HERACLES: THE SUPERMAN AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

by D. L. Pike
(University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg)

Among the various types of hero which appear both in mythology and on occasion in real life, there is one reasonably clear-cut and popular type which may be called the Superman. The Superman-hero is not usually renowned for intelligence, subtlety or sensitivity (though he may sometimes have one or all of these qualities); he is primarily the man who can swing the club, sword, battle-axe or fist harder, faster and longer than anyone else; who has extraordinary strength and endurance; and who is totally courageous, at least in physical terms. He is the lusty, fearless, sometimes brutal and brutish, overwhelmingly virile and violent strongman. Examples of the type which spring readily to mind are Heracles in Greek myth, the Semitic Samson, and the Northern-European storm-god Thor.

The principal appeal of the Superman seems to lie in his status as a fighter, either against men or monsters or giants, with perhaps some interest in the posthumous rewards to be won by courage and endurance. For this reason, his affairs with women tend to be of secondary importance in myth. However, women do sometimes play a significant part in heroic myth, a part which on occasion brings destruction on the hero in question; two of the best representatives of the Superman-hero—Samson and Heracles—were both destroyed by the actions of women. It is ironical, and doubtless not unrealistic, that mighty men capable of conquering the most fearsome enemies can be brought low by creatures vastly inferior to them in terms of physical strength. In the case of Heracles, his relationship with Deianeira and its tragic outcome will require special attention.

It is also possible that the Superman is at least partially a symbol of virility in the strictly sexual sense: his great physical prowess can be expected to operate as well in bed as on the battlefield. For that reason, his dealings with women will almost certainly add something of interest to the portrait of his greatness already painted by his heroic actions in other spheres.

Finally, it can be illuminating, as Sophocles proved in the Trachiniae, to place the Superman in the context of personal relationships and to see how he functions within such a context. Glorious exploits of physical prowess will not necessarily be accompanied by successful human relationship.

Heracles, arguably the mightiest, most dynamic and most popular hero of ancient Greek mythology, became involved in more or less intimate relationships with women on a number of occasions, and it is the purpose of this paper to examine the nature and the consequences of those relationships.
i. The Young Heracles and the Daughters of Thespius

At the age of eighteen, and during the Cithaeronian lion-hunt, Heracles is said to have slept with every one of King Thespius' fifty daughters in the course of fifty nights.\(^1\) According to one version,\(^2\) he enjoyed all fifty in one night. Three other interesting details are to be found: firstly, that Heracles thought he was with the same girl every night;\(^3\) secondly, that Thespius himself had encouraged Heracles in these activities in order to ensure the production of sturdy grandchildren;\(^4\) and thirdly, that one of the daughters refused to sleep with the hero and was therefore condemned by him to spend the rest of her life as a virgin priestess in his shrine at Thespiae—a story which Pausanias disbelieved because he could not imagine Heracles behaving so arrogantly towards the daughter of a friend, and because Heracles punished hybrisitc behaviour, and in particular that of people who behaved impiously towards the gods'. Pausanias at least seems to have regarded Heracles as a model of respectability, certainly in matters of religion and self-control.

There is little doubt that this story had its origins in ritual and cult. There was a shrine of Heracles at Thespiae, and it was served by a priestess who had to remain a virgin until death—presumably because she was held to be the bride of the god.\(^5\) Here, then, is the comparatively rare phenomenon of a Greek myth the origin of which can be traced with near certainty to a specific cult-practice.\(^6\) It is impossible to discover how old either the cult or the myth was at Thespiae. Pausanias\(^7\) felt that the sanctuary there must have belonged to the 'Idaean Dactyl' Heracles and was therefore built at a time before that of the 'historical' Heracles (i.e. presumably before the Heroic Age); but that surmise hardly offers any aid for precise dating. However, it does appear that the cult antedated the myth. The latter, once on its way, seems to have gathered a certain ribald momentum of its own: the detail that Heracles enjoyed the fifty girls in a single night probably owes its existence to Heracles' nature as a Superman rather than to any cult-considerations; and the fact that he could not tell the difference (admittedly in the dark) between the fifty girls appears to have cynical overtones—the Superman is a blind and lustful brute—unless the implication is

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1. Apollodorus 2.4.10.
2. Pausanias 9.27.6.
3. Apoll. loc. cit.
4. Ibid.
5. Paus. loc. cit.
6. Paus. loc. cit.
7. See L. R. Farnell, Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality, Oxford, 1921, 166.
8. See G. S. Kirk, Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures, Cambridge, 1970, 8–31. Kirk concludes (25): 'The truth is that myths seem to possess essential properties—like their fantasy, their freedom to develop, and their complex structure—that are not reproduced in ritual, and suggest that their motive and origin are in important respects distinct.'
that Heracles would have been horrified at the thought of sleeping with fifty different girls and had to be hoodwinked into doing so. Such scruples, however, would hardly have deterred the lusty Strongman.

It can be surmised, then, that Heracles’ connections with Thespiae and its virgin priestess arose from ritual, but that the myth, as a story, owes its developed form to the personality of Heracles as the Superman. It is a tale which is most appropriate to the virile Strongman, and could easily have been popular among people who were either ignorant of or uninterested in the facts of cult at Thespiae.

ii. Heracles and Megara
Nearly all the ancient sources agree that the wife of Heracles (while he was on earth) was the Theban princess Megara, daughter of Creon, given to the hero as the reward for his defeat of the Minyans of Orchomenus. Heracles’ relations with Megara are dealt with in detail in only two of the surviving sources, both of which clearly indicate the anguish which seems to be the lot of Supermen’s wives.

In Euripides’ Heracles, Megara admittedly begins as the wife of a loving, conscientious and dedicated husband. In the first part of the play her only real unhappiness is caused by her husband’s absence and the consequent threat against her life and the lives of her children posed by the tyrant Lycus; but even here the disturbing implication can be detected that the wife of Heracles must inevitably be without her great husband for much of the time. In the second half of the play, to Megara’s great joy and relief, Heracles returns safely from the Underworld and delivers his family from the clutches of Lycus; the hero then goes insane, slaughters the children, and finally kills Megara herself. Euripides is alone (as far as the sources indicate) in making Heracles kill his wife, and to that extent her death is not part of the generally accepted Heracles myths. However, in the context of the play her death is another definite indication of her essentially tragic fate as the wife of Heracles: for much of her married life her husband is elsewhere, engaged in perilous exploits—and there is considerable point to the Chorus’ lament in line 430: ‘Your home, Heracles, is empty of friends’. Then, when Heracles returns, madness overcomes him and the marriage ends in bloodshed.

In the later Megara, attributed to Moschus, Megara appears as a most sorrowful woman, still alive after her husband’s fit of madness but bitterly lamenting her fate. She points directly to the two critical facts about her marriage: first, she had to witness her own children being done to death by her crazed husband (6–28); and second, she weeps, ‘But it’s for little of the time that

10. Homer, Odyssey XI, 269–70; Pindar, Isthmian 4,70; Euripides, Heracles 7–12, 67–8; Moschus (?), Megara; Apoll. 2.4.11.
I see my husband in our home, for there is toilsome work at hand for him as he wanders among the peoples of the earth and labours on the sea' (41–4). The heroic husband who roams the world is frequently away from home; and the husband who is capable of vicious murder abroad cannot be relied upon to keep death out of his home.

iii. Heracles and Deianeira
Heracles, like his Semitic counterpart Samson in the Old Testament, was ruined by a woman. He first became aware of her existence, according to Bacchylides, in the Underworld while talking to the shade of Deianeira's brother, Meleager.12 Heracles there appears eager to marry Meleager's sister, presumably out of pity for her brother. Ironically, this one moment of compassion leads ultimately to Heracles' downfall. Further details are given by Bacchylides: he mentions briefly Heracles' intention of taking the princess Iole of Oechalia as his mistress13 and the hero's sacking of Iole's home town14—a 'Viking' type of exploit, and the best example of this particular hero burning and slaying ordinary people for the sake of sexual desire. The story is not to Heracles' credit, unless it be judged according to the canons of the roughest type of Heroic Age (see below, Section iv).

It is not easy to decide what Bacchylides' attitude towards Deianeira is, nor whether he regards her or Heracles as having been primarily responsible for the disaster that befell them. He says, 'When Deianeira heard the grievous news, it was then that an ἀμοχὸς δαίμων contrived for her a thoughtful, tear-fraught plan' (23–6). Here, much will depend on what Bacchylides means by the words ἀμοχὸς δαίμων. The phrase could mean either an irresistible external force (somewhat like the goddess Hera in Euripides' Heracles) or 'Deianeira's unconquerable character'.15 If it means the former, then Deianeira was the innocent victim of arbitrary and external malevolence; if the latter, then the fault lay within her own personality. In fact, however, the distinction made here between external compulsion and more or less autonomous willful wrongdoing is not entirely valid in the Greek context: there is considerable evidence in Greek literature to show that even when a person blames a god for his own evil actions he does not therefore expect to be exonerated from all personal responsibility.16 Deianeira, then, was greatly responsible for what happened; and this impression is reinforced by Bacchylides' later statement that 'wide-mighted jealousy destroyed her, and the dark veil which hides the future' (31–3). She is destroyed

12. Epinician 5,56ff.
16. See H. Lloyd-Jones, The Justice of Zeus, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, passim, but especially 161: 'Wrong action is due to the actor's perverse preference for self-interest over justice; even if the passions that caused it came from a higher power, that can never be effectively pleaded as an excuse.'
both by her own jealousy and by her quite pardonable ignorance concerning the
future. In the final analysis, Bacchylides' presentation of Deianeira is realistic
and compassionate: he sees her as a proud, emotional wife who acted from
perfectly understandable jealousy, thus causing a disaster which she could not
(being an ordinary mortal) foresee. Heracles, moreover, was hardly unspotted
in this affair, behaving in a violent and selfish manner towards both Iole and
Deianeira. The news that reached Deianeira's ears concerning Iole and Heracles
was indeed 'γαλατευθής' .

It is possible that Deianeira was in origin a dangerous witch of the Medea-
type who has to some extent received the same sort of humanizing treatment
from Bacchylides that Medea received from Euripides in his Medea. Deianeira's
name appears to mean 'man-slayer' (from 'δηνίων + ἄνηρ'); and although such
a name might signify no more than an unfortunate and misguided woman who
accidentally killed only one man (her husband), it is more the sort of name that
would be attached to a pernicious professional murderess, or at least to a
treacherous siren like Samson's Delilah. As is usually the case with the origins of
mythical figures, nothing is absolutely certain. All that is available for
consideration is the fairly sympathetic approach taken by Bacchylides, and
more particularly by Sophocles in his Trachiniae.

In this play, Sophocles not only treats Deianeira with considerable com-
passion, but also twists the 'facts' of the myth in order to make it clear that
Deianeira had always been the wife of Heracles. Megara is not mentioned, and
it appears that Deianeira has been married to Heracles throughout most of his
Labours (27–35). This modification enables Sophocles to test the worth of the
Superman-ideal by setting it against a background of continuing wifely
goodness as embodied in Deianeira. The Superman-ideal is found wanting
against such a background.

Almost the first words of the play (spoken by Deianeira) are 'I know well that
my portion is an unfortunate and heavy one' (5). Her unhappiness, she points
out, has been due to two facts: the first was that as a girl she had been wooed by
the river-god Achelous—a terrifying suitor (9–17); the second was that, after her
apparently fortunate rescue from Achelous by Heracles and her marriage to the
latter, she has spent nearly all her married life in fear for the husband whom she
hardly ever sees: 'Having joined with Heracles in a fine marriage, I nourish
all the time one fear after another, in anxiety for him; for each night in turn
brings on and drives away grief. And we brought forth children, whom he
sometimes sees, like a farmer who acquires a distant field which he sees only
once, at seedtime and harvest. Such is the life which brings my husband home
and drives him away, slave to a certain master' (27–35). Her complaints are in
part identical with those of Megara (see Section ii above): she seldom sees her
husband, and she is afraid in his absence because she knows that he is
continually risking his life. Finally, she has now not seen him for fifteen months,
and has no idea where he is (36–45). Later in the play, the Chorus describes the
full extent of her misery: 'She never soothes the yearning in her dry eyes, but,
brooding on the fear ever-mindful of her husband's wanderings, she wastes away from her bed's emptiness which preys on her mind, expecting some evil unhappy fate' (106-11). Deianeira's marriage has been one long round of loneliness and anxiety. In this she shares the often unhappy lot of women throughout the ages who have been married to soldiers, test-pilots, racing-drivers, mountaineers and other men whose occupations or obsessions constantly lead them into danger.

Still later in the Trachiniae it becomes apparent that Deianeira has had yet another misery to endure, and that is her knowledge that Heracles has been unfaithful to her on numerous occasions during his wanderings (459-60). She appears to have come to terms with this particular fact, but can hardly derive any comfort therefrom.

The fatal incident which finally leads to the ruin of both husband and wife is the former's sending home of the princess Iole to be his mistress. Deianeira, after years of suffering, cannot stomach such a situation, although she still refuses to blame Heracles: 'I cannot bring myself to be angry at this frequent disease that afflicts him; but to share the same home and husband with this girl—what woman could do that! For I see her youth heading for its full bloom, and mine withering; and the lover's eye goes for the flower, but shrinks from the rest. This then, is my fear: that Heracles will keep the bare name of Spouse for me, and be the younger's Husband' (543-51). It is her utter desperation that drives her to send to Heracles the robe stained with the poisoned blood of the Centaur—an act committed in the genuine belief that the Centaur's blood will act as an aphrodisiac and win back her husband's love. She is perhaps guilty of gullibility in believing the story told to her in the past by Nessus; but her actual motives are natural and venial, the main one being her great if unwisely possessive love for Heracles. Only the result is terrible; and it is due to pardonable ignorance. The Chorus had encouraged Deianeira to test the device of the robe; only through action and experiment, they had said, can one obtain clear knowledge of how things will work out (592-3). The problem about taking action 'in the dark', as the Nurse later bitterly points out, is that the Future is utterly uncertain: 'If one reckons on two or more days, one is being rash and foolish; there is no tomorrow until today has been lived through' (943-6).

Such is Deianeira's tragedy; and, in Sophocles' play, it can be blamed entirely on two factors, both closely connected with Heracles: firstly, his constant absence from home and his wife's consequent habit of fear; and secondly, his infidelities, particularly the latest involving Iole. As a husband, and compared with the tender if simple Deianeira, he is a disaster.

Some commentators have regarded Deianeira as a remarkably foolish and gullible person, and seem to feel that, to a great extent, she deserves all she gets: Bowra \(^{17}\) condemns her childish, dangerous and potentially illegal use of an

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aphrodisiac, and criticises what he considers her unfeminine arrogance as a Greek wife in attempting to alter a situation which her connubial lord and master has decided upon; Ehrenberg\textsuperscript{18} feels that Deianeira’s mere mention of her husband’s infidelities ‘discloses a petty and bourgeois mind’ (150), that she is ‘very conventional’ (\textit{Ibid.}), and that she is totally ignorant about the real nature of her husband and what he needs from her in their marriage (151). Likewise, Bowra, Ehrenberg and Kirkwood\textsuperscript{19} all feel that Heracles is a man so much out of the ordinary that he simply should not be judged according to normal (mortal) standards. There is some truth in all of these views: but the fact remains that the drama (and Heracles) \textit{must}, to a great extent, be judged by normal standards. (Even Bowra says, of Heracles and Deianeira, that ‘They might be typical of any married pair, and their tragedy private and domestic’;\textsuperscript{20} although he does go on to point out that they are both extreme cases of their respective sexes). The point that is being made in this paper is that by normal standards of humanitarian behaviour, whereas the devoted Deianeira may be irresolute, unimaginative and over-possessive and therefore an unsuitable wife for Heracles, it is impossible to imagine that the latter could ever be a suitable husband for \textit{anyone}. He is a Superman, for which he cannot be condemned; he is very much at the mercy of his own destiny; but as a Superman, he is an appalling husband.

iv. Heracles and Iole

‘Kupris gave away to the son of Alkmena that girl of Oechalia, a filly unyoked in marriage, still inexperienced of men and unwedded, marrying her out of Eurytus’ home like a running nymph, a maenad, with blood and smoke in gory matrimony’. Thus sings the Chorus in Euripides’ \textit{Hippolytus},\textsuperscript{21} starkly outlining the fate of Iole, another innocent woman who was wrenched from her home, after seeing it destroyed, and indirectly caused the deaths of both Deianeira and Heracles. Rape, bloodshed and destruction were the fruits of Heracles’ lust.

Apollodorus\textsuperscript{22} states that, had Iole’s family behaved better towards Heracles, their town of Oechalia need not have been destroyed at all: it seems that Eurytus of Oechalia had promised Iole as a prize to anyone who could defeat him and his sons in archery. Heracles did so, but Eurytus refused to give Iole to him, fearing that since Heracles had killed his own children by Megara he might do the same to any future progeny—a reasonable enough fear. For this reason, then (according to Apollodorus), Heracles later ‘punished’ Eurytus and his city.\textsuperscript{23} Here, Apollodorus contradicts the Messenger in the \textit{Trachiniae}, who tells Deianeira that Heracles sacked Oechalia for one reason only—Eros\textsuperscript{24}—and

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\textsuperscript{18} V. Ehrenberg, \textit{Aspects of the Ancient World}, Oxford, 1946, Chapter 10.
\textsuperscript{19} G. M. Kirkwood, \textit{A Study of Sophoclean Drama}, New York, 1958, 118.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Op. cit.} 117.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Hipp.} 543-53.
\textsuperscript{22} 2.6.1.
\textsuperscript{23} 2.7.7.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Trach.} 354-5 (Eros 354).
that Heracles, having failed to persuade Eurytus to give Iole to him, and having 'devised some trifling pretext', destroyed both Eurytus and his city. Apollodorus manages to find some excuse for Heracles’ rampant militarism; Sophocles can find none. It may be that Apollodorus' version is the more authentic, since he does not have Sophocles' purpose of criticising the Superman-ideal; but the fact remains that a whole city was ruined because of what was either a not-undeserved insult or else a case of thwarted lust—neither reason bringing much credit on Heracles.

It is greatly to be regretted that the early epic, The Capture of Oechalia, attributed to Creophylus of Samos, has not survived, since it would very likely have thrown considerable light on the issues involved. However, the basic features of the tale, as they have survived, are clear enough, and they highlight two interesting points: Heracles' murderous anger as a result of insult or frustration; and the pitiable helplessness of Iole, the pawn in a deadly game played by ruthless men. Her fate is perhaps best depicted in the lively but ominous painting on a Corinthian krater of c. 600 B.C. in which are portrayed Eurytus, Iole and Heracles at supper. On the right, Heracles sits up and stares boldly and intently at Iole; on the left, the reclining Eurytus looks up uneasily; and in the centre, Iole, with averted face, fearfully pulls her cloak more tightly around her body. The table-knife in Heracles' right hand could almost be a symbol of the slaughter to come.

v. Heracles and Omphale
According to Apollodorus Heracles was sold as a slave by Hermes to Queen Omphale of Lydia, whom he served for three years. This embarrassing servitude was urged on him by the Delphic Oracle, since he was suffering from a serious disease after his killing of Iphitus. Thus Heracles found himself in Lydia with Omphale.

There is some disagreement among the sources as to the exact nature of Heracles' relationship with Omphale; generally, he seems to have been her slave; but it was also believed that he was her lover; certainly, the rulers of Lydia were supposed to have been descended from Heracles and a Lydian woman. Omphale's name ('Navel') may well have had some connection with the Earth Goddess and fertility; but it could possibly also have been (or

28. 2.6.2-3.
become, in certain circles) something of a sexual joke; Heracles' 'enslavement to the Navel' would have been a pleasing description of his enthusiastic virility. His relations with Omphale and Lydia are very complicated; but it seems most likely that they originated in some Lydian theological or mythological belief, in which Heracles originally had no part at all. However, as with the story of the daughters of Thespius (above) narrative exuberance tended to obscure the origins of the tale, and the Omphale episode became a story both ludicrous and lewd. The Greeks were probably intrigued by the paradoxical image of the strongest man on earth acting as the slave of a mere woman; by the element of transvestism that led to Heracles' wearing of Omphale's clothes while she donned his lion-skin and carried his club; and by the fact that Heracles seems to have exceeded his servile function and found his way into Omphale's bed.

vi. The Seduction of Auge
At Tegea in Arcadia, Heracles is said to have seduced Auge, a priestess of Athena, as a result of which the girl conceived and bore the child Telephus. The after-effects of this union were somewhat complex, the main one being that both Telephus and Auge ended up in Mysia. Whatever its origins, the story as it stands depicts Heracles as a casual and callous seducer.

vii. Heracles and Xenodice
During his term of 'servitude' with Omphale, Heracles became involved with Xenodice, the daughter of Syleus the Robber. In Apollodorus Heracles killed Xenodice along with her father. The incident is only a subsidiary part of a story incidental to the Omphale episode; but it is illuminating, since it shows Heracles as a woman-slayer, and as a hero who inevitably becomes involved with women—seldom to the latter's advantage.

viii. Heracles and Hylas
Although Hylas was not a woman, the fact that he seems to have been loved, in some way or other, by Heracles justifies his inclusion in this paper. His

33. Possibly a queen-consort relationship between the local Earth Goddess and some Asiatic god, most likely Sandon (with whom Heracles was often identified: see Farnell, Greek Hero Cults etc. 144–5).
34. Cf. Kirk, Myth etc., 185. A similar, but far more tragic, paradox appears in Soph. Trach. 1962, where the mighty hero is brought low by a 'woman, an unmanly female' (Heracles' own words).
35. Plutarch, Moralia 304 c–e; Ov. Fasti II, 303f. But this appears to be a late element, as far as the evidence indicates, both literary and artistic. (On the latter, see W. H. Roscher, Ausführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie, Teubner, Leipzig, 1884–90, 2247–8).
36. Paus. 8.4.9, 8.47.4; Apoll. 2.7.4.
37. Paus. 8.4.9; Apoll. 3.9.1. The whole story may well have been invented in order to account for some early Arcadian migration to Mysia.
38. 2.6.3.
relations with Heracles are a little ambiguous: In Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* he appears largely as a foster-child of Heracles rather than as a beloved;39 on the other hand, Heracles' grief at the loss of Hylas40 seems perhaps too intense to be the result of purely paternal concern. In Theocritus, Hylas is definitely loved by Heracles;41 yet even Theocritus introduces a considerable element of the father-son relationship, both in a simile42 and in his description of Heracles' careful training of the youth to be a 'true man' (ἀλαθευνόν ἀνδρόν).43 However, the evidence as a whole suggests a love-affair of sorts, and Apollonius' version thereof may be a deliberate attempt to remove the explicitly erotic elements from an older and more sexual story.

ix. Heracles' Marriage to Hebe

Practically all the sources from Homer onwards relate that Heracles, after his death, was transported to Olympus and there married Hebe, the daughter of Hera.44 This particular 'affair' is included in this paper only for the sake of completeness, since it has no romantic or sexual interest at all, and can throw no light on Heracles as lover and husband. However, it does have considerable symbolic significance, it marks the climax of Heracles' career, and it effectively brings to an end the long and bitter enmity between Heracles and Hera—for by the hero's marriage to Hebe he is at last reconciled to Hera, Hebe's mother and his own stepmother.45

As regards the symbolic significance of the marriage, it can be said that the latter represents the ideal union: of overwhelming δύναμις (Heracles) and Youth. Hebe also presumably represents eternal youth (i.e. the immortality which Heracles gained by his promotion to Olympus). Finally, the marriage may contain a passing reference to the fact that in Athens the eighteen-year-old youths poured a libation to Heracles before cutting their hair—just one example of the several connections between Heracles and Youth in Attic cult.46

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The Superman, then, being the man of supreme energy, power and confidence, can easily become a symbol of sexual virility; he tends also to be an unreliable

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40. See Apollonius, *Argonautica* 1, 1261–72, where Heracles' grief at Hylas' disappearance produces in him many of the symptoms of insane frenzy: he breaks out in perspiration, 'the dark blood boiled within him' (1262), and he rushes away at top speed, like a bull stampeded by a gad-fly (1265). At the end of the passage, he pauses to utter a great cry (1272).
41. *Idyll* 13, 5–6 (note ἐρατε in line 6).
45. See *Apoll.* 2.7.7: διαλλαγές etc.
lover, since he is driven largely by the force of his own vitality, a force which may lead him into acts of violence and desertion. In the case of Heracles, both of these considerations apply: his great virility manifests itself in his prodigious feats with the fifty daughters of King Thespius, his conquest of the monstrous Acheloüs in order to win the hand of Deianeira, his ruthless devastation of the city of Oechalia in order to carry off the princess Iole, his audacious adventure with Omphale of Lydia, his callous seduction of Auge in Arcadia, and his destructive treatment of Xenodice in Lydia. His unreliability, or at least his undomesticated independence, as a lover is revealed by his long and worrying absence from his two wives Megara and Deianeira, by his sudden and lunatic slaughter of his children by Megara, and by his infidelities in general. Even in Euripides' *Heracles*, where the hero is portrayed in the most favourable possible light from a humane point of view, it is made clear that his long, perhaps unavoidable, absences from home leave his wife in an anxious state and vulnerable to abuse from unscrupulous men. On balance, it appears that Heracles, even at his noble best, is by his nature and destiny compelled to cause desolation and grief to his womenfolk.

Here, the possibility should be mentioned that at least some of Heracles' 'love-affairs' may originally have represented historical events of various kinds—i.e. that they may have started out as allegorical tales rather than as genuine love-stories. For example, his marriage to Megara in itself may originally have been part of an attempt by the Thebans to appropriate the story of the hero who probably belonged more properly to the Argolid; his dealings with the daughters of Thespius are almost certainly aetiological, invented to explain certain aspects of cult at Thespiae. Nonetheless, by the time these stories had appeared in Greek literature they had taken on their own narrative interest, and could be regarded as tales illustrating the personality of Heracles and describing his relationships with other people.
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