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Bachelor of Arts in English Literature
Minor in Classical Studies

The Other, the Madman, the Hero:
The Epileptic as an Ambivalent Figure in *Hercules Furens* and *Othello*

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to uncover the positive story regarding epilepsy by showing how it operates as a signifier of greatness in two influential and connected narratives: Seneca's *Hercules Furens* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. I want to prove that the two texts offer a portrayal of the epileptic as an ambivalent figure who can be defined through "negative stories" of otherness and madness, while also being narrated as a person of exceptional strength, endurance, and the life experience of a hero. The first part of the thesis will analyze Hercules' and Othello's otherness. Hercules' otherness derives from his liminality, which poses him between the realm of the living and the dead, and the one of gods and mortals. Othello, on the other hand, becomes a "dangerous other" through the racist, animalistic, and hypersexualized images that other characters use to describe him. The second chapter concerns the way Seneca's and Shakespeare's heroes are presented in relation to their madness. A comparison between Seneca's play and Euripides' *Herakles* will allow me to perform a more complete analysis of the trope of the epileptic as a madman. The third and final chapter deals with Hercules' and Othello's status of hero, to which they rise in different, but both valid, ways. While Hercules owes his glory to his decision to not commit suicide, Othello dies by his own hand and becomes a tragic hero for purging the earth from his inner monster.

Dedication

A mamma e papà.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction.....	2
Defining Epilepsy and its Narrative Status	2
Seneca and <i>Hercules Furens</i>	4
Shakespeare and <i>Othello</i>	5
The Influence of <i>Hercules Furens</i> in Renaissance Drama and Shakespeare’s <i>Othello</i> 7	
Chapter One: The Other	10
God, Human, or Monster?: Hercules’ Liminality	11
Black, Animalistic, and Monstrous: Othello “the Moor”	17
Chapter Two: The Madman	23
From Pious Victim to Dangerous Force: Euripides’ and Seneca’s Mad Hercules	24
From Great General to the Mad, “Blacker Devil:” Othello’s Insane Jealousy	31
Chapter Three: The Hero	36
Hercules: The Greatest of Men	36
Othello: A Man of “Constant, Loving, Noble Nature”	42
Conclusions.....	48
Works Cited	51

Introduction

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

–Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*

The aim of this thesis is to study the cultural construction of epilepsy and the figure of “the epileptic” in two works of Literature: Lucius Annaeus Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* and William Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Relying on semiotics, I will analyze the symbolic use of the neurological disease as a signifier of otherness, madness, and heroism or exceptionality in relation to the protagonists of the two tragedies.

Defining Epilepsy and its Narrative Status

Blakiston’s New Gould Medical Dictionary defines epilepsy as:

A disorder of the brain characterized by a recurring excessive neuronal discharge, manifested by transient episodes of motor, sensory, or psychic dysfunction, with or without unconsciousness or convulsive movements. The seizure is associated with marked changes in recorded electrical brain activity. (qtd. in Stirling, *Introduction* xxii)

It is reductive to define epilepsy *only* in medical terms. What I am interested in is showing the *cultural* construction of epilepsy using Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* and Shakespeare’s *Othello* as examples. As French neurologist Henri Gastaut argues, in order to gather a complete

understanding of the phenomenon, one needs to analyze the relationship between the medical discourse and cultural narratives surrounding epilepsy (Stirling, *Introduction* xxi). That is because “epilepsy has acquired a range of historical, social, and symbolic meanings through cultural representations, and medical culture is not immune to these representations” (Stirling, *Introduction* xxiv).

Stories and cultural representations matter because, as Stuart Hall argues, we understand what things mean through “the words that we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce” (qtd. in Stirling, *Introduction* xxv). The stories that surround epilepsy have generated a dominant tradition that depicts the epileptic as a “disordered other” (Stirling, *Introduction* xxv). People affected by epilepsy have often been reduced to a negative story where they play the role of cursed individuals, sexual deviants, madmen, violent murderers.

I was diagnosed with epilepsy at age 7, and back then the only stories about epilepsy I had access to were used to “dispossess and to malign” (Adichie). It took me a while to discover that there is a whole different narrative waiting to be discovered. One where the epileptic is an ecstatic and visionary figure, like the Prophet Mohammed, Saint Francis, and Jeanne d’Arc, or a person gifted with a peculiar vision of the world like Vincent Van Gogh and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

In her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls for the need to produce more positive narratives to make sure one’s life experience is not flattened or simply reduced to a “negative story.” While Adichie’s objective is to *build* a positive narrative, my aim is to *uncover* the positive story regarding epilepsy by showing how it operates as a signifier of greatness in two influential and connected narratives: Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*. There is no need to *create* a new, more positive narrative of epilepsy,

because it already exists, and it is in plain view in the two selected works of literature. The issue is that, for some reason, this narrative became separated from the dominating, neuronormative discourse.

Hercules Furens and *Othello* merge the two types of narratives that exist about epilepsy, offering a portrayal of the epileptic as an ambivalent figure who can be defined through “negative stories” of otherness and madness, while also being narrated as a person of exceptional strength, endurance, and the life experience of a hero. It is up to the reader to decide which of the two interpretations wins. I, for once, read in the characters of Hercules and Othello a redemption of the epileptic.

Seneca and *Hercules Furens*

One of the most prolific writers of Ancient Rome and an imperial courter, Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born between 4 and 1 BCE in Corduba, the modern Córdoba in Spain (Bernstein 65). He was known principally for his philosophical works and plays, which often drew from the Greek tradition. Out of seven and a half extant tragedies composing his *corpus*, four are adaptations of Greek tragedies, and the rest are either free rewritings of Greek texts or examples of contamination between the Greek and Roman tradition (Calder 6). This practice, however, was not exclusive to Seneca. The reworking of Greek material was particularly common among Roman writers, including Plautus and Terence, who also produced Roman adaptations of Greek plays.

Together with *Agamemnon*, *Medea*, and *Oedipus*, *Hercules Furens* is one of the four tragedies that Seneca adapted from the Greek. We have no way of dating the play with accuracy but, because of the way it criticizes the abuse of power of a tyrannical, absolute monarch,

scholars believe it was written during the rule of Claudius, with whom Seneca had a troubled relationship (Bernstein 67).

Hercules Furens is set in Thebes, and the key *dramatic personae* of the tragedy are Hercules, the protagonist of the play, a demigod born from the god Jupiter and the mortal Alcmena; Juno, Jupiter's wife; Amphitryon, the husband of Alcmena; Megara, Hercules' wife; and Lycus, the usurping king of Thebes. The play opens with Juno expressing her frustration about Hercules' power and her determination to defeat the hero. The scene then moves to Thebes, where Lycus has murdered Megara's father, Creon, and has taken control of the city. At this time of the play, Hercules is still completing the last of the Twelve Labors assigned to him by King Eurystheus: defeating Cerberus in the underworld. When he returns to the realm of the living, in Act Four, Hercules immediately slays Lycus and is then overcome by a seizure: his homicidal frenzy has begun. Under the effect of Juno's powers, Hercules murders his wife and children. When he recovers from his insanity, he is determined to kill himself to purge the earth from the monster he now identifies with. However, moved by filial *pietas* and by his characteristic endurance, Hercules decides to live: "Let this labour now be added to my labours: staying alive," he declares at the end of the play (1216-1317).

Shakespeare and *Othello*

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-Upon-Avon, Warwickshire (Black et. al. 647). His works are often considered the foundation of Western culture, and their influence on the subsequent literary culture is unmatched. His production includes three narrative poems, 157 sonnets, and 39 plays. Shakespeare's plays have been a part of popular culture for centuries and they have held the stage ever since the eighteenth century. They are traditionally divided into

three categories: histories (mostly written in the 1590s), comedies (dated between 1595 and 1601) and tragedies (produced between 1599 and 1606). Together with *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*, *Othello* belongs to the last group (Black et. al. 649).

Othello is a five-act tragedy set in Venice, Italy, and in the isle of Cyprus. The play centers around the character of Othello, a black man described as a “Moor” and the general of the Venetian army. Iago, a lower member of Othello’s army, plots the hero’s downfall from the beginning of the play. His motives are overall unclear: he appears to be driven by professional jealousy, but also by the unfounded suspicion that Othello had an affair with his wife Emilia. The vagueness about Iago’s reasons suggests that the real motive for his behavior is located in his prejudice against “the Moor.” Iago’s plan consists of planting in Othello’s mind the suspicion that his wife Desdemona (with whom the general secretly eloped) has been having an affair with Cassio. To prove his accusations, Iago secretly places one of Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s rooms. Then, he encourages Othello to eavesdrop on a conversation between himself and Cassio. However, he stages the conversation so that Othello reads in Cassio’s words confirmation of the illicit affair. At this point, Othello has an epileptic fit and, when he recovers, he orders Iago to murder Cassio while he himself kills Desdemona. Immediately after the murder, Desdemona’s innocence is revealed, and Iago’s plotting is exposed. The play ends with Othello’s death by his own hand. His suicide represents both payment for the unjust murder of his wife and his last heroic quest. By killing himself, Othello also kills the monster that people have turned him into through racial stereotypes. He, therefore, succeeds in the heroic quest of purging the earth from an evil force.

The Influence of *Hercules Furens* in Renaissance Drama and Shakespeare's *Othello*

There is a connection and relationship of influence between these plays. Miola defines Seneca's *Hercules Furens* as "a classical text that resists localization, a text that, by virtue of its popularity and influence, has acquired the status of myth" (50). Seneca's tragedy is echoed in a great number of plays, and particularly in those produced in the Renaissance. Some examples include: Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc*, Robert Greene's *Selimus*, Thomas Hughes' *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, and George Chapman's *Byron* plays (Miola 50-51). Rolf Soellner argues the Roman text was so influential a convention originated from it. The "Hercules Furens convention," as Soellner calls it, brings together elements of myth, stage practices, and medical and philosophical theories, blending them all together "according to Renaissance recipes" (Soellner 309).

Shakespeare made great use of the Hercules Furens convention, as proved by the many traces of Seneca's influence that were found in *Hamlet*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, to which Miola dedicates particular attention. He performs a comparative analysis of the structure and characterization in *Hercules Furens* and *Othello* and concludes that Seneca's text supplied Shakespeare with a mythical archetype for his tragedy (51-52).

Miola notes three key structural parallelisms between the plays. The first has to do with the events that preface the main action. Both texts open with a threat to the community: *Hercules Furens* begins with Lycus usurping the throne of Thebes and instituting a tyrannical reign; *Othello* opens with the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (Miola 52). The second parallelism that Miola addresses is related to the part that Hercules and Othello play in the resolution of the initial crisis. Both are called to act in defense of their communities. Taking on the endeavor, they

leave the stage and only return when the threat has been extinguished (52). A final point of comparison is the fact that both Othello and Hercules are not able to celebrate their success upon their return. Instead, the heroes fall victim to their own fury, a homicidal madness that is kindled by a third party (Miola 52). In both plays, the initial *external* threat (Lycus' tyranny in *Hercules Furens*, and the Turkish invasion in *Othello*) is ultimately substituted by an *internal* threat, represented by Hercules' and Othello's inner monsters.

Although he respects the overall structure of Seneca's play, Shakespeare makes some essential changes to the narrative. While Hercules dispatches Lycus' unjust reign by slaying the man himself, Othello plays no active part in the extinction of the Turkish threat: the Turks are defeated by a storm, *not* by Othello. A second key difference is found in the identity of the third party responsible for the homicidal madness of the heroes. In the case of Hercules, his madness is kindled by Juno, a powerful goddess. When it comes to Othello, however, he is driven insane by Iago, the lowest-ranking soldier who has no divine quality to him.

By taking Seneca's tragedy and reworking part of the original material in his *Othello*, Shakespeare turns his play into a story about the importance of stories. If Hercules' madness is determined by a divine force out of his control, Othello's insanity is the direct consequence of the violence and prejudice found in the stories of a common (and socially and morally inferior) man. Iago can manipulate Othello's heroic narrative and convince him that he was never the monster-slayer but the monster, the innately mad, "blacker devil" (V.ii.161). As Miola notes, Iago "presents Othello as a comic Hercules," a man who tries to be the hero of the story but is just not right for the part (54). In particular, the initial episode of the play establishes a clear contrast between Hercules, the hero who saves his people by killing the evil tyrant, and Othello, the satyr-like creature who tries to defeat his enemy but ends up not having to lift a finger.

However, Iago only tells a part of the story. He omits Othello's heroic exploits during his exploration of exotic lands as well as the way he earned Desdemona's love.

Iago uses the single, negative story in order to dispossess, malign, and break Othello's dignity. Yet, stories can also be used to empower, humanize, and repair that broken dignity (Adichie). Othello knows it, and that is the reason why, before dying by his own hand, he asks Lodovico to tell his story, to "Speak of me as I am" (V.ii.402).

Chapter One: The Other

Qu'est-ce qu'un monstre? Un être, dont la durée est incompatible avec l'ordre subsistant. Mais l'ordre général change sans cesse; comment au milieu de cette vicissitude la durée de l'espèce peut-elle rester la même?

What is a monster? A being whose existence is incompatible with the subsiding order. But the general order is constantly changing; how is it possible, in the midst of this vicissitude, for the duration of the species to remain the same?

–Denis Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*

A possible definition of “otherness” sees it as “the outcome of a discursive process in which a dominant, hegemonic in-group (‘we’, or ‘Us’) constructs one or several out-groups (defined as ‘them’ or ‘Other’) by exploiting – existent or imaginary – differences serving as potential motives for bias, discrimination, and aggression” (Tischler 7). In both Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*, a person or a group of people discriminates the main character on the base of existing and constructed differences. Hercules is othered because of his liminality. Not only is the hero stuck between the realm of gods and mortals, but also between the world of the living and the dead. Othello is othered through the racist prejudice of other people. Iago performs a “racial disablement” (Buchheim 3) of the hero when, through animalistic metaphors and hypersexualized images, he makes Othello identify with the devilish and monstrous being he paints him as (V.ii.161). Both heroes, therefore, turn into monsters for the simple reason that their existence is “incompatible with the subsisting order” (Diderot 170). However different the

causes of their discrimination might be, in both plays, the characters' epilepsy is used as a tool to confirm their otherness and their monstrosity.

God, Human, or Monster?: Hercules' Liminality

Act One of *Hercules Furens* begins with a furious monologue delivered by the goddess Juno, the sister and wife of Jupiter (Bernstein 1). Looking at the constellations in the night sky, she expresses her anxieties about Hercules, who she fears will dethrone Jupiter and rob Juno of her title as queen of heaven (Bernstein 1). When the "defeated night tucks in her wandering fires/ as light is born again" (127-128), the Chorus begins a lengthy description of rural people engaged in various occupations. The Chorus was a characteristic element of Greek drama, later borrowed by the Romans. It consisted of a large group of actors (usually fifty) that commented on the events unfolding on stage. However, while the Greek Chorus "typically provides the audience with a larger context in which to interpret the action of the play... the Senecan Chorus often demonstrates the inadequacy or absence of such interpretative framework" (Tarrant 94). While the Greek Chorus is usually all-knowing and acts as a sort of *objective* omniscient narrator, Seneca's Chorus lacks knowledge of what is happening. The voices of the Chorus, therefore, represent the *subjective* impressions of a community that listens, observes, and comments on the base of the information gathered from the unfolding drama.

In its first intervention, the Chorus remarks on how the shepherd, the sailor, and the fisher all live in "in innocence— in peace and quiet, each home happy with its own small stock" (158-160). Their idyllic and balanced life is contrasted with the vices and dangerous ambitions of the people who live in the city. The Chorus refers to key city figures like the man who "does not

sleep,/ haunting the doorways of the royal palace,” looking for a patron (164-165), or the one who is deluded with dreams of popularity.

Then comes the warning to Hercules: “Hercules, you are rushing to see the grieving ghosts;/ your courage is too much (186-187).” In the opinion of the Chorus, Hercules’ *hubris* surpasses that of the city people. Instead of treasuring the short life that is granted to mortals, Hercules has decided to march toward his own death, taking on endeavors such as the journey to the Underworld (Bernstein 3-4). Neil Bernstein puts particular emphasis on the concluding lines of the ode, where Hercules is addressed as the one “who rides high up on his chariot” (196). The image has two readings. On the one hand, it alludes to Hercules’ ascent to Olympus after his death, and his welcoming into the immortal world of gods. On the other, the Chorus might be hinting at Pompey, the Roman general who rode a chariot around the city after defeating his enemies. According to tradition, a slave reminded the general that “he was not a god but a mere mortal” (Bernstein 6). The implication of the Chorus would therefore be that Hercules, too, should listen to the words of the slave and be reminded of his mortality (Bernstein 6).

The double reading of Hercules as someone who belongs to both the divine and mortal realm links to his identity as demigod. Demigods are “in-between” beings who escape classification: they are neither mortals, nor gods, but both. Martin Heidegger writes that demigods are *overhumans* and *undergods*. They are “not themselves gods” but rather “beings that point in the direction of the gods, and indeed in a direction that leads over and beyond human beings” (Heidegger 150).

Hercules’ status as demigod derives from his parentage. The earliest accounts of Hercules’ origins are found in Greek texts (Fulton 3). In the *Iliad*, Zeus (Jove in the Roman tradition) briefly mentions that the mortal “Alcmene...bore [his] dauntless son, Herakles” (qtd. in Fulton

3). Hercules' half-divine, half-mortal parentage already makes him a hybrid being, not quite mortal but also not *au pair* with the gods. Although Hercules *is* the biological son of Alcmena and Jove, the hero was brought up in the mortal world and Amphitryon, Alcmena's *mortal* husband was like a father to him. It is not a coincidence that, in the *Theogony*, Hesiod refers to Hercules not only as *Διὸς υἱὸς*, son of Zeus, but also as *Ἀμφιτρωνιάδης*, son of Amphitryon (Fulton 3). So, who is Hercules? Is he the anomalous son of two mortals, or a hero born from the greatest of gods?

Hercules' dubious parentage plays a key part in his characterization as a liminal figure, as it makes it impossible to define the hero in terms of origins and capabilities. This theme is explored in Act Two, and specifically during the argument between Lycus and Amphitryon that follows Megara's rejection of the usurper. Lycus refuses to believe Hercules is the son of Jove, as "human beings cannot mate with gods" (448), and consequently states that Hercules is not and never will be a hero. In response to Lycus' accusations, Amphitryon replies:

After so many deeds
of legendary heroism, after he made peace
through all the lands the rising and the setting sun can see;
after so many monsters killed; after he scattered
the blood of the impious Giants, and defended the gods—
is his paternity still unclear? Are we calling Jove a liar?

At least believe in Juno's hatred. (141-147)

As Neil Bernstein comments, Amphitryon is not ashamed of the illegitimacy of Hercules. He rather assumes a protective role, using Hercules' Labors as proof of the heroism conferred upon the hero by his divine father.

At this point, Lycus points out that, regardless of his divine parentage, Hercules has often displayed wicked qualities that make him more appropriate to being a slave than to becoming equal to the gods. In particular, he references the episode at the court of Omphale, where Hercules was enslaved and compelled to wear women's clothing and be occupied with women's work ("...Should we call him brave, whose shaggy hair/ dripped with perfume? Whose famous hands were quick/ to work to the womanish beat of the tambourine,/ wearing a foreign turban on his ferocious head?") (468-471). Lycus also mentions the kidnapping of Iole, a deed that was not part of the Twelve Labors ordered by Eurystheus, but a simple act of *hubris* (and ruin the house of Eurytus,/ and drag off flocks of virgin girls like sheep?/ No Juno nor Eurystheus ordered this;/ these are his very own actions") (476-479). To the accusations Amphitryon responds: "You do not know it all" (480) and moves on to provide examples of all the monsters Hercules killed of his own initiative. Among them are the bully Eryx, Antaeus, Busiris, Cycnus and the three-bodied Giant Geryon (480-488).

The exchange between Lycus and Amphitryon highlights Hercules' hybridity, which manifests itself through a general unbalance of body and mind capabilities: on the one hand, he possesses a physical strength equal to the gods that allows him to slay monsters and overcome twelve otherwise impossible deeds. On the other, his mind has the vulnerability of human beings: he is as prone to *hubris* as the city people that the Chorus describes in the first act. As Kristen Fulton points out, Hercules "is physically as powerful as the gods, but he is no match for their mental games," as will be proved in Act Three and Four, when Juno corrupts Hercules' mind into madness (30).

Hercules' madness increases the audience's perception of the demigod as a dangerous "other." It is through the episode of Hercules' homicidal madness that the hero's liminality— the

mismatching of his extraordinary physical strength and vulnerable mind resulting from his peculiar parentage—ultimately turns the monster-slayer into a monster. Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark refer to lines 937-939 of Seneca's play as the point in the text where Hercules becomes monstrous. In the lines in question, Hercules states: "if earth is still going to produce any wickedness, let her hurry, and if she is preparing any monster, let it be mine" (qtd. in Motto and Clark 269).

Motto and Clark note that Hercules is explicitly asking for "wickedness" to occur *as soon as possible* ("let her hurry"). Furthermore, through the words "let it be mine," he is not only taking *responsibility* for any forthcoming monsters that the earth may produce, but he is asking the monster to belong to him, to be *a part of himself* (Motto and Clark 269). In the lines that precede the quote, Hercules refuses to pray to Juno, and rather prays to himself as if he was a god greater than the ones on the Olympus. The two scholars interpret Hercules' actions as the demonstration of a "boastful attitude [that] smacks of *hubris* in the extreme" (269) as well as a show of Hercules' inflated ego and naiveté (271).

Whenever the gods are challenged, a horrible recompense awaits. Just like Ajax who was driven mad by Neptune after offending Athena, Hercules' wish is almost immediately granted (Motto and Clark 269). As a matter of fact, Juno, Jove's wife already hostile to Hercules because of his paternity, makes sure that the demigod "becomes himself the very monster he has been asking for" (Motto and Clark 270).

Misled by hallucinations, Hercules imagines the constellations plotting against him, and therefore promises to challenge the gods and conquer Mount Olympus with the help of the Titans. Another hallucination leads him to mistake his sons for the ones of Lycus, and his wife

for the goddess Juno. He, therefore, kills his family and then collapses to the ground in what resembles an epileptic fit:

Amphitryon: ...Or do I see

Hercules' hands tremble? He is falling asleep,

his head sinks down, his neck is bowed and weary.

Now his knees collapse, he falls to the ground,

like an ash cut down in the forest, or a mass of bricks hurled out

into the sea to build a pier. Are you still alive?

Or has the madness which killed your family killed you too?

He is just asleep: I can see the movement of breath. (1043-1053)

It must be pointed out that Seneca never labeled Hercules' fitful disease as epilepsy, and neither did Euripides in his *Herakles* (as we will see in Chapter Two, Seneca partly used the Greek play as reference when writing *Hercules Furens*). However, at this point in history, it was common knowledge that Hercules' frenzy was driven by "epileptic furore," as demonstrated by the fact that epilepsy was also known as *Herculeus morbus*, or Herculean disease (Stirling, *From Hippocrates to Shakespeare* 4). It follows that, although it is not explicitly stated, the sickness of Hercules in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* can, without any doubt, be identified as an epileptic seizure.

As Jeannette Stirling points out, the signifying potential of epilepsy and of the epileptic makes the disease "something of a stock device in literature" (*Introduction xv*). From Hippocrates to Shakespeare and Dickens, epilepsy has been considered a curse, or the cause of unpredictable and non-conventional behavior. "More often than not" Stirling writes, "cultural representations of epilepsy locate the affected character in the borderlands between normality

and abnormality; as a figurative device, ‘the epileptic’ is inevitably poised on an unstable threshold between order and an ever-threatening chaos” (Stirling, *Introduction* xv).

Seneca, like Euripides before him, and Shakespeare after, recognized what Stirling calls “the dramatic possibilities of epilepsy” (Stirling, *Introduction* xv). Hercules becomes a prototype for the stock character of the epileptic: he is a being stuck between the realm of gods and mortals, and between the world of the living and the dead (as a matter of fact, he is still in the Underworld during the first two acts of the play). His mortal and divine origins locate him on the “borderland between normality and abnormality.” On the one hand, he brings order by slaying monsters and removing innocent people from danger, on the other, his *hubris* and vulnerable mind drive him to commit horrors and bring chaos into the life of the people he loves.

Hercules’ epileptic seizure is just further confirmation of his state of perennial liminality. Ultimately, it is not simply his actions— the murdering of his family— that transform Hercules into the very monster he asks to become, he has always been a monster because of his otherness. “What is a monster?” asked Diderot in his *Éléments de Physiologie*, “A being, whose existence is incompatible with the subsisting order” (170).

Black, Animalistic, and Monstrous: Othello “the Moor”

Just like Hercules, Shakespeare’s main character does not immediately appear on stage. The audience *hears* of Othello before they *see* him. In particular, the first descriptions of the character are provided by Roderigo and Iago. Their mention of Othello’s appearance in the first scene of Act One is charged with racial, animalistic, and sexual connotations (Bayles). Before Iago suggests informing Desdemona’s father of her involvement with Othello, Roderigo remarks “What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe if he can carry ‘t thus!” (I.i.72-73). As Maggie

Bayles notes, by using the expression “thick-lips” in reference to Othello, Roderigo is “reducing him to a racialized physical attribute, taking away his subjectivity as a whole person.”

Furthermore, an intrinsic sexual reference can be found in the same lines, as lips (and big lips in particular) are often considered an erotic symbol (Bayles). A few lines later, Iago informs Brabantio of Desdemona and Othello’s relationship. It is interesting how he puts particular emphasis on the description of the two having sex. He says:

Your heart is burst. You have lost half your soul.

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram

Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise!

Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,

Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you. (I.i.96-101)

Here, both Desdemona and Othello are compared to animals. However, while the former is similar to a white sheep, a symbol of purity and innocence, Othello is equaled to a black ram. Not only does the animalistic figure associated with Othello act as a racist reminder of his otherness, but it once again hypersexualizes Othello because of the notions of penetration and domination associated with the animal (Bayles).

Iago’s sexual and animalistic comparisons do not stop here. Just a couple of lines later, he continues: “You’ll have/ your daughter covered with a Barbary horse,/You’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have/ Coursers for cousins and jennets for germans” (I.i.124-127). In these lines, Desdemona is no longer compared to an animal, but Othello is. Bayles comments that there is a true sense of bestiality in the words used by Iago. Even before the audience has the chance to see Othello on stage, they are persuaded to form a prejudice of him as an “extremely primal and uncivilized” man (Bayles), associated with the unnatural, a brutish sexuality, and “the evil of the

devil himself—” just think of Iago’s statement “the devil will make a grandsire of you” (Tischler 38) (I.i.100).

The juxtaposition between Desdemona as a “white ewe” and Othello as a “black ram” is only the first of many images that contrapose the skin colors of the two characters, putting emphasis on Othello’s blackness. In this regard, Laurie Maguire points out:

The Elizabethans inherited from the Middle Ages an iconographic color-coding which equated black skin with the devil and hence with moral blackness (because God was light). In medieval plays the devil was portrayed as black... and in the Elizabethan printing house the printer’s assistant, covered in ink dust, was known familiarly as the “printer’s devil”. Black became a metaphor for evil. (Qtd. in Tischler 16)

Othello’s blackness makes him a “black devil” (II.iii.161), a wicked, sexually driven monster closer to animals than human beings. On the other hand, the whiteness of Desdemona’s skin corresponds to an inner purity and beauty comparable with the one of Dian, the goddess of chastity and female virtue (III.iii.438-445). Desdemona herself makes the divide between Othello and herself clear when she refers to him as “the Moor,” an appellative which highlights Othello’s ethnical difference from herself and the other characters in the play (Bayles).

By the time Othello finally appears on stage, he is quick to dismiss the degrading descriptions Iago and Roderigo have provided of him. When Iago communicates to Othello that Brabantio “spoke such scurvy and provoking terms/ against your Honor” (I.ii.9-10) and that he will not hesitate to obtain a divorce, Othello replies: “Let him do his spite:/ My services which I have done the signory/ Shall out-tongue his complaints” (I.ii.20-22). As Tischler remarks, Othello appears self-confident in these lines, and he does not consider his status of black foreigner an obstacle to his integration in Venetian high society (42).

Another instance in which Othello refuses the status of “other” is when, in Act Three, Iago tries to awake in him a sense of jealousy, suggesting an affair between Cassio and Desdemona. In response to Iago’s speculations, Othello denies he could ever “make a life of jealousy” (III.iii.208). He continues: “Exchange me for a goat/ When I shall turn the business of my soul/ To such exsufflicate and blown surmises,/ Matching thy inference” (III.iii.211-2214). Othello’s words hint at and reject the previous racist remarks in which Iago compares Othello to a black ram, a horse, and, later on, an ass who can be “tenderly... led by th’nose” (I.iii.445) (Stirling 6). Othello’s words do not simply address the theme of racism, but, if read from the perspective of a Hippocratic representational economy, they also foreshadow his epilepsy, tackling another aspect of the character’s otherness (Stirling 6). As Jeanette Stirling explains, Hippocratic physicians conducted most of their research concerning epilepsy on goats, because of their susceptibility to seizures. Stirling believes that Shakespeare was not only aware of this association, but also extremely influenced by Hippocratic imagery (6). Hence, through the likening of Othello to a goat, Shakespeare is hinting at the hero’s imminent seizure.

After he compares himself to a goat, Othello appears dislocated. He manifests a number of symptoms that anticipate his epilepsy. Among them are “a pain upon [his] forehead” (III.iii.326), extreme stress, and difficulty in articulating coherent thoughts (Stirling 7). The words “Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone,” pronounced a few lines after (III.iii.409), signal a shift in the attitude of the character. From this point on, Othello begins to believe Iago and Roderigo’s initial remarks about his inferiority. He, therefore, gradually internalizes the devilish and monstrous connotations related to his skin color and ethnicity, and consequently develops a deep sense of insecurity (Tischler 39). Walter Cohen argues that Othello’s self-doubt is particularly evident

when he attempts to find a cause for Desdemona's betrayal, which he has now been convinced of (qtd in Tischler 39). Othello exclaims:

By the world,

I think my wife be honest and think she is not.

I think that thou art just and think thou art not.

I'll have some proof! Her name, that was as fresh

As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black

As mine own face. (III.iii.438-443)

Othello's words seem to echo Brabantio's argument that Desdemona ran "from her guardage to the sooty bosom [of Othello]" (I.ii.89). As Maggie Bayles points out, the adjective "sooty" does not simply allude to the color of Othello's skin, but it also suggests that it is dirty, hence corrupted. In a similar way, Othello associates blackness with dirt. He says that "fair Desdemona's" reputation, once as white as Dian's face, is now "begrimed and black." Othello, therefore, unconsciously locates the reason of Desdemona's betrayal in himself. It is Othello who "dirtied" Desdemona's soul when the woman ran "from her guardage to [his] sooty bosom," and her betrayal is nothing but a direct consequence of her initial corruption by the hand of "the Moor."

According to Andrew Buchheim, Iago performs a "racial disablement of Othello." He invents Othello's monstrosity on the base of his race, and disables him both metaphorically and literally (3). On the one hand, he rhetorically "disables Othello from full humanity" by describing him as a devil, a sexual offender, and a half-human-half-animal being (Buchheim 3). On the other hand, when Iago's invention of Othello's monstrosity persuades Othello himself to identify as a monster, he *literally* loses control over his body through an epileptic seizure (Buchheim 3).

Jeanette Stirling argues that Othello “becomes epileptic at the moment he succumbs to Iago’s manipulations” (7). It is Iago who comes up with the diagnosis of Othello’s epilepsy in the first place when he states, “My lord has fallen into an epilepsy” (IV.i.64). It must be pointed out that, at the time the play was first performed in London, epilepsy denoted “breaches in the boundaries of social and moral propriety... in both popular and medical imaginations” (Stirling 6). It follows that, in the moment Iago publicly announces Othello’s epilepsy, he places Othello even more in “the netherworld beyond the boundaries of mainstream society and rationality” (Stirling 7). In other words, he others him, he disables him, and uses epilepsy as proof of Othello’s monstrosity.

Just like Hercules, since the very beginning of the play, Othello is viewed as a monster for the simple reason that his existence as a black man is “incompatible with the subsisting order” (Diderot 170). If, throughout the first acts, Othello refuses the devilish and monstrous connotations that others link to his name, by the end of Act Three, he starts to think them true. Ultimately, he *becomes* the very monster that others portray him as when, maddened by jealousy, he murders his wife Desdemona.

Chapter Two: The Madman

*As long as Pentheus was still alive,
he kept on screaming. The women cried in triumph—
one brandished an arm, another held a foot—
complete with hunting boot—the women's nails
tore his ribs apart. Their hands grew bloody,
tossing bits of flesh back and forth, for fun.
His body parts lie scattered everywhere—
some under rough rocks, some in the forest,
deep in the trees.*

—Euripides, *Bacchae*

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the way Euripides', Seneca's, and Shakespeare's heroes are presented in relation to their madness. Euripides' Herakles is portrayed as an ideal citizen, a loving father, son, and husband both when he is sane and when he goes mad. His madness is determined by an external, divine factor: Juno. As a result, he is not held accountable for the actions he performs while under the spell of Lyssa (the Greek spirit of madness) and his status of hero remains unaltered throughout the play. Seneca's Hercules, on the other hand, is a boastful, impulsive demigod guilty of *hubris*. His madness derives from an internal factor, as he possesses a certain potential for madness (his madness is, therefore, innate). When it comes to Othello's madness, Shakespeare performs a fusion of the two narratives about madness. At the beginning of the play, the hero presents qualities that resonate with Euripides' Herakles: he is a loving husband, a skilled general and orator, and he is well-integrated in Venetian high society.

One would therefore assume that his madness, like the one of Herakles, must derive from an external force rather than from an inner predisposition. However, when Iago succeeds in the racial disablement of the hero, Othello turns into the “blacker devil” (V.ii.161): one who is, as Emilia remarks, “not ever jealous for the cause,/ But jealous for [he’s] jealous” (III.iv.181-182).

Seneca’s Hercules and Shakespeare’s Othello are defined and then destroyed by their insanity. Their annihilation takes the form of a *σπαραγμός* (*sparagmos*), “a ritual death in which a body (divine or mortal) is torn asunder” (Tribby 8). The Greek word is associated with the cult of Dionysus (described by Euripides in his *Bacchae*) and has two primary meanings: “a tearing, rendering, or mangling” and “a convulsion or spasm” (Tribby 8). Although they are not *physically* torn apart, both Hercules and Othello are psychologically annihilated by the hand of two very different figures: on the one side is the all-powerful goddess Juno, on the other is the socially and morally inferior Iago. Seized by a fitful disease (a *sparagmos*), both heroes ultimately become sacrificial beasts because their exceptional potential constitutes a threat to convention and order.

From Pious Victim to Dangerous Force: Euripides’ and Seneca’s Mad Hercules

There are two versions of the story of Hercules’ madness, one recorded in the works of Diodorus Siculus and Apollodorus, the other attributed to Euripides (Soellner 309). In the first, the hero’s insanity precedes the famous Twelve Labors. When Jove, Hercules’ father, commands him to serve Eurystheus, Hercules refuses, outraged at the idea of being at the mercy of a man he considers his inferior. Jove’s wife Juno, hostile to Hercules because of his paternity, takes advantage of the hero’s angry disposition and strikes him with madness. Under the effect of Juno’s powers, Hercules kills his sons and wife, and later expiates his guilt through the Twelve

Labors. Euripides tweaks the original story in *Herakles* (Soellner 309). In his version, the madness of Hercules (Herakles for the Greeks) happens *after* the Labors and upon his return from the Underworld. When he reaches home, he is informed of Lycus' violent ascent to power. He therefore takes it upon himself to kill the usurper and is immediately after driven into a homicidal rage by Juno (Hera in the Greek tradition) (Soellner 309).

In his *Hercules Furens*, Seneca chooses to tell the story of the hero's *furor* according to the Euripidean version. Although Seneca's play is built on the model of Euripides, the two playwrights deal with the hero's madness in different ways. Euripides portrays Herakles as a pious and innocent victim. He is a sane man of good judgment whose madness is an extraordinary event determined solely by Juno's thirst for revenge. Seneca's Hercules, too, is a victim of Juno. Yet, he is not as pious: he is a boastful, impulsive demigod guilty of *hubris*. His madness, inextricably connected to his epilepsy, is not just Juno's punishment for his birth status. It is a measure necessary to make sure the *ordo mundi* is not dismantled by Hercules' exceptional, and therefore dangerous, potential (Bishop 221).

In Euripides' play, Herakles is portrayed, from the beginning, as an ideal citizen, a loving father, son, and husband. His insanity is just an anomaly, a single episode that cannot affect Herakles' glorious reputation. It is a delusion, an "alternate reality" that the hero has no control over (Horgan 2). Herakles's madness has a clear beginning: it starts when Lyssa, the Greek spirit of rage and frenzy, dramatically enters the stage mid-play and announces what she will do to him:

... I Enter Herakles' heart

And make it beat louder and louder in his ears,

Breakers pounding on a reef, or the ground

Shaking and cracking wide, or lightning slashing

Through gasping clouds, won't match my rage. (1110-1114)

Karelisa Hartingan remarks on the peculiar choice to place the divine intervention in the middle of the play rather than in the prologue or closing. According to the scholar, the “unusual intervention of deities at midpoint... [emphasizes] the external nature of Herakles' punishment.”

(127) Through this dramatic device, Euripides makes it clear that Herakles is a sane man: his madness does not derive from an inner predisposition, but from an external intervention (Hartingan 127). The fact that madness does not pertain to the hero is also clear in the way his insanity is portrayed. The mad Herakles never appears on stage. All his actions are related by the Messenger (Horgan 2), so that there is no visual association between insanity and the hero. The audience is only allowed to see Herakles at his best, as an ideal citizen, loving father, son, and husband.

Through the messenger's words, we learn that Herakles' madness happens unexpectedly, while he is purifying his house after murdering Lycus. Suddenly, he becomes “dead silent. Suspended. *Not there*” (1222 emphasis mine). With a twisted laugh, he says:

So Father... why waste time

With sacrifices and cleansing fire?

I might as well kill Eurystheus first

And save the trouble of doing it all again.

When I cut off Eurystheus's head

And bring it back here, then I'll wipe

My hands of blood. (1228-1234)

Possessed by the spirit of madness, Herakles decides to kill Eurystheus and conveniently thinks to postpone the purification until *after* the murder. He imagines traveling to the city of Eurystheus to fetch the man, but he never moves from his own house. Herakles then kills his own children under the assumption that they are the sons of his enemy. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro speak of “Herakles’ Dionysiac madness” as an “alienated mimetic action” (18). Through a Dionysiac illusion (soon to become a delusion), Herakles “is described miming a journey from Thebes to Argos, and then he casts his own family in the role of his enemy Eurystheus” (18). Euripides uses this image of “subverted theater” (Burian and Shapiro 18) to highlight the contrast between “the subjective context within which Herakles *believes* he is acting and the objective reality in which he is *actually* functioning” (Horgan 2). The audience, therefore, develops a certain empathy toward Herakles. It is thus that the hero ultimately becomes an innocent victim of Juno’s rage.

We mentioned that Herakles’ madness has a clear beginning, marked by divine intervention. The end of the hero’s frenzy is also clearly defined. As Herakles approaches his father to kill him, the Messenger reports:

But something—a shimmering
That firmed up into Athena’s shape
(At least that’s how it looked) shook her spear
Above her helmet’s crest— she hurled a boulder
Against Herakles’ chest—it knocked him senseless
And stopped his bloody rampaging. (1310-1315 emphasis mine)

Horgan notes that “Herakles’ madness is limited to a fixed period, initiated by the gods and ended by them” (3-4). It is a short bracket, a standalone episode, where the hero is not himself,

but under the effect of a divine curse. As a result, Hercules cannot be held accountable for the crimes committed.

In Chapter One, we described Seneca's Hercules as a character stuck between the realm of gods and mortals, as well as the world of the living and the dead. Because of this intrinsic liminality, Seneca's protagonist cannot be the ideal hero Herakles is presented as. Lycus implicitly calls Hercules an abomination, as "human beings cannot mate with gods" (448). His half-divine half-human origins make him guilty of *hubris* and drive him to commit both extremely wicked and heroic acts (think of the episode at the court of Omphale or the kidnapping of Iole in contrast with the slaying of Eryx, Busiris, Geryon, and the other monsters). Hercules' madness is *still* the result of a delusion, as he perceives a reality different from the one he acts upon (he still thinks he is killing Lycus' sons when he is slaying his own). However, Seneca "[calls] into question the extent to which [Hercules] is conscious of this reality in his delusion" (Horgan 5).

Unlike Herakles, Seneca's hero openly denounces his hallucinations, making it clear that he *knows* the reality he perceives no longer corresponds to objective reality (Horgan 5). He says:

But what is this?

Darkness gathers at noon! The sun is overcast

but by no cloud. What makes day run away,

driving it back to the east? Why does strange night

bring forth its black face? Why do so many stars

fill up the sky by day? (939-944)

Furthermore, while Herakles thinks he has traveled from one house to the other, Hercules is aware of his actions within the given frame of space and time. In other words, he *knows* he has

not moved from his own house, and still reaches the illogical conclusion that the children living in it are Lycus' ("But look, my enemy's children are skulking here,/ the nasty seedlings of the tyrant Lycus. I hate your father;/ I will send you back to him with my own hands) (987-989).

Hercules' insanity does not stand as an event in and of itself, nor can it be solely blamed on supernatural forces independent from the hero. When madness strikes Euripides' Herakles, he becomes "suspended. Not there" (1222). The Greek playwright clearly states that the hero is not in himself, that he has become another person. With Seneca's Hercules, his madness does not *change* him: it simply *exaggerates* the power trips of the hero's sane mind (Horgan 6). Before his *furor*, Hercules already states his superiority to the gods: "If I had wished to rule the underworld,/ I could have" (606-608). When he goes mad, he expresses the same conviction, but the hypothetical period ("If I had...") becomes an affirmative clause ("I will"):

...*I will* whip [the Titans] up to fight. *I will* carry mountains, forests,
my hands will seize the clifftops, thronged with Centaurs.

I will build two mountains into a path to the sky:

Pelion will see its Chiron under Ossa,

Olympus, set up in third place, will reach the heavens—

thanks to me. (968-973 emphasis mine)

Unlike Euripides, Seneca does not identify a specific moment where Hercules' madness begins and ends. The blurring of the lines between Hercules' sanity and his insanity led scholars to argue that Hercules is never *entirely* sane (Horgan 7). This thesis is reinforced by the fact that Hercules' madness takes the form of an epileptic fit, once believed to be a melancholic disease that caused mental instability in those who suffered from it (Soellner 313).

According to Foucault, madness is born from the cultural, intellectual, and economic structures that a society depends on (*Madness and Civilization*). It is a fabrication, a way society constructs a fact of the body which is, in itself, neutral. The madman, like the monster, is “a being, whose existence is incompatible with the subsisting order” (Diderot 170). In Chapter One, we looked at how Hercules’s liminality defines him as a monster even *before* he commits a monstrous act (the killing of his family). The same principle applies to the hero’s madness: Hercules is depicted as a madman even before Juno’s intervention. Hercules is considered innately mad because nothing about him conforms to social norms: from his birth to his Labors, to his time in the underworld, his life experience locates him “in the borderlands between normality and abnormality;” stuck between the constructs of “sanity” and “insanity” (Stirling, *Introduction xv*).

Considering Hercules’ “insanity” an indicator of exceptionality, David Bishop argues that the cause of the hero’s divine punishment in Seneca’s play cannot be reduced to Juno’s ancient grudge against him. Rather, Hercules’ madness must be a consequence of Juno’s anxieties about the hero’s ambitions and the likeliness of them coming true. Bishop explains:

In Act 1, Juno plainly tells us that Hercules’ type of life is tragically outrageous... His physical capacity and accomplishments and his psychological readiness are dangerous. That is, the kind of man Hercules is, coupled with the kind of deeds he does, produces a violence of action which Juno abhors because it is contrary to the *ordo mundi*, regardless of the results and intentions of the doer. (qtd. in Horgan 6)

Hercules’ madness *almost* ends like Juno had planned: through the hero’s *sparagmos*, the dismembering of a sacrificial beast to grant the happiness of the gods and maintain order in the heavens. Seneca’s Hercules, just like Euripides’, is a victim. However, in *Herakles*, the hero is

simply punished for being a child of infidelity. In Seneca's version, Hercules's near-destruction comes as a direct consequence of the inability of other characters to recognize the value of his exceptional potential.

From Great General to the Mad, "Blacker Devil:" Othello's Insane Jealousy

Iago's racial disablement of Othello (discussed in Chapter One) culminates in the hero's insane jealousy. Iago first kindles the hero's jealousy when, in Act Three, he remarks on Cassio's "guiltylike" attitude after having conversed with Desdemona in private (III.iii.42). He then suggests to Othello that the two are having an affair. To back up his accusation, he confesses to Othello that he has seen Cassio "wipe his beard" with "such a handkerchief/ I am sure... was your wife's" (III.iii.496-498). Othello, falling into Iago's trap, proclaims:

Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago,

All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.

'Tis gone.

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell! (III.iii.504-507 emphasis mine)

In the same way Seneca's Hercules is considered innately mad, Othello is often labeled as innately jealous (Tishler 58). Even within the play, Emilia calls Othello a "jealous soul," who is "not ever jealous for the cause,/ But jealous for [he's] jealous" (III.iv.181-182) His jealousy "is a monster/ Begot upon itself, born on itself" (III.iv.182-183). Yet, when Othello describes vengeance as black and locates it outside of himself (note that vengeance arises from "the hollow hell," not from *within* Othello), he makes it clear that, although he is conscious of a social prejudice that links blackness to evil, there is no actual connection between his ethnicity and an *innate* jealous and vengeful temperament.

Othello, therefore, is not innately mad. He is rather *driven* mad by Iago's violent and hateful words. As proof of that, one can think of the episode in Act One in which Othello expresses a desire to take Desdemona to Cyprus with him. He says his decision is meant

...not

To please the palate of my appetite,

Nor to comply with heat (the young affects

In me defunct) and proper satisfaction,

But to be free and bounteous to her mind. (I.iii.296-300 emphasis mine)

In these lines, there is no trace of qualities like hot temperedness, possessiveness, and obsessive jealousy (Tishler 58). Rather, Othello reminds us of Euripides' Herakles: a loving husband who cares about the wellbeing and freedom of the ones he loves.

However, as Iago persists in his mission to convince Othello of his own monstrosity, the hero's views on marriage and the condition of women shift entirely. He identifies love with ownership and adopts a misogynistic mentality (Tishler 59) when he remarks:

O curse of marriage,

That *we can call these delicate creatures ours,*

And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,

And live upon the vapour in a dungeon

Than keep a corner in a thing I love

For others' uses. (III.iii.309-314 emphasis mine)

Juliet McLauchlan notes that Othello's loss of his honorable principles corresponds to the deterioration of his once-excellent rhetorical skills (52). This is particularly true if we look at the way Othello expresses himself in Act One in comparison with the end of the play.

When he has to justify his secret marriage to Desdemona in front of Brabantio and the Senate, he speaks as follows:

Most potent, grave, and reverend signors,
My very noble and approved good masters,
That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,
It is most true; true I have married her.

...Rude am I 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. (I.iii.91-94, 96-101 emphasis mine)

Tony Bromham remarks that “though Othello says that he is not accomplished as a public speaker (‘Rude am I in my speech’), the speech strikes one as that of a person who does have oratorical skills and who knows how to be persuasive with words” (79). In this passage, Othello presents himself as calm, open-minded, and composed, in contrast to Brabantio, whose speech is agitated and poorly eloquent. Othello demonstrates his rhetorical skills through sentence structure, rhythm, and his choice of words. For instance, he uses many complimentary adjectives to win the favor of the senators while painting Brabantio as a simple “old man,” an outsider. At the same time, he makes sure to describe himself as a soldier and a man of action to remind the Senate of how much they need him in order to fight the Turkish threat (Bromham 79).

Fast forward to Act Four, Othello's once-eloquent speech turns into strange utterings that resemble a stream of consciousness. Right before he falls into a trance, he says:

Lie with her? Lie on her? We say 'lie on her' when they belie her. Lie with her? 'Swounds', that's fulsome! Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief... It is not words that shake me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil! (IV.i. 45-54)

While the other characters continue speaking in verse, Othello switches to prose. His vocabulary is limited, dominated by repetitions, and his sentences are incomplete, illogical.

McLauchlan relates Othello's initial eloquence to a clear and ordered vision of the world, one that precedes Iago's disablement of the hero (52). By contrast, once he is persuaded of Desdemona's betrayal, Othello's *ordo mundi* is destroyed, and his ability of self-expression (which was considered an indicator of prestige and dignity at the time Shakespeare was writing) follows.

At this point in the play, Othello, just like Seneca's Hercules, perceives the universe as "strange and disordered" (Miola 56). Hercules sees darkness covering the morning sky, Othello refers to his mental state before the trance as a "shadowing passion" (IV.i.50). Hercules sees the stars unfix'd and threatening to start a war, Othello laments:

O heavy hour!

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse

Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe

Did yawn at alteration (V.ii.122-125 emphasis mine)

Othello, like Seneca's and Euripides' hero, is under the effect of an illusion. In the case of Hercules, the one responsible for the delusion is Juno, who wants to make sure the hero's "dangerous" aspirations do not upset the *ordo mundi*. In Shakespeare's play, Othello's chaotic perception of the world is a symptom of his maddening jealousy, kindled by Iago. Yet, Iago's

reasons are not as clear as Juno's. Othello does not threaten the universal order. It is clear, however, that he represents a threat to Iago himself for reasons related to professional jealousy or the unfounded suspicion that Othello had an affair with Iago's wife Emilia. The vagueness that surrounds Iago's motives suggests that the soldier's prejudice about Othello is stronger than the reasons that are identified as the rational cause of his behavior.

As we saw in Chapter One, Iago performs both a metaphorical and physical disablement of Othello: first, he disables him from humanity by characterizing Othello as a devil, a sexual offender, and an animalistic being. Then, he convinces Othello of his own monstrosity and physically disables him when he declares his "lord has fallen into an epilepsy" (IV.i.64). Iago therefore succeeds in the construction of a racist narrative about Othello, which he uses to turn the hero against himself and ultimately drive him mad. It is thus that the story of Othello as great captain-general, a skilled public speaker, and loving husband is replaced by the image of the mad, "blacker devil" (V.ii.161), a monster that Othello himself feels the need to erase from the face of earth. Othello's death, like the near-suicide of Hercules, ultimately becomes an example of *sparagmos* where the violence and prejudice of Iago's words *tear apart* Othello's reputation as well as his self-image, and pose an end to his life.

Chapter Three: The Hero

Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are seized by the illnesses that come from black bile, as is said in connection with the stories about Heracles among heroes?

–Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems*

There are two sides to Hercules and Othello. On the one hand, as we have seen, they are depicted as monsters and madmen. On the other hand, they are heroes. Hercules' heroism comes across through his characterization as the embodiment of good and the defender of peace. His *patientia* also contributes to making him "the greatest of men" as it allows him to overcome his thirteenth and most important labor: rethinking his decision to kill himself. Othello's heroism and exceptionality are highlighted in relation to three points: his positive characterization in contrast with Iago's negative one, his sensational stories of exotic lands and heroic exploits, and his suicide. In both the narratives of Hercules and Othello, epilepsy becomes a signifier of the characters' exceptionality and a sign of their heroic status.

Hercules: The Greatest of Men

At one extreme, Seneca's Hercules "can be seen as an overachiever, the very exemplar of human hubris," at the other "he can be regarded as the greatest of men, a model to be emulated" (Fitch 20). As Thalia Papadopoulou remarks, one extreme does not always exclude the other

(270). Rather, the hero's flaws and virtues often coexist. In Chapter One and Two, we focused on the first extreme by looking at the way Seneca depicts Hercules as both a liminal figure and an innately mad character. In this chapter, we will discuss Hercules' status as hero and his characterization as "the greatest of men."

At several points in the play, Seneca uses the theme of "bipolarity between good and evil" to establish Hercules as the embodiment of "good". There are three episodes where this is most evident (Papadopoulou 270). The first is located in Act Two, which begins with Amphitryon stating his anxieties about Hercules. He lists many of the hero's Labors, from the killing of the Nemean lion (224) and the Lernean Hydra (241), to the creation of the Strait of Gibraltar through the smashing of the mountain that was once the Titan Atlas (237). A question follows:

What good did all this do him? He is gone from the world he saved.

The earth has understood: *its peacemaker*

has gone off-duty. They give the name of virtue

to successful crime. The good obey the bad.

Might is right, and fear stifles the law. (249-253 emphasis mine)

It is important to notice how Amphitryon paints Hercules as a hero on a universal pacifying mission. His role is to be a dispenser of good who defeats the monsters that inhabit the dramatic past—the ones he kills during his Labors, as well as the dramatic present—the unjust tyrant Lycus (Papadopoulou 270). Amphitryon defines Hercules in opposition to Lycus, who represents "the bad" that "the good" obey to. Lycus' reign of fear and injustice is compared to Hercules' "*righteous* hands [that] destroyed the rule of tyrants" (271 emphasis mine). Amphitryon continues by describing Hercules as one "who *pursued all wickedness* by land and sea" and is now unjustly "enslaved and banished; forced to endure/what he fought against" (272-274

emphasis mine). Through this statement, Amphitryon is clearly locating Hercules and Lycus at the two opposite poles of the good-evil dichotomy.

A second example of this bipolarity of good and evil is found in the Second Ode of the Chorus (Papadopoulou 271). The Chorus goes back to the theme of the hero's restless life introduced by Amphitryon, and comments on the injustice of Fortune, considered antagonistic to heroes:

Fortune, enemy to heroes, how unfairly
you portion out the prizes of the good.

Eurystheus can be king and take it easy;

Alcmena's son must struggle all the time,

fighting monsters with hands that held the sky. (524-528)

Once again, we are faced with a binary opposition between Hercules, the "good" man, the hero whose prizes are unfairly portioned, and another character, Eurystheus. While Eurystheus is free to reign over his people without struggle, the demigod has to travel the world— as well as the *underworld*, without any certainty about his return home (Bernstein 8).

The third and final example of the good-evil polar opposition that characterizes Hercules as "the greatest of men" is found in Act Four, right at the beginning of the hero's madness. When Amphitryon implores his stepson to allow himself "some time for rest and quiet" (926), Hercules replies:

No! I want to do it myself. I will pray

as Jupiter and I myself deserve. May heaven stand still,

and earth and sea; may the everlasting stars

run smooth across the sky, *may deep peace feed the people*;

may all the iron of the world be used for harmless farmwork,
and may the sword be buried. (926-931 emphasis mine)

Once again, Hercules is depicted as a hero on a universal pacifying quest. He is determined to fight every cruel tyrant that aspires to rule the world (937), every storm and river that threatens to shake the ocean or ruin the crops (931-934), any fire that might spur from Jupiter's hand (932), any poison that might cause unjust death (935-936). Even in his madness, he still plays the part of fighter of evil and defender of peace and order (Papadopoulou 271). Later on in his prayer, he reiterates the polar division between himself and the evil he is determined to fight:

But if, even now,
earth still intends to produce more evil, if even now
horror is in the works—then let it be mine. (937-939)

Little does he know that the next monster he will have to fight— and defeat, is himself. The audience already learns this in the prologue, when Juno says: "...let the lofty moon bring forth new monsters./ But he has conquered these. Do you want his match?/ *There is none but himself. So let him fight himself*" (83-85 emphasis mine). The goddess recognizes that the only monster that might stand a chance against Hercules is the hero himself. For this reason, she will "guide his maddened hands" (120) as she lets him "beat himself" (116).

When Hercules recovers from his fit and learns about his homicidal madness, he perceives himself as a monster. However, he is still determined to maintain his heroic status. For this reason, Hercules concludes he must commit suicide and free the earth from his own monster (Papadopoulou 271). He states:

If I live, I am a murderer. If dead, a victim.
I need to hurry up and clean the earth; *too long*

this wicked, cruel, wild, barbaric monster

has wandered free before me. Come, right hand,

try a mighty labour, bigger than the Twelve. (1278-1282 emphasis mine)

However, Amphitryon disagrees with Hercules. He makes a point that the murders are a *casus* (accident), not a conscious *scelus* (act of wickedness) and that the one responsible for them is Juno (“The grief is yours,/ the guilt your stepmother’s. Bad luck is not your fault”) (1200-1201). The hero’s suicide would therefore result in the triumph of his enemy, not his own (Rose 110). When Hercules is not persuaded by the man’s argument, Amphitryon threatens to kill himself unless the hero lives. He therefore announces that, if Hercules follows through, he will commit a conscious *scelus* “—Here is the crime of Hercules *sane*,” (1313 emphasis mine). Moved by filial *pietas*, Hercules obeys his father and changes his mind on suicide.

Amy R. Rose notes that, although *pietas* is what motivates Hercules’ decision in the moment, “the act finds its ultimate justification in its characterization as an exercise of *patientia*,... his capacity to undergo troubles with courage and to withstand seemingly insurmountable difficulties” (111). Hercules’ *patientia* makes him stand out not only among common men, but also among other heroes. In the *Odyssey*, Ulysses ventures in the Underworld and meets Hercules, whose mortal self still figures as a soul in Hades despite his ascent to Olympus (Bernstein 42). Through the few words Hercules speaks in Book XI, Homer portrays him as a great example of *patientia*. The hero introduces himself as follows:

I was Kronos’ son Zeus’ off spring, and yet I suffered

woes beyond measure, for I was placed in subjection

to a man far worse man than myself, who laid hard labors on me.

He even once sent me here to get Hadēs’ hound: *he could think*

of no harder labor for me than this. Yet that hound I did

indeed carry off and bring up out of Hadēs (XI.620-625 emphasis mine)

Bernstein argues that Hercules' words in the *Odyssey* "inaugurate a new way of looking at the hero, as a man famous for his endurance of sufferings as much as for his triumph over enemies" (42).

Seneca goes back to the theme of the hero's endurance several times in his play. One of them is in Act Five, when Amphitryon encourages the demigod to "be a Hercules" in the way he bears his pain ("Now we need a Hercules: to bear this weight of pain") (1239). According to Amy Rose, Amphitryon's statement not only highlights Hercules' characteristic *patientia*, but it also stresses the hero's duality as both a suffering, self-destructive man, and a model of Stoic morality (111). A second example is found a few lines after, when Theseus addresses Hercules, now sane, as follows:

Your father's prayers

ought to work, but let me also try

to move you with my tears. Get up, burst through your troubles,

with your usual energy. Take up again that spirit

which can face any danger. *Now is the time*

to use your heroic courage: Hercules must not stay angry. (1271-1276 emphasis mine)

It is thus that Hercules' restraint from suicide becomes his thirteenth and most relevant Labor as the hero himself points out when he declares: "Let this labour now be added to my labours: staying alive" (1216-1317).

A final point must be raised regarding the correlation between Hercules' heroic status and his epilepsy. The Greek author of *Problems* (erroneously identified with Aristotle) argued that

Hercules suffered from melancholy, a disease related to the ascent of black bile from the stomach to the brain. He also noted that Hercules' melancholy manifested itself through epilepsy, which was commonly believed to be a melancholic disease (Soellner 313). Pseudo-Aristotle was among the first to see in Hercules' melancholy, and therefore his epilepsy, a signifier of exceptionality. He painted the condition not as a dangerous disease, but as a trait shared among the most prominent figures in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts, as well as among the most heroic men. In the previous chapters, we saw how Hercules' epilepsy both characterizes the hero as "the other" and is a symptom of his predisposition to insanity. However, if we flip the coin, we will realize that, in Hercules' narrative, epilepsy also becomes a signifier of the man's exceptional endurance, of his unmatched heroic quests, and of his status as "the best of men."

Othello: A Man of "Constant, Loving, Noble Nature"

Othello, like Hercules, is characterized by an intrinsic duality. He is, at once, the monster and the monster-slayer, the madman, and a man of "constant, loving, noble nature" (II.i.311). In Chapter One and Two, we focused on the depiction of Othello as monster and madman. This chapter will look at the other side of the coin, analyzing Othello's status as hero. Examples of Othello's heroism and exceptionality can be found in relation to three points: his positive characterization in contrast with Iago's negative one, his sensational stories of exotic lands and heroic exploits, and his suicide.

Seneca defines Hercules as "good" by comparing the hero to evil figures like the tyrant Lycus and the other monsters that inhabit the earth (and the underworld). A similar dichotomy is found in Shakespeare's play, where Iago is characterized as a devilish, evil figure and Othello as a God-like, or Adam-like being. In Act I, Iago delivers one of his most famous lines: "I am not

what I am” (I.i.71). Aside from being a declaration of his own insincerity (note that Iago is referred to as “honest” throughout the entire play), Iago’s words contain an allusion to Exodus 3:14. In the biblical text, God (Yahweh) says to Moses “I am who I am... say this to the people of Israel.” According to Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo, by reversing the words of God, Iago metaphysically locates himself in a realm opposite to the divine one: if Iago is what God is *not*, then he identifies with the devil (Paolin).

Alexander Gonzalez conducts an analysis of the symbolical patterns in *Othello*. He focuses on the use of religious language and imagery in relation to Iago and gets to the same conclusion as Ercolino and Fusillo that “we can consider Iago to be a Lucifer or Negative God” (43). Gonzalez proves Iago’s association with the devil by noting that he is the only character who uses the words “hell” or “devil” in the first act. All the other characters use religious terms sincerely and devotedly until they have a verbal confrontation with Iago. It is only when Iago “infects” everyone around him with his evil disposition that they begin to use God’s name in vain and repeatedly (40). Eventually, Iago will infect Othello as well. For this reason, Othello is both an Adam-like figure, sinless and pure until the devil corrupts him and turns him into “the blacker devil” (V.ii.161), and a God-like one, as he represents the devil’s enemy, the one Iago envies and wants revenge over (Forti).

Iago’s line “I am not what I am,” is preceded by another interesting assertion: “Were I the Moor I would not be Iago” (I.i.63). Through this statement, Shakespeare describes Iago and Othello as two opposite poles: at one extreme is the wicked, devilish, dishonest Iago; at the other, Othello, who is consequently associated with the opposite values. It should also be noted that the two lines delivered by Iago (“I am not what I am,” and “Were I the Moor I would not be Iago”) have a linguistic element in common: they are both negations. These are not the only

instances in which the character expresses himself using negative constructions: it rather is a recurrent pattern in the text, which develops in opposition to Othello's speech, mostly made up of positive assertions (among other examples is his final soliloquy, where he states "Speak of me *as I am*") (V.ii.402 emphasis mine). Even linguistically, therefore, Iago is portrayed as a "negative" character, and Othello as a "positive" one (Paolin).

A second example of Othello's heroism is found in his sensational stories of exotic lands and heroic exploits. In Act I, Brabantio invites Othello to relate the circumstances of his elopement with Desdemona in front of the Senate. Othello begins by explaining how, prior to his marriage to Brabantio's daughter, he had a friendly relationship with the man, who used to welcome him into his house and loved to question him on "the story of [his] life/ From year to year– the battles, sieges, fortunes/ That [he] passed" (I.iii.150-151). Under the request of Brabantio, Othello recounts the most various stories of

...moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hairbreadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,
And portance in my traveler's history. (I.iii.156-161)

In the passage, Othello depicts himself as a military hero. Like Hercules and Ulysses, he becomes an example of endurance because of his capacity to undergo many "accidents by flood and field" with courage and leadership.

The fact that Othello's travel stories take place in exotic lands unknown to the listeners adds a seductive power to his heroism (Tischler 44). It is not surprising, therefore, that Othello wins the heart of Desdemona through his mysterious and heroic tales:

My story being done,

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.

She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,

'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.

...She loved me for the dangers I had passed,

And I loved her that she did pity them.

This only is the witchcraft I have used. (I.iii.182-186, 193-195 emphasis mine)

Othello's glory as traveler and warrior also appeals to the Senate, which is ultimately persuaded of the truthfulness of Desdemona's love for the man (Tischler 44). One could go as far to say that the Senate itself is in love with Othello and with his stories about foreign, unknown lands and brave quests. Karen Newman points out that Othello's origins are, at once, empowering, charming, as well as threatening. She concludes that part of Othello's exceptionality lies in his "exotic otherness, his cultural and religious differences as well as his heroic exploits" (qtd. in Tischler 45). Desdemona ultimately falls in love with Othello *because* of his otherness: she loves him because he is a "monster" (and by doing so, she dismantles Iago's thesis that no one could ever love the monstrous Othello).

The third and most meaningful example of Othello's heroism is his decision to kill himself. David Houston Wood defines Othello's suicide as a "classical heroic assertion" because it allows him to both defeat and reclaim his own monstrousness (Buccheim 4). This is evident in the hero's final soliloquy, which begins as follows:

Soft you. A word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know't.

No more of that. (V.ii.397-399)

Ironically enough, through Othello's undermining of his service to the State, the reader is reminded of his heroic pursuits as a general and fighter of evil. Like Hercules, Othello is aware of his dual identity as monster and monster-slayer. His suicide, therefore, is not just a way to pay for the murder of Desdemona, but it represents his last heroic quest, the slaying of his last monster.

The conclusion of Othello's soliloquy is reminiscent of Hercules' words before he attempts suicide. Hercules speaks of himself as a "wicked, cruel, wild, barbaric monster" (1280) that needs to be purged from the earth. In a similar way, Othello addresses Lodovico as follows:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a *malignant* and a *turbanned Turk*
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog,
And smote him, thus. (V.ii.413-417 emphasis mine)

There is no escape from death in Othello's story, no God to blame or paternal *pietas* to resort to. His suicide, however, does not diminish Othello's heroism: the man rather turns into a *tragic* hero. He does not simply kill himself; he kills the monster that people have turned him into through racial stereotypes born from jealousy or envy. Othello's story does not die with him, as he orders Lodovico to

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme... (V.ii.402-406 emphasis mine)

Othello does not die as a violent, jealous murderer. He is still a man of “constant, loving, noble nature” (II.i.311) who has been “perplexed in the extreme” and tricked by the devilish Iago. He dies a Christ-like figure: fallen by the hand of the devil, and raised to the status of hero thanks to self-sacrifice.

This brings us back, once again, to the words of Pseudo-Aristotle: “Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are seized by the illnesses that come from black bile...?” (*Problems*). Because their epilepsy, like the one of Hercules and Othello, *denotes* their exceptionality, it indicates that, in one way or the other, they have raised to the much-acclaimed status of hero.

Conclusions

Through a comparative semiotic analysis of the characters of Hercules and Othello, I attempted to shed light upon the narrative status of epilepsy, by which I mean the cultural narratives surrounding the neurological disease and the set of historical, social, and symbolic meanings that are associated with the figure of the epileptic. In my research, I look into the way Seneca and Shakespeare characterize the epileptic protagonists of their plays as, at once liminal figures that represent “the other,” madmen, and heroes with extraordinary capabilities.

The first topic of discussion is the depiction of Hercules and Othello as “the other.” Hercules’ otherness derives from his liminality. Hercules is not just physically stuck between the realm of the living and the dead. As a demigod, he also exists somewhere in between the world of gods and mortals. Although he possesses a superhuman physical strength and endurance, Hercules still has the mind and the vulnerability of a mortal. This general unbalance makes his existence “incompatible with the subsisting order” (Diderot 170) and results in his reputation of “dangerous other.” While Hercules exists between *Heaven* and Earth, Othello’s liminality locates him on the border between Earth and *Hell*. Throughout the entire play, Iago, together with Cassio and Brabantio, associates Othello’s blackness with racist, animalistic, and hyper-sexualized images that portray him as the “blacker *devil*” (V.ii.161). Although Othello initially dismisses the degrading descriptions offered by other characters and refuses to be characterized as a racial “other,” he ultimately internalizes the remarks about his inferiority and *becomes* a “monstrous other” through the killing of Desdemona.

Both Hercules and Othello are defined and then destroyed by their madness. However, there are some key differences in the way Seneca and Shakespeare portray the fury of their heroes.

Seneca inherits the story of Hercules from the Greek playwright Euripides. In both the Greek and Roman tragedy, Juno is responsible for the hero's madness. In *Herakles*, Hercules plays the part of a pious man whose madness is the result of Juno's grudge against his paternity. Hercules' insanity only derives from an *external*, divine factor that he has no control over. Seneca, on the other hand, suggests that Juno's intervention is not only a form of divine punishment for Hercules' paternity. The madness of Seneca's Hercules originates from an *inner* factor, located in the hero's *hubris* and his "excessive" ambition. Juno, therefore, strikes him with madness because he represents a threat to the *ordo mundi*.

Shakespeare's tragedy, consistently with the humanistic theme of the Renaissance, eliminates the divine element from the narrative of the hero's madness. Rather than being driven insane by an almighty, unstoppable, divine force, Othello's maddening jealousy is kindled by Iago: not only a mortal, but the *last* of them, too. Furthermore, his decision to destroy Othello is not determined by the fact that the hero represents a threat to the universal order. Iago is rather a man without social, cultural, or moral status, whose actions are essentially unmotivated.

By the end of the play, both Hercules and Othello rise to the much-acclaimed status of hero, although in different ways. Hercules' exceptionality lays in his *patientia*, or endurance. His final decision *not* to commit suicide marks his most laudable Labour, as it proves his superhuman "capacity to undergo troubles with courage and withstand seemingly insurmountable difficulties" (Rose 111). In Othello's story there is no escape from death. However, his suicide does not take away from his heroism. Through the complicated act of slaying his inner monster, Othello rather turns into a *tragic* hero.

Othello's final plea to Lodovico is: "Speak of me as I am" (V.ii.402), in other words "tell my story." Shakespeare does more than that in *Othello*. He builds on Seneca's *Hercules Furens* to

tell the story not of a single person, but of a people. He takes the trope of the epileptic and highlights its ambivalence by posing attention to the importance of telling one's story.

Ultimately, he teaches us that, while stories can (and have been) used to dispossess, malign, and break someone's dignity, they can also be used to empower, humanize, and repair that broken dignity (Adichie).

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