UNITY AND MEANING OF
EURIPIDES' HERACLES *)

BY

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Among the so-called alphabetical plays the Heracles is perhaps the one about which we are inclined to wonder most why it was not included in the number of selected tragedies alongside Medea and Hippolytus and instead of, for instance, Andromache or Rhesus. For whatever its defects—if any—it is a great play and central to our comprehension and appreciation of Euripides' art and view of life. I for one am on the side of Browning and inclined to quote, when reading it again: "Accordingly I read the perfect piece" 1), and in my opinion Wilamowitz' choosing it as the starting point for his great career in the interpretation of Greek Tragedy is meaningful. But perhaps the unknown ancient grammarian who is responsible for the selection of nine or ten commented plays is to be thought of as a forerunner of Swinburne, whose startling verdict you will remember ("a grotesque abortion" 2)) or of Murray and his statement 3) ("I do not mean that I consider the Heracles of Eur. to be a very great work of art. I do not. It is broken-backed...").

But apart from this diversity of general evaluation it has to be observed that among modern scholars an even moderate communis opinio as to the structure and the meaning of the play is far from having been reached. The main problem, to which different solutions have been proposed, is the relation between part I (up to and including Lycus' murder) and part II (Heracles' madness, the murder of wife and children). How is the unity of these parts, if unity there is, to be conceived? Does Heracles' madness come from

*) Lecture delivered at the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London, 16.3.1965.
1) Introduction to his translation in Aristophanes' Apology.
2) Quoted by Verrall in Four Plays of Euripides (Cambridge 1905).
3) G. Murray, Heracles "The Best of Men" (1928), Greek Studies (1946), 112.

Mnemosyne, XIX
without or from within? Further problems are for instance: should we distinguish two or three parts of the play? What share does tradition have and what Euripides' personal view in the representation of Heracles? What about the action of the gods and the apparent inconsistencies in their rôle? And so forth. Since it has been argued, not so long ago 1), that the play owes its remarkable structure to the fact that part I had been originally conceived as one tragedy (with a happy ending) and that the poet thought only afterwards of adding Heracles' madness and the rest, and since, on the other hand, Mr. H. H. O. Chalk, in his outstanding paper 'Απετρῆ and Βία in Euripides' Herakles 2), following in the wake of Sheppard 3), has convincingly argued for the unity of the play on the strength of some recurrent themes which pervade the whole of it, it will be as well to state from the start which elements, in my view, have to be taken into consideration when we embark upon an examination of its unity and meaning.

The degree to which a play has unity may be described as depending on a number of factors: (1) on the close or not so close inter-relation between its scenes and acts, (2) on the greater or lesser degree of strikingness in recurrent motifs in imagery and ideas, (3) on the greater or lesser plausibility of the successive speeches and actions of the dramatis personae, (4) on the greater or lesser relevancy of the choral odes, but its unity has also to be considered in relation to the curve of tension and relaxation in the mind of the spectator: since however no reliable standard for measuring the latter can be found, we had better leave them out of account. A scrutiny of these four points or aspects will certainly yield some results, but in the case of Greek Tragedy it will not be enough. In the elucidation of a Greek tragedy we should never lose sight of the elementary fact that it is an interpretation of myth or saga. And although it is true that, at any rate with Euripides, we may safely and confidently assert that tragedy is also, or even more, an interpretation by means of myth or saga of the state of man, it is also

2) J.H.S. 1962, 7-18.