Affirming Human Bonds in a Time of Crisis – A Central Action of Euripides' *Heracles*?

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Summary

Amongst the most troublesome of classical tragedies is the *Heracles* by Euripides. Interpreters are puzzled by its form, its structure, its jarring transition, and its ending. However, not only are its innovative meta-theatrical devices instructive of Euripides' experimentation with the tragic genre; recently, Katherine Riley (2008) has revisited its performance history, and her comment that it resurfaces at pivotal moments of historical importance may engender a proposal that it contains a message that is significant for our time, if not, indeed, for all time.

Opsomming

Euripides se *Herakles* is een van die mees problematiese klassieke tragedies. Interpreteerders krap kop oor die vorm, die struktuur, die ontstemmende oorgang en die slot daarvan. Dis egter nie slegs die innoverende meta-teatrale middele wat mens insig gee in Euripides se eksperimentering met die genre van die tragedie nie. Katherine Riley (2008) het die opvoergeskiedenis van hierdie tragedie weer onder soek en haar kommentaar dat dit op deurslaggewende oomblikke van geskiedkundige belang weer op die toneel verskyn, kan 'n voorstel inhou dat dit 'n boodskap bevat wat belangrik is vir ons tyd – indien nie weliswaar vir alle tye nie.

1 Introduction

Scholars are dissatisfied with the *Heracles* of Euripides. They claim that its suspenseful activity descends in bathetic manner toward an enfeebled dénouement. It fails as a drama, and, certainly, it is not a "real" tragedy (Papadopoulou 2005: 2). It conflates an accepted form of a dramatic work – the suppliant drama – with a play that seeks to understand the violence of temporary insanity (Griffiths 2006: 46-47, 62). Perhaps it intends to be a "homecoming drama", a catalectic attempt to appropriate the "epic odyssey"? Or, to employ a symphonic structure, it is a play of "four movements" – those of "waiting for Heracles", which, perhaps, more aptly, may

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be rendered "waiting to die", of murder, of madness and murder, and of friendship – and this framework has been imposed upon a mythic tale (Barlow 1996: 6-8, 17). Alternatively, it coheres around the notion of madness, which is evident in Heracles from the time of, if not before, his arrival on the stage (Bond 1981: xix).[1] Another proposition suggests that the play may be a "mantic" or "medical" drama, which probes the onset and effects of epilepsy (Aylen 1964: 128).[2] Or, and rather boldly, it is a proleptic exploration of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is the regular diagnosis of the battle-scarred and war-ravaged of our own age (Meagher 2006: 14, 48, 50, 55).

Given this range of views, any endeavour to interpret the *Heracles* entails entering an agonistic arena, a theatrical space from which many readers and viewers of the play leave rather bewildered. But if it is to be doubted that the *Heracles* of Euripides is as *aporetic* as some readers and viewers may assert – and it is a doubt that "worries" about the possibly concealed suspicion of the play's detractors that, possibly, Euripides was "tired", "short of time", "drunk", "sick of his kids", or, owing to no shortage of psychological interpretations, projecting his own derangement onto the text, or that he simply did not care – it may be helpful, first, to observe the "conventions-busting" and theatrically innovative aspects of the play as sufficient justification for its "awkwardness"; and, as a consequence of this observation, second, to ask about the central action of the *Heracles*, a question which raises the issue of its socio-political context, even though it may be difficult to date the play with any accuracy.[3] Such an endeavour, in part, is generated by the observation of Riley (2008: 4, 2) that, while the interest in this play has been desultory since its inception, it "has always surfaced in historically charged circumstances (e.g. late Julio-Claudian Rome, Tudor England, fin-de-siècle Vienna, Cold War- and post-9/11 America)", and that it "has been adapted for the stage more times (and in a wide variety of forms) in the last decade than in the whole of its previous history".

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1. Bond (1981: xix) notes that "Wilamowitz tried to achieve unity by using the rising science of psychology and discerning in the *Heracles* of the first part the seeds of madness. But few now accept his 'megalomaniac theory', which depends entirely on one speech of Heracles and a couple of lines in the messenger speech".

2. Aylen (1964: 128) is convinced that "Heracles is an epileptic .... Epilepsy attacks without any warning". However, see the careful exploration by Bond (1981: 309-310) of this proposal.

3. Bond (1981: xxxi) employs metrical evidence to place the drama "close to that of *Troades* (415). 416 and 414 are both possible", and Griffiths (2006: 41) dates the play between 425 and 416. Also see fn. 11.

2 Meta-theatre

An inquiry into the meta-theatrical features of the *Heracles*, features which highlight the artifice, the "serious playfulness", of theatre, is relevant to the play in six important respects. First, Euripides reorders the myth of Heracles by placing the Twelve Labours, which are decreed by Eurystheus for him to undertake, before the Madness descends upon him. The alternative order – Madness and then Labours – appears to be the prototypical version (Griffith 2006: 21; Riley 2008: 18), with the promising suggestion that the Labours are an act of atonement for his murderous deeds, although this suggestion is dependent upon later expositions. Nevertheless, the unsettling alternative surely is purposeful, because Euripides is able both to disrupt the expectation of the audience, and also to heighten their expectation of what is now to be the dénouement of a play which, previously, would have written itself – madness, followed by murder, followed by penitential labours. Second, the mythic tradition does not include, or always emphasise, Heracles as a devoted father, son, and even, probably, husband (Griffith 2006: 76), and the foregrounding of the principal character as such a figure demands scrutiny. Third, owing to the genre's limitation upon the number of actors, it is more than likely that the same actor played the part of both Lycus and Heracles. Lycus is portrayed as utterly base, an unscrupulous and calculating murderer, who is defiantly provocative, while Heracles is presented as a noble warrior and affectionate father, whose misfortunes are not intentional or self-willed. At a meta-theatrical level, this dualism of single actor and dual characters transgresses the mimetic boundary, and it may be read as more than merely a reference to the dyadic parentage of Heracles of a god and a mortal. In addition, it probes the nature of the gods and their purposes in relation to humankind, exemplified in the divine admixture to the human Heracles, since they display both exemplary and base qualities (Papadopoulou 2005: 25); and it also questions the nature of human character[4] in a time of war, or in a time of an intermittent and "volatile" peace, when acts of violence are undertaken by those who, usually, are peaceable. Fourth, Euripides again disturbs the tragic fault-line and overturns the expectation of a dominant, powerful, even violent, female character. The initial perception of Megara as simply "the children's mother" and an annoying "extra", since it is the children that threaten the future power of Lycus, and it is the welfare of the children which appears to concern Heracles more readily, is challenged by the nobility with which she conducts herself, her rational approach to her situation, her desire for honour and not disgrace, and her care of the children, "whom, like a bird, I keep the chicks under my wings" (ll. 71-72), an image that is contrasted to

4. In the ancient context, perhaps "character" is more appropriate than "personality", since the latter may suggest an "internal life" more appropriate to modern psychology.

Heracles' use of the same term, while in a state of derangement: "This is one of the chicks of Eurystheus, dead" (l. 982). This presentation of Megara, quite possibly, ruptures the theatrical "fourth wall", in order to portray the role and importance of women, as they exercise, what may be perceived to be "manly" virtues. It may provide a particularly apposite contrast to their husbands in a situation where they may be absent exercising the ("womanly") heightened emotions of passion in warfare. Fifth, the sudden appearance of gods, and here of Iris and Lyssa in line 822, in the middle of Euripidean dramas, has no parallel (Barlow 1996: 160), which is both a redrafting of a theatrical convention, and also, and pertinently, the foregrounding, in a graphic manner, of a suggested central action, as noted below. Finally, it is possible to view the presentation of Heracles, who commits atrocities when deceived by the gods – seeing, but not seeing correctly – as an indictment of the deities, a rejection of an enchanted world view (Papadopoulou 2005: 188), and a call to human community and friendship.

These meta-theatrical tremors sabotage the cause of the *pleromatist* interpreters, who determine the success or otherwise of a literary work within the hermetic seal of, or what approximates to, New Critical interpretive techniques (Scott 2004: 179).[5] In a dramatic work, as, mutatis mutandis, in a poem or a novel, meaning, so it is asserted by these proponents, resides within the unfolding plot, which, in this particular instance, is taken to be episodic, nontraditional, and which attenuates into a situation "emptied of all authority and reduced to the verbal sparring of friends" (Dunn 1996: 119). Unfortunately, it remains the case that "[p]oetry in our contemporary world would seem to exist in a largely autonomous sphere, distinct from both science and wisdom. Nevertheless, the idea that poetry should instruct at the same time as giving pleasure has been one of the constants in Western culture, at least into the nineteenth century" (Scott 2004: 179), and one avers in other cultures as well, and, particularly, amongst the "makers of plots" of Athens (Allan 2005: 81).[6] Indeed, the poets of antiquity did not simply provide entertainment. Both the tragedies and the comedies, which

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5. Scott (2004: 179) is writing of Dante, but his remark is not without import since it assists in contextualising Dante's endeavour in the *Commedia* and, indeed, the presence of Virgil in the work: "After Auden's pronouncement that 'poetry makes nothing happen' and the doctrines of art for art's sake and hermeticism, any insistence on the alliance between poetry, knowledge, and wisdom such as we find embodied in Dante's Virgil may be difficult for the modern reader to accept".

6. Allan (2005: 81) argues that "[m]uch recent scholarship has insisted on the importance of tragedy's civic and political setting. It is equally crucial not to neglect its wider intellectual context, nor to reduce its interrogative range to issues of collective ideology".

were produced at the dramatic festivals, endeavoured to educate and instruct the citizenry by reminding them of their collective tradition of learning and wisdom (Croally 2005). In the plays, the myths were revisited, quarried, and retold, and the shared values of the tradition were emphasised, in order to reaffirm the joint possession of their tradition and the unity of their community (Ford 2002). However, even though the poets endeavoured to teach and to remind the audience of their common tradition, they also used their plays to interrogate the prevailing customs and practices, and, quite specifically, within that milieu "Euripides' characters are more inclined than Aeschylus' or Sophocles' to challenge the order of things" (Gregory 2005: 264).

3 Towards a Central Action

Appropriating Euripides' use of experimental and meta-theatrical devices, Riley (2008: 24) foregrounds "two startling and pivotal innovations – the introduction of the usurper Lycus and the placing of the labours before the murder of the children ... [as] ... proof that the opening scenes have a positive purpose, that they are, in fact, our best guide to interpreting the madness which follows". This is a strong claim, and the notions of "proof" and "interpretation" transgress the mimetic arena, and, subsequently, when the viewer has returned across the foyer, generate interpretation*s*, which do not, of necessity, *only* suggest a trajectory *to* the madness, but also one *through* the madness. Here the assertion of Riley (2008: 24-30, esp. 29) may be productive, for she notes that the early exchange between Amphitryon and Lycus about Heracles' prowess in battle (ll. 140-235), and the choral ode which recounts the Labours (ll. 348-441), emphasise the ability and power of a mortal hero of moral excellence, and are "a pointed humanization of Herakles ... [and] ... Herakles does not assume Olympian airs or boasts .... All his concern is centred on his family and, far from having any hubristic pretension to autonomy, he stresses the importance of cooperative human values (ll. 633-636) and accepts the sound advice of his father (l. 606)". In fact, such an observation permits the frenzy and the homicidal mania of Heracles to be placed in the context of the portrayal both before, and also after, this corybantic and delusional insanity. Beforehand, Heracles is presented as the exemplary man in the performance of his duty to his family and to the civic community; afterwards, Heracles is severed from the most meaningful of consanguineous and *koinônic* alliances, and then, in *aporia*, in bewilderment of his deed, he leans upon a long-standing and bonded friendship. As immediate and absolute as was the affection of Heracles for his family, so too is the loyal devotion of Theseus to Heracles – "I am not concerned about myself; rather, I am prepared to participate in your woes" (l. 1220). This is a love that draws close to that of "dying for a friend"; or, as in David Algie's adaptation of this play, entitled, *Home Front* (2006), of exercising a "mercy-killing" of a friend, who, after committing a

similar act, turns away from the initial decision of suicide in preference to one which requires enduring "sack cloth and ashes" and a long life of penance, remorse, and self-recrimination (Riley 2008: 352-355).[7] Furthermore, that Theseus comes from Athens deliberately interpolates a locative association for the Athenian audience and all that this may entail, and purposefully denotes that this scene of the tragic as a site of otherness – Thebes – and its characters as foreigners – of Argos and Thebes – is, in fact, the metonymic site of their own city, and that the characters are themselves, or, at least, are addressing their own condition (Goldhill 2007: 125-126).[8]

4 A Central Action of the *Heracles*?

Here, and all too briefly, it may be useful to turn to one aspect of the inaugurating text of literary criticism, namely the *Poetics* of Aristotle. The conviction of Riley (2008: 357) that "Euripides' text, with its unreasoned madness and unconditional *philia*, enables us to conceive a positive ... rendering of the transcendent human nobility and fellowship at its heart", addresses the quest for *a* central action – interpreters can by no means be definitive – of the *Heracles.* Indeed, the debate concerning the separation of *action* from *plot* in classical drama theory is not without its own, and, as is rightly pertinent to all classics, perennial hermeneutical disputes. But the contemporary scholarly opinion may be tending toward a viewpoint expressed somewhat hesitantly by Halliwell (1986: 141-142) that, for Aristotle, "the 'action' (*praxis*) ... is the pattern discernible in the 'actions and life' which the poet dramatizes. As such, it can be described as the object or content of the plot-structure (*muthos*), which can in turn be understood to be the design or significant organization of the work of art". Although others have been more strident in their support for such a view

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7. In Algie's play, both "Harrison" (Heracles) and "Ted" (Theseus) are lifelong friends, and have been comrades during the Vietnam War. The latter, who is now the local deputy sheriff, is faced with arresting the former for murdering his family, whom he mistakenly supposes are members of the Vietcong.

8. Goldhill (2007: 125-126) observes that

> [t]ragedy ... unlike comedy, is set in other places, at other times, and involves other people. Tragedy is staged at the scene of the other .... Tragedy may be set at the scene of the other, but it turns out to be about us. Tragedy raises questions about each one of us, our sense of self-knowledge, yet to do so it takes a detour through the other. What look like stories about others, prove to go to the heart of the self. Indeed, it is *because* tragedy takes this strange detour that it can be so powerful. It gets past the censor, the checkpoints that prevent an audience's engagement with the staged action.

(see Jones 1962; Aylen 1964: 28-29,153-159; Kitto 1951: 185-186, Kitto, 1956: 233), their agreement has allowed Eagleton (2003: 27) to admit that, in tragedy, "what grips the imagination is the death of the hero", while asserting that a former professor of Drama at Cambridge, Raymond Williams, "is right to insist that 'the ordinary tragic action is what happens *through* the hero'" (original emphasis), and that, for Aristotle, "the latter is included for the sake of the former" (Kermode 1979: 153-154, n. 2; also see Mossman 1995: 138-139). For Aristotle (*Poetics* 1450a: 16-17), "tragedy is the imitation not of people but of an action and of life", an assertion repeated several times in the *Poetics* (1449b: 24, 36; 1450a: 3-4; 1451a: 16-19; 1462b: 11). If this is the case, what then may be a central action of the *Heracles*?

Conjectures about the intention of an implied author are not without their own disputatious debates, but one proposes that, in the *Heracles*, the "object" of the plot, which itself serves that purpose, is the affirmation of family bonds and the ties of friendship. The play opens with an account by Amphitryon of his family history, the relationship of his wife with Zeus, which produced his stepson, Heracles, who married Megara; the murder of Megara's father, Creon, and the desire of the usurper, Lycus, to kill him, his daughter-in-law, and his three grandsons. Immediately, the entire lineage is established, but it is an irregular one in its provenance, which already raises a concern, and, in addition, it is an incomplete one, without its paterfamilias. Less seriously, the natural line is not direct; more seriously, it is fractured, and is under threat of utter demise. One suggests that of some emphasis for a spectator or reader is the description by Amphitryon of himself as a "nurse" and "housekeeper" (l. 45); two roles which are reserved for women. Thus, in a situation of extremity – lest the children of Heracles die (l. 47) – demarcated roles matter little. Palpable too, quite probably, is the wider socio-political uncertainty – perhaps even hinted at in its partly discontinuous lineage – and its impact upon many households, in which the paterfamilias was absent, either killed in battle or on active service, owing to a war that had already begun. In addition, one conjectures that, during a time of war or of a friable truce, of the four rituals that preceded the performance of the tragedies in Athens, the one that would generate a more emotive response – both of pride, but also, and, possibly, during such a time, more especially, of pity – would be the procession of the "war orphans" (Hornblower 1991: 315). They were raised and schooled at the State's expense, and at the end of this period "they were presented with a suit of armour, and in front of the collected citizens in the theatre, they publicly took a moving oath" (Goldhill 2007: 122). Moreover, it may not be insignificant that the murder of the children is more prominently recounted and more tellingly regretted, since often they are the innocent victims in times of war. Thucydides' (VII 29.5) response to the Thracian slaying of the schoolchildren in Mycalessus in 413 BCE, as "a misfortune that fell upon the whole city, much more unexpected and terrible than any other", would

be no less appropriate at any other time. But rather than draw that context in bold relief, undoubtedly it is the family that is prominently exposed in the opening scenes of the *Heracles*, and it is the depths of familial relationships that are both scrutinised and exhibited, and, in fact, celebrated, in spite of the broken line of parentage.

Euripides not only revisits and alters the mythic sequence, but he also ostends "a remarkable portrait of an affectionate father and his loving sons which is *unparalleled* in Greek tragedy" (Griffiths 2006: 72; my italics). "From various directions" (l. 73), the children pester their mother with questions about their father (ll. 73-76), who is their playful companion, as Megara recalls of one of the children, Heracles "throwing about your head in the lion's skin" (ll. 465-466; see also through to l. 473). But this exaltation of family life may well foreground itself as a target of opprobrium, of jealousy, and of a malignant divine caprice, since its portrait is generated by the adultery of Zeus. For Heracles, quite possibly for Euripides – conjectures of authorial intention attract their own opprobrium – the one common human attribute is "loving one's children" (l. 636).[9] Notwithstanding the meta-theatrical aspects of the characterisation of Megara, the prominence of this ubiquitous human disposition is evident in her, when, at the point of their slaying by Lycus, she expresses her inmost and inconsolable grief: "Which of you might I hold against my breast first, and which last? Or kiss or hold?" (ll. 485-487). Amphitryon is not without his role as a defender of the family. He upholds the courage of his son in the face of Lycus' disparagement – "I am concerned to demonstrate the ignorance of this man by my argument" (ll. 171-173). But given his age and lack of physical strength, he also laments his condition as "an enfeebled friend … who can do nothing other than make a noise" (ll. 228-229), which disables him from accomplishing a more vigorous counter-attack on behalf of his daughter-in-law and grandsons.

Madness descends, and, with it, uxoricide and infanticide. But the dissolution of the family does not mean the dissolution of the suggested action of the play. Rather, it may be argued that the murder of Megara and the children by Heracles more forcefully foregrounds this action as the centre upon which the consequent, and not unimportant, issues focus, and that, since the immediate family is dead, this action returns in as proximate a

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9. The rendering of this line as specific – that is, "Everyone loves their *own* [my italics] children" – rather than general, is resisted, because it may suggest a more rational than deranged action by Heracles, who, at that moment, thinks that they are the children of his enemy rather than his own. Rather, quite specifically, the audience has been prepared for his madness, by means of the "confusion of his thoughts", which is performatively demonstrated – one can envision Iris shaking, "the skipping of her feet", and twisting about like a "rope" as it is "lowered" (ll. 835-837).

form as may be possible, that of the inextricable and indissoluble union of friendship.

The speech by Iris to a fearful Chorus highlights the issues of family bonds. She, with Lyssa, is one of the two agents of Hera, the wife of Zeus, whose vengeance is not about "bringing harm to the city; rather, we march upon the house of one man" (ll. 824-825), a man who is then identified with respect to his lineage, "whom they say is Alcmene's child from Zeus" (l. 826). The statement that Zeus protected Heracles from Hera while he was engaged in the Labours is a statement of dutiful fatherly care (ll. 828-829). But it is also an assertion that there are limits to that protective care, and thus it speaks of the nature of the gods and of their power, a matter not without import to this play. The deed that Heracles will commit is "family murder" (l. 831). The word *koinos* is translated here as "family", or, perhaps better, "kindred", and although the word may engender the wider associations of the shared life of the community, the type of bloodshed is then specified: this is "the slaying of the children" (l. 832). Heracles is "driven by madness" (ll. 835 & 837); he is a "child murderer" (l. 835), a father whose deeds are grotesquely portrayed: "with his own murderous hand, he weaves a garland of his beautiful children" (l. 839), who depart from the light of day. Given the notion of "loving one's children" within the mimetic world of the drama, it is only in a state of madness that such an act could be undertaken, but this notion of abnormality, even of insanity, and its implications simultaneously are present in the real world of the spectators, who reside both within the heightened mania of a fractured peace in a time of war, but also who experience the resultant disruption of the effects of warfare upon their lives, from the disturbance of the quotidian and normal tasks to the wounded and broken lives of the unprotected and the inevitable deaths of the innocent. In this light, the irony in Lyssa's succeeding remarks is evident. Heracles, for all the esteem in which he is held – and Lyssa pleads his cause most eloquently (ll. 849-854) – is not excluded from the impact and implications of the destructive visitation of this madness, and, therefore, nor is anybody else: war ravages and is no respecter of persons, with the result, and to personify the conflagration of war in Lyssa's words, "I shall rip down your hall, and cast down your house" (l. 864). These wider implications possibly are palpable too in the use of *genos* in the ensuing cry of the Chorus of the impending destruction (l. 886), a term with semantic extension beyond that of "family" to an "age", "generation", or "race". And when the Messenger emerges from the house, he says that "insufferable things" (l. 911), which cannot be forgotten, are occurring. And when he states that "what we have suffered is beyond speech" (l. 916), he evokes a *traditio* of "wordless words" spoken across all ages by those who have seen and witnessed the horrors of war, of "those things which cannot be spoken about". But in an age of less visible graphic depictions, where the violent deeds were undertaken offstage, the saga must be related. The descriptions

in the speech of the Messenger portray no less an inhuman brutality than the visual images of the Holocaust, or those of the killing fields of Cambodia.

One of the reasons for the reticence to recount the acts undertaken and observed during military operations may be the disjunction between the soldier and the civilian. The transition of a husband and a father to a soldier and a killer leaves the latter unrecognisable as the former. In the *Heracles*, the transformation occurs before the eyes of the innocent victims, in the same sense that the change in the demeanour of the soldier would occur on the battlefield, and the words spoken of Heracles are not alien to a father or brother turned military killer: "He was no longer himself" (l. 931). If *hautos* here is translated as "the same", then the impact is direct: indeed, the warrior is not "the same" person as the husband and father, who sits before the hearth of the family, and who now, in his state of manic butcher, is portrayed with rolling eyes, which expose the veins, and foam dripping down from his mouth into his beard (ll. 932-934), which conjures up an extreme, bestial image that serves to engender not simply a belligerent spirit ready for the war, but one which depicts the emotional impulses and lack of rationality that combat invokes. More specifically, in this state of preparedness for battle, Heracles asks for his chosen weapon, the "bow" (l. 942), which Lycus earlier had disparaged as the weapon of a coward (l. 162), and Heracles imagines that he is "going to Mycenae" (l. 943; cf. l. 963) to engage in violent and destructive acts.

The poignancy evident in the slaying of the children could not have been drawn more exactly. It is the innocent and those who do not "understand" this manic aggression, who become the purveyors of compassion as they reach out for understanding, as one of the children does, by "casting his hand up to his father's chin and neck" (l. 987). But they are "in the way", and perceptible here is an often bewildered civilian population, who find themselves "caught in the line of fire", and who are categorised as "collateral damage". But, when the murders have been committed with "the club" (l. 993) and "one arrow" (l. 1000), and the conflict is over, the battle won, it is the victor who emerges now bound like a prisoner of war, since even the victor is bound to his deeds and their implications: "ropes, with their many supporting nooses, fasten Heracles to the stone pillars" (ll. 1035-1037). The fear of Amphitryon that the bellicosity of combat may continue after the battle, a fear that confronts the families and communities of those returning from warfare, invokes his plea to the Chorus, lest the bound and dazed Heracles awakes: "Elders, will you not cry the lament stilly?" (ll. 1053-1054).[10]

The emphasis on the relational bonds of family and friendship that bind the central characters together in this play causes some resistance to an exclusive focus on the chief protagonist in the wake of the slaughter. Thus,

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10. These words are attributed to Amphitryon by Hermann.

rather than the synaptic node – the sense of a "nerve centre" is not without purpose – residing in line 931 ("He was no longer himself/the same"), the location preferred by interpreters in a post-Freudian age, one suggests that line 1133, informed by line 1132, may be preferable. When looking upon the conflagration and destruction of organised human aggression, the question that is asked, and which, once again, transgresses temporal restrictions, turns away from an exclusive focus upon the perpetrator, as in l. 931, and allows him to look outward: "In my wretched state, what is this sight I see?" (l. 1132). Amphitryon's answer is both specific, with reference to the children of Heracles, and general, with respect to the visitation of suffering upon the innocent, and, furthermore, upon the future, upon one's children's children, which is emphasised by Amphitryon calling Heracles "child": "My child, you hastened a war against your children, that was no war" (l. 1133). Looking on this "darkness" (l. 1159), it is unsurprising that suicide is contemplated (ll. 1146-1152; 1241; 1247), since "there is no darkness here like a black cloud that would conceal the circumstances of your wretched deeds" (ll. 1216-1217).

It is not without signification that when Heracles is "about to dip the torch in his right hand into the sacred water" (l 928-929), the madness descends upon him. The gods themselves are subjected to scrutiny in this drama, since "they do not respect the law and commit adultery with one another, and they chain their fathers and dishonour them because they wish to assert their despotic power" (ll. 1316-1318). Their actions defy customary behaviour. They possess no reverence or respect for their parents, and, with reference to Heracles, they act out of jealousy and spite, in a play in which "the incompleteness or arbitrary transience of divine favour is perhaps most strikingly exemplified" (Mastronarde 2005: 76). But, as Theseus points out: "nevertheless, they reside on Olympus, and have suffered their misdeeds" (ll. 1318-1319).

To whom does one turn, if one turns away from the gods, since they are the instigators of the murders and the subsequent misfortunes of Heracles, or, more specifically, if these actions are engendered by the jealousy (l. 1309) of the spouse of Zeus (l. 1312)? An auto-reliance, which severs a person from being responsible and accountable to the community and its mores, is not the answer, in spite of the defence by Amphitryon of Heracles as a lone archer against the argument of Lycus for the superior bravery of the infantryman who fights alongside the fellow soldiers of his company (ll. 188ff.), because the consequences of the individual pursuit by Heracles of his Labours are extreme both for his family (Gregory 1991 quoted in Barlow 1996: 134), which has contributed to their being "friendless" (ll. 55-59; 558-559), as well as for the city of Thebes, which has witnessed the murder of their king and his replacement by Lycus. Theseus offers both the counsel – "for now you are in need of friends" (l. 1337) – and, with his own outstretched hand evoked by his words, also the gesture – "give your hand to a friend who might help" (l. 1398). The "yoke" that binds the family is

replaced by "a yoke of friendship" (l. 1403), as, at Theseus' instruction, Heracles places his hand around the neck of Theseus (l. 1402). These "yoke-bonds" of friendship, which extend outward from the first and natural relationships within the family, are championed as being superior to "riches" or "might" (l. 1425). As the children grow older within the nuclear unit, so they change from being "small boats", which are towed, and become "ships", which tow their own "small boats" (ll. 631, 1424). But this term, "small boats", ruptures the boundary of the inclusive nuclear family unity, since, while it is employed first by Heracles of his children, since he is the one who tows them, he then uses it of himself, as now he is led away – towed – by Theseus (ll. 631-632 & l. 1424). And when the relational bonds of family and, by extension, of friendship are affirmed, then the natural cycle of birth and death is more usual. Thus, in Heracles' instruction to his father, Amphitryon, to bury his children (l. 1419), he is able to turn away from an abnormal filial duty to the reaffirmation of a normal one, because when Amphitryon asks, in a question specifically directed to his child: "Who will bury me, son?" (l. 1419), Heracles replies, "I will" (l. 1420), which may be a literal "change of subject" by Amphitryon from the children to himself, as Dunn (1996: 115) asserts, but is not a thematic change. Rather, it is suggested, the lesson, the action, is underlined, and the quality of friendship, which is essential to human well-being, is generated within, and focused upon, the family, which, when destroyed, is replicated and emulated in the only literary trope and mode of human existence that is available, namely, the portrayal and enacting of the trustworthy covenant of friendship.

In addition, it may be proposed that this "doubling" of the family bond in friendship engenders the *katharsis* that Aristotle may have sought, when employing this "most vexed" (Halliwell [1995]1999: 17) term of the *Poetics*. The "fear" that tragedy engenders denotes an intellectual realisation that the suffering of the principal character is not his alone, but that it is a shared human experience. His undeserved suffering warrants "pity", which results in an intellectual awareness and cognition on the part of the viewer of the reason for experiencing pity and fear. This intellectual, mental act constitutes an epistemic, rather than a medical (Craik 2006: 293, 297), process of purgation, and defines the experience, reorders the emotions, and "purifies" them of their threat (Belfiore 1992: 246, 299-300; Meagher 2006: 20; Golden 1992: 37, 31; de Kock & Cilliers 1991: 131-132). Therefore it involves "a transformation in which a tragic audience's cognitive understanding interacts with its highly charged emotional response" (Halliwell 2005: 405) and causes a reintegration of the aroused emotions through an act of intellection. Thus, drawing on Aristotle, the cathartic experience of viewing the *Heracles* is one of undergoing, of suffering, the emotional effects for the sake of reaffirming the relational bonds of family and friendship.

5 Conclusion

From the Theatre of Dionysus, the sixteen thousand spectators departed, probably during the period of the fragile Peace of Nicias (421-416 BCE),[11] an uncertain "truce and alliance between the Spartans and the Athenians", which was not adhered to everywhere, and during which "they continued to harm one another greatly" (Thucydides V. 25). The disruption of relationships in a time of war, and which is most acutely experienced within the family, would, one conjectures, be the experience of some, and not be far from the thoughts of many others.[12] Not unlike the *Hecuba*, which "never forgets the war ... but is concerned with its more indirect effects" (Mossman 1995: 206), the *Heracles*, perhaps, is more deeply embedded with the whole range of battle sounds – the threats of armed troublemakers and the din of their brawls, the triumphant strains of victory and the despairing wails of defeat, the pitiful cries of the suffering and the absent noise of the dead – in the dialogue and odes of hostility and affection, of enmity and friendship.[13] And in order to focus the action, the *Heracles* ostends family relationships at their most precious, by displaying them at their most devastated.[14]

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11. On the date, see fn. 3. But also, and significantly, Meagher (2006: xi) suggests that "[a]lthough 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 BCE". One is uncertain, however, whether this view is shared by most of the commentators, and, while all admit that any date remains speculative, this earlier dating does cohere more readily with Meagher's reading of the play.

12. Meagher (2006: 5) is adamant 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 own.

13. Of the Peloponnesian War, Meagher (2006: 49) notes that "[i]slands, 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".

14. The remark by Rowan Williams (2008: 1) in his recent book on Dostoevsky is not without relevance:
> The novels [of Dostoevsky] ask us, in effect, whether we can imagine a human community of language and feeling in which, even if we were incapable of fully realizing it, we know what was due to each other; whether we could imagine living in the consciousness of a solidity or

The cost of warfare already is evident to the playwright and to his audience, and in the aftermath of every skirmish, and with each threshold on the road to greater hostility crossed, the encroaching lamentations, the self-lacerating questions, the perplexing meaning of life in the face of death, and the termination of the relational bonds that both kindle and continue to fuel the cause of being human, are thrown into sharp relief. In this borderland of uncertainty, a region to which citizens are driven more often by selective and passionate political rhetoric than by considered and rational deliberation, an intentional meditation on the "madness" of being human, on those "manic" extremes to which people are led, and on their consequences, is required of the close circle of characters which constitutes the family, and of the intricate alliances and complex interdependencies that radiate outward from it, and which both support it and are supported by it, and which together extend the boundaries of economic, political, and cultural well-being of the community and the society. From the more proximate, familial, and intimate to the more distant, social, and companionable arcs of human relationships, the insanity of heightened individual and civic aggression threatens and subverts the human project, and this is a madness forcibly and ostentatiously exhibited in warfare.

*All Classical Greek translations were undertaken by the author.

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depth in each other which no amount of failure, suffering, or desolation could eradicate. *But in order to put such a challenge, the novels have to invite us to imagine precisely those extremes of failure, suffering, and desolation.*

(Williams 2008: 1; my italics)

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