

The Two Faces of Hercules: Cicero's use of Hercules as Tragic and Philosophical *exemplum*

The example of Hercules is invoked frequently by Cicero in his philosophical works. This mythological figure, who undertook “the greatest labours and hardships for the sake of preserving and helping all peoples” (*Off.* 3.25) is extolled as “protector of the human race” in the *De Finibus* (3.66). In the *De Officiis*, he is held up as a model of good behaviour to be emulated by the reader (*Off.* 1.118) – an idea that Cicero underscores by means of a compressed retelling of the famous story of Prodicus (as told by Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.21-34), in which Hercules chooses the Path of Virtue over the Path of Vice.

The promotion of Hercules as a positive figure, meanwhile, is consistently shown as having a positive impact on the state. In the *De Legibus*, Cicero proposes that the ideal state institute a law to worship him as a divinity, on the grounds that this will show that “the souls of all men are immortal, but those of good and brave men are divine” (*Leg.* 2.27). In the *De Natura Deorum*, meanwhile, it is argued that deifying brave men, such as Hercules, “makes men more willing to encounter danger for the sake of their country” (*Nat. D.* 3.50). This Euhemerist strand in Cicero's religious thought is explored more fully in Cole (2014).

This characterization of Hercules as a philosophical role model to be emulated continues in the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations*, where the Prodician story of Hercules at the crossroads, faced with a choice between the Path of Vice and the Path of Virtue, is referenced as we are told: “[Hercules] would never have departed to the gods, if, while he was among mortal, he had not built this path (*eam viam*) for himself” (*Tusc.* 1.32).

As the text progresses, however, Cicero invokes a different picture of Hercules: he is also the figure who broke down, losing his virtue, under the pain of a poisoned tunic given to him by

a woman (*Tusc.* 2.20). A similar, negative image of the maddened Hercules shooting his own sons is invoked in the *Academica* (*Luc.* 89). Interestingly, however, in each of these instances, this version of Hercules is attributed to a Greek tragic playwright (Sophocles and Euripides, respectively). This paper will argue that, in attributing these negative representations of Hercules to Greek tragedians, Cicero constructs an alternative, markedly *tragic* view of Hercules that he is able to invoke as a negative *exemplum*, without compromising his generally positive view of the figure in his philosophical works. In this way, Cicero is able to manage the ambiguous nature of this mythological figure (for which, see Blanshard (2005)), separating his own, philosophical Hercules from the Greek, tragic Hercules, and so allowing him to use Hercules as both a positive and a negative *exemplum*.

Works Cited

- Blanshard, A. 2005. *Hercules: a Heroic Life*. London: Granta.
- Cole, S. 2014. *Cicero and the Rise of Deification at Rome*. Cambridge.