CHAPTER 17

The Children of Heracles (Heraclidae)

Rosie Wyles

Euripides’ The Children of Heracles is a patriotic play about the Athenian protection of vulnerable suppliants (the children of Heracles) threatened by the violent King of Mycenae, Eurystheus. The tragedy includes a chorus of Athenian war veterans (proud Marathon fighters), the selfless voluntary sacrifice of a maiden (a daughter of Heracles either without name or called Macaria)\(^1\) and the miraculous battlefield rejuvenation of Heracles’ elderly relative, Iolaus. It is likely to have been staged in the first years of the Peloponnesian war (ca. 431 BC) and can be argued to have been accepted in this original context as a celebration of Athenian ideology.\(^2\) The play’s inclusion of virgin sacrifice, which was probably a Euripidean innovation to the myth, has invited comparison with Euripides’ Hecuba and Iphigenia at Aulis both of which, however, enjoy fuller reception histories.\(^3\) Despite very little attention being given to The Children of Heracles during the Renaissance, the virgin sacrifice and battlefield rejuvenation of the elderly warrior appealed to cultural sensibilities in the 18th century and ensured its influence on three tragedies. To modern sensibilities, one might expect the combination of propaganda, patriotic sacrifice, and miraculous in Euripides’ tragedy to be more troubling; the past two decades, however, have produced an unparalleled (in its reception history) growth of interest in the play as it has been appropriated to explore issues of immigration, war and the ethics of revenge.\(^4\)

---

\(^*\) I would like to thank everyone at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (hereafter APGRD), Oxford, especially Edith Hall,—without their path-breaking work, I could not have written this chapter. I also extend my thanks to the Editors of this volume.

1 Euripides does not name her in the text, but in medieval manuscripts she is given the name Macaria: see Kovacs (2005) 54 n. 10. Similarly Eurystheus’ herald is not named in the play but is given the name Copreus (following the Iliad) in manuscripts: see Kovacs (2005) 14 n. 3. On the naming of Macaria: see also Wilkins (1993) xix. For ease of reference I use the name Macaria.


3 As for Euripides’ innovation: see Wilkins (1993) xix–xx. On the reception of Iphigenia at Aulis and of Hecuba, see above, pp. 15–43 and 100–42.

4 As a result of the play’s general neglect, there has been very little written on its reception; there is, for example, no entry in the otherwise invaluable Reid (1993) for the children of Heracles. I offer what I hope is a helpful starting point here, though the subject merits a
Euripides’ *The Children of Heracles* enjoys its first impact on literature through the selection of this myth, by 4th-century orators, as an exemplum for the excellence of Athenian greatness.\(^5\) This was a popular motif in Funeral Orations. For example, Lysias (5th–4th century BC), in his *Funeral Oration* (for those who died in the Corinthian War, ca. 392–1 BC), selects the Athenian championing of the lawful burial of the seven against Thebes and defense of the children of Heracles as glorious acts from the Athenian past demonstrating the city’s virtue.\(^6\) Through these examples he evokes two Euripidean suppliant plays in succession: *Suppliant Women* and *The Children of Heracles*. Considering the continuing popularity of the latter in art, it seems fair to assume that Lysias might expect his audience to appreciate this allusion. Similarly when Demosthenes (4th century BC) offers a briefer mention of the same two examples in his *Funeral Oration* (dating to 338 BC), it is possible that the Euripidean treatments of these myths were brought to mind.\(^7\) The details of the children of Heracles myth given by both orators correspond with Euripides’ version; except, unsurprisingly, they omit to mention the uncomfortable detail of the virgin sacrifice. In the year before Demosthenes’ *Funeral Oration*, Isocrates (4th century BC) cites the example of the Athenian’s response over the issue of the bodies of the seven against Thebes in his *Panathenaicus*.\(^8\) What is particularly significant about this reference is that Isocrates draws explicit attention to the tragic sources for the audience’s knowledge of this myth. When later in the same speech he refers to the example of the children of Heracles, the details of Eurystheus’ fate (battlefield capture, failed supplication and death) confirm that he has Euripides’ play in mind.\(^9\) If these *exempla* were already being used by orators in the 5th century, then the rhetorical impact of these references would certainly have been enhanced by the memory of the performance, which *per se* constitutes an instance in the reception history of the play.\(^10\) Although Aeschylus (ca. 525–455 BC) also wrote a *Children of Heracles*,

---

5 Regarding this, see, also, above p. 330.
6 *Funeral Oration* 2. 7–16.
7 *Funeral Oration* 60. 8.
8 12. 168–74.
9 12.194. Isocrates also uses this example in two earlier speeches (*Panegyricus* 4.54–60 and *To Philip* 5.34).