

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Herakles Mainomenos or Herakles in Madness 416 BCE Euripides

Overview

The ancient Greek title for this play, *Herakles mainomenos*, or *Herakles in Madness*, catches the grim event, Herakles' killing of his wife and children, which marks the central tragic moment for the play. It will be remembered that in two previous plays—*Alcestis* (438 B.C.E.) and *The Children of Herakles* (430 B.C.E.)—Euripides has found, in Herakles, a protective figure, in one case the ally of a woman who has sacrificed for her husband, in another case a father figure looming over his ill-fated children, who are suppliants for refuge in Athens. *Herakles in Madness* reveals the cult Hero, and often god figure—there is a slippage from the former to the latter in the fifth century B.C.E.--returning from his last Underworld labor, capturing the hound Cerberus. The mortal and tragic denouement of the play takes off from that point.

Characters

Amphitryon. Husband of Alcmena, mother of Herakles.
Megara. Daughter of Creon, rightful ruler of Thebes: wife of Herakles.
Lykos. Illegal king of Thebes, murdered by Herakles.
Iris. Messenger of the gods
Madness: figure who separates Herakles from his judgment. She is sent by jealous Hera.
Theseus. Ruler of Athens
Chorus of Old Men of Thebes. They side with Creon, but are too feeble to take action.
Herakles. Son of Zeus and Alcmena; condemned by Eurystheus to carry out twelve labors in the Underworld.

Synopsis

Megara, Amphitryon, and Herakles' children stand before the great altar of Zeus in Thebes. They narrate the history of Herakles; his birth as Zeus' love-child, his punishment at the hands of Eurystheus—twelve labors in Hades. Herakles appears in the distance, just as his wife enters the palace to prepare her children for death; Herakles grasps the critical situation on the ground, enters his palace, kills Lykos, and then falls victim to madness, sent down on him by vengeful Hera. In his madness he kills his wife and children. Waking, understanding his crime, Herakles wants to kill himself, but is comforted by Theseus, King of Athens, who leads away the broken hero.

Story

Lykos As the play opens, we find ourselves before the Altar of the temple of Zeus in Thebes, over which the unlawful king, Lykos, now wields power, having driven out the rightful ruler, Creon, and being on the verge of killing Amphitryon, the uncle of Herakles, Megara, the wife of Herakles—because she is the daughter of Creon—and the three children of Herakles. Lykos appears to demand the death of Heracles' children, on the grounds that when they grow up they will want to take revenge on behalf of their grandfather Creon.

Debate. There follows a formalized debate between Lykos and Amphitryon, Heracles' uncle—who begs mercy for Herakles' children and wife—out of which it results that Lykos decides to stop talking and incinerate the children. Megara, refusing to face death by burning, dresses her children in black, to prepare properly for death, while the chorus of Old Men, too weak to intervene on the slaughter, chant praises of Herakles the Laborer, and wait for the worst.

Heracles returns Anticipating death, Megara spots Herakles coming in the distance, and tells him about Lykos, the dethroning of Creon, and the plans to kill Megara and her children. Herakles tells her about his struggle with Cerberus, and that he has brought Theseus back with him. Herakles and the others enter the palace. Herakles kills Lykos, in the palace.

Heracles' madness At that fateful juncture, as the chorus are celebrating, the figures of Iris and Madness appear hovering over the palace. Hera has sent these fiends to take terrible vengeance on Herakles, who was the love child of Zeus, her husband. Hera has not forgotten. When the madness hit Herakles the hero believed that he himself had arrived to kill Eurystheus, his own tormenter; Herakles had begun to chase the man from room to room, through the palace. Herakles kills his wife and children, in this wild delusory chase, When he threatens his uncle, Amphitryon, Athena intervenes and knocks Herakles out.

Heracles recovers When the palace opens, Herakles is revealed, tied to a pillar, waking to realize what he has done, feeling his horror, and wanting to kill himself. Theseus extends his friendship to Herakles, tries to console him, by saying that such misfortunes are common even among the gods.

Theology. Herakles responds that the gods have no desires, commit no crimes of commission. He agrees, though, that it would be cowardice to commit suicide, and he follows Theseus to Athens, unable even to see to the burial of his family in Thebes.

Themes

Madness. Herakles' madness is driven onto him by the pursuing jealousy of Hera, who will not forgive Zeus' adultery. Herakles believes he is attacking and killing Eurystheus, terrible foe, who has driven him to his labors in the Underworld. Greek literature is full of instances of madness;-- Orestes, Ajax, Dionysus-- and in every case the mania in question is god driven, and leaves its victims exhausted and helpless.

Helplessness. The chorus of old men, in Thebes, are passionately sympathetic to Megara and Amphitryon but are too feeble to intervene and thwart the plans of Lykos. They shuffle artfully through their intricately choreographed dance steps.

Jealousy. Hera's terrible jealousy, rooted in Zeus' philandering, drives her to take a terrible revenge on Herakles, Zeus' love child. At the end of the play Herakles is the shell of a person.

Supplication. As elsewhere in Euripides, and in other Greek dramas, like Aeschylus' *Persians*, the posture and mindset of supplication are prominent parts of the dramaturgy. Prayer, submission, and hope are fused in this universal gesture of the weak.

Emotion. Uninhibited displays of grief, happiness, and fury are common in Euripides, who is also a master of formal devices—choral dances, heralds' reports and pronouncements, and seemingly endless genealogical backgroundings, as that provided at the beginning of the present play, in the speeches of Amphitryon and Megara.

Compassion. The children of Herakles, and their mother, beg for compassion at the gates of the Temple of Zeus at Thebes. This kind of hope for, and assumption of, compassion is a highly formalized protocol throughout ancient Hellas. Often, this procedure met with mercy.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Herakles Herakles spends little time onstage, but he is prominent and attention-riveting when he is before the audience. Even offstage, say in the introductory background provided by Amphitryon and Megara, Herakles is in our imaginations from start to finish. When he first appears to Megara, as she is entering the palace to prepare her children for death, he is immediately a winning character, large and exhausted, and reminding us of the slightly clumsy figure who saves Alcestis, in the play of her name. His

outrage, at the situation brought on by Lykos' usurpation, is just and honorable as is his killing of the intruder.

Totally on Herakles' side, we are stunned to find him besieged by the spirit of madness, which jealous Hera has brought down on him. Driven by delusions, he searches his palace convinced that in it is hiding Eurystheus, Herakles' great enemy, the source of torment for himself and his children. All this time we are fascinated only by Herakles, and his wild insanity, until finally the goddess Athena puts him to sleep. When the stage is once more lighted, Herakles is once more before our eyes, waking, feeling the horror, wishing to kill himself. We will follow him with pity and terror as he leaves the palace in the custody of his true friend, Theseus.

Appearance. Herakles appears at the crucial moment, as his wife Megara is entering the palace. She is astonished, and delighted to see him, as he brings the power to get rid of Lykos.

Astonishment: Herakles is amazed to learn that his secular power has been usurped, his palace invaded, and his wife and family are ready to be killed. He has just returned from an arduous harrowing of hell, and now he is faced with life threatening necessities.

Threatened. Herakles grows aware of the forces of madness forming around his palace, and he is not surprised to find that the wife of Zeus, Hera, has sent disaster down on him. Our hearts go out to the astonished hero, who has no responsibility for the circumstances of his birth.

Subtle. Though brawny and powerful, Herakles is subtle. He demurs, when Theseus consoles him, by saying that even the Gods on Olympus commit heinous acts. Herakles rebuffs this idea, claiming that the gods are 'without desires,' not up for misbehavior.

Parallels Greek literature is marked by interest in *mania*, loss of sanity driven by the fury of the gods. 'Whom the gods love, they first drive mad,' runs an ancient parable. Achilles, son of a god (Thetis) is literally maddened by the loss of Patroklos, who had himself gone mad with representing the furor of Achilles. Bacchos, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, herds wild women like cattle, in his own compelling madness; with which he injects the once bland Pentheus. Such a great modern figure as Shakespeare's Lear goes mad—loses all orientation—when driven too hard by loneliness and greed for love. Keeseey's Patrick McMurphy (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1962) is a beautiful critique of madness in our time, as seen from within the mind of a deep individual in an Oregon psychiatric hospital.)

Discussion questions.

What do you think of the lengthy and complex genealogical introductions to the play, that are given by Amphitryon and Megara? What is the importance, for the drama, of such a lengthy reminder? Is it that Hera's vengeful nature has to be deeply understood, before the play makes sense?

Does the end of the play leave you with any hope, or is Herakles walking away to his death, without any rescue of meaning for all his struggles? Put in another way, what is Euripides trying to tell us? Is Euripides conveying an attitude toward the gods?

Herakles becomes 'ethicized' in Renaissance art. A common motif, in sculpture and painting, depicts the massive Herakles at a crossroads from which he has a choice of directions: one way toward Virtue, another toward Vice. In other words, he becomes a model of mankind seeking its virtue but tempted by vice. Can you see how Herakles can have given himself over to this interpretation?