

That Sinking Feeling:
The Archive and Anti-Catharsis in Euripides' *Heracles*

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Euripides' *Heracles* is bookended by two archival images: the assemblage of the twelve labors recollected by the chorus and the hero's prospective monumentalization in Athens at Theseus's behest. In this paper I want to explore how against Theseus's program of incorporating the "crown" of glory of Heracles together with his labors in a calcifying political memorialization, the text suggests a persistent form of resistance, a mobile stuckness. This resistance is encapsulated, at the end of the play, in Heracles' farewell to Thebes, "We, completely ruined, will follow Theseus like small boats in tow." The image, which recapitulates earlier language Heracles had used as he led his children to their death, has an unappreciated ominous resonance. Like the doomed children, the literal ship that will carry Heracles (and the figurative ship of state it represents) threatens to perish somewhere beyond representation (the reference to his complete ruin may be taken as proleptic as well as analeptic). The possibility of sinking, alternating with the expected floating, creates a sense of instability, of suspension between actual and virtual, counteracting the immobilizing future of political memorialization. This suspension corresponds to the looping death drive theorized by Žižek—the endless circling caused by proximity to and postponement of death. The ship of Heracles and Theseus exemplifies the contradictions of the archive, constitutionally wavering between memory and forgetting, preservation and destruction, as theorized by Derrida in *Mal d'archive*. What can be construed as a death-driven recalcitrance toward Theseus's political memorialization offers the possibility of an anti-cathartic aesthetic experience. As an alternative to the precarious pleasure principle of Theseus's political program, we may conceive of a masochistic game of sinking and staying afloat, with no desire for an ending.