Rhetoric, Irony, and the Ending of Euripides' Herakles

In memoriam
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No play has provoked more controversy about its unity and meaning than Euripides' Herakles.¹ The drama opens with a tableau of suppliants: Herakles' wife, his children, and his mortal father Amphitryon sit at the altar of Zeus soter, seeking to escape death at the hands of the recent usurper Lykos.

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Threatened with the burning of the altar and despairing of Herakles’ return (he cannot, we are repeatedly told, come back from his final labor in Hades), the family abandons the altar and yields to death. In the play’s first peripety, Herakles arrives, rescues his family, and dispatches the wicked tyrant. No sooner does the chorus celebrate his victory and rejoice in the apparent proof of a theodicy than Iris and Lyssa appear and madden Herakles into murdering his family. Shamed when he learns of these murders, Herakles decides on suicide. But when Theseus appears, this action also is thwarted. In a lengthy debate Theseus eventually persuades Herakles to renounce suicide and to live with him in Athens.

This debate between the two men contains a celebrated passage. Theseus has tried to persuade Herakles to continue living; the opening of Herakles’ reply is the passage in question (1340–46): 2

οἶμοι πάρεσσα ἄρ’ ἔστ’ ἐμοὶ κακῶν· ἐγὼ δὲ τοὺς θεοὺς οὔτε λέκτα ἀ μὴ θέμις στέργειν νομίζω δειμά τ’ ἐξάπττειν χεροῖν οὔτ’ ἔμεινα πάσποτ’ οὔτε πείσομαι ὅδ’ ἄλλον ἄλλου δεσπότην πεφυκέναι. δεύται γὰρ ὁ θεὸς, ἐπερ ἕστ’ ὄθεν ὁ θεός, οὖθεν ὕππνότων οἴδε δύσπηνοι λόγοι.

In a play much concerned with divine justice, these lines bear on the play’s unity and meaning. Critical opinion on their significance is sharply divided. Many argue that these lines undermine the mythological foundations of the play, while the other pole of opinion would have it that the lines are merely the “voice of the poet.” I attempt to offer a new reading of these lines, considering their rhetoric, their narrow and their broader contexts, and their function as part of the drama’s ironic ending.

Previous attempts to confront this interpretative problem have for the most part either exaggerated or minimized the importance of these lines. The former approach is represented most clearly in Verrall and Greenwood. For Verrall this statement by Herakles was the cornerstone of the play. 3 Herakles’ pronouncement, he argued, invalidated the entire preceding action of the drama. This argument, however, forced Verrall to reduce the startling and impressive appearance of the divinities in mid-play to a dream of the chorus, and he glossed over the contradictory conclusion of Herakles’ speech. 4 Greenwood, trying to improve on Verrall’s interpretation, contended that Euripides presented what might be called a “conditional drama,” explaining, “Euripides

4. Verrall ([supra n.3] 192) described the conclusion as “the single and final touch of irony, which warns us that the fierce feelings, and even the insane beliefs, which fill the preceding speech [1255ff.], may still be revived.” See below for a discussion of the speech’s conclusion.
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says to us in effect 'what you see in my play could not have occurred, but if the received story were true, what would have occurred is just what you see in my play.' The events of the play are a fantasy, a fiction. But this approach fails to explain how, in the words of one critic, "the gods of myth appear as impossible while the moving and edifying human elements in the action succeed in transcending the mythological nonsense." A full-fledged critique of these interpretations is not offered here; let it suffice to point out that both views, by ignoring other elements in the play and neglecting much of its dramatic force, fail to give a satisfying account of the drama as a whole.

Other critics have taken the opposite approach, denying the lines any dramatic value: far from being the cornerstone of the play, they have no dramatic effect at all. These critics have claimed the lines as a belief of the poet's own or as a reflection of his interest in contemporary speculation. The "voice of the poet" breaks through in the character Herakles, and the passage is thereby rescued through biographical criticism. But speculation on the poet's belief is just that—speculation. We shall never know what Euripides did or did not believe. More importantly, these words are spoken by the character Herakles in the play, and we must attempt to make sense of them in that context.

The narrow context is a debate between Theseus and Herakles, and we should examine that before considering the broader context of the whole drama. When he learns fully what he has done, Herakles decides to end his own life (1146ff.). As he contemplates the traditional methods, Theseus' arrival interrupts his thoughts of suicide (1153–54). Theseus wishes to help his fallen friend, even at the risk of pollution (1234). The stichomythia between the two men (1229–54) produces no conclusion but details their positions: Herakles is determined to die and feels helpless under Hera's sway, while Theseus urges him to live, appealing to his greatness and endurance. In a rhesis (1255–1310) Herakles then outlines for Theseus how from the very beginning his life has been and continues to be unlivable (ἀναστάτως δὲ οὐ/ἀδρόμων ἡμῖν νῦν τε καὶ πάροιχεν δὴ, 1256–57). Hera's hatred, unsurprisingly, plays a large role in Herakles' narrative, and with a stinging attack on her he ends his speech, concluding (1307–10):

6. Conacher (supra n.1) 81; Conacher, it should be pointed out, for all his criticisms of Greenwood, agrees with the "general truth" of his thesis.
7. See the critiques by Arrowsmith (supra n.1) lxxvii—xcii, and Rohdich (supra n.1) 79–80.
8. Among those who have held this view are Wilamowitz, ed., Euripides: Herakles (Berlin 1895; rpt. Darmstadt 1959), III, 271–72; G. Grube, The Drama of Euripides (London 1941) 58–59; H. Chalk, "APETH and BIA in Euripides' Herakles," JHS 82 (1962) 15 n.39; and A. Brown, "Wretched Tales of Poets: Euripides, Heracles 1340–6," PCPS n.s.24 (1978) 24. These critics see no dramatic value in the lines because they reflect the poet's belief or interests; others, it should be noted, including Verrall and Greenwood, see both dramatic significance and a reflection of the poet's belief in this passage. G. Bond, ed., Euripides: Heracles (Oxford 1981) 400, concedes that they "may well reflect Euripides' own considered view" but correctly adds that "that is another matter."
The chorus,9 in the familiar role of buffer between two speakers, follows with confirmation of Hera's involvement (1311–12).

The opening of Theseus' reply is lacunose. How much is remains uncertain, but a small gap seems likely.10 The opening possibly went something like this: (If you were to be the only person defiled by misfortune) I would advise you (to kill yourself) rather than to suffer ill.11 But Herakles is not the only one to suffer misfortunes; no one of mortals is exempt, nor of gods (1314–21):

οὐδεὶς δὲ θνητῶν ταῖς τύχαις ἀσήματος,
οὐ θεῶν, ἀοιδῶν ἐπερ οὐ θευδεὶς λόγοι.
οὐ λέκτρι ἐν ἄλληλουσι, ἂν οὐδεὶς νόμος,
συνήπαν; οὐ δεσμοίσι διά τυραννίδα
πατέρας ἐκηλίδωσαν; ἀλλ' ὀικοῦ ὀμος
'Ολυμπὸν ἤνεσχοντο θ' ημαρθηκότες.
καίτοι τί φήσεις, εἰ οὐ μὲν θνητὸς γεγώς
φέρεις υπέρφευ τὰς τύχας, θεοὶ δὲ μὴ;

Just as the gods err but continue to live on Olympos, so too, Theseus argues, Herakles must bear his misfortunes and stay alive.12 The ring (τύχαις . . .

9. Wilamowitz, ed., in translation and commentary, Murray, and Diggle are among those who correctly follow Camper's attribution of these lines to the chorus; Nauck, Prinz-Wecklein, and Parmentier are among those who retain the mss. attribution to Theseus.

10. Kroeker (supra n.1) 95–96, and M. Pohlzen, Die griechische Tragödie1 (Göttingen 1954) II, 125, argue unconvincingly for a longish gap. H. Drexler, "Zum Herakles des Euripides," NAKG 1943 nr. 9, 333 n.21, makes a strong case for a slight one, perhaps of only one verse. This view is supported by J. de Romilly, "Le refus du suicide dans l'Héraklès d'Euripide," ARXAIOGNOSIA 1 (1980) 3.

11. This is Bond's, ed., 393, reworking of Drexler's reconstruction; Bond aptly cites Iliad 12.322ff. as a parallel.

12. On mythological exempla in tragedy, see R. Oehler, "Mythologische Exempla in der älteren griechischen Dichtung" (diss. Basel 1925) 78–111, and H. Friis Johansen, General Reflection in Tragic Rhetoric: A Study of Form (Copenhagen 1959) 50–53. The closest parallel to Herakles 1314–21 in both language and situation is the Nurse's speech at Hipp. 451 ff., where she tries to persuade Phaidra to abandon, like Herakles, thoughts of suicide. In Phaidra's case, however, the argument based on the divinities has a clearer relevance: both Phaidra and the gods are overcome by the great power of love; in this regard Phaidra suffers no differently from the gods. With Herakles the comparison shows up a significant disparity. Theseus alludes to the very familiar tales of divine adultery and binding and revolt, acts chosen by the gods, errors they committed (ἡμαρθηκότες, 1319) and then put up with. In making the comparison to Herakles' case, Theseus uses the neutral τύχη, ἀμάρτημα is not τύχη. Theseus' well-intentioned sleight-of-tongue makes clear the essential difference in the situations: the gods err, while Herakles is erred against.
τύχας, 1314, 1321) marks off this section of the speech, and with μὲν οὖν (1322) Theseus turns from this general principle to the specifics of what he offers Herakles: a luxurious life and honorific burial in Athens, all a return for Herakles' rescue of his friend Theseus.

At this point Herakles makes his pronouncement on the gods as preface to his speech, beginning (1340) ὁμοι· πάρεσθαι (1341) τάδε ἔστι ἐμῶν κακῶν. The opening line poses more than one problem. To what does τάδε refer? ὅδε usually looks forward, but, of course, very frequently does not. It is most improbable that here it refers to what follows, Herakles' own remarks on the gods in response to Theseus, since this makes little sense of the exclamatory ὁμοι·.14 If, then, τάδε looks back, does it refer to Theseus' offer of gifts, asylum, and heroic burial, or to his comments on the gods, or both? It cannot refer to the gifts, even though they are the nearer potential antecedent, because Herakles does in fact accept Theseus' offer: he will go to Athens and enjoy the proffered gifts (1351-52). τάδε harks back, rather, to Theseus' arguments about the gods, as the rest of Herakles' speech makes clear: these arguments are what he goes on to rebuff. δέ at 1341, then, is the equivalent of γάρ, as is often the case.15 The likely supplement in 1340 is μὲν,16 but the δέ that responds is, as just stated, not in the following line but at 1347 (ἐσκεφώμεν δέ).

Herakles replies quite specifically to Theseus' arguments, meeting his logic point for point.17 Gods do not commit adultery (1341-42, responding to 1316-17); gods do not bind one another in chains (1342, replying to 1317-18); one god is not tyrant of another (1344, echoing διὰ τυφανύδα, 1317). The final two lines of the proem then supply the reason for Herakles' assertions and explain the source of these fictions: ᾧ ὁδῶν ὁδέ δύστηκοι λόγοι, 1346. This concluding statement overturns Theseus' assumption (1315).18

Herakles, having rejected Theseus' arguments (a rejection explained at 1341-46), now offers his own reasoning for continuing to live. This reasoning balances (δέ, 1347) the rejection (μὲν, 1340):

13. I am convinced that a monosyllabic word has fallen out and see no cause for more elaborate emendation. See the appendix of Prinz-Wecklein, eds., for other possibilities.
14. Wilamowitz, ed., ad 1340, suggests that ὁμοι· signals Herakles' repugnance at the necessity of discussing metaphysics, and, implicitly, that τάδε looks forward. But this interpretation, which involves a brachylogic reading of 1341 (ἐγὼ δέ ... νομίζω=λέξιον δέ, νομίζω γάρ), produces an awkward transition between the speech's opening lines (1340-46) and what follows.
15. See J. D. Denniston, Greek Particles (Oxford 1954) 169-70.
16. Accepted by Prinz-Wecklein, Wilamowitz, Murray, and Parmentier. γάρ is attractive paleographically and would make good sense explaining the exclamatory ὁμοι·; see, e.g., Her. 1140 and Denniston (supra n.15) 80. This supplement is certainly possible and would only slightly alter the rhetoric of the speech as I read it, by giving greater weight to the δέ of 1347.
17. I am following Bond's, ed., ad 1341-46, analysis of these lines.
18. ἐπερ in Theseus' ὁδῶν ἐπερ ὀφ ἐπερεῖς λόγοι (1315) implies, as usual, confidence, not doubt; see Denniston (supra n.15) 223 n.1 and 488 n.1.
The balance makes plain that Herakles’ decision to live stems from his own reasons. ἑσκεψάμην, an “instantaneous” aorist,19 gives emphasis to Herakles’ announcement that he will live. His mind is made up; he will not by committing suicide incur the charge of cowardice.20 The μή clause does not introduce an indirect question, but explains, after the verb of caution, what Herakles takes care to avoid.21 In his resolve he does not wonder about the cowardice of suicide, but asserts what he strives to avoid (δελλά). Appropriately for a man of battle, he confirms his resolve with a comparison from combat (1349–50). The asyndetic ἐγκαρτηρήσω βιότον22 amplifies his decision.

Herakles then (στάρκ) turns to his sufferings (μυρών, 1353, picking up μυρών, 1352) and the tears that he sheds for the first time, concluding that now he must serve τύχη (1357). With εἶν (1358) the next section of the speech begins, as Herakles mournfully contemplates his family and seeks burial for them. He then wonders (the anaphora of λυγραί, 1376–77, making the link) whether to continue carrying his bow and arrows, reminders of his heinous deeds. They have served him on his labors and Herakles decides to keep them (οὐ λειπέεόν τάδ’ ἀθλίως δὲ σωστέον, 1385).23 Making a final request for Theseus’ aid, he bids farewell and asks the citizens to mourn his family and himself, all ruined by Hera (1392–93).

The rhetoric and context of Herakles’ statement put a clear emphasis on Herakles’ decision to live, a decision based on his own consideration of the cowardice of suicide. But before announcing this decision he must first dismiss Theseus’ notions about the gods. He is doing more than disapproving of the


20. On attitudes toward suicide relevant to this drama, see Bond, ed., ad 1248, and de Romilly (supra n.10) 8–9.

21. As a parallel for this construction with σκοπέείν, cf. Soph. Phil. 504–6. Commentators and translators seem united in taking the μή clause as an indirect question. Such an interpretation does not significantly change my argument, since such a question would be rhetorical, but would ruin the balance of the μεν... δὲ construction, impeding the rhetorical flow of the speech.

22. I accept Wecklein’s conjecture βιότον for the mss. θάνατον; see the arguments on both sides set out by Bond, ed., ad loc.

23. On the thematic importance of the bow throughout the drama, see Chalk (supra n.8) 14 n.33.
And Euripides' Theseus' pertain he n.23; but adultery his expressly and not gods' parenthetical gods' critical perhaps, 28. The greatest man of Greece, the benefactor of gods and men, has been humiliated and ruined by one of the very gods whose honors he alone restored (852–53) and on whose behalf he fought (117ff., 1190ff.). In his anger he rejects the sort of gods he described moments ago, the sort the drama has shown to have caused his brutal misery. At the critical moment when he decides to live, he lashes out against this conception; his decision to live will not be based on such arguments as Theseus'.26 Rather, his revived conception of arete and the philia newly offered by Theseus will lead him to accept his suffering and his life.

Herakles' statement on the gods has a clear and precise rhetorical context: a reply to Theseus' arguments and a foil for his own announcement that he will continue living. It will not hold, however, to maintain that this statement has no further application to the specific case of Herakles.28 Theseus' exemplum on adultery (οὐ λέκτῳ ἐν ἄλληλοισιν, ὃν ωδὲς νόμος, / συνήφαν 1316–17) does pertain to Zeus' union with the mortal Alkmene, since Theseus' words reply to and even echo the end of Herakles' speech, his condemnation of Hera in which he refers to this union (γυναικὸς οὐνεκά / λέκτων φθονοὺσα Ζηνι, 1308–9). And Herakles' pronouncement does apply to his own case, even if he does not expressly say so. True, he does not refer specifically to his own circumstances, but in replying to Theseus' assertions, he echoes his earlier condemnation of

24. As argued by T. C. W. Stinton, "‘Si credere dignum est’: Some Expressions of Disbelief in Euripides and Others," PCPS n.s. 22 (1976) 82–84. Even Stinton, 89 n.56, confesses, "I am not sure that I now believe it [this view] myself." A fuller critique of Stinton's argument is Brown (supra n.8), who, however, maintains that 1340 ff. "represent a cherished belief of his [Euripides'] own" (p. 24).

25. This motivation provides a psychological plausibility for Herakles' change. D. J. Mastro- narde, "The Optimistic Rationalist in Euripides: Theseus, Jocasta, Teiresias," in Greek Tragedy and Its Legacy: Essays Presented to D. J. Conacher (Calgary 1986) 208, explains the outburst differently, as the remarks of a good man "imposing an ideal order and morality on experience."

26. De Romilly ([supra n.10] 3) puts it well: "Par une heureuse répartition, l'auteur a donc pu ne prêter à Thésée que l'argument formulé dans notre texte, celui de la θυγ, et laisser au héros celui de l'honneur. Dans ce cas, la liaison entre le refus du suicide et le courage d'Héraclès est plus étroite encore: Thésée offre un appui, il stimule, il encourage: mais il laisse Héraclès découvrir lui-même ses vraies raisons." See also Chalk (supra n.8) esp. 13.

27. On the connection between arete and philia in this play, see Chalk (supra n. 8) esp. 11 n.23; for criticisms of Chalk's view of the play, see A. Adkins, "Basic Greek Values in Euripides' Hecuba and Hercules Furens," CQ n.s. 16 (1966) 209–19.

28. As maintained, e.g., by Grube (supra n. 8) 58, and A. Burnett, Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal (Oxford 1971) 175 n.24.
Hera's sexual jealousy, the condemnation that concluded his previous speech. And Hera's anger at Zeus' adultery motivates the entire action of the drama.29

Herakles' remarks on the gods, then, have a place also in the broader scope of the drama as a whole. His words, with their echo of Xenophanes,30 do seem to contradict the premises of the dramatic action, as they imply a criticism of the traditional, poet-created view of the gods' behavior. Herakles' words are at odds not only with what we have heard of Hera's involvement in the action prior to this point31 but also with what we hear at the end of the speech (1392–93).32 Herakles' opening proclamation is not the first or, after all, the final word on the gods in this play; he does not reject the role of the divine in his sufferings for very long. He returns to Hera's role in his suffering at the end of his speech (1392–93), thus framing his rhesis with a rejection and an acceptance of Hera's role in that suffering. At 1357, having determined to continue with life, Herakles asserts: νῦν δ', ὄς ἑοικε, τῇ τῷ χήμῳ δουλευτέουν. But at the end of the speech he concludes (1392–93): πάντες ἔξολωσιςεν Ὀρας μιᾶ πληγέντες ἄθλοι τῷ χήμῳ. Tyche personified does not replace Hera;33 this use of τῦχη (τῷ χήμῳ . . . Ὀρας) is a traditional way of expressing an act ascribed to a deity. The events of Herakles' life, as the play has so vividly depicted, have the appearance of randomness—the many turns of fortune, culminating in the overthrow of the greatest hero at the moment of his greatest triumph. But the appearance of randomness, as the drama also presents, has behind it the substance of Hera.34 Thus the phrase which frames the last line of the speech, Ὀρας . . . τῷ χήμῳ.

It might be objected that I am suggesting for Herakles' words a significance greater than the character realizes and for the character himself a problematic volte-face. First, the irony of Herakles' words—he, if anyone, belies 1340ff.—is typical of Euripides, and of drama. Dramatic irony is the stuff of drama, and it consists precisely of this difference in awareness between character and audience. Second, as I hope I have demonstrated, Herakles' statement does make sense in context and on the level of character: a proud man's response to

29. This statement should not cause controversy. Hera's χόλος at the illegitimate offspring Herakles is a mythological datum as old as the Iliad (18.119), and to the extent that the play raises the issue directly it assumes that this is the cause of Herakles' suffering (see 1263 ff. and 1308 ff.). On the interpretation of the difficult 841–42 see M. Cropp, "A Stylistic and Analytical Commentary on Euripides' Herakles," 1–814" (diss. Toronto 1976) 30–31, and the disagreements of K. Lee, "The Iris-Lyssa Scene in Euripides' Heracles," Antichthon 16 (1982) 50–53.

30. See esp. frgs. A 32, 23 ff. DK and B 11 DK.

31. See supra n.29 on Hera's χόλος, and on her responsibility for Herakles' murder of his family see, e.g., 830 ff., 1189, 1253, 1308 ff., and 1311–12.

32. As H. D. F. Kitto, Greek Tragedy (London 1961) 246, observed, "But Herakles is a very imperfect Platonist, for he does not draw the obvious conclusion . . . for the speech ends [with lines 1392–93]."

33. The most eloquent, yet still unconvincing, case for this view is Arrowsmith (supra n.1).

34. This is quite in keeping with fifth-century belief; see, e.g., H. Lloyd-Jones, The Justice of Zeus (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1983) 162. On 1392–93 see also H. Foley, Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides (Ithaca 1985) 163–65.
Theseus’ arguments and his own plight. The issue of character in Greek tragedy requires more attention than can be given here, but it is unproblematic to assert that Greek tragedy did not seek the same degree of verisimilitude of character that most modern drama does. Furthermore, especially in this drama of multiple reversals and sudden shifts Herakles’ changes are not out of place.

As a dramatic character, Herakles has no life outside the drama. Himself a creation of a poet, he remains fixed in the context the poet creates for him. He goes on, after a brief hint at an alternative view of the gods, accepting Hera’s role and the traditional view, and, on the positive side, comforted by Theseus’ philia. But although Herakles rejects the view espoused primarily for rhetorical purposes at 1340ff., the audience need not. A view antithetical to the traditional one has been presented to the audience. They, unlike the character Herakles, are free to evaluate it. And the action of the play gives ample reason to consider this redefinition. From its opening scene, the entire drama raises the question of divine justice. Nowhere in Greek tragedy is the question raised so directly, and nowhere is the answer more disturbing.

The broad context of the play, not just Herakles’ bold statement of 1340ff., suggests a reevaluation of notions about the gods and a theodicy. Albin Lesky, arguing for a different position, comments about Herakles’ proclamation that “for a moment the colorful curtain of myth is torn away.” The curtain is torn away for a moment, but not for the first time. Several times already rents have appeared in the fabric (most notably in Amphitryon’s two “prayers” to Zeus, 339–47 and 498–502). And once before, in a different way, we have seen behind the curtain: in the Iris-Lyssa scene. Such a scene is unparalleled in Euripides. Nowhere else do gods appear in the middle of the drama, elsewhere they are propelled to the peripheries of the action, the prologues and exodoi. The caprice and extreme cruelty of the traditional gods are underscored in this scene by both the savage wrath that is vented against the innocent Herakles (despite Lyssa’s protests) and the juxtaposition of this scene with the preceding jubilant celebration of divine justice (763–814). Euripides “tears away the curtain” at two crucial junctures of the play: the moment when Herakles’ greatest victory, proof of a theodicy, is overturned, and again when

36. See A. Rivier, Essai sur le tragique d’Euripide (Paris 1975) 105. Hippolytos reveals a similar pattern of changes of mind. In his anger and disgust at the Nurse’s suggestion of a sexual union with Phaidra, Hippolytos threatens to break his oath (612), but by the end of his speech he has returned to his original position—he will abide by his oath (656).
38. For the dramatic impact of the first prayer and the link between the two, see my Stagecraft in Euripides (London and Sydney 1985) 82–84.
39. I exclude the almost certainly spurious Rhesos. In Bakchai we see only the “stranger” until the epiphany at the end; with E. R. Dodds, ed., Euripides: Bacchae (Oxford 1960) 147, and many others, I assume that at 576 ff. Dionysos speaks from offstage.
he decides to renounce suicide and continue with his life; the second moment balances the first.

*Heraclès* ends with two different views on the gods: one the characters accept, and another that points in a different direction. The meaning of the drama does not lie with one or the other but, rather, in the interaction of the two and the rest of the play. The play cannot prove or disprove either set of beliefs; that is not the power of poetry. Near the end of the play, Euripides distances the audience from the characters: the characters’ knowledge becomes fixed, while the audience is asked to entertain another possibility. The nature of the gods, the audience must consider, is perhaps less simple than the characters conclude. It is not chance that “the lines which express the loftiest conception of divinity in all of Euripides occur in the play whose action does least to justify them.”

Most dramas end with a decrease in dramatic irony: the characters’ knowledge reaches the level of the audience’s. Sophokles’ *Oidipous Tyrannos* provides the textbook case, and *Hippolytos* and many other Euripidean plays end in this way. But this was not the only way Euripides had of concluding his dramas: he could also increase the irony at the end of the play. *Troades* provides a parallel—imperfect, of course, since every drama has its own logic and rhythm—for this type of ending, as a brief sketch of it shows.

A major irony extends through the whole *Troades*, an irony established in the prologue. Athene wins Poseidon’s aid in punishing the Greeks with shipwrecks on their voyage home. The Trojan women throughout the play thus suffer in only apparent contrast to their Greek conquerors, since these too will meet with misfortune on their way home. This irony, however, loses much of its force toward the end of the play, where the emphasis falls heavily on the suffering of the Trojan women, and Hekabe in particular. Another irony is developed in the play’s closing. Throughout *Troades* we witness the destruction of Ilion, as one by one the remaining members of the city are led off to the Greek ships or, in the case of Astyanax, to be killed. Such devastation leads

40. Brown (supra n.8) 27.

41. Let me make clear that I am not, in the fashion of Verrall and Vellacott, proposing that Euripides wrote for a two-tiered audience, the *sophoi* who understand the play on one level and the *polloi* who understand it on another. Another type of irony has been proposed for *Heraclès*, by, e.g., Burnett (supra n.28) 182), and most recently by R. Meridor, “Plot and Myth in Euripides’ *Heraclès* and *Troades*,” *Phoenix* 38 (1984) 205–15: namely, the contrast between what the characters know and what the audience knows about Heraclès’ later apotheosis. Such an irony is not at odds with the one I suggest, but it operates differently, since it relies on the audience’s knowledge of events not referred to in the drama.


43. Of which misfortune we are reminded by the play’s many references to the Greeks’ sailing home and the frequent nautical images (e.g., 102 ff., 115 ff., 137, 537 ff., 686 ff.).
Hekabe, the symbol of both Trojan grief and endurance, to reach out for the last remaining solace, fame in the song of future generations, traditional κλέος ἀφθιτον (1242–45):

ei δὲ μὴ θεός
ἐστραφεὶς τὰνω περιβαλὼν κάτω χθονός,
ἀφάνεις ἂν οἴνες οὐκ ἄν ὑμνηθείμεν ἂν
μούσαις ἀοιδὰς ὥντες ὑστέρων βροτῶν.

This fame is one of the traditional powers of poetry and is as old as the Iliad (6.357–58, which the present passage echoes). Hekabe also echoes the prophet Cassandra’s earlier claim (394 ff.) of the fame war brings. But even this last possible comfort, fame in the song of future generations, is denied to Hekabe and the other Trojan women. The final fiery destruction of their city, witnessed by these women, leads them to proclaim despairingly that even Troy’s name is gone. Three times (1277–78, 1319, 1322–24) they voice this lament, virtually the last words heard in the play. The audience is aware of Troy’s future fame (the play itself is evidence of that) and has been reminded of this by Hekabe’s attempt at solace moments before, but the Trojan women, in their ignorance, despair of this as they see their city collapse and they exit towards the Greek ships. Euripides raises the theme of the fame of song as a solace only to crash it down on the Trojans. This irony at the play’s end perhaps revives the larger irony established in the prologue. Just as the Trojan women are unaware of the victors’ imminent sufferings, they despair of Troy’s future glory. And this increase in irony at the play’s end adds a bleak closing commentary on this story of Trojan woes.

Euripidean drama presents a world that is not only painful and unfair, but also random and complex. Hard, simple truths are not to be found in his plays. In Herakles he suggests as vividly as he can the cruelty and perhaps even the absurdity of the traditionally viewed divinities who act in this world. But he does not speak with the clear voice of a Xenophanes. The rhetoric of the rhesis at 1340–93 helps both to define Herakles’ heroism and to create the play’s final irony. The character Herakles accepts, if grudgingly, the Hera who persecutes him. But we, distanced from that view, must all the more seriously question it, while admiring the mortals who can survive within it.

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