



Greek Heroes in Popular Culture Through Time

Heracles discussion

Penny Boreham:

Heracles, or Hercules since Roman times, was a divine hero in Greek mythology. He was born of a mortal woman, but as the son of Zeus he held the status of both hero and god. He's well known for his Herculean task, the Twelve Labours, and as the strongest of all mortals, stronger in fact than many of the gods. Heracles has been continuously portrayed in the western tradition as larger than life in most areas, especially in terms of his physical prowess, his sexual appetites and his relationship with death. But at different points in history the portrayal of his power and strength has been cast in very different lights, some perhaps more flattering than others. Why would that be? I've been joined here by Open University Classicists, Dr. Paula James and Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni. Thanks very much for joining me.

Both:

Hello.

Penny Boreham:

So Anastasia, would you say interpretations of Heracles have been revealingly diverse?

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

Absolutely. In antiquity, Hercules was a very complex figure, particularly in Greek tragedy we see some of the darker aspects of his character. For example, in Euripides's *Heracles Mainomenos*, or *Furens*, basically 'maddened Heracles', we have a portrayal of the hero killing his three sons and his wife Megara. I mean he regrets doing it, but he does commit this terrible crime. Also in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* he brings back a concubine and obviously his wife, Deianira, is not at all happy about this, and tries to win back his love by giving him a robe which is infused with poison, which she thinks is a love potion, to win him back, and he dies obviously in horrible agony. What's quite interesting is that even though he learns why his wife did this, he has very little sympathy, I think, with her position and asks their son to avenge his death. Deianira though has already pre-empted Heracles' edict by committing suicide. So you definitely see a lot of very dark aspects of the hero, as somebody who has an insatiable sexual appetite, which destroys his family life and, in effect, himself as well.

Penny Boreham:

So it says something about the whole attitude to heroism, that you can be like that and still be a hero?

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

You can still be a great hero because the emphasis, I think, in antiquity is very much on his physical prowess, his physical strength, that is what makes him a hero. The fact that he has all these other darker, and what we would consider unheroic aspects, doesn't count. But I thought it was very interesting that in the modern TV series from the '90's, *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, the death of the wife and the children is actually Hera's fault, she kills them, not Hercules, and I think the reason for that is that the producers must have thought that the modern audience could not accept a hero who has killed his family.

Penny Boreham:

So Paula, what do you think popular culture has most often seen in Heracles? Do you notice that that's been lost, that more complex side?

Dr. Paula James:

I think in popular culture, they love the Heracles who is larger than life, and who is supernaturally strong. You have to think about Heracles, or Hercules, strangling the snakes in his cradle, so that from birth he's a bit of a Superman for his time, and I think that's how people would relate to him. So in some ways, I suppose, mass culture, film and television might want to simplify Hercules and just give him those very heroic attributes in terms of strength, but not I mean necessarily, if we want to perhaps go back to a film with Arnold Schwarzenegger, a film called *Predator*, a 1987 film, I know that's been used in classical teaching in America, in classes to try and get students to think about the complexities and the challenges of being a hero, because Arnie in that film ends up without any companions and all his high-tech stuff, all his high-tech weapons are taken away from him, so it's him in the jungle with just his own strength and brute force, and so I think students warmed much more to the Hercules figure after being asked to look at it in comparison with the film.

Penny Boreham:

And in that film what's motivating the strength, what's his aim, what's behind this strength, if you like?

Dr. Paula James:

Well I suppose it's destroying evil, it's going up against monsters, and there is this whole aspect of Hercules in his own time, and also through the centuries, that he is an uncivilised civiliser, if you like. He goes around, sometimes they're tasks are foisted upon him, and sometimes they're voluntary, the Twelve Labours are quite varied from that, from the motivation point of view. But when he is cleansing a place of a horrible monster, it means he's liberating the people and they can start carrying on life as normal again.

Penny Boreham:

Anastasia, you talked earlier about Hercules, Heracles' great displays of power and the darker side of that. How has that changed over time, in terms of interpretations of Heracles?

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

I think that is the key to understanding how Hercules has changed down the centuries. In antiquity it was perfectly acceptable for a hero to have these darker aspects. The fact that he couldn't control his temper, or that he had to have all these other women in his life, was acceptable but as the centuries passed, and particularly with the advent of Christianity, those darker aspects became less acceptable, so the hero changed and he was portrayed as being motivated more by a desire to be a civiliser, to be a virtuous hero who helps the people, and that is the aspect that started to be stressed more and more in later receptions of Hercules.

Penny Boreham:

What sort of time?

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

I would say that this was particularly evident around the Renaissance and there's a lovely example of that in visual terms, a painting by a late Renaissance artist called Annibale Carracci, *The Choice of Hercules*, where we virtually see the hero have a choice between an easy life and a hard life of virtue. And of course, being a good Christian hero, he chooses the tough life of doing all these labours for the betterment of humanity, and that becomes his motivation. So the fact that maybe sometimes he was a bit more unwilling in antiquity, gets swept under the carpet.

Penny Boreham:

Paula.

Dr. Paula James:

And there are enough ingredients in the classical Hercules, the Greek Heracles in fact, for a kind of Christian interpretation, because he does retrieve his heroism and have a martyr's death by building a huge funeral pyre on Mount Oeta, so that he doesn't actually sort of die from the poison, but he dies in a conflagration, and this kind of martyrdom is something that the Christian interpretation of Hercules could tie in with, I think. And that's quite interesting really because the Christian Hercules pops up in other areas. You've mentioned this amazing

painting. I have a wonderful illustration of the dockers' union export branch banner around the time of the dockers' strike in the late 19th century, the strike against casualisation for the dockers' tanner. This is a lovely banner because it's got a Hercules figure in the middle of it, strangling a serpent and it actually says, 'This is a holy war until all destitution and prostitution is swept away, we shall not cease fighting', and it's really strangling the serpent of capitalism, and Hercules here, he is a Christian figure because somebody who was very much involved in this fight for the dockers' tanner was Cardinal Manning of the Catholic church, so you have the Catholic church element, a Christianised Hercules at the centre strangling a snake of capitalism, which I think is just an absolutely wonderful image. And of course Hercules again associated with water, associated with those who work on the water and at the waterside, and cleansing as he diverted a river through the Augean stables, and he also destroyed the hydra in the lake so I mean he's associated with water, he's associated with cleansing and all these wonderful, so he's revolutionary and Christian at the same time in this very interesting banner.

Penny Boreham:

So ultimately, when we analyse all these different interpretations, are we learning as much about ourselves as anything else in terms of the reception?

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

Very much so. I think we reflect our own cultural values back onto the classical past and see our own, in effect we see our own values reaffirmed, and because the classical past has so much cultural value, so much kudos is attached to it, I think that is partly why society keeps going back to it again and again, and there's been a sort of long history of reception of these Greek heroes down the centuries until the present.

Penny Boreham:

Paula.

Dr. Paula James:

He is a hero for our time in that he seems to link up so much with heroes of the graphic novel traditions, of cinematic texts as well and he is, well for the dockers he was also, he was part of the aristocracy of muscle because there were workers there who in their short lives had to lift enormous loads in their work and I think again so he was a perfect kind of iconic figure for them, and I think in the present day, as I said before, he's the perfect kind of figure for someone who, from birth, is clearly unusual and supernaturally strong, so he fits in with modern heroes from *Superman* to *Spiderman*.

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

I think that the Hercules we most like to see in modern times is very much Hercules, the strongman, I mean that's why he was actually portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the film *Hercules in New York*. He was definitely the perfect figure because I think he embodied this modern view of Hercules as a physically very strong hero, and that's the aspect that we like to focus on, I think.

Dr. Paula James:

But perhaps other aspects of Hercules are going to be more and more accessed, sort of appropriated by modern culture, in that, we do like our conflicted heroes as well, and so perhaps things will change or things are already changing in those terms.

Penny Boreham:

So we may be looking forward to new versions of Heracles in the future, but if you could finally sum up why, so far, you think he's been constantly portrayed and reinvented, all through the media, what do you think for you is the overriding reason? Anastasia.

Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni:

I would say that it's the complexity of the character. He has so many different aspects to him that we can basically pick and choose the ones we want and the ones that fit in with contemporary attitudes and this is, I think, what's so wonderful about the classics, that we are dealing with highly complex material that allows us to do so. If these were simple black and white figures, then they wouldn't hold our interest in the way that they do.

Penny Boreham:

Paula, you talked before about more new different versions of Heracles. Is this something you look forward to?

Dr. Paula James:

I think it's there in our modern heroes, if people could be encouraged in their understanding of Hercules or, indeed, if cinema could produce a Hercules where they suggested he had his own particular form of Kryptonite, so what are his weaknesses and how might we weaken Hercules? Of course we know he'll fight back, and he'll fight another day, and so on, but that might be rather interesting, and then they would be forced perhaps to go back to the classical sources for some ideas, and it's always nice to keep that two-way traffic going, otherwise somehow you've cut loose the hero from the past. You've distilled his essential qualities, you've packaged them up in someone else, and then you have lost something, I think.

Penny Boreham:

We look forward to that, but you've certainly helped me to unravel the hero from the hero. Many thanks to my contributors, Paula James and Anastasia Bakogianni.

Both:

Thank you.