

This paper observes that mad scenes were a popular staple of Greek tragedy, and argues that these scenes were popular for two reasons. First and foremost, they provided a showcase for virtuosic acting. Second, they offered the audience a chance to reflect on the nature of acting (and theater) as possibly a kind of madness. Mad scenes occur regularly in tragedy throughout the second half of the 5th century, attesting to their popularity with Athenian audiences; their continuing popularity is attested by Roman comedy's parodies of mad scenes, Seneca's tragedies (which provide mad scenes "onstage" where their Greek models do not), and the anecdotal tradition about dramatic performance.

Mad scenes occur regularly in Greek tragedy, yet they have not been studied as a type (one might contrast studies of stock scenes in comedy, such as knocking at the door, the running slave routine, eavesdropping). Studies of madness in Greek culture, such as Dodds (1951) and Simon (1978), tend to focus on religious and/or prophetic aspects of madness, while Padel's study (1995) examines the symbolism and "grammar" of tragic madness. As a stock type of tragic scene, however, mad scenes provide a fascinating window onto ancient theater practice. While a few mad scenes take place offstage and are described in messenger speeches, such as in Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Hercules Furens*, most take place onstage: Cassandra, Io, Orestes, Pentheus, Agave, Oedipus, Phaedra, and Philoctetes all have fits which transport them out of their mind to some degree. Whether the actor is dramatically describing the fit (as a messenger) or enacting it (as the principal character), these scenes call for some intense "scenery-chewing" which must have delighted Athenian and Roman audiences, who were increasingly interested in virtuosic acting. The nature and process of acting itself was brought to the fore in a mad scene; there was a strand of thought in the ancient world which considered acting to be a kind of possession, inspiration, or madness. There are several anecdotes from the Roman world about actors temporarily "losing" themselves while playing mad characters, such as Ajax, and doing actual violence to fellow actors (Lucian, *On Dance* 82-84); these anecdotes speak to this conception of acting as madness. During mad scenes, moreover, many characters either "see" things which are not evident to anyone else onstage (Orestes sees the Furies; Cassandra sees blood dripping down the palace walls), or they mistake one object for another (Ajax believes he is slaughtering his enemies when he slaughters sheep; Agave believes she holds a mountain lion's head in her hands, rather than her son's). This altered perception is characteristic of religious inspiration, as Dodds argues, but it is also one of the requirements of theatrical spectatorship: the spectator is asked to "see" things which are not there (perhaps the "Palace Miracle" in Euripides' *Bacchae*) or things which are not what they seem to be (men dressed as women, or gods; a *skene* building that is supposed to be a tent). Mad scenes became popular and remained popular because they offered spectators a way to appreciate "inspired" acting while distancing themselves comfortably from it.