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Madness as Psychosocial Function in the Ancient Myth of Heracles

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Abstract
Since its origins, Greek culture became aware of the importance of mental illness in their daily lives. Greeks established the difference between two types of mental illness: the first one had its origin in the divine inspiration and the second one was caused by a physical disease. Both of them presented symptoms in the form of outbreaks of cholera, rage and anger but are different kinds of violence which could even get to the homicide. Physicians proposed their patients healing the soul through verbal psychotherapy or healing through the words. In this article, we propose to review the psychosocial function of the transitory mental illness and verbal psychotherapy in the myth of Heracles.

Keywords*: myth, mental illness, anger, social balance, verbal psychotherapy.

1. Introduction

Since ancient times, many primitive cultures know and live diseases like a divine intervention on human beings whether spirits (demons) or the gods. The Greeks, like the Egyptians and other peoples of the Middle East, believed in a supernatural etiology of diseases but also conceived the existence of natural causes that explain the illnesses. This common survival between natural and religious beliefs in the explanations of the generic concept of disease is directly linked to the distinction in the ancient Greek medicine from a technical and rationalized medical branch, in close link with the body and other religious and magical ritual, more in line with the soul (Lopez, 2006:186). The influence of religious and magical ideas was so significant that Greek medicine was administered with due regard to religion and magic.

Although the disease is a reality in itself and a psychological reality that is lived differently in each afflicted, it also reflects, to some extent, the structure of a social convention. This is particularly remarkable in the field of mental illness. The diagnosis of normality or mental abnormality is only referring to the integration or marginalization within a sociocultural context (Fernandez, 1969:30-32).

The disease as divine punishment for sin, offense or sacrilege was attested in Greece from the Homeric poems. The ailments arising as a result of chance or fate are also characteristic of Greek thought. The disease of whatever kind is a test of patience and magnanimity of the patient and the love of man to those around him. Also, as a reality, the disease reveals to man consecutive features in his existence which in a state of psychosomatic normality are not evident such as vulnerability and dependence. In this way, we discover another human dimension since the morbid condition is an affliction that modifies the usual course of the patient's life. Sick people

can show an uncontrollable, unexplained and obnoxious behavior (Parker, 1983). So illnesses, disabilities and mental disorders were feared and respected by human beings since ancient time.

2. Psychopathology in Ancient Greece through the myths

Every culture has a category that can be called 'madness'. In ancient times, this disturbance seems to be more a religious and ritualistic process than a disease itself (Simon, 1984:46). The Greeks made a distinction between the human and divine madness. Herodotus stated a double explanation of mental disorder: on the one hand, the divine or supernatural intervention that seemed to reflect the popular thought and on the other hand the natural origin of the disorders that alters the normal psychic activity, represented by the medical position that comprised the etiology of illnesses in physiological terms (Lopez, 2006:190). They understood that a change of external factors, including habitat and life forms, and the use of the pharmacopeia would positively influence the achievement of internal balance and restoration mental health.

Popular thinking believed that mental abnormality is due to the action of some supernatural force or some being penetrated in the human body which produced a pernicious effect. In addition to these spirits and demons, many gods could send madness, these are: Ares, Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Hecate, Aphrodite, Hera, the Furies and the Nymphs, among others. The reasons that drove these divinities to send the madness were varied: sometimes it was on a whim and others for rebuke. The divine madness was inflicted as a punishment to those who made any offensive or sacrilegious act against the deities. The cure of illness was often made by the deceased, provided that the affected through offerings, let him off the punishment to the offense committed. In the mythical stories abound examples of crazy sent by the gods as a rebuke of a wicked act. The myth that we discuss in the following paragraphs is an example of how Hera can no longer bear the abuse of Heracles' force and sends him madness. After the defeat of the Minyan, Heracles marched into Thebes, defeated Pirecmes - the king of the Euboeans and ally of the Minyan - and spread terror throughout Greece whit the order that Pirecmes' body was divided in two by four foals and left without burial next to Heraclius River (Plutarco, *Vidas paralelas*). Given this sacrilegious act of leaving a body without honorable burial, Hera - angry at the excesses of Heracles - did mad the hero. So Heracles taking on enemies his own family killed his wife Megara, their children and his nephew Iolaus (Apolodoro: 114.12; Diodoro Sículo: IV.11; Eurípides: Heracles, 462 y ss.).

The Greek stereotype of the mentally ill individual has some characteristic physical signs, most notably delirium, wandering behavior, but above all, verbal and visual hallucinations, and all kinds of illusions that cause ghostly images. Patients prone to extreme abnormality are conceptualized in the melancholic group. In the following lines, we will see how this is the case of Heracles because on more than one occasion he suffers from this type of symptoms and his disease is called as melancholy in classical writing sources. The sadness suffered for the loss of Hylas provoked in Heracles a frenzy of maddening symptoms: sweating, blood boiling in his veins and running at high speed. Finally, he stops and weeps bitterly (Apolonio de Rodas: Argonautas, I, 1261-1272).

Secular and physiological treatment of diseases will search remedy for ailments caused by natural causes, and the magic-religious treatment seeks to heal those which arise from a possession or divine action by exorcisms and cleansings or through divine intervention. Back in the myth of Heracles we can find examples that show how it was used both medical and the magic-religious treatments: Athenian legends relate that Theseus, who was very grateful to

Heracles because the hero took him out of Tartarus, was horrified by the murder his crazy friend had committed and took him to Athens where Medea cured his madness using medicaments (Eurípides: *Heracles* 26 and 1163; Pausanias: IX.11.2; Diodoro Sículo; IV.55). The therapy of dementia was supplemented with homeopathic and sympathetic treatment which is reflected in the consideration of disease as stain and in the need of purification. In this point, we have to recall that Heracles, along its adventures, had to resort to the act of purification after a fit of madness repeatedly. In one of them, after killing Iphitus in a fit of rage, Heracles went to Neleus, the king of Pylos, to purify him but Neleus would not do it because he was an ally of King Eurytus, Iphitus' father. Only Nestor, the youngest son of Neleus met the hero and convinced Deiphobus, son of Hippolytus, to purify Heracles in Amiclas. But still, he didn't get great help since he still had nightmares and had to go to the Oracle of Delphi to see how he could get rid of them (Apolodoro: II.6.1; Diodoro Sículo: IV.31). Priestess Jenodea refused to answer on the grounds that the hero had killed his host in a fit of rage and she had no oracles for people like him. Heracles got into a new fit of rage, stripped the temple of their votive offerings and snatched the tripod on sat priestess Jenodea. Apollo, angered by this action, fought with Heracles until Zeus separated them. Heracles had to return the sacred tripod. Then Jenodea gave him the following oracle: "To get rid of your affliction, you must be sold as a slave for a year, and the price you get must be given to the children of Iphitus ". Heracles obeyed but swore revenge on the man who enslaved him: Eurytus (Apolodoro: II.6.1; Higinio: Fábula 32; Pausanias: X. 13.4).

A person who had exceeded what was culturally allowed and admitted was considered mentally ill. Depending on the degree of alteration of their behavior and the attitudes of the social group's members an individual could be considered insane. Two specific behaviors were believed to be characteristic of the insane: the habit of roaming the streets singing, laughing and dancing and propensity for violence. The latter used to be accompanied by a murder case and posterior suicide of the criminal, usually repented. Some episodes of the myth of Heracles are good to illustrate the folly coupled with a murder case and subsequent repentance, without suicide.

In Greek law when judges were judging a mentally ill person, they did not judge the disease itself, but the acts committed under that particular state. Indeed, Heracles is tried on several occasions for committing any of their abuses after suffering an attack of insanity, either because of his uncontrolled rage or induced by Hera. Murders are conceived in Greek thought as brothers of disease. So a murderer is considered as sick, especially a mentally ill person who can become a criminal. As usual, the Greek mythical corpus illustrates this relationship. Back in the Heraclea saga, we can find more than one episode in which Heracles goes mad after a serious frustration and kills the agent that causes it.

The acts of murder in the myth of Heracles, whether voluntary or involuntary, found the only remedy in his expulsion from the community, exile or banishment, and the purification-expiation of the murderer. The mythical purifier is usually a man with wealth, position and responsibility, usually a king while in historical processes is a priest or representative of an old aristocratic family. We can deduct from this that the mythical approach differs not many of the Athenian homicide law, under which murder is an attack on men and gods and thus constitutes an impiety.

The mythical murder is perpetrated specifically against relatives of the criminal (matricide, patricide, fratricide, infanticide and uxoricide), or against notables who had high socioeconomic status, as kings, princes, priests and warriors. For example, Heracles killed his wife, children and nephews in his first attack of madness.

The link between madness and murder has on numerous occasions a third element that is the suicide which works as a dramatic climax of the trilogy of unholy and abnormal events for the community. Suicide would appear as the only method to get rid of suffering to an extreme situation. This third factor does not appear the myth of Heracles, who dies accidentally killed by his wife to present him with a poisoned robe.

3.   Psychosocial function of madness in the myth of Heracles

The analysis of the mechanisms of social deconstruction (obfuscation, violent anger, and fury) bring us closer to understanding the idealism of the worldview reflected in the Heraclea saga, ideologically speaking, which consistently shows the psychosocial proposed system. Henceforth we focus on the specific example of the manifestations of blind rage, anger and fury as manifestations of temporary insanity in the myth of Heracles.

Obfuscation is often defined as 'making a mistake' as a result of the intervention of the goddess namesake (Ate). It is also related whit the intervention of the gods that frustrate previous hopes of mortals. In the mythic saga of Heracles, Ate, the obfuscation, affected Zeus when Hera struck him to swear that the child born that day would stand in front of their neighbors. The above situation is as follows: Zeus boasted on Olympus that he had fathered a son who was to be born and to be known as Heracles, meaning 'glory of Hera', and would rule the noble House of Perseus. At that, Hera made him promise that if born a prince of the House of Perseus before nightfall would be King Supreme. When Zeus did about an inviolable oath, Hera went to Mycenae where hastened the birth pangs of Nicipe, wife of King Sthenelus. Afterward, she ran to Thebes where delayed Alcmene's childbirth, delaying the birth of Heracles until the birth of Eurystheus, the two months premature son of Sthenelus. Heracles was born an hour behind of Eurystheus. At the time of his birth, Heracles was called Alcaeus or Palaemon (Hesíodo: *Escudo de Heracles* I.35, 56 y 80; Homero: *Ilíada* XIX.95; Apolodoro: II.4-5; Diodoro Sículo: IV). When Hera returned to Olympus satisfied with her feat, Zeus burst into a fit of anger. He grabbed his older daughter Ate, the personification of obfuscation, who had prevented him see the trick of Hera, and solemnly swore that she would never visit the Olympus. Zeus took her golden hair and turned her until he launched her on the earth. Though Zeus could not violate his oath and allow Heracles to rule the House of Perseus, he persuaded Hera to accede to, that after making any twelve labors ordered by Eurystheus, his son Heracles became a god (Homero: *Ilíada* XIX. 91 and 119; Diodoro Sículo: IV. 9 and 14).

Goddess Ate, the obfuscation, affected Zeus in this circumstance until the father of the gods was willing to repair his error, offsetting the position of Heracles in the Olympic pantheon. So, if among mortals are denied him the honor of being a prince, among the immortals Heracles will become a god. But the hero must pay a price: perform twelve labors for Eurystheus, his rival for the throne and a man he considered morally very inferior.

In his work on the hero and his limits, Ceccarelli (2001) point out that the origin of Ate –as obfuscation- may be divine, but it is difficult to explain whether or not the hero or mortal can resist committing the action led by her. The stimulus may come from outside, but the action is the result of the interpretation of the person who receives it, example of that is the episode of the murder of Eurytus and his sons by Heracles: Eurytus, king of Oechalia and friend of Heracles, had offered to marry his daughter Iole with the archer that could win him and his four sons in competitive game. For Heracles was not hard to beat in this competition. Eurytus found this result greatly unpleasant when he found out about that Heracles, in a fit of madness, killed

Megara - his former wife- and their children , so that he refused to grant him his daughter 's hand. King Eurytus quashed the competition, insulted Heracles by calling him ruffian, humiliated him reminding his social position as slave of Eurystheus and violated the duty of hospitality, expelling him of his palace. Heracles did not take reprisals against Eurytus right away but vowed to take revenge. In this case, the nature of the obfuscation that affected the hero by Ate is not ethic, since the problem is not the infringement of a legal or religious rule, and the consequences are not derived from a divine punishment for transgression. The bug is a miscalculation in the mortal king Eurytus attempt to go beyond their means and, therefore, adversity is not a divine punishment, but the natural consequence of the situation. The error initiating the action is progressive: Eurytus makes a miscalculation in offering his daughter in marriage to the tournament champion, running the risk of not liking the winner as a son in law. In this case, the error is not inevitable and the characters have a personal responsibility because they do not foresee the consequences of their actions. As a result of king Eurytus' miscalculation, hero Heracles is placed in a situation where both cannot leave without a price: Heracles, not to lose his prestige, swears he will avenge killing Eurytus and his sons. In other words, with his performance Eurytus (agent subject) pushes Heracles (patient subject) to commit murder (action) to restore his honor that has been sullied (interpretation of action) with insults and humiliations.

Following the above, we see that feeling of ate starts making wrong decisions that leads to negative consequences which not always come from the deities who can also be affected: see the example of Zeus regarding the birth of Heracles. And of course, the hero or the deadly maintain their capacity for decision and action. In this study, we are interested in large measure in the consequences of this process of Ate that ultimately leads to a breakdown in established social parameters which, in one way or another, should be recovered.

For its part, the menis, defined as anger or rage that remains in time justified by the legitimate desire for revenge, is considered as an angry reaction to the breakdown of the established order, which, in turn, like other manifestations of anger , leads to a new psycho- social rupture that must be restored (Montes , 2007:86) . It is considered proper to gods or demigods and normally this angry reaction occurs in situations they consider to cause an imbalance of the established order, for example if they have not received the appropriate sacrifices or if they perceive the actions of an 'other' as an undervaluing; if the internal hierarchy or the natural order alter; or in the absence of respect for certain human laws, such as the funeral ritual or rules of hospitality. Among mortals, the menis is basically governed by the reason of psycho-social undervaluation. The story of Herakles wears the context of the menis to the Olympus and conceives its submission to the authority of society embodied in Euristheus as an inevitable aspect of his heroic status. The participation of the hero is determined by the need that others have of him. His strength and his preeminent ability force him to be a servant of his fellow mortals (Whitfield, 1967:57-60). His heroic status is submitted to the authority of society. Heracles must adapt to new needs, in other words, the traditional ideology is transforming (Montes: 2007:87).

His anger is the subject of most of his adventures. Heracles has been treated in a way that calls into question their social appraisal, and this has broken the system of social hierarchy and therefore the predictability in the treatment of equals. It is explicitly stated on several occasions that his anger is directed against Eurystheus. Not surprisingly, the reaction of Heracles is described as angry because of the seriousness of what happened and the seriousness of the consequences of his decision: his retirement, first, and then submission to Eurystheus, his rival among mortals. The menis of Heracles must be appeased recomposing the social breach; just as

divine wrath is appeased demonstrating the worth of the gods through offerings, rebalancing their social balance. In the Heraclea legend, the menis of the hero has been caused of social undervaluation that must be formally repaired.

When a reference to the menis is made, it is never a matter of minor offense. Almost always it seems to be accompanied by situations of disobedience to authority, whether divine or human such as deprivation of burial to the dead, violation of the rules of hospitality, treachery in a rescue or inequality in the distribution of awards, among others. The concept itself implies the violation of fundamental rules and the invocations of menis are intended to reinforce the cosmic order, i.e., the political and social coherence menis is not just a term for a hostile emotion that arises in an individual against another individual, but is the name of a sense which is inseparable from the implicated actions; it is a social force whose activation brings drastic consequences for the community. In short, the idea of menis appears linked to the protection of the rules whose violation threatens the entire social order. The menis is dangerous as well as difficult to appease once started, so it is always better to avoid.

Conversely, anger or rage may occur among the gods, either among them or among them and a mortal, and among humans. In the divine world, the causes of anger are the same as in the human world: the social chain that is composed by breach-anger-breach-anger and so on. When the deities felt that their opinions are not been taken into account or felt undervalued by another, then anger arises. The same occurs in the relations with the heroes. Addition of fate, the death of Heracles is in part caused by the wrath of Hera (Montes, 2007:93). Anger, like the danger of breaking the harmony of human society, is present everywhere. When it appears among the members of a family may have as consequence the exile. Heracles, because of anger, kills repeatedly: his teacher Lino, two young butlers, and so on. The immediate consequence will be the voluntarily or involuntarily exile as a means of repair. At other times, after a state of anger, social rebalancing is attempted by revenge, compensation or the delivery of goods, if the victim agrees and deposes his anger. In any case, anger is conceived as pejoratively painful and malignant because it corrodes the moral and annuls the solidarity in relations of otherness (Montes, 2007:94). No one benefits from it. Anger can even lead to death if it is a matter of social honor.

All these manifestations of temporary insanity (obfuscation, anger, wrath) that could reach to the deconstruction of the society, could find part of the remedy, as we noted at the beginning of this discussion, in a kind of verbal psychotherapy that was developed in the oracles of Apollo, like Delphi, and in the temples of Asclepius. Here the word heals when it is pronounced and heard. The tragedy entitled 'Heracles' by Euripides offers a valuable example. In this work, Hera instructs Lisa, personification of the Madness, to confuse the mind of Heracles. The hero, touched by a fit of madness, killed his wife and their three. When Heracles recovers his senses, Amphitryon, his adoptive father, tells you what he has done. Listening to this story the hero moves and shakes. His friend Theseus intervenes at a critical time. Heracles, ashamed of what he has done, hides his face under a cloak and plans his death. Despair has seized Heracles and the only honorable considered solution is death. But Theseus is with him and offers friendship, understanding and material assistance. Theseus, who had come to accompany the hero in his pain, helps him with his companionship and with his words to overcome despair. Also, Theseus remembers him that Hera is responsible for his madness. Thus, Heracles cannot be guilty of what he is not responsible. The hero has gone mad because of Hera. His wicked stepmother gets the blame and this situation helps Heracles to accept the loving help offered by Amphitryon and Theseus. Prepared for the consolation of Theseus, the hero can openly mourn and show their

pain. In this sense, it is important to note the sharpness of Theseus to lead at this time his words intended to operate a major change in the mood and attitude of Heracles. From now the hero can embark on a new journey and accept the material aid offered by Theseus. The intervention of Theseus has operated a significant change in Heracles, but the hero - far from suffering a transformation in his personality - will remain loyal to himself with all its consequences since it is the only way that allows the hero to continue his fate.

Heracles experienced imposed madness by goddess Ate, and pain by his recognition of what he did for the insanity: the murder of his wife and children. The intervention of Theseus happens once the attack of madness has finished. His words are not intended to cure madness but ease the grief and despair that follow. Theseus comes along to accompany Heracles in his pain (Eurípides: *Heracles*, 1203). In short, this example of dialogue between Heracles and Theseus shows the therapeutic word in action. The word cures through the use of dialogue which transforms those who pronounce and those who listen. Maybe this dialogue is a sign of the existence of psychotherapy verbal in ancient Greece.

Concluding remarks

The reactions of anger and rage, as manifestations of episodes of temporary insanity, bring us closer to the idealism of the social uses in ancient Greece, since the fury is unleashed when they broke. Greek society reflected in the Heraclea saga, as mythic-ideological construction, intended primarily to avoid breaking the tenets which are defined as suitable, i.e., respect for the rules of interaction of the heroes and notables: appraisal and recognition, strategies of symbiotic otherness (kinship, friendship, etc.) or cultural friendship (supplication, friendship and hospital agreements). On the other hand, it pretend to avoid unpredictable behavior between notables, criticizes the severance of ties, as well as interior violence (anger and rage) that interferes with the aforementioned predictability. A man, to remain so, must not be closed in anger since this approach would place him outside the community in which he lives. In the myth of Herakles, we analyses anger as an indispensable and dangerous emotion for society, exploring its moral, psychological and practical problems. Moderation is therefore necessary. It is necessary to expose that each society has its own arête, that is, its excellence par excellence, with its particular manifestations. The Heraclea arête includes not only bravery, courage, boldness, fighting ability but also a cooperative dimension in two ways: one hand, since the hero is responsible for the defense of the community, it benefits from the heroic ethic; on the other hand, it is observed a cooperation in maintaining strategies of otherness own of the collective that pretend the social pre-eminence. In the symbolic universe of the hero, not only battle and the Assembly provide the glory but also a compassionate attitude: the hero leaves an imprint in the memory of generations and in what their peers say about him through his attitude in combat. But glory affects both, the winning hero as well as his progenitor and their social community which demands that Greek heroes should seek fame. A breakdown in the established psychosocial parameters could cause a breakdown of social order stipulated, triggering a chain reaction: each dispute leads to a new rupture which must always be repaired. In short, the manifestations of anger and confrontation should be avoided at all times because they can collapse the social system based on the culture of predictability among equals, ie, among heroes, princes and nobles. In the case of not being able to prevent an access of mental obfuscation and because Greek culture had recognized the extent of mental illness in everyday life, the Greeks practiced psychotherapeutic treatments called verbal psychotherapy. These were performed in the temples of Apollo and Asclepius through suggestive actions of priests and priestesses (e.g. Pythia of Delphi). Similarly, classical Greece recognized the

healing ability through catharsis, exemplified in the therapeutic value of dialogue in Greek tragedy. These verbal therapies along with pharmacopeia therapies wanted to restore the common sense of the patient and thus restore the social balance which ran the risk of breaking if the remedy is not put on proper time.

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