

Faking the Myth

The audience has paid for Hercules – *any* Hercules – and any wise-cracking strongman in a loincloth will do. But can he ever be the genuine article; or even get his story straight? The Italian strongman films give us a Hercules blurred and made indeterminate by multiple attributions and roles. He is not so much an identifiable hero as a collage, an improbable patchwork of borrowed and improvised tall tales; he doesn't add up. Paradoxically, his kitschy implausibility makes him an *authentic* Hercules – and so does our scepticism.

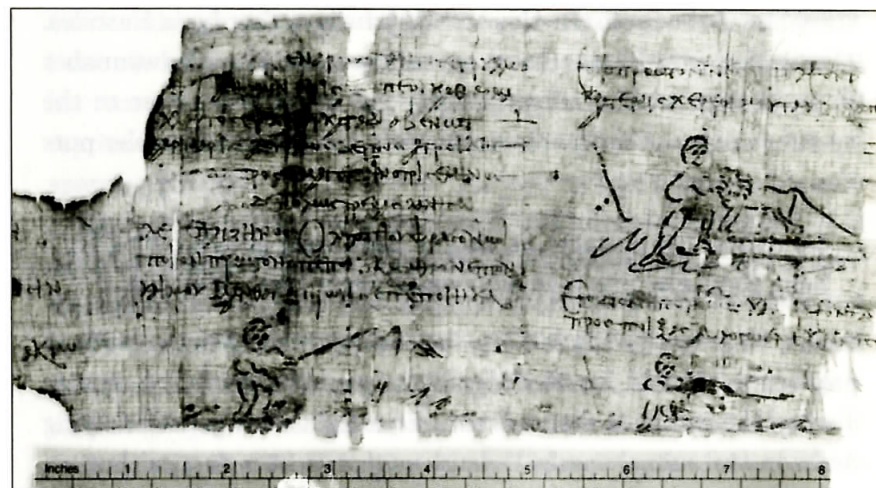
Ancient readers were already attuned to Herculean unreliability. There were simply so many stories; surely any one hero, even a supernatural strongman, couldn't have fitted them all in. Perhaps this is one reason that the *Legendary Journeys* franchise worked so well: he's a ready-made serial hero. In any case, not all of these stories agreed with one another. At least some of them had to be wrong and, from early on, Greek writers started picking holes in Hercules' CV. Hercules jumps ship from Jason's *Argo* when his young friend Hylas is kidnapped by nymphs; but Theocritus, a learned Hellenistic poet, digs up (or invents?) an alternative *Argo* story in which he hikes overland to catch up (*Idyll* 13). Theocritus insists that the mainstream version is a lie, no matter what the other heroes may have said. The Greek word for myth, *muthos*, means nothing more substantial than 'story'; any myth could be challenged. Even the basic chronology and motivation of Hercules' labours were open to question. Conventionally, Hercules is driven temporarily mad by Hera and kills his wife and children, undertaking the labours as a penance. However, Euripides' tragedy *Herakles* turns the story around: Hercules returns triumphant to his family, boasting of his famous labours; only then does Hera turn him into a murderer.

Greek theatre audiences accepted that some of the Herculeses doing the rounds in myth had to be spurious, too. We know of at

least two ancient Greek comedies called *The Fake Hercules*; there may have been more. Even the genuine article was hardly a reliable source for his own adventures – assuming you could tell him apart from the wannabes. Old Comedy playwrights including Aristophanes wrote him up as a self-important, food-guzzling dimwit; and he became a loose prototype for the braggart soldier or *miles gloriosus* of New Comedy. Audiences also knew that he was vain; he liked to quote his own good reviews. In a papyrus fragment of a satyr-play by Sophocles he recites an approving quotation about himself from Pindar, the famous writer of victory odes.

In one fragment of an ancient Greek ‘graphic novel’ he goes further, actively faking his own legend. The cartoonist narrator mischievously asks Hercules to tell the story of his adventures, and the hero obligingly launches into a textbook account of his famous labours – a story familiar to his readers from great art and canonical literature. Meanwhile, satirical cartoons interrupt the flow of the text and show us a very different version of events, undercutting Hercules’ versified ‘press release’. A chubby Hercules bumps into the Stymphalian birds by accident while out fishing; later we seem to see him engaged in a much more photogenic labour, wrestling the legendary Nemean lion. But the picture is a posed shot, a fake – look closely and you can see that the ‘lion’ is just a statue (Fig. 5). The final surviving cartoon rejects the hero’s dramatic reconstruction in favour of a fly-on-the-wall view of what actually happened. Hercules manfully chokes the life out of what the text slyly refers to as a ‘lion-on-the-ground’ – an inoffensive colour-changing lizard which the Greeks called *khamai-leon*. The painful puns and sight-gags of the cartoon Hercules papyrus suggest that, for at least some ancient readers, any Hercules was already a fraud and wannabe.

The ‘hero roulette’ of the Italian Hercules *pepla* picks up where the ancient sceptics leave off. The heroes shuffle a full deck of fake and seemingly interchangeable identities; the strongman actors



5. Hercules as heroic fake and inept self-publicist: the ancient Oxyrhynchus papyrus.

who play them, too, tend to be working under assumed names. False papers aside, the fake-Hercules plot continues to resurface, as in *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* (1962). Xena, too, must deal with multiple imitators and wannabes. The persistence of this story idea is unsurprising. Hercules’ enthusiasm for rehearsing his own myth at the drop of a hat is an authentically ancient feature – and it authentically makes us suspect him of being inauthentic. Are we being taken in by an exhibitionist fake claiming to be Hercules? Then it *must* be Hercules ... unless it’s an exhibitionist fake.

Hercules in the Maze of the Minotaur (TV film, 1995)

Hercules runs into just this problem in the fifth of his 1990s films, made by Universal for the US television networks and shot in New Zealand. The hero, played by likeable hunk Kevin Sorbo, is en route to the Minotaur’s cave with his buddy Iolaus. Night is falling; they find a tavern nearby, but none of the locals will believe Hercules’

story about the monster. Nor will they believe that he is Hercules. The innkeeper estimates that they see 'five or six' Hercules wannabes in an average week. Understandably so: as the voice-over to the opening credits proudly announces, even the genuine Hercules puts himself around a lot:

No matter the obstacle, as long as there were people crying for help, there was one man who would never rest – Hercules.

Iolaus, who fancies himself the fast talker of the pair, is quick to produce proof that his Hercules is the genuine article: he repeats a story about one of their adventures, a fight with gravity-defying Amazons in animal masks. Iolaus' *muthos* is non-classical but we know that it's genuine within the modern canon of adventures established in the four earlier TV films: it's an extended flashback to *Hercules and the Amazon Women*. All the same, it sounds like an awfully tall tale, especially as Iolaus himself dies at the end of his own story – so how can he be telling it now? The innkeeper and her regulars are unconvinced.

Luckily for Hercules, a tavern brawl begins, allowing him to establish his hero credentials by beating up the sceptics. However, there's plenty to provoke scepticism in a modern TV audience – making the 1990s Hercules very much the genuine article. Made quickly and on the cheap, *Maze of the Minotaur* is heavily padded with long flashbacks to earlier exploits – seven in all – using footage culled from its four predecessors. The 1960s strongman pictures often resorted to the same money-saving dodge, an extreme example being *Maciste, Avenger of the Mayas*, which largely consists of footage from two movies with different leading men. The patchwork narrative of *Maze* also rips off an exploit that we know properly belongs to another famous hero, Theseus; and it mixes loose versions of known Herculean labours (the Hydra, again in extended flashback) with exploits that we know have been made up for previous

movies (the giant 'Darga' and the Hercules-Zeus standoff on 'Mount Ethion'). Iolaus has even picked up some martial-arts skills during his recent travels in the East – allowing for a *Hercules vs. Kung Fu* reprise early in the movie, as he tries out his new moves on his old sparring partner.

Everything is here, very little of it makes sense, and none of it adds up: this is definitely Hercules. The contradictions and redundancies of the 'original' Hercules myths are recaptured by *Maze* and by the 1990s Hercules cycle which was to follow: the five TV movies spawned the more famous ongoing TV series, *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys*. In classical myth, for instance, Hercules' second wife is Deianeira. The TV films give us two Deianeiras, the first of whom is not married to Hercules at all. The second Deianeira is played by two actresses, who look quite unlike each other. The second actress to play this second Deianeira is killed by Hera – twice. Really, of course, Deianeira shouldn't die – it should be Megara, Hercules' first wife, and Hercules should kill her in a fit of madness. Then Deianeira should accidentally kill *him*. But who's counting? And all of this even before the first series has got under way ...

All of this is fun for classical *cognoscenti* and continuity buffs, but there are other, more glaring, discrepancies which are shared with *Legendary Journeys'* successful spin-off, *Xena: Warrior Princess*. For a Greek hero, Hercules spends a lot of time intervening in Roman narratives. The series' one-off characters have names chosen for their generic 'ancient' sound, many of them Roman or thereabouts. The first six episodes contain two fugitives from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Evander and Camilla), along with two Roman emperors slumming it in three walk-on plebeian roles (Marcus, Aurelius and Titus). Later episodes recycle these names for other one-off characters, and in Season 3 Hercules remarries a Romanesque 'Serena'. There are echoes here of Dan Vadis' Roman-blockbuster stage name. These Roman invasions penetrate deeper into the series' imaginative terrain. Episode

10, 'Gladiator', is a Roman gladiator epic in miniature – and full of conscious references to *Spartacus*. (Is this sixties *Hercules* Richard Harrison's gladiator-movie baggage, catching up with the franchise thirty years on?) The mythic framework of *Xena*, a wholly invented character, is if anything more solidly Greek than that of *Legendary Journeys*; in early episodes Xena helps Hercules free Prometheus, recaptures Sisyphus and is caught up in a war between Amazons and Centaurs. But this doesn't stop her bedding Julius Caesar in a Season 2 episode, 'Destiny', in which Xena also endures a Roman crucifixion. (Crucifixions return to derail another notionally Greek narrative in ch.3 below.)

But a Hercules who breaks across cultural boundaries and transforms into a Roman hero is *also* an authentic Hercules. The quintessential Hellenic hero only really comes into his own when he crosses over into his Roman 'afterlife'. The Romans took him up enthusiastically; like the modern film-makers, they found his myths wonderfully malleable. Modernity, in turn, takes its Hercules from Rome. Archaeology allows us to walk the streets of the unearthed town of Hercules – Roman Herculaneum, where (until Vesuvius) the hero brought fertility and good luck. In the well-known 'house of the Augustales' at Herculaneum, a sumptuous meeting-place for local officials of the imperial cult, the hero's labours and apotheosis are the subject of tasteful frescoes. Hercules' self-conscious readiness to toil for the world's good struck a chord with Roman ideas of Stoic duty to the State; they admired his stiff upper lip. In particular, his apotheosis might have helped the Augustales take on board the posthumous honours awarded to 'good' emperors in Augustus' new world order. Autocratic rule was no perk; it was a Herculean labour, willingly undertaken, and entitled its bearer to the same worship as Hercules once the burden was set aside in death. Later emperors were unwilling to wait that long to get the Hercules treatment. Commodus, the villain of *Gladiator*, notoriously modelled his

personal style on that of Hercules. Official portrait busts showed him with a Greek-style beard and Hercules' classic accessories, the lion-skin and knotted club. He even hijacked a colossal statue of the sun-god Sol (erected as a self-portrait by Nero) to write his image large across Rome's skyline; the colossus was quickly modified into a gigantic Commodus in full Herculean drag. (Mussolini tried to resuscitate the idea two millennia on, but *his* sculptors never got further than casting one of his / Hercules' gigantic feet.)

Alarming, Hercules could be trouble for Romans, too. Marc Antony, avenger of Caesar and conqueror of the barbarous East, styled himself as Hercules on the coins he used to pay his troops; but his Hercules act was swiftly hijacked by his political rival, Caesar's nephew Octavian (later to repackage himself as Augustus). Octavian was able to point to areas of Antony's public image where Hercules was too close a comparison for comfort: his fondness for drink, and his voluntary enslavement to an exotic foreign queen. Hercules' comic episode as a cross-dressing maid to queen Omphale was a usefully suggestive parallel for Antony's entanglement with Cleopatra. Hercules was the great (new) Roman myth but he had too much baggage to be a safe propaganda tool; he could all too easily invite accusations of un-Roman activities, even of being a big sissy.

Modern treatments of Hercules suffer from a similar set of anxieties, but the focus has shifted. The hero's larger-than-life star image is what attracts film-makers; yet some of its most 'authentic' ingredients are still considered box-office death. We will see a similar pattern emerge for Alexander in the next chapter. Alexander, though, was a flesh-and-blood person before he became a myth. Perhaps misguidedly, we feel that we might discover true stories about him; and this opens up the possibility of dismissing other (inconvenient?) stories as lies. Any Alexander anecdote that threatens to frighten the horses can be argued away as a histor-

ical misunderstanding, as ancient or modern propaganda. With Hercules, nothing is true and the stories are everything. Some of the most important are about a boy called Hylas.

'Mommy, what's Daddy doing to Uncle Iolaus?': the sidekick problem

Hercules is frequently accompanied in his ancient adventures by a loyal young companion. 'Iolaus' is the son of the hero's half-brother, Iphicles, and accompanies Hercules on several adventures; 'Hylas' is a young favourite who sails with Hercules on the *Argo*. The two sidekicks are never in the same place at the same time; they are effectively interchangeable in modern versions, where their transliterated names even sound alike. (Just to muddy the waters further, one of Hercules' surviving sons is called 'Hyllus'; a semi-retired Iolaus teams up with him in Euripides' *Children of Herakles*, and Hyllus puts in an unexpected repeat appearance in the 1961 Reg Park peplum, *Hercules in the Haunted World*.)

Hylas in particular gets some readers hot under the collar. The ancient sources are unambiguous: Hylas is Hercules' jailbait boyfriend, his beautiful and self-regarding *eromenos*. Lust-struck water-nymphs kidnap and drown the boy, who has been sent off by the Argonauts to fetch water; Hercules, distraught, abandons the *Argo's* mission to Colchis and wanders the countryside calling for his lost love. *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* never re-created this episode, and its inclusion in any future version seems unlikely, but for ancient authors it was a favourite scene – Hercules at his most human, and Hylas' fifteen minutes of fame. Its most famous versions are Hellenistic, in Apollonius of Rhodes' new-model epic *Argonautica* and Theocritus' *Idylls*. For Theocritus, the story is well enough known to deserve a minor but crucial correction: as mentioned above, *his* Hercules gets over it, hiking overland to catch up with his

fellow-Argonauts in time to complete the mission. The Roman poet Valerius Flaccus also produced an effective, neo-Homeric retelling in which Hercules' grief is as heroically unconstrained as Achilles' rage. Flaccus' version, too, takes the voyage of the *Argo* as its backdrop. Other versions clearly did the rounds. A papyrus fragment found a century ago in Egypt accidentally preserves part of a poetic catalogue of heroic man-boy relationships, with Hercules and Hylas playing a prominent role. It has been suggested that this list of examples (or *priamel*) was written to please Hadrian, justifying his relationship with his cute young boyfriend Antinous by digging up legendary precedents in the Greek literature that the Roman emperor loved so much. (Or is it just early Hercules slash?)

More modern receptions have had a trickier time justifying Hylas' inclusion. Don Chaffey's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) is usually remembered for Ray Harryhausen's splendidly scary skeleton warriors, but it makes bold choices in its portrayal of Hercules – most obviously in its intelligent against-type casting of British character actor Nigel Green, best known as the ramrod-straight drill sergeant in *Zulu* (1964). The screenplay, by Beverley Cross and veteran Jan Read, is a surprisingly literate and relatively faithful adaptation of Apollonius' Hellenistic epic. Cross and Read respect their source enough to include Hylas, but the film is at a loss to know what to do with him.

We shall see in ch.3 below that Greek historical films can have similar problems: in particular, what are they to do with Alexander the Great and *his* best buddy, Hephaestion? *Jason and the Argonauts* resembles Robert Rossen's 1956 *Alexander the Great* in contriving simultaneously to include and sideline the problem character. Partly this is achieved at the level of casting, as in Rossen's picture. Hercules in *Jason* is a heavy hitter with stage experience; Hylas is John Cairney, a minor Glaswegian bit-player. Partly, too, the film pushes Hylas to the margins by minimising his role in the

action and removing his motivation as a character. The kid sidekick is welcomed on board, not as Hercules' squeeze, but as a plucky trickster who'll be an asset to the expedition (an un-classical characterisation established in a pre-voyage scene involving a discus). But the script denies him any opportunity to display these positive traits, and gets him out of the way as quickly as possible. Even the nymphs are written out in case they remind us of Hylas' 'sissy' narcissism. The clear implication of the ancient sources is that Hylas sets himself up for a fall: he's too in love with his own good looks to just fill the jug and go without lingering to check out his reflection. Instead, *Jason and the Argonauts* squashes him under the feet of Harryhausen's giant bronze robot, Talos. Nigel Green's Hercules is badly shaken, and leaves the ship's company just as in Apollonius; but it's no longer at all clear *why* – other than professional embarrassment at his failure to manage a promising protégé.

A recent made-for-TV *Jason and the Argonauts* (2000) reprises the 1963 storyline on the cheap; most of the characters and incidents stay in, but Hylas' role is cut altogether in favour of a strictly heterosexual quest. Jolene Blaylock, now better known as Vulcan science officer T'Pol in the *Star Trek* prequel series *Enterprise*, plays Jason's love interest Medea; Dennis Hopper and Derek Jacobi slum it in cameo roles. The 2000 TV special is a notoriously feeble version of the story, but its decision to leave Hylas on the cutting-room floor makes sound economic sense. Character in cinema is best defined by actions, and a passionate kiss between Hercules and Hylas is an action too far for all but the boldest production companies. Several of the *Alexander* contenders peddled an openly bisexual conqueror in their pre-production publicity, and aspects of this persona filtered through into Stone's final cut; but this is a very different game: on this, see ch.3 below.

Legendary Journeys, too, prudently skirted around Hercules' penchant for Boy Wonders – but it did so by building the character

up, not by cutting it altogether. The series' sidekick, Iolaus, is very much a youngish grown-up who can usually take care of himself – and occasionally has to step in to save Hercules' skin. The *Hercules* series is action-packed but also character-driven, and it invests heavily in Iolaus' development as a stand-alone character. He has motives, muscles, a distinctive fighting style and a personality that evolves as the series progresses. He is a much better effort than the Hylas of *Jason and the Argonauts* – or, really, the pin-up Hylas of Apollonius' *Argonautica*. Even so, bits of Hylas leak through into Iolaus at moments of heroic bonding. In *Maze of the Minotaur*, Hercules and Iolaus have settled down as farmers after their previous adventures; both are bored silly, and any excuse for an adventure will do. (Their motivation thus uncannily mirrors that of the TV movie's producers.) Iolaus drops in on his pal to reminisce about the good old days, and brags about his subsequent travels in the East; one thing leads to another. Deianeira and the children walk into the barn to find the pair in tight leather trousers, stripped to the waist and entwined in what they assure her is a wrestling move:

small child: Mommy, what's Daddy doing to Uncle Iolaus?

Deianeira: I don't know, sweetie, I was wondering the same thing myself.

And so were we ... But once the ongoing series got its act together, it was consistently careful to avoid camping up the relationship between Hercules and Iolaus. On this point, *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys* stands in stark opposition to its successful spin-off, *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Although constrained by what the networks would stand for, *Xena* consciously courted a lesbian audience via increasingly heavy hints – most famously in the episode 'A Day in the Life' – about the relationship between the heroine and her sidekick, Gabrielle. Audiences responded enthusiastically to this erotically charged subtext. The implicit romantic tension clearly helped the

show expand its market share, broadening its appeal beyond the obvious, and still indispensable, core demographic of teenaged boys. (The TV series *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer* enjoyed a similar mid-run rejuvenation when it brought Buffy's best friend, Willow, out of the closet.) Receptions of the show in unofficial media, too, embraced the idea of a hidden relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. It became a favourite topic for female-authored slash fiction online. Meanwhile, a string of 'unauthorised' episode guides and series companions titillated the guys by cataloguing the show's double-entendres and smouldering glances.

None of this fan activity transferred back to the original *Legendary Journeys*, which shared Xena's commercially essential core audience of male adolescents. The scriptwriters' assumption – almost certainly correct – was that this audience would find Xena's hinted lesbianism alluring but would switch channels at any suggestion of a gay leading man. Accordingly, they were consistently careful to keep the show on the straight and narrow (thus nipping in the bud any potential gay receptions). Episode guides and other spin-offs play along, reinforcing the heroes' straight personae. Hercules' original mythology is discussed at length, but selectively: Hylas is conspicuous by his absence. Hercules and Iolaus are doomed to be just good friends.

Serial infidelity

Is Hercules himself, though, any less of an intractable absence? Is there anything behind the chiseled good looks and the 'Herculean Muscle'?

Often, of course, Hercules isn't himself (or is only himself as a marketing afterthought): he is Maciste, Ursus, Colossus, Géant, or a variety of 'Sons of ...'. To be a proper Hercules, he must be inauthentic often enough – unfaithful to, or implausible in rehearsing,

his own myth. This Hercules is the perfect post-modern hero; the simulacrum is everything. The Hercules of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, self-consciously photogenic, has pulled it off with panache. He has also revealed a strong sense of humour, knowingly resuming his ancient role as class clown. It is probably no accident that the most 'unfaithful' Hercules of all, trouser-clad WWE-alike Kevin Sorbo, has been far and away the most satisfying – and a runaway commercial success. *Hercules: the Legendary Journeys*' multiple infidelity to classical sources was if anything its greatest strength. Any Hercules story is always already a series of citations – conscious or unconscious recyclings of previous versions, along with incorporations of 'new' material – and *Maze of the Minotaur* and its companion pieces are the perfect exemplars of this very ancient trend. (The twelve labours, as featured on the sculpted metopes of the ancient Temple of Olympian Zeus, were already an improvised and spin-doctored 'greatest hits' collection.) Sincerely tongue-in-cheek, *Legendary Journeys* and *Xena* were worthy successors to the Herculean excesses of the sixties *pepla*. They represent the latest growth spurt of a Hydra-headed monster that has swallowed the myths of other Greek heroes and continues to gorge on everything from gladiators to kung fu. The ancient Hercules franchise has been rejuvenated, pretty much literally. A *Young Hercules* was spun off early on; and a new and entirely unconnected *Hercules* series is set to appear shortly, this time with a strong youth emphasis.

By a combination of attrition and absorption, Hercules has come to stand as the paradigmatic hero of Greek myth; but he has also come a long way from Greece. He began the journey in antiquity, when Rome bought out his contract; the Italian muscleman flicks of the 1960s assert an unbroken and long-standing Roman stake in the hero's management. Meanwhile, America beckons; the Italian strongmen brush up their CVs, recasting their stories and identities for an easier assimilation into the new Rome beyond the

Pillars of Hercules; and the hero's old story of westward migration resumes in response to a new cultural imperialism. Does Hercules labour only for non-Greeks? While the Italian musclemen oiled up as 'Herculean Muscle' at the drive-in, modern Greece high-mindedly stayed away from the meat market: its contemporary forays into classical myth were limited to the High Culture cul-de-sac of reverential communion with long-dead classical tragedians. The latter-day Greek nation's relationship to its classical namesake has always been a difficult one to negotiate, both internally and in the eyes of a wider European and global culture. The flipside of the West's philhellenic nostalgia for the ancient cradle of democracy has been a consistent tendency to regard contemporary Greece with dismissive condescension as a fruit fallen far from the tree of the Tradition. Perhaps inevitably, Greek culture's receptions of its self-declared autochthonous legacy have been conservative and risk-averse. An insistence on dramatic authenticity and serious values has left Hercules – braggart, clown, and heroic serial faker – out of work. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, non-Greeks everywhere know his name; Disney and Kevin Sorbo have made him the world's hero. In Greece, meanwhile, he is little more than a brand of cement.

ANCIENT GREECE
IN
FILM AND POPULAR CULTURE

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