

Child of Night: Divine Madness in Euripides' *Herakles*

The sudden appearance of Iris and Lyssa in Euripides' *Herakles* has been described by contemporary scholars as a divine epiphany (Bond 1981, Papadopoulou 2005). But how to interpret the shocking and disjunctive action of the scene remains problematic. Some readers find seeds of madness in Herakles' behavior before the sudden peripatya brought on by Iris and Lyssa. In fact, Lyssa's account of the initial stages of her effect on Herakles has itself been interpreted as a clinical description of such mental infirmities as epilepsy, manic depression, and even megalomania, a reading which dismisses a divine, external explanation of madness in favor of an internal, natural cause. Others, accepting the play's basic presumption of divinely-inspired madness, interpret Lyssa's *rhexis* in defense of Herakles as part of an extra-dramatic espousal of anti-Olympian rationalism. While the issue of theodicy is an integral aspect of the Iris/Lyssa epiphany, a reading based on the Iris/Lyssa *agon* as the sole purpose of the goddesses' presence is too narrow, since it centers only on their argument, while treating the possession of Herakles as if perpetrated directly by Hera herself. Beyond the scene's overt rhetorical value for assessing the justness of Hera's will, there remains a complex and compelling portrayal of divine power and intervention, from which Hera is decidedly absent. This paper focuses on the importance of Lyssa who, in addition to being a rarely depicted yet potent divine character, most directly influences the events of the play, though her role has been largely overlooked.

Through a close reading of the Iris/Lyssa epiphany, I argue that Euripides contrives a hierarchy in which an agent's level of power and determination is inversely proportionate to the character's level of materiality and interaction with the physical world. Hera, who maintains no physical presence in the play whatsoever, is nonetheless presented as the motive force behind the tragic action. She supplies the will, which is in turn enforced by Iris, a self-proclaimed servant of the gods. In this capacity, Iris' function is first to assert Hera's authority over Lyssa, and second to justify Hera's case against Herakles to the chorus. Iris' influence over the events of the play is limited to the former, and the latter establishes her willingness and complicity in Hera's scheme. Lyssa, however, has clearly been constrained to act against her will. Yet, of the three divinities present in the play, her interaction with and influence over the physical world—through her possession of Herakles—is unmistakably the most direct. This power structure illustrates a striking similarity between Lyssa and Herakles. Like Herakles, Lyssa is an entity of extraordinary power who is exploited and forced to cause great harm and suffering. But unlike Herakles, Lyssa acts knowingly, and therefore her inability to resist is subject to question.

This paper focuses primarily on the significance of Lyssa and her relationship to Herakles within the hierarchical framework outlined above. After exploring Lyssa's divine lineage and the traditional background of her characterization, my inquiry offers a comparison of her possession of Herakles with other instances of divine possession in Euripidean tragedy. I will argue that several features of Lyssa's *rhexis* reveal her divine nature as uniquely empathetic: her speech in defense of Herakles; her description of her effect on Herakles through his own experiences and sensations; Euripides' portrayal of both characters as fundamentally powerful and ambivalent; and the two characters' distinctly parallel alignment in the divine power structure of the play.

Bibliography

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