

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF MADNESS IN HERCULES:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN EURIPIDES' *HERACLES* AND
SENECA'S *HERCULES FURENS***



Heracles wrestling the Nemean Lion by Psiax (520–500 BCE). ARCHAIOPTIXCC BY-SA 4.0

Amaia Cid Martín

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Supervisor: Alejandro Martínez

ABSTRACT

Hercules is probably the best-known hero in Greek and Roman mythology, not only for his feats, but also for the interest his madness has aroused. In previous research, where the insanity of the hero has been studied, two opposing fronts can be found: those who see the hero as a benefactor of humanity and an altruistic civilizer close to the ideal of the stoic model, opposed to those who consider Hercules a megalomaniac who exceeds the limits of his nature and causes his own madness. In this study, and after a brief introduction to the origin and evolution of the tragedy, I will pursue a comparative analysis between Euripide's *Heracles* and Seneca's *Hercules Furens* to examine how madness is constructed in this mythological figure explaining concisely the most outstanding episodes of the hero's life, as told by mythology. I will also analyze the rage and madness of Hercules examining these two currents, as well as the different possible causes of his dementia: internal and external causes. To avoid misunderstandings, I will use the name of Heracles to talk about Euripides' work, and the name of Hercules to refer to Seneca's tragedy.

Keywords: Euripides, Seneca, The madness of Hercules, Tragic hero.

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1. Introduction

The episode of Heracles/Hercules' madness has been extensively studied by different authors¹, especially regarding the works of Euripides and Seneca, where they acquire different nuances. In this paper, and based on what other researchers have investigated, I intend to analyze how madness is represented in Euripides' *Heracles* and Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, and its development connected to the incidents experienced by the hero. Euripides and Seneca rewrote the story of Hercules in their tragedies presenting a new perspective to the legendary hero so as to challenge traditional heroic ideals, explore the consequences of violence and the complexities of human nature. Their adaptations reflect their respective cultural and philosophical backgrounds.

I will also examine the possible causes of the hero's delirium, as well as the different attitudes shown by other critics in regard to both tragedies. The episode of madness has aroused a lot of interest, and we find ourselves with two differentiated currents regarding the origin and evolution of the hero's mental state. On the one hand, in regard to Euripides' tragedy, the author emphasizes the madness as a factor generated from outside the hero's mind, a dementia caused by external forces. On the other hand, Seneca sets this psychosis within the hero as a consequence of an excessively violent life, the result of which is an unstable mind. Thus, we will observe how both figures (Heracles in Euripides and Hercules in Seneca) seem to be marked by different features that distinguish this character in both tragedies.

The dissimilarities encountered in *Heracles* and *Hercules Furens*, not only are seen in the features of the hero, but also regarding the way the events are narrated and how the rest of the characters intervene in the story. Concerning the order, Euripides took some episodes from the mythical tradition, but he also changed others, and added new themes and characters, such as the story of Lycus or the appearance of Theseus at the end of the tragedy. Originally, the twelve deeds of Hercules were set soon after returning to Thebes from the Underworld and subsequent to the madness episode and the murder of his wife and children². Euripides, and Seneca afterwards, placed the twelve labours of Hercules

¹ Mateusz Stróżyński (2013); Cecilia Josefina Perczyk (2012); Carmen Gonzalez Vazquez (1995); Julio López Saco (2002); Myriam Librán Moreyo & Antonio Ramírez de Verger (2013), among others. In this work I will follow the 9th edition of MLA.

² Apollodoro and Ferecides narrated the story as it was originally told in the mythology placing the madness of Hercules and the murder of his family before the labours, and so these deeds became as atonement for

before returning to Thebes, where his madness awakens soon after his arrival. This difference in the order of the events will be a turning point for the character, as we will see when analyzing both tragedies, since it changes completely the way we perceive this tragic hero. I regard this reversal of the events not to be a coincidence, and is probably caused due to the conception of the hero by each author respectively. I consider it important to recall the influence that their own cultures, values, and beliefs had on both authors when creating and writing their tragedies as well as the way they envisioned their legendary heroes in ancient Greek and Roman society.

For a better understanding of Heracles/Hercules' circumstances in Euripides and Seneca, first, I will briefly explain the origin of the tragedy in Greece and Rome: how it evolved from the dithyrambic songs to tragedy and drama. I wanted to dedicate a small section to explain the origin and background of the tragedy to better understand the aim of this genre and its usefulness for both the Greeks, and later for the Romans. I think that having some basic notions helps us to better understand the characters described in tragedies and the purpose for which they were created. And so, it will help us comprehend more easily what makes Hercules a tragic hero. Secondly, I will briefly recount the myth of Hercules together with the importance of the heroic figures in Greco-Roman society. Finally, looking into the heroic feats of Hercules and what others have stated about his insanity, I will pursue a comparative analysis between both plays in order to study how madness is constructed in this mythological figure establishing a correlation between the forces that cause his insanity and temper. I will examine the behaviour of both characters (Heracles and Hercules) based on the psychology they show through what they verbalise and what other characters say about them, paying close attention to the description of the actions they perform. I will use the name Heracles to refer to the work of Euripides, and the name of Hercules to designate the character in Seneca's play. When referring to the myth itself, I will use the Latin designation 'Hercules' to refer back to the hero, since I am alluding to the same character, and it is the name best known traditionally.

his crimes. See the introductory part of the play in Crespo, E. *Esquilo, Sófocles, Eurípides. Obras completas*. Cátedra, Madrid, 2004, págs 635-36.

2. The tragedy in Greece and Rome: the evolution from Dithyrambic songs to Tragedy

Tragedy was a cultural phenomenon bound to the history of Athens which developed from the cult of the god Dionysius, being mythological representations the most recurring themes that were connected to Greek origin and culture. Tragedy reached its peak in Athens around the 5th century BC, and was born from the lyrical songs known as Dithyrambs³: a dialogue based on gesture, movement and voice performed by a choir, and dedicated to the god Dionysus. In the Dionysiac festivals, which originated around the end of the 7th century BC, the Dithyramb was sung by the chorus and the Coryphaeus, the choir director or guide, while the statue of Dionysus was brought and praised during the danced parade. Afterwards, these lyrical songs changed: the Coryphaeus was separated from the chorus engendering the concept of the first actor who, not only dialogued with the chorus, but was also part of the action narrated in the song. From this moment, the audience started gazing at some characters that appear as distinct entities acting independently on the scene provided with a psychological dimension⁴. At this point, with the appearance of the first actor, we can talk about the notion or idea of drama. Inspired by the myths and sacred representations, what began as a mere improvisation reproducing a dance through a purification rite, then assumed a written and pre-established form of script in which the chorus dialogued with the actor giving rise to dramatic scenes. The plot of the tragedy narrated the fall of an important character who suffered misfortunes, since he/she took wrong decisions, often caused by ignorance, leading the character to a tragic end, which would cause the catharsis of the soul of the viewers. The catharsis is the purification, compassion and fear of the immoral and iniquitous emotional states that these protagonists undergo. Thus, tragedy was an effective way of teaching and making the viewer learn from the characters' errors⁵. The purpose of making the audience experience sympathy towards the tragic heroes, who were role models for the society, originated from the fact that the viewers mirrored themselves in the characters, since, as human beings, they were made of the same mass, and the fear that the characters' misfortunes might befall them as well.

³ Aristóteles. *Poética*. (translated by Alicia Villar Lecumberri) Alianza editorial, Madrid. 2004.

⁴ Oliva, C. & Torres, F. *Historia básica del arte escénico*. Cátedra. Madrid. 9º ed, 2006.

⁵ <https://www.ensayos-filosofia.es/archivos/articulo/la-catarsis-en-la-poetica-de-aristoteles>.

The Roman Tragedy, on the other hand, is the union of the Greek literary tradition and the Roman tradition strictly speaking. It evolved from two currents: the Hellenistic, and the one that defended the traditional currents of properly Roman identity. Greek drama largely influenced the creation of Roman plays in terms of the assimilation of literary genres, stylistic procedures, writing techniques and Greek mythological heritage, among others⁶. The Romans embraced different forms of entertainment including music, drama, and dance. These constituted an important part of the public games (*ludi publici*) celebrated, firstly, in honour of the Roman gods⁷, then as a propaganda medium in which, not only values and civic-religious life were represented, but also events related to the origins of Rome⁸. Theatre became a political instrument that served to promote and magnify public figures as well as to express political opinions. And so, although Romans included a large amount of Greek heroic legends to their assortment, the main purpose was to magnify their political image, since they wanted their heroes to be as popular as the Greek ones, and thus, they deified them to praise their empire⁹. Some of the Roman stories are etiological myths¹⁰ for the creation and establishment of Roman culture and traditions as a means of explanation for how the Roman state came to be. Roman writers like Ovid and Virgil documented and extended the mythological heritage of the ancient Mediterranean, giving us many enduring and iconic figures such as Aeneas, Vesta, or the founders of Rome itself, Romulus and Remus. One example is the *Aeneid*, a Latin epic poem written by the Roman poet Virgil in the 1st century BC, was commissioned by the Emperor Augustus to glorify the Empire by attributing a mythical origin to it.

Tragedy, and theater in general, were therefore a cultural phenomenon linked to the history of both countries whose purpose was to educate citizens in their history and values. Besides, as the tastes of the public kept changing, the plays also evolved to what

⁶ Signes Codoñer, J., et al. *Antiquae Lectiones. El legado clásico desde la antigüedad hasta la revolución francesa*. Cátedra, Madrid, 2005, Págs. 95-96.

⁷ The Romans adopted Greek mythological characters maintaining the status given by the Greeks but modifying part of their history, as well as the names. Thus, we have, for example, the name of Hercules, which derives from the Greek name Herakles, or the Gods like Jupiter, with its Greek equivalent Zeus, or Juno, being the Greek name Hera, etc. More information about Roman gods can be seen on the following webpage: <https://mythopedia.com/topics/roman-gods>.

⁸ Vicente Sánchez, A. & Beltrán Cebollada, J. A. *Grecia y Roma a escena. El teatro grecolatino: actualización y perspectivas*. Cima press, Madrid. Capt. 6, 2010.

⁹ Signes Codoñer, J., et al. *Antiquae Lectiones. El legado clásico desde la antigüedad hasta la revolución francesa*. Cátedra, Madrid, 2005. Págs 98-99.

¹⁰ Etiology (or Aetiology) is the science focused on the study of causation; the investigation or attribution of the cause or reason for something, often expressed in terms of historical or mythical explanation. See for its different definitions <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/etiology>.

the audience demanded. Thus, classical authors began to focus more on the study of the psychology of their characters, providing a more dynamic action and stage movement¹¹. For example, we will see how Seneca, using Euripides as a model, develops the psychology of Hercules in more depth, triggering feelings and passions in an excessive way that distances him from the Greek model. Seneca abandons the mere confrontation between gods and heroes and impregnates his tragedy with Stoic philosophy¹², while Euripides establishes a strong relationship between heroes, gods and destiny, as we will observe when analyzing Hercules' madness episode.

3. The mythological origin of Heracles/Hercules

Even though we can come upon different versions of Heracles/Hercules' birth and the occurrences that befall him during his life, I will follow the text by Antonio Ruiz de Elvira¹³ to explain the hero's myth¹⁴. Despite the fact that in the next point, when comparing both works, I will differentiate Euripides' Heracles from Seneca's Hercules, in this section, since we are talking about the same character in the mythology, I will use the Latin term, Hercules, because it is more commonly known.

Hercules¹⁵ is the son of Zeus and Alcmena, the last son he begets in a mortal woman, was a semi-god human and an exceptional man with a supernatural strength given by his divine nature. Zeus impersonates Alcmena's husband, Anfitrión, in order to deceive her.

After Zeus' affair with Alcmena, when Anfitrión arrives the day after and tells her about his campaign, he notices that something is wrong¹⁶. Once he finds out that Zeus had slept with his wife, instead of infuriating, he considers it an honour, and he himself

¹¹ Crespo, E. *Esquilo, Sófocles, Eurípides. Obras completas*. Madrid, 2004. Pags 21-24.

¹² Librán Moreno, M. y Ramírez de Verger, A. *Seneca. Hércules loco, Medea, Las troyanas, Freda*. Alianza, Madrid, 2013.

¹³ Ruiz de Elvira, A. *Mitología clásica*. 2ª Ed. Grecos, Madrid, 2018. Pags 250-263.

¹⁴ I thought it interesting to tell the myth of Hercules before comparing both works, since to understand the evolution of this character in both plays I consider that the reader should know a little about his origin and history. Myths were important narratives that expressed the ancestral ideas of a particular society about the world and explained how all things came to exist. In this regard, I reckon we should have some knowledge about these mythical stories to understand the role these masterpieces played in antiquity.

¹⁵ The Greek name Hercules seems to derive from the name of the Goddess Hera and the Greek word kleos, meaning 'glory', which meaning has been interpreted as 'Hera's glory'. However, there seem to be discrepancies about the origin of the term, as Antonio Ruiz de Elvira indicates in his work, there are authors who suggest that the term Herakles could mean 'glorious for his services'. Pags 259.

¹⁶ Different versions are recounted by different authors about the plot. Some of them can be found in the text by Antonio Ruiz de Elvira. Pags 253-254.

sleeps with her that same night. Alcmena conceives two twins: Hercules, son of Zeus, and Ificles, son of Anfitrion. Since the day Hercules was born, Hera, Zeus' wife, persecutes Hercules in rage (much of Hera's mythology tells of the wrath upon Zeus' lovers and illegitimate children). Hera made Zeus promise that the descendant of Perseus¹⁷ who was born first would have immense power over men. Thus, when Nicipe is about to give birth to Eurystheus¹⁸, Hera delays the birth of Hercules, and so Eurystheus is born before Hercules. While still in the cradle, Hera sends two serpents to kill Alcmena's children, but Hercules strangles them revealing his power.¹⁹

During Hercules' childhood, he had many teachers, the best known is the centaur Chiron²⁰. Hercules' bravery and physical power made him famous, and so, Hera, enreaged by these occurrences, drove Heracles mad and he killed her family by mistake. When the echo of his fame reached Eurystheus, already proclaimed king of Mycenae, and given their rivalry, he called him to his court and ordered him to complete the famous twelve deeds as penance to atone for his sins (the murder of his wife and children).

Regarding the argument of both tragedies, *Heracles* and *Hercules furens*, they follow most of the original version told in the myth, except that Euripides reversed the events placing the labours before the murder of his family and the madness of the hero. The play is set in Thebes, where the family of Heracles is threatened with death by the usurper Lycus²¹. Upon finishing the last labour in the Underworld and returning to Thebes, Heracles acknowledges the death of his wife's family by the hands of Lycus and takes revenge. Then, Lyssa, a servant of Hera, makes her appearance in the scene and drives Heracles mad, which leads him to kill unlawfully his wife and children. In Seneca, following Euripides' version, the events are narrated in the same order, but no deity

¹⁷ Alcmena's father, Electrion, King of Micenae, was descendant of Perseus.

¹⁸ Eurystheus is the son of Nicipe and Estenelo, descendant of Perseus, since Estenelo was the son of Perseus and Andromaca. Hercules was also a descendant of Perseus. His mother, Alcmena, was Estenelo's niece.

¹⁹ There is a version that tells us how Alcmena, for fear of Hera's jealousy, abandons Hercules in a field while he is still a baby. Then, Athena and Hera find him, and Hera breastfeeds the baby, whose divine milk would make him immortal. When Hera learns who the child is, she abruptly separates him from her breast, and the spilled milk is called the Milky Way. This is another fact that seems to establish a close relationship between these two characters, Hera and Hercules, according to what Antonio Ruiz de Elvira denotes in his publication. Ruiz de Elvira, A. *Mitología clásica*. Gredos, Barcelona, 2015. Pag 260.

²⁰ The centaur Chiron was honored by both gods and mortals and trained some of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology, including Jason, Hercules, Asclepius, and Achilles. <https://mythopedia.com/topics/chiron>; Hercules also received education from other characters. For more information see also Ruiz de Elvira, A. *Mitología clásica*. Gredos, Barcelona, 2015. Pag 254.

²¹ Lycus was regent and later usurper of the throne of Thebes. It is argued that this part could be Euripides' own invention. In the original story Lycus is not mentioned. See for more reference Elvira's work.

intervenes in the episode of madness (this difference I will analyse in the following points). After the murder, the protagonist survives his woes, and haunted by guilt and remorse he sought redemption for his actions. However, we will find dissimilarities in both works, *Heracles* and *Hercules Furens*, in relation to his mental state and behavior closely connected to the nature of his character and a life full of violence and war.

4. Heracles and Hercules: benefactor of humanity or megalomaniac hero?

There are two opposing positions concerning the figure of Heracles/Hercules. Some authors defend the idea that the hero is a protector of humanity and, as such, an exemplary hero, while others assert that Hercules is a megalomaniac who lacks control over himself and causes harm to those around him. According to Myriam Librán Moreno and Antonio Ramírez de Verger²² for example, there is a distinction between those who see Hercules as an admirable man, close to the ideal stoic portrayal²³, whose madness is caused by a jealous goddess, versus those who consider Hercules a man with the ability to provoke his own madness when he tries to exceed the limits of his nature.

This is the most divergent development in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* from Euripides' *Heracles*: the introduction of a psychological cause as the source of the hero's madness, opposed to the Euripides' *Heracles*, to whom this madness falls upon as a tragic injustice due to a deity²⁴. This fact seems to make this euripidean character a more philanthropic and humanitarian hero, since historically he has been represented as a semi-mortal being with colossal strength that risks his life to protect humanity performing great

²² Myriam Librán Moreno y Antonio Ramírez de Verger. *Séneca, Hércules loco, Medea, Las troyanas, Freda*. Alianza, Madrid, 2013. Pag 58-59.

²³ According to the essayist Joerg Knipprath in his essay *The Stoics and Classic Roman Thought on Human Nature and Good Government*, one of the aspects of the stoic philosophy was the 'Apatheia', which means 'a conscious effort to achieve a state of mind freed from the disturbance of the passions and instincts'. In the face of life's challenges a man has often no control, and he focuses on his own actions. As Knipprath states based on stoic philosophy 'a man must train himself to live his life in accordance with nature and reason. He must control his passions and avoid luxuries and material distractions that would lead to disappointments and frustrations'. Knipprath, J. *The Stoics and Classic Roman Thought on Human Nature and Good Government*. Colleyville, Texas, 1988. It can also be found at <https://constitutingamerica.org/90day-aer-stoics-and-classic-roman-thought-on-human-nature-and-good-government-guest-essayist-joerg-knipprath/>.

²⁴ We should take into account that both Euripides and Seneca come from different backgrounds, and therefore, they would be influenced by the ideas of their own time, and so their conception of the hero would also be unlike.

deeds against evil (he killed monsters that terrified people, such as the Nemean lion or the Leena hydra).

However, this image of ‘benefactor of humanity’ that seems closer to mankind, is overshadowed by other no less striking descriptions that we find in many sources²⁵.

In the *Iliad*, for example, the portrait made of Hercules is by no means a hero that lacks hostility and malice: the character that is presented to us is an impious assailant of the gods, a feisty warrior whose life is repleted with action and violence²⁶:

‘When the son of Zeus himself, who bears the aegis, shoots at Pylos a swift arrow, and entrusting him in pain to the dead (...) with a heavy heart, pierced with pain, the god goes to the palace of Zeus (...) Insolent! Reckless! He did not refrain from committing nefarious actions with the bow and saddened the gods who inhabited Olympus’ (V, 396-404).

In the myth of Hercules, the number of atrocious episodes the hero commits due to rage are striking. There are many references to his violent and lascivious character, even reaching the conclusion that it is due to his violent actions and the qualities he possesses the source of his downfall²⁷. In the *Odyssey*, for example, he is already described as a man who lacks control over himself, and does not fear revenge or punishment from the gods²⁸.

Julio López Saco, in his study on the violent behavior of Hercules²⁹, tells us about some of these episodes in which Hercules, driven by anger and madness, murders multiple characters: Lino, his first teacher, who taught him lyrics and music, reprimands him for being undisciplined and prideful, and therefore, Hercules kills him; Eunomo, King Aeneus’ cupbearer, at a banquet, accidentally spills hot water on Heracles, who slaps him and kills him for his clumsiness; Iphitus (already mentioned in this page), son of the king of Ecalia, Eurytus, after an argument over some stolen mares, allegedly stolen by

²⁵ Even though I have focused my study in comparing both works by Euripides and Seneca, to better understand these two positions, I thought it interesting to draw information from other sources that might second these two sides of the hero depicted in many studies.

²⁶ Qualities that will also be mentioned in Juno’s monologue in Seneca’s play.

²⁷ <https://mythopedia.com/topics/heracles>. For more information on the myth of Heracles, see also Grimal, P. *Diccionario de mitología Griega y Romana*. Translated by Francisco Payarols. Paidós, Barcelona, 2010. Pags 239-257.

²⁸ Homero. *Odisea*, XXI, 22-30. In these lines, the death of Iphitus by Heracles is told.

²⁹ Saco, J. L. *‘El héroe griego perturbado y criminal: Heracles trágico’*. Praesentia. Venezuela, 2002.

Hercules, argues about the ownership of the animals, and so Heracles murders him blinded by his choleric temperament.

These are some of the atrocious deeds that the hero commits throughout his life, which makes us reflect on his incapability to measure his impulses and his aggressive nature. Hercules' rage seems to reflect a desire to return damage, whether conscious or not, since its cause lies in the idea of having received an offence by other characters. This uncontrolled rage will be more dominant in Seneca than in Euripides, since the latter describes the hero's rage and dementia as a punishment from an external force, and the former emphasizes the importance of the twelve labours as part of that bloody life of monster hunting and brutality that will affect his state of mind. However, from my point of view, these criminal actions carried out by Hercules seem to respond to a desire to punish and seek revenge, rather than a homicidal intention. The excess of his strength he does not control, and it is likely that his crimes are due to a momentary impulse of anger rather than a desire to kill. If this were the case, this character could be understood, not so much as a megalomaniac, rather as a warrior who has had the misfortune of being born with such a strength that he is unable to control. I wonder then whether this character could be atoned for all responsibility in the face of such brutal acts. Perhaps the lack of an authoritative and powerful figure who would have taught him to control his impulses, his temper and his power has been one of the causes of his violent life.

For her part, Cecilia Josefina Perczyk in her study about Heracles/Hercules madness³⁰, presents to us the human side of Heracles in relation to the work of Euripides. She explains, based on sources such as Apollodorus, how after Heracles fights the minions³¹, Hera, infuriated, drives him mad, and Heracles, after killing his sons and nephews, is exiled to Delphi where the Pythia advises him to serve Eurystheus and fulfill the twelve labours as atonement for his crimes³². In her study, she presents the most human face of Heracles (pag 350): a victim of divine hostility who, repentant for his crime, is committed to his destiny to seek salvation³³, and discovers the true meaning of

³⁰ Perczyk, Cecilia J. *Heracles y Hércules: una mirada clínica en Eurípides y Séneca*. Nóstoi, 2012, pag 342.

³¹ Called Deimos and Phobos (in modern versions they are known as Pain and Panic); Ares and Aphrodite's sons; shapeshifting imps (evil spirits) send to kill Heracles.

³² As I explained before, in the original mythological story, the twelve labours took place before Hercules returns to Thebes.

³³ We must recall the importance it had for the Greeks the purgation of the soul from all crimes, that is, achieving the catharsis. Rojo Mula, P. *La catarsis en la 'Poética' de Aristóteles. Ensayos de filosofía*, N° 12, 2020 (2), artcl. 10.

friendship thanks to his friend Theseus. There seems to be a demystification of the Greek hero in the last part of Euripides' play, where Heracles is seen just like a man who has lost his heroic features: his grandeur. Euripides must have given the twelve labours a new motivation different from the one given by the mythology³⁴, and therefore, he seems to manage to present us with an antithesis: the hero appears to us at the zenith of his glory upon returning from his last labour, and becomes a tragic character when the suffering of his family falls on him. However, contrary to what we will observe in Seneca, in Euripides Heracles is driven mad by an unexpected force; and so, the murder of his family becomes an irrational act unconsciously executed. For this reason, as Cecilia states, Heracles is acquitted due to lack of responsibility towards his family's death (pag 343).

Similarly, Julio López Saco in his study³⁵ explains how Heracles³⁶, belonging to the strong hero archetype, and despite having an angry temper along with his colossal physical strength, which leads him to naturally commit violent acts, does not think that Heracles is an unstable man. As Julio López recounts in his study, 'Heracles' primitive and moral traits, in spite of being criticized, overlap with other aspects that ennoble him: carries out civil actions, he is founder of cults, and protector of humanity, etc' (pag 4).

I do support this conception of a more humanitarian picture of the hero in Euripides' work. The author seems to present a more benevolent picture that lacks direct responsibility towards the murder of his wife and children, in addition to other crimes he commits prior to the slaughter of his family. Gods played an important role in Greek tragedies, and were usually considered to be behind those heinous acts. Euripides seems to leave behind an image of a dependent character that, after an intense suffering³⁷ caused by Hera's rage, has deepened in knowledge and understanding: he has gathered the courage to accept the affection of his friend Theseus, who persuades Heracles from committing suicide, and recognises the value of human friendship (another aspect that seems to humanize Heracles):

³⁴ To purify his soul from his crimes, especially due to the murder of his family.

³⁵ Saco, J. L. *El héroe griego perturbado y criminal: Heracles trágico*. Praesentia. Venezuela, 2002. Pag 2-3.

³⁶ His work is a study on the Greek character Heracles. That is why I am using this name instead of Hercules in this case because he is Euripides' character.

³⁷ After he murders his wife and children, and his conscious is back to reality, a deadly sorrow surrounds him for a while (Eur. *Hercl.* vv 1140-1162).

THESEUS:

For the law's sake, leave Thebes and come with me to the citadel of Pallas Athena. There I shall cleanse your hands from this taint and give you a home and a portion of my wealth. I shall give you the gifts I received from my fellow citizens for killing the bull of Knossos (...) This will also be my repayment to you for saving my life: for at present you stand in need of friends (vv 1328-1333).

Furthermore, in order to complete the twelve deeds that Eurystheus orders him to do, it seems inevitable to think that Heracles is a character with great ingenuity and mental faculties, assuming that the tasks that he must carry out (most difficult and deadly) require not only brute strength but also intelligence. Hence, I hold the opinion that the pressure that heroes must endure to become exemplary men could be one of the causes for them to become psychologically unstable, yet in no way do I consider that they are mentally affected to the point of becoming insane; on the contrary, I assert that Heracles' performances seem to be the result of his intelligence and ingenuity³⁸, and only by possessing a temper not trained to be controlled does he harm others around him.

Contrary to this 'protector of humanity' image of Heracles we observe more clearly in Euripides' play, Seneca pictures a more megalomaniac hero whose life is full of action, violence and war (qualities that are highlighted especially in Juno's monologue at the beginning of the play)³⁹. The author fills his work with stoic philosophy using the war as the precursor to the excess of violence that madness implies⁴⁰. Hercules is first and foremost a warrior, and this image strengthens the idea of the crime as a violent result of his character. The fact that the twelve labours occur before his madness is significant, since it reinforces that life full of violence and bloodshed. Seneca seems to make it clearer that war marks the aggressive character of a person to the point of causing dementia and committing atrocities without using reason. For Seneca, rage is the cause of the disappearance of reason. As soon as it takes possession, it does not listen to reason and

³⁸ Here I am not talking about the murder of his family. In Euripides, this act is caused by Hera's intervention. Instead, I allude to the twelve labours that made him famous. Not all the works carried out by Heracles were executed with divine help; and so, the fact that he himself could perform them without external help, I consider it sufficient reason to think that he was a man with innate abilities and intelligence. One example is the Citeronian Lion, Heracles hunted it down with his own hands and abilities. For more information on his twelve labours, see Grimal, P. *Diccionario de mitología Griega y Romana*. Trad. Francisco Payarols. Paidós, Barcelona, 2010. Págs 243-248.

³⁹ Known as the monster slayer, a life full of action and violence shapes an unsteady mind. The madness and the murder of his family will occur after completing these labours and killing Lycus.

⁴⁰ Perczyk, C. J. '*Heracles y Hercules: una mirada crítica en Euripides y Séneca*'. Nóstoi, 2012.

drags us along, dominating passions⁴¹. As the author rightly asserts in his work *Of rage*, ‘rage is violent and indomitable (...) it is ready for recklessness and does not know how to avoid dangers (...) there is no passion as avid for revenge as rage’ (I, pages 16-17). Therefore, a man whose rage cannot be controlled is bound to no good; and so, no good deed goes unpunished, since gods will punish evil acts.

In *Hercules furens*⁴², we perceive a hero that does not understand the limits of his power. Hercules claims to have conquered death, which appears to be a very bold thought:

‘The desolation of eternal night...the grim gods and the Fate – I overcame them; I flouted death and returned’ (vv 609-12).

This is his first appearance in the play within the third act, and we are already introduced an arrogant and presumptuous character, who is asking Juno⁴³ for more tasks:

‘I have seen and revealed the underworld. Assign any further task, Juno, you have left my hands idle too long: what do you bid me conquer?’ (vv 614-16).

Since his first appearance on the scene, the portrait made of Hercules is that of a very proud warrior who is eager for more action, contrary to what we observe in Euripides’ character, whose arrival pictures a man full of joy and happiness to meet his love ones:

‘House, doors, and heart, I bid you greetings! How glad I am to return to the light and see you! (vv 523-24).

By completing the twelve labours he has molded himself into the role of all-conquering hero, and we can observe in Seneca that he is more obsessed with overcoming any possible threat. Fitch, in the introductory part of *Hercules furens*, states that it does not seem like a coincidence that Seneca portrays Hercules as a character who longs for

⁴¹ Séneca. *De Ira*. Translated by Francisco Navarro Calvo. Sequitur, Madrid. 2^a ed, 2022.

⁴² Anneo Seneca, *L Tragedies, Volume I: Hercules. Trojan Women. Phoenician Women. Medea. Phaedra*. Edited and translated by John G. Fitch. Loeb Classical Library 62. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

⁴³ Hera in Greek mythology.

more actions and wants to pour human blood as sacrifice to the gods just before the onset of his madness:

‘I wish I could pour a libation to the gods with the blood of that hateful life. No more acceptable liquid would ever have stained the altars. No victim more choice or boundteous could be slaughtered to Jove than as unrighteous king’ (vv 920-925).

Could we then talk about a more insane and megalomaniac hero in the play of Seneca than in Euripides? From my point of view, and from the descriptions already seen above, I do think that in Seneca’s play we are dealing with a more unstable character who lusts for power, and who may suffer from a mental disorder due to all those years of monster hunting and slaughter. Other authors, such as Cecilia Perczyk, in her study, she claims that Hercules is a megalomaniac character from the beginning of the play until even after the madness episode⁴⁴. In the fifth act, when Hercules wakes up exhausted, he believes he is still seeing images from the underworld, as if he had just arrived home:

‘What place is this, what region, what track of the earth? (...) Certainly I have returned: why do I see blood-stained bodies in a ruined house? Has my mind not yet cast off images from the underworld?’ (vv 1138-1145).

After awakening, his mind is still full of harrowing images of death, as if a bloody confrontation had just taken place. It seems very real to him and does not perceive it what as something he could have just dreamed. Hercules seems eager for revenge when he realizes that his weapons are missing, also a symbol of his warrior life (elements that reinforce the image of a fighter):

‘Where are my arrows, my bow? Who could strip my armor from me while I lived? Who stole such mighty spoils and had no dread of Hercules even in his sleep? I long to see my conqueror. Rouse yourself, my courage! (vv 1154-58)

Once again, we see a trend of a furious and angry outburst after he awakes. Nonetheless, I gather that we should reflect on whether this insane disturbance is independent of him or not, that is, a madness that could be motivated by his violent life as well as by his most recent crime (the murder of Lycus), or ‘a madness coming from

⁴⁴ Perczyk, C. J. ‘*Heracles y Hercules: una mirada cínica en Euripides y Séneca*’. Nóstoi, 2012. Pag 342.

the outside without a clear connection with the mythical life of the hero and with the structure of his *psyche*' as Julio López Saco asserts in his study⁴⁵.

These two possible causes that could trigger this episode of madness (external or internal sources) is precisely what I will try to develop in the following point: whether Hercules/Heraclēs' madness is the result of an internal and psychotic disorder, or a delirium caused by an external force that he is unable to control.

5. The rage and the madness: external or internal causes?

When returning from the Underworld, Heracles realizes that his family is threatened by Lycus, and so, in an attempt to save them, and blinded by rage, he loses contact with reality and kills not only Lycus, but also his family. Although in Euripides this furor is caused by Hera, some have suggested⁴⁶ that Heracles/Hercules might also suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), and that the war is the precursor for the slaughter to continue. In my opinion, this sudden dementia that falls on the hero seems devoid of justification. Despite Hera's hatred towards Hercules is well known in Greek mythology, in Euripides' *Heracles* the presence of the goddess occurs unexpectedly when Heracles returns with Cerberus from Hades, not giving rise to suspect that he might have offended her to cause this sudden punishment (contrary to what will happen in Seneca's work, as the play opens with Juno's monologue, where she is resolved to destroy Hercules and predicts the downfall of the hero by driving him mad). Should we then consider the possibility that Hera unleashes her fury on him whenever she wants and without justification causing him to become insane⁴⁷? Mateusz Stróżyński, when stating his opinion about the madness scene in his study⁴⁸, suggests that, were Euripides in desire of

⁴⁵ Saco, J. L. *El héroe griego perturbado y criminal: Heracles trágico*. Praesentia. Venezuela, 2002. Pag 17.

⁴⁶ Meagher, R.E. *Herakles Gone Mad. Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War*, Northampton, 2006. Pag 54-56.

⁴⁷ Here I am referring to the play, not to the myth itself. I mean, it is well known in the myth that Hera persecutes Hercules since the day he is born due to jealousy, and this might be enough to understand the reason why she chases him all the time. However, in *Heracles*, Hera's servant's arrival, Lyssa, we cannot foresee; there is nothing previously said or done that anticipates her arrival through other characters or the goddess herself, and it is of most unexpected and lacking in justification. In a theatre play every action has to be justified at some point. For more information about dramatic constructions and triggering conflicts: Alonso de Santos, J.L. *Manual de teoría y práctica teatral*. Castalia, Madrid, 2007. Pags 91-101.

⁴⁸ Stróżyński, M. *Love, Agression and Mourning in Euripides' Heracles*. Poznan, Poland. 2013. Pags 234-37.

portraying Heracles mad before the furor takes place, then ‘he would have placed the epiphany of Lyssa earlier’. When Euripides reversed the episodes⁴⁹, placing the labours before the madness, I assume that he would want to give the twelve labours a new meaning (originally carried out as penance for the hero’s sins), seeking a dramatic impact of the story. The inversion allowed him to emphasize the internal struggles and conflicts faced by Heracles, and so he introduced a different perspective to the story and the character. However, it seems hard to justify because the goddess’ arrival and intervention is not anticipated beforehand⁵⁰. It is true, nonetheless, that Hera is known for her ‘jealous and vengeful character who struggles with her husband’s infidelities, and rages against his many lovers, both mortal and divine’⁵¹.

Then again, it seems understandable that there exist two different stances when it comes to qualifying the madness of the hero as something intrinsic to the character or externally caused, since both possibilities seem equally valid regardless of this mismatch.

As soon as Heracles returns and learns about the state of his family, we begin to see a character who, blinded by the desire for revenge, does not listen to reason and to the advice given by his father (vv 571- 95):

HERACLES:

Whom shall I defend rather than my wife and my children and my old father?...I must risk death in their defense. (...)

AMPHITRYON:

It is your nature, my son, to be loving to your friends and to hate your enemies. But do not be too hasty.

HERACLES:

Which of my actions is hastier than is right, father?

⁴⁹ Since the dramatic contest in Athens began in VI BC changes in public tastes often occurred, and therefore, theatrical works were adapted to what the audience requested. These substantial changes can be seen in the plays of many authors such as Euripides. See for this reference: López Saco, J. *El héroe griego perturbado y criminal: Heracles trágico*. Praesentia, 2002. Pags 20-21.

⁵⁰ This apparent lack of justification could simply be due to the fact that in ancient Greece they wrote and explained things in a different way, taking things for granted that the public was expected to already know. Perhaps there was no need to explain the appearance of certain characters since it was understood that the viewers knew the story.

⁵¹ <https://mythopedia.com/topics/hera>.

AMPHITRYON:

(...) You were seen entering the city. And since you were seen, take care that you do not cause your enemies to unite and yourself take an unexpected fall.

HERACLES:

I care not if the whole city has seen me. (...)

In Euripides, even before the goddess' intervention and the madness *momentum*, we can already observe a vengeful and violent character. Yet, his rage does not reach its peak until Lyssa descends to the mortal world to drive Heracles mad following Hera's orders:

'Old sirs, take heart! You are looking at Lyssa, daughter of Night, and me Iris, the gods' servant. We have not come to harm the city: our expedition is aimed at a single man's house, The man reported to be the son of Zeus and Alcmena. (...) But now that he has finished Eurystheus' tasks, Hera wishes to stain him with kindred bloodshed, the blood of his own children, and that is my will too' (Eur. *Herc.* Vv 825-832).

The cause of Heracles' delirium, as we can observe in Euripides, seems to be of divine origin: an external force generated by Hera's wrath. It is described as an episode of divine possession not connected to the character's reality. Lyssa gives a very visual and detailed description of Heracles' delirium caused by this divine possession:

'See! He shakes his head about, rolling his fierce eyes out of their sockets; his breathing is disquieted, like a bull about to charge, and he bellows frightfully, calling forth the death spirits...Soon I shall make you dance still more and charm your ears with the pipe of panic!' (vv 867-871).

Cecilia Josefina Perczyk describes this madness episode as 'a bacchic ritual that seeks blood'⁵². If we look at how Lyssa narrates the possession sequence, she makes Heracles move his body violently to the sound of the flute as if it were a bacchanal, and compering him with a bull. The image shown here seems to be that of an enraged bull about to attack; and it does not seem a coincidence that the figure of the bull is used in this delirium episode, since for the Greeks, the bull symbolized the unleashed violence⁵³.

⁵² Rituals associated with Hades, the god of death. Perczyk, C. J. *Heracles y Hercules: una mirada cínica en Euripides y Séneca*. Nóstoi, 2012. Pag 343.

⁵³ http://chato.cl/blog/es/2009/08/cuando_el_toro_era_un_dios.html.

On this account, as the source of the madness is not human, it seems reasonable to exonerate Heracles of all guilt because he could not be considered the author of the murder *per se*. Another example where we can observe that these facts appear to be alien to the character, who seems to have no control or conscience over himself when he commits these atrocities, is in the scene where Amphitryon and Heracles converse after the murder: Heracles admits to have no memory of what has happened. The first sentence is the moment when Heracles awakens from the possession and has no account of what has just occurred, and asks his father why he is crying and standing away from him (vv 1110- 1123):

HERACLES

Father, why do you weep and veil your eyes, standing far from the son you love?

AMPHITRYON

My son: for even in misfortune you are mine!

HERACLES

What misfortune is mine, misfortune to make you weep? (...)

AMPHITRYON

I am examining you to see if you are now quite sane.

HERACLES

Tell me if you are hinting at some disastrous change in my life.

AMPHITRYON

I will tell you if you are no longer an infernal Bacchant.

HERACLES

I have no memory that my mind was crazed.

In Seneca's *Hercules Furens* the character's feelings, thoughts and actions seem more connected to each other rather than being directly related to inhuman forces. From the opening monologue, despite Juno's determination to punish Hercules and infuriate him, no deity emerges from the sky the moment the hero becomes mad, contrary to what we see in Euripides. It appears that this external force we observe more explicitly in Euripides' *Heracles*, when Lyssa descends to inflict Heracles with a fit of insanity as a form of punishment, leaves a hole in Seneca's play, since his madness appears suddenly without a clear antecedent. Should we then assume that this madness emerges explicitly from within Hercules? Was this madness already inside him or is it the consequence of

an uncontrolled rage that suddenly makes him lose his senses? Even though the character does not seem to be insane when he first appears, I do think that Seneca might have wanted to depict this madness as originating from within Hercules himself. He seemed to explore the psychological turmoil and internal conflicts of Hercules, who appears to be tormented by his own actions and haunted by his guilt rather than an external punishment or divine intervention. The anger that arouses in him when he learns of the death of Megara's family seems to be the cause of the outbreak of madness that will be unleashed afterwards. Looking at the scenes we can see it more clearly, as I will indicate below.

Hercules begins to lose his mind when he discovers the murder of Megara's family, and so, determined to kill Lycus he becomes enraged:

'Let the victim be slaughtered, and let my virtue near this stain!... I'm carried off to drink my enemy's blood. Stay here, Theseus, lest some sudden force approach. Battle calls me' (vv 634-9)⁵⁴.

However, there seem not to be a clear antecedent that could justify more clearly this sudden dementia. When Hercules first appears in the scene, his performance is seemingly rational. Even so, although it seems that we are contemplating an isolated event that has nothing to do with Juno's intervention, she does foretell his downfall announcing the madness that will befall him, and suggesting that she is the one who will provoke it:

'...he will forge a path by destruction, and he will want to rule in an empty sky (...) Now he must war with himself. (...) 'hateful Crime shall come, and savage Disloyalty, lapping its own blood, and Confusion, and mad Rage, always armed against itself - yes, this must be the agent of my resentment' (vv 66-100).

Nevertheless, in Seneca's work no divinity intervenes in this madness episode. It seems that his fit of anger and madness is separated from all divine connection. When his mind reaches a climax of megalomania, he falls into lunacy. Hercules suddenly sees how the daylight goes out and the night comes, and begins to have hallucinations related to his life, which might be a reflection of his fears, conflicts and ambitions. These hallucinations, as Myriam Librán Moreno and Antonio Ramírez de Verger explain in their

⁵⁴ Fitch, John G. *Seneca. Tragedies, Volume I: Hercules. Trojan Women. Phoenician Women. Medea. Phaedra*. Loeb Classical Library 62. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

introduction to *Hercules Furens*⁵⁵, have some continuity between the healthy mind and the lunatic mind of Hercules, as there seem to be a transition in order to connect his real experiences with fictional reality:

HERCULES:

‘But what is this? Midday is shrouded in darkness. Phoebus’ face is obscured, though not by clouds. Who chases the daylight back and drives it to its dawning? Why are so many stars filling the heavens in daytime? (...) Look, my first Labour, the Lion, shines in a large segment of the sky, burns all over with anger and prepares to bite’ (vv 939 – 47).

As the Lion is about to bite, so is Hercules to lose his senses and attack his own children mistaken them for those of his enemy. This madness that befalls him, as Juno describes in the prologue, seems like a battle that Hercules wages against himself (an outcome of the nature of Hercules and not the result of divine revenge):

JUNO:

‘... free the pinioned neck of that horrific monster⁵⁶. But he has defeated these! Do you need a match for Alcides⁵⁷? There is none but himself. Now he must war with himself’ (vv 83-36).

Once again, we observe a delirium that seem to come from inside the hero himself rather than caused by an external force, a conflict that he must face on his own. In addition, it is interesting to notice how the scene of the murder of his family is described. In Euripides, the slaughter takes place offstage, and no details are given about how the assassination is executed. The only facts we encounter are described by Lyssa about what she intends to perform:

‘I shall break down his roof and cast his house upon his head, but first I’ll kill his children. And their slayer will not know that he has killed the sons he begot until he gets clear of my madness’ (vv 862-65).

⁵⁵ Librán Moreno, M. and Ramírez de Verger, A. *Séneca. Hércules loco, Medea, Las troyanas, Freda*. Alianza, Madrid, 2013. Pags 58-60.

⁵⁶ Typhon, a primitive divinity related to hurricanes and imprisoned under the Mount Etna.

⁵⁷ A name frequently used for Hercules, meaning ‘grand son of Alcaeus’.

The next thing she describes is the possession of that madness, and then Lyssa leaves the scene. Next we see the chorus lamenting over the tragedy that has already taken place offstage, and Amphytrion enters shouting and crying (vv 875- 886).

However, in Seneca, this episode is narrated more explicitly and in such a way that the images seem to sprout on their own. The murder occurs in the palace (probably offstage), and it is Amphytrion who describes the episode that is taking place in a very violent way:

‘Look, he stretches cajoling hands to touch his father’s knees, and begs in a pitiful voice. O monstrous crime, tragic and fearful to see! He caught the pleading child up in his hands, whirled him around twice, three times, and flung him; his head smashed, and spattered brains wetted the walls (...) (vv 1003-1008).

Being an act narrated in a more explicit way, somehow it drags us to see those terrible images that seem to be much more real and truthful than those described in the work of Euripides, where the murder itself is not described at all. This fact I find very significant, since Seneca seems to hold the hero responsible for his own actions and misfortunes by presenting us with a scene so strongly and so directly connected to the hero, contrary to what we observe in Euripides with the intervention of an external force.

K. Lampe⁵⁸ also argues that Hercules is a man who is easily carried away by his passions such as anger (*ira*) and fury (*furor*), and unites this idea with the Stoic conception that ‘an enraged person is temporarily insane’. And so does Seneca state that ‘anger is all agitation, thirst for war and blood, outbursts of superhuman fury, forgetting himself in order to harm others’ (Sen, *De Ira*, 1.1). Should we then assume that all this anger and madness comes to Hercules from within and not from an external force? From my view, there seems to be a logical connection between the hero’s way of acting and his unsound mind. His experiences, including the madness and the subsequent remorse, suggest that his mental state is not entirely sound or unaffected.

This would make me hypothesise, given the way the character is introduced to us as soon as he first enters the scene, that he is already prone to uncontrollable rage and debauchery before his arrival. Otherwise, it would be inconsistent to assume that he suddenly goes insane if there is no antecedent that drives his madness. In Euripides, this

⁵⁸ Lampe, K. *Philosophy, Psychology, and the Gods in Seneca’s Hercules Furens*. Bristol, 2018. *Philosophia*, 48, pp 233-252.

antecedent is the wrath of a goddess coming from the outside, yet in Seneca it seems more reasonable to deduce that this madness arises from internal forces mainly because no deity appears in the scene as the precursor of the events.

6. Conclusion

The portrayal of Hercules' mental state is subject to interpretation and can vary depending on the specific version or adaptation of the myth. The madness of Hercules provides these two authors with an appropriate theme to address the tragedy. We must take into account the different times in which these two plays were written⁵⁹ in order to understand the dissimilarities we encounter in both works regarding Hercules' madness. Thus, in literature we find two distinguished postures: an idealized figure of a savior and civilizer of humanity, and a megalomaniac who struggling with inner conflicts and brings his own end.

On the one hand, Euripides introduces a more humanized hero whose madness is suddenly caused by an external factor; the downfall of a hero who becomes a man that irrationally suffers the arbitrariness of the gods. From what I have observed in Euripides, Heracles is a hero with a moody personality and a tendency to excess, yet I do not consider him to have an insane or deranged character. I state that he is an unstable hero who carries human greatness on his shoulders, and on whom pressures and demands fall. In addition, the change that Euripides provides to the chronological order of the events narrated in the original myth serves as a tool to demystify the Greek hero, and thus, to turn him into a more vulnerable human being. In this way, the fall of human greatness and his vulnerability become the main themes, as Greek myth demonstrates that not even the greatest of men is exempt from human fragility and mortal condition.

Seneca, on the other hand, presents us with a character that, since his first appearance in the third act, is already portrayed as a hero who arrives complimenting his triumphs with great pride. Seneca shows us the fine line that separates greatness from excess and the human cost that involves. Hercules' madness is explained in his work as a rage produced by his excessive ambition, and consequently, his confidence in his physical

⁵⁹ The democratic Athens of the 5th century BC, and the Roman Empire of the 1st century AD.

power will destroy himself. Most likely, Seneca wanted to implicitly show in his tragedy the follies that underlie the empire that he had to live. He seems to suggest that a character with such qualities (such as the emperors) has the potential to become a megalomaniac, selfish, and violent human being that acts compulsively causing harm to other. Seneca's version of Hercules may reflect the political context of the Roman Empire, and so, he might wanted to present Hercules as a symbol of imperial power and explore the corrupting influence of absolute power on individuals.

In summary, Euripides and Seneca depict Heracles as a complex and tragic figure, examining the human condition, the limits of heroism, and questioning the traditional notions of heroism emphasizing the vulnerability of human beings. They highlight the human capability for both great strength and destructive tendencies, and focus on the importance of self-control, temperance, and the pursuit of virtuous actions to overcome challenges and achieve personal growth.

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