THE COMIC ASPECTS OF THE STRONGMAN-HERO IN GREEK MYTH

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i. Introduction
Most mythologies, including Greek, tend to contain one or more heroes of a type which may be called the Strongman: a hero of surpassing strength and courage, often with giant appetites of various kinds, whose major activities involve the killing, capture, or, in general, the conquest of more or less monstrous foes. Non-Greek examples which spring to mind are the Semitic Samson, the 'heroic' Northern-European storm-god Thor, both the 'wild-man' Enkidu and Gilgamesh himself in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the folk-tale Jack the Giant-Killer, St. George and his dragon (to an extent), and doubtless a good many others. In the Greek context, there are a number of figures who are more or less suitable subjects, like the hunter Orion, Zeus in his capacity as a conqueror of the monstrous Typhon/Typhoeus, even Apollo as conqueror of the Delphic Python, Achilles to some extent (though his killing is confined mainly to people), the greater Ajax likewise, Odysseus in several of his adventures, and above all the 'mighty Heracles'.

This paper, because of its Greek orientation and because of several other factors (to be mentioned in the next paragraph), will confine its attention to Heracles.

Heracles, who looms so large (figuratively, and sometimes literally) in Greek literature, visual art, and cult from at least the Archaic Period onwards (with brief but striking appearances in the Homeric poems also), provides the supreme example of the Strongman-hero in the Greek mythological corpus. Heracles, moreover, is unique among Greek heroes in his attainment of full apotheosis on Olympus after his death; and further, he becomes the husband of Hebe (Youth) and so the son-in-law of Hera, no less. As a rule, then, Heracles provides an imposing spectacle: either because of his almost brutish power and vitality, or (at least after about the middle of the Fifth Century B.C.), because of his lofty moral qualities of Stoic endurance, selfless labour and, in general, his championship of Virtue against Vice and of Good against Evil (in whatever way, precisely, those ethical terms were defined and re-defined from time to time).

However, it is difficult to imagine any creature or phenomenon on earth which could remain eternally impressive and totally free from the ridiculous: much depends on the viewpoint of the observer. The Strongman, therefore, can become laughable under certain circumstances and from certain viewpoints. In fact, he has perhaps even more comic potential than lesser figures do, since the fall from the sublime to the ridiculous is a good deal longer and more startling than the fall from the merely mediocre. If it is true that the essence of nearly all humour is incongruity—the spectacle of a creature about whom one normally
cherishes certain expectations suddenly behaving or being regarded as behaving in a manner which betrays those expectations—then the mighty Strongman is relatively vulnerable to the incongruous and the ridiculous; for while the sublime (the Strongman’s normal milieu, even when he is being sublimely brutal) is comparatively rare, the ‘unsublime’ is not; and the Strongman has only to step (or fall) into the ordinary everyday world in order to appear a clumsy and laughably earnest misfit.

The Strongman then, by virtue of his very greatness, is liable to appear ridiculous in situations where greatness is incongruous. But consider the differing attitudes of those who laugh at him.

ii. Laughter at the Strongman’s Expense: Different Viewpoints
Perhaps the most obvious general attribute of the Strongman is his inclination towards the physical; and certain people might well find this attribute highly amusing. Such people might be either (a) intellectual, in which case their laughter would probably be essentially hostile, the result of their regarding the Strongman as something alien to themselves; and (b) coarse and genial, in which case the laughter would be essentially friendly and admiring, the result of at least partial identification with the Strongman.

To intellectual people the Strongman may appear to be stupid (though he is not necessarily so). What is however more important, is that in his pre-occupation with the physical and with direct action he appears to be clumsy, over-impulsive, possibly unimaginative, and generally boorish—a personality in complete contrast to the thoughtful, critical, ‘cerebral’ persona expected (rightly or wrongly) of the intellectual. The laughter which the Strongman provokes in such people would therefore be largely the laughter of scorn. On occasion, it may also be a species of nervous laughter: for the Strongman represents not only something alien but also something dangerous. His great strength, lack of inhibition, his decisiveness and courage render him an apparent threat to less robust and less active people. Moreover, he seems in many ways better equipped to cope with life than the more circumspect and hesitant; and if that is so, then the laughter of the intellectual may contain also an element of envy (often unadmitted).

To coarse, unintellectual and jovial people on the other hand, or to people in a cheerful mood, the blustering excesses of the Strongman may provoke mirth which is basically the laughter of admiration. The ‘sins’ of the Strongman—his inselence towards authority both secular and divine, his excessive eating, drinking and wenching, and his basic selfishness—are all sins of the ordinary man, and can therefore be seen as venial or even as worthy of delighted applause. However, even in the laughter of such people there may again be traces of fear and envy: fear of the Strongman’s giant power and unpredictability, and envy of his independence of authority and his great success in all things physical. He has the foibles of ordinary men, but in a greater and more impressive degree; and, unlike most ordinary men, to a considerable extent he exercises his foibles
with impunity.

In the case of Heracles, the situation is somewhat complicated by the fact that he was not always regarded as an oafish bully, and could therefore be taken very seriously by someone as intelligent, 'intellectual', and morally earnest as Pindar. There are no signs in Pindar's extant poetry of his ever finding his super-hero laughable. However, attributes implied by the two types of attitude to the Strongman also belong to Heracles, and go at least some way towards explaining his considerable popularity in Old Attic Comedy.

iii. Heracles in Greek Comedy

(a) In Aristophanes

**THE BIRDS**

It has been pointed out elsewhere that Aristophanes presents Heracles in two completely contrasting roles: as a brave and determined destroyer of evil monsters, and as a selfish, gluttonous and uncouth brute; and it is to this second aspect that attention must now be given.

In *The Birds*, Heracles appears as a character whom even Poseidon (his fellow-ambassador) can only describe as 'a fool and a glutton' (ηλιθίος καὶ γάστρης: 1604); and indeed, Heracles' limited intelligence seems to be concerned mainly with food. This fact is at once perceived by Peisthetaerus, who ostentatiously starts preparations for a meal (1579–80). Heracles at once takes note, inquiring as to the nature of the flesh being prepared (1583). He appears to have lost all interest in the purpose of the gods' mission, especially when he learns to his dismay that there is no oil for basting the birds (1589–90). The cunning Peisthetaerus, having thus engaged the attention of Heracles, then suggests possible terms of agreement, and invites the three gods to dinner—if they will accept his terms (1596–1602). Heracles is completely satisfied, and votes for acceptance (1603)—a vote which he doggedly re-affirms several times during the ensuing argument about the terms (1626–7, 1631, 1640, 1674–5). The promise of a meal has (as Peisthetaerus knew it would) completely won him over, his wits apparently fuddled by the smell of cooking. Finally, he suggests that Peisthetaerus and the other two gods should depart for heaven to implement the terms of the agreement, leaving him to see to the cooking (1689–90); but Poseidon is not fooled by that, and Heracles is dragged away, looking back wistfully at the food he would have ‘dealth with’ (διετέθην: 1692) so well. Exit the mighty, fearless, much-enduring hero of the Twelve Labours.

Gluttony appears to be Heracles' main problem here. However, he is also bedevilled by an apparent lack of intelligence (partly due, no doubt, to his inability to use whatever intelligence he may have concerning anything but food once the subject has been raised). Thus, he immediately advocates violence as the solution to the gods' problems—though he is a member of a peace-delegation (1574–8). He is incapable of realizing that Peisthetaerus is duping him, in spite of Poseidon's pointing this out (1641–5). He eagerly interprets all of the
Triaballian’s meaningless gibberish as signifying support for his (Heracles’) vote (1629 and 1679); he is not only stupid but conceited as well. Finally, he assumes that the argument about who should possess the lady Basileia is simply a sexual matter, and he suggests that one woman is not worth fighting over (1639). Basileia, meanwhile, is ‘Sovereignty’, and it is a matter of cosmic importance whether she remains with the gods or moves in with Peisthetaerus in his rebel settlement of Cloudcuckooland.

Heracles’ third major attribute in this passage as a whole is pugnacity. He suggests initially (and has apparently done so before: 1574) that Peisthetaerus should be strangled (1575–6). Poseidon’s reminder that they are on a peace-mission seems to annoy him, the idea of Peace being like a red rag to a bull: all the more reason for strangulation, he feels (1578). When the Triaballian’s opinion is asked, Heracles threatens to beat him (1628). Heracles’ most active bodily parts appear to be his fists and his stomach—but certainly not his brain.

It is nonetheless interesting to observe the extent to which Heracles controls his divine colleagues. Poseidon’s first action on arrival at their destination is to ask Heracles what should be done (1574); and it is in fact Heracles who decides the whole matter, Poseidon (the only serious-minded member of the delegation) finally giving up in disgust (1683–4). Heracles, for all his faults, is the one who gets things done, swiftly if ill-advisedly.

THE FROGS

The Heracles who appears in the first part of the Frogs (38–164) is somewhat more amiable than his counterpart in the Birds. Although convulsed with mirth at the sight of Dionysus wearing a Heraclean lion-skin and carrying a club (42–3, 45–7), he manages to suppress his laughter and proves as helpful as possible in giving directions into the inner parts of the Underworld (120–64). However, in the course of his conversation with Dionysus, he betrays his obsession with bodily matters: when Dionysus describes his intense longing (presumably aesthetic) for the deceased Euripides, Heracles immediately interprets this in sexual terms, and wide-ranging ones at that: is the object of Dionysus’ passion a woman, a boy or a man? (56–7). Admittedly, Heracles seems to draw the line at necrophilia, although it is difficult to gauge the exact tone of line 67 (καὶ τῶν τοῦ τεθνηκότος:) is it outraged, amused, or sympathetically inquiring? Whatever the exact answer to these questions, Heracles is clearly obsessed with his sexual interpretation of Dionysus’ craving. Dionysus himself finally discovers that the only way in which he can convey to Heracles the intensity of his longing is by comparing it to Heracles’ craving for soup. Heracles at once comprehends the seriousness of the problem (61–5).

In a later part of the Frogs (465f.) Heracles is described in the most unflattering terms by several characters in the Underworld as a bully, a glutton and a thief. It should be borne in mind that misbehaviour in the Underworld might not have been regarded as a great sin by Aristophanes’ living audience, since high-handed
treatment of Underworld-beings is undoubtedly the comic counterpart of the
defiant bravery exhibited in the face of Death by doomed heroes in more tragic
or heroic art; also, characters in the Underworld are bound to be prejudiced
against heroes like Heracles, the great Harrower of Hell. Nonetheless, Heracles’
misdemeanours during his former visit to Hades seem to have been excessive,
even by infernal standards. One might question the validity of Aeacus’ condem­
nation of the hero for the latter’s ‘strangling’ (ἀγχων) of Cerberus (465–9):
Cerberus, after all, is a deadly monster, and Aeacus is guilty of obvious infernal
prejudice here; but there is no reason to doubt the reality of Heracles’ monstrous
behaviour at the inn, as described by the two landladies. According to them
Heracles once visited their inn and devoured sixteen loaves of bread (549–51),
twenty portions of roast meat (553–4), quantities of garlic (555) and dried fish
(558), and all the fresh cheese along with the baskets containing it (559–60). A
formidable repast. Even worse, when asked for payment, Heracles had glared
and bellowed, drawn his sword, ‘apparently insane’ (μανιασθαυ δοκῶν) with
rage (561–4), and had forced the ladies to hide in the store-cupboard (565–6).
By way of a grand exit, he had walked out of the inn with the floor­mats (567).

On the other hand, Heracles appears to have made a good impression on
certain of the women in the Underworld, notably the maidservant and her
‘Mistress’ (ἡ διός—presumably Persephone herself: 504). The maid practically
falls on the disguised Xanthias’ neck, mistaking him for Heracles, and tries to
drag him inside to partake of a sumptuous meal specially prepared for Heracles
(503–12). The maid and her mistress have also provided a flutist-girl and some
dancing-girls for Heracles’ entertainment (513–15). The impression is created
that Heracles is the sort of reckless rogue quite often found attractive by women.

THE PEACE, THE WASPS and THE LYSISTRATA

The portrait of Heracles that emerges from the two plays examined above
appears to have been a stock-in-trade of Attic comedy, to judge by Aristophanes’
(invalid) claim in the Peace: that he had swept this type of Heracles from the
stage. Similarly, in the Wasps, Xanthias tells the audience not to expect to see
the stock ‘Heracles defrauded of his supper’ (Ἡρακλῆς τὸ δεῖπνον
δεσπατώμενος); and this hungry Heracles is mentioned again in the
Lysistrata, where his long wait for supper appears to have become almost
proverbial. It seems, then, that Aristophanes’ portrait of Heracles in the Birds
and the Frogs was a common and popular one—and its main characteristic is
its concentration on the excessive pre-occupation of the Strongman with
physical matters; or, to be more precise, with non-heroic physical matters.

(b) In Lost Comedies

Woodford mentions twenty-four lost comedies in which Heracles may have
been involved, including three more by Aristophanes. Heracles’ great popularity
in Attic comedy, therefore, is indisputable. This popularity was no doubt due
principally to two factors: the ebullient vitality of this aggressively physical hero, and the wide range of incidents included in myths about him.

iv. The Heracles of Apollonius’ Argonautica

Apollonius’ quiet but ubiquitous humour is much at home with Heracles, and a faint but unmistakable aura of the ridiculous surrounds the Strongman in several parts of the poem. For example, his almost childishly eager reaction to the news of the proposed expedition is finely portrayed in Book I, where he unceremoniously drops the fierce Erymanthian Boar ‘at the entrance to the assembly at Mycenae’ (ἐνὶ πρώτῃ Μυκηνῶν ἁγορῇ: 128) and speeds away to join the Argonauts ‘without the knowledge of Eurystheus’ (παρεκ νόον Εὐρισκῆς: 130). Both the hero’s playing truant behind the back of his taskmaster and his abandoning of the trussed and doubtless angry monster in a public place are neatly comic.

Although Apollonius’ description of the Argo sinking beneath the weight of the hero and his club (1.531-3) is superficially meant to express admiration for his great stature, it is not without comic exaggeration. There is also a subtle irony at 1.865-74 where Heracles (the lover of Deianeira and Iole, seducer of the Arcadian Auge, and at least the servant if not the lover of Queen Omphale of Lydia) is made to scorn the Argonauts for their desire, on Lemnos, to loiter ‘with foreign women’ (οῖν δὲ νεκρῆς γυναικῶν: 1.869). More obviously comic is the undignified scene in which Heracles breaks his oar and ‘falls sideways’ (πέσε διόμοις: 1.1169) off his rowing-bench, then sits up ‘glaring and speechless’ (εἰς ἐντολήν τοῦπατρίου: 1.1170-1), or perhaps ‘looking wistfully (after his oar)’, depending on the meaning of ἐντολήν.

Finally, the ‘magnanimity’ (μέγα γρονέων: 1.348) of Heracles should be noted in his refusal to accept the leadership of the expedition, in spite of the general wish of the Argonauts (1.341-3). Although the traditions of the story demanded that Jason should lead the expedition, and although Heracles does not properly belong in the Argonautic story at all (he conveniently withdraws at the end of Book I), this passage, and especially line 348, does highlight one aspect of Apollonius’ Heracles, namely, a certain amiability.

v. The Fringe of Comedy: Euripides’ Alcestis

In this somewhat unclassifiable play, Heracles skirts along the edges of the ludicrous for much of the time, and a great deal of his behaviour in Admetus’ home is true to the stock Heracles of Attic comedy. The servant who waits on him complains bitterly of Heracles’ apparent greediness at table, his drinking of neat wine, his consequent drunkenness, and his cacophonous singing in a house whose mistress has recently died (747-66). However, as has been well demonstrated by Woodford, Heracles’ actions are utterly natural under the circumstances, and are completely justified by the nature of his reception in Admetus’ home. He is deliberately kept in the dark by Admetus about the death of Alcestis; his eating and drinking are the normal behaviour of an hospitably-
entertained guest who has done a lot of travelling and has a lot more in front of him; drunkenness is the natural and arguably desirable result of drinking; drunken and atonal singing in one's cups is hardly a crime; and the servant, to judge by Heracles' remarks (773–8), had waited on him both inefficiently and surly. Even Heracles' inebriated philosophising with the same servant (against whom, characteristically in this play, the hero harbours little resentment for his poor service) contains more pathos than comedy in its advocacy of the 'Horatian' *carpe diem* attitude (773–802), and particularly in Heracles' apparent inclusion of himself among 'mere mortals' (9νησον; 799). As in Euripides' *Heracles* and Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, the later apotheosis of the hero is not mentioned at all, his humanity being thus emphasised. As for the remainder of the *Alcestis*, Heracles behaves admirably, exhibiting courteous friendliness, decisiveness, and outstanding selflessness and courage in his combat with Death.

The Heracles of the *Alcestis*, neither tragic nor comic, is in many ways one of Euripides' most interesting creations: for the dramatist has not only blended the best and most appealing characteristics of the hero into an impressive amalgam, but has also managed to incorporate in that amalgam the traits in Heracles which are usually the least dignified. The result is a depiction of a strong man, lively, humane, courageous, realistic, and truly 'magnanimous'. Euripides has angled the spotlight of his art onto the stock figure of Attic comedy in such a way as to reveal a character neither brutal nor ridiculous.

vi. Heracles and the Cercopes

One of Heracles' least dignified, though not unhappy, experiences was his encounter with the Cercopes. Their name has been translated as 'tailed men', but it might also reasonably be translated as 'rump-faced men' (κέρκος, ὀψ, taken literally)—a crude name which would accord well with the general atmosphere surrounding these impudent creatures. According to the Suda, they were two brothers who 'practised every sort of wrong-doing' (πᾶσαν ἄσκιαν ἐπειδήκυμενον), and the Suda remarks, perhaps significantly, that they were called Cercopes 'as a result of their appalling behaviour' (ἐκ τῆς τῶν ἔργων δεινοτητος). These two dubious characters were warned by their mother to beware of Μελάμπυσος—'the black-rumped man'. Coming upon Heracles as he was sleeping, they attempted to steal his weapons; but the hero awoke, seized them, and tied them upside-down to a carrying-pole which he rested on his shoulders. From this position the Cercopes were able to observe Heracles' rear parts, which were presumably of marvellous swarthiness for reasons known, ultimately, only to the original tellers of the tale. The Cercopes were exceedingly amused by this phenomenon, and the genial Heracles was so taken with their mirth that he released them.

This upside-down view of the least obviously 'heroic' part of the great Heracles' anatomy seems to epitomize the element of the incongruous mentioned in the introduction to this paper, and to demonstrate, in an unusually graphic way, the real vulnerability of the sublime Strongman to ridicule—depending on the viewpoint of the observer.
NOTES

1. Note the epithet ὀνόματος used by Pindar of the mighty Heracles in OI. 10, 15. This word, when used as a compliment (as in the line of Pindar referred to), would mean 'of overwhelming power'; but elsewhere in Greek literature (e.g. Hom. Il. 18, 262; Od. 1, 368; and even Pindar in line 30 of OI. 10), it can mean 'overwhelmingly lawless', 'outrageous'. This double-edged Greek compound indicates an important fact about the Strongman-hero, and about Power in general: it can be good or evil, admirable or terrible, superhuman or subhuman.

2. The formulaic ἴπτ' Ἡρακλῆσιν alone (ignoring variants and synonyms like ἴπτ' Ἡρακλῆςκος, κρατερός, ἀλκιμως, and some others) occurs with considerable frequency in Greek literature (Hom. Il. 5, 638; Il. 11, 696, 15, 640; 19, 98; Od. 11, 601; Hes. Theog. 289, 315, 943, 982; Hes. Shield of Heracles 52, 69, 349, 416, 452; Theocr. Idyls 25, 154; Moschus? Megara 95).


5. See Woodford, op. cit., 98–102.

6. Peace 739ff.

7. Wasps 60.

8. Lysistrata 928: ἀλλ' ἢ τὸ πέος τόδ' Ἡρακλῆς ἔνειζε.


10. The former translation seems the more likely, in view of the possible echo in πανταίνων of Hom. Od. 11, 608 (where the phrase is δεινὸν πανταίνων, and can only mean 'glaring terribly'—Heracles is there depicted as a grim and terrifying wraith prowling through the gloom of the Underworld with an arrow always on his bow-string). However, if Apollonius does mean 'looking wistfully', it must be admitted that even a 'wistful' Heracles would not be an unamusing sight.

11. On the whole, however, Apollonius' Heracles is not particularly 'amiable': he is somewhat like the proverbial bull in a china-shop—slightly comic and incongruous but basically dangerous and destructive. (Note the arresting remark by G.K. Galinsky in The Heracles Theme, Oxford, 1972, 109, that Heracles 'appear among the Hellenistic citizen-heroes of the Argonautica like a solitary mastodon left over from the palaeolithic world').


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