

Herakles passages

Discussion questions

- What is the story told in the text?
- What does Herakles do in the text?
- What qualities does he display (moral, physical, intellectual...)? How does the text show this?
- Is he displayed as a likeable or admirable character?
- Where does this story fit into the chronology of the Herakles myth? (e.g. a labour, death, etc)
- Where does this story take place?
- How does it compare to other depictions of Herakles, e.g. in Apollodorus?

Euripides *Alcestis*

From Euripides *Alcestis* 477-505. This tragedy is set at the court of King Admetus. You may need to look up what the tragedy *Alcestis* is about: Herakles has a small, but important, role.

Enter Heracles with his characteristic lion-skin and club. A servant goes in to tell Admetus of the arrival.

Heracles: Strangers, citizens of this land of Pherae, do I find Admetus at home?

Chorus-Leader: Yes, Pheres' son is at home, Heracles. But tell us what need brings you to Thessaly [480] and to this city of Pherae.

Heracles: I am performing a certain labour for Eurystheus, king of Tiryns.

Chorus-Leader: Where are you bound? What is the wandering you are constrained to make?

Heracles: I go in quest of the four-horse chariot of Thracian Diomedes.

Chorus-Leader: How can you do that? Do you not know what kind of host he is?

Heracles: [485] I do not. I have never yet been to Bistonia.

Chorus-Leader: You cannot possess those horses without a fight.

Heracles: But all the same, I cannot decline these labors.

Chorus-Leader: Then you will either kill him and return or end your days there.

Heracles: This is not the first such race I shall have run.

Chorus-Leader: [490] If you defeat their master, what will it profit you?

Heracles: I will bring the horses back to the lord of Tiryns.

Chorus-Leader: You will not find it easy to put a bit in their mouths.

Heracles: Surely so, unless they breathe fire from their nostrils.

Chorus-Leader: No, but they tear men apart with their nimble jaws.

Heracles: [495] This is fodder for mountain beasts, not horses.

Chorus-Leader: You will see their feeding-troughs drenched with blood.

Heracles: Whose son does their master claim to be?

Chorus-Leader: Ares' son, and shield-bearing lord of Thrace rich in gold.

Heracles: Like the others this labour you name befits my destiny [500] (which is always hard and steep) since I am fated to do battle with all the sons of Ares: first Lycaon, then Cynus, and now this is the third contest I enter, going off to fight horses and master alike. [505] But no one shall ever see Alcmena's son quake at the hand of an enemy.

Homer

Homer *Iliad* 8.362-369 Athena is speaking.

He [Zeus] is hard, and forever wicked; he crosses my high hopes, nor remembers at all those many times I rescued his own son, Herakles, when the tasks of Eurystheus were too much for his strength. And time and again he would cry out aloud to the heavens, and Zeus would send me down in speed from the sky to help him. If in the wiliness of my heart I had had thoughts

like his, when Herakles was sent down to Hades of the Gates, to hale back from the Kingdom of the Dark the hound of the grisly death god, never would he have got clear of the steep-dripping Stygian water.

Homer *Odyssey* 11.601-628 This passage is from Odysseus' visit to Hades (recounted to the Phaeacians).

And after him I [Odysseus] caught sight of the mighty Herakles – the phantom of him: he himself is with the immortal gods in the enjoyment of their feasting, with lovely-ankled Hebe as his wife, the daughter of great Zeus and Hera of the golden sandals. Around him the dead kept up a clamour like frightened birds, and fled away from him wherever they could: and he walked like a black night, holding his bow at the ready and an arrow on the string, staring fearfully round him, as if always on the point of shooting. And there was a grim baldric round his chest, a golden belt with amazing scenes worked on it, bears and wild boars and staring lions, and fights and battles, slaughters and the killing of men. Whoever it was who encompassed that belt in his craft should never have made it, and may he never make another like it.

Herakles recognised me at once, as soon as he saw me, and in sorrow spoke winged words to me: “Royal son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus, you poor man, have you too then had to carry some wretched fate with you, like that which burdened me under the light of the sun. I was a child of Zeus, son of Kronos, and yet I had misery without limit. I was bound in servitude to a man much my inferior, who set hard labour on me. And once he even sent me here to bring back the dog of Hades, thinking that no further labour would be harder for me than this. But I took the dog and brought him up out of Hades, with Hermes and bright-eyed Athene helping me on my way.”