



Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology IX, Further rough patches for He#rakle#s

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September 20, 2019 | By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2019.09.20 | By Gregory Nagy

The text of this essay was written in honor of Thomas J. Figueira. I did a public reading of this text, “live,” on the same day of the posting here, 2019.09.20. The occasion, which took place at Rutgers University, was a most happy one, organized by a dedicated group of Tom’s colleagues and students and friends to celebrate the completion—so far—of forty years of service at the university. When I say “service” here, I cannot help but think of the Labors of Herakles. At this celebration of Tom’s Herculean service, a number of papers were presented in his honor, and my essay here was one of them. This essay, which is “TC IX” in a continuing series concerned with “thinking comparatively” about Greek mythology, is closely linked in content with “TC VIII VII VI V IV III II I,” going all the way back to 2019.07.26. I hereby dedicate the whole series, including the upcoming numbers “TC X XI XIII” and so on, to my dear friend Tom, whom I described at the celebration at Rutgers as the ultimate master of source criticism. One of the many things I learned from Tom during our many years of working together on so many shared projects is the importance of examining from a historical point of view the sources of myth. Without a historical perspective, comparative perspectives are doomed to fail.

§0. Picking up from where I left off in my essay TC VIII in [Classical Inquiries 2019.09.13](#), I continue here in TC IX with further observations about difficulties or “rough patches” to be encountered in any attempt to reconstruct a prototype for the hero Hēraklēs on the basis of the various different ancient Greek myths that were told about him. Such difficulties, as we just saw in TC VIII, can be traced back to the myths themselves, which occasionally reveal inconsistencies that were never completely smoothed over in the traditions of ancient Greek mythmaking. Some of these inconsistencies have to do with contradictions in details, which can usually be explained as resulting from localized variations in mythmaking, as for example when Hēraklēs performs a short-term service for the king Augeias of Elis—a service that is in some ways different, from the standpoint of our hero’s overall “program” of Labors, from the long-term services that Hēraklēs performs for the king Eurystheus of Mycenae. But there are also other cases where the inconsistencies had been built into the myths themselves. Such cases center on contradictions that reflect badly on the “good character” of the hero, as for example when Hēraklēs becomes an exponent of “vice”—in stark contrast to his conventional reputation as an exponent of “virtue.” To illustrate a moment in the life of Hēraklēs where we see such an exceptionally negative side of the hero, I show here an ancient vase painting where Hēraklēs is pictured in the act of giving up his lionskin, trading it in, as it were, so that he may now wear instead an ultimately deadly robe that is smeared with the excretions of a vicious Centaur. This act of exchanging the heroic lionskin for a robe of death is symbolic, as we will see, of what is recognized by experts in comparative mythology as one of the three great “sins” committed by Hēraklēs in his lifetime.

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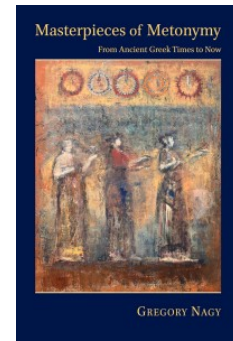
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Hēraklēs trades his lionskin for the poisoned robe. Red-figure pelike, ca. 430 BCE. [Image](#) via the British Museum.



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Archives

§1. I use here the English word “sin” advisedly. The same word is used by David Weeks in translating a relevant formulation by Georges Dumézil (1983b:123–124) in volume two of Dumézil’s *Mythe et épopée* (1971:117–118), who himself uses the French word *péché*. The “sin” here—and I find that this English word is perfectly accurate in conveying what Dumézil means by way of his French wording *péché*—is that Hēraklēs seeks to marry a young woman named Iole without unmarrying his current wife, named Deianeira. As Dumézil points out, this “sin” is one of only three “sins” committed by Hēraklēs that will merit punishment by way of a divine sanction—a penalty—in the myths about the hero.

§2. In what follows, I will paraphrase not only the hero’s “sin” of “adultery,” as Dumézil describes it (1971:117–118 = 1983b:123–124), but also the other two great “sins” that will be penalized by way of divine sanctions. As noted by Dumézil, all three sins (I will no longer use quotation marks in referring to them) are attested in the overall narrative about the life of Hēraklēs by Diodorus of Sicily, who lived in the first century BCE. Some relevant details are also attested in a related narrative we read in the *Library of “Apollodorus,”* dating from the second century CE. In the paragraphs A B C that follow, I paraphrase and briefly analyze the narrative of Diodorus:

A. As we read in Diodorus 4.11.1, Hēraklēs initially hesitates about complying with the will of Zeus, who mandates that the hero must perform twelve Labors commanded by Eurystheus, king of Mycenae. Although Zeus is unhappy with his own mandate, the formulation of which had resulted from a deceitful contrivance by the goddess Hērā, the god must now enforce his formulation. Hēraklēs must now suffer a penalty for his hesitation, and that is why Zeus allows Hērā to inflict a fit of madness on the hero, causing him to kill his own children, that is, the sons that he fathered with his then-wife Megara.

B. After then complying with the mandate of Zeus and eventually performing all twelve of his Labors, we read further in Diodorus 4.31.1 that Hēraklēs now marries off his wife Megara to his nephew Iolaos, since he fears fathering any more children with her, and he proceeds to woo a young woman named Iole, with whom he hopes to father new children. But the father of Iole, Eurytos, fears that Hēraklēs will likewise kill the children that he fathers with Iole, and so he refuses permission for the hero to marry his daughter. Feeling spiteful about this refusal, Hēraklēs rounds up and steals the horses of Eurytos, driving them off to his fortress in Tiryns. But Iphitos, son of Eurytos and the brother of Iole, suspecting what has happened, goes after Hēraklēs, hoping to track him down and to recover from him the stolen horses. When Iphitos arrives at Tiryns, he is welcomed as a guest by Hēraklēs, who pretends not to have rustled the horses. Then Hēraklēs invites Iphitos to ascend with him to a high tower, so that Iphitos may look around and ascertain, as Hēraklēs claims, that the stolen horses are not to be found in the territory of Tiryns. While Iphitos, standing high up on the tower, is looking around, Hēraklēs sneaks up behind his guest and pushes him. Iphitos plunges from the heights to his death, and Hēraklēs must now suffer a penalty for his stealthy killing of his guest. The gods inflict a polluting disease on the hero, which will not be cured without the lifting of his pollution. I will forgo here the narrative that follows, about the eventual curing of Hēraklēs.

C. Here we come to the third great sin of Hēraklēs. We already saw in Diodorus 4.31.1, with reference to the hero’s second great sin, that Hēraklēs was wooing a young woman named Iole, daughter of Eurytos. But even before that wooing, as we now see from a remark made by Diodorus at 4.34.1, Hēraklēs had

already wooed and even married Deianeira, daughter of Oineus and sister of Meleagros. And it is the attempt of Hēraklēs to undo this marriage that leads to his committing his third great sin.

§3. An essential part of the story about Hēraklēs and Deianeira starts at a later point, in Diodorus 4.36.3–5, where we read that Hēraklēs killed a vicious Centaur named Nessos when the beast was trying to rape Deianeira. The hero shot the Centaur with a poisoned arrow—the poison originated from the Hydra killed by Hēraklēs in one of his Labors. Unbeknownst to Hēraklēs, however, the Centaur persuaded Deianeira, just before he died of the poison that was smeared on the tip of the fatal arrow, to accept from him a dying gift, described as a liquid ‘love-charm’, a philtron, which Deianeira was to save and to store secretly inside a container, that is, in a vial. The dying gift of the Centaur turned out to be a gift most deadly. The liquid love-charm contained in the vial was a toxic ooze consisting of three ingredients all mixed together. There was the blood, and there was the poison mixed in the blood, but there was also semen mixed in the poisoned blood. The narrative of Diodorus 4.36.5 makes it quite explicit that the Centaur had experienced an emission of gonos or ‘semen’ in the course of his death throes, and that this semen was to become an essential ingredient in the trifecta of moistures that I had described in §0 as the “excretions” of the vicious Centaur. The striking detail about the gonos ‘semen’ of the Centaur as a third ingredient, made explicit in the narrative of Diodorus (again, 4.36.5), is mentioned explicitly also in the corresponding narrative that we read in the Library of “Apollodorus” (2.7.6 p. 260 ed. Frazer). Nowhere else in the ancient sources, as far as I know, can we find such a detail, which is also missing in the analysis of Dumézil (1971:117–118 = 1983b:123–124). But I think that the detail is relevant to the argument that Dumézil makes about the third great sin of Hēraklēs. And that is because the dying Centaur had told Deianeira that she could use the mixture of the Centaur’s poisoned blood and semen, mixed further with olive oil, as a love-charm that would prevent Hēraklēs from successfully loving any woman other than Deianeira herself. Again, this part of the narrative is made explicit in Diodorus (4.36.5) and in the Library of “Apollodorus” (2.7.7 p. 268 ed. Frazer). But the third great sin of Hēraklēs was in fact the attempt on his part to marry Iole and thus become the successful lover of a woman other than Deianeira. And, for this third sin, the penalty was not madness, not pollution, but death, as narrated in Diodorus 4.38.1–5.

§4. In an earlier essay, [Nagy 2019.07.12](#), I presented an epitomized retelling of the relevant parts of this narration about the hero’s death, which is followed in Diodorus 4.39.1–3 by a narration of the hero’s life after death. I retell here, following my paraphrase in [Nagy 2013 1§46](#), only the relevant parts about the death, as narrated in Diodorus 4.38.1–5.

Hēraklēs is fatally poisoned when his skin makes contact with the love-cream extracted from the vicious Centaur Nessos. The estranged wife of Hēraklēs, Deianeira, had preserved this poisonous substance in a vial, and she smears it on an undergarment called a khiton that she sends to Hēraklēs in a vain attempt to regain his affections; the hero had asked for a cloak and a khiton to be sent to him so that he could perform a sacrifice to Zeus after capturing Iole, the younger woman whom he now intends to marry. Hēraklēs gets dressed for the sacrifice and puts on the khiton. The consequences are fatal. Once the skin of Hēraklēs makes contact with the poison smeared on the undergarment, he starts burning up on the inside as the poison rapidly pervades his body from the outside. The pain is excruciating, and Hēraklēs knows he is doomed.

§5. In the vase-painting we saw at the start of this essay, Deianeira does not merely send the deadly robe to Hēraklēs. She hands it over to him directly. And, most pathetically, Hēraklēs will not only accept the robe, dropping his club to the ground, but he will also hand over to Deianeira the lionskin that marks the positive side of his heroic identity. The deadly robe, by contrast, marks his third great sin, epitomizing the negative side of that same identity.

Tags: [Comments on Comparative Mythology](#), [Deianeira](#), [Georges Dumézil](#), [Herakles](#), [Iole](#), [Iphitos](#), [Megara](#)

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