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Bats in the High Culture Belfry: Presentations of Madness in Euripidean and Shakespearean
Tragedy

Crazy is a word that is taken lightly and tossed around in everyday conversation. You call a parent breaking out in screaming fits over a youth soccer game crazy. You call the elderly woman single-handedly causing a standstill in traffic crazy. These examples of real-world crazy are endless, and everyone who has spent time being human has plenty of firsthand stories involving the craziness of people. However, this is not the crazy I'm interested in. What I'm interested in is the more real implication of the word, being reserved for the truly afflicted individuals on a psychological level, what we might refer to as mental illness or madness. More specifically, I am interested in the presentation of madness in two periods in time we have decidedly deemed important in regards to the advancement of knowledge and artistic expression. I've chosen to look at the presentation of madness in theater in Ancient Greece and the English Renaissance. These time periods stand out in the timeline of humanity because of the levels of high thinking and inspiration that are derived from them. When looking at these periods, I wanted to choose a champion from each period. Someone who was respected in their times and history books, and rely on specific works of these champions to analyze how they present madness. For this, I have chosen two of the most influential and important playwrights in all of history, with Euripides representing Ancient Greece, and William Shakespeare to stand in for the English Renaissance. When looking at these two poets in tandem, although coming from wildly

different times and cultures, their presentation of madness in their tragedies shows remarkable parallels. Having vastly different primary religions and knowledge of science, these two playwrights had every opportunity to be worlds apart in their depictions of madness, but the nature of humans seems to be too dominant to be diluted by differing societies. In this analysis, I will pair Euripides's *Heracles* with Shakespeare's *Othello* to show these similarities in the madness and mindset of the tragic hero in both plays. I will also pair Euripides's *Orestes* with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to show that the form of madness these two princes are afflicted by are similar situations and mental illnesses despite the contradictory worlds and cultures they live in.

I will first analyze the tragedies *Orestes* and *Heracles*. These two plays, written two-thousand and eleven years apart, but both tell the tale of a war hero returning home, away from the battlefield the heroes are accustomed to. In an environment where action can't solve every problem, these heroes lose themselves in a way that leads to tragedy and devastating loss. It is not certain if Shakespeare ever had the chance to read Euripides, and if he did, it was likely very late in his life. Acting under the necessary assumption that Shakespeare did not model any of his plays after a work by Euripides, these parallels prove rather interesting and say a lot about the nature of the human mind.

Heracles and Othello

To an ancient Greek, the word "sophrosyne" was on a level of importance that modern readers would not understand. There is no direct translation of this word to modern English, but in short, sophrosyne means to be in total control of oneself, in all matters of the body and of the mind. When one shows lack of sophrosyne in Greek culture, you have given in to your emotions, and to succumb to passion is not a quality of the ideal Greek citizen. K.J. Dover breaks down the

meaning of sophrosyne in his book, Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle. Dover explains that sophrosyne is “A virtue through which people behave as the law requires them to behave in respect of pleasures and passions” (Dover 59). Although the word itself carries less meaning today, whenever anyone loses control, whether it be from fear, anger, or grief, it is very uncomfortable for all parties involved, especially after composure is regained and one can replay the moment again in one’s mind. For instance, if I were to get angry at a waiter in a restaurant, the worst-case scenario for me is to get kicked out of the restaurant and be forced to live with the embarrassment and shame of my actions. In Ancient Greece, however, an outburst in lack of sophrosyne would be an extreme hit to your character and family name in the community. This sort of behavior was expected to be followed by punishment for your actions, usually by one of the gods you had managed to offend in your fit.

In Euripides’ *Heracles*, the character of Heracles experiences this loss of sophrosyne when he is overtaken by the goddess of madness, Lyssa, whose name translates to a personification of Madness. Although it is Lyssa that directly inflicts the madness into Heracles, she does not wish to do so, but the strict orders of Hera leave her no choice in the matter. Of course, to lose sophrosyne, one must have had it at it in the first place. As renowned as Heracles is today, his folkloric fame was amplified tenfold to the Greeks when the play was first performed in 416 BCE. Everyone who was going to see this tragedy would have been vastly familiar with the myths surrounding Heracles, along with the personality and characteristics expected of an on-stage depiction of the Greek hero. Heracles was known first for his strength. Greeks expected Heracles to be a man of action before anything else. Just as Heracles was known for his power and ability, he was also expected to be a man of few words. Just like Odysseus was known for his wit and intellect, it was expected of Heracles to be lacking in those

areas. Heracles is a simple but mighty warrior and viewed as morally good from the standpoint of the Greeks. The tragic element of the play only works because it tells of the misfortune of a morally decent man caused by either his own actions or the gods.

Euripides makes a point to establish that the Heracles depicted in his play fits the character mold and that his Heracles is a man of morals as the crowd would expect. When Heracles arrives halfway through the play, and is informed that his family has been taken captive and are very near their deaths at the hand of Lycus, he immediately wishes to right all the wrongs that have occurred in his absence. Once Heracles is told this, he delivers the bold line, “what honor can I claim from that if I do not exert myself when my own sons are in mortal peril? Then I will forfeit the title of Heracles the Triumphant”, solidifying the brave and moral Heracles people know from Greek theater (*Heracles* 581-584). This heroic Heracles can be used as a rubric to look back on as Heracles is inflicted with his madness, and the clear changes he goes through.

In his rampage, Heracles kills his wife, Megara, along with his three young sons. Since any deaths in an Ancient Greek Tragedy do not occur on stage, these details come through a messenger. The Messenger describes the madness of Heracles as thus: “He was a different man; in his affliction, he started rolling his eyes, where bloody veins had sprouted, and foam began to trickle down his beard (*Heracles* 932-35). From the lines, “He was a different man,” Heracles has lost control to the extent that he is no longer himself, but another man entirely. When Heracles is inflicted with madness, it has affected him internally, changing his internal personage. The madness also affects his physical body as well, altering his exterior. The Messenger points out how the eyes of Heracles roll back in his head, leaving nothing but the white area exposed. Along with his eyes, Heracles is so inflicted he is literally foaming at the

mouth as if he were rabid. Once the state of Heracles is established, the Messenger describes in detail of how the action unfolds, and just how truly confused and lost Heracles has become. At this point in the messenger's description, he describes how Heracles believes he is somewhere else, fighting one of his familiar foes, Eurystheus, when in reality it is his adopted father, Amphitryon. Heracles casts aside his mortal father and turns to his wife and kids, who he sees as the family of Eurystheus. Heracles kills them all, and as he turns to murder Amphitryon, Apollo interferes and puts Heracles to sleep, casting out the madness within him. It is noteworthy to realize that the madness of Heracles is both started and finished by gods. The goddess of madness inflicts Heracles under Hera's orders for no reason other than Hera's dislike for Heracles, and this madness is only interrupted because of the pity Apollo feels for Heracles. Although Heracles lost his grips on *sophrosyne*, it was not due to any of his actions but was purely a matter of the supernatural. Due to the actions of the gods, Heracles is left to grieve the loss of his family, and forced to leave his hometown of Thebes due to his abominable actions.

The madness experienced by Heracles is strikingly similar to the madness we see in Shakespeare's character, Othello, in the character's namesake tragedy. Like Heracles, Othello is a man famous for his ability as a fighter and soldier, yet his talents on the battlefield do not help him in the slightest in regards to the plot of the play. These characters frequently rely on their physical abilities to solve their problems, but the issues they face in their tragedies render their talents useless, and ultimately hindering. The character of Othello is cut from the same archetype as that of Heracles. Othello is a gifted warrior, but not known for his intellect. He is a man of few words, but because of his straightforwardness and ability as a military commander, Othello is a man highly respected by everyone in the play, despite the fact that he is from a different ethnic background than the rest of the characters involved. If the tragedy of Othello had been performed

in Ancient Greece, Othello would have been regarded as a man of good moral character who, through loss of sophrosyne, suffered tragically. In order for Othello's character to fall, he needs to first establish himself as morally good early in the play, just as Heracles did. Due to the racism Othello experiences by the Italians in the play, when news that Desdemona has betrayed her father and ran away with Othello, Barbantio assumes that Othello could not have won over the affection of his daughter, Desdemona, without supernatural help. Barbantio says to Othello,

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her;
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t' incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou- (*Othello* 1.2. 63-71).

Initially, Barbantio thinks Othello has obtained Desdemona in an immoral way, although his accusations are unspecific. Barbantio, with no hard evidence, reverts to invectives in his attempt to undermine the status of Othello's character. Barbantio starts his attack with the line, "Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her." This line works in one level as an insult, by damning Othello, Barbantio accuses him of having damnable qualities even before this act. Barbantio progresses in his speech by then suggesting that Othello used witchcraft, or magic, to seduce his daughter. This idea of Othello using magic is an attempt to create a gap between Othello and the other characters as a foreigner from a country whose customs are mysterious and misunderstood by the men from Venice. Barbantio concludes his attack by sinking even lower and using a racial slur in "sooty bosom," just to further outcast Othello. Throughout these claims though, Shakespeare makes sure to extinguish these claims about Othello quickly with a rebuttal.

With Othello's moral character in question in a setting not unlike a courtroom, Othello must do his best to convince the Duke and Barbantio that there has been no foul play in his relationship with Desdemona. When Othello gets a chance to speak, he does not deny his relationship with Desdemona. In regards to his marriage to her, Othello says; "That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter / It is most true; true I have married her" (Othello 1.3. 78-79). Othello, being known as a warrior and not as a scholar, uses this fact to his advantage by talking down his ability to publicly speak.

"Rude I am in my speech,
And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace;
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field;
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking of myself" (Othello 1.3. 81-89).

Othello's opening lines, "Rude I am in my speech" disarm the tension of the debate, by taking away all expectations of his rebuttal. By claiming to be unskilled at public speaking, he claims that the only defense he has regarding his allegations is his blunt delivery of truth. Othello follows up this modest claim by then using elevated speech to surpass the expectations he had for himself. Othello shows education by using tools such as alliteration, seen in "broils of battle." These lines also establish the common background he has with Heracles, in that they fit the same archetype of the unintelligent warrior, but with an emphasis on the idea that, he, like Heracles, is not as dimwitted as he leads on. Othello then says, "therefore little shall I grace my cause / in speaking of myself," when in fact he has just gotten through talking about himself. Othello's defense is used by Shakespeare to elevate his tragic hero, by showing tactful speech while also successfully persuading everyone that he was genuine in his winning of Desdemona. With

Othello winning this courtroom-like conflict, it establishes him on the winning side of the hero defeating the villain. Othello earning the role of hero allows for the madness of the character to lead to the character's descent more tragic.

Just as the madness of Heracles comes from an external force, Othello's madness is also catalyzed by characters getting into the head of the hero. Although the concept and struggles of these characters share commonalities, the forms of how the seeds madness sow come in different ways. Where Heracles is stricken abruptly by madness curtesy of the gods, Othello's descent into madness is much more gradual and grounded in human psychology. Othello's madness comes from jealousy. This jealousy stems from the close relationship between his wife Desdemona, and his lieutenant, Cassio. The suspicion that Othello feels would be justified if this relationship between Desdemona and Cassio had scandalous undertones, but no such tones seem to exist; the conversations the two have appeared to be of a professional and sincere nature. The audience of the play would have been able to observe the talks Cassio has with Desdemona, and nothing more seems to be going on other than Desdemona merely trying to get Cassio his job back after he loses it due to a drunken fiasco. With Othello established as a morally good character, under normal circumstances, Othello would have seen their friendship as harmless. Just as Lyssa, or Madness, can get inside the mind of Heracles, Iago has this same ability to alter the internal state of Othello, even though he is a mortal man instead of a goddess. Iago plants ideas of infidelity and betrayal into Othello's mind, and as Iago continues to chip away at Othello's sanity, Othello falls deeper and deeper into the fictional world Iago creates inside Othello's mind.

In Act 4, Scene 1 one of the play, Iago's deceit has taken over in the mind of Othello, and rationality has been replaced with madness. When Iago tells of Cassio lying with/on Desdemona, Othello falls into a fit of rage. In his passion Othello raves,

“Handkerchief! Confessions! Handkerchief!—To confess, and be hanged for his labor. First to be hanged, and then to confess: I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears and lips! Is’t possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!” (*Othello* 4.1. 37-42).

When comparing this to the earlier quote regarding his marriage with Desdemona, the Othello giving this speech is a very different man than the one seen in Act 1 of the play. The once honorable and composed military commander has lost control of his identity. Where he was once a modest but adequate orator defending his love for Desdemona with alliterative speech, Othello now can barely get out a complete sentence. In place of composed sentences, there is now incomprehensible outbursts. “Handkerchief! Confessions! Handkerchief!”, Othello cries out, and to any rational man within the play who would walk by Othello would undoubtedly take him for a raving madman. These lines allow for a picture of a newly painted Othello. The once willful war hero is now quite literally trembling at the thought of a handkerchief. Seen in line 39, Othello admits to trembling at the very idea of a lost handkerchief.

The sporadic nature of Othello’s speech shows that the madness is taking its toll internally, but Shakespeare pushes the envelope farther and allows the madness to affect him physically as well. This quote ends with the stage note, “he falls into a trance.” This note allows us to recognize that the madness inflicting Othello is affecting him internally and externally. This stage direction allows Othello’s madness to be viewed as more than just anger, but as a true form of mental illness. This sickness suffered by Othello has changed his character in a very severe way. This change is not only visible from the outside perspective of the play, but within as well. Later in the scene, as madness continues to plague Othello, Desdemona and Lodovico enter. By Desdemona saying she cares for Cassio, she unknowingly adds fuel to the fire inside of Othello, which causes him to strike her.

The Othello portrayed at the beginning of the play would have never struck his wife, but we now see Othello acting out in violence against the woman he proclaimed his love for three acts earlier. Lodovico recognizes the change and speaks up on the matter. After Othello strikes her, Lodovico says, “My lord, this would not be believed in Venice, / Though I should not swear I saw’t. ‘Tis very much; Maker / her amends—she weeps” (*Othello* 4.1. 236-238). Othello ignores the advice of Lodovico, and continues his rampage, calling Desdemona a liar and a devil. After Othello and Desdemona exit, Lodovico is shocked by what he has seen, and looks to Iago for answers about the current state of Othello, asking,

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident not dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce? (*Othello* 4.1. 259-263).

Lodovico’s question is full of astonishment, surprised that the Senate would put so much faith in a man who just demonstrated to Lodovico how mentally unhinged he is. To Lodovico, Othello was supposed to be a man whose stability could not be shaken by the passions humans sometimes lose control over, and by his actions, Othello has proven that this is not true.

The balance of passions is the renaissance equivalent of sophrosyne in Ancient Greece, and Othello has fallen victim to letting his chemical balance slip out of place, resulting in this madness. In the cases of both Heracles and Othello, both heroes seem to suffer from an abundance of choleric. In chapter one of Lawrence Babb’s The Elizabethan Malady, a choleric man is described as “rash, quick to anger, proud, vengeful, bold, ambitious, shrewd” (Babb 9). The downward journey both Heracles and Othello go on end in personality changes that align with the description of a man who has an excess of cholera in their make-up of the four liquids.

With this idea in mind, the descent of both characters can be seen in tandem as their demise progresses.

The tragic descent of Othello has matched up to that to of Heracles thus far, but for these two tales to align and fit their tragic nature, death involving the hero's family or lover looms over and is almost certainly expected from the audiences seeing the tragedy performed. What makes the tale of Heracles tragic is that the most important thing in his life, his family, has been killed by his own hands. Othello does not have children, but the most important person in his life, Desdemona, faces the same demise as the family of Heracles, death at the hands of a loved one. The endings of these two plays differ in part, due to the fate of the tragic heroes. At the end of *Heracles*, the hero lives and the play ends with Heracles walking away from his home heartbroken. Othello, on the contrary, succumbs to the madness and ends his own life. The key difference being that Heracles can live with what he has done and Othello cannot. Heracles' madness came and went abruptly, and once the killing of his family was over, the morally good Heracles returned to face the consequences of his actions that occurred while he was in a frenzy. Othello, however, is not given the courtesy of not remembering his murderous acts and returning to his morally aligned original self. Where Heracles believes he is killing his enemies when he is killing his wife, Othello is very much aware that he is killing his beloved. As Othello suffocates Desdemona, he expresses his instability and must reassure himself that he is doing the right thing. Othello says, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul." Othello is having doubts about killing Desdemona, and is trying to talk himself into sticking with it, and that it is what's best for him. Othello continues,

Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more me (*Othello* 5.2. 5-7).

As Othello is killing her, he recognizes her beauty, and cannot bring himself to kill her in a way that would blemish her physical appearance. For a moment, Othello gets lost in this description of Desdemona, as if he is forgetting what he is about to do. It isn't until the line, "Yet she must die" that Othello snaps back into his madness and continues with the murder. Just before Desdemona dies, Othello kisses her, adding further to the tragic nature of the play. The fact that Othello is aware of who he is killing is what separates his madness from Heracles. The fact that he is knowingly killing his wife, the woman he was willing to go in front of a duke to proclaim his love for, is what creates the need for Othello to end his life. Although the tragedies of Othello and Heracles took place in different periods of time and under various social pretenses, the similarities in the two tragic heroes' descents into madness are undeniable in both cause and effect. These two archetypally similar characters meeting similar fates in two completely different eras in time shows that human nature travels across generations and time. The only difference is how we attempt to explain the way we act.

The psychological afflictions present in Othello are not just reserved for the play's tragic hero but can be seen in the play's villain, Iago, as well. Where we see the stable and initially moral Othello helplessly watch himself relapse into insanity, Iago seems to be ahead of the process of mental ailment and is afflicted from the very start. The moment of realization that Othello has as he kills Desdemona allows him to take a step back and realize how far lost his sanity is. Iago has nothing remotely close to this kind of realization, and in fact, spends a considerable amount of time justifying his plots to kill people. Iago seems to completely believe his actions are not villainous and has no trouble with causing the death of Desdemona. If admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery, then it is clear that Iago was never to reach that first step. In Fred West's article *Iago the Psychopath*, West makes the argument that

Iago is not just a stock Machiavel villain, but an exploration on Shakespeare's behalf to explore human psychology. West's article analyzes the actions and words of Iago, and through the lens of psychology, labels him as an accurate portrayal of a psychopath. In West's conquest to elevate Iago above the archetypal villain, the author uses Marvin Rosenberg's description of the character. "[Iago] was wonderfully shaped by Shakespeare into a first-rate dramatic character, as well as a clearly recognizable type of human being, with passions and frustrations—and even physical symptoms—characteristic of a type of troubled humanity common enough so that psychologists in our time regularly encounter it" (West 27). This description of Iago allows for the character to fit into the realm of a dramatic character while also looking at him as a person and assessing him as a truly afflicted psychopath.

Operating under the arguments made by West, what separates Iago from the standard villain is his psychopathy. The ability to justify immoral behavior falls under the categorization of psychopathy, then Lycus, the mortal antagonist in Euripides' *Heracles* belongs in this category as well. Like Iago, Lycus is an undisputed villain with no redeemable or likable qualities that could be seen or interpreted by the audience of the play. The conflict in the play arises from Lycus taking over Thebes while Heracles is in the underworld, and plans to kill the wife and children of Heracles. Lycus is completely aware of his intentions and has no problem justifying killing women and children for his gain. When Amphitryon accuses Lycus of being cowardly, Lycus claims that his actions are not from cowardice but careful planning. Lycus replies to this accusation, "What I do now, old man, shows careful planning, not a lack of shame. I realize I killed this woman's father, Creon, and now sit on his throne. I do not want to let these boys grow up to become my executioners and take their revenge" (*Heracles*, 165-168). The irrational behavior of Lycus is viewed rationally, allowing Lycus to match Iago in psychopathic

and narcissistic behavior. In both plays, madness is not a simple affliction with a set of side-effects and tendencies, but comes in many forms and affects characters in different ways. Regardless of this, the madness experienced by the heroes in the plays are remarkably similar, just as the rationale in the mindsets of the antagonist's mirror each other. Although madness is not singular in either play, the level of madness experienced by a character impacts how the audience views them in the binaries of good and evil.

A prominent trait of both Greek and Shakespearean Tragedy is the blurry line segregating good and evil. A tragic hero may not be wholly aligned with good, and will often have traits less than redeemable. Part of the reason tragedies of these time periods wrestle with morality may be due in part to the questioning of religion in the societies. In Ancient Greece, every feeling felt and everything experienced was explained by the presence of a god. Up until the 5th Century BCE, the importance of the gods had been overwhelmingly accepted. In the 5th Century, Euripides famously questioned these societal beliefs in his plays. The famous Comic playwright Aristophanes wrote a comedy about Euripides, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, in which a character accuses of Euripides of persuading men into believing the gods don't exist (Aristophanes, line 457). The fact that Euripides was being called out on his 'against the gods' mentality even during his own lifetime shows Euripides confronted religion differently than his peers.

Euripides owns up to Aristophanes's claim in *Heracles* with one of the most blatantly blasphemous scenes in Greek Tragedy. As Lycus prepares to kill Megara and her children, Amphytrion prays to Zeus to come and save him and his family from injustice. When Zeus does nothing to interfere, Amphytrion lashes out in a speech to the god, "I have behaved more honorably than you, though you are a great god and I a mere mortal, for I have not betrayed the

sons of Heracles...Either you are a stupid god or you have no sense of justice” (*Heracles* 142-148). Euripides uses the two fathers of Heracles, the immortal Zeus and the mortal Amphitryon to display how it is better to put trust into humans than into gods. Although the presence of gods is prominent in the play, these gods do not care for humans, and that they do nothing significant to assist the mortal characters. Initially Lycus, a mortal, seems to be the primary evil in the play, but as the play progresses it becomes clear that the real enemy is the gods, in the forms of unmotivated violence caused by Hera and Lyssa, and the nonchalance of Zeus towards the mistreatment of his son and his son’s family. When one looks at the religion involved in the play, the idea that humans must face their problems on their own is present in the way that makes Euripides famous for his enlightened take on the religious society of the time.

Not unlike 5th Century Athens, the Elizabethan era Shakespeare writes was going through an intellectual awakening as well. In times prior, people looked to religion as the answer for the unexplained. During Shakespeare’s life, an interest in science had taken hold, and explanations for physical and mental phenomena became sought after instead of deferred. *Othello* adopts this wave of thinking, and as a result, the characters in the play cannot rely on religion for their wellbeing. This lack of reassurance is established in Act 2 of the play, after Othello arrives in Cyprus, and is overjoyed to see Desdemona. When he sees his beloved, Othello proclaims,

As hell’s from heaven! If I were now to die,
‘Twere I now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate (*Othello* 2.1. 187-191)

To which Desdemona replies, “The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow” (*Othello* 2.1. 191-93). Similar to the characters in *Heracles*, the existence of religion is present in the beliefs of the characters, as Othello and Desdemona

look to religion to keep their love intact. But as the play unfolds, the very thing the couple prays to keep is demolished in front of their eyes. In regards to religion, in *Othello* the importance and power of religion take a back seat, and divinity seems to be no match for the tragedy of the mortal world.

Orestes and Hamlet

When assigning myself the task of comparing the presentations of madness in Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, I could not in good conscious do so without spending a considerable amount of time on the two most significant characters of the times, Ancient Greece's Orestes, and the Shakespeare's Hamlet. In present the day, Hamlet is by far the more renowned of the two, as Hamlet is still a household name despite that the play was written over four-hundred years ago, while the fame of Orestes has taken a considerable backseat to Shakespeare's skull-holding superstar. Despite Hamlet winning the modern times' popularity contest, it is important not to underestimate just how big of a deal Orestes was in Ancient Greece. As Earl Showerman points out in his article, "Orestes and Hamlet": From Myth to Masterpiece," Orestes is the most central character of at least eight known tragedies performed on the Greek stage (Showerman 104). With his role appearing and starring in such a wide array of plays by all three of the most important playwrights— Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides— Orestes's notoriety was on par with that of the 20th century James Bond. Unlike James Bond, Orestes is not a middle-aged personification of a hero. Orestes, by contrast, is a young man on the cusp of adulthood and is not a perfect hero in any of the plays in which he stars. In fact, part of the appeal for playwrights to use Orestes as a character was the fact that the demeanor of his actions could be manipulated to further complicate the role in any way the poet wished.

Aeschylus was responsible for bringing Orestes to the stage with his three plays known collectively as the *Orestia*. Sophocles then created a romanticized rendition of Orestes in his play, *Electra*. These plays were popular and important to both the study of Greek theater and to the character of Orestes, but the play I want to emphasize is Euripides's *Orestes*, which takes place last chronologically to the aforementioned adaptations. Euripides take on the story of Orestes is first performed around 408 B.C.E. By this time, Greek theater-goers would have been very familiar with the character of Orestes, and the tragedy that follows him. When Greeks were going to see Euripides' *Orestes* at the festivals, they were not going to see a new plot. The audience may not have known who the other central characters would be, or what new elements the poet was going to bring in, but what they knew with certainty was that in one way or another, Orestes was going to kill his mother, Clytemnestra.

Orestes takes place after the infamously tragic incident of Orestes's matricide, which leads to Orestes and his sister Electra facing the consequences of their actions of avenging their father's death. Like in Aeschylus's version, Euripides' Orestes is plagued by madness after he knowingly murders his mother. To modern readers, this act of killing the person who birthed you is an astonishingly, undisputedly terrible and immoral act. Without context, it seems as if Orestes is a villain. In contrast, in Ancient Greece, it was considered morally just to kill the person who killed your father. Being that the killer of his father and the person who birthed him are one in the same, this creates a push-and-pull on the morality of Orestes, and Euripides makes a point to emphasize this turmoil. In the introduction to John Peck and Frank Nisetich's English translation, The authors point out that Euripides chooses the epithet of his Orestes to be "tlemon," which roughly translates to English, "the enduring" or "the suffering" (Peck). In Euripides's version, Orestes is forced to tackle this moral conundrum in both his mind and in the

physical world, as the townspeople, led by Tyndareos, seek to punish Orestes and Electra for the killing of Clytemnestra. The ringleader of this endeavor, Tyndareos, is the maternal grandfather of Orestes and Electra, making him the father of the murdered Clytemnestra and Helen. With this mob of people against him, Orestes' matricide affects him externally as well as internally.

The internal madness of Orestes is caused, in all accounts, by Furies; a gaggle of immortal creatures that torment anyone to have committed crimes against blood relatives. In *Orestes*, these furies are not personified as they formerly were. Aeschylus did so much as to make these Furies his chorus and named his play, *Eumenides*, after these creatures. In opposition, Euripides merely uses them as an excuse for the pitiful mental state of Orestes. When Orestes first enters the play, he is deeply impacted by his madness. In the opening speech of the play, the audience is informed of the Orestes' state by Electra. Electra describes the condition of her brother,

Orestes lies here savagely ill,
collapsed in bed, and Mother's blood
whips him from it into fits of madness—
I say "Mother's blood because
I dare not name the dread goddesses
who frenzy him (*Orestes* 46-49).

This bit of information is the first the audience hears about Orestes, yet Electra does not explicitly bring up the Furies being the cause of madness. Even though this "Mother's blood" Electra mentions would be reason enough for the Furies to come, this vagueness allows speculation on whether the thoughts on the act of murder itself is also causing illness in Orestes.

Electra continues describing the state of Orestes,

It's been six days, now,
Since Mother's bloodstained body was cleansed by fire,
six days since he has eaten or washed himself.
Whenever the pain eases a little
And lets him come to his senses, he sobs there

buried under his robes, or sometimes
races from bed like a colt
bucking free of its yoke (*Orestes* 51-58).

The illness Electra describes is again pinned directly with the act of murder Orestes commits, as his fits of madness begin the very day Clytemnestra leaves for the underworld. Electra then describes some of the actions of Orestes, how even when he regains composure, he sobs uncontrollably. The sobbing is not explained, leaving it ambiguous whether Orestes' crying is due to the Furies, or if he is crying out of guilt for killing his mother. The description of the physical actions of a maddened Orestes shows likeness to that of previous fits of madness already discussed. Again, we are met with madness being described in tandem with actions of animals. In this case, Orestes is described as racing around the bed like a young horse. This allows us to see just how much the madness is affecting Orestes as it is now not all mental but is now affecting his physical body.

This broken version of Orestes is how this character enters the play. A young man of royal descent, with enough passion to murder his own mother is at first this frail and timid man. At the beginning of the play, Orestes is passive and thoughtful in his speech. His only hope, it seems, is to persuade Menelaus to vouch for him and his sister to the people of Argos. When Menelaus enters the play, a debate ensues between Orestes and Tyndarius as both parties attempt to persuade the authority figure of Menelaus to either kill or spare the lives of Orestes and Electra. In a debate where the topic at hand is whether or not you should live or die, it would be understandable and even expected of Orestes to show much passion in his defense. Contrarily, Orestes tries his best to keep as calm a manner as possible, and when he goes to rebuttal the argument of Tyndareus, he stops himself from verbally attacking his opponent out of respect, because Tyndareus is his elder.

Sir, I am afraid to answer you
in a situation that guarantees offense.
If your great age were not before me,
I might not choke back my words (*Orestes* 551-54).

In this moment in the play where Orestes is offered a moment to convince his uncle to support him, Orestes shies away from the opportunity. In his first lines, Orestes says, “I am afraid to answer you.” Up to this moment in the play, this debate is the best chance Orestes has to save his and Electra’s life, and yet he chokes back his words for the sake of politeness. The man who was unafraid to return home and kill his mother and her lover is now afraid to answer a claim by an old man. The bold character of Orestes that Greek audiences came to see is not present in the first half of the play.

It is the entering of Orestes’ best friend, Pylades that resurrects the fiery passion with which Orestes is often associated. After Menelaus refuses to help, Orestes all but gives up hope. Pylades arrives at Orestes’ bleakest moment and convinces him to go directly to the townspeople and try and convince them firsthand not to kill him and his sister. When this plan fails, Orestes is again ready to accept his death. Pylades then tells Orestes of a plan that involves Orestes killing Menelaus’s wife, Helen. After Orestes hears this plan, all his tepidness is replaced by passion for the remainder of the play. This plot leads to the wild ending of the play, where after an attempt to kill Helen, Orestes and Pylades stand on the roof of the palace holding a sword to Menelaus’s daughter Hermione’s throat. Although Orestes is known to be a bit of a loose cannon, holding an innocent girl hostage on a roof seems to be a bit far even for him. In almost all the other theatrical renditions of this story, Pylades often doesn’t even have a speaking part, but with Euripides, the entire revenge plot is his. This brash and somewhat villainous climax puts the motivation of Orestes’s actions into question. Euripides allows for the question to be asked if this is the real Orestes who decides this heinous acts are justified or was Orestes just an

impressionable madman in a bad place that allowed an overzealous friend to talk him into a bad deed. The audience has the opportunity to ask these questions as Orestes and Menelaus engage in stichomythia:

MENELAUS. Give me my wife's body, so I can bury her.

ORESTES. Ask the gods for that. I'll kill your daughter.

MENELAUS. Will you? Pile corpse on corpse—the mother killer?

ORESTES. The father avenger—whom you betrayed to death.

MENELAUS. Wasn't your mother's blood enough for you?

ORESTES. I'll never have enough of killing whores (Orestes 1660-1665)

Here, with the warning, "I'll kill your daughter," Orestes makes it clear that he is willing to kill his cousin, Hermione, to spite Menelaus for not helping him earlier in the play. When Menelaus calls Orestes a mother killer, Orestes corrects him. In the eyes of Orestes, he is not a mother killer, but rather an avenger of his father's death. In the last lines, when Orestes is asked if his mother's blood was enough, he responds brutishly with the line, "I'll never have enough of killing whores". This harsh dialogue is coming from the same man who was afraid to speak in fear of disrespecting an elder earlier in the play. Although whether this change was caused by madness is ambiguous, Orestes has changed in a drastic way.

Fortunately just as the likability of Orestes is on the verge of disappearing altogether, Apollo arrives *Dies Ex Machina* and saves the entire situation from turning bad. Apollo defuses the situation, frees Orestes of all charges regarding the death of his mother, and relieves him of his madness. Apollo saves Orestes from an all-out descent into madness, but Apollo also saves Euripides from pushing the envelope too far with Orestes's morality. With Apollo's arrival, the audience could take a sigh of relief, knowing the story would end like they expect it to. Still, this ending allowed Euripides to explore the character of Orestes more than any other Greek poet before him, allowing the questions of the madness and character of Orestes to be present until the very end of the play.

In *Orestes*, when being questioned on whether killing his mother was ethical, Orestes defends himself by replying, “if I had condoned my mother’s actions / by holding my tongue, what would my father’s ghost have done to me?” (*Orestes* 606-608). Although Orestes intends for this to be rhetorical, this question provides a better segue than I could have scripted myself into Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Flash-forwarding from Ancient Greece to the English Renaissance, another analysis can take place to show the similarities between Euripides and Shakespeare, and how their madness mirrors one another.

In the cases of Heracles and Othello, their stories parallel in that within the confounds of their plays, we spectate as a morally sane hero descends into madness. The firm line that separates Orestes and Hamlet from these other heroes is that in their plays, a mentally stable version of either character is never present. Although Hamlet’s madness is less tangible and more complicated than any of the other tragic heroes, from the get-go, Hamlet is not mentally well. As the play progresses, Hamlet’s charade of madness can be questioned as a performance or an affliction, but before this can take place, Hamlet shows signs of being burdened by mental illness that links to madness.

Not unlike Orestes, Hamlet is a man that above all things is suffering. Hamlet shows signs of what we would now consider depression. In Act 1, Gertrude when Gertrude urges Hamlet to stop brooding over his father’s death and hints at Hamlet overplaying his grief, Hamlet replies,

Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother
Nor customary suits of solemn black
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play

But I have that within which passes show—
These but the trappings and the suits of woe (*Hamlet* 1.1 82-86).

In the first several lines, Hamlet lists all the physical aspects that his mother sees that represent his grief. Then, by following up this list with “Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief, / That can denote me truly,” Hamlet is attempting to give the people around him an idea of how truly miserable he is inside. Hamlet suffers in a way that cannot be represented or understood by anyone who is mentally healthy and has never suffered in this way before. His mother sees Hamlet’s black clothes, sighing, and sobbing as being a dramatization of reality, but in these lines, he says exactly the opposite. Hamlet ends his line here with “But I have that within which passes show— / These but the trappings and the suits of woe.” Hamlet tries to convey his inner emotions by explaining that what they see of his suffering is only the tip of the iceberg and that so much more is happening that they cannot see. This explanation by Hamlet shows just how alone Hamlet is in this play. Although Horatio is his friend, he can never truly comfort Hamlet because he is not able to understand how Hamlet feels.

If Hamlet’s attempt to show the severity of his emotions was not convincing enough for you to be concerned about Hamlet’s depression, then his remarks less than one hundred lines later would undoubtedly persuade anyone to put him on suicide watch. In the same dialogue with the new king and queen, Hamlet goes into greater detail about his wish to die:

O that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter. O God, O God,
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world! (*Hamlet* 1.2. 129-134).

Hamlet expresses his wish to die in a very outright fashion, and with vivid detail, as he describes his desire for his flesh to melt away and out of existence. Hamlet follows this up with, “Or that

the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.” With this line, Hamlet explains that the only reason he has not already killed himself is that doing so would go against God. Hamlet’s predicament is that he is stuck between two unsatisfactory choices. If he were to kill himself, he would damn himself to Hell, but staying alive is a form of hell. Hamlet describes his lack of joy in the world by his views that his reality is “weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable.” The description of the world through Hamlet’s eyes are clearly melancholic, and describe a world without substance, pleasure, or benefit. Hamlet is no longer talking to his family, but switches to addressing God in his cry of misery. It is noteworthy that Hamlet never asks for help from neither his family nor God here, and seems to have lost any hope of ever getting back to a more stable state of mind.

Where modern experts might label Hamlet’s talk and behavior as signs of clinical depression, through the lens of renaissance psychology and passions, Hamlet would be viewed as having an excess of melancholy in his assortment of four liquids. According to Lawrence Babb, the melancholic man is “churlish, whyning...obstinate...holding down their heads, with countenance and loke...They love to be alone, and they are continually tormented by fears and sorrow” (Babb 9). This description fits the character of Hamlet as a glove fits a hand, and describes the actions and state of mind that Orestes is in at the beginning of *Orestes*. Sorrows torment Orestes and Hamlet to the point of mental instability that can be taken for madness. Orestes and Hamlet both verbalize their desire for death, but neither of them commits suicide. Hamlet gives the reason behind his hesitation for self-harm being his unwillingness to commit a great sin against God. Orestes, however, does not have this excuse because, in Ancient Greece, it was not a religious wrong to kill oneself. However, in Ancient Greece as well as in the Renaissance, there was a stigma that related suicide with cowardice, and neither Orestes nor

Hamlet want their actions to be cowardly, what the Greeks viewed as ‘Kakos’ (Dover 165). The lack of desire to live coupled with fear of being cowardly by committing suicide creates a toxic environment for Orestes and Hamlet. Where Hamlet and Orestes differ comes as their plays progress. As Orestes is eventually rescued from his madness by Apollo, Hamlet is only met with more layers of madness on his already unstable mind.

After Hamlet meets the ghost of his father and the plan to avenge his murdered father’s death sets into motion, Hamlet warns his friends that his future actions may be strange, as he will be faking madness.

But come:
Here as before, never, so help you mercy,
How strange or odd some’er I bear myself
(As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
To put an antic disposition on),
That you, at such times seeing me, never shall...

Or such ambiguous giving out, to note,
That you know aught of me – this do swear,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you (*Hamlet* 1.5 171-183).

As we all have done with our own friends at one point in our lives, Hamlet is merely telling his friends a secret with a promise that they won’t tell anyone else. From a surface-level standpoint, this act of secrecy is something seemingly ordinary. However, Hamlet’s oath comes with flaws that have the potential to destroy Hamlet while his friends can do nothing to help. When Hamlet says “How strange or odd some’er I bear myself”, this rids the plan of a safety net if Hamlet cannot handle the persona he puts on. This ‘antic disposition’ Hamlet refers to is just another level of instability to an already battered mind. In this oath, Hamlet’s allies swear on the grounds of grace and mercy, to not interfere or let on to Hamlet’s plan. By forcing his friends to swear to secrecy, he detaches himself from the remaining people who are still on his side, allowing

Hamlet to ultimately succumb to his melancholic mind by successfully isolating himself from everyone.

In Act 2, scene 2, this loophole begins to take effect on Hamlet after his conversation with the ghost of his father. With only a spirit to talk to, we can see the self-induced isolation taking its toll on Hamlet, and a glimpse at Hamlet's furthering madness begin to unfold. Hamlet realizes this, and expresses his grief, "...Now I am alone. / O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (*Hamlet* 2.2. 487-488). Hamlet has gotten the loneliness he strived for, but here he realizes that separation will not ease his mind. Hamlet also refers himself to a "peasant slave," because his relationship with the ghost mirrors slavery, in that he now has no freedom from the relentless hauntings of the mind his father's spirit inflicts on him. This also shows how harshly Hamlet views himself, as both a peasant, who has nothing but freedom, and a slave, who has no freedom. There is no positive light shining in any part of Hamlet's dialogue, and shows how truly depressed he has become. The emotional torture Hamlet is experiencing is undeniably similar to the case of Orestes and the Furies. Both men are afflicted continuously with the madness that they inherently blame on outside forces. Although the ghost of Hamlet's father was seen by other men in the first act of the play, as the plot progresses, the ghost becomes less and less tangible, and allows for the question of whether the ghost is the cause of Hamlet's worsening madness, or if it is all internal.

The role of King Hamlet's ghost significantly decreases in Act 3 of the play, during a heated discussion between Hamlet and his mother, Gertrude. The ghost of King Hamlet interrupts this conversation and Hamlet's attention switches from Gertrude to the Ghost. The ghost is in the same room as both Hamlet and his mother, yet she cannot see the ghost, and takes

this secondary conversation Hamlet is having to himself as further proof of her son's madness.

Gertrude describes the physical appearance of Hamlet,

Fourth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep
And as the sleeping soldiers in th' alarm
Your bedded hair like life in excrements,
Start up and stand on end (*Hamlet* 3.4. 199-122).

Again, Gertrude looks to the outward appearance of Hamlet to reflect his inner conflict. Just as the black cloak and sobbing minimized his grief, now Hamlet's wild eyes and mussed hair understate his lack of mental stability. This description is the opening of the rabbit hole that is Hamlet's mind, and if this description is only the surface, the depths of the prince's insanity are unknown. This layering of mental strain has led Hamlet to the point of no return, and it is this version of Hamlet that will finish the play.

The climax of *Hamlet* follows closely to that of *Orestes*, in that the madness of the tragic hero causes a domino effect of immoral actions. If Euripides would have taken away the Deus Ex Machina ending of *Orestes*, the play would very likely fall very close to *Hamlet*, which ends in bloodshed. If *Orestes* would not have been saved, he would have killed Hermione and Menelaus, burned the palace down, and undoubtedly have been slain by the Menelaus's soldiers. This outline is on par with how *Hamlet* closes out, with Hamlet filling the role of Orestes, Hermione being Ophelia, and Claudius playing the part of Menelaus. The main difference in the endings is the role religion has in the outcome of the play. Where Orestes is saved by Apollo, the Christian God that Hamlet is afraid to disobey earlier in the play does not rescue any of the characters from their seemingly fated doom. This lack of intervention of God in *Hamlet* does not seek to undermine the existence of God, but to instead distance humanity's reliance on the divine. The fact religion is prominent in both plays shows the importance of religion in the times these plays were being performed. Euripides and Shakespeare have no problem acknowledging

the existence of a deity or deities, but the role they have on humans is shown to be less than easily relied upon. *Hamlet* and *Orestes* explore the confounds of the human mind and through characters, show the struggles humanity faces within ourselves. This outlook allows these plays to be grounded into reality in a way that makes these tragedies more relatable as well as more terrifying because the emotions of the characters hit so close to what humans face in the real world.

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