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Author(s): Nino Dianosashvili

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HEALING THE MIND: A PSYCHOTHERAPY SCENE IN EURIPIDES' *HERACLES**

NINO DIANOSASHVILI

Abstract. The exodos of Euripides' *Heracles* presents a uniquely Euripidean scene of psychological healing, centered on the encounter between Heracles and Theseus. This article analyses Heracles' conscious response to the actions he committed in madness, expressed as grief (λύπη), at times overshadowed by shame (αἰδώς), and, at others, by an overwhelming sense of pollution (μίασμα). The study evaluates the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the therapeutic strategies undertaken by Heracles himself, Amphitryon, and Theseus in addressing Heracles' psychological crisis. Employing a multi-disciplinary approach, the article integrates close textual analysis with insights from contemporary psychological and psychotherapeutic frameworks. Central to the discussion is the role of Theseus as a therapeutic figure

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who facilitates Heracles' emotional and cognitive transformation. His intervention initiates a shift in Heracles' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, closely mirroring principles found in modern eclectic psychotherapy, particularly those drawn from body-oriented therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

INTRODUCTION

Tracing Psychotherapeutic Elements in Greek Literature

In Ancient Greece, understanding of the human mind extended beyond theoretical discourse and found practical application in addressing various mental conditions, as emphasized in classical scholarship, with growing attention in recent years.¹ The earliest evidence of psychotherapeutic approaches and the power of therapeutic language can already be observed in the Geometric period, in Homeric epic, both in poetic expressions and individual narrative episodes. Forms built on *θελκτήρια* (*θελκτήριον*, “charm,” “spell”; *θελκτήριος*, “enchanting,” “soothing”; e.g., *θελκτήρια πάντα*, *Il.* 14.215; *θελκτήρια οἶδας*, *Od.* 1.337) and on the idea of *τέρψις* (*τέρψις*, “enjoyment,” “delight”; cf. the description of song as giving delight, *Od.* 8.45) refer to types of verbal discourse that affect and improve a person's psycho-emotional state in both epics.² Several episodes in the *Odyssey* further illustrate Homeric strategies for managing psychological distress. Odysseus' stay with Alcinoüs, particularly Demodocus' song about the fall of Troy, Odysseus' emotional reaction, and his own narration of his sufferings (*Od.* 8.521–534), demonstrates relief of grief through listening and verbal expression. Additional episodes, such as the encounters with the Lotus-Eaters (*Od.* 9.84–104) and the Sirens (*Od.* 12.167–196), depict responses to altered psychological states and forms of psychological dependency.

¹ For the sophistication of ancient conceptions of the mind, see Drabkin 1955; Entralgo 1970; Gill 1985; Hankinson 1991; Sullivan 1995; Van der Eijk 2005; Harris 2013; Thumiger 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2020; White et al. 2020; Kazantzidis and Spatharas 2022; Thumiger 2024, etc.

² Entralgo 1970, 25–32.

These narratives reveal Homer's early representations of coping mechanisms and therapeutic strategies embedded within epic storytelling.³

In the Archaic period, Greek culture engages with the theme of psychological well-being through the voices of lyric poets such as Archilochus (fr. 128 W), Theognis (219, 335, 401, 657), and Pindar (*Pyth.* 2.21–42; 10.49–52; *Ol.* 13.47–48; 13.70–91; *Nem.* 11.48; *Isthm.* 7.45–48), who echo the call to preserve moderation—“nothing in excess” (μηδὲν ἄγαν). Their poetry presents moderation as a principle for maintaining harmony, balance, and the integrity of life, offering a path toward psychological equilibrium—a concern that finds a parallel in the philosophical thought of the same period, particularly in Pythagorean teaching, which emphasizes harmony, psychological balance, and the cultivation of a healthy inner life.⁴

Although traces of this knowledge are discernible throughout Greek literature, its most developed and nuanced expressions emerge in the Classical period, especially in tragedy. The material preserved in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, alongside the philosophical writings of Empedocles and Plato provides the most comprehensive articulations of psycho-therapeutic approaches in antiquity.⁵ Tragedians portray various responses to psychological distress, including reassurance, advice, physical support, ritual purification, exoneration, and the rationalization of suffering (Aesch. *Eum.*; Eur. *IT*, *Or.*, *HF*, *Bacch.*). In some cases, however, such responses is either absent, as with Ajax (Soph. *Aj.*), or actively rejected, as by Cassandra (Aesch. *Ag.*; Eur. *Tro.*)—reflecting a tragic failure of care.⁶

Among the extant tragedies, Euripides' *Heracles* stands out for its portrayal of a remarkable scene of psychological healing, which, I argue, represents one of the psychotherapeutic models employed by Euripides. This scene, the encounter between Heracles and Theseus, occurs in the

³ Dianosashvili 2016, 7–20; Thumiger 2020, 742–743.

⁴ Dianosashvili 2016, 20–59.

⁵ Entralgo 1970, 32–108; Dianosashvili 2020.

⁶ Devereux 1970, 36.

exodos of the play and illustrates a process of recovery following a profound mental crisis: upon returning home after completing the twelve labors, Heracles is seized by madness and kills his wife and children, whom he had only just rescued. When he regains his sanity, he is overwhelmed by grief and contemplates suicide. In this state of despair, Theseus arrives and offers support. Heracles gradually recovers and ultimately chooses to live, departing for Athens with Theseus (Eur. *HF* 1089–1434).

Scholarly Views on Heracles' Healing

In the tragedy, Heracles' recovery has prompted a wide range of scholarly interpretations. Sonia Pertsinidis offers a general survey of these readings.⁷ Hubert Chalk and Celia James view Heracles' decision to continue living as a manifestation of a newly acquired virtue,⁸ while Arthur Adkins emphasizes the role of external intervention, portraying Heracles not as self-redeemed but as rescued through the agency of Theseus.⁹ William Arrowsmith and Kathleen Riley interpret his recovery as the emergence of a new inner courage grounded in love,¹⁰ while Thalia Papadopoulou and Jacqueline de Romilly highlight a newfound commitment either to human solidarity or to an acceptance of fate.¹¹ Friendship is frequently identified as a central theme, functioning as a powerful antidote to despair and suffering.¹² In contrast, Jocelyn Moore emphasizes the strength, significance, and irreplaceability of familial bonds.¹³ More recent approaches apply contemporary psychological frameworks to Heracles' mental state. Scholars such as Philippe Charlier, Julio López Saco, and Sonia Pertsinidis offer analyses grounded in

⁷ Pertsinidis 2021.

⁸ Chalk 1962, 9–10; James 1969, 19.

⁹ Adkins 1966, 219.

¹⁰ Arrowsmith 1956, 53; Riley 2008, 41–42.

¹¹ De Romilly 2003, 289; Papadopoulou 2004, 282.

¹² Yoshitake 1994, 151–153; Padilla 1994, 280; Barlow 1996, 14–16; Bond 1981, xxii–xxiii; Silk 1985, 2; Holmes 2008, 264; Papadimitropoulos 2008, 132; Gregory 1997, 141–149; Stafford 2012, 92.

¹³ Moore 2022.

modern clinical theory,¹⁴ while David Konstan and Robert Meagher interpret Heracles as a figure of post-war trauma, viewing his psychological breakdown through the lens of combat-related stress and its aftermath.¹⁵ Extending these approaches, this article foregrounds Heracles' psychological crisis and recovery, emphasizing the emotional dynamics of disruption and repair in the play.

Methodological Approach

The present study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology, integrating close textual analysis of *Heracles* with insights from contemporary psychological and psychotherapeutic frameworks. This reading combines linguistic approaches, focusing on word meanings, with hermeneutic interpretation to illuminate the play's dramatic and psychological dimensions. On this foundation, I engage with classical scholarship on Greek emotional vocabulary (λύπη, "grief"; αἰδώς, "shame"; μίαισμα, "pollution") and conduct a comparative analysis informed by modern psychological theory to examine the role of Theseus as a therapeutic figure responding to Heracles' psychological crisis.

HERACLES AFTER MADNESS: GRIEF, SHAME, POLLUTION, AND THE PEPLOS

The primary research questions guiding this study are: How does Euripides construct Heracles' mental state upon recovering from madness? How do Heracles, Amphitryon, and Theseus each engage with and attempt to manage this psychological condition?

According to the play, the mental condition Heracles experiences after regaining his sanity is profoundly severe. The only course of action he perceives is to end his life (1146–1154, 1247, 1301). He veils his head with a peplos (1161–1162) and withdraws from his surroundings, ceasing all communication (1205–1214, 1218). Physically weakened (1396), he is barely able to move (1402).

¹⁴ Charlier 2003; López Saco 2002; Pertsinidis 2021.

¹⁵ Konstan 2014, 4–6; Meagher 2006, 50 and 60.

In the tragedy, the term that conveys the protagonist's emotional distress is λύπη ("grief," 1388).¹⁶ After regaining his senses, Heracles metaphorically describes his state as a "cloud of mourning" (στεναγμῶν νέφος, 1140), an image that evokes the oppressive and all-encompassing nature of his suffering. He himself later gives the name λύπη (1388) to this experience. This name clarifies what is meant by the phrase "cloud of mourning." The term occurs only once in the play, at the very end of the exodos. Through Heracles' words, Euripides presents λύπη as a complex emotional condition that closely anticipates modern understandings of depression,¹⁷ characterized in the tragedy by two interwoven elements: shame (αἰδώς) and a sense of pollution (μίασμα).¹⁸

Heracles stands before a horrifying reality of his own making, the beloved family he himself has slain. He declares that from now on, all that remains to him is a future marked by a disgraced name. Heracles

¹⁶ In Ancient Greek, the term λύπη conveyed a variety of related meanings: "pain of the body" (Pl. *Phlb.* 31c), "sad plight" (Hdt. 7.152), "pain of mind," and "grief" (Aesch. *Ag.* 791; Soph. *OC* 1217; Thuc. 6.59; Andoc. 2.8; Xen. *Hell.* 7.1.32). In Galen's usage, λύπη denotes a "chronic worry about a future threat" (Gal. *De praecogn.* 6; *De opt. corp. const.* 3; *De loc. aff.* 3.10; *De atra bile* 6; *Praesag. puls.* 3.8; *De cris.* 2.3, 2.13; *De meth. med.* 8.3, 10.4; *In Hipp. Progn.* 3.23; *Ars med.* 24; *Thras.* 40; *De temper.* 2.6, etc.). According to Susan Mattern, it is best translated as "anxiety," a precursor to modern anxiety disorders, reflecting its semantic evolution toward a psychological state closely resembling the modern concept of anxiety; see Mattern 2015. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the "anatomy" of λύπη is markedly distinct from this later meaning: it encompasses a profound sense of shame and a belief in one's own pollution, rendering Heracles incapable of coping with it and driving him to the desire for death.

¹⁷ Depression commonly presents with low mood, fatigue, psychomotor slowing, and social withdrawal, often accompanied by impaired interpersonal functioning. For more on depression, see Harrison et al. 2018, 193–195, 233–236.

¹⁸ Douglas Cairns offers a differing perspective, suggesting that λύπη, alongside αἰδώς and μῖασμα, constitutes one of three equally significant components of Heracles' emotional response to his actions; see Cairns 2011, 20. Rather than treating λύπη as one component among others, however, I argue that it functions as the primary emotional category, within which αἰδώς and μῖασμα are embedded as integral aspects of Heracles' experience.

longs for death as a result of the shame he has brought upon himself, believing that by ending his life, he can escape the burden of living under a name broken by dishonor (δύσκληια, "infamy," 1152). Ashamed of having murdered his children (αἰσχύνομαι, "I am ashamed," 1160), he withdraws from his surroundings, refusing to face his friend Theseus, whom he sees approaching (1154–1156, 1199–1200). Heracles urges Theseus to leave, fearing that his pollution (μίασμα, 1233) might taint even his loyal companion.

Before explicitly naming the protagonist's mental state as λύπη, Euripides draws the audience's attention to the shame and the sense of pollution that shape the grief afflicting Heracles. Upon regaining reason, Heracles' outlook on his future is entirely defined by these two emotions. They dominate his thoughts (1155–1156, 1160–1162, 1199–1201, 1233, 1295–1297) and dictate his coping responses.

Heracles' only action after recovering his sanity is to veil his head with the peplos (1162, 1295–1297). However, this act does not aid his self-recovery. The play strongly implies that external intervention is necessary for him to begin healing. Both his stepfather Amphitryon and his friend Theseus attempt to guide him out of this mental state by urging him to do the opposite, to remove the peplos (1203, 1204–1205, 1215–1217, 1226).

Before examining the implications of removing the peplos, it is important to first consider the significance of veiling one's head. Douglas Cairns argues that covering the head with a peplos is a typical response to shame, one that Heracles exemplifies, functioning within a complex interplay of shame, eye contact, and gaze.¹⁹ While I concur with Cairns that Heracles' act of veiling his head and avoiding the gaze of others (1159–1162) reflects his overwhelming sense of shame, I propose that the gesture carries a broader, multidimensional significance.²⁰ This complexity likely explains the persistent insistence of Amphitryon (1204–1205) and Theseus (1203) that Heracles remove the peplos, perceiving this act

¹⁹ Cairns 1993, 291–292.

²⁰ In ancient Greek culture, the correlation between veiling or concealment and emotions such as shame, grief, and weeping is further explored in Cairns' own publications following his 1993 work; see Cairns 2009 and 2011.

not only as a rejection of shame but also as a crucial first step toward psychological restoration.

Covering one's body is a natural response to Heracles' mental state, for the urge to hide is a central feature of shame, one of the most intense and suppressive emotions a person can experience. Shame is inherently social,²¹ presupposing the presence of others who might witness the shameful act or condition,²² and involving a sense of being devalued in their eyes, a devaluation that impacts not only one's judgments and behavior, but the entire self or personality. Broadly, the impulse to hide or conceal oneself is thus an automatic psychological defense, a protective response to this emotion.²³ This dynamic is clearly reflected in the dramatic moment when Heracles' sense of shame intensifies upon Theseus' arrival, prompting him to cover his head with the peplos just before Theseus approaches.

Contemporary research suggests that basic emotions are expressed in similar ways across cultures and historical periods,²⁴ a view also attested by ancient Greek literary and medical texts.²⁵ Notable contributions to this discussion are those of Jennifer Kosak and Chiara Thumiger. Kosak argues that in the 5th century B.C., self-covering or veiling functioned as

²¹ Luna Dolezal offers a significant and nuanced exploration of the emotion of shame and its social dimensions; see Dolezal 2015a and 2015b. According to her research, the experience of shame is fundamentally embedded in the social realm and often manifests through bodily expressions, such as the act of covering oneself; see Dolezal 2015a. In this context, Thumiger's observation is particularly noteworthy: she distinguishes shame from other emotions by emphasizing its uniquely intense social structure, which surpasses the social dimensions typically attributed to emotions such as fear and anger; see Thumiger 2017a, 359; see also Kosak 2022, 128.

²² It is indeed possible for an individual to experience shame while physically alone; however, in such cases, the presence of an imagined or remembered observer is implied; see Lazarus 1991, 240–247.

²³ Tanner 2020/2021, 33; Lewis 2008.

²⁴ Ben-Ze'Ev 2000, 510–529; Lewis, Haviland-Jones, and Barrett ³2008; Dolezal 2015a; 2015b.

²⁵ Kazantzidis and Spatharas 2022.

a visual expression of shame, whether elicited by external circumstances or by one's own loss of self-control.²⁶

In exploring the relationship between shame and concealment/covering, Thumiger draws on both the Hippocratic Corpus and Late Antique medical sources, in particular the nosological treatises of Aretaeus of Cappadocia, and defines shame as "a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior, a loss of respect or esteem, or dishonor."²⁷ Shame is considered as an essentially bodily manifestation; however, subjective experiences, including shame, do not constitute a subject of medical interest in that period. Physicians become more sensitive to and more deeply engaged with emotions in Late Antiquity, when these phenomena are subsequently examined in a more systematic and comprehensive manner.²⁸ Classical Greek drama, by contrast, provides a distinct and especially rich perspective. As Thumiger observes, "fifth-century drama reaches unique depths in exploring the interlacing of felt embodiment, body-image, and projected visibility to an audience, all of which converge in the experience of being shamed, alongside the ethical and societal consequences that shameful conduct brings."²⁹ An analysis of the shame experienced by the protagonist in *Heracles* supports this observation: Euripides portrays shame in all its complexity, offering emotional insights that closely resonate with contemporary psychological understandings of the emotion.

Significantly, Heracles' act of veiling with the peplos reflects not only his sense of shame but also his belief in his own pollution. This gesture is not only an attempt to avoid eye contact with his friend because of shame, but also a means of protecting Theseus from the perceived pollution caused by Heracles' violent deeds. Believing himself to be a source of μίαισμα due to the atrocities committed during his madness, Heracles seeks to shield the innocent from his defilement (1161–1162, 1233). According to Cairns, in tragedy, shame and pollution are closely

²⁶ Kosak 2022.

²⁷ Thumiger 2022, 145.

²⁸ Thumiger 2022.

²⁹ Thumiger 2022, 168.

interwoven. I concur with this view, arguing that these two aspects form an inseparable unity within the hero, even at the level of expression, and together constitute a complex response to his condition.³⁰

The peplos functions as a kind of boundary through which Heracles physically separates himself from everyone and everything, creating a space into which neither anyone nor anything can enter. Paradoxically, this very gesture of separation underscores his continued connection to the world around him. His withdrawal, as previously discussed, is motivated not merely by detachment but by care—a desire to protect others from the danger he believes he poses. It is evident that Heracles still embodies the constructiveness and altruism that typically characterize the hero in Greek mythology.

These are not the only significances. Beyond concealing himself, the gesture serves as a visible, physical manifestation of Heracles' suffering and aligns with his expression of grief. In Greek literature, grief is often intertwined with shame. A connection already evident in the *Odyssey* 8. 83–86, where Odysseus, moved to tears by the bard's song, draws his mantle over his head to hide his weeping from the Phaeacians out of shame. As Cairns emphasizes such acts of veiling do not simply conceal emotion but also serve to display it, making grief visible while simultaneously registering the social sensitivity characteristic of shame, so that concealment itself becomes a form of multivalent expression.³¹

In this way, the peplos emerges as a multivalent symbol, encompassing both psychological and ethical dimensions. It becomes the only tangible link between Heracles and the external world, and its removal marks a crucial turning point: it re-establishes his connection with that world, symbolizing the end of his isolation and the dissolution of the emotional boundary between himself and others. Moreover, the removal of the peplos initiates the unraveling of the mental complex at the core of his grief, laying the groundwork for emotional recovery.³²

³⁰ Cairns 1993, 291–292; 2011, 20.

³¹ Cairns 2009.

³² Dianosashvili 2020, 238.

REVEALING THE FACE: INTERVENTION AND THE FIRST STEP TOWARD RECOVERY

A crucial moment in Heracles' psychological recovery involves revealing his concealed face, an act encouraged by both Amphytrion and Theseus. Amphytrion implores him to expose his face to the sun (1204–1205), while Theseus urges him to lift his gaze and show his face to his friends (1215, 1226). Amphytrion's appeal highlights the symbolic importance of nature, particularly sunlight, as a restorative force. As Kosak observes, Amphytrion sees no hope for divine or human aid.³³

For the ancient Greeks, the natural world and each of its elements were seen as sources of vitality and health. They believed that light and a clear sky had the power to cleanse and clarify the mind.³⁴ In an effort to help Heracles, Amphytrion seeks to harness the sun's healing energy. In the tragedy, the sun stands in opposition to the darkness within Heracles (σκοτός, "darkness," 1159, 1216), which serves as another manifestation of his λύπη, and which is also physically represented around him by the use of the peplos. Thus, the gesture of turning his face toward the sun could signify a reestablishment of contact with the external world and a potential dispersal of his grief.

Amphytrion demonstrates profound compassion and empathy toward Heracles: he weeps, touches his son's cheeks, beard, and hands, and attempts to influence him through pleas and tears (1204–1213). However, Heracles remains unresponsive, offering no verbal or physical reaction. Amphytrion's suggestion is by no means unrealistic. In contemporary psychiatry and psychotherapy, both natural sunlight and artificial bright light are used in the treatment of various forms of depression, particularly Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD).³⁵ Amphytrion's appeal can be

³³ Kosak 2004, 168–169.

³⁴ In *Bacchae* (1264), Kadmos invokes a traditional cultural practice to help Agave recover from an altered state of consciousness, urging her to look at the "cloudless sky." His intervention proves effective, as she soon begins to regain clarity (1267); see Devereux 1970, 41; Thumiger 2007, 13–14, 99.

³⁵ Rosenthal and Blehar 1989; Harrison et al. 2018, 769–770; Dianosashvili 2020, 238–240.

interpreted as Euripides' intuitive anticipation of ideas that modern science has since articulated through empirical methods.

It is noteworthy that Heracles' reaction also closely aligns with the expectations modern psychiatrists and psychotherapists have regarding the effectiveness of light therapy. Light therapy tends to be most effective when depression is caused by biological or seasonal factors: the onset of autumn or winter, or the reduction in daylight hours.³⁶ In contrast, coping with Heracles' grief requires addressing the underlying beliefs that constitute his emotional state, particularly his feelings of shame and his conviction that he is polluted. This becomes evident in the words of both Heracles (1153–1156, 1255–1310) and Amphytrion (1199–1201). Heracles is ashamed before other people and believes he must first face them. He thinks he is polluted, and this belief is grounded in a whole network of underlying convictions. Sunlight, however, has its limitations. While it can elevate low mood and alleviate distress on a physical level, it cannot dispel feelings of shame in relation to others, nor can it assist in cognitive restructuring. In the tragedy, the "cloud of mourning" that surrounds Heracles could not be dispersed by sunlight alone. Light could have served only as an auxiliary aid in coping with his grief, but not as a decisive force in overcoming it.

Within the tragedy, Theseus stands as the only figure able to lead Heracles through a therapeutic process that reshapes both his emotions and cognition. Through his intervention, Heracles' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors begin to shift. The following analysis explores the contrasting approaches of Theseus and Amphytrion, highlighting how Theseus' therapeutic strategy sets Heracles on the path to healing.

Georges Devereux characterizes Theseus' intervention as a form of supportive therapy.³⁷ It is important to note that both Theseus and Amphytrion display a similarly supportive attitude toward Heracles, offering understanding without judgment. Neither regards Heracles as an offender, nor do they question that his madness is the result of Hera's vengeance (1042–1228; 1125–1126; 1189–1191). They share identical

³⁶ Terman and Terman 2005; Wirz-Justice 2006.

³⁷ Devereux 1970, 39.

intentions behind their actions: both strive selflessly to help Heracles. However, the paths they take to achieve this goal differ significantly. Not only do they vary in their emotional attitudes toward Heracles, but also in the means and forms through which their assistance is offered.³⁸

Amphitryon shows empathy toward Heracles, yet empathy alone proves insufficient to effect any positive change in Heracles' condition. Theseus, too, expresses compassion and solidarity with his friend (1195, 1203, 1236, 1238, 1240). He presents himself as a fellow sufferer (1236, 1238, 1240), but crucially, he refuses to let emotion or persuasion dictate Heracles' future. Theseus' empathy is accompanied by firmness: he takes a deliberate lead, guiding Heracles emotionally, cognitively, and physically, and succeeds in doing so with a combination of compassion, authoritative steadiness, and, when necessary, categorical insistence. His words are delivered more as imperatives than as requests (1215–1217; 1226–1227).³⁹ While Amphitryon's words convey a sense of helplessness and despair (1113, 1115, 1141, 1181, 1194–1197, 1204–1213), Theseus' speech is marked by fearlessness and courage. Theseus offers an effective counter to Heracles' grief by maintaining emotional composure in the face of it (1214–1228), responding instead with an affirmation of loyalty and friendship (1220–1225). He reminds Heracles of their bond and of his own past act of heroism in rescuing him from Hades (1221–1222)⁴⁰ stating

³⁸ Dianosashvili 2020, 242–245.

³⁹ Theseus' authority is effective only because Heracles accepts it. His attitude toward Theseus is evident even in silence: a silent hand gesture in response to Theseus' appeal (1207–1208) contrasts with his unresponsive silence toward Amphitryon's emotional words.

⁴⁰ According to Greek mythology, the benefactions of Heracles to humanity and the cosmic order are immeasurable. He accomplished what no mortal could: he subdued sinister forces, cleansed the world of pollution, stood against tyranny and reinstated justice, founded cities, and advanced the process of civilization. The rescue of Theseus from Hades is but one of his many heroic deeds; see Roscher, *Lex*. In the tragedy, the appearance of Theseus at such a grievous moment for Heracles and his selfless support of his friend reflects not only Theseus' loyalty and the responsibilities inherent in friendship, but also serves as

that he will never abandon his friend in times of hardship (1223–1225). In the tragedy, Theseus is not a sensitive friend but a motivator of action, a person who stands firmly by his position and demands active steps from Heracles.

Some scholars view Theseus' intervention as a therapeutic model grounded in friendship: Bennett Simon describes this as a "therapy of *philia*,"⁴¹ while Brooke Holmes suggests that Euripides presents friendship as a form of panacea, an alternative to both physical and symbolic death brought about by overwhelming grief.⁴² I argue, however, that although the bond between Theseus and Heracles undoubtedly plays a crucial role in the latter's restoration, it constitutes only one among several factors contributing to the effectiveness of Theseus' intervention.

Amphitryon focuses on Heracles' overall condition, particularly his isolation and grief, but his approach proves ineffective. Unlike Amphitryon, Theseus attends not only to this general state, but also to the specific, painful elements of Heracles' grief, including social withdrawal and shame (1214–1217, 1225–1228), as well as his belief in personal pollution (1218–1220).⁴³ While Amphitryon relies on external, natural forces to bring about healing, Theseus adopts a more interpersonal strategy, emphasizing the restorative power of human connection.

Theseus' intervention exemplifies a flexible, individualized mode of healing that closely resembles modern eclectic psychotherapy which combines different psychotherapeutic approaches within a single framework and enables the therapist to respond flexibly to each individual's unique needs.⁴⁴ Similarly, Theseus adapts his approaches to Heracles' psychological crisis. Initially, his therapeutic action is focused solely on

an artistic expression of cosmic order: good deeds circulate perpetually in the world and, at the right time and place, return to their benefactor.

⁴¹ Simon 1978, 101.

⁴² Holmes 2008.

⁴³ In these lines (1218–1220), "why do you wave your hand at me, signifying murder? Is it that I may not be polluted by speaking with you?" (all translations are from Coleridge 1891 unless otherwise noted), Theseus reveals to Heracles his awareness of Heracles' sense of pollution and does not agree with him.

⁴⁴ Beutler 1983; Norcross 1986; Smid et al. 2015.

overcoming shame, marking the beginning of a supportive process grounded in openness toward those he trusts. First and foremost, Theseus encourages Heracles to communicate through bodily expression. His appeal, “show to your friends your face” (1215), suggests emotional openness toward loyal companions and the rebuilding of trust.⁴⁵ Likewise, “look on me” (1226), emphasizes re-establishing a bond with the external world through eye contact, initiating a path toward overcoming shame.⁴⁶

Theseus' understanding of the body as a medium for expressing psychological states anticipates core principles of body-oriented psychotherapy, which treats bodily gestures, postures, and muscular responses as integral to emotional regulation and trauma processing. This somatic approach recognizes the body not as a passive recipient of psychic distress, but as an active site for recovery.⁴⁷ Modern mental health research further supports the psychological significance of such embodied interactions. Eye contact, in particular, plays a vital role in building and maintaining social bonds: it communicates trust and goodwill, fosters interpersonal connection, and signals openness to the other's perspective. For individuals experiencing shame, who may instinctively avert

⁴⁵ φίλοισιν ὄμμα δεικνύναι τὸ σόν (1215). In Euripides' tragedy, this line is addressed by Theseus to Heracles and may be translated literally as “show your eyes to your friends.” In Ancient Greek, ὄμμα most commonly means “eye,” though it can also denote “face.” In line 1215 (“show your eyes to your friends / show your face to your friends”), the choice of ὄμμα, given its semantic range, is likely not accidental. Theseus' later appeal, βλέψον πρὸς ἡμᾶς (“look on me,” 1226), further emphasizes the direction of Heracles' gaze. In both instances, Theseus' exhortation may be understood as a call for Heracles to reestablish visual—and thus interpersonal—contact with his friend(s).

⁴⁶ Psychologists commonly describe the physical manifestations of shame as cowering, shrinking inward, lowering one's head, and avoiding eye contact; see Ben-Ze'Ev 2000, 510–529; Lewis 2008; Lewis, Haviland-Jones, and Barrett 2008; and Dolezal 2015a; 2015b.

⁴⁷ On body-oriented psychotherapy, see Reich 1933; Lowen 1958; 2012; Levine and Frederick 1997; Staunton 2002; Hartley 2009; Marlock et al. 2015.

their gaze or withdraw, restoring eye contact can function as a somatic mechanism for emotional reintegration.⁴⁸

In this light, Theseus' appeals, "show your face to your friends" (1215), and "look on me" (1226), carry psychological weight beyond their dramatic function, serving as embodied interventions aimed at re-establishing Heracles' relational self and anchor him back in the human community. However, even these words have no effect on him; Heracles remains motionless. At this point Theseus' authority and categorical tone are translated into action: he takes it upon himself to draw Heracles out of his withdrawal, removing the peplos from his friend with his own hands.

Heracles: "Why then have you unveiled my head to the sun?"

Theseus: "Why have I? You, a mortal, cannot pollute what is of the gods." (1231–1232)

In doing so, Theseus moves beyond verbal appeal and catalyzes a turning point in the narrative, which ultimately prompts Heracles to break his silence and re-enter the world of human connection.

Heracles emerges in the tragedy as a hero shaped by a culture of shame.⁴⁹ Within this cultural framework, fame and glory represent the highest values, serving as markers of social respect and moral standing. Conversely, the gravest personal misfortune is the loss of one's name and honor, that is, the collapse of public identity and esteem.⁵⁰ Heracles' grief over the permanent separation from his wife and children is deep and overwhelming (1132, 1136, 1140, 1374–1376); however, his desire for death arises not from this loss but from the defilement of his own name

⁴⁸ Eye contact encompasses a range of forms—brief, prolonged, intense, or accidental—each conveying distinct social meanings that vary across cultures. In many Western contexts, it is associated with confidence, attentiveness, and sincerity, whereas in many Eastern contexts, direct gaze may be perceived as impolite or even confrontational. For the nuances of eye contact, see Hall 1973; Knapp, Hall, and Horgan 2013; Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd 2016. Theseus' appeal "look on me" (1226) may thus be understood as an instance of brief, affiliative eye contact, signaling trust and solidarity.

⁴⁹ On the shame-based culture in ancient Greece, see Dodds 1951, 1–27.

⁵⁰ Benedict 1947.

(δύσκληα, 1152; see also 1148–1152) by his own hands and the consequent expectation of total social and universal rejection (1281–1290, 1295–1296). Ashamed and regarding himself as polluted, he asks, “Why then should I go on living? What profit is there in a life that is useless and impious?” (1301–1302),⁵¹ and finding no answer, he longs for death. Within a shame-based value system, the self is defined externally—through reputation and the gaze of others—rather than inwardly, through private emotion or conscience. Therefore, the loss of public honor and the expectation of universal exclusion outweigh even the deepest personal loss. Even at this stage in the unfolding tragedy Heracles remains a figure shaped by the values of a shame culture.⁵² His very first question concerns Theseus’ perception of his actions, as he seeks his friend’s judgment, asking: “O Theseus, did you witness this struggle with my children?” (1229). Only after learning that Theseus knows everything, yet still chooses to stand by him (1230, 1238, 1240), Heracles utters his desire to die (1241, 1247).

RESHAPING THE MIND: THESEUS AND THE COGNITIVE PATH OF HERACLES
Euripides invites the audience to observe how Theseus’ reasoning methodically reshapes Heracles’ mental state. Carefully following Heracles’ line of thought, Theseus offers immediate and purposeful responses to each of his statements. Far from spontaneous or merely reactive, his intervention unfolds according to a clear and deliberate structure, closely anticipating the principles of modern cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), an evidence-based approach that addresses maladaptive mental states by identifying, challenging, and reframing distorted cognitions.⁵³ Like CBT, Theseus’ method facilitates cognitive restructuring, guiding

⁵¹ Author’s literal translation (τί δῆτά με ζῆν δεῖ; τί κέρδος ἔξομεν / βίον γ’ ἀχρεῖον ἀνόσιον κεκτημένοι).

⁵² Even after his grief lifts and reason returns, Heracles remains shaped by shame culture. He laments that his children will gain nothing from his fame and glory (εὐκλεια, “glory,” 1370): “You have had no profit from my triumphs...” (1368–1370).

⁵³ On CBT, see Ellis 1962; Beck 1979; Beck et al. 1979; Beck 2011; Solso, MacLin, and MacLin 2008; and Wenzel, Brown, and Beck 2009.

Heracles to replace destructive beliefs with more adaptive thought patterns and thus fostering emotional recovery.

It is noteworthy that even the authoritative empathy displayed by Theseus resonates with one of the fundamental principles of CBT: engaging with the individual empathetically while firmly guiding them toward cognitive transformation. In times of crisis, empathy within the CBT framework helps to relieve emotional tension, reduce psychological distress, and transform the therapeutic relationship into a safe space. This, in turn, enables the person to articulate their thoughts openly, thereby fostering trust, which is an essential precondition for the success of cognitive intervention. Meanwhile, authoritativeness and assertiveness, when combined with compassion, serve to prompt the individual toward cognitive change and function as catalysts for psychotherapeutic progress.⁵⁴

Cognitive restructuring typically consists of four main steps: (1) identifying problematic thoughts and beliefs, which often reflect negative views of the self, the world, or the future; (2) recognizing cognitive distortions embedded within these thoughts; (3) challenging or confronting these distorted beliefs; (4) constructing new cognitive frameworks and, based on these, developing new constructive behaviors. All four stages of cognitive restructuring are clearly discernible in the tragedy.

The self-destructive thoughts expressed by Heracles during his dialogue with Theseus, particularly his desire for death, may be regarded as the first stage of cognitive restructuring, namely, the identification of problematic thoughts and beliefs. According to Heracles' own words, the actions he committed in the state of fury exclude the possibility of any alternative outcome other than death (1241, 1247). This reasoning corresponds to one of the most dramatic forms of cognitive distortion: catastrophic thinking, in which a person interprets events through an extremely negative and pessimistic lens.

In *Heracles*, the further progression of the plot also mirrors the second stage of cognitive restructuring, which, as previously noted, involves the exploration of the underlying foundations of distorted thoughts. At this

⁵⁴ Beck 1979, 122, 213–232; Beck ²2011, 88; Dryden 2003.

stage, the therapist seeks to identify the cognitive ground from which the client's faulty beliefs have emerged.⁵⁵ Although Theseus holds a position of authority in relation to Heracles, he is neither authoritarian nor domineering. Instead, he uses his authority to support and benefit his friend. He allows Heracles to express himself freely and does not immediately challenge his views. Rather, he listens with empathy, patience, and attentiveness.

The impact of influence depends on its motivation, context, and mode of delivery. Influence can be either constructive or harmful. When the intent is to help the target achieve beneficial outcomes, such as making sound decisions, developing effective plans, or breaking harmful patterns, and when the target's autonomy and rights are respected, such influence may be considered supportive or beneficial. By contrast, when the intent is to exercise covert control or to deceive the target into believing the induced behavior is self-directed, the influence constitutes psychological manipulation. Notably, a state of readiness or willingness on the part of the target is a necessary precondition for any form of influence to take hold.⁵⁶ In this context, Theseus does not manipulate Heracles; rather, he exerts a constructive influence on his friend. The subsequent scenes illustrate Heracles' receptivity to this influence, as he begins to openly articulate the foundations of his own thinking.

Heracles' core argument for ending his life is rooted in his understanding of *μίασμα*. As he claims, "when the foundation is badly laid at birth, it is necessary for the race to be cursed with woe" (1161–1162). He sees himself as a descendant of pollution: Amphitryon, his mortal father, killed Alcmena's father and married her without undergoing purification. Zeus then fathered Heracles with Alcmena. Heracles believes he has perpetuated this defilement by murdering Megara and his children (1258–1262, 1279–1280).

In ancient Greek culture, *μίασμα* was understood as a form of metaphysical pollution that arose in the subject as a result of committing a grave offense. It was believed that the reach of *μίασμα* extended far

⁵⁵ Beck 1979, 233–262; Beck ²⁰¹¹, 199–235.

⁵⁶ Braiker 2004; Kantor 2006; Simon 2010; Dianoshvili 2020, 120–137.

beyond the individual who had committed the crime. According to the ancient Greeks, *μίασμα* could spread to the broader community to which the individual belonged, potentially provoking the wrath of the gods not only against the person but also against the society as a whole. Therefore, purification was considered necessary both for the individual and for the community. Particularly relevant to this issue is the work of Robert Parker, who argues that, in ancient Greece, the experience of pollution was closely associated with a sense of alarm.⁵⁷ This alarm, according to Parker, stemmed not only from metaphysical pollution following a grave offense, but also from a perceived disruption of divine order, specifically, the breakdown of socio-religious structures and the collapse of legally defined oppositions. Such disturbances were understood as systemic ruptures or collapse. As a result, the bearer of *μίασμα* was excluded from social and religious life, not merely as a criminal, but as a potential contaminant of civic and sacred space. Parker writes, “to be polluted is to be unfit to participate in the life of the community, whether civic or religious. His presence endangers others,”⁵⁸ and, “a polluted man is not just wrong, he is out of place; his presence threatens the purity of the social and religious body.”⁵⁹ According to ancient Greek belief, even the gods avoided the polluted.⁶⁰ Importantly, Parker also emphasizes that the sense of alarm evoked by pollution encompassed both anxiety and guilt. In this way, alarm functioned as both a social and individual response to the disruption of cosmic and moral order, one that demanded purification as a countermeasure.⁶¹

Heracles’ psychological state reflects ancient Greek conceptions of the consequences of committing a grave offense. He is convinced that he is polluted both by inheritance and by his own actions, and no longer sees himself as belonging to any realm of the world. He feels that he will be rejected by everyone and everywhere, even by nature itself. For him, this

⁵⁷ Parker 1983.

⁵⁸ Parker 1983, 59.

⁵⁹ Parker 1983, 107.

⁶⁰ Parker 1983, 144–190.

⁶¹ Parker 1983, 145–160.

condition of pollution acquires a cosmic dimension. He declares that he cannot remain in Thebes, cannot enter temples, cannot join his friends, nor can he seek refuge in any other city, as he will be marked and shunned by all as the murderer of his own wife and children (1281–1290). Neither earth, nor sea, nor rivers, nor springs will accept him (1295–1296). A life in such a state, he says, is meaningless and not worth living (1301–1302). Heracles' conscious emotional response to his actions, as a figure shaped by a shame culture, is not expressed through anxiety or guilt, but rather through λύπη, grief. Within this emotional state, shame and the conviction of pollution alternate in intensity. The latter, in turn, is experienced as an existential alienation and a sense of being rejected by the world.

Heracles' thought patterns reveal common forms of cognitive distortion, namely overgeneralization and black-and-white thinking. These types of thinking prevent an individual from perceiving the multilayered and complex nature of events or experiences, making it impossible to identify any middle ground. In overgeneralization, one or more specific negative experiences are projected onto the entire reality, the future, or one's identity as a whole. In black-and-white thinking, reality is interpreted only in extreme terms, such as good or bad, right or wrong.⁶²

Heracles places himself within just such a radical framework. He does not interpret his deed as merely a single, extreme, and tragic event in his life; rather, he views his entire identity and existence through the lens of this one incident. For Heracles, pollution has become an ontological condition that defines his past, present, and future. Through this absolutized mode of thinking, he develops the conviction that he has only two options: to live a life of shame and rejection everywhere and by everyone, or to embrace death as liberation from this state.

In his effort to aid his friend, Theseus purposefully draws on the very information Heracles himself has supplied. His approach is remarkably nuanced and strategic, and may be seen as a model of the ethics of friendship and compassion. Theseus does not confront Heracles harshly—he does not tell him that he is wrong, nor does he point out any cognitive

⁶² Burns 1980, 7–51.

distortions. At the same time, he neither justifies him nor denies his suffering, nor does he diminish the intensity of his experience. What Theseus rejects is only the all-encompassing character Heracles attributes to his deed; gently yet firmly, he shifts the perspective from which his ordeal is perceived and places it within a comparative context: Theseus compares his friend to the gods, who possess supreme power and authority (1316–1321). He recalls the transgressions of the gods and reminds Heracles that, despite these, they nevertheless continue to dwell on Olympus (1316–1319).⁶³ The actions of the gods, erroneous and often morally questionable, do not exclude them from dignity, authority, or the right to continue living. This idea, advanced by Theseus, directly counters Heracles' conviction that a single deed of his own, however dreadful, is sufficient to justify his permanent exclusion from the world and, moreover, to compel him to renounce life itself. By comparing Heracles' act to the deeds of the gods, the magnitude of his crime is relativized, and the absoluteness of his self-perception is shattered. In this way, Theseus creates a new conceptual space in which life remains possible alongside the past (1314–1321).

Theseus' strategy echoes the principle of cognitive reframing, a technique widely used in CBT. Cognitive reframing is a psychological method aimed at altering distorted or negative perceptions and interpretations of events or circumstances in order to reduce anxiety or self-condemnation. In the tragedy, the comparison of Heracles' deeds with the lives of the gods serves as a means of cognitively reframing Heracles' belief system within a new interpretative framework. This part of Theseus' speech corresponds to the third stage of CBT, in which, as noted above, the therapist actively challenges and deconstructs the client's distorted beliefs through rational argumentation. His subsequent intervention reflects the fourth stage of CBT, which involves helping the client construct a new cognitive framework and, on its basis, develop new patterns of behavior.⁶⁴

⁶³ Theseus: "... still they inhabit Olympus and brave the issue of their crimes" (1319).

⁶⁴ Beck 1979, 263–305; Beck 2011, 214–255.

At this point, Theseus directs Heracles' attention toward the future. He creates a new vision of what lies ahead, encompassing not only of continued life but also of existence beyond death. In this reality, Heracles is purified, accepted, and once again valuable to society: he must leave Thebes "for the sake of law" (νόμου χάριν, 1322), not because of pollution. In Athens, alongside Theseus, he will be purified; Theseus will grant him a home and share his wealth. The abundant gifts Theseus received for saving fourteen children's lives will belong to Heracles (1322–1330). After his death, Heracles will be honored, and a sanctuary will be dedicated to him in Athens in recognition of his heroic deeds (1331–1335). In this way, a new existential space is created for Heracles and becomes accessible through the transformation and rejection of his former beliefs.

Theseus' therapeutic intervention proves effective: Heracles undergoes a transformation in his conviction as he abandons the idea of ending his life. Suicide, which he had previously perceived as the only solution, now appears to him as an act of cowardice. He offers a moral critique of suicide as a response to suffering, arguing that one who cannot endure misfortune will likewise be terrified by an enemy (1349–1350). Heracles finds within himself a renewed strength—at this stage only cognitively—to bear the memory of his deeds, to suffer because of them, and once again to take up the bow and continue living (1378–1385). The mistaken belief has been corrected, and the hero chooses to go on living. However, the unfolding of the plot reveals that his cognitive transformation has not yet fully translated into emotional and physical vitality. Heracles is unable to stand; he lacks the strength, his body feels heavy, and his legs are weighed down like stones (1395). He is incapable of moving on his own (1402).

In this episode, Euripides presents the complexity of Heracles' psychological reality: taking a step toward life does not equate to the immediate restoration of identity. A new cognitive foundation has been laid, but it still requires reinforcement both in terms of a renewed sense of life's meaning and in Heracles' physical and emotional condition. He once again expresses the desire not to live (1397), invokes the theme of pollution, declaring himself untouchable (1399), and wishes to see his

children one last time (1406). The newly formed belief demands enactment, but Heracles himself lacks the internal resources to act on it. To begin a functional and active life, he still requires external support, which may be interpreted as the ongoing necessity of therapeutic intervention. This stage corresponds to the post-cognitive phase of transformation: an intermediate state before behavioral expression, in which the new conviction has been cognitively established but has not yet been emotionally integrated into the self or embodied in action.⁶⁵

Theseus remains fully engaged in the process of restoring his friend. Even at this point, his unwavering support for Heracles is strongly felt, and he continues to empathize with him. He encourages Heracles by reminding him that being struck by misfortune is not a sign of weakness: "... even the strong are overthrown by misfortunes" (1396). In doing so, he once again places Heracles' plight within a broader context of heroic vulnerability. At the same time, Theseus maintains a categorical, and authoritative stance. With a single commanding word—"stop" (παῦσαι, 1398), he intervenes decisively to interrupt Heracles' downward spiral as the latter shows signs of relapse. He counters Heracles' impulse with immediate physical action: he extends his hand and offers his neck aligning himself with the courage Heracles invokes (1398–1402).

Theseus presents a coherent and purposeful approach in both word and action. In this way, he once again refutes Heracles' conviction of pollution (1400) and, with firm and uncompromising resolve, leads him forward along the proposed path. Furthermore, he refuses Heracles' plea to look upon his children one last time (1406) and does not allow him to

⁶⁵ For a detailed discussion of the post-cognitive phase and the period before behavioral expression, see Wells 1997, 86–96; Westbrook, Kennerley, and Kirk ²⁰¹¹, 165–178; Beck ²⁰¹¹, 239–259. As noted by psychologists, "awareness of one's thinking is not sufficient to bring about change; patients often need help in translating this awareness into action" (Wells 1997, 92); "it is common for clients to accept a new way of thinking but feel stuck when trying to act on it. Emotional change and behavioral change often lag behind cognitive insight" (Westbrook, Kennerley, and Kirk ²⁰¹¹, 174); and "sometimes patients intellectually believe new ideas, but the new beliefs have not yet become emotionally compelling or behaviorally implemented" (Beck ²⁰¹¹, 257).

turn back toward the past.⁶⁶ He asks pointedly: "What for? Do you think to find a drug in this to soothe your soul" (1407)? Kosak notes that the phrase ὥρων ἔσθῃ (literally, "you will be at ease"), used in line 1407, also appears in the Hippocratic corpus, where it denotes the effect of soothing remedy that provides temporary relief from pain without addressing the root cause.⁶⁷ In this context, Theseus implies that gazing upon his children might offer Heracles brief emotional relief, but ultimately impedes his recovery by reawakening his λύπη and deepening his emotional wounds. In contrast, Theseus' words and actions are directed toward stabilizing Heracles and sustaining his movement away from self-destructive impulses.

Theseus' refusal of Heracles' request, and the broader constraint he imposes on expressions of grief and familial attachment, can also be read as a curtailment of the hero's emotional needs. His approach privileges forward movement over mourning, and stability over the full articulation of loss. Accordingly, Theseus permits Heracles only a final embrace with Amphitryon, entrusting the father with the burial of Megara and the children, while Heracles departs with Theseus for Athens to begin a next chapter in his life (1421–1426). The resulting trajectory suggests a managed transition toward continued life, though at this point emotionally and existentially diminished.⁶⁸ The play concludes with Heracles exiting the stage side by side with Theseus.

According to Kosak, the effectiveness of Theseus' intervention on behalf of Heracles lies in his strategic selection of the social institutions

⁶⁶ According to Holmes (2008, 264–272), Theseus' approach combines compensation and enforced oblivion. He not only offers his friend a means of making amends for his loss but also aids him effacing the memory of his tragic deeds. In Holmes' interpretation, the experience or even the very concept of μίαισμα functions as a form of bodily memory, an inscription of human transgression upon the physical self. Within this framework, Theseus imposes a price on Heracles' amnesty: the cost of amnesia.

⁶⁷ Kosak 2004, 172–173; on this topic, see also Van Brock 1961, 212–213.

⁶⁸ Any fuller resolution of Heracles story belongs to the broader mythological tradition beyond the play; see nn. 73, 74, and 75.

he invokes.⁶⁹ However, Kosak contends that Heracles' recovery, as portrayed in the tragedy, is ultimately implausible and should be attributed more to the playwright's dramatic skill than to psychologically realistic development. Similarly, Mills credits Heracles' healing to Euripides' literary craftsmanship.⁷⁰ However, familiarity with contemporary psychotherapeutic approaches, along with reflection on certain defining traits of Heracles' character, such as his sensitivity to social evaluation and his dependence on acceptance from his environment, may serve as the basis for an alternative interpretation.

As I have already noted, Heracles is deeply affected by the permanent separation from his wife and children. Moore argues that Heracles' emotional bond with his family is so strong that even after their deaths, he is unable to sever that connection.⁷¹ Nonetheless, in the tragedy, Heracles, as a hero shaped by a shame culture, is ultimately defined not by grief over the loss of his family or the inability to be close to them, but by the defilement of his name by his own hand. What determines his suffering is, above all, the experience of shame (social judgment, loss of honor, and the breaking of his name) and the conviction of pollution that stems from his actions expressed as exclusion from the community and from the moral order of the world. For this reason, the overcoming of his grief is specific, becoming possible only through confronting shame and revising his understanding of pollution. If one assumes that the inner world of an individual is similarly shaped by such dynamics, then Heracles' psychological recovery, facilitated by an intervention akin to Theseus' therapeutic action, gains plausibility. Theseus does not bring about a personal or profound transformation in Heracles. He merely helps his friend out of the deadlock in which he found himself at that moment, thereby enabling him to continue living. In the broader mythological tradition,⁷² after recovering from his madness, Heracles returns to his former way of life. Hera continues to give him no peace. He

⁶⁹ Kosak 2004, 151–173.

⁷⁰ Mills 2020.

⁷¹ Moore 2022.

⁷² Roscher, *Lex*.

once again engages in campaigns, conquering territories,⁷³ confronting gods,⁷⁴ and establishing the Olympic⁷⁵ Games.⁷⁶ What appears particularly implausible is the rapidity with which Theseus is able to heal Heracles. The dialogue between Heracles and Theseus spans only 217 lines (1212–1429). Nevertheless, Euripides masterfully condenses into this brief scene what, in reality, would unfold over numerous psychotherapeutic sessions, embracing all the critical phases: the bodily overcoming of shame, the reshaping of beliefs about personal pollution, the construction of new, hopeful visions for the future, adapting to grief, and moving forward physically, emotionally, and cognitively.

CONCLUSION

The final scenes of *Heracles* may be read as an impressive portrayal of ancient psychological insight and therapeutic practice embedded into the tragic narrative. Rather than proposing a single, linear path to recovery, Euripides dramatizes a layered, dynamic process that responds to the protagonist's shifting psychological needs. Theseus' targeted and multi-dimensional support guides Heracles out of his acute psychological crisis and helps alleviate the complexity of his state.

Heracles' psychological condition demands different therapeutic approaches at different stages. His physical manifestations, such as covering his head with the peplos and his inability to move, call for a body-oriented therapy, which aims to reach the psyche through somatic engagement. In contrast, his maladaptive beliefs require cognitive-behavioral techniques, focused on restructuring distorted thoughts and constructing new representations of the future. In this light, I argue that ec-

⁷³ Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.5, 2.6.4, 2.7.2–7.3, 2.7.5, 3.10.5, 3.12.7; Paus. 2.15.1, 3.15.3, 3.19.7, 3.20.5, 5.1.8, 5.2.1–2.2, 5.3.1, 5.3.8, 7.25.5–25.6, 8.14.1–14.6, 8.25.5, 8.47.4, 8.53.3; Diod. Sic. 4.32, 33, 68; Hyg. *Fab.* 33, 89; Ap. Rhod. 1.156–160; Plut. *Quaest. Graec.* 41.

⁷⁴ Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.6.2; Paus. 2.21.3, 10.13.4; Hyg. *Fab.* 14; Soph. *Trach.* 248; *Serv. Dan.* 8.300.

⁷⁵ Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.7.2; Paus. 5.13.1, 5.14.2–14.3, 5.8.1, 5.15.3; Diod. Sic. 4.14; Hyg. *Fab.* 273.

⁷⁶ Dianosashvili 2020, 245–246.

lectic psychotherapy, an integrative method drawing on multiple therapeutic modalities, would be a fitting model for addressing the psychological challenges faced by Heracles. In contemporary clinical settings, such integrative approaches are commonly used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depressive disorder (MDD), in ways that resemble the therapeutic role Theseus performs.

Theseus' intervention mirrors this integrative method. His physical encouragement, removing the peplos and helping Heracles stand and walk, reflects body-oriented therapy aimed at overcoming shame through movement. Simultaneously, his reasoned arguments for choosing life and his efforts to help Heracles envision a viable future reflect the principles of cognitive restructuring central to CBT. Heracles' acts, removing the peplos (1227–1229) and taking his first supported steps (1398, 1402), mark the embodied release of shame and despair. The persuasive dialogue reshapes Heracles' core beliefs, while the future-oriented vision constructed by Theseus provides him with a renewed schema for life both in this world and beyond.

Theseus' role is crucial. His devotion to Heracles, his courage and fearlessness in the face of his friend's crisis, combined with a rare balance of empathy, authority, and firmness, form the foundation of his therapeutic action. His intuitive grasp of Heracles' psychological condition, what could be called a kind of psychological anatomy, alongside his sequential strategy (initially addressing shame, then challenging Heracles' belief in his own pollution), his use of reasoned argument to deconstruct those beliefs, his construction of meaningful and realistic future images, his unwavering commitment to the chosen path, and the integrity between his words and actions, all of these elements work together to guide Heracles toward an outcome that neither audience nor reader could foresee upon his entry onto the stage. Theseus succeeds where both Heracles and Amphitryon had failed: he helps his friend confront and survive a grief so profound it renders even the hero powerless. Now, Heracles is ready to reintegrate into society.

Tbilisi State University, Georgia
nino.dianosashvili@tsu.ge

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