

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Herakleidae (The Children of Herakles) (430 B.C.E.)

Euripides

Characters.

Iolaus. Old friend of Herakles. With a recovery of miraculous strength, he slays Eurystheus. He is transformed from aged to youthful. He is the most effective guardian of the children.

Copreus. The herald of King Eurystheus of Mycenae. Presented as contumacious and harsh.

Demophon. Son of Theseus, the king of Athens. Protector of the children of Herakles. A facile battlefield dialectician, unswayed by Copreus, and clearly representing the author's pro-Athenian viewpoint.

Macaria. Daughter of Herakles, who offers to sacrifice herself, to save Heracles' children—who are her own siblings.

Servant of Hyllus, son of Herakles and Deianira. He brings to Athens the news that a revenge army is on its way north from Argos and Mycenae.

Alcmene. The mother of Herakles, whose father is Zeus. Alcmene is a deadly foe of Eurystheus, and strongly presses for his execution.

Eurystheus. Powerful Peloponnesian foe of Athens, king of Mycenae. He meets the children of Herakles from his death by Athenian execution, thereby finally freeing the children of Herakles from their anxiety.

Synopsis.

The Children of Herakles (430 B.C.) is a play about the ancient Greek god, Herakles, and the efforts of his children to obtain sanctuary in Athens, after his demise. Resident in the Peloponnese, those children are subject to the fury of the King of Mycenae, Eurystheus, who has been the source of much suffering for Herakles, and who fears the revenge of those children on behalf of their father. Knowing that Eurystheus wants to kill them, those children flee from the Peloponnese to Athens, under the protection of Iolaus, the nephew and best friend of Herakles. The entire play is a drama of suppliant flight, of the dangers of being without the protection of statehood, and of the spiritual zones of prophecy and self-sacrifice.

Story

Iolaus' supplication The play opens before the altar of the Temple of Zeus at Marathon. Iolaus, the nephew of Herakles, appears on the steps of the altar with the children of the god Herakles. He explains the long and exhausting trek that has brought him to this altar, and his sense of responsibility for his best friend's youngsters.

Copreus' aggression Copreus, herald of Eurystheus, arrives to seize the children, and to take them back to the Peloponnese. He knocks Iolaus down. Chorus of Athenian elders: they inform themselves about Iolaus' mission of child protection. They are cautious and conservative. Demophon, son of Theseus, confronts Copreus; Iolaus and Copreus argue about the responsibility of Athens to admit suppliants. Copreus mocks the Athenians for their predilection to protect the weak; Copreus assures the Athenians that they will eventually yield to the power of Eurystheus.

Makaria's sacrifice Makaria enters, to offer to sacrifice herself, in order to save the children of Herakles. Iolaus and Demophon grow effusive in their praise of the self-sacrificing maiden.

Eurystheus Captive. Lengthy dispute over the ins and outs of battle; eventual capture of Eurystheus. Eurystheus brought in bound and captured, vanquished.

Last war A large army advances against Athens. Iolaus, who is determined to turn back the foe led by Eurystheus, proves himself a rejuvenated hero in war, and rejoices at the repulsion of the enemy forces. The turning of the battle, against Mycenae and Eurystheus, assures the survival of the children of Herakles. The Athenian reputation for guest friendship is maintained.

Themes

Self-sacrifice. Makaria, the daughter of Iolaus, the nephew of Herakles, offers herself as a sacrifice to Persephone, as part of a saving of Athens. The ultimate rescue of Athens comes from elsewhere, from the resurrected Iolaus' capture of Eurystheus, and obliteration of the Peloponnesian army. Nonetheless Makaria has joined Alcestis and (incidentally) Iphigenia (in work by Homer and Euripides) as a volunteer to purifying action. It is the gods who must be appeased, and whose emotional needs can be unpredictable in Greek religion.

Patriotism. The entire play circles around the noble role of the Athenian state, which is fighting its ninth year of the Peloponnesian War. Euripides is eager to underline the generosity of the Athenians, who are able and willing to shelter and protect the children of Herakles. With the god on their side, the Athenians think, there is no losing the war.

Miracles. After the safe resolution of the fate of Herakles' children, Eurystheus is captured by Iolaus, the nephew of Herakles. Iolaus is at this point old and feeble, and it is only by a miracle that he recovers his strength, and marches out to single handed combat. Sacrifice and miraculous empowerment are both on the side of the Athenians.

Supplication. This is the first of two plays in which Euripides highlights the power of supplication in Athenian culture. In a culture pervaded by oracular pronouncements, and by close relationships between interactive gods and mortal families, direct address requests are a regular form of high state prayer.

Character Analysis

Makaria A tragic triumph for Athens, the present play hardly stresses character development. In following the course of action, the audience will concentrate on Makaria, whose willingness to kill herself for the children of Herakles is a symbolic act of moving importance. Accepting the demand of the oracle, that a maiden of noble birth must be sacrificed to Persephone, Makaria volunteers to play that bitter role, but is just then saved, by the arrival of Hyllus, son of Herakles, to protect the young children from Eurystheus.

Parallels. As early as 460 B.C.E. Aeschylus composed *The Suppliant Maidens*, which concerns the pathos of the Persian widows caught up in the backwash of the terrible Persian Wars. The victims, though part of 'enemy culture,' were presented as worthy of sympathy. In Christian and other religious literature supplication is closely related to prayer. The thirteenth century German mystic and theologian, Meister Eckhart, was famed for simple but intense experiences of nature, from which he derived powerful prayers to God; many fine writers of twentieth century English have consigned their wisdom and metaphorical genius to the supplications of prayer: T.S. Eliot and Flannery O'Connor come keenly to mind.

Supplication. The play opens dramatically; Iolaus beseeches the Athenians' pity on the children of Herakles. Statuesque scene, before the altar at Marathon. The suppliants stand conspicuously on the steps of the noble temple, which faces out to the open sea.

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Argument. Copeus, the emissary of Eurystheus, appears before the court in Athens, to demand that the children of Heracles remain under the control of Eurystheus in the Peloponnesus. The harshness of the Peloponnesus is contrasted, in the formulation of these demands, with the sophistication of Athens, which Euripides highlights for his Athenian audience.

Praise. Iolaus monologues on the importance of a great father—like Herakles—and the respect that is due to the children of Herakles. This 'grand old man' type, who will regain his youth, is a spokesman for the noblest values that prevail in Athens. Copeus stands by and listens to this harsh indictment of his own Peloponnesian culture.

Sacrifice. Upon learning of her and her siblings' predicament, Makaria, the daughter of Herakles, nobly offers to sacrifice her own life for the safety of her family. She comes from the spiritual lineage of Iphigeneia, Antigone, even of Penelope, who was a mistress of standing by her man, and holding out.

Discussion questions

What kind of moral values does Euripides develop in this play? Is he a nationalist? Or a globalist?

What do you make of the presence of oracles and miraculous rejuvenations in this play? Is Euripides a rationalist?

What do you think of the blending of populism and patriotism in this play? Would you call the play propaganda, for the beneficence and innocence of Athens? Or a salute to the generosity inherent in mankind?

What do you think of the stagecraft of this play? What is the effect of the interventions by this chorus of Athenian elders. Does their presence simply deepen the case for the suppliant children? Think also of the effect of the intervention of dancing—dancing intricately correlated with the dialogue of this play, which is primarily speech and persuasion. Does the dancing, especially in the stylized costuming of the Greek tragic theater, in which prosody, dance steps, and costuming compose a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, does that dancing translate the whole drama of supplication into a work of high imagination rather than of realism?

Are you satisfied with the final resolution of the play, which explains that the execution of Eurystheus will generate a spirit which will protect the children of Herakles in the future? Does this resolution create a sense that justice has been done, to the children, while the bad guy, Eurystheus, has paid for his viciousness?