



On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2019. "On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Published Version

<https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/on-cases-of-wolfish-rage-experienced-by-greek-heroes/>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:40935566>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins

Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

About

Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

While articles archived in DASH represent the original *Classical Inquiries* posts, CI is intended to be an evolving project, providing a platform for public dialogue between authors and readers. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries for the latest version of this article, which may include corrections, updates, or comments and author responses.

Additionally, many of the studies published in CI will be incorporated into future CHS publications. Please visit http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:CHS.Online_Publishing for a complete and continually expanding list of open access publications by CHS.

Classical Inquiries is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Every effort is made to use images that are in the public domain or shared under Creative Commons licenses. Copyright on some images may be owned by the Center for Hellenic Studies. Please refer to captions for information about copyright of individual images.

Citing Articles from *Classical Inquiries*

To cite an article from *Classical Inquiries*, use the author's name, the date, the title of the article, and the following persistent identifier:

http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

For example:

Nagy, G. 2019.01.31. "Homo Ludens at Play with the Songs of Sappho: Experiments in Comparative Reception Theory, Part Four." *Classical Inquiries*. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy](#) » On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes

On cases of wolfish rage experienced by Greek heroes

May 24, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

Comments off

2019.05.24 | By Gregory Nagy

§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.

Share This



Classical Inquiries (CI) is an online, rapid-publication project of Harvard’s Center for Hellenic Studies, devoted to sharing some of the latest thinking on the ancient world with researchers and the general public.

Editor

Keith Stone
kstone@chs.harvard.edu

Search for:

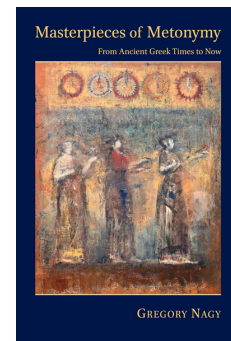
Subscribe Now!

Subscribe to this site to receive email updates about the latest research—just one or two notices per week.

[EU/EEA Privacy Disclosures](#)

Now Online

Mickey Mouse - The Mad Dog -1932



§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 6§§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 *berserkr* 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 delusionally imagines, since the victims of the hero’s fury here will be not 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 kuōn* (κύνα λυσσητήρα), *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 (ὄθ δὲ μιν ἄρης), *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 Arēi*, ‘equal to *Ares*’ at *Iliad* 8.215, 17.72, and as *īsos Arēi*, ‘equal to *Ares*’ at *Iliad* 11.295, 13.802.

Top Posts & Pages

The Last Words of Socrates at the Place Where He Died

Helen of Troy: Unwomanly in Her Sexuality

Who is the best of heroes, Achilles or Odysseus? And which is the best of epics, the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*?

Most Common Tags

[Achilles](#) [Aphrodite](#) [apobatēs](#) [Archilochus](#)
[Ariadne](#) [Aristotle](#) [Artemis](#) [Athena](#)
[Athens](#) [Catullus](#) [chariot fighting](#)

Commentary [Daphnis](#)

[and Chloe](#) [Demodokos](#) [Dionysus](#)
[etymology](#) [Euripides](#) [Gregory Nagy](#)
[H24H](#) [HAA](#) [travel-study](#) [Helen](#) [Hera](#)
[Herakles](#) [Herodotus](#) [Hippolytus](#)

[Homer](#) **Homeric epic**

Iliad [Jean Bollack](#) [lament](#) [Lesbia](#)

[mimesis](#) [Mycenae](#) [Odysseus](#)

Odyssey [Pausanias](#)

[Phaedra](#) [Pindar](#) [Plato](#) [Poetics](#) [Posidippus](#)

Sappho [Theseus](#) [weaving](#) [Zeus](#)

§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' ὁ γέρων Πρίαμος πρῶτος ἴδεν ὀφθαλμοῖσι |26 παμφαίνονθ' ὥς τ' ἄστέρ' ἐπεσσύμενον
πεδίῳ, |27 ὃς ῥά τ' ὀπώρας εἶσιν, ἀρίζηλοι δέ οἱ αὐγαί |28 φαίνονται πολλοῖσι μετ' ἀστράσι
νυκτὸς ἀμολγῶ, |29 ὃν τε κύν' Ὀρίωνος ἐπικλησιν καλέουσι. |30 λαμπρότατος μὲν ὃ γ' ἐστί,
κακὸν δέ τε σῆμα τέτυκται, |31 καί τε φέρει πολλὸν πυρετὸν δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσιν· |32 ὥς τοῦ
χαλκὸς ἔλαμπε περὶ στήθεσσι θεόντος.

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 ΛΥΣΣΑ 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 rabidly 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.



Red-figure krater by the Lykaon Painter: Actaeon devoured by his dogs, who have been driven mad by Lyssa, a personification of madness. Lyssa, in a short hunter's tunic, wears cap with a canine head. Looking on are Zeus (left) and Artemis (right). Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 00.346.

Drawing: Ernst Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen* (Munich, 1923), fig. 515.

Archives

Archives

Users

[Log in](#)

Burkert, W. 1972. *Homo Necans: Interpretationen altgriechischer Opferriten und Mythen*. Berlin.

Burkert, W. 1983. *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*. Trans. P. Bing. Berkeley and Los Angeles. Originally published 1972 as *Homo Necans*. Berlin.

Ceragioli, R. C. 1992. *Feruidus ille canis: The lore and poetry of the Dog Star in antiquity*. Dissertation, Harvard University. Reproduced by University Microfilms International, with permission of the original copyright owner.

Dumézil, G. 1983. *La Courtisane et les seigneurs colorés. Esquisses de mythologie* (26–50). Paris.

H24H. See Nagy 2013.

Lincoln, B. 1975. "Homeric *lyssa*: 'Wolfish Rage'." *Indogermanische Forschungen* 80:98–105. Reprinted in Lincoln 1991:131–137.

Lincoln, B. 1991. *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*. With a Foreword by W. Doniger. Chicago

Nagy, G. 1979/1999. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore. Revised ed. with new introduction 1999. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_Nagy.Best_of_the_Achaeans.1999.

Nagy, G. 1990b. *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Ithaca, NY. Revised paperback edition 1992. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_Nagy.Greek_Mythology_and_Poetics.1990.

Nagy, G. 2013. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge, MA. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_NagyG.The_Ancient_Greek_Hero_in_24_Hours.2013.

Nagy, G. 2018.04.20. "A sampling of comments on the *Herakles* of Euripides." *Classical Inquiries*. <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/a-sampling-of-comments-on-the-herakles-of-euripides/>.

SCIO. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hinc.essay:Nagy.A_Sampling_of_Comments_on_the_Iliad_and_Odyssey.2017.

Tags: [Achilles](#), [Actaeon](#), [Herakles](#), [Herakles of Euripides](#), [Iliad](#), [lyssa](#), [Roger Geragioli](#), [Sirius](#)

Comments are closed.

[Nostalgic glimpses in search of the Three Musketeers of 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince »](#)



Classical Inquiries, edited by Keith Stone, is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

[EU/EEA Privacy Disclosures](#) [Cookie Policy](#) [CHS GR Privacy Notice](#)

Classical Inquiries powered by [WordPress](#) and [The Clear Line Theme](#)