

Why is the wild lion still and silent?

A Case Study in Psychological Metaphor in Euripides' *Herakles* 1210-1211

After killing his family in a state of divine-sent madness (922-1015), Herakles, in Euripides' play of the same name, through a rapid *stichomythia* with his step-father comes to realize what it is he actually did (1089-1143). His response to this horrifying revelation of familial murder and to the impending approach of his friend Theseus is to veil himself in shame and to remain silent (1146-1162). Amphitryon, Herakles' step-father, at this point kneels as a suppliant before his speechless son, pleading with him to remove his veil, show his face to the sun, and "restrain" his "wild lion's *thumos*" and not "join new troubles with old" (1203-1213). He is terrified that Herakles is determined on suicide. The phrase "restrain your wild lion's *thumos*" (κατά-/σχεθε λέοντος ἀγρίου θυμόν, 1210-11) is puzzling. Why does Amphitryon compare the now silent and still Herakles to a wild lion?

Few scholars explore the peculiar use of this metaphor. Commentators Bond (1988) and Barlow (1996) both consider that the imagery refers to Herakles' earlier thunderous and violent madness. This reasoning misinterprets the context. Herakles is no longer violent and mad, but rather quietly sits veiled and unmoved. In cross-examining his son to determine whether he was still "an infernal Bacchant" (1117-1123), Amphitryon has personally verified that Herakles is in his right mind. Papadapoulou (2005), on the other hand, argues that the lion image represents Herakles' stubbornness in this scene and is part of a system of metaphors present throughout the play that portray Herakles' fraught liminal state between human and animal. This argument, however, is not fully satisfactory because in this interpretation the particularity of the animal's species has little significance.

A comparison of Herakles to a lion is especially appropriate for this hero who is instantly recognizable in art and myth for his distinctive costume won from arguably his most famous labor, the Nemean lion, and who throughout the play is enrobed in that iconic garment. And while no doubt Euripides is exploiting that imagery here, this reasoning is not sufficient enough to explain why the comparison of hero to lion occurs at this moment in the play when Herakles is in this particular psychological and emotional state. This is the only lion metaphor in the play (*cf.* literal references to the Nemean lion and lion-skin in 359-363, 465-46, 579, 1271). Why choose this moment to use this metaphor? Moreover, what is the significance of the *thumos* being the fulcrum of the comparison?

The analogy of *thumos* to a lion has a long tradition of use beginning in Homer and continuing through tragedy. It is certainly not a Euripidean invention, but in this paper I will show how Euripides uses this metaphor and the various affordances that it raises in this scene as an innovative extension of the lion-*thumos* conceptual system. I will show how the animal imagery is not a shallowly descriptive metaphor, because in raising certain social, cultural, and conceptual affordances the metaphor itself creates meaning about Herakles' psychological state. Other scholars have shown how animal metaphors and imagery have psychological resonance. For example, Clarke (1995), Thumiger (2014), and Provenza (2013) detail how animals in epic and tragedy can act as symbols of psychological states. For the *Herakles* in particular, Provenza (2013) explores the imagery of the bull and its relationship with Dionysiac madness in the earlier scenes of Herakles' *mania*.

Drawing upon Clarke (1995) in particular, who shows how the lion imagery in the *Iliad* articulates the fraught ethical and psychological problems of heroism, I will argue that Euripides synthesizes, distills, and extends two different affordances of the lion imagery seen in Homer and

elsewhere in tragedy – the lion as self-destructive hero and the lion as protector of its offspring – in an innovative and subversive way. Each image creates new affordances and links Herakles with other instances of these metaphors that in turn recursively inform and enrich Herakles’ characterization in this scene. Finally, I will show how this psychological metaphor establishes certain expectations on what the play’s and Herakles’ end might be.

Bibliography

- Barlow, Shirley. 1996. *Euripides: Heracles*. Aris & Phillips: Warminster.
- Bond, Geoffrey. 1988. *Euripides: Heracles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Clarke, Michael. 1995. “Between Lions and Men: Images of the Hero in the *Iliad*” in *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 137-159.
- Papadopoulou, Thalia. 2009. *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Provenza, Antonietta. 2013. “Madness and Bestialization in Euripides’ *Heracles*: Οὔποτ’ ἄκραντα δόμοισι Λύσσα βακχεύσει” in *Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 1, pp. 68-93.
- Thumiger, Chiara. 2014. “Animals in Tragedy” in G. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 84-98.