A Gluttonous Strongman and Irascible Stoic: Heracles in Greek Epic from Homer to Nonnus

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Introduction

Heracles – ladies and gentlemen! – was the perhaps most prominent, most popular, and most prevalent figure in ancient mythology. He was present in as good as all aspects of ancient Greek (and Roman) culture, religion, literature, iconography, etc., but also in many facets of daily life. The focus of my lecture today will be on Heracles as a character in ancient Greek epic. We know from various sources that Heracles was used as an eponymous hero in numerous Greek epics from the Archaic Period onward. However, unfortunately, most of these Heracles epics do not survive (the only exception being the pseudo-Hesiodic *Aspis*). On the other hand, existing Greek epic from Homer to Nonnus is not concerned with the life and deeds of Heracles. However, these epics nonetheless all include references to Heracles, be it on a diegetic or on a metadiegetic level. In what follows, I will offer a selective *tour de fource* through existing Greek epic with a focus on the appearance and function of Heracles in the Homeric epics, in Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, and in Nonnus of Panopolis' *Dionysiaca.* For reasons of limited time (and with a bleeding heart!) I will exclude Hesiod and Quintus of Smyrna.

As a first step, I need to lay out some of my methodological premises, the main of which is narratological character analysis. The main tenet of narratological character analysis is the insight, as Mieke Bal puts it (see n. 1 on your handout), that

> the people with whom literature is concerned are not real people [but] fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people, without flesh and blood.

However, as Mieke Bal continues,

> the resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so great that we forget the fundamental difference: we even go so far as to identify with the character, to cry, to laugh, and to search for or with it, or even against it, when the character is a villain.

When dealing with literary characters, we are confronted with a hermeneutic problem – a problem that I call the *real life fallacy.* That being said, it seems a truism to state that the overlap between artificially created characters on the one hand and our mental concept of

flesh-and-blood humans on the other hand is a necessary precondition for literary characters to fulfil their function within the fictional world of a literary text. Otherwise, literary characters would arguably lose most of their function as well as much of their appeal. Consequently, the real life fallacy must not simply be dismissed, but should instead be acknowledged and incorporated into a fully-fledged narratological character analysis.

Incorporating the real life fallacy into narratological character analysis basically calls for a cognitive approach. Fotis Jannidis, in a study from 2004, develops a cognitive definition of "character" based on prototype theory (see quote n. 2 on your handout):

> The prototype of a character is without doubt a human being, but numerous other creatures can be closer to, or more remote from, this prototype because of certain features and therefore can be identified as characters more or less easily. By way of intentional acting, especially by the use of language, as well as by the attribution of mental conditions, close proximity to the prototype and thus unambiguous classification as a character is achieved.

With their massive population of gods, demons, monsters, etc., ancient narrative texts exhaust the possible range of human-like characters to the uttermost. In addition to this, Jannidis' cognitive definition facilitates the understanding of the hermeneutic problem that arises from the real life fallacy: for, it is only when we acknowledge that literary characters can deviate from the human prototype that a succinct definition of "character" becomes possible – a definition that is inclusive, but does not simultaneously become arbitrary.

Another aspect that deserves consideration here is that of transtextuality. A transtextual character is a character inherited from earlier tradition or from preceding texts: a character travelling through literary history. Consequently, transtextual characters are diachronic and therefore require an approach that combines narratological character analysis with intertextuality. Again, it is obvious that transtextual characters are legion in ancient literature because of the overwhelming presence of historical and mythological figures – and because of the decidedly intertextual nature of ancient literature.

It seems evident that a figure such as Heracles is almost predestined to be analysed along those lines. First, Heracles is one of the most complex and inconsistent figures in ancient mythology. These "Heraclean paradoxes", as Denis Feeney has called them, are reflected – and functionalized – in practically all literary genres. In his twelve labours, Heracles is first and foremost conceived as a "civilizer" who acts for the benefit of mankind when fighting against savage monsters and beasts; in this capacity, he is also, as Bernd Effe has phrased it, "a hero of the lower classes". In contrast, there is also an emphatically dark

side to Heracles' character: in Attic tragedy, he often is the type of the irascible *Hercules furens* who kills his wife and his children (see Euripides' Ἡρακλῆς μαινόμενος). Furthermore, there is also a comic potential to Heracles: in Attic comedy and in the satyr play, he represents the type of the simple-minded and gluttonous drunkard, the *Hercules comicus* (see, for example, Euripides' *Alcestis*). This type, in turn, is also akin to the fairy-tale type of the strongman hero. Finally, we also find the intellectual and philosophical Heracles – best known from Prodicus' allegory of Heracles at the crossroads as reported in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, and typologically important in the form of the abstentious *Hercules Stoicus.*

Secondly, the transtextual nature of Heracles is eminent. He is incorporated, in one way or another, in all major Greek epics from Homer to Nonnus (but never as a main character). Acknowledging that a literary character is a narrative construct and not the paper copy of a flesh-and-blood person is vital to understand Heracles in all his complexity, inconsistency, and transtextuality. Furthermore, a cognitive approach to narratological character analysis helps to understand that such a multifaceted character can sometimes be closer, sometimes be more remote from the centre of the human-centred prototype.

Heracles in the *Iliad*

As indicated, apart from the pseudo-Hesiodic *Aspis* no Heracles epic has survived. The Homeric epics, in turn, contain several references to Heracles. Heracles is evidently not part of the main narrative of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* since he belongs to an earlier generation of heroes; rather, the Heracles references are external analepses that serve as flashbacks to events that lie before, and beyond, the actual timeframe of the narrated time of the Homeric epics. In other words, Heracles in the Homeric epics forms part of what Jonas Grethlein has called the "epic plupast", that is (I quote), "the embedded past of the heroes [that] figures as a mirror to the heroic past presented in epic poetry" (end of quote). In what follows, I will demonstrate that in the *Iliad*, these references serve a specific narrative and metapoetic end – and that the *Odyssey* subsequently responds to this function by reversing it.

References to Heracles can be found dispersed over the entire *Iliad* – notably, in Books 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, 15, 18, 19, and 20 (you can find a list of all references on your handout, n. 3). Thus, it appears that Heracles should be recalled in the reader's mind on a regular basis – Heracles is meant to be part of what I call the reader's "epic memory", that is, the reader's horizon of knowledge about the epic past and the epic world. (Please note that I use the term "reader" for practical reasons, but this is also meant to include auditors.) The first mention fulfils exactly that purpose: in the catalogue of ships in Book 2, Tlepolemus, a son of

Heracles, is mentioned as a participant, and a short digression recounts how Heracles once, in the not-so-distant past, had captured Tlepolemus' mother. Shortly thereafter, two grandsons of Heracles are mentioned who now also participate in the Trojan enterprise. Reminding the audience of the greatest Greek hero in the context of the panhellenic catalogue of ships seems particularly apt to establish the idea of some sort of national hero *avant la lettre*. At the same time, mentioning Heracles as the father and grandfather of three of the combatants from the current generation of heroes makes it clear that Heracles himself does not partake in the narrated time, but that he belongs to the past – a past that is still relatively close to the present.

Subsequently, Heracles is being firmly rooted in the epic plupast by different secondary narrators. In Book 5, Dione consoles her daughter Aphrodite who was injured by Diomedes in battle by telling her stories about Hera and Hades who were wounded by Heracles. In Book 8, Athena, talking to Hera, is irritated about Zeus because he weakens the Achaeans against her will. She mentions how she, in turn, used to assist Heracles on Zeus' behalf during his twelve labours. In Book 11, the old Nestor tells Patroclus how Heracles killed all of his brothers in his youth whereas he was the only one who was spared. All these stories create both proximity and distance, because they clearly belong to the epic plupast, but at the same time they are still close enough to be remembered and therefore can serve as *exempla* for the current generation. Heracles is used as an *exemplum* from the not-so-distant past that is regarded as relevant for the present.

A story to which allusions are made on several occasions is that of Hesione and her rescue by Heracles. Laomedon (the father of Priam) had promised to award Heracles with his immortal horses if he was going to kill the sea monster that threatened his daughter Hesione. Heracles rescued Hesione and killed the sea monster, but Laomedon did not keep his promise, and therefore Heracles destroyed Troy. The story is never recounted in full in the *Iliad*, but bits and pieces of it are alluded to in Books 5, 14, and 20. The first destruction of Troy happened as a revenge by Heracles for not being compensated as promised by Laomedon; the second destruction is going to happen as a collective retaliation by the Achaeans for the abduction of Helen through Laomedon's grandson Paris. Thus, via the repeated references to the story of Hesione, a parallel is established between the first and the second destruction of Troy. In other words, the first destruction serves as a prolepsis (a foreshadowing) to the impending second destruction, and consequently, the references to Heracles in the *Iliad* obtain a collective narrative function, since each mention of Heracles has the potential to invoke this association. Consequently, Heracles and Achilles – the latter being the Iliadic key factor towards the capture of Troy – can be seen as parallel figures, whereby Heracles serves as a

mythical example from the epic plupast. Interestingly, Achilles puts himself into a parallel line with Heracles when he consoles his mother Thetis (this is n. 4 on your handout):

> For, not even the powerful Heracles escaped the doom [of death]
>
> although he was dearest to king Zeus, the son of Cronus;
>
> but destiny and the painful wrath of Hera overcame him.
>
> Such I too, if a similar destiny is meant for me,
>
> will be lying there once I've died. […]

Shortly afterwards, Agamemnon uses the same equation for his own purposes where the story of Eurystheus' premature birth is used as mythical *exemplum* to demonstrate the power of ἄτη (infatuation). In doing so, Agamemnon attempts to justify his abusive behaviour towards Achillles by attributing it to a moment of infatuation. However, there is irony in this parallelization, because Agamemnon is in a superior position over Achilles, but the latter is physically superior. The same is the case with Eurystheus and Heracles. Thus, by citing the Eurystheus-and-Heracles-story as an example, Agamemnon ironically puts himself into the same inferior position as Eurystheus. At the same time, the equation between Achilles and Heracles is reconfirmed once again.

Heracles in the *Odyssey*

In the *Odyssey*, Heracles is both similar to, and different from, his counterpart in the *Iliad*. He belongs to the same past, but the Heracles references are considerably fewer in the *Odyssey* as compared to the *Iliad* (see the list on your handout, n. 5), and they are of a different quality. In the *Odyssey*, a personal meeting between Heracles (a figure from the epic plupast) and Odysseus (the protagonist in the narrated time) takes place. However, it is significant to note that this meeting takes place outside the narrated space-time-continuum, namely, in the Underworld (Book 11). Despite the fact that the two characters encounter each other, they belong to different worlds and different time periods. Interestingly, according to *Odyssey* 11.601–604, Heracles is not only in the Underworld, but he also dwells on Mount Olympus after his apotheosis (this is n. 6 on your handout):

> After this one [= Sisyphus] I saw the powerful Heracles
>
> [that is to say,] his shadow: he himself is enjoying himself among the immortal gods
>
> at festivities and has Hebe with the fair ankles [as his wife],
>
> a daughter of the great Zeus and of Hera with the golden shoes.

Unlike Heracles in the *Iliad*, Heracles in the *Odyssey* no longer serves a proleptic function, and he does, arguably, not serve any comparable function at all in relation to the main narrative. This lack (or, rather, loss) of function may be reflected in the fact that he dwells both in the Underworld *and* in Heaven, but not on Earth. The simultaneous presence of Heracles in the Underworld *and* in Heaven can therefore be read as a metapoetic hint suggesting that Heracles has been expelled from the "here and now" and thus should be unwritten from epic memory. In contrast to the narrator of the *Iliad*, whose goal it is to constantly recall Heracles in the reader's memory, the narrator of the *Odyssey* seems to suggest that Heracles should instead be forgotten.

Two other passages in the *Odyssey* include an external analepsis to Heracles in the Iliadic style. Both passages emphasize the darker side of Heracles: in Book 8, Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians mentions Heracles as an example of an excellent archer from a previous generation who even challenged the gods and with whom he would not be able to compete. In Book 21, the primary narrator recounts the story of Iphitus from whom Odysseus once received his bow as a host gift, and how Heracles subsequently killed Iphitus and stole his horses. The passage in Book 21 shows Heracles not only as a brutal killer, but also as someone with a massive disregard of what was arguably one of the most hallowed laws in ancient Greek culture, namely, the hospitality right. Karl Galinsky therefore rightly called this episode (quote) "one of the most devastating indictments of Herakles in literature". However, scholars disagree as to how this passage should be understood in connection with the main narrative. In my opinion, Galinsky is right in viewing Heracles as a parallel figure to the suitors, since both he and the suitors disregard the hospitality right. Yet, he does not so simply foreshadow the forthcoming massacre at the court of Ithaca, but he stands prototypically as a representative of a barbarian stage of development. Thus, the passage demonstrates the immense cultural distance between the past of Heracles and the present of Odysseus. In the *Iliad*, Heracles is a model for Achilles looming large in the past; in the *Odyssey*, Heracles is a *non*-model for Odysseus. In other words, the paradigmatic function of the Heracles references in the *Iliad* is reversed and annihilated in the *Odyssey*; in the world and the world view of the *Odyssey*, there is, eventually, simply no more room for Heracles.

Heracles in Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*

That being said, Heracles' destiny in Greek epic was by no means sealed with the *Odyssey* – quite on the contrary. Several centuries after Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes wrote his *Argonautica* – a story that renarrates the quest for the Golden Fleece by the Argonauts under

the leadership of Jason. Chronologically, the quest of the Argonauts lies one or two generations before the Trojan War and thus falls within Heracles' lifetime and prime. Therefore, Heracles is introduced into the expedition of the Argonauts as one of their participants – but he quits the diegetic level again as early as the end of Book 1. The premature loss of Heracles is connected to the famous Hylas episode: Hylas, the young loverboy of Heracles, is abducted by a spring nymph and Heracles is subsequently forgotten by the Argonauts while he is looking for his lost lover. However, although Heracles is no longer part of the team of the Argonauts after that incident, his memory is kept alive throughout the rest of the narrative on a metadiegetic level, until the Argonauts finally almost meet him again, but fail to reunite with him, at the end of Book 4 (on your handout you can find all relevant passages, see n. 7).

Jason in the *Argonautica* is repeatedly characterized by the primary narrator as weak, helpless, incapable – a virtual anti-hero. Most scholars interpret Heracles in the *Argonautica* as a counterpart to the weak Jason: they see in Heracles the traditional type of the firm and steadfast hero from the ancient times who, after having mentored Jason for a while, needs to leave and thus withdraws from a world that is no longer his. Indeed, the antithetic and at times even hostile relation between Heracles and Jason is obvious. It is programmatically introduced as a motif at the beginning when the leader of the Argonauts is elected: Jason asks the other Argonauts to chose the best – and as a result, Heracles is elected. Heracles, however, rejects the offer and instead suggests Jason, who then is appointed without a dissentient vote. This scene clearly demonstrates the undisputed authority of Heracles: not only is he elected, but he also has the power to decline and pass on the function. Jason, in turn, is not elected because of his abilities, but – as Adolf Köhnken has adequately put it – "by grace of Heracles".

Another example that illustrates this antithesis can be found in the episode on the isle of Lemnos where most of the Argonauts, including Jason, are enjoying themselves with the women who previously killed all their men but now regret their action. Heracles, however, remains abstentious, and after a few days he becomes angry, tells the Argonauts off and instructs them to sail ahead. He finishes his speech with an invective against Jason (see text n. 8 on your handout, the first three lines):

> Let's go, each one onto his place! But the one over there [= Jason], leave him
> in bed with Hypsipyle all day long, until he has
> populated Lemnos with male children and gets great glory [out of that].

With these words, Heracles does not merely insult Jason, but he establishes an intertextual link to the paradigmatic weakling and womanizer in Greek epic, namely, Paris: in the *Iliad* Hector scolds Paris for being γυναιμανής ("mad for women") on two occasions – which is, evidently, a heavy term of abuse against a hero. By doing so, Heracles combines several of his typologies. First, he indirectly puts himself into the role of Hector and thus appears as an epic character. (The epic side of Heracles, however, is marginal in the *Argonautica* otherwise.) Secondly, he also hints at his role of the *Hercules Stoicus* who is duty-conscious and abstentious. Thirdly, the choleric *Hercules furens* is also insinuated since Heracles is enraged – so much so that no one dares to look into his eyes, but instead everyone immediately obeys him (see the rest of text n. 8 on your handout):

> Thus he scolded the crowd; and no one dared
>
> to lift up their eyes against him or to talk to him –
>
> but directly from the assembly they prepared themselves to travel along
>
> in a hurry […].

These lines clearly show how the Apollonian Heracles is constructed as an inconsistent, even self-contradictory character. By no means does he constitute a coherent, round figure as several scholars have maintained – such as, for example, Adalgott Hübscher who writes (n. 9 on your handout): "Apollonius had to abstain from bringing Heracles to the foreground and having him join in the entire journey. However, he made an effort to provide us with a comprehensive and coherent picture of the hero." Statements like this and others reveals an urge to reconcile the different traits and types of Heracles into something that at the end of the day could go down as a coherent character. However, the Apollonian narrator operates precisely on the basis of the complexity, the ambivalence and the inconsistency of Heracles' character, and these features are, in turn, employed for metapoetic purposes.

Let me trace this metapoetic aspect a bit further. A large number of the Heracles references in the *Argonautica* concern the twelve labours. With this focus, the topos of Heracles the "civilizer" and saviour of mankind seems to be invoked. However, many of these instances are comically inversed, since in many of them their burlesque side is emphasized to the detriment of their heroic qualities – such as on the occasion of Heracles' very first appearance in Book 1 that includes a description of how he arrives in the nick of time with the Erymanthian Boar on his shoulders, panting and sweating. This description introduces Heracles as an athletic, but intellectually limited strongman hero – a motif that recurs several times again. Furthermore, several times his heavy club is mentioned – the club being a

weapon that is clearly not worthy of an epic hero, but, rather, serves to stress the uncouth, unheroic, even uncivilized nature of Heracles.

Akin to the strongman hero motif is the theme of the drunken and gluttonous (and therefore overweight) Heracles, which is at home in comedy and in the satyr play. This *Hercules comicus*-motif is prevalent in an alternative mythological tradition according to which Heracles was denied access to the Argo because of his overweight. Obviously, Apollonius does not follow this tradition, but he alludes to it – for example in lines 531–533 of Book 1 (see passage n. 10 on your handout):

> And in the middle Ancaeus and the big, strong Heracles
>
> were sitting, and next to himself he had put down his club; and beneath
>
> his feet the keel of the ship sank down deep. […]

In the context of the Hesperides episode in Book 4, the comic Heracles comes to the foreground again when he drinks lying on the ground in front of a water spring. Here, in fact, the motif of the comic Heracles who is fond of drinking is combined with the opposite type of the Stoic Heracles, since he does drink a lot – but only water, not alcohol. (Interestingly, the idea that excessive consumption of water could lead to intoxication is attested in Diodorus' *Universal History*, too.) Thus, towards the end of the *Argonautica*, two different types – the comic Heracles *and* the Stoic Heracles – are blended into one simultaneously.

The Hesperides episode may actually be seen as the key to the understanding of Heracles in the *Argonautica.* Here again, Heracles is, first and foremost, portrayed negatively as a *Hercules furens*-type: violent and ruthless, pursuing his twelve labours regardless of the consequences. The primary narrator gives a detailed account of the current situation that is focalized through the perception of the Argonauts: desperately looking for water, the Argonauts arrive at the garden of the Hesperides where Heracles passed by just the day before in order to steal the golden apples. The traces of his destructive action are still clearly visible: The guardian snake is lying on the ground, struck down by Heracles' arrows, wincing from pain; and the Hesperides are lamenting his loss in their distress. When the Argonauts approach them, they suddenly dissolve into dust; the seer Orpheus (an Argonaut) interprets this as a sign of their apotheosis and asks them where they could find water. Thereupon the Hesperides suddenly rematerialize in the form of trees, and one of them – Aigle – tells what has happened. Let us look at the first part of her speech (this is text n. 11 on your handout):

> Truly then, as a very great help for your strains
>
> he came hither, the very much dog-like, who deprived

the guardian snake of her life, took away the golden apples of the goddesses

and went off again – but to us [nothing but] odious pain has been left.

For, yesterday there came such a man, abominable in his outrageousness

and his appearance, and his eyes were sparking below his ferocious forehead –

the merciless! And around his shoulders he was wearing the skin of a giant lion,

an untanned one; and he was holding the hefty bough of an olive tree

and a bow, with which he shot his arrows against this beast here [= Ladon] and killed it.

With a mixture of anger, embitterment, and sarcasm, Aigle recounts the recent incident with Heracles, for whom she uses the abusive term κύντατος ("very much dog-like"). Even more interesting, though, is the fact that she does not actually seem to know who he is, as becomes clear from her remark ἤλυθε γὰρ χθιζός τις ἀνὴρ in line 1436 ("for, yesterday there came *such a man*"). The Argonauts, on the other hand, of course recognize him instantly and start a search operation.

For the Argonauts, Heracles has proven to be a saviour because he saves them from dying of thirst thanks to the water spring which he knocked out of a rock the day before. For the Hesperides, on the other hand, he has brought nothing but death and sorrow. This passage thus combines two completely different views on Heracles; it opens up for the juxtaposition of differing perspectives and unfamiliar views, for which the ambiguous and contradictory nature of Heracles' character seems to be predestined. Unlike anyone else in the world, Aigle does not know Heracles. Therefore she might be interpreted as a model reader of the *Argonautica*, that is, a model reader who takes the polyvalence and ambiguity of the Heracles figure as a starting point for a completely different perception and interpretation of Heracles as opposed to the Argonauts. The Argonauts, in turn, represent the mainstream readers.

The multidimensionality and inconsistency of Heracles' character can also be transferred onto the level of narration and narrative strategies. For Heracles, the Argonauts' expedition is not much more than an interlude that interrupts his main assignment, the twelve labours. After he has left the main story, the twelve labours continue in the background, as a parallel action to the voyage of the Argonauts, and the numerous allusions and references to Heracles make sure that his memory is kept alive, both innerfictionally and extrafictionally. I call this phenomenon a *narrative palimpsest.* As is the case with a manuscript palimpsest where the scratched-off text never completely vanishes, but can be made visible again, here a Heracles epic comes to the foreground as a parallel narrative behind the Argonautic quest. Again, it does not seem to me to be a coincidence that Heracles was chosen to achieve this end. As pointed out before, there existed also mythological traditions according to which

Heracles was denied access to the Argo because of his overweight. In contrast to these, we can also find traces of alternative versions of the Argonautic expedition according to which Heracles was, and remained, their leader throughout. The primary narrator clearly does credit to – and plays on – all these traditions by introducing Heracles into the main story, but making him leave early; by having him elected as the leader of the expedition, but making him decline; and by ironically alluding to his overweight that could potentially cause problems on the Argo. By way of these allusions, the narrator ultimately invites the reader to reflect on what the *Argonautica* itself may have looked like depending on the presence – or absence – of Heracles.

Heracles in Nonnus of Panopolis' *Dionysiaca*

We hop over several centuries again. The Greek world from the third to the sixth century A.D. enjoyed a rich and continuous production of hexameter poetry, ranging from the didactic poems by the two Oppians, Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, Triphiodorus' small-scale epic *The Capture of Troy* to Nonnus of Panopolis as well as those epicists who are intertextually indebted to Nonnus and therefore often (but inappropriately) are called his disciples; and not to forget, of course, all those many hexameter poems that have not survived, but are known to us only in fragments, mostly on papyrus. Nonnus of Panopolis stands out from this "heap" of epic production in every respect, but mostly because of the sheer length of his *Dionysiaca*, the gargantuan tale of the birth, life, adventures and apotheosis of the wine-god Dionysus. With its 48 Books and over 20'000 lines, the *Dionysiaca* is truly the longest coherent hexameter poem in antiquity and beyond. As time is running by now, I must keep my remarks on Heracles in the *Dionysiaca* relatively short (for the rest, I kindly refer you to my book…).

Nonnus too, in his *Dionysiaca*, resumes the established practice of inserting Heracles references throughout (see n. 12 on your handout for all passages). Eight times (in Books 10, 11, 17, 29, 34, and 43), Heracles is part of a comparison; in four of these comparisons, he is explicitly parallelized with his half-brother Dionysus. A common feature of several of these comparisons is that Heracles (implicitly or explicitly) serves as a negative paradigm in relation to Dionysus: Heracles is downgraded, even belittled, for the sake of upgrading and eulogizing Dionysus. I have provided two examples on your handout (texts n. 13 and 14):

> And as the god [= Dionysus] heard of it [= Ampelus' death], he started running as
>> quickly as the air.
> No such sprint did Heracles accomplish when the Nymphs

embosomed tender Hylas in their squinting waters.

Not like this did Heracles drive off the Stymphalian Birds with his noise
and with his loudly thundering gadget made of metal, as Terpsichore drove off the
	army of the Indians
when she let resound the warcry of her dance.

This negative paradigmatic function of Heracles can easily be understood from the antagonistic relation between Heracles and Dionysus. Indeed, Heracles and Dionysus share numerous features: they are half-brothers and demigods, both stemming from the same father – Zeus – but from a different (mortal) mother; and as a result, they are both chased and haunted by Zeus' jealous wife Hera, and their trial and tribulations, their adventures and their achievements are to a large extent the result of Hera's impetus. At the same time, however, the two half-brothers are also fundamentally different because Heracles is mortal and needs to work hard in order to achieve his immortality, whereas Dionysus – albeit only a demigod himself – is immortal by birth. The oscillation between similarity and dissimilarity, and the resulting antagonism, is thus at the heart of Heracles' function in the *Dionysiaca.*

In Book 25, in the context of the famous extended in-text proem in which the Nonnian narrator calls upon Homer as his father, Dionysos is compared to three of his half-brothers stemming from Zeus and a mortal mother, namely, Perseus, Minos, and – of course, again – Heracles. The juxtaposition with Heracles is the last and the longest of those three and therefore clearly constitutes the climax within this series. In the Heracles syncrisis, the twelve labours of Heracles are systematically juxtaposed with similar achievements by Dionysus, whereby Heracles' labours are consistently belittled and downgraded for the sake of Dionysus' encomiastic elevation. To achieve this end, the Nonnian narrator employs various rhetorical strategies. He begins by announcing a systematic evaluation of Heracles' twelve labours (see text n. 15 on your handout):

[…] But when you praise

Inachus and Heracles, then I will personally evaluate his entire record of achievement.

The use of the verb ἐλέγχειν here is most illuminating, since it is highly ambiguous. For one thing, the verb ἐλέγχειν is used in the *Dionysiaca* several times with a decidedly negative connotation, meaning "to opprobriate, to abuse, to humiliate". Thus, the narrator clearly announces – and discloses – his intentions. For another thing, though, the rhetorical/philosophical technique called ἔλεγχος – that is, the logically founded refutation of a seemingly correct assumption – seems to be implied in the use of this verb form here too.

The implied proposition through this word choice is therefore that Heracles' labours are only a seeming achievement, and that the following evaluation is going to reveal the truth about them.

In what follows, Heracles' deeds are systematically ridiculed and disqualified as worthless – for example, the lake of Lerna is just (quote) "some little snake-water", and the Lernaean Hydra is called a (quote) "useless viper"; the Cretan Bull is qualfied as (quote) "just some bull" with "a small horn"; and the entire dodekathlos (the twelve labours taken together) is belittled as an οὐτιδανὸς πόνος, "a useless piece of work". Furthermore, the narrator emphasizes on several occasions that many of the accomplishments by Heracles as an adult are matched by equivalent performances by Dionysus as a child: for example, Dionysus used to kill lions, panthers and bears when he was a small boy, but only for pleasure (contrasted with Heracles' first of the twelve labours, the killing of the Nemean Lion); and Dionysus has had snakes on his head since his birth (which is an ironic allusion to Heracles' first adventure as a baby when he strangled the snakes sent by Hera; this achievement, however, remains unmentioned by the Nonnian narrator).

To summarize this brief sketch, it can be stated that Nonnus in his *Dionysiaca* uses the centuries-old practice of epic Heracles references with a paradigmatic function for the purpose of an encomiastic praise of his protagonist Dionysus. We have seen that Heracles has been serving specific narrative and metapoetic purposes in Greek epic since the Homeric epics, and that the Heracles figure is particularly apt to serve these ends because of its decidedly multifaceted and in large parts contradictory nature. In the *Iliad*, by way of several external analepses he fulfils a proleptic function in his role as the first destroyer of Troy, foreshadowing the ultimate destruction of the city. The *Odyssey*, in turn, attempts to unwrite Heracles from the epic memory by condemning him into the Underworld and into Heaven, and by emphasizing his barbarian nature. In the *Argonautica*, Heracles is first present, then absent from the main narrative, and on a metapoetic level he is used as a means of reflecting alternative narrative strategies and contents. Nonnus in his *Dionysiaca* finally returns to the Homeric practice of using Heracles references interspersed throughout his epic, but instead of his analeptic and paradigmatic nature, Heracles is here given a comparative and anti-paradigmatic, negative function. In sum, Heracles proves to be a virtual model of a transtextual character that travels through the history of Greek epic, a character that is inscribed, unwritten, and inscribed again into epic tradition. He may be a gluttonous strongman or an irascible Stoic, as indicated in the title of my lecture – but one thing he is throughout all the centuries: indestructible.