## THE MONSTER IN SENECA'S *HERCULES FURENS* 926–939

> Qu'est-ce qu'un monstre? Un être, dont la duré est incompatible avec l'ordre subsistant. Mais l'ordre géneral change sans cesse; comment au milieu de cette vicissitude la durée de l'espèce peut-elle restre la même?
> —Diderot, *Eléments de Physiologie*

The acme of accomplishment for Hercules the hero in the Senecan *Hercules Furens* is attained by line 937. He has just destroyed the tyrant Lycus, who had threatened Hercules' own family with destruction, and he has triumphantly completed the Twelve Labors imposed upon him by Eurystheus and Juno, concluding with the daring and sensational descent into the Underworld and safe return. Hercules brings back in captivity no less a monster than the fearsome triple-headed dog, Cerberus. He is at the apex of success.

Yet at this high point, Hercules is impatient (*Hercules Furens* 937–39):

> si quid etiamnum est scelus
> latura tellus, properet, et si quod parat
> monstrum, meum sit.[1]

> . . . if earth is still going to produce any wickedness, let her hurry, and if she is preparing any monster, let it be mine.

His tone is hardly humble or propitiatory. Hercules appears to be challenging the whole world to do its worst; he will nonetheless prevail. This boastful attitude smacks of *hubris* in the extreme. One recalls the disastrous recompense awarded to Ajax for challenging the deities, when, shipwrecked at sea, he had taunted Pallas Athena—only to be instantly overwhelmed and destroyed by the sea-god Neptune.[2] Hercules seems to be dangerously vaunting against fate itself, and therefore it should come as no surprise to us when we learn in the play's very next half-line that Hercules commences to display overt signs of an incipient and hallucinating madness.

In fact, these three lines constitute some of the most poignantly ironic lines in all of dramatic literature. Here Hercules calls for speed; he wishes wickedness to occur *at this moment*. He fully gets his wish: for the second half of line 939 marks the overt outbreak of his delirium and frenzy. He distractedly envisions the day darkening and the heavens in a chaotic explosion of turmoil. The net effect of this furor is his slaughtering his own wife and children. Assuredly, he is granted a surfeit of "wickedness," and with all the "haste" that he had requested.

Furthermore, he announces that if any monsters are to be forthcoming, they appropriately are *his* responsibility; in effect, they "belong to" him. Once again, the cruel thrust of bitter irony strikes home: as noted in an earlier study of this play, "Hercules, the one sure slayer of monsters, has become himself a monster."[3] Alas, monstrosity in this play is shown to be relative, subject to change without notice.

1. In O. Zwierlein, ed., *L. Annaei Senecae, "Tragoediae"* (Oxford, 1986), p. 34.
2. Sen. *Agamemnon* 528–56.
3. A. L. Motto and J. R. Clark, *Senecan Tragedy* (Amsterdam, 1988), p. 292. Others have mentioned this irony in passing; J. G. Fitch (*Seneca's "Hercules Furens"* [Ithaca and London, 1987], p. 27) perceives

Hercules in a trice becomes himself the very monster he has been asking for.[4] Here in Seneca's drama is again enacted the brilliant irony of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus,* where the shrewd detective metamorphoses into the very criminal he has been seeking. But in this passage, Seneca's irony unfolds in a few brief seconds of dramatic time, thus acquiring unusually incisive force.

To get a better grasp of Hercules' state of mind when he speaks these three lines, we need to consider them in context. Amphitryon has just suggested to Hercules that he should pray to Jove for an end to his Labors, pray for peace and quiet (*otium quiesque,* 925–26). The hero responds (*Hercules Furens* 926–39):

> Ipse concipiam preces
> Iove meque dignas: stet suo caelum loco
> tellusque et aequor; astra inoffensos agant
> aeterna cursus; alta pax gentes alat;
> ferrum omne teneat ruris innocui labor
> ensesque lateant; nulla tempestas fretum
> violenta turbet, nullus irato Iove
> exiliat ignis, nullus hiberna nive
> nutritus agros amnis eversos trahat.
> venena cessent, nulla nocituro gravis
> suco tumescat herba. non saevi ac truces
> regnent tyranni. si quod etiamnum est scelus
> latura tellus, properet, et si quod parat
> monstrum, meum sit.

> I myself shall devise prayers worthy of Jupiter and myself: may heaven, earth, and sea abide each in its own place; may the eternal stars continue their course unhindered; may profound peace nurture the nations; may the toil of the innocent farmer employ all the iron, and may swords be hidden; let no violent storm disturb the sea, let no fire leap forth from angry Jove, let no river swollen by winter snow flood the cultivated fields. Let poisons disappear, let no detrimental herb swell with harmful juice. Let no savage and cruel tyrants rule. If earth is still going to produce any wickedness, let her hurry, and if she is preparing any monster, let it be mine.

Here Hercules reveals a host of unusual traits. Instead of requesting an end to his labors, Hercules proposes a super-Herculean task: contention with any and all forms of wickedness that may ever come into existence. Surely this is a remarkably extremist petition. Furthermore, he wants *haste:* let all future wickedness approach *at once*—Hercules is impatient to end *all* injustice in the universe. This is an incredible prayer; certainly it is well meaning, but it displays extreme naiveté. The universe cannot ever be purged of evil, especially at one fell stroke. As Seneca

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in lines 938–39 "unconscious irony": "the monstrous evil will indeed be his own." F. Caviglia (*Seneca, "Il Furore di Ercole"* [Rome, 1979], pp. 46, 53) believes it to be "tragic irony." J. Shelton (*Seneca's "Hercules Furens": Theme, Structure and Style* [Göttingen, 1978], p. 65), because she stresses Hercules' flaws, believes it to be a punitive irony.

4. Later in the play, tempted to commit suicide, Hercules clearly identifies his maddened self as this very "monster"; 1279–81: "purgare terras propero. iamdudum mihi / monstrum impium saevumque et immite ac ferum / oberrat. . . . " Cf. *Hercules Oetaeus* 55–56.

acknowledges elsewhere, vice tends to proliferate and multiply: *Cito nequitia subrepit,*[5] and *meliora praetervolant, deteriora succedunt.*[6] *Malum* is woven into the fabric of existence and cannot so rapidly or so easily be dislodged.

Yet, in his prayer, Hercules wishes to guarantee that men will eliminate warfare and henceforward utilize iron from the earth for the making of plows. Although these be admirable sentiments, we know full well that they do not take cognizance of the flawed human heart. It is an inherent portion of human nature that Hercules in his prayer would seem to overlook, abolish, or deny.

He is even more rash in his desire to restrain Nature itself, for he calls for an end to lightning and the extinction of natural poisons. He wants spring thaws, causing the overflowing of riverbanks, to cease. Here Hercules overtly desires an end to the natural cycles of seasons and seeks to obliterate the normal patterns of the weather.

Are these the "monsters" Hercules is now poised and willing to conquer? Can he do battle with mankind, with nature, and with the gods as well? At this point, Hercules' wishes and ideals take a flight into the unnatural. We have to assess fully not merely Hercules' naiveté that could generate such fantastic aspirations, but also the magnitude of his ego: for he appears to believe that only he, that he alone, can and will—almost instantly—eliminate all sin, crime, and difficulty from the creation, as if he alone could serve as instantaneous Savior, one about to institute a Nirvana purged of impurities, thereby providing us with a universe transformed to perfection. In short, lines 926–39 portray a Hercules who is steadily and incrementally becoming more and more rash, illusionary, and unstable. Instead of praying to Jupiter, as Amphitryon had recommended, his prayers are concerned with both Jupiter and himself (*preces / Iove meque dignas,* 926–27); but by lines 937–39, his focus is solely upon himself, Jupiter having been displaced. For in these lines Hercules has commenced to pray to himself—as the greatest of gods—requesting the complete alteration and reformation of the universe and its laws.

Scholars have traditionally conjectured that Hercules' madness commences at line 939b, where his hallucinations are patently evident:[7]

> —Sed quid hoc? medium diem
> cinxere tenebrae. Phoebus obscuro meat
> sine nube vultu.
> [939b–941][8]

But what is this? Darkness has enveloped midday. Phoebus moves with darkened face in a cloudless sky.

5. *QNat.* 3.30.7.

6. *Ep.* 108.25. Consult A. L. Motto and J. R. Clark, "Seneca on Vice," *Euphrosyne* 21 (1993): 239–48.

7. At line 939, the editor of the Loeb edition asserts: "The madness planned by JUNO begins to come upon him" (Seneca, *Tragedies,* ed. F. J. Miller, 2 vols. [Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1968], 1:83). At line 939, H. M. Kingery similarly comments: "In the midst of his haughty challenge he is overtaken by madness" (*Three Tragedies of Seneca* [New York, 1921], p. 195). Fitch, "*Hercules Furens*", pp. 363, 28, observes that lines 939–52 mark "the onset of Hercules' madness."

8. Surely there is additional irony here: Hercules imagines he is witnessing "darkness at noon," a popular Senecan *topos* representing the world-upside-down and emblematic of the apex of the "unnatural." But Hercules' ideas all along, as we have shown, have partaken of this selfsame unnaturalness.

We, however, would propose that his very prayer in lines 926–39 suggests that madness is already upon him, mounting both in strength and in force.[9] Indeed, it is only reasonable to assume that the rising tide of madness has been upon him throughout the entire play. And why not? We have learned at the very outset from the furious Juno that Hercules is to be afflicted with insanity. It is but one further monstrous irony that he is, like Juno herself in this play, well on his way toward madness all along.

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9. Shelton, "*Hercules Furens*", pp. 63–66, maintains that the madness is ongoing (owing to Hercules' own character flaws).