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CHAPTER 19

Rockules' Revenge: The Portrayal of the Veteran Warrior in Brett Ratner's *Hercules*

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In Brett Ratner's 2014 film *Hercules*, the Greek hero is placed squarely into the historic age (358 BCE) and in the non-mythological land of Thrace.¹ In addition, the storyline constantly questions the heroic feats of Hercules, suggesting that his great feats and successful labors were made possible by the band of warriors around him rather than some divine lineage. This rationalization of myth in film follows a reintroduction of this cinematic motif for a new audience generation by Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy* (2004).² By removing the confirmed presence of the gods or monsters, *Hercules* aligns itself more closely with historical films such as *Gladiator* (2000) and *300* (2006)³ rather than the unabashedly fantastical films loosely based on Greek myth, such as *Clash of the Titans* (1981 and 2010), *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), and *Immortals* (2011).

Hercules actually combines core elements of both approaches to the ancient world in film. The opening sequence of the film, which featured heavily in pre-release trailers, shows Hercules battling fantastical, CGI-formed monsters in the form of the Nemean Lion. The film then deviates drastically from the

1 All references to the 2014 film and its titular character will be spelled Hercules; any reference to Euripides' play and the ancient Greek hero will be spelled Herakles to avoid confusion.

2 Baker (2018) 45.

3 During an interview, Dwayne Johnson specifically mentioned *Gladiator* and *300* as comparative films. See Weintraub (2014).

traditional myths and focuses on a simplified storyline with dramatic combat sequences. This focus on cinematic experience rather than story development has drawn disdain from certain areas of the scholarly community for what Martin Winkler describes as a “weak and puerile” understanding of Greek myth, history, and culture.⁴ By contrast, this chapter will show that, in the case of Ratner’s *Hercules*, the simplification of the storyline focuses the audience’s attention onto the demythologization of the character, and in turn allows for the film to centralize the hero within the context of being a veteran of war. What is more, Dwayne Johnson’s portrayal of Hercules fits within a long-standing cinematic tradition of veteran motifs, thus reinforcing the popular perception of the modern veteran and their experiences.⁵

Recent studies of Ratner’s *Hercules* have predominantly focused on the rationalization of myth within the film, and the physicality of the role brought by the bodybuilder/wrestler physique of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson.⁶ Yet the choice of Hercules to portray two common strands of cinematic sub-genres has thus far gone unexamined: Hercules as a mercenary and Hercules as a veteran. For the chapter at hand, these two sub-genres converge, as they so often do, allowing for an examination of both through the overarching theme of his veteran status. Veterans have long been used within the cinematic tradition to explore society’s relationship with war and the people who perform combative roles. The most common veteran tropes have been broadly categorized by Emmett Early as “action heroes or anti-heroes, the wounded veteran, the veteran aging within the family, or the veteran as a disguised or comic figure.”⁷ Each category can of course be subdivided: for instance, a common motif of veterans portrayed on screen is the presence of combat induced psychological trauma or often survivor’s guilt, which can fit within Early’s wounded veteran category.

Hercules is not the first veteran Johnson has portrayed on the big screen. His version of Chris Vaughn, in the remake of *Walking*

4 Winkler (2015a) 6. Winkler does not criticize demythologization in and of itself, but rather what he considers the overt focus on visual spectacle in the film to the detriment of storytelling and character development.

5 Early (2003) 2–3.

6 Cyrino (2020) 651–55; Stafford (2018) 46–47.

7 Early (2014) 11.

Tall (2004), envisages Vaughn as a Special Forces veteran who returns to find his hometown awash with drug use and gambling. Johnson's portrayal offers a continuity of veteran-based storylines of the experienced fighter reasserting a moral balance as well as security in the community, similar to Akira Kurasawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *The Magnificent Seven* remake (1960), Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008), Stallone's *Rambo: Last Blood* (2008), and the Coen siblings' remake of *True Grit* (2010). More recently, his portrayal of the disabled veteran Will Sawyer in *Skyscraper* (2018) showed Johnson playing a more well-rounded character with a loving family whom he is trying to protect. His mercenary Hercules is more aligned to his early-career performance as Mathayus in *The Scorpion King* (2002) where Johnson plays a similarly valiant yet mercenary role as the eponymous hero. It was during filming of *The Scorpion King* that Johnson first considered playing Hercules, but the similarities in the role were described by Johnson as "a little too close."⁸

In addition to his experience of playing veterans or experienced men of war on screen, it is necessary to also consider Johnson's personal brand which he brings to every role as part of what is known as his "star text."⁹ As first described by Richard Dyer, the star persona and career of a popular actor or celebrity influences the reception of their subsequent roles by audiences. This is particularly notable when actors portray similar characters across films.¹⁰ For Johnson this not only includes his cinematic performances of old, but also his pre-cinema career as a professional wrestler.¹¹ Add to this Johnson's public persona which follows him into every role he plays, his is a brand that offers support and direct interaction with modern veterans. This has included him inviting veterans or service-personnel onto his film sets, through to post-*Hercules* initiatives such as the variety show "Rock the Troops" (2016) and his more recent clothing line Project Rock x UA Freedom, with the sports brand Under Armour, the proceeds of which go towards Under Armour's UA Freedom initiative.¹² His links to the veteran community have a personal meaning for Johnson, who has highlighted his own family's military service record while

8 Weintraub (2014).

9 Dyer (1979).

10 Llewellyn-Jones (2018) 346; Cyrino (2020) 654.

11 Cyrino (2020) 655.

12 Freeman (n.d.).

promoting his Under Armour clothing line.¹³ Considering his personal, professional, and public relationship with veterans, it is fair to assume that Johnson's portrayal of Hercules as a veteran is both purposeful and well thought-out.¹⁴

1 Hercules as Veteran

The ancient figure of Herakles, and in particular Euripides' portrayal of the hero in his eponymous play, has drawn strong parallels in the modern day with the struggles faced by returning soldiers. The story of his *mania* and the brutal murder of his own family has inspired research that analyzes this sequence of events through the lens of post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁵ Our interest here is not in the validity and merits of such an approach, but rather in the underlying assumption of presenting Herakles as a military veteran in the first place.

As a Greek hero, it is easy to forget that Herakles was not a military veteran.¹⁶ In the various strands of his mythology, his feats are performed either by himself or as part of a small band of other heroes such as the Argonauts. He never belongs to a state-based military system, nor does he fight in an army that offers any meaningful historical comparison to military service beyond the experience of violence. However, Euripides' play does purposefully invert the standard mythological narrative by having Herakles return home and kill his family *after* he has completed his legendary labors. While this does not transform Herakles into a soldier, it does present him in a similar vein to the returning veteran; in this case, Herakles has veteran status following the successful completion of his labors. Like a veteran, Herakles has performed his duties as required, experienced extreme hardship and violence, and witnessed much death. It is in the context of this status as a returning veteran and hero that Lyssa (goddess of rabid madness) induces his *mania* and Herakles kills his family. The parallels are self-evident for a modern

13 https://www.instagram.com/p/BMZCYreDCnh/?utm_source=ig_embed (accessed February 28, 2023).

14 It is perhaps relevant that before the official release of the film, Johnson arranged a preview showing at the Marine Corps base Camp Pendleton: <http://www.marines.mil/News/Marines-TV/?videoid=352275> (accessed February 28, 2023).

15 Konstan (2014) 1–13; Meineck (2016); Torrance (2017) 231–46.

16 Rees (2022) 91–92.

audience: the motif of the returning warrior experiencing bouts of violence and aggression has become almost a cliché of cinema and television, but we must be cautious in assuming such a direct parallel was drawn by an ancient Greek audience.¹⁷

Ratner's portrayal of Hercules removes all ambiguity and makes it indisputable that this Hercules is a military veteran. Such a characterization is achieved through two simple means: the first and most obvious is Hercules' clear role as a mercenary; the second appears in a flashback sequence where Hercules is shown returning to the court of King Eurystheus in Athens with the heads of the vanquished "Hydra." This deliberate characterization also establishes Hercules as an outsider in more ways than one. As a mercenary, he exists with his team outside of the formalized military systems on display with the army of King Cotys (John Hurt) and to an extent that of the warlord Rhesus (Isaac Andrews). It permits Hercules to be used as an external expert, asserting his superiority over the men of Cotys' army who lack the experience he has in abundance. As an external expert, Hercules' heroic façade can remain intact, but his position as a mercenary, a sword for hire, aligns him with a cultural tradition of distrust, of money-driven ethics, of self-interest and, within the framework of cinematic storytelling, more of an outlaw or anti-hero.¹⁸ This is an interesting and important departure from other Greek warriors in film. His dubious morals and clear financial motivation offer a stark contrast with other cinematic heroes, such as Achilles in *Troy* who explicitly rejects the idea that he is a mercenary and under the control of Agamemnon, or Leonidas in *300* who embodies the cultural ideals of dutiful service and moral absolutism, as opposed to the treacherous Spartan politician Theron who was bribed by the Persians.

Within the flashback sequence, Hercules maintains many of the same qualities on display that we see in Thrace – he is with his band of warriors; they have clearly been asked to defeat the bandits who formed the basis of the Hydra myth; he returns with the bloody bag containing their heads – but the bright white stone of the Athenian cityscape, mixed with the loving embrace of Hercules' wife and three children, sets the tone for a sanitized and positive presentation of Hercules' actions. We do not see

17 For the impact that these scenes can have on a modern veteran/military family audience, see Meineck (2016) 202–203.

18 Rich (2018) 129.

money change hands between him and Eurystheus (Joseph Fiennes) – as opposed to the clear financial agreement between him and Cotys’ daughter, Ergenia (Rebecca Ferguson) – and the chanting of the crowds after he delivers the heads creates the impression of a heroic homecoming. Hercules is no longer a mercenary in the minds of the audience, but a beloved hero, something that is reaffirmed in the words of Eurystheus to Hercules: “Come, let the people have their hero.” This is reinforced later when Autolycus (Rufus Sewell) tells Ergenia how he and Hercules met as orphans on the streets of Athens and went on to join the Athenian army together. His heroic status in Athens is now separated from his later mercenary identity, thus transforming him fully into the modern notion of the military veteran.

Within these two presentations of Hercules’ role, we clearly witness the hero’s fall from grace from the brightly lit home of Athens to the dark and gritty backdrop of his actions in Thrace. Hercules is, then, a dutiful veteran hero of Athens who protects his hometown and his family, but also a veteran mercenary who does not seem to care for his paymaster and thrives in a hostile and violent environment. As a veteran, Hercules is capable of both these things concurrently, playing a contrasting hero-antihero duality that veterans are so often made to play.¹⁹ His veteran status cements his violent capabilities, his combative superiority, his knowledge and expertise, as well as his heroism.

A final point in his veteran characterization must be the fundamental underpinning of the film, the demythologized state of Hercules himself. This serves two purposes that are pivotal to his representation. The first is that it humanizes the demi-god; a veteran on film can be a hero, a villain, moral or immoral, brave or troubled, but no matter which it is, he must be human. Without a human status, the character fails to embody a realistic and relatable presentation of what the audience conceives a veteran to be. The second purpose is that the film’s method of demythologization allows Hercules to be better informed and more rational than other characters. Hercules and his band know

19 The most obvious example is Robert De Niro’s portrayal of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), but we also see it in other veteran characters, such as Nicholas Cage’s former-marine Michael Williams in *Red Rock West*, both portrayals of Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit* (1969, 2010), and Jason Statham’s Joseph Smith in *Hummingbird* (2013). For further examples, see Early (2003) 180–81.

the truth behind the labors and their often less than fantastical realities. It is perhaps no surprise that the narrative twist at the end of the film gives the revelation for the one part of the myth that even Hercules cannot work out. The three-headed black dog that appears in his flashbacks, a clear allusion to the mythical capture of Cerberus, is finally revealed to be three man-eating wolves.²⁰ It is at this moment of epiphany, where Hercules is free from all of the myths that surround him, that he is finally able to break free from the shackles that hold him, both literally and metaphorically.

2 The Character of a Veteran

How a military veteran is presented in film is a direct reflection of the time period and culture that created that character. To watch a veteran performed on the screen is to watch a society battle with its own conception of war, their role within that war, and the impact of war on the individual combatant. For instance, the cinematic presentation of the veteran during, and after, the Vietnam War was very pronounced. During the war, he would either be shown as a classic celluloid hero, or as a disturbed criminal.²¹ As Smith noted in 1973, producers and writers “assumed the mass audience will accept the portrayal of veterans as constantly violent.”²² This characterization has not completely changed in the interceding years; the reception of war in post-Vietnam America has forged an uneasy relationship between audiences and veterans. War is understood to be a necessary evil, but an evil nonetheless. What we have seen in the portrayal of veterans since the start of the Iraq War in 2003 is a shift toward the internalization of emotional and behavioral disturbances on the part of the veteran.²³ These are struggles

20 Intriguingly, as Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos reminds me, there is also a possible echo of *300* here, when a young Leonidas is shown battling a black wolf. In both instances, the revelation, and overcoming, of the beast symbolizes the elevation of the character to the status of a hero.

21 Compare, e.g., the positive portrayals of veterans in *Ocean's 11* (1960) or the character of Billy Jack in *The Born Losers* (1967) and *Billy Jack* (1971), with the villainous veterans in *Motor Psycho* (1965) and *The Visitors* (1972). For the development of the Vietnam veteran character over time, see Doherty (2010) 238–50; Early (2014) 39.

22 Smith (1973) 10.

23 Early (2014) 39.

that define the veteran character, but do not have to directly impact the people around him. So often the veteran is a man of ambiguous dichotomies: he is both violent and loving, hero and anti-hero, moral and immoral, something that may well reflect the uneasy situation in the post-Iraq war socio-military framework in which we find ourselves. Public relationships with the war are torn: an allegedly illegal war removed a dangerous dictator – no matter which side of the conversation we find ourselves on, the blame for such things can rarely fall on the veterans themselves. So where do they sit within this matrix of contrasting realities, contrasting explanations?

Hercules epitomizes this frictional relationship between modern audiences and war. He is defined not by his firm traits of character, but by the contrasting expressions in his behavior. Rather than simply imbued with heroic and moral virtues, he is shown in such contrasting lights that his very character forms a cognitive dissonance in the audience where he is both moral and immoral. His legend is a lie, and yet he is to be trusted. He is a mercenary, driven by money, and yet he gives up his payment from Cotys. He is capable of horrific violence, and yet in his dealings with his friend Tydeus (Aksel Hennie) he shows that he understands the damage that violence can inflict on the individual. But perhaps the most important trait in Hercules is the overt arrogance and confidence that masks his lack of self-confidence. This comes not from his physical abilities, but rather his mental faculties as he struggles with hallucinations, flashbacks, and the unanswered question regarding his role in his family's murder.

The interplay between his overt leadership and his pangs of self-doubt is built up throughout the film. The demythologization of the story creates a constant question of who Hercules actually is: is he the son of Zeus and nemesis of Hera, or is he just a man who has suffered a terrible fate? The opening scene sets the groundwork for this question, when the narrator's story about Hercules' legendary labors is interrupted by a gruff voice: "What a load of crap!" The scene cuts to reveal that the narrator is Hercules' companion Iolaus (Reece Ritchie), who is tied up and dangling over a sharp stake, and the gruff voice belongs to an unnamed bandit who has captured him. The use of a blunt refutation of the myth is done with humor, something Hercules himself joins in with when he responds to the notion that he

killed the Nemean Lion, whose pelt he wears, with his bare hands, with a laconic, “or so they say.”²⁴

Hercules is often shown listening to other people retelling the stories of his labors, with either a bemused or uncomfortably embarrassed look on his face. This constant defacement of his identity, the myth that he knows to be false, accentuates the lack of peace that he feels inside. What is clear is what Hercules knows himself *not* to be, but it is never clear how he sees himself. Indeed, the only time we hear him clearly define what he wants to be is during a flashback where he claims he wants to be a husband and a father – an identity he can no longer claim for himself. It is only toward the end of the film that we see the true extent of his struggle with identity, when the ever-knowing Amphiaraus (Ian McShane) demands that Hercules have faith in himself and fulfill a potential he has failed to achieve because of his self-doubt. Aside from the obvious and rather cheesy Hollywood lines, we hear the thematic underpinnings of Hercules’ character:

Who are you? Are you a murderer? Are you a mercenary who turns their back on the innocent? Are you only the legend, or are you the truth behind the legend?

While scholars of classical reception have focused more on Hercules’ reaction to these questions – the famous “I Am Hercules” cry and the scene’s clear invocation of Steve Reeves’ Hercules as he rips himself free of his chains²⁵ – this moment of cinematic enlightenment comes as a direct result of Hercules being forced to face his inner turmoil, something Amphiaraus has been trying and failing to do sporadically throughout the film.

This denial of his true self, or at least what he is capable of being, encourages us to see Hercules as a humble man. Indeed, this notion is formulated early in the film, when Hercules sits in a tavern discussing his dreams in life. He declares that he is looking for one more job, to make enough money so that he can finally fulfill his greatest desire: to find peace. To him, such flights of fancy exist beyond the boundaries of the Greek world and so he intends to settle on the coast of the Black Sea. Such humility in

24 Baker (2018) 45.

25 Blanshard (2018) 30–31.

his desires, and such simplicity in his intent, presents Hercules as a veteran who has grown weary of the conflict and violence around him. He wants to leave it all behind and return to a tranquil and halcyon life, one that elicits modern notions of “the good life” more than it does ancient ideals. Cinematically, this small dialogue conjures up memories of another ancient, war-weary fighter from the big screen: Maximus Decimus Meridius (Russell Crowe) of Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*. Maximus describes his home villa in Spain, which also features in flashback sequences, and creates a poignant contrast between the chaotic violence of his life and the welcoming family home in Iberia. His intention to retire there once the fighting ends is laid out early in the film and allows the audience to sympathize with the character in the ensuing chaos of the storyline, knowing as we do that all he wants is to be left alone. The version in *Hercules* is perhaps a little less emotive in its delivery, but it serves a similar function.

This end game creates a moral framework that permits us to accept Hercules’ actions within the film as a means to an end. It presents the morally dubious elements of his character as almost justifiable as he strides toward his life at peace. This is particularly important when the hero is shown to be driven by money. His desire for money is because he is a mercenary, of course, but that money is not for its own sake. As a result, the issue of money is highlighted at both the beginning and toward the end of the film, allowing Ratner to emphasize the personal transformation that Hercules has undertaken. The conversation he is having with Autolycus about his dream retirement is interrupted by Ergenia and her job offer. During her proposal, the subject of payment is raised, not by Hercules but by Autolycus:

Ergenia: “I thought heroes fight for glory?”

Hercules: “But mercenaries fight for gold.”

We do not see any money change hands, but we hear the extraordinary offer of Hercules’ own weight in gold. This proposal is accepted and, in the eyes of the characters, confirms the mercenary status and money-driven motivations of Hercules, while we as the audience know the true end goal for Hercules. The topic of money is raised once again, following Hercules’ first meeting with Cotys when his team realizes what their job

actually entails; to allay their concerns, he informs his team that he has convinced the king to double their payment. Hercules the mercenary is once more pushed to the front of the screen; the job is linked to the money, and there is no other publicly visible motivation. This makes Hercules' later refusal of the payment all the more pertinent. Following his successful commanding of Cotys' army, and the subsequent capture of Rhesus, Hercules discovers he has been misled: Cotys is a tyrant, and Rhesus is the leader of a resistance against his plans for aggressive expansion. Following this revelation, Hercules refuses to leave, much to the indignation of Autolycus in particular. Hercules throws his money to the ground and gives his friend permission to take his share. This symbolic gesture of rejecting his payment sees Hercules shed his mercenary skin once and for all. Now, he is not motivated by money, but by justice and his own sense of personal honor. It embodies his own personal transformation from anti-hero to hero.

Finally, there is Hercules' relationship with women and children to consider. Seeing Hercules interact with Ergenia and her son Arius (Isaac Andrews) softens his more overtly masculine traits. It allows him to be presented like a father and husband, in the absence of his own family. In this way, *Hercules* follows once more the lead of *Gladiator* and Maximus' interactions with Lucilla and her son Lucius.²⁶ Hercules is not shown to be in a relationship with Ergenia in any way. There is no allusion to physical attraction and there is no attempt to build a sense of sexual tension in their scenes together; but her conversations with him offer an important insight into his authentic identity, often allowing us as the audience to peek behind the curtain. She is the first person in the film to see Hercules topless, in a state of vulnerability as she nurses an injury for him.²⁷ The next time he is in a similar state of undress is when he is captured and bound in chains. Ergenia is also one of the only ones outside of his band of warriors who is openly skeptical about the legends that surround him.

Even in the face of having lost his family, Hercules is allowed to exhibit the characteristics of a moral veteran on screen. His dubious morality, as evidenced in his behavior and profession, is

26 We see a similar character development with Achilles in *Troy* (2004) through his developing relationship with Briseis, but the focus there is less about family than it is about a romantic relationship.

27 Stafford (2018) 49–50.

balanced once again by his personality and by his actions. The doting father-veteran is not, perhaps, as pervasive in film as the more troubled relationship between veterans and their children,²⁸ but it is not unprecedented in recent decades especially. Films such as Roland Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000) use the paternal bond as a plot device to motivate the veteran back into military action. In *Gladiator*, Maximus' devotion to his family is used to accentuate the pain and anguish he has suffered, a fate worse than his own enslavement. In the *Taken* franchise (2008–2014), Liam Neeson's ex-Green Beret Bryan Mills is driven by his love for his daughter to immerse himself once more in a life of violence and death. Or, like Hercules, there is Joaquin Phoenix's character in *You Were Never Really Here* (2017) whose trauma and suicidal ideation is eventually set aside for the care of a surrogate daughter-figure Nina, whom he is compelled to keep safe. Most recently, there is *Extraction* (2020), where Chris Hemsworth's character is driven by the memory of losing his young son to lymphoma while he was serving abroad.

The insertion of children into the story is becoming a regular device with which the veteran on screen is able to exhibit a caring and emotional side that is purposefully juxtaposed with both the violence and trauma that surround him. The clearest example of this contrast between tenderness and violence on screen can be seen in the relationship between Leonidas and his son in *300*. A scene where he is affectionately teaching his son many of the skills that he will need as adult is interrupted by the arrival of a Persian messenger. What follows is Leonidas' famous "This is Sparta" cry, and his violent, sacrilegious act of kicking the Persian into a well. The loving father quickly transforms into that which his society needs from him: ruthless violence.

In essence, this paternal presentation of the veteran allows the audience to look beyond their own veteran mirage – the fears surrounding their violent nature, and the seemingly predetermined nature of their moral decline – and empathize with them in a way that conforms to civilian notions of honor, duty, and indeed of masculinity. For Hercules, it also reinforces his humble nature. At the start of the film, he expresses two simple wishes: the first, in the tavern, to live in peace around the Black Sea; the second, during the flashback in Athens, to be only

a husband and a father. The uneven symmetry of these two desires offers a continuation of the theme of Hercules' desire for the simple things in life, but also highlights what he has already lost.

3 The Mind of a Veteran

The troubled veteran has been a mainstay of cinematic and later televised portrayals of veterans. It has become an enduring cliché that has evolved from its earliest days of substance abusing veterans (*Heroes for Sale*, 1933), through to violent and uncivilized veterans (*Rambo* series, 1982–present), and now into more sensitive portrayals focusing on PTSD found in films such as *Brothers* (2009), or *Mudbound* (2017). Even films set in antiquity, especially post-9/11, have drawn upon modern experiences of war to inform their characters, as laid out by Oskar Aguado Cantabrana in this volume. Such a common motif does not come without its issues, for we are left with an unsettling reality: veterans on screen are regularly portrayed with severe psychological injuries. Considering that the percentage of veterans with PTSD is estimated to be 11–20% in the US, and 8% in the UK, this regular presentation on screen reflects a narrow portion of the lived veteran experience.²⁹

Concerns surrounding the presentation of all veterans as “damaged” or struggling to adjust to home life has encouraged former US Army officer Chris Marvin to establish Got Your 6, a non-profit organization that aims to get military veterans portrayed more accurately in film and on television. Marvin’s mission suggests an interesting shift in the relationship between the veteran and the general public: “We believe the way veterans are portrayed on the screen is the way they will be thought of in the living room and the way they will be treated in the community.”³⁰

This would suggest that there has been a dramatic reversal from earlier veteran-films. Now, the concern is that the

29 https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_veterans.asp (accessed February 28, 2023). This range reflects the hands-on experience of the VA year on year. Studies on the prevalence of PTSD seem to corroborate these statistics at the lower and mid-range values: Bergea et al. (2020); Rhead et al. (2022).

30 Phillips (2015a).

prolificacy of film and the firm presence of a clichéd presentation of veterans is not reflecting society's relationship with the veteran, but is actually influencing it.³¹ This may go some way to explaining a recent poll in the UK which found that 83% of the public believe that PTSD is the greatest mental health problem faced by the military, when the research shows it is not as prevalent as alcohol abuse or common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety.³²

Hercules inevitably presents psychological disorders in a few of its main characters, reinforcing its place as a veteran film. Most clearly, we see this in the nightmares and delusions of Hercules himself, and then in the presentation of his friend and companion Tydeus. The split in psychological turmoil between the two characters offers a clear distinction in the popular perception of PTSD, even though the term is never used.³³ In *Hercules* we see the veteran troubled by his past; yet he is still able to function in a relatively normal capacity. His trauma is internalized, so the only person who needs to deal with it is Hercules himself. In Tydeus, we see a different manifestation entirely. His trauma is ever present in his barbaric nature, his lack of speech, and his animalistic traits.

The use of flashbacks to highlight Hercules's trauma was an obvious cinematic choice. Indeed, Edgar Jones has suggested that the presence of flashbacks as a symptom of psychological injury in military medicine coincides with the spread of televisions into the home.³⁴ For *Hercules*, the flashbacks are symbolic of his emotional turmoil. He relives the experience of losing his family, something he believes he bears responsibility for. Within these episodes he sees a three-headed, black dog, which serves not only as an allusion to Cerberus, but also to highlight the hero struggling within his own mind. Hercules knows the myths are not true, but he still envisages this fantastical beast. That inner turmoil is accentuated by his emotional struggle at the loss of his wife and children, his guilt at surviving them, and the nagging feeling that he may have killed them himself. This turmoil is symbolized by the black dog, perhaps a nod to the metaphor that was popularized by Winston

31 Phillips (2015b).

32 Palmer et al. (2021). For the full TRIAD report, see Palmer et al. (2022).

33 Davies (2019) 195–97.

34 Jones (2003) 162.

Churchill to describe his depression.³⁵ Hercules' nightmares spill over into reality when on one occasion he is seen leaving his tent at night and charging at Cerberus with a spear. At the point of impact, the beast disappears and Hercules is left on his own, holding his spear out in front and revealing his state of hallucination to the viewer. Following this episode, Hercules is chastised by the seer Amphiaraus, who tells him that the gods are showing him things that they do not show to anyone else. Hercules' response is characteristically laconic and self-deprecating: "There is a word for that, madness."

In *Hercules*, the viewers are able to perceive the physically indomitable Johnson as emotionally fragile, exhibiting all of the popular conceptions of PTSD through his flashbacks, something he attributes to madness. In the feral barbarian Tydeus, the audience is offered the other side of the PTSD coin. Whereas Hercules is functionally atypical, Tydeus is not. Ratner's *Hercules* greatly deviates from the graphic novel inspiration for the film in the portrayal of Tydeus. In the graphic novel, he is introduced as Tydeus of Calydon, the Brutal. He is a bloodthirsty and savage cannibal with a macabre sense of humor. But in *Hercules*, he is made mute, his cannibalism in the graphic novels is sanitized for the big screen, and he is given a back story to explain his barbaric behaviors. According to Hercules, Tydeus was born in war and this experience left him "more animal than human." We later find out that he was found as a child, the sole survivor in a city of corpses according to Autolycus. This traumatic experience is used to explain his inability to communicate with anyone, his propensity and lust for violence, and his animalistic behaviors, such as licking up blood and the growling sounds that he makes when he is asleep.

His hyper-aggression and mutism, combined with his characterization as a barbarian among the group, offer a caricatured personality that embodies everything that modern pacific civilian society fears about the prolonged exposure to violence: that it creates violence in the self, that it destroys any notion of civilized behavior. Tydeus quite literally cannot be understood, nor seems able to fully understand everyone around him, including those he knows best. Within this caricature, a glimmer of familiarity is offered when Hercules tells the young Arius that Tydeus "never speaks of what he saw. Never speaks at

all.” This recalls the popular perception of many military veterans who have experienced active service but do not talk about it to others.³⁶ Tydeus shows us the uncomfortable side of combat trauma that we, as a detached audience, do not want to consider part of our heroes. Hercules does not have this problem.

Angeline Chiu was correct when she observed that the interaction between Hercules and Tydeus “presents Hercules as a charismatic and compassionate man to whom others are drawn and whom those others admire,” but it is worth noting what the root of that compassion is.³⁷ The strongest relationship either Hercules or Tydeus exhibits throughout the film is undoubtedly with one another. Hercules informs Arius that Tydeus is his most loyal warrior, which is some statement to make considering his longest serving companion is his childhood friend Autolycus. Comparisons can be drawn between similar male bonds on screen, such as the cousins Achilles and Patroclus in *Troy*, and the childhood friends/adult lovers Alexander and Hephaestion in *Alexander* (2004), but the close connection between Hercules and Tydeus is slightly different. Its foundation rests on Hercules clearly seeing something in Tydeus that he understands in himself. They are connected by a bond that runs deeper than simple friendship. As an animal-like child, traumatized by his experiences of death and warfare, Tydeus was shunned by everyone, whereas Hercules saw through his behavior and, according to Iolaus, he “took Tydeus in, when everyone else saw nothing by a wild animal.” Indeed, Hercules seems to be the only character to really understand Tydeus and, when we consider Hercules’ concern for his own sanity, there is more than an air of “There but for the grace of God go I” in the looks of the titular hero.

The interconnected nature of their friendship is highlighted from start to finish. Hercules found him as a child, in many ways adopting a paternal role. Even after years of fighting side by side, Hercules does not let go of this quasi-familial bond. In his plans to live on the coast of the Black Sea, he does not describe going alone but rather describes himself and Tydeus going together, staying together as a family. Not bound by blood, nor indeed by their relationship as brothers-in-arms, what connects them to each other is stated outright by Hercules – it is the reason he is

36 Tritle (2000) 81.

37 Chiu (2018) 68.

contemplating leaving Greece: “Civilization has become too civilized for us.”

For Hercules and Tydeus, the two sides of the PTSD coin, their sense of rejection from society is complete. In a simple sentence, Hercules expresses an underlying concern of many veterans, that life, society, their families, have moved on without them. That they no longer fit the world they once knew, and that that world would not want them if they came home.

4 The Ancient Veteran

Hercules embodies so many of the modern themes that we can directly associate with the veteran in film. The hero encapsulates the troubled veteran, the heroic veteran, the anti-hero, the psychologically troubled man. Hercules is capable of immense violence, but he strives for a life away from it. His isolated nature means he forms only a few close relationships, but his paternal attributes are clear for all to see. Ostensibly, *Hercules* is a paradigmatic instance of the modern veteran on screen. Yet the film also echoes many of the themes we see from the ancient Greek stage.

While “veteran” is, as yet, a poorly defined term when examining classical Greece, the number of plays that focus on the aftermath of war, and in particular the experiences of individual warriors post conflict, is notable. The most prominent examples include Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, and Sophocles’ *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. If we accept the reading of Euripides’ *Herakles* as a purposeful allusion to the returning warrior, or indeed specifically the *nostoi* genre, then that grows the list further.³⁸

In these plays, we can easily identify certain themes that offer a consistent veteran sub-genre in line with modern film. *Ajax* centers around the post-combat experiences of the eponymous hero, offering a unique insight into the mindset of the Greek hero as he commits suicide. The reasons for his suicide may seem slightly alien to the modern audience, but his inner turmoil is self-evident.³⁹ *Philoctetes* showcases the abandonment of the veteran, left as he was by his

38 Rees (2022) 91–93; Rehm (2002) 100; Riley (2008) 14–15; Alexopoulou (2003) 129–35, (2009) 61.

39 Garland (2019).

comrades in arms following a disabling encounter with a snake.⁴⁰ We also see the centering of family within these plays, not so much as a form of motivation for the hero but rather to accentuate their tragedy. For Ajax, it is the relationship with his son and his consort Tecmessa, which is the focus of a long and emotive monologue by Sophocles as Ajax prepares to kill himself.⁴¹ In *Herakles*, the relationship between father and his children is stated clearly by Herakles:

καὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἀναίνομαι θεράπευμα τέκνων. πάντα
τάνθρώπων ἴσα: φιλοῦσι παῖδας οἳ τ' ἀμείνονες βροτῶν οἳ
τ' οὐδὲν ὄντες: χρήμασιν δὲ διάφοροι: ἔχουσιν, οἳ δ' οὐ:
πᾶν δὲ φιλότεκνον γένος.

[F]or I too do not reject the care of my children; here all mankind are equal; all love their children, both those of high estate and those who are nothing; it is wealth that makes distinctions among them; some have, others want; but all the human race loves its offspring.⁴²

In *Philoctetes*, his ultimate betrayal relies on the quasi-paternal bond he quickly forges with Telemachus.⁴³ In the *Agamemnon*, it is during the reunion with his wife Clytemnestra following his many years commanding the Greek forces at Troy that Agamemnon suffers his gruesome fate.

One theme that is consistent from the ancient world right through to the modern is the veteran being betrayed. In Athenian tragedy, we see this most clearly with the stories of Philoctetes and Agamemnon. Both are lied to, manipulated, and exploited for the gain of other people. In the *Philoctetes*, it is done by the scheming Odysseus, who uses Telemachus to convince Philoctetes to hand over the bow of Herakles and fulfill the prophecy that would see the fall of Troy. In the *Agamemnon*, the king is betrayed by his own wife, Clytemnestra, and her new lover, although it is the queen that is shown to be the driving force

40 As Sherman (2014) 214 argues, Philoctetes becomes a metaphor for isolated, war-wounded, and resentful veterans.

41 Soph. *Aj.* 550–82.

42 Eur. *Her.* 633–6. Translation from Coleridge (1938).

43 Sherman (2014) 210–13.

behind the murder. This theme is echoed in Ratner's *Hercules*: the hero is betrayed by his employer Cotys, but it is the role of Ergenia that hurts him most. Similar in many ways to the betrayal of Philoctetes, Hercules is not particularly shocked that Cotys is capable of such deception, but it is the role within the deception of the quasi-family he has developed that cuts the deepest.

Ergenia was the one who hired Hercules in the first place; she was also the one who healed him when he was injured in battle. The growing intimacy throughout the film, as platonic as it is, is under threat following the capture of Rhesus. After Hercules successfully corners Ergenia, she reveals the true extent of the deception: Hercules has not subdued an evil warlord, he has helped in the subjugation of a local resistance to Cotys' tyranny. In *Philoctetes*, it is only the intervention of Herakles through an epiphany that persuades Philoctetes to help Telemachus, no matter how betrayed he feels. In *Hercules*, it is not a divine epiphany, but rather an explanation for Ergenia: her son was under threat from king Cotys, so she had to do as she was ordered.

The thematic continuities of the betrayal and manipulation of the veteran are often amplified in both ancient and modern media, through another important theme: the abuse of the veteran. Abuse can come in various forms, whether it is the mocking and shaming aimed at Ajax by his supposed peers, Philoctetes' abandonment on the island to die, or Agamemnon's murder. These acts highlight the fall of the hero and amplify the betrayal they feel at the hands of their abusers – most of whom are their peers or commanders. In *Hercules*, the abuse comes from Cotys and Eurystheus, who were also the masterminds of his manipulation and betrayal. His capture and impending execution echo the emotional environment of the ancient dramas. Hercules' situation is compounded by the fact that it is the result of his decision to follow his own moral directive. To the modern audience, we are seeing his lowest moment as a direct result of his heroic behavior, something that amplifies the *pathos* of the scene.

5 Conclusion

By transforming Hercules so markedly into a military veteran, Ratner's presentation of the hero embodies modern society's contradictory relationship with men of war. Hercules is everything we love and fear about the veteran character. He is a hero, he is moral and upstanding, he is a caring family man, but he is also able to do the dirty work to get things done. He embodies what modern men are told they should be. But he also reflects our concerns about the impact of war on the individual. He is mentally scarred by what went before him. He feels disconnected from the world around him, a world he feels would reject him if they realized what he was truly like.

The hero's transformation throughout the film is in essence an exposition of our own cultural battle surrounding our relationship with war and with military veterans. We accept the damage war can inflict, and what it can drive men to do as a result, but our veterans on screen are still heroes. The concern, of course, is whether this is a reflection of actual veteran experience or, more likely, another idealized conception of our pacific society.

While *Hercules* articulates many of the clichés of the veteran in film, it also echoes traditions that go back two and half thousand years. Although the cultural reactions and experiences of the issues faced by veterans vary widely, it is at least revealing that our Hercules shares the same broader experiences of isolation, alienation, betrayal and manipulation faced by veteran characters from the Athenian stage like Ajax and Philoctetes. In turn, the film offers an incisive social commentary on the modern audience's perception of the veteran, who needs to be sanitized on screen to fit modern ideals of heroism and masculinity.

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- First Blood*, 1982, USA, dir. Ted Kotcheff.
- Gladiator*, 2000, USA, dir. Ridley Scott.
- Gran Torino*, 2008, USA, dir. Clint Eastwood.
- Hercules*, 2014, USA, dir. Brett Ratner.
- Heroes for Sale*, 1933, USA, dir. William Wellman.
- Hummingbird*, 2013, UK, dir. Steven Knight.
- Immortals*, 2011, USA, dir. Tarsem Singh.
- Magnificent Seven, The*, 1960, USA, dir. John Sturges.
- Motor Psycho*, 1965, USA, dir. Russ Meyer.
- Mudbound*, 2017, USA, dir. Dee Rees.
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Patriot, The, 2000, USA, dir. Roland Emmerich.
Rambo III, 1988, USA, dir. Peter MacDonald.
Rambo, 2008, USA, dir. Sylvester Stallone.
Rambo: First Blood Part II, 1985, USA, dir. George P. Cosmatos.
Rambo: Last Blood, 2019, USA, dir. Adrian Grünberg.
Red Rock West, 1993, USA, dir. John Dahl.
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Skyscraper, 2018, USA, dir. Rawson Marshall Thurber.
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Troy, 2004, USA, dir. Wolfgang Peterson.
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AQ 6: Chapter 19: Do you mean “*Scorpion*”?