

### Hercules (1997), an Academic Review

Welcome to the grown-up world of "Hercules," the Disney animated feature film marketed to children and their trusting parents. Following the Roman tradition of adapting Greek stories for their benefit, the directors of "Hercules" (1997), Ron Clements and John Musker, along with Disney studios, seem to pursue a good versus evil story formula and theme by presenting a loose interpretation of the hero's journey and re-creation of the mythological twelve labors rather than following the source text. The adaptation of "Hercules" works to capture the largest audience possible for the financial benefit of Disney Studios, seemingly positioning the film to grab the attention of children, teens, mothers, African Americans, people seeking a savior, gospel music lovers, and, unfortunately, sexual deviants.

The film seems to leave no one out of reach except perhaps Greek Mythology aficionados, who would rip the script to shreds with Herculin strength. The animated feature objectifies the protagonist, Hercules, for his physical looks, sexualizes the love interest, Megara, as a vampy trope, vilifies Hades as a megalomaniac, lasciviously rancidifies Philoctetes, revealing his offensive sexual desire. The script morally manipulates the text source by distorting the labors' mythological structure and intention as a means of purifying the story and the tragic hero's persona into a messianic caricature.

In the *Medium is the Massage*, Marshall McLuhan warned the viewing public that "electronic technology is reshaping [...] every aspect of our personal life"<sup>1</sup> however, the public continues to consume media messaging without consideration of its influences. By analyzing Disney's character profiles, storyline, animation, and dialogue, it is clear that "Hercules" distorts

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<sup>1</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium is the Massage*, Bantam Books, 1967.

the myth's truths and should receive a Parental Warning label stating this fact along with a PG13 rating due to sexual content.

Heracles, known as Hercules by the Roman poets, was, as Barry Powell tells the reader in *Classical Myth 8<sup>th</sup> Edition* "strong and willful [...] (and) the greatest of Greek heroes."<sup>2</sup> Although he is a demi-god, Hercules is portrayed as loyal and sympathetic to human culture, both in the myth and in the film. The good versus evil story formula begins with Hercules evolving through an adorable infant's physical stages, then into an awkward teenager "Jerkcules" and finally, into a righteous strong man referred as a "hunk-ules" by the all African American chorus who provide the back story for the audience. Although Hercules, characterized as a fumbling messianic hero with a bad girl fetish who stumbles into becoming a god through making mistakes, he does defeat Hades. However, Hercules wins because his intentions are good, not because of his intelligence or strength. At the same time, Hades, who is cunning, shrewd, and witty, loses because he is evil.

The mischievous pair, Pain, and Panic, who, although they are minions of the evil Hades, are two of the most entertaining characters in the story because of the humorous ways they physically transform and continually fool the righteous characters in the story. Pain and Panic are ordered by Hades to kidnap and kill Hercules, which is not entertaining; it is rather vicious. Good versus evil continues as a theme when the mischievous pair kidnaps the hero, dragging him to earth, nearly killing him with a bottle full of poison. However, the duo's mission becomes foiled when a good shepherd and his wife surprise them, saving the infant. The shepherd and his wife are a traditional theme dating back to the Epic of Gilgamesh, where Enkidu, a human created by the gods, is raised by a shepherd whose task is to civilize the wild man into a servant obedient to

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<sup>2</sup> Powell, Barry B. *Classical Myth 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*, with translations by Herbert M. Howe, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 362.

the deities. Although Hercules caused havoc everywhere, his adoptive father and mother are compassionate and loving, accepting Hercules god like strength as an average teenage phenomenon that he simply can't control. Hercules's father, Amphytrion, says Hercules "didn't mean any harm, he's just a kid. He – he just can't control his strength."<sup>3</sup> Although in the source text, a shepherd and his wife did not raise Hercules, the storyline does teach the audience compassion and understanding for people who are different from the majority. However, it perpetuates the myth that right actions and behavior win, and evil acts and conduct fail, which is not true because bad things do happen to good people in life.

The Ancient's tell of a mythological demi-god named Hercules, who, with great strength and heroic efforts, completed twelve labors, purifying his past sins, which granted him immortality, allowing him to become a god and sit on Mount Olympus with his father, Zeus. Powell writes that the modernized myth of Hercules comes from an assembly of many pieces of literary accounts.<sup>4</sup> Hercules was born to the god Zeus, and although Zeus was married to Hera, he fathered Hercules with mortal Alcmene. The animated feature diverges from the source text early in the animated feature showing Hera as his loving mother. In the myth, Hera, not Hades, acted as the catalyst for all of Hercules's problems. When Hercules is born in the animated feature, Hera holds Hercules affectionately, telling him to "behave"<sup>5</sup> himself as she and Zeus admire the newborn. Later, Hera weeps when Hercules becomes mortal because he could never come home. However, In the source text, Hera hated Hercules, and it is Hera who misbehaves. Out of jealousy of Zeus's love affair with Alcmene, Hera takes revenge on Hercules, causing his mother to expose him to the elements, leaving him to die. The moral manipulation of the text source works to

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<sup>3</sup> *Hercules*, Directed by Ron Clements, John Musker, performances by Tate Donovan, Danny Devito, James Woods and Susan Egan, Disney Studios, 1997, 17:26.

<sup>4</sup> Powell, 362.

<sup>5</sup> *Hercules*, 03:26.

reinforce Abrahamic traditions of the intact and loving family and ignores the amoral behavior of Zeus, Hera, and Alcmene, purifying the story facts to appeal to a more generalized audience.

Sexual innuendo begins in the animated film's first scene with the Muse's song that introduces Hercules to the audience. The Muses are beautifully animated African American women who sing with Grammy-winning gospel voices; however, the lyrics are age-inappropriate for the film. Although a chorus is authentic to Ancient Greek plays, the women would have been men dressed as women. That put aside, the script seems to contradict the puritanical need to cleanse Hercules' matrifamilias at this point and forward. Instead, the script devolves into continuing sexual innuendo and outright objectification of both men and women in the animated feature. The message becomes confusing, especially for young audiences, because the dichotomy implies that certain truths are unacceptable. At the same time, sexual exploitation seems to be sanctioned as long as it is not overt.

The lead Muse sings, "We are the Muses, goddesses of the arts and proclaimers of hero's" (Hercules 01:05), which is accurate and appropriate; however, a second and third Muse take the lyrics to a sexual nature. One, a very sensual Muse says we proclaim, "Hero's like Hercules" (01:12) while she bats her eyes and attempts to cool herself with a fan, implying Hercules makes her sexually hot. Then a plump Muse says, "Honey, you mean Hunkcules, I'd like to make some sweet music with him,"<sup>6</sup> implying she'd like to fornicate with Hercules; however, the alpha female admonishes her with a judgmental and scornful look for her sexual desires.

Next, Hercules meets Megara at a river, where he saves her from the monstrous River Guardian. Meg, who has been sent by Hades, does not want to be saved by Hercules from the monster, who is attempting to rape her. Meg has been tasked by Hades to seduce the monster into

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<sup>6</sup> Hercules, 01:14.

joining his plan to unleash the Titans so he can rule the world. In the source text, Hercules saves his wife Deianira, not Meg, from rape by the centaur, Nessus, the river guard. Powell writes that Hercules shoots Nessus with a poisoned arrow, killing him and Deianira collects the "blood and semen"<sup>7</sup> of the dead Nessus, using it as a love potion to secure Hercules love for her. In the animated feature, Meg prefers that Nessus lived so she could fulfill her duty to Hades and win her freedom.

The irony of this scene is that although Hercules saves Meg in the film and Deianira in the myth, Ancient's tell of a tragedy that took place prior to this event. Zeus fathered many children with women other than Hera, causing her to lash out at Zeus's illegitimate children, specifically at Hercules. Hera caused Hercules to go mad, killing his wife and children, therefore, the actual reason Zeus charged Hercules to prove himself as a hero on earth was due to his crime of murder, not losing his godhood from drinking Pain and Panics poison formula. Recognizing the target audience of Hercules, the screenwriters Clements and Musker made the correct choice to eliminate the murder of wife Deianira. David Grene writes in "Heracles," *Euripides II: The Complete Greek Tragedies*, that he supports a cautious intuition of the play's "extraordinary power. Of caution there should be no question"<sup>8</sup> due to the brutal and shocking scene that erupts from Hercules madness. Although the screenwriters Clements and Musker chose to eliminate Hercules's act of uxoricide and filicide, they capitalize on Hercules's weakness, akin to his father Zeus's failing, which is women. Although Meg acts dismissive and rude to Hercules, while at the same time, Pegasus and Philoctetes warn him away from her, he still falls victim to her sexual powers, providing another mixed message for the audiences.

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<sup>7</sup> Powell, 391.

<sup>8</sup> Euripides. "Heracles," *Euripides II: The Complete Greek Tragedies*, translated by David Grene, Richmond Lattimore, The University of Chicago, 1956, 44.

The writers create sexually charged dialogue and animation for Megara, turning her into a carnal weapon, first against the River Guardian, then against Hercules. After Hercules saves Meg from the River Guardian, animators seem to intentionally physically animate the character to seduce Hercules. Meg, fresh out of the river, saved from rape by the monster, bends over, ringing water out of her long seductive hair, while she pushes her rear end towards Hercules as he walks up behind her. Hercules asks, 'how'd you get messed up with the River Guide?'<sup>9</sup> Meg answers, "well, you know, men think "no" means "yes" and "get lost" means take me "I'm yours,"<sup>10</sup> providing another mixed message for young viewers. Hercules speaks kindly to Meg, asking if she would like a ride home on Pegasus, but she brushes him off, walking away in an exaggerated, hip-adulating stride. Meg sashays off, hips swaying back and forth, and says, "bye-bye Wonder Boy" in a disrespectful and demeaning manner, yet Hercules looks on with a love-drunk dreamy eye stare.

Philoctetes, the do as I say not as I do, satyr is characterized as a creepy "peeping Tom" when he hides in the bushes, watching the Nymphs bath in the river. Later, when Phil meets Meg, he backs his rear-end into her face and jumps onto her lap, but she shoves him off. When Hercules doesn't understand a sexually charged verbal reference, Meg says, "don't worry, shorty here can explain it to you," referring to Phil, implying he is a sexual creep. However, when Phil chases after Hercules, who has flown off on the back of Pegasus to save the kids trapped in the rockslide, Phil says, "I'm right behind you kid, like a fur wedgy,"<sup>11</sup> which is funny for kids and age-appropriate. They all know what a wedgy means and Phil is a furry, funny-looking animal.

Hades, the likable and entertaining, yet evil Satan like protagonist, attempts to foil the hero's efforts to become a god. As in "Jesus Christ Super Star," where Judas is worried about

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<sup>9</sup> Hercules, 36:34.

<sup>10</sup> Hercules, 36:36.

<sup>11</sup> Hercules, 43:08.

Jesus's popularity, in "Hercules," Hades is worried that Hercules will foil his evil plan to unleash the Titans. Although, in both cases, the antagonists have evil plans, their characterizations are more compelling and charismatic than their rivals. Other than his megalomania and homicidal tendencies he is a straightforward villain, which makes him the most reliable character. Hades may be ruthless, but he tells the truth regardless of its severity. For example, Hades says to his brother, hey "Mr. High and Mighty, Mr. Hey, you get off of my cloud,"<sup>12</sup> a reference to the Rolling Stones lyrics, which translates to "get off of my girl."<sup>13</sup> This comment refers to Zeus's reputation as a philanderer, which is true to his character.

Although Hades is a straightforward villain, the dialogue associated with his character befalls a dark and age-inappropriate style for a P.G. rated film when he suggests murdering an infant. Hades asks Pain and Panic, "how do you kill a god"<sup>14</sup> for which they respond, "you can't, they are immortal." Grene writes that it is "violence in (Hercules) [...] which more than anything else injured its reputation and hindered reappraisal,"<sup>15</sup> therefore, it is important to be cautious with adaptations of Hercules. The writers seem to heed this warning, when Hades follows by asking the minions to turn the "little Sunspot, mortal"<sup>16</sup> rather than killing him. Pain and Panic contemplate killing Hercules during the kidnapping scene while they are feeding him poison from a baby bottle and say, "Let's just kill the kid and get it over with."<sup>17</sup> The malicious duo is interrupted by the shepherd before killing Hercules. Although the good versus evil theme supports right behavior over wrong behavior, I put forth that the film overall is age-inappropriate and introduces concepts that are overly mature for the psychological development for the targeted age of the audience.

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<sup>12</sup> Hercules, 05:28.

<sup>13</sup> Hercules, 08:42.

<sup>14</sup> Hercules, 10:33.

<sup>15</sup> Grene, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Hercules, 10:35.

<sup>17</sup> Hercules, 11:53.

Although the "Hercules" production was written and animated with a young audience in mind, it is laden with adult satire, sexual innuendo, and an Abrahamic religious subtext, all supported by a distortion of the true story of Hercules. Suppose we accept that the "Medium is the Message" (McLuhan), then music and movies act as a powerful, influential apparatuses of children's minds and ways of thinking. As in ancient Greece, the chorus provides the place to clearly explain the accurate back story of "Hercules" to the audience, representing a missed opportunity. If we value the influence of popular song lyrics and the power of the film medium, then, "let us stop talkin' falsely now"<sup>18</sup> and rather "have a code [...] (to) teach [...] (our) children well."<sup>19</sup> Although the film eliminates the extremely inappropriate topics found in the "Hercules" source text in an effort to make the story age appropriate, it nevertheless puts profit over the well-being of children viewers. Therefore, Disney's adaptation of "Hercules" distorts the truths of the myth inappropriately and should receive a Parental Warning label stating this fact along with a PG13 rating due to sexual content.

P.S. I thoroughly enjoyed watching this movie. I watched it twice.

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<sup>18</sup> Dylan, Bob. "All along the Watchtower." John Wesley Harding, Columbia Records, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Nash, Graham. "Teach Your Children," Déjà Vu, Atlantic Records, 1970.



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