

From 'Zero to Hero': The rise of Neo-Mythologism in the cinematic rebirth of Disney's Herakles [1997]

Walt Disney, as J.P. May bluntly observes, 'never produced films that demanded much intellectually of the audience.'¹ Academic dissections of his work seemed to have avoided the limelight as a result in the pursuit of separating what has been termed as light hearted entertainment with real media. Simply put, one of Disney's greatest achievements in the world of film was replacing the desire to read with indulging in slapstick humour; he has changed literature from the classical to the mainstream².

Consequently, instead of situating his retellings in the depths of their thematic or cultural complexity, Disney retains only a shell of familiarity in order to provoke that comfortable feeling of recognition in their audiences. A new narrative emerges, grounded in fast paced action, emotional accessibility, and middle class American values. After assessing Disney's intentions, it may seem that analysing the classical reception of Disney's *Hercules*, a film which proudly declares its disinterest in accuracy, might seem redundant. It is precisely for this reason of disinterest that such an examination becomes necessary.

By turning the hero Herakles into *Hercules*, Disney exemplifies how contemporary mass media aims to digest classical material: with the intention to create palatable content relatable to Western sensibilities. The metamorphosis reveals how modern American culture wants the past to be bent according to their own ideals. When he bought the rights to a certain classic, what he really wanted was the rights to the basic plot. While the settings then depended on the author of the adaptation, the scenes rarely adhere to the characterisation, style, and plot of the originals. *Hercules* presents the cultural fantasy of ancient Greece as a backdrop for the American narrative that it aims to push, with ideals of being self-made through personal branding permeate every aspect of the film.

Further, *Hercules* comes across as somewhat conceited on his journey to God-hood, with his story arc being a long attempt to find his way back to Olympus where he believes he rightly belongs³. This then raises the question if of all his actions are self-serving; it is only when he does something truly unselfish, wilfully sacrificing himself for Megara, that he attains his reward. In stark contrast, the ancient Herakles is defined by his confusion and consequent suffering. After killing his wife and children in a divine fit of madness, he emerged shattered, labelling his labours as futile. His God-hood only comes about through even more pain and suffering, with the jealous of his second wife Deianira leading to his mortal body's destruction.

The film *Hercules* performs a striking act of neo-mythologism, a term coined by the Italian film maker Vittorio Cottafavi to describe the phenomenon of screen writers and directors taking great

¹ May, J.P. (1981). Walt Disney's Interpretation of Children's Literature. *Language Arts*, [online] 58(4), pp.463–472.

² May, J.P. (1981). Walt Disney's Interpretation of Children's Literature. *Language Arts*, [online] 58(4), pp.463–472.

³ Emerson, D.L. (2019). Mythology in Children's Animation. *Mythlore*.

liberties with their classical sources⁴. Essentially, it points towards the modern reinvention of classical mythology through contemporary aesthetics and commercial frameworks. This idea was not foreign to antiquity, with the idea of ‘myth’ being fluid enough to accommodate to divergent and even contradictory versions of the same story within the works of playwrights on the one hand and those of sculptors and painters on the other⁵.

Therefore, it seems that the rise of cinema has only continued this tradition, serving further as a cultural translation. Traditional Greek mythology aimed to explore the instability which emerged from human suffering, while neo-mythologism aims to streamline this chaos to resonate with 21st century audiences. By stripping Herakles of his tragedy and guiding him thorough the path of an American hero, Disney engages in mythic domestication. By comparing the Herakles of antiquity and his classical counterparts to his animated descendent, this essay aims to understand the broader patterns of Western engagement with the classical world, and why it chooses slapstick humour over the existential enquiry of the former.

“What is the measure of a true hero?”⁶

Before the credits, Disney’s animation begins by panning over a dusty backdrop symbolising the ancient Greek ideal; a tableau of ancient artworks housed in a pantheon-esque museum. Offscreen, a solemn male narrator introduces the myth we are to see unfold, asking what metrics are used to claim the title of a Greek hero. The classical opening manifests as white, dry, and self-important,⁷ serving as a reflection of the general American view of the ancient world itself.



⁴ Winkler, M.M. (2005). Neo-Mythologism: Apollo and the Muses on the Screen. *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*

⁵ Winkler, M.M. (2005). Neo-Mythologism: Apollo and the Muses on the Screen. *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*

⁶ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

⁷ College, T. and Curley, D. (n.d.). *The Gospel Truth: Animated Narrative in Disney’s Hercules (1997)*.

⁸ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

As the world of Disney aimed to diverge from intellectual pursuits in their media, and in some regard from an aesthetic lens, to create ‘art for art’s sake’, the theatrical pretention is promptly disrupted by the Muses.



Moving past the classical façade, we are introduced to a close up of an amphora on which we see both a large painting of Hercules wrestling the Nemean Lion, and above it the narrators of our story, the Muses.

This deliberate parody of the classical world falls apart with this shattering of the fourth wall by breaking out of the black-figure vase, painting Greek tragedy and its counterparts in media as slow and out of fashion.

First muse: *Will you listen to him? He’s makin’ the story sound
like some Greek tragedy!*

Second muse: *[to narrator] Lighten up, dude!*

Third muse: *We’ll take it from here, darling.*

Narrator: *[resigned] You go, girl.¹⁰*

Despite their lamenting over the mundanity of Greek tragedy in the prologue, the film in good tragic fashion has the Muses return as the central narrators, providing commentary on the action at hand, almost functioning as the Chorus on the classical Greek stage.

⁹ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

¹⁰ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

“We are the Muses, Goddess of the arts and proclaimers of heroes...”¹¹

The irony is rich: Euripides’ Herakles is a Greek tragedy, steeped in divine cruelty and psychological ruin.

Despite the fact that Disney’s version rejects that line of thought, the Muses’ musical interjections and snappy gospel songs do not merely function as a new stylised storytelling. The Muses remain narrators in the classical sense, but they perform in a genre foreign to Euripidean tragedy. They introduce here a metatextual declaration which is important for the intent of Disney’s reception throughout the rest of the film. The gravitas of ancient Greek tragedy has been displaced in favour of an attempt to modernise the narrative for mass entertainment; a witty retelling of Greek myth as a satire of modern consumerism and celebrity cults¹².



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Despite the obvious diversion from the story of the ancient Greek hero, Herakles, Disney still maintained a certain level of accuracy in their detailing, prevalent outside of the main storyline.

Most notably, Herakles is known for his Twelve Labours, the first of which being him wrestled the Nemean Lion to death. This lion is visually reference twice, the first being in the introduction scene above, therefore paying an ode to the original myth.

¹¹ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

¹² Winkler, M.M. (2005). Neo-Mythologism: Apollo and the Muses on the Screen. *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*

¹³ Herakles and the Nemean Lion, Athenian red-figure stamnos, C5th BC, University of Pennsylvania Museum



The second nod to the mythic version however is less of an adaptation, as Hercules emerged wearing the hide of what is unmistakably Scar from the Disney film 'The Lion King.' This scene was clearly added as a in-joke laugh for attentive viewers, but on a deeper level acts as a moment of corporate self-reference. By tying the myth of Herakles and his labours to another Disney franchise, the company further domesticates the ancient Greek world, reducing its distinct and independent culture.

Additionally, by removing the concept of 'The Twelve Labours' entirely from the film, except in regard to the presence of a few of the beasts he battles, Disney reduces the plot further. After being commanded by King Eurystheus to destroy the Lion as the first of his labours, he took the hide to make a lion skin cape which was impervious to weapons. Hera, then placed the Lion amongst the stars, as the constellation Leo. By removing the action detailed to reaching this point, and the importance of the actions for the rest of Herakles narrative, the Disney reception again pushes American ideals onto the Greek hero.

While the ancient Greeks found a marker for being a 'hero' in *kleos*, or glory, specifically through great deeds in battle, the Americanised Hercules seems to find his eternal moment of glory after his act of love towards Megara, willingly sacrificing himself in the Underworld by believing he was exchanging his souls for hers.

In contrast, while the Labours in the film version are performed for personal growth and popularity, they are essentially dismissed as a conflation between an act of strength and an act of heroism. On the other hand, while Euripides too essentially dismisses the heroism behind the labours, it is for far graver reasons.

**Whom should I protect more than my wife,
my father, and my sons? Farewell, my labours:
in vain I have I achieved them for others more than these;
yet I must die in their defense, since for hteir faither
They were to die. Or shall we say it is good
that I met the Hydra in battle, and the lion
sent by Eurystheus, but not to keep my sons from death
I will not labour ardently? Ah! May I then be called
The glorious-conquering Herakles no more.¹⁴**

It is accepted in both the film and the original Greek play by Euripides that the labours are performed for others, however while in Hercules this realisation comes from the lack of personal fulfilment from the popularity he gained through these tasks, the Euripidean Herakles must complete the twelve labours as purification for the murdering of his wife and children after a divine madness is delivered to him by Hera.



¹⁴ Potter, R., Ebbott, M. and Dué, C. (n.d.). *Euripides, Herakles*. [online] The Center for Hellenic Studies.

¹⁵ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.



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The later encounter with Nessus is particularly telling. In classical myth, the centaur attempts to assault Herakles' second wife, Deianira, after the murder of Megara. Herakles kills him with a poisoned arrow, and in his dying breath, Nessus gives her his poisoned blood as a gift, disguised as a love potion. Eventually, this deceit will lead to Herakles' show, and agonising death.

In the Disney world, the sexual danger of the centaur is defused in the light of being a palatable family friendly film. He is still presented in a lecherous manner, but cartoonishly so. The dark and tragic themes of the myth are mitigated and replaced with slapstick: what was once a myth encapsulating a fatal betrayal becomes a plot device in a romantic subplot.

Pain, Panic: [disguised as kids trapped in a rockslide] *Somebody call IX-I-I!*



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¹⁶ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

¹⁷ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

The mythic hydra is rendered here as an action piece set in Hades games. Instead of facing Heras wrath, Disney has created a villain out of the God of the Underworld. Classically the Lernaean Hydra was understood as a metaphor for the heroes inability to ever truly conquer chaos, and the feelings of futility and frustration that accompany this fact; from each head that one decapitates, two more would spring forth. Herakles is able to defeat her with the help of Iolaos, who helps him to apply burning brands to the severed stumps, cauterising the wounds to prevent any regeneration.

In *Hercules*, the moral complexity of facing this seemingly endless and unyielding struggle is flattened by a quick punch and a rock slide: the labour essentially becomes an arcade game.



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This point is only extrapolated further by the transposed battle with the Cyclops, taken from Homers Odyssey. Despite the fact that this element of the film is devoid of relation to the ancient Greek Herakles, Hercules encounter with Polyphemus is detached from the wit and deception of the original.



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¹⁸ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

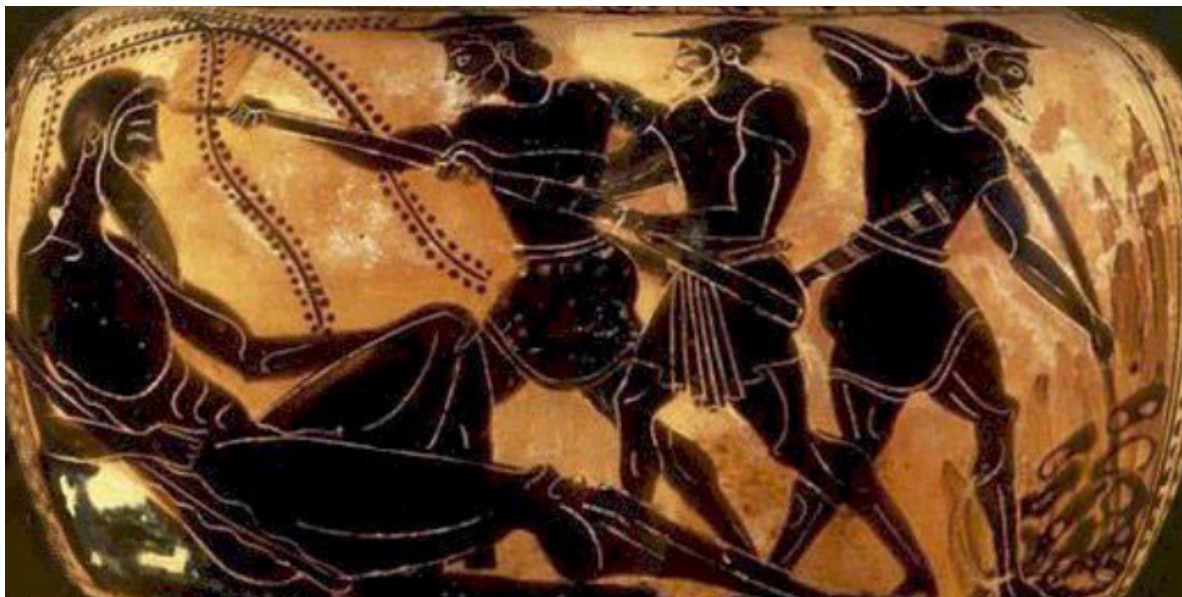
¹⁹ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

²⁰ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

The hero Odysseus stumbles across the island of the Cyclops on his return from Troy, seeking xenia from the abode of an unknown cave dweller. Becoming stuck in the giants cave, the hero plied him with divine wine and as he drifted off, plunged a burning stake into his one distinct eye.

‘So we seized our stake with its fiery tip and bored it round and round in the giant’s eye till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft... its crackling roots blazed and hissed – as a blacksmith plunges a glowing axe or adze in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam and its temper hardens– that the iron’s strength – so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake’²¹

Yet again this encapsulated the films entire approach, where classical material is stripped of ambiguity and repackaged as pure entertainment. In Disney’s world there is no need for nuance or morally conflicted characters like that of Odysseus; there are merely the good and the evil. The scene simply confirms that Hercules is strong enough to win – a narrative convenience.



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Hades: [slowly burns up] I’ve got 24 hours to get rid of this... bozo, or the entire scheme I’ve been setting up for 18 years goes up in smoke, and YOU ARE WEARING HIS MERCHANDISE?



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²¹ Homer (1996). *The Odyssey*. Deluxe ed. Translated by R. Fagles. Penguin Classic.

²² Cyclops Polyphemus blinded by Odysseys, Athenian black-figure oinochoe, C6th BC, Musée du Louvre

²³ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

²⁴ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

Nowhere is Disney's process more explicit than in the song 'Zero to Hero.' The following montage charts Hercules' transformation into a celebrity, appearing on pottery, sandals, and drinkware. He signs autographs and endorses products, all while becoming a commercial entity himself.

This marks a shift in the definition of celebrity across the ancient and current periods, with the former honouring those heroes who died earning *kleos* through endurance in suffering. For the latter, it has become increasingly apparent that market visibility and public acclaim has replaced such noble, or moralistic, ideals.

When examining 'Who owns our myths?', Harris pushes further and asks what happens to the mythic figure as he fights for survival under the ideals of our society²⁵? The ancient myths belonged to everyone, with the oral tradition to be invoked whenever the occasion suggested. Now, the ancient hero finds himself existing in a world built around the 'twin notions of private property and liberty of expression'²⁶

During the last hundred years, advertising and media appetites have combined to create a powerful post-industrial folklore²⁷; a story that can be remoulded and spat out on demand. In the search for quick profits, merchandisers have curated the perfected time tested formulas, and in effect, our modern mythic heroes have succumbed in morality to be franchised and rented out as experiences or a product. Even the author of Superman, Jerry Siegel has stated:

"I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one. Only more so."²⁸



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He's makin' the story some Greek tragedy!

This paradoxical return back to the lyrical proclamation that Hercules' 'daring deeds make great theatre' collapses the dissonance between the past and the present. Even as Disney ironises these

²⁵ Harris, N. (1985). Who Owns Our Myths? Heroism and Copyright in an Age of Mass Culture. Social Research

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²⁷ Harris, N. (1985). Who Owns Our Myths? Heroism and Copyright in an Age of Mass Culture. Social Research

²⁸ Harris, N. (1985). Who Owns Our Myths? Heroism and Copyright in an Age of Mass Culture. Social Research

²⁹ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

³⁰ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

contradicting statements, this is definitely emphatic of the gradual shift away from media being made to hold moral value rather than for simple entertainment. Both Disney and the ancients would agree that the feats of Hercules, or to the latter Herakles, are spectacles to be examined. But it is clear that the tragic element has been exorcised as film narratives became more secularised.



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The idea of the divine and Greek polytheism being prevalent amongst the ancient populations of the time was essential to the forming of the characterisation of the hero. Consequently, perhaps the most striking departure from myth comes in the film's resolution. In the film, he offers to trade his life to save Meg, and is then momentarily offered the God-hood he had been working towards his whole life, which he declines in favour of his mortal love. This certainly reflects a Christianised moral lens, by which there is salvation through love.

In antiquity, deification was neither romantic nor optional. Suffering does not necessarily need to be redemptive. Herakles finds that he has murdered Megara, his wife, alongside his children in a frenzy induced by Hera, and after his recovery he cries out:

Herakles:

Ah me! A cloud of sorrow hangs around me,

...

Amphitryon:

Only one thing I know: in all things you are wretched³²

³¹ *Hercules*. (1997). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures.

³² Potter, R., Ebbott, M. and Dué, C. (n.d.). *Euripides, Herakles*. [online] The Centre for Hellenic Studies.

The Herakles of tragedy is neither entirely rewarded or fulfilled in the same way as Disney's Hercules is. In Euripides' *Herakles*, the hero's potential follows with disaster, and only after enduring the unbearable does he find some solace with the assistance of Theseus. More pointedly, in Euripides' *Alcestris*, Herakles wrestles with death itself, not for glory or heaven, but to return a wife to her grieving husband. This was a feat of compassion and service to others, not a tidy reward of individual self-actualisation.

Disney's Hercules dives into the glowing River Styx to rescue his own lover, Meg. The effect seems the same, but in tone it is not. In replacing the purpose prescribed to Herakles with the choices presented to Hercules, Disney is able to provide a neat narrative closure, where the hero 'earns' his divinity by embodying righteous virtues. Ancient myth recognises the Gods as cruel and indifferent, but Disney makes them benefactors of the morally upright; a revision which is both ideologically and theologically modern.

Disney's *Hercules* exemplifies how classical material survives in terms of mass entertainment, and how through societal and cultural shifts, myths must also undergo reinvention. This shift from Herakles to Hercules does not necessarily indicate a betrayal of antiquity, but rather, it reveals an act of cultural authorship whereby narratives are moulded to fit the aesthetics and ideologies of their receivers. Classical reception is an active process, and in the hands of Disney, the ancient world becomes a canvas for creative liberties.

It tells us more about the values and desires of contemporary America than it does about ancient Greece. For the ancients, Herakles was a hero of suffering and endurance. Hercules is transformed into a character of cheerful perseverance and individual agency. Yet perhaps this adaptation is itself part of an ancient tradition. The ancient Greeks themselves continually reworked their own myths, existing contently with various contrasting versions of the same characters. Tragedians reshaped Homeric epics and sculptors gave Gods new forms.

Neo-Mythologism, then, is not the decaying of myth, but its metamorphosis. While Disney's Hercules may no longer be wrestling with madness or morality, there is still a meaning behind his new form as he stands representing the imaginative needs of each new age. Antiquity gave us stories to contemplate the divine, and so perhaps modernity now gives us myths to contemplate ourselves. In this way, Disney's Hercules not only reimagines the idea of the classical hero, but reveals how every era while inherently change the myths it inherits in the image of its own aspirations, fears, and dreams.

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