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### **Editors**

Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)  
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)  
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)  
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

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### **Contact**

#### **Principal Contact**

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

#### **Support Contact**

PD Dr. Christian Rollinger  
Email: [thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de](mailto:thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de)

### **Layout and Typesetting**

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JANICE SIEGEL

(Hampden-Sydney College)

## Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy*: A Kinder, Gentler, More Modern Heracles

**Abstract** In *Hellboy* (2004, Sony Pictures), Guillermo del Toro presents a mythic hero (half human/half demon) seemingly made from the same mold as the classical hero Heracles (Hercules). *Hellboy*'s modern world is shaped by a cosmology not unlike that of Greek mythology, and as is true for Heracles, his unique pedigree and superior physicality empower him to mediate between the forces of supernaturality and humanity. *Hellboy*'s experiences evoke comparison with most characters and exploits in the Heracleian mythological corpus; his good character precludes comparison with others. *Hellboy* must contend with his own versions of Hera, Eurystheus, and a Nemean Lion/Hydra-like monster. He, too, relies on his own superhuman strength, innate cunning and an Athena-like protector to be successful at his job. Both heroes navigate a difficult path to their very different destinies. But in the end, *Hellboy*'s compassion, humility, unerring moral compass, and genuinely altruistic motivations make him both a better man and a better mythic hero, one worthy even of being loved.

**Keywords** *Hellboy*, Heracles/Herakles/Hercules, Classical Reception, Reception of Mythology, Mythic Hero

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

This essay explores the many resonances between the titular hero of Guillermo del Toro's film *Hellboy* (2004, Sony Pictures)<sup>2</sup> and Heracles, the quintessential hero of Greek mythology.<sup>3</sup> While there is no reason to assume direct influence, the many narrative, dramatic, and thematic points of intersection between their stories help illuminate the shared mythic aspect of these heroes and illustrate how their adventures reveal certain universal truths that transcend time and space and culture, all of which can teach us something about what it means to be human, the purpose of mythology writ large.

Del Toro's *Hellboy* is a chaotic bricolage of Nordic mythology, Russian folklore, Dracula trivia, occult magic, Lovecraftian imagery and lore, and Christian apocalypticism. Members of the film's production team even identify certain scenes deliberately designed to evoke classic films.<sup>4</sup> There is a lot of extra-refer-

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1 The arguments developed in this essay benefitted from the many nuanced discussions I enjoyed with the Hampden-Sydney College students enrolled in my Fall 2021 experimental course, "The Mythic Hero in Film." Collegial suggestions after my presentation at the Classics and the Supernatural in Contemporary Media conference on the Isle of Wight, UK in July 2022 led to further improvements. I remain grateful for the generous consideration shown to me by Hunter Gardner, Amanda Potter, and the editorial staff and anonymous readers at *Thersites*.

2 Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004, Sony Pictures), starring Ron Perlman, is a live-action film dramatizing the adventures of the comic book character created by Mike Mignola (*Dark Horse Comics*, 1993 – present) that spawned a trans-media franchise. Del Toro had originally envisioned *Hellboy* as the first of a trilogy of films starring Perlman but made only one more: *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008, Universal Pictures). The 2019 reboot *Hellboy: Rise of the Blood Queen* (Lionsgate) is directed by Neil Marshall and stars David Harbour. Plans for a second reboot entitled *Hellboy: The Crooked Man* (Millenium Media) were announced in February 2023.

3 Given the complex nature of the sprawling mythological corpus related to Heracles, I have taken special care to cite specific sources for the material provided. Greek sources are favored over Roman (hence "Heracles" rather than "Hercules"). Visual representations of Heracles in ancient art or architecture are referenced when appropriate. Dialogue from the film, generally presented in italics within parentheses, is transcribed from the Director's Cut DVD; stage directions or descriptions are cited from the original screenplay as published in Allie (2004).

4 As noted in Allie (2004), Abe's goggles "echoed the vampire Ninja goggles created for [del Toro's] *Blade 2*" (71); the hall of spikes leading to Kroenen's lair was a "visual nod to the hall of razor blades in the film *Tales From the Crypt*" (176); and Hellboy's "restraint yoke" deliberately evokes the monster's bonds in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (184).



ential material to be found in *Hellboy*, but not a hint of Greek mythology.<sup>5</sup> Yet the *Hellboy* universe and the world of classical mythology share the similar conceit of an overarching cosmology in which men and gods co-exist on different planes of existence that occasionally intersect, causing humanity and supernatural to collide in ways that call for mediation by mythic heroes.

As mythic heroes, both *Hellboy* and Heracles have similarly unusual birth stories. Each suffers the interference of a divine figure determined to manipulate his path to his destiny. Each is a magnificent, confident and nearly invincible warrior directed by an inferior authoritarian to dispatch creatures with surprisingly similar traits that pose comparable physical and mythic threats to humanity. Both *Hellboy* and Heracles are aided in their tasks by their super-human strength, innate cunning, and the assistance provided by both supernatural and human actors. But while essential to this study, such shared narrative elements prove to be only a springboard to the more important contrasts of character – as shaped by their widely divergent motivations, appetites, and behavior – that inspire the heroes to seek their very different goals.<sup>6</sup> For while Heracles wishes to become a god, *Hellboy* wants to become a man.

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<sup>5</sup> Before the theatrical release of *Hellboy* in 2004, the only character drawn from Greek mythology that appeared in Mignola's *Hellboy* universe was the witch Hecate. But in December 2006, the worlds of *Hellboy* and Hercules intersected in Mignola's short story, "The Lion and the Hydra" (*Dark Horse Book of Monsters*), in which *Hellboy* visits Hercules' grave and with the help of a Lion-girl dispatches the Hydra. And in May 2022, Mignola and co-writer Olivier Vatine published "Hellboy and the B.P.R.D: Night of the Cyclops" (*Dark Horse Comics*), whose cover art features a toga-clad *Hellboy* striking a heroic pose amid pieces of Greek statuary and clutching a Greek-style shield emblazoned with the B.P.R.D. logo. The publisher's website offers this enticing hook: "Join *Hellboy* in a strange hidden land of treachery and togas as he takes on the wrath of a jealous god" (Dark Horse Comics, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> Contrast the comparative method of myth interpretation as popularized by Joseph Campbell in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949, Princeton) and later repackaged as a manual for screenwriters by William Vogler in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1998; 2020, Studio City, CA), which flattens out essential differences in stories by hyper-focusing on such shared narrative elements at the expense of character development. See Curley (2018) 175–7 for "the impact of Campbell's work on print and screen texts from the 1960's onward."

## COSMOLOGY AND KEY PLAYERS OF HELLBOY

The film's opening title card quotes a purportedly sacred alien text that introduces the events of the dramatic opening scene:

In the coldest regions of space, the monstrous entities Ogdru Jahad – the Seven Gods of Chaos – slumber in their crystal prison, waiting to reclaim Earth...and burn the heavens. (*Des Vermis Mysteries*, page 87)

The film begins in 1944 on a remote island off the coast of Scotland. A rain-drenched platoon of American GIs enters the remains of Trondham Abbey, littered with stone fragments of grinning demons and embattled angels. The platoon leader scoffs at the rosary proffered by the mission's leader, Professor Trevor Broom. Cresting a slope, they find themselves looking down on dozens of Nazi soldiers swarming the thick Romanesque passageways now festooned with swastikas. In a center clearing in front of a broken altar, German soldiers assemble a large, strange, electric-powered gyroscope, dubbed the "Hell-Hole Generator" by the film's production team.<sup>7</sup> The activity is directed by Karl Rupert Kroenen, a Nazi identified by Broom as Hitler's top assassin and head of the Thule Occult Society, "a group of German aristocrats obsessed with the occult."<sup>8</sup> Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin, onetime mystic advisor to the Romanovs, prepares to take his place near the central altar as Nazi officer Ilsa von Haupt reverentially robes him. These, then, are the key players in the cosmic conflict that propels the plot of the film.

Because the Abbey is built on an intersection of Ley Lines (*the boundaries between our world and the other*), there is every reason to believe Rasputin will be successful in bringing about this prophesied Apocalypse (*...I will open a portal and awaken the Ogdru Jahad, the Seven Gods of Chaos...*). Kroenen fits him with an oversized, mechanical glove connected with thick cables to the Hell-Hole Generator. The glove activates, Rasputin points at the empty space above the altar, and a fire-rimmed hole appears in mid-air, a door to that other dimension where those imprisoned Gods of Chaos can be seen writhing restlessly in their crystal prison. At Prof. Broom's urging, the American forces attack. The machine is damaged and a malfunction causes Rasputin to be sucked into the vor-

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7 Allie (2004) 14.

8 Allie (2004) 60.

tex, his body pulled to pieces by the tremendous forces at work. The portal closes but not before a bright-red demon infant with a great stone hand is transferred to Earth. In the group photo taken later that day, rosaries can be seen hanging from soldiers' guns.

After the opening credits, the film catches up to the present day (2004). Sixty years on, a now grown Hellboy works closely with his foster-father Prof. Broom, the classically educated, devoutly Catholic, "foremost authority, outside Germany, on Nazi occultism," and founder of the American government's secret Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (B.P.R.D.).<sup>9</sup> The agency's motto is "In the absence of light, darkness prevails."<sup>10</sup> Its mandate is to discover and neutralize paranormal and occult threats around the world (*There are things that go bump in the night...and we are the ones who bump back*). And there is much to guard against, for Rasputin has returned to earth to finish the job Prof. Broom interrupted in 1944 – but only Rasputin knows that the fate of all humanity hangs on Hellboy, whose great stone hand turns out to be a powerful ancient relic called the Right Hand of Doom, the key to the door of the prison holding the Ogdrun Jahad, those who would unleash the Apocalypse on earth.<sup>11</sup>

## HERACLES AND HELLBOY AS MYTHIC HEROES

### Conception, Birth, and Education

It is a common trope in Greek mythology for heroes – mortals with one divine parent – to experience unusual conceptions and births. According to Apollodorus, the human Alcmene gives birth to twin boys of different fathers: Iphicles is the son of her human husband Amphitryon, and Alcides (Heracles' birth name) the son of divine Zeus, who impregnated her at about the same time. Heracles grows up in Amphitryon's home, but after he murders his music teacher (and is

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<sup>9</sup> Allie (2004) 12.

<sup>10</sup> The Latin inscription is painfully incorrect: *In absentia luci, tenebrae vinciunt*. Hellboy will later also use a non-sensical Latin incantation to re-animate a corpse: *animam edere, animus corpus...*

<sup>11</sup> A great stone hand also happens to be the only surviving fragment of a colossal cult statue found in the first century B.C.E. Temple of Hercules in Amman.

acquitted of the crime), his mortal father ships the young hero off to the cattle farm out of fear he might do something like that again.<sup>12</sup>

Hellboy has two fathers, too. Like Heracles, the Hellboy of Mignola's graphic novel is born to a human mother and supernatural (demon) father.<sup>13</sup> Soon after his birth, Hellboy's father chops off his infant son's hand and replaces it with the Right Hand of Doom. Incarcerated for this crime, he ceases to be a part of Hellboy's life. In the film, Rasputin is presented as Hellboy's surrogate father (complete with memories of Hellboy from the time he was born). Presumably, had Rasputin not been sucked into the vortex in the same accident that delivered Hellboy to earth, he would have raised Hellboy to know that he had been chosen to be the destroyer of humanity. In an ironic twist of fate, Hellboy is instead adopted and raised by Prof. Broom to become humanity's protector.

As "the mortal son of Zeus of the house of Amphitryon,"<sup>14</sup> Heracles is provided with the kind of education, training, and treatment suited to a hero son of Zeus. As a youth he receives specialty training by experts in such areas as chariot-driving, wrestling, archery, light arms, and music.<sup>15</sup> He is also the beneficiary of certain gifts imbued with divine power, including bow and arrows, sword, breastplate, robe, and horses.<sup>16</sup> But while Heracles lives in a culture with a monolithic belief system, Hellboy's human foster-father Prof. Broom has raised Hellboy to believe that there are many roads to Truth: science, religious faith, the paranormal, the occult. Just as his father always carries a rosary and is just as likely to put his trust in a tarot card reading as in his doctors' medical opinions, Hellboy supercharges the bullets of his big gun, "The Samaritan," with capsules containing his own eclectic concoction of magical ingredients (*Holy water, silver shavings, white oak: the works*) and hands out Catholic reliquaries to his fellow

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12 Apollod. 2.4.8–9.

13 In Mignola's comic, Hellboy's demon father kills his pregnant mother by burning her alive and then removes the full-term baby demon from her charred body. This scenario is somewhat reminiscent of how Zeus plucks Dionysus from the body of Semele, whom he unintentionally incinerated.

14 Hes. *Theog.* 317–8 [Evelyn-White].

15 Different texts identify different experts as Hercules' instructors (e.g., Apollod. 2.4.10 and Theokr. 24.105–33).

16 His divine gifts and the gods by whom they are bestowed differ according to author (e.g., Apollod. 2.4.11, 2.5.6, and 2.7.4; Diod. 4.13.3; and Hesiod's *Shield of Heracles* 14–38, where Heracles' other armaments are mentioned before the poem turns its focus to his shield).



paranormals to protect them from the evil it is their job to dispatch (*I think it's a pinkie*). Most importantly, Hellboy lives by his Catholic father's moral code: to believe in God and in himself, to respect the sanctity of human life, to show compassion for others, and to exercise his own free will.

### Destiny and Divine Adversity

On the day Alcmena was preparing to give birth, Zeus proudly announced, "Today the goddess of birth pangs and labor will bring to light a human child, a man-child born of the stock of men who spring from *my* blood, one who will lord it over all who dwell around him."<sup>17</sup> Annoyed at her philandering husband, Hera delighted in the inexact phrasing of his proclamation and cajoled Zeus into swearing an "inviolable oath" she could exploit: "that he shall lord it over all who dwell around him – that child who drops between a woman's knees today, born of the stock of men who spring from Zeus' blood."<sup>18</sup> Hera then abused her divine position and powers to prevent Alcmena's son from winning that honor: she persuaded Eileithyia to delay Alcmena's labor, and at the same time caused Eurystheus, son of Perseus' son Sthenelus, to be born two months prematurely.<sup>19</sup>

At every opportunity, Hera causes Heracles trouble. When he is just an infant, she sends two serpents against him, but he strangles them with his bare hands.<sup>20</sup> And then there is the madness she inflicts on him as a young man, leading him to kill his wife and children. After these murders, Heracles visits the Oracle of Delphi to ask the Pythia where he should live.<sup>21</sup> "And she told him to dwell in Tiryns, serving Eurystheus for twelve years and to perform the ten labours im-

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17 Hom. *Il.* 19.103–5 [Fagles lines 119–22].

18 Hom. *Il.* 19.109–11 [Fagles lines 128–9].

19 Apollod. 2.4.5; cf. Hom. *Il.* 19.132–57.

20 Apollod. 2.4.8.

21 Apollod. 2.4.12. While Hera's infliction of madness on Heracles is well-attested in classical literature, the popular belief that Heracles' labors serve as penance for his crime depends on a rather tenuous textual connection. For discussion, see Hsu (2021) 15–6. Here, Apollodorus reports that Heracles sought and received expiation for this crime elsewhere. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the hero kills his family *after* completing his labors.

posed on him, and so, she said, when the tasks were accomplished, he would be immortal."<sup>22</sup> Hera's earlier intervention in Heracles' fortunes now bears its fruit, but there is textual evidence that her early plotting against Heracles didn't end there. According to Hesiod, Hera herself had nurtured the first two beasts Eurystheus would command Heracles to dispatch – the Nemean Lion<sup>23</sup> and the Lernaean Hydra – the latter specifically because she was “angry beyond measure with the mighty Heracles.”<sup>24</sup> Hera will be a constant thorn in Heracles' side: sabotaging his visit to Queen Hippolyte,<sup>25</sup> afflicting Geryon's cows with a gadfly to disperse them,<sup>26</sup> and even after he successfully concludes his labors, whipping up a storm as he sails home from Troy.<sup>27</sup> Plus, she gets the added satisfaction from knowing how much it pains Zeus to be reminded of how she bested him.<sup>28</sup>

Rasputin will interfere in Hellboy's life too, but to facilitate the fulfillment of his destiny, not to thwart it. He too will abuse his “divine” powers, acquired when he took into his own body one of the evil gods he worships. And like Hera, he plays the long game. Rasputin has returned to earth to ensure Hellboy's presence in the secret chamber he built for this purpose long ago under his empty tomb in Moscow. In one week's time, when the Apocalypse Clock counts down to the moment the Prophecy of Doom is to be realized, Rasputin will command Hellboy to perform his “heroic” task of unleashing the Apocalypse on earth. To bring Hellboy into his sphere of influence, Rasputin sets the demon Sammael loose in the hero's home city, knowing he will come to dispatch it.

Rasputin then magically appears in the psychiatric hospital where Liz Sherman, Hellboy's longtime love and fellow paranormal, has been keeping herself isolated and drugged with high doses of thiorazine to quash her destructive pyrotechnic powers, which she cannot control. Much like Hera inflicts madness on Heracles, Rasputin implants a dream in Liz's mind that activates her powers,

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<sup>22</sup> Apollod. 2.4.12.

<sup>23</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 329.

<sup>24</sup> Hes. *Theog.* 314–5 [Evelyn-White].

<sup>25</sup> Apollod. 2.5.9.

<sup>26</sup> Apollod. 2.5.10

<sup>27</sup> Apollod. 1.3.5; cf. Hom. *Il.* 14.249 ff. and Hom. *Il.* 15.24 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Zeus rued having been deceived by the goddess *Ate* (and Hera) “whenever he saw Heracles, his own dear son, endure some shameful labor Eurystheus forced upon him” (Hom. *Il.* 19.132–3 [Fagles lines 156–7]).

causing her to burn down the hospital. This tragedy leads her back to the B.P.R.D. and to Hellboy, whose feelings of love for her Rasputin sees as a weakness he is prepared to exploit to get Hellboy to do his bidding. For despite his rhetoric, Rasputin seems to understand that what he keeps referring to as Hellboy's "destiny" is not, in fact, his inescapable Fate. Heracles' is a true destiny, pronounced by oracles, seers, and gods, all purveyors of Truth in the Greek belief system.<sup>29</sup> When Hellboy's father grafted that enormously powerful relic of a bygone age onto his infant son's arm, all he did was impose his own will on the hero, who will turn out to have much more to say about his own "destiny" than even the gods of his native world, and their mortal agent on earth, know.

### Physical Attributes

Both Heracles and Hellboy boast a striking, intimidating physicality that betrays their supernatural nature. About Heracles, Apollodorus says, "Even by the look of him it was plain that he was a son of Zeus; for his body measured four cubits, and he flashed a gleam of fire from his eyes."<sup>30</sup> Hellboy is six and a half feet tall with a right hand literally chiseled from stone, red skin etched with alien runes, golden eyes deep-set under an over-arching brow, and a large prehensile tail. He wears a long, sweeping, leather trench coat that evokes the signature full-body lion skin worn by Heracles.<sup>31</sup>

Heavily-muscled, indefatigable, and impossibly strong warriors, both Heracles and Hellboy can endure physical punishment that would kill an ordinary mortal. Heracles even seems invulnerable: in only one instance is he reported to

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<sup>29</sup> In addition to the Pythia's pronouncement in Apollod. 2.4.12, Heracles is also prophesized to be granted immortality once he completes his labors by Apollo (Diod. 4.10.7) and by the sea god Glaucus (Apoll. Rhod. 1.1315–20). An apotheosized Heracles himself confirms the truth of it after the fact to Philoctetes in Sophocles' play of the same name (lines 1418–20). Tiresias (in Pind. *N.* 1) prophesies immortality for Heracles as a newborn, right after he strangles the snakes sent by Hera, without specific reference to his labors to come.

<sup>30</sup> Apollod. 2.4.9. Aulus Gellius begins his *Attic Nights* by providing Plutarch's (lost) account of how Pythagoras determined that Heracles was taller than an ordinary man from the size of his foot (itself an extrapolation). Pythagoras' maxim of proportionality, known as *ex pede Herculem*, has been adapted by a variety of scientific disciplines.

<sup>31</sup> Apollod. 2.4.10.

have been wounded in a battle, from which “Zeus snatched him away, so that he took no harm.”<sup>32</sup> *Hellboy*, on the other hand, emerges from every fight bruised, battered, and bleeding. Once, he even faints from loss of blood. But even when an entire subway mezzanine falls on his head – concrete, steel, glass, and all – his understated, matter-of-fact acknowledgment of his hurt (*ow*) reassures that he will persevere. The fact that he *can* be hurt makes him more relatable than the inhumanly indestructible Heracles.

### Motivation

Determining the “true” character of the mythic hero Heracles poses certain problems for those who seek to synthesize the vast amount of source material related to him into a coherent whole. His many dozens of exploits take him to the farthest reaches of both physical and mythological space. Most problematic for scholars has been the task of explaining the apparent contradictions in his character as revealed by his storied actions, for even more than most heroes of classical mythology, Heracles’ persona was “manipulated by authors at different time periods and in varying texts to create appropriate figures for particular audiences.”<sup>33</sup> The early fifth century poet Pindar, whom Emma Stafford identifies as one of the first to try and “‘clean up’ Herakles’ image,” rebrands the terrifying dragon-slayer and sometime madman of the archaic tradition as “a paragon of piety and punisher of evil-doers.”<sup>34</sup> Subsequent treatments of Heracles as tragic hero, comic buffoon, allegorical exemplum of physical perfection and moral virtue, model for political leaders, and cult hero/god craft new stories about Heracles or re-interpret old ones by cherry-picking and manipulating details from established narratives either to justify his many despicable acts or to attribute altruistic motives to selfish ones.<sup>35</sup>

Such re-interpretations of Heracles’ record have led him to be celebrated as “a culture hero who purged the earth of monsters and tamed the uncivilized

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32 Apollod. 2.7.1.

33 Augoustakis/Raucci (2018) 4.

34 Stafford (2012) 121–2.

35 See Stafford (2012) chapters 3–6 for full discussions of each.

world, making it safe for the spread of Greek culture.”<sup>36</sup> Even Apollodorus, who unblinkingly reports all sorts of shameful deeds of Heracles, specifically notes that the communities terrorized by, for example, the Lernaean Hydra,<sup>37</sup> the Erymanthian Boar,<sup>38</sup> and the Mares of Diomedes<sup>39</sup> all become safer after Heracles either dispatches or relocates the beasts. But Heracles' motive for performing these heroic acts is to fulfill his divine mandate so that he can win immortality for *himself*. The fact that his actions are sometimes also good for *others* is a happy but unintended consequence. Heracles is also celebrated as a defender of Greek culture for killing a number of nasty characters he comes across in the course of his *parerga*. But again, any benefit to the affected communities is incidental to his own personal interests, for numerous classical authors (including Apollodorus) report that Heracles takes no action against any of these terrorizers of innocents, despite their infamy, until they dare to challenge or target him personally.<sup>40</sup>

Such self-centeredness is typical of Greek mythic heroes and leads to acts of entitlement and excess. Heracles's astounding sexual promiscuity and potency is legendary.<sup>41</sup> His appetites for food, water and alcohol are similarly out-sized.<sup>42</sup> He objectifies women: his wives, for example, are all rewards or prizes won in

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36 Quotation from Felton (2021) 196. Cf. Stafford (2012) xxv and 3–4; Hsu (2021) 24; Hunter (2021) 202; Mitchell (2021) 90; and Pache (2021) 11. Heracles struggles to reconcile the contradictory aspects of his own character and actions in Euripides' *Heracles*.

37 Apollod. 2.5.2.

38 Apollod. 2.5.4.

39 Apollod. 2.5.8.

40 The list includes Emathion (Diod. 4.27), Lityerses (Diod. 4.31.6), Saurus (Paus. 6.21.3), Boursiris (Apollod. 2.5.11), Cycnus (*Schol. Pind. Ol.* 2.82; Apollod. 2.7.7), Antaeus (Pind. *Isth.* 4.3; Apollod. 2.5.11), and Cacus (Verg. *Aen.* 8.190–272; cf. Prop. 4.9.1–20 and Ov. *Fast.* 1.543–82).

41 Apollodorus (2.7.8) numbers his children at sixty-six, including the fifty-one he sires with the daughters of Thespius. Pausanias (9.27.7) even claims that he accomplished this feat in a single night.

42 One of the Hesperides tells how a thirsty Heracles kicked a hole in a rock to create a fresh-water spring (Apoll. Rhod. 4.1445–6). Apollodorus twice relates the tale of how a hungry Heracles “loosed one of the bullocks from the cart of a cowherd...sacrificed it and feasted” (2.5.11 and 2.7.7). See Stafford (2012) 104–17 for the common tropes of a drunken and famished Heracles in literature and art.



contests.<sup>43</sup> Other women he rapes, such as Auge and the unnamed daughter of King Amyntor.<sup>44</sup> Heracles also lays claim to an outrageously high body count. He kills a number of men just for having the audacity to try to steal from *him* the cattle that *he* stole from Geryon.<sup>45</sup> Unbridled Fury drives him to kill his music teacher Linus and his herald Lichas.<sup>46</sup> He dares even to wound several of the immortal gods.<sup>47</sup> He reveals a disturbing sadistic streak when he mutilates several tributes he meets on the road, sending them home with their cut-off ears, noses and hands hanging from their necks by ropes.<sup>48</sup> Accompanied by an army, Heracles later re-visits those who dare renege on their promise to pay him for his services.<sup>49</sup> These are presumably some of the many “arrogant deeds” for which the *Homeric Hymn to Heracles* claims he was celebrated before he was made a god.<sup>50</sup>

Greek mythic heroes are not admirable human beings. They often cause injury and pain to others with little or no provocation or acknowledgement. They

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43 Megara, as a reward from her father Creon for helping him to win a war (Apollod. 2.4.11); Deianara, as the prize for beating Achelous in a wrestling contest (Ov. *Met.* 9.4–7); Iole, taken forcibly after her father Eurystus denies her to Heracles as his promised prize for winning an archery contest (Apollod. 2.6.1); and Hesione, whom Heracles hands off to Telamon because his own promised reward for rescuing her from the sea monster Cetus – her father’s immortal horses – is a prize he holds in higher esteem (Apollod. 2.6.4).

44 Apollod. 2.7.4 and Diod. 4.37.4.

45 These include Poseidon’s sons Ialebian and Dercynus and King Eryx of Sicily (Apollod. 2.5.10). The Romans add the monstrous Cacus to that list (see note 40 above). Hercules even fills the River Strymon with rocks to make it unnavigable, punishment for obstructing his attempts to round up the cattle after Hera dispersed them with a gadfly (Apollod. 2.5.10).

46 For Linus, see Apollod. 2.7.8; for Lichas, Ov. *Met.* 9.216–8. Heracles also murders his family in a madness sent by Hera, but no explanation is provided for why he throws his guest-friend Iphitus from the walls of Tiryns (Apollod. 2.6.3; cf. Hom. *Od.* 21.22–30). For these crimes, Heracles is sentenced to enslavement first to Eurystheus and then to Omphale, circumstances that ironically provide him with the opportunity to accomplish the very feats that win him immortality.

47 Hera (Hom. *Il.* 5.392–4), Hades (Hom. *Il.* 5.395–9; cf. Apollod. 2.7.3), and Ares (Hes. *Shield of Heracles* 362–4).

48 Apollod. 2.4.11.

49 See Apollod. 2.7.2 for his war against Augeus, and Apollod. 2.6.4 for the one against Laomedon.

50 Hom. *h.* 15.6.

are amoral. They care first and foremost about themselves.<sup>51</sup> And because they tend to put their own need for glory first, they rarely make good husbands/lovers/partners or sons or friends/teammates.<sup>52</sup> But these are the very things the hero Hellboy yearns to be: a good romantic partner to Liz, a good son to Prof. Broom, and a good teammate and friend to his B.P.R.D. colleagues.

Unlike Heracles, Hellboy – a demon raised by a Catholic father, a monster with the moral imperative to keep humanity safe from monsters – is a legitimately conflicted soul. Hellboy celebrates his demon physicality that allows him to protect people but hates being marginalized for it. So he self-consciously styles himself as human, most notably by grinding down his horns to stumps (*Don't stare...he hates when people stare*). His cocky bravado, sarcastic wit, and expressions of disdain and revulsion for the monsters he fights give him a brutish bully vibe, but his genuine expressions of compassion (to loved ones, to strangers, and notably, to cats) cast him as charmingly human. He is genuinely altruistic. His sense of duty doesn't allow him to expect or receive payment for his heroic services. He even dismisses expressions of gratitude from those he saves (*It's my job*). Keeping humanity safe from otherworldly terrors is all the motivation Hellboy needs. His only larger-than-life appetite is literally for food: in scene after scene, we see his six meals a day delivered on carts towering with meat, mashed potatoes, pancakes, chili nachos. Shows of over-confidence and protestations of self-sufficiency are not always successful attempts to hide his emotional insecurities: his doubt about his ability to win Liz's love and his fear that he may not be worthy of his father's. Although his unresolved frustrations do occasionally lead him to lose his temper, his outbursts never generate casualties. Hellboy kills only two human beings during the course of the film, both righteously, as we shall see.

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51 Apollonius shows how detrimental human sentiment can be to a classical mythic hero's career: in the *Argonautica*, Heracles' despair over Hylas' disappearance leads him to abandon his heroic quest.

52 See Stafford (2012) 84 on how even the "loving" Deianara's comments in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* "indicate that Herakles is hardly the ideal husband: he never sees his children (ll. 31–3), he has countless lovers (ll. 459–60), and of course he is now threatening the stability of the household by introducing a second 'wife' (ll. 427–9 and 536–42)."

## Humility

Jon Solomon's description of Heracles could just as well be applied to Hellboy: "a semi-divine, monster-slaying strongman who is susceptible to suffering but ultimately triumphs and re-emerges to fight another battle."<sup>53</sup> But Hellboy understands that the B.P.R.D. can only be effective if he remains a legend, not a reality. So he voluntarily lives locked away in the deepest levels of an underground complex hidden under a non-descript "Waste Management Services" building in Newark, N.J. When called to scenes of paranormal disturbance, this hero suffers the indignity of being transported in a high-tech lab disguised as a garbage truck (to Machen Library) or inside a sealed crate marked "Live Cargo" hoisted into the bed of a pick-up truck (in Moscow). He shows a humility inconceivable in a mythic hero like Heracles, a son of Zeus who sails the seas in the great ship Argo and returns from his far-flung adventures comfortably nestled in the golden cup of Helios. But Hellboy chafes at the restrictions that prevent him from being with the girl he loves (the walls of his room are lined with screens playing videos of Liz on a loop), or from attending his father's funeral (he can only watch from afar, a gargoyle perched on the edge of a nearby roof). He understands that sneaking out of the B.P.R.D. compound puts its mission at risk (*you got yourself on tv again*). Then FBI Director of Special Operations Tom Manning must do the morning talk show circuit to debunk the legitimacy of any Hellboy sightings (*Why are these photos always blurry?*).

For a mythic hero like Heracles, fame is currency. The cult of Heracles was the most widespread of any hero cult in the Greco-Roman world. His feats are everywhere immortalized with shrines and eponymous cities; in classical art, architecture, and literature; and on innumerable everyday items.<sup>54</sup> Heracles also works to expand his own cult, such as by establishing both the Olympic and Nemean Games and by erecting "as tokens of his journey two pillars over against each other at the boundaries of Europe and Libya."<sup>55</sup> But ironically, Hellboy's rogue outings have inspired a kind of modern cult worship of him, too.

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53 Solomon (2018) 26.

54 See Stafford (2012) 17 for the monumental buildings whose artwork depicts Heracles' heroic feats and Stafford (2012) 18 for the wide range of everyday items decorated with Heracles' image in antiquity. For discussions of specific items organized by topic, see Gantz (1993) 374–466. For source catalogues of vase paintings, see Stafford (2012) 246, n. 9 and n. 10.

55 Apollod. 2.5.10.

Even Myers is a fan of the *Hellboy* comic book series that circulates in his popular culture (*He's real???*).<sup>56</sup> But flattered or not, *Hellboy* is careful to warn a young, star-struck fan he meets on a rooftop (*You're Hellboy!*) to keep his secret (*Shh. I'm on a mission...don't tell, ok?*).<sup>57</sup>

But *Hellboy* and Heracles both discover that a father's punishment for a son's violation of house rules can be extreme. When Agent Myers first meets *Hellboy*, Agent Clay explains that he is locked in his room behind doors made of twelve-inch steel because Prof. Broom has grounded him for violating protocol by sneaking out of B.P.R.D.'s secure compound to visit Liz. This situation is comparable (given the appropriate contextual adjustment) to a similar scenario in Heracles' life. For the crime of murdering his guest-friend Iphitos<sup>58</sup> – the ultimate violation of house rules (Xenia, the Laws of Hospitality) – his father Zeus arranges for Heracles to be sold into slavery to Queen Omphale,<sup>59</sup> who dresses him in women's clothes and sets him up with loom and spindle.<sup>60</sup> In both scenarios, fathers punish their equally rebellious and reckless adult hero sons by denying them personal freedom and agency (grounding ≈ enslavement) and subjecting them, for a limited time, to comparably humiliating circumstances (infantilization ≈ feminization).

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56 Del Toro's commentary on the Director's Cut DVD supports making such a connection: "All my life, comics have remained as important an artform in my mind as film, theater, painting, anything..." Del Toro further observes that the most iconic scenes in the film perfectly re-create illustrations from Mike Mignola's comic book, a genre equally dependent on words and images. Classical poets use literary ekphrases to paint equally evocative pictures with words (e.g., the description of Heracles' exploits on his son Eurypylos' shield in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Fall of Troy* 6, and on the shield of the Argive warrior Capaneus in Statius' *Thebaid* 4).

57 Introducing the *Hellboy* comic into the film in this way is not only a nice metapoetic touch, but also helps focus the film on *Hellboy*'s character development. In Mignola's graphic novel, *Hellboy* works out in the open and is respected, not feared, by the public.

58 Hom. *Od.* 21.22–30.

59 Apollod. 2.6.2 and 2.6.3.

60 Ov. *Epist.* 9. Because Heracles' infidelity propels the plot of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, his storied enslavement to Omphale is presented in that play as an elaborate lie fabricated to hide his affair with Iole.

## Supernatural Allies

Even among Greek heroes, Heracles may indeed have “experienced more hardships, more tortures, and faced more monstrous creatures than any of the others, partially because the goddess Hera bore an unusually strong grudge against him.”<sup>61</sup> But he also enjoys protection, guidance, and gifts from other gods, most notably Athena. Such divine assistance, along with access to knowledge inaccessible to ordinary mortals, allows Heracles, like all mythic heroes, to fulfill his mythic mandates. For example, Athena gives Heracles bronze noise-makers made by Hephaestus so he can more easily flush out the Stymphalian birds,<sup>62</sup> and she effortlessly helps Heracles hold the world on his shoulders while Atlas fetches the Golden Apples of the Hesperides (as depicted in one of the extant metopes from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia).<sup>63</sup> In vase paintings, Athena and Hermes are often depicted standing by Heracles’ side as he performs such tasks as routing the Centaurs from Pholos’ cave,<sup>64</sup> wrangling Cerberus in the Underworld,<sup>65</sup> and dispatching Cycnus.<sup>66</sup> In expression of a typical mythic hero trope, Heracles holds down the shape-shifter Nereus until the god reveals the information he needs to fulfill his heroic task(s): how to acquire the Cup of Helios to cross Oceanus, how to get to Erytheia (so he can steal Geryon’s cattle), and how to find the Garden of the Hesperides, where he follows Prometheus’s divine advice to have Atlas retrieve the apples for him.<sup>67</sup>

Hellboy, too, has access to arcane knowledge necessary to bring down evil beasties, and the guidance and help of paranormal advisors to get the job done. Just as Heracles is guided and inspired by the goddess of wisdom, Hellboy is advised by the sentient water-breather Abe Sapien, of the genus *Ichthyo Sapiens*. This “wise fish” provides Hellboy with the same kind of information out of reach of ordinary humans but necessary to his success. Just by touching something, Abe can divine “the past, the future, whatever this object holds,” much like Pro-

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61 Felton (2012) 115.

62 Apollod. 2.5.6.

63 Apollod. 2.5.11.

64 Gantz (1993) 391.

65 Gantz (1993) 414.

66 Gantz (1993) 422.

67 Apollod. 2.5.10–1.



teus (a stand-in for Nereus) knows “what is, what has been, and what soon will come.”<sup>68</sup> Abe can then replay recently transpired events (as if a video) for others to see. This is how Prof. Broom learns of Rasputin’s return to earth and the nature of the threat posed by Sammael. Like Athena, Abe also does field work, but Abe is only paranormal, not divine, and suffers grievous injuries when he is attacked while attempting to ferret out the water demon Sammael’s nest.

### Human Allies

While Heracles more often than not defeats his adversaries in single combat, he does accept the assistance of human players whenever necessary to achieve his goals. For example, Iolaus is identified as Heracles’ charioteer when he goes up against Cycnus<sup>69</sup> and he helps Heracles dispatch the Lernaean Hydra, an encounter central to this study.<sup>70</sup> Heracles even brings “a band of volunteers” to help him accomplish two of his labors: fetching Diomedes’ mares<sup>71</sup> and the belt of Hippolyte.<sup>72</sup> Iolaus is Heracles’ nephew by blood, the son of his twin brother, Iphicles. As Myers learns from Agent Clay, the B.P.R.D. is Hellboy’s family (*Well, come on in and meet the rest of the family*). Myers is incredulous when Hellboy is allowed to enter the first scene of paranormal disturbance without any back-up (*it’s the whole lonely hero thing*). Hellboy rejects Myers’ offer of help as a point of pride even when he is wounded (*No one ever helps me. It’s my job*). But Hellboy will only start thinking of himself as part of a team when he sees that his insistence on going it alone actually brings harm to his fellows.

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<sup>68</sup> Verg. *Georg.* 4.393 (*quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox ventura trahantur*).

<sup>69</sup> Hes. *Shield of Heracles* 78.

<sup>70</sup> Apollod. 2.5.2.

<sup>71</sup> Apollod. 2.5.8 and cf. Diod. 4.13.3.

<sup>72</sup> Apollod. 2.5.9.

## Human Adversaries

As mentioned earlier, mythic heroes are often regarded as culture heroes who defend civilization from savagery and order from chaos. Their usual adversary is a monstrous beast not able to be dispatched by ordinary men. But like all heroes, Heracles also kills humans (or half-humans). Some are simply cruel and opportunistic criminals who prey on innocents, such as Lityerses<sup>73</sup> and Saurus.<sup>74</sup> But others might as well be monsters, for they do more than just disrupt the lives and works of men. These villains throw the world out of balance by dehumanizing human beings.<sup>75</sup> One such man killed by Heracles is Egypt's King Bousiris,<sup>76</sup> who sacrifices men instead of animals on Zeus' altar, roasting them alive slowly inside a bronze bull. Two others are Cycnus, son of Ares, and Antaeus, son of Poseidon, who Pindar claims decapitate their innocent victims and then use their skulls to adorn temples built to honor their divine fathers.<sup>77</sup> Heracles also kills Cacus, a man-eater Roman poets say nailed to his door the decaying heads of his victims, whose fresh blood and bones litter the floor of his cave.<sup>78</sup>

In *Hellboy*, Rasputin and his apostles Kroenen and Ilsa are the horrific humans who threaten not only human life, culture, and civilization, but the core tenets and continued existence of humanity itself. They are far more dangerous than the typical cartoon villains who also dress head-to-toe in black leather and latex and spend their time plotting world domination and their enemies' destruction. The savageness with which they kill and the carnage they wreak on human society certainly mark them as enemies of culture, but equally disturbing are the ways they transcend the natural limitations of their own humanity. It is of course apt that Kroenen and Ilsa are Nazis, the standard of evil to

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<sup>73</sup> Diod. 4.31.6.

<sup>74</sup> Paus. 6.21.3.

<sup>75</sup> See Felton (2021) esp. 183.

<sup>76</sup> Apollod. 2.5.11.

<sup>77</sup> Pindar's unique portrayal of Cycnus (*Schol. Pind. O.* 2.82) and Antaeus (*I.* 4.3) as such outrageous violators of cultural taboos may be part of his campaign to rehabilitate Heracles' image as a defender of culture. Apollodorus makes no mention of any skull-collecting by either Cycnus (2.5.11) or Antaeus (2.7.7).

<sup>78</sup> See note 40 above.

beat in human history.<sup>79</sup> However, Rasputin allies with the Nazis only to exploit their resources for his own purposes. Ushering in the Apocalypse constitutes a far greater mythic threat to humanity than the puny aspirations of evil mortals. Even Nazis.

Imbued with all the powers of the god living inside him, Rasputin can violate the laws of nature in the same ways as the Olympian gods. He can travel through space instantaneously, know and share visions of the future, command supernatural creatures to do his bidding, and infiltrate the minds of mortals. Further, Rasputin has become immune to aging and death, those inescapable sorrows for all mortal creatures. Prof. Broom insinuates that Rasputin was famously able to survive being “poisoned, shot, stabbed, clubbed, castrated, and finally drowned” in 1916 because as the mortal agent on earth of the Ogdrū Jahad, he was even back then already no longer wholly human. One quirky aspect of *Hellboy*'s supernaturalism is that his aging process is significantly retarded (*Sixty years old by our count. But he doesn't age like we do – think dog years: he's barely out of his teens*). In accordance with divine prophesy, when Heracles completes his labors, he will ascend to Mt. Olympos where he will live “amongst the undying gods, untroubled and unaging all his days.”<sup>80</sup> But Rasputin's immortality and agelessness is an abomination, one he also ritualistically confers to Ilsa in the opening scene of the film (*I grant you everlasting life, youth, and the power to serve me*).

Now sixty years later, a still youthful Ilsa fulfills her promise to Rasputin (*I will never leave you*) by using his rune-filled notebook to guide her and Kroenen to a “sacred space” hidden deep in a mountain pass in Moldavia. Here they will welcome Rasputin back to earth. In the center of a vast chamber lies a large, circular, deeply grooved labyrinth. At her nod, Kroenen skewers their local sherpa guide as he bends down to pick up his reward of Nazi gold. They watch raptly as his blood follows the path of the grooves to the central basin, creating a bloodbath from which Rasputin's form silently rises. This blood sacrifice ritual is vaguely reminiscent of how in Homer's Underworld, shades of the dead must drink the blood of a sacrificed animal before interacting with the living. It is telling that a human sacrifice is necessary to reanimate Rasputin.

Kroenen is an even worse abomination. In his quest to keep aging and death at bay, he has introduced so many mechanical parts into his body that hardly a

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79 According to his biography provided in Allie (2004) 103, Kroenen was the Commandant of Auschwitz.

80 Hes. *Theog.* 954–5 [Evelyn-White].

whisper of his organic self remains. Now a steampunk-style clockwork cyborg, Kroenen has deliberately transformed himself into the kind of liminal creature regularly dispatched by Greek mythic heroes (such as the many centaurs killed by Heracles). Just like all liminal creatures, Kroenen is a threat to culture – by bringing violence and disorder to society – and to the natural order of things – by blurring the boundary between animate and inanimate. He no longer has the human capacity for speech. Even his mechanical laugh lacks any vestige of humanity. Prof. Broom comes to realize the extent of Kroenen's horrific body modifications only when he observes him naked on the autopsy table: eyelids and lips surgically removed, heart replaced by a turnkey, living limbs swapped for prostheses. Dust, not blood, poured from bullet holes made by desperate men ill-equipped to protect themselves against such monstrosity. Like Rasputin, Kroenen chose to sacrifice his humanity in order to transcend it. "And Del Toro is a good enough storyteller, or a moral enough fabulist, that these human creations are not only dangerous, not only alarming, but so surprisingly pitiable."<sup>81</sup>

### Supernatural Adversaries

*Hellboy*'s primary monstrous adversary in the film is the demon Sammael. Sammael introduces chaos and savagery into the world by killing people, terrorizing the community, and destroying the works of man, but he also inspires humanity's most primal fears. Sammael shares the traits that monsters needing to be dispatched by Greek heroes tend to have in common: he is "incredibly strong," "imbued with malice," "inherently destructive, exhibiting tremendous hostility toward humans," "closer to mere abstractions of frightening concepts [than] identifiably animal," in short "a creature unlike anything anyone has ever seen before; a creature that evokes revulsion."<sup>82</sup> This perfectly tracks with the vision for Sammael expressed by Wayne Barlow, one of the illustrators on the film's production team: "Our goal was to scare the audience with a nightmare creature unlike any they had seen before."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Gray (2018).

<sup>82</sup> Felton (2012) 104.

<sup>83</sup> Allie (2004) 86.

Together, the subjects of Heracles' first two labors – the Nemean Lion and the Lernaean Hydra – provide a perfect double model for understanding the depth and breadth of the different mythic threats posed by this monster Sammael. They are the only two mythological beasts Heracles is required to kill outright rather than catch and deliver to Eurystheus alive. And the Lion<sup>84</sup> and Hydra,<sup>85</sup> both darlings of Hera,<sup>86</sup> are also siblings: the offspring of Typhaon, the fiercest representation of violent nature, and the immortal, man-eating, viperous Echidna. Sammael is conjured into existence when Rasputin exhales a sickly green fog onto a pile of salt crystals (*gathered from the tears of a thousand angels restraining his essence*). He then makes the beast virtually unkillable by giving it the power to regenerate itself two-fold after death (*for every one that falls, two more shall rise*).

Abe Sapien's reference book identifies Sammael as "a dark entity...evil, ancient, and hungry." Hesiod's Hydra is "evil-minded".<sup>87</sup> Sammael is the Harbinger of Pestilence; according to Hesiod, Hera placed the Lion in Nemea as a "plague to men."<sup>88</sup> Sammael is the Seed of Destruction; Alcman calls the Hydra the "Destroyer of Men."<sup>89</sup> And Sammael is the Hound of Resurrection; Euripides twice calls the Hydra a "dog."<sup>90</sup>

Sammael also has physical qualities of both Lion and Hydra. His oversized head, mane (of tentacles), slim hips, carriage, and well-muscled legs give the demon a vaguely leonine look, which illustrator Barlow confirms was intentional: "We came upon an inspiring picture of a lion's skull, and worked around that, shriveling skin, draping tentacles, adding eyesockets, and layering in the director's beloved nermies [large, wart-like appendages]."<sup>91</sup> Those same thick tentacles crowning Sammael's head also evoke the multiple snaky necks that sprout from the Hydra's central trunk.

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84 Apollod. 2.5.1.

85 Hes. *Theog.* 313–5.

86 See notes 23 and 24.

87 Hes. *Theog.* 313 [Evelyn-White].

88 Hes. *Theog.* 329 [Evelyn-White].

89 Alcman, fr. 815.

90 Eur. *Herc.* lines 420 and 1274.

91 Allie (2004) 89.



By settling both the Lion and the Hydra in populated places, Hera ensures the future heroic intervention by Heracles.<sup>92</sup> Heracles fights both monsters outside in the natural landscape, in spaces “untamed by culture.”<sup>93</sup> Rasputin looses the amphibious water-demon Sammael on a rampage inside the limits of the hero's city, making an encounter between the demon and Hellboy equally inevitable but all the more dangerous for human beings.

Hellboy's first encounter with Sammael occurs when the B.P.R.D. is called to a scene of paranormal disturbance at the city's Machen Library, current sponsor of a special exhibit aptly named “Magick: The Ancient Power.” Before Sammael even appears on screen, we see evidence of the kinds of threats he poses that require the intervention of a mythic hero. Hellboy enters the Exhibit Hall to find the floor littered with smashed art treasures (threat to culture) and the half-eaten bodies of security guards (threat to humanity). Anthropophagy is perhaps the paramount fear of humankind represented in world mythologies, as it threatens not only death but the very erasure of an individual, a race, a culture...in the most gruesome manner imaginable. Most classical mythic heroes, including Heracles, are called upon to dispatch at least one man-eating monster.<sup>94</sup>

Hellboy is quizzically inspecting a sodden mess of still-clothed body parts covered in goo when another slimy clump splats on the floor in front of him. Hellboy looks up to find the demon hanging from the ceiling above. (Just as Heracles' adversaries Periclymenus and Achelous are shape-shifters, Sammael can transform his right ulna into an extendable “bone blade” strong enough to pierce stone or metal and bear his own weight). This scene evokes the grisly interior of the monster Cacus' cave.<sup>95</sup> Having such a scene play out so incongruously in an exhibition hall of a city's cultural center, though, makes the threat all the more terrifying. Not even Hellboy's dry wit can dilute the horror of this looming threat still gorging himself on the remains of men (*Six library guards, raw? Plus belts and boots? Man, you're going to need some heavy fiber to move that out*).

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92 Hes. *Theog.* 315 and 329.

93 For natural spaces as the typical haunts of Greek monsters, see Felton (2012) 105.

94 Man-eaters dispatched by Heracles include the mares of Diomedes (Apollod. 2.5.8; Diod. 4.13.4), the sea monster Cetus (Ov. *Met.* 11.211–2), and according to Pausanias (8.22.4), the Stymphalian Birds.

95 See note 40 above.

Initially, each hero attacks from a distance using his favorite ballistic weapon. For Heracles, that weapon is his bow, a gift from Apollo.<sup>96</sup> *Hellboy* puts just as much faith in his big gun. But even Heracles' divine gift of unerring aim<sup>97</sup> doesn't help him since his arrows just bounce off the Nemean Lion's impenetrable hide.<sup>98</sup> And even *Hellboy*'s "really big bullets" fail to stop Sammael because of his supernatural ability to heal instantaneously. Realizing his superior position, Sammael launches *Hellboy* across the room, crashing him through case after glass case of valuable library holdings (a dramatic illustration of the threat Sammael poses to human culture).

Heracles will end up wrestling with the Lion until he eventually strangles it to death with his bare hands.<sup>99</sup> Scholars have noted that "attempting to lift an opponent prior to throwing him to the ground is a standard device of ancient wrestling"<sup>100</sup> and that "the objective of an ancient Greek wrestling match...was to throw your opponent to the ground three times without first suffering three falls yourself."<sup>101</sup> On one Athenian red-figure amphora c. 6th B.C.E.,<sup>102</sup> Heracles is depicted holding the Nemean Lion stretched to its full length straight above his head as he prepares to smash it to the ground.<sup>103</sup> This is the very technique Sammael uses against a comically out-matched *Hellboy*: he lifts the hero high over his shoulder, his feet pointing to the ceiling, and in a blurred flurry of action smashes him from one side to the other over and over and over on the marble floor. He then tosses the limp *Hellboy* out an upper story window.

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**96** Apollod. 2.4.11.

**97** Apollod. 2.4.9.

**98** Bakchyl. 13.46–54 and Apollod. 2.5.1.

**99** As a wrestler, Heracles is unequalled. He kills or grievously injures a number of opponents in high-profile matches including Polygonus and Telegonus, sons of Proteus (Apollod. 2.5.9); Antaeus (Apollod. 2.5.12); Eryx, son of Poseidon (Apollod. 2.5.10); Menoetes, servant to Hades (Apollod. 2.5.12); and the river god Achelous (Apollod. 2.7.5 and *Ov. Met.* 9.31–88).

**100** Gantz (1993) 417.

**101** Felton (2021) n. 9.

**102** BM 1839, 1109.2.

**103** Gantz (1993) 384: "The Nemean Lion is the most popular of all Herakles' exploits in art, with hundreds of representations, almost always displaying variations on basic wrestling poses."

As each hero contemplates the ineffectiveness of his weapon of choice (bow/gun), he considers alternative tactics to neutralize his opponent's advantage. Heracles chases the Lion inside a cave with two entrances, blocking one end of it. Hellboy can only follow his stronger, quicker, and more agile prey into the New York City subway system, the urban equivalent of a cave with two openings. After wrestling the Lion to the ground (and in some accounts, bashing it over the head with his club),<sup>104</sup> Heracles chokes the beast to death<sup>105</sup> and then skins its otherwise impenetrable hide with its own claws.<sup>106</sup>

Before Hellboy can catch up with his adversary in the subway tunnel, though, he must first endure another comical attack by a valiant train engineer who mistakes him for an evil monster and pummels him with a fire extinguisher (*Hey! I'm on your side!*) until he is pushed beneath the wheels of the speeding train. With only his pride hurt, Hellboy brushes himself off and goes further into the subway tunnel. When Sammael sees Hellboy, he scampers towards him at great speed on all fours, roars and screams, and leaps at him in a way reminiscent of how the Lion attacks Heracles, according to a first-hand report by the hero himself: "his spine bent like a bow as he gathered his length below his flanks and midriff...so the terrible lion arched himself and sprang from far upon me, raging to taste my flesh."<sup>107</sup> A well-known Attic red-figure stamnos illustrates how Heracles holds open the Lion's jaws with his bare hands to avoid being bitten.<sup>108</sup> Hellboy takes this tactic to the next level by violently breaking Sammael's upper and lower jawbones apart at the joint, only to gape in surprise as they instantly fall back into place and reknit.

Sammael also has much in common with the Hydra. The biggest problem the Hydra poses for Heracles is its ability to regenerate itself two-fold after death. For every head that Heracles bludgeons (or cuts off), two new heads immediately grow in its place.<sup>109</sup> Together, Heracles and Iolaus make short shrift of the mon-

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<sup>104</sup> E.g., Ps.-Theokr. 25.221–7.

<sup>105</sup> Apollod. 2.5.1; Bakh. 13.45–50.

<sup>106</sup> Ps.-Theokr. 25.240–2.

<sup>107</sup> Ps.-Theokr. 25.212–9, *passim* [Rist 1978: 239]).

<sup>108</sup> Philadelphia L-64–185.

<sup>109</sup> The nine-headed Hydra is just one of Heracles' many adversaries made more formidable through multiplicity of form. Other such creatures dispatched by Heracles include triple-

ster once they realize it is conquerable by fire: as Heracles lops each head, Iolaus sears the wound with a firebrand, preventing the budding of new ones.<sup>110</sup> Hellboy learns that Sammael, too, is conquerable by fire. This first encounter with Sammael ends when Hellboy, pinned by Sammael on the subway tracks, deliberately touches the third rail, sending electricity surging through his own body into the demon's, incinerating him (*I'm fireproof. You're not*).

But it is a different detail from Heracles' fight with the Hydra that leads to a deeper connection with Hellboy's story. Heracles first attacks the Hydra with his bow, but his arrows are as useless as they were against the Nemean Lion. Apollodorus reports that "by pelting it with fiery shafts he forced it to come out" of its den and "it wound itself about one of his feet and clung to him."<sup>111</sup> Then a crab sent by Hera to torment him bites him on the foot. Hellboy finds himself in a similar predicament. When his big gun does not make the expected big impression, Sammael gets close enough to shoot out his "arm-thick," seven-foot long tongue and wraps it around Hellboy's human wrist. After Hellboy gets free, he removes the wriggly stinger left embedded in his flesh, throws it to the ground, and squishes it with his foot (*it pops like a ripe grape*) as disdainfully as Heracles stomps on Hera's crab.<sup>112</sup>

When Abe Sapien examines Hellboy's wound, the team learns two things. First, Hellboy was "burned by some organic acid" in Sammael's saliva. This is impressive, given that Hellboy is fireproof. But the gall produced by the Hydra

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bodied Geryon (Hes. *Theog.* 287) and his two-headed dog Orthos (Apollod. 2.5.11); conjoined twins Eurytus and Cteatus (Apollod. 2.7.2); "the immortal dragon with a hundred heads" that Apollodorus says guarded the tree in the Garden of the Hesperides (Apollod. 2.5.12), and Cerberus, described as having fifty heads in Hesiod (*Theog.* 312) before the standard number becomes three. For the benefits to monsters of such anatomical superfluity, see Felton (2012) 104.

**110** Apollod. 2.5.2. Heracles just lops off the ninth, immortal head of the Hydra and buries it beside the road. The catastrophic consequences of such an undying evil being unearthed later is in fact the jumping off point for the 2019 *Hellboy* reboot. The film begins with the discovery of the dismembered and discretely buried body parts of the evil, immortal Blood Queen Nimue, buried long ago by King Arthur to prevent her from unleashing a humanity-ending plague on Earth. Made whole, she poses a mythic threat of the kind only the mythic hero Hellboy can dispatch.

**111** Apollod. 2.5.2 [Frazer].

**112** Ps.-Eratosthenes. *Catast.* 11.

is said to be even more toxic, so poisonous as to render any wound incurable.<sup>113</sup> Second, the team learns that the creature laid eggs in the wound. What they have yet to learn is that Sammael has laid a lot of eggs, and that every time *Hellboy* kills a Sammael, he triggers the release of two eggs from his underwater clutch that grow into full-size Sammael-clones in seconds. Just like the hydra's re-growing heads, Sammael's prodigious fertility and regenerative abilities pose a grave threat. Although understood to be male, Sammael thus evokes the destructive potential of uncontrolled female power inspired by a host of female monsters in Greek mythology.<sup>114</sup> The engraving on an illustration of Sammael in Kroenen's lair – "Death becomes the fertile ground"<sup>115</sup> – echoes the description given the Hydra by the Roman playwright Seneca: "made fertile by death" (*morte fecundum*).<sup>116</sup>

Heracles never fights the same monster twice, but his encounter with the Hydra will come back to haunt him. After he kills the beast, he dips his arrows in its gall to give himself an edge over future adversaries. It is with one of these poison-tipped arrows that Heracles will kill the centaur Nessus for attempting to abduct and rape his new wife Deianara. But Heracles will not learn until it is too late that even after he dispatched the monster, it still remained a danger. For in the time it took Heracles to cross the river and retrieve his bride, the centaur had convinced her to collect some of his blood as a love potion to use on Heracles if his attentions ever strayed. And when that time comes, in her own ignorance of the true nature of the love potion (tainted by the poison that tipped the arrow that killed the centaur), Deianara sends the robe that burns Heracles' skin so badly that he takes his own life.<sup>117</sup> Heracles' arrogance and ignorance has terrible consequences, but true to form, the hero has little concern for others, including Lichas, the herald he kills for bringing Deianara's gift, and Deianara, who

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**113** Diod. 4.11.5. With these arrows dipped in this gall, Heracles brings down Ladon, dragon guardian of the Tree of the Hesperides (Diod. 4.38.1; cf. Apoll. Rhod. 4.1603); Chiron (Paus. 5.5.9) and a number of other centaurs including Pholos (Apollod. 2.5.4); Nessus (Soph. *Trach.* 572–7; Ov. *Met.* 9.130); and Geryon (in a Stesichoros fragment from Oxyrhynchus, 15 *SLG*). The arrows Philoctetes inherits along with Heracles' bow are also imbued with that poison (Quint. Smyrn. *Fall of Troy* 9.392 ff.).

**114** Felton (2012) 105.

**115** Allie (2004) 128.

**116** Sen. Ag. 835–6.

**117** See Soph. *Trach.* 770–1; Diod. Sic. 4.38.1; and Ov. *Met.* 9.157–272.



kills herself when she learns of the tragedy her gift has wrought (as dramatized in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*). And after his mortal essence is burned away, Heracles leaves his troubles behind to live eternally on Mt. Olympus with, it should be noted, a new wife.<sup>118</sup>

In a comparable plot escalation, *Hellboy*'s second encounter with Sammael, too, causes everything to go wrong for him and everyone else. The team embarks on a mission to find and destroy Sammael's nest of eggs in the flooded subway tunnels. Surprised to see Sammael there (*Didn't I kill you already?*), *Hellboy* impulsively chases the monster, leaving his team unprotected. When he returns triumphant, he learns that in his absence Agent Clay was mortally wounded by Kroenen (whose "dead" body they transfer to B.P.R.D. headquarters) and that two Sammaels devoured two other FBI agents and grievously wounded Abe Sapien. Only now does *Hellboy* come to understand that the birth of these two monsters was magically triggered by his killing of the Sammael he chased and dispatched. *Hellboy* acted in an attempt to prove his heroic worth rather than out of arrogance. But like Heracles, his ignorance of his adversary's ability to continue to cause harm even after being killed has dire consequences. This disastrous series of events brings to a boil long simmering tensions between *Hellboy* and Tom Manning, Director of the B.P.R.D.

### The Overseer

The fraught relationship between Manning and *Hellboy* has much in common with the one between Eurystheus and Heracles. Homer's Heracles expresses his resentment at having had to obey Eurystheus' orders when he sees Odysseus in the Underworld: "Son of Kronion Zeus or not, how many days I sweated out, being bound in servitude to a man far worse than I, a rough master."<sup>119</sup> It is equally apparent that Eurystheus feared and hated Heracles. After Heracles appears before Eurystheus draped in the skin of the Nemean Lion, the king makes some changes to increase his security, including having a bronze pithos made for himself to hide in.<sup>120</sup> Numerous vase paintings depict Eurystheus div-

118 Pind. *N.* 71–2.

119 Hom. *Od.* 11.620–2 [Fitzgerald lines 11.738–40].

120 Apollod. 2.5.2.

ing into this jar when Heracles brings back alive both the Erymanthian Boar<sup>121</sup> and Cerberus.<sup>122</sup>

For his part, Manning has always considered the paranormals to be no different from the monsters they are called upon to dispatch (*These freaks, Trevor, they give me the creeps*). And like Heracles, Hellboy considers himself superior to his unworthy overseer. But then Manning places the blame for the murdered agents squarely on Hellboy. Hellboy is equally distraught at the loss of men he considered his friends, but Manning condemns him, along with the whole concept of the B.P.R.D., in words Eurystheus might have directed at Heracles: *"This whole thing is a farce, because in the end, after you've killed, after you've captured every freak out there, there's still one left. You."*

Manning's accusation that Hellboy is not a "man" but a "freak" taps into Hellboy's deepest insecurities, and he reacts in anger, ripping a heavy metal canister from its mounting and holding it aloft. Perhaps Heracles felt the same pleasure from watching his oppressor Eurystheus dive into his pithos as Hellboy does from watching Manning cower in fear on the floor. Halfway through the scene, the camera abruptly shifts point of view to the exterior hallway to catch the moment the canister crashes through the glass wall, startling Myers and Broom as they welcome Liz back into the B.P.R.D. fold. Manning steps gingerly through the hole in the wall and yells, "I want that thing locked up, starting now! Now, you hear me?!" When Hellboy, now perfectly calm, steps into the hallway, Manning scurries away in fright. If only there had been a giant pithos for him to dive into.

Abe Sapien had once warned his fellows, "If there's trouble, all us freaks have is each other." And now the unthinkable happens: Kroenen rises from his autopsy table and murders Professor Broom. Manning takes charge of the team, with the promise that after they return from Moscow (pursuing a clue left by Rasputin for them to find), he plans to "close this freak show for good." But the threat posed by Rasputin turns out to be much greater than they could ever imagine.

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121 Gantz (1993) 389.

122 Gantz (1993) 415.

## CONFLICTS RESOLVED AND THREATS NEUTRALIZED

The setting, action, and imagery of the film's final extended sequence is replete with the motifs of *katabasis*, a metaphorical conquest of Death dramatized by a journey to the Underworld and back. Virtually every classical mythic hero undertakes a *katabasis*. Heracles has three to his credit.<sup>123</sup> Once the team arrives in the Moscow cemetery, Hellboy uses his typical combination of occult magic, technology, and a Latin incantation to find and re-vitalize a half-decomposed corpse to act as their Sibyl and lead them through the catacombs to where Rasputin awaits them. The underground labyrinth they must navigate is a hellish landscape of treacherous pathways complete with a crumbling bridge that spans a bottomless pit. A number of team members fall to their deaths, including their erstwhile Sibyl. A harrowing close call temporarily separates Hellboy and Manning from Liz and Myers.

### Neutralized: The Threat of Kroenen

Since arriving in Moscow, Manning and Hellboy have been bickering non-stop, each jockeying for position as team leader. Now they find themselves alone together in the dark catacombs, cut off from the rest of their team. Hellboy signals for quiet as faint strains of Wagner come wafting down the passageway. Manning eagerly follows the music, with Hellboy reluctantly in tow...as they walk right into Kroenen's lair. This mistake of equating signs of human culture with the absence of savagery is yet another popular trope in classical myth. Odysseus' men, for example, assume they are among civilized people because they see smoke coming from the chimneys of the Laestrygonians who will devour them, and then later, from the abode of Circe, who literally turns them into animals. Hellboy and Manning now find themselves in equivalent peril. Manning is off his guard when Kroenen attacks, but Hellboy moves in to protect him. A violent scuffle ensues. When Hellboy is momentarily put on the defensive, Manning rather comically comes to his rescue by pitching one small, steel gear after another at Kroenen's metal-encased face, giving Hellboy a chance to regroup. But then Kroenen trips a trap door that opens under their feet, and

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123 Apollod. 2.5.12.

Hellboy and Manning narrowly escape falling into the spear pit below. Hellboy throws in Kroenen, instead. Transfixed by one of his own swords, Kroenen looks up helplessly into Hellboy's eyes as the hero takes his vengeance by crushing him to death with a giant metal gear (*You killed my father! Your ass is mine!*).

### **Resolved: Hellboy's Conflict with Manning**

Even after Heracles' death, Eurystheus continues to persecute the hero's mother and children until he is slain by Heracles' son Hyllus.<sup>124</sup> But Manning and Hellboy reconcile their differences. For the first time, Manning sees that Hellboy is not just a demon monster-killer but also a man of good character who risked his own life to save someone who had only ever shown him disrespect. Hellboy is grateful not only for Manning's assistance during the fight, but also for teaching him to use a wooden match to light his cigars (*preserves the flavor, you see?*). They exchange thanks and together enjoy that uniquely human ritual, a celebratory smoke. Their reconciliation is a watershed moment in Hellboy's journey toward becoming – and being accepted as – a man. Hellboy leaves Manning in the relative safety of Kroenen's empty lair as he continues alone to face his destiny.

### **Neutralized: The Threat of Sammael**

Meanwhile, Liz and Myers stumble into the demon's egg chamber deep in the bowels of the catacombs. The place is crawling with dozens of Sammaels, in much the same way that all sorts of horrid creatures, including the Lernaean Hydra, mill about before the entrance of the Underworld.<sup>125</sup> When Liz calls out for Hellboy, he dramatically crashes his way through the ceiling and is immediately beset by rabid Sammaels. The epic battle that follows is akin to another Gigantomachy, an elemental battle pitting fire-demon Hellboy and pyrotechnic Liz (≈ the Olympians) against an army of slithering, leaping, shrieking, snaky water demons (≈ Giants) hellbent on overturning the cosmic order. Heracles

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124 Apollod. 2.8.1; cf. Euripides' *Heraclidae*.

125 Verg. *Aen.* 6.285–8.

was indispensable to the Olympians' victory over the Giants.<sup>126</sup> But even though Hellboy has a plan (*We have to nail 'em all at once. And the eggs*), the beleaguered hero is no match for these Sammaels whose number only increases with his every successful kill. As Hellboy disappears from sight under a growing pile of Sammaels, Liz exhorts Myers to strike her to induce the fearful pyrotechnic fury she had for so long struggled to suppress. The terrible raw power she unleashes completely incinerates every Sammael and every one of his eggs: the beast is dead, never to rise again. Rasputin and Ilsa arrive to survey the damage. Liz is left unconscious by her effort, Hellboy is knocked out by Ilsa, and a shell-shocked Myers, human witness to a battle of the gods, has barely survived.

### Neutralized: The Threat of Apocalypse

The penultimate scene of the film is set in a chapel-like chamber presided over by a giant stone Angel (*and in his hand the key to the bottomless pit*). The Apocalypse clock counts down to the looming blood eclipse, the celestial sign of the Prophecy of Doom fulfilled. Hellboy is on his knees, his hands locked into a massive wooden yoke set around his neck. Just as the Pythia required Amphitryon's son to adopt a new name (*Hera + kleos = Glory of Hera*) before performing the heroic labors that would win him his prophesied apotheosis,<sup>127</sup> Rasputin commands Hellboy to recite the name Anung-un Rama – his true demon name – so that he can fulfill his “destiny” of unleashing the Apocalypse.

It is only now that Hellboy learns from Ilsa the purpose of his “Right Hand of Doom,” whose dimensions exactly match the circular impressions on the great stone door the Ogdrú Jahad wait to be opened. After Hellboy refuses, twice, Rasputin exploits his love for Liz to manipulate him into obeying his order. He approaches the unconscious Liz and sucks her soul right out of her body, an action he claims Hellboy can reverse if he capitulates to Rasputin's demand (*Her soul awaits on the other side. If you want her back...Open the door and claim her*). Will Hellboy turn out to be the incarnation of Rasputin's Dark Angel, the terrible Destroyer of Humanity? Or is he a tormented Christ-figure pinned to a make-

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126 Apollod. 1.6.1 and 2.7.1.

127 Apollod. 2.4.12.

shift cross, the Protector of Humanity his adoptive father Prof. Broom raised him to be?

Although he has spent his entire life denying his demon nature, now Hellboy surrenders (*for her*). He intones his true demon name and his locks spring open. As he shrugs off his yoke, Hellboy physically transforms into a full-on demon: horns grown out to their full length and ringed with fire, breath like red smoke, his now fearsome countenance purged of every trace of humanity. Hellboy has almost completed the unlocking process when Myers makes one last appeal to his human nature (*Remember who you are! You do have a choice! Your father gave you that!*). In fact, moments before Rasputin had him killed, Prof. Broom had refused to bow to his demand to acknowledge Hellboy's demon name (*I call him son*) and rejected this very outcome – shown to him in a vision by Rasputin – as Hellboy's inescapable “destiny.” Myers tosses Broom's holy rosary to Hellboy, who instinctively catches it. Horrified that he is now so devoid of humanity that the rosary's cross burns his demon flesh, and empowered by the reminder of his father's faith in him, he roars and snaps off his horns: the cosmic sequence falters, the monsters recede from the sky, and every trace of Anung-un Rama leaves Hellboy.

Rasputin despairs (*What have you done? Now you will never know your destiny!*). But Hellboy celebrates his expression of free will (*I chose!*).<sup>128</sup> And just as he had earlier killed Kroenen for murdering his father, Hellboy now punishes Rasputin for stealing Liz's immortal soul by stabbing him in the belly with one of his own broken-off horns.<sup>129</sup> As Rasputin falls to the ground, a vaguely squid-like creature slithers out of the wound in his belly, growing larger by the second. By the time Hellboy moves Myers and the still unconscious Liz into the corridor, Rasputin and Ilsa – true believers to the end – are unceremoniously flattened by a flick of their uncaring god's monstrous tail.

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128 This scene plays out in the film exactly as it appears in Mignola's comic, but choice and disobedience are hallmarks of character for del Toro as well. In his film *Pan's Labyrinth*, as the hero Ofelia prepares to make her own fateful choice, she passes under an archway bearing the Latin inscription “*in consiliis nostris fatum nostrum est*” (“our destiny lies in our own decisions”). For discussion, see Siegel (2020) 429–31.

129 This scene is reminiscent of how Heracles wrenches off the horn of Achelous during a wrestling match for which Deianara is the prize (Apollod. 2.7.9; Soph. *Trach.* 10–1).



### Resolved: Hellboy's Inner Conflicts

Aware that he was dying of cancer, Prof. Broom chose Myers to be Hellboy's new liaison because he knew Myers was "pure of heart" and that Hellboy would need his guidance to realize his full potential (*Have the courage to stand by his side after I'm gone. Help him find himself. Who he must be. He was born a demon...he can't help that. You will help him become a man*). And with Myers' urging, Hellboy was able to stare down his own inner demons and emerge from his identity crisis purged of distractions. Now Hellboy willingly entrusts Liz's safe-keeping to Myers and gruffly expresses his fondness for him, his petty jealousy forgotten. Now he graciously accepts the help Myers offers, even if it is only a damaged grenade belt that can no longer be detonated remotely. He is ready to fulfill his hero's duty to dispatch Behemoth with characteristic confidence and wry humor, but he barely has time to crack a joke (*How big can it be?*) before a huge tentacle snakes around the corner and yanks him back into the main chamber.

### Neutralized: The Threat of Behemoth

Behemoth, Rasputin's god made flesh, is an absolute monster, now grown almost too huge to fit inside the cavernous chamber. When Hellboy wrenches a steel sword from a nearby stone statue and lops a thick, sinuous tentacle from its bulbous body, we are again reminded of Heracles' fight against the Hydra. But the gargantuan Behemoth repeatedly smashes the helpless Hellboy, tiny in its grasp, against the cavern wall and then slams him to the ground. Hellboy's strength and weapons are useless to him. All he has left is his cunning. Hellboy grabs the fully charged grenade belt just seconds before Behemoth scoops him up and swallows him whole. After a beat, the beast's belly begins to glow and writhe and then with an enormous boom, a goo-covered Hellboy is thrown clear by the exploding grenades that shred Behemoth from the inside out.<sup>130</sup> This scene resonates in several ways with Heracles' conquest of the sea monster Cetus – also a large, tentacled sea creature – who comes to devour Hesione, set

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<sup>130</sup> Cf. Pausanias' story (9.26.7–8) of the Boeotian youth Menestratus, who wore a breast-plate festooned with fishhooks designed to rip apart the insides of a dragon to which he had volunteered to be sacrificed in his lover's stead.

out as a human sacrifice by her father, King Laomedon of Troy. In some tellings of the tale, Heracles himself even enters Cetus's body through its mouth and then cuts his way out.<sup>131</sup>

### Resolved: *Hellboy's* Inter-Personal Conflicts

*Hellboy* rushes back to where he left Myers and Liz to find that Liz has no pulse and isn't breathing. With infinite gentleness, *Hellboy* embraces her and whispers something in her ear. After a long beat, Liz revives. Having just returned from dispatching Behemoth, described earlier by Rasputin as "guardian of thresholds, destroyer of worlds," *Hellboy* does not share Myers' surprise at Liz's miraculous recovery. Now restored to life, Liz asks, "In the dark I heard your voice...what did you say?" *Hellboy* replies, "I said 'Hey, you on the other side, let her go because...'" and his voice breaks... "for her I'll cross over and you'll be sorry."

Only mythic heroes can journey to the Underworld and come back alive. Rarely can they bring anyone else back with them. Heracles once bridged the liminal space between the worlds of the living and the dead to bring another still living mythic hero, Theseus, back to earth.<sup>132</sup> But Orpheus is the only classical hero who, like *Hellboy*, attempts to retrieve an immortal soul already removed from its body. Both Virgil and Ovid tell how Orpheus cajoles the Underworld gods into releasing Eurydice's soul.<sup>133</sup> Ovid's Orpheus even resigns himself to an early death should his request be denied. *Hellboy* does not negotiate. He threatens war, not surrender, if his demand for Liz's soul is not met. Earlier in the film, *Hellboy* soothed Liz's anxiety by pledging his undying love (*I won't give up on you, ever*). Now he has proven true to his word.

The film closes with the two lovers at last sharing a romantic embrace, safely engulfed in Liz's blue fire. Both the screenplay's final stage direction – *Liz looks at Hellboy for the first time as what he is: the man she loves* – and Myers' concluding voiceover celebrate *Hellboy's* evolution of character:

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<sup>131</sup> See Gantz (1993) 401 for attestations of this version in both literary and artistic sources.

<sup>132</sup> Apollod. *Ep.* 1.24; Eur. *Herc.* 619.

<sup>133</sup> Verg. *Georg.* 4.467–84; Ov. *Met.* 10.11–48.

*What makes a man a man, a friend of mine once wondered. Is it his origins? The way he comes to life? I don't think so. It's the choices he makes. Not how he starts things, but how he decides to end them.*

When Heracles chooses to end his mortal life to escape the insufferable pain of the Hydra's poison, his divine father Zeus rewards him with the prophesied destiny he has always wanted. *Hellboy* makes the impossibly hard decision to live with the insufferable pain of losing Liz rather than forfeit his own humanity and unleash the Apocalypse, a "destiny" imposed by his surrogate father Rasputin, one he doesn't want and cannot abide. In his moment of crisis, each hero stays true to the principles that have guided his life. *Hellboy* ends up saving his girl, saving humanity, and saving the world. Heracles saves only himself.

By the end of the film, *Hellboy* comes to accept the love of those he loves, and to love himself for who he really is: both man *and* demon. By the end of the film, he comes to understand that his demon nature doesn't *prevent* him from being human: rather, it *allows* him to transcend the limits of humanity so he can preserve and enjoy the benefits of being human for himself and others. It is his hybrid nature that enables him to be humanity's protector, to be a good teammate to his fellows at the B.P.R.D., to be the man Liz always knew he was and the man his father always hoped he would become. And for all these reasons, *Hellboy* is the very model of a modern mythic hero.

## EPILOGUE

In this essay, I have explored the ways in which del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004) resonates with the literary and artistic record of the quintessential classical mythic hero Heracles, even as the ancient and modern heroes turned out to be of very different character. A reasonable next step in expanding the parameters of this reception study would be to consider the similarities between del Toro's *Hellboy* and the modern presentation of Hercules in television and film.<sup>134</sup> For example, while Mike Mignola claims that *Hellboy*'s "restraint yoke" is "a nod to

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<sup>134</sup> The evolution of Hercules on screen has long been of interest to classicists. See the essays by Blanshard, Chiu, Curley, Potter, Solomon, and Stafford in Augoustakis/Rauci's *Epic Heroes on Screen* (2018). Also see Blanshard/Shahabudin (2011) 58–76 and 194–215.

Frankenstein chained into the chair in James Whale's classic, brilliant *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and I myself compare Hellboy's pose to Christ's on the cross, this image of Hellboy with outstretched arms locked in place at shoulder height also evokes the "'famous lateral spread' struck by [Steve] Reeves in *Hercules* (1958) [and reprised in 2014 both by Kellan Lutz in *The Legends of Hercules* and by Dwayne Johnson in *Hercules*], a pose in which the hero is chained with his arms outstretched in such a way as to emphasize his lateral, pectoral, and deltoid muscles."<sup>135</sup>

Also of interest is how the modern screened versions of Hercules (those produced during and after the 1990's, the same era that saw Mignola create Hellboy) duplicate Hellboy's "everyman" heroic aesthetic, perhaps the most significant way that Hellboy diverges from the profile of the classical Heracles, a true stand-alone hero. For example, in much the same way that Hellboy works as part of a team under the aegis of the B.P.R.D., the modern Hercules on screen is more often than not presented as a member of a "heroic collective...which speaks to modern principles of collaboration and coalition."<sup>136</sup>

Further, there are notable patterns of reciprocity of reception and cross-pollination connecting the presentations of these two heroes on screen. For example, in my essay I discuss how del Toro's Hellboy tries to win social acceptance and reduce his sense of isolation by minimizing his differences. When Agent Clay first brings Myers to meet the hero, he advises: "Try not to stare. He hates when people stare...at his horns. He files 'em. To 'fit in.'" Later, Hellboy's outsider status is dramatized in his run-in with Manning, who berates Hellboy for his differences: "This whole thing is a farce, because in the end, after you've killed, after you've captured every freak out there, there's still one left. You." And when Hellboy appears to lose control in response, Manning barks orders to his team: "I want that thing locked up, starting now! Now, you hear me?!" A scene with remarkably similar elements occurs in Disney's animated *Hercules* (1997). When the young, undisciplined hero accidentally destroys the town's marketplace, the potter speaks for the whole community when he tells Amphitryon, "I'm warning you! You keep that, that, that freak away from here!" Young Hercules woe-fully admits, "They are right. I am a freak. I try to fit in. I really do. I just can't. Sometimes I feel like I really don't belong here." Even if the mirrored circum-

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<sup>135</sup> Blanshard (2018) 29.

<sup>136</sup> Quotation at Curley (2018) 185, from a discussion of *Hercules* (2014); cf. Chiu (2018) 65-70.

stances and repeated key words and phrases in these scenes do not prove direct influence, the similarities point to the fundamental comparability of the two heroes.

Other examples of repeated visual narrative elements may simply amount to similar expressions of an over-used trope. In my essay, I observe that *Hellboy*'s method of dispatching Behemoth – by killing the monster from the inside after being swallowed by it – is not unlike the way some ancient sources say Heracles killed the monster Cetus. Similarly, the young hero of Disney's *Hercules* (1997) is swallowed by the Hydra (in a marked departure from classical source material) and escapes by using his sword to cut himself out. An earlier scene from the same film shows the infant hero dispatching the serpents sent to attack him by tying them together in a knot (another dramatic departure from any classical telling of the tale). Nine years later, Mignola publishes "The Lion and the Hydra" (*Dark Horse Book of Monsters*, 2006), a short story in which *Hellboy* – for the first time expressly linked with Hercules' story – ties the Hydra's snaky necks together to facilitate its transfer to B.P.R.D. headquarters.

Another crossover example seems to suggest a scene from *Hellboy* (2004) as the inspirational link between how one of Heracles' exploits is illustrated in classical art and how it is presented on screen in *Hercules* (2014). In my essay, I note that in some ancient vase paintings, Heracles holds open the jaws of the Nemean Lion with his bare hands to avoid being bitten until he can strangle the lion to death. I then explain how "Hellboy takes this tactic to the next level by violently breaking Sammael's upper and lower jawbones apart at the joint, only to gape in surprise as they instantly fall back into place and reknit." In the 2014 film starring Dwayne Johnson as Hercules, the hero does to the Nemean Lion what *Hellboy* does on-screen to Sammael in 2004.

Such modern examples of *contaminatio*, possibly unintentional and perhaps even unrecognized by the artists responsible, add a delightful and unexpected dimension to classical reception studies such as this one. But since "filmmakers continue to use the ancient world as a means to explore issues relevant to modern society, issues that speak to a twenty-first century viewer,"<sup>137</sup> it is worth noting that since the character of Hercules in television and film started to become more relatable to a wider demographic and more attractive to modern sensibil-

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137 Augoustakis/Raucci (2018) 2.

ities, the hero became more and more divorced from his divine nature.<sup>138</sup> In short, it seems that Hercules can only be a truly *modern* hero if he ceases to be a *mythic* one. The wonder of Hellboy is that he manages to be both at the same time.

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<sup>138</sup> As seen in the made-for-television *Hercules* (2005), through much of *The Legend of Hercules* (2014), and at its nadir in *Hercules* (2014). On these “all-too-mortal Herculeses,” see Blanshard (2018) 40; cf. Solomon (2018) 23–6.



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Janice Siegel  
Hampden-Sydney College  
Hampden-Sydney, VA USA  
jsiegel@hsc.edu

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