

The Heraklean and Promethean Protagonists of *Supernatural* (2005-2015)

Over ten seasons, The CW series *Supernatural* has developed an elaborate mythology from its core premise: two brothers criss-cross the United States hunting vampires, ghosts, and other dangerous creatures as they track the demon who killed their mother. To populate its cast of villains, *Supernatural* mines various mythologies and folklores, including classical myth: for example, a man-eating Siren, an effervescent Cupid, the bloodthirsty goddess Veritas, and the duplicitous Mercury. Beyond these specific engagements with Greco-Roman myth, the show's subterranean architecture—character, plot arc, and cosmology—strongly resembles models from classical myth, situating *Supernatural* in the classical tradition.

This paper examines three aspects of *Supernatural*'s resonances with classical myth. First, the older brother, Dean, closely coheres to the characteristics of the heroic archetype exemplified by Herakles (cf. Galinsky 1972, Stafford 2012): identified with a hometown but homeless due to domestic disaster; peripatetic in his characteristic monster-slaying, which renders him a savior but also reinforces his inability to function in normal human society; marked by his gluttony, drunkenness, and a voracious sexual appetite, which is heterosexual but repeatedly flirts with homosexuality; unable to live out a normative domestic life because his eventual girlfriend and her son are threatened with torture and death by his supernatural enemies; and himself pulled up from the Underworld in order to fulfill his destiny—incumbent upon his bloodline—to serve as the earthly vessel for the Archangel Michael in his fated battle with the fallen angel Lucifer. Ultimately, Dean's arrogance and alienation from humanity due to his growing supernatural powers result in his self-destruction; Season 9 ended with another defeat of death and transformation into a supernatural force. But instead of a Heraklean divinity, Dean becomes a demon of the sort he once hunted.

Second, *Supernatural's* cosmology, though it adopts a Judeo-Christian cast of characters, adopts Greek views of the divine rather than popular Christian representations of the heavenly host. While representations of pagan gods are frequent, primarily in connection with the importance of blood sacrifice for their veneration, starting in Season 4 angels largely displace them as a major element of the series' mythology. Rather than benevolent guardians of mankind, these angels are soldiers in a strict chain of command, focused on the maintenance of cosmic order in which humans play an insignificant role. Most angels display attitudes toward humanity that range from disinterest to contempt, not unlike gods' comparisons of humans to leaves or ants in the *Iliad*. These angels are more powerful than humans—but not morally superior. In the absence of God, whose abdication of responsibility creates the ultimate power vacuum, the succession story that Hesiod represents as stopping with Zeus' accession to power resumes, and angels battle each other to be the new God ruling over Heaven.

Third, this cosmic disorder is exacerbated by the only angel who does exhibit a benevolent attitude toward humanity, which he develops through his association with Dean: Castiel. He alone decides to rebel against the heavenly chain of command in supporting Dean's opposition to an Apocalyptic battle between Michael and Lucifer, because it would cost millions of human lives in collateral damage. In this rebellion Castiel fulfills particularly the Romantic understanding of Prometheus as the guardian of humanity's interests against the tyranny of the divine order, which cares nothing for human suffering (cf. Dougherty 2006, Corbeau-Parsons 2013). Like Prometheus, Castiel is "freed" from his servitude to Heaven by the Heraklean Dean's example and intervention. The other half of the Promethean identity is portrayed by the angel Balthazar, a puckish opportunist who has stolen Heaven's most valuable weapons-grade technology and agrees to ally himself with Castiel. Finally Castiel, drunk with power over the

possibility of becoming the next God, kills Balthazar for betraying him—just as the Hesiodic Zeus eliminates Prometheus' threat to his kingship.

As this overview indicates, *Supernatural*'s integral structural elements can be traced back to models from classical antiquity that emerge in particular texts, and reflect long-standing cultural preoccupations specific to a polytheistic culture invested, albeit ambivalently, in the overlap between the human and divine/infernal, or supernatural, layers of the cosmos. While the tragic hero is common in cinematic and televisual texts, his transposition into a world beset by monsters and divinities finds its most ready cultural analog in the world of classical mythology, with Herakles as the heroic paradigm for serial and complex relations with those forces, and Prometheus as the model for divinity whose rebellion touches humanity—for good and ill.

Bibliography

- Corbeau-Parsons, Caroline. (2013). *Prometheus in the Nineteenth Century: From Myth to Symbol*. Legenda.
- Dougherty, Carol. (2006). *Prometheus*. Routledge
- Galinsky, G. Karl. (1972). *The Herakles Theme*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Stafford, Emma. (2012). *Herakles*. Routledge.