It is agreed that ‘madness’ does not exist in the Homeric poems,¹ and is rather common or even central in Greek tragedy either as a metaphor or as frank clinical madness.² However, the vocabulary later appropriated by tragic madness—on the one hand ἄτη, *ἀάω, etc., and on the other μαίνομαι, μάργος, μαργαίνω and λύσσα³—already occurs in Homer.⁴ But these two semantic fields never overlap and the only apparent exception (the story of Eurytion told in Odyssey 21.295–304) proves the rule. I propose in this paper to illuminate some distinctive features of tragic madness by looking at its prehistory and comparing it with its antecedents in Homeric poetry, pointing out both continuities and ruptures, instead of the usual comparison between tragedy and the Hippocratic writings.⁵ The interest of such an approach, already suggested by B. Simon and R. Padel,⁶ has been demonstrated for ancient epic by the book of D. Hershkowitz, who has shown how ‘the words and deeds of Homeric characters can be appropriated by the representation of madness found in later epic tradition and transformed into images of madness’.⁷ I shall focus mostly on Aeschylus, looking not only at descriptions of ‘mad’ characters but also at their presentation on stage, since tragic poets, as opposed to Homer, who only ‘told in his myths the contests and battles of the demigods, rendered the myths in the form of contests and actions, so that they are presented not to our ears alone, but to our eyes as well’, as Isocrates already said.⁸ In the Oresteia this theatricalization of madness is pushed even further, since the audience is given with the Eumenides
an opportunity to share the true visions of Cassandra and Orestes. In order to better assess the originality of Aeschylean madness, I shall conclude with a comparison of his mad heroes to their Euripidean counterparts, Cassandra in *Troades* and Orestes in *Electra, Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Orestes*.

1. *Homeric Madness?*

Let us look first at Homer and the two semantic families of ἄτη and μαίνομαι and its associates λύσσα/μάργος/μαργαίνειν.

A. ἄτη

Rather than choosing between two interpretations of *ate*, ‘damage of mind’ and ‘damage in life or fortune’, let us attempt to establish its core meaning by looking at all its occurrences, as did R. Padel and D. Hershkowitz.10

*Ate* and cognate terms are applied to a wide range of behaviors that turn out to go against the best interests of the author. As D. Hershkowitz well said,11 ‘neither the state of mind of the actor nor some inherent quality of the action is at issue, but rather the subsequent reception of the action which then colors one’s view of the actor’s state of mind, as well as of the quality of the original action’. This is the reason why mistakes brought about by alluring promises of gods12 or men,13 actions of other men14 or interventions of a god,15 errors made out of carelessness,16 intoxication17 or stupidity18 that

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13 *Iliad* 10. 391–399: Dolon who was lured into going by night to the Achaeans’ ships by Hector who promised him the horses and the chariot of Achilles.
14 *Odyssey* 10. 68, 12. 372: Odysseus victim of the behavior of his companions who opened the bag of the winds and killed the cattle of the Sun during his sleep.
16 *Iliad* 11. 340: Agastrophos forgot to bring his chariot close by and was killed by Diomedes; 16. 685–687: Patroclus disregarded the warning of Achilles and pursued the Trojans instead of returning after saving the ships.
17 *Odyssey* 11. 6: Elpenor bewildered by drinking too much wine broke his neck by falling from the roof instead of using the ladder.
18 *Odyssey* 15. 470: Eumaeus was kidnapped by Phoenicians because he stupidly followed his Phoenician nurse.