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Word count: 1519 words

Emma Griffiths (G.) has written a book which is very useful for people who are interested in Euripides' *Heracles* but are not specialists in Greek tragedy. She deals with the cultural-historical and mythological background of the play and discusses the play's most important themes, paying attention to methodological considerations as well. As such, her book can be helpful in an undergraduate course on this tragedy, giving the students a common starting point. G.'s book belongs to the series "Duckworth Companions to Greek and Roman Tragedy". Up until now, the introductions to fourteen tragedies have been published, some of which have been reviewed for BMCR.¹

The book contains nine chapters, each of which is divided into sections with headings usually running to one or two pages. Overall, the structure is well-organised, although I did not always find the headings very instructive. The first chapter is an introduction. G. draws attention to the complex image of the mythological Heracles in ancient as well as modern times. She states the book's purpose of [p.11] "primarily examining the play within its original context, exploring the ways it related to issues and ideas current when it was originally produced some time in the late fifth century." She warns of the tension between understanding the play in its original context and appreciating our own response to it. G. mentions some principal objections against 'universalising' approaches as some of these approaches will be considered in discussing the *Heracles*. "(...) modern ideas and constructs affect our ability to access the ancient world and thus change the ancient mythology." [p.14]

The second chapter, 'Heracles and Greek myth', begins with the various images of Heracles in myth. Heracles shows up in many stories all over Greece and the episodes cover all stages of his life: birth, marriages, labours, death and deification. No wonder then, that this mythological figure has been approached from very different perspectives. Rightly, G. restricts her overview to ideas which are relevant to the study of the Madness of Heracles, such as Heracles' multivalency (his mortal and immortal sides due to his double parentage), the unfixed chronology and causality between Labours and Madness, the extremity of his passions, his cultic aspect and his status as a *heros* in the Athenian democracy. G. concludes [p.29] "(...) for the original audience there was a complex religious, as well as literary, background to the drama."

The third chapter, 'Euripides, Heracles and Greek Tragedy', first offers a short introduction to Athenian drama and the three tragedians. How is the play *Heracles* related to other Greek drama, especially by Euripides? Heracles appears as a character in four surviving tragedies. Relying on the little material that is left, G. argues that the character of Heracles was not very common in tragedy because he was strongly identified as a comic figure due to his extreme
passions. Characteristics of Euripides' tragedies are an increased interest in domestic situations and a rationalising and critical approach to myth. His tragedies often play with illusion and reality, which creates a metatheatrical level. All these aspects can be traced in the *Heracles*.

Chapter 4, 'Dramatic Structure and Unity', gives an overview of the play itself. One of the main problems in the interpretation of the *Heracles* is caused by its seeming lack of unity. At first, the play has the structure of a suppliant drama with a happy end for the suppliants, but then the story rapidly changes to a second story, the madness of Heracles and its aftermath. Among scholars there is no consensus about the structure and the meaning of the play. G. first explores a number of approaches to the question of unity in the play and next focuses on the lack of unity as a positive dramatic virtue. Though one may criticize the play for lacking unity at the level of the story, the *Heracles* can be shown to have a different unity based on the continuity of the characters, certain imagery and visual elements. G. concludes, following the approach of many recent critics [p.63]: "It may be that the play's awkward structure is a deliberate ploy which ties in with wider themes of reality, story and truth, and that Euripides was deliberately leaving raw edges to the story to unsettle the audience, a mark of his literary skill rather than of dramatic incompetence."

Chapters 5 to 8 deal with several key themes of the play. One can read these chapters separately. However, although the chapters consider themes which relate to the play as a whole, they each focus on a different part of the play, which avoids the risk of needless repetition.

Chapter 5, the longest one of the book (25 pages), deals with 'Family Values'. G. first shows how [p.67] "the original audience of *Heracles* had two sets of family patterns to draw upon, one from their own daily lives and one from the inherited body of myths which belonged to wider culture." Most attention is paid to an exploration of the family dynamics in the play through the individual relationships. At first sight, Heracles has a good family structure. He has a good wife who behaves well in the absence of her husband (which is very exceptional for tragedy) and he is dear to his children. After he has killed his children and wife, his father still responds to him in a human way. While Heracles is away it turns out that his family cannot survive without him, which makes it all the more ironic when he becomes the cause of their destruction. Discussing the aspect of family, G. also makes a connection to the issue of madness. Heracles' words "All mankind is child-loving" are ambiguous as they can refer to children in general or to one's own children. They become significant when Heracles kills his own children, but does his delusion concern the killing of children or the killing of his children? G. concludes the chapter by discussing the significant role of Heracles' bow. Lycus criticizes Heracles because of this cowardly weapon, and it is the bow that Heracles uses for killing his children.

Chapter 6 deals with Heracles' violence and madness. For G.'s interpretation of the play the main issue concerning Heracles' madness is the question, what exactly belongs to his nature and what is due to the delusion sent by Hera? G. deals with this question by discussing several other cases of madness in tragedy such as Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Ajax*. Another important question is why Hera attacks Heracles. G. finds the interpretation that Heracles pays the penalty not for what he has done but for who he is persuasive but not unproblematic.

Chapter 7, Suicide and the Gods, deals with the exceptional aftermath of the play. When Heracles has come to his senses, he first considers suicide, but his friend Theseus arrives and
finally both go to the city of Athens. G. shows in what way Heracles differs from other tragic characters who commit suicide, not just because he rejects it, but because the audience perceives his reasoning which accompanies the impulse. Heracles' rejection of suicide is closely connected with the way he has been treated by the gods, especially Hera and Zeus.

Chapter 8 considers several aspects of friendship and the role of Theseus, who offers Heracles another 'solution', to go to Athens with him, which is by no means an uncomplicated one. The personal relationship between the two characters is also looked at from a political and religious perspective. G. states [p.103]: "While the end of the play leaves a number of issues unresolved for modern audiences, the original audience may have believed it a satisfying ending if judged from an Athenocentric position. That is to say, if they believed that Theseus' actions were entirely honourable, the story could have been understood as a panegyric of Athenian power and policy." G. shows that Theseus' friendship is problematic, however, because this Athenian hero has not always behaved in a virtuous way. This leads G. to discuss 'the dark side of Athenian political friendship', meaning Athens' relationship to its allies in the Peloponnesian War. Linking the issue of friendship with international concerns, G. considers the play's depiction of family relationships in the domestic situation of Athens.

The final chapter gives an overview of the reception history of the play, which cannot be completely isolated from the reception history of all Heracles myths. Among other things, attention is paid to Seneca's Hercules Furens and to some modern performances.

To conclude, taking into account the lack of consensus on the interpretation of many aspects of Euripides' play Heracles, Griffiths has presented most important issues of the play in a critical but readable discussion of current ideas. Readers who like to go deeper into certain subjects, can find many (recent) bibliographical references in the notes. At the end, a guide to further reading, a glossary, a chronology and an index are included. The book also has an extensive bibliography, which is frequently referred to in the notes. I found but four small typos in the book. All quoted passages are in translation. Greek words occur rarely and are transliterated.

Notes:


2. p.52 in the heading: 635 should be 636. On p.100 and 122 an apostrophe should be deleted: line 10 after 'Heracles', resp. line 9 before 'In'. In the bibliography p.161: M. Lefkowitz's article is not named correctly: 'Impiety in Euripides' should be "Impiety' and 'Atheism' in Euripides' dramas'.

3. I thank Bé Breij for correcting my English.