

Emma Stafford, *Herakles. Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*. London-New York: Routledge, 2012. Pp. xxvi + 302, ISBN 978-0-415-30067-4.

In his Sather Classical Lectures on *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, Walter Burkert wrote this memorable sentence: “The Heracles theme in ancient civilization is so rich and full of variations that it may easily fill a book – or even a scholar’s life work”.¹ Over thirty years later, Emma Stafford has achieved the seemingly impossible in her comprehensive treatment of the Herakles theme. Not only does she cover the Greek and Roman periods from the early archaic to the late imperial era, she also opens a window into the immense field of reception, a topic which in itself could easily be another scholar’s life work.

“Why Herakles?” asks Stafford at the beginning of her short foreword (p. xxv). Because he is “the quintessential Greek hero”, because “he featured in more stories and was represented more frequently in art than [any] other hero or god”, is her answer. However, Herakles is more than that. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Herakles is the fact that no other figure in ancient mythology is as multifaceted and ambivalent as he; in fact, Herakles, unlike any other mythological hero, encompasses so wide a range of (seemingly) conflicting traits and features that he can be, virtually at the same time, a cloddish monster slayer, a torn tragic hero, a gluttonous comic figure, a paradigm of good virtue, etc., and therefore he can sometimes be a man, sometimes a demigod/ἥρωας, and sometimes a god. To some extent, this may explain the ancients’ preoccupation with this mythological character. It certainly explains why Stafford’s book is a pleasure to read from the first to the last page.

In an introductory chapter (“Introducing Herakles”, pp. 3–19), Stafford provides a concise summary of Herakles’ life and deeds (following mainly the account in Apollodoros’ *Bibliothēke*), introduces the most important textual and iconographic sources, and gives an overview of some of the most prevalent and influential theoretical approaches that were (and are) used for the study of the figure of Herakles. Some, but unfortunately only a little, attention is devoted to the vexed question of Herakles’ name and its origin (or ‘original’ meaning). Although this question may, admittedly, be of minor interest to non-specialists, nevertheless it should have been examined in greater detail. First, the name Ἡρακλῆς need not necessarily mean “glory of Hera”, as is commonly assumed, but could be read as something like “glory [achieved] through Hera” – glory achieved involuntarily, one might add, since Hera wanted to kill Herakles, not grant him eternal honour and life; but as Herakles always managed to escape Hera, he ultimately achieved all his honour thanks to her. Secondly, if we wish to adhere to the seemingly paradoxical interpretation of the compound as “glory of Hera”, we might wonder whether there may have existed, somewhere and sometime, a parallel tradition according to which Herakles himself was “the glory of Hera”. As a matter of fact, Stafford offers an example which might potentially point in that very direction: she discusses the representations of Herakles on the temple of Hera at Foce del Sele (Campania, c. 560 BC), where one can find, *inter alia*, “a group of three metopes present[ing] what may

¹ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1979), p. 98.

be Herakles protecting Hera from the attack of four Silenoi, an episode not attested at all in literature, but found again in early fifth-century vase-painting at Athens” (ch. 1, p. 28). Could it be possible that this scene is a faint trace of an otherwise lost tradition where Hera was not at all hostile towards Herakles, where she was perhaps even his mother, and could it be that the hero’s name “glory of Hera” was a remnant of this tradition?

The first of the following six main chapters (“Key Themes”) is – not surprisingly – concerned with the twelve so-called ‘canonical’ labours of Herakles (“Monsters and the Hero I: The Twelve Labours”, pp. 23–50). In addition to the re-narration of the stories of these labours in the preceding introductory chapter, here Stafford traces each labour’s ‘story’ in turn by presenting the textual and iconographic sources in chronological order. Although this chapter is more descriptive than analytical, the author provides a sufficient amount of specialised information, too. For example, it comes as some surprise to learn that, besides Apollodoros in his *Bibliothēke*, no other ancient authority provides the well-known detail that one of the heads of the Lernaian hydra was immortal, and therefore it could not be killed but had to be buried alive. Furthermore, one is taught that there existed ancient disputes about why the Keryneian hind had horns (“sexual ambiguity”, p. 35), and that Kerberos had only two, not three heads on Attic black-figure vases, where he was a fairly popular subject for some time. Prior to her in-depth presentation of the twelve labours, Stafford also discusses the development of their canonisation in Greek culture, whereby she emphasises the (perhaps again astonishing) fact that the first appearance of the *dodekathlos* as a specific ‘twelve-labour-thing’ is not in a literary source, but on the metopes of the Zeus temple at Olympia (c. 460 BC).

The second chapter follows the same structure as the first and presents the remaining labours of Herakles aside from the *dodekathlos*, of which there are also plenty (“Monsters and the Hero II: Other Battles”, pp. 51–78). Again, Stafford meticulously traces the various (and often quite dispersed) sources of all these adventures and arranges them in chronological order. And again, it is a surprise and a pleasure to learn a wealth of new details and gain new insights. Who knew, for example, that an alternative version of the famous first Heraklean deed, the killing of the two snakes, is attested by Pherekydes (fr. 69 F), and that according to this version it was Amphitryon, not Hera, who sent the snakes – not to kill Herakles, but to find out which baby was which? Who would have guessed that archaic iconography usually depicts Herakles in his fight against the centaur Nessos not with poisoned arrows, but with a sword or a club, although this is, as Stafford rightly points out, “slightly at odds with the logic of the story”, but, after all, “more in keeping with the archaic conception of a good fight, as well as suiting the limited canvas offered by most Greek media” (p. 77)?

In the following three chapters, Stafford presents and discusses the appropriation of the Herakles figure in Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, and politics. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Herakles as represented in Greek and Roman tragedy (“The Tragic Hero”, pp. 79–103). At the centre of Stafford’s interest lies the usage of Herakles as a character in Attic tragedy; in addition to the five extant Herakles tragedies (Soph.: *Women of Trachis* – *Philoktetes*; Eur.: *Alkestis* – *Herakles* – *Children of*

Herakles), Stafford also discusses two of Euripides' Herakles tragedies of which only fragments survive (*Auge – Peirithous*), as well as adaptations of the tragic Herakles/Hercules character in Roman drama. It is only logical that this chapter should follow the one on Herakles as a killer of beasts, since tragedy, as Stafford puts it, “takes the monster-slaying Herakles of archaic tradition and explores the potential for disaster when he returns to the confines of the everyday domestic world” (p. 103). As a result, “Euripides’ version of his madness and Sophokles’ of his death [...] define Herakles as a tragic hero, excessive in both his life and his suffering but nonetheless human” (ibid.). It may have been useful here to add that the tension between Herakles as a human and a god, viz. his role as a ‘borderliner’ between the worlds of mortals and immortals, is also a key element in tragedy. Stafford rightly draws attention to the ending of Sophokles’ *Philoktetes*, where Herakles is staged as a human first, but as a *deus ex machina* in the final scene. In a similar vein, one could perceive the same tension at work in Euripides’ *Herakles*, where Herakles, after returning from the Underworld and thus coming close to his imminent deification, suffers his heaviest stroke of fate and is rescued by his *doppelgänger* Theseus, who adopts the role of the *deus ex machina* on this occasion. In so doing, however, Theseus not only lives up to “the Greek ideal of reciprocal friendship”, as Stafford argues (p. 92), but on a structural level, Euripides also negotiates Herakles’ oscillation between the world of men and that of the gods.

The next chapter (“Vice or Virtue Incarnate”, pp. 104–36) leads us away from Herakles the doer of good (or bad) things to “three broad trends in Herakles’ treatment in literature and art of the classical period and later”, which “all focus not on Herakles’ famous monster-slaying exploits but rather on internal qualities, of the intellect, appetites and emotions” (p. 104). The result of this trend is that one and the same figure is represented as (i) the gluttonous (would-be) hero in Attic Old Comedy and satyr plays; (ii) the intellectualised, even allegorised *exemplum virtutis* and proto-philosopher from the classical period onward; and (iii) a ‘romantic’ Herakles, viz. Herakles as a lover, in the Hellenistic and Roman eras. While treatments like Prodikos’ *Choice of Herakles* or Theokritos’ *Hylas* (*Idyll* 13) are widely known (so much so that their discussion will perhaps not offer many new insights to certain readers of Stafford’s book), others are not: for example, the reception of the voracious Herakles from Old to Middle Comedy and, from there, to the so-called “phlyax” drama in Southern Italy (c. 4th cent. BC) accounts for the continuation and popularity of a stock figure which is otherwise mainly known from the classical period, such as from Aristophanes’ *Frogs* or Euripides’ pro-satyrical drama *Alkestis*.

In Chapter 5 the “Political Herakles” is explored (pp. 137–70). Again, this is an extremely wide field. For one thing, it encompasses the widespread notion of Herakles as the ideal, prototypical ruler from whom numerous Greek and Roman kings and emperors (not only colourful figures such as Alexander the Great or Commodus) claimed their ancestry; for another, it also features Herakles as a model for the founders of Greek colonies, as well as for (pan-)Hellenic institutions such as the Olympic games. In her summary of the chapter, Stafford concludes that the “idea that institutions of the present day, from cities and concrete local landmarks to rituals, were a result of Herakles having once passed through is a clear indicator of

the power of the past in the ancient consciousness” (p. 170). It is, however, also an indicator of the core role that Herakles played as a paradigm of the Panhellenic idea: if several kings and rulers from various places claim to be descendants of the same hero, this ultimately accounts for a certain sense of association, of ‘belonging together’, in the present.

As much as there is a tension between the human and the divine Herakles (as negotiated e.g. in Attic tragedy; cf. above), there is also a tension between a super-regional Herakles and ‘different’ local ‘Herakleis’. In this context, Stafford discusses the relation between Herakles and Theseus in the last part of Chapter 5. She demonstrates that there is a clear shift in the popularity of the latter, to the disadvantage of the former, from the beginning of the classical era in Athens (as iconographic evidence indicates), for as “a local hero, Theseus [was] also much better suited than the Panhellenic Herakles to represent an increasing sense of Athenian identity” (p. 167). However, the “shift from one hero to another is not as neat as some have supposed”, since there were also “a number of instances where the two are juxtaposed” (ibid.). All evidence considered, it seems as if Herakles and Theseus should, to some extent, be regarded as two figures that complement each other more than they exclude each other; the ending of Euripides’ *Herakles*, as mentioned above, can certainly be viewed as a literary piece of evidence for this idea.

Both the above-mentioned types of ambiguity (man – god *and* Panhellenic hero – local hero) are at play when it comes to the role of Herakles as a locally worshipped demigod in various parts of the Hellenic world and beyond. Stafford’s sixth chapter (“Worship of the Hero-God”, pp. 171–97) is thus devoted to Herakles in his role as a ἥρωας θεός.² It is, once more, stupendously exhaustive in its treatment of all the material and the evidence that is available. This treatment begins with Athens and Attica before moving on to the Peloponnese, Central Greece and various islands, and finally Herakles/Hercules in Sicily, in Rome, and in Anatolia is discussed. In this context, Stafford emphasises the tendency in religious studies to “revise [the] traditional sharp opposition” (p. 175) between ‘full’ gods on the one hand and demigods on the other. The case of Herakles is certainly the most obvious case-in-point to consider this development in scholarship justified: while, on the one hand, Herakles “really ought to be a hero, since he has a god for a father but a mortal mother” (p. 171), on the other he reveals clear signs of a god. Amongst other things, Stafford points out that various toponyms in the Greek-speaking world were derived from the personal name ‘Herakles’ – a practice that was uncommon for demigods/heroes, and therefore “this would suggest that Herakles was regarded as a god in the areas concerned” (p. 175).

In accordance with the general aims and structure of the series *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*, Stafford’s book ends with a chapter on reception (“Post-Classical Variations”, pp. 201–44). It goes without saying that this sketch had to be very

² This collocation stems from Pindar, *Nemean* 3.22; cf. p. 171 in Stafford’s book, and her in-depth treatment in her articles “Héraklès: encore et toujours le problème du heros-theos”, in *Kernos* 18 (2005), pp. 391-406, and “Herakles between Gods and Heroes”, in Jan N. Bremmer & Andrew Erskine (eds.), *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 228-44.

selective, and it would be entirely inappropriate to quibble about what else could (or should) have been included within these few pages. Considering the limited space, the wealth of material covered and discussed here is most impressive. The chapter begins with the long-lasting reception and appropriation of the Herakles figure in Christian thought and writing, and continues on to deal with the Renaissance Hercules and the role-model ‘Gallic Hercules’ in 18th-century France, before it finally touches upon the vast topic of the hero’s modern reception in popular culture. In this last sub-chapter, Stafford is eager to illustrate the ‘knots’ between ‘our’ modern ‘Herculeses’ and their ancient forerunner(s). For example, it is most revealing to learn that the first Hercules film, Pietro Francisci’s *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1957), focuses on Hercules as an Argonaut. This role was of some significance in antiquity too, but by no means did it belong to the most important, let alone the twelve canonical, labours of the hero. Therefore, in a case like this we can see how a ‘classical’ background can help us to understand the deeper mechanisms of reception and revival, which can sometimes remain “vaguely ancient”, but are sometimes “completely divorced from [their] Greek context” (p. 235).³

The appendices of the book are packed with almost twenty pages of endnotes (pp. 245–62), which attest to the thorough research-based background of virtually everything in the main text; a selective, but useful glossary of some technical terms (pp. 263–5); an equally useful further reading list for each chapter (pp. 266–71); a rich bibliography that is not remotely restricted to Anglophone scholarly literature (as is, unfortunately, often the case these days), but incorporates international research, with a particular focus on French theories of myth and mythology (pp. 272–94); and, finally, an index (pp. 295–302).

Stafford’s rich book makes it very clear that there is hardly any field within the wide scope of what we call ‘antiquity’ where Herakles does not, in one way or another, play a (major or minor) role. Therefore, the Herakles figure is of interest and significance to virtually all classicists. For this reason, Stafford’s *Herakles* ought to be on every classicist’s bookshelf.

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³ Further research on the reception of Herakles/Hercules in Western civilisation and culture is being carried out by Emma Stafford in the context of her project “Hercules: a hero for all ages” at the University of Leeds (UK), the first step of which was an international conference held at Leeds on 24–26 June 2013 (cf. http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125176/hercules_project – last accessed 8 August 2014).