

Where would you expect to find *your* hero?

When I first saw Heracles (Hercules) with his tell-tale club and the skin of the lion he has killed I wondered what he was doing there: 'there' is in the forecourt of Cambridge North Station. Does he represent the power of rail – (or at least in the good old days of steam engines) – or perhaps their unpredictable behaviour over which we have little control? It was only recently that I noticed this other (?androgynous) figure gazing up at him – a symbol of humanity or of the rail passenger, gazing in awe or despair? I googled the press releases when the pair were first revealed (?right word) in 2021; according to the Cambridge Independent it 'depicts Greco-Roman deities Hercules and Galatea and is intended to challenge traditional perceptions.' Hercules is very rough and crude, Galatea 'produced digitally conveys power and poise'. Galatea we are told is shown as the "strong, dynamic and empowered figure challenging Hercules, who is sculpted to appear rigid and dated". I had hoped to use this evening's talk to challenge the unexpressed gendered assumptions of this term's theme; there is a Greek word we should translate 'heroine', in fact 2 – not because they were plentiful but because there was no real idea of 'the heroine. Galatea is neither a goddess nor a heroine. She is not, I think, the nymph beloved by the one-eyed Cyclops, but belongs to the story of Pygmalion. Pygmalion, a sculptor, was repulsed by 'all the countless vices nature gives to womankind' – not my words but those of the Latin poet, Ovid; instead he carved from snow-white ivory a figure 'with perfect shape, more beautiful than ever woman born'; Pygmalion -of course - fell in love with his statue, beseeched the gods to give life to her and achieved his wish. Only in the 18th Century does she acquire the name Galatea' – milky white – then popularised in a comic opera by WS Gilbert. There is plenty here to talk about; we can discuss over drinks whether you think our 21st century sculptor has achieved his goal of inverting expectations of the male and female gaze; I am afraid my gaze is indeed on Heracles, bristling with muscle and masculinity.

Greek heroes like Heracles have had a bad press in this series so far (Simon dismissed at start as elite; Prof Archibald contrasted Arthur with Hercules and his like who were only interested in themselves). Misrepresent. Throughout the Greek and Roman worlds Heracles for centuries before Christ and after him Heracles could be found everywhere; You can visit him in the Museum of Classical Archaeology just down the road (visit!) – a cast from an early 19C collector in Battersea, a copy of a Roman original discovered in 16C but made in 3rd century CE as a copy of a 4th C Athenian original, presumably visited by the artist Matthew Darbyshire at the behest of a Chesterton group of architects but besides him the N Cambridge one is puny. Also found everywhere in art, wall paintings, mosaics, statuary, even on sarcophagi where the dead were buried.

Yes, he was often portrayed as a comic figure; short and chubby, showing all the effects of his love for good wine, good food, and women. He might be leaning on his club because, drunk, he cannot stand up straight without it. But he would not be the first to be derided for eating and drinking with the riff-raff – so too Jesus! But as a figure he was also the recipient of prayers and offerings, as a cult-hero, not a god; he is praised for his philanthropia, as the friend of humankind; he is addressed as a saviour. (Coin)

But Heracles was also renowned for his 12 labours or ordeals, dodecaethlon. These included the killing of various mythical and monstrous creatures on land and sea, defeating fierce animals who terrorized local peoples, travelling to the utmost ends of the world, and even bringing up from Hades the 3-headed watchdog who guarded the entrance to Hades, the place of the dead. (All displayed on images of wall paintings, pottery, mosaics, a burial casket).

One of the exploits of Heracles that has a particularly long afterlife is that of Alcestis; for reasons we cannot explore this evening, Admetus, king of Thessaly, has been promised by Apollo that if he can find someone to die in his place then he can survive death; when the time comes no-one is willing to fill that role except his wife Alcestis — Alcestis not a heroine, just the ideal, dutiful wife. While the court is just in mourning following her long-drawn out death, Heracles turns up, finds out what has happened, goes down to Hades, fights and defeats death, and brings Alcestis back to a supposedly joyful reunion with Admetus (although I would have thought some marriage counselling would have been needed). Heracles as one who defeats death and offers hope of life (tomb painting).

Euripedes, the 5th C BCE Athenian playwright who immortalised Alcestis also digs deep into another of the stories of Heracles. Heracles returns home to Thebes after completing his labours; only to find that the tyrant Lycus is trying to wipe his family out; his father Amphitryon, his wife Megara, and his children, have taken refuge and are on the point of being taken away and murdered. Immediately, Heracles becomes the ideal husband and father, determined to protect his family at all costs – in the nick of time he tricks and kills Lycus. Yet just at the moment when Heracles is performing rites to purify himself from bloodshed, madness, sent from the gods, descends upon him and overwhelms him. In his hallucinatory mania he sees his wife and children, mistakes them for his enemies and kills them. When he comes to his senses, the bodies and blood around him, he discovers what he has done and sinks into horror, self-loathing, despair. For such an act he is polluted, he can enter no Temple; he will bring pollution to anywhere he goes. Heracles we need to know, is the son of Zeus, highest god, and of a mortal woman, Alcmene. We learn that it was Zeus's wife, Hera, who out of jealousy sent the madness upon him, but Heracles refuses to blame the gods, refuses too to ask the gods to help him, refuses the hope of exaltation and worship after death. Instead, he prefers to cast his lot in with his fellow men (and women); better to face the future burdened with the knowledge of what he has done. Tempted to commit suicide, he rejects what he believes would be an act of cowardice, of defeat, unworthy of a hero; yet he also refuses to play the hero, to hide his utter devastation, the depths of his emotional pain – even when others rebuke him for 'playing the woman'. At the very end, if there is any redemption in the story it comes when Theseus, king of Athens, ignores the danger of pollution and divine anger, and offers Heracles friendship and refuge/ asylum in Athens where he can live out his days until death comes.

Here Heracles the hero experiences the depths of undeserved suffering and pain that belong to what it is to be human. His divine paternity may have enabled him to perform mighty deeds, but it is his human condition that determines who he is and what befalls him. And it is his solidarity with other men and women that he embraces to the end. It is the solidarity that they show in return that gives the only meaning that can be given to his meaningless suffering.

Heroes vary from culture to culture, but they also transcend the limits of their culture. There are echoes of Heracles in Samson in the Hebrew Bible, a man of superhuman strength, killer of the enemies of the people, but ultimately ensnared in the frailties of his own character, and, by the wiles of a woman Delilah; David the king, also a slayer of lions and of a giant, Goliath, but he too is fatally flawed, bringing havoc into his family; his story and his despair are conventionally echoed through the psalms by generations afterwards. But I suspect that those who first heard the passage from Hebrews in our second reading (Hebrews 2:10-18) would also have immediately thought of the familiar and ubiquitous story of Heracles, 'he shared these same things that he might destroy death... because he himself was tested by what he suffered he is able to help those who are being tested'. The author of the letter,

searching for contemporary models, images, to describe Jesus and Jesus's significance perhaps saw in Heracles a story worth rewriting, reshaping.

The wall painting I showed earlier comes from a 4th century CE catacomb (on the Via Latina) where it is surrounded by other paintings from the Christian Scriptures (Heracles bringing Alcestis from the dead/ Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb). Did the Christians buried here see in the story of Heracles a presage of their story of Jesus; or did non-Christians and Christians share the same burial spaces, each with their own reassuring images of the defeat of death? We do not know.

Of course at this point many a sermon, many a preacher, will say, 'But Jesus was different because ...' But you have been told that in previous talks. My point is different.

Heroes, I suggested vary from culture to culture, but they also transcend culture. It is sometimes supposed that heroes are those who make us what we are; who save the nation and set the pattern for what it can and should be; we study their stories to make us better – why politicians do not like it when some retell those stories in unheroic ways. But the reverse is also true; we rewrite our heroes to explore our own stories, our own hopes, our own fears. In them are played out the tensions and contradictions within which we live between our highest ideals and aspirations, even our highest potential, and the flaws of human character, or the injustices we create and feel are inflicted upon us; the contradictions between the projected models of female and male ideals and the strengths and weaknesses, the ambiguities, we acknowledge within ourselves; the contradictions between ideals of individual sufficiency and greatness, and our embeddedness in family, in friends, our dependency on others; our desire to be something more than the banalities of mundane existence.