Informal Commentary on Euripides, *Herakles*
by Gregory Nagy

97 The idea of returning from Hades implies a return from death

109f The mourning swan... Cf. the theme of the swansong. Cf. 692ff.


131f “their father’s spirit flashing from their eyes”: beautiful rendition!

145f Herakles’ hoped-for return from Hades is equated with a return from death, with resurrection; see 297, where this theme becomes even more overt; also 427ff.

150 Herakles as the *aristos* man: not that he is regularly described in this drama as the best of all humans, not only of the “Greeks” (also at 183, 209). See also the note on 1306.

160 The description of the bow as “a coward’s weapon” is relevant to the Odysseus theme in the *Odyssey*

203 *sôzein* to *sôma* ‘save the body’... This expression seems traditional: if so, it may support the argument of some linguists that *sôma* ‘body’ is derived from *sôzô* ‘save’. By metonymy, the process of saving may extend to the organism that is destined to be saved.

270 The use of *kleos* in the wording of the chorus seems to refer to the name of Herakles; similarly in the wording of Megara at 288 and 290. Compare the notes on 1334 and 1369.

297 See at 145f above. Cf. the theme of Herakles’ wrestling with Thanatos in Euripides *Alcestis*.

342ff Note the god-hero antagonism as expressed by Amphitryon. His claim that he was superior to Zeus in *aretê* brings out the meaning of ‘striving’ in *aretê* (as a nomen actionis derived from *arnumai*; cf. E.D. Francis).

350 The hero Linos is “wilted [*phthitos*] in his beauty,” but Apollo sings “him.” By implication, the song of Linos is therefore unwilting. Compare the *kleos* of Achilles in *Iliad* IX 413, which is *aphthiton* or “unwilting.”

356 In the words of the chorus, the narration of the Labors of Herakles is a song of praise (*eulogia*). Note *humnos* (/*humneô*) at 355.

357 The catalogue of Herakles’ Labors is introduced with the word *ponoi*. The wording is crucial in light of the fact that the drama sets up the horrific slaughter of Herakles’ children as his “last *ponos*.”

425ff As the choral song starts a new antistrophe here, the catalogue of Labors has already reached nine, if I am counting correctly. Now, in this antistrophe, the climactic “last of his *ponoi*” is announced at 427, and this *ponos* is the bringing of Cerberus out of Hades into the light of the world. As we will see later, however, this *ponos* is in fact not the last one, in terms of the drama. See also
already at 357. On the idea of going into Hades as dying and of coming out of Hades as resurrection, see the notes at 145f.

456ff Megara’s sad words here, addressing her children and telling them how she had brought them up, is typical of the wording of women’s laments.

485ff The pathos of Megara’s words here again is typical of women’s laments: which one of you will I embrace last? Note too the metaphor about the honeybee collecting honey much as a woman who sings laments [gōi] is compressing and thus “condensing” her tears. A metaphor of intensification.

494f “shade ... dream”: see the note at 113.

518 When Megara sees Herakles as he returns from Hades, she asks herself: “What sort of dream do I see so anxiously?” Note the premonition. Note the emotion of FEAR.

524 Herakles describes his return from Hades as “re-ascending to the light.” There is inherent symbolism of resurrection here. On the word asmenos here (also at 621, 725), see the book of Douglas Frame, The Myth of Return.

567ff Herakles announces his intention of ripping off the head of Lukos and feeding it to the dogs. Note the brutality / bestiality of his urge.

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

581 Herakles will now “labor” to save / avenge his nearest and dearest.

588ff Note the anachronistic description of Lukos as a turannos who tries to ally himself with the “poor.”

597 Herakles says that he had premonitions that some ponos was threatening his nearest and dearest.

619 The “rescuing” (komizô implies ‘bring back to light and life’) of Theseus from the Throne of Lethe is presented as an additional deed of Herakles in Hades, besides capturing Cerberus. This additional deed meant a “delay” for Herakles, which meant that he almost did not arrive in time to rescue his family from Lukos.

627 Herakles to his wife: “tremble no more.” Note the emotion of FEAR.

659ff The chorus sings that those who display great striving or aretê in this life deserve to “come back to the light of the sun again” after they die, so as to live a second life. The sing: how unfair of the gods, not to let such men have a second life! This dramatized attitude reveals a poetically-created misunderstanding of what “really” happens to heroes after they die, how they are resurrected to a state of immortalization. The problem with Herakles is that he did not “really” die when he went to Hades to get Cerberus. If he had really died, he would already be a cult hero, eligible for immortalization. He is behaving like a cult hero when he returns to Thebes, but he has not yet “earned” it, so to speak. Similarly with Oedipus in the Oedipus Tyrannos. He behaves like a cult hero when he is king of Thebes, but he has not yet earned it. Oedipus earns that status finally when he dies, as we see in the Oedipus at Colonus. See also the notes on 1291 and 1300.
The invocation of the Kharites along with the Muses evokes the primal song of the Wedding of Cadmus and his bride, Harmonia, as described in Theognis.

“as an old man I sing the song of Memory [Mnêmosunê]... This song is the wedding song of Cadmus and Harmonia, sung by the goddesses of Memory, the Muses, along with the “Graces” or Kharites.

The victory song of Herakles I sing”... This song is the kallinikos of Herakles (see also 180ff and 582), the equivalent of the first epinician song ever sung (“epinician” is a victory song celebrating the victory of an athlete at an athletic event, as at the Olympics). According to one myth, the first victory song of Herakles celebrated his victory in the wrestling match with the river-god Akheloo; in another version, it celebrated his victories at the Olympic Games (the very first victories at the very first games).

“the Delian maidens”... These were apparently “local Muses” at Delos, the island of Apollo. They are described here as making humnos (687).

“paeans at your gates”... A paiân ‘paean’ is a victory-song sung in worship of Apollo to mark his victory over a plague or any other misfortune that threatens humanity.

“I will sing like a swan”... Cf. the swansong theme at 109f above.

“Surpassing all in his striving [areté], the noble son of Zeus, with great toil has made life tranquil for mortals, having destroyed the horrible beasts.” Note that the Labors of Herakles benefit mankind in inverse proportion. What is anxiety for the hero converts into tranquility for humankind. (See also the note on 851 below.)

Compare the words of Bob Costas, commentator at the Barcelona Olympics, in describing Herakles as the benefactor of humankind.

He who violates what is lawful “shatters the black chariot of prosperity [olbos].” Is the color black proleptic here?

The song of the chorus is coextensive with a victory song celebrating the labor [agôn] of Herakles.

The ambiguity of the identity of Herakles’ true father - is it Zeus or Amphitryon? - is matched here the ambiguity of Herakles’ true moment of glory.

“Time has shown the brilliant strength of Herakles.”

As Lussa enters the dramatic space, we may ask whether the same actor who had been assigned to Lukos, now dead, has now been assigned to Lussa. The Greek name Lukos is from the noun lukos, meaning ‘wolf’. The Greek name Lussa is the divine personification of the noun lussa, derived from lukos and meaning ‘rabies’ or ‘wolfish rage’.

Iris, messenger of the gods, says that Herakles has now finished the Labors (that is, those that had been assigned to him by his inferior cousin, Eurystheus). His Labors are called athloi at 827. Iris says that Hera could not hurt Herakles directly while he was performing these Labors.
Note the reference of Iris, messenger of the gods, to the “rage [kholos] of Hera.” There are three basic categories of ANGER that heroes can experience in Homeric and dramatic poetry:

A) mênis - an emotion so powerful that it becomes coextensive with the combined forces of nature in the cosmos, so that the hero’s anger becomes a cosmic sanction: see Leonard Muellner, *The Anger of Achilles: Mênis in Greek Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1996).

B) kholos - an open-ended chemical chain-reaction; it can be visualized as yellow bile; since Hera nursed Thetis who nursed Achilles, the bile of Hera is already flowing in the veins of Achilles before he ever even has his quarrel with Agamemnon: see Joan V. O’Brien, *The Transformation of Hera: A Study of Ritual, Hero, and the Goddess in the Iliad* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), especially ch. 4 (“Hera’s Iliadic Venom).

C) kotos - a time-bomb that ticks away until it explodes at exactly the right moment in the plot of the narrative, which is coextensive with the plotting of the angry hero who is nursing this emotion for its well-timed explosion as a theatrical climax for all to see and to sing about forever. The most celebrated kotos scene in Greek literature is the killing of the suitors by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Thomas V. Walsh is publishing a book on kholos and kotos, forthcoming in 2004 (Lanham: Lexington Books).

Here I have summarized the contexts in which these words for ‘anger’ are different from each other. But there are also contexts where they overlap dramatically. In the *Iliad*, Achilles experiences all three variations on the theme of anger.

Herakles is described as a civilizing hero by virtue of his having defeated monsters on land and sea. See also the note on 696ff above.

The violence that possesses Herakles is equated in the words of Lussa with the cosmic violence of earthquakes and storms. Just as Herakles’ mind and body become shaken up, so also, by metonymy, the palace collapses in an earthquake. By metonymy, the storm within Herakles is coextensive with a cosmic storm. See the note on 905ff.

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

Note the symptoms of Herakles’ *warp spasm*: “he shakes his locks, and rolls ... his distorted Gorgon eyes, his breathing is not balanced; like a bull ... he roars”; he “howls like dogs rushing on the hunt.”

“I will dance you even more quickly and will play the flute [reed] of terror.” The “wolfish rage” of the *warp spasm* induced by Lussa will make Herakles perform a sinister song-and-dance: it will “dance him.” Note the emotion of FEAR: *phobos* ‘terror’. Here we see a negative Bacchic possession and song in myth, as opposed to the positive Bacchic possession and song in ritual (that is, the possession of devotees who participate in a properly conducted ritual. (Compare the *Bacchae* of Euripides, where we find the negative possession of the elite women of Thebes in the myth of the drama vs. the positive possession of the foreign women of Asia [...
the chorus] in the ritual of the chorus.) This sinister Bacchic music of 871ff is like the SaintVitus dance in medieval ritual traditions.

879  *lussa*... See also 865 and 888.

885  Note the usage of *daimôn*.

888  *lussa*... See also 865 and 879.

892f  “Blood will be poured for a libation, not the wine the wine of Dionysus.” The blood becomes sacramental in terms of hero-cult.

905f  “The wild storm shakes the house, the roof is falling in.” Again, by metonymy, the storm within Herakles is coextensive with a cosmic storm. See the note on 861ff.

917f  The *atê* or ‘ruin’ of the children of Herakles and of Herakles himself can be linked with the metaphors of windstorms.

934  Herakles is literally *foaming at the mouth* while he is possessed by the “wolfish rage,” *lussa*, of Lussa.

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

966ff  In this part of the Messenger’s narrative, an essential question is raised: was it Herakles’ fury in the killing of Lukos that extended into the fury that led to the killing of his own family? This essential question operates on the metonymy of blood: the blood spilled in the killing of the enemy spills over, as it were, into the killing of Herakles’ sons and wife.

970ff  The killings of the three sons corresponds to the killings in (1) hunting (2) warfare (3) sacrifice [of animals]

1015  The reference to the horrific scene of the slaughter of Herakles’ wife and sons as an *athlos* makes this scene equivalent to a Labor.

1022  The description of Procne’s murder of her own son as a “sacrifice to the Muses” is relevant to the transformation of Procne into a nightingale - a songbird who symbolizes the singer of songs, the protégé of the Muses.

1071  The chorus vicariously sings the emotion of Amphitryon: FEAR.

1072ff  Amphitryon fears not so much for himself but for Herakles. But the emotion is in any case FEAR.

1089ff  As Herakles “comes to,” the symptoms of the warp spasm start to fade: but now he is conscious of these symptoms for the first time.

1119  Note again the reference to a negative Bacchic experience: a “bad trip,” as it were.

1135  The question is, who is the gods is responsible, *aition*? In *Iliad* XIX, such a question can be answered by Agamemnon in terms of *atê*.
Variations on a theme: here it is a lion’s rage, not a wolf’s.

“whoever Zeus may be”: note the “agnosticism” of Herakles here.

Note the negative and *irreligious* description by Herakles of his own Labors (as if they were not ritual), preceded by his childhood deeds, also viewed in a sinister light.

Note the pleonasm of a thousand labors, *ponoi*.

The horrific killing of his sons is for Herakles “this last bloody labor [*ponos]*.” See also 1353.

Herakles refers to his own *atê*.

Herakles was “once blessed”: see the note on 695ff.

Herakles was once *olbios*: see the notes on 695ff and on 1291.

On Herakles as “the noblest man in Greece”: see the note on 150.

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

In poetry, it is said that the gods actually “err” (*hamartanô*).

Theseus will give a “home” to Herakles in Athens. Compare Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Theseus will cede to Herakles the *temenê* (plural of *temenos* ‘sacred space’) that had been allotted to him.

The city of Athens will worship Herakles after he dies: the city will thus “bring him back” (*an-agô*) every time they sacrifice to him, making him a recipient of *timê* ‘honor’ (that is, cult-honor).

The *kleos* of Herakles will extend from him to Theseus, and, by further metonymy, to all of Athens. Compare the notes on 270, 1369.

By contrast to what Theseus says at 1315ff (on which see the note), Herakles says that the gods cannot be accused of questionable things. So the poets must be wrong after all: “The god, who is indeed a god, needs nothing: these are the wretched stories of the bards [*aoidoi*].”

Note again the pleonasm of a thousand labors, *ponoi*. See also 1275.

Again, Herakles explains himself in terms of *kleos*. Compare the notes on 270 and 1334.

Theseus understands that Herakles is suddenly not the man he used to be. If Herakles has lost his *mnêmê* ‘memory’ of his Labors, then he cannot act like himself. He might even start lamenting like a woman. Compare Euripides *Hippolytus*, where we will hear Theseus himself lamenting like a woman, singing in *dorchmiac* rhythms.

Herakles retorts to Theseus: what were *you* like, when you were sitting on the Throne of Lethe? (Note that *lêthê* means non-remembering.)
The word *lêma* ‘will’ (by extension, we may say ‘courage’) here implies that Theseus had lost all his will-power when he was sitting on the throne of Lethe.

Herakles tells his father: “entomb the children!” The ritual of entombment is key to the concept of hero-cult.

Conceivably, we may interpret the Greek as “I will have *you* brought from Thebes to Athens. {I agree with John W. to the extent that we probably cannot read “I will have *them* [= the children of Herakles] brought from Thebes to Athens.” Diggle rejects (without due justification, in my mind) the whole line, on the grounds that the Thebans’ in Euripides’ time would surely have claimed that Amphitryon’s grave was in Thebes. I would object: how can we be sure that there weren’t Athenian counter-claims?

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