

Euripides  
HERAKLES



Translated by Tom Sleigh

With an Introduction and  
Notes by Christian Wolff

THE GREEK TRAGEDY  
IN NEW TRANSLATIONS

GENERAL EDITORS

Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro

EURIPIDES: Herakles

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EURIPIDES

# Herakles

Translated by

**TOM SLEIGH**

With Introduction and Notes by

**CHRISTIAN WOLFF**

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## EDITORS' FOREWORD

*"The Greek Tragedy in New Translations* is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a *re-creation* of these plays—as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times."

With these words, the late William Arrowsmith announced the purpose of this series, and we intend to honor that purpose. As was true of most of the volumes that began to appear in the 1970s—first under Arrowsmith's editorship, later in association with Herbert Golder—those for which we bear editorial responsibility are products of close collaboration between poets and scholars. We believe (as Arrowsmith did) that the skills of both are required for the difficult and delicate task of transplanting these magnificent specimens of another culture into the soil of our own place and time, to do justice both to their deep differences from our patterns of thought and expression and to their palpable closeness to our most intimate concerns. Above all, we are eager to offer contemporary readers dramatic poems that convey as vividly and directly as possible the splendor of language, the complexity of image and idea, and the intensity of emotion of the originals. This entails, among much else, the recognition that the tragedies were meant for performance—as scripts for actors—to be sung and danced as well as spoken. It demands writing of inventiveness, clarity, musicality, and dramatic power. By such standards we ask that these translations be judged.

This series is also distinguished by its recognition of the need of nonspecialist readers for a critical introduction informed by the best recent scholarship, but written clearly and without condescension.

## EDITORS' FOREWORD

Each play is followed by notes designed not only to elucidate obscure references but also to mediate the conventions of the Athenian stage as well as those features of the Greek text that might otherwise go unnoticed. The notes are supplemented by a glossary of mythical and geographical terms that should make it possible to read the play without turning elsewhere for basic information. Stage directions are sufficiently ample to aid readers in imagining the action as they read. Our fondest hope, of course, is that these versions will be staged not only in the minds of their readers but also in the theaters to which, after so many centuries, they still belong.

### A NOTE ON THE SERIES FORMAT

A series such as this requires a consistent format. Different translators, with individual voices and approaches to the material in hand, cannot be expected to develop a single coherent style for each of the three tragedians, much less make clear to modern readers that, despite the differences among the tragedians themselves, the plays share many conventions and a generic, or period, style. But they can at least share a common format and provide similar forms of guidance to the reader.

#### 1. *Spelling of Greek names*

Orthography is one area of difference among the translations that requires a brief explanation. Historically, it has been the common practice to use Latinized forms of Greek names when bringing them into English. Thus, for example, Oedipus (not Oidipous) and Clytemnestra (not Klutaimestra) are customary in English. Recently, however, many translators have moved toward more precise transliteration, which has the advantage of presenting the names as both Greek and new, instead of Roman and neoclassical importations into English. In the case of so familiar a name as Oedipus, however, transliteration risks the appearance of pedantry or affectation. And in any case, perfect consistency cannot be expected in such matters. Readers will feel the same discomfort with "Athenai" as the chief city of Greece as they would with "Platon" as the author of the *Republic*.

The earlier volumes in this series adopted as a rule a "mixed" orthography in accordance with the considerations outlined above. The most familiar names retain their Latinate forms, the rest are transliterated; *-os* rather than Latin *-us* is adopted for the termination of masculine names, and Greek diphthongs (such as Iphigenia for Latin Iphigenia) are retained. Some of the later volumes continue this practice, but where translators have preferred to use a more consistent practice of transliteration or Latinization, we have honored their wishes.

2. *Stage directions*

The ancient manuscripts of the Greek plays do not supply stage directions (though the ancient commentators often provide information relevant to staging, delivery, "blocking," etc.). Hence stage directions must be inferred from words and situations and our knowledge of Greek theatrical conventions. At best this is a ticklish and uncertain procedure. But it is surely preferable that good stage directions should be provided by the translator than that readers should be left to their own devices in visualizing action, gesture, and spectacle. Ancient tragedy was austere and "distanced" by means of masks, which means that the reader must not expect the detailed intimacy ("He shrugs and turns wearily away," "She speaks with deliberate slowness, as though to emphasize the point," etc.) that characterizes stage directions in modern naturalistic drama.

3. *Numbering of lines*

For the convenience of the reader who may wish to check the English against the Greek text or vice versa, the lines have been numbered according to both the Greek text and the translation. The lines of the English translation have been numbered in multiples of ten, and these numbers have been set in the right-hand margin. The notes that follow the text have been keyed to the line numbers of the translation. The (inclusive) Greek numeration will be found bracketed at the top of the page. Readers will doubtless note that in many plays the English lines outnumber the Greek, but they should not therefore conclude that the translator has been unduly prolix. In most cases the reason is simply that the translator has adopted the free-flowing norms of modern Anglo-American prosody, with its brief-breath- and emphasis-determined lines, and its habit of indicating cadence and caesuras by line length and setting rather than by conventional punctuation. Other translators have preferred to cast dialogue in more regular five-beat or six-beat lines, and in these cases Greek and English numerations will tend to converge.

Durham, N.C.  
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2000

PETER BURIAN  
ALAN SHAPIRO

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HERAKLES

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## INTRODUCTION

Herakles is a figure rarely found in Athenian drama playing a tragic role. Darker aspects of his life appear briefly in Homer. In the *Iliad* Achilles evokes him as prototypical of a hero's tragic mortality (18.117–18). Odysseus, visiting the world of the dead, meets Herakles' ghostly double who is haunted by his former life of misery (*Odyssey* 11.601–26). More commonly Herakles is characterized by his fantastic exploits, by his geniality and by an immense capacity for endurance capped by final successes. This most famous and ubiquitous hero appears in the worlds of fairy tale and legend, close to the gods in the ancient time of the heroes, but also in the aristocratic world of the wellborn who achieve successes in their competitive life; and, as one can see in religious cult and dramatic comedy, he can be found to be a comfortably familiar figure of everyday life. Euripides' play brings something of all these facets of the hero together to tragic effect, which may well be something like a dramatic experiment, bold and risky. This introduction will look at the play's structure; how the hero is characterized by his deeds and by his family relations, human and divine; at the role of the gods and the place of religious practice in the play's action; and, emerging out of all these, the role of poetic performance as the play itself draws our attention to it.

1

The play, while centrally focused on a single heroic figure (as rarely in Euripides<sup>1</sup>), is marked by an apparently irregular and sometimes

1. Medea and possibly Hecuba, in the plays named after them, are comparable. The single male heroic figure of Herakles is quite unusual among Euripides' surviving plays (the youths Hippolytos and Ion, in the plays named after them, and Pentheus in *Bakkhai* come closest).

violently surprising dramatic movement. This movement or structure, as in all Attic tragedies, is made out of a number of plot elements or actions, variously combined and transformed. At the start both hero and his family are in mortal danger. The family—old stepfather, wife and three boy children—are on stage, huddled around an altar of Zeus the Savior, a spectacle that signals the familiar plot element of supplication. The helplessness of Herakles' family is occasioned by his absence on the last of his famous Twelve Labors (the descent to Hades to bring back its monstrous guardian dog Cerberus), that is, Herakles' confrontation with death. The supplication plot involves the helpless and weak—often women, children, the old—taking refuge at an altar, putting themselves under a god's protection. Religious and political issues are at stake: Will the deity of the altar provide efficacious protection? Will the human community where the altar is located protect and enforce the altar's sanction? In this instance the human community of Thebes has been at war with itself.<sup>2</sup> A tyrannical usurper, Lykos, has emerged after assassinating the city's legitimate ruler, Kreon, father of Megara, Herakles' wife, as well as her brothers. In a spirit recalling contemporary political realities,<sup>3</sup> Lykos will not put religious scruple above his political self-interest. He means to destroy what remains of his enemies; the children represent future avengers and legitimate claimants to his power. In response to Lykos' threat to remove them violently from the altar's protection, Herakles' wife persuades her reluctant, determinedly hopeful father-in-law, Amphytrion, that the family should give itself up voluntarily for execution and so maintain a semblance of dignity. She also gets from Lykos a concession, to be allowed to dress the children for death. This briefly delays the execution, gets Lykos temporarily off stage and makes possible Herakles' all but too late arrival. The suppliant action, ending in apparent failure, is followed by another set of actions, whose outlines are again drawn

I would like to acknowledge here my debts to many scholars who have written about this play. A particular debt is owed to Helene Foley's *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca 1985). My sense of the play's ending is close to Pietro Pucci's strong reading in "Survival in the *Heracles*," an appendix in his *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' Medea* (Ithaca 1980). Anne Michelini's chapter on *Herakles* in her *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison 1987) is also valuable.

2. The civil war in the background of the play's action is a contemporary realistic, not mythic, feature of the play. Intense internal political conflict was endemic to a number of Greek city-states, not least among them Athens where there was a bloody, though short-lived, oligarchic coup in 411 B.C.E. We have no firm date for *Herakles*, but there are grounds for putting it close to the time just preceding that coup, somewhere between 417 and 414.

3. The breakdown of traditional, religiously sanctioned values is vividly expressed by Thucydides, famously at 3.82–84. The great majority of supplications reported by the historian were ineffective or violated.

## INTRODUCTION

from a standard repertoire: return (*nostos*) of the hero, rescue or recovery (*sôteria*) and a revenge.<sup>4</sup> The suppliant story and the rescue dovetail, but the efficacy of the altar's divine sanction is left in doubt. The savior Herakles arrives after the altar is abandoned; Megara says, "He'll be more help to us than Zeus" (680). As for the communal, political support normally expected for the altar's sanction, it has been notably absent.

The rescue is quickly sealed with the revenge killing of Lykos, a double reversal (what Aristotle in the *Poetics* calls *peripeteia*) in which the lives of the helplessly endangered noble family of Herakles are saved, and the dominating criminal usurper Lykos is overthrown and killed. The initial plot structures are played out and the drama might be finished.<sup>5</sup> This halting of the dramatic movement—not yet half the time of the play has elapsed—is unsettling and might cause what has happened to feel, in retrospect, rather sketchy and perfunctory (though much of importance has been said that remains to be addressed). In parallel with these actions the chorus of old men, citizens of Thebes and supporters of the legitimate royal household, sing and dance their songs, about old age and its weaknesses—their utter helplessness, which links them to Herakles' family, about Herakles' great past achievements, the Twelve Labors—manifestations of extraordinary endurance and victorious strength; and, as rescue and vengeance are done, about the power of youth and the vindication of the gods' justice. Their weakness is offset by the power of their poetic performance and their declaration of enduring dedication to it.

Their last triumphant song is instantly followed by the appearance above the house roof<sup>6</sup> of two divine figures, and they are abjectly terrified by these unexpected presences looming over them. Divine appearances are normal at the beginning of a play, where they serve as prologue, explaining and foretelling; and at a play's conclusion, where they mark part of a resolution and complement it with prophecy. This abrupt appearance of deities in the middle of the play is a very unusual

4. These patterns are found, for example, in the *Odyssey*, Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* and the *Electra* plays of Euripides and Sophocles. In each of these there is also a recognition scene, perhaps suggested in this play by Megara's momentary hesitation in recognizing Herakles (669–70). Revenge in these works involves some kind of deception and ambush, not Herakles' usual mode of action: his initial impulse to use outright force is modified, fitting the pattern (727–37, 750–69).

5. As it is after the sequence of these patterns in, for example, Sophocles' *Electra*.

6. A not uncommon but still striking theatrical effect. Since Iris is said to be coming from and returning to Olympus, that is, on high, the actor playing her part is most likely to have been suspended from the "machine" or crane and swung up and in and out of view above the roof of the stage building representing Herakles' house. Lyssa will enter the house as Iris swings away. She is thus more likely to have stepped out on the roof (from behind the building) and gone off the same way, as if down into the building.

structural feature, an enactment of disruption. Instead of a divine epilogue we get a prologue for a new sequence of events. The dissonances of this moment are underscored by the nature of the deities themselves: two maiden figures, one, Iris (which means rainbow), familiar messenger of the Olympian gods, the other, Lyssa (which means frenzy, raging madness), belonging to a more ancient pre-Olympian world; the first complacently vindictive, the other paradoxically restrained and judicious: two maiden goddesses representing and acting for the mature, enraged and wronged wife of Zeus, Hera. The divine incursion foretells and sets in motion a new action—divine punishment,<sup>7</sup> the gods' version of a revenge action.

A further, more astonishing *peripeteia* is set in motion. Herakles in his madness becomes the agent of what he had come to prevent. What he had for a moment achieved, a return, a rescue and a revenge, is just as quickly, in the case of the first two, reversed, and, in the case of the latter, revenge, is made to recoil on himself. The initial action of suppliance too, first elided by Herakles' initial rescue, is dreadfully replayed. The children when prepared for execution are presented, with bitter irony, as sacrificial victims: "Where's the priest and his knife?" (594) This marked the apparent failure of the play's opening suppliant action. Now the undoing of the rescue is marked by Herakles' going mad in the process of performing a sacrificial ritual, a formal, technical procedure that involves the slaughtering of animals, intended to purify him after the revenge killing of Lykos and his men. Both the earlier supplication and now the madness-inducing sacrifice take place at an altar of Zeus (59–60, 1269). In the face of Herakles' madness Amphitryon supplicates (1269) and the third, last surviving child assumes the traditional suppliant posture (1292–93) only to become Herakles' final sacrificial victim (1302).

However, the divine "prologue" does not quite prepare us for two further actions. The first is recognition (what Aristotle called *anagnôrisis*), a learning of what is really the case and who one really is.<sup>8</sup> Herakles, with Amphitryon's help, comes to realize what he has done; he makes an initial recovery from mad delusion and self-alienation. But the process of coming to understanding continues as Herakles wrestles with an identity now threatened after extreme disaster, in desperate

7. Other examples are found in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bakkhai*.

8. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* dramatizes an outstanding example. This recognition has behind it the traditional notion of knowing oneself as a human being, as mortal and subordinate vis-à-vis the gods. This may be what is meant when Iris says, "It's time he [Herakles] learnt the depths of Hera's rage" (1087).

need of recovery or perhaps redefinition. He first intends to commit suicide to salvage his honor. Then, as the play moves to its conclusion, that decision is reversed (a kind of *peripeteia*, again). Linked with this process is a second action of rescue. Herakles' arrival to rescue his family came for them unexpectedly, in the face of utter despair. Now the Athenian hero Theseus appears unexpectedly, though his recent rescue by Herakles in Hades had been reported—as the cause of Herakles' near-fatal delay in coming to rescue his family (784–85). Herakles' rescue came just in time, only to be utterly negated. Theseus, supposing he was coming to offer help against Lykos, is too late for that, and so perhaps too late to have forestalled the occasion for Herakles' madness. This second rescue, like the process of *anagnôrisis*, is complex. Theseus will offer a refuge in Athens for the hero who is now a polluted killer of his own family and thus forbidden to live in Thebes. But first Herakles must be persuaded to live. Again there is a structural replay: Herakles' wife Megara had persuaded the family to give up hope of rescue and accept death nobly as, she says, Herakles would have wished it. So now Herakles argues for suicide as the honorable response to the condition of his life, which he regards as beyond all hope of redemption. Megara and the family were rescued, as it were, in spite of themselves, and then destroyed. Herakles—and here the story pattern shifts<sup>9</sup>—changes his mind. With Theseus' help he persuades himself to go on living. (Megara had persuaded Amphitryon to give up hope, and he had changed his mind in doing so.) Herakles decides to accept the saving help of Theseus, and by making that decision he becomes again, with Theseus, a rescuing figure—now of himself.

These transmuted actions of recognition and rescue finally conclude with yet one more *peripeteia*, which frames the whole play. The plot was set in motion because of Herakles' absence. His return brings a victory, saving his family and home, and perhaps the city of Thebes. This is followed by defeat and destruction of family and (literally) his house. Coming home Herakles makes himself homeless; his return brings about his departure in exile. The powerful, victorious hero finally leaves the stage defeated and broken, so weak he has to be held up by Theseus. Yet Theseus is there to hold him up and take him to another, adopted home in Athens, which is also the home of Euripides' dramatic production.

9. In Sophocles' *Aias* the great warrior hero, like Herakles, is made mad and humiliated by the gods. *Aias*, adhering to an older, individualistically sustained heroic code, resists the appeals of those closest to him and commits suicide. On the issues involved see Sumio Yoshitake, "Disgrace, Grief and Other Ills: Heracles' Rejection of Suicide," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 114 (1994): 135–53.

## INTRODUCTION

Euripides' play has often been considered structurally flawed, lacking in coherence and unity. In fact it has underlying it a powerful, almost relentlessly repeating and transforming structural procedure. It is not the play's structure that lacks cohesion, it is the whole story, generating the destabilizing transformations and reversals, contained within the play's structure, that threatens a larger coherence of meaning.

### II

Herakles is the central figure around whom questions of meaning are raised. One can trace them along two interconnected lines throughout the play: Herakles' traditional, heroic achievements, principally his famous Twelve Labors, and, what may well be a distinctively Euripidean innovation, a various—both mythic and realistically intimate—representation of Herakles' family relationships.

Herakles undertakes the labors traditionally<sup>10</sup> as expiation for killing his children in a fit of madness. But at the start of our play we hear that the labors are performed as payment to Eurystheus, Herakles' cousin and ruler of the region around Argos, so that Amphitryon, once native there and now in exile, might be able to return.<sup>11</sup> This arrangement is said to have been instigated by Hera or brought about by necessity, a doubled motivation, both mythic and abstract, that introduces us from the start to the play's characteristically multilayered perspectives on its action: mythic or legendary, abstract and rationalistic, contemporaneous—historical and political, and personal or psychological. It is, then, Herakles' own individual choice to undertake the labors on behalf of his human foster father.

The first labors we hear about are two of the best known, killing the Nemean Lion and destroying the many-headed Hydra. But we hear about them from Herakles' enemy Lykos who debunks and trivializes them as mythic exaggerations irrelevant to the uses of the human community, the city-state (*polis*). Lykos also goes on to attack Herakles' iconic weapon, the bow, as a coward's, good only on one's individual behalf, in contrast to the shield and spear of those fighting with true

10. The traditions are fluid. The majority of the labors are essentially folktale material where motivations are a mix of the mysteriously necessary and arbitrary. Tasks are imposed on the (young) hero so that he may prove himself. Herakles' exploits extend into his maturity, which gives him more weight as an individualized heroic figure. On Herakles' traditional story material and its development see, for example, Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979).

11. The cause of Amphitryon's exile is his killing of Alkmene's father Elektryon who is his uncle as well as his father-in-law. This exile for kin-killing prefigures Herakles' killing of his own family and his subsequent exile. Herakles' labors, which will end in his madness, are contingent on Amphitryon's crime (1562–64).

## INTRODUCTION

courage in the close, interdependent combat of hoplite formation. Having the politically and morally villainous Lykos argue effectively for a positive, communal ideology is a characteristically disconcerting Euripidean move. One might tentatively see it as pre-emptive. From a realistic, contemporary point of view the exaggerations of mythic stories are acknowledged, yet, because this realism is articulated by an otherwise negative figure, symbolic weight and space for the myth's expressive fantasy is still allowed. In defending Herakles' reputation and his use of the bow Amphitryon briefly refers to an association of Herakles with the gods' mythic world, but then, as though admitting the irrelevance of such a world, he adopts the rationalizing terms of Lykos' argument. Amphitryon's arguments, though, thus make Herakles' use of his fabulous bow seem no more than a calculated stance. And, more pointedly, the play's subsequent events will show the drastic inadequacy of such rationalism. Herakles' madness will be the terrible refutation of Amphitryon's claim, at the center of his argument, that the bow makes the hero's autonomy possible. Focus on the bow in this debate also evokes for a moment a facet of Herakles' traditional and archaic character as heroic hunter,<sup>12</sup> a role played at the margins of human communities, in the wild, among threatening, often monstrous animals, in a realm of initiatory activities and stories. Early in the play, however, Herakles' image is drawn into a contemporary political and intellectual world at odds with his older, traditional heroic character. Euripides is asking what can such a hero mean to us [Athenians] now?

After the exchange between Lykos and Amphitryon Herakles' family give up all hope of the hero's return. They despair at what they have been persuaded are the limits of his mythic prowess. In contrast a long choral ode follows, amply filling the mythic space, sung and danced by the old Theban citizens who are deeply loyal to the hero and his family. But they too assume Herakles' death. Their ode is a poetic memorial and a dirge, finely wrought and archaically stylized. The effect is of distancing or at least a retrospective view. The splendor of the labors debunked by Lykos is reasserted. Herakles' exploits are often those of a culture hero who has made the world safer from the forces of a violent wildness—including the alternative community of Amazons against whom he has led an expedition, asserting an ideological hierarchy of differences between Greek male and "barbarian" female warriors. In several labors the hero does the gods service (though

12. Archaic examples are Orion and Actaeon. Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, as master of the bow, has assimilated this role, among his others. In his madness Herakles will become hunter again, of his own family (see 1270–72). On the background and implications of Herakles as bowman see Helene Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 169–75.