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herakles gone mad

rethinking heroism in an age of endless war



HERAKLES GONE MAD

***RETHINKING HEROISM
IN AN AGE OF ENDLESS WAR***

Robert Emmet Meagher

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PREFACE

Overview

The focus of this book falls on the ancient figure of Herakles—the archetypal Greek champion and, we are told, the most familiar and favored of all the “superheroes” who inhabited the popular Greek imagination in the classical period. My concern here is with the radical redefinition of Herakles and of ancient martial heroism found in the drama of the same name by Euripides. In this play, transparent to his own experience as a combat veteran, Euripides explores the trauma of war and, even more, of the return to peace. The eponymous hero, Herakles, returning from his violent labors, distilled into the task of “civilizing the world,” experiences what is clearly a flashback to the war and murders his own wife and children. *Herakles*, arguably “ripped from the headlines,” then and now, is about the war veteran, who finds that not only war but also peace can be hell for him.

At a time when the Greek classics are being misused to frame and support the imperial misadventures of the current U.S. administration (reference the notorious influence that classicists Donald Kagan and Victor Davis Hanson have had on the Bush Administration), one aim of this book is to set that record straight and to argue that the ancient authors had much more to say about the folly and horror of war than about its allure.

This book has three parts: a new original translation of Euripides’ *Herakles* aimed at the contemporary stage; an interpretive essay on the power and significance of this ancient drama as a voice in the current debate over imperialism, war and what it means to “support the troops”; and a detailed commentary on the translated text.

Theater and War

The century in which Greek drama was developed — twenty-five centuries ago — was for Athens a century of war so like our own that General George C. Marshall, as Secretary of State, once said “I doubt seriously whether a man (*sic*) can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues

today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens.” The same may be said of a less international issue: not how and where best to wage war, but how and where best to recover from it. For the ancient Athenians, the answer lay in the theater.

When Athenian citizens went to the theater to see the tragedies, they anticipated unspeakable violence and suffering, as they did when they went to war. Neither was a matter of simple entertainment or diversion. The same men massed for both events. In the theater, playwrights, actors, and audience were soldiers, always either on their way to war or on their way home. Apart from the battlefield, the theater was where they gathered in force and found strength in each other.

It may be argued, and sometimes is, that Athenian drama was developed as a form of civic group therapy, a ritual of catharsis and healing for a society saturated with violence, atrocity, and grief. Jonathan Shay puts it quite simply when he argues that “Athenian theater was created and performed by combat veterans for an audience of combat veterans; they did this to enable returning soldiers to function together in a ‘democratic’ polity.”

Theater and Healing

What the ancients understood and what we have learned again is that the process of healing from trauma lies fundamentally in communalizing it. In saying this, however, we must never confuse the “communalization” of violence with the “publicizing” of it. Communalization, in a theater or anywhere else, requires a live “audience” and live “actors,” all able to feel each other’s presence and see each other’s pain, what Shay has described as “a living community to whom his (the combat veteran’s) experience matters.” This means mutual recognition and commitment, not the anonymity offered by the media.

What seems strange to many is that the ancient theater — a place soaked in violence and betrayal — was a sacred precinct, its actors holy. Equally strange to some is the comment of one veteran cited in Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam*, who calls the war stories of combat veterans “sacred stuff.” Without a sense of the sacred, what we propose here is bound to be misunderstood.

Herakles the Veteran

Euripides' *Herakles* is a drama transparent to the darkest and the brightest moments any combat veterans might imagine for themselves or their fellows. Although it is impossible to say with certainty when Euripides wrote and produced the *Herakles*, perhaps the most common span of time suggested by scholars is 424-421 B.C. If this dating is accurate, it means that the creation of the *Herakles* coincided with Euripides' own release from military service. It means too that the *Herakles* may have coincided as well with the initiation of the one-year truce agreed upon by Athens and Sparta with a view towards fashioning a permanent peace. From this we may conjecture that, as this play was being written and performed, Euripides and his fellow veterans of the Peloponnesian War were coming home from the most bitter and brutal war the Greek states had ever experienced. The *Herakles*, in short, is the story of a hero's homecoming.

In all of Greek myth there was no hero more beloved than Herakles. He combined phenomenal strength and courage with generosity and goodwill. He was the stuff of which legends are made, a statue waiting to be cast. In Euripides' hands, however, Herakles is fragile and weary. He is haunted by what he has done and endured, and now must face still more violence. His homecoming is wrecked, and his own survival becomes a curse. With any imagination at all, Herakles is universal. If we doubt this, we need only remind ourselves that as many or even more Vietnam veterans have taken their own lives since coming home as were killed in combat, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq promise to prolong this nightmare.

Herakles the Survivor

The truism that "war is hell" may be traced to General William Tecumseh Sherman, although the truth behind it is older than anyone likes to admit. The counter-truth — that "peace is hell" — is only slightly less old, by as many hours or days or years as the first war lasted. Herakles knew both, the hell of combat and the hell of survival.

In the second half of Euripides' *Herakles* we witness the startling heroism required to come back more or less intact from the trauma of combat and to affirm life again. Euripides, who doubtless knew this struggle first hand, gives us a profoundly

luminous and compelling portrait of the warrior's real homecoming, to life and to love. In a word, what we witness and experience in the *Herakles* is communalization and thus healing, the most essential craving of every veteran and the most fundamental obligation of the country they served.

Notes on the Text

When only Greek line references to any source are given in this volume, it is to be assumed that the translation is my own. All other references and translations are to sources found in the bibliography. Line numbers in my translation of *Herakles* refer in each instance to the nearest corresponding lines in the Loeb Greek text of *Herakles* contained in Perseus 2.0, a digital database edited by Gregory Crane, and published by Yale University Press, 1996. (Any citation or translation here labeled "Perseus" is from this collection.) The critical edition of *Herakles* and the corresponding commentary by Martin Cropp and Richard Hamilton, published by Bryn Mawr College, 1987, were also used in composing this translation.

Passages enclosed in brackets [], while invariably consistent with the sense of the original Greek, are not to be found literally in the Greek text. In these cases I have taken substantial liberty with the original, for the sake of explication or emphasis. Most translators take these same liberties without ever indicating their exact location and extent, and my doing so here represents an experiment on my part, a gesture in the direction of greater accountability and honesty to the original. I am at the same time hopeful that the brackets will be mostly overlooked and will not prove a distraction or obstacle to the reader's or the actor's immediate rapport with the text.

• PART ONE •

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

1 • THE WORLD OF HERAKLES

Introduction

The defining focus of this volume falls on the beleaguered and beloved figure of Herakles—Herakles of the ancient poets and playwrights, Herakles the hero, the warrior, and, at the end of the day, the survivor. More specifically, the Herakles at the core of this volume is that one drawn and breathed into life by Euripides in the drama named for him in his darkest moment and known traditionally as *Hercules Furens* or “Herakles Gone Mad.” But why Herakles, and why now? The answer is simple, though it will require the remainder of this book to make it clear and compelling: Herakles, as Euripides staged him, is the quintessential hero for our times, the clearest and most revealing of mirrors for America and Americans at war, a war that we are told is without foreseeable end. Convinced of this, my aim here is to provide a translation of *Herakles* for our times, a play that will both challenge and hearten us in our most profound personal and political struggles, a play that will tell us the truth about ourselves.

Why, any of us might ask, turn to an ancient face, retrieved from myth, in order to confront and to learn about ourselves? Again, the answer is both disarmingly simple and, at first, unconvincing. Heraklitos put it in the fewest possible words, as was his gift: *phusis kruptesthai philei* (Fr. 123). “The unfolding nature of things is wont to conceal itself.” In other words, “truth likes to hide.” And, of course, we like to hide from it. The truth, no less than the sun, sears our eyes if we look at it straight on. It is not our favorite sight. We mostly avoid it and keep it to our backs. Indeed, we need to be tricked into confronting the unwelcome truth about ourselves, as the prophet Nathan knew and put into practice when he lured David into painful self-awareness with a story sure to provoke a self-righteous and self-deceiving king. Plato too counseled his pupils and his readers to gaze on truth indirectly, as they would on the sun reflected in a pond.

This, I believe, is why the site of the ancient Greek dramas was called the *theatron*, the “seeing place.” First off, on the surface, what was seen there was the spectacle created by dancers and actors, draped and masked, to provide a captivating glimpse into the myths and legends of the past. Secondly and more importantly,

however, what was seen was that most elusive and essential of sights, the truth. Euripides, more relentlessly than any of his playwright peers, used the masks of tragedy to both conceal and reveal, at the same time, the truths from which he and his fellow citizens were currently in full flight. His characters and plots were *eikones* or icons, challenging and inspiring their viewers to *eikasia* or imagination, the act of seeing one thing in another, the same act by which the mind ascends towards “the Good” or “Being itself” in Plato’s *Republic*. Consider for a moment the later Byzantine icons of the Christian era. They are not created as objects of art to be aesthetically admired but rather as sacred habitats wherein iconodules or devotees might commune with the saints and their god. The same is true of the ancient theater, a sacred precinct, where fragile mortals are buffeted, broken, healed and enlightened before our eyes. Like it or not—and many of Euripides’ contemporaries did not—the ancient theater, more than any civic temple, was the house of truth.

What does myth, we might ask, have to do with truth? And, while we are at it, what does the myth of Herakles have to do with us? The word “myth” comes from the Greek *mythos*, which among other things means “plot,” the plot of a drama. Myth, it has often been said, is not what happened once, but rather what happens always, inevitably. It is what is always about to happen or what, if we admit it, is already underway. It is the truth that stalks us daily. When we run from it, we run into it; and, when we pursue it, it hides. Some classical scholars, true enough, avoid such notions of myth. They collect myths as one would collect stamps—sorting, mounting and labeling them in all of their versions and postmarks—and then keep them bound away in books. Such collectors have long since lost interest in and discarded the missives to which the stamps were first affixed and which they served to deliver. So, too, there is a deep resistance among some classicists to consider, much less to concede, that the ancient Greek playwrights used mythic plots to deliver contemporary messages. The purists among them prefer to believe that ancient audiences flocked to the theater of Dionysos to perch on unforgiving benches in the blazing sun for the better part of three days for the sheer, undiluted thrill of seeing their beloved myths reenacted before their eyes. For my part, I think it unlikely that in classical Athens there were twelve thousand citizens as devoted to myth as was Joseph Campbell or Mircea Eliade, both of whom I esteem. No, each ancient drama was

written for the moment and to the moment, for a single performance. If we ignore that moment or *kairos*, we consign its drama to the museum, to be forever revered but never understood. A butterfly pinned to a board and labeled is no longer a butterfly. We must see it take wing and fly, in that brief window of life afforded it, before we know what it truly is. The same is true of drama. It lives and reveals itself on the stage, not on the page.

Lest we lose ourselves here in generalities, I will cite a few specific examples of what I have in mind. It seems incontestable, and is widely admitted, that Euripides' *Trojan Women* represents his attempt to confront the Athenian demos or voting populace with their wartime atrocities on the island of Melos. Less often acknowledged but no less obvious, I believe, is the transparency of Euripides' *Helen* to the aftermath of the Sicilian debacle; and it seems more than probable that a much earlier event, at the start of the Peloponnesian War—the revolt on Corcyra—inspired and shaped Euripides' *Hekabe*. More tenuous and yet intriguing is an identification of Sophokles' Oedipus (*O.T.*) with Perikles and, more specifically, of Thebes' loss of her *tyrannos* or tyrant-king with Athens' loss of her overbearing *strategos* or general. This just might explain Sophokles' introduction of the blinding and disappearance of Oedipus. After all, one of the last stages of the plague, which afflicted both Thebes and Athens and took the later's first citizen, is blindness. Who is to say that the blindness of Perikles—a bold conjecture for me to propose—was not common knowledge to late 5th century Athenians? The truth is that a close reading of the extant corpus of Athenian tragedy side-by-side with the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon, will yield a host of all-but-compelling parallels between mythic fiction and historic fact. The plays of Euripides in particular were no further removed from his own times and experience than are the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller or, for that matter, David Mamet from our century. It is the aim of this book to make that very case for one such play, the *Herakles*.

Even if we are convinced, however, that Euripides' *Herakles* spoke to its fifth-century Athenian audience with all the immediacy that we expect from a gripping contemporary drama, the question remains what it has to say to us. For reasons that will become clear and, I hope, compelling in the pages that follow, the *kairos* or moment embodied in the *Herakles* bears a remarkable likeness to the moment in which we

encounter it today. Just as in the cave of Plato's *Republic*, the cave of images, we see here too a chain of images, linking Herakles and ourselves. Partly this is because the *Herakles* confronts realities that change far too slowly for the mere two and half millennia that separate us from the time of Euripides to make any significant difference. Just as important, however, is the surprising resemblance between Athens in its "golden age" and the United States in what has been called "the American century." Secretary of State George Marshall called this resemblance to the attention of his Princeton audience in an address delivered on February 22, 1947. "I doubt seriously," he suggested: "whether a man (*sic*) can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the Fall of Athens." (in Connor 3) This conviction was later underscored by another State Department official, Louis J. Halle, who wrote in 1952 that:

"The present, in which our country finds itself, like Athens after the Persian Wars, called upon to assume the leadership of the free world, brings him [Thucydides] virtually to our side.... It seems to me that since World War II Thucydides has come still closer to us so that he now speaks to our ear."
(in Connor 3)

The truth is that America today, in the 21st century, stands even closer to Athens and to her historian than either Marshall or Halle might have anticipated; and not only he but Euripides too bends our ears with a poignancy and power perhaps unrivalled by any contemporary historians or playwrights. This, then, is the line to be traced in this book: from the mythic Herakles to the Herakles of the 5th century B.C.E. on to the Herakles of the 21st century—Herakles yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Herakles and War

Euripides' Herakles is first and foremost a warrior, a citizen-soldier in the service of his state. This understanding is foundational to all that follows and will be argued here at length in due course. In focusing on Herakles and war and in stressing the bonds between Athens in the 5th century and America in the 21st century, I run the risk of aligning myself with a host of voices—some ancient and some contemporary—with whom I take great issue. For twenty-five centuries warriors and warrior spirits have drawn, or rather extracted, inspiration from the ancient Greek poets, playwrights and

historians. Western empires, too, from Rome to Britain to America have looked to the Greeks, to Homer and to Perikles, for vision, collegial encouragement and moral justification. Alexander, en route to destiny, is said to have slept with a copy of the *Iliad* under his pillow; and, today, as a new crypto-empire is envisioned and launched, an odd couple of American classicists—Donald Kagan and Victor Davis Hanson—are nurturing the enterprise on a decidedly classical diet. Up to a point, their argument runs parallel to mine here, namely that we may gain a privileged and powerful vision of ourselves and our times, particularly as Americans, by turning to the Athenian 5th century, the Athenian empire, its policies and its war-craft. With all of this I agree; and it will ground my interpretation of *Herakles*.

Where I part ways and where I would suggest that others would do well to part ways with Kagan and Hanson, is in the conclusions they draw from their ancient mentors. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, after all, represent two of the most fierce and eloquent critiques of war and of the warrior code in all of world literature; and the story begun by Thucydides and completed by Xenophon is of the dissolution of the Athenian empire. By the end of the Peloponnesian War, Athens is ruined. Its infantry and navy are destroyed, its economy in collapse, its democracy undermined, its moral leadership abandoned and discredited, its privileged place in the world forever forfeited. Euripides, in his *Orestes*, provides a shocking glimpse of the final stage of the great Athenian unraveling, the image of a city so rotten from within and so besieged from without that it is anyone's guess which will occur first—its collapse or its conquest. In all of this we find no genuine encouragement, no promising incitement to think imperial thoughts, to take on a war without end, to treat our allies as subjects and to consign our enemies to annihilation. Gratefully, we as a nation and a people, are not there yet; but why would we ever point ourselves in such a direction?

I will focus here, as briefly as possible, on the voice and work of Victor Davis Hanson, an acknowledged authority on ancient Greek hoplite warfare and an increasingly recognized scholar of Western military history, from the walls of Troy to the streets of Baghdad. Like others, I have learned a great deal from him about ancient warfare and the warring polis. What I find particularly alarming are the violent mantras which he claims to have derived from his studies and his invoking of them over the past several years to

help plunge America into two wars. As a respected advisor of George W. Bush and Richard Cheney, and as a bold, prolific pundit, his voice carries much further than that of the average classical scholar; and, because it is so misguided, does much deeper harm. I have mentioned Donald Kagan here mostly because he has thrown his considerable credibility as a Thucydides scholar behind the work of Hanson and has gone on record in his assessment of Hanson as “a national treasure.” At this point, regrettably, “national threat” may be closer to the mark.

The foundational assertion of Hanson’s work may be distilled in his claim that the “Western way of war” may be traced to the weaponry and tactics—the hardware and the software, as it were—of classical hoplite warfare, battle-tested in the Peloponnesian War and brought to dazzling perfection in the Asian *Anschluss* of Alexander. A number of elements must converge to create the chemistry that Hanson sets forth as war waged Western style: democratic citizen soldiers, superior cutting-edge weaponry, head-to-head shock battle aimed at the swift annihilation of the enemy, and what George S. Patton described as “that vitalizing spark, intangible, yet evident as lightning—the warrior soul.” (in Hanson 1999 frontispiece) Technological superiority, ideological purity, individual freedom, and the unleashing of violence without fetter or scruple are the ingredients of decisive victory, a victory assured to the West, according to Hanson, whenever and wherever “marching democracy” goes to war against the East, or the Middle East for that matter.

As Hanson and Kagan read history and where it points, war is so endemic, so natural, so inevitable to democracies as they confront the wider world, that they barely distinguish between states and states at war. “From the Stone Age, at least as far back as ten thousand years ago,” writes Kagan,

organized armies in formation fought one another and built fortifications to protect themselves and their people from attacks by other armies....Most thinking and writing about the subject, however, has assumed tacitly that peace is the natural state of relations among states,” that war is an aberration.... The evidence provided by the experience of human beings living in organized societies for more than five millennia suggests otherwise... The cases we have examined indicate that good will, unilateral disarmament, the avoidance of alliances, teaching and preaching of the evils of war by those states who, generally satisfied with the state of the world, seek to preserve peace, are of no avail. (Kagan 1995 4, 569, 570).

Granted, Machiavelli and Hobbes said as much long ago; but the wages and stakes of war have risen in the meantime. When Hobbes described the natural state of man (and woman) as a ceaseless “war of every one against every one,” (1966 100) he never imagined the technological capacity to annihilate humankind. When he rooted individual freedom in the capacity of any one person, if sufficiently desperate, to take the life of any one other person, he never dreamt of suitcase nuclear devices or of launch codes capable of bringing an end to the planet rather than to a hostile neighbor. Even Hobbes, however, conceded that there would be respites, moments when actual hostilities cease. Admittedly, he cautions that such moments should not be called peace, “but rather a breathing time.” (1972 260) Perhaps “breathing time” is what we call life, life treasured, life deliriously cherished and tenaciously preserved.

Ordinarily, when classical scholars, philosophers, and even military historians discuss matters such as these the stakes are moderately low. Tenure, promotion or publication may be on the line. But when an academic finds the ear of the president and the vice-president of the most powerful nation in the world, it is more than sherry that might be spilt. Again I have in mind Victor Davis Hanson who brandished more than books after the attacks of 9/11. Summoning all of his core mantras, he called the nation to war. “Western nations at war,” he reminded us, “from the Greeks to the present, are not weak but enormously lethal...

In our peace and affluence, and in awe of the suicidal fanaticism of our enemies, we Americans of this complacent age have forgotten these iron laws of the Western way of war—Alexander the Great destroying an empire of seventy million with an army of forty thousand, Cortés wrecking an imperial people of two million in less than two years, or a small band of British redcoats ending the power of Cetshwayo and his Zulus in less than a year.... The world, much less the blinkered fundamentalists, has not seen a United States unleashed for a long time and so has forgotten all this. Americans are kind, and they are a generous people. But when wronged, held in contempt, and attacked in peace, they define victory as the absolute annihilation of the enemy. (2002.2 6–8)

Hanson is arguably accurate in his account of the legendarily lethal and brutal character of the Western military tradition and correct in tracing it to the Peloponnesian War in which Euripides fought and which he so profoundly opposed. His celebration of that tradition, his confident righteousness, his eager embrace of carnage, and his seeming assumption that the hoplite charge need only be tinkered with to be effective against

civilian insurgents and urban terrorists make at least one thing manifestly clear—that he has learned of war from books. His dreams of combat, if he has them, are second-hand, far from the nightmares of a veteran. Not so Euripides and his Herakles, on whom this book will more fruitfully dwell.

I will challenge Hanson only on one point here, a matter crucial to our understanding of Euripides' *Herakles*. The great achievement of the Western way of war, mastered by the armies of Alexander, is, in Hanson's words, that "they killed without dying because of a military tradition that for centuries had proved unlike any other in the ancient world." (2002.1 10) This same tradition is the birthright of the United States, which as Hanson sees it "has awoken from its moral slumber and found itself not feeble, but fearsome beyond its wildest imagination." (2002.2 10). What this means, Hanson assures us, is that "not only can Americans defeat their adversaries, but they don't even die doing it." (2002.1 241) As a prediction or claim to fact, that American soldiers kill without dying can be refuted any day of the year by a walk through Arlington Cemetery or a pilgrimage to the Vietnam Wall or, these days, by turning on the evening news. As an aspiration or dream, to kill without dying is a cruel delusion.

The dream of war, or perhaps more appropriately the dream war, infecting the writings of Hanson is historically incarnate in the "vast democratic infantry forces" such as those of Epaminondas, Sherman, and Patton, who "appeared out of nowhere, wrought such havoc, and then dispersed among the consensual culture that fielded them." (1999 8) Killers appearing from nowhere, destroying without being destroyed, all in the name of freedom, and then disappearing into the nowhere from which they came. Sheer fantasy! Even without personal combat experience, the most cursory survey of the vast literature of war—autobiographical accounts, psychiatric surveys, Congressional Records, and Veterans Administration studies—together with common sense and sensibility would readily dispel such a dangerous delusion. A brief summary of this evidence will suffice at this point, en route to a fuller discussion of Herakles and Euripides, both veterans of brutal combat.

Firstly, killers are not born. They do not just "appear out of nowhere." They are made, by a state that needs them to do its bidding. The ground-breaking battlefield surveys of combat troops conducted by Lt. Colonel S.L.A. Marshall in the Pacific

Theater of World War II revealed a startling truth—that in direct combat, when soldiers were able to see and to take aim at their adversaries, only 15–20% of infantry were willing to fire their rifles. “One lieutenant colonel complained to Marshall that

four days after the desperate struggle at Omaha Beach he couldn’t get one man in twenty-five to voluntarily fire his rifle. “I walked up and down the line yelling, ‘God damn it! Start shooting!’ But it did little good.” These men weren’t cowards. They would hold their positions and willingly perform such tasks as delivering ammunition to machine guns. They simply couldn’t bring themselves to aim a rifle at another human being—even an armed foe—and pull the trigger. “Fear of killing, rather than fear of being killed, was the most common cause of battle failure in the individual,” wrote Marshall. (Baum2004 45)

Marshall’s findings among World War II infantry, accepted as accurate by the U.S. Defense Department, match closely those of a range of other scholars who have studied the fire rates in earlier mass conflicts, such as the Napoleonic Wars and the American Civil War. In 1775, on Lexington Green, where Minutemen confronted British Regulars at close range, “only seven fired their muskets, and only one Redcoat was actually hit.” (Weiner 31). The Civil War, we know, marshaled the best trained and most lethally armed forces ever yet sent into battle, and still they were surprisingly ineffectual in close combat.

An average engagement would take place at thirty yards. But instead of mowing down hundreds of enemy soldiers in the first minute, regiments killed only one or two per minute. And instead of the enemy formations disintegrating in a hail of lead, they stood and exchanged fire for hours on end. (Grossman 1995 20)

This despite their disciplined training and advanced weaponry. More specifically, it has been estimated that at Gettysburg, riflemen on both sides spent more than 95% of their time loading rather than firing their rifles. Twenty-four thousand loaded rifles were found discarded on the field after the battle, thousands of them loaded multiple times, rendering them useless. One musket, in fact, was stuffed with twenty-three charges. (F.A. Lord in Grossman 1995 21–22). Clearly, even in the heat of battle, many thousands of men in grave personal peril only pretended to engage their foe. This concurs with persuasive evidence that across centuries of black-powder warfare, until the mid-20th century, most infantry, face to face with the enemy, either fired over their heads or failed to discharge their weapons at all.

How, then, do we account for the massive casualties of modern warfare up to and including World War II? The fact is that the devastating death tolls of the Civil War and of the far more lethal wars which followed it were mostly caused by “impersonal” forces—disease, exhaustion, exposure to deadly heat or cold, and increasingly sophisticated and remote weaponry fired or dropped from such a distance that killer and killed never directly confront each other, in life or in death. More important for our purposes here, however, is to account for the startling non-fire rate among screened, disciplined, well-armed warriors.

Lt. Colonel Marshall, whose findings provoked both consternation and future resolve in the War Department, as it was then called, offered his own explanation of the unwillingness of trained killers to do what they were trained to do. The reason, for him, is clearly that

The average and healthy individual... has such an inner and unusually unrealized resistance towards killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible for him to turn away from that responsibility....At the vital point... (the soldier) becomes a conscientious objector. (in Grossman 1995 29)

Human beings, of course, are not the only potentially lethal creatures to manifest a profound aversion to the killing of their own species. Most every species on the planet shares this same deeply rooted taboo. Within any species, however, there are individual exceptions. Among humans, for example, psychiatrists estimate that the aversion to homicide is absent in roughly 2% of the population. These may be called “natural killers,” who, far from having to overcome a profound inhibition to take another human life, are actually predisposed to it and to enjoy it.

This is, over course, very bad news for any military establishment or endeavor. And it was received as such by the War Department after World War II. Despite a selective draft, extensive pre-combat training, and an intense demonizing of the enemy, less than 20% of the nation’s natural conscientious objectors (representing 98% of the population) had been made into effective killers. They were going to have to do better. After all, even Victor Hanson acknowledges “that warfare is simply battle, that battle is only fighting, that fighting is always killing and dying, nothing more, nothing less.” (1993 11). And they did do better. By the Korean War, the American fire rate was up to 55 percent and, in Vietnam, it was up to 90–95%. From a military perspective, this is a

remarkable success story, which cannot be told in any detail here. At the risk of considerable over-simplification, it comes down more than anything else to distance—the physical and psychological distancing of the killer from the killed, and the distancing of both from their own, much less their shared, humanity. “Unless he is caught up in murderous ecstasy,” writes J. Glenn Gray, philosopher and World War II veteran, “destroying is easier when done at a little remove. With every foot of distance there is a corresponding decrease in reality.” (Gray 1998 178) The systematic desensitization and conditioning of today’s warriors, combined with ever “smarter” weapons whose firepower all but eclipses the significance of the finger that releases them, has been conceived and executed as a science. Indeed, the history of modern warfare “can be seen as a history of increasingly more effective mechanisms for enabling and conditioning men to overcome their fellow human beings.” (Grossman 1995 13) Mission accomplished, it would seem—“killing without dying,” so long as superior Western powers, or other forces who have learned to imitate them and can afford their weaponry, never face off on the same field of battle. But there is another dirty secret, another startling surprise of warfare that undermines the increasing readiness and lethality of the infantry. In a word: trauma. Whether we have in mind a modern superpower like the United States or an ancient superhero like Herakles, both of which unleash irresistible force, we find that there is no such thing as killing without dying, no such thing as inflicting casualties without enduring them. Every wound inflicted on another is a wound suffered within.

War and Trauma

Although war, ancient and modern, has always been a matter of killing and dying and of their aftermath, its survivors—those who killed without dying—had never been systematically inventoried, interviewed, analyzed and studied until the post-Vietnam era. Like all old soldiers—and every veteran, regardless of age, is somehow old, as the Latin *vetus* suggests—they just faded away. They went back home and either fit back in or didn’t. Their homes were full of silences, agonies, disappointments, losses, and casualties which seldom reached public scrutiny or recognition. “Peace for veterans is not an ‘absence of war,’ writes the renowned Jungian analyst, James Hillman, “but its

living ghost in the bedroom, at the lunch counter, on the highway.... The return from the killing fields is more than a debriefing; it is a slow ascent from hell.” (2004 32–33) As for the ancient Odysseus, the way home proved longer, more arduous, more threatened, exhausting and tumultuous for the Vietnam veteran than for his or her earlier peers. Vietnam opened wide an old box, uncovered an unwanted truth. Richard Gabriel, a twenty-two-year veteran intelligence officer in the Pentagon, put it this way: “To understand the development of war is to recognize a single indisputable fact: not only is war becoming more lethal in terms of its ability to kill and maim, but it is far more destructive in its ability to drive soldiers mad.” (1987 45) Sadly and predictably, early reports on acute psychiatric problems, including elevated suicide rates, among American military personnel deployed in Iraq bear out Gabriel’s perception.

One trade-off of the rise in fire-rate from 15–20% in World War II to 90–95% in Vietnam was an excruciating rise in delayed and often debilitating reactions to trauma, a complex of physical and psychological afflictions eventually diagnosed and categorized as PTSD, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD was not invented or first suffered by Vietnam Veterans. Numerous studies have noted its occurrence among earlier war veterans from Odysseus to Audie Murphy; and, indeed, the interpretation of Euripides’ *Herakles* later offered here will revolve around our diagnosing Herakles with the same disorder. While the exact statistics of PTSD, homelessness, suicide, addiction and despair among Vietnam veterans are disputed and may never be agreed upon, even the more conservative accounts are deeply alarming. According to a 1980 Veterans Administration Office of Research report, roughly 500,000 Vietnam combat Veterans were suffering from PTSD. (in Hendin and Haas 1984 6–7) Estimates of suicide among Vietnam veterans have ranged widely. The most disturbing estimates have suggested that as many or even more veterans have taken their lives since returning home as lost their lives to enemy fire in Vietnam. Jonathan Shay, M.D., Ph.D., one of the nation’s most eloquent and influential therapist-advocates for Vietnam veterans, has written to this point that: “Vietnam veterans assert that twice as many of their brethren have died by suicide than died at the hands of the enemy. I, for one, have no inclination to dispute this number, though accurately estimating suicides is even more difficult than counting the homeless.” (1994 179) Faces, not numbers, in the end bring us to the horror, of course;

and I doubt that there is anyone reading this book who has not looked closely and helplessly into one such face, whether across a table or desk, on a bus, in bed, or in the mirror.

Why, we might ask, should delayed stress from battle rise so severely in a war which cost so proportionately few American combat deaths? Americans did more killing and less dying, on balance, in Vietnam than in any previous war. The answer to this may be less surprising after what has already been said above. “Killing is what war is all about, and killing in combat, by its very nature, causes deep wounds of pain and guilt.” (Grossman 1995 93). Clinical evidence suggests that it is the stress and trauma of killing, of taking others’ lives, that inflict the deepest and most lasting psychic wounds in the warrior. This trauma and its wounds are made far worse when many if not most of those killed are civilians, particularly children, women, and the elderly. In combat zones in which soldiers are encompassed by a danger whose face it is often impossible to read until it is too late, where any child, young mother, or bent old man may represent an imminent threat, where fear and rage can easily become blind, unthinkable slaughter requires only the slight contraction of a forefinger or the depression of a thumb. In that moment, those under fire go dark in death, and those loosing that fire go dark in life.

“Guilt in combat,” write Hendin and Haas in *Wounds of War*, “is usually seen as a reaction to killing. When killing is not necessary or warranted, or is committed in a mood of angry retaliation, or especially when it is committed in a non-combat situation, susceptibility to guilt is even greater.” (1984 65) Excessive brutality, close-range, personal killing, mutilation of corpses, and rape—all of these haunt every war zone and promise, long after peace has been declared, a long legacy of trauma. Dan Knox, who served as a helicopter door gunner in Vietnam, tells how “If **they ??? me** to kill a whole village, that’s what I’d do...I still see images—a woman and her children rolling in the dust.” When asked nearly forty years later how often these images still occur, his considered response was “Every ten minutes.” (in Baum 2004 50) Major Peter Kilner, one member of a team currently assigned to compile the army’s official chronicle of the Iraq War, has expressed public concern over the high percentage of infantrymen who have killed Iraqis at close range. “There’s just too much killing,” one young West Point graduate told him. They shoot, we return fire, and they’re all dead.” (in Baum 2004 46)

“Even some of the most grievously wounded Iraq-war veterans,” writes Dan Baum in the *New Yorker*, “seem more disturbed by the killing they did than they are by their own injuries.” (Baum 2004 46) War is surely hell, but so is peace for those, like Herakles, who have survived the killing and try to find their way back.

War and Healing

The ancient warrior ideal, embodied in the world’s oldest epics from India to Ireland, suggests that only in war does the human spirit burn at its brightest. Everlasting fame, the enduring remembrance accorded to those whose luminous deeds in battle have inspired the songs of the poets, belongs to those willing to kill and to die on the field of battle. It is in battle alone that men shine and acquire the warrior’s light or halo. So the story goes, then and now. The reality, for veterans, and for those who receive them back in their arms, is very different. Far from representing the culmination of humanity, war often entails the compromising and even the eclipsing of humanity. And, in war, men go dark more often than they shine. “No man in battle is really sane,” wrote noted historian William Manchester, who served as a marine in the Pacific front in World War II. “The mind-set of the soldier on the battlefield is a highly disturbed mind, and this is an epidemic of insanity, which affects everybody there, and those not afflicted by it die very quickly.” (in Gabriel 1987 xi).

The psychic wounds of war comprise a catalogue of horrors. Among the most dramatic effects of combat are the “conversion reactions” recorded from ancient times to the present. Herodotus describes the sudden onset of blindness at Marathon and Plutarch tells of a case of surdomutism or elective muteness at the Roman siege of Syracuse. Both of these continue to afflict warriors to the present day, as do instantaneous deafness and paralysis. Those caring for the unwounded casualties of battle across the centuries have come up with a host of colorful, compassionate or clinical names for the afflicted and their afflictions, including: *mania*, frenzy; *ate*, madness; *Lyssa*, raving; *insania*, unsoundness; *dementia*, out-of-mindness; nostalgia; *Heimweh* or *maladie du pays*, homesickness; *estar roto*, to be broken; hysteria, the blues, exhausted heart, irritable heart, shell shock, battle trauma, combat fatigue, Vietnam Syndrome, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. After the Civil War, ordinary people at a loss for words, described their

returning warriors as they found them: lonesome, discouraged, downhearted, played out, used up, worn down, rattled and badly blown.” (see Dean 1997 15–16)

Ancient poets describe the “otherness” of the warrior in transcendent terms, either as semi-divine or semi-bestial. These, since the earliest account of human love, violence, death and loss in the Epic of Gilgamesh, have been the only alternatives available to us. Warriors and the warrior experience, it seems, have always been understood in liminal terms. They walk and occasionally cross the boundaries of the human. Some ancient warriors and killers, like Herakles, Achilles, Bhishma, Rama and Cuchulainn have been luminous in their near-divinity. These and others, however, have at the same time been described in bestial terms. In the *Iliad*, Achilles, for example, wishes he could consume raw the flesh of Hektor, his most hated enemy; and, in the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma does just that, eating the heart and drinking the blood of Dushasana, assuring us all the while that the blood of his enemy is sweeter to him than his mother’s milk. What Euripides makes clear and stresses throughout his dramas, however, is that what the bestial and the divine share, for all their startling transcendence, is inhumanity. Transcendence, at the end of the day, is only a euphemism for transgression. Inhumanity is just not an appropriate or enhancing or, for that matter, achievable ambition for *thnetoi*, as Homer calls us, “the deathful ones.” “A human being,” Gray explains, “who...deserts his humanity does not become like an animal, but, in the expressive German term, an *Untier* (an ‘unanimal’), in an exact sense, a creature without parallel in nature.” (1998 67)

If war has always been a matter of killing, and if killing—however necessary, justified, or even involuntary—always disfigures and dements the killer, then every warrior requires to be restored and healed from the sickness and stain with which he or she is afflicted. “All warrior societies, tribes, and nations” sums up Arthur Hadley, “incorporate some form of purification ritual for their returning soldiers, and this ritual appears to be essential to the health of both the returning warrior and the society as a whole.” (in Grossman 1996 271–2) The return, the homecoming, the coming back to oneself from the “otherness” of the killing fields is not something which the individual warrior can accomplish alone. “Societies have always recognized,” writes Richard Gabriel,

that war changes men, that they are not the same after they return. That is why primitive societies often required soldiers to perform purification rites

before allowing them to rejoin their communities. These rites often involved washing or other forms of ceremonial cleansing. Psychologically, these ritual provided soldiers with a way of ridding themselves of stress and the terrible guilt that always accompanies the sane after war. It was also a way of treating guilt by providing a mechanism through which fighting men could decompress and relieve their terror without feeling weak or exposed. Finally, it was a way of telling the soldier that what he did was right and that the community for which he fought was grateful and that, above all, his community of sane and normal men welcomed him back.... When soldiers are denied these rituals they often tend to become emotionally disturbed. Unable to purge their guilt or to be reassured that what they did was right, they turn their emotions inward. (1987 155–156)

Parades and family reunions, however, hardly address the need for purification. They rarely acknowledge the horror of what has been endured and inflicted by returning veterans; they mostly evade those demons and, instead, cheerily celebrate the returnees as heroes, one and all, when all too often this is the very last thing these men and women feel themselves to be. One Vietnam veteran put it this way: “If at the end of a war story [*or post-war parade, we might add*] you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.” (O’Brien 1990 76) A problem here is that those with no experience of war know only two possible responses to warriors come home—either to regard them as heroes or as criminals, sublime demigods or savage monsters, pitiful victims or pitiless executioners. They don’t want to know what happened “over there” and so they stress what seems obvious to them—that it’s over. But, more often than not, it’s not nearly over for the veteran. We shall soon see just how much it is not over for Herakles. It fact, for him and for many like him, *it* is only beginning.

The ancient Greeks had a word for what we are inclined to overlook—*miasma*, which might be translated as defilement or pollution. It is akin to guilt but itself implies no necessary moral or legal culpability. *Miasma* can be incurred not only by killing but also by loving, by the spilling of seed in sex as well as by the spilling of blood in combat. Not surprisingly, it is compounded and darkened when the life or lover taken shares the same blood, as in fratricide or incest. A brief story, unfortunately true, will make transparent the crucial difference between pollution and guilt. Forty years ago, when I was in college, tragedy struck the home of one of my instructors. It was a warm and welcoming home always open to students, a haven from the noise and nonsense of the dorms. The family’s 6-year-old twins were pure delight—four-foot volcanoes of energy

and imagination. Late one Saturday afternoon, after returning home from a children's matinee of *Peter Pan*, they erupted. Mimicking the swordplay of Peter and Hook and using anything they could find as rapiers, they leapt to and from every large piece of furniture in the living room. Told to go below to the family room, one of the twins, on his way downstairs, slipped into the kitchen and took with him the two longest knives in the drawer, the ones most resembling pirate swords. In the basement they resumed their swordplay, being careful to avoid hurting each other. Then, in a burst of enthusiasm and ill-calculation, they both lunged at once. One twin, losing his balance, tumbled towards the other and onto his sword. Moments later he bled to death on the family room floor. In the hours and weeks and months that followed the surviving twin was assured relentlessly that he had not meant to hurt his brother, that he had been careless and disobedient in playing with knives; but that he was forgiven and it was no one's fault. It didn't work. Nothing did. What was to be done except to take up their days and nights again as best they could? In Christian ethics—and this family were devout Christians—sin is a matter of evil intent and resides in the heart. No evil intended, no evil done. It was clear that no one had willed this, except perhaps God, for reasons they would never grasp. In ancient terms, however, the boy, his family, and their house were all polluted, infected with a *miasma* that would not go away. The boy's heart may be pure; but all the same he had his brother's blood on his hands.

The answer to *miasma*, its cure or antidote, as it were, was called *katharsis*, an elusive word meaning something like purgation, cleansing, and the restoration of normalcy. It makes possible and marks a return to the original, unstained, unpolluted condition prior to the incurring of *miasma* and thus the re-incorporation of the polluted one back into family, society, and state. When the *miasma* of the returning warrior is denied, he or she is also denied *katharsis*. In a state of pollution, to say that nothing is wrong is all but to assure that nothing will ever again be right. The terror and avoidance of pollution and of the polluted is, in a healing society, the first stage of *katharsis*, the first welcoming embrace of the lost and the damned. *Miasma* is, we might say, the diagnosis, and *katharsis* the cure, which is to say that they are all but inseparable. But where does this cure occur and who administers it?

Katharsis, we recall, is the goal and result of tragedy, according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*. “Tragedy,” writes Aristotle, with such brevity that he must assume everyone knows and takes for granted what he is saying, “...achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fear incidents.” (1968 VI.9–11) The “pitiable and fearful incidents” represented on stage are imaginary, mimetic, which is to say they are not really taking place. The catharsis is real, however, and occurs in the spectators, who somehow recognize their own actions and sufferings, the “pitiable and fearful incidents” of their lives, in the plot and characters displayed before them in the drama. What Aristotle claims, it seems, is that drama is collective therapy and brings both individual and shared healing to a traumatized, polluted community.

The ritual therapy offered by Greek drama addresses with remarkable precision the most essential requirement for recovery from trauma. In the words of Jonathan Shay:

healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it to others in the community... to talk about the traumatic event, to express to other people emotions about the event and those involved in it, or to experience the presence of socially connected others who will not let one go through it alone. This is what is meant by communalizing the trauma. (Shay 1994 4, 55)

The audience gathered in the theater of Dionysos, we must recall, is no random collection of drama enthusiasts; rather, it is the citizenry of Athens, come together for one of the most sacred and consequential civic rituals of the liturgical year. Before looking more closely, however, at this audience and its traumas, we would do well to consider in greater detail the relationship between communalization and healing.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, one of the most influential psychiatric texts of recent decades, Judith Herman writes that “Sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world... The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma.” (1992 70) For trauma disorders, including post-war trauma or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, she outlines three stages of recovery. The first is “safety”. Presumably the theater of Dionysos, well within the highly fortified walls of Athens, represents a zone of unquestionable security. The next stage is “remembrance and mourning”; and the final stage is “reconnection”. These too, as we shall see, are to be found here in the theater,

where Athens' citizen-soldiers are surrounded by those who have endured the same unforgettable terrors, committed the same unthinkable atrocities, and now weep and embrace each other as they see their worst fears and transgressions enacted before them.

The most essential element of tragedy, writes Aristotle, is the plot or *mythos*. In classical Greek theater, the vast majority of the tragic plots are taken from the epic cycles, particularly those attributed to Homer. And the vast majority of these, make no mistake, are war stories, particularly when we consider that the beginnings and endings of wars are not easily delineated. When a veteran returns home from a war and murders his wife and perhaps even his children, as does Herakles, it is a war story. By this measure too, the entire *Oresteia* is a war story. Whether in the theater or in group therapy, then, "remembrance" begins, in Herman's terms, with "reconstructing the story." As the narrative moves from the easy flow of ordinary life towards the traumatic event, the truth of what happened becomes more difficult to tell.

As the narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication... Given the "iconic" visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the most effective initial approach to these 'indelible images.' ... A narrative that does not include the traumatic imagery and bodily sensations is barren and incomplete. (Herman 1992 177)

What better than the rich spectacle of tragedy—the fusion of poetry, music and dance—to reconstruct the trauma and provoke memory? But "reconstructing the trauma story," adds Herman, "also includes a systematic review of the meaning of the event...

The traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist. The survivor is called upon to articulate the values and beliefs that she once held and that the trauma destroyed... Throughout the exploration of the trauma story, the therapist is called upon to provide a context that is at once cognitive, emotional, and moral.... She also contributes to constructing a new interpretation of the traumatic experience that affirms the dignity and value of the survivor. (1992 178–179).

Without having ancient drama specifically in mind, Herman has highlighted and explained here the role of the tragic playwright, who in weaving his plot from ancient warp crossed and textured by the strands of contemporary events, must be theologian, philosopher, and jurist, as well as, we might add, politician and artist. The role of the tragic chorus, too, may arguably be seen as providing context—cognitive, emotional, and

moral—and thus a new interpretation to the trauma story. All too often, especially in the drama of Euripides, and decidedly so in the Herakles, there is a collision between inherited values and actual events, between myth and reality. Chris Hedges might as well have been introducing the tragedy of Herakles, when he commented on myth that it “allows us to believe we have achieved our place in human society because of a long chain of heroic endeavors, rather than accept the sad reality that we stumble along a dimly lit corridor of disasters.” (2003 23)

Well before the birth of tragedy, the role of remembrance was played by bards who, at warrior feasts in the great mess-halls of the Bronze Age, sang from a wide repertoire of songs in which “pitiable and fearful incidents” held the fore. Homer records one such feast and song in Book VIII of the *Odyssey*. The scene is the court of King Alkinous of the Phaeakians. Stillness falls over the assembly as the bard “moved by a god, began to sing. He made them see it happen.” (Homer 2000 VIII.540–541). As in the theater, the stories of the past become iconic, visible. Odysseus listens incognito, and relives his life, as a version of its most glorious episodes are sung and revealed to all those assembled. While the audience thrills to the tale, we are told that Odysseus for his part hides his tears. Then the bard comes to the most career-making moment in Odysseus’ life, the sack of Troy, for which he was largely responsible. “Like the War God himself,” he—at the crest of a flood of ravenous warriors—wreaks havoc, coming at last to the royal palace of Priam where he “fought his most daring battle.” So goes the received version, the myth, as remembered by the poet and revealed in by his audience. Meanwhile, “Odysseus wept. Tears welled up in his eyes and flowed down his cheeks.” (564–565)

But why? Why does the reconstruction of his story, the remembrance of his most shining moment, cast the hero into inconsolable grief? In tragedy, we might well learn the answer from the chorus. In Homeric poetry, we do well to look to the lyrical aside, inserted in such a way here as to represent Odysseus’ inner thoughts, what *he* sees, *his* memory, not the bard’s. Here we witness the truth, not the myth, of the Troy’s fall.

A woman wails as she throws herself upon
Her husband’s body. He has fallen in battle
Before the town walls, fighting to the last

To defend his city and protect his children.
As she sees him dying and gasping for breath
She clings to him and shrieks, while behind her
Soldiers prod their spears into her shoulders and back,
And as they lead her away into slavery
Her tear-drenched face is a mask of pain. (566–574)

The face of Odysseus too, the man of sorrow, is a mask of pain. He is in recovery. This moment of “remembrance” and “mourning” has brought him closer to the final stage of healing, “reconnection.” For this he must reach home.

Far more than the warrior feasts of their hoary past, for the Greeks of the classical age the ancient *theatron*, their “seeing place,” was a place of remembrance, mourning, and indeed reconnection. It was a place of *katharsis*, a place of healing for warriors who had seen, suffered, and inflicted too much horror to be altogether sane, altogether whole. They came to the theater with “indelible images” of their own, which they would see reflected in the *mythos*-become-spectacle before their eyes. They would remember, mourn, find and give recognition, and finally reconnect with themselves and their fellows.

The dramatic performances of the fifth century, no less than the warrior feasts of the past, brought together a host of warriors. Indeed, the late John Winkler has argued persuasively for the decidedly military character of the assembly and rituals of the City Dionysia. He suggests that the central ten wedges of the theater’s seating plan were reserved for the ten “tribes” (*phulai*) created by Kleisthenes and comprising the contemporary Athenian state, and thus that citizens were seated by tribal affiliation. Since military units were also defined along those same tribal lines, this meant that nearly the entire audience of the tragedies was drawn up in military formation, according to unit and likely according to military rank. Appropriately, it was also by *phulai* that Athenian citizens voted for or against war in the *ekklesia* or assembly. Winkler argues further, from a range of iconographic and textual evidence, that the dramatic choruses were cast from the city’s nineteen-year-old *ephebes*, or military recruits, and that their dances represented a choreographic equivalent of close-order drill, accompanied only by an *aulos*, the same double-reed pipe used to keep hoplite ranks in order and in step as they closed on the enemy.

Another martial highlight of the City Dionysia was the parade of young men previously orphaned by war, the sons of fallen warriors, maintained at state expense until they reach full military age. Now, come of age, they march into the orchestra in full hoplite armor, as a herald announces them, tells of the heroism of their fathers, and invites them to sit in the front ranks of the theater, as they may soon be asked to stand in the front ranks of the killing zone. In sum, the core audience of the tragedies, making up the vast majority of those assembled, were adult Athenian citizens, who from the age of eighteen to the age of sixty were eligible for military service. In the 5th century, the age of the tragedies, and particularly after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C.E., this likely entailed for every fit male of military age, nearly every year, some extended period of active combat duty. In short, the audience of the tragedies, as well as the playwrights and actors, were combat veterans one and all. They gathered annually in the theater as they marshaled more or less yearly for war, according to tribe, abreast of their fellows. These men had relatively few secrets from each other. Their lives and their sanity were in each others' hands. Here, no matter what they had done or suffered in the past year, they had each other. Remembering and mourning their traumas together, they found "reconnection," the final stage in recovery. "The restoration of social bonds," writes Judith Herman,

begins with the discovery that one is not alone. Nowhere is this experience more immediate, powerful, or convincing than in a group....Because traumatized people feel so alienated by their experience, survivor groups have a special place in the recovery process. Such groups afford a degree of support and understanding that is simply not available in the survivor's ordinary social environment. The encounter with others who have undergone similar trials dissolves feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma. (1992 215)

A "survivor group"—this is precisely how Jonathan Shay, classical scholar and psychiatrist, views the audience of the tragedies. "The ancient Athenians," writes Shay, "had a distinctive therapy of purification, healing, and reintegration of returning soldiers that was undertaken as a whole political community." (1995 3) This, he argues, was the theater. "Theater was this community's primary means of reintegrating the returning veteran into the social sphere as Citizen. (1992 3)

War and Love

There is only one rival to war in the ancient Greek imagination, and that is love. At first glance they would appear pure opposites, mutually exclusive and mutually repelling. But that is not how the Greeks saw them. Instead, we find them entangled in Greek art, myth and literature. They are one minute incompatible and the next minute inseparable. Not surprisingly, then, we find them as on-again-off-again lovers. Ares the man-slaughterer, the god of war, the most hated of the Olympians, was drawn on more than one occasion to the most beautiful and beguiling goddesses of all, Aphrodite, the icon of love. If not a match made in heaven, it lit both their fires on occasion, and yielded divine fruit. To Ares, Aphrodite bore Eros and Harmonia, unlikely progeny for a god of devastation. It may be that love-genes are dominant and hate-genes recessive, or it may be just one more case in which only the mother knows the true father of her children. Regardless, there is a bond here to be explored before we turn single-mindedly to Herakles, who we may note in passing was not only a notorious warrior but also an unquenchable lover.

The imagery and language of love and battle in ancient Greek art and poetry, as well as the rituals that accompany them, are curiously similar, mirroring and echoing each other, as if either could in an instant metamorphose into the other. We notice at once that both lovemaking and combat are intimate and passionate rituals. Listen to this:

—my tongue is broken;
a thin flame runs under
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears
drumming, I drip with sweat;
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than dry grass. At such times
death isn't far from me. (Sappho 1958 #39)

We would imagine, hearing these words, that we are on the brink of battle; but instead we are on the precipice of love. In these lines, Sappho brings us into the trembling, precarious terror of a young girl when she suddenly, unexpectedly encounters her lover. Imminent love, embodied in a lover, like imminent death, embodied in a warrior, have the same effect. They make the heart all but stop.

Without warning

As a whirlwind

Swoops on an oak

Love shakes my heart. (Sappho 1958 #44)

Again Sappho, and a moment of passion as intimate as combat, as near to death as a warrior on the edge of battle. Indeed, “it was a formal principle of Greek myth and literature,” writes Vermeule, “that love and death were two aspects of the same power.” (1979 159)

The Greeks had a determined distain for remote forms of warfare. The deadly skill of archers and slingers, however effective, was suspect. Like the samurai of Japan, Greek warriors found the measure of themselves and of others in close combat, eye to eye, hand to hand. They died in each others arms. And, of course, love-making at a distance, before the telephone or the internet chat room, was a contradiction. We will do well to consider each ritual in some detail. I will do so in terms familiar to us and faithful to the ancients. In these matters, several thousand years make little difference.

First, the ritual of battle, as depicted on ancient vases and described in ancient poetry. Two warriors are drawn to each other, for whatever reason—a challenge, an obvious match, an easy kill. Initially they exchange words—dark, disdainful, barbed, and bitter words—whose only aim is to provoke rage and aggression. The warriors taunt and insult each other until their *thumos* is up and their blood boiling. Then they approach each other and begin testing the other’s strength and agility and timing with lunges, feints, prods, and slashes. They try to wear each other out, searching for vulnerability, opportunity, a dropping of guard or a lapse in attention. The grappling grows closer and more intimate and, at the right moment, the thrust is made, by a firmly gripped spear or short sword. If there is penetration, there is often an outcry, a succumbing, and a swoon, as a dark mist glides in over the dying warrior to blow him out or away, like a flame or a feather.

The ritual of love is depicted in much the same images and terms by Greek artists and poets. Lovers first notice and strangely fascinate each other for reasons impossible to trace. It is as if they were both lightly wounded by the invisible darts of a mischievous archer. But it is not yet love, not yet even strong attraction. Words come first. The

would-be lovers sweet-talk each other, using flattery and flirtation to maintain and raise interest, until they find themselves, smiling, laughing, looking down, looking away and back again. When all signs point to its being welcome, they draw close, find ways of touching each other, and of lingering where they want to. Sooner or later they are wrestling in each others' arms until the moment of penetration, when there is likely to be a shout or a love-scream, followed by a sudden collapse, a calm, and a drifting off to sleep.

In each ritual the stages are the same: a chance or fated meeting, provocative speech, foreplay, consummation, and unconsciousness. Both Ares and Aphrodite are preceded and assisted by their offspring, who set the mood of love or war. Ares' sons and charioteers *Phobos* and *Deimos*, Fear and Terror, convey their father to the killing fields; and Aphrodite's son Eros infects lovers with a frenzy they are helpless to control. The foreplay of war and of love is indeed "play" in that it is harmless—an inconsequential game or sport, provided it go no further. When it does go further, there is the moment of erotic or deadly copulation, for which ancient Greek provides one word, *meignumi*, "joining," "mingling" or "mixing it up," used to denote both intercourse in battle and intercourse in bed. And lastly there is either sleep or death—all but indistinguishable in their approach—to carry away warriors or lovers in their arms, gently, like a soft breeze.

Each stage, each participant, each word and move of love and war reminds us of its counterpart. Thus Homer speaks of the "enchanting love-talk of war," and "Hektor fears he will be stripped naked like a woman and killed by some piercing weapon, which is what happens... and when he is dead the Achaians find him "softer to handle"... as a girl would be." (Vermeule 1979 103) "Homer," Vermeule points out, has a habit, at mocking moments, of treating enemies as lovers, fusing the effects of Eros and Thanatos." And everyone has a difficult time telling apart *Thanatos* and *Hypnos*, death and sleep, identical twin brothers in Greek myth. The one takes the fallen warrior and the other takes the fallen lover, though neither is aware of the journey.

The theory and practice of sex in ancient Greece is, for the most part, androcentric, which is to say phallocentric and aggressively invasive. Penetration between women was seen as "unnatural." Otherwise—whether between a man and a woman or between two men—penetration was power. To penetrate was to exert power

and to be penetrated was to accept weakness. These were the only two possibilities. We will recall here the taunting mockery of the Athenian generals at Melos who assure their enemy inferiors that it is a simple, inescapable law of nature that the powerful press their advantage as far as it will go and that the weak must accept whatever they are unable to resist. There is no equality available in battle to the death, nor is there any such thing in love. Further, in love and war, these two roles, regardless of the actual sex of the participants, were imaginatively construed in terms of gender, such that to be penetrated was to play the woman, while to penetrate was to play the man. Sex like war was defined by power and weakness. John Winkler explains that, for the Greeks, “what are significant in sexual activity are (i) men, (ii) penises that penetrate, and (iii) the articulation thereby of relative statuses through relations of dominance.” (1991 39) Replace the penis with a thrusting weapon, such as a spear or sword, and we move all but imperceptibly from the bed to the battlefield. Paris, we recall, in the *Iliad*, undergoes the reverse transition when he is wafted away, armor and all, from his duel-to-death with Menelaos to the love-chamber of Helen. In the Greek imagination, battlefields and bedrooms adjoin each other, like connecting rooms in a hotel.

The further we pursue the canonical Greek understanding of sex and war the more they blur and fuse into each other. Both are a matter of dominance. Both are aggressively violent. Cities—the word and the reality—were feminine to the Greek tongue and mind. A woman’s veil and a city’s walls represent the same thing, their inviolate chastity. That is why Hecuba, at the sight of her son Hektor dragged in the dust behind the war-car of his killer, rips the veil from her head and hurls it far from her, letting out a great wail as she does so. Hektor was the city’s wall. With him slaughtered and strung like a wild animal, his mother—a woman first and a queen second—takes the next inevitable step in her imagination. It is now only a matter of time before the city and its women are to be raped. She knows this to be a certainty. Her wail is contagious, spreading through the city as it soon will on the fateful night of Troy’s fall. It is no accident that the Greeks had a single word—*damao*—to cover the full spectrum of domination: to tame or subdue a wild animal, to yoke a woman in marriage, to rape or to kill. Even aged Nestor, the revered grandfather of the Greek invasion force at Troy, had taken for granted this clustering of categories when he reminded the army, in an earlier

moment when they were inclined to abandon the war and go home, that there was a Helen behind those walls for each and every one of them. They had lost the taste for war; and he revived it by lighting in each of them a still darker, more hateful flame. “Professional officers,” writes philosopher and veteran Intelligence Officer J. Glenn Gray, “consider part of the psychological training of their troops to be training in hatred, and this becomes more systematized and subtler as the war goes on.” (Gray 1998 161) Arguably, there is no more hateful or savage an act of war than rape, and none more feared.

Many of those who have experienced or studied war come across a curious fact, that “it is far easier to deliver a slashing or hacking blow than a piercing blow.” (Grossman 1995 121). Easier psychologically, that is. Such blows, of course, can only be delivered intimately, at close range, “sexual range” as it were. At such range, meeting eyes is all but inevitable, unless the enemy is taken from behind. Regardless, the other’s rapid breathing, racing heart, tangible terror and rage are unavoidable. If the killer is male and his prey female, as when Herakles grappled with Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, with her girdle as his prize, the line between slaughter and seduction is easily crossed, particularly for the victor. “To pierce is to penetrate,” writes Grossman, returning to combat. “To reach out and penetrate the enemy’s flesh and thrust a portion of ourselves into his vitals is deeply akin to the sexual act, yet deadly, and is therefore strongly repulsive to us.” This may explain in part the extreme resistance of soldiers to engage in bayonet warfare, and the extraordinary potential for trauma inherent in any such encounter.

First, the closer the soldier draws to his enemy the harder it is to kill him, until at bayonet range it becomes extremely difficult, and, second, the average human being has a strong resistance to piercing the body of another of his own kind with a handheld edged weapon, preferring to club or slash at the enemy. (Grossman 1995 123)

It seems the thoroughly professional Roman legions of antiquity were well trained to overcome the natural resistance to piercing the enemy’s flesh. In a section of his work entitled “Not to Cut, but to Thrust with the Sword,” the ancient military historian Vegetius comments on how

They were likewise taught not to cut but to thrust with their swords. For the Romans not only made jest of those who fought with the edge of that weapon, but always found them an easy conquest. A stroke with the edges,

though made with ever so much force, seldom kills, as the vital parts of the body are defended by the bones and armor. On the contrary, a stab, though it penetrates but two inches, is generally fatal. (in Grossman 1995 121)

In intimate slaughter, like sex, size matters very little. Two inches suffice either to bring an end to life or to bring new life. Both are awesome, not everyday, events. We do not approach such moments without trepidation. Perhaps that is why ancient warriors and lovers, no more and no less than their modern counterparts, turned to alcohol or drugs before going to battle or bed. Without wine to ease their approach, neither love nor war would happen quite as often as they do.

Finally, one last clue to the cognate character of love and war, sex and battle, may be found in the kinship of each to hunting, at least as the Greeks thought of all three. In Greek art, hunting, war, and sex are the three dominant themes, and they are often linked. Many vases, especially drinking cups, for example, have a battle scene on one side and a hunting scene on the other, reverse side. Soldiers, after all, are hunters of the ultimate quarry. Homeric battle accounts are replete with bestial language and allusions to the hunt. “How the hunt and the battle are linked in male psychology, or were in the early Greek period,” writes Emily Vermeule, “is not for a female to guess. They seem so inextricable,

One supposes a man could become confused about which he was engaged in, or fuse his human and animal opponents in his mind. The line might be drawn between the malicious intelligence of the human creature and the simple self-protectiveness of the animal. That line is blurred on purpose in many wartime messages. The hunting party and the war party merge, and kill the enemy more easily if he is called an animal—monkey, pig, dog, snake, rat, vermin—or a bewildered deer when a lion is on the prowl. (1979 85)

Greatest of all hunts, in Greece and throughout the ancient Near East, was the lion hunt. “If a warrior can kill a lion, he has reached the top of his skill as a hunter and absorbs the qualities of his enemy for good or for bad.” (Vermeule 1979 87) The lion was the signature quarry of the king or the super-hero, and Herakles is no exception. Any hunter who returns with a lion-skin is clearly at the top of his game. “Herakles in the lion-skin, or Alexander the Great in Herakles’ lion-skin, the lion-hunter and the man-hunter, have become so blended in image, it would be surprising if they could be separated in thought.” (Vermeule 1979 87) Hunters bend and skin their prey, as warriors strip the armor from their felled opponents. They become trophies and, at times, vestments. Not

surprising, then, that women are often imagined and spoken of as quarry, particularly in war zones, when they become, to borrow a Greek term, “spear prizes,” prey carried home on the tips of men’s spears, as it were.

War and Friendship

It is appropriate to conclude this discussion of background matter to Euripides’ *Herakles* with a brief series of reflections on friendship. Brief, not because the topic is of marginal importance, but because it will prove so central as to preoccupy us once we enter the text of the play. “We must love one another,” wrote W. H. Auden, “or die.” (in Gray 1959 3) The ultimate truth of Auden’s counsel would depend, of course, on our extending the reach of the “we” to embrace all of humanity and, for that matter, all sentient beings, as the Buddha would instruct. We will begin, however, in our present context, with the battle zone, where it applies first and most readily to one’s comrades in arms, one’s mates.

The bond—some would call it “friendship” and others “love,” while fortunately the Greeks had one word, *philia*, for both—between warriors is legendary. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Achilles and Patroklos, David and Jonathan, Arjuna and Krishna all rank among the great lovers or friends of world literature. More recent veterans cherish their own memories, whether or not they ever put them into words or down on paper. When they do speak about their wartime mates or buddies, their special band of brothers, veterans often stress the intensity of these relationships and how they surpass, in commitment and heart, any other relationships in their lives before or since, including their marriages. “Why such fervor?” we might ask.

The most eroding element of war may be the lived recognition and daily reminder that I am hated, hated so profoundly that there others like myself out there, and maybe very close, bent on killing me. There is only one antidote to this, and it is love or friendship, the lived recognition and daily reminder that I am so loved that there others who would willingly die that I might live, as I would for them. The feelings and the affinities that are the core of friendship,” writes veteran J. Glen Gray, “are the true opposites of the hostile disposition that underlies all warfare.” (1959 95–96) War is

venomous to the human spirit, and friendship is the anti-venom. Like air, it allows us to breathe rather than suffocate.

The irony and contradiction in all this is that friendship is also what allows wars to be fought; for, at the end of the day, men fight wars not for their country or their cause but for each other. In his memoir from the war in the Pacific, William Manchester says with conviction that: “Men, I know, do not fight for flag, country, for the Marine Corps, or glory or any other abstraction. They fight for one another.” (Manchester 1980 391) Veteran war correspondent and Pulitzer prize winner Chris Hedges confirms the same truth, nearly in the same words, when he cites the words of a Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel before crossing into Kuwait in the first Gulf War: “Just remember that none of these boys is fighting for home, for the flag, for all that crap the politicians feed the public. They are fighting for each other, just for each other.” (in Hedges 2003.1 38)

Ancient warriors and their commanders knew no less fully the bond of love among their warriors and acknowledged, even celebrated it, it openly. The most single-mindedly martial of all the Greek city-states, Sparta, sacrificed to the love-god Eros before battle, since, as Athenaios once declared, security depends on the love between those in the front ranks. In the same vein, the warrior-historian Xenophon relates how Cyrus arranged for his troops to eat their meals in common, convinced “that comradeship would be encouraged by their messing together and that they would be less likely to desert one another.” In the same text, Xenophon claims “it has been demonstrated on many other occasions that there is no stronger phalanx than that which is composed of comrades that are close friends.” (Perseus *Cyropaedia* 2.1.28; 7.1.30) Nowhere was this truth more poignantly demonstrated than among the most fierce and famed warriors of ancient Greece, the Sacred Band of Thebes, the elite of the elite—three hundred hand-picked gay warriors, each fighting to the death beside his lover. And that was precisely what it came to in the battle of Chaironeia in 338 B.C.E., when they were annihilated by Alexander’s cavalry. Philip of Macedon, the enemy commander, is said to have wept at the sight of their slaughtered bodies, fallen in battle into each other’s arms.

In imperial Rome, legionaries swore an oath not only to the state but also to each other. The Christian saint Cyprian likened this oath, the *sacramentum*, to the rite of Baptism. Just as the Church makes of all its members one body, so the army forges the

unit, which like a living organism, lives and dies as one. Hedges offers his own account of this remarkable phenomenon, which he has personally witnessed in a handful of wars on four continents and to which “unit cohesion” scarcely does justice:

“Combatants live only for their herd, those hapless soldiers who are bound into their unit to ward off death. There is no world outside the unit... Soldiers will rather die than betray this bond. And there is—as many combat veterans will tell you—a kind of love in this. (2003.1 40)

More rare, and even more remarkable, is when friendship, even if momentary, is kindled across enemy lines—when men who had been trying, and may try again, to kill each other, drop their weapons, recognize the humanity of the other, and embrace. The first recorded instance of this is when, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Gilgamesh, fight each other to exhaustion, only to find each other as friends:

Enkidu with his foot blocked the door of the wedding house,
Not allowing Gilgamesh to enter.
They seized each other at the door of the wedding house,
In the street they joined combat, in the Square of the Land.
The door-jambs shook, the wall did shudder...
Gilgamesh knelt, one foot on the ground,
His anger subsided, he broke off from the fight...

They kissed each other and formed a friendship. (George 1999 16–17)

The most famous moment of enmity transformed into friendship, however, may be found in the *Iliad*, in the tent of Priam, when Achilles embraces the father of Patroklos’ killer and Priam takes into his arms and shares a meal with the slaughterer of his son, who lies mutilated by Achilles only feet from the two of them. Literature, history, and occasionally the newspaper are scented with such stories, providing some sweetness amidst the stench of war, which too many of us regard as the inevitable burden of our species. Many others have commented from their own experience, among them Sophokles and Aristotle, that when we live long enough we realize that not only do our friends occasionally become enemies, but also that yesterday’s enemies sometimes turn into tomorrow’s friends. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle concludes from this phenomenon that the young love and hate too much, as if they will love and hate forever, while the elderly, schooled by life’s strange reversals, love and hate coolly, loving as if they might one day

hate and hating as if they might one day love. This is precisely what Sophokles' Aias learns too late and expresses shortly before he takes his own life:

I know now to hate an enemy
just so far, for another time
we may befriend him. And the friend
I help, I will not help too greatly,
knowing that one day may find him
my enemy. (Sophokles 1999 753–758)

These are words mostly lost on warriors, however, as they would have been lost on Aias himself at any time earlier than when he himself uttered them. “Rather perish than hate and fear,” advises Nietzsche along the same vein in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, “and twice rather perish than make oneself hated and feared.” (in Gray 1959 225–226) But again, when the fog of war descends and the din of battle erupts, advice such as this becomes difficult to hear. Nonetheless, after years of combat, J. Glenn Gray assures us “It would require only a coming to themselves to transform killers into friends and lovers, for, paradoxical as it may seem, the impulses that make killers are not so different in kind from those that make lovers.” (Gray 1959 232–233) In saying this, Gray returns us to our beginning here, to the realization that “truth likes to hide”; and, at the same time, he sends us on the Herakles, a warrior who truly came to himself and, in doing so, learned that love is all there is worth caring about.

2 • THE DRAMA OF HERAKLES

Herakles the Hero

Heroes, modern as well as ancient, have this much in common: they stand out. They cross the line. Why? For a start, because it's there. And what line is that? The human line, the border between humans and gods, on the one hand, and the border between humans and animals, on the other. Heroes stand larger than life and break the barriers easily containing the rest of us, thus providing a spectacle that is rarely as admirable as it is awesome. The single epithet most widely attributed to ancient heroes is *deinos*, "terrible, strange, wondrous." Thus, at their first moment of encounter with the physically blind and metaphysically battered Oedipus, in the grove of the Eumenides, the Chorus of elders describe him in song as: "*deinos* to see, *deinos* to hear." (*Oedipus at Kolonos* 141) To be *deinos* is to be blatantly bipolar. The hero and his or her deeds both attract and repel the eye; their story is one that we'd rather not hear and yet want to go on. Anyone or anything *deinos* is both painful and alluring to witness. In our time, the events and images of 9/11 were "heroic" in this ancient sense. They horrify in the same moment as they captivate. They redefine the imaginable.

The first heroes in the Greek tradition were those mortals named and sung by the bards, the epic cast of characters. They were, in a word, celebrities, some much shinier than others. Eventually, surely by the late 8th century B.C.E., these same heroes became the focus of local cults, in which they were joined by other notorious figures, either too parochial or too recent to be found in the bardic songs. The playwright Sophokles was, we know, a priest in the cult of the hero-god Asklepios, and under the name of *Dexion* became the object of his own hero cult after his death. Death was one of the prerequisites for "herohood," as it is for Christian sainthood. In fact, there are many parallels between the ancient Greek cult of heroes and the later Christian cult of saints. Another particularly close cognate tradition may be found in India, where the cult of saints, particularly of women martyrs performing *suttee*, resembles both the classical Greek cult of heroes and the later Christian cult of the saints.

The death requirement for heroes limited their number to mortals. This did not mean, however, that a hero might not have had one divine parent. In the genetics

operative in ancient Greek poetry and religion, mortality is a decidedly dominant gene. “Even the sons of the gods go dark and waste away in death,” sings the Chorus in *Alkestis*. (988–989) Dionysos and Herakles are sometimes said to have been exempted from this rule; but mentions of such full immunity are rare and isolated and lie beyond our consideration here. Regardless, the mortality of Euripides’ Herakles is never in question. The deathfulness of the heroes is manifest each time they are venerated or invoked for assistance. The glance of the devotee is directed down to the earth, not up to the sky. More specifically, the cult is fixated on the *heroon*, the cult site, defined by the grave of the hero. The remains, partial or whole, of the hero, said to reside in this spot, may be likened to radioactive material, charged with awesome power for good or ill. Nonetheless, like radiation, its reach is limited. Hero cults are always more or less local, though multiple cities may rival each other in claiming to be the final resting place of a particular hero. Long before DNA analysis, the only proof of possession lay in the power that a city or cult managed to harness from the site, to prosper or prevail. Even this, of course, was hardly definitive, as the placebo effect was presumably as powerful then as now and extends beyond the swallowing of pills.

If heroes are always dead, they are also always beautiful. In their occasional epiphanies, they appear perfect, untouched by time, much less death. Though they have died, they are usually understood to have gone on to a special everlasting reward, not in Hades, but in a far less dank and depressing and rather more green, upscale address, such as the Elysian Fields or the Islands of the Blessed. Heroes and saints, however, no matter how dead and no matter how distant, still somehow inhabit and permeate with power the site of their cult, the soil containing their bones. It is here that ritual sacrifices of dark victims, such as a black ram, are made to them or that nourishing, invigorating fluids—wine, water, milk, olive oil, honey, and blood—are poured down to them, either to seep slowly through the earth or to flow at once through a “feeding tube” installed between the surface and their remains. In return for these attentions, the hero is expected to succor and secure his devotees. Greek religion, like any other, is in part an “arrangement” and implies a certain mutuality, no matter how great the gulf separating ordinary folk from the gods and heroes they reverence.

The greatest of all the Greek heroes was Herakles, one of the many offspring of the famously philandering Zeus. More than his mightiness, however, what was most striking about Herakles was his popularity. His cult was ubiquitous throughout the Greek world. Deprived of a locatable grave, he was everywhere. There was no place, and for that matter never a time, that he was not honored. The complex of his myths is so old as to contain fossils of far earlier Neolithic, perhaps even Paleolithic, figures—the shaman, traversing the corridor from life to death and back again; the master of the animals, slaying and subduing monstrous beasts; the primordial warrior taking on fabled opponents, such as centaurs and Amazons. As we shall see, however, his popularity was not simply a matter of the geographical reach of his cult, it was also a matter of his vulnerability and appeal. For all his invincibility as a super-hero, he led an exhausting, laborious life that ended rather miserably. His days were long and often thankless, and his pleasures mostly simple. There was nothing slovenly, decadent or arrogant about him. He was a hero without airs or attitude. He used his privileges and power more often for others than for himself. Like Prometheus, he was a lover of humankind; and humankind loved him back.

The ordinary ancient Greek, like the ordinary reader today, might easily identify with Herakles, making certain allowances for his Olympian paternity, lion skin, and oversized wooden club. Herakles knew well the servitude of a slave, the turbulence of uncontrolled passion, the wrath of a jealous wife, the disfigurement and despair of being forced to engage in chaotic violence, the longing for home and family, and the abrupt brevity of an unfinished life. His relationship with his human father and his own son was close, respectful and loving—a bond any Greek would recognize and honor. And, in his down time, the few respites or “R&R’s” granted him from his labors, he was quick to indulge in the most simple pleasures. Here, in his famous drunken scene in Euripides’ *Akestis*, he shares his everyman’s philosophy of life with a servant who looks on with a face that Herakles finds to be far too glum and disapproving:

You there, c’mere.

I’m gonna make you a wiser man.

Do you know what’s what?

I mean do you know what it means to be human?

I don’t think you do.

Anyway, you listen to me.
We all gotta die.
There ain't one of us alive today
That knows whether he'll be around tomorrow...
So there, that's it.
You heard what I got to teach.
Enjoy yourself, have a drink...
Concentrate your piety on Aphrodite.
People like us,
With death on our breath,
Know she's the sweetest god up there.
And she's willing to give what she's got...
If you're mortal,
You gotta have mortal thoughts. (779ff)

Finally, the thankless drudgery, the violence, and the remarkably bad luck he endured would evoke sympathy from anyone of good will; and his suicide makes him an object of pity. To sum up, in life he resembled the rest of us, and to his death we are likely to respond "there but for the grace of god go I."

There is no doubt that Herakles was and is best known for his signature *athloi* or "labors." Like the so-called "wonders of the world," Herakles' labors are usually assigned a number, and the number that has come down to us is "12." The canonical *Dodekathlos* or "Twelve Labors," however, seems to have been first carved in stone, as it were, in the metopes of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. This is hardly the first or sole appearance in stone for the laborious Herakles. He was a favorite, all-but-ubiquitous figure on archaic pediments. In each instance, sculptors drew from a diverse repertoire of labors and episodes, some universal and some local, as many images as they had room for and seemed appropriate. What is original to the Olympian metopes is the number twelve and the particular twelve labors selected, which from this point on form the definitive canon of the Labors of Herakles found, for instance, seven centuries later in a mosaic floor at Leiria. In the classical period, playwrights made up their own lists of labors for Herakles. Sophokles, for instance, in his *Women of Trachis*, lists only six labors, while Euripides, in *Herakles*, cites eleven labors, eight canonical and three others.

In the canonical twelve labors, all of the first eight, with one exception, involve the slaying, capturing or subduing of animals, whether familiar or mythical: a lion, a hydra, a boar, an hind, birds, a bull, and a team of man-eating horses. The exception, number six, the cleaning-out of the Augean stables, involves no violence or peril, only wretched work. In this context it seems a curious anomaly, but in fact has its place in the fuller biography and cult of Herakles in the ancient Greek world (see Commentary). Each of the last four labors contains and revolves around quite fantastic elements or protagonists: the warrior-queen of the Amazons, a man with three bodies living on an island beyond the River Okeanos, a multi-headed dog guarding the door to the Netherworld, and a tree at the edge of the world, yielding golden apples and guarded by a snake. Like the adventures of Odysseus en route to Ithaka, the labors of Herakles offer leaven to the literal mind and excitement to the weary soul. Not so for Herakles. Besides winning him his reputation, his labors do nothing but wear him down. What is important to keep in mind is that Herakles' labors, whatever their number, are imposed upon him. Each labor represents a *ponos*: "task-work, toil, drudgery." They are his burden. Who imposes them and why varies from one version of the story to another; but in each instance he pursues another's agenda. He does as he must, as he is told; and all this takes its toll on him and on his family, who mostly wait for his return.

In Sophokles' *Women of Trachis* (adhering to an alternate account of the labors and of the hero's marital history) Herakles' second wife, Deineira, expresses quite unguardedly the *ponos*, the sheer emotional toil, of her marriage. Approached by a group of young women from Trachis, her own region in central Greece, she greets them with these words:

You must have heard about my suffering.
That's why you're here. But without being me,
you'll never understand it,
and may you never have to. (Sophokles 1978 140–144)

Earlier, in her entry speech, Deianeira provided a revealing glimpse into the familial stress, frustration and fear endured by the family of a super-hero. We will need to keep her words closely in mind when, at a later point, we consider the martial aspects of Herakles' labors and his identification as a hoplite warrior in Euripides' *Herakles*. We

enter the speech of Deineira here, after she has told of a savage but successful battle fought over her:

Ever since I've been
With Herakles, sharing his bed, standing with him,
All I seem to have done is nurse terror for him.
One night is fear, the next drives that fear out
With new fear.

We had children, of course.
He sees them the way a farmer sees his back fields:
He drops a seed and comes around once in awhile
To check the harvest.

All right, that was his life,
Home, gone, home and then slogging away again
To labor for some master or another. (Sophokles 1978 29–38)

Such is the life of the stay-at-home wife to the never-at-home hero. It is also the life of a warrior's wife, as we shall soon investigate more fully.

The fact that our hero's home life is hardly worth mentioning does not mean, however, that he spent his days and nights alone. As is mostly the case with violent adventurers, his erotic affairs were numerous; and, more significantly, he nearly always had a loyal companion at his side, most frequently his own nephew Iolaus. Indeed a bright and common thread running through many of the appearances and tales of Herakles is that of friendship. Again and again, he evoked loyal friendship from others and knew how to return it. Euripides, in his *Alkestis*, immortalized the friendship of Herakles and Admetos. In fact, it could be argued that their friendship, its ups and downs, forms the core of that drama and overshadows either the relationship between Admetos and his father or that between Admetos and his wife, Alkestis. It is Herakles who teaches Admetos what it means to be human and how to love. It is Herakles too who teaches Admetos what it means to be a true friend. Enraged that Admetos concealed the death of his wife from Herakles, his good friend, rather than disrupt his revelry, Herakles upbraids and lectures Admetos on friendship:

Admetos,
When a man is angry with his friend,
he should speak his mind frankly and freely;

not keep his feelings smoldering inside.

As your friend, I thought I had the right
to stand beside you in your hour of need
and prove my loyalty.

But you misled me;
you deliberately concealed the truth...

It was wrong of you, Admetos, wrong I tell you,
to treat a friend this way. But let it pass.

You have sorrows enough, old friend. (Euripides 1974 1269–1290)

Forgiving his friend, Herakles calls an end to his holiday to take on an extracurricular labor, and a harrowing one at that. In what he describes as “a damned hard fight,” (1316) he wrestles with Death and wins back Alkestis, who becomes a gift to the now broken and wiser Admetos. In passing, as we will focus on it soon, we should make note that in our focal drama here, Euripides’ *Herakles*, the hero’s homecoming is delayed by his successful descent into Hades to save his companion and friend Theseus.

To conclude this brief preliminary exploration of the central theme of friendship in the life and tales of Herakles, we leap to the last scene of his life, as related in the *Women of Trachis* and elsewhere. On the very last leg of his homecoming, after completing his finale labor, Herakles sends a messenger ahead with the news of his approach. Moments later, when Lichas, his herald and companion, also arrives along with Iole, the delicate blossoming lover that Herakles has taken into his bed and heart, Deineira is consumed with jealousy. At once, to insure her privileged place in Herakles’ affections, she sends off to him a shirt that she has woven for his return and that she now infuses with what she imagines to be a love potion. In fact it is a fatal infusion of unquenchable fire which will ignite the moment he dons the shirt and exposes it to the light of the sun. The fiery outcome is at this point sealed, and Herakles is soon ablaze with flames that nothing on earth will extinguish. Like the legendary fires of hell, the shirt’s flames cause indescribable pain without consuming his flesh. There is only one possible end to his pain. At his begging, his son Hyllos erects a massive log pyre atop Oita, the mountain of Zeus, and carries his father in his arms to it, placing him at its peak. Then, at his father’s desperate insistence, Hyllos lights the pyre with a torch and dispatches his father’s soul.

In another version, told by Diodoros, Apollodoros and others, and reflected in the Sophokles' *Philoktetes*, Herakles is left to find his own release from life and pain. Uprooting whole trees in his frenzy, he hurls them atop each other to form a pyre and then climbs aboard; but the demonic flames in his shirt do nothing to ignite the wood beneath him. He cries out in agony for anyone to light the pyre and put him out of his misery; but no one of the passers-by dares to approach and do the deed. Not, that is, until a young shepherd boy named Philoktetes comes to the base of the pyre, looks up into Herakles' eyes, and sets the pyre ablaze. In return for this final act of compassion, Herakles then leans down and extends his hand through the flames to give to the boy his magical bow, a token of their new friendship. This bow, a divinely lethal weapon and a souvenir of the one friendship that has not failed him, lies at the center of the Sophoklean drama of named after the young shepherd boy Philoktetes. It is a play written by an old playwright, age eighty-seven, about an old warrior, clinging to his humanity, staving off despair, and propped up in all this by the bow given to him by Herakles, his first and, as it has turned out, his truest friend. The themes to remember here and to take with us as we turn to the *Herakles* are those of a longed-for homecoming gone wrong, suicidal release from unendurable pain, and the blessing of friendship.

Turning squarely now to the drama of Euripides, it is as a hero that Herakles returns to his home city of Argos. His last labor—his descent into Hades and the rescue of his friend Theseus—is complete. His long-awaited homecoming is at hand, an homecoming recently complicated by the bloody treachery of Lycos, a usurper, who after killing Kreon, the ruler of Argos, and his sons, is about to complete the slaughter of the royal family with the multiple execution of Megara, daughter of Kreon and wife of Herakles, the children of Herakles and Megara, and lastly Amphiphitryon, Herakles' aged father. In Herakles' absence, no one has come forth to defend the city and the royal family from Lycos. All that remains, it appears, are women, children and men either too old, infirm or broken to be of use. This curious dearth of able-bodied men may well be a clue to the significance of this play in late 5th-century Athens. Regardless, for now we simply note that Herakles the hero returns home only to face one final labor, one final violent task. He must and will save his family. He must and will kill Lycos in cold blood

and thus avenge the murder of Kreon and his sons. Herakles returns home not only as a hero but as a savior too.

At first all goes well, as is to be expected when super-hero meets non-entity in close combat. Herakles' dramatic timing is impeccable. Fresh home from hell, he appears at the last possible auspicious moment, learns of his family's peril, and handily dispatches the vile usurper Lycos to the depths of hell, whose geography Herakles knows well by this time. Then something goes wrong. In fact everything goes wrong. Herakles suddenly turns on his own family and savagely slaughters them; and the only explanation given is that *Lyssa*, insanity personified, has descended on the house and loosened Herakles from his wits, driven him clear out of his mind. What are we, what is anyone to think? It may not be only the house of Herakles that falls into ruin at this point. Numerous critics have argued that the play too plunges into dark nonsense as soon as *Lyssa* or Madness makes her entry and transforms Herakles from hero-savior to pathetic psychopath. A common critique of the *Herakles*, is that it snaps in two with the appearance of Madness. From that moment, we are arguably left with two unrelated dramas: one a triumphant homecoming, and the other a domestic disaster. Like an ancient ship that once came apart on rocks and lost its treasures to the sea, the *Herakles* is mostly regarded as a wreck not worth recovering and has long been abandoned to the ocean floor, rarely if ever produced and seldom studied. The loss is all ours, however, because the *Herakles* is indeed sunken treasure. It remains one of the great masterworks of Athenian drama, and deserves to be salvaged, all the more because the voice it preserves is one that we truly need to hear. It is, I am convinced, the voice of a weary and wise warrior, who may have fought his last battle but whose labors have only begun.

Herakles the Warrior

As we have already seen, despite the graphic diversity of Herakles' labors, they are nearly all quite violent, involving either hunting or a combative struggle of some sort. Not surprisingly, then, his images, from the Geometric period to the fifth century, show him most often armed and outfitted as a warrior. In the seventh century he commonly appears as a fully armed hoplite, though it is also in the 7th century that he makes his first appearances with a bow. It is in the textual tradition, however, that we find the most

vivid and compelling clues to his identity as a warrior; and it is this identity that clearly defines him in the Herakles.

In the *Alkestis*, Euripides leaves little doubt how he sees Herakles and his labors. When the Choral Leader, in line 486, concerned over Herakles' next labor, says that "Those horses (Diomedes') won't be yours without a fight (*aneu maches*, literally "without a battle"), Herakles answers resignedly: "I know. But fighting is my job, my burden. I can't just say no." (487) Then, moments later in the same conversation, Herakles reacts abruptly to the mention of the war-god Ares and sums up his life:

There. You've put your finger on it—my labor, the story of my life.

My road is uphill, steep, a punishing climb.

My orders? To do battle with Ares' spawn.

Every son, down to the last. (499–502)

To underline this same profile of Herakles as warrior, we return now momentarily to the *Women of Trachis*. Deineira, addressing a group of local women and talking about her life with Herakles, tells how: "As many times as he'd gone out on trials before / he'd never bothered to explain anything—he always left to conquer, not to die." (Sophokles 1978 157–159) Thus all of his labors come down to this: killing or conquering without dying. This in so many words was the prayer accompanying the traditional blood sacrifice before battle, the *sphagia*, the slaughter before the slaughter: "Gods! We take this life. May we kill and not be killed. Be with us in this." Until this day, the gods were indeed with Herakles. He took life without losing his own.

Deineira, like Megara before her, is a warrior's wife. No ordinary warrior. No ordinary wife. But a warrior's wife all the same, as is clear from her earlier description of their life together, or rather apart. This realization casts an interesting and disturbing light on the fear she expresses now that he is about to return. With his labors behind him and his homecoming imminent, she admits that "now my anxieties are worse than ever." (Sophokles 1978 40) Warriors, like hunters, and for that matter like gods and beasts, are liminal figures. They live on the edge of the human circle. Topologically and psychologically, war is fought in marginal territory, in the wild, as it were, far from the paved street or the plowed field. And when the warrior returns, he all too often brings the wild back with him, which may explain why Deineira's excited anticipation of her mate's

imminent return is infected with a gnawing anxiety. Which is worse, having a husband at war or having a warrior at home? She seems unsure at this point.

Herakles, however, is not the only war veteran here in the play named after him. Most notably there is Theseus, whom Herakles saved from Hades or “hell,” arguably a euphemism for the combat they had endured together. In the shock battle of hoplite warfare in the 5th century, when the aim was to annihilate rather than humiliate the enemy, survival was a matter of mutuality. If a warrior fell from wounds or exhaustion, his only hope was to be lifted onto friendly shoulders and carried from the chaos. In the *Symposium* of Plato, *Alkibiades*, surely the most notorious figure in the Peloponnesian War, tells how in just such a moment, at Potidaea in far northern Greece, the philosopher Sokrates lifted him from death. The Athenian army was frozen in place, unaccustomed to such severe cold. Even so, Sokrates, to the wonder of all, walked barefoot over the ice. Alkibiades goes on:

Should I say something about his conduct in action? Yes, I think he’s earned it. In the battle in which the generals gave me a decoration, my own life was saved by none other than Sokrates. He refused to leave me when I was wounded, and saved both me and my weapons. So I recommended that the generals should give you the decoration. Isn’t that true, Sokrates? You can’t object to that, or say I’m lying, can you? In fact the generals were inclined to favour me, because of my social position, and wanted to give it to me, but you were keener than they were that I should get it, rather than you. (Plato 1989 221 d–e)

It brings only clarity to the *Herakles* if, in considering the recent rescue of Theseus from Hades, we imagine some such moment as this, an episode of life-saving valor in combat. Indeed, it is an act that we shall see repeated and thus repaid in the due course of this drama, when Theseus enters Herakles’ hell and lifts him back to life.

Beyond Herakles and Theseus, though, Argos is populated with veterans. We hear their voices throughout the play in the Chorus of elders, who tire of everything these days except lamenting how much they hate old age. They enter together, because otherwise they would not enter at all. They need one another to muster the will to get up at all and to make their way out into the streets and the public square. “We are no more than ghosts, only half here,” they sing, “things of the night or of dreams, trembling, wanting to help, useless.” (112–114) The fact of their age is, as it is for anyone, a matter of time’s passage; but they are also inwardly weary and outwardly broken. On their side,

however, is the bond they share. They are friends. And, I would suggest, it takes no reading between the lines to see too that they are veterans:

Keep going. Don't give in to weariness.
Drag yourself along, the way a horse pulls a heavy load
Up a steep, rocky slope, one exhausting step at a time.
When you lose your footing, reach out.
Grab hold of a hand or robe.
We are all old now. We stand or fall together.
The same as in our spear-bearing youth,
When we stood as one in the toil of battle
And brought home only glory
To our fatherland. (119–130)

Our circle of veterans widens. We see that it includes not only Herakles and Theseus, but the Chorus as well. But there is another prominent veteran, whom we need to consider here, and that is the playwright. We may assume this from the fact that Euripides was an able, fit Athenian citizen, whose long life spanned most of the fifth century, a century of war. In Athens and most other Greek states, military service was no optional matter. Athenian males entered the youth core, or ephebate, at age eighteen and were fully armed and ready for action after two years of training. From then until their sixtieth birthday, they were eligible for active duty. In the 5th century, particularly after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C.E., active duty was not a matter of odds. It was a certainty. It has been estimated that the average Athenian citizen in the fifth century would have seen combat in well over half of his adult years until he became disabled, dead, or retired. Although each year the three tragic playwrights whose plays had been selected for production in the Dionysian festival were relieved of active duty for the duration of their rehearsals, Euripides the warrior is unlikely to have deviated significantly from the estimate cited above. That he knew war intimately, not from the accounts of others but from personal experience, is further supported by the vivid, detailed descriptions of close-up combat found in many of his plays. One particularly graphic and compelling example is his account of the hand-to-hand hoplite duel between Polyneikes and Eteokles in *The Phoenecian Women* (1382ff).

There is a possibly closer and more revealing connection here, however, between Herakles and Euripides. Herakles, we know, is coming home because his labors are over; and those labors have been identified for the most part as the labors of war. The curious and remarkable fact is that, as he was envisioning and creating the *Herakles*, the very same may have been true of Euripides and his fellow Athenians. In 424 B.C.E., Euripides turned sixty and thus would have come home from war for the last time. Furthermore, only several years later, he would have been joined in his military retirement by many or most of his comrades in arms. This was due to the fact that in the spring of 421 B.C.E. Athens and Sparta signed a sweeping agreement known as the Peace of Nikias. On paper, it called for, among other things, a fifty-year peace between the principal adversaries of the Peloponnesian War. Although its provisions were never fully implemented and began to unravel nearly as soon as it was ratified, Nikias' peace held for nearly eight years, until 413 B.C.E. This means that, in the years immediately following 421 B.C.E., not only Euripides but most all of Athens' veterans, like Herakles, put their combat labors behind them and returned to their farms and families and the challenges of peace. This fragment from Euripides' *Erechtheus*, a drama produced during this period (c.424–421 B.C.E.) and now lost, surely echoes the sentiments of many of those veterans: "Let my spear sleep until the spider has woven her webs around it..." (in Plutarch 1960 218) Another document of the time, Aristophanes' *Peace*, produced in the spring of 421 B.C.E., contains a stirring paean to Peace, in which, like a conch, we may hear a sea of voices—innumerable veterans returning home, then and now:

Think of all the thousand pleasures,
Comrades, which to Peace we owe,
All the life of ease and comfort
Which she gave us long ago;
Figs and olives, wine and myrtles,
Luscious fruits preserved and dried,
Banks of fragrant violets, blowing
Hearts are yearning,
Joys that we have missed so long,
Comrades, here is peace returning,
Greet her back with dance and song. (571–581, in Kagan 2003 190)

While there is no sure date for the *Herakles*, it is often dated to the period from 424 to 421 B.C.E. I believe that the analysis here makes such a dating all the more compelling. It is, I would suggest, a play written by a veteran about a veteran for veterans, all of whom are attempting to put war behind them. Not an easy task.

Aristophanes, above, wrote of the “thousand pleasures” of peace. For those returning from combat, however, those pleasures may prove elusive, the Peace of Nikias notwithstanding. Aristophanes’ *Peace*, we must remember, was a comedy. It is not surprising then that what Trugaios fails to mention in his paean is that peace— figs, olives, wine and myrtles aside—can be hell, as harrowing and life-threatening as the hell left behind on the slaughter fields. “Walk down the street of any American city at noon,” writes Dr. Robert Ostroff, a psychiatrist with the Veterans Administration, “and you pass someone who has been to war or been profoundly affected by contact with war. War is a life-altering event even for those who return with no physical scars.” (Ostroff 1992 12) There is simply no reason for imagining that, in 421 B.C.E., the streets of Athens were any different than ours today. Modern psychiatric research into combat trauma demonstrates that “Each moment of combat imposes a strain so great that men will break down in direct relation to the intensity and duration of their exposure... psychiatric casualties are as inevitable as gunshot and shrapnel wounds in warfare.” (in Keegan 1978 329). We shall consider briefly in a moment the intensity and duration of combat in the Peloponnesian War, which were the most extreme ever experienced in any war to date in the ancient world. “It is not too far from the mark,” sums up Grossman, in concurrence with most psychiatrists close to the question, “to observe that there is something about continuous, inescapable combat which will drive 98 percent of all men insane, and the other 2 percent were crazy when they got there.” (in Hedges 2003.2 90)

With this in mind, we need not look far for a more accurate diagnosis of Herakles’ madness than that provided on stage or offered by most traditional classicists. Indeed, we need not look beyond the previous decade in which the Peloponnesian War had enlisted virtually every eligible Athenian into the war effort. Lyssa is merely a prop, an empty mask, as it were. Herakles’ madness neither required then nor requires now any elaborate explanation for those who have taken part in the insane rampage of war. Theseus, for example, seems to understand not only what has happened to his friend but also how to

go about helping him. For Athenians in 421 B.C.E., as now, a returning veteran who suddenly murders his wife and children is a tragic but hardly unfamiliar event. Such domestic murders would not have been reported, nor would they have gone to court in 5th-century Athens. Today, they are only minimally reported, particularly during wartime. According to Pentagon statistics, on average, one child or spouse dies each week at the hands of a relative in the military.” (Ashford and Huet-Vaughn 2000 192) More specifically, within a period of six weeks in 2002, three members of the Special Forces returned home to Fort Bragg, North Carolina from Afghanistan, killed their wives and then killed themselves. (in Corbett 2004 56) We will look more closely in a moment at the episode that leaves the house of Herakles drenched in blood. For now, it may be enough to suggest that the percentage of Athenian veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress may well have rivaled those among combat veterans in the 20th and 21st centuries, and that given those numbers now and then the murderous madness of Herakles is no mystery.

Any lingering doubt that the Peloponnesian War was less likely to have left its veterans as shattered as those we know or are today will be dissolved by an attentive reading of Thucydides’ account of that war. Donald Kagan, a renowned scholar of the Peloponnesian War, describes with succinct precision the nature and character of this war which its first historian accurately foretold would be remembered forever:

From the perspective of the fifth-century Greeks the Peloponnesian War was legitimately perceived as a world war, causing enormous destruction of life and property, intensifying factional and class hostility, and dividing the Greek states internally and destabilizing their relationship to one another, which ultimately weakened their capacity to resist conquest from outside.... The Peloponnesian War was also a conflict of unprecedented brutality, violating even the harsh code that had previously governed Greek warfare and breaking through the thin line that separated civilization from savagery. Anger, frustration, and the desire for vengeance increased as the fighting dragged on, resulting in a progression of atrocities that included maiming and killing captured opponents; throwing them into pits to die of thirst, starvation, and exposure; and hurling them into the sea to drown. Bands of marauders murdered innocent children. Entire cities were destroyed, their men killed, their women and children sold as slaves. (Kagan 2003 xxiv–xxv)

Like the most savage modern wars, the Peloponnesian War was fought by two opposing ideologies, each determined to eradicate the other. Ironically, religious wars and wars over ideas are without rival in their inhumanity. Unlike most previous Greek

wars, which amounted to brief but intense ritual battles fought by weekend warriors over disputed territory, the Peloponnesian War went on not for hours or days but for decades. Its ultimate aim was not to humiliate the enemy by forcing them to quit the field of battle; rather it was to annihilate the enemy. And as the enemy on either side was Greek, it took on many of the worst aspects of civil war. Islands, cities, and even families divided and formed factions loyal to one side or the other, betraying and murdering each other in streets and homes they had shared as long as they could remember. The line between combatant and civilian grew jagged, blurred, and eventually disappeared altogether. The other—man, woman or child—was the enemy and, unless it would convert and embrace the acceptable set of ideas and alliances, must be eliminated. In sum, Thucydides leaves us with no lingering doubts. All of the principal risk factors for posttraumatic stress, indicated by today's psychiatric specialists, were present, even rampant, in the war between the coalitions led by Athens and Sparta: morally suspect mandate, unclear mission, civilian slaughter, torture and murder of prisoners, rape and atrocity, massacres driven by rage and revenge. War as usual, then and now, was hellish; but this was an unusual war—a war without limits and seemingly without end—and it must have left the majority of its survivors with severe psychic wounds. One such survivor, I am arguing, was Herakles and, quite possibly, Euripides himself. The Chorus, veterans themselves, know only too well what Herakles has endured and done on their behalf. They openly acknowledge their debt and his wounds:

Your life-exhausting labors,
ridding the world of our most feral fears and demons,
have given to the rest of us a less troubled life. (697–700)

Herakles is not the first trauma victim in Greek war literature, however. Many of the greatest heroes bear the same wounds and exhibit the same behaviors as he. We all—scholars, veterans, students, citizens—owe a deep debt to Jonathan Shay for his inspired work with veterans and with the Greek classics, assisting each to find revealing and healing words in the other. Rather than try to distill here his brilliant analyses of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, I will simply and urgently direct you to his two extraordinary works, *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*. In these profoundly influential volumes Dr. Shay has changed the way Homer is read today. Somehow we classical scholars had

forgotten that the *Iliad* is about war, and that the *Odyssey* is about coming home from war. Heraklitos haunts us one more time. The truth likes to hide; and the obvious truth is often the most elusive one. One truth that, thanks to Shay, we shall never overlook again, however, is that Achilles and Odysseus, no matter their heroic stature, are psychically wounded, severely so. In contemporary diagnostic terms, they suffer from PTSD. It is this, not the muse, that makes them act as they do any more than it is Hera and Lyssa who make Herakles murder his family). In passing, too, I want to point the reader to the extraordinary work of Doug Anderson, once a medic in Vietnam and since then writing arguably the most exquisitely wrenching and painfully intimate war poetry to come from that experience. Anderson, like Shay, often turns to Homer for light, for material, and for the raw imagery of war; and, in doing so, he casts a brilliant beam into those shadowed corners of the great epics that often hide the dirtiest secrets. Here, for instance, is his poem “Homecoming,” the homecoming of Odysseus, but it might as well, with some obvious changes, be about Herakles, or Euripides, or our neighbor home from Iraq. “Homecoming”:

Telemachus felt something enter his spine
when his father threaded the ax-heads,
victorious arrow quivering in the wall,
and a small cry escaped him when,
without pausing, the old man fit
another shaft onto the string
and shot Antinoos between the nipples.
And so it began for Telemachus,
the deep, swirling momentum;
some power slipping him on like a skin,
and him mad with it; hiss of sword-stroke
father and son working the cowering suitors,
the one stalking, the other cutting off escape,
until the stone floors were slippery red.
But finally, when he thought it was over,
his righteousness spent, and the weeping servant girls
on their hands and knees were sopping up the blood,
he leaned on his sword,

tried to fit his dream of the man gone twenty years
over the gore-soaked beard and chest before him.

And then his father looked around, and scarce believing
there was no one left to kill, smiled at his son. (Anderson 1994 43)

We need not look to contemporary poets and scholars, however, to find profiles and analyses of severely traumatized Homeric heroes. Sophokles, whose military and political career rivaled his dramatic one, offers an excruciating example in his *Aias* or *Ajax*. Sophokles knew first-hand the savagery of war. While serving as general with Perikles in the Samian War of 441/440 B.C.E. he surely would have witnessed and may have participated in the atrocities committed there by the Athenian forces, who tied their prisoners to posts in the agora and, after ten days, cut them down, crushed their heads, and left them to rot. Although as dramatist, playing the myths like a harp, Sophokles attributes the madness of Aias to Athena, he knew better the nature and root of the insanity eating at his hero. Aias, son of Telamon, was a mountain of a man, the great wall of the Greeks, impassable. By Odysseus' measure, "he was the greatest of all who came to Troy, second only to Achilles," (Sophokles 1999 1511–1513) a towering hero and a man of unimpeachable honor. Two events in quick succession, like two blows to a great oak, however, brought him down—something the entire Trojan army had failed to do. First, there was the death of his friend Achilles; and then there was the bestowal of Achilles armor on Odysseus rather than on him, with all of the dishonor and humiliation that entailed.

When the invisible curtain lifts on the drama of Aias, he is already thoroughly mad. Lunging and leaping across open fields, swinging his sword wildly, he resembles many a legendary berserker such as Merlin, Suibhne, or Cuchullain. He beats his head, howls and wails in anguish, slaughters and tortures dumb beasts, imagining them to be his most hated enemies, bathes in their blood, clawing his own face and tearing away at his hair. Worst of all, laments Tekmessa, his distraught and helpless wife, "The man is in a hurry to die." (Sophokles 1999 904–905) The oft-consulted and occasionally helpful house-prophet Kalkhas assures Tekmessa that this storm of insanity will soon blow over, that Aias will recover from his raving if only he can be kept alive for a single day. Not

an easy assignment, though, to keep a giant of a man, abandoned by his wits and bent on death, away from his own sword.

The asylum-cum-slaughterhouse chaos of the *Aias* is a lot to enter and absorb straight off the street, as it were. Even the assembly of the Greek leaders at Troy was having trouble figuring it out and responding to it. Kalkhas did his best, for once, to shed light on the situation:

He said

The gods strike down unwieldy
and outsized bodies, men grown
from the human branch who let
their minds go beyond the human.
The man's father warned him against
Such recklessness when he saw him
Rushing headlong to war... (Sophokles 1999 836–843)

Aias' father likely knew from experience what war can do to anyone, especially the rash and the bold who rush into it. Whether he could have imagined this scene—his son waist deep in carnage, muttering and bellowing unintelligibly—is impossible to say. Regardless, we will assume that he will curse war and not Athena for what became of his son. And, if he were searching for words, he could do no better than to repeat those sung over his corpse by the Chorus of comrades from his own island of Salamis:

The man who invented war,
if only he had vanished in the steep sky or sunk
to the common darkness of Hades before
he taught men to use the tools
of hateful, heedless Ares—
oh, pain breeding pain—for the slaughter of men.

He has robbed me of garlands
and deep wine bowls,
kept me far from the joy of friendship, the sweet
clamor of flutes,
he has cut me off
from the night-
long joys

of sleep and love and lovemaking.... (Sophokles 1999 1337–1350)

To modern clinicians, Aias is utterly recognizable. He is one of the “ice men, that is men unable to communicate, who when driven to extremes will take their own lives.” (Matsakis 1996 54) Addressing this category of the “ice man,” Vietnam veteran and classical scholar Lawrence Tritle concludes that

Even allowing for cultural differences and formalities, it is clear... that Ajax fits this picture with astounding accuracy. Ajax, then, is to be seen as an ancient Greek equivalent to the traumatized veteran from Vietnam: numbed by extensive combat, then betrayed by his own comrades, who loses control and strikes out at whoever or whatever is nearest to hand. Afterwards nothing is left but suicide. This is Ajax. (Tritle 2000 96)

And in many respects it is also Herakles, except that Herakles survives. He is in as much a hurry to die as Aias was; but, as we shall see, he is kept alive by a friend who knows what to say and what to do. We may recall how, when Achilles, delirious with grief, threw himself prostrate in the dust and tore at himself beside the corpse of his beloved Patroklos, Antilochos lay at his side, watchful. Antilochos held the hands of Achilles throughout the long ordeal, fearful that otherwise Achilles might cut his own throat. Herakles too has a watchful and wise friend. But we are ahead of ourselves here and must return to focus on the moment of Herakles’ madness and its bloody aftermath.

If the revenge of Hera and the mission of Iris and Lyssa are dismissed as a mythic cover story for the true event, what then did happen to Herakles beginning on line 815, as the Chorus cry out at a sudden intrusion on the *skene* roof? We know at this point, from the lips of Lycos himself in line 754, that the usurper has been ambushed and the slaughter has begun. Soon we learn that Lycos is dead—an easy kill for a hero. Only moments after the *kallinikos*, the victory song is sung (789), however, the slaughter continues, or rather spreads. In Iris’ graphic words,

Madly churn his soul until it swirls in confusion
And seethes with child-slaughtering fantasies.
Whip his legs into frenzy, teach them the dance of death,
The death of those dearest to him.
Let him sail back over the waters of Acheron,
Wreathed with the bloody fillet of those who murder their children.
(835–839)

In plain words, Herakles can't stop killing; from Lycos he goes on to kill his own children. We are not left to wonder precisely what went on inside the palace. A distraught Messenger appears and tells all. With the blood of Lycos on his hands, Herakles looked at his father and saw instead the hated Eurystheus, the wretch responsible for all his labors. We are reminded of Aias' hatred of the Atreidai and how he saw them in the dumb beasts he butchered. Why the murder of Eurystheus? Unfinished business? The thirteenth labor, spawned by all the rest? Surely Herakles harbored a greater hatred for Eurystheus than for any of those creatures he snared, maimed, or murdered in his "labors," his wars. They were never his enemies, only his opponents. Eurystheus, like Lycos, is the true enemy. Eurystheus had made him a killer and, in the process, had all but murdered him; and Lycos was about to murder Herakles' sons, all that was left of him, all that was still pure, untainted, and joyous in life. It was no leap from Lycos to Eurystheus, only a small step.

Herakles, we are told, decided to start first with the offspring of his enemy, murdering them before his eyes. Indeed, the children he saw belonged to Eurystheus; but the children he slaughtered were his own. Then, as he turns to slay his father Amphytrion, thinking him to be Eurystheus, Herakles blacks out and collapses. It is over. The storm has passed. "Is this a game, or is our master mad?" (952) the Chorus sings. The answer, we know, is yes. All too often. It is the legacy of war. As I write this, the media report—not every day and not every week, but all too tragically often—the attempts, sometimes successful, of combat veterans to murder their families, and then, once they grasp what they have done, to take their own lives. In a special "Iraq War Clinician Guide," prepared by the National Center for PTSD and distributed to veterans and their families by the Department of Veterans Affairs, we find "Flashbacks" listed and discussed among the traumatic stress reactions to watch for and cope with. Here is the advice given:

- Keep your eyes open. Look around you and notice where you are.
- Talk to yourself. Remind yourself where you are, what year you're in, and that you are safe. Trauma happened in the past, and you are in the present.
- Get up and move around. Have a drink of water, and wash your hands.

- Call someone you trust and tell them what's been happening.
- Remind yourself that this is quite common traumatic stress reaction.
- Tell your counselor or doctor what happened to you. (*IWCG* 2004 20)

This counsel is, of course, lost on Herakles. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to us to realize that flashbacks are a “quite common traumatic stress reaction.” Such flashbacks are often triggered by violence or hostility and, for those who have been trained and conditioned to kill, may rapidly turn murderous. Clinicians describe how, when experiencing “misrecognition” or “misidentification,” some victims know that the visual phenomena before them do not coincide with reality, while others will “believe” without question that what they visualize is real. Flashback episodes may last only minutes or they may go on for an hour or more. Some Vietnam veterans tell how quite spontaneously the faces around them will slowly mutate into the faces of Vietcong as the surrounding landscape—their backyard or a cityscape—will turn to jungle. Billiards sticks may be seen as rifles, baseballs may visually morph into grenades. In such moments, of course, veterans often react as they have been trained to do and attempt to kill the enemy before them with any weapon at hand or simply with their bare hands. Veterans who assault or murder others in such a state are frequently arrested and charged with the crime committed, as if they had been fully aware of what they were doing. The legal dilemma here is that “the diagnosis of PTSD depends in great part on self-report and is therefore readily simulated. Therefore, the flashback-induced misidentification state will continue to pose a challenge to those who seek to utilize it as a psychiatric defense.” (Silva 1998 1110)

The legalities of his condition are, of course, beside the point for Herakles. His children lie slaughtered by his own hands. He is polluted with their blood. And he is understandably in despair. No matter who acquits, understands, or forgives him he is, in his own eyes, a murderer. Madness, after all—Lyssa aside—does not descend from above but rises from within. Herakles knows where the slaughterous rage that left his children dead came from. As he lowered his lethal bow on each of them and drew it back, he looked into his children’s eyes. True enough, he saw then the children of Eurystheus; but soon enough he will see his own children. The eyes are the same. It is enough to pitch anyone into despair and to make them in a hurry to die. This, as Herakles

comes to his senses, is now the only longing left to him, to go lost in death. He is in hell, and it will take a miracle, we may guess, to save him.

Herakles the Survivor

When Herakles first awakens, as if from a deep slumber, what he sees reassures him, welcomes him into a familiar world—the sun, the earth, a clear sky, all as they were and should be. This is often the case with those who have endured great loss, found sleep, and then wakened to a new day. Dennis Lehane has described beautifully this “cruel trick of the mind”:

Waking, after all, was an almost natal state. You surfaced without a history, then spent the blinks and yawns reassembling your past, shuffling the shards into chronological order before fortifying yourself for the present. (Lehane 2003 20)

Slowly, Herakles follows the clues strewn around him—weapons and bodies, dead bodies. Another clue—he is inexplicably bound with ropes. *This may be hell and not earth*, he conjectures. But he is helpless. *Even in hell—I’ve been there and back before—I was never helpless. So where*, he cries out, *could I be, where could I, Herakles, be helpless?* His next response—his first instinct in helpless terror and confusion—is to cry out for a friend.

Is there anyone there? Anyone close?

A friend... nearby?

Someone to [wipe my face...

my mind]... wash away this confusion? (1106–1107)

We should not pass over lightly or take for granted these words. They reveal, after all, why Herakles and not Aias found katharsis and healing. In his darkest moment, Herakles calls out at once to his friends, to whichever of them might be close enough at hand to help him. It is his human father who is nearest at hand and first answers his appeal; but Herakles is ensconced in a culture, a web, of friendship reaching well beyond his immediate family, what remains of it. The theme of friendship—declared or denied, embraced or betrayed—has surrounded us since the opening laments of Amphytrion over the ill-timed and ill-fated absence of his son Herakles, whom Theseus later calls “the great friend and benefactor of all mortals.” (1252) The word *philos*, “friend,” or words stemming from the same root, simply permeate the text of the *Herakles*, occurring well

over sixty times. They form, as it were, the *raga*, the mode, in which the entire composition is written.

Megara acknowledges her friendship with the Chorus (who are outspoken friends one to the other) and addresses her husband as “old friend,” while Amphitryon, in turn, confronts Zeus for being such a let-down, such a disappointing friend:

All this time we imagined you a true friend,
one of the family, but you fell far short of that.
Face it. I am a mere mortal and you a great god.
And I'm twice the man you are. (341–342)

Here friendship is the measure of the man. In this play friendship is even the measure of the god; and, by this measure, Zeus, king of the gods, is a public failure. Finally, of course, there is Theseus, dearest of friends to Herakles. Herakles descended into hell to save him, and Theseus is about to return the favor, as friends do. Though Megara was once convinced that misfortune has no friend (561), Theseus appears to prove otherwise. Indeed, by the end of the play, all of the principal players in the *Herakles*, with the sole exception of Lycos, their enemy—Amphitryon, the Chorus, Megara, Herakles, and Theseus—have all addressed each other as friends and acted accordingly. In short, they form a true community, a polis, whose essential and defining bond, according to Aristotle is *philia*, friendship.

It is only in this circle of survivors, this community of friends that Herakles could hope to and will find healing. We may recall the stages of healing from trauma discussed earlier: safety, remembrance, mourning, and reconnection. These are precisely the stages through which Herakles is led and saved by his friends. His father has already restrained him, as Antilochos once restrained the hands of Achilles, for his own safety and the safety of all. And now, as Herakles, stirs and comes to consciousness, Amphitryon knows he must go to him to begin the process of remembrance and mourning. It is understandably a task he dreads and in which he looks to his friends, the old veterans in the Chorus, to support him.

AMPHITRYON. Old friends, [what do I do?].
Such darkness... evil... pain... do I dare go nearer?
CHORUS. Not alone. [But you aren't alone.] I'm going with you.
I'm not about to desert you in your troubles. (1109–1110)

From here to the last lines of the play, we would need to attend to each line to appreciate the power and poignancy of what takes place between father, son, and friend. To a degree, this is what we will do in the Commentary to follow, while here we will trace in more cursory fashion the course of Herakles' katharsis and healing.

Like Kadmos in the *Bakkhai*, Amphytrion hesitantly and painfully helps his pathetic child to recall the atrocity he committed and to recognize the blood on his hands. Judging it safe to do so, Amphytrion unties him. Then, under his father's tutelage, Herakles learns in pieces the truth of what has happened, what he did. That his life is ruined, but not yet why. That the bodies around him are those of children, but not yet whose. Not only does the truth like to hide, but even more we long to hide from it. All too soon, however, the full truth is out; and Herakles' immediate wild impulse is to punish, torture, kill himself. He wants to bury a sword into his gut or set himself ablaze, to purge his guilt, avenge his own crime, and stop his pain. At that moment, however, Herakles sees his friend Theseus approaching. Theseus' arrival—to say nothing of his timing—is miraculous, which is just what Theseus must have thought when he saw Herakles come for him in hell.

This timely arrival of friend Theseus, who knows nothing of what has taken place here in the last minutes and hours, means that the full narrative of Herakles' trauma must and will be reconstructed and shared on the spot. This, we know, is an essential therapeutic element in the healing of trauma and, while it inflicts great suffering on Herakles, moves him closer to reconnection with all those near and dear to him. For now, though, throughout the entire discourse in which the story of Herakles' ruin unfolds and is discussed, the once and future hero hides beneath his cloak, covering himself in shame, not wanting to see or be seen. But he hears everything. He hears Theseus ask regarding him: "Was there ever a man born as ill-starred as Herakles?" (1195) and Amphytrion respond that: "You'll never find anyone more burdened or more adrift." (1196–1198) These words, of course, though unacknowledged, are balm on his psychic wounds. Compassion is the oxygen of any community worthy of the name.

The next step in Herakles' recovery and so the next task faced by father and friend is to persuade and enable Herakles to uncover his head and come out of hiding.

Amphitryon and Theseus, a chorus of two, combine their voices and appeal to Herakles to let them help:

THESEUS. I have come to share his suffering. Uncover him.

AMPHITRYON. My son, pull the cloth down from your eyes, toss it aside.

Show your face to the sun. As a wrestler uses his weight
to throw his opponent, I will move you with my weeping.

THESEUS. Herakles, hear me. I have something to say to you,
as you lie cringing in misery down there. Your friends are here.

Look up. Open your eyes to us. (1202–1215)

Finally, Theseus lays down a challenge to Herakles, appealing to a hero's honor. He tells him in so many words that every man has to accept the hand he is dealt and that it's up to him to face his fate with courage. This said, Theseus bends down and uncovers Herakles, which is perhaps what provokes Herakles to speak to him for the first time.

The dialogue that ensues between Herakles and Theseus comprises the remainder of the drama. It is neither an exchange of insults between warriors before locking in combat, nor is it an exchange of flirtations between lovers before embracing in sex. Rather, it is a loving and confrontational conversation of comrades trying to live up to the challenge of friends, to have all things in common. Herakles warns his friend to flee, to run with all his might from his pollution (*miasma*), and Theseus assures him that there is no such thing as pollution between friends. Theseus makes it clear that he is going nowhere, nowhere without his friend. And Herakles makes it equally clear that there is only one place he wants to go—to death, back to the netherworld, where he just came from. Theseus responds that this is the kind of talk he would expect from an ordinary man, but not from a hero.

What takes place in these last moments of the drama is more than the retrieval of Herakles from the brink of despair and suicide. It is the redefinition of heroism, ancient and modern. Herakles assures Theseus that none of his labors were nearly as harrowing as what he now endures. None of them called for the courage that he must now summon and somehow find within himself. Being able and ready to die or to kill is, as it happens, far less of a challenge than to embrace life after one has hovered close to death and sent others into its dark mouth. War is undoubtedly hell, but the peace that follows can be an even greater hell for the warrior. In the front ranks, when a warrior goes down on one

knee or plunges prostrate to the dust, he knows himself to be as good as dead. He is already a ghost. The same is true in peace. Herakles is down. He is over. Until, that is, a friend extends his hand, steadies him, and lifts him back to his feet. We do well to recall here the opening lines of the Chorus' parodos:

Leaning on our staves,
A procession of propped-up old men,
We make our way slowly to a great house...
We are no more than ghosts, only half here,
Things of the night or of dreams,
Trembling, wanting to help, useless...

When you lose your footing, reach out.
Grab hold of a hand or robe.
We are all old now. We stand or fall together.
The same as in our spear-bearing youth,
When we stood as one in the toil of battle
And brought home only glory
To our fatherland. (107–129)

Neither they nor Herakles stand any longer in the front ranks of battle. Instead, they hold their ground in the front ranks of a different, more grueling struggle to affirm themselves and each other in the face not of death but of life. Their enemies, their Furies, lie within. As friends, and this is what they call each other, they are ready to steady, to lift, or even to carry each other if need be from one day to the next, which is how life must be lived.

Theseus offers to Herakles all it is that a friend, a family, a community, a nation—the human circle however wide we manage to make it—can offer: gratitude, respect, a livelihood, honor and remembrance. This is nothing more than justice. “This will be my thanks to you,” explains Theseus, “for saving me from the mouth of hell.” (1336–1337) In saying this, we should make no mistake, Theseus speaks not only as an individual but as the legendary King of Athens. He speaks for his country. He extends to his friend what only a city, a state, can offer to her citizens, to her veterans, her heroes. At the Greater Dionysia, in a civic theatre whose political acoustics surpass that of any commercial theatre known to us, these words reach well beyond the actors and the orchestra to the tens of thousands of citizens and warriors seated on the slope of the

acropolis to share the tragedy of Herakles. They are words of healing meant for all; more than the recovery of an individual is at stake here. "If our wars were to make killers of all combat soldiers, rather than men who have killed, civilian life would be endangered for generations or, in fact, made impossible." (Gray 1998 86)

Theseus listens one more time to Herakles recount his nightmare and lacerate himself with bitter words, and then he extends his hand to him. It is time to get up and to go back to the great labor of living: "Enough tears, poor man.," counsels Theseus. "Now, up on your feet." (1394) And, when he can't find the needed strength, Theseus lifts him to his feet, puts his arm around his neck in the yoke of friendship, and takes each slow step with him. Herakles' final words say it all, all that the play is meant to teach. They sum up what anyone who has come back from hell knows already:

Any man who would prefer great wealth or power to love, the love of friends, is sick to the core of his soul. (1425–1426)

I cannot help but hear the voice of Euripides still resonant in these words of Herakles. In the ancient theatre, Euripides is the great poet of friendship, despite his legendary reputation for having few friends, at least in Athens. He hated war, but loved the warrior. He loved Athens, but hated her policies. Although his plays won fewer civic prizes than those of his eminent peers, his were more widely prized and preserved by common people and as a result have survived in far greater number. All the same, he died in exile. Whether he was driven out or left on his own will likely never be known. What we do know is that the promises made to Herakles by Theseus were never made to him. He reconciled his patriotism with fierce and loyal dissent and paid the price for it. Friendship, as Euripides portrayed and celebrated it on the tragic stage, was rooted in common suffering and committed not to proliferate it. Euripides, of all the classical playwrights, was the one known for writing down his plays, to be read and not just performed. Confronted with controversy and rejection in his day, he may have written for the future as much as for the present, knowing that the world might never know a lasting peace and that war would always have to be both questioned and survived. The need for friendship would surely never cease nor diminish; and this friendship is precisely what he extends, both in his plays and in the following fragment [902] ascribed to him:

The good and decent man,

even if he lives in some distant place,
and even though I never set eyes on him,
I count as a friend.

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• PART TWO •

TRANSLATION

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Amphitryon

Herakles' foster father

Megara

Herakles' wife

Choros

Old citizen-warriors of Thebes

Lykos

Usurper tyrant of Thebes

Herakles

Son of Zeus and Alkmene, foster-child of Amphitryon

Iris

Messenger of the gods

Lyssa

Madness

Messenger

Theseus

King of Athens

Sons of Herakles and Attendants of Lykos and Theseus

HERAKLES

The scene is Thebes, outside the house of Herakles. His father Amphytrion, his wife Megara, and their small boys huddle in sanctuary at the shrine of Zeus Soter, Zeus the Savior.

Amphytrion

My name, everyone knows, is Amphytrion, Amphytrion of Argos.
Can there be anyone out there who hasn't heard my story—
 the one about the man who shared his bed and wife with God?*

My father was Alkaios; my grandfather Perseus;
 and my son is no other than Herakles.

Thebes is my city—home to a murderous race of men,*
 sown in the soil as dragons' teeth.

A remnant of these survived and flourished here, clenched in Ares' own fist.
Meantime, from the brow of Kadmos the Theban crown made its way down to Kreon,
 son of Menoikeus and father to my son's wife, Megara.

On their wedding night, the people of Thebes,
 plucking their lutes and swirling the air with song,
 brought Megara, the bride, to our ancestral door.

My own great boy held her tight and led her every step of the way—Herakles—
 whose name and fame are lost on no one.

10

But now my son is far from here.
Leaving me, his wife and all her kin behind,
 he has set his back to Thebes, where I have found refuge, an exile.

Herakles is bent on retracing my steps back to Argos,
 a city whose walls were set in place by giants.

His aim is to make a home again there where I once fled.
I had killed a man, you see, a man named Elektryon.
I ran from Argos to Thebes with blood on my hands.

Now, to turn back time, reverse my fortunes, and bring our family home to native soil,
 Herakles has made a deal with Eurystheus, agreed to pay an awful price for our return.

He will tame the earth, make it a kinder, gentler place.*

It may be Hera who has fitted this yoke to his neck.
Or it may just need doing, and he is the only one to do it.*

20

All this—his legendary labor—is mostly behind him now, a done deal.
One last task remains and he is at it as I speak.
He has descended into a cave at Tainaron, said to be the mouth of hell.*
He went in after Kerberos, the three-headed hound of Hades,
He was meant to drag him into the light of day.
That is all I know—my son went in but has yet to come out.

There's an old story here in Thebes. Any Kadmean can unravel it for you.
It starts with a man named Lykos,
 who married into the royal house, thanks to his wife Dirke.
This same Lykos held power over seven-towered Thebes
 in the period before the tyranny of Amphion and Zethus,
 the twin bastards of Zeus whom people called "the white colts". 30
Lykos eventually had a son, named after him.
This second Lykos had no more connection to Thebes and Kadmos than did his father.
Even so, he saw an opportunity and seized it.
The city was sick with strife and dissention,* ripe for the plucking.
Lykos murdered Kreon and seized power.

Needless to say our family ties to Kreon are no advantage to us now.
They have in fact become our greatest liability.
With my son deep in the world's dark abyss,
 Lykos, the land's latest lord, has it in his head to slaughter Herakles' sons,
 and to add their mother and me to the pile.
 (not that an old discard like me matters much, one way or the other).
For a man like Lykos, it's a simple calculation—a bit more bloodshed now
 to prevent carnage in the future. 40
He's right about that.
Those boys, allowed to grow into men, would spill their share of blood
 to settle the family score for good.

So I man my post, here in our house, where my son left me
 to watch over and to nurture his children,
 as he marched into impenetrable darkness*.
There is nothing left to me now to save my son's little ones
 but to huddle here beside his wife against the altar of Zeus the Savior,
 a shrine built by my radiant warrior son*
 to commemorate his glorious defeat of the Minyai. 50
We have nothing—no food or drink, no robes for warmth or to put down
 between us and the hard earth.
We crouch and keep watch over each other.
Barred from our own house, we sit and wait. But for what?
No hope or help are in sight.
Our friends fall into two camps:
 those who could help but won't; and those who would help but can't.
That's the way it is with friendship.*
It either measures up to misfortune or it proves false.
It's an ugly sight when friends turn their backs on friends.
Apart from our enemies, I don't wish it on anyone.

Megara

Old sir. To think you once led the Theban host to victory against the Taphian pirates, 60
 relieving them of their fortress walls!
The gods have their way with us and it all remains a puzzle.
For a time my father's fortune rubbed off on me.

He was a great man—lavished with happiness—and everyone saw it.
He also wielded the kind of power that provokes desire in others,
 creates rivals, ignites violence, destroys well-being.
Of course he had children, me among them.
My marriage to your son was his doing.
I was a gift to his bed and his bed a gift to me.
Once upon a time that was my life, but no more.
It's dead and gone.

You and I, old man, are as good as dead; 70
And the same is true for these little ones, Herakles' beloved chicks,
 safe for the moment, tucked here under my mother-hen's wing.
They take turns falling into desperation and crying out for answers:
"Mother, say something. Where on earth has our father gone? Tell us."
What is he doing? When will he come home?*

They're so little, so new to the world, so overwhelmed.
Naturally they turn to their mother,
 and I say whatever comes to me, anything to take their minds somewhere else.
But all it takes is the slightest creak of a distant door,
 and they are off, tumbling over one another,
off to wrap themselves around their father's knees.
Anywhere else it would be a marvelous sight.

Aged sir, dearest father, I turn to you.
Tell me, where do you see any hope at all, any way out of this? 80
We could never reach the border unseen.
There are patrols everywhere; and we are not their match.
As for our friends, we can hang none of our hopes on them.

If you have any scheme hatching in there,
 now's the right moment to let it out.
Otherwise, it's time for us to die.

Amphitryon

Daughter, what you ask is no easy thing.
The kind of plan we need calls for sweat; and days, not hours.
We're helpless.
I suggest we stall for time.

Megara

More Time? What for?
What can't you give up—pain or the light of day? 90

Amphitryon

What's wrong with relishing life?

So long as there is life, there is hope.

Megara

I love life as much as you do, grandfather;
but it makes no sense to wait for what isn't coming.

Amphitryon

Some evils, if only delayed, eventually go away.

Megara

Waiting is pain, like the bite of serpent.
Time is its venom.

Amphitryon

Listen, daughter, there may yet be a way out of all this for you and me—a happy ending.
My son, your husband, could still appear at any time.
Stay calm. Your boys' eyes are filling up with tears. Give them a wipe.
Say whatever you have to say to soothe their hearts. Make up something.
A good story, no matter how false, will help them stop crying and feel better. 100
Fortunes change. No adverse wind blows forever. Every lucky streak runs out.
Nothing remains the same for long.
It is the mark of the best and bravest among us to live by hope.
Everything else is craven cowardice.

Choros

Leaning on our staves,
A procession of propped-up old men,*
We make our way slowly to a great house,
To the shelter of its roof
And the comfort of an old man's couch.
Like aged birds, their plumage drained of all color,
We sing a pitiful song.
Our laments are all we have left.
We are no more than ghosts, only half here,
Things of the night or of dreams,
Trembling, wanting to help, useless.
Hello boys, children of a long lost father.
Poor old sir and mother of sorrow.
What can we say?
The man for whom you ache and groan
Languishes in deepest hell.

Keep going. Don't give in to weariness.
 Drag yourself along, the way a horse pulls a heavy load 120
 Up a steep, rocky slope, one exhausting step at a time.
 When you lose your footing, reach out.
 Grab hold of a hand or robe.
 We are all old now. We stand or fall together.*
 The same as in our spear-bearing youth,
 When we stood as one in the toil of battle
 And brought home only glory
 To our fatherland. 130

Look at those children's eyes.
 Fierce like their father's.
 The same flame burns in them.
 They've got it all in their blood—
 His lousy luck, as well as his charms.
 They'd be great warriors one day.
 If they perish now,
 All of Greece will be the loser.

Well look who's coming—the man in charge of all this—Lykos.
 [He even walks like a thug.]

Lykos enters, with a swagger.

Lykos

I wonder if I might ask the sire and mate of Herakles a question or two. 140
 Of course I may. After all, I'm in charge here now, and I can ask whatever I please.
 What I'm wondering is just how much longer you hope to prolong your lives?
 Look around. Do you see any source of hope or support?
 Anyone or anything that could keep you alive.
 Do you really believe that the father of these whelps, whose last address was hell,
 is coming home anytime soon?
 This pained display of yours over having to die seems to me a tad tawdry
 for a man who boasted all over Greece that Zeus shared his marriage bed
 and co-sired his son.
 And the same for you, woman, who claimed to be the wife of a luminous hero. 150
 What was so dazzling about his managing to slay a marsh snake
 or to do away with that Nemean beast,
 the one he claimed to have caught and strangled with his bare hands.
 Everyone knows he snared it in a trap.
 So where is your defense? Are you going to take me on with big empty boasts?
 Do the children of Herakles have a privileged claim on life
 just because they come from a line of big mouths?
 This Herakles, after all, won his reputation for courage battling with animals.
 That's as far as his valor goes.
 His left arm never held a shield, and he never came near a spear, from either end. 160

He preferred the bow, the coward's weapon of choice, light, ideal for sudden flight.
 The bow offers no measure of a man's courage.
 For that you need to put a man in the front ranks, facing enemy spears,
 and watch whether he holds his ground as their points cleave the air before his eyes.
 There is no shame in what I have done or plan to do, old man. I am only taking precautions.
 I know I cut down this woman's father and seized his throne.
 I have no interest in allowing these harmless sprouts to grow into vengeful killers
 bent on balancing old accounts.

Amphitryon

I call upon Zeus to save the child we share. 170
 As for me, son Herakles, I have only words at my disposal;
 and I must wield them to splay the bloody ignorance of this man.
 He tells nothing but lies about you; and I won't stand for it.

I begin with the unspeakable, because he spoke it.
 Herakles, you are no coward.*
 With the gods above bearing witness, it falls to me to dismiss this man's charge.
 I enter into evidence the thunderbolts of Zeus and his celestial chariot,
 drawn by four gleaming steeds, the one in which my son rode to victory
 over the Giants, the monstrous spawn of Gaia,
 sinking his feathered shafts deep between their ribs.
 On that day Herakles stood tall beside the very gods 180
 and sang with them the victory song.
 Next, before your royal perversity, I call to witness the race of Centaurs,
 a notorious breed of four-legged monstrosities native to Pholoe.
 I invite you to ask them who they would say is the bravest man on earth.
 Their answer? My son, the man you call a fake.
 Now, suppose we call your own native soil, Euboean Dirphys, to testify on your behalf.
 But it has nothing to say, not a single word to commend you.
 It seems you have never done anything worthy of mention for your fatherland.

So let's change the subject and consider that ingenious invention, the bow and arrow,
 for which you have expressed contempt.
 Listen up and you may learn something.
 The infantry grunt is at the mercy of his weapon.
 It breaks and he's as good as dead. He's only got the one.
 And if, in the ranks, he finds himself surrounded by men who'd sooner run than fight
 he's sure to become a casualty of their cowardice.
 It's different and far better for the skilled bowman.
 He lets fly a hailstorm of arrows; and, if things get hot, he always has a safe way out.
 Far from harm's way, he fights a distant foe.
 The enemy, however vigilant, never sees the shaft that brings him down.
 Much less does he see the remote, invulnerable man who loosed it. 200
 This is the first and highest maxim of war: to do harm without suffering it,*
 to kill without dying, and to keep bad luck at bay.

I'm done arguing with you, Lycos. I've said all I have to say on the matter.
 Your charges lie in shreds.

But tell me this. What's your point in killing these children?
What have they done to you?
No. It's the future that worries you, isn't it?
Cowards, after all, aren't being stupid when they fear the orphans of brave men.
Still, let me tell you, it doesn't go down easily, having to die
so that the likes of you can sleep at night. It sticks in the throat. 210
If Zeus had only dealt us a fair hand, you'd be the one at our mercy.

Look. If all you want is to rule in Thebes without rival, send us off as exiles.
Every wind changes directions, and not at your bidding, Lycos.
Spawn violence, and it will come back home to visit you.

Land of Kadmos, now it's your turn for reproach.
Is this the best you can do for Herakles and his sons?
He once stood alone in battle against the Minyans 220
so that Thebans could look out on a free city.
I simply have no good words for Greece, nor will I hold my tongue,
not when I find her behaving so wretchedly towards my son.
Greece should rise up and summon her full might—fire, spears, every arm in her arsenal—
all on behalf of these children and as due payment for the pure seas and dry land
their father gave us through his labors.
Instead, they do nothing.
So you have turned to me, the most exhausted friend you have,
armed with nothing but hollow words.
Whatever strength I once possessed took leave of my body long ago. 230
My limbs quiver under me, and the force in me fades.
If only I were young again, rippling with life, I'd reach for a spear
and splash our tyrant's tawny locks with some of his own bright blood.
I'd send the coward running for his life beyond the earth's edge
where Atlas dutifully holds the sky in place.

Choros

The best and bravest are often reticent at first,
but they eventually find their voice and the right words..

Lycos

What a tower of words you've erected!
Now I'll make you pay for every one of them.
You, go at once to the slopes of Mount Helikon, and you to Parnassos, 240
order the woodsman to start swinging their axes.
I want oak logs—loads of them—brought here to the city, now,
and stacked around this altar on every side.
Then, when you've got a proper pyre,
throw them on it and burn them alive.
Let them learn that dead men don't wear crowns.
But I do.
And you old wrecks, since you're clearly not on my side,

resume your laments for the whelps of Herakles,
but from now on include yourselves in them.
I intend to make you suffer. 250
That way you're unlikely to forget that you are slaves and I am your master.

Choros

Ages ago Ares sowed the soil with strange seed, teeth torn from the dragon's maw,
and from that earth our fierce fathers sprung, a race of rabid warriors.
Rise up, sons of Thebes, raise your staves, the ones you lean on,
and make bloody the vile head of this man who would be king.
Not even Theban but some blow-in, a perverse tyrant, acting out at our expense.
I say to that man, you will never enjoy trying to lord over me.
Nor will you ever reap what my hands sow.
Go back where you came from and take your insolence with you. 260
You will never slay the sons of Herakles, not so long as we draw breath.
The man who left these boys behind is not as deep beneath the earth as you think.
He did only good for his city, while you have done only harm.
Yes, you rule for now, but his reward awaits him.
So, is it too much to try to help a dead friend, when he needs it most?
How my right hand aches to brandish a spear, but it aches in vain.
My arm is too feeble to respond.
Otherwise I would have shut your mouth when you called me a slave 270
and, with our honor restored, we would live on in Thebes,
the city in which you now revel.
The truth is our country has gone mad.
Its schemes are wild. And it is sick with dissent and division.
It's come apart. Otherwise how would you ever have come to power?

Megara

Gentlemen, I thank you for these words.
We are friends, and your rightful outrage on our behalf is appropriate, and appreciated.
But be careful. Raging out against tyranny is never free of charge.
You'll be made to pay for it.
Amphitryon, I've made up my mind about something.
Hear me out and tell me what you think.
I love my children.* How could I not? 280
I gave them life and so much labor.
Death, I know, is terrible. I dread it.
But I know something else too.
Anyone who pulls in one direction when fate takes another
is nothing but a clumsy fool.
We are about to die. Nothing is going to alter that.
But we don't have to die in a bonfire,
our burning flesh providing a spectacle for our enemies,
who will watch and laugh at our agony.
That would be worse than death needs to be.
We received a noble legacy and we owe it something.

You are known as a great warrior. You earned that with your spear.
 It is unthinkable for you to die a craven death.
 Herakles needs no witness to his honor 290
 or to what he would do if he were here.
 This much I know for sure. If it ever came to either saving his children's lives
 or saving their honor, he would choose the latter.*
 And I must stand with my husband on this.
 When children fall into disgrace, they pull down the nobility of their parents.

Take another look at your hopes, as I see them.
 Do you really expect your son to re-emerge—just like that—from earth's darkest depths?
 Which of the dead has ever managed to return from Hades?
 Or would you think to soften this man with your entreaties?
 Not possible.
 When your enemy is a savage, it's best to turn away and never look back.
 Yield instead to the wise and the well-bred. 300
 It's easier to build a friendly agreement when there's mutual regard.

Admittedly, my thoughts have already gone down the same road as yours.
 It's occurred to me that, with the rights words, we might just win exile for the boys.
 Exile. What does that mean? To embrace safety and in the same moment
 to find your arms around misery and abject poverty.
 They say that friends smile on exiled friends for a single day, no more.
 That's how long their welcome lasts.

Now, take heart and die with us. Death awaits you all the same.
 Accept it as a challenge to your noble birth and brave spirit.
 Anyone who tries to wrestle with his fate, sent to him by the gods,
 shows spirit for sure; but it's the spirit of a fool. 310
 No one ever alters what must be.

Choros

When there was still some might in these arms of mine it was an easy matter
 to put the lid on anyone daring to outrage you.
 Now I count for nothing; and you, Amphitryon, must use your wits to find a way
 to hold off unwanted fortune.

Amphitryon

It's not cowardice, nor even the simple love of life
 that makes me step back from death.
 I just want to save my grandchildren.
 I know that I'm holding out for the impossible; but I don't care.
 Here. My neck is ready for the blade.
 Slit it, sever it, hurl my head from a cliff. It doesn't matter.
 But I beg you—on my knees, lord—grant us just this one grace. 320
 Kill me and this hapless woman first, before you slaughter the children.
 Spare us that sight, hideous and unholy...

these boys, releasing their souls, like panicked sparrows, to the open sky.
“Mother... grandfather.” [Their cries already claw at me.]
In all the rest—the lurid rites] you await so eagerly—have your way.
As for us, we know death’s grip; and we know there’s no prying it loose.

Megara

I too fall to my knees and beg you to add just one more small favor to his request.
Then you will have us both in your debt.
Unbar these doors, grant us entry to the palace that was our home,
and allow me to drape my boys in their burial shrouds.
Surely you will not begrudge them this much of their inheritance

330

Lycos

I grant your requests.

Shouting to his attendants.
Unbar the doors!

Go inside and pretty yourselves.
Take all the fine robes you want. I’m not stingy.
When you’re presentable, I’ll be back
to see you off to the netherworld.

Megara

Come children, accompany your godforsaken mother into your father’s house.
Others live there now, but at least the family name is still ours
[to carry to the grave].

Amphitryon

Lord Zeus, in vain we slept in the same woman’s bed.
All for nothing we shared credit for a famous son.
All this time we imagined you a true friend, one of the family,
but you fell far short of that.
Face it. I am a mere mortal and you a great god.
And I’m twice the man you are.*
I can say I never betrayed the sons of Herakles.
[What can you say for yourself? What’s your great deed, your claim to fame?]
Like a thief you made your way in stealth to a woman’s bed,
taking what wasn’t yours to take, another man’s wife.
And now you do nothing to save your family of choice, your “friends”.
Either you were born unfit or you are a god who never learned his manners.

340

Choros

Apollo, lord of song,
Re-tuning his soul-rending lyre for darker notes 350
Is lost in lament, for Linus,
Who has begun an endless night.
Mine is a brighter hymn of praise
To one lost in the same dark haunts,
A son with two fathers, one divine,
One all too human.
I will crown each of his toils with song.
So the labors of our hero* last forever
And make the dead shine through time.

His first service was to Zeus,
Ridding his woods of a savage lion. 360
The lion became his wrap,
Its tawny pelt mixing with his own blond locks,
And the lion's dread maw
[A great mask,
Revealing as much as it concealed.]

Next he took to the mountains
With his deadly bow strung for battle.
He loosed its winged shafts of death
At the unruly race of Centaurs
Who are no more.
Well is he remembered there
Along the soft curving banks
Of the River Peneus,
And in the eye-stretching seed-land
Made barren under centaurs' hooves.
Never forgotten too
In the vales of Pelion 370
And the nearby haunts of Homole.
From there the Centaurs, armed with pine shafts,
Once launched their conquest of Thessaly.
But never again.

Then too there was the dappled hind
Whose golden antlers caught the sun.
Dazzling and dangerous, it preyed upon
The country folk of Oenoe,
Until Herakles took its life and made it a gift
To Artemis, Radiant Lady of the Hunt.

After that he leapt aboard a four-horse war-car, 380
And tamed to the bit Diomedes' unbridled team of man-eaters,
Who with blood-frenzied jaws fed from a gory trough,
Savoring their hideous human feast.
Then crossing beyond the silver-rich banks of the River Hebrus,

Herakles resumed his labors for the tyrant of Mykenai.

Next, near the Malian headlands beside the streams of Anauros
He shot his deadly shafts into the chest of Kyknos.
A host in the habit of murdering his guests,
He had kept a memorably savage house in Amphanai,

From there the son of Amphitryon drove on due west,
Until he reached the earth's sharp edge,
Where pristine maidens fill with song
The famed orchard of the golden fruit,
Watched over by a coiled dragon with crimson scales,
Fearsome and impassable.
The beast duly slain,
From gilded leaves the hero plucked a gleaming apple,
And made his way at once to the furthest reaches
Of the salt-thick sea,
Calming the waters and the hearts
Of the men who sail them.

400

A long trek then brought him to the abode of Atlas
Just below the sky's luminous bowl.
Reaching up his arms to touch heaven's rim
He placed on his shoulders the awesome weight of the firmament.
For a time impossible to measure
The starry mansions of the gods were balanced on this man's back.

Now he braved the Black Sea's crashing swells
And came to the banks of Maiotis,
A lake fed by surrounding streams.
Here the mounted Amazon host made its home,
Until Herakles brought down on them waves of crested warriors,
Men of Greece, mustered in friendship and sharing the same lust for a bloody hunt.
Their quarry—the daughter of Ares, the Amazon Queen.
Their trophies—her legendary robes, encrusted with golden brocade,
and the glistening girdle cinching her slender waist.
Gifts to Greece, these souvenirs of the barbarian warrior queen
hang on a hook at Mykenai,
[while the maiden who wore them molds in an unmarked mound].

[There's more of course.] Hydra,
The murderous serpentine bitch of Lerna
With too many heads to count,
Made a great bonfire,
And provided the tips of his arrows with venom,
Making an easy triple kill of the monstrous herdsman of Erytheias,
The one with two extra bodies.

420

In other contests too
He ran the distance and won the crown.
And now, [after his many days in the sun,]

He has lowered his head for a final descent
To Hades, [cavernous house of shadows,]
Whose walls are stained with tears.
All his roads have led him here.
And none lead out.*

Meanwhile, in Thebes, the roof of your great house
Shelters only enemies, no friends. 430
Charon, the ungodly boatman, sits and waits, gripping his oars,
To row the sons of Herakles
On a route they have not deserved
And can never retrace.
Your house and all your beloveds
Look only to you, Herakles,
And you are nowhere to be seen.

If only I were still young,
Hot-blooded, high-spirited, and strong enough
To hold my spear steady in the front ranks,
I would close ranks with my Kadmean comrades
And be a wall of safety for your boys.
But all that, the life-pulse I once reveled in, 440
Is so far, so far, behind me now.

Enter Megara, her Boys, and Amphitryon.

Look. Here they come.
The sons of the once invincible Herakles
Robed for death.
Megara, his bedmate and friend,
Tows her little ones behind her,
All tethered to a common fate.
Behind them, the grandfather,
[Who once found joy in a glorious son
And an enviable life.]
I am desolate.
My old eyes,
Practiced in holding back tears,
Lose an old habit. 450
[They have never known such sorrow.]

Megara

So. Who is to be the priest or the butcher in charge of these wretched rites?
There has to be someone here prepared to dispatch this wretched soul of mine.
Speaking for the cursed, we stand ready to begin our journey to hell.
Boys, that new weight you feel on your neck, is the unwelcome yoke of the dead.
We all bear it together—mothers, grandfathers, children.
Things could not be worse for us, my little ones, for you and for me.
Here, let me fill my eyes with you for the last time.
I gave you life and brought you up healthy and strong, it seems,

to become victims of atrocity, a sadist's treat, helpless prey.
Listening to your father and his stories, I imagined many things, 460
but never this.
The hopes I nourished and that nourished me have dropped like leaves in winter,
dry and forsaken.

Addressing each son in turn.

[Dearest son,] your dead father used to say that your portion would be Argos.
From the palace of Eurystheus you would rule [without rival]
over the fair and fruitful Argolid.
I picture him still, how he used to drape over your head
the massive lion skin that served as his only armor.

And [you, my sweet,] you were to be lord of Thebes,
our city, mad for the chariot race.
The broad lands of Kadmos, my birthright, would go to you one day.
You talked him into it. He could deny you nothing.
He even let you grip his enormous club, his weapon of last resort, 470
pretending it was a gift to you, father to son.

Next, on you, [my child,] he was determined to bestow Oichalia,
ravaged and reduced to submission by his inescapable arrows.

Looking ahead, then, to when you three would come of age and bloom into men,
your father made ready as many kingdoms to lavish on his several sons.
And I, for my part, woman and mother—my eye on apt alliances—
took my pick of brides for you,* the most eligible maidens to be had,
from Athens, Sparta and Thebes.
My only thought, to assure you blessed lives,
secure in your moorings, like well-anchored ships.

So much for my plans and hopes. 480
Fate has taken the rudder and changed our course.
Your new brides are the winged maidens of death,
sleepless scavengers of the killing fields..
And my tears [the ones I would have shed at your weddings]
will give you your last bath.
Such dark and desperate thoughts. Nothing else comes to mind.

Here is your grandfather, taking his son's part,
standing ready to host your wedding feast.
With a father's grief, he offers the customary welcome to Hades,
the father of the brides.
Any moment now, my heart will break.
Sweet things, whom do I hug and kiss first... or last? Where do I begin?
[Not decisions a mother can make.]
Like a russet-winged bee collecting pollen,
I would extract from each of you every pain and every tear,
and distill them into a single devastating torrent.
Then I would shed it all at once [and go to my death].

O dearest husband, in case a mortal voice, [if only desperate enough,]
 might pierce the walls of hell and make itself heard, however faintly,
 I cry out to you. 490
 Your sons, your father, and your wife... we are all about to die.
 I am utterly lost—me, the wife everyone called so blessed because of you.
 Come home! Protect us!
 Come as you are, any way you can—as only a ghost or a dream—it doesn't matter.
 I don't care how you come, just get here! Now!
 Foul wretched men are going to hurt your boys. They're going to slaughter your children.

Amphitryon

Lady, it's time.
 Prepare for our rites of passage.
 Heavenly Father Zeus, I reach up my arms as far as they will go and implore you.
 If you have any thought to help these children, do it, save them now, 500
 because any moment it will be too late.
 [Nothing. We get nothing back. It's not the first time.]
 Wasted effort...[praying to the gods. You might as well talk to a stone].
 Anyway, everyone knows death never takes no for an answer.

Old friends, a word of advice.
 Life is short; so make sure you spend it as sweetly as you can.
 Don't pile up cares from morning to night if you can help it.
 Worrying is a waste of precious time, nothing more.
 Time pays no heed to our hopes.
 All it does is pass quickly and then run out.
 Take a hard look at me, a man of note, widely admired.
 All that's required on any day is a change in the wind, a whim of Fortune,
 and I am blown away, like a feather. 510
 [Make no mistake, I'm the rule in this, not the exception.]
 I know of no one whose honor or happiness is any more secure than mine.
 [Well, here we are.] I bid you farewell for the last time, my old comrades and dear friends.
 That's it. You've seen the last of me.

Megara

Father. There! I see... is it possible? Is that... my truest friend? Do I dare utter it?

Amphitryon

I don't know, daughter. I'm speechless.

Megara

They said he was lost to us, deep beneath the earth.

Could this really be Herakles?
Maybe not. We could be making this up... dreaming.
What am I saying?
I let go of all hope. What kind of dream could I make up?
No, dear old man, this is your son coming, no one else, nothing less.
Boys, come here quick. Run to your father and hold on tight.
Don't ever let go. Zeus is too late.
Your father will be the one to save you.

520

Herakles

Good god. My own house and gates.
What a joy to my eyes, grown accustomed to darkness.
Wait. What's this?
I see my own children clustered at the front door, robed and garlanded for death...
and a crowd of men... my father... my wife... weeping... why?
What's happening? I must find out.

Herakles runs to his wife and family.

Megara, what's going on? What's happened here?

530

Megara

O sweetest friend...

Amphitryon

You're a light to your father's eyes.

Megara

You're all right? [Thank god!]
You've come just in time to save us.

Herakles

What do you mean?
Father, what kind of mess have I come home to?

Amphitryon begins to respond when Megara breaks in.

Megara

We're being destroyed!

Turning to Amphytrion.

Forgive me, father, for bursting in and taking the words from your mouth.
I'm a woman and I have less control over my feelings.

Turning to Herakles.

My children were almost dead and so was I.

Herakles

My god!
With a beginning like this, I dread to hear the rest.

Megara

My brothers and my aged father... they're all dead.

Herakles

Your father's dead? How? What did he do?
Whose spear did he run into?

540

Megara

It was Lykos, our new ruler.
Lykos murdered him.

Herakles

Was it open war, a fair fight... or some pernicious plot?

Megara

The city came apart. It was faction against faction. A matter of clout.
He has it now and rules seven-gated Thebes.

Herakles

I see.
But why are you and my father so panicked?

Megara

He was going to kill us all—me, my father, and the children.

Herakles

What are you saying?
Orphaned children?. What could he possibly have had to fear from them?

Megara

He imagined they might one day avenge the death of Kreon.

Herakles

What about these robes our boys are wearing?
They belong on the dead.

Megara

Well, we were as good as dead.

Herakles

By violence? Someone was going to kill you?
I can barely stand hearing this.

550

Megara

Well we heard you had died.
Our friends deserted us. We had no one.

Herakles

By why did you lose all heart, all hope?

Megara

Because of the news we were given... that you were lost, gone forever.

Herakles

So you just abandoned our home, our family hearth?

Megara

I was driven out by force. Your father was dragged from his bed.

Herakles

Dishonoring an old man like that... he felt no shame?

Megara

Lycos feel shame? He doesn't know her touch.

Herakles

[We had so many friends when I left.]
How did we suddenly come to have none?

Megara

Misery has no friends.

Herakles

So, after all I endured for their sake in the Minyan Wars,
they spit on me and walk away.

560

Megara

I already told you. The miserable are friendless.

Herakles

Enough gloom.
Tear from your heads the wreaths of death, open your eyes wide,
look up and drink in the light of day.
What a sweet change from the darkness below!
Now I have work to do.
First I'll go to our new tyrant's palace and bring it down on him.
Then I'll take his head,* leaving the rest, and hurl it to the dogs.
After their glut, let them bury it.
Next I'll clean house.
Whatever ungrateful Thebans I find to have played me false
[will wish they hadn't.]

My club, blood-soaked and beautiful in victory, will pound them to a paste. 570
The rest of the villains I'll cut down with my razor-winged shafts,
until the River Ismene overflows with bobbing corpses
and the pure streams of Dirke turn thick and clot with gore.

[Where I belong is here, at home.]
What could be more important than protecting my own wife and children and aged father?
So much for my famed labors.* From today, I put all that madness behind me.
I was out of my mind to care more about the state of the world
than about the condition of my family.
If I was willing to die, it should have been in defending them.
After all, they were going to die because of me.
Tell me, where is all the glory in slaying hydras or battling with lions
in the service of Eurystheus, 580
when my labors do not include saving my own children from death?
I was known as "Kallinikos", Herakles "Radiant in Victory", [a hero for our time].
Good riddance to that, I say.

Choros

The right thing* is for those who produce children to also protect them,
to come to their aid, and to care too for their own parents and for each other.

Amphitryon

My son, it is your way—second nature to you—to keep faith with your friends
and unleash your wrath on your enemies.
But don't rush into this. Bide your time.

Herakles

What do I need more time for, father?

Amphitryon

The [would-be] king in there has collected around him a sizeable host.
In fact, they're insolvent lowlifes,
but they talk big and pass themselves off as upper class.
They fomented division and tore the city apart. 590
Their aim was simple theft.
Lazy and profligate, they had let their own lands and homes go to rot;
so they planned to plunder their neighbors.

You must have been seen entering the city just now.
If your presence here is no secret, you need to be cautious.
They'll all come after you at once.
Be wary. Don't fall into a trap.

Herakles

What would I care if the whole city saw me just now?
But the fact is, on my approach I saw an ill omen—
 a small bird perched on an inauspicious site.
It told me some grave misfortune had befallen my house;
 so I took precautions. I stole my way into the city, unseen.

Amphitryon

Marvelous. Then go inside at once and pay homage to the family altar.
Let the walls of your father's house feast their eyes on you. 600
Lykos will be arriving any time now to murder your wife and children
 and then to finish me off for good measure.
If you wait inside you'll be safe and everything will fall into place.
Just don't turn the city upside down until you've first dealt with our aspiring executioner.

Herakles

What you say makes sense, and I'll do just that. Now I'm off to our house.
Home at last from the sunless subterranean haunts of Kore, bride of Hades,
 I am not about to disrespect our own household gods.
I go now, straight to their shrine, to greet them.

Amphitryon

So you really were in hell, my son?
You went all the way down to the sanctum of the lord of death? 610

Herakles

Yes [and back again].
I carried off the monstrous three-headed hound of Hades
 and brought him up snarling into the blazing glare of the sun.

Amphitryon

Did you seize him by force or was he a gift from the goddess?

Herakles

By force. I had to do battle for him. [I was blessed with success by the goddess.]
Initiated into her mysteries, she blessed my mission.

Amphitryon

The hell hound... is he housed now in the house of Eurytheus?

Herakles

No. He is kept at Hermione, in the sacred grove of Demeter Chthonia, Goddess of the Earth.

Amphitryon

So Eurystheus doesn't know that you succeeded and have come back to the light of day?

Herakles

He knows nothing. I came home first instead, to learn of things here.

Amphitryon

You spent a long time in hell. What kept you?

Herakles

I was rescuing [my friend] Theseus.
I stayed on as long as it took to carry him out of there.*

Amphitryon

So where is he? Gone back to his homeland?

620

Herakles

Yes. He's home in Athens, glad to have made it out of hell.

To his children.

Boys, come along now. Accompany your father into the house.
It feels better going back in than it did coming out—doesn't it?
So be my brave little men and hold back those tears.
And you, my wife, collect yourself and stop shaking all over.
You can actually let go of my robe.*
I'm not a bird, [apt to fly away, unless you hold me captive.]
I have no desire to desert those I love most.
I see. Instead of letting go, you hold on even tighter, [as if for dear life].
You all came very close didn't you? A really close shave. [I understand.]

630

Here. Take my hands. I'll go first and you can follow.
 Like tiny boats in tow, I'll draw you behind me.
 [I know what you've been through and I know the kind of scars it leaves.]
 I'm your father, and I'm going to help you put all this behind you.
 In this, we mortals are all the same, all equal.
 Whatever else of value we have, or don't have, we love our children.*
 Money, property, possessions—these are what make us different and divide us.
 The rich and the destitute seem to be different races. But they aren't.
 There is only one human race and it loves its young.

Choros

Youth is my first love.* And always will be.
 Old age the spoiler. A merciless burden.
 The severed crag of some great mountain, if balanced on my head, would weigh less. 640
 It casts a sky-darkening shadow longer than my life.
 The bliss of being young surpasses everything else,
 for the poorest urchin no less than for the child of a king.
 God help anyone who would ever barter away a single day of youth
 for the fabled fortune of some Asiatic strongman,
 or for palaces lined with gold.
 Old age diminishes everything and eventually proves deadly. I hate it. 650
 May it slide into the sea and be gone,
 never again to intrude into the homes and cities of mortals.
 Or let some sudden wind arise and blast it high into oblivion.

If the gods, by any human measure, were truly wise and had a bit of common sense,
 they would take note of lives well lived and refill the cups of the virtuous
 with a second draught of youth, as visible tribute to their character. 660
 Then, when death claimed them, these worthy ones would receive yet another round of life,
 another full ration of days in the sun.
 The wicked and worthless, on the other hand, would get a single go at life, no more.
 This way, the decent and the degenerate would stand apart, 670
 and we could find our way among them, the way sailors in the open sea,
 despite obscuring clouds, chart their true course by the stars.
 As things are, we have from the gods no marker,
 no clear boundary between good and evil—only the blind flow of time,
 in which the wicked prosper with no avenging justice in sight.

Never will I tire or have enough of the Graces
 mingling their voices and the flow of their bodies with the blessed Muses.
 Together they make more sweet beauty than the world can bear.
 May I never live among men who have no ear nor soul for their song.
 Instead, I will dance out my days among the garlanded.
 Even old men, whose sole surviving muse may be Memory, have a song to sing.
 My song is a hymn to Herakles, Radiant Victor; and I will sing it out 680
 whether wine-bearing Bromios fills my cup or not.
 I need no seven-stringed lyre or Lybian flute to make my voice heard.
 So long as I draw breath, it will go out as song to the Muses
 who dance round me in the choros.

The sacral choros of Delian maidens, circling the gates of Lord Apollo's shrine,
 lift a soaring hymn of praise to Leto's luminous son. 690
 So do I, before your great house, Herakles, lift my voice in song.
 Swans, the story goes, as they approach death, find their full voice and sing as never before
 and never again.
 Aged and gray as an old swan, I do well to lift my last and best song to you,
 child of Zeus, noble in blood and even nobler in life.
 Your life-exhausting labors,* ridding the world of our most feral fears and demons,
 have given to the rest of us a less troubled life. 700

Lycos enters with his henchmen.

Lycos

Well, Amphitryon, I see you've come from the house at just the right moment.
 What a waste of my time already—all this waiting for you to dress for death,
 draping yourselves in the robes and trappings of the world below.
 But where are the others? Tell them to come out here.
 Tell the brats and the bride of Herakles that the time has come
 to honor their promises and to march to their deaths without any fuss.

Amphitryon

Lord, your hounding me in my misery only adds insult to outrage.
 I have already lost my son.
 I admit you are powerful.
 Even so, some moderation—a little less eagerness to destroy us—would be seemly.
 That said, you have yoked us to death, and we have no choice but to accept it. 710
 It's your word that decides what will happen here.

Lykos

So where is Megara... and the whelps of Alkmene's son?

Amphitryon

From out here, where I stand, my guess is...

Lykos

Why guess? Don't you know?

Amphitryon

To finish what I was saying... my guess is that she is crouched as a suppliant
at the feet of the shrine of Hestia...

Lykos

...futilely begging the goddess to save her life.

Amphitryon

...and, no doubt, crying out in vain to her dead husband.

Lykos

Well, he's not here anymore and never will be.

Amphitryon

No, not unless one of the gods decides to raise him from the dead.

Lykos

Enough of this.
Go inside and get her out here.

720

Amphitryon

[I can't.] That would make me an accomplice to her murder.

Lykos

The children and their mother are going to be dragged out of that house.
If it's a problem for you to accomplish that, I'll do it myself.
I got rid of my scruples long ago.
Men, follow me, we'll put an end to their stalling
and soon revel in a job well done.

Amphitryon

By all means go in there. It's something you need to do.
Then maybe the rest will be up to someone else.
Evil doers should expect evil to me done.

Lykos and his henchmen exit.

Old ones, the way they marched in there... it was a satisfying sight.
Soon the predator will become prey.
One moment he rehearses the kill; the next he thrashes about hopelessly 730
in the tangling, sword-infested mesh of the hunter's net.
I'm going inside. I don't want to miss this... the sight of the wretch
going down... and hemorrhaging out his life on the palace floor.
The slaying of an enemy and the exacting of retribution from the wicked...
these yield a certain exquisite pleasure.* [They are like honey on cracked lips.]

Amphitryon exits to the palace, not far behind Lycos and his men.

Choros

The winds of ruin change direction.
A king—mighty only a moment ago—makes his way to hell.
I salute the justice of the gods and their awesome retribution.

In your insolence, you violated those far above you on any scale but evil.
Now, at last, the time has come for you to pay off your debts with your life. 740

Joy brings these tears to my eyes.
Our king has come back to us.
My heart had lost all hope of his return.

Come, mates, let's go inside, to see for ourselves
whether the deed we've dreamt of is done.

Lykos

Crying out from inside the palace.

No. O god no! Help! 750

Choros

In there, listen! He sings the prelude to his own sacrifice!
To my ears there is no sweeter song.
Death hovers and the king keens in despair,
anticipating his slaughter.

Lykos

Kadmeans, anyone [who can hear me,] I'm dying.
It was a trick. They ambushed me.

Choros

Listen to the man who was so eager to make others die.
Get a grip. Then open your mouth and swallow what's coming to you.
It's time to pay for what you did. Lady Justice wants to balance her books.

Who was this man—a mortal, precarious and perishable—
 who so defiled the celestials with his depravity?
What possessed him to ridicule the blessed gods above,
 calling them impotent and spineless?
He was a blasphemous fool, nothing more.

Old comrades, he is no more.
[There is one less impious man in the world.]

760

The house grows still.
It is time for us to dance.

For what we wanted has come to be.
Fortune smiles on our friends.

Let the choros break out.
Dancing in the streets, feasting in every hall,
 for those who revere the holy and mighty city of Thebes.

Tears turn to laughter, mayhem to merriment,
A new bright song is born.

The upstart king is gone.
Our once and true king, quitting the frigid shores of Acheron,
 is back in power.
Hopes we dared not cherish have come true.

770

The gods keep constant vigil over men's lives, sorting out good and evil,
 and doling out each its due.
The glimmer of gold and a stretch of good fortune relieve men of their wits
 and tempt them with power and its abuse.
Which of them have ever dared to look into the eyes of avenging Time
 and face the reversal that waits for them.
Instead, they disregard any law they didn't make, embrace anarchy
 and drive hell-bent the black chariot of affluence
 until it flies apart under their feet.

780

Ismene, let your pure streams fill with garlands.
People of seven-gated Thebes, pour into the smooth-paved streets,
 and form a choros*—[a city swirling in every laneway].
Dirke, font of fair waters, add your rippling rhythms and soft voice to what we sing.
You daughters of Asopos, enchanting nymphs glistening with youth,
 come up from your father's depths and join in our hymn
 to the grueling triumph of Herakles.
Tree-clad crags of Pythian Apollo, haunt of Helikon's muses,

790

you too will make your way with clamorous praise to my city and its walls,
where the race of the dragon-sown first broke the earth's dry crust.
This awesome host of brazen-shielded warriors hands down our great land
to the children of their children and shines over Thebes as a sacred beacon..

Hail to the marriage bed of Alkmene,
broad enough for god and man to share the bride.
Under its covers [thunderous] Zeus came in desire to the granddaughter of Perseus. 800
So the story went.
And to my surprise, Lord God Above, all of this, the unlikely legend of the bed,
is now a proven truth.
For time has disclosed the luminous strength and valor of Herakles,
[the superhuman seed sown in Alkmene's legendary bower].
Into hell's inner sanctum, the marriage chamber of the lord of the underworld,
this sublime son made his descent,
and has now climbed back out into the light of day, to be our king.
To mine [or any] eye, he far outshines the royal disaster of a warrior 810
bleeding out his degenerate blood [from more wounds than he can count].
The gods, it seems, still favor the just.

Iris and Madness suddenly appear aloft, and the Choros gaze up at them.

[Look, up there!]
In a heartbeat we reach the same frenzy.
Hovering over the rooftop... what are they? Specters? Demons?
What an ungodly sight.
Run, get out of here! Faster! Move those old limbs of yours.
Out of the way!
Apollo, Lord of the Choros, Divine Healer, 820
ward off harm! Protect us!

Iris

Take heart, old ones, all you see is Lyssa, daughter of Night
and me, Iris. I run errands for the gods.
We are not here to do your city any harm.
Only one man need fear us.
It is against him we have joined forces—the son of Alkmene,
the one people say is the child of Zeus.
Until now—until he brought to completion his bitter labors—
his father Zeus would not allow me nor Hera, his wife, to lay a hand on him.
He was immune, untouchable, preserved by fate for this moment.
Herakles has finished his chores for Eurystheus, 830
and Hera wishes to smear him with fresh gore, stain his soul with kindred blood,
by having him murder his own children.
This is my wish too.

Rise up, unwed daughter of darkest night and lunge upon this man.
Madly churn his soul until it swirls in confusion and seethes with child-slaughtering fantasies.
Whip his legs into frenzy, teach them the dance of death, the death of those dearest to him.

Let him sail back over the waters of Acheron,
wreathed with the bloody fillet of those who murder their children.
Let him learn and know by heart the venomous hatred to Hera, 840
and my own rage as well.
Unless this man pays the price he owes,
mortals will have no rivals, and the gods will count for nothing.

Lyssa

I am well born.* Illustrious blood runs in my veins.
My father is Ouranos, and my mother Night.
Even so, my line of work, the office I perform, gains me nothing.
I am far from admired, and I win no friends doing what I do.
Neither do I find enjoyment in stalking mortals [and ruining their lives].

[I have something to say. I want to go on record. I feel strongly about this.]
Before I have to see her make a big mistake,
I advise and exhort Hera—and all of you, if you'll trust my words—
don't wish this man great harm.

This man, whose house you're sending me to invade, is not some nobody. 850
His fame reaches from earth below to sky above.
Men and gods know and revere him.
He tamed the wildest, most remote lands and seas,
 extending the human reach and bringing civilization* everywhere he went.
And when blasphemous fools defiled the honor of the gods,
 this man single-handedly restored it.
[Again, I implore you, do not hurt this man.]

Iris

Don't lecture us!
If Hera and I want your advice on our schemes, we'll ask for it.

Lyssa

But what you're doing is wrong. I just want to set you straight.

Iris

The wife of Zeus and I sent you here to do our bidding,
not to philosophize and pursue virtue!

Lyssa

I invoke Helios, the sun-god, to be my witness that I'm doing here

From within.

Cursed, wretched home.

Choros

The dance begins*—now without the clash of cymbals
or the glad waving of Bromios' wand.

890

Amphitryon

From within.

What home? [We inhabit a tomb.]

Choros

No glistening wine cups here.
No festive pouring of libations to Dionysos, [Lord of the Dance].
The demon Choros wends its way, instead, towards a bath of blood.

Amphitryon

From within.

Children, flee. Run for your lives!

Choros

The pipes sing a wild, desolate song.*
[I close my eyes and suffer it.
Every note breaks my heart.]
A wolf on the scent, Lyssa stalks them.
The sons are his prey.
[His eyes are ablaze.
He is full of the god, like a forest in flames.]
The revel begins.
The children haven't got a chance.

Amphitryon

From within.

[No more, please no more.]

Choros

My lament is for the old man, the father and grandfather,
and for the mother, who gave the boys their life and nourishment.
All in vain. All for this.

900

Look up. See! Some tempest or tremor rocks the house on its foundations.
The roof is caving in!

Amphitryon

From within.

Child of Zeus, Apollo, why are you doing this to us?
You once buried the giant Enkelados under a volcano,
and now you hurl hellish chaos and ruin on our house.

The Messenger enters from within the house..

Messenger

White-haired old man...

910

Choros

What is it? Why call out to me?

Messenger

It's unbelievable in there! A nightmare.

Choros

I don't need a prophet to tell me that.

Messenger

The children are dead.

Choros

[His response, when it surfaces, is wordless, unshaped, ragged.]

Messenger

Weep. That's all there is to do.

Choros

Callous, brutal slaughter... their own father... savage.

Messenger

Words add nothing.

We have [seen and] suffered beyond anything we could ever put into words.

Choros

This woeful ruin, this savage violence of father on sons—how did it happen?

Tell me, what was it like when the gods sent unspeakable evil

crashing through the roof of the palace?

How did the poor children meet their miserable fate?

Messenger

Though his aim was to rid his house of a great scourge,

Herakles had, after all, killed the king of the land.

This called for the purification of the palace, a cleansing of the stain of regicide.

The victims for the sacrifice were already in readiness before the household shrine of Zeus.

Herakles' children stood round, a seemly chorus for the ritual,

together with Megara, their mother, and their grandfather.

The basket of barley concealing the sacrificial knife

had already been danced in a circle round the altar.

We became still, observing the prescribed silence.

Then, just as Herakles, carrying in his right hand the ritual firebrand,

was about to dip it in the bowl of water, he paused.

He did nothing. He just stood there, in silence.

930

Minutes went by as the children stared intently at their father.

He was no longer himself.

He grew more and more agitated and disfigured,

as his eyes rolled back in their sockets and showed increasingly bloodshot,

the veins swelling like rivers about to burst their banks.

His mouth filled with a froth that oozed from between his lips and streamed down his beard.

Herakles then spoke in a strange voice to his father, laughing nervously like a lunatic.

“Father,” he said, “what is the point of offering the purifying fire now,

before I have even killed Eurystheus? I'll only have to do it again.

It's up to me alone, to do this job now and to do it right.

Once I bring back here the head of Eurystheus,

then I will cleanse my hands from the blood of the slain.,

940

Just pour out the lustral waters for now, and cast the ritual baskets from your hands.

So who is going to fetch my bow, and my club? I'm off at once to Mykenai.

I'm going to need crowbars and picks.

I can't expect to pull down, with my bare hands, walls raised and perfectly fitted

by giants, using precision tools and measures.

[The Kyklopes built walls to last forever, but those walls are coming down!]

[That was all he had to say.]

Next he mounted a chariot that wasn't there, grabbed rail and reins,

waving his hand and lashing to full speed horses that only he could see.

Meanwhile, the household servants smiled nervously at each other, 950
finding their master's performance both humorous and terrifying.
One said to another, "Is this a game, or is our master mad?"
With [a warrior's or a hunter's] stealth, Herakles stalked the halls of his own house
until he stormed into the banqueting room and announced
that he had breached the walls of Nisos.
Then he dropped to the floor, as he was, and made as if to prepare himself a meal.
A moment of waiting passed and apparently the meal was over,
because he muttered something about crossing the wooded flat-land of the isthmus.
Not without a struggle, however, because after stripping naked, he wrestled furiously
with an unseen opponent and, doubling as herald, he called for the attention of an equally
unseen assembly and proclaimed Herakles, himself, the glorious victor. 960

Next, he swaggered his way into Mykenai, trumpeting wild threats against Eurystheus.
This was when his father took hold of his powerful arm and tried to get through to him.
"O child what is happening to you? Where have you left us and gone to?
You're raving and possessed. Why? It must be the killing you've just done.*
You still have their blood on you... in you."
But Herakles never saw or heard his father say these things.
To him, Amphytrion was no other than the father of Eurystheus,
come as a desperate suppliant to touch his hand and plead for life.
So Herakles flung his father across the room, strung his bow, nocked an arrow,
and began to sight his targets, thinking to slay the sons of Eurystheus.
His own children, wild with fear, darted this way and that.
One ran for cover under his hapless mother's skirt, another dashed behind a pillar,
and the third son, like a terrified bird, huddled alone against the base of the altar.
Their mother cried out frantically to her husband:
What are you doing? We brought these children into the world!
Are you going to kill your own sons?
The old grandfather and the whole household of servants and attendants
then added their pleas to hers.
[Herakles did not make us wait long for his reply.]

In sudden hot pursuit of one child, he chased him round and round a pillar,
and then, with a quick and deadly reverse of direction, confronted him face to face.
At point blank range, Herakles loosed an arrow into the boy's heart.
[Under the shaft's impact] the child fell straight back and lay facing the ceiling,
soaking the stone pillar with his blood as he bled out his life.
Standing over the body, Herakles gave the victory shout and added his own boast:
"Here at my feet lies one of Eurystheus' whelps, dead at my hand,
in [partial] payment for his father's enmity."
Back on the attack, he drew a beat on the second son, clinging in fear to the base of the altar
and hoping to escape notice.
The wretched child in his frenzy was too quick for him, and, in supplication,
threw himself at his father's knees, grasping too for his beard or neck.
[He pleaded for his life with the man who should have loved him most.]
"O beloved father," I beg you, "don't kill me. I am your son, your boy.
Eurystheus is not my father. You are."
What looked down on him, though, was not his father

but some crazed killer with the wild, leering eyes of a gorgon.
 With his prey clutching him close, Herakles found he could not draw his bow;
 so instead, with all the force of a blacksmith smiting molten iron,
 he smashed the blond-haired boy's head with his club, crushing his skull.
 Two down, and Herakles wasted no time in pursuing his third victim.
 The child's desperate mother, however, beat him to the quarry, snatching up the boy
 and racing from the chamber with him tucked under her arm.
 She reached safety none too soon, slamming and bolting a great door behind her.
 Undaunted, as if tearing down colossal Kyklopiian walls, Herakles went at the door
 with crow-bar and pick, and soon tore up the doorposts.
 Launching one of the posts as a massive makeshift lance,
 he brought down mother and child in one throw, [their spines split in two]. 1000
 Then so swiftly that you would have imagined him mounted on a horse,
 Herakles raced to rob his aged father of his life.
 But at that instant a dazzling apparition filled the room and convinced our eyes
 that we were in the presence of Pallas Athena.
 Her helmet was brilliantly plumed and above her head she shook a fearsome spear.
 Then, with her other hand she hurled a virtual boulder at Herakles' chest,
 dropping him at once to the floor, where he lost his rage for slaughter
 and passed into a deep sleep.
 As he went down, he struck his back against a stone column
 that had fallen and broken in two when the roof caved in.

 Our fear, like a fever, broke and we reappeared from wherever we had fled and hidden, 1010
 and we helped the old man bind his son to the column with strong rope,
 so that, whenever he came to, he would be unable to add to his atrocities.
 There he lies, poor devil. He can't be having happy dreams.
 Not after slaughtering his own wife and sons.
 If there is a more miserable man anywhere,
 I don't know who he could be.

The Messenger exits.

Choros

When on a single night all but one of fifty brides murdered the men beside them,
 The Daughters of Danaos made myth, carved in the stones of Argos,
 A story that would never fade or be surpassed.
 That was a slaughter beyond belief.
 Still worse, still further from anything the mind can grasp
 Is the bloodshed witnessed here today and
 The misery of the son of Zeus. 1020

 The story too of Prokne comes to mind and bears telling,
 A mother with only one son,
 Slain by the one who gave him life and offered to the Muses.
 But you Herakles, so deadly and so desolate, had three sons—
 Threefold blessing, threefold doom.
 Haunted and berserk you murdered them all.

What sort of scream or sigh, howl or moan,
What song or dance of the dead do I summon,
[When my feet will not move and my voice craves only silence]?

The palace doors open to reveal the bodies of the slain and the slumped, motionless form of Herakles, bound to a fallen column. Amphitryon bends over the bodies of Megara and the children, broken with grief.

Look, the doors of the great hall open. 1030
O god what a sight.
See the cursed children strewn around their wretched father,
So haunted, gone off somewhere terrible yet still,
After slaughtering his sons.
See how they've lashed Herakles' body to pillars
That once held high the roof of a great house.
Have you ever seen so many knots!

And listen to the old grandfather,
Screeching like a mother finch over savaged fledglings.
He's coming out. Every step brings pain. 1040
See how he drags his feet,
As if they were tied to a great rock.

Amphitryon

Fellow Kadmeans, old friends, shhhh.
Speak softly [if you must say anything at all].
Let him sleep and forget.
This brief oblivion is all the space there is
Between Herakles and hell.

Choros

I weep for you, old man, and for your grandchildren.
I weep too for your dear son. Such a glorious champion he was.

Amphitryon

Move back a little... not so close.
Nothing loud. Whisper.
Somehow he sleeps calmly and is at peace. 1050
Don't take this from him.

Choros

All that slaughter. So much blood...

Amphitryon

Be quiet! You'll waken him, and then we'll all be dead.

Choros

Blood everywhere.

Amphitryon

Old friends, if you must lament, do it quietly.
If he awakes, his bonds will not hold him.
He will lay waste the city, put an end to me,
And bring down what's left of this house.

Choros

How to be quiet in the face of all this?
Not possible.

Amphitryon

Stop it! Not a word!
I'm trying to hear his breathing.
I need to put my ear very close.

1060

Choros

Is he sleeping?

Amphitryon

Yes, he's asleep, if you can call it sleep.
More like death.
He lies lost somewhere else
After murdering his wife and children
With his merciless bow.

Choros

[Heartrending.]

Amphitryon

[Too much to bear...]

Choros

The death of children.

Amphitryon

[No words come out, only moans.]

Choros

And what your son...

Amphitryon

[Still no word, only sounds of pain and grief.]

Choros

Old friend...

Amphitryon

Be still! Don't make a sound.
He's coming back.
He's moving... turning over
Quick. I have to get out of sight,
Hide somewhere inside the house.

1070

Choros

Calm down. [He's not dangerous yet.]
He's still half asleep.
He can barely open his eyes.

Amphitryon

You don't understand.

[What you see in me is not fear.]
After all this, no fiber of me dreads death.
I shrink more from the light of day.
My concern is for Herakles.
Killing his own father will only add to the evils
He has done and suffered,
And will give the dark Furies,
The Avenging Daughters of Night,
One more reason for their rage.

Choros

[We can, it seems, live too long.]
What a pity you didn't die years ago,
On the glorious day you sacked the sea-girt city
Of the Taphians, making them pay dearly
For slaughtering the brothers of the woman you would marry.

1080

Amphitryon

Hurry up, old friends. Now's your time to escape.
Get away from the palace, far away.
Flee my son. He's waking up and he's
As deadly as he is deranged.
It won't be long now before he adds another corpse
To his pile, and launches his rampage
Through the city of Thebes.

Choros

Lord Zeus, why this cruel hatred of yours
For your own son? Why have you driven him
From any solid land into an open sea
Teeming with evils.

Herakles wakens and comes slowly to his senses.

Herakles

Do I still live? It seems so. My eyes see what they should...
The sky... the earth... the sun's brilliance, [warm on my face].
But this wild pounding, wave after wave, [against my walls, my thin borders]
This seething, terrible turbulence in my heart, [like a sea in storm...
I am plunged into it and I go down... come up... go back down]...
I gasp for each breath... my lungs... the air burns as it bursts out.
What are these... why ropes... wrapping my chest and arms... pinioned... staked?

1090

Why am I moored and anchored like a boat?
Death all around me... bodies...
My bow... there... arrows... strewn... old companions in my labors... my battles...
Saved me... more than once... I saved them... old friends... old friends 1100
Hades? Again? Back there? Have I gone back? For Eurystheus?
But I've just come back... [I've just come home]. No.
Can't be. I don't see him... Sisyphos... his rock... or Pluto... or his royal bride... the girl...
Demeter's girl... nowhere.
I am brought down. Where am I? Helpless.
How could I be helpless?
Is there anyone there? Anyone close? A friend... nearby?
Someone to [wipe my face... my mind]... wash away this confusion?
I used to know... I used to know... no use... nothing where everything used to be.

Amphitryon

Old friends, [what do I do?].
Such darkness... evil... pain... do I dare go nearer?

Choros

Not alone. [But you aren't alone.]
I'm going with you.
I'm not about to desert you in your troubles. 1110

Herakles

Father, you're crying. Why? Why won't you look at me?
Do you need to stand so far from me?
I am your beloved son.

Amphitryon

Yes you are, my son, my dear, dear son, no matter what you did.

Herakles

What did I do, Father, that has so distressed you... made you cry like this?

Amphitryon

What you've done would make any of the gods or even a [stone] weep,*
if they could hear me tell the tale.

Herakles

Such big words, father.
But you still haven't told me what happened.

Amphitryon

See for yourself. Just open your eyes.
They will tell you everything, if your wits have returned.

Herakles

Please father, tell me this much.
Has something changed in my life, something new I need to know about?

Amphitryon

All right, if you can assure me you are no longer some hell-sent madman,
I will try to tell you what you need to know.

Herakles

Sighing with exhaustion and foreboding.

These strange words of yours... they stir something in me,
bring back something I almost remember.

1120

Amphitryon

I suspect you are not yet steady. Your wits are still whirling.
[Better to let the madness pass.]

Herakles

Mad? I don't remember being mad.

Amphitryon

Old friends, [I need your advice]. Will I untie my son?
What should I do?

Herakles

Of course untie me! And tell me who did this.

They have brought me shame!

Amphitryon

Yes, and that shame will suffice for now.
As for the rest of the evils that face you, let them be.
[Don't be in any hurry to know more.]

Herakles

[But I am in a hurry.] I want to know what happened here.
Your silence isn't a very good start.

Amphitryon

Lord Zeus, you see what you wife has done to us.

Herakles

So I've been the victim of Hera's enmity. What has she done?

Amphitryon

Just let her be.
What you need to do is attend to the wreckage she has left.

Herakles

You're saying she destroyed me.
The news you have for me is very bad.

1130

Amphitryon

Just look, and you will see the corpses that used to be your sons.

Herakles

Gasping. Taking in breaths but unable to release them.

My seeing is back and I am nothing but pain.
What is this unspeakable sight?

Amphitryon

War.* What you witness, my boy, is the ungodly war you waged
against children, your own.

Herakles

What war are you talking about?
Who did this. Who made this mess of them?

Amphitryon

You did... and your bow... and some god or demon, whoever it was.

Herakles

What are you saying? I did what?
Father, please, you are saying such terrible things... make it clear.

Amphitryon

You went mad, raving mad.
What you want me to tell you... it's so unspeakably awful.

Herakles

Over there. My wife. Did I do that too?

Amphitryon

All this. Everything you see. It is all your work, [your labor].

Herakles

A cloud of grief descends on me. [I see nothing beyond it.]

1140

Amphitryon

I understand, and my heart breaks for you.

Herakles

In my raving, did I also do this to my house? Make a ruin of it?

Amphitryon

My son, I know only this—there is nothing of yours that you didn't ruin.*

Herakles

Where did the madness seize me?
Where did my obliteration begin?

Amphitryon

At the family altar.
You were shedding the pollution of battle in the sacred fire.

Herakles

[Pollution!]
Now I have my own children's blood on my hands.
I have murdered what I loved most.
Why would I spare my own life,* when I have taken theirs?
There must be some rocky height I can leap from
 or a sword [lying around] I can plant in my liver.
By right, it falls to me to avenge my sons' slaughter. 1150
This began in the sacred fire. Why not end it there?
Let the flames consume the body they infected with such fury.
How short of death can I outrun the shame and infamy that await me?

Look. As if to stand between me and these deadly thoughts,
 Theseus, my friend and kinsman approaches. [He's nearly here.]
He will see me, like this. All my defilement, my pollution, [my shame...]
My dearest friend and guest will get this [hideous spectacle as his welcome].
What can I do? Where can I hide from all this and not be found?
What wings would take me high enough? How deep a hole would I have to dig?
My shame for the evil I have done consumes me. 1160
I will cover my head. [It's my only way to disappear.]
I am soaked in blood-guilt, polluted, contagious.
The innocent must not come near me. [He must not come near me!]

Theseus enters.

Theseus

Addressing Amphitryon at some remove.

Venerable Sir, I come as an ally to your son.
I bring with me an army of young warriors in their prime, Athens' finest.
Encamped along the shores of the Asopos. they stand ready.

A report reached my city that Lykos had seized Thebes' scepter,
made clear his enmity and launched a war against you.
I am here at your service, and so is my entire army, to do what needs doing..
I have come to repay a profound debt.
Herakles, [you see,] rescued me from the depths of hell 1180

Theseus draws closer and sees the floor of the great hall covered with corpses.

O good god! Corpses lying everywhere. Why? What happened here? It looks recent.
Could I have prevented this bloody mayhem? Did I linger too long?
These are children. Who murdered them?
That woman slumped over there. Whose wife is she?
Children don't line up for battle. No. This was no battle.
I've come upon some other, some different kind of evil.

Amphitryon

O Great king, in the soil of your towering city, Athena herself planted the sacred olive...

Theseus

What is this about? Why this strange invocation?
There is such agony in your voice.

Amphitryon

[Because] we have suffered so much misery from the gods. 1180

Theseus

These children for whom you weep... whose are they?

Amphitryon

They belonged to my desolate son.
He gave them life.
Then he somehow summoned the savagery to slaughter them.

Theseus

What are you saying? He did what?

Amphitryon

Crazed and driven from his wits by some raving madness, he slew his children
with poisoned arrows, dipped in the blood of the hydra with a hundred heads.

Theseus

What you've told me is dreadful.

Amphitryon

We are destroyed.
Ruin is winged. [You rarely see it coming.]

Theseus

Don't you have anything hopeful to say?

Amphitryon

I only wish I did.

Theseus

This was Hera's doing.
Who is that there, old one, in collapse among the dead?

Amphitryon

That is my son, the man of many labors... [or what is left of him, 1190
the same one] who joined ranks with the gods on Phlegra's plain,
and in fierce battle skewered giants on the tip of his spear.

Theseus

Was there ever a man born as ill-starred as Herakles?

Amphitryon

You'll never find anyone more burdened or more adrift.

Theseus

Why does he cover his poor head with his robe?

Amphitryon

Out of shame.

He is ashamed to meet your eye.

The friendship of his kin and the stain of his children's blood, the blood he shed... 1200

He can't face any of this.

Theseus

I have come to share his suffering.*

Uncover him.

Amphitryon

My son, pull the cloth down from your eyes, toss it aside.

Show your face to the sun.

[I'm not going to let you do this.]

As a wrestler uses his weight to throw his opponent,

I will move you with my weeping.

As a suppliant I crawl to you.

I grasp your beard, your knees, your hands...

I throw myself before you and pour out an old man's tears. 1210

O child, tame the ferocity within you. Play the lion no longer.

The fury you unleash... your path... is murderous and unholy.

You are ravenous, my son, for one atrocity after another.

Theseus

Herakles, hear me. I have something to say to you,

as you lie cringing in misery down there.

Your friends are here. Look up. Open your eyes to us

No darkness, however deep and dense, is enough to conceal or obscure

the evils that have befallen you and the misery they bring.

Why do you wave me off, signaling slaughter and bloodshed?

Your hand warns me of defilement if I come nearer and speak with you.

But why? Why would I fear to share your suffering and your misfortune? 1220

You were once sheer grace to me, the embodiment of good fortune.

Of course I have in mind when you rescued me from hell and death,

and lifted me back into the light.

I detest friends with short memories, whose gratitude grows stale in a day.

They are all too ready to come aboard and sail with a friend in fair waters,

but they jump any ship that hits a storm.

Arise, Herakles! Unveil your tormented head and look at me.

Men of your blood and stature stand and hold their ground

in whatever winds the gods send against them.

They don't quit.

Theseus bends down and removes the cloth from Herakles' head.

Herakles

Theseus, did you witness the battle I waged against my own children?

Theseus

I've been told of it.

And what you point to tells me the rest.

1230

Herakles

Why have you exposed my head to the sun?

[I am a pollutant, an offence to the gods above.]

Theseus

You are a mortal, a human being.

You cannot pollute what belongs to the gods.

Herakles

Poor man, leave, get away from here! I am unholy, defiled, polluted.

Theseus

[With friends, there is no such thing as defilement.]

The demon of pollution cannot pass from friend to friend.

Herakles

I believe these words and I thank you for them.

I will never regret any good I did for you.

Theseus

[Nor will I forget it.]

You were on my side then; so now I truly pity you.

Herakles

Yes, I am truly pitiable—murdering my own children.

Theseus

You have been such a godsend to others.
It breaks my heart to see you in such a state as this.

Herakles

Have you ever seen anyone in a sorrier state?

Theseus

This catastrophe of yours reaches from the earth below to the sky above. 1240

Herakles

That is why I am bent on death.

Theseus

And do you imagine that the gods care one way or another about such threats?

Herakles

The gods are indifferent to everything but themselves.
I return their indifference.

Theseus

Be careful. Don't talk that way. You may make things even worse for yourself.

Herakles

[Worse?] The hold of my ship is full.
Where would the gods load any more misfortunes on me?

Theseus

So what will you do?

Where is this deep anger of yours taking you?

Herakles

Back where I just came from, to the darkness below.
Death will deliver me there.

Theseus

You sound like a perfectly ordinary man, not a hero.

Herakles

And you sound like someone unacquainted with misfortune.

Theseus

Are these the words of the indomitable Herakles,
the man who can make it through anything?

1250

Herakles

Not anything. Not this.
I have my limits.

Theseus

Are you really Herakles, the great friend and benefactor of all mortals?

Herakles

[Mortals don't mean anything.]
What difference can they make, when Hera takes over?

Theseus

Greece will never let you die a meaningless death.

Herakles

Hear me out. You have offered your advice.
Now it is my turn to counter it.

I will reveal to you why my life—the past as well as what you see now—is intolerable.
 I am the son of a murderer, a man once polluted [as I am].
 It all began when my father slew Elektryon,
 and then took Alkmene, the old man's daughter, as his wife. 1260
 Amphitryon and Alkmene, my father and mother—my foundation stones.
 When, from the beginning, the foundation of a family is poorly laid,
 every generation that follows is inevitably doomed to misfortune.
 Then there's Zeus—whoever that is.
 I am his seed and for that alone Hera hates me, as an enemy to be destroyed.

To Amphitryon.

Please take no offense, old sir, when I trace myself back to Zeus.
 I look upon you, not Zeus, as my real father.

Then, before I was even weened, the bedmate of Zeus made an attempt on my life.
 She placed a tangle of fierce-eyed serpents [into my cradle,
 coiled] among my swaddling clothes.
 Later, as soon as I came of age and bloomed the way boys do, their bodies perfect,
 their skin flawless and drawn tight [as if across a drum], my life's labors began.
 Where should I begin? 1270
 Lions, triple-bodied Typhons, giants, waves of warring four-legged centaurs—
 I dispatched them all. What didn't I do battle with and destroy?
 Then there was Hydra, a bitch of a monster,
 sprouting heads faster than I could hack them off; but I slew her anyway.
 And made my way through a host of other labors until I came to the land of the dead.
 There, in the service of Eurystheus, I dragged hell's canine gate-keeper,
 three-headed Kerberos, up and out into the light of day.
 That brings me to the last task I took upon myself, my last wretched labor,
 [the finishing touch on a career of murder and mayhem.]
 I murdered children. I landscaped the family house with corpses. 1280

I have come to the point where I have no options left, nowhere to go.
 Thebes is my beloved home, [where I belong,]
 but living here now would be unconscionable.
 If I were to remain in Thebes, what temple would not close its doors to me?
 At what festival or assembly of friends would I be welcome?
 What kind of welcome or greeting do you give to a man reeking of atrocities?
 So do I go to Argos? As an exile from my own fatherland? How could I?
 Well, then what? Run off to some other city? [I would hardly be anonymous.]
 [What would life be like as] as a public object of suspicion and judgment?
 Eyes following me, tongues just out of earshot lashing me without pity.
 [I can already hear what they say, can't you?]
 "That's him, isn't it, Zeus' son, the one who murdered his children? His wife too.
 Let some plague rid the land of him." 1290
 You see, I think I know well where my pathetic path leads.
 One day the earth itself will cry out forbidding me to touch her.
 Seas and rivers too will shun me, denying me a crossing.
 Like Ixion, I shall whirl in despair forever,* tied fast to a wheel of fire.

So why should I go on living? 1301
 When the prize is a useless, impious life, what point is there in pursuing it?

It's time to let the illustrious Hera, bedmate of Olympian Zeus, dance [in victory],
[her gold-sandaled] feet pounding [the earth like a drum.]
She has executed her plot, realized her dreams—
Greece's hero toppled from his pedestal, his life a shambles.
Who on earth would offer prayers to such a god?
A cheating husband... a jealous wife... [a familiar story].
But for nothing more than that [Lady] Hera savaged innocent Greeks 1310
who served their country well.

Choros

Your words ring true.
This is Hera's handiwork.
None but the wife of Zeus
Has masterminded this mess.

Theseus

[My friend,] I have no other or [better counsel] than this—to go on and to endure,
whatever suffering that might entail.
No one alive and doomed to die is untouched, unspoiled by what fortune brings him.
If the poets ever tell the truth, not even the gods escape this stain.
They couple in beds where they do not belong, and they cast their own fathers in irons,
all in the pursuit of power and sovereignty.
Still, after all their misadventures, they reside and hold court all the same on Olympus
So, explain to me how it is that you, a mortal born of man and woman, 1320
are so undone by [the memory of] your misdeeds when the gods are not?

Do this. Honor the local law of exile.
Leave Thebes now and come with me to the city of Pallas Athena.
There, after your hands are purified of pollution,
I will give you a home and a share of all my wealth.
This includes the gifts bestowed on me by the citizens of Athens,
in gratitude for my saving their children—seven boys and seven girls—
from being sacrificed to the Minotaur, the great Bull of Knossos, whom I slew instead.
I will lavish you with lands throughout Attika, domains assigned to me as king.
For as long as you live these will bear your name. 1330
Then, whenever you die and make your way to the dark world below,
the city of Athens and all its people will honor you with sacrifices,
and erect stone monuments [to hallow and preserve your name].
For coming to your side, a good and brave man, my city will win its fair crown,
a bright name in every corner of Greece.
For myself, this will be my thanks to you for saving me from the mouth of hell.
When the gods spoil a man with their attentions, he has no need of such friends.
Divine favor, capricious as it is, suffices when it comes our way.
The rest of us, in moments like this, need each other and the friendship we share.

Herakles

Some of what you've just said has no bearing on my troubles. 1340
 I myself don't think the gods dally in beds forbidden to them by what is right,
 nor do I think they tie one another up in ropes or chains.
 I've never had any respect for such stories, and I still don't.
 Gods don't lord it over one another. There are no despots among them.
 All this nonsense belongs to the poets and their pathetic tales.
 God, if such a God truly is, wants for nothing.
 What I have been asking myself, is whether I want to be known as a coward,
 who turned his back on life when everything in his life turned really dark.
 Anyone who can't stand up under misfortune,
 will never be able to hold his ground in the ranks facing enemy spears. 1350
 I am resolved to grasp life and not let go.
 I am going to your city, and, from my heart I thank you for your many gifts.
 I endured and survived so many labors without ever giving up or breaking down,
 without ever allowing a tear to drop from eyes.
 Never did it enter my mind that it would come to this... [so helpless,] my eyes... rivers.
 [My last labor,] it seems, is to be a slave, and fate is my master.

To Amphytrion, sighing.

[Poor] old father, you [live to see] my exile.
 You gaze upon your son, the murderer of his own.
 [I ask this of you,] give these [dear ones] a proper grave. 1360
 Wrap them snug. Bathe them in tears.
 [With their blood on my hands,] I am forbidden by law to do these things for them.
 Nestle the boys on my wife's bosom. Wrap her arms around them.
 It's a sad fellowship they share... my family.
 I killed them [one by one] without knowing it.
 Father, when you have buried them and they lie unseen beneath the earth,
 live the rest of your days—bitter as they may be—here in Thebes.
 And compel your soul, [if you would,] to bear with me the burden of my sorrows.

To the corpses of this children.

Children, I am your father and your slayer. I gave you life and I took it away.
 The moments when I shone shed no light or warmth on you. 1370
 All my labors, all that violence, just to win for you a legacy of fame,
 the advantage of having a father that everyone knows and holds in awe—
 [all for nothing... all for this.]
 And you, sad spouse, I murdered you too.
 This was how I thanked you for honoring our bed,
 and for the weariless watch you kept over our home.
 From all my labors, what a achievement, what bitter fruit—for you my wife
 and you my children and for me—to find ourselves apart forever

Bending over and kissing his children and wife each in turn.

Nothing so sweet as a kiss... but these are so bitter.

Standing over his bow and club.

Old companions, ours is a fellowship of misery.
 I am at a loss. Do I take them up again or leave them lying here?
 Hanging at my side, [I can hear what] they will whisper:

“With us you cut down you wife and children.
 Stained with your children’s blood... and yet you keep us.”
 Do I take you up into my hands again? What do I say?
 I would be naked without my weapons.
 Together we have wrought the most wondrous things in Greece.
 Without them, wouldn’t my enemies walk over me, and I die an ignominious death?
 No, I cannot abandon my arms, even if bearing them brings me agony.

Turning to Theseus.

I ask one more favor, Theseus.
 Come with me to Argos, and help me deliver there the wretched hound of hell.
 [I need your company.]
 If I am alone now, [thinking of my children with every step,] the pain will consume me.

Land of Kadmos and people of Thebes, cut short your hair and grieve with me. 1390
 Gather at the burial of my boys, and with one voice and one lament,
 mourn [the living and] the dead, [my family] and me.
 Hera, with a single savage blast of fate, ruined us all.

Theseus

Enough tears, poor man. Now, up on your feet.

Herakles

I can’t. My legs don’t any longer [want to] bear my weight.

Theseus

Misfortune does that, even to the strong.
 It pulls them down[, and tries to keep them there].

Herakles

If only I could become a rock, unfeeling, oblivious of evil.

Theseus

Stop that. Just give me your hand.
 I’m your friend, and I’m here to help you.

Herakles

[I’m covered] with blood. It will stain your robe and pollute you.

Theseus

Let it all wipe off on me. Don't let that hold you back.
I'm not leaving without you.

1400

Herakles

I lost all my sons; but now I have a son in you.

Theseus

Here, put your arm around my neck and hold tight.
I'll get you there.

Herakles

Two friends—one in misery—yoked in love.

To Amphitryon.
Father, [I know this now.]
There is no making it through life without a friend like this.

Amphitryon

Blessed in her womb is the land that gave this man life.

Herakles and Theseus begin their departure.

Herakles

To Theseus.

Friend, I need to turn around and go back. I need to see my children.

Theseus

Why? Is there in them some charm or cure to ease your pain?
[Will it really make things easier for you?]

Herakles

It's just an ache inside me.
And I want to wrap my father in my arms one last time.

Amphitryon

Here I am, child,
I want the same thing.

Herakles breaks down, weeping.

Theseus

All of your labors, have you forgotten how bravely you faced them?

1410

Herakles

No. They were far easier to endure than this.

Theseus

If people see you crying like a woman, they'll say things you won't like.

Herakles

What about you? Does this change the way you see me?
I'm making my way through [the rest of] life... broken, [that's all there is to see].

Theseus

But you've fallen too low.
The way you are now[—"broken" as you put it—]the old Herakles, [the hero I knew...]
 where is he?

Herakles

And what kind of hero were you when you found yourself trapped in darkest hell?

Theseus

[No hero at all.] In courage and resolve I ranked last among any men, anywhere.

Herakles

Then how can you [of all people] say that I am made less by my misfortunes?

Theseus

Let's keep going.

Herakles

Goodbye, father.

Amphitryon

Goodbye, my son.

Herakles

You will bury my children, as I have asked.

Amphitryon

Of course. And who will bury me?

Herakles

I will.

1420

Amphitryon

When will I see you again?

Herakles

[One thing at a time, father.]
First bury the boys.

Amphitryon

How? {How will I ever see you again?}

Herakles

I will send for you here, from Athens.

But now gather up my children in your arms.
The earth will not be glad to receive them.
I leave my home a shambles, drenched in shame—all my doing.
[Sail down and full of holes], like a wrecked boat in tow,
I [remain afloat] in Theseus' wake.

Any man who would prefer great wealth or power to love, the love of friends,
is sick to the core of his soul.

Choros

Broken-hearted,
[Barely able to lift our voices or our feet,]
We sing the saddest of songs as we make our way.
Today we lost the best of friends.

• PART THREE •

COMMENTARY

Notes on the Commentary

This commentary is not meant to provide a full range of philological, geographical, mythological or historical notes to the text. Instead, my aim here is to comment directly and all but exclusively on those portions and aspects of the text that most clearly evidence and ground the interpretation of *Herakles* offered in this volume. In short, this commentary is best understood and used as an extension of the interpretive essay comprising Part One of this volume.

Each commentary entry is signposted in the text by a * after the last word in the relevant passage. These focal passages are repeated below, preceded by the most recent Greek line indicator for ready reference.

1 • the man who shared his bed and wife with God

To anyone familiar with the sexual exploits and conquests of Zeus (and this would include surely most if not all of Euripides' audience), "sharing" would seem a euphemism here. Zeus was, after all, the most notorious rapist in Greek mythology. It was improbable that either Alkmene or Amphytrion enjoyed much choice in the matter of "sharing" their bed with Zeus. Late in the tragedy, when Herakles laments the violence that has marked his family's and his own experience, he fails to mention the violence with which he was in all likelihood conceived; but this nonetheless serves to fill in the seamless story of violence that Herakles tells as his own.

1 • home to a murderous race of men

This depiction of the "founding fathers" of Kadmean Thebes helps to fill out the legacy of violence in this city and, by extension, in the house and family of Herakles. Murder runs in their blood. They are a family of killers from a city and race of killers. It is to be noted too that Thebes, Argos and other cities serving as the backdrop of Athenian

tragedies are often not far removed in the mind of the audience from the mother city of the playwrights. Just as it is often claimed that every character in a dream represents the dreamer, so it is often the case that cities represented in the tragedies represent or at least comment on Athens.

20• He will tame the earth, make it a kinder, gentler place

This “civilizing” mission statement of Herakles is resonant with the imperial rhetoric of Athens in the 5th century as it accumulated and exercised unprecedented power in the Greek world. This rendering here is reminiscent as well of George H. W. Bush’s promise of a “kinder gentler America,” a promise reiterated by his son eight years later and extended to foreign policy. In none of these cases—Athenian or American, domestic or foreign—was the promise kept; nor was it ever meant to be. Herakles, however, is not the one making the promise but only the one burdened with carrying out its concealed agenda. He is the hoplite, the Tommy, the grunt, the infantry soldier making the empire happen. He is also the engineer, the architect, and the laborer, building the empire and bringing those civil improvements for which empires are occasionally appreciated—roads, bridges, dams, reservoirs, schools, hospitals, railroads, power plants, etc. **Several of Herakles’ labors may be and have been interpreted as referring to ancient water-management projects. River diversion and damming, swamp drainage, artificial irrigation, and land-reclamation were all a part of the impressive engineering agenda of the late Mycenaean rulers (14–11c. B.C.E.) and many of these achievements were attributed in myth and legend to the hero Herakles. For example, Herakles was widely known and appreciated for his public works as a hydrolics engineer, diverting the River Skamander at Troy, constructing an enormous dam at Tiryns, draining the swamp at Lerna, and canalizing the Augeas (thereby cleaning the Augean stables?). (See Knauss 2001; Luce, forthcoming.)**

20• Or it may just need doing, and he is the only one to do it

This suggests again the servile or “enlisted” status of Herakles, the man taking orders, not giving them, doing a thankless job because there’s no one else around prepared or willing to do it. This also echoes a sentiment often expressed by imperial spokesmen to the effect that it is the burden of great powers to do other peoples’ urgent business or unfinished chores for them. Empires, as the Corinthian spokesmen in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* point out (I.70.2 ff.), are restless, not idle—quick to notice that something needs doing and quick to assume that they are the ones to do it.

20• the mouth of hell

The descent into hell and, equally crucial, the return represent the consummate heroic feat, whether the hero be male or female, martial or spiritual, human or divine. Any list of such ultimate boundary-crossers would include: Inanna, Dionysos, Odysseus, Persephone, Sisyphus, Herakles, and Jesus. “Hell” here is clearly multivalent. While its most direct and evident meaning is physical death, it clearly connotes spiritual or moral death as well. The Greek text refers to Hades, the land of shadows, where the dead do not cease to exist but reside instead in a half-life of shadows and radical diminishment. The residents of Hades are the living dead, which is perhaps why the experience of war is often described as hell. Even peace becomes hell for the returning warrior, because for the ordinary mortal there is no such thing as a return from war, any more than there is a return from death. War and death are “lands of no return”. “Hell” becomes just this in *Herakles*—a land or place of no return, i.e. no return to life or to life-affirmation.

Throughout the drama, Herakles’ return, in each of its stages and metamorphoses, is seen as a return from hell and from death. See also lines 145, 297, 427ff.

30• the city was sick with strife and dissention

This is precisely how Thucydides, in Book 3 (81.1 ff.) of his *Peloponnesian War*, describes Greece in his comments on the *stasis*, the civil and moral disintegration, consequent upon extended war. He explains that war is a harsh teacher and that in war most peoples' moral standards sink to the level of their desperation and misfortune. In short, Euripides describes here the state of his own city and of the cities of Greece more widely after roughly a decade of internecine war.

40• he marched into impenetrable darkness

A telling and timeless image, to be sure, of the soldier's march into battle.

40• my radiant warrior son

The Greek epithet here—*kallinikos*—occurs with remarkable frequency (8 times) in this drama. It literally means “beautiful in victory” and describes the heroic ideal of the beautiful warrior, glistening with triumph. In the *Herakles*, this word and the culture of war that enshrines it are demythologized, denied all artificial lighting and disclosed as dark lies. Then, and only then, *kallinikos* is redefined to highlight the edifying integrity of the survivor. In war there is no such thing as radiant victory; there are no glorious heroes. In war there is only defeat, no winners only losers, wounded and broken. As yet, Amphytrion has not come to realize this. He lionizes his son and takes pride in all of his labors. He, like Herakles and like the audience in the theater of Dionysos, stands at the beginning of his journey.

50• That's the way it is with friendship.

Friendship represents the moral through-line of this drama. While the Greek root for friend and friendship (φιλ) occurs with remarkable frequency in the text, the theme of

friendship utterly pervades the text. Not only men but also gods are measured by how well they live up to the expectations of their friends. Friendship (φιλία) designates the bonds not only of kin and families but also of lovers, comrades, fellow citizens and fellow Greeks. Euripides, I would argue, also extends φιλία beyond fellow Greeks to barbarians and slaves, and still further to all human beings. The fundamental consortium and solidarity of all mortals was recognized in the ancient rites of hospitality, wherein any human being could expect from any other human being the essentials of life—a roof, a bed and bath, and a place at table—for two nights, long enough to keep going on one’s way. Anonymous hosts and guests, both designated by the word ξενοί or “strangers” (for that is what they are to each other) are presumed to bear towards each other a fundamental good will. An old Irish proverb says that “he who gives me to eat wants me to live.” This “wanting someone to live” is the essential life-affirmation that we extend to and expect from each other as human beings and as friends. It is, in computer lingo, the “default setting” with which we are born. The direct opposite presumption and sentiment belong to enemies, who wish each other to die. It is an inescapable element of the experience of warfare to confront an enemy who hates me to the point of trying to bring an end to my life, even at the risk of his own. Such hatred, in the flesh and in the field, is at first incomprehensible and threatens to undermine the mutual trust without which any concept of a common humanity becomes an idle dream. In sum, before a single shot is fired, the first casualty of any war is friendship, the friendship presumed intact between strangers who at the very least wish each other to live.

70• What is he doing? When will he come home?

This and the other questions thrown at their mother by Herakles’ sons are all too familiar to any family who has seen a father off to war and awaits his return.

100• a procession of propped-up old men

These old men are self-evidently the “remaindered” citizens of Thebes or of any city at war for any length of time. For Euripides they likely represent the ranks of the “old-age pensioners” which he himself was joining in Athens at this time. After two outbreaks of the plague and a decade of war, Athens’ adult male population was comprised either of warriors or of those too old or otherwise unable to stand in the ranks. They are aged men for whom (and here I have in mind Aristotle’s sketch of old age in the *Rhetoric*) the past is long and the future is short, men who mostly inhabit their inevitably enhanced memories of a valorous past. They are now in their own kind of hell or half-life. “Hades”, after all, may be seen as a Greek pun on the word for “invisible”; and old age brings down on those enduring it a cloak of invisibility, a foretaste of the final obscurity and invisibility awaiting them in death.

120• We are all old now. We stand or fall together.

The martial comradeship of these retired veterans is unmistakable here. In the Greek battle phalanx, each warrior depends on the other to remain upright and alive. Apparently none of that changes in peace and in old age. The absence of the enemy and of enemy spears does not leave life without its challenges and the need for friendship. These men find themselves in the front ranks again, facing the approach of death, the most hated of all of enemies.

170• Herakles, you are no coward.

This defense of Herakles strikes the core of the drama. Heroism is a matter of courage, and the entire drama may be seen as a relocation and redefinition of courage, from courage in war to courage in peace, from the willingness to die and to kill, to the willingness to affirm life, one’s own and others’. By the measure of this drama, the “ordinary” man is neither up to the demands of war nor to those of peace. He makes neither a formidable enemy nor a reliable friend. The open or debated question at this

point is whether Herakles is an ordinary man (a man defined by or at least inclined towards cowardice) or a true hero.

At this point in the drama, however, the account that immediately ensues is an inventory of violent episodes, beginning with Herakles' fighting side by side with the gods against the giants, taking part in other words in the primordial battle between gods and demons, an episode repeated in the mythic traditions of many ancient peoples. This chronicling of Herakles' feats and triumphs is resumed and soon brought to completion by the Choros in their first stasimon or choral song.

200• to do harm without suffering it

This "maxim" of warfare has a decidedly familiar and modern ring to it, which may well signal the new theory and practice of war emerging in the Greek world in the late 5th century. It stands in curious contrast to the Choros' recent reminiscences of life and death in the hoplite ranks. While the Choros stressed the strength and solidarity of the cohort, Amphitryon highlights the individual's vulnerability to any failure of nerve among one's fellows.

280• I love my children.

Herakles makes the same assertion later. This unadorned assertion of a parental truism seems gratuitous; and yet, set against a backdrop of war, it is something that can no longer be taken for granted. It is, after all and always, a question of priorities. If family is first, how has it become so threatened? This is the question here and for every society at war; and the answer given it by Megara is provocative and precarious.

290• he would choose the latter.

But would he? Megara, like her father, is still enamored of the old and outdated warrior code that this play challenges and may be said to overturn. She claims that, given the choice between saving their children's lives and saving their honor, Herakles would choose the latter. He would prefer death to disgrace and would not hesitate to sacrifice his boys' lives to the family honor. It is clear from these words that Megara does not know her husband very well, not only who he will become but also who he is. In his choice of weapons it was claimed by Lycos and strangely corroborated by Amphytrion that Herakles has already opted for less conspicuous valor and greater lethality. A bowman's contribution to a battle is his accuracy, not his ardor. Courage is beside the point for Herakles the archer; for, in the very words of Amphytrion, his greatest admirer, "if things get hot, he always has a safe way out."

340• I'm twice the man you are.

For Euripides, mortality and the human solidarity implied in it are the measure of the human. The gods and the animals, whose realms and realities lay beyond and enclose the human demesne, may be fierce, beautiful, powerful, cunning and much more, but they cannot ever be human. What the gods and the animals share is their inhumanity. There are only two fundamental moral categories or possibilities for mortals: humanity and inhumanity, and the former is always to be chosen over the latter. This brief one-sided confrontation between Amphytrion and Zeus—a mere mortal and a great god—is reminiscent of the biblical showdown between Job and Yahweh. Ironically, despite the irrefutable magnificence and cosmic clout of Zeus (or Yahweh, for that matter), humanity comes out on top, by any moral measure. Zeus makes a poor friend. In fact, having him as a friend is worse than having no friend at all. And saying that is, in this context, having the last word.

350• the labors of our hero

The twelve labors noted and celebrated by the chorus here comprise a series of slayings (savage lion, unruly Centaurs, dappled hind, murderous Kyknos, Hesperidean dragon, Amazon army, many-headed Hydra, and monstrous herdsman); several tamings (breaking of Diomedes' mares, calming of the seas, retrieval of Kerberos, hound of hell); and the sharing of Atlas' burden. This list has eight labors (in bold above) in common with the canonical list represented by the metopes of the temple of Zeus at Olympia. Where they differ from the canonical list is in substituting the episodes involving Centaurs, Kyknos, Hesperidean dragon, and sea-calming for the labors regarding the Erymanthian boar, the Stymphalian birds, the Augean stables and the Cretan bull.

420• All his roads have led him here. And none lead out.

These lines offer ominous recognition to an obvious truth—that so much mayhem and death can only lead to the hell in which Herakles will soon find himself trapped. The Choros that begins on line 348 and that promises to crown each of Herakles' labors with song also points the way to his last labor, the rescue and slaughter of his wife and children (see 1279–1280). The *lyssa* or madness that eventually grips him, like the dragon teeth sown in the soil of Thebes, must have out. Such a profound legacy of violence, personal and collective, must take its course, dragging him along every inch of the way. There is truly no exit, not from within. The gates of hell can only be opened from outside, by a friend and a friend's love.

470• took my pick of brides for you

The peacetime “plans and hopes” once harbored by Megara for her sons and their future marriages signify not only what is thinkable in a world without enemies but also what is doable to prevent future enmity from emerging. In the ancient Near East and East Mediterranean, arranged marriages between ruling and powerful families were an often

effective way of bonding those families together for at least a generation. This strategy, of course, has been employed ever since among the powerful, both to consolidate their power and to prevent its misuse. If the kings of two rival cities, lands, or empires share the same grandchildren, as they do when their children intermarry, they are less likely to unleash war and devastation on each other. There is a saying in the *Mahabharata*, surely the greatest war epic of all, to the effect that, when one people finds the death of others' children more acceptable than the death of their own children, war is near. Intermarriage among rivals thus makes war less attractive and cooperation more likely. In the text of *Herakles*, the three cities from whom Megara had thought to procure brides for her sons were Athens, Sparta, and Thebes. These same cities were at fierce odds with each other in the Peloponnesian War. Sparta and Thebes were sworn allies and Athens was their arch enemy. The foreseeable marriage of Herakles' sons to brides in these three cities may be seen either as wistful thinking on Euripides' part or as an oblique reference to the Peace of Nikias, establishing a truce between these long-time bitter combatants.

560• Then I'll take his head

In several lines Herakles rehearses the menu of atrocities he intends to inflict on Lykos and his cohort, as well as a host of Thebans who took the wrong side in the city's recent crisis. These plans provide a window into the savage mind of Herakles as well as a sampling of his repertoire. Neither is a pretty picture. He is someone you definitely want to have on your side, but even then not too close. Like a dog trained to kill first and bark later, Herakles is frightening figure, far more dangerous than endearing.

570• So much for my famed labors.

Here Herakles deconstructs his own myth and puts his life in less than heroic perspective. These are the words too of any imperial warrior or adventurer who pursues a fantasy, and only when it is too late remembers the reality he abandoned. These same words have the

ring of truth coming from the mouth of Athens, a city which at this point had lost far more than it gained in the war and stood to lose everything, all for the sake of an empire of which the playwrights were increasingly skeptical and disdainful. Euripides, usually through the Choros, frequently commented on the madness of those who roam the earth pursuing grand schemes, meanwhile forsaking their homes and families and the far preferable lives they might otherwise have enjoyed with them. One such commentary is to be found in these words from the *Bakkhai*:

Ten thousand men
dream ten thousand different dreams.
Some of them come true and end in bliss.
Nothing at all comes of the rest.
What I call blessed
is the life lived in simple happiness
day by day. (907-909)

Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad* comes to very much the same insight and conclusion, when he points out to the Achaean emissaries that death makes no distinctions between the restless hero and the remote stay-at-home. No amount of fame or fortune, he assures them, is worth the one precarious and precious life given him. At that decisive moment his intent is to board ship at dawn and set course for home. Good riddance to Achilles (or Herakles) “kallinikos”. Radiance in victory, even when it does not immediately translate to “dark in death”, is no excuse or substitute for the care and comfort of home and family.

580• the right thing

In other words, short of war at the gates of one’s own city or at the door of one’s own house—a war of self-defense—the warrior’s and even the hero’s place is at home with his family. This disavowal of elective war or war of conquest was timely in the late 5th century after decades of Athenian empire building.

610• I stayed as long as it took

This act of staying in hell for as long as it takes to make good a friend's escape as well as one's own is the quintessential heroism of the combat warrior. More than winning the battle, much less winning the war, the aim of every warrior is to stand by and with his comrades and not ever to let them down. There is no more devastating a moment in ancient literature than Thucydides' wrenching account of the forced retreat of the Athenian forces from their camp outside Syracuse:

[3] The dead lay unburied, and each man as he recognized a friend among them shuddered with grief and horror; while the living whom they were leaving behind, wounded or sick, were to the living far more shocking than the dead, and more to be pitied than those who had perished. [4] These fell to entreating and bewailing until their friends knew not what to do, begging them to take them and loudly calling to each individual comrade or relative whom they could see, hanging upon the necks of their tent-fellows in the act of departure, and following as far as they could, and when their bodily strength failed them, calling again and again upon heaven and shrieking aloud as they were left behind. So that the whole army being filled with tears and distracted after this fashion found it not easy to go, even from an enemy's land, where they had already suffered evils too great for tears and in the unknown future before them feared to suffer more. [5] Dejection and self-condemnation were also rife among them. (Perseus *Peloponnesian War* 7.75.3–5)

A far more gratifying and grateful story is told by Alkibiades in Plato's *Symposium*, a story of how Sokrates once carried him from the hell of battle to safety. The voice here is that of Alkibiades:

“Then, if you care to hear of him in battle—for there also he must have his due—on the day of the fight in which I gained my prize for valor from our commanders, [220e] it was he, out of the whole army, who saved my life: I was wounded, and he would not forsake me, but helped me to save both my armor and myself. I lost no time, Sokrates, in urging the generals to award the prize for valor to you; and here I think you will neither rebuke me nor give me the lie. For when the generals, out of regard for my consequence, were inclined to award the prize to me, you outdid them in urging that I should have it rather than you. (Perseus *Symposium* 220d)

Herakles' lingering in hell for as long as it took to bring his friend Theseus out with him was clearly just such an act of heroic loyalty and love towards a friend, an act soon to be returned in kind by that same friend.

620• You can actually let go of my robe.

Megara's clinging to Herakles for dear life and for fear that he will otherwise desert them again is a poignant reminder of the insecurity of any military family. This brief scene has the ring of truth to it, whether in 5th century Athens or in 20th century America. In a time of endless war, warriors are liable and likely to be called up at any time, which only tightens the grip of spouses and children. To let a warrior out of your sight or free from your grasp is quite possible to lose them.

630• we love our children

Here and in the succeeding lines, Herakles might be accused of protesting too much. Who is endeavoring to convince of this moral truism if not first of all himself? A truism is a truth we take for granted, a truth at risk. Indeed, if we were convinced of what Herakles says here, there would be no wars; for there would be no one willing either to kill or to die—a truth not lost on him at this point.

630• Youth is my first love.

It is no real stretch to hear Euripides' own voice in these words and in the succeeding choral lines. After all, he is at this point a retiree, an old man by Athenian standards. The love of youth and the hatred of old age are common if not universal sentiments of the elderly, who cannot quite believe what the years are doing to them. The one consolation in this choral song is the love of beauty, especially the beauty of song and dance and poetry, all of which converge in tragedy. I find it nearly impossible not to hear the voice of Euripides in these words of the Choros:

May I never live among men who have no ear nor soul for their song.
Instead, I will dance out my days among the garlanded.
Even old men, whose sole surviving muse may be Memory, have a song to sing.
My song is a hymn to Herakles, Radiant Victor; and I will sing it out
 whether wine-bearing Bromios fills my cup or not.
I need no seven-stringed lyre or Lybian flute to make my voice heard.
So long as I draw breath, it will go out as song to the Muses
 who dance round me in the choros.

Euripides, after all, as he writes, directs and produces *Herakles* does so as a retired hoplite, an aged man whose life for the first time since the age of sixteen is his own. It is a commonplace to ask the newly retired what they are going to do with themselves and their time now that their days are their own; and here, we might suspect, Euripides—“aged and gray as an old swan”—is providing his own response to that question. He says he is going to devote himself wholly to the one place he loves, the theater, where there is “more sweet beauty than the world can bear.”

700• Your life-exhausting labors...have given to the rest of us a less troubled life.

This is a fitting and often expressed tribute to returning warriors. Nothing is so life-exhausting as combat. It is a high price for anyone to pay. And what, anyone might ask, has been purchased with that price? Though not always true, one of the most fitting answers is that others' lives, the lives of those back home, have been spared as a result. Otherwise it was all for nothing. Spared what? It is often not easy to say, surely not for Megara or her father or her sons.

730• The slaying of an enemy... yield(s) a certain exquisite pleasure.

These are ominous words, in retrospect if not at first hearing. The act of killing, of uninhibited slaughter is by many reports, ancient and modern, sometimes rapturous, intoxicating and addictive. In the *Iliad* we are told how Achilles, when he first removed himself from battle, ached for the act, the bloody murderous act of war. Likewise, Bhima in the *Mahabharata* declares that to his lips the blood of enemies is sweeter than his mother's milk. The enthusiasm of Amphytrion and the Choros as they imagine the lurid scene taking place in the palace and their voyeuristic eagerness to behold it all portend the path that Herakles will soon go down. There is something obscene in the thrill of slaughter enjoyed vicariously by Amphytrion and his veteran cronies. They are caught up and swept along in the orgasmic violence unfolding in the palace, and they are only

imagining it. Then, as the corpse falls, their first impulse is to dance around it. It is clear they are no longer in control. They can no longer answer for themselves. The dance they would dance is not theirs. They are already a bit mad, touched by the god and his mania. And their hands have no blood on them. There is in all of this nothing hopeful, nothing auspicious for the murderous hero within.

780• form a choros

The frequent and varied use of the word choros here and throughout the drama suggest that it is identified with community, the many that become one. A dramatic choros, while retaining their individual voices, often moved as one body and sung with one voice. Similar chorei were central to festivals, marriages, funerals, victory celebrations and other such pivotal moments in the city's life. The city indeed could be seen as choros, just as the choros might speak for the city.

840• I am well born.

We have to take her word for it on this. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, the many miserable children of Night do not have Ouranos for their father. In point of fact, they have no father at all; and Lyssa is not mentioned among them.

850• bringing civilization everywhere he went.

This aspect of the heroic mission and legacy of Herakles is eloquently and (to the contemporary ear) poignantly voiced by the 1st century B.C.E. writer Dionysos of Halicarnassus:

Herakles, who was the greatest commander of his age, marched at the head of a large force through all the country that lies on this side of the Ocean, destroying

any despotisms that were grievous and oppressive to their subjects, or commonwealths that outraged and injured the neighboring states, or organized bands of men who lived in the manner of savages and lawlessly put strangers to death and in their place establishing lawful monarchies, well-ordered governments and humane and sociable modes of life. [*Roman Antiquities*, 1.41, tr. Earnest Carey, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974]

860• like a hound on a hunt

Indeed, like a hunting dog Lyssa is dispatched by a master, or in this case mistresses; but unlike such a hound she has no instinct, no inner appetite for the hunt. She is sent to do others' bidding and is not glad over that. She takes no pleasure in what she does here. In fact, she strongly objects to it. But who is she really? Her name is derived from *lykos*, which means "wolf" and which is, of course, also the name of the tyrant currently lying in a pool of his own blood. Curiously, another link to *Lykos* is that, given the realities of rotation among the actors of a classical tragedy, the role of *Lyssa* was almost surely filled by the same actor who had just played *Lykos*. The word *lyssa*, personified here as a minor and subservient deity, may mean "rabies" or "lupine rage". Homer uses the same word to denote the fury that possesses and drives the berserk warrior (specifically Hektor and Achilles) to unspeakable levels of daring, strength and savagery. (See *Iliad* 9.235; 309 and 21.543) In the ensuing lines the metamorphosis undergone by Herakles closely resembles the description of berserkers in numerous epic traditions, as well as in modern battlefield accounts. Some of the most graphic and detailed accounts of an epic hero undergoing this transformation (what Thomas Kinsella calls a "warp spasm") are to be found in the Irish epic, the *Tain*. Understood in this way as an aberration peculiar to warriors and triggered by violence, Hera's causal rage fades into insignificance and the murderous fury of Herakles is seen to emerge from his own demented depths.

880• The dance begins

Throughout Herakles' mad scenes his wild condition and slaughterous ritual are described in Dionysian imagery and language. Like Shiva, his Indian cousin, Dionysos dances the world, or in this case the royal House of Thebes, to total destruction. While it is Lyssa that possesses and drives the individual mortal Herakles to blind murder, it is Dionysos/Bromios, Lord of the Dance, who choreographs the more encompassing drama unfolding on the cosmic stage of which this play is but a fragmentary reflection. The great puppet-master will, of course, reveal himself in the *Bakkhai* years from now at the close of Euripides' career and life.

A curious side note here is that the aulos, the double flute (more like a shrill oboe than anything we would think of as a flute today) accompanying the choral dances in the tragedies, was also the instrument of battle, blown to keep the ranks in order and to stir the warrior spirit as the phalanxes closed on each other. Combat too was a dance and, in the *Bakkhai*, the frenzy of battle is attributed to him by the prophet Teiresias:

Even the powers of Ares, god of war, are partly his to wield.
Picture a host of men in heavy arms,
 already in the field, positioned for battle.
Now, even before a single spear is thrown, or even raised,
 terror blows through their ranks
 and scatters them like dry leaves.
This terror is our god's doing.
It is one form of his madness. (*Bakkhai* 302–305)

Herakles, in going into battle, takes up the dance of destruction and moves in step with the god that possesses him.

890• The pipes sing a wild, desolate song

From this point forward we see how Euripides earned the comment of Aristotle that he was indeed the most tragic of all the playwrights. The West would have to turn eastwards to India's *Mahabharata* or else wait for Shakespeare's *Lear* in order to experience again such exquisite desolation and despair. Admittedly, the veritable

“crucifixion” of Herakles is followed by what might be called his “resurrection and ascension”; but there is no transcendence on offer here, no absolution, no redemption, only the open-eyed love of friends, flooded with common human tears.

Euripides, it might be argued, in *Herakles* and perhaps elsewhere, pushes the limits of his genre, just as he tests his audience’s capacity for suffering and compassion. It is known that he was experimenting with the “new music” of his day, that some of his long monologues were sung, as were of course the choral odes, and that at least some of his dialogues were likely duets. Spoken words, depending on their provenance and poetry, may have an intrinsic weight limit, as it were. If so, then that limit is surely reached or at least approached in *Herakles*. As a translator, confronting the second half of *Herakles*, I sense the need for music, for the sung voice, to carry these words, whether in Greek or in English, the full emotional distance. This may only reflect my limitations, but I suspect that the same limit was being confronted by Euripides. Only screams, ragged and unending, could convey the depth of *Herakles*’ despair, and no one can expect others to attend to his screams, much less relish them in drama. It’s only either song or the asylum at a certain point; and Euripides was surely moving in the direction of the former. In *Herakles* I would suggest that Euripides was on the verge of composing an opera without knowing what that would mean. His words at a certain point require wings to carry them where he wants them to reach, and perhaps only music can provide those wings. In the theater of Dionysos there was no suitable space for a Verdi or a Mozart; but Euripides was already clearing a space for them all the same.

960• It must be the killing you’ve just done.

To explain the hideous deformation of Herakles, Amphytrion ignores the figures of Lyssa and Dionysos and points instead to the fresh blood on Herakles’ hands and the murderous acts he has just performed. These have manifestly brought on this clearly psychotic episode or flashback that will soon breed more death and destruction. What follows

reads as a nearly clinical account of “misrecognition” or “misidentification” as discussed earlier in the interpretive essay.

1110• would make any of the gods... weep

The Greek gods—the immortals or “deathless ones”—are emotionally challenged, notoriously so. Immune from death, their wounds, few and far between, heal overnight. Without ever knowing or paying the full price for anything, they resemble children, callow and often callous. Bringing tears to a god’s eyes was seen as a task equal to making a stone weep—not impossible but surely challenging. Animals, though finite, are also not mortal, because they lack human, much less divine, consciousness. Consequently human emotions are not usually attributed to them in Greek literature. That said, there are notable exceptions when deep emotions are evoked from and attributed to both animals and gods. Achilles’ horses weep over the death of Patroklos; and the aged dog of Odysseus, pining for him for as long and with seemingly equal anguish as Penelope, drops dead with relief and a sense of consummation at the mere sight of him returned home. Perhaps most poignant and telling is how the gods are occasionally given a taste of mortality. Although they cannot die they can love those who do die. This happens when they lust after human mates and produce their own sons or daughters. To their surprise, they find themselves desperately caring for their human children, vulnerable to suffering, danger and death through them. Achilles’ divine mother, Thetis, is a fine example of this. So great is her love for him that he focuses on her a unique concern. Anticipating his own imminent death, he pities her especially, because her grief will be deathless. When a mother loses a son, it opens a wound that will never close. Only her death will bring a cessation of her pain. But his mother is deathless; so her grief will last forever. Similarly, we find even Zeus helpless and anguished. He sees the future, and even more so the future that is only moments away. In the *Iliad*, Zeus and the other Olympians look down from a towering peak on wooded Samothrace upon the bloody battlefield of Troy with much the same agony as parents, like my own, watched daily footage of fierce firefights on the evening news during the

Vietnam War, dreading the sight of their own sons in the dust, a sight that might any moment appear before their eyes. Homer has pictured and preserved that very moment for us. First a bit of background. Zeus once lay with Laodameia, daughter of Bellerophon, and she bore to him the godlike Sarpedon, who grew to be a great warrior, a shining hero and comrade of Hektor. We find him now, in Book 16, locked in combat with Patroklos. Zeus knows well that fate stands against his beloved son and he is about to intervene on his son's behalf when his wife stops him, arguing that he is not the only god with a son at risk down there. He like the others must act as if they are powerless or else the lives and stories of men will be the mere extensions of divine whim. This is exactly the acceptance that all human parents must reach when they know it is time to let their children live their own lives, make their own missteps and reap the consequences of their own actions and omissions. Even the King of the Gods must sit on his hands and watch his son die. Not easy for a god and a father, as Homer tells us:

the father of men and gods... shed bloody rain-drops on the earth, shewing honour to his dear son — his own son whom Patroclus was about to slay in the deep-soiled land of Troy, far from his native land. (Perseus *Iliad* 16.459–461)

Note • lines 1291–1293 and 1299–1300

These lines in some surviving Greek texts are so intrusive and inconsistent that I have omitted them. They make no sense here and cannot have been part of the original text, unless Lyssa had taken a bite out of the playwright as well, which I am assuming, safely I would say, did not happen.

1130• War

This word, a refrain in lines 1133–1134, construes the palace of Thebes as a battlefield and the slaughter within as war. That is clearly how the mad Herakles saw it; and, we might surmise, that is how Euripides would have us see it—as the extension of war. Contemporary veterans and their families often discover to their horror that their sons or daughters, fathers, mothers or siblings have brought the war home with them instead of

leaving it behind where they found it or it found them, in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq or wherever else the blood-craving hounds of war have been loosed.

1140• there is nothing of yours that you didn't ruin

This is the fear, and on all too many occasions the fact, confronted by combat veterans after returning home. Seeing themselves as a potentially or actually destructive force, a threat to everything and everyone they love, some veterans willingly withdraw from their homes and families, sacrificing themselves rather than putting others at risk.

1140• Why would I spare my own life

Self-destruction, as an impulse and in practice, plagues those who bring the violence of war home with them like a virus. Guilt—the guilt of the survivor or the guilt of the killer or both—relentlessly hounds and possesses them. Self-destruction, whether slow and incremental or rapaciously sudden, fits the profile of the wounded and polluted warrior. His logic is as tight as it is intolerable: “I have murdered what I loved most. Why would I spare my own life, when I have taken theirs?” This is the logic of revenge directed against the self and it has on its side all of the passionate attractiveness of poetic justice. But poetic justice is not in the end justice. Like fast food or military music, it offers its consumers a brief satisfying rush and then lets them down hard. And, of course, it can get people killed. The alternative path was indicated decades ago by this philosophical slogan of Albert Camus: “neither victims nor executioners”. This is the path of the non-violent survivor, no longer willing either to die or to kill. It is along this path that Theseus will try to lead Herakles. Camus, in his two widely read philosophical essays *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, made the case that suicide and murder are inseparable and that both are unacceptable. He argued that to disavow suicide is to disavow murder, and vice-versa. The same case is obliquely made here in *Herakles*. It is the logic of affirmation. Why affirm life? Because it's there and it's all we have. For Camus and for Herakles, however, there is a further realization—that we are not alone.

We have each other. Affirmation is communal, best made and maintained in the fellowship of friends.

1200• I have come to share his suffering.

These words contain the core of grace and healing offered by the friendship of Theseus. They disarm guilt and pollution and begin the only healing possible. Further commentary on this last episode, focused on the giving and receiving of love among friends, seems all but pointless, as Euripides has already provided here one of the most eloquent and timeless commentaries on friendship ever written.

1290• Like Ixion, I shall whirl in despair forever

Ixion may be said to be the Greek Cain. He was the first mortal to slay his own kin. After being cleansed of his pollution by Zeus, Ixion made matters worse again by attempting to rape Hera. His punishment for this crime was meted out in Hades, where he was bound to a wheel of fire and spins to this day in excruciating and everlasting pain.