

This paper offers a new reading of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*. I argue that the play sets up an opposition between legitimate deification and illegitimate theomachy as two contradictory ways of entering heaven. This opposition is undermined by Juno's dissenting voice and by the pattern of divine usurpations familiar from mythology. I further argue that the political themes of the play are foregrounded by the parallelism between the tyrannical Lycus and the theomachic Hercules. This focus on legitimacy and challenge moves criticism of the play beyond earlier debates about divine and human responsibility (e.g., Lawall, Segal, Motto and Clark). I conclude by relating these political themes to contemporary historical concerns.

Hercules Furens presents deification as a legitimate means of entering the pantheon, in contrast to its more violent counterpart, theomachy. Various figures in the play treat Hercules' future apotheosis as a *fait accompli* (e.g., Juno at 23, Amphitryon 265-67, Hercules 959), often justified by his divine parentage and peerless feats. Juno's dissent, however, raises doubts concerning the legitimacy of Hercules' deification, in part because Jovian ancestry has become a cheapened coin (1-18). More importantly, Juno perceives deification not as a form of legitimate induction or succession but rather as a threat to the established order, namely to her own status as Jupiter's consort (19-29). Her fear culminates in reinterpreting Hercules' deification as the first step towards theomachy and the eventual usurpation of his father's sceptre (64-74, *sceptra praeripiet patri* 65).

In the human realm, usurpation is constructed as tyrannical through the figure of Lycus. He explicitly rests his authority on force rather than on pedigree (337-53), and he conceives of total success as the elimination of the old Theban order (397-408). Although the play ostensibly contrasts the legitimate ruler Hercules and the usurper Lycus, these two figures are assimilated through their mutual valorisation of force. By further analogy, Hercules' imagined theomachy perfectly represents illegitimate succession (963-73). However, I argue that theomachy gains some sort of legitimacy through the pattern of divine patricidal usurpation, a practice to which Hercules refers when he threatens to liberate Saturn to fight against Jupiter (965-67). Finally, Hercules' violence and concern for status resemble the characteristics of the one god present in this play—Juno—thereby forcing us to question the moral standards of apotheosis and divinity, legitimate or otherwise.

I conclude by suggesting that the play's preoccupation with these questions maps onto contemporary concerns of legitimate succession, tyrannical rule, and imperial deification (see, e.g., Sen. *De Clem.*, Tac. *Ann.*, Suet. *VC*, esp. *Cal.*), while agreeing that Senecan drama should not be read as referring to specific events and persons (Henry and Henry, Schiesaro; *pace* Bishop). The new interpretation of the play adumbrated in this paper builds on the work of Braden, Fitch, Littlewood, and Papadopoulou, and complements the work of Cole, Shelton, and Wilson, amongst others.

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