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FOR THE CONCEPTUAL FUNCTION OF THE GODDESS OF MADNESS IN HERACLES BY EURIPIDES

The goddess of madness is the least known character of the Greek mythology. She is Lyssa, daughter of Nyx and Uranus, (Λύσσα), who used to assault a human and capture him/ her completely. The obsessed could not account for his/ her actions.

Madness is a polysemantic concept. That is why it can be understood in many different ways; however, all of its instances can be qualified as a state when a person is unable to act rationally and adequately – when there is no cognitive link between his ideas, actions and the reality.

This phenomenon has attracted attention in every epoch. Although human reasoning has failed to find its logical explanation, it has been described and examined with the intention to find its source and remedy. In ancient times, Greeks showed special interest in studying the instances of madness. Particularly remarkable is the 5th century B.C. when medicine and philosophy started to examine the cases of human spiritual disorder and when myths and literature presented the phenomenon from various angles. This is the very period when the image of madness was incarnated in tragedians' works and was shaped as a personified goddess.

The word Λύσσα has a double meaning in Ancient Greek – it denotes ferocity and rabies.¹ In the Homeric epics, and in particular, and in the *Iliad*, λύσσα means "fierceness", "fury". It is connected with fight and refers to "furious fight".² In Plato's *Leges*, λύσσα is the determinant of ἐρωτική.³ In

¹ Liddell, H.G. Scott, R., Jones, H.S. Mc Kenzie, A Greek-English Lexicon, Oxford, 1968. RE, Bd. XIV₁, 69 ff., DELY, III, 651 ff.

² II, IX, 239; IX, 305; XXI, 542

³ Plat. Leg. 839a.

Theocritus' *Idylls*, λύσσα indicates the strength of love experience, and is translated as a "rage love";⁴ in Xenophon's *Anabasis*⁵ and Aristotele's *Historia Animalium*, we come across λύσσα in the meaning of "rabies".⁶ Evidently, λύσσα ("ferocity") in different contexts acquired different senses but everywhere referred to an unbalanced, immoderate state. It seems the word was seeking for its real meaning and found it in tragedy. That is why λύσσα was chiefly used figuratively. It denoted the "loss of reason" or clinical "madness" only in tragedy.

Λύσσα as a character of a play first appears in Aeschylus' drama *Bassarides*. Regrettably, only several of its fragments survived, which are of no real help for those who attempt to study the phenomenon of madness. Lyssa as a goddess of madness is mentioned in Euripides' *Bacchae* – however, not as an acting character. The only surviving play where she acts is *Heracles* by Euripides. She is sent by Hera to punish Heracles, to make him lose his mind and kill his own children. It is believed this amazing scene of madness (which is the object of my research) is one of the reasons that accounts for the survival of the play. I am particularly interested in the following:

What are the properties of the goddess?

What kind is the madness she afflicts?

Why did Euripides choose Heracles as a victim for the goddess and not somebody else?

To identify Lyssa's features, I have singled out several lexical units that characterize Lyssa herself and the madness of Heracles, and help to specify chief properties of the goddess. These lexical units are ὁ πόντος, γῆς σεισμός, κεραυνοῦ οἶστρος, ὁ κλύδων, ὁ μαινόμενος πίτυλος, ὁ πέλαγος, ὁ κυνηγέτης κύων, ὁ Γόργων, ἡ Λύσσα μαρμαρωπός. Each of them will be discussed below.

Lyssa considers herself more fearful than sea waves, an earthquake and a thunder-storm. Heracles, too, compares his madness to sea-waves and to a storm. Amphitryon calls Heracles Μαινομένω πιτύλω πλαγχθεῖς (E. HF. 1189)⁷. It is interesting that ὁ πίτυλος denotes "attack" and "blow" but it also means the "rhythmic splash of oars", and "fall of drops". Thus, in this case, the madness is partially connected with the water. Κακῶν δέ πέλαγος⁸ (E. HF.1087) is the metaphor of Heracles' fate.

⁴ Theoc. III, 47

⁵ Xen. Anab. 5.6.7.26

⁶ Arist. Ist. Animal 604 a5

⁷ "This frenzy seized him sprinkled with the venom", Euripides, Hercules Distracted, transl. by Woodhull, in: The Plays of Euripides in English, Vol. II, London, Toronto, 1934.

⁸ "Sea of troubles" (E. HF. 1087).

Heracles himself is identified with a vessel (E. HF.631). When the hero recovers reason, he calls himself the "vessel tied" to the shores (E.HF.1094). When he realizes how his wife and children were killed, he returns to life with the help of Theseus and becomes metaphorically similar to "a burdened boat" (E. HF.1424)⁹.

Apparently, the sea, as the blustering element, is regarded as madness in this tragedy, while Heracles is considered as the vessel which found itself in the blustering water element. Connecting water with the madness is not accidental. Ancient Greeks used to think that one of the main reasons that could drive one mad was the sight of the water nymph. According to the tradition, the nymph came out of water only by noon. So, it was not advisable to walk near water in the daytime. It is also a widely-known fact that a rabid animal will not touch water even if it is unbearably thirsty.

Water could do both – drive a man mad or clear his agitated mind (it was believed so in old times). The water is the destroyer of the existing; it demolishes all kinds of forms and leaves nothing from the past. At the same time, it lays the foundation for a new life. Destruction of the old gives it the ability to purify, renew and revive. And that is why washing with water was believed to liberate from guilt and folly as it purified from sins¹⁰ and revived the disordered psychic processes.¹¹

Water with its two main functions (to destroy and revive) is connected with Dionysus. The Sea is one of Dionysian elements. According to Plutarch, Greeks considered Dionysus not only the lord of wine, but of all liquids.¹² The cult of Dionysus spread on the island linked the god to the sea element. A magnetic coin proves Dionysus' relation to the sea (one side of the coin has the image of young Dionysus, and the other side – that of a bunch of grapes together with a crater and a dolphin)¹³. Dionysus' name is also related to an earthquake.¹⁴

Ὁ κυνηγέτης κύων ("a hunting dog", E. HF. 860) accentuates the animal nature of madness. Remarkably, Dionysus himself is called a hunting dog in the *Bacchae*.¹⁵

Ὁ Γόργων (E. HF. 990) is connected with the characteristics of the above-mentioned madness by its origin and function. The children of the gods of

⁹ ναῦς (631), δεσμοῖς ναῦς (1094), ἐφορκίδες (1424).

¹⁰ V.Aen. 11, 717-20.

¹¹ Vtr. De arch. 8;ib M.Eliade, *Aziastic Alchemy*, Moscow., 1998.

¹² Plut. De Is et Os.

¹³ V.Ivanov, *Dionisius and Pradionicity*, Sanct-Petersburg, 1994.

¹⁴ R. Seaford, *Euripides, Bacchae*, Warminster, 1996.

¹⁵ E.Bacch. 1189.

Sea, Phorkids – Ceto and Phorkis, were Gorgons.¹⁶ Gorgon in herself united two ambivalent forces: lethal and renewing¹⁷.

Λύσσα μαρμαρωπός (E. HF. 884)¹⁸ is used to stress the Gorgonian nature of Lyssa.

Generally, Lyssa's action in this tragedy is expressed with the verb βακχεύω (E. HF. 899), and the madness through which Lyssa deprives Heracles of reason is called maniva (E. HF. 835, 878). βακχεύειν (E. HF. 899) is a specifically Dionysian term that refers to the communion with the god and in most cases is translated as participation in divine madness, while the word maniva meant Dionysian madness. Maniva, the state ecstasy during the divine service, was believed to be afflicted by Dionysus. It was a means to join the god¹⁹.

Thus, Lyssa' principal property is ambivalence by which she is related to the most ambivalent god Dionysus. It is natural that Heracles' madness is ambivalent too – when he had the fit of madness, he acquired all Lyssa's properties. Similar to the goddess of madness, Heracles is also called a Gorgon (E.HF.868,990). If Lyssa is a Bacch woman, Heracles is a Bacchus of Hades (E.HF.1119-1120). Lyssa compares herself with κυνηγέτης κύων. Heracles is getting ready to hunt children (E.HF.899). Though κυναγεται in this line is translated as "chases", the primary meaning of the word is "hunts".

It should be noted that ambivalence and resemblance of Lyssa and Heracles are revealed even through their origin. Heracles' mother, Alkmene, is an ordinary mortal while his father, Zeus, is the supreme deity, ruler of gods and people. Lyssa's mother Nyx is of Chthonic, and father, Uranus, of heavenly origin (E.HF.843-44).

The same can be said about Lyssa' and Heracles' feelings. From the beginning the goddess is calm (E.HF.843-859) and Heracles mind has not dimmed yet (E.HF.922-930). Gradually, Lyssa's quietness develops into madness. The goddess experiences transformation and turns into Fury (E.HF.861-872). Heracles too loses his reason, goes mad and the superman gradually acquires the image of a creature lower than a human being (E.HF.930-1000). Lyssa and Heracles seem to blend with each other.

Apparently, the resemblance is so big that it erases the border between the divine interference and human impulses; madness is fulfilled in Heracles. Thus Euripides transforms Heracles' madness, which most likely existed as

¹⁶ Hes. Theog. 270 etc., 333 etc., Apoll. 11, 4,3.; Met. IV 792 – 802, R.Graves, Myths of Ancient Greece, M., 1992.

¹⁷ Apollod. III-10.3; Diod. Sic. V. 74.6, E.I.999 etc.

¹⁸ "Eyeballs bright (Lyssa)".

¹⁹ K.Gurchiani, Unpublished thesis: Mysteries of Dionisus and their representation in Euripides "Bacchae", Tbilisi, 1999.

an independent phenomenon, into the hero's inward feeling. At the same time, he maintains the traditional pattern of madness according to which some external supernatural divine force influences a human.²⁰

Lyssa's possession of Heracles caused his complete transformation. Heracles starts shaking his head, turns violently his blood-spattered eyes, breathes hastily and foams at his mouth (E. HF. 867-68; 932-35). It is followed by his mad laughter, wild dance (E. HF. 836; 87; 879; 892) and roar (E. HF. 870). Lyssa compares Heracles with a bull ready to attack. The hero loses his human image.

A bull was considered as one of the epiphanies of Dionysus. At the same time Dionysus in Antique painting was associated with personified laughter, while the dance that accompanied frenzy i. e. the state of ecstasy, is the ancient ritual action which was a typical feature of the Dionysian cult²¹.

Heracles' madness continues in his imaginary "march". He has a vision that he leaves for Mycenae, and on "arriving" there looks for Euristheus. Then he imagines that he slaughters the enemy's children and destroys the walls erected by Cyclops – in fact, he destroys his own palace and kills his own wife and children. He intends to kill Amphitryon but at that moment Athena appears. She throws a huge stone at Heracles and makes him stop. Heracles falls down and asleep. The theme of killing one's own children is associated again with Dionysus. Disrespect for Dionysus was normally punished with madness and killing of one's own children in such a state²² – Heracles' behavior (the slaughter of his wife and children) is the climax of his madness. Transition from madness into a normal state is performed through sleeping, which ends the scene of Heracles' spiritual disorder.

It is not accidental that Lyssa is connected with Heracles. Even in mythological tradition there existed the information about Heracles' ferocity. According to the tragedy, the reason of Lyssa's appearance is Hera's anger, which, as the analysis reveals, is motivated by Heracles' origin (E. HF. 20-21; 1261-62; 1307-10).

ὁ ταν δέ κρηπίς μὴ καταβληθῆ γένους

²⁰ J.Gregory, Euripides and the Instructions of the Athenians, The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

²¹ V.Ivanov, Hellenistic Religion of Suffering God (Aeschylus, Tragedies, Moscow, 1989).

²² Leucippus, together with his sisters, has torn to pieces his own child Hypas, O.Met. IV 1-40; 390-415; Lycurgos cut with an axe his son Drius. Apolod. (III.S.1; 130-140); R.Graves, 1992; about killing of one's own children and Dionysus see R.Shlesier, Mixture of Masks, Maenads as Tragic Models (ed. Carpenter/Faraone), 1993; M.Detienne, Dionysos mis amont, Paris, 1977.

ὀρθῶς ἀνάγκη δυστυχεῖν τοῦς ἐκγόνους²³ (E. HF. 1261-62) – says Heracles.

The disease that destroys his psychics is in his blood. Thus the victim of Hera is the hero with whom madness is inherent.²⁴

The climax of Heracles' madness (killing of his wife and children) marks an end to one particular stage of the hero's life. Heracles was newly born – this time as Amphitryon's son.

σὺ μέντοι μηδὲν ἀχθειςθῆς, γέρον,
πατέρα γὰρ ἀντὶ Ζηνὸς ἠγοῦμαι σὲ ἀγῶ²⁵ (E. HF. 1264 – 65).

He transformed into a different kind of man, which is mentioned several times in the final part of the tragedy.²⁶

It is interesting that in the mythological tradition, after killing his children, Heracles starts a new life – life "without madness". Therefore, Euripides' idea to picture the madness afflicted by Lyssa through connecting it with that very period of Heracles' life is particularly successful.

The analysis of the text revealed that the chief property of the goddess of madness is ambivalence, the destroying and renewing force. The state afflicted by Lyssa is parallel to Dionysus' madness – the elements they have in common are actions, metaphors and similes; however, the two states have different essence and purpose.

It should also be mentioned that the picture presented in the tragedy strongly resembles the state of madness described by Hippocrates. The treatise *De Morbo Sacro* considers different cases of epilepsy and madness. Heracles' hallucinations, ferocity, excitement, redness and wild movement of eyes, foam at the mouth and loss of reason coincide with the clinical picture described by Hippocrates, while the slaughter committed by the hero is the behavior of a mad person²⁷.

Traditionally, the epilepsy and madness have been regarded as divine diseases²⁸ because during a fit of madness, a man closely resembled the one in the state of ecstasy at the divine service; however, the parallel is based only on physical likeness while the content, the essence of the divine i.e. ritual

²³ "When thus the basis of a family
Is laid in guilt, the children must be wretched".

²⁴ H.D.F.Kitto, Greek Tragedy, USA, 1954.

²⁵ "... Jet, O let not this
offen thine ear, old man, for thee, not Jove,
I deem my real sire" (1264-65).

²⁶ J.Gregory, 1997.

²⁷ Hp. Morb. Sacr. 7,14,15.

²⁸ E.R.Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational, Berkeley, 1951

madness is an absolutely different phenomenon.²⁹ The necessary condition for the latter was a group of people who sought communion with the god through the ecstatic state. As concerns individual insanity, it was nearly always regarded as pathology and was called a divine disease only because of its outer resemblance with the ritual madness, which was believed to be the only remedy to cure the psychic disease.³⁰ Euripides succeeded to the best to render in terms of fiction the nature of madness afflicted by Lyssa.

²⁹ M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, London, 1964.

³⁰ Plat. *Phaed.* 244 E Ecstatic state had a treating function as well. Aim of the treatment was to transform the lost-way madness gradually into healthy, "right" madness (🗨️ jorqw" manh'nai).