SENECA'S HERCULES FURENS—A MYTH RENEWED

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Seneca's Hercules Furens is a play rich in originality—a serious attempt to give a new interpretation to a well-known myth. This has not always been appreciated and therefore in this essay it will be endeavoured, by a close reading of the text, to clear away some of the misconceptions surrounding this tragedy.

The first prejudice critics often used to obscure Seneca's version was an overemphasis on his dependence on Euripides. Kingery's almost bored judgment is an extreme example: 'The title Hercules Furens is the Latin translation of the Greek Ἡρακλῆς Μοιχόμενος, and the content of the two tragedies is practically identical.' It does not mean that a comparison between the treatments of Seneca and Euripides cannot be meaningful—the work of Siemers proves the contrary. Apart from stressing that the purpose of Senecan tragedy should be sought in the literary field, he also convincingly dismisses attempts to see in Seneca's Hercules Furens the portrayal of the 'passion of the patron saint of Stoicism' as i.a. Marti's thesis has it. (Her interpretation of course requires Hercules Furens to be completed by Hercules Oetaeus in its depiction of the apotheosis.)

In recent years we have been presented with the stimulating interpretation by Henry and Walker. Although they, in their zeal to counterbalance the traditional and limited view of Hercules as a hero and as a Stoic saint, go too far in seeing him as a 'clownish figure', they do make a number of valid observations and, what is most important, invite a more alert reading of the play by their provocative remarks, e.g. that 'at no point in the play does Hercules reveal heroic or impressive qualities of character.' 'The central theme of the hero is obscurely and coldly handled so that the precise nature of the heroic achievement remains obscure while he himself strikingly fails to emerge as either

2. T. B. B. Siemers, Seneca's Hercules Furens en Euripides' Heracles, (Utrecht, 1951) 106: 'Het is niet te ontkennen, dat in deze drama's de moralist Seneca telkens weer naar voren komt, maar het doel van de tragedies ligt op litterair terrein. Evenmin is Seneca een mystieke ziener, die van zijn Hercules een verlosser der mensheid heeft willen maken als een Christus. Hij gebruikt de Heracles van Euripides, die onder zijn handen het nationaal-Griekse vertoont, maar daarvoor in de plaats geen nationaal-Romeinse, zelfs geen Stoische held wordt'.
a tragic or heroic figure'. Owen, although supporting most of their conclusions, also feels that they overstate the farcical character of Hercules in this play. Their view seems to be largely the result of an overenthusiastic reaction to the discovery that Seneca in his prose works expressed a dislike of strong muscular men and that he did depict a buffoonish Hercules in the Apocolocyntosis. Yet it should surely be common knowledge that the Greek myths lend themselves to many and varied interpretations and that it is essential to judge the representation of a mythological figure independently in the context of each literary work.

To anyone reading Hercules Furens it should be obvious that the Hercules portrayed there differs greatly from the dolt in the Apocolocyntosis. Seneca, like Euripides, adopts the version of the myth where Hercules is stricken with madness and slays his wife and children after he has completed the twelve labours. Hercules is therefore, as the play commences, famous throughout the world. This is repeatedly underlined. But at the end of the drama we see this proud and confident hero changed into an abject man. What does Seneca mean to convey to the auditor or reader by this 'tragedy'?

II

There are weaknesses in the structure of the play from a dramatic viewpoint, but unity is achieved by certain themes which run throughout the play. Dramatic weaknesses usually criticized are the intervention of the chorus at 524 which delays the first appearance of Hercules and especially Theseus' long narration about the underworld; the latter has come under fire from inter alios T. S. Eliot and Zwierlein. Zwierlein quotes 642ff.

6. That it is just as easy to take a different reference to Hercules in another work of Seneca as his ‘real’ opinion and then interpret the play accordingly is shown by M. Piot in ‘Hercule chez les poètes du ler siècle après Jésus-Christ’ REL 43 (1965) 324ff. She cites as part of the basis for her interpretation, ‘Ulixen et Herculem... Stoici nostri sapientes pronuntiaverunt, invictos laboribus et contemptores voluptatis et victores omnium terrarum’. (Sen. De Const. Sap. I.2) and then arrives at a slightly modified version of the traditional view of Hercules as a Stoic saint, ‘... certes il nous a présenté là un Hercule malheureux, vaincu par une force contre laquelle sa volonté demeure impuissante; il lui donne pourtant les traits dont l'avait gratifié la tradition stoïco-cynique.’
7. A random example of such divergent interpretations of a mythological figure by one author in different works is Helena as seen by Euripides. A. M. Dale remarks: 'In Troades... (Helen is) false, fluent and self-righteous, engaging with Hecuba in the debate which makes rhetorically articulate all the ambivalence of her actions and moral responsibility. The Helen of the play named after her, a faithful innocent wife, victim of a diabolical plot of the gods and the total misjudgement of men.' Eur. Helen, ed. A. M. Dale, (Oxford 1967).

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şi novi Herculem,
Lycus Creonti debitas poenas dabit.
lentum est dabit: dat; hoc quoque est lentum: dedit
and adds, ‘Das Missverhältnis zwischen dieser Auskunft und der Länge des folgenden Berichtes liegt auf der Hand’. This objection seems heavily pedestrian. Surely 642ff. are not meant to be taken literally? These lines with their prominent wordplay as a rhetorical flourish are an expression of Theseus’ absolute confidence in Hercules’ power—a confidence which his family seems to share. Their expectations have been shown to equate Hercules’ arrival with deliverance from their oppressor.

It is difficult to justify the ecphrasis in terms of conventional dramatic structure, but such ‘delaying’ narrations are by no means unusual in Senecan tragedy, e.g. the account by Eurybates of the storm in Agamemnon 421ff. and the messenger’s description of the palace in Thyestes 641ff. Seneca seems to incorporate these scenes for their poetical qualities and to create an atmosphere which intensifies the effect of certain aspects of the drama. Regenbogen seems to be the first critic who responded sensitively to this. He also estimates the quality of poetry and description in these lines highly. However, in addition to the beauty and polish of the verse, this ecphrasis is functional in the play—it seems only logical to link this scene with the theme of death which is so prominent in the drama. The contrast between Hercules’ former self-confidence and his broken spirit is clearly illustrated by the change in his attitude to death. After he returns from the underworld he proclaims ‘morte contempta redi’, 612, but in his despair his only hope is ‘mortis inveniam viam’, 1245. These words also call to mind Juno’s ‘quaerit ad superos viam’, 74, and imply his abandonment of the goal of divinity and his submission to the human lot. (Cf. too ‘cupiat mori ab inferis reversus’, 116–7). There is a conscious contrast between the stylized fantasy of the underworld described and the chorus’ praise of the simple life and their acceptance of human mortality. The themes of aspirations to divinity and man’s fate, i.e. mortality, run as strong unifying threads throughout the play. In this context the ambivalence of terms such as ‘ad astra’, ‘ad superos’, ‘caelum petere’ etc., which refer sometimes to Hercules’ striving to godhead and immortality and sometimes to his return to earth and mortality, has been discussed by Henry and Walker11 and by Owen12 who has investigated the symbolism of the stars in inter alia this drama: ‘This allegory of mad ambitions to divinity which are ultimately frustrated by the nature of madness herself, Juno, develops extensively the topos of the stars as symbols of deification, in conjunction with the idea of the heavens as mirrors of the moral atmosphere on earth’. These aspects will therefore not be discussed in detail here.

11. Loc. cit. 16.
Before Hercules’ own appearance in 592 a certain impression of him is created by the attitude of the other dramatis personae towards him. Amphitryon views him as ‘terrae pacis auctor’, 250, and underlines his great physical prowess by a detailed description of his labours, 213ff. He prays that Hercules will return as their saviour, 277-8. Megara, although she shares his love, admiration and hope, is not equally confident and there is an ominous and ironical note in her words:

aut omnes tuo
defende reditu sospes aut omnes trahe.
trahes nec ullus erigit fractos deus.

Although the chorus praise Hercules as champion of peace and order they also sound a warning note, 186ff.

On the other hand Juno who regards him as her bitter enemy and by her vengeance thus far has only provided proof of his divine paternity, 35ff., in spite of a reluctant respect for his strength and endurance, 43ff., and even fear of him, 61ff., has the clearest insight into his character and knows where his weakness lies, 89ff.:

I nunc, superbe, caelitum sedes pete,
humana temne, iam Styga et manes feros
fugisse credis? hic tibi ostendam inferos.

By the subtlety of her plan she provokes the tragedy—the ultimate confrontation of Hercules with himself and his realization of the limitations of his code of life. Henry and Walker13 are guilty of exaggeration when they say, ‘The difference between Juno and Hercules is merely this, that Juno is a ridiculous goddess, Hercules a ridiculous demigod with aspirations for full divinity’. Juno in her rage does present herself in an undignified way, e.g.

immoto cervix sidera et caelum tuli
et me prementem
but on the whole she is more fiendish than ridiculous, especially when outlining her plan, 89ff., 113ff.

Lycus too sees Hercules as his natural enemy. His opinion of Hercules is unflattering. He seems to refuse to acknowledge that Hercules is Jupiter’s son, 357;438, refers to him contemptuously as a slave, 398;450, as a bragart, 436, speaks disparagingly of his decadence, 465ff., and admits no fear of him, 503ff. Owen14 suggests that Seneca has created in Lycus ‘a careful Doppelgänger of the

hero, a man of deeds, brutal, a master of bella. Lycus differs from Hercules only in his candour in recognizing his lack of birthright (337ff.) and his reliance not on right but on force—which he, too, calls clara virtus (340)'.

There are numerous parallels between Lycus and Hercules: that he wants Hercules' wife as his wife, that he plans to kill Hercules' wife and children and that Hercules in his madness actually does it himself, while thinking that the children are Lycus'. There are also certain ironical identifications: Hercules thinking he is referring to Lycus speaks of him as 'invisus', 988, and 'scelestus', 1002, while he is of course aptly describing himself. In 1161 Hercules, surveying the slaughter accomplished by his own hand, asks, 'Quis Lycus regnum obtinet?'. These parallels show the risk Hercules runs in depending too much on force as a way of obtaining justice. The margin between his way of life and the cynical expediency of Lycus is shown to be narrow (and disappears when Hercules is stricken by madness). The great difference lies in their motivation. Lycus is interested in power for its own sake while Hercules champions order and right.

IV

Hercules' own actions and utterances bring this image into focus. His arrival is announced, 523, at the moment when the rights of the helpless are in dire need of defence, but his actual appearance is postponed while the chorus praise his works and pray for his safe return.

Hercules' first words, 592ff., show his respect for the order of the universe, but soon his tone changes to one of pride, 606ff., and even bravado, 'et si placerent tertiae sortis loca, regnare potui', and 'morte contempta recti'. His challenge to Juno to provide him with a new task, 'quae vinci iubes?', is charged with irony.

Confronted with an injustice which demands redress, 629ff., Hercules acts immediately. Although his supposed coldness to his family in this scene has often been recognized, his behaviour is consistent with his belief that his first duty to humanity is to remove those who are evil. After the slaying of Lycus Hercules triumphantly prepares to give thanks to the gods. He does, however, show signs of pride. He refuses to purify his hands, 918ff., and instead of following Amphitryon's advice to pray for a cessation of his toils he brashly replies, 'Ipsi concipiam preces / Iove meque dignas', 926-7. His prayer is for peace and order. His declaration,

\[
\text{si quod etiam num est scelus} \\
\text{latura tellus, properet, et si quod parat} \\
\text{monstrum, meum sit}
\]

is in keeping with his vision of himself as defender of law and order, but highly ironical, especially in its juxtaposition with the first signs of his madness. As this
grows the expression of his delusions of grandeur intensifies. There are signs that his use of violence to obtain justice has at last got out of hand, as he threatens to cause chaos in order to satisfy his craving for divinity. He suffers from hallucinations in which the whole world is in danger of destruction but he still has time to turn his attention to his personal foe, 987ff. It is notable that Hercules mad is merely an extension of Hercules sane. His methods are the same but his motivation has become warped so that he has come to resemble Lycus.

The slaughter of his children and his wife is described in ghastly detail by Amphitryon and hardly merits being called 'knock-about farce'. 15 It is important to remember that it is Amphitryon who is speaking and he is expressing his horror at the havoc wrought by Hercules' strength.

When Hercules recovers from his sleep, he is, significantly, still the same man. He senses some great disaster, 1147ff., and when he sees the corpses of his wife and children, his reaction is the only one he knows—to seek vengeance forcibly, immediately, 1171. The reactions of Theseus and Amphitryon show him that this is not a simple case and progressively he shows signs of becoming more of a man and less of a hero: 'Miserere, genitor, supplices tendo manus', 1192, but his response to the discovery that he himself has committed the crime is true to his code. He must be punished and he calls upon Jove do so, 1202ff. He sees the whole purpose of his life defeated, the way of life which he hoped would gain him access to heaven. The only way to retain a measure of dignity is to destroy himself as he would anyone else responsible for the crime, 'morte est sanandum scelus', 1262. His attempt is, however, prevented by Amphitryon, who, because of his belief in Hercules' ultimate innocence and nobility, wants to prevent him from destroying his life and all he has accomplished. So Hercules is for the first time placed in a situation where to act according to his code, i.e. in this instance to seek his own death, is to cause a crime, i.e. Amphitryon's death, 'hic, hic iacet Herculis sani scelus'. He therefore submits to continuing life. This difficult decision brings him into contact with the ordinary human lot where absolutes are seldom possible and compromises have to be made.

Juno, ('iam Styga et manes feros / fugisse credis? hic tibi ostendam inferos', 90–1,) by causing Hercules to suffer 'hell on earth', not the stylized hell of the underworld, succeeds in completely breaking his spirit and his aspirations to divinity. The effect of her vengeance is sharpened because her methods cause his ideal of divinity to distort his forceful methods so that in his madness he is a caricature of the normal Hercules. At the end of the play he is no longer a proud hero but a broken man. He has to try to come to terms with a life based on compromise. The only spark of hope is kindled by Theseus:

illa te, Alcide, vocat,  
facere innocentes terra quae superos solet.

15. Henry & Walker, loc. cit. 18.
The theme of Hercules' hands, almost as instruments by which he deals justice, is very prominent throughout the play. By following the references and examining the qualifications with which 'manus' or 'dextra' is provided important aspects of the drama are highlighted.

In the prologue Juno mockingly tells of Hercules leading Cerberus 'superbifica manu', 58,—this unique epithet is transferred significantly. It is the work of his hands which has brought him fame and it is in this world of physical force that Hercules is at home. The idea is also contained in Amphitryon's reference to Hercules 'iusta manus', 272, by which he persecutes crime. (Cf. Amphitryon's description of Lycus' hand as 'impia', 518). Hercules' hand is described as 'victrix', 800, in his fight against Cerberus and he repeats this term after he has punished Lycus, 895. (Lycus speaks about his own 'victrix dextra', 399, which enabled him to seize power—again a pointer to their similar methods). The chorus laud the peace established 'Herculea manu', 882.

In the thanksgiving to Jupiter Hercules says, 'Tonantem nostra adorabit manus', 914, but Amphitryon's warning:

\[ \text{nate manantes prius manus cruenta caede et hostii expia} \]
\[ 919 \]

goes unheeded—a powerfully ironical situation in the light of Hercules' later view of his hands as permanently defiled, 1323–9. This links too with Theseus' image of 'innocuas manus', 740, when he urges the necessity for just rulers to abstain from bloodshed—an implicit criticism of Hercules' way of life. The chorus plead with Amphitryon 'unumque manibus aufer Herculeis scelus', 1034. They paint a picture of him asleep, 'quaerit vacua pondera dextra' and believe 'proxima puris sors est manibus nescire nefas'. They want him to show his grief and repentance by beating his breast with the hands which committed the crime, 1101 ff.

During the madness his hands are mentioned dramatically in the context of senseless violence threatening chaos: 'rapiamque dextra plena Centauris iuga', 969; 'ut Cyclopia eversa manibus saxa nostris concidant', 998; and 'petet undecumque temet haec dextra et feret', 1011.

Emphasis is also placed on Hercules' hands as the force which is going to destroy him when Juno prays, 'manuque fortis redeat', 114, and triumphantly exclaims, 'scelere perfecto licet admittat illas genitor in caelum manus!', 122. Her responsibility is made clear when she plans to poise his arrows, 'librabo manu', 119. Amphitryon recognizes this, 'Hoc, Juno telum manibus inmisit tuis', 1297, as does Hercules: 'infaustas . . . novercale manus', 1235–6.

After the slaughter Hercules' qualification of his hands as 'supplices', 1192, marks the change in his attitude. As he realizes that he is responsible for the crime he cries 'quid hoc? manus refugit—hic errat scelus'. This is reiterated by
'non quaero manum'. 1196. His hands are central in the recognition of his guilt. He prays for punishment from Jupiter, specifically ‘vinctae manus’, 1210ff., to render him helpless. When he decides to carry out his sentence himself he repeatedly demands that his weapons be restored to his hands, 1243-4, 1271 and 1281. He considers his hand defiled by the deed: ‘dextra contactus pios / scelerata refugit’, 1319. The idea of an indelible stain is elaborated in 1323–9. Although some of these references may be regarded as conventional, they are too numerous to admit of doubt that Seneca, by directing attention constantly to Hercules' hands, wants to underline the predominantly physical way in which Hercules relates to the world.

VI

The play leaves a largely pessimistic impression which is, however, slightly relieved by Theseus' last words and the fact that according to his belief expressed earlier in the drama there is a better fate in store for those who rule justly:

    quisquis est placide potens
    dominusque vitae servat innocas manus
    et incorvrentum mitis imperium regit
    animoque parcit, longa permensus diu
    felcis aevi spatia vel caelum petit
    vel laeta felix nemoris Elysii loca,
    iudex futurus. 745

Hercules, relying too much on physical force to right injustice has suffered a tragic confrontation with his own moral weakness and limitation, but may yet, if he follows Theseus' code, attain his former goal.

Seneca has shown Hercules changing from the traditional hero, who strives for divinity, who champions justice by force into a man who has to compromise his absolute ideals and so submit to 'human' fate. In so doing he has succeeded in adding a new dimension to the old myth.
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