

Article

Resilience and Euripides' *Heracles*Sonia Pertsinidis 

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Abstract: In the midst of the current global health crisis, there is ongoing discussion about the need to cultivate resilience, that is, the ability to survive tragic events, adversity and prolonged stress. This paper engages in a reading of Euripides' *Heracles*, a bold and disturbing tragedy in which the eponymous hero suffers several striking reversals of fortune. After being victimized by Hera and unwittingly destroying his family, Heracles resolves to commit suicide. Only two hundred lines later, he resolves to continue to live. This change in outlook is remarkable given the traumatic events that he has just suffered. How does Heracles find the strength to endure? What factors bring about this positive change in Heracles' perspective? This paper will draw on findings from modern resilience research to shed light on Heracles' decision. It will discuss the complex combination of internal and external factors that play into Heracles' change of mind. I argue that the processes that Euripides portrays in his play dramatize many of the protective factors that are said to promote resilience in real life.

Keywords: resilience; Heracles; Theseus; trauma; madness



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1. Introduction

Euripides' *Heracles* is not just a psychologically compelling dramatization of madness; it is also a thought-provoking enquiry into heroism (Riley 2008, p. 5; all translations are my own; the Greek text is from Diggle 1981). In classical scholarship, the reasons for Heracles' rejection of suicide and his heroic decision to live have been variously interpreted. Some have argued that Heracles expresses a new type of virtue (ἀρετή; Chalk 1962, pp. 9–10; James 1969, p. 19); others have argued that it is really Theseus who saves Heracles (Adkins 1966, p. 219). Some see in Heracles a new internalised "courage founded on love" (Arrowsmith 1956, p. 53; Riley 2008, pp. 41–42), while others see a newfound commitment to human solidarity or to fate (Papadopoulou 2005, p. 182; de Romilly 2003, p. 289). For many, it is the saving grace of *philia* (friendship) that is the core message of the play (Stafford 2012, p. 92; Gregory 2011, pp. 141–49; Papadimitropoulos 2008, p. 132; Barlow 1996, pp. 14–16; Yoshitake 1994, pp. 151–53; Padilla 1994, p. 280; Silk 1985, p. 2; Bond 1981, pp. xxii–xxiii). More recently, scholars have used contemporary approaches to mental illness to explain Heracles' madness (Charlier 2003; López Saco 2002). Some view Heracles as a war veteran recovering from combat trauma (Konstan 2014, pp. 4–6; Meagher 2006, pp. 50, 60). The range of factors identified by scholars suggests that the situation is complex and that the identification of a single definitive reason for Heracles' rejection of suicide is impossible: rather, we should perhaps be examining the interplay *between* different factors.

In light of this, I would like to shift the discussion away from (a) the emphasis on Heracles' madness and (b) attempts to argue in favour of a "definitive factor" that leads to Heracles' rejection of suicide, in favour of examining the range of factors that contribute to resilience according to studies from modern psychology. I argue that resilience studies can provide a useful framework for analysing the complex combination of internal and external factors that contribute to Heracles' decision.

2. Surviving Crisis Events

It is well recognised in psychology that failure to cope effectively with adversities, such as the death of a loved one, serious illness or natural disasters, can trigger a range of illnesses and psychological disorders (Smith and Ascough 2016, p. 8). In recent decades, modern psychology has shifted from studying disorder to analysing the processes that help people cope effectively, that is, resilience (Ungar 2018a, p. 34). While the term “resilience” originates from the Latin verb *resilio*, meaning “to spring back, bounce back or rebound”, the use of the term in modern psychology does not necessarily imply recovering quickly from exposure to trauma. Psychologists recognise that there is no fixed timescale for recovery and that recovery may involve considerable emotional distress (Masten and Wright 2010, p. 221). Thus, the American Psychological Association defines resilience as “the *process of adapting well* in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress”.

Resilience research began with developmental studies of children living in disadvantaged and dangerous environments (Greene et al. 2004, p. 76). Leading researchers including Rutter (1987), Garmezy (1983), Werner and Smith (1982) and Masten et al. (1990) observed that some children thrived despite being exposed to factors such as violence, parental divorce or psychopathology (*risk factors*). This finding prompted further investigation into the *protective factors* that help children thrive in adversity. Protective factors include internal and individual factors, such as intelligence, expressiveness and secure attachment, as well as external factors, such as family cohesion and stability, positive role models, and cultural/spiritual identification. Most, if not all, theorists emphasise supportive social relationships as an important protective factor (Shean 2015, p. 27).

Today, resilience research has expanded beyond the fields of child psychology and psychiatry to examine the wellbeing of individuals from diverse age groups and backgrounds (Ungar 2018a, p. 34). Resilience is now understood as a complex and dynamic process that depends on a combination of factors (Greene et al. 2004, p. 78). Whilst it is recognised that some external factors are largely beyond one’s control (such as educational opportunities), there are a number of internal factors, such as positive self-regard and confidence, making firm plans for the future, and managing strong negative feelings (Smith and Ascough 2016, p. 2). Importantly, researchers have concluded that resilience is not an innate trait but a set of behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and practised over time (Reich et al. 2010, pp. xiii–xiv).

One of the primary factors in building resilience is said to be the cultivation of close and supportive relationships based on love and trust. In addition, there are several internal factors that can typically help to build resilience, including utilising problem-solving skills; maintaining confidence in one’s strengths and abilities; having a sense of meaning in life; and cultivating feelings of personal control (Rutter 1987).

There are, of course, other considerations. An individual’s willingness to express an emotional response to a traumatic event, for example, is a matter for each individual and it may, in part, reflect cultural differences (Greene et al. 2004, p. 79). Accordingly, one must consider resilience within broader cultural contexts (Ungar 2012, p. 387). Further, in order for a person to express resilience, s/he needs access to psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources and the opportunity to engage with those resources in a way that is empowering and culturally meaningful (Ungar 2011, p. 10). The resources themselves need to be appropriate and address psychological as well as social needs (Ungar 2018b, pp. 33–44). Applying these observations to a reading of Euripides’ *Heracles*, let us start by examining Heracles’ early life.

3. Heracles: Early life

As the character of Heracles points out in the play, he has unfortunate origins and was exposed to high levels of risk from birth. Zeus is an absent father and is unknown to Heracles (see line 1263; subsequent line numbers from the Greek text will appear simply as numbers; on Zeus’ absence see Wolff 2009, p. 12; on the “emotional damage” caused by

both fathers see [Padilla 1994](#), p. 294; for a different reading see [Gregory 2011](#), p. 137). The fact that Zeus used deception to impregnate Alcmena but takes no interest in his offspring strongly suggests that Zeus is unjust and unprincipled (347). When Zeus is called upon in desperate times, he remains silent and invisible (341, 501, 922–93; nor can Zeus prevent Hera and Lyssa from harming Heracles, see 828–9). Amphitryon, in contrast, is loving and supportive but he too is a problematic father figure since he is tainted by blood-guilt (1258–62). On the maternal side, Alcmena is dead ([Wolff 2009](#), p. 12n14) while Hera is hateful (1263–64). Hera sent serpents to strangle Heracles in his cradle (1266–68) and since that time, Hera's persecution has been vicious and relentless. It culminates in the mad rage that Hera inflicts upon Heracles in this play.

Apart from his difficult origins, Heracles has an unstable identity owing to the fact that he is a demi-god, occupying a liminal state between humanity and divinity ([Papadopoulou 2005](#), pp. 47–48; [Silk 1985](#), p. 6). By the time this play was produced (around 415 BC), this ambivalence was an accepted feature of Heracles' character ([Silk 1985](#), pp. 6–7; on the date of this play see [Bond 1981](#), p. xxxi; [Riley 2008](#), p. 1). Euripides contrasts Heracles' superhuman strength with his human weakness: his love for his children is presented as a defining quality of humanity (636). Thus, while Heracles has the potential to achieve divine status through his glorious exploits, he is also prone to human loss and suffering. This tension within Heracles has explosive capabilities and, in order for it to be resolved, Heracles must become either entirely divine or entirely mortal ([Papadimitropoulos 2008](#), p. 136; [Silk 1985](#), pp. 17–18; [Papadopoulou 2004](#)). Ultimately, Heracles relinquishes his divine attributes and embraces humanity. It is this resolution that makes Heracles such an extraordinary example of human resilience.

4. Physical and Emotional Resilience

Resilience research stresses the importance of utilising problem-solving skills to deal with adversity ([Rutter 1987](#), p. 328). The first half of Euripides' play, in effect, primes us to view Heracles as a hero with a proven and remarkable ability to overcome tremendous obstacles using physical strength and bravery. With his superhuman strength, Heracles has boldly battled the earthborn Giants (178–79), the hubristic Centaurs (181) and the Minyans (220–21). He has also successfully undertaken a series of Labours (359–429) that entailed journeying to distant lands, battling monsters and eradicating dangers for the benefit of humankind (696–700; see [Stafford 2012](#), pp. 89–90; on the labours and landscape see [Barlow 1982](#)). In some respects, Heracles' experiences resemble the experiences of Greek warriors who also fought battles in distant lands, against foreign enemies, for the sake of both personal glory and communal benefit. In this way, Heracles' experiences would have resonated with war veterans and survivors in the theatre audience.

Although Heracles may have proven to be highly experienced and capable during the Labours, this does not necessarily guarantee psychological and emotional resilience in matters involving his own home and family (on the spiritual rather than physical qualities of Heracles see [Papadopoulou 2004](#), p. 267). The twelve Labours were tasks set by another (Eurystheus) and they largely required extraordinary physical effort. In this play, Heracles will have to face violence within his own home, committed by his own hands, and he will have to rely on inner psychological and emotional strength to overcome it ([Meagher 2006](#), p. 60). According to Euripides, enduring personal adversity is more difficult than facing an opponent's weapons (1349–50; on the labours as a precondition of Heracles' downfall see [Wolff 2009](#), p. 11). The doubt about whether Heracles can survive this new type of trial is voiced by Lycus who jibes that while Heracles has built a reputation for fighting wild animals, in other respects he is not brave at all (158).

After Heracles' mad rampage, he awakens from his "palliative sleep" and must come to terms with the terrible scene before his eyes (1089ff; [Riley 2008](#), p. 39). There can be no doubt in the audience's mind that "mad Heracles" was not himself (931). He was a puppet of divine and vengeful forces (one view of Heracles' madness is that it is simply a manifestation of a pre-existing tendency toward excess and violence, see [von Wilamowitz-](#)

Moellendorf 1895, pp. 562–82; Kamerbeek 1966, pp. 12–13; Grube 1961, p. 252; Silk 1985, p. 17; or a subconscious part of the hero's soul, see Papadimitropoulos 2008, p. 134. Another view is that Heracles' madness is caused by external factors, see Riley 2008, pp. 37–38; Hartigan 1987, pp. 26–35; Bond 1981, p. xviii. I agree with the latter view: Heracles is an innocent victim of Hera, with Lyssa acting as her agent). Iris announces that Hera's wish was to stain Heracles' hands with his family's blood (831–32). Amphitryon appeals to Zeus to witness what Hera has done (1127; here I follow Bond's second suggested translation, see Bond 1981, p. 353), while Hera is described as the one in control ("Ἡρᾶ κρατεῖ 1253) and the events described as "Hera's battle" ("Ἡρᾶς ὄδ' ἄγων 1189, 1311–12; for a discussion of Hera's motives see Silk 1985, pp. 2–3, 17). Lyssa acted as an agent of Hera but, importantly, she was reluctant to undertake this role (858), citing Heracles' good reputation and good deeds (849–54). When Heracles awakens, he simply has no recollection of his actions (1122).

Heracles' *anagnorisis*, which is achieved by means of a detailed question and answer session with Amphitryon, is painful yet gripping to witness. As Heracles strives to discern who was responsible, Amphitryon is evasive and inconsistent, fearing that Heracles will react violently. At first, Amphitryon orders Heracles to let Hera be and "attend to his own troubles" (τὴν θεὸν ἑάσας τὰ σὰ περιστέλλου κακά 1129). Later he suggests that there is shared responsibility between Heracles, his bow and a non-specific god (1135). Finally, he says that Heracles is responsible for all the deeds (1139). According to Amphitryon's account, Heracles must take full responsibility for the crimes.

In Heracles' mind, the only way to atone for these crimes is to pay with his life. Motivated by grief, fear of dishonour, and a desire to avenge his children's murder, he does not pause to consider whether suicide is right or necessary—the only question is how to go about it. He contemplates whether to jump from a cliff, thrust a sword into his belly, or burn himself in a fire (1146–52). In the solitude of his implacable grief (reminiscent of Ajax's isolation in Sophocles' tragedy), we have no reason to doubt that Heracles *will* commit suicide. Amphitryon's loyalty, pity and love give Heracles no succour (1203–13), nor does the pity and grief shown by the Chorus (1045–46, 1087–88).

Yet, there is another solution to the "problem" of what happened and it involves revisiting the question of who is to blame. This occurs with the unexpected arrival of Theseus (on Theseus' heroic career see Papadopoulou 2005, pp. 160–61). When Theseus and Amphitryon engage in *stichomythia*, Amphitryon again assigns full responsibility to Heracles for the deaths (1184). However, Theseus does not accept Amphitryon's attribution of causation (1187). Theseus judges the matter for himself and rightfully lays the blame on Hera: he says, simply and plainly, "this is Hera's contest" ("Ἡρᾶς ὄδ' ἄγων 1189). Heracles is not an active participant in this discussion but, presumably, he is listening (Meagher 2006, p. 59). For the first time, Heracles hears a sympathetic individual articulate that although he may have committed these acts, he did so *unwittingly*. According to Konstan's analysis, madness caused Heracles to be ignorant of the particulars and, therefore, his acts were involuntary (Konstan 2013, pp. 434, 430). In modern legal terms, one might say that Heracles lacked mental culpability, or *mens rea*, which absolves him of the criminal conduct. In this sense, Heracles is more victim than perpetrator.

Theseus then proceeds to address Heracles directly. He reminds Heracles of his great deeds in the past, including rescuing Theseus from the Underworld (1221–22). Using rhetorical questions, he prompts Heracles to join him in affirming his reputation for being all-enduring (1250) and his role as "mankind's great benefactor and friend" (εὐεργέτης βροτοῖσι καὶ μέγας φίλος; 1252). Theseus' message is simple: Heracles has overcome tremendous difficulties in the past and he can do so again.

Theseus urges Heracles to draw strength from his previous successes and to view these events as a grievous misfortune to be suffered and overcome. Now Heracles must take on the endurance of suffering as a "labour" (1279; Papadimitropoulos 2008, p. 137). Heracles ultimately accepts this challenge and takes on psychological and emotional suffering as his "last labour" (τὸν λοίσθιον . . . πόνον 1279). All of his mythical labours pale in comparison to this new labour (1411). Despite this, viewing the endurance of suffering

as a “labour” represents a fitting solution to the problem of what Heracles must now do (Euripides’ placing of the labours before the madness lends further support to this reading, see [England 2010](#), p. 3; [Riley 2008](#), pp. 17–20).

5. Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is said to be an important factor in building, and maintaining, resilience ([Rutter 1987](#), p. 327). Before Hera’s interference, Heracles was self-confident and decisive. As soon as he became aware of the situation in Thebes, he took control and announced his plan to wipe out the usurper Lycus and his sympathisers in a systematic killing raid (on the etymological similarities between Lycus and Lyssa see [Konstan 2014](#), p. 6; [Mastronarde 2010](#), p. 70). Heracles’ self-confidence was initially bolstered by his family’s pride in him. Heracles’ mortal and aged father, Amphitryon, stridently defends his son’s reputation (170–203). He is hugely relieved by Heracles’ return, describing him as “a light of rescue” (ὦ φάος μολῶν πατρί 531). Megara is a devoted and loving wife who refers to her husband as “dearest” (φίλτατ’ 490, 514) and compares his role to that of Zeus the Saviour (521–22). The three young boys are so relieved to see their father that they will not let go of him (629–30). The Chorus of Theban elders sing a paean of joy, celebrating Heracles’ return and his many triumphs (687–700). In turn, Heracles is willing to risk death to defend his family (577–78), he affirms his love for his children (632–36) and he urges his wife to take courage (626).

After Heracles is struck down by madness, he is broken, both physically and psychologically. We see Heracles tied to a stone pillar, lying amidst the ruins of his house and surrounded by corpses (for interesting similarities with *Prometheus Bound* see [Papadopoulou 2005](#), pp. 157–58; [Burnett 1971](#), p. 169). This situation of helplessness is unrecognisable to him: “where am I that I am so without means” he asks (ποῦ ποτ’ ὦν ἀμηχανῶ; 1105). After learning that he has unwittingly killed his own wife and children, he is overcome by shame (1160). Fearing that he will pollute his friend Theseus, he hides his head in the darkness of his cloak (1198). This is an apposite visual metaphor for Heracles’ inner psychological state: he is suffering from all-consuming shame and cannot see a way out of his despair.

How can Heracles possibly regain his self-confidence after committing such acts of violence? The answer lies in the reactions of those around him. Despite Heracles’ self-accusations, Amphitryon has refused to disown Heracles (1113, 1203), he kneels before him as a suppliant (1206–10) and he exhorts his son out of love and deep concern (1211–13). Theseus also offers positive encouragement and valuable help. Like a good friend (or therapist), Theseus listens with compassion and pity, and he acknowledges that Heracles has suffered greatly (1214, 1225, 1240). At the same time, Theseus never allows Heracles to take the entirety of the blame upon himself and he urges Heracles not to surrender to suffering as an “ordinary man” would (ἐπιτυχόντος ἀνθρώπου 1248). Theseus insists upon Heracles’ goodness even when Heracles fails to see it in himself.

Eventually, with persistence, support and encouragement, Heracles regains his self-belief. Heracles’ speech eventually shifts from self-blame to an outburst of anger against Hera. He accuses her of overturning the foremost man in Greece (1306) who is guiltless (οὐδὲν ὄντας αἰτίους 1310). In this defiant, bitter and cathartic outburst, we see a ray of hope for Heracles’ future resilience (on the vigour of Heracles’ language in this scene see [Grube 1961](#), p. 259). The recognition that he is not personally at fault marks the beginning of reclaiming his sense of self-worth, reframing the events as Hera’s doing, and asserting his right to live.

6. Finding Meaning in Life

Traumatic events may test spiritual identification or, conversely, they may strengthen it by giving individuals a sense of hopefulness and appreciation for life ([Greene et al. 2004](#), p. 82). Prior to his madness, Heracles is shown to be pious and respectful toward the gods ([Halleran 1988](#), p. 84). He is an initiate of the Eleusinian Mysteries (613), he prioritises

greeting the gods of his own house (608–9), he is described as encouraging piety among humankind (852–53) and, after killing Lycus, he seeks to purify the house by performing the appropriate rituals (922–30).

Thus, after his madness, a critical issue for Heracles is how to reconcile his former respect for the gods with the terrible deeds that Hera has forced him to commit. Theseus's answer is that the gods are imperfect and that mortals and gods alike suffer misfortune but, this argument is summarily dismissed by Heracles as (a) totally unpersuasive and (b) untrue (1340–46; Halleran 1986, p. 175; part of Theseus' speech is missing (see Bond 1981, pp. 392–93) but the thrust of the argument is self-evident: see de Romilly 2003, p. 287). Heracles responds with a strong statement of belief in the essential nature of divinities: "a god, if he is truly a god, needs nothing" (δείτ' αὖ γὰρ ὁ θεός, εἴπερ ἔστ' ὁρθῶς θεός/οὐδ' ἐνός 1345–46). According to Heracles, true gods do exist but they are impervious to needs, desires and weaknesses. Heracles has not lost his piety—he is expressing piety toward a different vision of the divine.

This radically different view of divinity has been much discussed (for a summary see Halleran 1986, pp. 171–73; for a detailed discussion see Papadopoulou 2005, pp. 178–79; on forcing the audience to "confront a contradiction in the classical conception of divinity" see Konstan 1999, pp. 83–84). It is a view that has enduring consequences—for the Olympian gods and for Heracles himself. According to this view, Hera, who is motivated by hatred and revenge, quite clearly cannot be characterised as a "true god". To this end, it is important to note that Heracles has already gone some way toward undermining Hera's status as a goddess. He has represented her as a childish and vengeful figure, dancing with delight in her victory over Heracles (1303–4), he has questioned why any man would pray to such a goddess (1308) and he has presented her as a victim of her own ill-will towards Zeus (1309). In this way, Heracles recasts Hera as depraved, unjust and un-godlike (on the annihilation of Hera as an Olympian goddess and the conflation of Hera with Tyche see Arrowsmith 1956, p. 55).

For Heracles himself as a demi-god, this revised outlook on divinity also has ramifications. Heracles quite clearly needs love, friendship, compassion, help, support and recognition. Thus, he is much less divine than he thought, and perhaps not divine at all (Papadimitropoulos 2008, p. 135; Barlow 1996, p. xiv). In light of these needs, Heracles must reorient himself away from divinity and toward humanity, fully accepting and embracing his human attributes and frailties (Walker 1995, p. 131). This emphasis on Heracles' humanity is evident in the second half of the play: Theseus repeatedly refers to Heracles as a mortal man (at 1195, 1232, 1248 and 1320) as does Amphitryon (1197) and even Heracles himself (1306; Silk 1985, p. 14).

Paradoxically, by fully embracing his human frailty and weakness, Heracles can achieve several positive outcomes. Rather than foolishly trying to punish the gods for his misfortune (1242), he can tap into a wellspring of human kindness (342). Secondly, *Heracles can tap into his own distinctively human source of strength, namely, the capacity for resilience*. Heracles comes to accept that to live a human life is to live a life of suffering and endurance (1357). To this end, Heracles' apotheosis is no longer appropriate and Euripides abandons it (Silk 1985, p. 16). Heracles will suffer and endure and, after his death, he will journey to Hades along with other mortal shades (1331–33).

7. Taking Control

It is said that while individuals cannot control traumatic or adverse events, they can control their reactions to those events. To this end, resilience researchers advise that it is important to look beyond present problems, to make goals and to take decisive action. Prior to being afflicted with madness, Heracles was supremely rational and he demonstrated intelligence, foresight and good planning. The madness inflicted by Lyssa represented a complete (albeit temporary) loss of physical and psychological control. Heracles' grip on reality was so distorted that he mistook Thebes for Mycenae (943) and his own family for that of Eurystheus (967–71). He was just about to commit patricide when

Athena intervened—hurling a boulder at Heracles' chest, knocking the weapons from his hands and putting a stop to the violence (1001–8). As an embodiment of *metis*, this direct intervention by Athena symbolises what Shay calls “a return to safety and sobriety” (2002, pp. 168–69). Athena's actions bring Heracles back to his right mind and save him from committing further acts of bloodguilt (on Athena's mercy see [Burnett 1971](#), p. 172). The appearance of Athena also foreshadows Athens' role as the promised refuge for Heracles at the end of the play (the boulder was displayed as a sacred relic in a sanctuary of Heracles at Thebes: see [Wolff 2009](#), p. 17; also [Gregory 2011](#), pp. 139–40).

In addition to receiving this external help, Heracles must find a way to distance himself from his past actions, orient himself towards the future, and make realistic plans. This occurs in stages. In the first stage, as we have seen, Heracles constructs a personal narrative about his difficult life since birth (1258ff). This narrative is necessarily past-oriented and self-oriented. It is a therapeutic exercise that enables him to give some order and sense to his traumatic life ([Shay 1994](#), p. 188; [Shay 2002](#), p. 174). Crucially, this narrative is heard and acknowledged, in this case by Theseus who, like a therapist for a victim of war-trauma, is a compassionate, trustworthy and non-judgmental listener ([Shay 1994](#), p. 189).

The second stage involves turning away from past and present grief and looking towards the future. From the moment that Heracles accepts Theseus' offer of help, we see signs that Heracles is taking steps toward a more resilient outlook. At line 1351, Heracles explicitly says “I will endure life” (ἐγκαταστήσω βίον). There has been much debate about whether it is “life” (βίον) or “death” (θάνατον) that Heracles commits to enduring (see [Gibert 1997](#), pp. 247–58 who defends θάνατον; also [de Romilly 2003](#), pp. 290–91; [Bond 1981](#), pp. 399–400, 402–3). Yet, the verb ἐγκαταστήσω is even more significant: it means “to stand fast in” or “to endure”—a highly appropriate verb to express the concept of resilience. At the same time as committing to enduring, Heracles accepts Theseus' offer, unreservedly: “I will go to your city, and I feel infinite gratitude for your gifts” (εἶμι δ' ἐς πόλιν τὴν σήν, χάριν τε μυρίαν δώρων ἔχω 1351–52). The decisiveness of this statement indicates that Heracles is regaining control over his future.

The third stage involves grieving for the dead and making arrangements for their burial (1358–64). The fact that Heracles gives clear instructions for the burial of his family signals a return to his former confident and competent self and it indicates that the process of grieving has begun. It is also a touching farewell that evokes the familial care and love that we saw in Heracles prior to his madness. Finally, his promise to return to bury Amphitryon when he dies (1419–21) signals a future commitment to return to Thebes.

8. Accepting Help

Maintaining a sense of openness to loving and trusted individuals is said to be resilience-enabling ([Shay 2002](#), pp. 175–76). There is no doubt that for Heracles, Theseus proves to be a true “friend and relative” (1154). He is determined to repay Heracles' *euergetia* in rescuing him from the Underworld (on reciprocity see [Johnson 2002](#), p. 116). When he learns of the horrific events that have taken place in Heracles' home, he declares that he is not afraid of contamination (1234) and he expresses his willingness to share in Heracles' misfortunes (1202, 1220). It is Theseus who exhorts Amphitryon to uncover Heracles' head (1202), then begs Heracles to do so (1226), and finally, does it himself (1231; [Furley 1986](#), p. 110). In the conversation that follows, Theseus expresses pity for his friend (1236), he weeps for Heracles (1238) and he recognises the enormity of his misfortune (1240). Theseus undoubtedly has an important role to play as a supportive friend and listener.

Yet, Theseus' love and concern for Heracles is not *in and of itself* sufficient to help Heracles overcome his grief (on friends as helpless, unreliable, and absent see lines 305–6, 559 and 561; discussion in [Wolff 2009](#), p. 16; [Mastrorade 2010](#), p. 70). Despite all of Theseus' love, pity and support, Heracles *three times* reaffirms his intention to commit suicide when he says that he has prepared himself to die (παρεσκευάσμεθ' ὥστε κατθανεῖν 1241), that he cannot bear any more (γέμω κακῶν 1245) and that he intends to die and to return to

the Underworld (εἶμι γῆς ὕπο 1247). He persists in his view that suicide is the only option and that his life is “unliveable” (ἀβίωτον 1257).

However, when Theseus’ concern for Heracles is backed up by a practical offer of care and support, it carries far greater persuasive weight. First and foremost, Theseus offers to purify Heracles of contamination through a process of ritual cleansing (1324). This is significant. One of the most important stages of recovery for any victim of war trauma is said to be a process of cleansing and purification, at a physical, psychological and spiritual level (Shay 2002, pp. 152–53, 244–45). Earlier, Heracles had attempted purification for the killing of Lycus but the ceremony was interrupted by his fit of madness (936–37). When he later talked of being polluted, Theseus rejected the notion of pollution (1232) or the idea that *miasma* can be transmitted between friends (1234; Papadopoulou 2005, p. 163). In making this offer of purification, Theseus finally recognises that it is not his viewpoint that matters most—it is that of his friend. Even if Heracles may not be at fault, he still feels a *need* for purification (a useful comparison is Dodds’ analysis of Oedipus as morally innocent but still feeling the need for purification: see Dodds 1983, pp. 183–84). Theseus recognises this need and promises to address it.

Apart from offering purification, Theseus offers support that addresses Heracles’ practical needs. Theseus offers Heracles a home and a share of his wealth, as well as a share of gifts and plots of land (1324–29). This is a generous offer (Braden 1993, p. 248). In terms of Ungar’s definition of resilience (discussed above), the resources that Theseus offers encompass the psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that Heracles needs to sustain his wellbeing. The terms of Theseus’ offer of help are also practical, timely and generous enough to be meaningful and appropriate to Heracles’ former status as a hero.

In short, the offer of real and practical support from Theseus helps Heracles to express a resilient outlook. We can see how the offer is culturally appropriate and in accordance with the ancient Greek view of friendship, which implies more than just emotional attachment and requires an exchange of benefits and mutual reciprocity (Adkins 1966, p. 215; Johnson 2002). Theseus’ offer to help Heracles is a fair exchange for Heracles’ extraordinary help in retrieving him from the Underworld. Heracles considers Theseus’ offer, which addresses many of his most pressing needs, and accepts it. Heracles’ “infinite gratitude” (χάριν τε μυρίαν 1352) counterbalances the “countless labours” (πόνων δὲ μυρίων 1354) that he has suffered. In this way, Theseus’ generous offer of help is appropriate to, and commensurate with, the extent of Heracles’ adversity (Johnson 2002, p. 123).

9. A Sense of Belonging

A core factor for resilience and for recovery from trauma is social connectedness (Shean 2015, p. 27). One of Heracles’ greatest fears and concerns is that no community on earth will accept him (1281–84). This is not an imaginary fear (modern victims of war and trauma do not always find acceptance in a community. They may be subjected to rejection and abuse: see Shay 2002, p. 245). Viewing himself as a wretched criminal, Heracles anticipates that he will be rejected by everyone before being rejected by the earth itself (1295–98; Johnson 2002, p. 119). He cannot remain in Thebes, he cannot go to Argos, and he fears that everywhere he turns, he will be ridiculed and cast out as a bearer of blood guilt (1281–90). To some these lines indicate Heracles’ concern with his loss of heroic honour and reputation (Wolff 2009, p. 15; Garrison 1995, p. 71). However, at this point Heracles is also concerned with the sense of social belonging that is crucial to an individual’s sense of emotional and psychological wellbeing.

Heracles’ initial concerns about being reabsorbed into a community also illustrate the extent to which his social trust has been damaged. Shay defines social trust as “the expectation that power will be used in accordance with “what’s right”” (Shay 2002, p. 151). We recall that at this point, Heracles’ former view of the gods has been overturned—he no longer views Zeus and Hera as agents of “what’s right”. To some extent, Heracles’ trust in human society has also been damaged—he expected Lycus to be constrained by shame

but Lycus was shameless (556); he expected his friends to help his family but no help was forthcoming (558); he expected to be repaid for his good deeds in battling the Minyans but there was no repayment (560).

Theseus' offer to adopt Heracles into the Athenian community represents an attempt to rebuild Heracles' social trust. Theseus promises that Heracles will have a new home in Athens and that he will be recognised and accepted into a collective Greek identity (1334–35; Gregory 2011, p. 146). Theseus is in a position to make this offer because he is the King of Athens and therefore a representative of Greece itself (Barlow 1996, p. 3; Meagher 2006, p. 61; Theseus plays a similar role in Euripides' *Suppliants* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*). While the Athenians are proclaiming their faith in Heracles' innocence and goodness, Heracles' acceptance of the offer shows his willingness to trust in Athenian society (on the importance of civilian displays of gratitude to those who have performed military service see Sherman 2014, p. 215).

For some, Theseus' offer is a propagandistic device to make Athens look good: a pleasing take-home message for the Greek audience and an aetiology of Athenian worship of Heracles (Wolff 2009, p. 14; Stafford 2012, p. 92; Papadopoulou 2004, pp. 267–68). Yet, the play stands for more than just a story about Heracles' heroic relationship with Athens: Heracles was, after all, a panhellenic hero (Gregory 2011, p. 121). It is a profound illustration of community help and support in any crisis situation (Papadopoulou 2004, p. 268; Meagher 2006, p. 61; duBois quoted in Nussbaum 2008, p. 151). In other words, while the Athenian community may be the saviour in this play, Euripides may also be making a broader observation about how community can be an individual's saviour in life.

10. Signs of Resilience?

In the final scene of the play, the Heracles who limps off stage has lost all traces of divinity. He is not cured of his grief, he is in tears (1394), his joints are stiff (1395) and he is physically supported by Theseus (1424; Worman reads this physical bond between Heracles and Theseus as symbolic of the "citizen bond" (Worman 1999, pp. 94, 102); also see Padilla 1994, p. 297). He is both pitiable and self-pitying and has been utterly brought low by misfortune. It is a sorry picture and one could be forgiven for asking whether Heracles really is resilient. It is crucial to recognise, however, just how far Heracles has come in terms of his psychological outlook. From a state of despair in which he could imagine no alternative but suicide, he has now committed to enduring life.

As we noted earlier, the path to resilience is not the same as "bouncing back"—it more often involves a long and arduous emotional journey *through* distress. Euripides conveys this in dramatic form by showing Heracles' emotional and physical frailty (1398–1404). Heracles' weeping is an important expression of his inner state. Although Theseus tells him that he has wept enough (1394), Heracles cannot stop (1354–56, 1395) just as the elderly Thebans cannot stop weeping (449–50). Weeping is a sign of Heracles' humanity (for a discussion of "excessive" weeping see Papadopoulou 2005, pp. 186–87. I would argue that Heracles' weeping is not excessive since weeping is a healthy outlet for distress and a natural consequence of suffering loss).

As Shay observes, forgetting combat trauma is not a legitimate goal of treatment. Rather, the goal is to remember and to grieve, not only for external losses but also for internal losses such as lost innocence (Shay 1994, p. 192). In this sense, Heracles' decision to keep his weapons may indicate a conscious decision to remember and to grieve his traumatic past (1376–77; Papadopoulou 2005, p. 179; Riley 2008, p. 43; on the psychological risks of denial see Zautra et al. 2010, p. 7). Heracles asserts that he will not let the weapons go (1385) but will treat them as potent reminders of the loss of his family and his divine honour (1380–82).

Finally, Heracles insists that Theseus accompany him to fetch the dog Cerberus so that he may not suffer in being alone (μή πάθω μονοῦμενος 1388). One possible implication is that Heracles may still be liable to fall into despair and commit suicide (on this request as a sign of Heracles' physical weakness see von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1895, p. 109;

on Heracles' willingness to undertake heroic labour once again and the concept of a "joint task" see [Johnson 2002](#), p. 124). Heracles' request may not seem the mark of a resilient man, but the recognition of his own vulnerability shows a high level of self-awareness and self-regard. Theseus will act as a guard against Heracles committing self-harm. Theseus and Heracles are now bound together literally/physically, metaphorically/spiritually and in an emotional/familial sense, since Heracles adopts Theseus as a replacement son (1401). Importantly, the image of Heracles leaning upon Theseus also mirrors the *proven* resilience of the aged members of the chorus: weary war veterans who physically and emotionally lean upon each other as they make their way through life (126–30).

11. Conclusions

Euripides was, first and foremost, a dramatist whose primary concern was the creation of memorable (and successful) theatre ([Riley 2008](#), p. 31). That being said, great drama is not necessarily distant from the psychological realities of human suffering and survival. In Euripides' play, Heracles endures one of the greatest tragedies imaginable and, in doing so, he emerges as a remarkable example of human fortitude. Heracles demonstrates that it is more heroic to endure human suffering and to continue with life than to be consumed by suffering. He finds a way through his despair by drawing on his emotional and psychological strengths, regaining his self-belief, taking responsibility for his future, finding meaning in life, and accepting help offered by loved ones and a broader community. Although Heracles may be fragile at the end of the play, he is *alive* ([Gregory 2011](#), p. 148). While it may be argued that the play illustrates a solution that is particular to Heracles, the play can also be viewed from a broader perspective, with Heracles as a Panhellenic hero and a hero of humankind. Viewed in this way, Euripides' drama illustrates a complex set of protective factors that are recognised to be of assistance to individuals recovering from trauma. Euripides dramatizes events that can stretch human resilience to its limits but he also dramatizes the protective factors that can help to bring an individual back from the brink. In short, Euripides gives us a highly sophisticated and masterfully dramatic representation of how an individual can successfully transition from personal crisis to resilience.

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