

Domestic violence, status and spectacle in Seneca's *Hercules Furens*

This paper considers the crime of familicide and how it is portrayed in Seneca's tragedy *Hercules Furens*, which tells the story of Hercules' hyper-violent annihilation of his wife Megara and their children. The paper offers close readings of four short extracts from the play and argues that Seneca's self-conscious, meta-theatrical focus on violence has the aim of ironically criticizing contemporary Roman enthusiasm for visual displays of violence and raising two ethical questions: firstly, whether the *act* of looking itself could be harmful to the character or soul of the spectator, and secondly whether extreme violence, even when conducted for the supposed 'benefit' of the state in military or colonial enterprise, is ultimately a destructive and dangerous force for the violent individual and the society in which they live.

As criminology and psychology studies have shown with reference to modern examples of familicide, Hercules' assault on his family does not come out of nowhere. The play makes it clear that his life has been dedicated to violence practically from the day of his birth. Before Hercules even appears on stage, every other character has described him in terms of his tendency to violence. So, his foster-father Amphytrion proudly describes Hercules' famous attack on the snakes which Juno sent to kill him in his cradle: as a new-born baby he crushes the snakes effortlessly in his tiny hands. Amphytrion goes on to list some of Hercules' other "achievements" – he is proud of his son because he thinks of the people listed here, all of whom Hercules has killed, as tyrants or monsters, which in his view justifies their violent deaths at his son's hands. This paper argues that Seneca is here raising the uneasy question of whether violence is ever a safe or justifiable means of achieving such an end.

Juno's prologue speech is riddled with violent, destructive language relating to Hercules and his labors throughout. She claims that Hercules' violent nature would not submit to the laws even of a tyrant, emphasizing the physicality of his labors with destructive verbs such as 'effregit', 'praeripiet' and 'occupet'. Hercules has violently conquered the earth and the underworld, so Juno imagines he will now scale heaven and usurp the gods, but his reign is imagined as 'empty' and achieved through 'ruin'— he is so destructive there will be nothing left. This impulse to complete eradication is a theme which Seneca will return to in the 'climactic' family annihilation scene, and is a strategic means by which he portrays Hercules' violence as excessive and problematic, rather than heroic.

Heracles' wife, Megara, also speaks of him almost exclusively in terms of his violence. She is proud of his earth-shattering attacks in creating the dramatic gorge between Mount Olympus and Mount Ossa. This passage is characterized by language with connotations of sexual as well as physical violence, strongly implying that their sexual relationship has been similarly violent. Hercules' violent ravaging of the land thus resonates with hubris in his refusal to accept the physical boundaries of earth while simultaneously indicating that he is sexually violent. This is especially interesting as there is a strong link in the modern psychopathology and criminology studies of familicide between sexual violence and eventual family annihilation. Seneca thus appears to have anticipated modern studies in his awareness of the psychological links between sexual violence and eventual domestic abuse.

The final scene considered is Hercules' savage attack on his defenseless children and wife which is depicted in gory detail. The extreme nature of the violence, far in excess of its Euripidean model, combined with its taboo context in a domestic setting, is deliberately constructed to raise the question of whether anger, once unleashed, can ever be re-contained.

Such concerns are also reflected in Seneca's philosophical work *De Ira*, in which he famously problematizes Aristotle's claim that anger and aggression are necessary tools to be used in certain contexts. The close reading of this scene also reveals many words related to sight and spectacle, and raises the question of whether Seneca is problematizing the Roman culture of violent spectacle as entertainment. In this play, Seneca directly connects anger and aggression outside the home with unintended attacks on the family within the home. This paper argues that Seneca's Hercules is the hyperbolic example of ambition and aggression gone out of control. When his status is threatened, Hercules becomes the executioner of his own closest family members, and he does indeed come to bitterly regret his actions at the close of the play.

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