

“*Heracles*, *Alexandros*, and the divergent paths of Euripidean epinician”

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In this paper, I focus on the echoes of epinician poetry and celebration in Euripides’ *Heracles* and *Alexandros*. As I argue, in each play epinician provides a poetic backdrop for a play that dramatizes the problem of how an outstanding individual fits into his community. In *Heracles*, epinician song is an explicit aspect of the Theban chorus’ response to the person (and return) of Heracles, while Lycus’ rejection of the hero doubles as a repudiation of epinician celebration. The songs themselves fade in the second part of the play, but the values implicit in epinician poetry – and indeed the language with which these are expressed – nevertheless remain embedded in Theseus’ decision to welcome Heracles into Athens: his presence will be a “crown” for the *polis*.

Alexandros takes a different approach. As a fragmentary play in which almost all choral songs have been lost, it is difficult to get a solid grasp on the poetic underpinnings of *Alexandros*. But we do know that Alexander’s victory in athletic competitions serves as the fulcrum for the play’s action, and we see gestures, in the extant fragments, towards epinician song, celebration, and performance. Unlike in *Heracles*, however, it appears that epinician celebration does not serve to encourage Alexander’s integration into either *oikos* or *polis*, but rather to foment animosity against him. Moreover, it is explicit that unlike with Heracles, Alexander’s ultimate acceptance in Troy will be ruinous for *oikos* and *polis* alike.

In both plays, then, we see that the thought and diction of epinician poetry become a vehicle through which (or against which) important political considerations are formed. The fact that the two plays come to seemingly opposite conclusions about whether to accept an exceptional figure suggests that Euripides sees these as questions that can be explored with the mediation of epinician poetry, but that definitive answers may be elusive. This shared interest is all the more intriguing given the proximity in date not only of the two plays to each other, but also to the Euripidean “Epinician for Alcibiades,” all of which suggests a persistent interest in the civic implications of epinician poetry in this period.