

## HERCULES THE BRUTE, HERCULES THE TACTICIAN IN STEVE MOORE'S *THE THRACIAN WARS* AND *THE KNIVES OF KUSH* COMICS

T. H. M. Gellar-Goad & John Bedingham

Keywords: Hercules, Steve Moore, comics

The Herakles/Hercules of Graeco-Roman myth is often a solitary hero. The Herakles story most frequently depicted in vase painting is his single combat with the Nemean Lion (Stafford, 2012, 30–32); the Herakles of Apollonius' *Argonautica* reverts from team member to wandering one-man army during the course of the epic; and the Roman literary imagination is captured by stories of his lone-wolf triumphs (e.g., over Cacus in Livy 1.7, Vergil *Aeneid* 8.184–305, and Propertius 4.9, or over Achelous in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 9.1–97). Modern popular renditions of Hercules, however, often show him as a leader of armies or of heroic bands: the first major *Hercules* film (1958, starring Steve Reeves) centers on Hercules the team-player Argonaut, and a recent cinematic Hercules (*The Legend of Hercules*, 2014, starring Kellan Lutz) has him leading a rebellion against a tyrannous Amphitryon. In the two comic mini-series *Hercules: The Thracian Wars* and *Hercules: The Knives of Kush* (2008 and 2009, published by Radical Comics), in which Hercules leads a small contingent of Greek mercenaries, Steve Moore creates a tension in the Hercules character between violent, vengeful rage on the one hand and both tactical forethought and even moral reservation on the other. We argue in this paper that such tension not only reflects apparent contradictions among ancient versions of Herakles/Hercules familiar to Moore but also underscores Moore's grim portrait of the Greek mythic age, a portrait thematically marked by betrayal and cruelty.

Moore's comics present Hercules after the completion of the Twelve Labors: but completing them, the narrator Iolaus tells us in the first issue of *The Thracian Wars*, did not appease Hera's wrath as had been promised, and Hercules himself avoids mentioning his past exploits, as if they are more trauma than triumph. The author's introductory essay to the trade paperback of *The Thracian Wars* explicitly models these comics after the Homeric *aoidos*; and as Moore says in an interview printed at the end of the same volume, "Hercules' (mythological)

glory days are over and we now see him less as a demi-god than a human being.” (Incidentally, there is no mention of any of Hercules’ wives in either series, nor any mention of the Greek myth-cycle’s events in Thrace and Egypt: the Horses of Diomedes and Bousiris, respectively.) Gods do not appear in person (cf. Manning, 2009) or even offer assistance to Hercules or his comrades. According to Moore (at Vamvounis, 2008, cf. Wickliffe, 2008a), the publisher “wanted a grittier, more human Hercules, which played down the more mythological aspects and emphasized that of the warrior.” So Moore casts Hercules as leader of a band of Greek mercenaries seeking fortune abroad. Moore’s Hercules series, then, fit into the third category of Classics-related comics, “direct representations of the classical world,” in the critical frame of Kovacs, 2011, 15 (and see Kovacs & Marshall, 2011, *passim*, for a number of essays on comics and Graeco-Roman culture).

Designed by Jim Steranko, illustrated by Admira Wijaya (*The Thracian Wars*) and Chris Bolson (*The Knives of Kush*), the Hercules of Steve Moore’s comics is the typical American comic-book strongman figure, with massive muscles, Caucasian complexion, and long, greasy hair. He carries a gigantic, spiked club, and (in contrast to many other recent pop-culture versions of Hercules) wears the skin of the Nemean Lion at almost all times. Simply put, he looks like a bad boy. When not wearing the lion skin, this Hercules looks a lot like Kevin Sorbo in the 1990s television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*—despite claims to the contrary by the head of the art studio for Radical Comics (Wickliffe, 2008b). Almost every other male character is similarly well-built. Women characters, including Atalanta, are, as is ubiquitous in American comics, voluptuous and scantily clad. The art style on the whole is dark, ruddy, and gory: the violence is detailed and painstakingly drawn. The sexuality is more guardedly portrayed.

The first of Moore’s Hercules mini-series, *The Thracian Wars* follows Hercules and his fellow mercenaries Iolaus, Amphiaraus, Tydeus, Atalanta, Meleager, Autolycus, and Meneus (the last of whom Moore invents for his story) during their service to the Thracian king Cotys, who has hired them to train his army so that he can conquer the tribes of Thrace and unify the land. After leading Cotys’ army on a successful campaign—culminating in the defeat of Cotys’ main rival, Rhesus, whom Hercules spares on the advice of the prophet Amphiaraus—the Greek mercenaries discover that Cotys plans next to lead his army to conquer mainland Greece. King

Cotys imprisons the protagonists, but Hercules escapes and goes to his lover, the king's daughter Ergenia, for aid, but she turns him over to her father for torture. After breaking out of his bonds, Hercules frees his comrades, kills Ergenia (as Tydeus kills Cotys), and runs into an army of rebels under the command of Rhesus, who spares Hercules and his companions but kicks them out of Thrace.

Moore's sequel, *The Knives of Kush*—which he claims in the trade paperback's introductory essay will be his last work in mainstream comics—picks up where *The Thracian Wars* left off, with Hercules and crew (minus Tydeus and Amphiaraus, who have gone to participate in the Seven's assault against Thebes) headed to Egypt to look for employment as mercenaries. After they fight off an assault on a royal caravan by assassins known as the Knives of Kush, the Pharaoh Seti II hires them to uncover palace spies working for his half-brother Amenmessu, who has revolted, allied with a lightning-wielding sorcerer named Khadis, and claimed the southern portion of the kingdom, Kush, as his base of power. The Greek adventurers help Seti's army fend off an invading force of Amenmessu, undertake a reconnaissance mission in the Knives of Kush stronghold, defeat Amenmessu and Khadis, and at last uncover the traitor in Seti's midst, one of his own wives, Takhat. The story ends with Hercules and his comrades, handsomely rewarded, returning to Greece.

Hercules in these stories is a brute, prone to bouts of uncontrolled violence, not unlike the original Herakles in Greek myth. The first issue of *The Thracian Wars* begins with Hercules' comrade Meneus—serving as herald of Hercules' arrival at the court of the Thracian king Cotys—rejecting the stories of Hercules' murderous rages as “scandalous tales that only barbarians would believe.” It ends with the sudden slaughter of all of the Thracians present in court. (We discover at the beginning of issue 2 that these courtiers were in fact imposters, put there by Cotys to test Hercules' combat skills.) In *The Knives of Kush*, Hercules, on his way into battle, gleefully proclaims that “there's no better exercise than slaughter!” These two anecdotes are symptomatic of Hercules' character: when he is provoked, when he decides to join the fray, he unleashes himself and becomes a relentless killing machine. His joy in the gruesome work of war is borne out by his habit of mocking those he defeats in battle with sarcastic quips about their demise. Most egregious among these is when Hercules, upon fatally stabbing Ergenia in the back in the final issue of *The Thracian Wars*, tells her, “You died the way you

lived...impaled on a man's shaft." Moore's Hercules is cold-blooded, even in the bloody heat of a fight.

At the same time, this Hercules is a master strategist, a team-oriented tactician, a renowned general. He plans and successfully executes a number of military gambits on both small and large scale—and, significantly, he seeks out and heeds the advice of his friends, particularly (in *The Thracian Wars*) the seer Amphiaraus and (in *The Knives of Kush*) the mastermind Autolycus. This novel aspect of the mythic character is perhaps suggested by his successful sack of Laomedon's Troy (e.g., Apollodorus 2.6.4, Diodorus Siculus 4.32), or by euhemeristic accounts of the Labors (e.g., Palaephatus 38); but the strategist Hercules of Radical Comics is closer to pop-culture variants of other Graeco-Roman warriors like Leonidas of the *300* comic books (Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, Dark Horse Comics, 1998; see Fairey, 2011), or Maximus of the movie *Gladiator* (2000), than he is to the ancient city-raider Herakles, or even to the stalwart wingman Herakles of Apollonius. The initial motive for Hercules' travel to Thrace in *The Thracian Wars* is an invitation by King Cotys, who describes Hercules' fame as based not only his warrior prowess but also on his martial leadership skills. Cotys hires Hercules to teach Greek tactics to his soldiers, and the second issue of the mini-series is focused on the process of training Cotys' army to fight like a phalanx. At the end of the second issue and into the third, Hercules moves from drill sergeant to commander in the field, as he and his companions lead the forces of Cotys on a successful, carnage-filled campaign to subjugate rival Thracian tribes. The Greek protagonists perform a similar role at the head of the pharaoh's army in *The Knives of Kush*. As part of his commission, Hercules coordinates a feint and surprise attack against an invading army.

Correspondences between Hercules and the Spartan king Leonidas of *300* further demonstrate Moore's transmutation of Hercules in ways contradictory to the essential character of the ancient hero. Though Moore prides himself in using historical research to create a supposedly authentic setting for his Hercules (Vamvounis, 2008)—and though he claims, in the interview at the end of the trade paperback printing of *The Thracian Wars*, to have avoided reading *300* or watching the 2006 movie adaptation of it by the same name—phalanx warfare smacks more of Thermopylae than of *Iliad*, and Moore does acknowledge (in the same interview) that Radical Comics was looking for *300*-esque fare when approaching him to write a

comic about a veteran, ungodlike Hercules (cf. Manning, 2008). In attempting to repel the invading southerners in *The Knives of Kush*, Hercules mounts a Thermopylae-like defense in a narrow, well-defended passage, against a far larger force, one equipped with fireball-launching technology reminiscent of the bomb-throwing “magi” in *300*. In Greek myth, Hercules usually fights alone or in small numbers, relying mostly on his superhuman strength; Moore’s presentation of a Hercules who manages complex troop maneuvers, who relies on his wits as much as his strength, and who doesn’t always leap headlong into a fight creates an alter ego to the raging man-beast Hercules becomes in the midst of battle.

There’s a logical contradiction of sorts between the two defining traits of Moore’s Hercules. The hair-trigger fighter and the considered commander-in-chief do not sit well together in one person. Where the former lays all foes to waste, the latter evaluates how to allocate military resources most effectively, when and when not to attack, when not to kill. (The Labor of the Ceryneian Hind, which Hercules pursued for a full year but could not injure without incurring Artemis’ wrath, could serve as an ancient *exemplum*, but the connection to battle-tactics would be tenuous, and Moore doesn’t include the Hind among the selection of Labors he recounts.) Such a juxtaposition of opposing inclinations results in moments of tension in the work between Hercules’ violent instincts and his strategic interests. In *The Thracian Wars*, for instance, when he discovers Cotys’ plan to invade Greece, Hercules wishes to kill the king on the spot, but yields to the advice of Amphiaraus, who says that it is not yet Cotys’ time to die, that killing him would be an impious act. Mere moments later in the story, when the Greek mercenaries are betrayed and imprisoned by Cotys, Hercules voices regret at not having slaughtered the king while he had the chance.

This tension between rage and strategic restraint is in part a reflection of what Moore might have seen as contradictions among ancient versions of Herakles/Hercules. Moore’s preparation for writing these comics included study of ancient mythological literature: he mentions Homer, Hesiod, Apollodorus, and Apollonius by name, as well as “a lot of the really obscure poets” (Vamvounis, 2008). Moore additionally describes himself as a devotee of the Greek goddess Selene, and as such an avid reader of Greek and Roman texts (Stone, 2011). Among these named sources we may see nascent seeds of the brute/tactician polarity in Moore’s comics. For instance, in one of his few appearances in Homer, Herakles is described as

“merciless, doing deeds of violence, he who would take no heed when doing godless things” (σχέτλιος ὀβριμοεργὸς ὃς οὐκ ὄθειτ’ αἴσυλα ῥέζων, *Iliad* 5.403)—a brute—whereas in the first two books of Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, Herakles is the embodiment of forethought, ceding the leadership of the expedition to Jason and urging the Argonauts to end their dalliance with the Lemnian women in order to continue their quest for the Golden Fleece. (Of course, book 2 ends with Herakles parting from the expedition in search of Hylas, whose loss prompts him to punish the locals by taking their children hostage; and a glimpse of Herakles in book 4 shows him wrecking the Garden of the Hesperides.) To an extent, the conflict in Moore’s comics between rage and restraint is a synthesis of Moore’s sources, which conflict with each other, even if they individually are internally consistent. Versions of Herakles such as the intellectualized decider between Virtue and Vice in Prodikos (paraphrased in Xenophon *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34; see Kuntz 1993–1994) or the comedic sex-crazed glutton (as presented in, e.g., Aristophanes *Frogs* and *Birds*) of the Christ-like half-god of Julian (*Orations* 7) metamorphose the epic and tragic Herakles to a much greater degree than do Moore’s comics, but they provide precedent for investing Herakles/Hercules with attributes profoundly different from his core characteristics as a warrior and beast-killer.

The self-contradictory fusion of the roles of brute and tactician in the character of Hercules draws attention to one of the key themes of Moore’s Hercules comics: betrayal. In *The Thracian Wars*, the Thracian army is betrayed to Rhesus by a scout on the field of battle, Iolaus describes Hera’s continued wrath against Hercules in terms of betrayal, the Thracian king Cotys betrays the Greeks by planning to invade their homeland, and his daughter Ergenia betrays Hercules by handing him over to Cotys (right after Hercules had asked her to betray her father). Within the group of Greeks led by Hercules, Tydeus threatens mutiny and Autolycus both manipulates and lies to his comrades for his own gain. In *The Knives of Kush*, the pharaoh Seti has been betrayed by his usurpatory half-brother Amenmessu, the pharaoh’s wife Twosret and his primary advisor Bay engage in a secret sexual affair, and the pharaoh’s wife Takhat is ultimately revealed as the orchestrator of the civil war between Seti and Amenmessu.

Betrayal, then, is a leitmotif in the comics. In the third issue of *The Thracian Wars*, the narrator Iolaus’ offers a programmatic expression of this theme: “[a]s mercenary soldiers, we expect betrayal. Daily. That doesn’t make it any easier to handle. Sometimes it seems even the

gods betray their own.” In *The Knives of Kush*, the theme is symbolized by the titular antagonists, a secret society of assassins. As again Iolaus says in his narration: “with a secret society, how can you tell where they come from, who they are? How can you trust anyone?” Moore paints a bleak picture of the world, or at least the world of the Greek mythic age—violence, gore, and death are part of the fabric of life, but so too is the failure of trust. As the persona of Hercules shifts uneasily, so too do the allegiances and the trustworthiness of the people he encounters. His trust in others is not static, either; rather, in *The Knives of Kush*, Hercules is much more guarded, suspicious, and quick to anger at those who may betray him. (It may be relevant that Hercules’ primary mentor in *The Thracian Wars* is the prophet of the gods Amphiaraus, but thereafter in *The Knives of Kush* his central advisor is the thief and trickster Autolycus.) Whether this change signals Hercules’ learning from his earlier, naïve mistakes or merely his becoming more jaded and cynical as the story progresses, it effects a breakdown of social bonds, it unmoors the protagonists from their human contexts, in an echo of their self-exile from Greece prior to the beginning of the first issue of *The Thracian Wars*.

The cruelty of Hercules, his companions, and everyone they encounter in the world around them constitutes a second major theme, one that evinces a tension parallel to the tension between Hercules’ roles of brute and tactician. Moore positions Hercules in a violent environment, often in kill-or-be-killed situations; what sets the protagonist apart from his enemies, particularly the Thracian king Cotys, is that he occasionally forebears from exterminating those whom he has overpowered or driven to surrender. In these moments we see Hercules the tactician predominant over Hercules the brute. Yet more often than not, people begging Hercules and his companions for mercy do not get it. And so the brute prevails.

Cruelty, not mercy, is indeed the default mode for protagonists and antagonists alike in Moore’s Hercules comics. Tydeus, the most daring fighter among Hercules’ band of mercenaries, takes exquisite pleasure in consuming the brains of his enemies, and in inflicting psychological trauma on them beforehand by asking them how their brains will taste. Atalanta, who is suicidal, seeks what she considers the mercy of death—and at the same time treats Meleager, who is hopelessly in love with her, with the utmost disdain and outright malice. Both Greeks and non-Greeks appear to consider enslaved persons subhuman. In the second issue of *The Thracian Wars*, for instance—right after informing Hercules that he has just slaughtered a

room filled with ersatz courtiers including women and enslaved persons forced to participate in the charade—Cotys tells him that “[t]he women and slaves, of course, don’t matter,” and Hercules appears to agree. So also moments later, when Ergenia tells Hercules, “treat the maids as your own, of course. They’re only slaves.” Later in *The Thracian Wars*, Hercules is brutally tortured by Cotys’ right-hand man Sitalces, and repays Sitalces with a brutal death.

But sometimes, when the situation calls for it, the warriors in Moore’s Hercules comics are merciful. Rhesus in *The Thracian Wars* is spared by the Greeks, and in turn spares them after the defeat of Cotys. Just before slaying the magic-user Khadis in *The Knives of Kush*, Hercules grants clemency to the priestesses in Khadis’ entourage. Perhaps most emblematic is a scene in the middle of *The Knives of Kush* wherein the Greeks have defeated the Knives of Kush in a battle and are questioning one of them for details of the enemy’s grand strategy. After torturing and interrogating the captive to their satisfaction, Autolycus instructs Hercules to kill the captive; when Hercules balks and evinces shock at the suggestion of killing an unarmed, cooperative prisoner of war, Autolycus himself kills the man. “This isn’t right, Autolycus,” says Hercules. Autolycus’ response: “[w]ar isn’t right, Hercules. Listen, we’re both sons of gods...Gods have to be ruthless sometimes.” Hercules accepts Autolycus’ dictum and looks on in silence.

Packed into this exchange are several related concepts: this kind of cruelty, and the withholding of mercy, are morally wrong. But cruelty can seem necessary within the greater moral wrongs of warfare. (Ruthlessness, incidentally, is one of the essential traits Cotys, in the second issue of *The Thracian Wars*, says that he was looking for when hiring the mercenaries.) And cruelty is, Autolycus suggests, in a way sanctioned or implicitly authorized by the gods, who are themselves ruthless when necessary. Often the gods or “fate,” as the comics’ narrator Iolaus repeats throughout the series, are even inexplicably cruel. In the first issue of *The Thracian Wars*, Iolaus comments, “[w]hen Prometheus first made men, he must have made them like the gods themselves. Murderous. Vindictive. Treacherous. Unfeeling. Oh, yes, men and gods are far too much alike.” To survive in the age of myth, Iolaus suggests, requires embracing the tension between ruthless rage and cunning strategy. Hercules’ rage and his ruthlessness in battle conflict with—perhaps even undermine—his tactical skill and his intermittent moral qualms, and as a result this conflict ultimately calls into question the necessity of Hercules’



violence. We might make a comparison here to Athena's merciless and inexorable orchestration of the total slaughter of the suitors in *Odyssey* book 22; or to Alkmene in Euripides' *Children of Herakles*, whose ruthlessness towards the defeated king Eurystheus arguably derives from a need both to protect her family from possible future retribution and to harm Eurystheus as part of the "help friends / harm enemies" social structure of Greek mythic society (cf. Garrison, 1995, 144–149), but may in fact stem instead from mere vengeful cruelty.

Why this Hercules? Putting the archetypically solitary hero in a team context, giving him a leadership role, and confronting him with moral dilemmas regarding betrayal and mercy—all this serves to bring Hercules down to earth, to make him more grim and gritty, to match the American pop-culture zeitgeist of un-supernatural fantasy. The brutish Hercules appeals to Moore's imagination of a cutthroat Bronze Age, while the tactical Hercules appeals to Radical Comics' desire to profit from the success of *300*, and to the trend in comic-book literature towards clever stratagem over simple feats of strength. (The business model of *300* holds true for *The Thracian Wars*, a film adaptation of which is to be released in July 2014.) Whereas much of the popular appeal of Herakles/Hercules in the ancient world was his role as *alexikakos*, as superhuman protector (Woodford, 1976; Stafford, 2012, 176–177 and 196), Moore's comics offer instead a flawed and troubled Hercules, one whose endurance of hardships is admirable but whose struggle with moral choices in difficult situations can serve as a kind of crucible for our notions of heroism and of right and wrong, in comics, in myth, and in war. In Thrace and in Egypt, as a mercenary and a general, Hercules is able to escape the tension between rage and restraint no more than the inevitable, cruel fates of the gods.

## WORKS CITED

- Fairey, Emily. 2011. "Persians in Frank Miller's *300* and Greek Vase Painting." In Kovacs & Marshall, pp. 159–172.
- Garrison, Elise P. 1995. *Groaning Tears: Ethical and Dramatic Aspects of Suicide in Greek Tragedy*. Series: *Mnemosyne Supplementum* 145. Leiden: Brill.
- Kovacs, George. 2011. "Comics and Classics: Establishing a Critical Frame." In Kovacs & Marshall, pp. 3–24.
- Kovacs, George, and C. W. Marshall, edd. 2011. *Classics and Comics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kuntz, Mary. 1993–1994. "The Prodikeyan 'Choice of Herakles': A Reshaping of Myth." *The Classical Journal* 89.2: 163–181.
- Manning, Shaun. 2008. "CCI Exclusive: Levine Talks 'Hercules' on Film." *Comic Book Resources*. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=17349>
- Manning, Shaun. 2009. "Steve Moore on *Hercules: The Knives of Kush*." *Comic Book Resources*. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=21202>
- Stafford, Emma. 2012. *Herakles*. Series: *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*. New York: Routledge.
- Stone, Aug. 2011. "Lunar Rover: An Interview with Steve Moore and Extract from *Somnium*." *The Quietus*. <http://thequietus.com/articles/07629-steve-moore-interview-somnium>
- Vamvounis, Manolis. 2008. "Moore Talks 'Hercules: The Thracian Wars.'" *Comic Book Resources*. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=19043>
- Wickliffe, Andrew. 2008a. "Barry Levine Talks Radical Comics Launch." *Comic Book Resources*. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=12710>
- Wickliffe, Andrew. 2008. "Getting to Know Your Imaginary Friends." *Comic Book Resources*. <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=15887>
- Woodford, S. 1976. "Herakles *Alexikakos* Revisited." *American Journal of Archaeology* 80: 291–294.