

Erotic Rational Madness in the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*

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Abstract

In this article, I suggest that both the *Phaedrus* and the *Hippolytus* explore the idea that erotic madness encompasses an element of rationality. This concept of rational erotic madness gained prominence after the Platonic dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates posits that humans might attain the greatest fortune by allowing the rational part of the soul to guide them even in a state of madness. I contend that this idea is also evident in Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, where Phaedra confronts her passions and descends into madness, yet still strives to address her dilemmas with wisdom.

Keywords: erotic madness, rational madness, moral theory of eros, Euripides and Plato, Phaedra’s erotic passion, Platonic eros.

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In both Platonic philosophy and Euripidean tragedy, the concept of erotic madness is closely related to human erotic passion. Eros is linked to passion because it represents an excessive and intense emotion that encompasses more than just love. Erotic passion represents a state where one cannot fully act rationally, as the desires stemming from passion may override the dictates of reason. Madness, in this context, denotes a lack of control by reason, making it an inherent aspect of eros, which is inherently beyond complete human control. Plato and Euripides underscore an initially paradoxical aspect of erotic madness that actually illuminates the complexity of the erotic experience in the human soul: rational madness. This notion suggests that within the chaotic insanity of the erotic soul, there can still be an active and significant role for rationality.

There was a widespread belief, which is evident in the works of both Euripides and Plato, that eros is tied to madness and thus considered a form of disease.¹ The term *νόσος* often refers to madness

¹ E.g., Sophocles, *Antigone*, 781; Gorgias, *Encomium on Helen*, 19; Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 1.2.5.

as a mental illness.² Poets describe eros using metaphors of disease and madness, portraying it as a force that invades human life with destructive effects, leading to both physical and mental turmoil, all under the premise that this power is insurmountable.³ As we will explore, both Euripides and Plato often depict eros as a disease and as madness, with the terms frequently used interchangeably. This duality exists because madness is medically viewed as a disease, and having a disease can indeed provoke madness.

To truly comprehend human nature, it is essential to examine its irrational components. In doing so, we discover that elements of rationality are often entwined within these irrational aspects. Nietzsche aptly noted in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “There is always some madness in love. But there is always some reason in madness”.⁴ Rationality, being grounded in reason, contrasts with irrationality, which deviates from rational norms and is dominated by the pursuit of pleasures. A rational individual experiences desires but maintains them within moderate limits. Self-control, as a virtue, enables a wise person to manage irrational passions and align them with rationality. Having these in mind, I will explore instances in the works of Euripides and Plato that demonstrate what I term “erotic rational madness”, suggesting the presence of a rational component within the realm of erotic madness.

In this paper, we will examine how the concept of erotic rational madness is explicitly presented by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Here, Socrates discusses eros, asserting that within the state of madness, humans may achieve the greatest fortune (245b) through the guidance of the rational part of the soul toward true knowledge (247c). I will argue that earlier traces of this concept can be found in Euripides’ portrayal of Phaedra’s eros for Hippolytus. If this is the case, it is noteworthy that Plato’s seemingly innovative idea of erotic rational madness may be comparable to themes developed by Euripides in his tragic poetry half a century earlier. This comparison highlights the continuity and evolution of ideas in ancient Greek thought, showcasing the impact of Euripides’ tragic poetry on Plato’s philosophy. It also demonstrates their shared interest in understanding human nature and the

² Padel (1995), 158.

³ Cyrino (2018), 231; Calame (1999), 193.

⁴ Nietzsche (1954), 153.

transformative power of eros, as well as how different genres might shape the presentation and reception of an idea.

The *Hippolytus* provides a rich context to establish this correlation with Platonic philosophy, as the play focuses on Phaedra’s intense erotic passion and includes extensive references to how humans grapple with both their own desires and external forces influencing the erotic experience. In both the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*, the lover appears to be divinely inspired, but the capabilities differ: Phaedra is depicted as out of her wits (237-8), while in the *Phaedrus*, the lover regains their intellectual “wings” (251b-c). Both works highlight a divinely inspired eros associated with madness and an effort by the rational part of the self to overcome irrational desires. However, they reach different conclusions regarding the potential of the human soul. Through this study, I aim to demonstrate that the notion of erotic rational madness predates Plato’s *Phaedrus* and can be identified in instances where the human mind struggles to fully control the soul, such as in the case of Phaedra.

Euripides and Plato

There have been a few comparative studies examining Euripides’ poetry alongside Plato’s philosophy, and even more that explore the connections between Euripides and Socrates (see Wildberg, 2005; Sansone, 1996; Nussbaum, 1986; Irwin, 1983; Claus, 1972; Dodds, 1945). In particular, David Sansone’s influential 1996 article examined Plato’s deep engagement with Euripides’ texts, yet subsequent research on this topic, especially regarding concepts of madness in both tragedy and Plato’s works, remains scarce. Given the significant attention to madness in tragedy, this lack of exploration appears notable. Additionally, no studies have clearly suggested that within the moral theory of eros, similar perceptions of rational madness exist. Claus’s article “Phaedra and the Socratic Paradox” (1972) offers a useful foundation for this argument. Claus analyzes lines 380-90 from the *Hippolytus*, interpreting Phaedra’s moral character in Socratic terms and highlighting the struggle between reason and passion.⁵ I aim to extend this idea further by suggesting that we do

⁵ See also Cairns (2020).

not only meet an interrelation of reason and passion in *Phaedra* but in the erotic experience of both the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*, we meet a sort of rational madness.

In Euripides’ time, there was no clear distinction between philosophical and literary discussions of human practical problems, with tragic drama serving as the moral philosophy of fifth-century Athens, thoroughly exploring ethical issues.⁶ Plato’s ambivalent attitude toward tragedy is well documented;⁷ despite condemning its imitative nature, he adopts many of its characteristics and techniques in his philosophical writings. Sansone has posited that Euripides may have influenced the intellectual development of the young Plato. Diogenes Laertius even quotes Dicaearchus, who claimed that Plato wrote poetry, including tragedy, before meeting Socrates and practicing philosophy (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* III, 4-5). Later, Diogenes mentions that Euripides accompanied Plato on his journey to Egypt (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* III, 6). Although the authenticity of this information is debated,⁸ it is significant that stories emerged shortly after Plato’s time –only a few decades in the case of Dicaearchus– attempting to explain the thin line between tragedy and Platonic dialogues. This complex relationship between Plato and tragedy has led some to speculate that Plato saw himself as a continuator of the tragic tradition.⁹

Both Euripides in the *Hippolytus* and Plato in the *Phaedrus* explore the deep understanding of human character and the essence of eros by examining how individuals deal with their passions. While a full-length tragic drama may be more adept at depicting the complexity and multifaceted nature of erotic desire than a structured philosophical discourse, deciphering Plato’s intent is often more straightforward than understanding Euripides. Plato directs the reader’s attention to specific

⁶ Gregory (ed.) (2010), 112; Dover (1974), 17; Havelock (1934), 283. In tragedy, this exploration unfolds through dramatic staging, interaction among characters, debates featuring assertions and counterarguments, and a sequence of questions and answers. Billings (2021), 8.

⁷ See, for example, *Republic*, 607b-c.

⁸ Sansone (1996), 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

points,¹⁰ whereas Euripides embeds his key messages within the intricacies of the plot, sometimes leaving the central message ambiguous.

In the *Phaedrus*, as well as in the preceding *Symposium*, Plato illustrates how erotic desire can be the catalyst for a philosophical life. Although eros in the *Hippolytus* does not lead to a philosophical life, it suggests that the human mind can maintain rationality amidst erotic passion. It is not surprising that both Euripides and Plato, products of classical Athens’ “Enlightenment” period – a time deeply invested in the pursuit of reason – examine an inherently irrational passion’s potential for rationality.¹¹ During this era, human behavior was often interpreted through the lens of rational self-interest, and virtue was seen as practicing a rational way of living despite life’s complexities. Both Euripides and Plato employ metaphysical, mythical, or religious concepts to discuss forces beyond human control and, in our case, the divine power of eros. The distinction lies in Plato’s approach, as he preferred to “transpose his religious beliefs from the mythical to the philosophical level, thus transforming them into truths of reason”.¹²

While the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus* share several common elements, such as common imagery¹³ and scenes depicting intense mental suffering,¹⁴ the primary aim of this article is to

¹⁰ Socrates’ conclusion in his second speech in the *Phaedrus* (257a-b) clearly indicates that he aims to direct readers’ focus to this speech about eros, rather than to the preceding arguments found in Lysias’ speech and his own initial discourse.

¹¹ Dodds (1951) 188-9. The Greek Enlightenment of the fifth century BCE is linked to a period marked by progressive or revolutionary ideas and a critical re-evaluation of traditional beliefs and values. Solmsen (2015), 3; Cf. Billings (2021), 4-5.

¹² Dodds (1945), 24. Euripides’ plays deeply explore the theme of personal responsibility within the context of divine determinism, examining the complex interplay between human agency and the will of the gods. In some of these narratives, gods seem to reside within the tragic hero (e.g., Phaedra) on a symbolic level, representing internal conflicts. Rivier (1960) 46-7. This is how battling an emotion can equate to battling a god, leading to destruction. In stark contrast, Plato’s perspective on the gods differs significantly. He rejected the idea, common in tragedy, that gods experience emotions like anger, spite, and envy, as for Plato, the gods are perfectly good and serve as ethical exemplars for human behavior. Nightingale (2021), 12; Santas (1988), 66. Within this framework, Plato introduced a new conception of human beings and their relationship to the divine, integrating the gods, the cosmos, and the Forms into a unified system. Nightingale (2021), 31, 39.

¹³ For instance, in the *Hippolytus* (1272-3), eros is depicted as soaring over the earth and sea, while in the *Phaedrus* (246b-250c), the image of the chariot of the soul is used.

¹⁴ Both works emphasize psychological suffering rather than physical pain, as vividly illustrated on stage in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (248-9, 349, 433-42, 570, 596-7) and within Plato’s moral philosophy in the *Phaedrus* (251c-251e, 254a-254e).

concentrate on the theme of rational madness as the connecting thread between the two works. This analysis is even more focused, honing in on particular sections of each text. In the *Hippolytus*, the spotlight will be on Phaedra’s erotic desire and her experience of passion. In the *Phaedrus*, the emphasis will be placed on Socrates’ first and second speeches.

Eros and Madness

In both the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*, eros is depicted as a form of sexual desire manifesting as intense passion, intimately linked with madness, often resulting in a loss of self-control and disorder.¹⁵ Most argued that madness is inherent in tragedy and actually, we do not just have madness in tragedy but the madness of tragedy, which implies that this is a certain sort of madness and it has a fundamental role in the tragedy, as “in a certain sense, a scene of madness is the very essence of Greek tragedy”, while in some cases it is not easy to separate madness and tragedy.¹⁶ According to Padel, eros plays a pivotal role in tragedy as it reveals the fragile nature of the human mind and body.¹⁷ This madness shapes the tragic hero, making the association of eros with madness crucial to the narrative, often driving the tragic outcomes of characters like Phaedra. Thumiger’s chapter “Mad Erôs and Eroticized Madness in Tragedy” in *Erôs in Ancient Greece* (2013) explores the interrelation of these two notions in tragedy, concluding that when eros has a central role in the plot, it is negative and can lead only to misfortune due to its very element of madness. This does not suggest that eros in tragedy is always associated with madness, nor that madness is invariably linked to eros. Rather, it indicates that madness is a common aspect of erotic desire in tragedy. Let us explore how this interconnection of eros and madness applies in the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*.

In the *Hippolytus*, eros is repeatedly portrayed as a destructive force. The play portrays the suffering of three mortals (Hippolytus, Theseus, Phaedra, 1404) inflicted by Aphrodite and highlighting how humans struggle with the passions induced by superior forces, while those who are

¹⁵ Aristotle compares the persons under the influence of passion to men asleep, insane, or drunk (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147a).

¹⁶ Most (2013), 397-8.

¹⁷ Padel (1981), 118.

ignorant and disrespectful to these forces face destruction. Everyone in the play admits the destructive role that eros has on humans. The wording in the very beginning of the play makes this clear when Aphrodite refers to Phaedra as “a poor woman, groaning and made distraught by the goad of love, means to die in silence, and none of her household knows of her malady (νόσον)”¹⁸ (38-40). The Nurse considers Phaedra’s words as an irrational outburst, devoid of meaning (214), and Phaedra later acknowledges her madness, confessing that she has strayed from good sense (240-1). Aphrodite’s eros wounds Phaedra like a spear (392), breaking her φρένες down with a terrible disease, an unholy passion (765).¹⁹ Also, the Nurse defines eros as “great pleasure and great pain”, with Phaedra responding that on her end “it will be the second” (347-7), and later Phaedra again defines her erotic passion as “troubles” (συμφοράς) and “malady” (νόσον) (596-7). The Chorus echoes this, referring to Phaedra’s passion as “troubles” (πόννοι, 367) sent by Aphrodite (372), and characterizing eros as the “mankind’s despot” (538-9) who “ruins mortals and causes them every kind of disaster” (541). The Chorus later says that Phaedra is wrenched by an unholy passion sent from Aphrodite (764-7). Hippolytus admits that Aphrodite is the power that destroyed him (1400). Artemis, at the end of the play, remarks that “when the gods so ordain it is to be expected that men will make disastrous mistakes” (1433-4), underscoring how passion and its resulting madness provoked by a superior force can lead humans to destruction. Theseus, in his last words, attributes to Aphrodite the woes that he endured (1461).

Phaedra is possessed by a god and as a result, she is out of her wits. Aphrodite, instills erotic passion within in Phaedra’s soul, who in turn works on her erotic passion through her inner material (349, 570). Thereby, Euripides intertwines external (divine) compulsion with internal culpability in the causal chain of dramatizing actions. Phaedra’s affliction combines exogenous and endogenous factors, as the external divine force permeates her thoughts and personal traits. Within this framework, the Chorus ponders whether Phaedra is possessed by a god or simply manifesting a common madness seen in women (141-7, 159-61). All these perspectives of the different voices in

¹⁸ For the passage from the *Hippolytus* in quotation marks, I referred to Kovacs’ translation (2005).

¹⁹ The term “broken down” (κατεκλάσθη, 766) is a term used by the Hippocratics to describe the body being “reduced” or “broken” by fever. Padel (1995), 159.

the *Hippolytus* show that eros is a force beyond human control, imposed by a goddess, and with profound destructive consequences. In general, it comes as no surprise that eros is closely associated with disease and madness in tragedy since in all tragic plays human irrationality and the struggle of man against his passions are fundamental elements of the plot.

For Plato, rationality is a principal virtue for philosophical life and true knowledge, while the understanding of the foundational principles of existence comes through reason rather than the senses.²⁰ However, Socrates declares in the palinode, his second speech in the *Phaedrus*, that madness is not merely evil but can be the source of birth for the best things when it is a gift by a god (244a). Before the palinode, Socrates advocates for rationality over lack of self-restraint (241c) but then he rejects pure rationality as disrespectful (245b), positing that irrational erotics can lead the human mind and the rest of parts of the soul to the true world (248b-c). This transformation in the conception of madness in the *Phaedrus* shows that until that point of the palinode madness in Platonic philosophy was viewed negatively, a state where non-intellectual elements dominate the soul.²¹ Even in Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*, erotic madness is not explicitly mentioned; instead, the focus is on self-sufficiency.²² Therefore, it is intriguing that Plato in the *Phaedrus* closely associates eros to madness, whereas in the *Symposium*, eros is portrayed in strictly rational terms and in the *Republic*, madness is considered evil (400b). Santas, in his effort to explain this, comes to the assumption that Plato in the *Phaedrus* “is trying to remedy a defect of his own theory of eros in the *Symposium*” aiming to bring in that stage of his philosophy of eros the intensity and passion of sexual pleasures that he lacked in the *Symposium*.²³ Thus, by incorporating more aspects of sexuality into this philosophical theory, Plato seems to give a more realistic account of passionate love.

The distinction between self-control and madness is established in the two first speeches about eros in the dialogue. The progression from Lysias’ speech to Socrates’ first speech and then second

²⁰ Dodds (1945), 16.

²¹ Madness in the *Republic* is presented among the species of evils (400b). For more references to madness in the dialogues prior to the *Phaedrus*, see Nussbaum (1986), 204.

²² The only irrational aspects of eros in the *Symposium* could be traced in Alcibiades’ speech, who among others speaks about philosophy as a form of madness (218b).

²³ Santas (1982), 108.

speech looks like an initiation of the reader of the dialogue, which Plato seems to build gradually before reaching the peak of his philosophical theory about eros in this dialogue. In the first level, with Lysias’ speech, we start with the basic concept that lovers are sick rather than sane (*νοσεῖν μᾶλλον ἢ σωφρονεῖν*) and know that they are not thinking straight (*κακῶς φρονοῦσιν*) but they are unable to exercise self-control (231d). As Harris suggests here we encounter for the first time in the dialogue the metaphor of eros as sickness, and of course, Plato is not the first to use this idea but it seems that he takes “full advantage of its implications by availing himself of an aspect of popular thought in which Eros and/or Aphrodite could, for example, be regarded as an illness or even as madness, both of which may deprive us of our reason”.²⁴ This suggests that the concept of eros as a disease exists beyond tragedy as well.²⁵ Therefore, if being lovesick is the state of being out of self-control, Lysias’ speech implies the opposite, which is that reason is a necessary condition for mental health.²⁶ Later, Socrates in his first speech introduces in the conversation the two kinds of desire; the innate desire for pleasure and the acquired judgment that pursues what is best (237d). Then, he describes how they affect our lives in a manner foreshadowing his later palinode. More specifically, in the first speech he argues that when human judgment guides humans by reason (*λόγῳ*) toward what is best, it leads to self-control (*σωφροσύνη*) but when desire draws us irrationally (*ἄλογως*) to pleasures, it is called outrageousness (*ἔβρις*) (237e-238a). And then, a few lines later, while defining eros, he shows that eros is inherently irrational (*ἄνευ λόγου*) (238b-c). So, Socrates in his first speech contrasts self-control in love with the madness of love (241a), laying the groundwork for his second speech where he presents eros as the highest form of madness (249e).

The two speeches before the palinode made a distinction between evil madness and good *σωφροσύνη*, while Socrates’ recantation elucidates how these two properties can be reconciled.²⁷ Through his allegory, Socrates proposes a novel model of the soul, where reason and passionate desires coexist as two of its three parts (253d-254a). He emphasizes on how reason –the rational

²⁴ Harris (2006), 390.

²⁵ Cf. Phaedra’s definition of her erotic passion as *νόσον* at 596-7, as mentioned above.

²⁶ Harris (2006), 392.

²⁷ Harris argues that Socrates’ second speech is not a complete reversal of his views about madness in his first speech, describing the second speech “more emendation than recantation”. *Ibid.*, 388.

charioteer– can work along with the spirited part –the noble white horse– and the passionate appetite –the irrational black horse– to reach their destination beyond the heavens (247c). The second speech is very rich in content because, as Santas argued, Socrates “weaves into it religion, myth, phantasy, metaphor, simile, allegory, the immortality and tripartite division of the soul, and even the theory of Forms – a formidable mixture in which it is difficult to discern structure, coherence, and sense, not to speak of philosophic substance and truth”.²⁸ By introducing the fundamental principle that anything divine cannot be evil (242e), Socrates makes a crucial distinction between human and divine madness.²⁹ This redefines erotic madness, elevating it from a lack of self-control and lovesickness to a state that offers significant benefits to humans (244a, 245b). Thus, the second speech clarifies that the identification of madness with *ἄβρις* in the first speech mostly pertains to human madness, while divine madness is characterized as beneficial.³⁰

In the *Phaedrus*, as Vlastos argued, eros is not just described but defined as a form of madness closely related to philosophy.³¹ In Socrates’ first speech, eros displays characteristics of a disease (238a) and madness (241a), and the lover is depicted as being afflicted because he has lost his mind (241b). However, at the beginning of his second speech, eros is introduced as a type of divine madness, asserting that madness is not inherently simple or bad because it can lead to the best things (244a). The madness of eros redirects the erotic drive from physical beauty toward the recollected ideal Form of Beauty, and thereby, toward the philosophical life, which is considered for Plato the ultimate good (256a). This madness, according to Socrates (245b), is given by the gods to attain the greatest fortune, which is the reconnection with the world of Forms, enabling the control of bodily pleasures (256c). Thus, although erotic desire begins as an irrational passion, it has the potential to be transformed into a divine madness that propels individuals towards union with the Forms, making erotic madness positive and beneficial to both lover and beloved (256a-b).

²⁸ Santas (1982), 108.

²⁹ Harris (2006), 398.

³⁰ Santas (1982), 108-9.

³¹ Vlastos (1973), 27.

In Euripides and Plato, we find two distinct manifestations of madness, which can either lead to destruction or serve to “heal” the soul. Madness can be seen either as a disease or a mark of excellence, and can be perceived as either a divine punishment or a pathway to connect with the divine realm.³² In both cases though, namely in Phaedra’s passion and Socrates’ second speech, erotic madness is considered as engoddedness (*ἐνθουσιασμός*) and this is a crucial point for both authors. As we saw, Euripides in the *Hippolytus* attributes Phaedra’s erotic passion and subsequent madness to Aphrodite, thus demonstrating how gods intervene in human lives and incite their passions. On the other hand, Plato attributes the divine origin of madness to a higher purpose, connecting his moral theory about the human soul to the eternal, immutable knowledge of the Platonic Forms.³³ Unlike the divine origin of eros in tragedy which results from the gods of Greek mythology, Plato, although incorporating these gods into his philosophical framework (246e-247a), suggests that eros originates not from these deities but from the ultimate pursuit of the true world of Forms, a quest even the gods themselves undertake (247b-c). This connection between erotic madness and the divine world is emphasized repeatedly at the start of Socrates’ second speech (244a, 244b, 244c, 244d, 244e, 245a, 245b, 245c), underscoring its significance in Plato’s philosophical account in the palinode. By framing erotic madness as a divine gift, Plato resolves the paradox that within the state of madness, reason can guide the soul, leading to what I call rational madness, suggesting that madness can encompass rationality. The next section will delve deeper into this concept.

Erotic Rational Madness

To the extent that erotic madness can be deep-reaching, we meet erotic rational madness because the state of madness does not necessarily entail a complete loss of reality. The control of desire and the pursuit of goals beyond sensory experiences result from the exercise of reason within erotic madness. Through the combination of rational discourse and the effects of irrational passion, the

³² In the *Hippolytus*, madness appears not as the punishment itself but as the tool used to execute the punishment, as the god seeks to induce a particular mental state in humans to reprimand offenses against the divine. Padel (1981), 110. Padel’s hypothesis “Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad” is applicable in this context.

³³ Santas (1982), 109.

erotic experience evolves into rational madness. I will first examine how this concept is illustrated in the *Phaedrus*, before examining its application in the *Hippolytus* to argue that the notion of rational madness is present there as well.

In Socrates' second speech in the *Phaedrus*, where eros is seen as irrational desire, we encounter a type of rational madness in which the rational part of the soul can dominate the irrational parts (254e). Lovers need to continually struggle against distortion to attain what is good for the soul. The contrast between madness and *σωφροσύνη* is a contrast between the irrational, passion-driven aspects of the soul and its intellectual states, allowing it to reconnect with the transcendent world of Forms. According to Ustinova, “this characteristically Platonic leap from madness to revelation and back to reason makes erotic rapture a way to attain transcendent reality”.³⁴ Erotic rational madness occurs through the interplay of different parts of the soul, where both rational and irrational elements are stimulated by the sight of beauty. The irrational element sparks by bodily beauty (250e) while the rational one is caused by the recollection of the true Form of Beauty and of the realm beyond the heavens (254b). Thus, creative thinking is influenced by both internal and external factors. Beauty inflames madness in the soul, which seethes and throbs in that condition and feels anguish and helpless raving (251b-d). It is then up to the rational part of the self to take control and guide the soul toward true knowledge.

Socrates argues that “the greatest things we have come from madness when it is given as a gift of the god” (244a). This statement appears paradoxical due to the inherent contradiction between the greatest human achievements and madness.³⁵ The paradox deepens when Socrates claims that when the rational part of the soul prevails amid madness, the soul fulfills its ultimate purpose: to reconnect with the world of Forms through the process of recollection (249c) and live philosophically (256a). This represents a rationalization of madness. It is unsurprising that Plato, a rationalist philosopher, incorporates madness into his discussion of eros in such a way that even within this state, the rational part of the soul plays a crucial role. The positive aspect of this madness lies in its nature as a divine

³⁴ Ustinova (2018), 296.

³⁵ See Mackenzie (1982), 64-72.

gift (244a), placing the soul in contact with the supernatural world, which endows it with awe and powers beyond the common limits of the human soul (252c-253b).

The price for achieving erotic rational madness is the suppression of erotic desire and sexual pleasure (254e), which can obstruct the soul’s connection to the world of Forms. Passions can disrupt and distort judgment (254c-e). Therefore, restricting the self and suppressing certain parts can lead to rational control. However, even the non-rational parts of the soul play a crucial role in motivating the pursuit of true knowledge and philosophy (256a) by driving the soul intellectually. These irrational parts contribute significantly to the soul’s cognitive efforts. The actions inspired by erotic passion are essential for the soul’s ascent to the world of Forms through recollection. Nonetheless, it would be incorrect to claim that in Plato, all actions resulting from madness are intrinsically good; rather, they can be instrumentally beneficial.³⁶

Nevertheless, there are also those types of souls which during the circular motion did not see reality and remained uninitiated (248b) resulting in their rational parts failing to prevail during erotic desire due to the incompetence of their drivers. Consequently, they miss the opportunity to reconnect with the real world. The soul may act wrongly if it does not succeed in bringing irrational erotic desire under the control of reason. As Santas argues, the worst kind of lover in the *Phaedrus* is very close to what Socrates described in his first speech as human madness, namely the lover whose reason fails to prevail over his passion, but even this lover is reframed after the palinode in a new perspective that includes immortality of the soul, the tripartite division, and the recollection of the Forms.³⁷ That is to say that even this “bad” lover still processes recollection of divine beauty, while he sees bodily beauty, though his connection to divine beauty is weak, leading him to indulge in bodily pleasure instead. Reason is essential for mental health in all three speeches about eros (the one of Lysias and the two of Socrates), even though human reason alone, without divine madness, is insufficient, as highlighted in Socrates’ palinode. After Socrates’ second speech, the contrast between

³⁶ Nussbaum (1986), 219.

³⁷ Santas (1982), 111.

madness and self-control is radically re-evaluated through the lens of human versus divine madness (265a).

In tragedy, we observe an important and profound insight about humanity: individuals possess some freedom to transcend passion and act creatively, although this often comes at a cost. Humans in tragedy are free to choose but lack omniscience about their lives and cannot rely solely on their individual strengths. Thus, the greatness of the tragic hero can be diminished at any moment due to divine intervention. Phaedra acknowledges that she is a victim of irrationality and superior forces (240-1), refusing responsibility for her passion and focusing instead on hiding her disease rather than overcoming it, but she also dares to confront forces that surpass her (475). The symptoms of her erotic disease result from both Aphrodite’s influence and Phaedra’s resistance to her passion.³⁸ Phaedra attempts to overcome her erotic madness using pure reason but ultimately fails to conquer Aphrodite (398-402). Nevertheless, it would be excessive to argue that Aphrodite bears full responsibility for the mortal characters’ wrongdoings because if Phaedra did not bear any responsibility for the tragic outcome, her heroic status would be nullified.³⁹

So far, we have seen, through various references to the *Hippolytus*, how erotic passion can be likened to disease and madness and, thereby, become destructive for the tragic hero. However, as Thumiger argued in her discussion of madness in tragedy, “the implications of madness are not only negative but can also be enriching and empowering”,⁴⁰ which is a perspective that helps to bridge the approaches of Euripides and Plato regarding eros. In other words, as we will see, even Phaedra who is initially portrayed as being overwhelmed by a destructive divine madness, especially during the first episode of the play, is later, in the rest of the play, empowered to attempt to manage her passion with rationality in the best way she sees fit. This shows the reversals to which human life is subject and that humans can still be upright in disaster.

³⁸ Mueller (2016), 165. If the gods were removed from the plot, there would not be sufficient human malefaction to result in tragedy because the gods bestow on mortals to make disastrous mistakes when they so ordain (1433-4). Hathorn (1957), 211.

³⁹ Mueller (2016), 165.

⁴⁰ Thumiger (2013), 29.

Rivier described eros in Euripides as both human and divine, and therefore, daemonic, as Diotima would put it.⁴¹ From the outset of the play, Aphrodite reveals her plan, indicating that the ensuing troubles are part of her divine scheme. Aphrodite admits that Phaedra’s terrible desire is her own doing (28). She further reveals that her plan goes beyond Phaedra’s demise; she aims to expose this erotic longing in a way that leads Theseus to kill his son Hippolytus, thereby punishing him for his disrespect (41-6). If we deal with eros as divine intervention, one interpretation of the play might criticize Hippolytus for his lack of respect toward Aphrodite, which triggered the plot’s misfortunes. However, when non-human forces influence human judgment, it becomes unclear, unlike in Platonic philosophy, how to assign moral responsibility. In this context, Phaedra attempts to resist the passion inflicted upon her by Aphrodite. She tries to excuse her moral shortcomings by claiming that humans are defenseless against the internal struggle between reason and passion (398-9). She confesses her moral failure (248) but attributes it (725-7) to her erotic passion for Hippolytus, fully understanding that her eros for him is forbidden. Thus, it becomes evident that although Phaedra is aware of what is right, she still succumbs to ruin because she cannot control her passion with reason. In her case, there is no excusable ignorance; she knowingly commits a wrongful act, fully aware that her nature is influenced by overpowering forces that hinder wise action.⁴²

The Nurse attributes a lack of self-control to Phaedra (493-6) and, based on this, she urges Phaedra to surrender to her passion. Phaedra, a few lines later, admits that her passion has overtaken her (504-5) and subsequently portrays herself as a victim of this detested passion (727). Describing her passion as hateful is crucial, as it indicates that her mind rejected this passion from the start, driven only by her desires. The Chorus later echoes this sentiment, suggesting that Phaedra’s mind was twisted by her passion sent from Aphrodite (764-6). While this does not suggest that Phaedra possesses rationality within her passion, it underscores her internal conflict between mind and passion. In Phaedra’s case, the forces of Aphrodite (passionate desire) and of Phaedra herself (modesty) coexist.⁴³

⁴¹ Rivier (1960).

⁴² Barrett (1964).

⁴³ Holmes (2010), 255.

Phaedra appears to use her rational part in her effort to cope with her malady. She recognizes that maintaining a sound mind while grappling with madness is an immensely challenging task (247-8). At one point, she realizes that due to her moral character, she is not strong enough to fully resist the desires stirred by her passion (380-3). Therefore, she contemplates how best to endure it (392-3). Initially, she considers hiding her malady in silence (393-4) and then clearly expresses her intention to conquer her passion through self-control (398-9). This indicates that she is aware of her condition and desires to regulate her passion with reason. This self-awareness is crucial for examining Phaedra’s moral character and assessing whether the concept of erotic rational madness predated Plato’s *Phaedrus*. It is evident that Phaedra wishes to achieve rationality over her irrational passion. However, she eventually realizes that she cannot confront Aphrodite, the divine force behind her passion, and thus considers death to be her only escape (400-2). She believes that death will provide relief from her troubles (599-600). Later, Artemis acknowledges Phaedra’s determination to “conquer” Aphrodite using her intelligence but she was ultimately undone by the Nurse’s scheming (1304).

Another indication of Phaedra’s use of rationality in her madness is her concern for her name and reputation, striving to appear virtuous. Although this focus makes her seem unsympathetic and not genuinely virtuous, it suggests her ability to think and plan for self-preservation. At the beginning of her speech, Phaedra expresses shame over her words (244). After discovering that the Nurse has disclosed her desire to Hippolytus, Phaedra worries that she will no longer die with honor and quickly devises a new plan to safeguard her reputation (687-90). Phaedra pursues her own moral objectives, even if these objectives are morally ambiguous. As a result, she does not seem entirely or literally mad. However, she was undoubtedly affected by possession and illness. She was cognizant of her passion and made a destructive choice, fully aware of its consequences but prioritizing her reputation above all else (716-21).

The play explores the ethics of honor and shame, particularly illustrated in Phaedra’s monologue in the first episode (373-90), reflecting the contemporary debates initiated by Socrates during Euripides’ era. Contrasting with Socratic thought –that no one willingly does wrong because virtue

is the knowledge that it is always good for us to be good and thus the right kind of thinking requires the right kind of action (Plato, *Protagoras*, 352b-358a.)— is Phaedra’s view (377-86) that appearing virtuous is beneficial even if actual goodness is not essential.⁴⁴ Through Phaedra, Euripides acknowledges incontinence as a factor in human behavior, demonstrating that individuals can know what is good yet act contrary to that knowledge.

Knowing that what she does is not morally proper, Phaedra tries to partially control her erotic passion by not externalizing it directly toward the object of her desire. However, she fails to fully contain her erotic madness, ultimately causing harm to herself.⁴⁵ For Phaedra, it is preferable to perish unconscious rather than endure the unbearable pain of being rational while possessed by irrational evil (247-9). Therefore, throughout her ordeal, Phaedra uses her intellect and demonstrates wisdom amidst her erotic passion. This aligns with Nussbaum’s observation that deeply held beliefs about goodness can persist even when individuals are unable to fully control themselves.⁴⁶ Thus, the critical point in this story is not whether Phaedra manages to conquer her passion with her mind but that she continues to use her rational faculties to contend with it. Phaedra only partially controls her passion for Hippolytus but even this is a significant achievement for her moral character given her circumstances. Later, she accuses Hippolytus of lacking moderation (730-1), which results from self-control, hoping that her suffering will teach him *σωφρονεῖν*. This could indicate her respect for the virtue of *σωφροσύνη*. For Hippolytus, *σωφροσύνη* is to be chaste, and sexually proper, while Phaedra uses the term *σωφροσύνη* to refer to the ability of self-control, the control of reason over passion.⁴⁷

Phaedra seems to claim that she possesses good sense (*εὖ φρονεῖν*) and that to fare badly should not be an indication of nature with bad sense (377-9). She differentiates between wise understanding and acting accordingly, implying that the former reflects the nature of one’s intellect, while the latter

⁴⁴ Liatsi (ed.) (2020), 120; Lesky (2010), 93; Dillon (2004), 71-2; Halleran (2001), 180. However, according to Claus, Phaedra is “incapable of a meaningful dialogue with Socrates” because Euripides places this view about human morality in the traditional context. Claus (1972), 237.

⁴⁵ According to Segal, by sacrificing Hippolytus, Phaedra gets a greater *μίσσημα* than the one she feared in 317. Segal (1970), 293.

⁴⁶ Nussbaum (1986), 25.

⁴⁷ Powell (1990), 81.

might be influenced by external factors beyond one's nature. Phaedra as a woman of great intelligence and admirable principles who nonetheless meets a tragic end.⁴⁸ Even Phaedra acknowledges that a good and just mind is as valuable as life itself (426-7). She seems to appreciate contemplation (375-6) and values the ability to think, despite her lack of complete self-control. Phaedra fought hard to avoid the crime of which she was accused, indicating that even within the condition of madness, one can retain comprehension of their experiences. This is evident in Phaedra's case; despite her loss of self-control, she has not lost self-awareness. This is not to suggest that Phaedra is equally rational and irrational, but rather that her madness and passion involve varying degrees of rationality. Therefore, Phaedra's eros should not be seen solely as madness, given that she retains some rational capacities. In this context, we witness a form of rationality within the condition of erotic madness.

In the dialogue that the Nurse has with Phaedra, we see the Nurse suggesting that Phaedra has the skill of good sense by nature, although this would not be enough to save her from her passion. Even if mindful humans (*σώφρονες*) do not want to, they might end up being in love with disaster (358-9). Therefore, from her view too, being mindful does not ensure the ability to be *compos mentis*. The Nurse further cites Phaedra's intense desire to conceal her erotic passion to protect her reputation as a mark of wisdom, claiming that hiding dishonorable deeds is among the wise practices of mortals (*ἐν σοφοῖσι γὰρ τάδ' ἐστὶ θνητῶν*, 465-6). Hippolytus also recognizes Phaedra's cleverness, remarking that he does not wish for an overly intelligent woman in his home because Aphrodite stirs more trouble in the clever ones (640-3). Hippolytus suggests here that erotic passion combined with cleverness can lead to greater destruction, acknowledging that Phaedra is not entirely mindless. Before discovering Phaedra's false accusations, Hippolytus notes that “she showed chastity, though she could not be chaste” (*ἐσωφρόνησε δ' οὐκ ἔχουσα σωφρονεῖν*, 1034) indicating that she displayed some rationality amidst her overwhelming erotic desire.

Tragedy often portrays individual emotions as being shaped by external factors imposed by the environment. Within this framework, Phaedra aims to maintain a reputation for virtue. It is not surprising that Euripides depicts eros as a primarily destructive force, unlike Plato, because tragedy

⁴⁸ Winnington (1960), 173; Hathorn (1957), 214.

emphasizes the downfall of human character. In this context, eros’s role as a force of intensification is significant. I concur with Thumiger’s assertion that “a focus on an eros which ends positively would contradict the dramatic requirement of tragedy itself”.⁴⁹ Eros in tragedy is characterized by exclusivity and individuality, reinforcing that the essence of eros is the inner struggle between reason and passion. Despite her failure to be virtuous, Phaedra remains a woman with some moral standards as she attempts to manage her passion according to principles of prudence and reputation.⁵⁰ Her inner goodness starkly contrasts with the harm she inflicts on Hippolytus.⁵¹ When she realizes her inability to conquer her erotic passion, she resolves to overcome it through death rather than succumb to dishonor.⁵²

Conclusions

In both the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*, the soul is depicted as a battleground for competing forces, specifically the conflict between reason and desires. In both cases, the virtue of reason is an innate capacity of the self, while desire is stimulated by external factors and stimuli, such as a god or the sexual attraction to bodily beauty. This innate otherness within the self complicates the idea of a unified, self-contained identity. Consequently, the soul is naturally divided and eros can be the reason for the disorder of harmony among the parts of the self. If eros can lead even the righteous into misdeeds (*Hippolytus*, 358-9), then this capacity “is not truly part of the self”, since it is not “within man’s conscious control”.⁵³ This implies that in tragedy, eros has its own energy that can force the human soul to act contrary to its nature, as seen in Phaedra’s case. Conversely, in the *Phaedrus*, the ability of the soul to manage its passions depends on its innate qualities and skills from its prenatal past (250a-b). Although Phaedra’s madness does not exhibit any clear signs of divine inspiration or

⁴⁹ Thumiger (2013), 39.

⁵⁰ Lesky (2010), 91-2.

⁵¹ Phaedra’s initial goal is to transform a great disgrace (*αἰσχρῶν*, 331) into something fine (*ἑσθλά*, 331) but ultimately, her actions prove to be a bane (*κακόν*, 728) to Hippolytus as she strives to maintain the appearance of goodness.

⁵² She no longer embodies the wholly wicked woman depicted in the earlier version of the *Hippolytus*. In the revised version, Euripides safeguards Phaedra’s character by presenting her as a woman struggling to suppress her shameful passion. Easterling (ed.) (1997), 201-2.

⁵³ Dodds (1951), 41.

special insights, unlike the divinely inspired madness experienced by the lover in the Phaedrus, her irrational erotic passion is still inflicted by a divine power. Despite this, she retains rational elements to manage her passion. This is what makes erotic madness in the Phaedrus comparable to erotic madness in Hippolytus.

As Claus suggested, given that Phaedra understands her passion and its destructive impact, one might expect, according to Socrates, that she would prevent her passion.⁵⁴ However, this is not how moral character functions in tragedy. Instead, Phaedra admits no guilt and is more concerned about her reputation. For her, appearing virtuous equates to being virtuous.⁵⁵ She believes she has adhered to her moral imperatives, primarily driven by a concern for honor (*εὐκλεία*, 489). Similarly, Plato in the *Phaedrus* acknowledges that a sense of shame can prevent people from pursuing sexual pleasure and surrendering to erotic desire (254a).

There is a significant contrast between the erotic passion described in the palinode in the *Phaedrus* and Phaedra’s passion. On one hand, Socrates in the allegory suggests that the rational part of the soul can prevail and control passion, leading to right action. On the other hand, in the case of Phaedra, her *θυμός* and her *βουλεύματα* are interrelated without her rational part fully controlling them. However, Plato’s allegory also includes instances where reason fails to completely control passions, noting that some souls struggle intensely because they have not trained the bad horse properly (247b, 248b). But it would be wrong to say, using the Platonic terms, that Phaedra has failed to “train her bad horse” to follow the order of her reason because Phaedra is subject to divine infliction and, eventually, her erotic passion does not take full control of her mind.

As previously discussed, the *Phaedrus* suggests a distinction between divine and human madness with the former implying that reason manages to prevail over passion and the latter that reason fails to control erotic passion. In my interpretation, Phaedra, who attempts to manage her passion rationally but fails because she is influenced by Aphrodite, does not fit neatly into either category. As

⁵⁴ Claus (1972), 235-6.

⁵⁵ Reputation was a fundamental factor in ancient Greece, usually associated with *κλέος*, honor, and shame. See Cairns (1993); Kovacs (1980); Solmsen (1973); Dodds (1925).

demonstrated, Phaedra does not lack self-control; however, her capacity for self-control is insufficient to overcome her passion entirely. Nonetheless, I consider Phaedra’s situation to be an instance of erotic rational madness, not exactly as presented in the *Phaedrus*, but in a similar context where rationality and irrationality coexist within the erotic experience. This suggests that in Plato’s time, there were already instances of rationality within erotic madness, as seen in the *Hippolytus*.

In both Euripides and Plato, eros comprises both rational and irrational elements. These elements intertwine during the erotic experience. Rationality does not eliminate irrational passion but controls it. Therefore, a rational person is not devoid of passions but is someone who can manage them to some extent. The interplay of these elements forms what I call erotic rational madness. The difference between Euripides and Plato lies in the degree of prominence given to rational decision-making.

Unlike Platonic moral philosophy, tragedy does not present a binary, black-and-white morality. These two works invite exploration of the self and its moral complexities. In tragedy, good people might face ruin due to factors beyond their control. Euripides illustrates that reasonable prudence and self-control can be overridden by irrational passion, emphasizing that successful resistance to passion cannot depend solely on the power of reason.⁵⁶ Conversely, Plato provides clearer solutions to this moral deadlock and is more explicit about what constitutes good and bad morality. Plato’s innovation is presenting the self as a continuous psychological entity capable of managing the interplay of reason and passion, thereby being responsible for controlling emotions and passions. In this sense, Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, moves erotic rational madness a crucial step further from what we saw in the *Hippolytus*.

One might wonder why Plato, a rationalist, emphasizes that gods bestow humans with a divinely given madness and asserts that the greatest benefits to humans come from this madness (244a). I believe Plato takes the concept of erotic madness from tragedy and integrates it into his philosophical framework, stripping away its destructive aspects and infusing it with positive meaning. Just as

⁵⁶ Thornton (1998), 245; Markantonatos (ed.) (2020), 967-8.

Socrates’ second speech in the *Phaedrus* transforms the negative effects of erotic madness into positive ones, this shift mirrors the transition from eros in Euripides to eros in Plato.

Euripides and Plato both explore the discrepancy between the nature of human character and the extent to which individuals successfully navigate their lives. Euripides focuses on how a good character can fail, while Plato emphasizes how a character can achieve a life well-lived. In the *Hippolytus* and the *Phaedrus*, among other works, characters are depicted as being harmed or corrupted by erotic desire due to circumstances beyond their control. Despite this similarity, Euripides and Plato offer different perspectives in these narratives. Euripides examines the self’s relationship to its moral struggles through human passions, whereas Plato seeks to demonstrate the path to true knowledge and ultimately, to bliss. Studying these irrational factors in behavior leads to a deeper understanding of human nature, particularly in the context of erotic experience.

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