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Heracles and Greatness

I. Introduction

Heroes have appeared throughout the ages; Gilgamesh is the first of which scholars have extensive knowledge. However, there has been one depicted time and time again, Heracles. Better known by his name Hercules he completed daring tasks of greatness and, at least according to the Disney representation, saved the world from the scheming Hades. Yet, underlying each of these portrayals is a tale of the cultures that constructed them; They tell how those cultures perceived greatness and tragedy through Heracles's story.

There is importance in the different rhetorical ecologies of the societies where the stories developed and infected the stories of Heracles. As Edbauer postulated, rhetoric functions like a "viral economy," infecting other rhetoric's (13). Rhetoric acts effectively "as a process of distributed emergence and as an ongoing circulation process" (Edbauer 13). Each story and word spoke within that culture culminates into the rhetoric's ongoing creation; movies included. However, to derive the perceptions of greatness and tragedy of the different cultures' depictions of Heracles, one must understand and know the stories first.

II. The Depictions of Heracles

There are two portrayals of Heracles that will be discussed. First is the original text, or texts, with artifacts dating back to 500 B.C.E. (Crane). Second is the cartoon adaptation presented by Disney in 1997.

The Greek Story

According to Crane, the Greek story begins with Zeus sleeping with the mortal woman Alcmena and giving birth to Heracles. However, Zeus was married to the goddess Hera, and she was furious by his infidelity (Crane). She then planned “to pay Zeus back for his infidelity by making the rest of Hercules’ life as miserable as she could.” (Crane). Hera caused Heracles to murder his first wife (Megara) and children; afterward, Apollo told Heracles that he could be cleansed from his actions by performing ten labors of heroism (this number eventually became 12) (Crane). After many adventures and the completion of these labors, he came to marry Deianira. Yet, she inadvertently gave him a cloak that caused excruciating pain and would eventually kill him after she had been tricked by a centaur (Crane). Heracles requested that he be burned on a pyre while still alive because death was better than the pain he was suffering (Crane). As the pyre was lit, Zeus determined that Hercules had suffered enough and deserved to join Olympus’s gods, and Hercules took his place with them (Bulfinch 143).

The Disney Story

This story begins with Hercules being born to Zeus and his wife (Menken). However, Hades, the lord of the underworld, sends his henchmen Pain and Panic to kill Hercules because

Hercules could thwart the titans (Super-powerful beings) and prevent Hades's scheme to rule Olympus (Menken). Pain and Panic fail, and Hercules loses his god status but keeps his incredible strength (Menken). He then is raised on earth to a mortal family but learns of his true origins; Zeus tells him that if he wants to rejoin his family and his rightful place as a god, he must become a true hero (Menken). Heracles trains under a satyr and becomes a famous hero, and in the process, falls in love with a woman Meg, who works for Hades against her will (Menken). Eventually, the time comes when Hades attacks Olympus, yet Hercules thwarts his scheme and becomes a true hero and a god, as he was willing to sacrifice his life for Meg's (Menken). Hercules chooses to become and remain a mortal instead of joining the gods of Olympus and lives happily ever after with Meg (Menken).

III. Greatness

There can be found within the stories of Heracles one common representation of greatness; the transformation of Heracles from a mortal being to a god. For Heracles in the Disney story, Heracles must attain the title of “True Hero.” True hero in this context represents greatness; it is the line one must cross to become a great being, worthy of godhood. In the Greek story, godhood is granted at the end of Heracles’ life, after he has endured life’s tragedy. But what exactly was the underlying philosophy that drew the line to godhood in each story, and how did they differ? To better understand this question, there will be rhetorical listening applied to the ecologies that created the stories.

The Greek Story

To understand Heracles’ death and ascension to godhood, one must first understand the scene’s depiction. This was when Heracles was burned on the pyre as the cloak’s poison was slowly killing him. Thomas Bulfinch, a famous mythologist from the nineteenth century, depicted the scene as follows:

“The gods themselves felt troubled at seeing the champion of the earth so brought to his end. But Jupiter [Zeus] with cheerful countenance thus addressed them: “I am pleased to see your concern, my princes, and am gratified to perceive that I am the ruler of a loyal people, and that my son enjoys your favor. For although your interest in him arises from his noble deeds, yet it is not the less gratifying to me. But now I say to you, Fear not. He who conquered all else is not to be conquered by those flames which you see blazing on Mount Oeta. Only his mother’s share in him can perish; what he derived from me is immortal. I shall take him, dead to earth, to

the heavenly shores, and I require of you all to receive him kindly. If any of you feel grieved at his attaining this honor, yet no one can deny that he has deserved it." The gods all gave their assent; Juno [Hera] only heard the closing words with some displeasure that she should be so particularly pointed at, yet not enough to make her regret the determination of her husband. So when the flames had consumed the mother's share of Hercules, the diviner part, instead of being injured thereby, seemed to start forth with new vigor, to assume a more lofty port and a more awful dignity. Jupiter [Zeus] enveloped him in a cloud, and took him up in a four-horse chariot to dwell among the stars. As he took his place in heaven, Atlas felt the added weight (143)."

It can be seen that Heracles was granted godhood, as Zeus declared, "no one can deny that he has deserved it [godhood]" (Bulfinch 143). Yet, what was it that Heracles did that entailed deserving this rank? Look earlier in the paragraph, and it says, "Fear not. He who conquered all else is not to be conquered by those flames which..." (Bulfinch 143). Later, there is more evidence that may point to why Heracles had been granted the rank of god; "your interest in him arises from his noble deeds" (Bulfinch 143). Noble deeds were those such as the acts commanded through the gods like the 12 labors and deeds done from a good heart. The following of the gods' commands is pious, which may also play a factor in the ascension of Heracles. He had shown to the gods that he was deserving of greatness, not a single time, but across his entire life through many adventures and heroics; this repetition and consistency separated him from the rest who would call themselves heroes. Another interpretation of the death said, "In Olympus, Zeus congratulated himself that his favorite son had behaved so nobly [about his nobility in death on the pyre]" and "if anyone here grieves at his deification, so richly

merited, that god or goddess must nevertheless approve it" (Graves 325). Again, there is more evidence that Heracles deserved the rank of god through his merit. It was through the repetitive noble actions that entailed he was worthy of greatness and godhood. However, there is evidence that he could also have been deified not just because of the noble deeds but because of his endurance and conquering of tragedy. Repeating the quote earlier, "He who conquered all else is not to be conquered" (Bulfinch 143). The merit that he attained, the conquering of all, the noble behavior, it may be about how he endured and acted in the face of tragedy and his deeds. The primary identifications of greatness from the Greek story are the noble acts Heracles committed and the endurance of that nobility in the face of tragedy.

The Disney Story

The Disney story was much more straightforward in terms of identifying what entailed greatness. In the film, Zeus tells Hercules he must become a "True Hero" to join him on mount Olympus and become a god (Menken). This is finally achieved when Hercules dives into the River of Death in an attempt to save Meg, risking his life for another even though his death is assured (Menken). One can derive that it is the act of selflessness that entails one is a true hero or have the qualities to be considered a great individual. This entails that it was not the strength of a character, the piety, nor the deeds done, but rather the heart of a character that defined if one should become a god.

IV. The Ecologies

There is now the analysis of the ecologies that created the rhetoric for the stories. What was the driving factor behind the Greek story that allowed piety to entail greatness? Why had the Disney story changed so much from the source material?

Greek Ecology

The Greek story was not just a tale meant to entertain. Many factors contributed to the way the story was told. Most obviously was the religious ecology of which it was born. In the modern era, one takes Greek mythology to be just that, mythology. However, it was a religion that they were to abide by, and even in states like Athens, impiety could be taken to court (Plato)! The tales of Heracles were religious texts that showed how a truly pious individual should act, and this fact influenced how the story portrayed greatness. There is also the audience the story was attempting to reach; the general public. Portrayals of impiety, abundant death, and rape are not for the faint of heart; those are adult themes that contrast heavily to the Disney portrayal. As it was orated to the public, it needed to be entertaining and exciting with more than just piety at its focus. It presented a character men and children could aspire to be like with thrilling tales of monsters, some of which were born of political rivalries (McInerney).

Disney Ecology

The Disney tale is intended for the whole family, a lighthearted story featuring beautiful soundtracks and loveable characters; even the villains were phenomenal. This specific audience

required the entire story to be rewritten and the themes to be reinvented. Rather than piety taking a front seat, it was selflessness, something that is catered to an audience mostly of children and families of any religion. There is also the rhetoric within the film industry's current culture that requires movies to first and foremost be entertaining, taking away from the author's focus on morale and piety.

V. Synthesis

The takeaways from the ecological and cultural impact upon the rhetoric of Heracles are how ecologies that hold prominence impact stories the most. Piety was vital in the ancient world; thus, it was important in Heracles. It was orated to the public; therefore, it was crafted so that the public would listen to its oration. The Disney tale was catered toward families; consequently, it was family-friendly. It also raises ideas for future research. Heracles' story contained and was written with a bias toward piety due to religious ecology; other works have been influenced by religion yet have not been identified as such. It may then be necessary for analysts of rhetoric to pay attention to the ecologies present during the creation of a piece to determine the rhetoric within the work, even if it does not encompass the entire work's rhetoric.

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