A sampling of comments on the Herakles of Euripides

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Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone
Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins
Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

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For example:

The comments in this posting about the Herakles of Euripides derive from a set of compressed notes I had started writing in 1999. These notes were meant as a companion to the Herakles as translated by Robert Potter—his translations of Euripides first appeared in two volumes, 1781 and 1783—and as adapted by Casey Dué and Mary Ebbott in 1999.

[Essay continues here...]

The madness of Hēraklēs. Mosaic (3rd–4th centuries CE) from the Villa Torre de Palma. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Their adaptation is available at https://kosmossociety.chs.harvard.edu/?p=1496#herakles. Some of my notes on the Herakles were incorporated into The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours, hereafter abbreviated as H24H, which was published in 2013. But there were other relevant notes that were never incorporated into H24H, and what I now attempt here is a merger of those notes with what I say in H24H about the Herakles of Euripides. My merged comments in what follows concentrate on poetic language referring to a ghostly madness that led Hēraklēs to slaughter his own wife and children.
Amphitryon expresses the wish that his would-be son Hēraklēs, after that hero's sojourn in Hādēs, may come back home. Implied is the idea of the hero's returning to life after death. But this benign idea will become infected with the malignity of madness.

107–111 The singing-and-dancing ensemble, that is, the chorus, refers to itself here in the first person singular, representing a gerōn 'old man', line 110, who is an aōidos 'singer' of iēlemoi 'laments', lines 110–111 (ἐννόησιν ἄνδρὸν ὀνομάζειν). The singer compares himself to a bird with white feathers, that is, to a swan, line 111. We see already here the idea of a swansong. That idea is continued at lines 687–695.

112–113 δόκημα νυκτερωπὸν 'an apparition, visible by night, emanating from nocturnal dreams'. I compare Pindar Pythian 8.95–96, ὁσοὶς ὀνομάζονται ὀνείρων 'man is the dream of a shade'—which I interpret as referring to a dream that emanates from the shade of someone who is already dead: see H24H 24§36. For a more nightmarish variation on this theme, see the comment on lines 494–495.

145–146 In the words of Lykos, a return for Hēraklēs from Hādēs is equated with a coming-back-to-life from death. See also line 297, where this idea becomes even more overt; also lines 425–427.

150 Hēraklēs in this drama is regularly described as the aristos 'best' of all humans, not only of all 'Greeks'. See also at lines 183, 208, and especially the comment at line 1306. Relevant are the further comments at H24H 18§37–38, which I epitomize here. In Iliad 19.76–138, the high king Agamemnon is telling the story about Hēraklēs and his inferior cousin Eurystheus. The goddess Hērā accelerated the birth of Eurystheus and retarded the birth of Hēraklēs, so that Eurystheus the inferior hero became king, entitled to give commands to the superior hero Hēraklēs. So, even though Hēraklēs qualifies as the supreme hero of them all, the aristos or 'best' of all humans, his heroic superiority is overruled by the social superiority of Eurystheus, who is entitled by seniority in birth to become the high king and to give orders to Hēraklēs. Similarly, the heroic superiority of Achilles is overruled by the social superiority of Agamemnon at the beginning of the Iliad. [13§38.] The twist in this story told by Agamemnon, in micro-narrative form, is made clear by the macro-Narrative of the story that is the Iliad. In terms of Agamemnon's micro-narrative, the point of his story is that Atē the goddess of 'derangement' made it possible for Zeus himself to make a mistake in the story about Hēraklēs, just as this same goddess Atē made it possible for Agamemnon to make a mistake in the story about the Iliad. In terms of the macro-Narrative of the Iliad, however, the parallel extends much further: the mistake in the story about Hēraklēs and Eurystheus is that the hero who was superior as a hero became socially inferior, and that is also the mistake in the story about Achilles and Agamemnon as narrated in the overall Iliad: Achilles is superior to Agamemnon as a hero, but he is socially inferior to him, and that is why Agamemnon seemed to get away with the mistake of asserting his social superiority at the expense of Achilles. Like Hēraklēs, who is constrained by the social superiority of Eurystheus and follows his commands in performing ἄθλος, 'labor', Iliad 19.133, so also Achilles is constrained by the social superiority of Agamemnon in offering no physical resistance to the taking of the young woman Briseis, his war prize, by the inferior hero.
The disparaging reference, made here by the figure of Lykos, to the bow and arrows used by Hēraklēs as a coward's set of weapons needs to be contrasted with the glorification of such weaponry in the Odyssey—as also at lines 188–203 further below.

The heroic prestige of the bow and arrows used by Hēraklēs is glorified here by the words of Amphitrion.

203 σῶιζειν τὸ σῶμα ‘to save [sōzein] the body [sōma]’. This expression, it can be argued, is not just word-play. See Nagy 2017, the anchor comment at Iliad 23.184–191, “on the salvation of Hector’s body.”

The description of Hēraklēs here as eukleis ‘having good glory [kleos]’ is relevant to the etymology of this hero’s name. See H24H 1639. As we can read in such sources as Diodorus of Sicily 4.8–4.39, the Labors of Hēraklēs led to the kleos, ‘glory’, that Hēraklēs earned as a hero, and these labors would never have been performed if Hērā, the goddess of seasons, had not made the hero Hēraklēs unseasonal by arranging for him to be born after rather than before his inferior cousin. So, Hēraklēs owes the kleos that he earns from his Labors to Hērā. See also the comments on lines 1334 and 1369.

See the comment on lines 145–146.

The god-hero antagonism of Zeus and Amphitrion is expressed overtly here. The claim of Amphitrion, that he is superior to Zeus in aretē—‘excellence’, line 342, may be relevant to the etymology of aretē—if this noun can be interpreted as ‘a striving to excel’, derived from the verb arnusthai in the sense of ‘strive to win as a prize’. On such a possible etymology, see Nagy 1990 10§16.

In the words of the chorus, the narration of the Labors of Hēraklēs is ‘a song of praise’, eulogía. Relevant is the verb hymnein ‘to hymn’ at 355.

A catalogue of twelve Labors performed by Hēraklēs is introduced with the word ponoi ‘ordeals’ here. The wording is crucial in light of the fact that the drama sets up the horrific slaughter of the hero’s wife and children as an event that is linked to the twelfth of twelve ponoi, at line 427.

The twelve Labors of Hēraklēs are the following ordeals endured by the hero:

1. the lion of Nemea, 359–363
2. Centaurs, 364–374
3. the golden-headed hind, 375–379
4. the horses of Diomedes, 380–383
5. Kyknos, 389–393
6. the apples of the Hesperides, 394–400
7. opening the seas for navigation, 400–402
9. the cincture of Hippolyta the Amazon, 408–418
10. the hydra of Lerna, 419–422
11. the cattle of Geryon, 423–424
12. the bringing of the hound Cerberus out of Hādēs, 425–429.

By the time when the choral song begins a new antistrophe here, the number of the hero’s ponoi or ‘ordeals’, as already narrated, has reached eleven. Now, in this antistrophe, the climactic ‘last of his ordeals [ponoi]’, the twelfth, is announced at line 427, and this ordeal, this twelfth Labor, is the bringing of the hound Cerberus out of Hādēs and into the light of the world. As we will see, however, the twelfth ordeal is in fact not really the last, in terms of the drama, since the return from Hādēs will now extend into a fit of madness that results in a horrific slaughter—inflicted by Hēraklēs himself on his own wife and children. Here we see the ultimate ordeal for the hero in this drama.

In Megara’s grieving words here, she reminisces about the upbringing of her children. Such reminiscences are typical of wording found in women’s laments.

The pathos of Megara’s words is here again typical of women’s laments: which one of you, she asks, will I embrace last? We see here an intensification of the grief, expressed by way of a metaphor comparing a honeybee that collects honey to a woman who sings laments [gool], line 488. The weeping of the woman is ‘condensed’, athroon, line 489, just as the flow of her tears intensifies.

Megara, in distress, calls out to an absent Hēraklēs for help: appear to me, she implores, even as a skīl ‘shade’ of a dead man, line 494. It would be enough for her, she adds, if Hēraklēs now became a mere onar ‘dream’. What will soon happen is a most horrific fulfillment of such a wish: Hēraklēs will indeed appear, a shade of his former self, but he will then become a ghostly murderer of his own wife and children. He will become the evil onar ‘dream’ emanating from a deadly skīl ‘shade’. We see here a nightmarish variation on a theme introduced already at line 113.

When Megara sees Hēraklēs returning from Hādēs, she asks herself: ‘What sort of dream do I see so anxiously?’ The nightmare is about to become reality.

Hēraklēs describes his return from Hādēs as ‘re-ascending to the light’. Implied is a return to life from death. On the etymology and translation of the word asmenos here (also at 621, 725), see Nagy 2017.11.17, with reference to Frame 1978 and 2009.
567–568  Hēraklēs announces his intention of ripping off the head of Lykos and feeding it to the dogs. The brutal wording here evokes the idea of an avenging ghost.

575  Hēraklēs seems ready here to give up the credit for all his previous Labors if he cannot avenge his wife and sons.

581  Hēraklēs says that he will have to 'labor', ekpongeîn, to save his children from death.

597  Hēraklēs says that he had premonitions that some ponos 'ordeals' was threatening his nearest and dearest.

619  Hēraklēs refers to his rescuing of Theseus from the Throne of Lethe, where komizein 'rescue' implies 'bring back to light and life': for this implied meaning, see H24H 24§40. This act of rescuing Theseus is presented here as if it were an additional Labor of Hēraklēs in Hādēs, besides the act of capturing the hound Cerberus and bringing it to the realm of light. This additional Labor resulted in a delay, as it were, for Hēraklēs, which meant that he almost did not arrive in time to rescue his family from Lykos.

655–672  In the song of the chorus here, it is said about mortals who display great striving or aretē in this life, line 659, that they deserve to 'come back to the light of the sun again' after they die, so as to live a second life, lines 660–662. How unfair of the gods, not to let such men have a second life! This dramatized attitude reveals a poetically-created misunderstanding of what "really" happens to heroes after they die—how they are brought back to life, thus achieving a state of immortalization after death. The problem with Hēraklēs, however, is that he had not "really" died when he went to Hādēs to bring back the hound Cerberus from there. If he had really died, he would already be a cult hero, eligible for immortalization. He is behaving like a cult hero when he returns to Thebes, but he has not yet earned it, so to speak. There is a similar situation, as I argue in Hours 18 and 19 of H24H, in the case of Oedipus in the Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles. He behaves like a cult hero when he is king of Thebes, but he has not yet earned it. Oedipus finally earns the status of cult hero only after he dies, as we see in the Oedipus at Colonus. See also the comments on 1291 and 1300.

673–686  The invocation of the Kharites 'Graces' along with the Muses evokes the primal song of the Wedding of Cadmus and his bride, Harmonia, as described in Theognis 15–18. On that passage, see H24H 21 §§62–64.

687–695  \[παιάν μὲν Δηλιάδες παίανα μὲν Δηλιάδες \]  The Delian Maidens sing a paean [humnos] around the temple gates, \[ηπειρόμενοι ηπειρόμενοι \]  as they swirl, and they have such a beautiful chorus [khoros] of singers and dancers. \[αυτοὶ ηπειρόμενοι αυτοὶ ηπειρόμενοι \]  I too, singing paean [paîānai] at your palace, \[ιπειρόμενοι \]  aged singer that I am, like a swan [kuknos], \[ιπειρόμενοι \]  from my graybearded throat, \[ιπειρόμενοι \]  will send forth a cry. For whatever is real \[ιπειρόμενοι \]  has a place to stay in my hymns [humnoi].
The comment that follows is epitomized from H24H 23§§34–35. As we can see from the wording here at 687–695, the Delian Maidens are pictured in the act of performing a kind of choral song known as the païn, ‘paean’, which is equated here with the performing of a humnos. The equation is made clear in the syntax of the wording, which can be analyzed in two steps. First, the verb humnein, ‘sing a humnos’, takes as its inner object the song that is sung as a humnos, and this song is in fact a païn or ‘paean’. Second, the same verb humnein takes as its outer object the name of the god Apollo, who is both the object of praise and the subject of the song that is the humnos. When I use the expression subject of the song here, I mean the subject matter, not the grammatical subject. In the grammar of a humnos as a song, the divinity that figures as the subject of the song is in fact the grammatical object of the verb of singing the song. [23§35.] As earlier at lines 107–111, we see here once again the idea of a swansong with reference to the hymning of the god Apollo. That idea fits the context of the drama here, since the chorus represents a group of elderly men who are on the threshold of death in their old age and who rejoice at the prospect—a sadly false prospect, as it turns out—of happy events awaiting Hēraklēs. So, we see here once again an old man’s song of joy at the prospect of good things to come—in this case, for someone other than the self. We may compare here the swansong of Socrates, in Plato's Phaedo 85b: there Socrates is rejoicing at the prospect of good things to come—both for himself after his own death and for others, whoever may be listening to the dialogue.

696–700 ‘Surpassing all in his striving [aretē], the noble son of Zeus, with great toil [mokhthein], has made life tranquil for mortals, having destroyed the horrific beasts.’ I note that the Labors of Hēraklēs benefit humankind in inverse proportion. In other words, what is a matter of anxiety for the hero converts into a state of tranquility for humankind. See also the comment on line 851.

780 He who violates what is lawful ‘shatters the black chariot of prosperity [olbos]’. Perhaps the color black is proleptic here.

788 The song of the chorus is coextensive with a victory song celebrating the agôn or ‘labor’ of Hēraklēs.

798–808 The ambiguity about the true father of Hēraklēs—is it Zeus or is it Amphitryon?—corresponds to ambiguity about the exact timing for the true moment of glory for Hēraklēs.

805–806 ‘Time has shown your brilliant strength [aikê], Hēraklēs!’

815–819 As Lussa enters the dramatic space, we may ask whether the same actor who had been assigned to Lykos [Lukos], now dead, has now been assigned to Lussa. The Greek name Lukos is derived from the noun lukos, meaning ‘wolf’. The Greek name Lussa is the divine personification of the noun lussa, derived from lukos and meaning ‘rabies’ or ‘wolfish rage’. See H24H 6§44–45.

827 The Labors of Hēraklēs are called his ãthloi ‘ordeals’ here.

830 Iris, messenger of the gods, says that Hēraklēs has now finished the Labors—that is, those labors that had been assigned to him by his inferior cousin, Eurystheus. The Labors of Hēraklēs, as we see at line 827, can be called ãthloi. Iris says that Hēra could not hurt Hēraklēs directly while he was performing those Labors.

840 Note the reference of Iris, messenger of the gods, to the ‘rage [kholos] of Hera’. This word refers to an open-ended chemical chain-reaction, as it were. It can be visualized as yellow bile; since Hera nursed Thetis who nursed Achilles, the bile of Hera is already flowing in the veins of Achilles before he ever even has his quarrel with Agamemnon. In this connection, I cite the work of Joan V. O’Brien 1993, especially ch. 4, “Hera’s Iliadic Venom.”

851 Hēraklēs is described as a civilizing hero by virtue of his having defeated monsters on land and sea. See also the comment on 696–700 above.

861–864 The violence that possesses Hēraklēs is equated in the words of Lussa with the cosmic violence of earthquakes and storms. Just as the mind and body of Hēraklēs become shaken up, so also the palace collapses in an earthquake. The storm within Hēraklēs is coextensive with a cosmic storm. See also the comment on lines 905–906.

865 Lussa refers to her own wolfish rage, lussa. See also line 879. Also line 1024.

867–870 Note the symptoms of warp spasm experienced by Hēraklēs: ‘he shakes his locks, and rolls ... his distorted Gorgon eyes, his breathing is not balanced; like a bull ... he roars’; he ‘howls like dogs rushing on the hunt’. On warp spasm, see H24H 6§44.

871 ‘I will dance you even more quickly and will play-the-reed [kat-aulêin] of terror.’ The wolfish rage of the warp spasm induced by Lussa will make Hēraklēs perform a sinister song-and-dance: it will ‘dance him’. Here we see a negative Bacchic possession-song in myth, as opposed to the positive Bacchic possession-song in ritual—that is, the possession of devotees who participate in a properly conducted ritual of singing-and-dancing. We may compare the Bacchae of Euripides, where we find the negative possession of the elite women of Thebes in the myth of the drama, as opposed to the positive possession of the foreign women of Asia, who are the chorus, in the ritual of singing-and-dancing in the chorus. The sinister Bacchic music of line 871 is like the Saint Vitus dance in medieval ritual traditions. See in general Hour 21 of H24H.

879 lussa... See also lines 865 and 888.
The word daimōn here refers to an otherworldly force that cannot be specified.

See also lines 865 and 879.

'Blood will be poured for a libation, not the wine of Dionysus.' The blood becomes sacramental in the context of hero cult.

The wild storm shakes the house, the roof is falling in.' Again, the storm within Hēraklēs is coextensive with a cosmic storm. See the comment on lines 861–864.

The atē or 'ruin' of the children of Hēraklēs—and of Hēraklēs himself—can be linked with the metaphors of windstorms.

Hēraklēs is literally foaming at the mouth while he is possessed by the wolfish rage, lussa, of Lussa.

When Hēraklēs wrestles with the phantom of nothingness, the ancient Greek song culture would surely be reminded of conventional pictures of Hēraklēs wrestling with Death incarnate, Thanatos, as in Euripides Alcestis 1027, on which see H24H 22650. Back to lines 959–960... Hēraklēs here is staging his own drama of madness. He rides on his war-chariot, he eats at a banquet, and so on; all these actions are familiar from countless Hēraklēs narratives. But here, the substance and even the props of this mad drama add up to nothingness.

In this part of the Messenger's narrative, an essential question is raised: was it the fury of Hēraklēs in the killing of Lykos that extended into the fury that led to the killing of his own family? This essential question operates on the metonymy of blood: the blood spilled in the killing of the enemy spills over, as it were, into the killing of the hero's sons and wife.

The killings of the three sons corresponds to killings that take place in (1) hunting (2) warfare (3) sacrifice [of animals].

The reference here to the killing of the hero's wife and sons as an ἀθλος makes this horrific scene equivalent to a Labor.

The description of Procne's murder of her own son as a 'sacrifice to the Muses' is relevant to the transformation of Procne into a nightingale—a songbird who symbolizes the singer of songs, devotee of the Muses.

As Hēraklēs "comes to," the symptoms of the warp spasm start to fade: but now he becomes conscious of these symptoms for the first time.

I note again the reference to a negative Bacchic experience: a "bad trip," as it were.

The question is, who of the gods is 'responsible', aitios? In Iliad 19.86, such a question can be answered in terms of atē 'derangement'. See H24H 1536.

Variations on a theme: here it is a lion's rage, not a wolf's.

'I whoever Zeus may be': I note the "agnosticism" of Hēraklēs here.

I note here the negative and irreligious description, by Hēraklēs himself, of his own Labors—as if they had nothing to do with ritual. The description of the hero's childhood deeds is likewise irreligious here.

I note the pleonasm of a thousand 'labors', ponoi.
The horrific killing of his sons is for Hēraklēs 'this last bloody labor [ponos]'. See also 1353.

Hēraklēs refers to his own atē 'derangement'.

Hēraklēs was 'once blessed [makarios]'.

Hēraklēs was 'once blessed [olbios]'.

On Hēraklēs as 'the foremost man in Greece [Hellas]': see the comment on line 150.

On the questionable things that gods do... 'unless the stories of the singers [aoidoi] are false'.

In poetry, it is said that the gods actually 'err', hamartanein.

Theseus will give a 'home' to Hēraklēs in Athens. Compare the 'home' given to Oedipus in Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, as analyzed in H24H Hour 18.

Theseus will cede some of his own temenē—plural of temenos 'sacred space'—to Hēraklēs.

The city of Athens will worship Hēraklēs as a cult hero after he dies: the city will thus an­gagein 'bring back' Hēraklēs every time they sacrifice to him, making him timios, that is, a 'recipient of honors'. Such honors are owed to cult heroes.

The kleos 'glory' of Hēraklēs will extend from him to Theseus, and, by further metonymy, to all of Athens. Compare the notes on 290, 1369.

By contrast to what Theseus says at 1315, about which I refer back to the comment there, Hēraklēs says that the gods cannot be accused of questionable things. So, the poets must be wrong after all: 'The god, who is indeed a god, needs nothing: these are the wretched stories of singers [aoidoi]'.

I note again the pleonasm of a thousand labors, ponoi. See also 1275.

Again, Hēraklēs explains himself in terms of kleos 'glory'. I compare the comments on 290 and 1334.

Theseus understands that Hēraklēs is suddenly not the man he used to be. If Hēraklēs has lost his mnēmē 'memory' of his Labors, then he cannot act like himself. He might even start lamenting like a woman. Compare Euripides Hippolytus, where Theseus himself laments like a woman, singing in dochmiac rhythms.

Hēraklēs retorts to Theseus: what were you like, when you were sitting on the Throne of Lethe? I note that lēthē means non-remembering.

The word lēma 'will' here—by extension, we may also translate 'courage'—implies that Theseus had lost all his power when he was sitting on the Throne of Lethe.

Hēraklēs tells his father: 'entomb the children!' The ritual of entombment is key to the concept of hero cult.

Conceivably, we may interpret the Greek text here as 'I will have you brought from Thebes to Athens'. If this interpretation holds, then the wording indicates that the hero cult of Amphitryon was transferred from Thebes to Athens.

Bibliography


Tags: Casey Dué, Commentary, Euripides, Herakles, Hercules, Mary Ebbott

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