

Female madness between mythical
and medical tradition

[Locura femenina entre la tradición mítica y la médica]

Esther Carra*
University of Siena

Abstract:

The aim of this article is to analyze how female madness is placed between mythical and medical tradition. Medical sources recognize and treat mental illness, the etiology of which is sought in a physical place of the body and always associated with the functioning of the uterus, so much so that it is perceived as an object of integration into society. According to the doctors of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, an interaction between body and *psyche* generates psychic affections, that is signs of a biological imbalance. The pathologies of the uterus can be solved with sexual activity and with pregnancy: an example can be found in *Girls*, the Hippocratic treatise examined. The mythical sources foresee an ethical sanction that leads to considering madness as an object of segregation and isolation. In this regard, three myths are examined: Io in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Agave in Euripides' *Bacchae*. In each case, the madness of these three women is caused by a deity. Although the characters concerned are innocent, their insanity causes a violation of ethical values. A particular case is the myth of the Proetides, in which the young women unleash divine wrath and the consequent punishment. Proetus's daughters are healed and, finally, through marriage, they respect the representations and beliefs relating to the role of young women within Greek society.

Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar cómo la locura femenina se sitúa entre la tradición mítica y la médica. Las fuentes médicas reconocen y tratan la enfermedad mental, cuya etiología se busca en un lugar físico del cuerpo y se asocia siempre al funcionamiento del útero, hasta el punto de percibirlo como objeto de integración en la sociedad. Según los médicos del *Corpus Hippocraticum*, la interacción entre cuerpo y *psique* genera afecciones psíquicas, es decir, signos de un desequilibrio biológico. Las patologías del útero pueden resolverse con la actividad sexual y con el embarazo: un ejemplo lo encontramos en *Sobre las enfermedades de las vírgenes*, el tratado hipocrático examinado. Las fuentes míticas prevén una sanción ética que lleva a considerar la locura como objeto de segregación y

* **Dirección para correspondencia:** University of Siena/Center AMA - Center for the Anthropology of the Ancient World, via Roma 56, Siena, Italy 53100. Correo electrónico: esther.carra@unisi.it. orcid.org/0009-0001-1385-9792

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aislamiento. A este respecto, se examinan tres mitos: Io en *Prometeo encadenado* de Esquilo, Fedra en *Hipólito* de Eurípides y Ágave en *Bacantes* de Eurípides. En cada caso, la locura de estas tres mujeres está causada por una divinidad. Aunque los personajes en cuestión son inocentes, su locura provoca una violación de los valores éticos. Un caso particular es el mito de las Prétides, en el que las jóvenes desatan la ira divina y el consiguiente castigo. Las hijas de Preto se curan y, finalmente, mediante el matrimonio, respetan las representaciones y creencias relativas al papel de las jóvenes dentro de la sociedad griega.

Keywords: female madness; ancient Greek literature; ancient medicine; mythology; illness and health; women and society; ancient imagery

Palabras clave: locura femenina; literatura griega antigua; medicina antigua; mitología; enfermedad y salud; mujer y sociedad; imaginería antigua

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In the Introduction to *Dialoghi con Leucò*,¹ Cesare Pavese wrote ‘Had it been possible, I would gladly have done without all this mythology. But myth, it seems to me, is a language of its own, an instrument of expression’.² Myth is not only a way of narrating the memory of our predecessors, but it is also a way of reflecting on our culture. Mythical thought, the product of human imagination, draws a path of memory and knowledge about that fantastic world, apparently mute, that is able to talk about everything as long as you agree to listen to it. Certainly, the relationship between man and the divine, destiny and human responsibility constitutes not only the core of many mythological narratives, but also the starting point of a scientific process that attempts to overcome traditional representation by demonstrating a rational interpretation: the Greek tragedy stages the drama of human suffering in the face of the divine in the same years as the compilation of the first treatises on medicine.

Before analyzing some female characters with shocked minds and delusional words, it is necessary to make a premise. The female body, as opposed to the male one, can be observed in ancient sources, in the succession of the ages. This is well-evidenced by the fact that the onset of puberty, and therefore the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics, clearly indicates the

¹ The *Dialoghi con Leucò* by Cesare Pavese is a series of twenty-seven very short stories, structured in dialogical form, written from 1945 to 1947 and published that same year.

² ‘Potendo, si sarebbe fatto a meno di tanta mitologia. Ma siamo convinti che il mito è un linguaggio, un mezzo espressivo’, *Dialoghi con Leucò*’s Italian passage, see C. Pavese, 1952, p. 308.

differences between male and female bodies, whereas this process is less recognizable during childhood. To confirm this, the ancient authors of medical and biology writings have always recognized in these different bodily characteristics also distinct qualities and meanings, which highlighted a gender and role boundary between the two sexes. In this way it is possible not only to understand gender discourse, but also to perceive what the construction of this discourse was in the authors themselves.³ Undoubtedly, it is also good to point out that in ancient culture the distinction of sex or gender was punctually emphasized and the purpose was to define different characters and roles that obviously remained well distinct.

It was necessary to look at the phases and times, in this case the feminine ones, in which a young girl was on the way to becoming a woman and then a mother. In the period of a woman's life, the transition from girl to woman deserved a special place.

In ancient Greece the distinction of sexual roles was evident, in fact, if it was possible for men to deal with problems outside the home, with the life of the *πόλις* (city-state), women were only allowed to dedicate themselves to those inside the *οἶκος* (home). If on the one hand the female role was recognized

³ For sake of clarity, definition of an ideal timeline for young women to engage in marriage, sexual activity and child bearing in Ancient Greek society can be retrieved by referring to Soranus of Ephesus, a Greek physician who exercised his profession in the cosmopolitan Rome of the emperors Trajan and Hadrian. Although the Roman custom provided for the marriage of prepubescent girls, the Ephesian doctor is said to have opposed these customs by forbidding sexual intercourse and, therefore, a prepubescent pregnancy. First of all, Soranus of Ephesus opposed the idea of those who recognized sexual desire as the right moment to join with man and motivated what goes with his disapproval of the different anatomical conformation between the male and female body. Defloration for the woman was more delicate and consequently needed time in order to avoid unpleasant consequences. The recommended age was therefore fixed at about fourteen years, that is the age in which the menarche would have already arrived and the uterus would have been able to perform its functions, see Soranus of Ephesus, *Gynaecia* 1.10.38-41. It is necessary to take into consideration that at that age the female reproductive system would still be neither well nor ready: an age greater than that indicated was enough to avoid abortions or difficulties in childbirth. The age suitable for getting pregnant was chronologically between fifteen and forty years, the average age of menopause: therefore, the age to be avoided because of the greater the risks was that of very young women, see Soranus of Ephesus, *Gynaecia* 1.6.17-25. Also in the Hippocratic texts there are general considerations on the ability to conceive, see Hippocrates, *Diseases of women* 1.17 (VIII, 56.1 - 58.2 L.).

as important as far as the management of the home was concerned, on the other it was considered absolutely inferior in relation to the performance of typically male tasks. The difference between the male and the female⁴ was always presented in reference to the man, in relation to which the woman was thought of in terms of incompleteness or opposition.⁵

The Greek theories on the anatomy and physiology of the female body were strongly influenced by the cultural prejudices of the time. On the basis of the masculine vision in force, typical feminine traits were taken into consideration to prove how much the feminine physical nature was different and inferior to the masculine one. In fact, the Aristotelian biological theory considered the woman only as a provider necessary for reproductive purposes while the man, being the 'form and spirit', represented the active element who with his sperm 'transformed' the feminine matter, therefore this theory recognized the reproduction as an necessary act for life in which the essence deteriorated as it materialized.⁶

However, in a society that was strongly supported by men, women could not be excluded: the logic aimed at the perpetuation of the species required the woman to have a role, as wife, and a space, the nuptial house, inside of which it was necessary to dominate desires and passions otherwise ungovernable.

Certainly, the gynecological treatises of the *Hippocratic Collection* allow us to obtain a systematic view regarding observations made by doctors of that time. In these texts it is possible to notice the first scientific formulation of knowledge about the female body and, at the same time, the first classification of the biological characteristics and functions of women. In addition, although paying considerable attention to the harmonious psychophysical balance of women, the doctors of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* do not attribute autonomy to mental illness and so 'madness' appears to be a symptom of a differently connoted disease.

Despite the fleeting and hardly definable boundaries of those evils in which the dichotomy between physical and psychic is evident, the Hippocratic

⁴ Whether it was given as a radical, or in the difference in nature; whether it was seen as relative, or in the degree of perfection.

⁵ On the subject, see J.-B. Bonnard, 2013, pp. 21-39.

⁶ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, 716 a 4 ff. and also 734 b 35 ff. On the subject, see M. Foucault's work, 1984, p. 97 in which he states that the feminine virtues 'se définissent en référence à une vertu essentielle, qui trouve sa forme pleine et achevée chez l'homme'.

gynecological works allow us to present a surprisingly broad and detailed framework of what actually is called ‘delirium’. In the short treatise *Girls*, female pathological phenomena characterized by functional disorders emerge, concerning in particular virgins and infertile women. Thus, the mutual influence between body and *psyche* is highlighted: delusions and madness depend on an unhealthy body.⁷ Pathologies of the uterus can be resolved with sexual activity and pregnancy.

The short Hippocratic writing⁸ establishes the premises of a disease destined to be very significant in the field of psychiatry and, in general, in Western culture, namely *hysteria*.⁹ When menstrual flow occurred in a young unmarried woman of marriageable age, the uterine orifice, being closed, did not favor a normal outflow of menstrual blood and consequently led to retention, reflux and pressure of the non-evacuated blood, which crept into the areas of the diaphragm and heart. From this massive functional disorders originated and, in addition, the fact that plethora and blood pressure were pathological factors was also proven by the phenomenon of tingling in the leg. The subsequent compression of the blood in this area led to the temporary inability to walk. However, the blood pressure in the diaphragmatic-cardiac area, where the outflow had already slowly arrived because of the transverse arrangement of the veins, was a reason for a loss of sense and madness. In other words, the resulting disorders were caused by the degeneration of the blood. Sexual intercourse had therapeutic properties, especially if followed by pregnancy: it was the best way to cure young women from the terrible disease which was also characterized by the desire to hang themselves. The gynecological text is very significant in this regard, because the girls who avoided marriage tended towards a situation outside the norm, which could become pathological for their health.¹⁰

⁷ According to ancient Hippocratic medicine, the body dominates the *psyche* and consequently the psyche reacts to the body: such an interaction generates psychic affections, signs of a biological disorder: see L. Faranda, 1996, p. 40 ff.

⁸ The treatise is to be considered a fragment: this idea would be acceptable if it could prove a close relationship with the work, which undoubtedly had to be broader, to which the Hippocratic author, called C, refers as in his own independent treatment; if this relationship did not exist, only the fact that the treatise is short would demonstrate the fragmentary condition, I follow A. Lami’s observations, 2007, pp. 15-59.

⁹ In this regard, see G. Guidorizzi, 2010, pp. 210-216.

¹⁰ I follow A. Lami’s interpretation, 2007, pp. 15-59.

The symptomatic and psychic manifestations are evident and, consequently, the organic basis of virgin disorders emerges. The description of these problems completely cancels the physical symptoms and, in this case, one can glimpse a great distance from the remaining Hippocratic works.¹¹ As reported in a passage of *Girls* (ed. Potter 2010, 360; VIII, 466.17-468.9 L.), the appearance of the first menstruation is associated with pathological manifestations that occur when the girls reach *tempus nuptiarum* and do not marry. Consequently, the blood, which should flow externally, is hindered in its usual outflow and therefore causes internal pressure:

‘Οκόταν οὖν ταῦτα πληρωθῶσιν, ἐμωρώθη ἡ καρδίη, εἴτ’ ἐκ τῆς μωρώσειος νάρκη, εἴτ’ ἐκ τῆς νάρκης παράνοια ἔλαβεν. Ὡσπερ ὀκόταν καθημένου πολὺν χρόνον τὸ ἐκ τῶν ἰσχύων καὶ μηρῶν αἷμα ἀποπιεχθὲν ἐς τὰς κνήμας καὶ τοὺς πόδας | νάρκην παράσχη. Ὑπὸ δὲ τῆς νάρκης ἀκρατέες οἱ πόδες ἐς ὀδοιπορίην γίνονται, ἔστ’ ἂν ἀναχωρήσῃ τὸ αἷμα ἐς ἑωυτό· ἀναχωρεῖ δὲ τάχιστα, ὀκόταν ἀναστὰς ἐν ὕδατι ψυχρῷ τέγγῃ τὸ ἄνω τῶν σφυρῶν. Αὕτη μὲν οὖν ἡ νάρκη εὐήνιος, ταχὺ γὰρ παλιρροεῖ διὰ τὴν ἰθύτητα τῶν φλεβῶν, καὶ ὁ τόπος τοῦ σώματος οὐκ ἐπίκαιρος. Ἐκ δὲ τῆς καρδίης καὶ τῶν φρενῶν βραδέως παλιρροεῖ· ἐπικάρσιαι γὰρ αἱ φλέβες καὶ ὁ τόπος ἐπίκαιρος, ἔς τε παραφροσύνην καὶ μανίην ἔτοιμος. Ὅπόταν γὰρ πληρωθῶσι ταῦτα τὰ μέρεα, καὶ φρίκη ξὺν πυρετῷ ἀναίσσει πλανήτης.

Now when these parts are filled¹², the heart becomes stupefied, then from the stupefaction numb, and finally from the numbness these women become deranged. It is like when, in a person who sits for a long time, the blood is pressed out of his hips and things into his lower legs and feet, and this provokes numbness. As a result of the numbness, the feet lose their capacity to walk, until the blood moves back into its natural place: it moves back soonest when the person stands up and immerses his legs above the ankles in cold water. Now this numbness is tractable, for it goes away quickly on account of the straightness of the vessels, and furthermore those places in the body are not critical. But from the heart and the diaphragm the blood recedes only slowly, since the vessels there are transverse and those places are critical and can bring about derangement and raging. For when these parts are filled, a transient shivering with fever arises. [Potter’s translation]

¹¹ See the work of V. Andò, 2007, pp. 103-129.

¹² It is the diaphragm and the heart; blood pressure exerts itself on these areas.

Ancient gynecology presented female diseases as an opportunity to establish a norm *κατὰ φύσιν* (according to nature) that structured the sexual function of the female body according to precise rules: if on the one hand the man almost always managed to maintain a physiological balance, the woman, on the other, always lived a precarious unstable condition, which stemmed from her own disposition. As H. King observes: ‘the successful transition from *parthenos* to *gynê* depends on compressing menarche, marriage and childbirth into as short a space as possible’.¹³

In this environment of ‘hygienic terrorism’¹⁴, medical texts tended to the social control of women by pushing them to act as society required, marrying and giving birth at the age considered clinically and socially acceptable.¹⁵ The role of the woman was defined by a precise scheme regulated by social norms that had to be respected.

Sick in the body, women were subjected to a complex therapeutic system. The doctor recognized the pathology and tried to cure the patient, unless the disease was so violent as to lead to death; madness was not perceived as an object of segregation and isolation but, on the contrary, as an object of integration into the society. In a field such as the medical one, the ancient texts did not foresee any ethical sanction, on the contrary the disease was recognized and treated.

If on the one hand, the madness could be of physical origin which could be localized in a specific affected part of the body or attributable to a specific moment of biological life, in the case of a woman reference was made to childbirth, puerperium, virginity, on the other this disease could present itself as a manifestation of a nosological syndrome, the etiology of which was not of a physical nature but, on the contrary, psychopathological.

In the latter case, it is good to remember that, although women were not responsible for the evil carried out, the resulting madness, being an involuntary manifestation, represented a point of no return that forced them to social marginalization and to an irreversible removal from the community context. The only way to avoid such a repercussion was to be found in flight, exile

¹³ Cf. H. King, 1998, p. 79.

¹⁴ Cf. P. Manuli, 1980, p. 404. Paola Manuli spoke of ‘terrorismo igienico’ for the brutal medical description of the evils incurred by women who abstained from sexual relations. In the treatise *Girls* this form of terrorism is clear.

¹⁵ Theory supported by J. R. Pinault, 1992, p. 129.

or even suicide which could save them from this condition: no form of integration was imaginable.

An example is the madness in the myths of Io, Phaedra and Agave.¹⁶ This paragraph of the article will examine the myth of Io.¹⁷ Daughter of Inachus, first king of Argos and priestess of Argive Hera, Io was loved by Zeus, and later transformed into a heifer by Hera who was angry and jealous. Zeus continued to love her in the form of a bull; but the goddess placed her under the supervision of Argos with a hundred eyes, who, however, by order of Zeus, was killed by Hermes. Hera, then, relentless, as always, in the desire to take revenge on the mortal women loved by her divine consort, pursued her with the intolerable stings of a gadfly and forced her to wander, prey to an unbearable frenzy, from one region to another. Being attacked by gadflies was a dramatic experience, because this insect inflicted very painful stings. The Greeks called the gadfly *οἰστρος*, hence the term ‘fancy’, that sudden cue or whim that forces us to do something; the Romans called it *asilus*, hence the word ‘nagging’. So, the cow Io was harassed by a gadfly, haunted by the constant desire to wander like a madman. Finally, the woman found rest on the bank of the Nile, where she finally returned to her original features and mothered a son to Zeus, called Epaphos. According to other traditions, Io married Ariris or Telegonus, king of Egypt, and was subsequently identified with the Egyptian goddess Isis. Another recurring identification was with the moon. It is frequently represented as a female figure, the head however has the horns of the heifer.¹⁸

As already described, the goad, and its consequent wandering which results in madness, was sent by the divinity, and therefore the cause should not be sought within the body. Her illness is neither physically localizable nor due to the punishment of a fault, as the girl has no personal responsibility for her

¹⁶ See the work of V. Andò, 2003, pp. 17-46.

¹⁷ For the myth of Io, see Apollodorus, *The Library*, 2.1.3 and Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, in particular the v. 568 which speaks of the mad wandering of Io in fear; the v. 581 where the girl is worn out by madness; the v. 673 in which a goad torments her and forces her to a senseless escape, to mad leaps. As Valeria Andò points out in her work of 2003, p. 40, the delirium of Io, explained by motor agitation and fear, establishes analogies with the Hippocratic descriptions of madness, see J. Dumortier, 1975, pp. 67-79.

¹⁸ For the story of the myth of Io and his curiosities, I follow the analysis of A. Ferrari, 1999, p. 392 and M. Bettini, 2015, pp. 283-284.

illness. The innocence of Io highlights by contrast the divine power and the painful human condition. It is clear how love for Zeus is fatal for the girl. First of all, it is placed outside the marriage bond and then proposes an unbalanced logic of relationship, a love between a god and a girl.¹⁹

Another myth to consider is that of Phaedra.²⁰ Daughter of Minos and wife of Theseus, Phaedra was a famous heroine of Greek mythology. Falling in love with Hippolytus, son of Theseus and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons (or her sister, Antiope), she was unable to win the heart of the young man, who rejected her. Hippolytus, entirely devoted to hunting and the cult of Artemis, refused his stepmother's love, considering it incestuous. What Phaedra could not know was the fact that the goddess Aphrodite, to whom she had consecrated a sanctuary, was at the origin of that overwhelming passion; the goddess wanted to take revenge through Phaedra for the young man neglecting her rites. Also, to relieve her love, Phaedra stuck her brooch into the leaves of the myrtle; the choice of this plant was not accidental. Just as the oak was sacred to Zeus, king of the gods, one of the most imposing trees growing in the Mediterranean area, so myrtle was the sacred plant to Aphrodite, to which it was often associated in rituals, cults or iconographic representations. Later, the woman accused Hippolytus, in front of Theseus, of having tried to seduce her. After the death of Hippolytus, Theseus however learned the entire truth about the affair and Phaedra committed suicide by hanging herself.²¹ Phaedra's story is similar to that of Io: she is innocent and a victim of a divinity that has made her mad. Contrary to Io's insane wandering, this insane passion is in itself unbearable for Phaedra, to the point of inducing her to commit suicide. Also in this case it is very clear how this love for the stepson, however involuntary,

¹⁹ On the subject, see V. Andò, 2003, pp. 40-41.

²⁰ For the myth of Phaedra, see Apollodorus, *The Library, Epitome*, 1.3 and Euripides, *Hippolytus*, in particular the vv. 38- 39 in which Phaedra is shocked by the goads of love; the v. 40 where the unhappy queen is consumed in silence; the v. 232 in which the nurse who assists the woman interprets her behavior and her words as consequences of her madness. The description of Phaedra's madness recalls that of the Hippocratic patients. The vv. 293-296 of the text seem to be in correlation with the Hippocratic passage, see Hippocrates, *Diseases of women* 1.62 (VIII, 126.7 - 126.14 L.), according to which Hippocrates complained of the very serious consequences due to the female self-respect felt towards the doctor: this prevented a clear explanation of the disease from being provided.

²¹ For the story of the myth of Phaedra and her curiosities, I follow the analysis of A. Ferrari, 1999, p. 324 and M. Lentano, 2018, in particular pp. 54-55 and p. 57.

leads the woman to an extreme decision. Her initiative is certainly conditioned by respect for those traditional values which in ancient societies, in this case the Greek one, define the role of women as mother and spouse: Phaedra violates the relationship of trust that binds a wife to a husband. The appeal to good reputation and to αἰδώς (self-respect) excludes women from the possibility of continuing to live in the political community to which they belong. Her madness involves social condemnation, the solution of which is found in voluntary death.²²

Let's refer to the myth of Agave.²³ Daughter of Cadmus, wife of Echione and mother of Pentheus, Agave, like her sister Ino, was known as a son-killer: her actions were dominated by amazing effects of madness. The young Pentheus succeeded Cadmus on the throne of Thebes and there in his homeland Dionysus arrived. The god was the son of Zeus and Semele, also the daughter of Cadmus and sister of Agave and Ino. Dionysus, in Thebes, laid the foundations of his cult, but his divine nature was denied. As a result, the god drove women mad by causing them to leave their homes and celebrate feasts in his honor. Since Pentheus, the king of Thebes, was opposed to the introduction of the cult of Dionysus in his kingdom, he himself was made mad by the same god and his palace was destroyed to its foundations. Pentheus, who obstructed the cult, was bewitched and induced to dress as a woman to spy on the Bacchae on the mountain. The place chosen by the poets, where the event was held, was Mount Cithaeron or Mount Parnassus. The women, led by Agave, the mother of Pentheus, found out. It was said that the king had hidden himself among the branches of a tree to attend, unseen, the rites of the Maenads, and that he met his terrible end because his hiding place was discovered. His fate was already foreshadowed by his name, which actually means 'the man of suffering'. He

²² On the subject, see V. Andò, 2003, pp. 41-43.

²³ For the myth of Agave, see Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.5.2 and Euripides, *Bacchae*, in particular the vv. 118-119 in which the women, possessed by Dionysus, were driven away from the spools and looms; the v. 851 in which the god insinuates a *slight* madness in Pentheus; the vv. 1122-1123 where Agave, at the height of the paroxysm, mistakes her son for an animal: she grabs him, tears him apart and sticks his head on the thyrsus as if it were a trophy. As Valeria Andò points out in her work of 2003, 45, Agave's delirium goes beyond the ritual invasion of maenads. The awareness of the crime committed is interpreted on the basis of psychoanalytic theories, see G. Devereux, 1970b, pp. 35-48.

was torn to pieces by his own mother and sisters, Ino and Autonoe, who in the grip of Bacchic ecstasy believed they saw him as an angry lion.²⁴

Like the other two heroines, the total distortion of reason is due to divine power. But Agave is guilty of a horrible crime: she kills her son by mistaking him for an animal. Once she comes to her senses and realizes the terrible actions she has committed, the woman is seized by an unbearable pain that leads her to accept, as the only solution, the verdict of the god who condemns her to exile. If Io finds the solution to the unsustainable social condemnation in flight and Phaedra in death, Agave, due to the killing of her son, is stained with a grave fault that appears completely outside the human world and social rules. All that remains for the woman is to atone for the crime committed by accepting the necessary exile, placing herself far from society and community norms. In Agave's case, it is noted that her pain was the painful realization after that crazy moment in which the loss of contact with reality and the inability to distinguish the true from the illusory prevailed by the will of a god.²⁵

Certainly, there is no resolution to the madness that these tragic heroines have in common because the disease, that lies in the depths of their being, is of divine origin and its effects are highly uncontrollable. The Greek tragedy witnesses the fact that the mechanisms of exclusion are accompanied by psychopathological manifestations.²⁶

In the reworking of mythical tales, the theatrical representation of madness presents points of contact with the data progressively processed and collected by ancient medical knowledge. It is essential to emphasize that the dramas that affect and overwhelm women offer themselves as an extreme opportunity to identify the symbolic models around which Greek society has built the image of the woman's body. The unleashing of madness is understood as an unhooking from reality.

A lot of elements of divergence and distancing from the Greek anthropological norm, which refers to the rebellious behavior of girls, punished with

²⁴ For the story of the Agave myth and its curiosities, I follow the analysis of A. Ferrari, 1999, in particular p. 20 and p. 553 and J. A Clua Serena, 2010, pp. 25-26.

²⁵ On the subject, see V. Andò, 2003, pp. 43-45.

²⁶ Idea supported by V. Andò, 2003, p. 46.

a form of delirium by divinities, but then cured by a famous diviner and doctor, is the myth of the Proetides.²⁷

Proetus's three daughters, Lysippe, Iphinoe and Iphianassa, known as the Proetides were simultaneously seized by madness when they reached adulthood. Different reasons are given: according to one version²⁸, one of the causes was their contempt for the cult of Dionysus, who punished them; another²⁹ one was their refusal to marry at the propitious age for marriage, which Hera, goddess of marriages, punished. The girls seemed to prefer their *status* as daughters tied to a father rather than that of women willing to marry. Furthermore, they had dared to offend Hera by saying that their father surpassed the goddess in wealth and magnificence.³⁰ Madness, divine punishment, not only struck Proetus's daughters, but also struck all other Argive women like a contagious disease. In addition to the madness³¹, the story of the myth is so detailed that it also describes the alopecia that had disfigured these girls. Melampus assured Proetus that he could cure them; the king then agreed to promise him half of the kingdom providing the scourge was removed. The soothsayer and his brother Bias then married two of Proetus's three daughters, who had been the first to be seized by madness.³²

This mythical tale can also be defined as a myth of 'madness'. Two aspects are in common with the other myths analyzed: the madness presented

²⁷ Among the various studies on the myth of the Proetides, I point out that of F. Marzari, 2010, pp. 47-74.

²⁸ Dionysus: in Hesiod, according to Apollodorus, *The Library*, 2.2.2 = Hesiod, fr. 131 M.-W.

²⁹ Among the different sources on Hera, Bacchylides, *Epinician Odes*, 11.

³⁰ As expected, numerous scholars have recognized the offence of the Proetides against Hera as a rejection of his dominion, that is to say of marriage, in this regard, see the studies of C. Calame, 1977, p. 216; N. Robertson, 1983, pp. 159-162; C. Montepaone, 1986, p. 228; R. Seaford, 1988, p. 119; J. Larson, 2001, pp. 114-115; M. Dillon, 2002, p. 67; D. Cairns, 2005, p. 46. See also E. De Martino, 1961, p. 207. Other reasons such as the insult to the statue of the goddess and her wealth would be only pale projections.

³¹ Among the manifestations of their madness, Virgil, *Eclogues*, 6.48, recalls the fact that the girls were believed to be cows. In reference to the myth of Io, it is emphasized that the Proetides did not really become cows, unlike Io that had been transformed into an animal. They believed they had become cows and therefore wandered, like Io, through the woods.

³² For the story of the myth of the Proetides and its curiosities, I follow the analysis of A. Ferrari, 1999, in particular pp. 585-586 and M. Bettini, 2015, pp. 295-298.

as a form of punishment determined by the offended deities and the young women condemned to distance themselves from the human consortium and to wander aimlessly throughout Greece.

One aspect of the myth, from which the other stories examined differ, concerns the healing of young women. Purification by the healing physician serves to restore a condition of balance and therefore of health. As also underlined in the other myths, it is necessary to remember the importance of shared norms and established rules, with which the various individuals are called to measure themselves by adapting. The acquisition of an adult *status*, normalized by marriage and parenthood, allows the Proetides to enter the social context overcoming the state of marginalization caused by the disease. The reference according to which, after coming to their senses, the girls were united in marriage with Melampus and his brother is not accidental: the nuptial union, as described in medical texts, cures that form of madness on which the girl's health depended. A connection is established between the mythical and the medical dimension. It is therefore possible to relate a myth of juvenile madness such as that of the Proetides with the Hippocratic writing, *Girls*, examined at the beginning, which focused on the madness of *παρθένος* (virgin) in marriageable age.³³

Compared to the other stories, the protagonists of the myth in question are certainly not innocent but, on the contrary, they voluntarily offend the gods by unleashing their anger. Proetus's daughters, while being aware of the role to be adopted within society, oppose marriage.³⁴ This myth once again underlines the representations and beliefs relating to the role of the young woman within Greek society.

This mental disorder, specific to women, led to violent forms of psychological instability, with crises of depression as well as suicidal instincts.³⁵ Some

³³ While not clearly connecting the mythical events of the Proetides to the treatise *Girls*, the myth in question was part of the 'mythes de puberté', see H. Jeanmaire, 1951, p. 208.

³⁴ Like the Proetides, the Danaids also refused marriage to their Egyptian cousins. The myth in question and the Hippocratic treatise *Girls* offer a more explicit comparison between myth and medical beliefs. They present a fairly clear description of a social disease that manifests itself in the refusal to accept one's body in a psychologically delicate phase of one's existence. This disease can find a modern parallel in that form of mental disorder, also typical of the female part of society, which is anorexia, see G. Guidorizzi, 1995, p. 183.

³⁵ See the Hippocratic treatise *Girls* and the myth of Phaedra.

studies³⁶ recognize a strong symbolic component in these forms of mental instability, like a representation produced by the collective imagination: the singularity of the relationship between the etiology of the disease, its manifestations and its therapy which leads to the need to recall models that go far beyond Hippocratic medical literature so as to obtain a clearer picture of the patterns and social norms imposed by Greek culture. Psychosocial considerations have been added to this theory.³⁷

Starting from a concept of ethnopsychiatry, it is possible to speak of 'ethnic stress', or a form of psychological malaise that derives from the emotional impulses and pressures induced by society on the individual. This aspect justifies the obsessive drive to suicide by those women who do not comply with the behavioral patterns imposed by society. Ethnic stress leads the alienated person to follow rules and norms shared by society: madness is recognized by society and by the patient himself who then decides to act according to the normal, just and accepted idea.³⁸

In conclusion, it is important to highlight how the image of the female body that emerged from the entire overview is under the evaluative gaze of others. In the medical sources, the relationships between body and *psyche* and the resulting alterations and treatments lead the woman to return to her right role in ancient society. As we have already stated, the male and female communities of traditional societies are not only brought up in different ways of life, but they are subjected to very different impulses and repressions of instincts. Healing through marriage removes the social cause of hardship by reintegrating women into society. The same happens in the mythical sources even if sometimes the solutions turn out to be traumatic or more radical. In the analyzed mythical stories, the representation of madness incorporates a social unease and an expression of extreme pain for an inevitable exclusion. The emerging idea marks a distance from the progressively processed and collected data from ancient medical knowledge.

³⁶ See the studies of G. Sissa, 1987 and V. Andò, 1990, pp. 715-737.

³⁷ Thesis supported by G. Guidorizzi, 2010, p. 212.

³⁸ On this point cf. G. Devereux, 1978a.

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