



TRANSFORMATION AND SELF-FASHIONING: MATTHIAS CORVINUS AND THE MYTH OF HERCULES

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In the development of new ideas about kingship at the end of the fifteenth century, the myth of Hercules provided potent imagery, which offered great scope to Matthias Corvinus and those who supported him. Without entering the debate about how far Matthias did in fact transform the institutions of government into a more modern form, I would like to highlight certain aspects of the Hercules myth that have a special place in the transformation of his image, aspects that have a peculiarly Renaissance flavour and a considerable degree of sophistication.¹

At first sight, the Hercules myth might seem quite unpromising as a model, for it relates to a child who is half divine, who strangles a serpent in his crib, grows up to be champion of the oppressed through displays of superhuman strength and endurance, but who overreaches himself and in a mad rage kills his wife and children. His mighty musculature is matched by gargantuan appetites, and he comes to a horrid, painful end on Mount Oetus. However, that is not

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¹ There is a large literature on the Hercules theme, and on iconography in Hungary, some of which is referred to in the footnotes below. A more extensive bibliography can be found in Ronald Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: The Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), and in Gergely Buzás, *The Hercules Fountain of Giovanni Dalmata in the Royal Palace of Visegrád*, (Budapest and Visegrád: TKM Association and the King Matthias Museum, 2001). Enikő Békés discussed ideological aspects of Matthias's portrait iconography in "The Lion and King Matthias Corvinus: A Renaissance Interpretation of a Classical Physiognomic Image," *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU*, 10 (2004): 77–94. The present article extends themes I have discussed in "The myth of Hercules as a symbol," in *Neoplatonism and the Arts*, ed. Liana de Girolami Cheney and John Hendrix, (Lewiston, Queenston & Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 151–175 and "Matthias Corvinus as Renaissance Prince—Propaganda or Reality?" presented to the Renaissance Society of America's annual meeting, Chicago, 2001. For discussion in English of transformation in the institutions of government, see Kathleen Garay, "Legislation under King Matthias I (Corvinus) 1458–1490 in *The Laws of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary 1458–1490*, tr. and ed. János M. Bak, Leslie Domonkos, and Paul Harvey Jr. (Los Angeles: Charles Schlacks, Jr., 1996), xix–xxxv; János M. Bak, "The Late Medieval Period, 1382–1526," in *A History of Hungary*, ed. Peter Sugar (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), 54–82 and Pál Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen: A History of Medieval Hungary 895–1526* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 298–322.



Valery Rees

how the myth was being read by fifteenth-century interpreters, and long before Hercules became a decorative theme in the royal palaces of Buda and Visegrád, a rich history of allegorical interpretation had grown up around him.

The Hercules Myth and its Interpretation

The myth of Hercules had always been both potent and popular, from Classical times onwards. To the ancient Greeks, he was a favourite character, depicted on vases and in sculpture, as well as having his praises sung in poetry and drama. Primarily known for physical strength and indomitable courage, he also had the distinction of being the one hero who spanned all Hellas in his deeds, and in this sense acquired a degree of universality. He was strong and brave without compare, but subject to passion and lust on an equal scale. Native wit and cunning were his mental qualities rather than sheer intellect, though later generations expanded the allegory to include intelligence too. His long and eventful life spanned a series of terrible trials, but at the end he was received into heaven.

Since the Classical renditions of Hercules' tale rose to new prominence in the Renaissance, it is worth noting the principal Greek studies of his character, as they formed the basis for all the later, more accessible versions. In Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, written around 440 BC, the focus is on the suddenness with which human triumph turns to tragedy.² The play opens with the meditations of Hercules' wife, Deianeira, upon the arrival of the beautiful young Iole, the "prize" Hercules has won through a bitter war with her father Eurystus, provoked by the latter's refusal to yield her to our hero's inexhaustible sexual appetites. Deianeira's well-meaning intervention allows hostile destiny to unfold, through the agency of a poisoned robe. The blood-stained robe of the centaur whom Hercules slew in protection of Deianeira acts not as the blessing she expects but as a dire curse, for the centaur's wound was tainted with the very poison which had assured Hercules' success. In an earlier exploit, when he slew the Lernaean Hydra he had dipped his arrows in its deadly venom. Unwitting authors of their own fate, both Hercules and Deianeira are shown as being moved by genuine emotion (though not many today would condone his

² This was known in fifteenth-century Italy, at least to speakers of Greek. Cardinal Bessarion's library contained the tragedies of Sophocles; Argyropolous in Florence was familiar with them, and a section of *Trachiniae*, consisting of lines 1046–1102, is translated by Cicero in *Tusculan Disputations*, II, 8, a book which had wide currency. The first printed edition of Sophocles' tragedies was by Aldus Manutius in Venice, 1502. See Rudolf Hirsch, *The Printed Word: Its Impact and Diffusion* (London: Variorum, 1978).



treatment of Deianeira) and endeavouring to apply reason. But these very traits render them vulnerable, and provide the mechanism whereby the ancient prophecies are fulfilled. As the centaur promised, Hercules does not leave Deianeira for another woman, but he is killed, as foretold, by an enemy from beyond the grave. Human action is important: we are told that “knowledge must come through action. You will never be sure unless you put it to the test;”³ but the world is presented essentially as the play of divine forces, and the divine presence is manifest in each and every happening if only we can see aright:

You but lately have seen dreadful deaths,
with many sorrows unheard of before —,
and none of these things are without Zeus.⁴

In Euripides’ version of the tale, written probably during the interwar years of 421 to 418 BC, even greater emphasis is laid upon nobility of character.⁵ As with Sophocles, the protagonists are undone not by their own faults but by divine decree. Indeed, there is an essential innocence about Hercules that pervades most accounts of his life. Euripides also focuses on human suffering. The first half of the play explores the evils of tyranny through the eyes of Hercules’ first wife Megara and his father Amphytrion, presenting a sensitive study of both the feminine and the elderly faces of fortitude. Then Hercules arrives home and transforms all, swiftly putting right the wrongs; but by another transformation the play sharply turns again, to a violent spiral of destruction. This transformation is wrought directly by the gods—by Iris, messenger of Hera, and Madness personified, traditionally played by an actor with gorgon mask, black chariot, and goad. Despite initial reluctance, they eventually inflict Hera’s vengeance, and Hercules slays his innocent wife and children in a frenzy of delusion and rage. When Hercules recovers, his first resolve is to take his own life, but Theseus, that other great hero, appears and persuades him that survival is the more courageous path. Love and friendship are the redeeming qualities in life, and are of greater account than suffering. Meanwhile the very

³ Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, line 592–3, tr. Robert Torrance.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1276–8.

For the idea of life as a play, see Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, ii, 15 and 17 and for its revival in the Renaissance *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (hereafter referred to as Ficino, *Letters*) (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975, 1978, 1981, 1988, 1994, 1999, 2003 and continuing), vol. 7, 56 (letter 49).

⁵ Euripides, *Heracles*, tr. William Arrowsmith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Hercules also appears in Euripides’ *Alceste* but in a very minor role; likewise in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes.



Valery Rees

nature of the gods is exposed to question, with Hercules casting doubt on all the traditional tales:

I do not believe the gods commit
adultery, or bind each other in chains.
I never did believe it; I never shall;
nor that one god is tyrant of the rest.
If god is truly god, he is perfect,
Lacking nothing. These are poets' wretched lies.⁶

On the whole, one might well conclude that the Greek Herakles is hardly a fitting model for a Renaissance king. However, familiarity with the hero of Sophocles and Euripides was mediated by later additions to the canon. The patience of Hercules in adversity and his final redemption by Zeus become key elements in the story.

Roman writers such as Cicero and Seneca echo the scepticism of the gods expressed by Euripides' hero. Cicero even goes so far as to question Hercules' legendary endurance.⁷ But for the most part, Hercules remained a very popular and exemplary hero, not least for having been accorded by tradition his celestial place among the stars.

Seneca built upon the Greek dramatic tradition, elaborating a portrayal of Hercules that highlighted human virtue. His *Hercules Furens* draws on both Sophocles and Euripides. It opens with Juno (the Roman Hera) proclaiming her vengeful intent, therefore from the outset it is clear that Hercules is being punished for no sin of his own but for Jupiter's infidelity.⁸ Yet the punishment of madness, when it comes, is rooted in Hercules' own psychological complexities. His former heroism turns to pride and delusion, and he plans to attack the heavens. This is a driven Heracles, who has sought out tasks for himself and does not know how to stop. He is also more doggedly attached to the idea of suicide after the mayhem, and it takes all Amphytrion's devotion as well as Theseus's love to bring him back from the brink. The sequel, *Hercules Oetaeus*, resumes the story with Deianeira and the poisoned love charm. Hercules meets his end on the pyre on Mount Oeta, displaying at last that fortitude and endurance so dear to the Stoics, once he learns that it is a worthy

⁶ *Heracles*, tr. Arrowsmith, lines 1341–46.

⁷ Quoting Sophocles's version of Hercules' agony on Mount Oeta, Cicero asks, "Can we scorn pain, seeing that we find the mighty Hercules bears it so impatiently?" *Tusculan Disputations*, tr. J. E. King (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1971), II, 22.

⁸ Amphytrion was not the real father of Hercules, but Jupiter, who turned one night into three to prolong his dalliance with Alcmene, Amphytrion's wife.



foe (the centaur) who has caused his downfall.⁹ Finally, he is carried to heaven; his divine nature takes its place among the stars and his disembodied voice is heard proclaiming his immortality, “now has my valour (*virtus*) borne me to the stars and to the gods themselves,” and the point is confirmed twice more before the play ends.¹⁰ Seneca shows us Hercules as benefactor of mankind, as a man of lusts and appetites, as sufferer and endurer, and finally as a god. But it is also clear that his Hercules is a symbol. Seneca’s plays enjoyed a real resurgence in the Renaissance; they were widely available in Italy and were in the Corvinian library.¹¹

Cicero, who had been even more sparing in his attitude towards divinity, nevertheless treats Hercules with great respect, acknowledging that “human experience and general custom have made it a practice to confer the deification of renown and gratitude upon distinguished benefactors” of the human race.¹² Hercules represents the personification of valour, a quality to be encouraged,¹³ though Cicero cannot help pointing out with some sarcasm that Hercules seems to be meeting Odysseus in the underworld while supposedly feasting with the gods on Olympus, a problem neatly solved by later writers through the device of a distinction between his soul and his *idolum*.¹⁴ Cicero also wryly observes the dangers inherent in allowing a great crowd of new deifications “admitted to celestial citizenship in recent times, by a sort of extension of the franchise!”¹⁵

But it is the Hercules of the poets that dominated the Latin tradition of the medieval world. Virgil describes one of his labours in a prolonged digression of

⁹ Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus*, lines 1468–87.

¹⁰ Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus*, lines 1942–3, 1971 and 1983–88. Behind Seneca’s choice of words is perhaps a conscious reference to Virgil’s famous phrase “sic itur ad astra;” see also on Virgil below. Seneca maintains in his philosophical works that the proper function of philosophy is to show the way to heaven. See *Letters from a Stoic*, tr. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 1969), 98–99.

¹¹ Csaba Csapodi, *The Corvinian Library: History and Stock* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1973), 352.

¹² *De natura deorum*, II, 62 tr. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1951, reprinted 1994).

¹³ *De natura deorum*, III, 50.

¹⁴ Based on Plutarch. See Michael J. B. Allen, “Life as a Dead Platonist,” in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. Allen and V. Rees with M. Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 169. For a full history of the Greek Neoplatonic interpretations of Hercules, see Jean Pépin, “Héraclès et son reflet dans le Néoplatonisme,” in *Le Néoplatonisme* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1971), 167–199.

¹⁵ *De natura deorum*, III, 39.



Valery Rees

great drama in Book 8 of the *Aeneid*. He relates the tale of Cacus' theft of the oxen of Geryon, and how Hercules found and crushed this monster in his lair. He also describes the nature of the cult that had grown up around Hercules, allowing us to appreciate the symbolic significance of the hero: it is human potential, *virtus*, that is the path to the divine.¹⁶ Virtue (*virtus*) may be understood as the essential quality of being a man (*vir*) as, for example, when Apollo congratulates Ascanius on arriving at that manhood which will raise him and his offspring to the level of the gods:

*Macte nova virtute, puer: sic itur ad astra,
dis genite et geniture deos.*¹⁷

Virtue is only seen in action, and it brings renown or glory:

*stat sua cuique dies, breve et irreparabile tempus
omnibus est vitae; sed famam extendere factis,
hoc virtutis opus.*¹⁸

Here, in language unmistakably appealing to Renaissance sensibilities, is that heady combination of virtue and glory to which Matthias Corvinus and most other Renaissance rulers aspired.

Ovid likewise stresses the ultimate ascendancy of the divine in Hercules' nature. As the roaring flames consume Hercules' body, Jupiter declares,

He who has conquered all things shall conquer these fires which you see; nor shall he feel Vulcan's power save in the part his mother gave him. Immortal is the part which he took from me, and that is safe and beyond the power of death, which no flame can destroy.¹⁹

His Hercules also questions how anyone can possibly believe in the traditional gods:

*et sunt qui credere possint
esse deos?*²⁰

¹⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, VIII, 288–306.

¹⁷ *Aeneid*, IX, 641–642,

¹⁸ [Each has his day appointed; short and irretrievable is the span of life to all: but to lengthen fame by deeds—that is valour's task]. These are the words from Jupiter to Hercules, in the heat of battle, *Aeneid*, X, 468–9. Tr. H. R. Fairclough. (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, revised edition, 1978).

¹⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9, 250–253. Hercules is the major subject of over three hundred lines of Book 9.

²⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9, 203–204 (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 3rd edition, reprinted 1984).



Since the works of Virgil and Ovid never ceased to be read, and those of Seneca at least found new favour in the Renaissance, one can safely conclude that the classical Hercules never went out of fashion. What is remarkable is that he kept this favour even in a deeply Christian age. In fact, he was claimed as a pious hero by Boethius, as a model for endurance in the face of suffering. In the *Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius briefly recites the well-known list of labours, and concludes:

Go now, ye strong, where the exalted way
Of great example leads. Why hang you back?
Why turn away? Once earth has been surpassed
It gives the stars.²¹

The labours of Hercules had been recounted time and again until the original twelve expanded by variation and accrual. Even Virgil refers to a thousand,²² and Hercules gained in moral and intellectual powers, too, especially through another strand that became interwoven with the main myth. This was the tale deriving ultimately from Prodicus, but transmitted through both Xenophon and Cicero, that placed Hercules at the crossroads, making the choice between pleasure and virtue.²³ This cross-current to the main stream became particularly fruitful when Hercules was accepted as a proto-Christian figure. Just as Christ was God made man, now the long-suffering Hercules, his virtues magnified and his vices eclipsed, was man made god, and therefore seen as an adumbration of Christ.²⁴ This helps to explain how Hercules was chosen to replace St. John on the seal of Florence in the thirteenth century, how he appeared on the baptistery pulpit in Pisa (c.1260), on the campanile of the cathedral in Florence (c.1300) and its mandorla doorway (c.1400).²⁵ Around 1380, the chancellor of Florence, Coluccio Salutati embarked on an exploration of the Hercules theme as allegory. His *De laboribus Herculis* began as a

²¹ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, IV, 7, tr. V. E. Watts (London: Penguin, 1969), 144–146.

²² *Aeneid*, VIII, 291.

²³ The writings of Prodicus have not survived, but he is quoted often in Plato, and in Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, 2, 21; Cicero, *De Officiis*, II, 32 (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1923 and 1913 respectively).

²⁴ Marcel Simon charts the medieval adoptions and adaptations of Hercules in *Hercule et le Christianisme* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1955).

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of these decorations see Marlis von Hessert, *Zum Bedeutungswandel der Herkules-Figur in Florenz* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1991) 7, 26–29 and 34–44. See also Lawrence Nees, *A Tainted Mantle: Hercules and the Classical Tradition at the Carolingian Court* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).



Valery Rees

commentary on Seneca's two Hercules plays, but it grew in scope, remaining unfinished at the time he died in 1406.²⁶ Nevertheless, his work was known and discussed in Florence from the 1390s onwards. He treats the entire Hercules myth as a celebration of man's capacities, focussing especially on the courageous pursuit of virtue and how this may raise man to the level of the stars, or rather to divinity.²⁷

In Ferrara, the revival of the name Hercules (Ercole d'Este, 1431–1505) produced a sudden vogue for representations of Hercules in the second half of the fifteenth century, with small bronzes by Bertoldo di Giovanni²⁸ and Antonio Pollaiuolo.²⁹ Pollaiuolo also produced Hercules pieces for Florence, including three large canvases of Hercules for the Medici palace which have not survived, but two small panels of tempera on wood are thought to be copies he made of them.³⁰ The *Hercules and Antaeus* bronze now in the Bargello Museum is also connected with this room.³¹

Thus it comes as no surprise to find Hercules as a champion or defender in the writings of the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino. Ficino also found in Damascius, sixth-century commentator on Plato, ample justification for

²⁶ *De Laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. Ullman (Zürich: In aedibus Thesauri mundi, 1951). This was the first printed edition of the work, but it is known to have circulated in manuscript in Florence at the time. See R. Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, 217–219.

²⁷ *De laboribus Herculis*, passim. For discussion, see Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, 212–226.

²⁸ See Wilhelm Bode, *Florentine Sculptors of the Renaissance*, tr. J. Haynes, 2nd ed. revised by F. L. Rudston Brown (London: Methuen, 1928), 185–187. Bode queries whether some of these are really Hercules or simply “wildmen.” One undoubted Hercules by Bertoldo is now in the Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe, Inv. 64/89. See Hessert, *Zum Bedeutungswandel*, Plate 12. Another fine and unmistakable Hercules on horseback by Bertoldo is in the Galleria Estense in Modena, Inv. 2265. (illustrated in *Renaissance Florence: The Age of Lorenzo de' Medici 1449–92*, ed. Cristina Acidini-Luchinat (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1993), 127.

²⁹ Now in the Frick Collection, New York, Accession no. 16.2.5. See Hessert, *Zum Bedeutungswandel*, Plate 13. Connections between Florence and Ferrara were strong, and between Ferrara and Hungary they became especially close after 1476, when Beatrix of Aragon, sister of Eleanora of Aragon, Ercole's wife, married King Matthias.

³⁰ Pollaiuolo's panels, *Hercules slaying the Hydra* and *Hercules and Antaeus*, are now in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence Inv. 1890, 8268 and 1890, 1478. See Patricia Lee Rubin and Alison Wright, *Renaissance Florence: the Art of the 1470s* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1999), 90. On the lost canvases, Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, tr. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1987), II, 75 and Hessert, *Zum Bedeutungswandel*, 51–53.

³¹ Rubin and Wright, *Renaissance Florence*, 91.



regarding Hercules as a figure representing liberation, a necessary step in the soul's proper journey through life and back to its homeland:

Like Kore, the soul descends into genesis, like Dionysus she is scattered by generation, like Prometheus and the Titans she is chained to the body. She frees herself by acquiring the strength of Hercules, gathers herself together through the help of Apollo and of Athena the Savior; i.e. by truly purifying philosophy, and she elevates herself to the causes of her being with Demeter.³²

Ficino attaches the name of Hercules to King Matthias in the very first letter he sends to him, the dedication of two books of his letters containing, amongst other things, his *Life of Plato* and some aids to the study of Plato.³³ Naturally, in considering how Ficino addresses the king, it is important to remember that he is not wholly exempt from the conventions of Renaissance oratory.³⁴ However, since the topic under discussion is itself a question of propaganda, it will be sufficient to look at the imagery and ideas that are being used.

Overtones of Transformation

Whereas Salutati had considered Hercules in a strictly republican setting, Ficino was quick to see the connection with kingship on a heroic scale. Ficino hardly travelled beyond the borders of the republican state of Florence and might be thought to have had little first-hand knowledge of kingship.³⁵ Yet it would be a

³² Ficino studied the manuscript of Olympiodorus and Damascius while preparing his *Platonic Theology* in the years prior to 1482. Although he ascribed the entire set of three commentaries to Olympiodorus, this section was later discovered to be by Damascius. *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, Vol. 2, Damascius, ed. L. G. Westerink, (Amsterdam, Oxford, New York: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1977) 81–82 (I, 130). I am grateful to Jozef Matula for providing this reference.

³³ See my “*Gloriam per saecula*: Marsilio Ficino and the Development of a Platonic Tradition in Hungary” in *Florentine Platonism and Central Europe*, ed. Jozef Matula (Olomouc: Palacky University Press, 2001), 11–29.

³⁴ On the whole Ficino is a relatively truthful writer. For a discussion of the problems see my “Aspects of Praise in Marsilio Ficino” in *Laus Platonici Philosophi*, ed. Stephen Clucas, Peter Forshaw and Valery Rees, (forthcoming).

³⁵ It is not clear whether he ever studied medicine in Bologna, as records are missing for the years in question. He certainly took some courses at the *studium* in Florence, and taught there in 1469. See Jonathan Davies, *Florence & its University during the Early Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 191–92. Ficino's own travels appear to have been



Valery Rees

mistake to consider his views to be limited by personal experience, for he lived in a remarkably cosmopolitan city. Not only was he deeply steeped in the philosophy and literature of two millennia, but the household of the Medici family to which he belonged was continually host to emissaries from all over Europe. In 1468, Ficino translated Dante's *Monarchia* from the Latin original into Italian for the benefit of his less educated friends.³⁶ He also explored the Platonic concept of a philosopher-king (which of course transcended political structures and could be applied to any leader) both through the study of Plato's words³⁷ and through direct dealings with the numerous princes to whose problems and challenges he addressed some of his finest letters.³⁸

In 1482, in a long letter on caring for the health of scholars that later became the first book of Ficino's *De vita* (published in 1489), he says that Hercules may be called upon by seekers of truth and wisdom to overcome the monsters that stand in their path.³⁹ In the *Apologia* which accompanied the *De vita*, Ficino called on his friends to defend the work, which had come under suspicion of heterodoxy for its discussions of talismans and magic. Poliziano is

restricted to the short distances between Florence and Careggi, Fiesole, Maiano, Celle for most of his mature years. For biographical information see Raymond Marcel, *Marsilio Ficino* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1958), 179–234, corrected by more recent information in Paolo Viti, “Documenti ignoti per la biografia di Marsilio Ficino” in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Studi e documenti*, ed. G. C. Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1986), I, 251–283 and *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Catalogo*, eds S. Gentile, S. Niccoli and P. Viti (Florence: Casa Editrice le Lettere, 1984), 165–201.

³⁶ The translation is dedicated to Bernardo del Nero and Antonio Manetti, both active participants in Florentine political life. Interestingly, in II, 9 Dante uses Hercules' struggle with Antaeus as the example for trial by combat where God has strengthened the weaker party. *Dante's Monarchia*, tr. Richard Kay (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1998), 170.

³⁷ Ficino's interest in Plato began by 1456, even before he learned Greek. From 1462 he was working on the translations of Plato's dialogues for Cosimo de' Medici, and it remained a main platform of his work right through to the publication of the second edition of his complete translation of the entire works of Plato, with commentary, in 1496.

³⁸ See “Ficino's Advice to Princes” in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, ed. Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees, with Martin Davies, Leiden: Brill, 2002, 339–357.

³⁹ *De Vita*, I, 7. See Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. and tr. C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1989), 122–129. The “monsters” Ficino is referring to include apathy, melancholy, sexual distractions, gluttony and staying up too late at night!



now his “Hercules.”⁴⁰ Though Poliziano was not entirely happy with the epithet, it was clearly a term laden with meaning and associations for all concerned.⁴¹

In the preface to the second version of his commentary on Plato’s *Philebus* (1491), Ficino recalls Hercules’ choice at the crossroads between pleasure and virtue, observing that in choosing virtue he “was never happy among men, but vexed perpetually with the work of labours.”⁴² This may seem familiar to overburdened academics, and only to be expected in what Ficino often called “this malign region of the universe.”⁴³ But the search for happiness is a legitimate one, indeed it is the main theme of the *Philebus* commentary and of many of his other works. Philebus, unlike Hercules, has to choose between wisdom and pleasure, rather than virtue and pleasure; but Ficino combines the two in a threefold model of choice where the third, the life of pleasure, can be quickly dismissed as an unsatisfying option, and he indicates a leaning towards the contemplative life of wisdom rather than the active life of virtue. When the preface reappears in his collected *Letters*, it is in fact clearly labelled as a choice between the contemplative life, the active life, and the life of pleasure.⁴⁴ Hercules represents the active life, an entirely appropriate model for one aspect of kingship. Matthias’s role as bulwark and protector against the Turks renders it especially applicable.

But not far behind, in Ficino’s thoughts at least, is the accompanying idea of a philosopher-king, who strikes the balance between the contemplative and the active life that always eluded Hercules. As Cicero had pointed out, “it is more in accord with Nature to emulate the great Hercules and undergo the greatest toil and trouble for the sake of aiding or saving the world ... than to

⁴⁰ Kaske and Clark, *Three Books on Life*, 394–400.

⁴¹ For Poliziano’s view of the epithet see Jill Kraye, “Ficino in the Firing Line: A Renaissance Neoplatonist and His Critics” in *Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, 377–397, at 382.

⁴² Ficino produced an early version of this work in the 1460s for Cosimo de’ Medici. The later version was published in a printed edition in 1496. Michael J. B. Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, reprinted Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2000), 479–483.

⁴³ E.g. in *Letters*, 4, 12 and 40 (19 and 55).

⁴⁴ Ficino collected his letters into books, gave them titles, and circulated them in manuscript. The first printed edition was in Florence, 1495. Page references to the Latin are, however, generally to the Basel edition of his *Opera Omnia* of 1576 which is more widely available having been reprinted several times in Turin: Bottega d’Erasmus (1959, 1962, 1979, 1983) and in Paris: Phénix Editions (2000). This letter is entitled “Pallas, Iuno, Venus, vita contemplative, activa, voluptuosa,” Ficino, *Opera*, 919.



Valery Rees

live in seclusion.”⁴⁵ Thus Ficino kept Hercules as a model for kingly conduct. This is partly because, as even Cicero admits, there is nobility in service to one’s fellow human beings. But it is rather Boethius that Ficino has in mind, with his insistence that valour provides a path to the heavenly world. He cites Boethius on this no less than four times. The first is in a letter extolling the solar qualities of Hercules, who conquered his twelve labours as the sun daily conquers the twelve zodiacal signs.⁴⁶ In January, 1494, he quotes Boethius’s words in the *Apologia* for his *de Sole et Lumine* while galvanizing support against attacks on its content, and says that Filippo Valori often has these words on his lips. He adds that Hercules did his twelve labours “for true glory, and for the splendour of truth, which is the very office and duty of the Sun.”⁴⁷ Again in August, 1494, he uses Boethius’s words to rouse Poliziano to assist in the controversy that has arisen over his uses of astrology; the fourth time is in his commentary on Plato’s *Laches*, commending Herculean fortitude.⁴⁸

In the 1490s Ficino is clearly very engaged with solar properties. In the *Philebus* dedication mentioned above, where his purpose is to promote a way of life that combines virtue, pleasing gifts, and wisdom, it is a solar metaphor that unites them: the three goddesses Pallas, Juno, and Venus are all seen as being subject to Apollo, who himself symbolises light, life, and inner illumination.⁴⁹ Hercules by association is another symbol of solar power, just as mankind in general is said to be a solar being.⁵⁰

These solar gifts far outweigh any human shortcomings with which Hercules might be charged, a side less often alluded to in the Renaissance than by the more forthright Greeks, though Ficino, concerned with all aspects of the care of the soul, does at one point ask,

Is there anyone who, upon due reflection, is not truly astonished at
... how bravely Hercules, the bravest of the Gentiles, overcame every

⁴⁵ Cicero, *De Officiis*, III, 5.

⁴⁶ In Book X, which is not yet published in translation, *Opera*, 920–21. Undated, but from 1489. See also Michael J. B. Allen, “Homo ad zodiacum: Marsilio Ficino and the Boethian Hercules,” *Forma e parola: Studi in memoria di Fredi Chiappelli*, ed. by D. Dutschke, P. M. Forni et al. (Rome: Bulzoni 1992) 205–221, and reprinted in *Plato’s Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino’s Metaphysics and its Sources* (Aldershot & Brookfield VT: Variorum, 1995).

⁴⁷ Book XII, *Opera*, 949.

⁴⁸ Ficino, *Opera*, 1309.

⁴⁹ Ficino, *Opera*, 919–920 and see note 17 above.

⁵⁰ E.g. Ficino, *Opera*, 895, 908, 984; *De Vita*, III, 14; *De Amore*, IV, 4.



danger, no matter how great; yet how weakly he placed his neck under the yoke of pleasure?⁵¹

Thinking perhaps of Iole, or his feasting in the house of Admetus,⁵² Ficino observes that prosperity “fills men’s spirits with the breeze of abundance and that this abundance makes them unrestrained and neglectful.”⁵³ Pleasure is a danger not just because it may conceal future pain, but because it deflects us from the real path of life, yoking us to the world of the senses, and cutting us off from our appreciation of the divine. In the same year Ficino wrote to Antonio Cocci on patience, ranking the difficulties of acquiring that virtue as even greater than the labours of Hercules, and just as important, “for impatience alone causes adversities, which could relate merely to external things and to the body, to pass right through to the soul as well.”⁵⁴

The remedy, he suggests, is to remove our separation from God, which is done through love, the prime activity that links us in an unbroken circular flow between God and the creation. Even more than strength of intellect it is love that allows us to rise to our true stature. This is the only path that leads to “eternal life, full knowledge of all things, unlimited bounty, total service and perfect happiness.”⁵⁵

One of the most widely circulated of Ficino’s letters on the Hercules theme was the letter of 1477 to Giovanni Nesi, sent also to Lotterio Neroni and made accessible to a much wider audience through translation into Italian as one of the *Sermoni morali della stultitia e miseria degli uomini* published in 1478.⁵⁶ The letter, entitled “That the soul is immortal. And why, though it be divine, it often leads a life similar to that of a beast,” puts us firmly within the traditional Hercules ambit. It also echoes the principal concerns and the language of the opening sentences of *Theologia Platonica* of the same period, Ficino’s major work on the immortality of the soul, uniting the Christian and Platonic traditions.

Were there not within us divine power, and were our minds not of heavenly origin, we could in no way acknowledge the insufficiency of

⁵¹ *Letters*, 4, 49 (letter 34 c. 1478) The letter is entitled “Our use of prosperity is even more perverse than our use of adversity” and is addressed to two leading churchmen, Cardinal Riario and Archbishop Salviati.

⁵² In Euripides’ *Alcestis*, Hercules is the drunken guest until he finds out what has happened and rushes off to the burial ground to rescue Alcestis from Death.

⁵³ *Letters*, 4, 49.

⁵⁴ *Letters*, 4, 55 (Letter 40).

⁵⁵ *Letters*, 4, 56.

⁵⁶ Nesi was an educator, philosopher and influential man of affairs. Neroni was an old and trusted friend, excluded from public office but also influential.



Valery Rees

mortal things and we should certainly never reason beyond, or pursue anything above, the physical level. No one would exert himself at all, even in the smallest matter, to resist the body for we should be satisfied with earthly riches. And all men, or certainly the great majority, would rest content with this middle region of the universe as their natural birthplace and home. But as it is, since our condition is very different, I believe – and with no empty faith – that we are of divine origin. Yet if we are divine, why do we often lead a life similar to that of a beast?⁵⁷

Citing Plato's figure from *Republic*, 9, 588, he proposes that we are actually made up of one man and many beasts, some tame, some wild, the heart of a lion, and the form of a man. The man should have mastery, or he will be starved of life by the lion and the beasts:

he should tend the many-headed monster like a husbandman, cherishing the tame heads, giving them water and food, but instantly cutting off the wild ones, making the lion's nature his ally in this; and in common care of them all, he should reconcile each one with the others in mutual goodwill towards himself.⁵⁸

He links this with two other Platonic descriptions of the soul, the tripartite division of the soul in *Timaeus*, into reason, passion, and desire,⁵⁹ and the representation of reason as charioteer, controlling the other two powers of the soul as horses.⁶⁰ All this sets the scene for an allegorical explanation of three of the labours of Hercules:

Reason within us is called Hercules: he destroys Antaeus, that is the monstrous images of fantasy, when he lifts Antaeus up from the earth, that is, when he removes himself from the senses and physical images. He also subdues the lion, meaning that he curbs passion. He cuts down the Hydra with its many sprouting heads; that is he cuts off the force of desire which, as passion, is borne not into a few things, and those of great importance, but into anything whatsoever, or rather into innumerable things, by means of an insatiable whirlpool. But while our Hercules is cutting down the Hydra of the liver with his sword, heads instantly sprout again because the fuel for

⁵⁷ *Letters*, 3, 59 (Letter 27).

⁵⁸ *Letters*, 3, 60.

⁵⁹ Plato, *Timaeus*, 69C–72C.

⁶⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246, 253DE.



new heads is still there. But when he consumes the Hydra by fire, he utterly destroys the fuel and so nothing is born from it again.⁶¹

The warning is not to cut off one sensual desire simply to feed another, because they will be endless. But the human being is not “a monster with more heads than Typhon, more full of fire and fury.” He is rather “a simpler and calmer being, sharing in some divine and favourable destiny, partaking in a quiet understanding.”⁶²

Whether Ficino considered the hero to have any special powers above and beyond the normal human being is worth considering for a moment. Ficino makes special pleading for heroes in two letters that he chose not to include in his published collection of letters, but which are preserved in manuscript.⁶³ Defending Pico della Mirandola after a notorious escapade involving another man’s wife, an armed chase and several people injured, he suggests that heroes are not subject to normal constraints of behaviour, being demi-gods. He is following the hierarchy of Iamblichus, in which heroes rank above normal souls, being “thoroughly superior in power and excellence, beauty and grandeur.”⁶⁴ His aim is clearly to bail Pico out of serious trouble by some sort of defence however fantastical, and he admits as much by casting the first of these letters as a fable. Far more important through the rest of his writings is his enthusiasm for that Iamblichian view that allows the ordinary, non-heroic, soul the capability of purification and participation in the highest levels of divinity.

So when Ficino calls Matthias “Hercules” in October 1480, when the Turkish threat seemed from the Italian perspective to be at its height, we can be reasonably sure that he meant it as praise of his already proven might and valour as a man of action, and as encouragement to further deeds of virtue that would bring him the stars. In the context of all the other correspondence that soon began to flow between Florence and Buda, such ideas of transformation and the starry heavens are particularly apt, though they were attendant upon the development of wisdom and contemplation, the strengthening of love and reason, the qualities of a Platonic contemplative rather than a muscular Hercules. But through his apotheosis, Hercules was able to stand as a symbol

⁶¹ *Letters*, 3, 61.

⁶² *Letters*, 3. 61 quoting Plato, *Phaedrus*, 230A.

⁶³ They have been included in the recent translation of the *Letters*, 7, 32–33 (Letters 27 and 28).

⁶⁴ Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, I, 5, tr. Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell (Leiden: Brill, 2003). Ficino sent Matthias translations of Iamblichus and other Neoplatonists as he completed them in 1488, and part of the Plotinus translation (which was not published in full until 1492).



Valery Rees

for both worlds, and in using the name of Hercules to address the king, Ficino is surely suggesting that such transformation is not beyond his reach. He considers the king to be a resourceful and charismatic human being who, like Hercules, is aware of his divine half. Though addressing him in 1480 as *felicissimo regi*,⁶⁵ Ficino more regularly adopts the formula *serenissimo Pannoniae regi Matthiae semper invicto*.⁶⁶ While one might ascribe this to conventions of court usage, it is at least possible that Ficino, who weighed his words with care, was making a deliberate choice reflecting his mental picture of the king. For *serenitas* was a quality ascribed to emperors, but was also the quality of the light of the heavenly realms, of the Elysian fields, clear, pure, and unclouded.⁶⁷ That is precisely the condition of the heart and mind that philosophy can bring if Matthias will follow the precepts of Ficino's teaching.

Themes of Transformation Echoed in Hungary

That Matthias had a real interest in such teachings seems beyond doubt. The image of him presented by Antonio Bonfini, presiding over philosophical discussions, pleased him greatly.⁶⁸ The invitation to Ficino to come and teach in Buda, where Matthias hoped to gather the most outstanding teachers of Europe, came through Nicholas Báthory, but appeared to have the personal approval and encouragement of the king.⁶⁹ His designs for a university have been much discussed, and his library displays an unmistakable commitment to higher learning, with philosophy well represented.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ *Opera* 721, 1 October, 1480 (*Letters*, 2, Proem.).

⁶⁶ *Letters*, 7, 178, 181 (*Letters* 52 and 61), *Opera*, 896, 902. Reflected too in letters to Báthory and Bandini e.g., 3, 78 (Letter 39 written in 1479) and 7, 40 (Letter 30).

⁶⁷ The use of *serenitas* as a title appears to have been reserved for imperial honours in the medieval period. Its use in Classical times as a personal epithet suggests a person full of calm assurance, but it is applied more often to a clear, bright sky, as, for example, in Virgil, *Aeneid* VI, 707.

⁶⁸ Antonio Bonfini, *Symposion de virginitate et pudicitia coniugali*, ed. S. Apró (Budapest: K. M. Egyetemi Nyomda, 1943). Although Bonfini wrote this before arriving in Hungary, he was both well-informed in advance, and well rewarded subsequently. See also Klára Pajorin, "La Rinascita del Simposio Antico e la Corte di Mattia Corvino" in *Italia e Ungheria all'epoca dell'umanesimo corviniano* ed. S. Graciotti e C. Vasoli (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 179–227.

⁶⁹ See *Letters*, 3, 78–9 (Letter 39) and 7, 55 (Letter 48) for Ficino's response.

⁷⁰ The most recent discussion of Matthias's plans for a new university in Buda is in Alessandro Scafi, "Filarete e l'Ungheria: l'utopia universitaria di Mattia Corvino," in



In 1480, Ficino is asking Matthias to look upon the books he is sending “with the joyful and lively rays of your eyes,” so that they may be transformed into something “altogether brighter and more joyful.” He raises the idea of philosopher-king, and requests that the works of the Platonic tradition be restored to light and life through Matthias’s support, not only on the library shelves, but also in action. The letter ends by invoking divine blessing on all this, and a prophecy of unbounded power.⁷¹

The king’s interest in Ficino’s programme of personal transformation through philosophy is attested by continuing signs of favour both to Ficino himself and to Francesco Bandini, his friend and the king’s close personal adviser, which are mentioned in Ficino’s correspondence.⁷² It also underlies Matthias’s unrealised aims for the transformation of the city of Buda, including a model academy for the liberal arts.⁷³ The extraordinarily lavish home he had in mind for the liberal arts reflects the part each one of those arts had to play in the training of the mind and soul,⁷⁴ while the heart is attuned to love of God through praise and the practice of religion.⁷⁵ Ultimately, the intellect and the will must be united in their operation.

That Matthias also gladly embraced the Hercules symbolism is attested by the claims made by his historians Johannes Thuróczy and Antonio Bonfini for

Storia dell’arte, Florence: Nuova Italia Editrice 81, 1994, 137–169. See also Tibor Klaniczay “Egyetem Magyarországon Mátyás korában” in *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 94, no. 5–6 (1990): 575–612. On his library, see Csaba Csapodi, *Bibliotheca Corviniana* (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1967; Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969, and revised Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1981); *The Corvinian Library: History and Stock* (Budapest Akadémiai Kiadó, 1973).

⁷¹ “On you alone almighty God will confer command without limit. That supreme God, who has appointed the Sun in the heavens as King of sky and stars, also appointed under the Sun Matthias alone, who should set Ocean as the shores of his sway and the stars as the limits of his glory.” Ficino draws on Virgil’s famous lines, regarded as allusions to the Emperor Augustus, *Aeneid*, I, 279 and 287, but he enlarges upon the solar metaphor.

⁷² See Ficino’s letters to Bandini in volumes 3, 5, 6, and 7, and note on 7, p. 190. Bandini’s letters to Ficino have not survived. His extant writings have been published by Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, I (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1969), 395–435.

⁷³ See Scafi, “Filarete e l’Ungheria,” note 69 above.

⁷⁴ Ficino, *Letters*, 1, 189 (Letter 123).

⁷⁵ See especially *Letters*, 6, 32–34 (Letter 18) but also throughout the letters.



Valery Rees

direct descent from Hercules through Scythian blood.⁷⁶ It is also evident in the decorative schemes adopted for the two principal royal residences. At the castle in Buda, Bonfini describes three large bronze statues: two figures of heroes stood at the drawbridge of the gate, but the dominant figure was Hercules on a pedestal of red marble in the main ceremonial court.⁷⁷ The Hercules theme was continued in the main entrance to the palace. A double flight of stairs led up to an ornate marble doorway, with doors of bronze panels depicting the twelve labours of Hercules. By 1488 these doors also bore an epigram of Bonfini's own devising, claiming immortal fame for the king:

*Atria cum statuīs ductis ex aere, foresque,
Corvini referunt principis ingenium.
Matthiam partos tot post ex hoste triumphos
Virtus, es, marmor, scripta, perire vetant.*⁷⁸

In the hall to which these doors led, on the ceiling, “the planets were dashing along wonderfully in their carts through the sky”⁷⁹ perhaps suggesting a continuation of the Hercules theme to the heavenly realm.

At the summer palace in Visegrád, the fountain of the main ceremonial courtyard features Hercules slaying the Lernaean hydra. By its novel conflation of two distinct episodes in the traditional Hercules canon, showing an infant Hercules grappling with a monster from his adult exploits, it perhaps also confirms that the conflation of the Herculean myth with that of the Christ child

⁷⁶ Johannes de Thurocz, *Chronica Hungarorum*, ed. E. Galántai and J. Kristó, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1985) vol. 1, I, 5, 26, based on *Herodotus*, IV, 9; Antonio Bonfini, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, ed. I. Fögel, B. Iványi and L. Juhász (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1936), I, 1, 32.

⁷⁷ Bonfini, *Preface* to his translation of Antonius Averulinus *De Architectura*, also quoted in an excellent discussion of Matthias's artistic programme, Rózsa Feuer-Tóth, *Art and Humanism in Hungary in the Age of Matthias Corvinus*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990), 123. Nothing survives of these three works of art which were taken by the Turks in 1526 and eventually melted down for ordnance.

⁷⁸ [Halls and gates with statues drawn out from bronze bring back the spirit of Corvinus. His virtue, bronze, marble and writings will not allow Matthias (and) so many triumphs won afterwards from the enemy to perish.] Bonfini, *Decades*, IV, 7. However, the immortality that Ficino speaks of is of a higher nature, closer to that expressed by Ovid for himself, echoing his own Hercules narration, “In my better part I shall be borne immortal far beyond the lofty stars and I shall have an undying name.” *Metamorphoses*, XV, 875–6 tr. F. J. Miller.

⁷⁹ Bonfini, *Decades*, IV, 7.



is well and truly established.⁸⁰ The water spouting from the hydra's wounds is no longer the hydra's venom but as fountains of water (or sometimes wine) has come to symbolise the abundance that flows from the valiant deeds of a human hero who remembers that the real homeland of his soul is in the supercelestial world, and who strives to return there.⁸¹

Finally it should not be forgotten that Matthias had earned great respect for his military achievements. They enabled him to claim the Hercules epithet for his own. He had established his rule against armed opposition, won back the crown from the emperor, gained significant victories in Bohemia and Austria, and by one means or another had succeeded in maintaining the border defences established by his father against the Turks, even though buffer states fell. Yet more significant for his reputation in Italy was the timely intervention of his troops in 1481 to free Otranto after a Turkish force had captured the town.

Hercules was not the only hero to whom Matthias liked to be compared: the military hero, Alexander the Great, was also a favourite. But no other hero possessed the wealth of multivalent qualities that I have tried to show were present in the image of Hercules, who therefore held a unique place in Matthias's self-fashioning. Matthias appears to have been a man of considerable intelligence and independent thinking, decisive and unafraid. A recent assessment of his character asserts that he always acted with "resolution, swiftness and determination," qualities well fitted to a Herculean image.⁸² Pál Engel further indicates a very real sense of transformation. At his accession, Matthias

found himself at the head of a disorganised, crisis-stricken kingdom. At his death, he was the highly respected ruler of a considerable empire. Yet it not his political achievement but his role as an open-handed patron of Renaissance art that best shows the inborn sovereignty of his personality.⁸³

This is why the question of self-fashioning is of real importance.

⁸⁰ The infant Hercules strangled two serpents in his cradle. Slaying the Lernaean hydra was one of the twelve labours he undertook for Eurystheus as an adult.

⁸¹ See Gergely Buzás, *The Hercules Fountain of Giovanni Dalmata*, 49–53. For the use of wine in the fountain channels, see Nicholas Olahus, *Hungaria*, ed. Colomannus Eperjesy and Ladislaus Juhász (Budapest: K. M. Egyetemi Nyomda, 1938), 11.

⁸² Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen*, 299.

⁸³ Engel, *The Realm of St Stephen*, 318.



Valery Rees

Conclusion

Ficino's Christian Platonism and the humanist-inspired decorative arts programme in Hungary combined to support the idea that Matthias was a king who combined unequalled strength and power in this world with a glorious immortality hereafter. This is a high ideal for kingship in any era, and certainly represents a transformation from the low esteem in which the monarchy was held before the election of Matthias, during the rebellions of his early years and again after his death. Without the force of his own personality, and his considerable skills as a ruler, the Hercules image would have carried no weight. That he was able to use the imagery of Hercules, with all its symbolic references, and to evoke praise rather than criticism from contemporaries in so doing is a mark of his success in transformation and self-fashioning.