Defining Sanity: The Reception of Euripides’ *Herakles* and Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* in Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*

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In his reception of Herculean myth, Marlowe, in *Tamburlaine*, interrogates a concept of madness developed both by Euripides, in his tragedy *Herakles*, and by Seneca in the tragedy *Hercules Furens*. Marlowe, through a comparison between Herakles/Hercules and Tamburlaine, reveals that, though Tamburlaine may behave like a madman, by the Euripidean and Senecan standard, he cannot in truth be called mad. Euripides gives a clear definition of Herakles’ madness. Herakles experiences a delusion: a disjunction between the subjective reality Herakles perceives and under whose logic he acts and objective reality as defined by other characters. Herakles kills his sons only because he does not perceive them to be his sons, even though, in reality, they are. Not only is madness in *Herakles* well defined conceptually but also in terms of duration and cause. Herakles’ madness is a temporary episode with a clear beginning and end and is imposed by the gods. Herakles is not fundamentally mad; he is a sane man who experiences a temporary delusion. Seneca, on the other hand, muddles the distinction between madness and sanity in *Hercules Furens*. Hercules still kills his sons under a delusion, but it is unclear where reality ends and delusion begins. Although his madness is still defined against an objective reality, Hercules expresses a desire to rule like the gods when sane as well as mad, implying that the tyrannical ambitions Hercules reveals in his madness may at any point bleed into his conscious actions. Hercules, unlike Herakles, may be a madman who experiences bouts of sanity.

When Tamburlaine kills his son in *Tamburlaine Part II*, Marlowe brings the scene into dialogue with the parallel scenes of filicide in *Herakles* and *Hercules Furens*. Just before Tamburlaine stabs Calyphas, he all but quotes Hercules’ mad ravings in *Hercules Furens*, saying, “For earth and all this airy region/ Cannot contain the state of Tamburlaine.”¹² The reference seems to make Tamburlaine a figure for the mad Hercules, calling into question Tamburlaine’s sanity at the point of murder. However, the murders that Herakles and Hercules commit within a delusion, Tamburlaine seems to commit with the perfect knowledge that he is killing his son. By Euripidean standards, this could be an argument for Tamburlaine’s total madness: as a character, Tamburlaine functions within a delusion so complete that it allows him to justify the conscious murder of his son. Unlike *Herakles* and *Hercules Furens*, there is no objective reality against which to define such a delusion. In the absence of active divine powers, Tamburlaine is


² *Tam II* IV.i.119.
the only functional divinity. Tamburlaine is the only character with the power to realize his will; the only reality that exists for Tamburlaine is the reality that his own will determines. Here, Marlowe has fully realized the godly ambitions which the mad Hercules expressed in Furens: Tamburlaine has the power to make his subjective perspective the objective reality. As a figure for the mad Hercules, Tamburlaine transcends the possibility of madness by imposing a reality so absolute that it does not allow for alternatives; Tamburlaine is sane by default.

Marlowe’s conception of Tamburlaine’s madness (or lack thereof) results from his reading, through Seneca, of Euripides Herakles. Euripides, in Herakles, defines Herakles’ madness as a delusion in which he experiences an alternate reality. Madness strikes Herakles mid-sacrifice, as he is purifying his house after killing Lycus. In the early moments of his madness, Herakles is still aware that he is in his own house and of his actions: “Why hallow fire, Father, to cleanse the house/ before I kill Eurystheus?.../.../I’ll go and fetch Eurystheus’ head, add it/ to those now killed, then purify my hands.” Here, Herakles registers that he is home and that he has killed Lycus. Madness, imposing upon Hercules a logic of her own, inspires him to kill Eurystheus before cleansing the house, so as to do all of his sacrificing at once. The problem, however, comes in the following lines, when he imagines that he travels to Eurystheus’ city. The messenger reports that Herakles “fancied his chariot stood there;/ he made as though to leap its rails and ride off,/ prodding with his hand as though it held a goad.” Unfortunately for Herakles, he hasn’t moved but remains in his own house. In his madness, Herakles believes that he has moved from his own house to Eurystheus’ city, and prepares to act accordingly.

Herakles, within the context of his delusion, mistakes the identities of his own family members for members of Eurystheus’ family. Herakles does not recognize his sons; the messenger says that Herakles clearly thought that “he was killing Eurystheus’ children.” Even when his son cries out to him, saying “‘Dearest Father...do not murder me./ You’re killing your own son, not Eurystheus!’”, Herakles merely stares at his son with “stony Gorgon eyes” and kills him. The delusion is total. Herakles, though he sees and hears his sons, does not recognize them with his senses, but acts upon the assumption that sons in Eurystheus’ house must belong to Eurystheus.

Within the context of his delusion, Herakles’ behavior makes sense. He has set out to revenge himself upon Eurystheus, and he does so. However, Euripides takes care to distinguish between the subjective context within which Herakles believes he is acting and the objective reality in which he is actually functioning. The other characters in the play define objective reality through their perspective on Herakles’ madness. The mad Herakles never appears on stage, nor does he speak. His words and actions are reported to the audience by the Messenger. Within the Messenger’s account of the madness, other

5 Ibid, Line 971.
6 Ibid, Line 988.
characters are constantly remarking on the madness they perceive in Herakles. An unnamed bystander is the first to bring up the deadly question of madness, when he asks “‘Is the master playing, or has he gone…mad?’”

Amphitryon too, interrupts Herakles in his madness, saying “What do you mean my son/ what is this change in you? Or has the blood of those you’ve slain/ made you mad?” Herakles’ madness requires other perspectives to define it; he would be unable to define madness for himself because within his delusion, he acts logically. The resulting disjunction between the two perspectives creates Herakles’ madness.

Even Herakles, when he returns to sanity, must react as an outsider to his own madness; initially, he does not know that he had been mad. When he awakes after murdering his children, he says to Amphitryon that he “cannot remember being mad.” He is forced to assess his own madness from the outside, and turns upon himself: “Let me avenge my children’s murder:/ let me hurl myself down from some sheer rock,/ or drive the whetted sword into my side,/ or expunge with fire this body’s madness.” He sees only the result of what he has done rather than the logic with which he did it. Indeed, Herakles seems to have even less information about his own madness than the rest of the characters, who know that he killed his sons thinking that they were Eurystheus’ children. Herakles is never told of his own deluded logic and is left to condemn himself. Herakles reaction to his own crime makes him a member of the objective reality, cementing the distinction between his deluded reality and objective reality, which does not exist for Hercules when he is sane.

While Herakles may condemn himself for his mad behavior, Euripides goes to great lengths to emphasize that madness is not fundamentally part of Herakles’ psychology. For one thing, Herakles’ madness has a clearly defined beginning. When Herakles asks Amphitryon “Where did my madness take me? Where did I die?” his father is able to answer with the precise location and time: “By the altar, as you purified your hands.” He is able to do so because Lyssa, when she appears with Iris in line 821, begins to drive the sane Herakles mad at a fixed moment: “to the heart of Herakles I run,/ more fast, more wild than ocean’s groaning breakers.” Herakles does not descend slowly into madness; the exact beginning of his insane episode can be located in the text.

As a god marks the beginning of Herakles’ madness, so too does a god end his madness. The messenger reports that Pallas appears to the bystanders just as Herakles makes to kill his father: “a vision came—or so it seemed to us--/Pallas, with plumed helm, brandishing a spear./ She hurled a rock; it struck him in the chest,/ stopped short his murderous rage and knocked him/ into sleep.” Herakles’ madness is limited to a
fixed period, initiated by the gods and ended by them. By bracketing off Herakles’ madness with instances of divine intervention, Euripides marks it as an anomaly within the play, indicating that the madness ought to be dealt with as an episode in and of itself rather than as something that may have been inherent in Herakles throughout the play.

In her article “Euripidean Madness: Herakles and Orestes,” Karelisa Hartigan discusses Euripides’ strange choice to stage the divine intervention in the middle of the play. She notes that “the dramatic effect of the total peripatry is one of the most powerful in tragedy.” So, when the playwright chooses to use divine intervention as a device, it signals a dramatic emphasis within the play. Here, the “unusual intervention of deities at midpoint, rather than at prologue or closing” emphasizes “the external nature of Herakles’ punishment.” The physical, rather than supposed or conjectured, presence of the gods at the moment of Herakles’ madness indicates that it is the result of an actual external will, “rather than a sickness that grows from within, resulting from some crime or deed he has done” or “an aspect of his character which is just now with divine assistance being revealed.” Euripides’ unusual dramatic choice indicates that madness for Herakles is equally unusual. The very fact that divine intervention is necessary to drive Herakles mad is evidence of his natural sanity.

However temporary or externally imposed Herakles’ madness, the scene of madness itself does not constitute the tragedy. Hera sends Iris and Lyssa to “taint [Herakles] with fresh murder” by making him “destroy his sons.” She gives no real reason; now that Herakles’ labors are over, Zeus is no longer protecting him, so Hera seems to feel that Herakles ought to have more misery. Lyssa, though reluctant, agrees to cause Herakles madness. She will cause him to kill his sons, but that “he [Herakles] won’t know/ he kills what he begot, until my [Lyssa’s] madness leave him.” According to Lyssa, Herakles cannot know his crime until she leaves him and he returns to sanity. The tragedy of Herakles madness lies in the fact that he must cope with the actions of his insane behavior when he becomes sane; his punishment isn’t madness but his grief at having killed his own sons. Herakles is a sane man; his very punishment relies on the clear distinction between Herakles’ behavior in madness and that he himself is able to rejoin the objective reality of others in condemning his own actions.

In his telling of Hercules’ madness, Seneca retains the general shape of Euripides’ Herakles. For Hercules, however, the boundary between madness and sanity is less clearly defined; it is clear that Hercules goes mad, but it is not clear when, how, or to what degree. The fact that the audience hears of Hercules’ experience of madness from his own lips makes it particularly difficult to determine the moment of his madness. The madness begins somewhere in the middle of his sacrificial prayer in Act IV. As he prays, he suddenly says, “But what is this? Midday is shrouded in darkness. Phoebus’ face is obscured though not by clouds. Who chases the daylight back and drives it to its

16 Ibid.
17 Euripides, Line 831.
18 Ibid., Line 865.
dawning...Why are so many stars filling the heavens in daytime?” Here, Hercules seems to exist in a liminal space between madness and sanity. He is conscious that the reality he begins to perceive is different from the one he knows to be true. He sees stars, and yet he knows that it is midday. In Euripides’ *Herakles*, madness requires an outside perspective with which to define it. While the messenger in *Herakles* is able to pinpoint the moment madness strikes from an outside perspective, from Hercules’ own perspective, it is impossible to tell at what point his delusion becomes complete.

The extent to which Hercules experiences a delusion like Herakles’ is also in doubt. Hercules’ delusion is less clearly divorced from reality than Herakles’. Herakles, in his madness, believes that he has travelled to the palace of Eurystheus and kills Eurystheus’ children, rather than his own. He experiences a complete delusion, almost entirely divorced from reality. Hercules, on the other hand, believes that his children are actually the sons of Lycus, whom he has just killed: “But look, here in hiding are my enemy’s children, King Lycus’ vile seed. This hand will send you straightway to join your hated father.” Clearly, Hercules is still aware in his madness that he is in Thebes, that Lycus is his enemy, and that Lycus’ children might be in the vicinity. Hercules has a surprising grip on reality in his madness: he is aware of his surroundings and the people likely to be there. If he is aware that Lycus’ children are in Thebes, he should also be aware that his own sons live in Thebes. Hercules’ madness is still, by Euripidean standards, a delusion: the reality he perceives is different from the reality in which he acts. However, Hercules’ delusion contains elements of objective reality, calling into question the extent to which he is conscious of that reality in his delusion.

The direct cause of Hercules’ madness is also unclear, as there are no gods physically present in Act IV to drive Hercules mad. In *Herakles*, Euripides drew attention to the gods’ intervention by placing them in the middle of the play as the physical impetus behind Herakles’ madness. Seneca has moved the physical divine presence to its more common location at the beginning of Act I, when Juno makes her speech. While Juno implies here that she will cause Hercules’ madness, she is not physically present in Act IV when his delusion begins. The audience is left to assume that Hercules’ madness begins because, in the middle of his prayer in Act IV, he asked Juno to bring on her next labor: “if she [Juno] is furnishing some monster, let it be mine.” Of course, from Juno’s speech in Act I, the audience knows that Juno’s next labor is to set Hercules against himself: “Do you need a match for Alcides? There is none but himself. Now he must war with himself.” Seneca, by removing divine intervention from the moment of Hercules’ madness, seems to deliberately muddy the waters, suggesting the possibility that Hercules may have gone mad naturally without divine assistance.

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19 Seneca, 125.
20 Ibid., 129.
21 Ibid., 125.
22 Ibid., 55.
Further questioning Hercules’ sanity are the threads of continuity between his insane ravings and his sane thoughts. When Hercules returns from the underworld, bringing back Cerberus, he reflects that he has done more than any other person or god: “I have seen things inaccessible to all, unknown to Phoebus, those gloomy spaces which the baser world has granted to infernal Jove.” Moreover, he insists that “if the regions of the third lot” had “pleased” him, he “could have reigned there,” deposing Pluto. When mad, he seems to take these thoughts to another extreme, threatening to unleash the Titans and to lead them in a war against the heavens: “Let the Titans in rage prepare war under my leadership…with a pair of mountains I shall now construct a pathway to the world above: Chiron must see his Pelion set beneath Ossa. Then Olympus, placed as a third step, will reach to heaven—or else be hurled there.” He not only wishes to rule in heaven but over heaven, threatening to stack the underworld, the earth and Olympus on top of each other to ascend to a heaven beyond the gods. It seems that the thoughts Hercules had while sane are magnified by his madness rather than being imposed on him entirely from the outside, as madness is in Herakles. Madness seems to work with material already present in Hercules’ mind, implying that there is potential for madness in the thoughts of the sane Hercules.

It is Hercules’ potential for madness, as indicated by this continuity, which seems to have caused Juno to turn against him in the first place. While in Herakles Hera seems to punish Herakles for no adequately explored reason, in Hercules Furens Juno states a motive. Hercules, she says, has become too powerful: “It is heaven we must fear for—that after conquering the lowest realm he may seize the highest. He will usurp his father’s scepter!” She fears that Hercules may attempt, after subduing hell, to conquer the gods. In his article “Seneca’s Hercules Furens: Tragedy from Modus Vitae,” David Bishop elaborates on Juno’s fears:

In Act 1 Juno plainly tells us that Hercules’ type of life is tragically outrageous…His physical capacity and accomplishments and his psychological readiness are dangerous. That is, the kind of man Hercules is, coupled with the kind of deeds he does produces a violence of action which Juno abhors because it is contrary to the ordo mundi, regardless of the results and intentions of the doer.

Bishop notes in particular, Hercules’ “psychological readiness,” or potential for madness. According to Bishop, Juno seems to think that Hercules is exactly the sort of person who would get it into his head to threaten war with the gods, and that he is powerful enough to make good on the threat. In punishing Hercules, then, Juno intends to exploit his

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23 Ibid., 98.
24 Ibid., 99.
25 Ibid., 127.
26 Ibid., 53.
“psychological readiness” to destroy himself, thereby protecting Jove and preserving the order of things from a potential usurper. Hercules, in this scenario, takes the role of the villain. While he is usually seen as a hero who preserves order on earth by subduing monsters, here Juno locates in him a potential madness that, when combined with his strength, could cause him to overthrow the natural order of things. Bishop suggests that there is something inherently subversive in Hercules that Juno fears. If in *Herakles*, Herakles is a sane man who experiences madness at Hera’s savage whim, the Senecan Hercules seems to be a madman who functions under a veneer of sanity who even the gods fear.

Marlowe invokes the Senecan Hercules with the lines “For earth and all this airy region/ Cannot contain the state of Tamburlaine,” which directly echo Seneca’s Hercules: “The earth cannot contain Hercules, and at last yields him to the world above.” Both these lines occur in moments of questionable sanity involving filicide. The passage Marlowe references marks the moment when Hercules’ madness is most clear. In Euripides, Herakles’ madness required an outside perspective to name it. After Hercules expresses his desire to ascend to the heavens and usurp the gods, his madness is finally named by Amphitryon: “Banish these monstrous notions! Restrained the crazy impulses of your mind, which is great to be sure, but scarcely sane.” In this passage, just before Hercules kills his sons, an outside perspective has finally decided that Hercules is no longer acting on the same plane of reality as the other characters. He is officially mad. Thus, when Tamburlaine echoes the mad Hercules as he kills his son, Marlowe seems to imply that Tamburlaine is insane, as Hercules is when he kills his children.

Marlowe complicates the reference, however, because by the Euripidean standard with which we determined madness in both *Herakles* and *Hercules Furens*, Tamburlaine cannot be mad. In both Euripides and Seneca, the other mortal characters defined Herakles’/Hercules’ madness; in Tamburlaine, there is no outside perspective. No other character ever calls him mad when he kills his son. Amyras, Techelles, and Theridimas beg for mercy for Calyphas; even Tamburlaine’s enemies call him a “damned monster,” and a “fiend from hell,” but no one ever questions his sanity.

The other outside influences that determined madness in *Herakles* and *Hercules Furens* were the gods. There are many deities on people’s lips throughout *Tamburlaine Parts I and II*, but it is not clear if and for whom these deities act. They are never present on stage and they do not speak. For example, in Act II of *Tamburlaine II*, when Orcanes, a Muslim general, invokes Christ rather than Mahomet, against the Christians who have broken their treaty with him:

> Thou Christ that art esteemed omnipotent./
> If thou wilt prove thyself a perfect God

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28 Tam II IV.i.119.
29 Seneca, 125.
30 Ibid., 126.
31 Tam II, IV.i.169.
Worthy the worship of all faithful hearts,
Be now revenged upon this traitor’s soul
make the power I have left behind
(Too little to defend our guiltless lives)
Sufficient to discomfit and confound
The trustless force of those false Christians.\textsuperscript{32}

While the idea of Muslims invoking Christ against Christians is ironic, it seems to work out for Orcanes. However, because Christ never answers him or appears to him, he isn’t quite sure whether it is Christ or Mahomet who has helped him: “Now lie Christians bathing in their血液s/ And Christ or Mahomet hath been my friend.”\textsuperscript{33} Ultimately, he decides that Christ has saved them, concluding that in their victory “the justice of Christ” and his “power” here “appears as full/ As rays of Cynthia to the clearest sight.”\textsuperscript{34}

Gazellus, Orcanes’ general, takes a more practical view of the case. He says that no gods were involved in the battle but that their victory is due to “the fortune of the wars…/Whose power is often proved a miracle.”\textsuperscript{35} In this passage alone, three different religions are referenced, turned against each other, confused, and ultimately, dismissed. In \textit{Tamburlaine}, the power of divine beings to affect the world is completely in doubt. In contrast to the worlds of Herakles and Hercules, Tamburlaine’s world is, for all intents and purposes, godless. There are no gods to cause madness, and no gods to blame for it.

Justina Gregory, in her chapter on \textit{Herakles} in Lusching’s \textit{Greek Tragedy vol. 25}, says that “It is almost a definition of divinity that its will must be done. A god’s wishes may be postponed…but they may not go unfulfilled.”\textsuperscript{36} By this definition of divinity, Tamburlaine is the closest thing to a god in his world. Mahomet, Jove and Christ never speak, so they have no articulated “will” to realize. Tamburlaine repeatedly articulates his will and makes good on it with his deeds. He goes so far as to say his word and deed are one when he tells Theridimas, Usumcasane and Techelles in \textit{Tamburlaine Part I}, “Fight all courageously and be you kings: I speak it, and my words are oracles.”\textsuperscript{37} According to Tamburlaine, his word decides the course of events.

Having a will, however, is not enough. In order to be a god, one must enforce one’s will. When Tamburlaine attacks Damascus, he sets his purpose: Damascus will be conquered, and the Soldan, Zencorate’s father, should surrender the city to him. He then sets an arbitrary timeline for their surrender. On the first day, he will appear in white to signify “the mildness of his mind/ That, satiate with spoil, refuseth blood.”\textsuperscript{38} On the second day, he appears in red and will attack only soldiers, “not sparing any that can

\textsuperscript{32} Tam II, II.ii.55.  
\textsuperscript{33} Tam. II II.iii.10.  
\textsuperscript{34} Tam II II.iii.28.  
\textsuperscript{35} Tam II II.iii.31.  
\textsuperscript{37} Tam I III.iii.101.  
\textsuperscript{38} Tam I IV.i. 52.
manage arms.”

On the third day, however, he will appear in Black, and will kill every citizen “without respect of sex, degree, or age.”

Though arbitrary, cruel and somewhat ridiculous, Tamburlaine has set his intention and therefore will not deviate from it: “When they see me march in black array/…/Were in that city all the world contained,/Not one should ‘scape, but perish by our swords.”

He is true to his word. In Act V, when he is advancing on Damascus with his “coal-black colors everywhere advanced,”

the Governor sends four virgins to make peace with Tamburlaine by surrendering the city. It is too late; Tamburlaine is wearing black, so he kills all the virgins without a second thought:

Away with them I say and show them Death.
I will not spare these proud Egyptians,
Nor change my martial observations
For all the wealth of Gihon’s golden waves,
Or for the love of Venus, would she leave
The angry god of arms and lie with me.
They have refused the offer of their lives,
And know my customs are as peremptory
As wrathful planets, death, or destiny.

Tamburlaine’s will is absolute: he enforces his will because it is his will and in doing so performs as both god and hero, setting the labors and carrying them out.

Juno’s worst fears, as she articulates them in Act I of Hercules Furens, are realized in Tamburlaine: he has become the hero who is more powerful than the gods in his world. In terms of the Herculean myth, if Tamburlaine is cast in the role of the mad Hercules, he also plays the role of a god with the power to determine reality. Whatever reality Tamburlaine envisions, he has the power to make it so.

If madness results from the disjunction between a perceived reality and an objective reality, Tamburlaine cannot experience such a disjunction because the only reality that exists for him is his own. Sanity, for Tamburlaine, is a condition of his absolute will.

Tamburlaine’s murder of Calyphas, therefore, needs no justification. The filicides of both Hercules and Herakles are justified by their madness; in both cases, they experience a delusion and kill their children by mistake. Tamburlaine kills his son because he is an insufficient son: “Here, Jove, receive his fainting soul again,/A form not meet to give that subject essence/Whose matter is the flesh of Tamburlaine.”

Calyphas refused to fight alongside his brothers as Tamburlaine ordered him to. According to Tamburlaine, Calyphas’ disobedience is reason enough to kill him. It is his duty, he says,

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39 Tam I, IV.i. 57.
40 Tam I, IV.i.62.
41 Tam I, IV.i.119.
42 Tam I, V.i.9.
43 Tam I, V.i.120.
44 To a certain degree; Tamburlaine does die. However, his last words determine his own death: “For Tamburlaine, the scourge of God, must die. [He dies.]” Tam II V.iii.248.
45 Tam II IV.i.111.
to kill those whom “Heaven abhors” and to fit the title of “scourge of God and terror of the world.” To maintain his title as “arch-monarch,” he must “apply [himself] to fit those terms./ In war, in blood, in death, in cruelty/ And plague such peasants as resist in me/ The power of heaven’s eternal majesty.”46 For Tamburlaine, Calyphas’ resistance of his will is reason enough. To maintain his godly status, he must kill his son because his son denied his will, and Tamburlaine’s will is always done. Therefore, unlike in Euripides and Seneca, Tamburlaine needs no madness to justify his filicide; his will is enough.

Sanity in Tamburlaine is completely relative. Marlowe underlines this by the complete inversion of the Herculean myth of filicide. What Herakles and Hercules do in a state of madness, Tamburlaine does with complete consciousness. Marlowe, in drawing on Herakles and Hercules Furens, exploits the potential of a madness defined by outside perspective. If madness depends on a difference between the perceived reality of the mad person and an objective reality as determined by other characters or divine forces, sanity is dependent on what constitutes objective reality. In the absence of gods, the most powerful individual will determines reality. Thus, carrying the idea of the empowered hero to its fullest extent, Marlowe reveals Tamburlaine, the hero turned tyrant. Tamburlaine, though he behaves like a madman, cannot be called so by the people he subjects. His will destroys all perspectives which are not his own, and without an alternative perspective, madness is impossible to define.

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46 Tam II, IV.i.155.