Thesis Abstract

Although many viewers of the modern story of Heracles deride modern works for their divergence from the ‘authentic’ story of Hercules, in actuality, there was a great deal of variation in the ancient myths of Hercules. Works such as Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* portray Heracles very differently from the Heracles portrayed in Euripides’ *Heracles*, or Aristophanes’ *The Birds*. In addition, the modern characterization of Hercules in visual media, from Steve Reeves’ *Hercules Unchained* to the TV program *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* to Disney’s *Hercules*, seems to be more internally consistent, focusing on traits such as modesty, kindness, and heroism for the good of the people, connecting the style and characterization of the modern Hercules story to the story of Superman. As a result, not only are the ancient myths of Hercules very divided on their portrayal of the character, the modern stories are much more internally consistent.
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Introduction

I have loved stories for my entire life, and some of my favorite stories were the stories of Greek mythology. I first met these legendary characters when I watched Walt Disney’s Hercules, and I was enraptured by the idea of immortal gods and powerful heroes. As I grew up, I learned that the version of Greek mythology that Disney’s Hercules portrayed was incorrect, and that many people could not enjoy watching Disney’s Hercules, and other mythological films like it, because they hated how inaccurate the storylines of each film were to the original sources. However, as I studied more and more ancient mythologies, and read more and more primary sources on Greek mythology, I began to realize that things were not as simple as they first appeared. While the Hercules portrayed in Disney’s Hercules was a very different character than the Heracles that appeared in Sophocles’ Trachinian Women, for example, it became clear that the Heracles in Trachinian Women was completely different character than the Heracles portrayed in many other original Greek plays and sources, such as Euripides’ Heracles, and vice versa. Because of this, I intend to show in this thesis that the portrayals of Heracles in ancient versions of the Heracles myth were significantly more varied than the portrayal of the modern character of Hercules, especially in films. Many variations of the Heracles myth existed before Disney’s Hercules created its own version of the legend; indeed, there was very little internal consistency in the ancient Greek and Roman variations of the myth. I shall therefore argue that the modern myth of Hercules, as told primarily through films, literature and visual media, actually has much more internal consistency in the character of Hercules than the plays and literature of ancient Greece and Rome did.

In order to properly convey the differences between ancient and modern versions of the Heracles myth, it is first necessary to explain the origin story of the character of Heracles. This
will help me to show the differences between each ancient variation of Heracles; in addition, I will briefly discuss the origin of the Heracles myth itself, and how religious syncretism can create new characters, or modify existing ones with characteristics from other, more ancient, mythologies. Finally, to explain why I refer to Heracles and Hercules as referring to different characters, Heracles is the ancient Greek way of referring to the character, while Hercules is how the Romans referred to him, a method that has been, for the most part, borrowed completely by modern writers and audiences. Because the morals and motivations of each version of Heracles/Hercules are significantly different, it is important to refer to them both by different names.

The Antecedents of Heracles

Before I explain how each variation of Heracles is so different from each other variation, it will be necessary to discuss the overall life story of Heracles. The ancient authors and playwrights changed the character of Heracles in each variation of the legend, but the underlying events that took place during each play and text stayed the same. As a result, it will be useful to establish a timeline of the life of Heracles so that the events of each play I will cite can be locked into place, so that there is no doubt as to which part of Heracles’ life each play covers.

Before even that, however, it will first prove extremely useful to discuss the possible origins of the hero Heracles himself. As Walter Burkert discusses in his text Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual, many ancient seals in Mesopotamia, dating to approximately the 4th millennium B.C.E. to the mid-3rd, were found bearing pictures that held a great similarity to the story of Heracles. For example, “There is not only a hero overcoming bulls, lions and snakes, but also a hero beheading a seven-headed snake, just as Heracles fought the
seven-headed hydra of Lerna” (Burkert 80). Not only that, other Sumerian seals show a hero wearing a lionskin and wielding a club and bow, as Heracles was famed to do; this character on the seal seems to be identified as either Ninurta or Ningirsu. Ningirsu is invoked as a god who overcomes monsters, dragons, and dangerous natural wildlife such as lions. Ninurta, on the other hand, is the son of Enlil the Storm God, and is thus a parallel to Heracles, son of the Storm God Zeus (Burkert 80). In addition, individual elements of the life story of Heracles seem to have roots in other, Eastern countries. The birth of Heracles by a god impersonating a mortal seems congruent with Egyptian mythology, in which this was Amen’s preferred method of birthing a new pharaoh; the death of Heracles upon a pyre at the top of a mountain “has its counterpart in the yearly burning of Santas, alias Heracles, in Tarsus in Cilicia” (Burkert 82). As Burkert writes, even the name ‘Heracles’ may not be original, as “an oriental candidate has been proposed, Eragal or Nergal, the Babylonian god who sends, and may ward off, pestilence, represented with lion, club and bow” (Burkert 82). The evidence here is not overwhelming, but it does seem to suggest that even before the ancient Greek variations of Heracles existed, there were characters with Herculean traits and Herculean backstories who fulfilled his general purpose as a hero and a civilizer.

**The Biography of Heracles**

From this point onwards, much of the biography of Heracles will be presented from the perspective of Apollodorus’ *Library* and Hyginus’ *Fabulae*. Regrettably, we do not know who actually wrote these texts, since we know that although there was a famous Apollodorus of Athens, he did not write this book. Because we do not know the actual identities of the people who wrote these books, we cannot know for certain when the texts were written; however, *The Library* is commonly dated to around the 1st to 2nd century C.E., while *Fabulae* is dated to the 2nd
century C.E. Regardless of dating, we can be sure that both authors wrote in an almost unbiased manner, more suitable to a mythology textbook than to individual interpretations of the Heracles character. This is important, because one of the accepted theories for why these books were written is that they were guide-books for mythology for the people of the time who could not read the Greek versions, and who were not familiar with the oral tradition (Smith and Trzaskoma xxxi). These texts were useful sources of mythology for less educated people in ancient Greece and Rome, since near the end of the Roman Empire, the oral tradition began to die out. Thus, if one was not educated enough to read the ancient mythological texts, and one was not versed in the oral tradition, one could not understand mythology. Thus, it is useful to think of Apollodorus and Hyginus as having written almost an ancient Cliff-Notes for mythology overall, to help instruct those ignorant of the oral tradition about their mythology. Furthermore, because these texts give a thorough description of Heracles, among other mythological heroes, and because they portray only his actions, and not his motivations or his moral character, these texts are perfect for establishing a comprehensive timeline and backstory for Heracles.

The story of Heracles properly begins, according to Apollodorus, with Alcmene and Amphitryon. Amphitryon had gone to war with the Taphians, and upon the eve of his return, Zeus cast himself in the form of Amphitryon and slept with Alcmene. After Amphitryon had returned, and slept with his wife properly, she bore two sons: Heracles, the son of Zeus, and Iphicles, the son of Amphitryon. Hera, however, was infuriated by Zeus’ infidelity, and sent two serpents to destroy Heracles. However, Heracles, only eight months old, throttled the serpents to death, proving his superhuman strength. According to some sources, however, it was Amphitryon who put the serpents into the bed, so that he could see which son was his, and which son was born of the gods (Apollodorus 28).
In his youth, Heracles was taught the arts of war, music and other manly arts. According to Apollodorus, when his lyre teacher, Linos, struck him on the head, Heracles flew into a rage and killed him. After this, he was taken to trial for murder, but he was acquitted because he appealed to a law stating that a man defending himself from unjust violence was innocent.

After this, Heracles was sent to become a cattle herder, and during this time he vanquished monsters and fought in wars. During this time, he fought against the Minyans, an old enemy of the Thebans who had demanded a large amount of tribute for the past twenty years. For his victory, Heracles was given Megara, daughter of Creon, and he had three sons by her. However, Hera, maddened by Heracles’ success, sent a plague of madness down upon him. In his insanity, he threw his children, along with two sons of Iphicles, into a fire, killing them and condemning him to exile. Heracles, after being purified, went to the oracle at Delphi. The priestess there told him that he was to serve Eurystheus for twelve years, fulfilling ten labors of Eurystheus’s choosing, and that when those labors were completed, Heracles would become immortal (Apollodorus 30).

Heracles was first sent to defeat the Nemean Lion, a monster whose hide was penetrable by neither blade nor blunt force. Heracles choked it to death, and carried it back to Eurystheus. However, some versions of the myth specify that because of the beast’s impenetrability, Heracles skinned the beast after killing it, and for the rest of his adventures, wore the lionskin as both trophy and armor (Stafford 31). After this, he killed the Lernean Hydra with the help of his cousin Iolaus, though that help was ruled by Eurystheus to have invalidated the task. After killing the hydra, Apollodorus noted that Heracles dipped his arrows in its poisonous blood (Apollodorus 31). This later would prove to be his downfall.
Heracles also captured beasts such as the Ceryneian Hind and the Erymanthian Boar without killing them. Other tasks included killing or frightening away monstrous birds, rustling cattle from a demonic cattle thief, claiming the belt of the Amazon queen, reclaiming Heracles’ own cattle from a cattle-stealing monster near the future city of Rome, finding the golden apples at the edge of the world, and even subduing Kerberos, the guardian of the afterlife itself!

According to Apollodorus and other storytellers, interspersed within these tasks, Heracles had many adventures on the side. According to Stafford, for example, Heracles killed the monster Cacus after successfully killing Geryon and taking his cattle, because Cacus had stolen the cows himself (Stafford 59). According to this account, Heracles found and killed Cacus for his theft, and in doing so, inadvertently saved the early Roman people as well. In addition to this, according to Apollodorus, Heracles’s search for the Golden Apples of the Hesperides led him across the known world of the time, leading him to kill tyrants such as Antaios, son of Poseidon, and Bousiris, a king of Egypt. In addition, in his travels, Heracles also saved Prometheus from his eternal punishment at the talons of the eagle (Apollodorus 35-36).

After having finished his trials, Heracles was absolved of his guilt. However, Heracles was again guilty of murder after killing prince Iphitos, son of Eurytos, in a rage, after Eurytos has refused to give his daughter Iole to Heracles as the promised prize of an archery contest. As Apollodorus wrote, “the Delphic oracle refused to tell Heracles how to absolve himself, and Heracles stole the holy tripod in order to institute his own oracle” (Apollodorus 38). Apollo himself began to fight Heracles, and the ensuing fight had to be ended by Zeus, who put a lightning bolt between them. According to Apollodorus, Heracles was sentenced to serve for three years as a slave in compensation for his murder, and to give the ‘blood money’ to Eurytos (Apollodorus 38). Omphale, queen of Lydia, was impressed with Heracles, and bought him at
the auction. During his time, Omphale had Heracles kill many of her enemies, who had ravaged her lands since the time that her husband had died. Some versions of the myth also showed that Heracles had to dress as a woman and perform womanly tasks, while Omphale wore Heracles’ lionskin and wielded his club (Stafford 133). Other versions said that Heracles married Omphale after his time of servitude was done, and that he had a child with her (Stafford 132).

After his time of slavery ended, Heracles acquired a new wife, Deianeira, whom he saved from the river god Acheloos. While bringing her back to his home, they crossed a river guarded by the centaur Nessos, who tried to rape Deianeira as they crossed to the other side. Heracles shot Nessos with his arrows, infected by the deadly venom of the Hydra, as he had dipped his arrows into the beast’s body after he had killed it. Apollodorus notes that Nessos tricked Deineira into creating a love potion out of his blood and spilled semen, the blood now tainted with the fatal infection of the Hydra (Apollodorus 41).

Heracles still fought monsters and waged wars after his marriage, and during this time, he decided to get revenge upon Eurytos for his humiliation. He sacked Oechalia, Eurytos’ homeland, and took Iole prisoner as a slave. When Deianeira realized that Heracles was returning home with Iole, and when she understood his history regarding her, she began to fear that Heracles would abandon her for Iole. Because of this, Apollodorus writes that she soaked his shirt in the ‘love potion’ that Nessos had proscribed, not knowing that the shirt was now tainted by the Hydra’s venom (Apollodorus 41). When Heracles put the shirt on, it burned him, and when he ripped the shirt off, his flesh ripped off as well. Deianeira, in horror, committed suicide for her actions. Heracles ordered that he be burned on a pyre. As he burned, the gods of Olympus transformed him into an immortal, as the Delphic oracle has foretold, and Heracles was allowed entry into Mount Olympus itself. Apollodorus finished his account by writing that Heracles was
finally reconciled with Hera, and married the goddess Hebe, daughter of Zeus and Hera, cupbearer of the gods, signifying the final step of his transition from mortal hero to immortal god (Apollodorus 42).

**Heracles in Greek Theater**

Having chronicled the main actions taking place in the story of ancient Heracles, as collected by Apollodorus, we can now begin to analyze the characterization of Heracles. Due to the nature of the hero’s story, and the actions that the hero took within, Heracles was often characterized very differently by different playwrights. Heracles was often the subject of tragic plays, due to the many trials that Heracles was said to have faced, and the people he was said to have killed, often in a rage induced by Hera’s jealous hatred. Yet Heracles was also a favorite of comic playwrights, as his perceived flaws could be over-exaggerated and characterized for the purpose of humor. Finally, between the two genres, there are many different interpretations of the character of Heracles, which I will attempt to explain.

**The Tragic Heracles**

Heracles is, perhaps, most well-known for his characterization in tragic theater, particularly from the plays *Heracles*, written by Euripides, and *Women of Trachis* (also known as *Trachinian Women*), created by Sophocles. Interestingly, according to Stafford, “Heracles is not, in fact, a frequent hero of the tragic stage, but the works under consideration here have had a disproportionately significant influence on the development of his image” (Stafford 79). In other words, while there are actually not that many tragic plays based on the Heracles myth, these two in particular have been extremely important to understanding how the ancients viewed Heracles, and how the character of Heracles himself was developed.
Intriguingly, these two characterizations of Heracles, portrayed by Euripides and Sophocles respectively, are diametrically opposed to each other. Sophocles portrayed Heracles very negatively, characterizing Heracles as a hubristic and violent man completely overblown by his opinion of himself as a god made flesh. Euripides, responding to Sophocles and to other versions of Heracles, chose instead to portray Heracles very positively, as a man whose life was wrecked by the intrusion of violent and uncaring gods, a man who exemplifies the virtues of the goodness of humanity. The reasons for this violent clash of opinions of the characterization of Heracles will soon be apparent.

Sophocles’ Women of Trachis

The exact date that Sophocles created Women of Trachis is not known, but Stafford cites some commentators who placed the date around 450 B.C.E., early in Sophocles’ career (Stafford 80). Women of Trachis chose to present an unusual version of Heracles: that of a hubristic and arrogant man, driven mad with power by his own great deeds. The play is presented from the point of view of Deianeira, Heracles’ wife, rather than Heracles himself, and Heracles is in fact a somewhat minor character, whose presence is felt throughout the play, but who only actually appears in two scenes at the end. Nevertheless, Heracles is presented as at best, morally ambiguous, and at worst, outright monstrous.

From the very beginning of Women of Trachis, Deianeira is explicitly set up to be the main character of the play. Deianeira’s monologue from the beginning of the play makes it clear that Heracles is never home to see her of her son Hyllas; Deianeira clearly shows the suffering that Heracles’ actions have put her through, saying, “For since he killed the mighty Iphitus we have been uprooted and have lived here in Trachis with a foreign friend, but where he is no one
knows; except that when he went away he afflicted me with sharp pains here” (Sophocles 135). Soon after this monologue, Heracles’ messenger Lichas comes, bearing news of Heracles, reporting to Deianeira that Heracles is coming home bearing slaves captured from Oichalia, the once-home of Iphitus and his father Eurytus, having sacked the city as revenge for his time of slavery to Omphale.

However, another messenger, this time from the city square, comes to tell Deianeira the whole truth, fragmenting Lichas’ lies. Heracles, he says, sacked the city not as revenge, but out of lust instead. The messenger exclaims to her, “it was Eros alone among the gods that bewitched him into this deed of arms, not the doings among the Lydians or his servitude under Omphale or Iphitus, hurled to his death” (Sophocles 165). Lust for Iole, daughter of Eurytos, was the cause of Heracles killing Iphitus and, now, sacking Oichalia. This tale, truly told inside of the story of the play, paints Heracles in a decidedly less noble light, showing that his actions were based on lust, not higher motivations, and that he cares little to nothing for Deianeira, as he fully intend to bring Iole, now a sex slave, into Deianeira’s house itself to be his mistress. Deianeira, out of fear for her (now) failing relationship with Heracles, uses the poison advertised by Nessos as a love potion, to try to win Heracles back from his lust. However, the poison begins to kill Heracles instead, and Deianeira, in horror over what she has done, commits suicide, killing herself on the marriage bed itself, a symbol of the dead relationship between Heracles and herself.

By the end of the play, when Heracles finally appears, his entire speech is dedicated to himself, showing how deeply his arrogance has permeated through his character. He notices Hyllas, his own son, only as a symbol of his own greatness, and not as his own person; Heracles’ monologue constantly asks for pity, begging “Come, my son, bring yourself to do it! Pity me, pitiable in many ways, I whom am crying out…” (Sophocles 229). In addition to this, Heracles
constantly quotes his own great deeds in his monologue, but gives no thought to the other characters, barely acknowledging Hyllas as a person separate from the identity as his son, and showing utter rage at Deianeira. Even after Heracles learns that Deianeira was innocent of malice, and that her crime was an unknowing one, Heracles never mentions her again; to him, her existence was only relevant when it concerned his own. Thus, Heracles in this play is characterized by his violent and lustful nature, bringing about his own downfall through his unquenchable lust for Iole, winning her not through his own virtue, but rather through war and violence, and, perhaps most of all, showing the disconnect between him, his fellow man, and even his own family.

Euripides, on the other hand, chose to portray almost the polar opposite Heracles compared to the Heracles shown in *Women of Trachis*. According to Stafford, Euripides’ *Heracles* was most probably produced some time between 425 and 419 B.C.E. Euripides, reacting to the versions of Heracles he had seen in *Women of Trachis*, as well as other version of the Heracles myth, portrayed his ideal of Heracles very differently from the self-centered and amoral Heracles found in Sophocles’ play.

**Euripides’ Heracles**

Euripides, when dramatizing Heracles, was faced with a tough choice: on one hand, he could portray Heracles as a living god, or one nearly on par with the immortals. On the other hand, he could portray the more human side of Heracles rather than the divine side. According to G. Karl Galinski, author of *The Herakles Theme*, this flew in the face of the traditional religious and ethical moral of the Heracles myth: that human aspirations and trials would be rewarded in the end by godlike rewards, and perhaps even divinity itself (Galinski 57). Instead of portraying
this traditional and stereotypical version of the Heracles myth, however, Euripides chose to focus on the intrinsically human aspect of Heracles himself, which Euripides believed to be “something purely internal and human and therefore vastly more enduring and valuable” (Galinski 57).

Euripides’ play *Heracles* therefore changes some of the timeline around, in order to better exemplify the themes that he is writing about. For example, although the play centers around Heracles’ killing of his wife and children, Heracles has, in this timeline, actually finished the Twelve Labors already, in order to win back his father’s homeland in an act of filial piety. Galinski explains that the reason for this switch is to exemplify Heracles’ success and greatness from the start, as well as the purity of Heracles’ motives for taking on the Twelve Labors, as compared to the hell which the play will put him through (Galinski 58). In addition, a new character is created for the play: Lycus, a tyrant persecuting the family of Heracles, serving to underscore the kindness and love that Heracles shows for his family in the first act.

In the play itself, Heracles is portrayed as a man whose trials have made him wise, and opened his eyes to the truly important things in the world. When Amphitrion asks Heracles why he has not, at the time of the play, brought back Kerberos to Eurystheus, so that he may be free of the Labors, Heracles replies that he came first to his family, to soothe their worries and help end their troubles. In addition, Heracles remarks that he spent even more time in the Underworld than necessary to his quest, because he wanted to free his friend Theseus (Euripides 618-21).

These lines of dialogue set up the main themes of the play, the bonds of family and friendship, and help to set up Euripides’ characterization of Heracles as an explicitly human hero, with concerns more entrenched in the safety and well-being of his friends and loved ones than
any divine reward. Euripides’ Heracles clearly loves his children completely, over any material gain: Heracles remarks to his father that “All mortals are equal: they love their children, both superior mortals and those of no account. They differ in money: some have it, others don’t; but everyone loves his children” (Euripides 633-36). These lines show that Heracles is a loving father, clearly devoted to his family.

The goodness of Heracles, according to Euripides, is so great that even the gods sent by Hera to drive him into insanity are loath to do so. Lyssa, goddess of madness, tells her superior, the messenger goddess Iris, that “This man, whose house you send me against, is not undistinguished either on earth or among the gods. Taming the desolate land and savage seas, he alone restored the honors of the gods which fell at the hands of impious men. And so I do not advise you to plot great evils” (Euripides 849-54). As you can see, Lyssa condemns Heracles to madness, and his wife and children to death, only in duress, and her speech in general is used to show the caprice and sociopathic qualities of the gods, as compared to the noble, human and humane Heracles. Because of this characterization, Euripides places a great focus on Heracles’ humanity as a positive characteristic, showing his kind and noble character as a foil to the uncaring attitudes of the gods. In this way, Euripides challenges the notion of Heracles’ divinity as a great gift, showing the supposedly ‘great and noble’ gods as being apathetic and generally unworthy of praise.

The Heracles portrayed in Euripides’ Heracles is, in many ways, a foil to the Heracles portrayed in Women of Trachis. Sophocles’ Heracles is defined by his self-centered nature, showing little to no respect for his family and friends. Euripides’ Heracles, on the other hand, is defined by his selfless nature, exuding love for his family and friends with every speech. This Heracles is clearly cut of a much different cloth than Sophocles’ Heracles: unlike the Heracles in
Women of Trachis, who cares only for his own personal pleasures, to the expense of his family, Euripides’ Heracles cares so much for his family that he came to them to help them rather than finally completing his final Labor. Indeed, this Heracles is even more the family man, as he underwent the Labors out of filial piety, rather than as penance for murder.

The two version of Heracles are foils of each other not only in characterization, but also in allegorical meaning. The overall backstory declares that Heracles is half god, half mortal. However, the two plays use that characteristic very differently. In Women of Trachis, Heracles’ actions, motivated by lust and rage and hatred, not by noble ideals, are the cause of his downfall; he has given in to his appetites, the near-purely negative side of the human condition. As a result, he is brought down from his possible godhood by his flawed human side. Euripides plays this trope exactly the opposite way: Heracles is still brought low, but this time, it is his godhood that brings him low, due to the jealousy and cruelty of Hera. In Heracles, the gods themselves are shown to be petty and spiteful, essentially ruining Heracles’ life on a whim. Meanwhile, through all of this, it is Heracles’ own love of his family and friends, an intrinsically human condition, that ultimately shows him to be a great human being, not simply a great hero. These two variations of Heracles, diametrically opposed to one another, should be ample proof that there was a great deal of variation between ancient versions of the Heracles myth.

The Comic Heracles

While Heracles was a relatively unpopular topic for tragic theater, the same could not be said for comic plays. According to Galinski, “The number of serious dramas in which he has a part is a small trickle compared to the torrent of satyr plays, farces, and comedies in which Herakles kept entertaining his audiences, and their delight with him does not seem to have
known a saturation point” (Galinski 81). Stafford sheds a little more light onto this topic: according to M. S. Silk, in his 1985 essay ‘Heracles and Greek Tragedy,’ “Herakles is generally avoided as a subject for tragedy because of his inherently disturbing character, whereas disturbance is grist to comedy’s mill” (qtd. In Stafford 105). In these plays, Heracles’ role was most frequently that of the glutton, desiring food, wine and sex in ridiculous quantities. In addition, he was often portrayed with a theme of over-the-top violence, and sometimes took on the role of the idiot-hero. Unfortunately, however, according to Stafford, only very few few works dedicated to the comedic Heracles survive; indeed, “the only comedies that survive in more than fragmentary form…are eleven plays by Aristophanes, no more than a quarter of his total output” (Stafford 105-6). Because of this, while it would have been ideal to portray a wide variety of comedic works for analysis, I am able only to provide two of Aristophanes’ works.

The Birds

Nowhere else is the comedic gluttony of Heracles portrayed more hilariously than in Aristophenes’ *The Birds*, created in 414 B.C.E. *Birds* is essentially a political satire of the Athenian republic, the play being a fantasy in which the ridiculous becomes the reality. The story revolves around two Athenians, Peisetaerus and Euelpides, who have left the city out of disgust for its politics, wishing instead to found their own republic. They quickly ally with Tereus, king of the birds, and create a republic floating in the sky called Cloud-Cuckoo-Land to rule over. While doing so, they thumb their noses at the gods, at other mortals, and everything in between.

Heracles is introduced late in the play, as one member of a peace embassy sent from the gods to the birds. At this point, the mortals have begun sacrificing to the birds, rather than to the gods, and the gods are starving, so they need the birds to endorse them once more. The three
gods chosen to meet with the birds are Poseidon, Heracles, and one of the Triballian gods, a representative on the part of the barbarian deities.

Instantly, Heracles is shown as a bully and a glutton. His first lines in the play cement his character: when asked by Poseidon what should be done first in the peace meeting, Heracles replies, “You’ve heard my opinion: I want to choke this guy to death, whoever he may be, that’s blockaded the gods” (Aristophanes 1574-76). However, as soon as Heracles sees that Peisetaerus is cooking meat, and that he would welcome Heracles at his table after the peace conference, Heracles is instantly ready to agree with him, just to end the meeting and start the feast. Later, when it comes time to vote on the issue, it takes Peisetaerus only a single call to the kitchen to get Heracles to agree with him in full. Poseidon, as expected, takes the side of the gods, leaving the Triballian god as the tie-breaking vote. Heracles, when asking the Triballian god for his vote, pointedly asks “Hey Triballian, how would you like some real pain,” to which the Triballian god timidly responds, “No hittum hide wit bat” (Aristophanes 1627-28). The play ends with Peisetaerus and his bird allies flying to Olympus to claim Zeus’s power, Poseidon looking on in disgust, Heracles eagerly awaiting his feast, and the audience howling with laughter.

Heracles, as portrayed in *The Birds*, seems like a truly malicious fellow; however, according to Galinski, the humor comes from all of the exaggeration. In the play, “Herakles is a monstrous glutton, bully and nitwit, but it is just because of this exaggeration that he comes off as good-natured rather than terrifying” (Galinski 88). Heracles’ role in *The Birds* is so exaggerated and outlandish that his threats of violence cannot be seen as anything other than cartoonish and ridiculous. The role of this violence is proven to be even more ridiculous by the fact that Heracles’ main intended recipient, the Triballian, is a god, and thus a higher status than Heracles himself, being merely half-god. The Triballian is terrified of Heracles, while
Peisetaerus, who is still, ultimately, very mortal, shows no fear of Heracles whatsoever, even whilst brazenly trying to manipulate him. Perhaps because of this, the threats that Heracles makes throughout his segment feel more in line with the absurd, cartoon violence inherent in *The Looney Tunes* or *Tom and Jerry* than any kind of real, threatening behavior. As these programs have proven, that same kind of over-the-top, downright silly violence has proven to be just as popular now as it was in ancient times.

Another means for the ancients to derive comedy from the character of Heracles was not through Heracles directly, but rather through his rip-off. This character, the Sham Heracles, was literally a comic rip-off of Heracles whose garish attire, brazen posturing and timid personality stood as a stark, ridiculous contrast to the awe-inspiring might of the true hero. Galinski relates that the characterization of the Sham Heracles was closely related to the concept of kings and heroes identifying as Heracles (or descendants of him); in other words, “What was good for the kings was good enough for that perennial stock character, the braggart soldier” (Galinski 94). Galinski mentions here Menander’s *Sham Heracles*, a New Comedy play from the Hellenic age in which the main character came on “not even with a solid club like Herakles’, but with a hollow, fake club which, naturally, was much lighter” (Galinski 94). The Sham Heracles is, perhaps, best known from Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, debuting in 405 B.C.E.

*The Frogs*

*Frogs*, like *Birds*, is not actually about Heracles, but it prominently features both the hero himself, and the sham character trying (and spectacularly failing) to portray him. The main plot is the quest of Dionysus and his slave Xanthias to reclaim Euripides from the Underworld, due to the lack of decent living playwrights. To do this, however, Dionysus has dressed himself up as
Heracles, to intimidate the guards of the Underworld, and has gone to ask the real Heracles for help in doing so. The plot is a parody that evokes Heracles’ journey to the Underworld to capture Cerberus, which according to Stafford, would have Heracles “take Kerberos either by force or aided by a friendly Persephone” (Stafford 108). Dionysus’ decision to masquerade as Heracles suggests that “the assumption inherent in Dionysos’ choice of disguise is that Herakles would be received favorably a second time round, suggesting the ‘friendly’ version;” however, as we shall see, things do not go nearly so easily for Dionysus as he would have hoped (Stafford 108).

Even the written descriptions in the play mock Dionysus, saying “Enter HERACLES. He too wears a lionskin, and carries a club—though with more grace than the effeminate DIONYSUS” (Aristophanes mid-35). This would have had to be portrayed through acting in an actual play, but the point still comes across: that the real Heracles looks regal in his attire, while Dionysus simply looks like an idiot. This distinction is noted by Heracles himself: upon first sight of Dionysus, Heracles bursts into laughter, exclaiming “So help me, I can’t stop myself from laughing. I’m biting my lip, but it makes no difference…No, this is too much! I’m hysterical! Look at the lionskin on the yellow tunic! What’s the idea? How does the club go together with the old soft shoe? Where on earth are you off to?” (Aristophanes 42-43, 45-48). Galinski notes that this role, which the true Heracles plays here, is the most favored role any comedic protagonist can aspire to – the “mocker of the pretensions of others” (Galinski 89). It is Heracles’ job to lead the audience in making fun of Dionysus’ false bravado and ridiculous attire. Heracles eventually does let Dionysus in on the secret to entering the Underworld, but of course, Dionysus is a fake Heracles, and throughout the play he can never do more than squeak in fear, a notion made all the more ridiculous by his otherwise heroic attire.
Dionysus’ attitude does not improve once the pair reach the Underworld. When Xanthias mentions that they have reached an area of Hades crawling with monsters, Dionysus boasts that Heracles exaggerated the danger, and that he would love to fight a monster. When Xanthias pretends to see one, on the other hand, Dionysus completely changes his tune, shrieking “Eek! Where is it,” and cowering behind his slave (Aristophanes 277-88). Afterwards, the two are met by Aeacus, gate-keeper of the Underworld. Unfortunately for Dionysus, however, Aeacus does not go by the ‘friendly’ version of the myth, and instead he shouts at ‘Heracles,’ “You stinking rotten pestilential skunk, you’re the one who ran off with our watchdog Cerberus, grabbed him by the throat, picked him up and bolted when I was his keeper! Now I’ve got you where I want you” (Aristophanes 465-77).

After being thoroughly cussed out, Dionysus flees in terror, further embarrassing himself. Dionysus decides that he isn’t cut out for being the heroic Heracles; rather, he forces Xanthias his slave into the costume instead. But no sooner does that happen than Persephone’s servant calls sweetly, “Oh Heracles honey, you’re here! Come inside!” (Aristophanes 503-7). Xanthias, now dressed in the guise of Heracles, is promised a massive feast, excellent wine, and prodigious sex by Persephone’s servant, all while Dionysus looks on in rage. But as soon as Dionysus snatches back the Heracles costume, intent on getting the heroic treatment he feels that he deserves, he is confronted by yet more angry people, this time in the form of two innkeepers who berate him for eating without paying. Dionysus, in terror, once again brings dishonor to himself and to the visage that he wears, and he takes off the disguise for the final time. The play ends with what can only be described as an ‘ancient Greek Rap Battle,’ in which Euripides and Aeschylus battle with tragic verses for the right to return to life. Amusingly, Dionysus, who ends
up the judge of the contest, chooses Aeschylus, and the play ends with Euripides cursing his would-be savior as Dionysus and Aeschylus leave the Underworld.

The humor inherent in this play comes mainly from the disparity between the real, godly Heracles and Dionysus, the cowardly mock-Heracles. It is apparent that the Heracles portrayed in *The Frogs* is of much the same disposition as the Heracles in *The Birds*: according to Aeacus and the two innkeepers, Heracles did a lot of harm to the denizens of the Underworld on his last visit. However, despite his bad attitude, he was still Heracles the mighty; he still had his incredible strength and fearsome power. According to the first innkeeper, “As soon as I so much as mentioned paying, He looked at me so fierce, and gave a bellow—And drew his sword; I thought he was going mad! And we were terrified and ran away and hid behind the counter, and he ran off and took the carpet with him!” (Aristophanes 561-8). Clearly, from the antics of the timid Dionysus, however, he may have walked the walk, and talked the talk, but he could not back up a single word of his boasting with real power. Ironically, Dionysus is himself a god, and should thus have had more than enough power and authority to stop anyone from threatening him. As a result, the humor comes not from the actions of Heracles, but rather from his reputation; the consensus, as shown by all of the characters above, is that Heracles the god is powerful and terrifying beyond compare, but that Dionysus (‘Heracles’ the fake) is pathetic and hilarious.

**The Roman Hercules**

While not as prolific as the Greek Heracles tradition, the Romans had their own robust and important tradition of worshipping Heracles, changed to Hercules on account of the differences between Latin and Greek. Unlike the Greeks, for whom Heracles was a significant
theatrical character with many different interpretations in addition to his other incarnations, the Romans primarily worshipped Hercules as a hero-god. His role in Roman mythology was primarily as a protector god; however, ironically, Hercules was not always cognizant of who he was saving when he did so.

The prime example of this is the story of Hercules against Cacus, a cow-stealing monster who terrorized the early Roman people, before the city of Rome had even been built. Virgil, in his epic poem *The Aeneid*, written between 29 and 19 B.C.E., describes Cacus as a half-human hybrid monster whose father was Vulcan, the Roman god of smiths appropriated from the Greek god Hephaestus, for whose home, located within the local hills, “the ground was always steaming with fresh blood and nailed to his high and mighty doors, men’s faces dangled, sickening, rotting, and bled white” (Virgil 227-9). Hercules, described as ‘that greatest avenger,’ was in the area just upon circumstance, as he was returning home from having killed Geryon and recaptured his cattle. Cacus stole Hercules’ cows, but when he heard one of the cows low from within Cacus’ hold, Hercules followed the call and made to enter Cacus’ lair in a rage. Evander, the king recounting the story, recalls that “that was the first we’d seen of Cacus afraid, his eyes aswirl with terror—off to his cave he flees, swifter than any eastwind, yes, his feet were winged with fear” (Virgil 257-9). Cacus hid inside of his lair within the hills, but to no avail: Hercules ripped the tops of the hills themselves off, and descended into Cacus’ lair, killing him by ripping out his eyes, then strangling him to death.

After the story, King Evander and his people, joined with Aeneas and his Trojans, all performed a ritual to Hercules, proclaiming all of the great deeds that he did. However, notably within the context of the story, Hercules was never said to have vanquished Cacus in order to help the early Roman people. It was fortunate that he killed Cacus, because doing so did a great
service to the early Romans, but within the context of the story, that was never Hercules’
intention. Hercules cared about getting his cattle back, and finishing his Labor. However,
Hercules’ heroic deeds, unintentional though they were, played a large part in the salvation of the
early Roman people. This theme, of Hercules the unintentional savior, would later come to be
developed further into the idea of Hercules as the intentional, heroic savior.

**Post-Classical Hercules: From Church Fathers to Le Fevre**

All of these interpretations of the story of Hercules made sense in the context of the
ancient world. However, as time moved on, and as Christianity became the dominant religion in
the European continent, the depictions of Hercules seen above became less and less popular. At
first, the Christian impression of the character of Hercules was profoundly negative, citing his
immoral actions as proof that Hercules was the opposite of Christ-like. In time, however, public
opinion would largely shift towards portraying Hercules as a noble knight in service to Christ, or
even an ancient comparative equivalent to Christ Himself, thereby laying the foundations for the
characterization of Hercules most often portrayed in modern works.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hercules’ biggest detractors in the early Middle Ages were the
Church fathers, who denounced Hercules, and the Olympian pantheon on the whole, as being a
godless and evil creation of the devil. Lactanius, an early Church scholar who lived from the
mid-3rd century to the early 4th century, linked Hercules not necessarily with Satan, but rather
with simplicity and immoral conduct in general. Lactantius writes about Hercules, “What
divinity could there have been in him, who, enslaved to his own vices, against all laws, treated
with infamy, disgrace, and outrage, both males and females…is it so magnificent if he overcame
a lion and a boar…These are the deeds of a brave and heroic man, but still a man…But to
conquer the mind and to restrain anger, is the part of the bravest man; and these things he never did or could do…” (Lactantius 9). Here, Lactantius acknowledges Hercules’ great physical deeds, but writes that while Hercules may be a strong, powerful man, he lacks the intrinsic spiritual goodness to be worthy of any Christian notion of divinity or salvation, as referenced by the “debaucheries, lusts and adulteries” by which he structured his life (Lactantius 9; Galinski 189).

Tertullian, another Church father who lived from the mid-2nd century to early 3rd century, took a similarly biting view of the character of Hercules, this time focusing on his sexual morals. Referencing Hercules’ sexually indeterminate relationship with Omphale in his book On the Pallium, Tertullian sneered, “So much was secret Lydia at liberty that Herakles was prostituted in Omphale and Omphale in Herakles” (Tertullian, Chapter 4).

An understandable reason for why the early Church fathers felt so strongly against the character of Hercules lay in the character’s origins. While Hercules was unacceptable at first simply due to his status as a pagan deity, the origin story of Hercules, coupled with the deeds that storytellers said that Hercules accomplished, appeared to reveal Hercules as a direct pagan rival to Christ; in other words, an almost-literary Anti-Christ (Galinski 189). Hercules was a man who, through strength and violence, became a god; Jesus, on the other hand, was a God who, through love and mercy, became a man. One killed to satisfy his lusts, and performed good deeds only as a penance for his evil ones. The other performed miracles out of mercy and kindness, and accepted his own death in the place of the death and damnation of his fellow man. From this perspective, it is clear how Hercules could seem to be the enemy of all things Christian.

In the mid-fifteenth century, however, Hercules began to be portrayed not as a pagan Anti-Christ, but rather as a contemporary hero, sharing the physical strength of the ancient hero, but with the chivalry and intellectual fortitude of a great Christian man. Raoul Le Fevre, a
popular French writer of the time, rewrote the character of Hercules as a contemporary knight, descended from the court of Burgundy, whom he explained as counting the ancient Hercules as their direct ancestors. Far from being a godless heathen, as the early Church scholars characterized Hercules, Le Fevre’s Hercules was brought up to be a medieval knight, with all of the chivalry and Christian morality that the ideal, heroic knight was meant to possess.

To ensure that his readers understood Hercules in the context of a heroic knight, not a heathen strongman, Le Fevre changed elements of the Hercules myth to better suit the contemporary times, and to better portray Hercules as the embodiment of Christian virtue. For example, Hercules meets Megara, his future wife, not as a battle prize from a king, but rather as a maiden that he courts in traditional knightly fashion. Achelous, known to be a river god in the ancient stories, has been translated into being a malevolent knight whom Hercules besieges, his shape-shifting being reduced to the level of allegory. Finally, Hercules’ killing of his wife is changed from the context of a plague of madness to that of Christian ethics: rather than being bewitched by the gods, Hercules is instead bewitched by accusations that Megara is an adulteress (Galinski 192).

In addition, Le Fevre makes sure to address his Hercules’ intellectual concerns. Le Fevre portrays Hercules’ quest to meet Atlas not as a quest for golden apples, but rather as a quest for knowledge. Atlas, restyled as the king If Libya, is in this story known most for his great library. In his quest for knowledge, Le Fevre’s Hercules was referred to as an intellectual prodigy, and Le Fevre cleverly tied Hercules’ new-found intellectualism into his heroism, linking brains with brawn, allowing him to conquer the Lernean Hydra, whom in Le Fevre’s tale fought Hercules not simply with claws and talons, but also with riddle-like philosophy, and that Hercules could only have been victorious due to his mastery of science and enlightenment (Galinski 193).
This post-classical period begins to show the metamorphosis of the ancient ideas of Hercules into the modern idea of Hercules. The beginning of this period is typified by a distrust of Hercules, due to his ancestry as a pagan divinity, and his symbolic importance being the deification of personal strength, selfishness, and immorality. However, as time progressed, the idea of Hercules metamorphosed from that of the selfish, immoral pagan divinity into the new form of a dedicated Christian knight, granted his superhuman strength for the purpose of exalting Christ and serving God. The perceived immorality of the ancient versions of Hercules was transmuted into a desire for personal betterment and service to the community. In essence, this metamorphosis shows the character of Hercules rejecting his selfish, decadent past and embracing his selfless, Christ-like future; a future which, as we will soon see in the modern depictions of Hercules, will eventually come to pass.

**The Modern Hercules**

In many ways, it could be said that our time, the modern era, is the final stage of the metamorphosis in the nature of what it means to be a ‘hero.’ This idea, began in ancient times as an unstoppable force of nature which turned aside monsters and men alike, began to grow during the Middle Ages and Renaissance period into a new kind of ‘hero,’ one who embodied the virtues of the community over the power of the self. Here, in the modern time, we see the completion of this metamorphosis; our heroes are virtuous community leaders who most embody the kinds of moral values that we aspire to. They bear not simply the power to do what they will, but also the weight of the responsibility to use their power in the right ways, for the right reasons. As Peter Parker’s uncle told him, “with great power comes great responsibility” (Spider-Man 0:34).
Given this change in the modern ideal of the hero, it should come as no surprise that the character of Hercules has shifted into a form more akin to what modern audiences have come to expect out of a hero. The ancient idea of Heracles, the powerful half-divine warrior bound by no one and nothing, not even morality, has mostly dispersed; the Medieval and Renaissance myth of Hercules, that of the heroic knight who fights in the name of justice and righteousness, has matured into the realization of that ideal. Hercules has left the classical ideal of the hero, and become a beacon unto the modern ideal of the hero.

**Hercules the Superhero**

Perhaps the most influential catalyst of the realization of the ‘new’ heroic Hercules was the creation of that timeless modern myth, the superhero. The superhero archetype perfectly characterizes the modern ideal of the hero: with few exceptions (in the early days of superheroes, at least), superheroes were beings with power much greater than regular people, who swore to use that power to defend the helpless and bring justice to the community. The first superhero, and perhaps the most iconic of them all, even now, was Superman. According to Neil Harris, author of the article *Who Owns Our Myths?*, Jerry Siegel, original author of Superman, first thought of his character ‘in a vision’ one summer night. This vision, according to Harris, was of “a dual-identity human avenger, simultaneously a mild-mannered newspaper reporter and a cape-powered, tights-wearing, extraterrestrial being to be known simply as Superman” (Harris 243). ‘Born’ in the late 1930s and popularized in the 1940s, we can already see, even from this bare glance at the original idea of Superman, the most important qualities that the modern ideal of the hero would come to encompass: Superman is incredibly powerful, with origins beyond that of a simple human. However, and most importantly, Superman chose to be primarily a newspaper reporter, and to only reveal his awesome, superhuman might in service to his family, his friends,
and his community. This choice, the choice between simple humanity and extraordinary power, between the normal life and the life of a demigod, between the warmth of belonging to a community versus the loneliness of carrying immense power (and responsibility) alone, has come to define the modern ideal of the superhero. And, in the same ways, it has come to define the modern myth of Hercules.

Already, Hercules was tied to the creation of the Superman. According to Jerry Spiegel himself, Superman was “a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one” (Harris 245). Hercules was not only an inspiration for Superman, but also a mold for the modern superhero archetype, one which had only to be changed slightly to be suitable for the modern audience. According to Harris, “Hercules or Herakles was contemptuously labeled clumsy and muscle-bound by fifth-century Greeks, but he earned the titles Defender against Evil, Tamer of Beasts and Criminals. These labels could surely be applied to Superman as well” (Harris 245). In this way, Superman became tied to the idea of the demi-god, the protector of the innocent, the heroic savior, and the warrior who fights against criminals and monsters. Indeed, the author Slater Brown described Superman as “‘a Hero God…a protective deity,’ fulfilling popular desires for a more primitive religion” (Brown 301). These labels were said to have come from Hercules, and to have been applied to the newly-emerging character of Superman. Interestingly, these labels and characterizations, strengthened by their association with the now-famous Superman, re-attached themselves to the character of Hercules. His legend, only now beginning to be integrated once more into the popular imagination, had been profoundly influenced by the modern myth of the Superman. As I shall show, this new, modern Hercules, both the predecessor and descendant of Superman, became, in essence, another legendary superhero.
**Steve Reeves Is Hercules**

The shift towards this new Hercules really began during the 1950s, with the creation of the genre of film that would later be dubbed ‘pepla.’ These *pepla*, or ‘sword-and-sandal’ films, featured modern retellings of ancient Greek and Roman legends with muscle-bound strongmen in the lead roles. As Maria Wyke, author of *Herculean Muscle!*, puts it, “the films endowed the classical heroes such as Hercules with the comic strip qualities of a Superman” (Wyke 64). The first of these *pepla*, which popularized the genre for seven years, was Pietro Francisci’s *Le Fatiche de Ercole* (in English, simply called *Hercules*).

The plot of *Hercules* is simple and formulaic, but well-adapted to pleasing audiences. In essence, Hercules stars in the leading role of the story of Jason and the Argonauts. In the film, Hercules rescues Iole, princess of ‘Jolco,’ falls in love with her, and wishes to marry her. However, Iole’s father, secretly a usurper who became king by murdering the previous ruler, has learned that the true heir to the throne, Jason, has returned to the city. While this is happening, Iphitus, the king’s arrogant son, is killed by the legendary Nemean Lion, which Hercules kills afterwards. Jason is arrested, and charged to find the missing Golden Fleece, symbol of the king, in order to prove his worth. Hercules, as penance for his part in the death of Iphitus (unjust though the accusation is), agrees to help Jason find the Golden Fleece. After many adventures, in which Hercules saves the Argonauts from certain destruction, they retrieve the Fleece. However, the king of Jolco ambushes the heroes on their journey home, imprisoning them in the dungeons. In the finale, Hercules shatters the chains holding him down, defeats the villain’s army by toppling the palace walls upon them, and saves the day. Hercules and Iole are reunited, and Jason, the rightful king, marries them. The film ends with the new couple boarding a ship destined for their next great adventure.
The plot, though formulaic, firmly establishes Hercules as the epitome of the modern hero. At the end of the film’s first third, Hercules is blamed for the death of Iphitus, and he goes to meet Sybil, the oracle, to ask what is to be done. This scene characterizes Hercules’ humanity and emotions over the simplistic superiority of godhood: Hercules begs Sybil, “I can’t stand being superior! Let me experience the real things—love, or hate.” When Sybil cautions him that those are mortal states, beneath immortal demigods such as Hercules, he passionately exclaims “If it’s my immortality making me unhappy, then I’ll do without it!” (Hercules 0:36). This exchange ties the film’s Hercules to Superman: like Superman, Hercules grew up with power that no mortal could match, but rather than exulting in his own strength, Hercules wants nothing more than to experience the simply joys of an ordinary life. As Wyke writes of Hercules, “In at least this respect he becomes an Everyman, even if one of epic proportions” (Wyke 64). In essence, just as Superman lives and works as a reporter, only donning the cape when necessary, so too does this Hercules want to experience the simple, normal life, donning the ‘hero’s cape’ only when absolutely necessary.

In addition, the film’s Hercules is claimed as ancient Greece’s champion of Justice; the Superman of the ancient Greek common people, so to speak. The reason that Hercules and Iphitus leave Jolco to find the Nemean Lion at all is because of Hercules’ compassion for the common people. When Hercules hears the fearful cries of the townspeople about the vicious lion, and sees the remains of those that the lion has already killed, he races away in his chariot to confront the monster, even as Iole runs behind the chariot, begging him not to waste his life (Hercules 0:28-29). Hercules would have gone alone to face the beast, and saved the city of Jolco. Not only that, Iphitus does not leave Jolco to help Hercules, but rather to taunt him, as he perceived that Hercules humiliated him during a training session. Because of Iphitus’ foolish and
vindictive actions, the Nemean Lion ambushes him and Hercules, and gores Iphitus to death before Hercules could save him, landing Hercules in the trouble that defines the rest of his adventures throughout the film.

_Hercules_ was extremely successful, and was followed by a sequel, dealing with the adventures of the newly-married Hercules and Iole. This film follows the conventions of the first, placing Hercules and Iole in the middle of the play _Seven Against Thebes_, while mixing in a variation of the story of Omphale from the ancient Heracles mythology. Here, Hercules is asked to intervene in the power-struggle between Polynices and Eteocles, the two incumbent kings of Thebes. While doing so, however, Hercules is tricked into losing his memory, and is captured by Queen Omphale of Lydia, in this film bearing a heavy reminiscence to the sorceress Circe from Homer’s _Odyssey_. Omphale has bewitched Hercules’ mind, and plans to kill him and embalm his remains as a statue, as she did with her previous lovers. Thus, it is up to Hercules’ friend and protégé Ulysses (later to become famous in _The Iliad_ and _The Odyssey_) to restore Hercules’ mind so that he can rescue Iole from the hate-crazed Eteocles and save the day once again.

One theme in particular, the modern theme of true love, is played up particularly in this sequel to _Hercules_. The first film legitimized Hercules’ relationship with Iole by removing all other relationships from Hercules, due to his status as an immortal. In _Hercules_, Iole plays the role of Lois Lane, to Hercules’ Superman. Thus, his relationship with Iole was considered true love, rather than simply being an overwhelming desire for extra-marital sex, as Sophocles characterized it in _Women of Trachis_. In _Hercules Unchained_, Hercules’ relationship with Omphale, rather than being another extra-marital tryst, as some ancient sources portrayed it as, is instead characterized by lies and manipulation. Hercules unknowingly drinks from the Waters of Forgetfulness, which erases his memory of all events previously: his name, his personality, his
moral code, his friends, and even his love for Iole (*Hercules Unchained* 0:26-27). He is taken by Omphale, who, taking advantage of Hercules’ mindless state, slyly questions Hercules, “Do you want me to believe that you can’t remember, that you’re the king of this land, that you’re my husband?” (*Hercules Unchained* 0:36). By influencing Hercules to believe that they were husband and wife, and by continually dosing Hercules with more Water of Forgetfulness to reinforce the illusion, Omphale keeps Hercules from remembering his love. Thus, Omphale is characterized here as an evil queen, and her relationship with Hercules is only a willing one while Hercules is still drugged. As a result, when Ulysses, who followed Hercules in order to save him, continually knocks the Water of Forgetfulness out of Hercules’ goblet, and tells him about who he really is, Hercules is able to finally recover his memory (*Hercules Unchained* 0:39, 0:48). When his memories return, Hercules escapes from Omphale’s palace, single-handedly defeating Omphale’s guards in order to return to Iole, his one, true love. Thus, rather than presenting Hercules’ time with Omphale as just one more scandalous, adulterous relationship, as Sophocles does, *Hercules Unchained* sets up the relationship as a false one, dominated by lies, and thus shows it as a contrast to the pure, true love between Hercules and Iole.

*Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* provide the first step in tying the character of Hercules to the modern ideal of the superhero. In these two films, Hercules rejects his godhood in favor of love; in essence, he rejects his ties to the ancient idea of the hero, accepting instead the mantle of the modern hero. Hercules’ every action is motivated by his love for Iole, his passion for Justice, and his desire to know the joys of the simple, ordinary life that mortals lead. According to Wyke, “The cinematic Hercules is the faithful servant of the status quo, the incarnation of legitimized power and force…a muscular hero of noble ancestry who is nonetheless disposed to fight on behalf of the people” (Wyke 64). In many ways, not only did *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*
start to tie Hercules to the idea of the Superman, the films laid the foundation for the character of the modern Hercules to fully mature into.

**Hercules: The Legendary Journeys**

The modern myth of Hercules continued to grow in the 1990s with the creation of *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, which retold the ancient myth of Hercules, while continuing the interpretation of the modern character of Hercules first seen in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*. The opening of each episode set the stage of the ancient world as one in desperate need of a hero: according to the narrator, “The ancient gods were petty and cruel, and they played mankind for their sport, plagued them with suffering, besieging them with terrors. For centuries, the people had nowhere to turn, no one to look to for help…” (*Hercules: The Legendary Journeys 0:00-02*). Hercules’ human characteristics and emotions were once again praised over raw strength and brutality, as the opening emphasized that “Hercules possessed a strength the world had never seen, a strength surpassed only by the power of his heart” (*Hercules: The Legendary Journeys 0:01*). Once again, Hercules is set up as the guardian of the defenseless and the protector of Justice, sometimes standing against even the gods themselves in his quest to protect the common people from the supernatural threats that beset them. As the narrator always ends with, “No matter the obstacle, as long as there were people crying for help, there was one man who would never rest: Hercules!” (*Hercules: The Legendary Journeys 0:02*). One particular episode, a direct-to-television movie called *Hercules in the Underworld*, shows perhaps best the character of the modern myth of Hercules compared to ancient versions of the myth. *Hercules in the Underworld* tells the story of the conflict between Deianeira and Iole; however, unlike the portrayal in Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*, Hercules’ modern heroic qualities shine through, completely changing the course of the story.
Immediately it is apparent that this Hercules is almost the realization of the Hercules that Steve Reeves’ character wanted to become. The beginning of the film shows Hercules playing with his children and relaxing with his wife, living life from day to day, and only doing heroic work when necessary. Hercules’ heroic character is still intact, however: when a giant man attacks the town Hercules lives near, the townspeople do not hesitate to call upon Hercules to defend them (*Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* 0:09-14). Hercules also willingly leaves his wife and children to journey with Iole (here portrayed as a seductress trained to catch heroes) in order to save her town, which has been threatened by a portal to the Underworld. In Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*, Heracles was blinded by his lust for Iole, and gave no thought to Deianeira’s feelings. This Hercules’ actions are the complete reverse of Sophocles’ Heracles: Iole tries to tempt Hercules, using her body to try to encourage Hercules to sacrifice his life to save her town. Hercules is not affected by her beauty, however, because of his faith to his wife and children, and his refusal to let them down (*Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* 1:01-04). Later in the film, after Deianeira, convinced that her actions have killed Hercules, commits suicide, Hercules journeys through the Underworld to the Elysian Fields (home of the exalted dead) in order to rescue her soul and bring her back to the land of the living. Deianeira has lost her memory, and Hades tells Hercules that she cannot recall it, as those in the Elysian Fields have blanked memories in order to soothe their past troubles. However, Hercules is able to return Deianeira’s memory by reaffirming his love for her, sealing it with a kiss (*Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* 1:22-25). Hercules is able to convince Hades to allow the newly-restored Deianeira to return to the world of the living and close the gate to the Underworld, saving everyone involved and ending the story on a happy note, with Hercules returning to his wife and children to live in peace. The
whole film clearly shows the progression of the modern character of Hercules, showing that this variation of Hercules is even more the modern hero archetype.

**Disney’s Hercules**

By now, the characteristics of the modern Hercules, fully begun in Steve Reeves *Hercules*, have fully matured into the modern idea of Hercules. This is most easily recognized in *Hercules* (1997), Disney’s rendition of the character. The film is the ultimate realization of the characteristics maturing in *Hercules* (1958), *Hercules Unchained*, and *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys*, and really shows the closeness in character between the modern Hercules and Superman.

The film ties the origins of Hercules almost completely to Superman. Born of two gods (in this film, Hercules is the trueborn son of Zeus and Hera, not a bastard child), Hercules is drained of his godhood in an evil plot, and falls to the mortal world into the care of a farmer and his wife. Hercules is an awkward child, as Hercules is not always in control of his superhuman strength. Thus, rather than being admired and respected for his strength, as many ancient portrayals of Heracles did, Hercules is instead feared and derided for it. After the last straw, Hercules leaves his home to make his way in the world and figure out where he truly belongs. This story almost parallels Superman’s origin story: born of alien parents, Superman is cast from his home-world due to a cataclysm into Earth, where he is found and raised by a farmer and his wife. Superman learns of his superhuman powers and goes to the big city in order to find his way in the world, learning there to protect the helpless and the needy. Clearly, the Hercules in Disney’s *Hercules* is tied, at least in origin, with Superman. As the film’s main conflict is
Hercules growing up and becoming a real man and a true hero, the film plays out not really as a modern retelling of a myth, but rather as a superhero origin story with a mythological twist.

Like all superhero origin stories, Hercules has to find his way in the world, and find the way that his powers, chaotic if left unchecked, can be used to do good. The drawbacks of superhuman strength are exemplified early on, in a scene in which Hercules accidentally destroys the town marketplace while playing a game, causing the townspeople to loudly deride him as a freak \((Hercules\ 0:14-17).\) Hercules’ most important goal in the story is to find out where he truly belongs. At first, he learns that he was once a god, and he believes that his true place is amongst the gods \((Hercules\ 0:20-23).\) To regain his godhood, Hercules must become a ‘true hero,’ someone worthy of being recognized as a god. Throughout the film, Hercules fights monsters and becomes a famous figure, the equal in status of many ancient portrayals of Heracles; however, no matter how many monsters he slays, and no matter how many cities and damsels-in-distress he saves, the gods can only consider him only a mere ‘hero,’ and not a ‘true hero’ \((Hercules\ 0:53-54).\) Finally, when the woman he loves, Meg, gives up her life to save his, Hercules realizes that life on Earth is worth nothing without her. He invades the Underworld, and trades his own life to Hades in return for her own return to life. It is only at this point that the gods acknowledge him as a true hero: as Zeus himself says, “a true hero isn’t measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart” \((Hercules\ 1:24).\) In other words, Hercules can only be recognized as a true hero once he learns to want to protect other people for the virtue of being a protector, rather than wanting recognition or fame for his actions. Not only that, Hercules realizes that his love for Meg, a mortal, defines him far more than his desire for godhood. As a result, as in Steve Reeves’ \(Hercules,\) the theme of love conquers the power and authority that godhood offers. The film’s end shows Hercules as having matured, both physically
and mentally (within the film), and spiritually and characteristically (within the theme of the modern Hercules and the ideal of the modern hero), from a boy into a man, from a selfish warrior into a selfless ‘true’ hero, from a hero by the ancient ideal to a true hero of the modern ideal.

**The Pendulum Swings Back**

Although most films and other visual media now characterize Hercules in similar ways to the examples I have explained above, not all examples choose to do so. The pendulum of public interest is always swinging, and in this case, it may be beginning to swing back in the other direction, in the direction of violent, lawless heroes who fulfill the ancient Greek standards for what makes a hero, but emphatically do not fulfill the modern standards for heroics. The best example of this is the *God of War* franchise. These games, the seventh entry of which just recently came out, portray the swinging back of this pendulum of the hero archetype. Kratos, the main character of the *God of War* franchise, is a brutal man: born a Spartan general with a penchant for zealotry, he pledged his life to Ares, the Greek god of war, in return for his aid during an unwinnable battle. Kratos, before simply a man, is trained into an unstoppable killing machine by Ares, and in his blood rage, Kratos killed even his own wife and child, mirroring the insanity that Hera cursed the ancient Heracles with (*God of War*). Unlike Heracles, however, Kratos kept his grudges: after ten years of serving the gods in penance for his actions, Kratos used a magical artifact to accomplish his revenge, and kill Ares.

Kratos, through his actions in the game, is characterized as a cold and brutal man, focused only on his revenge, and the liberation he thinks that revenge will give him. In battle, Kratos is utterly ruthless; his rips out the eyes of Cyclopes, he rips off the head of Medusa with his bare hands, and he even kills helpless civilians to regain health. Kratos is completely focused
on his goals, allowing no emotions except blind rage and hatred to guide his actions. For example, in the first game, Kratos needs to get through a door which demands a sacrifice. To do so, Kratos drags a prisoner to the door, while the man is screaming in fear and begging for his life, and immolates him with not a care in the world (God of War). In God of War II, Kratos takes this even further: he captures three old scholars and brutally kills them by smashing their skulls open, because he needs a blood sacrifice in order to continue (God of War II).

Not only is Kratos a particularly brutal character, Kratos is also basically a sociopath, caring nothing for other people, only himself. In the third game, Kratos is engaged in an all-out war against the gods; each god is tied to an element (e.g. Poseidon and the seas), and when they die, the world is wrecked in worse and worse ways (when Kratos kills Poseidon, the seas swallow the rest of the world; when Kratos kills Helios, the sun is blotted out from the sky, etc.) (God of War III). This does not affect Kratos at all; he barely even notices the changes to the world, focused only on killing his way to the top. This is, perhaps, best exemplified by the beginning of the first game, where Kratos is on a ship fighting the Hydra. The Hydra has swallowed the ship’s captain, and Kratos needs the key he carries in order to progress through the ship. After brutally killing the hydra (by impaling its main head on the mast of the ship no less) Kratos climbs down the creature’s throat and finds the captain, barely holding on. The captain begins thanking Kratos, but all Kratos says is “I didn’t come back for you.” Kratos simply takes the key, and pushes the man back down the Hydra’s throat, to his death (God of War). Later on, after Kratos himself has died and is in Hades, he adds insult to injury, using the shade of the captain as a human shield before throwing him screaming into the abyss (God of War).
The brutality in the *God of War* franchise is actually one of its selling points, suggesting that the modern audience has turned away, in some part, from the modern ideal of the hero. It may be that the modern hero archetype has grown stale; whatever the reason, games portraying violent anti-heroes have become more and more popular. Kratos himself exhibits many characteristics that are aligned with the Heracles/Hercules myth: he is a bastard son of Zeus, has super strength, is an insanely powerful warrior, and has fought many kinds of warriors and monsters (including hydras, gorgons, giant animals, titans, gods, and even the Fates themselves). In fact, at the end of the second game, it is revealed that Kratos, as a bastard son of Zeus, is Hercules’ half-brother, of whom Hercules is bitterly jealous. As a result, it may well be that the modern Hercules archetype is once more giving way to the ancient ideals of the hero.

**Conclusion**

The character of Heracles/Hercules has obviously undergone serious changes between the ancient and modern time periods. The ancient Heracles was characterized by a lack of consistency: ancient authors portrayed him in many different forms and fashions. Sometimes Hercules was a good, kind family man; sometimes he was a cruel, self-serving tyrant with no respect for anyone or anything except himself. Other times, Hercules was hilarious in his moronic actions, and sometimes Hercules was hilarious not due to his own actions, but rather due to the actions of the unworthy who tried to follow in his footsteps. Sometimes Hercules was even heroic, somewhat in the modern sense, and sometimes he was heroic without even realizing that he was. However, one thing that the ancient Hercules never was was consistent: no matter what, different authors always portrayed Hercules in different ways.
However, as I have shown, the modern Hercules is generally a very consistent character. He is a protector of the innocent and the helpless, a superhero in a time of gods and monsters where few other heroes lived and worked. Unlike the ancient Heracles, whose allegiance and love changed with the times and with the author, the modern Hercules is driven to complete his heroic tasks by his love, and is never unfaithful to his love interest. Hercules is a staunch supporter of the law, and actively works towards stopping monsters and criminals alike, even when he has to cross gods or superhuman beings to do so. The modern Hercules helps people not for a reward, and not for fame, but rather because he believes in the justice of the people, and the essential goodness of helping people for its own sake. Thus, it should be clear that not only was the ancient myth of Heracles far too unpredictable to establish any clear consistency in terms of character, the modern myth of Hercules the superhero, in contrast, is extremely internally consistent. As a result, the modern Hercules is not a ‘mistranslation’ or bastardization of the character of Heracles at all, but rather is just another acceptable version of the composite myth of Heracles/Hercules.
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