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Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XI, Homeric marginalizations of Hēraklēs as an epic hero

October 4, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2019.10.04 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. This essay, dated 2019.10.04, for which I give the abbreviated title TC XI, continues from the essay TC X, dated 2019.09.27, the subtitle for which was “A Homeric lens for viewing Hēraklēs.” In the subtitle for TC XI here, “Homeric marginalizations of Hēraklēs as an epic hero,” I view the term “Homeric” more narrowly than the term “epic.” To put it more accurately, I view Homeric poetry as a special kind of Greek epic poetry, not the general kind as reconstructed by way of comparative philology. And my point is that the heroic character of Hēraklēs, while he is central to epic poetry as reconstructed by comparatists, has become marginalized in Homeric poetry, where the central heroic characters are Achilles and Odysseus. In the illustration for my essay here, I show by way of a three-part picture this trio of heroes—Achilles, Hēraklēs, Odysseus—as imagined by artists. I have positioned Hēraklēs at the center of the three-part picture, indicating this hero’s centrality in the epic tradition inherited by Homeric poetry. In terms of the point I am making in this essay, however, Homeric poetry would have squeezed out Hēraklēs from the center of our three-part picture, and we would now have to look for him at the two margins of what could now be rethought as a four-part picture. So, we would now find Hēraklēs to the left of Achilles and we would find another Hēraklēs to the right of Odysseus. In Homeric poetry, after, all, Hēraklēs no longer has a single central role but rather a dual marginal role, both as an older version of Achilles and as an older version of Odysseus.



From left: [Achilles](#), [Hēraklēs](#), and [Odysseus](#).

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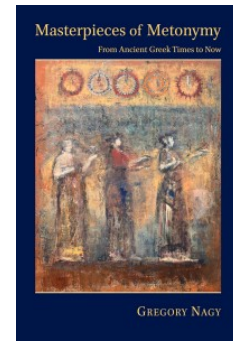
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The same three figures, now with Hēraklēs at the margins.



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§1. For background on Homeric poetry as a special kind of epic poetry that evolved out of a more general kind of Greek epic tradition, I refer to §§1–8 in a lengthy article, [Nagy 2015.12.24](#), where I posit

(A) an earlier phase of Greek epic, where ‘Homer’ was viewed mythologically as a be-all and end-all poet who created an entire ‘cycle’ of epic that once included the so-called epic Cycle

(B) a later phase of Greek epic, where poetry attributed to ‘Homer’ was being narrowed down to the Iliad and the Odyssey as we know them.

When I refer to Homeric poetry in the present essay, I have in mind “phase B.”

§2. In an earlier work, *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Nagy 1990b:13–16), I had already painted in broad strokes a picture of such a “phase B,” where the emergence of the Iliad and the Odyssey as the primary representatives of Greek epic led to the centralization of Achilles and Odysseus respectively as the primary exponents of epic heroism—at the expense of Hēraklēs, who in turn got marginalized.

§3. To supplement that picture, I now give two new examples:

§3a. Unlike Achilles, who has in the Iliad the central role in stories about the fighting at Troy, Homeric poetry features Hēraklēs only marginally in such a role. And yet, we read in Iliad 6.640–642 that Hēraklēs had once upon a time not only fought at Troy but have even conquered the city, hex oiēis sun nēusi (ἕξ οἰῆς σὺν νηυσὶ) ‘by way of merely six ships’, 6.641. As we see from the context, Hēraklēs was the main fighter in such a first Trojan War as opposed to the second Trojan War, which is of course the main subject of the Iliad. The hero was central back then, but he is marginal now in the Iliad. By contrast, the free-standing story about the conquest of Troy by Hēraklēs can be found in retellings by Diodorus of Sicily (4.32.1–5) and by “Apollodorus” (2.6.4 pp. 245–247 ed. Frazer 1921 I).

§3b. Unlike Odysseus, who has in the Odyssey a central role in all the various different stories about being blown off-course while attempting to sail home, Homeric poetry features Hēraklēs only marginally in such a role. We read in Iliad 15.24–30 that Hēraklēs, while sailing back home from Troy, was blown off-course and landed on the island of Kos, where he was mistaken for a pirate and almost killed—if he had not been rescued by Zeus himself. By contrast, the free-standing story that tells how Hēraklēs was blown off-course while attempting to sail home can be found in a retelling by “Apollodorus” (2.7.1 p. 247 ed. Frazer 1921 I).

§4. In an earlier work already cited (Nagy 1990b:13–16), I have given other examples of such parallelisms between a marginalized Hēraklēs and a centralized Odysseus, as also between a marginalized Hēraklēs and a centralized Achilles. I epitomize these examples in the paragraphs that follow.

§5. I start with the Homeric Hymn to Herakles (Hymn 15), where we find two verses that refer, first, to the Labors of Hēraklēs and then, second, to the hero’s sub-Labors:

πλαζόμενος πομπήσιν ὑπ’ Εὐρυσθήος ἀνακτος
πολλὰ μὲν αὐτὸς ἔρεξεν ἀτάσθαλα, πολλὰ δ’ ἀνέτλη

[Hēraklēs was] set off-course, on missions at the direction of Eurystheus the king.
Many are the reckless [atasthala] things that he did, many the things that he endured.

Homeric Hymn to Herakles 15.5–6

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This passage, as we will now see, reveals parallelisms between (a) Hēraklēs/Odysseus and (b) Hēraklēs/Achilles.

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§5a. On one hand, I compare the verses beginning the Odyssey:

ἀνδρα μοι ἔννεπε Μοῦσα πολύτροπον ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν προλίεθρον ἔπερσε.
πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα...

About the man sing to me, Muse, the one of many turns [polu-tropos], the one who many times
was set off-course after he destroyed the sacred citadel of Troy.
Many are the men whose cities he saw, and he came to know their way of thinking,
and many are the pains that he suffered at sea.

Odyssey 1.1–4

In the Hymn to Herakles, the anaphora of πολλὰ...πολλὰ 'many things...many things' at verse 6 in the context of πλάζόμενος 'set off-course' at verse 5 is parallel to the anaphora of πολύτροπον...πολλὰ/πολλῶν.../πολλὰ 'the one of many turns'...'many'/'many' .../'many' at Odyssey 1 verses 1/3/4 in the context of πλάγχθη 'was set off-course' at verse 2. Further, the expression πολλὰ...ἀνέτη 'he endured many things' at Hymn 15.6 describing Hēraklēs is parallel to πολλὰ...πάθεν ἄλγεα 'he suffered many pains' at Odyssey 1.4 describing Odysseus.

§5b. On the other hand, I note that the deeds of Hēraklēs, described as atasthala (ἀτάσθαλα) 'reckless' at Hymn 15.6, correspond to morally questionable deeds committed by Achilles in his own dark moments, where he is described as atasthalos (ἀτάσθαλος) 'reckless' (as in Iliad 22.418). I will have more to say in TC XII about the moral 'recklessness' of these heroes.

§6. In view of the kind of evidence we have just seen in §5a and §5b, I argue that the two heroic figures of Achilles and Odysseus reveal a split of characterizations that survive unsplit in one single heroic figure, Hēraklēs. In light of Dumézil's work on myths about Hēraklēs in Mythe et épopée II (1971, Part I), we see that Herakles is in fact far closer to a single integral Indo-European model of an epic hero than is either Achilles or Odysseus. We may even add another factor, this time in light of Dumézil's work in Mythe et épopée I (1968:117–132). Such heroes as the five Pāṇḍava-s in the Indic Mahābhārata are not only each parallel to specific gods in traits and actions: they are also sired by these very same gods. The father/son combinations are: Dharma/Yudhiṣṭhira, Vāyu/Bhīma, Indra/Arjuna, the two Aśvin-s / Nakula and Sahadeva (in each case the fathers are gods and the sons are mortals). So also with Herakles: the best of heroes, as he is described in the Homeric Hymn To Herakles (15.1–2), is sired by the best of gods. By contrast, most Homeric heroes are several generations removed from divine parentage, just as they are several stages removed from an Indo-European model of an epic hero.

§7. There is a reflex of this state of affairs on the formal level of poetic diction. The word in question is hēmí-theoi (ἡμίθεοι) 'demigods', which as we see from Hesiod F 204.100 MW and elsewhere clearly denotes direct divine parentage on one side (ἡμίθεοι at verse 100 = τέκνα θεῶν 'children of gods' at verse 101), not simply semidivine status. In Hesiod Works and Days 160, this same word hēmí-theoi designates the heroes of the generations that fought at Thebes and Troy. Yet Homeric diction consistently refers to this same generation of heroes as hērōes (ἥρωες) 'heroes', not hēmí-theoi (ἡμίθεοι) 'demigods'. The only exception is at Iliad 12.23, where hēmí-theoi does indeed refer to the Achaean heroes who fought at Troy—but the reference here is made from the standpoint of the Homeric audience in the post-heroic age, as it looks back, centuries later, at the remains of the Trojan War (the context of Iliad 12.26–32 is most revealing; commentary in Nagy 2006 §§66–75). The point remains, then, that Homeric poetry—unlike other early forms of Greek poetry—cannot as a rule designate its own heroes as hēmítheoi 'demigods', being restricted instead to the word hērōes. It is as if the Indo-European model of an epic hero were no longer appropriate for the Homeric tradition of epic narrative, whereas it remained so for other poetic traditions such as the Hesiodic.

§8. I return to Hesiod F 204 MW for a remarkable illustration of this principle. At verses 95 and following, we find a tightly compressed narrative about the beginnings of the Trojan War: how the Olympian gods were split into pro-Achaean and pro-Trojan factions ever since the éris 'strife' at the Judgment of Paris (verses 95–96), how the Will of Zeus ordained the deaths of heroes in the Trojan War (96–123). By good fortune, a corresponding passage is attested in a fragment from the epic Cycle, specifically from the beginning of the epic Cypria (F 1 ed. Allen 1912). Here, too, we find a reference to éris 'strife', this time designating the Trojan War itself (Cypria F 1.5), and how it was the Will of Zeus that heroes should die at Troy (F 1.6–7). So much for the convergences. One major divergence, however, is that the heroes of the Trojan War are called hērōes in the Cyclic version (F 1.7 ed. Allen) but hēmítheoi 'demigods' in the Hesiodic (F 204.100 MW). It appears that the epic format is more specialized, more restricted, than other forms of poetry, and that it cannot easily tolerate the semantics of an Indo-European model that contradicts the genealogies of its own more specialized, more restricted heroes.

§9. And yet the general themes shared by these Cyclic and Hesiodic passages are distinctly Indo-European in character. Even if the Cyclic Cypria avoids calling its heroes *hēmítheoi* 'demigods', these epic figures nonetheless share a vitally important theme with their distant Indic cousins, the divinely sired Pāṇḍava-s of the Mahābhārata: Zeus brings the *éris* 'strife' of the Trojan War because he intends to depopulate the Earth of the myriad heroes that weigh upon her (Cypria F 1.1–6 ed. Allen). Similarly in the Mahābhārata, the war of the Pāṇḍava-s is a divine solution to the overpopulation of heroes weighing upon the earth (details in Dumézil 1968:168–169). In this way the major epic narratives of the Greek and the Indic peoples are inaugurated with a cognate theme, and it is hard to imagine more compelling evidence for the Indo-European heritage of the epic traditions about the Trojan War (detailed argumentation in Nagy 2006 §§62–65).

Bibliography

See the dynamic [Bibliography for Comments on Comparative Mythology](#).

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