

## Herculean Madness: Aborted Agency in *Hercules Furens*

From the very beginning of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, Hercules is presented with different roles he could play. The play starts with two different retellings of Hercules' story up until his last labor, which he was completing before the play begins. Juno does the first retelling of the Hercules myth, followed later by Amphytrion's recounting of his son's heroic deeds. Although both Juno and Amphytrion recount the same or near-same set of events, the two sets of stories present two different Hercules. One is Juno's enemy, who causes her countless troubles. The other is Amphytrion's heroic son, who acts on behalf of his family and his people. Here Juno and Amphytrion emphasize two different sides of the hero – the protector and the killer – and when Hercules appears onstage, he too appears to be struggling between these two different versions of himself. This struggle ends with him killing his wife and children, because he cannot tell the difference between his family, whom he should protect, and his enemies, whom he should kill. Fitch and McElduff (2008) argues that this turn of events demonstrates that Hercules chooses the role of conqueror over protector: “one could argue that Hercules has destroyed his familial ties metaphorically, by constantly placing them second to self-aggrandizing achievement, before he destroys them physically.”<sup>1</sup>

However, it is also clear that Hercules does not truly get to make that choice. Rather than allowing him to choose between conqueror and protector, Juno drives Hercules to insanity, stating that she “will show [him] hell here [on earth]” (91: *hic tibi ostendam inferos*).<sup>2</sup> Then, Hercules, once sane and regretful of his actions, chooses to end his life, he is stopped by his

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<sup>1</sup> Fitch & McElduff 2008, 175.

<sup>2</sup> Translations are from Wilson 2010 unless otherwise noted. On the significance of the Underworld to *Hercules Furens*, see Ker 2009.

father, who threatens to die alongside him: “I will push my chest against the deadly sword: | here, here is the crime of Hercules sane” (1312-13: *senile ferro pectus impresso induam: | hic, hic iacebit Herculis sani scelus*). Wilson (2004) argues:

Patriarchal control conquers even the final possibility of freedom, which is death.

Hercules has to negotiate between his genitor, his father or begetter, and his own *virtus*, his manhood.

Thus, powerful Hercules, who overcame various monsters, yields not once, but twice: once to Juno’s madness and then to his father’s pleas. Ultimately, both of Hercules’ roles serve as a “straitjacket to his authentic self,” leaving him unable to make any decision about which role he can play; in fact, both roles fail him.<sup>3</sup> In *Tragic Seneca* (1997), A. J. Boyle states that “in one play (Hercules Furens), the possibility of human redemption,” an interesting position considering Hercules’ lack of agency.<sup>4</sup> In my paper, I will examine the ramifications of a figure like Hercules being unable to decide his own life and actions due to the influences of others.

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<sup>3</sup> Fitch and McElduff 2002, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Boyle 1997, 33.

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