

Euripides' *Heracles*: The Katabasis-Motif Revisited

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PRACTICES AND MOTIFS in Greek myth, cult, and literature are suggestive of the Greeks' profound and vigorous concern with ideas about the afterlife—the journey of the soul to the nether realm, the status of the dead, the geography of the Underworld, the quality of postmortem life, the power of the infernal gods, and so on. In fact, hero-cult, necromancy, spontaneous ghost apparitions, tomb visits, the use of curse tablets, lamellae, magical texts, and figurines—whether reflecting real-life phenomena or whether being products of creative imagination—show that the Greeks sought to maintain a constant communication with the dead and tended to challenge the impermeability of the boundaries between the upper and the lower world. The journey of the living to the Underworld, the so-called katabasis, is one of the most powerful expressions of this tendency.¹

Deriving from a simple and basic story, that of the movement between worlds, katabasis features in the saga of some of the greatest heroes and gods; Odysseus, Heracles, Theseus, Pirithous, Orpheus, Dionysus, and Persephone dare to cross the barrier that separates the two spheres, descend into Hades, and pay a visit to the dead. In all its occurrences in myth, literature, and cult, the infernal descent carries multifarious

¹ On katabasis in general see R. Ganszyniec, "Katabasis," *RE* 10 (1919) 2359–2449; R. J. Clark, *Catabasis. Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition* (Amsterdam 1979); J. L. C. Martínez, "The *katábasis* of the Hero," in V. Pirenne-Delforge and E. Suárez de la Torre (eds.), *Héros et héroïnes dans les mythes et les cultes grecs* (Liège 2000) 67–78.

significations and takes different forms depending on the context in which it appears. Even within the saga of the same hero the narrative constantly evolves and becomes subject to competitive variations, leaving room for diverse, often conflicting interpretations; it can be perceived as an exceptional proof of heroism, a victory over death, a spiritual journey toward knowledge, a symbolic regeneration of one's self, a symbolic expression of a promising eschatological message, a verification of the invincibility of death, or even an aetiological explanation for the life-cycle of vegetation.²

It is no surprise that this traditional and malleable motif attracted the attention of fifth-century dramatists. Tragic and, particularly, comic poets repeatedly thematise katabasis and use it as a creative device whereby they evoke their themes or even structure their plays. For instance, in the fragmentary *Pirithous* the infernal descent of Heracles constitutes the spinal episode of the plot and triggers the subsequent rescue of two other katabatic heroes—Theseus and Pirithous.³ Some repercussions of the katabatic tradition can also be traced in Euripides' *Alcestis*; not only is there a clear reference to Orpheus' infernal descent (357–362), but the encounter between Heracles and Charon that leads to the rescue of Alcestis from

² Clark, *Catabasis* 16, points out that, especially in oriental narratives, the katabatic pattern is accompanied by the death and rebirth of nature and is thus connected with the notion of fertility. This applies particularly to divine individuals.

³ Scholars attribute the play either to Critias or to Euripides. For a detailed analysis of the debate see C. Collard, "The *Pirithous* Fragments," in J. A. López Férez (ed.), *De Homero a Libanio* (Madrid 1995) 183–193. I myself regard this play as typically Euripidean; see the convincing arguments of Collard, 187–191, who underlines the similarities to Euripidean plays in terms of plot, theme, metre, language, and style. Cf. S. Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy and the Athenian Empire* (Oxford 1997) 257–262. A strong element in favour of Euripidean authorship is the fact that parts of this play survive in two papyri (*P.Oxy.* XVI 2078 and L 3531); rarely are Oxyrhynchus tragic texts attributed to anyone other than the three great tragedians. The date of the play is uncertain.

death may be read in katabatic terms. Noteworthy is the fact that Odysseus' semi-katabatic/semi-necromantic experience in *Odyssey* 11 becomes a source of inspiration for Aeschylus' *Psychagogoi* (fr.273–278)—even though the episode is there treated as purely necromantic. In comedy, on the other hand, katabasis is far more common. Apart from its prominence in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, it seems to occur in various fragmentary plays, such as Eupolis' *Demoi*, Aristophanes' *Gerytades*, and Pherecrates' *Metalleis* and *Krapataloi*.

It is perhaps oxymoronic that the focus of a paper dealing with the dramatic katabasis is a play where katabasis is not actually dramatised—Euripides' *Heracles*. Here the narrative of the infernal descent remains part of the offstage events and by no means functions as the driving force of the action as in Euripides' *Pirithous* or Aristophanes' *Frogs*. When the play begins, Heracles is absent, occupied with bringing Cerberus up to earth, and when he finally appears on stage, he has already executed his infernal labour with success. But does this mean that the katabatic motif is incidental and peripheral to the dramatic meaning? Otherwise put, does it serve as a mere, yet credible, excuse whereby Euripides manages to keep Heracles away from his family and leave the latter exposed to Lycus' threats?

A close reading of the text will lead us to an observation that has failed to attract the attention of scholars: far from being a mechanical plot device, the katabasis contributes to the more emphatic articulation of the theme of life and death and becomes one of the several means whereby the alternative sides of Heracles, which correspond to two different definitions of heroism, are brought into a sharper focus. In the first part of the plot, Heracles' descent is presented as his great achievement and the ultimate proof of his power. It is a literal encounter with the Underworld whose successful outcome signals the hero's victory over death. Things are reversed in the second part. Heracles is transformed into a weak man and undergoes a virtual death. The hero's plight takes on the wrappings of a second encounter with death that is often presented in the form

of a symbolic katabasis, which is now performed by Heracles the man rather than Heracles the hero. This second deathlike experience will also result in a return to life, which will now be achieved with the help of Theseus and through the bonds of *philia*. In other words, Euripides uses the katabasis-motif in order to articulate a core idea of his play—Heracles' gradual transition from an all-powerful hero to a weak ordinary man.

Katabasis as proof of heroism

In the first part of the play, Heracles' katabasis is recurrently mentioned by Amphitryon, Megara, Lycus, and the chorus,⁴ and becomes the hallmark of the hero's extraordinary power. Although the task involves two challenges, namely the journey itself to the Underworld and the capture of Cerberus, Euripides emphasises the former, showing his interest in the element of spatial dislocation that the labour entails.⁵ Indeed, in the long laudatory account of the hero's past achievements (348–435), the geographical coordinates of his last mission are of central importance; the episode is introduced as a sailing to Hades without any reference to the fetching of Cerberus (425–429). This insistence on the spatial aspect of the labour is not coincidental; it highlights the degree of difficulty involved and, most importantly, it contributes to the articulation of the hero's liminality during his sojourn in the Underworld.⁶

In fact, as long as he is in the Underworld, the Euripidean Heracles experiences spatial as well as ontological liminality. His spatial displacement is obvious; the hero is outside of human society altogether, asserting a place in the realm of the

⁴ *HF* 22–25, 37, 45–46, 97, 117–118, 145–146, 261–263, 296–297, 352–356, 425–435, 490–496, 516–518, 607–619, 717–719, 735–736, 769–770, 805–814. The references continue in the second part of the play: 1101–1104, 1169–1171, 1221–1222, 1235, 1247, 1276–1278, 1387–1388, 1415–1416.

⁵ *HF* 45–46, 117–118, 145–146, 262–263, 296, 352–353, 425–427.

⁶ Heracles' liminal state in this play is also noted by T. Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* (Cambridge 2005) 30–31, but not in connection with his katabasis.

dead. Moreover, the question whether Heracles is alive or dead repeatedly crops up during his absence, which in turn reflects the inherent ambiguity of Hades as place and state of existence.⁷ Lycus, for instance, asserts with conviction that there is no return from Hades (145–146, cf. 718) and refers to Heracles as ὁ κατθανών (245–246). Megara, who abandons all hope and is ready to surrender, mourns her husband as dead (117–118, cf. 462) and reminds Amphitryon that none of the deceased has ever returned from Hades (296–297). Amphitryon adopts a more optimistic view; although he states that his son is beneath the earth and has not come back yet (22–25, 37, 45–46), he still hopes for his return (95–97). Yet, later, his advice to continue propitiating the powers below reinforces the idea that Heracles is dead—even though he hopes that he is a powerful dead with the capability of intervening in earthly affairs. The chorus epitomises the ambiguous state of Heracles by raising two mutually exclusive prospects—his potential arrival (262–263) and his potential death (266–267, 425–429, cf. 348–450). Admittedly, the latter possibility is stronger and is accorded greater emphasis.

A third scenario is raised by Megara (490–496) who, taking it for granted that her husband is dead, encourages him to appear in the guise of a shadow (σκιά, 494) or even a dream (ὄναρ, 495):

ὦ φίλτατ', εἴ τις φθόγγος εἰσακούεται
 θνητῶν παρ' Ἄϊδη, σοὶ τάδ', Ἡράκλεις, λέγω·
 θνήσκει πατὴρ σὸς καὶ τέκν', ὄλλυμαι δ' ἐγώ,
 ἢ πρὶν μακαρία διὰ σ' ἐκληζόμεν βροτοῖς.
 ἄρηξον, ἐλθέ· καὶ σκιά φάνηθί μοι.
 ἄλις γὰρ ἐλθὼν κἂν ὄναρ γένοιο σύ·
 κακοὶ γὰρ εἰσιν οἱ τέκνα κτείνουσι σά.

⁷ Instances where death is expressed through the metaphorical image of a journey intensify the ambiguity of Hades (e.g. 335, 430–434, 838–839), as they point to its conceptualisation not only as a state but also as a place.

The traditional association between dreams and the dead,⁸ together with famous examples of revenants in tragedy like Darius and Clytaemestra in Aeschylus' *Persae* and *Eumenides* and Polydorus and Achilles in Euripides' *Hecuba*, underlie Megara's exhortations and make the scenario of Heracles' arrival as a 'living corpse' possible. It is not a coincidence that Megara's invocation is modeled on tragic speeches that aim at engaging the help of a dead character;⁹ especially, the verbal correspondences between the tricolon ἄρηξον, ἐλθέ, φάνηθι and the successive imperatives ἴθι, ἰκοῦ, ἐλθέ that the chorus addresses to the dead Darius in *Persae* (658–659) point to Heracles' indeterminate status, as this occult phrasing of necromancy invites a connection between Heracles and the dead Darius—the oldest surviving dramatic expression of the revenant-motif. At the same time, Megara's wish functions as a prelude for the status of the hero after the infanticide, when he registers features of a living corpse (see below). This is also how his arrival in the first part of the play is about to be interpreted (516–518).

It can be added that katabasis, as approached by mystery cults, not only legitimates but also foregrounds the liminal status of Euripides' Heracles. According to a ritual reading of the motif, the sojourn in Hades corresponds to liminality, the second stage of van Gennep's initiatory pattern, the two others being separation and re-aggregation.¹⁰ Such a reading is at

⁸ For the dead in dreams see e.g. *Il.* 23.65–107; Pind. *Pyth.* 4.159–164; Aesch. *Eum.* 94–139, *Pers.* 197–199; Eur. *Alc.* 354–355, *Hec.* 1–58. Relevant to this is the chthonic provenance of dreams: e.g. *Od.* 24.11–13; Aesch. *Cho.* 32–41, 532–535, *Pers.* 219–223; Soph. *El.* 406–410, 453; Eur. *Hec.* 70–71, *IT* 1262–1269; *Trag. Adesp.* 375; Ar. *Ran.* 1331–1332; cf. *Od.* 11.207–208, 222. See R. G. A. Van Lieshout, *Greeks on Dreams* (Utrecht 1980) 34–37; R. Padel, *In and Out of the Mind. Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton 1992) 79–81.

⁹ See G. W. Bond, *Euripides' Heracles* (Oxford 1981) 191–192, who cites Aesch. *Cho.* 306–309, *Pers.* 633–680, Soph. *El.* 1066–1081, Eur. *El.* 677–684, *Or.* 1225–1242.

¹⁰ A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London 1960).

home in this tragedy, as Euripides plays with mystic and ritual elements, such as the idea of Heracles as *bacchos* (1119, 1142) and the ‘Eleusinised’ version of his infernal journey (613).¹¹

As the *katabasis* is established from the outset as something extremely dangerous which should normally bring about Heracles’ death, his unexpected return proves that the hero has reached the extreme limit of human potential. His achievement is variously highlighted. First of all, his return remedies his spatial liminality and reintegrates him into Theban society. As the chorus formulates it, “the new king [Lycus] has gone and the old one reigns, having left behind the harbour of Acheron” (769–770, cf. 809–810). Also, his *anodos*, described as it is in terms of a return to light (524),¹² is equivalent to a rebirth into a new status. In reality, it reflects the extreme power of Heracles and raises the question of what he really is; he is evidently something more than an ordinary man. It is not a coincidence that after his return from Hades his divine origin is given a considerable degree of emphasis.¹³ He is raised to the level of Zeus Soter (521–522), he is emphatically called son of Zeus (Διὸς ὁ παῖς, 696), and in rescuing his family he achieves what Zeus has patently failed to achieve. In the second stasimon, the chorus draws an explicit parallel between Heracles and Apollo;

¹¹ On ritual elements in *HF* see H. Foley, *Ritual Irony. Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca 1985) 147–204; R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual. Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford 1994) 378–381; Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 48–54.

¹² On the alternation of light and darkness in the play see J. Assaël, “L’Héraclès d’Euripide et les ténèbres infernales,” *LEC* 62 (1994) 313–326.

¹³ On the man/god polarity in the play see C. A. P. Ruck, “Duality and the Madness of Herakles,” *Arethusa* 9 (1976) 53–75; J. Gregory, “Euripides’ *Heracles*,” *YCS* 25 (1977) 259–275; M. S. Silk, “Heracles and Greek Tragedy,” *G&R* 32 (1985) 1–22; more bibliography at Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 4 n.19. On Heracles’ intermediary status in general see Silk 5–7. On the other hand, M. W. Padilla, “Heroic Paternity in Euripides’ *Heracles*,” *Arethusa* 27 (1994) 279–302, analyses Heracles’ attitude on the basis of the destructive association between heroism and paternity.

just as the Delian maidens sing a paean to Apollo, so do the old *choreutai* in honour of Heracles (687–700).¹⁴ A few lines before, the chorus sings a glorious hymn both for Heracles and for Dionysus, associating the two in a context of festive celebration (673–687).¹⁵ As well as corroborating his divine origin, his return also validates his heroic valour; the adjective *καλλίνικος*, a term that belongs to the language of athletic victory, is repeatedly associated with him (570, 582, 681, 769), his *arete* goes behind his divine birth (696–700), and his successful katabasis proves his *ἀλκή* (805–808).

In all this Euripides makes use of the traditional interpretation of katabasis as a victory over death, an idea embodied in a range of other mythical labours of Heracles, such as his fight with Geras, his wrestling with Thanatos over Alcestis, his encounter with the Old Man of the Sea, the stealing of the apples of Hesperides and Geryon's cattle, and his marriage to Hebe.¹⁶ Heracles conquers death not in the sense that he has become immortal, but in the sense that, like Sisyphus, he achieves the impossible by coming back from the realm of the dead. The rhetoric he uses points to the same direction. His question *τῶν δ' ἐμῶν τέκνων οὐκ ἐκπονήσω θάνατον*; (580–581) enshrines the idea of a combat with death.¹⁷ As Gibert

¹⁴ See Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 46–47. The parallelism originates in a larger context of genre, as a comparison is in play between the paean to Apollo and the celebratory song to Heracles.

¹⁵ On the association between Heracles and Dionysus in the play see Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 48–51.

¹⁶ On Heracles' struggles with death see H. A. Shapiro, "Heros Theos: The Death and Apotheosis of Herakles," *CW* 77 (1983) 7–18; J. C. Gibert, "Euripides *Heracles* 1351 and the Hero's Encounter with Death," *CP* 92 (1997) 247–258, at 256–257; M. Davies, "Variazioni su un tema di *katabasis*," *Eikasmos* 19 (2008) 263–271. On how Euripides treats the victories of Heracles over the infernal powers see Assaël, *LEC* 62 (1994) 314–315.

¹⁷ As J. M. Bremer, "Euripides *Heracles* 581," *CQ* 22 (1972) 236–240, points out, the use of *ἐκπονώ* at this point is paradoxical and aims to puzzle the audience. In archaic and classical literature the verb means 'to accomplish by labour', a meaning that will only be confirmed in due course

notes, Thanatos here is not simply an event or an experience, but also a personified opponent, whom Heracles will ‘labour to avert’.¹⁸ It is in this larger spirit of a conquest of death that the chorus’ references to a second youth need to be interpreted.

Katabasis and the theme of life and death

The use of katabasis to present Heracles as an extreme form of heroism is only part of the story. It also brings into the play the theme of life and death and triggers the transition of Heracles’ family from a symbolic death to a symbolic rebirth. As long as the absent Heracles goes through a deathlike experience in the Underworld, his family undergoes a similar virtual death on the stage. Once again, this literary use of katabasis as a means of reflecting upon the notions of life, death, and rebirth is paralleled by the ritual reading of the motif as the initiate’s death and rebirth into a new status.¹⁹ For instance, in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the perpetual movement of Persephone from the earth to the Underworld and vice versa not only exemplifies the life cycle of nature (*Hymn.Hom. Cer.* 471–473) but also imitates the pattern of death and rebirth involved in two important rites of passage that an Eleusinian initiate must undergo—the initiation into the mysteries and the transition to a postmortem life. The former is perceived as a

when Heracles will indeed kill his children. Despite their initial surprise, the spectators are probably expected to reevaluate the verb in its immediate context and understand it as ‘labour to avert’.

¹⁸ Gibert, *CP* 92 (1997) 255–258.

¹⁹ On katabasis and death and rebirth in mystery cults see M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (New York 1958) 62; R. Seaford, “Immortality, Salvation, and the Elements,” *HSCP* 90 (1986) 1–26; W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1987) 83–86; P. Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford 1995) 251–252, 264–269, 291; I. Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus: Ritual and Theatre in Aristophanes’ Frogs* (Oxford 1999) 78–86, 103–108; S. Lavecchia, *Pindari dithyramborum fragmenta* (Rome 2000) 119–121. On the death-rebirth pattern in ritual see also Plut. fr.178 Sandbach; Pherecyd. Syr. 7B6 D.-K.

symbolic death and rebirth of the initiate into the new status of *mystes*,²⁰ while the latter involves a biological death that leads to a new, privileged existence in the Underworld. The three events—katabasis, Eleusinian initiation, biological death—are interrelated to the extent that they involve the stages of a ritual initiation, as defined by Van Gennep. It is not a coincidence that Persephone's descent was in all likelihood mimetically performed during the mysteries.²¹

In Euripides' play, the liminal condition attached to the hero as a consequence of his sojourn in the infernal realm characterises his family as well. Amphitryon, Megara, and the children are completely isolated and cut off from human society.²² They can move neither within the city of Thebes nor outside of it. Just as Heracles cannot return γαίης ὑπο (296), so his family is unable to cross γαίης ὄρια (82), for powerful guards protect the gates. Apparently, Lycus is in control of the geographical territory. Even exile is not a promising option for the children (302–306). The fact that the family is also banned from its physical space, namely the house (53–54), reflects the anomaly of the situation. The only place left for them is the altar of Zeus Soter. The problematic spatial position of the family is enhanced by the lack of friends (55–59, 84–85, 222–228, 551, 558–561), a fact that seals their alienation from any kind of reciprocal social liaison. Clearly, the family lives in a virtual Underworld with no food, drink, clothing, or friends

²⁰ On the symbolic death of the initiate see Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus* 57–60.

²¹ See e.g. Thuc. 6.28.1; Lys. 6.51; Isoc. 16.6; Andoc. 1.11, 12, 16; Plut. *Mor.* 621C; Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 2.12; cf. *Hymn.Hom.Cer.* 476 (δρημοσύνη) and Dion. Hal. *Rom.Ant.* 2.19.2. Cf. G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton 1961) 148–149, 261 ff.; K. Dowden, “Grades in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” *RHR* 197 (1980) 409–427, at 426; Lada-Richards, *Initiating Dionysus* 81–84. Dionysus' katabasis was also mimetically enacted by the initiates in the context of the Dionysiac cult, as evidence suggests (see Clark, *Catabasis* 102–106; Lada-Richards 78–81).

²² See R. Rehm, “The Play of Space: Before, Behind, and Beyond in Euripides' *Heracles*,” *ICS* 24/25 (1999–2000) 363–375, at 365–366.

(51–59).

The attitude of the family is also indicative of their contact with death. To talk about or contemplate death in a critical moment may be a commonplace in Greek tragedy, but to make funerary preparations while still alive is far less usual. The adornment of the children with funeral garments is emphatically presented, as it preoccupies all the onstage characters; it is prepared by Megara (329–331), permitted by Lycus (332–335, cf. 702–703), pointed out by the chorus (442–443), and persistently commented on by Heracles (525–526, 548–549, 562–564). This oxymoronic image of the living actors dressed like corpses must have made a strong theatrical impression upon the audience²³ and certainly functions as a reminder of the anomalous status of the family,²⁴ as well as a visual representation of the state of Heracles in Hades. Like the initiands in mystic transitions, the children undergo a deathlike experience, which is symbolised by their funeral garments.²⁵ This in turn prefigures their literal death. The deathlike experience of the family climaxes in Megara's speech at 451–496, where she views the whole family as a mixed group of corpses and looks for the sacrificer who will send the sacrificial victims to the house of Hades (451–455). Also, in an impressive metaphorical image, she makes use of the marriage-to-death motif and conceives their present plight as a perverted nuptial ceremony (480–484).²⁶ Besides, images like Charon and his oar

²³ On costume and the visual aspects in the play see N. Worman, "The Ties that Bind: Transformation of Costume and Connection in Euripides' *Heracles*," *Ramus* 28 (1999) 89–107.

²⁴ See Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 27.

²⁵ The clothes of the Eleusinian initiates were probably regarded as funerary and were dedicated to Demeter after the completion of the ceremony: see K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes' Frogs* (Oxford 1993) 62–63; Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* 378–379. Cf. Ar. *Plut.* 845–849 with schol. 845b (Melanth. *FGrHist* 326 F 4).

²⁶ On the motif of marriage to death in Greek tragedy see e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 406, 699; Soph. *Ant.* 813–815; Eur. *Andr.* 103, *Med.* 985. The motif is

lying in prospect for the children, the path with no return (430–434), and the idea of sending one to the world below (335, 453) give the impression that the children are about to reduplicate their father's infernal journey. What the family suffers is presented as a consequence of Heracles' absence in that the deathlike experience of the former is contingent on the latter's katabasis.²⁷ In fact, the chorus visualises the infernal journey of the children just after Heracles' own (425–435), as though they are causally related. Not surprisingly, Megara perceives the funeral garments of the children as the only patrimony from the house of their father (331).

The family's deathlike experience is reversed when Heracles returns from the Underworld. This idea rests on the rehabilitative power of the katabatic motif that is intrinsic not only to its ritual readings but also to some of its mythic expressions. For instance, Orpheus and Dionysus descend to the Underworld with the aim of reviving beloved persons (Eurydice, Semele), Heracles manages to restore Theseus to the world of the living, and Persephone by means of her *anodos* effectuates the renewal of nature. Similarly, the *anodos* of Euripides' Heracles signals the rescue of his relatives and their symbolic return to life. Indeed, Heracles is welcomed as a light for his family (ὦ φάος μολών, 531),²⁸ which has so far encountered the darkness

discussed by R. Seaford, "The Tragic Wedding," *JHS* 107 (1987) 106–130, and "Death and Wedding in Aeschylus' *Niobe*," in F. McHardy et al. (eds.), *Lost Dramas of Classical Athens: Greek Tragic Fragments* (Exeter 2005) 113–127; R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rites in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton 1994); G. K. Giannakis, "Το ποιητικό μοτίβο 'γάμος-θάνατος' στην αρχαία ελληνική και την ινδοευρωπαϊκή," *Dodoni* 27 (1998) 93–113. Ritual perversion is here doubled, for the motif no longer applies to young women, but rather to three boys.

²⁷ This parallelism between the fates of Heracles and his family is noted in passing by Assaël, *LEC* 62 (1994) 320. Interestingly, Megara states that she must become μίμημα of her husband's virtue (294).

²⁸ Agamemnon and Orestes receive a similar reception (Aesch. *Ag.* 601, Soph. *El.* 1224). Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* 377–378, discussing the latter play and *HF*, argues that this motif applies to a hero who is thought to be

of a virtual Underworld. The hero encourages his children to unveil their heads, tear off the funeral garments, and gaze at the light, alluding to their transition from death to rebirth (562–564):

οὐ ῥίψεθ' Ἄιδου τάσδε περιβολὰς κόμης
καὶ φῶς ἀναβλέψεσθε, τοῦ κάτω σκότου
φίλας ἀμοιβὰς ὄμμασιν δεδορκότες;

These acts are reminiscent of ritual ceremonies that involve mystic transitions to a new status. In this aspect, Heracles undertakes the role of a hierophant, who assists and brings to pass the initiatory ceremony. This is not alien to the cultic persona of the hero, who played an important role in initiatory rituals associated with age transition.²⁹ Relevant here is also the ritual interpretation of his katabasis in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries. According to the 'Eleusinised' version of the episode, Heracles becomes the first to be initiated into the Mysteries at Eleusis before his descent.³⁰ In such ritual surroundings, the hero's katabasis is raised to the level of a paradigmatic act that encapsulates the promising eschatological message of Eleusis, namely the symbolic conquest of death.³¹ Once again, Euripides makes creative use of the existing cultic associations of the katabasis-motif with the notion of death and

dead, but unexpectedly returns to save his kin. See also Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 52.

²⁹ For more see C. Jourdain-Annequin, "A propos d'un rituel pour Iolaos à Agyrion: Héraclès et l'initiation des jeunes gens," in A. Moreau (ed.), *L'initiation II* (Montpellier 1992) 121–141; E. M. Griffiths, *Euripides' Heracles* (London 2006) 25.

³⁰ *HF* 610–613; cf. Apollod. 2.5.12; Pind. fr.346c; [Pl.] *Ax.* 371E; Plut. *Thes.* 33.2; Diod. 4.25–26, cf. 4.14.3; schol. Ar. *Plut.* 845. On relevant iconography see Mylonas, *Eleusis* 205 ff. For more detailed discussion see F. Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens* (Berlin 1974) 142–150; N. Robertson, "Heracles' 'Catabasis,'" *Hermes* 108 (1980) 274–300, at 295–299.

³¹ Contrast Robertson, *Hermes* 108 (1980) 296–299.

rebirth; in this light, the presentation of the Euripidean Heracles as a mediator in the life/death continuum and as a man who can contribute to the virtual rebirth of his family is endowed with religious authority.

Interestingly, the chorus sympathises with the family and participates in its deathlike experience and subsequent rebirth. The choral odes are full of references to the physical decadence of old age, which characterises Amphitryon as well.³² They introduce themselves as ἔπεα μόνον καὶ δόκημα νυκτερωπὸν ἐννύχων ὄνειρων (112–113), foreshadowing the dream-like ontological status of the katabatic Heracles (495, 517–518) and pinpointing the kinship between old age and death. On the contrary, Heracles' return allows them to experience a second youth. νεότης is praised in the second stasimon (637–654) and becomes the topic of the stanza that follows (655–672). Once Lycus is killed, the chorus participates more actively in the surrounding spirit of rebirth by engaging in a festive dance that suggests a sort of rejuvenation (760–814). Their references to the crown (677, 781) allude to a return to life, for in a ritual context the garland is worn after the completion of the initiation process.³³ Here it decorates both the chorus and the river Ismenus, suggesting an extension of the regenerative effects of Heracles' *anodos* to the whole city.

Death resurgent

But here too we are not at an end. After the sequence of death and rebirth, the theme of death reappears. This time the notion is introduced by the portrayal of Lyssa and is further illuminated in the act of infanticide, before being associated with Heracles himself. In her Euripidean profile, Lyssa works as the representative of destructive infernal forces.³⁴ Her prom-

³² Chorus: 107–129, 124–130, 268–269, 312–314, 436–441, 448–450. Amphitryon: 115, 228–235 (note also his recurrent designation as πρέσβυς and γέρον).

³³ See n.38 below.

³⁴ For Lyssa in Greek tragedy cf. e.g. Aesch. *Cho.* 287, *PV* 883, *Xantriai*

inently infernal attributes are mainly owed to her resemblances to the Aeschylean Erinyes,³⁵ her affiliation with Night, and her designation as Νυκτὸς Γοργῶν (883). This idea is further stressed when the maddened Heracles is made to call forth the Tartarian Keres, the spirits of death (870), and when the effects of Lyssa's activities on the house are defined as τάρραγμα τάρταρειον (908, cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 72). When Lyssa invades Heracles she is actually identified with him in such a way that his actions and thoughts are not independent of her.³⁶

That he is now controlled by a deathly power is also implied by the fact that madness affects first his vision.³⁷ Hallucinations,

fr.169 (if we read with Lobeck Λύσσης instead of γλώσσης); Soph. fr.941 (*incert.*); Eur. *Bacch.* 977, 981. Euripides however is the first to stage this figure; see J. Duchemin, "Le personnage de Lyssa dans l'Héraclès Furieux d'Euripide," *REG* 80 (1967) 130–139, with references to texts and vase-paintings related to the figure of Lyssa.

³⁵ For instance, like them she is an unwedded virgin (834, cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 68–70, 791 = 821), she is the daughter of Night (822, 834, 844, 883, cf. *Eum.* 321–323, 416, 745, 791–792 = 821–822, 844 = 876, 1034), she is correlated with Gorgon (883, cf. *Cho.* 1048, *Eum.* 48–49), she has snakes on her head (883–884, cf. *Cho.* 1050, *Eum.* 128), and she is compared to a hound (860, cf. *Cho.* 924, 1054). Also, her activities are described in terms of hunting (837, cf. e.g. *Eum.* 111–113, 118–148, 244–253) and cause madness (835–836, 861–863, 867–872, 878, cf. *Cho.* 1023–1024, Eur. *Or.* 37, 254). For further details see Assaël, *LEC* 62 (1994) 319–320; Duchemin, *REG* 80 (1967) 130–139.

³⁶ See M. O. Lee, "The Iris-Lyssa Scene in Euripides' *Heracles*," *Antichthon* 16 (1982) 44–53, at 48–49, who also points out that Lyssa is identified with her victim on a fifth-century Attic red-figure vase (on which see A. D. Trendall and T. B. L. Webster, *Illustrations of Greek Drama* [London 1971] 62). On how madness ties in with the circular patterns of ἐλίσσω, στρέφω, and χορεύω in this play see Worman, *Ramus* 28 (1999) 100–101.

³⁷ On vision in the play see Griffiths, *Euripides' Heracles* 59–61. On Heracles' madness and scholarly discussions of its nature see K. Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides' Heracles: Reasoning Madness* (Oxford 2008). Heracles' madness is an exclusive product of divine intervention (so also J.-A. Shelton, "Structural Unity in Euripides' *Hercules Furens*," *Eranos* 77 [1979] 101–110, at 106), not something caused by the hero himself. Contrast U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides: Herakles II* (Berlin 1895) 128–129.

deceptive sight, and optical disorientation are the main symptoms of his affliction. In the context of a broader contrasting alternation between light and darkness in the play, the distorted vision is expected to be perceived as akin to the underworldly darkness. Death in the guise of Lyssa controls him, invades him, and transforms him into her instrument, bringing about one more, now definite, katabasis—that of his family. The prevalence of the infernal forces is corroborated by the Chorus, which abandons the discourse on youth and Heracles' *arete* for the song of Hades (1025–1027):

αἰᾶ, τίνα στεναγμὸν
ἢ γόον ἢ φθιτῶν ῥῥδᾶν ἢ τίν' Ἄι-
δα χορὸν ἀχῆσω;

Amphitryon will recognise in this fit of madness the workings of an infernal force like the one that avenges the murdered dead, for he will ask his son whether he is driven by the blood of the men he has killed (966–967) and will then compare him to a bacchant of Hades (1119).

The murder of the children is described in language that recalls katabasis. As Iris puts it, Heracles will send τὸν καλλίπαιδα στέφανον across the strait of Acheron with his own murderous hand (838–839).³⁸ The expression actually subverts the idea of Heracles' victorious crown (στεφάνωμα μόχθων,

Its cause has been traced in Heracles' glorious achievements (Lee, *Antichthon* 16 [1982] 51–53), the capture of Cerberus (Shelton 105; E. M. Griffiths, "Euripides' *Heracles* and the Pursuit of Immortality," *Mnemosyne* 55 [2002] 641–656), the murder of Lycus (Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* 380), and his interstitial nature between mortal and divine (Silk, *G&R* 32 [1985] 17–18). Still, I do not think that Hera's anger needs any justification; she has long been intending to harm the hero and now that the labours are completed she finds the opportunity to accomplish her plans, cf. *HF* 827–832 (so Gregory, *YCS* 25 [1977] 267–268; Bond, *Euripides' Heracles* xxiv–xxvi).

³⁸ According to Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* 380–381, the infanticide is presented as a reversed mystic transition insofar as the use of the crown in the Eleusinian mysteries marks the completion of the initiatory rite and the return of the Kore from the Underworld.

355–356) and his designation as καλλίνικος.³⁹ The previous symbolic rebirth of the family now gives way to an experience that takes on the nature of a katabasis pattern. The katabasis he will contrive for his children will ironically constitute another labour, but of a different kind (τὸν λοίσθιον δὲ τόνδ’ ἔτλην τάλας πόνον, παιδοκτονήσας δῶμα θριγκῶσαι κακοῖς, 1279–1280). Heracles’ heroic and domestic images are confused.⁴⁰ Imaginary chariots, enemies, and open-air fights subvert the idea of Heracles the fighter, who is now declared καλλίνικος over no one (959–962).⁴¹ Characteristically, the bow is transformed from an instrument of glorious achievements into an instrument of kindred death.⁴² Heracles will later consider the idea of keeping his weapons, commenting on their double function (1376–1385). In view of his ruinous acts, his previous question τῶν δ’ ἐμῶν τέκνων οὐκ ἐκπονήσω θάνατον; (580–581) obtains a different dimension; Heracles does not ‘labour to avert’ his children’s death, but rather ‘labours to accomplish’ it.

All in all, just before the second entrance of Heracles Euripides undermines the extraordinary kind of heroism with which he credits Heracles in the first part of the play. By means of his katabasis he may have exceeded by far the potential of the ordinary man and reached the extreme of human achievement, but in so doing he has (as we realise when Lyssa enters) placed himself in a dangerous position. The notion of death, as re-introduced by Lyssa’s entrance and the subsequent infanticide, reverses his achievement, questions his victory over death, and prepares for the revelation of his weak side in the second

³⁹ See S. A. Barlow, “Structure and Dramatic Realism in Euripides’ *Heracles*,” *G&R* 29 (1982) 115–125, at 122; Griffiths, *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002) 84.

⁴⁰ See Barlow, *G&R* 29 (1982) 117–122.

⁴¹ On how the term καλλίνικος helps articulate Heracles’ fall from glory to disaster see Shelton, *Eranos* 77 (1979) 109–110.

⁴² See C. S. Kraus, “Dangerous Supplements: Etymology and Genealogy in Euripides’ *Heracles*,” *PCPhS* 44 (1998) 137–157, at 142.

part of the play.⁴³ Euripides, therefore, raises through Heracles the traditional Greek theme of mortal limitation; by stretching the boundaries, some people are ultimately destroyed and serve as examples that define the boundaries for us. The unpredictability of the divine and the weakness that is inherent in man will eventually reinforce the human need for friendship.

Heracles' new contact with death

In the action that follows the massive killings of Lycus and Heracles' family, the hero undergoes once again a virtual death, which sometimes takes on the wrappings of a katabasis. The *ekuklema* is wheeled out carrying the sleeping hero and his murdered family and transforming the stage into a virtual Hades.⁴⁴ The presence of the corpses is repeatedly pointed out.⁴⁵ Most importantly, Heracles is presented among them (1189) and is lamented together with them, as though he too is dead (1045–1046, 1064–1066).⁴⁶ Even when he regains his senses, the hero continues to register features of a living corpse in an onstage Underworld. He says that he has dead bodies as neighbours (1097) and he initially identifies the place with Hades, wondering whether he has performed a katabasis once again (1101–1104):

οὐ που κατῆλθον αὐθις εἰς Ἄιδου πάλιν,
 Εὐρυσθέως διάυλον ἐξ Ἄιδου μολών;
 ἀλλ' οὔτε Σισύφειον εἰσορῶ πέτρον
 Πλούτωνά τ' οὐδὲ σκήπτρα Δήμητρος κόρης.
 ἔκ τοι πέπληγμαί· ποῦ ποτ' ὦν ἀμηχανῶ;

⁴³ Cf. Silk, *G&R* 32 (1985) 12–19.

⁴⁴ For the *ekuklema* in the play see Bond, *Euripides' Heracles*, on 1028 ff.; S. A. Barlow, *Euripides' Heracles* (Warminster 1996), on 1029.

⁴⁵ E.g. *HF* 1032–1033, 1051–1052, 1097, 1031, 1172, 1189. As Z. Petre, “La représentation de la mort dans la tragédie grecque,” *StudClas* 23 (1985) 21–35, at 23–25, observes, the bloody corpses of the children encapsulate all the previous references to death in this play.

⁴⁶ For Heracles as ‘mort-vivant’ in this final part of the play see Assaël, *LEC* 62 (1994) 324–325.

Moreover, his train of thought and the way he chooses to express his misfortunes are deeply influenced by his previous katabatic experience. The hero wishes to return to the Underworld from which he has just come (1247), imagines himself suffering like Ixion (1294–1298), and continuously contemplates suicide (1146–1152, 1241, 1247, 1255–1310).⁴⁷ Indicative of his deathlike status is also his reaction to Theseus' arrival. Heracles veils his head (1159, 1199), calling to mind the image of his children dressed in funeral garments.⁴⁸ This action not only signals his transformation from the wearer of the lion skin and victor's crown to a weak and defenseless figure,⁴⁹ but also stresses his current status as a *mort-vivant*, for the veiling covers the hero in darkness (1159, 1216–1217). The ritual connotations of the veiling reinforce the idea of Heracles' symbolic death.⁵⁰ Iconography depicts the hero seated and veiled in the course of his initiation at Agrai.⁵¹ This phase of the initiatory ritual seems to correspond to the stage of liminality or virtual death that the initiand undergoes before his re-aggregation and rebirth into a new status.

It should be noted that Heracles embodies the spatial liminality of a katabatic hero, and scenic elements are used to highlight this idea. The corpses of Megara and the children as well as the pillar to which the character is tied serve as visual representations of a ruined *oikos*, both in its physical meaning

⁴⁷ Heracles' dilemma is discussed in theological terms by H. Yunis, *A New Creed: Fundamental Religious Beliefs in the Athenian Polis and Euripidean Drama* (Göttingen 1988) 139–171, and in ethical terms by S. Yoshitake, "Disgrace, Grief, and Other Ills: Herakles' Rejection of Suicide," *JHS* 114 (1994) 135–153.

⁴⁸ See Worman, *Ramus* 28 (1999) 94. Veiling occurs also in Eur. *Supp.* 111 (Adrastus) and 286–287 (Aithra) as an expression of grief.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Worman, *Ramus* 28 (1999) 94–97.

⁵⁰ On the mystic connotations of veiling see Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 53.

⁵¹ So the Lovatelli Urn and the Torre Nova sarcophagus: Mylonas, *Eleusis* 205–208, fig. 83, 84.

(“building”) and in its abstract sense (“family”).⁵² Heracles may be staged among the human and inhuman remnants of his house, but his place in the family structure is ironically non-existent, as non-existent is the *oikos* itself. His isolation is absolute, as he is also excluded from the broader social group (1279–1298, 1161–1162). The use of the *ekkeklemma* underlines the spatially abnormal status of Heracles, as it places him in a liminal place in the intersection of what Rehm has identified as three distinct theatrical spaces—the ‘before’, the ‘behind’, and the ‘beyond’.⁵³ In fact, this device conventionally brings to the theatrical ‘before’ the result of events that unfolded in the interior of the house, the ‘behind’ of the performance, while in the context of this play it also contributes to the visualisation of an onstage Underworld, the theatrical ‘beyond’.

This last deathlike experience of Heracles is different from his previous ones. Heracles the all-powerful hero gives way to Heracles the man, as Euripides now discloses the weak and more human side of the protagonist. The destruction of his family brings about his own destruction. In a way, the scene that follows the infanticide functions as a foil to the initial episodes of the play; just as the family reproduced symbolically Heracles’ infernal journey, so Heracles now shares the family’s contact with death. His successful return to life will no longer derive from his extraordinary individualistic power, but rather from his *philia*-bond with Theseus. In this second part, therefore, Euripides presents us with an alternative way of facing and then conquering death.

Heracles’ second ‘anodos’

Although the full recovery of Heracles will occur outside the dramatic time and space, when he arrives at his new home in Athens, there are elements that attest to his second symbolic re-

⁵² Cf. J. Wohlberg, “The Palace-Hero Equation in Euripides,” *AAntHung* 16 (1968) 149–155.

⁵³ Cf. Rehm, *ICS* 24/25 (1999–2000) 370.

turn to life. This symbolic rebirth, as already pointed out, is not achieved by Heracles' extraordinary physical power, but rather by the mediation of the reciprocal bonds of *philia* that he establishes with Theseus. Heracles' first contact with life and gradual transformation begin with his act of unveiling (1202–1204, 1214–1215, 1226–1227, 1231). That it is Theseus who insists on the performance of this action indicates that this unexpected visitor will play a role comparable to the returning Heracles in the first part of the play—he will expel the notion of death and replace it with that of life. The uncovering of the head exposes Heracles to the sun (1231, cf. 1203–1204), just as tearing off the funeral garments exposed the children to light (562–564). On the basis of the light/darkness antithesis in this play, such an act can be interpreted as a symbolic return to life.

This symbolic return brings about the reconsideration and renewal of Heracles' heroism. Several elements subvert the previous image of the independent and self-sufficient hero, attributing to him qualities that are more peculiar to human nature. For instance, as opposed to the outcome of his *katabasis* that exalted his divine birth, his new deathlike experience uncovers his mortality;⁵⁴ he is repeatedly characterised as *θηητός* (1197, 1232, 1320, cf. 1227), declares defeat by Hera (1253, 1303–1307), rejects his divine origin (1263–1265),⁵⁵ pits himself against the Olympians (1242–1243, 1303–1310), and by advocating the idea of the perfect divinity (1340–1346)⁵⁶ dis-

⁵⁴ For the prevalence of Heracles' mortal nature in the second part of the play see Gregory, *YCS* 25 (1977) 271–272; Silk, *G&R* 32 (1985) 14–16.

⁵⁵ On the tension between Amphitryon and Zeus in the play see Gregory, *YCS* 25 (1977) 261–262.

⁵⁶ As Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 85–116, rightly notes, Heracles does not reject the existence of the traditional gods (contra S. E. Lawrence, “The God that is Truly God and the Universe of Euripides' *Heracles*,” *Mnemosyne* 51 [1998] 129–146), but he reacts to their morality, which no longer meets the standards of their nature. See also Gregory, *YCS* 25 (1977) 273–274. On the potential meta-theatrical dimension of this statement see Griffiths, *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002) 96–97.

misses the very foundation of his semi-divine birth, namely their illicit love-affairs. Also, the tradition of his apotheosis gives way to a more attainable sort of immortality: although he will die (1331), the Athenians will honour him with sacrifices and massive temples of stone (1331–1333). Under these new circumstances, Heracles asks Theseus' help in bringing Cerberus back to Argos (1386–1388)⁵⁷ and expresses his willingness to “submit to chance” (τῆ τύχῃ δουλευτέον, 1357).⁵⁸ More relevant to our discussion is the fact that this renewed perception of heroism goes hand in hand with a renewed attitude toward death. In fact, Heracles' declaration ἐγκαρτερήσω θάνατον (“I shall await death steadfastly,” 1351),⁵⁹ which actually subverts his previous assertion ἐκπονήσω θάνατον, implies that the hero sees death from another perspective.⁶⁰ The notion of ‘labour’ is now absent. Heracles will no longer engage in a fight against Death as part of his glorious achievements, but will rather await him steadfastly. This declaration suggests that Heracles modifies his stance on human limitations. If his return from the world of the dead reflected his breach of the limits on humankind, waiting patiently for death now reflects his awareness of those limits. This reconsidered perception forms the basis for his new collaborative approach to life and creates a sharp contrast with the lone Bowman figure in the *agon* earlier on.

⁵⁷ For the different interpretations of this request see J. F. Johnson, “Compassion and Friendship in Euripides' *Heracles*,” *CB* 78 (2002) 115–129, at 124 n.40.

⁵⁸ In this respect, he rejects the principle of the self-reliant hoplite with which Amphitryon had credited him earlier (μὴ ἔκ τύχης ὀρμισμένον, 201–203); cf. Papadopoulou, *Heracles and Euripidean Tragedy* 177.

⁵⁹ This reading is transmitted by codex L, but it is emended to ἐγκαρτερήσω βίον by Wecklein. Wecklein's correction is accepted by many scholars; for references see Gibert, *CP* 92 (1997) 247 n.2, and Johnson, *CB* 78 (2002) 121). For a comprehensive and persuasive defence of the transmitted reading see Gibert. See also W. Kranz, “ἐγκαρτερήσω θάνατον,” *PhW* 47 (1927) 138–139.

⁶⁰ See Gibert, *CP* 92 (1997) 247–258.

Reciprocity and interdependence also form part of Heracles' attitude toward his family. We have seen that, while in the first part of the play the family's fate was tightly dependent on the hero's actions, the terms are now reversed. The link he draws between the destruction of his kin and his own destruction (1374, 1389–1393) shows explicitly enough that it is their death that accounts for his new deathlike experience. Thus, he manages to recover and reverse his deathlike state only when he is “unyoked” (κἀποζεύγνυμαι, 1375) from his family and puts on the new “yoke” of *philia* with Theseus (cf. ζεῦγός γε φίλιον, 1403). Theseus will henceforth be regarded as his surrogate son, taking the place of his dead children (1401). The reciprocal dynamics of this new human bond, as well as the character of Heracles' redefined heroism, is registered in the staging of the hero's exit and, more precisely, in the physical contact it involves; Theseus offers his hand to Heracles (1398) and puts the arm of his friend around his neck (1402).⁶¹ This leaning on Theseus, the co-fighter and the son, exemplifies the reciprocity and interdependence involved in the *philia* bond, which makes possible another dimension of heroism.⁶²

Conclusion

It has not been my intention to assert that the only way to read the play is through the katabatic motif it involves. Nor did

⁶¹ The image of Heracles leaning upon Theseus mirrors the previous image of the children leaning upon Heracles while walking off stage (631–632). For the image of the two boats as a unifying link of the two parts of the play see M. R. Halleran, *Stagecraft in Euripides* (Totowa 1985) 92; Rehm, *ICS* 24/25 (1999–2000) 371; on the nautical imagery in the play see Griffiths, *Mnemosyne* 55 (2002) 59. See also the chorus of the Theban elders who lean on each other for support in lines 124–126 (cf. Worman, *Ramus* 28 [1999] 102–103).

⁶² Note in the final scene the repetition of *συν*-compound terms that stress the idea of interdependence (so Mills, *Theseus* 143). Certainly his decision to retain his weapons (1376–1385) and his intention to bring Cerberus to Argos (1386–1368) show that he does not renounce his heroic career (contrast Wilamowitz, *Euripides: Herakles* II 109).

I attempt to apply a reading that differs substantially from what most scholars accept as the mainstream reading of the play. I agree that Euripides redefines Heracles' heroic identity and explores a different type of heroism which is based on the principle of reciprocity and is undoubtedly closer to the standards of ordinary human nature. However, the above analysis shows that katabasis offers additional and richer interpretative possibilities, impacting on ways of seeing and thinking in the play. In the first part, it brings out the growth of Heracles' heroic excellence insofar as it serves as proof of his ultimate achievement. Through his infernal visit and return the hero contacts death and manages to triumph over it. At the same time, the motif serves as a backdrop against which Heracles' family undergoes a similar deathlike experience before experiencing a symbolic rebirth once the hero returns to his homeland. However, at Lyssa's arrival the notion of death reappears and pervades the offstage episode of infanticide. The same spirit characterises most of the second part of the play. Heracles undergoes another, much more arduous, deathlike experience, in which the triumph over death is achieved not by means of extraordinary power and supernatural courage, but rather through the bond of *philia* and the human reciprocity it involves.

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