Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology III, Herakles compared to a hero of the Mahabharata

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For example:

§0. So far, I have been comparing Greek myths about the hero Hēraklēs with Old Norse myths about the hero Starkaðr, concentrating on details that these myths have in common. Now I add to the comparison some further details to be found in an Indic myth about the hero Śiśupāla as featured in the Sanskrit epic known as the Mahābhārata. This Śiśupāla is antagonistic with Krishna, to whom I will hereafter refer as Kṛṣṇa—and who is an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu. But, despite this antagonism between the hero Śiśupāla and the god Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, the hero becomes a devotee of the god at the very moment when Kṛṣṇa kills Śiśupāla. Here is how it happens: Kṛṣṇa, activating his sacred weapon, which is a solar disk, throws it at Śiśupāla, and the disk of the god incarnate beheads the antagonistic hero. At the precise moment of this sacral beheading, which is pictured in the cover illustration I show here, a tejas- ‘flash-of-light’ is seen coming out of the gap between the beheaded hero’s head and body—while going into the body of the god Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu, all in an instant. There is a comparable moment in the myth about the death of Hēraklēs, paraphrased and analyzed in H24H §§46–47. My earlier analysis, however, can now be enhanced by comparing details in the Greek myth with details that I have just highlighted in the comparable Indic myth.


Here is another image showing the scene:
§1. I start with Hēraklēs, highlighting some details of the myth as reported by Diodorus of Sicily (4.38.1–4.39.3). We read in Diodorus that Hēraklēs, burning to death on a funeral pyre built for him at Mount Oeta, is suddenly blasted away by the thunderbolt of Zeus; the blast destroys his earthly existence but regenerates him on Mount Olympus. Again I cite my paraphrase and analysis in H24H §§46–47. On the basis of these details in the myth, I have argued in Nagy 2019.07.12 (I§§4–5, summarizing earlier arguments in Nagy 1990b:140–142 and 2006 §75) that the thunder and lightning of Zeus here is simultaneously destructive and regenerative for heroes, as we can see for example by contemplating the traditional idea of Elysium, which can refer simultaneously to two different places:

The first place is immediate: it is where the thunderbolt of Zeus is believed to have struck and killed a given hero. It is a localized setting for the ritual dimensions of hero cult.

The second place is remote: it is where that same hero is believed to be living forever, having been regenerated by the same thunderbolt that had killed him. It is a paradisiacal setting for the mythological dimensions of hero cult.

§2. I now turn to Śīṣupāla, highlighting some comparable details as narrated in Mahābhārata II (I will cite the śloka-numbers of the Pune Critical Edition). First, Kṛṣṇa declares that he will kill Śīṣupāla in full view of all the kings attending a royal assembly (II 42.14). Then Kṛṣṇa throws his sacred disk, which cuts off the head of Śīṣupāla, and the hero topples like a mountain struck by a vajra- ‘thunderbolt’ (II 42.21). Now the assembled kings see a tejas- ‘flash-of-light’, bright as the sun, radiating out of the body of Śīṣupāla (II 42.22), and this tejas- (the word is repeated) directly radiates into the body of Kṛṣṇa (II 42.23). Contemplating this transfer of the tejas- (once again the word is repeated), the kings recognize that an
adbhutam 'miracle' has happened (II 42.24), and this miracle is immediately confirmed by a sign from the heavens: out of a clear sky, there is now thunder and lightning and rain (II 42.25).

§3. I highlight two of the details that these Indic and Greek myths have in common:

1. Just as the god Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa is antagonistic with the hero Śiśupāla in Indic myth, so also the goddess Hērā is antagonistic with the hero Hēraklēs in Greek myth.

2. At the moment of death, however, the antagonism turns into symbiosis in both myths.

§4. In the case of Śiśupāla, his life-force is absorbed in a flash of light generated by the god Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, and this flash, explicitly compared to lightning in the narrative, comes out of the hero's body and goes inside the god's body. Comparably in the case of Hēraklēs, his life-force is absorbed in a flash of lightning generated by the god Zeus, and this flash goes inside the body of the goddess Hērā. Such an entry is implicit in the ensuing stylized detail: Hērā now gives birth to the hero, so that Hēraklēs must have been inside Hērā. Now the hero can be born, really reborn, from his new mother, Hērā, who has thus given him a life that becomes eternal. Thus an antagonism between Hērā and Hēraklēs has led to an eventual symbiosis between divinity and hero. On the original antagonism directed at the hero Hēraklēs by the goddess Hērā—an antagonism that had been validated, however reluctantly, by the god Zeus as her consort—I refer again to my paraphrase and analysis in H24H1 §§46–47.

§5. For Hērā and Hēraklēs, I must add, there are also other moments where the divinity and the hero can be seen as both antagonistic and symbiotic with each other. For example, as we read in Diodorus (4.9.6), Athena had once upon a time persuaded Hērā to breast-feed Hēraklēs when he was still a baby; the hero's mortal mother had abandoned him and exposed him to the elements, since she feared Hērā. This symbiotic gesture, where Hērā breast-feeds Hēraklēs, led to more antagonism, as we read further in Diodorus (4.9.6–7): while the breastfeeding was underway, the baby sucked too hard and bit the goddess on the breast, so that Hērā tossed the baby aside, and Athena had to bring him back to his mortal mother. In further versions of the myth, it is added that Hērā, when she abruptly pulled her breast away from the biting baby, spilled her milk into the sky, thus unwittingly creating the Milky Way (for example, "pseudo-Eratosthenes" Catasterismi 3.44 ed. Olivieri). There is a similar instance of antagonism in the Iliad (5.392–394), where we read that the adult Hēraklēs wounded Hērā by shooting an arrow into her right breast, causing her an incurable algos 'pain' (394). Once immortalized, however, Hēraklēs becomes the devoted son of Hērā, who gives birth to him, at least figuratively, as we have read in Diodorus (4.39.2). We find a further example of such symbiosis in an image, engraved on the back of an Etruscan bronze mirror from Volterra, dated around 300 BCE, where we see an immortalized Hēraklēs (Etruscan Hercle) being breast-fed by his new mother Hērā (Etruscan Uni, Latin Iūnō) attended by her consort Zeus (Etruscan Tini). Zeus here is holding up for all to see a tablet inscribed in Etruscan lettering, where the text is evidently validating what I describe here as a symbiosis of hero and goddess. I note especially the lettering HERCLE at line 3 and VNIA, in the genitive, at line 4. Jaan Puhvel (1987:252, with comments at 251) shows a copy of this image, and I too show a copy here:
Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology II, Hēraklēs as an 'Indo-European' hero »

Tags: Diodorus of Sicily, Elysium, Hera, Herakles, Juno, Krśna, Mahābhārata, Mount Olympus, Śiśupāla, tejas-

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