The Madness of Epic
Reading Insanity from Homer to Statius

DEBRA HERSHKOWITZ

CLARENDON PRESS - OXFORD 1998
For my Parents

-¥-
PREFACE

Mad call I it; for to define true Madnesse, What is’t, but to be nothing else but mad.

(Shakespeare, Hamlet, 11. ii. 98-9)

When Vergil's Trojan women try to set fire to the ships, Ascanius desperately asks, quis furor iste nouus? ('What strange madness is this?', Aen. 5. 670). Ovid's Pentheus, learning of the new rites being celebrated by the Thebans, demands to know, quis furor, anguigenae, proles Mauortia, uestras | attonuit mentes? ('What madness, offspring of serpents, offspring of Mars, has struck your minds?', Met. 3. 531-2). Lucan's possessed matrona, during her prophetic vision of the upcoming civil war, asks, quis furor hie, o Phoebe, doce, quo tela manusque I Romanae miscent acies bellumque sine hoste este ('What madness is this, Phoebus, tell me, why Roman battle-lines mix weapons and hands, why there is war without an enemy', BC 1. 681-2). In her failed attempt to prevent her sons, mutual fratricide, Statius' Jocasta puts it most simply: quis furor? ('What is this madness', Theb. 11. 329). In each case the question is more than rhetorical: it seeks to determine or define the nature of the madness which has suddenly arisen, to understand that which cannot be understood. By its very repetition it calls attention to the fact that in each case the furor in question is different: the Trojan women have been inspired by Iris, working on behalf of Juno, to their destructive deed; the newly made Bacchants are in the sway of Dionysiac frenzy; Caesar, Pompey, and their armies display the peculiarly Roman madness of civil strife; Jocasta's sons display the peculiarly Theban madness of the house of Oedipus. The changing nature of epic madness ensures that the basic question quis furor? never becomes redundant. This study does not try to answer the question; rather, its aim is to explore the reasons why it can -- and, in fact, must -- be asked again and again, and how the continuing and variable presence of madness in epic exerts its force on the texts' poetics.

The first chapter of this book serves as a general introduction to
the concept of madness in the ancient and modern worlds, and to the representation of madness in the epic genre. Its sections on the appropriation of medical models of madness into epic, and in particular on epic's appropriation of tragic imagery, provide a catalogue of some of the most obvious instances of madness which will not be dealt with in later chapters. Chapters 2 to 6 are each devoted to a single epic (or in the case of Chapter 3, two epics). In Chapter 1 I discuss the methodology I have adopted for my investigation of madness in these epics; here I would just like to warn the reader that I have not approached madness in each epic in the same way, exclusively in terms of just one ancient or modern theory of madness, and that, as a result, the chapters form a series of related studies rather than a single, unified argument leading to a single unified conclusion about madness in epic. I have done this despite, or rather, because of the incessant repetition of quis furor? The answers given or denied to this question are different in every case; in spite of the interrelatedness of the representations of madness in each epic, there is no single unifying thread. At the same time, of course, I am not suggesting that the way I have chosen to read madness in each epic is the only way to do so. It would have been just as reasonable, for example, to use ancient philosophical ideas about madness as the focal point for the discussion of Turnus' madness in the Aeneid, rather than the modern psychological model I have used, or to examine the madness of the Bellum Civile in modern psychological rather than in ancient political and philosophical terms. None the less, I hope that the diversity of approaches to madness and the overall readings of the epics produced by them help to illustrate the wide range of meanings vested in epic madness, and the wide-ranging importance of madness to the meaning of epic poetry.

A quick glance at the table of contents of this book may prompt the question of why there are no chapters devoted to the Argonauticas of Apollonius Rhodius and Valerius Flaccus and to Silius Italicus' Punica. The texts I have selected for individual studies are those in which madness has a central narrative and meta-narrative function. Homeric epic, in which there is not much madness and on which there is a chapter, is the important exception which proves the rule. As for Apollonius' Argonautica, all the points I wished to make I found I had made in Chapter 1; and while both Valerius' Argonautica and the Punica contain many varied

-viii-
examples of madness, in neither does madness serve a central role. Nevertheless, a number of passages from Valerius' and Silius' epics are examined in the first chapter and in the notes of subsequent chapters (with Silius, as usual, getting the worst of it), and I hope to make up for any perceived under-representation of Flavian epic here with a forthcoming general study of Valerius' *Argonautica*.

The translations in this book, such as they are, are my own, except where otherwise specified. The majority of section I of Chapter 6 first appeared in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, and section II of the same chapter is a modified version of an article which first appeared in *Materiali et Discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* (the two articles appear in the References as Hershkowitz (1995) and (1994) respectively); I would like to thank the publishers of both journals for permission to reuse the material here.

This book is a revised version of my Oxford D.Phil. thesis, also incorporating material from my Bristol MA dissertation. My time at Bristol was supported by a Fulbright Grant, and I completed the doctoral thesis and this book while enjoying the hospitality of Christ Church, Oxford, as a Junior Research Fellow. The book has greatly benefited from the comments and advice of Chris Gill, Juliane Kerkhecker, my D.Phil. examiners Angus Bowie and John Henderson, and especially Philip Hardie and Denis Feeney. I owe special thanks to Don Fowler, who oversaw this work both as a thesis and as a book, and who has been not only an excellent supervisor but also an invaluable friend.

D.H.

*Christ Church, Oxford December, 1996*
# CONTENTS

Abbreviations and Texts  
xii

1. Introduction: Fragments d'un Discours Furieux  
1

2. Vergil's Aeneid: The Romans and the Irrational  
68

3. Homeric Epic: The Greeks and the Rational?  
125

4. Ovid's Metamorphoses: Shifting Boundaries of the Divided Self  
161

5. Lucan's Bellum Ciuile: Epic In Extremis  
197

6. Statius' Thebaid: Furor Without Limits  
247

Epilogue  
302

References  
305

Index of Passages  
333

General Index  
343
ABBREVIATIONS AND TEXTS

For ancient authors and their works readers are referred to the abbreviations lists in the Oxford Classical Dictionary (1996) and in Liddell, Scott, and Jones, A Greek-English Lexicon (1940). The following (reduced) abbreviations are used for the works that are the subjects of individual chapters in this book and for a few other frequently cited works.

Aen. Vergil, Aeneid
AR Apollonius Rhodius, Argonautica
BC Lucan, Bellum Ciuile
Il. Homer, Iliad
Met. Ovid, Metamorphoses
Od. Homer, Odyssey
Pun. Silius Italicus, Punica
Theb. Statius, Thebaid
VF Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica

Note: I have used the Oxford Classical Texts for Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, and Vergil; the Teubner Texts for Ovid, Valerius Flaccus (ed. W.-W. Ehlers), Statius, and Silius Italicus; and A. E. Housman's edition of Lucan (1927).

Abbreviations for journals and periodicals are mostly those used in L'Année philologique. The following abbreviations for modern works and editions are used in the text, notes, and References section.

ANRW Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt (Festschrift J. Vogt), ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin and New York, 1927-)
DK H. Diels and W. Kranz (edd.), Die Fragmente der, Vorsokratiker (Berlin, 1952)
Helm R. Helm (ed.), Die Chronik des Hieronymus (Berlin, 1984)

-xii-
LfgrE  Lexion des frühgriechischen Epos ( Göttingen, 1955- )
RE Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft ( Stuttgart, 1893-)
Roscher W. H. Roscher, Ausführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie ( Leipzig, 1884-1937)
TLL Thesaurus Linguae Latinae ( Leipzig, 1900-)
-xiii-
1

Introduction: Fragments d'un Discours Furieux
Modern and Ancient Models of Madness

Quis furor...? What is madness?

There is no one simple definition, as even those who have built their profession on its study are forced to admit. The fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-IV*) begins by noting that 'Although this manual provides a classification of mental disorders, it must be admitted that no definition adequately specifies precise boundaries for the concept of "mental disorder"...'. Yet this difficulty in definitional precision has not, of course, prevented people (including the authors of *DSM-IV*) from attempting to pin down the meaning of madness. These attempts generally take an aetiological form, and can be divided broadly into three groups, although there is, of course, a good deal of overlap between them. First are the neurobiological models, which seek the roots of disorder of the mind in dysfunctional mechanics of the body. These models, based on 'hard science' rather than the more abstract theorizing which characterizes the other groups, are tempting because they seem to offer the stability of empiricism, but detractors -- most notably and vociferously, Szasz -- stress that they are, in fact, not based on empirical evidence at all, but rather on analogy: mental illness is like somatic illness, but it is not somatic illness, and to call it illness at all, according to Szasz, is to be using a metaphor.

---

1 *DSM-IV*, p. xxi; the similar definition from the third edition is quoted by *Szasz* (1987), 67, and see 47-69 for a good albeit biased discussion of the difficulties of defining mental illness.

2 For a general overview, again somewhat biased in favour of the author's own theory, of modern theories of madness see *Rosenberg* (1992), 5-29.


Another objection to such models is that they reduce an individual's experience of madness into biological processes occurring below the experiential level. In contrast, the two other groups of models are primarily concerned with the experience of madness, and the experiences which produce an individual's madness. Societal models, such as labelling, social control, or role-taking theories, see madness as a product of dysfunctional interpersonal relationships, while psychological models, particularly those in the Freudian tradition, see madness as a product of dysfunctional mental processes within the individual.

The ideas about madness which developed in the ancient world can be divided into the same three basic categories. The ancient equivalents to modern neurobiological models of madness are the various medical models which explain madness in purely scientific terms, whether as diseases of the brain, a preponderance of black bile, or floating wombs. At the beginning of On the Sacred Disease, the author famously declares his project of the demythologization of disease:

\[ \text{περὶ τῆς ἱερῆς νοσοῦ καλεωμένης οὐδὲ ἔχει. οὐδὲν τί μοι δοκεῖ τῶν ἄλλων θειοτέρῃ εἶναι νοσὸς οὐδὲ ἱερωτέρῃ, ἄλλα φύσω μὲν ἔχει καὶ πρόφασιν, οὶ δὲ ἄνθρωποι ἐνόμισαν θείον τι πρήγμα εἶναι ὑπὸ ἀπειρίης καὶ θαυμασιότητος, ὅτι οὐδὲν ἐσκεφτεὶ ἐτέρωσι.} \]

I do not believe that the 'Sacred Disease' is any more divine or sacred than any other disease but, on the contrary, has specific characteristics and a definite cause. Nevertheless, because it is completely different from other diseases, it has been regarded as a divine visitation by those who, being only human, view it with ignorance and astonishment. (Sacred Disease I)

135-69. For criticism of Szasz and other anti-psychiatrists see e.g. Roth and Kroll (1986), esp. 5-30.


6 See e.g. Freud (1911) with Storr (1989), 59-64; and cf. Sass (1992), 24-67; Lacan (1977); see also Lacan (1977), 179-225, with Benvenuto and Kennedy (1986), 142-61; and cf. Samuels (1993), 27-43; cf. also existential/phenomenological psychology, e.g. Laing (1965); Sass (1992); and see Rosenberg (1992), 7-15, for a survey of other psychological approaches.


According to the author, various non-medical 'specialists' (μ+άγ+ο+ι τ+ε' κ+α+θ κ+α +δ+ά+ρ+τ+α+ι κ+α+θ δ+γ+υ+ό+ρ+τ+α+ι, κ+α+θ δ+λ+α+κ+α+ζ+ό+ν+ε+ς 'witch-doctors, faithhealers, quacks and charlatans', Sacred Disease2) claim that the disease is sacred only to hide their own ignorance about its origins and its cure, but in contrast, the Hippocratics can provide information, based on rational scientific principles, on both. While the subject of the treatise is epilepsy, it is relevant to medical ideas about madness, since the two conditions were associated with one another in antiquity, as illustrated, for example, by the description of the hero's madness in Euripides' Heracles. 10 And during his discussion of the biological origins of the so-called sacred disease, the author describes how madness is the result of an abnormally moist and agitated brain (Sacred Disease 17). 11 But although the medical writers can in this way clarify the cause of madness and related diseases, they are still unable to circumscribe the experience of madness, or to explain why the symptoms of madness should be so manifold and variable. So, for example, the fifth-century AD physician Caelius Aurelianus is able to define madness as alienatio tardans sine febris ('an impairment of reason; it is chronic and without fever', Chronic Diseases I. 146) 12 and carefully distinguishes it from the related diseases of phrenitis and melancholia, 13 but his description of the actual condition of madness still remains vague:

[alienatio mentis] quibusdam uhehens, quibusdam leuis, et aliis alia specie atque uisu differens, uirtute tamen atque genere uno confecta. nam furor nunc iracundia, nunc hilaritate, nunc maestitum sine uanitate occupat mentem, nunc timore comminante inamurn rerum. [this impairment of reason] in some cases is severe, in others, mild; it differs in the various cases in its outward form and appearance, though its

---


11 Cf. also On the Sacred Disease I, where the author uses madness as an illustration of a non-sacred disease.


nature and character are the same. For, when mania lays hold of the mind, it manifests itself now in anger, now in merriment, now in sadness or futility, and now . . . in an overpowering fear of things which are quite harmless. (Chronic Diseases 1. 150)  

The ancient medical writers share this problem with their modern counterparts. So in DSM-IV,

each of the mental disorders is conceptualized as a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress (e.g. a painful symptom) or disability (i.e. impairment in one or more important areas of functioning) or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom.

What Szasz concludes about the similar statement in DSM-III is valid also here, that 'the authors . . . offer us a definition of mental disorder so obscure and all-inclusive as to be meaningless'.

One of the primary concerns of the author of On the Sacred Disease is to show that epilepsy and other illnesses are not caused by anything other than natural events, and the dissociation of the idea of disease (including madness) from notions of pollution or divine intervention is a fundamental, though usually implicit, aspect of the medical texts. Just as there is a connection between ancient and modern attempts to rationalize madness in terms of biological processes, so these ancient superstitious and supernatural alternatives to the medical approach may, I think, be viewed as analogous to modern societal models of madness, although, of course, there are many significant differences. In the ancient religious models, madness is still figured as a disease, but in a more metaphorical way, and with its roots lying outside rather than within the individual. In a sense, madness resulting from pollution is an indication of a dysfunctional interpersonal relationship between man and man, and madness resulting from divine intervention -- whether

---

14 Cf. Celsus, Med. 3. 18. 2-3, 17, 19, 24.
15 DSM-IV, p. xxi; the passage goes on to illustrate the overlap of the various types of modern models of madness: 'Whatever its original cause, it must currently be considered a manifestation of a behavioral, psychological, or biological dysfunction in the individual. Neither deviant behavior (e.g. political, religious, or sexual) nor conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict is a symptom or a dysfunction in the individual as described above' (pp. xxi-xxii).
16 Szasz (1987), 67 (author's italics).
17 On pollution and madness see e.g. Parker (1983), 128-9, 218; Burkert (1985), 80; Padel (1992), 172-9.
in the form of outright possession or more subtle attack—is an indication of a
dysfunctional interpersonal relationship between man and god. 18 The power element
which often functions in modern societal theories of madness, in which madness
becomes a way of categorizing and controlling social deviance, 19 is in evidence here
as well, particularly in the cases of madness by divine intervention which occur in
tragedy. There, one of the ways in which gods show their control over morals is by
punishing them with madness when, right or wrong, they oppose divine purpose and
so engender divine wrath. 20 Madness in these societal models is susceptible not to
medicinal cures, which act on the body, but to various types of purification which
reconcile men with men and with gods. 21 Though criticized by the Hippocratic
physicians, such 'remedies' for madness and other diseases were widespread, and not
without some influence on the physicians themselves. 22

Not only were the medical writers' views opposed to the irrational teachings of the
superstitious, but they were also set in opposition to the rational teachings of the
philosophers. Caelius Aurelianus, for example, remarks that

peccant denique etiam hi qui animae passionem principaliter, dehinc corporis esse
concipiunt, cum neque quisquam philosophorum eius tradiderit curationem, et
antequam mente falluntur, accidentia substantia corporis habereuideatur.

Thus those who imagine that the disease is chiefly an affection of the soul and
only secondarily of the body are mistaken. For no philosopher has ever set forth a
successful treatment for this disease; moreover, before the mind is affected, the
body itself shows visible symptoms. ( Chronic Diseases I. 154)

In contrast, the philosophers, to whom Caelius Aurelianus is reacting, believed that
their's was the only successful treatment in matters of the mind. 23 Chrysippus is
reported by Galen as stating that

18 On divine intervention, madness, and disease in general see e.g. Dodds ( 1951), 66-
8 ; Lloyd ( 1979), 29 n. 98 ; Parker ( 1983), 235-56 ; Padel ( 1992), 49-59; ( 1995),
149-50; and cf. O'Brien-Moore ( 1924), 11-20 ; for this type of ancient madness in
modern societal terms see Padel ( 1983).
19 See Ch. 3 below for a similar type of theory applied to the Iliad.
20 Cf. e.g. Hera's display of power over the hero by sending madness upon him in
Eur. HF ( cf. esp. 840-2), or Dionysus' mastering of Pentheus with madness in Eur.
Bacc.
21 See Parker ( 1983), 207-34.
23 On the commonplace see Gigante ( 1975) ; Temkin ( 1991), 8-17.
It is not true that whereas there is an art, called medicine, concerned with the diseased body, there is no art concerned with the diseased soul, or that the latter [art] should be inferior to the former in the theory and treatment of individual cases. (Plac. 5. 2. 22) 

Cicero also provides an explicit statement of this view when he notes in the Tusculan Disputations that the morbi animi (‘diseases of the soul’) are more harmful and more numerous than the morbi corporis (‘diseases of the body’, Tusc. 3. 5), and then claims that

est profecto animi medicina, philosophia, cuius auxilium non ut in corporis morbis petendum est foris, omnibusque opibus atque uiribus, ut nos met ipsi nobis mederi possimus, elaborandum est.

Without question there is a medicine for the soul, philosophy, whose help must not be sought externally, as with diseases of the body, and we must exert ourselves with all our resources and strength so that we ourselves are able to heal ourselves. (Tusc. 3. 6)

As these passages indicate, the idea of therapy is important in many philosophical approaches to mental disorders. It is not difficult, then, to relate the models of madness constructed by the ancient philosophers, and their emphasis on the necessity for an intellectual rather than a medicinal cure, to modern psychological models of madness and their accompanying methods of therapy. This, of course, does not mean that the medical and psychological/philosophical approaches to madness are completely separate, either in modern or ancient thought. Whereas a fairly firm division is now drawn, however, between medicine and psychology on the one hand, and philosophy of mind on the other, in antiquity the boundaries are much more fluid, and the division between what would now be termed philosophy of mind and psychology is non-existent.

---


26 On the interrelatedness of medicine and philosophy see e.g. Gill (1985), 322-3; Frede (1987); cf. Hankinson (1991a) and (1993) on the joint influence of