On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes

May 24, 2019  By Gregory Nagy

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§0. The Greek word that I translate here as 'wolfish rage' is lussa, which derives from lukos, meaning 'wolf', and which refers to the martial fury experienced by two of the foremost heroes in the Homeric Iliad, Achilles and Hector. The hero Herakles also experiences such fury in the drama Herakles of Euripides, but in this case it is evident that we cannot, strictly speaking, describe his rage as martial, since the fury of the hero is directed here not at his enemies. There is, then, a larger question here: what exactly is 'wolfish' about the rage experienced by these heroes?

Pluto foaming at the mouth. After "The Mad Dog" (1932).

§1. Before I attempt to answer this question, I must highlight the fact that the Greek word lussa in non-heroic contexts refers to what is scientifically known today as rabies. Such an affliction would ordinarily extend to humans themselves only if someone were to get bitten by a rabid dog. The point I just made is playfully illustrated in the Walt Disney cartoon "The Mad Dog" (1932), where Pluto the harmless pet dog of Mickey accidentally swallows a bar of soap, making him foam at the mouth, as if he were a "mad dog" who threatens to bite anyone in sight.
§2. The meaning of the Greek word lussa as ‘rabies’ has been explained fully in a dissertation by Roger C. Geragioli (1992). As we can see from his explanation, Greek lore about dogs becoming rabid and thus becoming mad dogs is connected with traditional ways of comparing the warriors of myth with two kinds of canines—dogs or wolves. Here is the relevant formulation by Ceragioli (p. 73):

The unifying structure I am proposing is that dogs, wolves[,] and warriors form a triad in which the dog and warrior are opposed to the wolf on the principle of culture versus nature (or tame versus wild). But the dog and warrior may cross the divide from culture to nature, becoming like the wolf.

§3. What kinds of warriors, then, would cross the divide and become mad dogs? I offer in answer an analysis I have written up in H24H §§44–46, an expanded version of which I offer here:

§3.1. The kinds of warriors who are comparable to mad dogs are modeled on the god Ares. He is the god of war, but he is also, more specifically, the god of martial fury. In war, a warrior who is possessed by the god Ares experiences a kind of martial fury that is typically bestial. The Greek word for such martial fury, as I already noted, is lussa, meaning ‘wolfish rage’. Such is the working translation of Lincoln 1975. Comparable is the Old Norse idea berserkur and the Old Irish idea of riastrad, ‘warp spasm’ or ‘distortion’. To experience such a martial rage or warp spasm or distortion is to be beside oneself, and to be beside oneself is to be possessed—possessed, in the case of Greek traditions, by the war god Ares.

§3.2. In the Homeric Iliad, such a state of possession is expressed by way of this word lussa, which I continue to translate as ‘wolfish rage’. From here on, however, I will transliterate lussa by way of its latinized form lyssa, since readers who are unfamiliar with Greek will be more familiar with the spelling lykos for the Greek word meaning ‘wolf’, which I spelled earlier, in a more consistent way, as lukos.

§3.3. In the drama Herakles by Euripides, starting at line 815, the female personification of madness, named Lyssa, enters the dramatic space. It happens after an evil hero named Lykos is killed by Herakles. Now Lyssa will possess Herakles and bring about his madness. At line 865 Lyssa refers to her own wolfish rage as lyssa (also relevant are lines 879, 888, 1024). Tragically, the wolfish rage of Herakles here is triggered not in the context of war, as he delusionsly imagines, since the victims of the hero’s fury here will not be the enemy but his own nearest and dearest—his wife and his children.

§3.4. In Homeric poetry, a prime example of lyssa is a description of Hector, when he gets into a state of martial fury, as a ‘rabid dog’, a lyssētēr kūn (κύων λυοσηήπρο), Iliad 8.299. Comparable is the wording that we read at line 934 in the Herakles of Euripides, where Herakles is pictured as rabidly foaming at the mouth while he is possessed by the ‘wolfish rage’, lyssa, of Lyssa. (I have more on this detail in Nagy 2018.04.20; further examples are provided by Ceragioli 1992:56–58).

§3.5. When Hector experiences his own special moment of wolfish rage, it is said that lyssa literally enters his body and pervades it completely, at Iliad 9.239. After Hector kills Patroklos and puts on the armor of Achilles that Patroklos had been wearing, Zeus seals Hector into the armor and then the war god Ares himself literally enters him (δε μν ΄Αρη, Iliad 17.210, thus possessing him completely. So, when Achilles finally kills Hector in Iliad 22, he is in effect killing the embodiment of Ares the war god. It is fitting, therefore, that Hector is described as atalantos Arē, ‘equal to Ares’ at Iliad 8.215, 17.72, and as isos Arē, ‘equal to Ares’ at Iliad 11.295, 13.802.
§3.6. Conversely, Achilles himself is possessed by lyssa in the most intense moments of his own martial rage, at Iliad 21.542.

§4. In the dissertation of Roger Ceragioli (1992), he demonstrates that the generic Greek warrior in poetic moments of wolfish rage is conventionally comparable not only to a rabid dog in general but also, more specifically, to the archetypal Dog Star or Sirius, that is, to Canis Major: during the dog days of summer, this celestial canine can show his destructive side by transforming into a wolf that rabidly scorches the earth by belching forth the burning fire from his insides, bringing fever while destroying the vegetation cultivated by humankind (p. 68). Achilles himself, in his own moments of wolfish rage, is compared to the Dog Star, as we see in Iliad 22.25–32:

Τὸν δ’ ὃ γέρων Πρίαμος πρῶτος ἔδειν ὀφθαλμοῖο |26 παμφαίονθ’ ὡς τ’ ἀστέρ’ ἔπεσάμενον πελίοιο, |27 ὡς θάν τ’ ὀπόρης εἰσί, ἀριθμημένοι δ’ οἱ αὐχνέν |28 φαίνονται πολλοί μετ’ ἀστράγαι νυκτός ἀμολύφ, |29 ὡς τ’ ὅπλων θέσαν ζήλευσαν καλέσαν.|30 λαμπράττος οὖν ὁ ζῷος ὅ τε κύν’ ὥραν ὑπηρετεῖν καλεσόν. |31 καὶ τε φέρει πολλὰν δειλία βροτοῖν. |32 ὡς τ’ χαλκὸς ἔλαμπε περί στήθος θέοντος.

The first to catch sight of him [= Achilles] with his eyes was old man Priam. [26] There he [= Achilles] was, radiant like that star, rushing over the fields, [27] the one that comes at the time of harvesting, and his eyes are burning bright, [28] shining forth among the other stars at night, [29] They call him the Dog of Orion, as a side-name. [30] He is the brightest of them all, fashioned as a sign [sēma] of bad things to come. [31] And he brings fever to wretched humankind. [32] That is how the bronze armor was shining as it covered the chest [of the hero].

§5. Ceragioli describes elegantly the symbolic complementarity between dog and wolf in the figure of the Dog Star (pp. 73–74):

The dog and the wolf can be viewed as opposed principles: the dog is the canine of culture and the ally of humans, whereas the wolf is the canine of nature and the enemy of humans. In Greek folklore the two are inveterate enemies. Yet at the same time the dog and wolf are like principles: both are canines and as animals both are part of nature. Also, dogs for all their inbred culture may revert completely to nature through rabies, when they become savagely destructive to human society and seek to escape it. In terms of internal heat, dogs are warm while wolves are fiery. But again through rabies, the disease of fire and the product of the fiery Dog Star, dogs become as hot as wolves.

§6. Not only Achilles but also his fellow warriors, the Myrmidons, have their own moments of wolfish rage. In one such moment, Iliad 16.155–163, they are compared to a pack of hungry wolves in the act of attacking and devouring a stag. Conversely, in a picture we see painted on a vase, shown below, we see the goddess of wolfish rage, Lyssa (she is labeled ΛΥΣΑ in the painting), in the act of afflicting with rabies the loyal hunting dogs of Actaeon the Hunter while he is being transformed into a stag, so that these hounds, once so loyal to their master, now turn on him, behaving like a pack of hungry wolves as they raudily attack and devour him alive. Most fittingly, there is a canine head pictured on top of the anthropomorphic divine head of Lyssa, this divine originator of rabies; by contrast, the human head of the hapless Actaeon has become theriomorphic, with deer-like ears and even antlers.

Bibliography