appearances in satyr-drama and comedy, the relatively infrequent presentations of him in tragedy have often been explained in terms of his comic associations or of the nature of his exploits, which would not be suitable in tragedy.[24] His ambivalent status, too, which shares in both humanity and divinity, may have made tragic treatments of Heracles problematic. The belief that whatever misfortunes he experienced, he was eventually rewarded with immortality may have accounted for the rarity of his appearances as the protagonist in tragedy. He appears in the role of a saviour in *Prometheus Unbound*, Sophocles' *Athamas*, Euripides' *Alcestis* and *Auge* and [Euripides'] *Peirithous*, while in *Philoctetes* this role takes on a new dimension as there he has divine status and appears as a *deus ex machina* in order to help Philoctetes and to carry out Zeus's will. The deified status of Heracles is also presented in *Heraclidae* (857–8; 869–72), where, though he does not appear, his divine intervention is reported by the Messenger.

[24] On Heracles in Athenian drama, see Conradie 1958; Woodford 1966: 49–115; Galinsky 1972: 40–100. On Heracles' relatively rare presence in tragedy as opposed to comedy and satyr-drama, see Silk 1993. On the tragic Heracles, see also Nesselrath 1997.

It is only in two extant tragedies, that is, *Trachiniae* and *Heracles,* that Heracles is at the centre of the drama as the suffering hero. *Trachiniae* presents him near the end of his heroic career and dramatizes the way in which he responds to his suffering. In *Trachiniae*, Heracles is the 'best of men' (811), but at the same time his valour is darkened with his portrayal as lustful and vengeful in his sack of Oechalia, as deceitful in his murder of Iphitus and as inflexible in his relationship with both his wife and son.

Like *Trachiniae*, *Heracles*[25] presents the hero at the end of his heroic career and also dramatizes the relation of Heracles with his family. The familiarity of the audience with previous portrayals of the hero is crucial for guiding the reception of Heracles in this particular play. Heracles is now portrayed as a more humanized and domesticated hero, until the onset of madness violently reverses this image and turns him into the murderer of his own family. The play thus brings to the fore the question of Heracles' *arete* with regard both to his heroic career in the past and to his familial and civic present. The relation between past and present is problematized in the play, as is also the role of the gods and the relation between them and humans. The themes raised throughout the play concerning the status of heroic excellence and the status of divinity and humanity are taken forward to their redefinition in a new context, into which Heracles can finally be safely integrated, and which also evokes for the Athenian audience familiar ideas concerning their own distinctive qualities as Athenians.

Ritual and violence, madness and the gods, *arete* and the image of Athens are central units comprising a number of important themes. Each of the next three chapters elaborates on a different thematic unit, and together they constitute a reading of the Euripidean play.

[25] On the relative dating of these two plays, see Easterling 1982: 19–23 and Bond 1981: xxx–xxxii respectively. Easterling 1982: 23 suggests a date between 457 and 430 BC for *Trachiniae*, while Bond 1981: xxxi argues for a date between 415 and 406 BC for *Heracles*. In his OCT edition of *Heracles,* 116, Diggle suggests a date around 415 BC for *Heracles*.

CHAPTER I

RITUAL AND VIOLENCE

Introduction

In the previous section I showed how the literary tradition from Homer onwards provides conflicting views about the mythological figure of Heracles. In particular, I pointed out that what seems to be constantly brought to the fore is a sense of an extreme ambivalence concerning the nature of Heracles' *arete*, 'virtue' or 'excellence'. On the one hand he is portrayed as the invincible hero and civilizer of mankind, an exemplar of virtue; on the other hand he is presented as the megalomaniac and hubristic conqueror, a representative of excess. In this chapter I will argue that Euripides exploits the dynamics of this ambivalence for his own dramatic purposes. What is missing in previous approaches to *Heracles* is an understanding of the central role of Heracles' ambivalence. The question is not whether Heracles is innocent or hubristic; what matters is the interplay between his virtue and his excess. The use of ritual[1] in the play makes a good starting point, particularly as the onset of Heracles' madness is set in a sacrificial context.

[1] On ritual and literature in general, see esp. Hardin 1983. The study of ritual and tragedy has focused on the sacrificial origins of the tragic genre (cf. Burkert 1966; Guépin 1968) and on sacrificial structures and themes in the plays (cf. Zeitlin 1965 and 1966; Seidensticker 1979; Foley 1985; Vidal-Naquet 1988; Lloyd-Jones 1998; Krummen 1998; Henrichs 2000; Gibert 2003), while comprehensive accounts of the function of different rituals have also been given and the association between ritual action and theatrical action has been explored (cf. Easterling 1988 and 1993a; Jouanna 1992; Seaford 1994; Rehm 1994; Lada-Richards 1997 and 1998; Tzanetou 2000). See also Sourvinou-Inwood 2003 for an examination of the ritual context as well as the deployment of ritual in Greek tragedy.

Ritual and ambivalence

In *Heracles* ritual has an ever-present and multi-dimensional role: supplication, *makarismos*, victory-song, hero-cult, all have their place in this tragedy.[2] But the aspect which dominates, and which acquires the major function to the point of becoming, arguably, the subject of the play,[3] is that of purification by means of sacrifice; in this respect, the dramatic action culminates in the event which determines everything else and around which everything else revolves, i.e. the catastrophic perversion of a purificatory sacrificial procedure, which results in a series of 'sacrificial' deaths. This development is significant not only because of the inherently problematic character of 'reversal' and all its connotations in tragedy, but also, in a broader sense, because sacrificial death is evidently a recurrent topic in Euripidean tragedies and indeed inextricably interwoven with their thematic concerns.[4]

With this in mind let us now examine the inversion of Heracles' purificatory sacrificial act, which lies at the core of the drama and constitutes the climax of the sacrificial imagery. In *Heracles*, the imposition of madness upon the hero, which results in the unintentional murder of his wife and children, is foreshadowed in the extraordinary scene between Iris and Lyssa, in an ascending order, i.e. from the general outline of the divine plan given by Iris and her exhortation to her unwilling companion (822–40), to the description by Lyssa of the nature of the forthcoming madness (861–6, in future tenses), until the direct presentation of the onset of madness (867–70, in present tenses), which is followed by the prediction of the subsequent stages of madness (871, in future tenses).

Although the scene between Iris and Lyssa sets in motion the off-stage action which is subsequently verified in the Messenger's long *rhesis*,[5] it does not provide any reference at

[2] See Sourvinou-Inwood 2003: 361–77.
[3] Cf. Girard 1977: 40. [4] See Foley 1985: 21.
[5] As de Jong 1991: 165 n. 116 remarks, there are three symptoms, i.e. shaking of the head, groaning and irregular breathing, which were mentioned by Lyssa but are not reported by the Messenger.