

The end of Euripides' *Heracleidae*, has long been the subject of scholarly discussion. Demophon, son of Theseus and king of Athens, agrees to defend the suppliant children of Heracles against Heracles' old enemy, Eurystheus. Although the situation seems hopeless, the voluntary sacrifice of Macaria and the miraculous rejuvenation of the aged Iolaos lead to the defeat of Eurystheus' army and his capture. At this point, the play takes an unexpected turn. Contrary to the custom, frequently cited in the play, of not executing prisoners of war, Heracles' mother, Alcmene, insists on Eurystheus' death. Despite all attempts to dissuade her, her desire for revenge prevails. Before he dies, however, he recalls an oracle that promises that his grave will become a defense of Athens against the descendants of Heracles.

Some have seen this play as a criticism of Athens (e.g., Burian 1977). They argue that Euripides wishes to undercut the noble picture of Athens that he painted in the beginning of the play. Far from being a noble protector of suppliants, Athens becomes a partner in the murder of a prisoner of war. To this school of thought, the ending of the play makes it clear that the idealism evident in the early part of the play is a fantasy. The acquiescence of the Athenians to the crime is seen as Euripides' criticism of present day Athens which fails to live up to the ideals and sacrifices of the past, symbolized by self sacrifice of the innocent Macaria.

This interpretation is difficult to maintain in the light of Greek beliefs about heroes and their cults, especially their tendency to see heroes and heroines as symbolically representative of cities and peoples. As I have shown in a previous paper ("Heroes, Territory, and Identity," APA Boston, 2005), heroes lent themselves to this symbolic representation by their ties to the land where they were buried, to the peoples who inhabited those lands, as well as to those peoples who were thought to be their descendants. Theseus, for example, being the former king of Athens, represented Athens and the Athenian people. In a similar way, as mother of Heracles, Alcmene represented the Spartans, whose two kings claimed descent from Heracles. That the Spartans themselves recognized their tie to Alcmene is shown in a story that Plutarch tells of the removal of her bones (Plut. *Mor.* 577 e-578b) from Haliartos to Sparta in 382 B.C. by the Spartan king, Agesilaos.

In the *Heracleidae* this tendency to see heroes as representations of cities and peoples can be used to help interpret the ending of the play. Alcmene's disregard for the ancient custom of not killing prisoners of war does indeed negate the previous sacrifice of the maiden Macaria, but as a heroine representative of the Spartans, Alcmene's action would reflect on the Spartans, not the Athenians. In addition, when she insists on killing Eurystheus, she does so in the face of Eurystheus' statement that blood guilt will fall upon his murderer. By offering to kill Eurystheus herself, Alcmene accepts the blood guilt for herself as well as for her Spartan descendants. While Athens does agree to the execution, it is only in circumstances that indicate that not to do so would be contrary to an oracle of Apollo. When Eurystheus quotes the oracle that predicts that his grave will be come a defense for Athens against the descendants of Alcmene, he is describing the establishment of his cult as an enemy hero (Visser 1982). The ties of the play's ending to the establishment of hero cult and an oracle, as well as Alcmene's acceptance of the blood guilt, all argue for an interpretation which places the guilt for the murder squarely on Alcmene and by extension, on her descendants. As others have noted (Vellacott 1975), it is difficult not to see this ending as an allusion to the Spartan massacre of the Plataean prisoners in 427.