

The Heracleian Odysseus and the Odyssean Heracles

This paper argues that there is an intertextual link between Euripides' description of Heracles' murder of his children in the *Heracles* and Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors in Book 22 of the *Odyssey*. This connection emphasizes the ambiguous nature of Heracles' heroism in the play, reinforcing previous scholars' arguments that the *Heracles* questions the strict boundaries between madness and sanity, and between hero and villain (Papadopoulou 2004 and 2005; Dunn 1997; Konstan 1999; Griffiths 2002). Heracles' act, committed in a divinely-inspired derangement, is placed in parallel with Odysseus' very deliberate slaughter of the suitors, and this parallel serves to weaken Heracles' already-weak insanity defense still further.

Even more significantly, this intertextual connection serves as an important example of the fifth-century reception of the ending of the *Odyssey*, showing that at least one reader of Homer saw killing the suitors as deeply morally problematic. The slaughter of the suitors can be read either as a heroic, glorious scene, representing Odysseus' *aristeia* and revenge against his enemies, or as something completely antithetical to the ideas of glory and heroism, a depiction of men being slaughtered within the space of the home and the banquet, unarmed and not prepared for a fight. The poem itself, as many critics have noted, supports both readings (Allan 2006; Buchan 2004; Schein 1996). Euripides' reading of *Odyssey* 22 highlights this essential ambiguity, proving that the ambivalent reading of the slaughter of the suitors is not a purely modern phenomenon.

Heracles, in his madness, brutally murders his own sons while believing that he is engaging in yet another heroic labor. Through his intertextual engagement with *Odyssey* Book 22, Euripides is reading a similar duality into Odysseus' actions. As such, the *Heracles* messenger speech offers compelling evidence against the idea (argued, for example, by Hall

2008) that ancient readers would have seen the killing of the suitors as triumphant and heroic, and that the view of these events as morally difficult or problematic is largely a modern conception.

The parallels between *Odyssey* 22 and the Euripidean messenger speech exist primarily on the level of actions and imagery. The action of the hero in each text follows the same narrative pattern: both heroes request their bows, begin shooting, meeting with disbelief and confusion from those present, and then launch into a series of brutal and graphically described murders. Euripides also highlights the domestic setting of Odysseus' murders, and both the *Heracles* messenger speech and *Odyssey* 22 continually draw the listeners' attention to the mundane details of household architecture and furniture.

Furthermore, in making Heracles' own children his stand-ins for Penelope's suitors, Euripides picks up on the connections of the suitors to children made throughout the *Odyssey*. The suitors in the *Odyssey* are presented as child-like because they are naïve and foolish, but the *Heracles* literalizes this characterization and thus suggests that perhaps the suitors are more innocent than they may seem.

Heracles and Odysseus are similar heroes in many ways, and the plot of the *Heracles*, at least before Heracles' madness, conforms to the *Odyssey*'s pattern of *nostos* followed by revenge. I will show, however, that the similarity between the two poems goes much deeper. Euripides sets Heracles' madness as directly parallel to Odysseus' triumphant scene of revenge, and in so doing, he gives us a fifth-century re-reading (and retelling) of the *mnesterophonia*, raising questions and doubts about Odysseus' morality and heroism of the kind that many modern readers assume would have been completely alien to ancient readers of Homer.

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