Herc the Hero, Then and Now: A Close Analysis of Disney’s *Hercules* and a Comparison to *Man of Steel*

Eddie Zhou

Precept: Ms. Dawn LaValle, P04

Walt Disney Pictures is commonly criticized for “'butchering' classic stories and for putting a happy-go-lucky spin on history” (Noelle para. 1), and Disney’s *Hercules* is by no means exempt from this pattern of criticism. Although it is rather difficult to find reputable, literary secondary sources discussing a Disney picture like *Hercules*, there is no shortage of online critics. The author of the blog “My Left and Right” uses many different sources to argue everything wrong and terrible about Disney’s *Hercules* – pointing out everything from the use of the Roman name “Hercules” instead of the Greek “Heracles”, to the deviation from the violence inspired by Hera in the original *mythos.* All these lead to what the author claims is a “reductionist depiction of ancient Greek symbols” (MLaR, “Cultural Stereotypes”). Ms. Cara Noelle similarly criticizes Disney’s inconsistency in both the naming of Hercules and the identity alteration of Hercules’ mother (Noelle para. 2). A rather harsh critic on TVTropes even goes so far as to say that the Disney movie was “just taking the names and slapping together an entirely different story” (“Opinionated Guide to Disney’s Hercules”, para. 24). This barrage of criticism contributes to a general attitude that the inaccuracies in the Disney rendition cripple the value of the movie, placing it within the large set of mangled classic stories. We cannot place too much blame on these critics – after all, the deviations they mention are indeed present in Disney’s *Hercules*.

The very notion of Greek *mythos* and the associated *traditio* defines a sharing of stories. Even within the range of readings we have explored in class, we find “inconsistencies” in the stories – we have acknowledged, then, that this variety serves to enrich our understanding of the stories. With this in mind, we will not seek to deny the accusations of the critics– instead, we will show that the differences between the Greek *mythos* and Disney’s *Hercules* serve to make *Hercules* an invaluable piece of literature as a modern lens for examining the Greek *mythos*. In this paper, then, we will present a twofold argument defending the value of Disney’s *Hercules* (from here on out, “Hercules” will be referenced as the Disney character, in contrast to “Heracles”, the character of ancient Greece). First, through a deeper and closer analysis than these critics afford *Hercules*, we will discover that many of the simple deviations from the original stories, while criticized, actually serve to *emphasize* themes discussed in class surrounding Heracles and company. Secondly, we will find that these differences can also be valuable in helping us understand our culture’s shifting attitude towards the archetypical hero.  In examining this shift to a modern hero, we will bring in characteristics of Superman, from *Man of Steel*, to directly compare to modern Hercules and ancient Heracles.

The first difference we address is the issue of the Twelve Labors. As we know, Heracles was bound to complete the Twelve Labors assigned to him by Eurystheus. In the Disney film, though, the Twelve Labors are casually presented as various victories by Hercules during his rise to glory. The shared theme that arises from this juxtaposition is that of Heracles’ agency, his control over his own fate. For ancient Heracles he first has his work in completing the Labors continuously meted out by Eurystheus – we see that even when Heracles undoubtedly finishes the task, Eurystheus finds something wrong with the completion thereof (the help in the slaying of the Lernean Hydra and the cleaning of the stables, etc.) and assigns him more. Heracles is bound by service to Eurystheus, and must do as he says – in other words, he lacks agency. Moreover, despite all of his efforts in accomplishing his labors, despite his triumphant return to Thebes in the nick of time to save his family from the usurper Lycus, his fate is still completely out of his control. After all of his achievements, his pursuer Hera sets her minion Madness upon him and drives him to slaughter his family. Her malicious, irrational act of hatred is unstoppable by any means available to Heracles. In lamenting his fate through a discussion with Theseus, he claims that “Zeus – whoever Zeus may be – begot me / for Hera’s hatred.” (Euripides, 1263-1264). We clearly see that Heracles’ fate, his accomplishments and failures, may be beyond his control. Examining some key moments in the film, we notice that this theme is played out very explicitly in Disney’s very different storyline. In the beginning of the film, the audience gets to see the potential conflict unfold as Hercules is born, and Hades consults the three Fates about the plan to overthrow Zeus. In his discussion, he conjures a small figurine of baby Hercules, and sets it upon his chess board (*Hercules,* 00:08:42), symbolizing the insignificance of Hercules within the context of his larger plot. Later, when Hercules has gained fame, the Muses sing “Zero to Hero”, and we see Hades putting monsters (the Erymanthian Boar, Scylla, etc.) on the same chessboard to face a now-grown Hercules. While Hercules dismantles each monster, one-by-one, he is still a chess piece, a figurine on the large stage of the gods. Moreover, he does not actively seek out the monsters that he originally needed to kill as part of his Twelve Labors – rather, Hades pits them against him in a series of battles. At this point, even though his fame and success are at an all-time high, Hercules’ agency is lower than ever. It is clear that the plot differences in the two stories have actually reinforced the lack-of-agency theme.

Disney’s depiction of Hercules’ growth from zero to hero is certainly different from the ancient Greek stories. Hercules grows from a bumbling teen to a worshipped hero, while Heracles goes from a brute to a disgraced child-killer. Through their growth as a hero, we see another theme in their constant conflict with the city, or *polis*. As we know, ancient Heracles – unlike other Greek heroes – has difficulty attaching to one Greek city. While he is well-known throughout all of Greece as a Pan-Hellenic hero, he acts alone and moves around in the world as an outsider. He is too strong for civilization (one only needs to point to the death of his music teacher by lyre-bashing), and consequently does not belong in any particular *polis*. The easiest connection to draw to Disney’s Hercules is his initial destruction of the town near his foster parents’ home – while trying to fit in with the other teenagers, Hercules mishandles his strength and instead literally destroys the entire structure of the trading square (*Hercules*,00:16:45). His displacement is characterized in “Go the Distance”, where he voices his desire to find a “far off place…where [he’s] meant to be…right where [he] belong[s]” (*Hercules,* 00:18:13 – 00:19:07). Sadly, the ancient Heracles would tell him that such a place does not exist for a hero like himself. More nuanced references of the anti­-*polis* theme crop up through the inconsistencies: for one, Hercules’ uncomfortable and unfamiliar first entrance into Thebes’ bustling city life. Philoctetes warns him to “stick with [Phil]…the city is a dangerous place” (*Hercules,* 00:39:21). Later, in perhaps the most spectacular playing out of the conflict between Hercules and the *polis*, he is quite literally defeated by the city, as a pillar falls on Meg and crushes her to death (*Hercules*, 01:15:52). Ancient Heracles may have had no pillars crushing his women, disconnecting him from Hercules, but a stronger, thematic connection is forged through his problems with the *polis*.

It is clear that Hercules battles different monsters in many different contexts that conflict with the ancient stories. From his struggle with Nessus to the battles with the Hydra and even Titans, mythological aficionados might wonder why Disney chose to change the story so much. Looking closer, though, these differences connect to the theme of Heracles’ brutish and strength-based nature. We know that throughout his labors, Heracles makes use of his bare hands to choke, grapple, and smash his way to victory, rather than the traditional sword or spear of the Greek hero. The Nemean lion is strangled to death, the Erymanthian boar wrestled into submission, the Cretan Bull throttled, and Cerberus slung over Heracles’ shoulder en route to exiting the Underworld. In *Women of Trachis*, Heracles’ pain-ridden madness from the donning of Deianira’s gift leads to the grotesque murder of Lichas, who is thrown against a rock that “pressed the pale brains out through his hair, / and, split full on, skull and blood mixed and spread” (Sophocles, 781-782). Over and over again, ancient Heracles makes use of his brute strength, rather than cleverness of mind, to achieve victory. The Disney Hercules, similarly, consistently discards his traditional sword in favor of his hands. During the fight with Nessus, Hercules remembers Philoctetes’ “Rule number 15: a hero is only as good as his weapon” (*Hercules*, 00:32:51). Still, instead of using his bow as in the ancient Greek story, he ends up taking down the centaur without any weapons. When Phil prompts him to use his head, he employs the most brutish interpretation of the advice possible, ramming Nessus with his head (*Hercules,* 00:33:14). He then straddles and punches his way to his first victory. Later, Disney’s writers take more liberties with the plot in Hercules’ battle with the Hydra – but again, these liberties only serve to strengthen the hands-on characteristic of ancient Heracles. When Hercules initially cannot defeat the Hydra through cutting off its multiple heads, instead of employing the canonic method of using his nephew Iolaus’ help in cauterizing the Hydra’s necks, he uses his bare hands to punch a cliff, starting an avalanche that buries the Hydra whole (*Hercules*, 00:47:35). Lastly, while he does head off to the final Titan battle with his sword, he ends up grabbing the Wind Titan with his hands and hurling it into the stratosphere, putting an exclamation point on his brute strength and prowess with his hands. All of these drastically different battles, again, actually connect the two stories thematically.

Hands aside, many of Hercules’ interactions with women (namely, Meg), contrast sharply with the stories involving Heracles and Meghara, or Deianira. These contrasts, however, bring out several themes relating to women that Sophocles’ *The Women of Trachis* introduces. In the play, the interaction between love and desire, with Nessus’ blood thrown into the mix, results in a combination of Eros and prophecy that brings down Sophocles’ Heracles, down to what Heracles believes is womanly behavior. He proclaims that “a woman, a female, in no way like a man, / she alone without even a sword has brought me down” (Sophocles, 1062-1063), and “[he] seem[s] pitiful to many others, crying / and sobbing like a girl…” (Sophocles, 1071-1072). We will note that, as discussed in lecture, Deianira/Meghara is, in fact, quite a masculine figure, as she kills herself with a sword rather than with the typical Greek female noose. Even the character of Meg shows her characteristic masculinity and tenacity throughout the film. She claims “she can handle [Nessus]” (*Hercules*, 00:32:37), later saying that she “is a big, tough, girl” (*Hercules*, 00:36:10). On the theme of downfall-by-woman, in Disney Hercules’ first encounter with Meg, he is struck by her beauty, and cannot focus on the battle. One could say that, similar to ancient Heracles, this woman’s words and actions lead to his initial beating by Nessus (*Hercules*, 00:32:39). Another connection to ancient Heracles’ dealings with women comes during the romantic scene with Meg, where Hercules says “[he] would never, ever hurt you” (*Hercules*, 01:00:00). To the normal audience, this represents a touching promise to an emotionally damaged woman, while those privy to a deeper knowledge of Greek mythology see an ironic pointer to ancient Heracles’ women-hating, wife-slaying words. After all, it only took a poison-soaked cloak for him to utter depravities such as “But I tell you this, even if I am nothing, / nothing that can even crawl, even so – / only let her come who has done this to me – / these hands will teach her, and she can tell the world: alive” (Sophocles, 1107-1111). Moreover, later, as Hercules heads into battle to fight the Cyclops without his godlike strength, Meg warns him, “Without your strength, you’ll be killed!” to which Hercules bitterly (and quite passive-aggressively) states, “There are worse things” (*Hercules*, 01:13:08). Here, we see a connection to Heracles’ beyond-death pain after donning the robe that Deianira sent to him. After all, in asking Hyllus to burn him alive (Sophocles, 1193-1199), Heracles implies that the pain he feels is worse than death. All of these non-classical interactions with Meg, while different in numerous plot-based perspectives, serve to bind Disney’s *Hercules* and the Greek stories together thematically.

On the subject of Heracles’ death wish, we know that ancient Heracles’ ascent to Olympus comes with the lighting of his funeral pyre. As mentioned earlier, he asks Hyllus to burn his body on the pyre during his painful madness. Furthermore, we know that sacrifice to the gods is inherently linked with the fire and burning of sacrificial food. With this in mind, we notice that in many of the steps in Hercules’ quest for godhood (a quest which differs completely from ancient Heracles’ ascent), fires are present. For example, when Amphitryon and his wife Alcmene finally tell Hercules of his origins, their entire house is lit solely by firelight, while a large fire figures prominently in the background (*Hercules*, 00:19:23). When Hercules visits the temple of Zeus, the arrival of Zeus is coupled with the sudden lighting of a throne-side torch (*Hercules*, 00:21:12), and again, the temple is entirely lit by firelight. Throughout the film, Hades constantly uses his divine powers to set things on fire, and later frees the Titans from their deep imprisonment by firing flames onto their jail door (*Hercules*, 01:10:48), further affirming the association between fire and immortality/divinity. As the film progresses, and as Hercules comes closer to his divine ascension, his association with fire grows stronger and stronger. Subtly, after the Hydra is slain, the Muses sing of Hercules: “He was so hot, steam looked cool” (*Hercules,* 00:49:00). Finally, in the climax of the film, when Hercules is the closest to his god form, he defeats the Cyclops using a flaming torch. Clearly, these differences in the respective paths to immortality of Hercules and Heracles actually serve to mirror the theme of fiery divinity relating to ancient Heracles. Moreover, they also bring out the ancient Greek theme of *kleos*. While Hercules’ may have a completely different quest from a plot standpoint, he nonetheless possesses Heracles’ thirst for *kleos*, or glory – from the glory-hungry overtones in “Go the Distance” (“Where a great, warm welcome will be waiting for me, and the crowds will cheer when they see my face”) to the gross over-commercialization he experience post-Hydra, to his bragging at Zeus’ temple (“They even applauded!”, “The crowd went wild!” (*Hercules*, 00:53:45)).

At this point, we have established a variety of thematic connections between Disney’s *Hercules* and the ancient Greek stories involving Heracles, all of which stem from deviations from the original story. This alone addresses the value of the criticized inconsistencies in the film, and we now move to further prove the value of these differences – namely, we discuss their usefulness in helping us understand our modern hero. We will do so by generalizing specific plot-based deviations to facets of the modern attitude/belief system towards the heroic.  We will also look to relate these deviations to Superman in *Man of Steel* to show that this modern belief system is demonstrated and reinforced in other modern heroes.

It is immediately apparent that the Disney birth of Hercules is opposite the ancient myths. Ancient Heracles was born ambiguously, with Zeus as a father and a human mother, Alcmene. He was born in the mortal world, though he did exhibit great strength from his beginnings (e.g. strangling the snake sent to his crib). In the Disney movie, however, Hercules is born to Zeus and Hera, as an immortal, on Olympus. After Pain and Panic transform him into (mostly) mortal, he cannot remain in the immortal realm. In other words, he is forced by extenuating circumstances from his home environment to a world where he is physically superior to the local inhabitants. It is easy to draw the connection to Kal-El/Clark Kent, who is born on the alien world of Krypton to two Kryptonians (a race superior to humans). When the world is on the verge of implosion (read: extenuating circumstances), his parents fire him off in a capsule to Earth. This tells us that our modern hero is not born into us – he is from a better, stronger place and has come to protect us, to save us.

Perhaps it is intuitive that because the modern hero is not born to us, he initially does not fit in. Eventually, though, he becomes dear to us and saves us (often, from ourselves). Hercules was the epitome of an awkward, clumsy youth, ostracized for his physical differences. And though throughout the film, Hercules has mixed motivations – his desire for glory, desire to protect Greece, desire to ascend to the gods, and desire to win Meg’s affection – the public begins to see him as the savior of Greece and the protector of the mortal world from natural catastrophe and monsters. We note that in *Women of Trachis*, Heracles is away, focused on besieging a city for the bed of a woman, and only returns to lament his fate and pain, and to curse his wife. Going back to the modern model, Clark Kent – who also has various personal struggles with his identity and purposes – has a near-identical image to the Disney Hercules. Growing up a teased, harassed, and bullied teen, he learned to hide his physical abilities. Later, though (and similarly, after he discovers his origins), he becomes someone who uses his superhuman strength to protect others, destined to be a shining idol, a savior of mankind. As the hologram of his father tells him, “You can embody the best of both worlds” (*Man of Steel*, 00:48:12). We see that our modern hero is caught between two places due to his nature, but eventually is relied upon to be a bridge between and a savior to both worlds.

We are delighted at the hero’s success in protecting us, largely because he succeeds against such odds, and even when things seem completely out of his control. The ancient Heracles is pitted against the vindictiveness of Hera, a god, and despite his best efforts, fails miserably. One could argue that his ascension to godhood is an indicator of success, but it must be noted that it is under the auspices of Zeus, who chose to lift him to Olympus. In other words, Heracles rises and falls by the whims of the gods. Hercules, on the other hand, ends up succeeding – and does so by his own strength of character. Although as argued earlier, he shows a lack of agency in the film, defeating godly characters (Hades and the Titans), and saving his love separate him from ancient Heracles by way of success. Similarly, Superman, despite having to fight several of his own kind who are as strong – if not stronger – than him, succeeds against all odds and saves our world from disaster. In other words, our modern hero triumphs despite impossible odds and obstacles.

Our modern hero also triumphs in more than the defeat of monsters and villains – he falls in love and wins the lady. Looking at ancient Heracles, we see a man who leaves his wife to besiege a city for another woman, and eventually is killed by that woman. From start to finish, the Heracles of *Women of Trachis* is at odds with women, and, as mentioned with the examination of Meg, he despises the idea of being brought down to a lowly, feminine state. On the other hand, Hercules is a sweet, near-boyish suitor to Meg, and treats her with love and respect (*Hercules,* 00:59:40). She helps him through his troubles, and motivates him to succeed. Despite betrayals and trust issues, he ends up risking it all to save her from the Underworld. In the same vein, Clark Kent falls for a human woman, who proves to be indispensable in his efforts to save the world. We see that our modern hero loves and depends on a woman, and cannot succeed without her.

Lastly, and perhaps most strikingly, we can examine the future of the hero, and the final choice of the hero at the conclusion. Heracles, who is dying from the poisoned cloak stripping flesh off of his bones, tells his son to light his funeral pyre and burn him alive. Although Hyllus does not light the pyre, Heracles ascends to immortality from the burning of his body as all mortal parts are burned away. In essence, he chooses death and the ensuing immortality over living with pain. In the ending of Disney’s *Hercules*, however, there is a different, almost opposite choice made. After his triumphant battle with the Titans and his enormous effort in saving Meg from death, Herc is deemed a true hero and granted godliness. When he ascends to Olympus, he is given the option to retain his immortality and live on Olympus with the other gods. Instead of joining the gods, however, he rejects his origins, the “greater” world, for the human world he has come to know, and stays with Meg (*Hercules,* 01:25:30). We see this same final choice reflected in the finale of *Man of Steel*. Superman/Kal-El, in order to protect Earth’s civilization, chooses to destroy the aircraft that carries the Genesis Chamber (*Man of Steel*, . The Genesis Chamber, in combination with the genetic codex infused in Kal-El’s body, has the capability of restoring the Krypton race. His choice to destroy the ship, then, is a rejection of his origins and his home world for the new, human world. Our modern hero, then, appears to choose us over his own kind – even after being shunned by us, even after going through hell to defend us.

Through the comparison between the plotlines and characters of Disney’s *Hercules* and ancient Heracles, along with Superman from *Man of Steel*, we have now assembled an idea of who our modern hero is. He is born to a species or people that are in some way superior to us. He is shunned as a child, but grows to love and protect us, and we learn to accept and follow him. He succeeds despite impossible odds, and along the way, wins the girl. In the end, he will always choose us over his origins and his own kind.

Now, we can ask ourselves what this modern idea of the heroic can tell us about our attitudes and beliefs. Perhaps the godly birth of a hero is more receptive to today’s audience, as we may have lost faith that one of our own (from birth) could truly be our savior. Maybe we want to live through the hero – succeed despite massive obstacles, win the girl in the end, and stay loyal to the people that depend on us. While we cannot say exactly why our idea of the hero has changed, the only thing for certain is that Disney’s *Hercules* has helped us form a better picture of who this hero is.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

*Eddie Zhou*

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