




2013-12-01

# Going the Distance: Themes of the Hero in Disney's Hercules

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Going the Distance: Themes of the Hero in Disney's *Hercules*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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December 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Going the Distance: Themes of the Hero in Disney's *Hercules*

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Disney's *Hercules* is an apt modern reception of the ancient mythology of Herakles, acknowledging ancient and modern sources surrounding three types of classical hero: the archetypal hero, influenced by the ideas of Joseph Campbell; the Pan-Hellenic hero, distilled from ancient Greek exempla of heroism from epic and other genres of ancient literature; and the tragic hero, inspired by the heroic criteria presented in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

By adapting these heroic types from their traditional ancient source myths, Disney's *Hercules* produces a new, contemporary definition of heroism—one informed by modern, Western family values. This adaptation renews the power of the myth of Herakles for a modern era, whose image and characteristics have been changed and adapted since ancient times to suit each receiving culture's conception of true heroism.

Keywords: Disney, Hercules, Herakles, Heracles, Joseph Campbell, archetypal hero, Pan-Hellenic hero, adaptation, film, mythology, reception, tragic hero, modern hero

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot express enough thanks to my committee for their support and encouragement: Dr. Roger T. Macfarlane, my committee chair; Dr. Cecilia Peek; Dr. Carl Sederhom. I offer my sincere appreciation for the learning opportunities provided by my committee's guidance and direction on this project.

Next, this work could not have been accomplished without the love and support of my family. The encouragement and advice of my parents, Jim and LeAnn Burchfield, and my parents-in-law, Karl and Gwen Merkley, kept me on the right track throughout the writing of this article, as did the warm love of my grandparents, Dr. Richard N. and Shirley Miller, and Dave and Bunny Burchfield. Your love of and commitment to education has been a guiding light in this endeavor.

Finally, upon my patient, loving, and brilliant husband, Kyle Merkley, I shower all my greatest thanks and love for his dedication and support through many nights and days of hard (as well as the occasional not-so-hard) work. But you can't rest on my laurels, Kyle—you're next!

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## Going the Distance: Themes of the Hero in Disney's *Hercules*

“Long ago, in the faraway land of ancient Greece,” begins the booming voice of Charlton Heston, introducing the story of Disney's animated film *Hercules*, “there was a golden age of powerful gods and extraordinary heroes, and the greatest and strongest of all these heroes was the mighty Hercules.” Heston, with his heroic film portrayals of such imposing characters as Ben Hur and Moses, fits the bill to play narrator in the story of Hercules, the quintessential figure of heroism in the ancient world, and one who still fills that role today. Continuing the monologue and introducing the premise of the film, Heston then wonders, “But what is the measure of a true hero?”

From its earliest tellings, the Herakles myth has sought to define the true nature of heroism for the societies in which they are told. The ancient Greek Herakles, for example, portrays heroism as the clever but pious navigation through the vacillations of the fate and caprice of the gods, whereas the Romans adapted the same story by portraying the heroism of Hercules' self-determined destiny, eschewing the influence of the divine.<sup>1</sup> Both the ancient Greek and Roman cultures had differing ideas about what comprised heroism, as did neighboring ancient cultures, and in each adaptation, the character Herakles was modified to better suit those ideas, as Herodotus suggests in his *Histories*:

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Euripides' portrayal of Herakles in his tragedy *Herakles Mainomenos*, in which Herakles' traditional madness is directly caused by the anger of the goddess Hera toward Herakles, whereas the Roman playwright Seneca's adaptation of the same story describes the madness as being caused by Hercules' (the Roman name for the hero) own nature.

I took ship for Tyre in Phoenicia, where I had learned by inquiry that there was a holy temple of Heracles. There I saw it, richly equipped with many other offerings, besides two pillars, one of refined gold, one of emerald: a great pillar that shone at night; and in conversation with the priests, I asked how long it was since their temple was built. I found that their account did not tally with the belief of the Greeks, either; for they said that the temple of the god was founded when Tyre first became a city, and that was two thousand three hundred years ago. At Tyre I saw yet another temple of the so-called Thasian Heracles. Then I went to Thasos, too, where I found a temple of Heracles built by the Phoenicians, who made a settlement there when they voyaged in search of Europe; now they did so as much as five generations before the birth of Heracles the son of Amphitryon in Hellas. Therefore, what I have discovered by inquiry plainly shows that Heracles is an ancient god. And furthermore, those Greeks, I think, are most in the right, who have established and practise two worships of Heracles, sacrificing to one Heracles as to an immortal, and calling him the Olympian, but to the other bringing offerings as to a dead hero.<sup>2</sup>

Herodotus' insights are an extremely brief introduction to the vast cultic popularity of Herakles throughout the ancient Mediterranean and the extensive proliferation of his myth.

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<sup>2</sup> Hdt. 2.44, trans. A. D. Godley

When nearly all ancient Mediterranean cultures had their own adaptations of Herakles' mythology and hero-cult, it is not without extensive precedent that Disney's film sets out to inquire after the modern definition of a hero, couched in and adapted to modern ideals. Audiences may be startled by the changes and pop culture references, not to mention the anachronisms that are introduced; however, all of these are hallmarks of good adaptation—creative, contextually-minded screenwriting minds at work. Classical myth purists may be dismayed, but their qualms miss the point—Disney is not interested in complete fidelity to the ancient sources on the Herakles myth—the film maintains whatever notions of faithfulness to the ancient myth only insofar as it aids in producing for American culture what Herakles' myth varied so widely anciently to become. The more disarmingly modern the narrative is, the more quickly the audience can realize that this production is not meant to be a cinematized ancient Greek Herakles myth. The muses in the introduction encourage us to "lighten up, dude" and stop framing the myth of Hercules in terms of ancient Greek sources.

With the question of the nature of the hero raised, and the ancient sources thus summarily dismissed until they are wanted, the mythological themes and classical setting of the movie provide fertile ground for a discussion of what a hero should be, cast in a modern adaptation of the myth. The film begins with the proud parents Zeus and Hera throwing a party in honor of their new son, the baby Hercules. Hades, the



jealous and vengeful brother of Zeus, knows the heroic destiny of Hercules in his role as savior of the gods, and attends the party as a spy, bent on planning a heavenly coup. He then releases his minions Pain and Panic to kidnap the baby and make him mortal so he may be disposed of, allowing Hades' plans for seizing power to move forward.

Hercules survives the attempt, however, and retains his godlike strength despite his mortality. As an awkwardly strong and clumsy youth, Hercules, raised by mortal parents, strikes out on his own to find out where he belongs, and after an intimidating and revelatory interview with his real father Zeus, seeks out Philoctetes, the satyr trainer of heroes.

The gritty, street-wise Phil at first lacks confidence when Hercules commences his training with the old satyr, citing the failures of his old protégés. "I trained all those would-be heroes. Odysseus, Perseus, Theseus. A lot of '-euses,'" he laments, "and every one of those bums let me down flatter than a discus. None of them could go the distance." However, Phil cannot believe Hercules' growing skill. When they set out to test it, Hercules rescues the lovely Meg, beats the hydra, and performs a number of heroic feats, earning riches, acclaim, and a reputation for greatness. Nevertheless, in another interview with Zeus after these escapades, when Hercules tries to gain readmittance to Mount Olympus, Zeus replies that his newfound fame does not qualify him as a hero. Rather, Hercules must look inside his heart for the meaning of true heroism.

In this search for what it means to be a true hero, Disney's *Hercules* addresses the question of heroic identity by acknowledging the three varieties classical hero: the archetypal hero, the Pan-Hellenic hero, and the tragic hero, then finally introducing a new, modern definition of true heroism. By archetypal hero, I mean the conception of the hero described in Joseph Campbell's work *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, whose adventures fighting monsters and rescuing damsels transcend time and place within western civilization, feeling just as much at home in an ancient Greek epic as on the modern silver screen. Disney employs this hero in nearly all of their animated films; however, only in *Hercules* is this modern conception of the hero highlighted so specifically by references to classical myth.

The other two types strictly refer to heroes shaped by classical literary traditions. In this analysis I am choosing to call the first of these two the 'Pan-Hellenic' hero. This type of hero deserves this name not only for its origin in literature from all over ancient Greece, but also for its adoption in nearly every era and distinct genre in ancient Greece's literary history. The Pan-Hellenic hero also got his start in Homer's Trojan War epics in the conflict that was known anciently as *the* pan-hellenic war. This hero and his virtues—such as ἀρετή, or the excellence of the hero; τιμή and κλέος, his honor and glory; and εὐσέβεια, his respect and consideration for those worthy of respect and protection—are described from the time of Homer through the Hellenistic age. The Pan-Hellenic hero might also be termed an epic or Homeric hero as these virtues are so

important to Homer's conception of the hero. However, these virtues are shown in conjunction with heroism not only in ancient Greek epic, but also in the genres of tragedy and history. While they are not as essential to the heroic character of the hero in latter two, they are integral to the first.

The last type of classical hero that may be seen clearly in Disney's *Hercules* is the tragic hero, a label sometimes loosely held to be loosely connected to Aristotle's *Poetics*, but never actually found in it. Some scholars, like the textual critic John Jones would prefer to dispense with the term altogether; however, it still exists defiantly in the discourse on the subject.<sup>3</sup> Because of its influence on modern understanding of the ancient tragic genre, we cannot ignore its *appearance* in informing the plot, not just in Disney's *Hercules*, but also in many of its other animated films as well. Thus, acknowledging the academic consensus (or lack thereof) concerning the problems with this term, I proceed with my use of it to refer to a hero who, as Aristotle describes in the *Poetics*, lives a life of neither surpassing moral excellence nor complete depravity, who stands to lose much (possibly of noble rank or background), and who suffers what is now considered Aristotle's tragic cycle: *ἄμαρτία*, or a tragic mistake; *ἀναγνώρισις*, or recognition; *περιπέτεια*, or reversal; and *πάθος*, or suffering.

However, all of these heroic traditions, while expertly deployed in the plot of the film, are ultimately rejected as true and complete definitions of heroism, but not

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<sup>3</sup> John Jones, "New Fictions for Old." In *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 12-20.

because Disney hopes to turn a profit by poking fun at musty old myths, as some critics may have it.<sup>4</sup> The true power of any myth is in its power to present truth to its audience through adaptation, and so it ought to (and does) adapt and change as the truth changes. As Julie Sanders puts it, “the metalanguage of myth is deployed [...] as an accessible code to discuss and communicate complex, and often troubling, ideas.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the myth of Herakles is too dynamic to have a fixed canon to offend; it spread in various forms to numerous cultures, both modern and ancient.<sup>6</sup> It is my claim that in examining and rejecting the heroic traditions with which Herakles has been associated in the past, Disney offers a new adaptation of the myth. The film clearly acknowledges but ultimately excises largely now-meaningless ancient traditions of heroism, to return the Herakles myth’s most universal concern—the actions and character of a true hero—to a modern, Western family audience. As Disney explores each of these three traditions with its hero, and as Hercules returns dissatisfied after undergoing and exemplifying each facet of those traditions, all three are rejected in turn in favor of an ultimately more familiar interpretation of the ancient classical heroic themes based on modern American values and concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> For a review characteristic of such an opinion, see anonymous Disney reception blogger okapina’s site at <http://dettoldisney.wordpress.com/2012/01/01/hercules-vs-heracles/>.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 69.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I will use the Greek name Herakles to discuss the ancient hero of classical myth, and Hercules to refer to the character in the Disney film.

The processes involved in the interpretation of those values invites the question—who gets to determine the values and concerns that should be examined in a contemporary adaptation of a myth? While the directors and screenwriters Ron Clements and John Musker are responsible for the content of the film, they work under and to some extent, sacrifice their auteurship (as all Disney writers and directors do to varying degrees) to the brand and aegis of Disney, to the point where the film is referred to as Disney's *Hercules*, not Musker and Clements' *Hercules*. As Thomas Leitch puts it,

Ever since the 1933 [Disney] *Alice in Wonderland*, Hollywood filmmaking has remained star-driven, unlike the production of television programming for children. In *Hercules* Disney can hide character stars like Danny DeVito, James Woods, and Amanda Plummer behind animated visuals partly because the stars have been chosen for their distinctive voices but mainly because Walt Disney himself, dead for thirty years, is the real star, the brand name that assures parents that the film will be safe for children and amusing for parents.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while the film's interpretation of who and what the hero should be is compelling to a modern audience, it is "our" society's interpretation only insofar as "we" allow the Disney brand its power to speak for us. Thus, to say that this is a valid adaptation of myth is to say that the majority of moviegoers subscribe to the values and cultural paradigms Disney allows its filmmakers to employ in the production of the film. This is

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 200.

done regardless of whether those paradigms, such as the three I have distilled in this discussion, are considered to be valid in academia or other contemporary cultural institution, so as long as they are widely known and accepted by the intended audience of the film. That caveat presented, Disney is famous for knowing its trade, and this talent shows in the clever and compelling adaptation of the ideas of the archetypal hero, the Pan-Hellenic hero, and the tragic hero to form a new type of hero relevant to its modern audience.

### *The Archetypal Hero*

The archetypal hero is the first type Disney examines in the plot of *Hercules*, perhaps because this hero is the most basic and general of the three—he has no other home time or space than that which humanity as a whole owns. Not particularly classical except the sense that this hero is *classic* or timeless, this trope applies to Herakles as much as it applies to Superman or Gilgamesh. As the most basic hero tradition of humanity, it seems a natural starting place for the film's exploration of the hero.

Joseph Campbell is best known for quantifying this hero's attributes, suggesting that their universality is due to the presence of this hero in the back of the collective psyche as an archetype that has haunted humanity since its infancy.<sup>8</sup> Campbell is also deeply influential in contemporary discussions of screenwriting, including popular

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 1.

guides to the craft—Blake Snyder believes that “*Hero with a Thousand Faces* remains the best book about storytelling ever.”<sup>9</sup> The same work is held to be an important source in several Disney films, including Disney’s *Hercules*.<sup>10</sup> Campbell, whatever the current academic consensus on the validity of his work, has remained extremely influential to the world of film since its first publishing, and thus belongs in a discussion of the hero of film. The full enumeration of Campbell’s characteristics of the archetypal hero’s journey and character reaches beyond the scope of this work, but we can see how Herakles’ ancient myths are modified in the film to highlight the archetypal attributes’ development in the young, budding film Hercules.

First, the young Hercules, having been kidnapped by Hades’ minions and taken down into the mortal world, enters the stage of the archetypal hero’s narrative that Campbell calls ‘the Ordinary World’—a world like ours, where the supernatural is extremely rare or nonexistent.<sup>11</sup> Here, due to his godlike strength, Hercules finds himself in conflict with his peers, local townsfolk, and even the setting around him—all of which are extremely mundane in stark contrast to his fantastical strength. One particularly clumsy misapplication of his great strength has the young hero toppling the

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<sup>9</sup> Blake Snyder, *Save the Cat: the Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need* (Saline, Michigan: McNaughton and Gunn, Inc., 2004), i.

<sup>10</sup> Scott T. Allison, and George R. Goethals. Heroic Leadership, "Heroes:What They Do and Why We Need Them." Last modified June 13, 2012. Accessed December 11, 2013. <http://blog.richmond.edu/heroes/2012/06/13/joseph-campbell-the-man-who-wrote-the-book-on-heroes/>.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 294.

entire agora of a Greek village, to the ire of the citizens and the shame and disappointment of his kindly old adoptive mortal father Amphitryon. That night, Amphitryon and Alcmene decide to reveal what they know of Hercules' true lineage, which spurs Hercules into Campbell's next heroic stage, the 'Call to Adventure.'<sup>12</sup> Hercules, in an inspiring musical scene, decides to leave his home and seek insight about his true purpose from his real father at an unspecified temple to Zeus. Once there, an enormous Phidian statue of Zeus comes to life and explains that it was through a sinister plot that Hercules was made a mortal and taken to earth, not through his divine parents' abandonment. He also says that Hercules, if he can become a true hero, may return to Olympus and live with his parents as a god. Hercules, in a moment of hesitation that Campbell titles the 'Refusal of the Call,' wonders why Zeus cannot just make him a god again.<sup>13</sup> When Zeus explains that his destiny is now up to him, he questions how he can accomplish such a thing. In response, Zeus advises him to "seek out Philoctetes" to be his mentor, an important character in Campbell's heroic narrative cycle.

The figure of the Campbellian heroic mentor, in the character of Philoctetes or 'Phil' as he is generally called after his first introduction, represents an interesting confluence of myths. As mentioned before, in his introductory scene he rattles off a list of ancient Greek heroes including "a lot of -euses" who all turned out to be

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 54.



disappointments. In classical sources, Philoctetes is not traditionally thought of as a trainer of great heroes, though he definitely takes on a mentor-like role toward Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and is with Herakles in a supporting capacity at the very end of that hero's life on Mt. Oeta. Thus, a helping, mentoring ally named Philoctetes belongs in the place the Disney film has set him; however the ancient Philoctetes is always human, never satyr. In choosing to present Phil as a different species, Disney may have been channeling the myth of Chiron the centaur as well, whose tutelage could boast Asclepius, Theseus, Achilles, Jason, Perseus, sometimes Heracles.<sup>14</sup> We need not be concerned that the majestic centaur has been scaled down to a small, stocky satyr. A centaur, as a large equine creature, would not have been as portable to accompany the flying Disney hero on Pegasus, nor would he have been as compact and easy to fit into complex shots as Phil's ultimate form must have been. The final factor in the transformation may be Phil's voice actor Danny DeVito's own short and stocky appearance, which was easily suggested in the satyr's compact build (Fig. 1). All of these concessions present Phil as the heroic mentor that Philoctetes could never have become, nor ever became in the ancient myths.

This conglomeration of myth and practicality is perhaps the first overt effort Disney made to help their Hercules myth echo the Campbellian hero, but it is not the

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<sup>14</sup> For a list of Chiron's students and the accompanying sources, see Fritz Graf, (Columbus, OH). "Chiron." Brill's New Pauly. Antiquity volumes edited by: Hubert Cancik and , Helmuth Schneider. Brill Online, 2013. Reference. Brigham Young University. 12 December 2013  
<<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/chiron-e232740>>

most dramatic. This honor goes to the sequence after Phil's training of Hercules, where he is made to rescue a dummy damsel from various improbable dangers. "I'm ready!" Hercules declares after a particularly slick rescue of the now-battered dummy. "I want to see battles and monsters! Rescue some damsels! You know, heroic stuff." Campbell asserts that the hero's journey usually includes "Crossing the Threshold" into a new country in which the majority of their heroic exploits are to take place, often encountering an antagonistic "threshold guardian" that he must face or defeat in the process.<sup>15</sup> Hercules' first encounter after he crosses the threshold from the relative safety of Phil's training island is with Nessus, a minion of Hades whom Hades calls, of all titles, "a river guardian," which is something the ancient mythic Nessus never aspired to be.

The classical Herakles meets Nessus late in his career, while Hercules comes early in the Disney conception. Classically, the accomplished hero crosses a river with his young wife Deianira. Too weary to manage the complex challenge posed by raging torrent and young bride, his wits addled by age, Herakles injudiciously entrusts her to the lecherous centaur. The classical sequence makes this miscalculation the beginning of Herakles' mortal end.<sup>16</sup> Shifting this incident to the beginning of Hercules' career, the film mines the myth for the needed Campbellian threshold guardian and provision for the prototypical archetypal heroic mission: Phil identifies the situation as a "basic

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 71.

<sup>16</sup> *Ov. Met.* IX.98 ff.

D.I.D.—damsel in distress." This cleverness displaces an archetypal, Campbellian hero-and-damsel narrative with up-to-date hipness. As Hercules implements his training, the archetypal situation goes horribly wrong. The hero loses his weapon. The damsel rejects his help. And the battle takes a turn such that he must eventually win by the sheer, comical brutish force the son of Zeus acquired without special training and without reference to the dignified precedence the archetypal heroic type has led us to expect from Hercules thus far.

The naive Hercules does not understand how the "D. I. D." situation came to be in the first place. We know, but he does not, that Meg has negotiated the mercenary contract between the vicious Nessus and the conniving Hades. Disney's displacement of the Nessus myth shows the ineffectual simplicity of heroic archetypes of the sort Campbell catalogued and how they are ill-matched to face the complexities of real-life peril, proving to be as blunt and useless as the fish with which Hercules tries to replace his lost sword. The final take-away is that Hercules' traditional training as an archetypal hero has not adequately prepared him to undertake feats of true heroism. In so doing, *Hercules* effectively rejects the traits of the archetypal, Campbellian hero as criteria for true heroism, acknowledging and eliminating the most visible and obvious of the classical heroic types. This leaves the depths of the film's erudition to be plumbed, as Hercules journeys to Thebes, the "Big Olive" to face even greater challenges to the true meaning of heroism.

*The Pan-Hellenic Hero*

The next hero Disney examines through the lens of the Herakles myth is the Pan-Hellenic hero, so named here for his essential ancient Greek literary attributes, especially those attributes depicted as heroic in Homer's works. Lewis Farnell suggests that Herakles was thought of "from very old times as an almost Panhellenic hero," and W. K. C. Guthrie mentions that:

He was, for example, the only one to transcend completely the borders which divided the small communities of Greece. He was an exception to the rule that heroes were local and tied to a grave. So completely did he become the possession of the whole of Greece that no single city is recorded as having claimed to possess his tomb. The Greeks took him to their hearts and into their homes, which some of them sought to protect by writing this charm over the door: 'The son of Zeus, the conqueror dwells here, Heracles. Let no evil thing come near.'<sup>17</sup>

Herakles is not the only hero to have gained the title of Pan-Hellenic, but Herakles was the most famous and least localized of any of them, so it is especially appropriate that Disney's *Hercules* should explore this hero type through his traditional Pan-Hellenic virtues, such as ἀρετή, τιμή and κλέος, and εὐσέβεια.

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<sup>17</sup> Lewis Richard Farnell. *Greek hero cults and ideas of immortality: the Gifford lectures delivered in the University of St. Andrews in the year 1920.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 29. and W. K. C. Guthrie. *The Greeks and their gods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 239.

These virtues, while later being ascribed to Herakles in other genres of ancient Greek literature, got their start as heroic attributes in Homer's works the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—sources in which Herakles features minimally. However, Disney's *Hercules* seems to desire us to cast our minds back to those epic precedents as we, with the young Hercules, begin our meditation on what comprises a hero. When Hercules finds the overgrown island home of Phil, the satyr catalogues his previous disappointing attempts to train a true hero. "I trained all those would-be heroes," Phil laments.

"Odysseus... Perseus... Theseus... A lot of '-euses,' and every single one of those bums let me down flatter than a discus. None of 'em could go the distance. And then there was Achilles... Now there was a guy that had it all: the build, the footspeed. He could jab; he could take a hit. He could keep on coming... But that furshlugginer heel of his! He barely gets nicked there once and kaboom! He's history!"

By mentioning Achilles as the Disney Hercules' predecessor in the quest for true heroism, the film presents an anachronistic (Achilles is part of the generation of heroes that follows Herakles' in Homer's stories), but interesting tie to the epic genre as a whole, and more specifically, to the quintessential classical epic hero. Achilles sets the standard by which later epic heroes are judged, and on which they are based. For example, Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, undergoes a rage parallel to Achilles' after the death of his young protégé Pallas, echo of Achilles' young friend Patroclus. This rage

is bolstered by armor—specifically a shield—of divine origin, which is portrayed in an extended epic convention known as an *ekphrasis*, or extended description.<sup>18</sup> Achilles' traditional rage narrative does not feature as conspicuously in *Hercules*; however, his early and anachronistic appearance in the scene on Phil's island compels the viewer to consider the epic attributes of Achilles, and how Hercules might be able to acquire and surpass them in his quest for true heroism.

Perhaps most central of these attributes to the character of the epic-inspired Pan-Hellenic hero, ἀρετή is the virtue of virtue itself. Embodying excellence or effectiveness in any task to which the hero is set, this term is applied by Homer as easily to Penelope as to Odysseus, but Herakles has a special relationship to the term in his mythology. For example, a tale is attributed to Prodicus the Wise wherein a youthful Herakles, at the crossroads of his adult life literally meets Virtue (ἀρετή) and Vice (κακία) at a fork in his path. Vice begins by enticing him with an offer of her charms:

'You shall have the fruits of others' toil, and refrain from nothing that can bring you gain. For to my companions I give authority to pluck advantage where they will.'

Now when Herakles heard this, he asked, 'Lady, pray what is your name?'

'My friends call me Happiness,' she said, 'but among those that hate me I am nicknamed Kakia.'

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<sup>18</sup> Verg. A. 8.626 ff.

Meantime the other [Arete] had drawn near, and she said: 'I, too, am come to you, Herakles: I know your parents and I have taken note of your character during the time of your education. Therefore I hope that, if you take the road that leads to me, you will turn out a right good doer of high and noble deeds, and I shall be yet more highly honoured and more illustrious for the blessings I bestow.'<sup>19</sup>

This relationship with ἀρετή is unique among heroes, in that other Pan-Hellenic-type heroes are merely said to possess ἀρετή or not, while Herakles is freely faced with the choice of assuming it or choosing another path.

This scene is also famously portrayed in a Carracci painting (Fig. 2), wherein Vice is gesturing toward a table on which are assembled the means of diversion and leisure, while Virtue points Herakles in the direction of a twisting and difficult mountain path symbolizing his arduous traditional labors. At the summit of the mountain, Pegasus awaits the hero to help him transcend the boundaries of mortality. In the development of the character of the Disney Hercules, audiences are not treated to a tableau of the personifications of Right and Wrong, but Hercules does embark on a youthful journey to find his purpose. On the road in this journey, he happens upon a temple of Zeus, where a Phidian statue of Zeus comes to life and instructs Hercules about his choice of future. Though the tempting figure of Vice is not present in this interview with the

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<sup>19</sup> Xen. *Mem.* 2. 1. 21, trans. Marchant.

divine, Hercules is still presented with a choice—if he would like to rejoin the gods and enjoy the fruit of his ἀρετή, the gods cannot make this happen for him. *He* must prove his own virtue by committing acts of true heroism. To help him achieve this, Zeus even reunites the young Hercules with Pegasus, in a parallelism with Carracci’s work.

But as the story progresses, for the most part Disney rejects the ancient Pan-Hellenic notion of ἀρετή as a primary component of true heroism. In the montage “Zero-to-Hero,” Hercules undergoes a Homeric ἀριστεία—the epic trope wherein the hero achieves glory through great, sometimes super-human feats of strength and courage—completing several of his traditional labors in addition to besting monsters whose defeats are customarily attributed to other mythological Greek heroes, such as Medusa, the quarry of Perseus; the sphinx, the antagonist of Oedipus; and the minotaur, nemesis of Theseus. As an ἀριστεία sequence, the “Zero-to-Hero” montage is like a Homeric ἀριστεία, such as that of Diomedes: they both describe the super-human exploits of mortal warriors against divine (or at least supernatural foes).<sup>20</sup> Yet when Hercules returns to the temple to give a report to his divine father, Zeus warns that while the achievements of Hercules’ ἀριστεία are noble and remarkable, he has not yet achieved true heroism. Zeus thereby denies the traditional Pan-Hellenic requisites for attaining ἀρετή, which would have more than qualified an ancient Greek hero like Diomedes or Odysseus to have fully possessed the virtue. In fact, it is only after his

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<sup>20</sup> Hom. *Il.* V.



‘true’ heroic act, denoted by the climax of the film, that Hercules’ ἀρετή results in ἀριστεία truly worthy of a divine hero.

The next two virtues, τιμή and κλέος, are two sides of the same coin—the honor of the hero. Τιμή, as the honor of the warrior and physical reward for his deeds, and κλέος, the hero’s glory and renown among men, both frequently serve as the primary motivation for good or for ill among ancient Pan-Hellenic heroes. Achilles, for example, is famous for his wrath at Agamemnon’s stealing of Briseis—an act which lessened Achilles’ τιμή to a degree the warrior found unbearable.<sup>21</sup> In both ancient mythology and in the Disney version, Herakles, though he has earned plenty of τιμή both intrinsic and extrinsic, ultimately realizes that material wealth is an enemy to heroism. Aesop famously records this sentiment in his 130<sup>th</sup> fable:

Riches are justly hated by courageous men, because a coffer of cash brings an end to honest traffic in praise. Thanks to his excellent qualities, Herakles was given a place in heaven. He saluted the gods who came to congratulate him, one after another, but when Ploutos (Wealth), the son of Tykhe (Fortune), approached him, Herakles turned his eyes aside. Father Zeus asked him why he did this. Herakles answered: ‘I hate the god of riches because he is a friend to the wicked, while he also corrupts the entire world by throwing his money around.’<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hom. *Il.* I.

<sup>22</sup> Phaed. 4. 12., trans. Gibbs.

The Hercules of the film, though true to character in being not terribly interested in physical wealth, is still very much taken in by the idea that κλέος is essential to the true hero. After the Zero-to-Hero montage, Zeus, though proud of his son's achievements, demurs to take his son up to rejoin the gods, and Hercules expresses his disappointment: "But Father, I've beaten every single monster I've come up against. I'm the most famous person in all of Greece! I'm an action figure!" (Fig. 3) In this statement, Hercules not only references his now-famous achievements from the Zero-to-Hero montage, but also the consumerist cult of merchandise that has grown up around his success, offering everything from sports drinks and athletic sandals to new branded workout scrolls entitled "Buns of Bronze." This merchandise is offered in a store whose façade is extremely reminiscent of the typical façade of the Disney Store commonly seen in American malls (Fig. 4). In this rare moment of parodic self-awareness, Disney cunningly translates the Greek ideals of τιμή and κλέος into what a modern audience views as fame and fortune. The result seems to be a cutting critique of the sports and pop-culture "heroes" of the modern era. To all of these measures of success that Hercules has presented, Zeus sadly replies, "I'm afraid being famous isn't the same as being a true hero." Hercules, disheartened to hear that his efforts so far, though they have brought glory and honor, have not been enough, retires to search his heart for what more he can do.

The last Pan-Hellenic virtue, εὐσέβεια, is never fully rejected as a criterion for heroism in the film, interestingly enough, though it never directly leads Hercules to true heroism. εὐσέβεια may be defined as proper reverence or respect for authority, tradition, or divinity, similar to the Roman ideal of *pietas*. As a Pan-Hellenic virtue of heroism, it has manifested in several conspicuous instances, such as Homer's character of Thersites in the *Iliad* (perhaps more as an example of anti-εὐσέβεια), and Philoctetes' advice to Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes*.<sup>23</sup> These literary instances show how the hero is to act towards those worthy of his respect. Hercules of the film shows εὐσέβεια in his deferential treatment toward his mortal adoptive parents at the outset of the film, in his religious devotion to his divine parents, and in his absolute trust and reliance on Phil as his mentor. The moment he begins to forsake this virtue results in his tragic mistake at the climax of the film, when he disregards Phil's advice and even carelessly assaults his teacher. In this narrative choice, the film shifts Hercules from his Pan-Hellenic quest for virtue to a raw struggle simply to survive the buffetings of fatal consequence—Hercules thus begins to painfully explore the lot of the tragic hero.

### *The Classical Tragic Hero*

The myth of Herakles has many literary sources from the ancient world, especially within the genre of tragedy. Euripides, the famous Greek tragedian, composed what was perhaps the most popular and well-known account of Herakles'

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<sup>23</sup> Hom. *Il.* II.211-277.

exploits in his tragedy, *Heracles Mainomenos*, in which Herakles is afflicted with madness or ἄτη by Hera, who is jealous of Herakles' siring by her husband, Zeus, with the mortal Alcmene. In this state of ἄτη, Herakles brutally kills his wife Megara and their three children, mistaking them for enemies of his house in his insanity. Once he recovers his senses and recognizes his tragic mistake, or ἄμαρτία, he goes through three key features of tragedy: recognition, or ἀναγνώρισις; reversal, or περιπέτεια; and its accompanying suffering, or πάθος.<sup>24</sup> Finally, compelled by his need to become ritually purified from his slaughter, he seeks forgiveness from the Oracle at Delphi, which instructs him to go on his famous twelve labors.<sup>25</sup> The heroic pattern of tragedy is complete when Herakles undergoes ἀποθέωσις and becomes a god—a metamorphosis not mentioned in Aristotle's description of what has been interpreted as the tragic hero, but which is hinted at in such tragedies as Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus*.

These steps—a tragic mistake or error in judgment often provoked by madness, recognition, remorse, atonement, and apotheosis—though they are not presented so cyclicly, or at all in the case of apotheosis, are seen throughout the canon of ancient Herakles literature, including Seneca's Roman versions of Euripides' play, and Diodorus' ambitious collection of legends and historical anecdotes. It is also the cycle undergone by many of the “-euses” Phil mentions in one of the opening scenes of the

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<sup>24</sup> Arist. *Poet.* XII-XV

<sup>25</sup> Apollod. II.4.12.

film, even in the genres of epic and history, and is one of the classical heroic precedents Disney explores throughout the film.

The journey of the tragic hero is quite easy to trace in Hercules' character in the film; Hercules, resting on his laurels, lets down his guard and falls for Meg, the beautiful double agent of the evil Hades. This—falling in love with Meg—seems to be the adaptation of Herakles' ancient madness or *ἄτη*. As uncomfortable as our society is with mental illness, it is not surprising that Hercules' *ἀμαρτία* is not accompanied by overt madness, but throughout the trouble ensuing from his *ἀμαρτία* in the film, it is remarked more than once that “people do crazy things when they are in love.” The idea of the madness of love taking the place of traditional *ἄτη* works well for Hercules' tragic heroism, since Hera, the ancient instigator of Herakles' *ἄτη*, was the goddess of marriage and family, and would have approved of Hercules' being removed from the heroic sphere of fame and glory by something as domesticated as marriage.

Once Hercules falls in love with Meg in the film, Hades uses this fact to trick Hercules into believing Meg is in trouble, mirroring the deception of Hera's ancient madness, and thus spurs the trusting Hercules into committing his *ἀμαρτία*—he makes a deal to give up his strength for twenty-four hours, and with it his identity, to save Meg, letting Hades continue his diabolical plot. After this choice, Hercules suffers the recognition of his mistake. He gave up his strength and, by extension, his identity to save a woman who was working for the villain all along, a fact which Phil had

previously noticed and pointed out to him. Sadly, Hercules would not listen in his “maddened” state, particularly weak to the temptation of hubris, or overweening pride endemic to Greek heroes.<sup>26</sup> Remorse inevitably follows this mistake, as does the need for atonement. However, instead of suffering solely for his own sins, he offers his own life for Meg, who was mortally wounded in the fighting. As Hercules slowly navigates the deleterious effects of the swirling pool of the dead in an attempt to reach Meg's soul before he himself dies, he apparently makes sufficient atonement, rescuing Meg and undergoing apotheosis.

The film *Hercules* rejects the means of atonement anciently available to Herakles. The ancient Herakles traditionally must perform one of two options for his atonement, depending on the source: a series of menial labors, such as those accomplished by Hercules in the ancient tradition, which are nearly impossible and mostly meaningless; or a specific ancient absolution ritual about which not many specifics are now known, such as that which the hero Jason seeks at the hands of the sea-witch Circe after he kills his brother-in-law in cold blood.<sup>27</sup> However, this ritual purification seems to be only

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<sup>26</sup> Hubris is especially common among the heroic *nostoi*—stories depicting the Trojan War heroes' returns home. Hubris can be said to have resulted in Agamemnon's death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* when the titular character treads fine carpets at the behest of his murderous wife—a presumptuous honor for a mortal to accept. So too does hubris result in Odysseus' troubles, when it prompts him to reveal his identity to the wounded Cyclops, who then invokes his father Poseidon's wrath upon the reckless warrior.

<sup>27</sup> Apollon. 4.II.557 ff. The mythology of Herakles hints at this sort of ritual at the end of Euripides' tragedy, when Theseus suggests that such a rite is a likely solution to Herakles' state of impurity after mistakenly killing his wife and children. As for the labors as atonement, see Apollodorus as noted above.

necessary for violent crimes like Jason's, of which we know the benevolent Disney Hercules is not guilty. As for the series of difficult labors, the film briefly references the traditional labors of Hercules in the "Zero to Hero" sequence, implying that they are a part of his attainment Pan-Hellenic heroism, which, as has been already established, is not sufficient qualification for true heroism. With this aspect of the tragic tradition rejected, Hercules must make atonement for his (and Meg's) mistake in another way, and he must look inside his heart to understand this new, transcendent way of heroism.

### *The Transcendent Hero*

As Disney's *Hercules* examines each of these three ancient hero traditions and more or less discards each one in turn, we are yet left with the question presented by Charlton Heston at the beginning of the film: "But what is the measure of a true hero?" In introducing and rejecting the archetypal, Pan-Hellenic, and traditional tragic heroes, *Hercules* leaves room only for a new type of hero who, while being influenced by ancient traditions, transcends them, becoming a new, modern, Western hero. This hero references cultural traditions like Judeo-Christian monotheism and the Christian image of the self-sacrificial warrior who defeats death by submitting to it, all of which seem more familiar to a modern western audience. Gone are the mysterious cultic references in which the ancient stories of Herakles were couched, along with the obscure cleansing rituals, the customs surrounding heroic kingship (such as the somewhat bizarre power Theseus seems to have to clear the ancient Herakles of guilt), the apparently senseless

violence, and the lengthy series of seemingly pointless tasks Hercules was originally required to undergo. Instead the Hercules of film is rewritten to omit the now more or less meaningless and mysterious tropes that were more significant to our cultural ancestors, the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean, and to include the values we hold today that would have seemed illogical to ancient Greek culture.

One of the sources of these values is monotheism, particularly as understood within Judeo-Christian thought. Hercules' divine parents are perfected and perfectly benevolent immortal beings, whose divinity is signified by shiny aureoles around their bodies. The moral goodness of Zeus' character as depicted in the film is another aspect of the story for which monotheism is responsible; the God of Judaism is a perfectly just and virtuous deity without mortal passion or weakness, certainly lacking the mischievous and often downright malicious tendencies of the ancient portrayals of Zeus. In the Disney universe, gods need to be good if the audience is meant to recognize them as gods.

The figure of an opposite enemy to the powers of good is also a loan from monotheism with its predilection toward cosmic dualism. Hades' evil portrayal in the film would have seemed strange to a Greek audience accustomed to very few completely villainous characters with whom they could not easily relate. The Greek conception of conflict was one of worthy opponents battling each other, each with justifications for their cause and each with a degree of rightness and nobility. The



Greeks acknowledged even the Persians, their archrivals, as just that—rivals—not necessarily a nation of demonic, inhuman boogeymen.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the fact that we see in this film good guys and bad guys locked in a battle for Olympus is more representative of our own conception of the battle between good and evil than of any Greek story.

The traditions of monotheism have influenced our perception of what divinity should be to the point that a philandering Zeus would seem appalling to family moviegoers. The best Disney can believably do with Hercules' parents is to put them in the perfect marriage; free of the strife and betrayal that marks Zeus and Hera's marriage in ancient sources. In addition to unconsciously catering to our expectations of the perfect morality of the divine, Disney also feels understandable pressure to protect children from the original stories of Zeus' adultery, which is now considered to be an immoral act in modern American culture, unworthy of a family-friendly show. The fact that our society only tends to show our young children an idyllic portrayal of life is important: this portrayal in Disney's *Hercules* shows what our societal ideal is—a moral, faithful, nuclear family full of love and support for one another. This is in stark contrast to the Greek ideal, wherein males are as fruitful as possible while the women remained faithful to their husbands, a purely biologically advantageous arrangement favoring survival and offsetting the high infant mortality rates of the ancient world, not necessarily prioritizing happy families. The fact that Hercules' birth is also thereby

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<sup>28</sup> Hdt., III.

legitimized may also be an unconscious carry-over from the former Christian practice of disenfranchising and stigmatizing illegitimate children because of the sin involved in their conception—hardly an ideal situation for a hero, especially the “noble” hero to which Aristotle refers, to be working within.<sup>29</sup>

It is not only the nature and role of the divine that is contributed to the film by Judeo-Christian monotheism, but also Hercules’ heroic code of ethics. First of all, Hercules has a gentle heart despite his vast strength, and he lacks the conquering spirit that we find in the ancient depictions of Hercules. We see instead the self-sacrificing and charitable spirit popularized by Christianity as Hercules seeks not to exhibit his strength so much as to preserve life and serve his earthly family and the people of Thebes. Finally, and most importantly, the sacrifice of self by Hercules the hero-god to save another seems to be referencing an emphatically Christian image.

Also, Hercules is chaste. In one scene after being mobbed and stripped by frenzied fan girls, he attempts to preserve his compromised modesty when Meg discovers him hiding behind a curtain (Fig. 6). He also replaces her slipped shoulder strap as she attempts to seduce from him the knowledge of his secret weakness in the next scene (Fig. 7). The Greeks likely would have scoffed at such a display of

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<sup>29</sup> Arist. *Poet.* XV

prudishness, familiar as they would have been with the story of Hercules' begetting of seventy-two children with numerous women.<sup>30</sup>

Hercules' chastity and romantic fidelity is also evident in his faithfulness toward Meg, when he chooses life with her above immortal life with the gods on Olympus at the end of the film. The Greek Herakles, by contrast, ascended to the gods upon his untimely demise and married Hebe, the goddess of youth, leaving his repudiated second wife and third wife-to-be with nary a thought.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that a modern hero must be chaste to be considered a hero. We may look at the personal lives of any number of sports icons or successful politicians whom people admire to see this. Chastity may not be necessary, but it adds to the heroism derived from Hercules' strength another dimension of heroism—self-control and purity—the concept of which we can trace back to medieval Christian hagiography, in which saints perform mighty feats and miracles not on the basis of their physical strength, but through their personal purity and moral courage.

Finally, the character of Hercules in the film has acquired several aspects of the Christian hero typified by Christ, as displayed in the scene in which he saves Meg's life and atones for both of their mistakes. His eagerness to take upon himself this task, and his strength and capability in doing so, as well as the deep spiritual significance of the task are all parallels of the Christian sacrificial god-hero, recalled, for example, in the

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<sup>30</sup> Arist. *Hist. an.* VII:6

<sup>31</sup> Soph. *Trach.*

early medieval Christian hero-poem, "The Dream of the Rood", in which the anthropomorphized cross of the crucifixion describes its experience:

/ I saw then the Lord of mankind  
 hasten with great strength / that he would climb up on me.  
 There I dared not / against the Lord's word  
 Bend or break / when I saw the  
 Corners of the earth tremble / I could  
 Kill all enemies, / nevertheless I stood fast.  
 He stripped himself then, the young hero. / This was God Almighty,  
 Strong and courageous, / he mounted the high gallows,  
 Brave in the sight of many, / when he wished to redeem mankind.  
 I trembled when the Warrior caught hold of me to climb up on me. / Even then I  
 dared not bow down to earth,  
 To fall to earth surfaces / but I had to stand fast.  
 I was raised a cross / I raised the mighty King."<sup>32</sup>

The conception of Christ as a mighty, atoning hero who mocks pain and death by his heroic indifference to them and as a warrior and victory-lord prevails in the Christian religious stories like this poetry, the imagery of which persists to modern era.

The Harrowing of Hell is another trope in these Christian heroic stories, wherein the hero, having temporarily succumbed to death, descends to the underworld and redeems the faithful warlike dead from their powerless state and brings them back to life and glory. This image is also present in the ancient mythology of Herakles' rescue of Alcestis from the underworld, but the rescue does not necessarily involve the self-sacrificial element that the Christian stories emphasize. The self-sacrificing Christian Atoner becomes a warrior against death, who robs it of its battle spoils in the form of

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<sup>32</sup> "The Dream of the Rood" 1:33-44, my translation.

souls. The Disney Hercules' martial storming of the halls of death on the back of its own guarding Cerberus, fearlessness in the face of his own demise, and eventual redemption of Meg's dead soul mirrors this martial Atoner type very well (Fig 8). In fact, the scene evokes this image much more clearly than it evokes the dejected Hercules of yore, who seeks ritual atonement through a mysterious process of anointing and sacrifice of livestock.<sup>33</sup> The transcendence of death through self-sacrifice is perhaps this hero's most innovative and important quality, surpassing even the tragic hero in emotional force for a modern, predominantly Christian or at least monotheistic audience.

### *Conclusion*

The last scene of the film shows Hercules ascending to Olympus on a cloud with Meg in his arms to the welcoming smiles of his divine parents and relatives. "Fine work, my boy!" his father gloats, "You've done it! You're a true hero." Hera continues, "You were willing to give your life to rescue this young woman." And Zeus explains, "For a true hero isn't measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart."

This statement is the message Disney seems to be trying to deliver in this film, that it is strength of character involving some form of virtue combined with self-

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<sup>33</sup> Hercules in this sense is perhaps most like the warlike Christ of the Germanic tradition, but Disney's *Hercules* is not the first cultural work to highlight similarities between the hero-son of Zeus and Christ. Bond, in the introduction of his edition of Euripides' *Herakles* makes the connection between Christ and the moment the hero steps onto the scene and is about to come to his family's rescue: "To get a notion of the atmosphere in the theatre at the original performance the student would do well to witness and share in the release of emotion experienced by the great national congregations of modern Athens at the midnight Mass on Easter Day: Χριστός ἀνέστη."

sacrifice that makes one a true hero in its interpretation of modern cultural values. This definition is different from what the Greeks thought of a hero as—a doer of deeds and a speaker of words who made a mistake, recognized it, and through ritual purification, overcame it. Critics of *Hercules* have mocked its mythological variance or its inconsistencies with respect to these classical traditions. But anyone familiar with the evolution of the myth of Hercules is aware that that are no *consistent* stories of Hercules. They all contradict and argue with one another, depending on where the story was told, and there is no 'original' authoritative account of the hero's life. Dick Caldwell, the consulting classicist on the film addressed this narrow judgment of the film in this way:

There is no true, or correct, version of Greek myth (although the Greek Ministry of Culture evidently thought so when they accused Disney Animation of creating a false version of the ancient myth in the movie Hercules). During antiquity the myths were constantly changing; in the field of drama alone, the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides all wrote versions of famous myths (Oedipus or Orestes, for example) which differed not only from the other dramatists but also from the earlier stories found in epic poetry.

So I make no claim that my version is the only true or correct one. My only claim is that I have considered all the available variants, and chosen those which seemed to me most enduring and coherent.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, the heroic power of Herakles is diminished if his attributes are not updated to suit the culture to which it is currently being presented. Herakles' strength is not physical strength at all, but his adaptability, and the process of adaptation in Disney's *Hercules* is clever and complete. Acknowledging the heroic tropes of the archetypal, Pan-Hellenic, and tragic heroes and adapting them into a more updated conception of the hero that has emotional meaning to the average movie audience of today, the film references traditions from sources meaningful to a modern audience's conception of heroism, like Neoplatonic monotheism and Christian religious hero-poetry to produce the Disney hero—the hero meant to be ours.

In short, the “real” myth of Herakles is actually an amorphous explication of the role and meaning of hero in the myth-teller's time and location and has changed accordingly. For this reason, *Hercules* should be given another chance, not as a rehashing of the classical myth, but as a story that helps us define the hero in our own culture by juxtaposing it with the hero of old. Indeed, as Zeus says, Hercules is not a hero because of his strength. If he were, the story would be more or less the same throughout its many tellings. The variety we see in this myth stems from the fact that the nature of

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<sup>34</sup> Dick Caldwell. Greece Travel, "Dick Caldwell's Greek Myths." Accessed December 13, 2013. <http://www.greecetravel.com/greekmyths/>.

heroism really is a question of what is in the heart of the hero, and changes in the heart of the hero mirror the changes in the heart of humanity.



## Appendix

Fig. 1: Hercules' mentor Phil's stature is reminiscent of his voice actor Danny DeVito's.



Figure 2: Annibale Carracci "Hercules at the Cross-Roads" (1596), National Museum of Capodimonte, Farnese Collection inventory Q365. In this painting, Carracci figures Prodicus' tale of Hercules at the crossroads, with the interesting addition of Pegasus in the top left corner.



Figure 3: "I'm an action figure!" Hercules protests. Unfortunately, fame and glory are not part of the criteria for heroism in Disney's *Hercules*.



Figure 4: The Hercules Store, not unlike the Disney Store found in American malls.



Figure 5: The shiny aspect of divinity



Figure 6: Hercules is found hiding modestly behind a curtain.



Figure 7: Meg's attempt to seduce Hercules



Figure 8: Hercules' "Harrowing of Hell" sequence, riding on the fearsome Cerberus

