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Audience of Euripides' Herakles

Virtually the entire citizen body of Athens in the late fifth century had both military training and combat experience. The implications of this fact for the reading of Athenian tragedy have however rarely been explored. In *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York 1995), Jonathan Shay argues, based on his experience in the treatment of Vietnam veterans, that group therapy is the most effective method of assisting combat veterans to recover from the trauma associated with combat and to reintegrate with society. He argues elsewhere that the performance of tragedy, with its katharsis of pity and fear, before an audience of veterans, may have performed an analogous function in the Athenian polis (<http://didaskalia.berkeley.edu/issues/vol2no2/Shay.html>). This paper provides a reading of Euripides' *Herakles* that takes into account the military experience of its intended audience, and the need of the polis to reintegrate its veterans into the city.

The "Peace of Nicias" probably immediately preceded the first performance of the *Herakles* (Bond, *Heracles*. xxi). Even during this period, however, Athens was involved in frequent armed conflicts. Most citizens in the audience will have had recent combat experience. Some will have been witness to or active participants in the killing of unarmed men (e.g. Mytilene, Plataia, Corcyra, and Scione, as well as Melos - Thuc. 3.36.2, 3.68.1-2, 3.81.4-5, 5.32.1, and 5.84-116). The play itself will have been performed at the City Dionysia, a context that acknowledged and validated the military contribution of its citizens to the polis (cf. Goldhill *JHS* 1987; Winkler 1990, 20-61). The military context of the festival and the combat experience of its audience are reflected in the narrative of the play. The play's inscribed audience (cf. Lada *PCPhS* 39 (1993) 94-140), the chorus of veterans, enter leaning on each other, the friendship they developed as youthful comrades in arms (128) supporting them in old age. The argument between Lycus and Amphitryon over the rival merits of close-order hoplite warfare versus use of the bow (157-164, 188-203) can be read as a technical debate, before an audience of interested professionals. Theseus' arrival is framed in military terms, at the head of an army of Athenians he has brought to assist Herakles (1163-1171). Herakles can accept Theseus' assistance because Theseus is a veteran and comrade in arms who has suffered as Herakles has suffered (1412-1417).

Herakles' murder of his family is not simply an act of madness, but a transgressive act which inflicts on the household the murderous *nomoi* appropriate to the battlefield, which must be shed by returning veterans at the gates of the city. Given that Herakles was driven mad by divine agency, it is odd that neither Amphitryon nor Theseus denies his responsibility when they attempt to console him. Amphitryon assigns him partial responsibility (1135). Theseus compares his state with that of the gods who must live on in Olympus with the memory of their own crimes (1419). A reassurance that he was not responsible for his act might seem more appropriate, given his madness; but such a reassurance would not have assisted an audience most members of whom had seen and committed enormous and sometimes transgressive acts of violence for the sake of the city. The combat veterans watching the play needed, rather, the reassurance that with the

assistance of their friends, who have seen and done what they have seen and done, they also could live on in Athens, with their own memories.

The play ends with Herakles' praise of friendship (1402-1404, 1425-1426), and his exit leaning on Theseus recalls the support the chorus of veterans gave each other on their entrance. Herakles' position at the end of the play thus mirrors that of a veteran who will be assisted in his reintegration into the polis by his comrades in arms.