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Citation

Blanshard, A. J. L., & Stafford, E. (Eds.). (2020). The egg-headed hero: Agatha Christie's the labours of Hercules. In *Metaforms: studies in the reception of classical antiquity* (pp. 105-120). Leiden: Brill. doi:10.1163/9789004440067_007

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The Egg-headed Hero: Agatha Christie's *The Labours of Hercules*

Hugo Koning

1 Introduction: in the Footsteps of Hercules¹

The year 1947 witnessed the publication of Agatha Christie's *The Labours of Hercules* (hereafter *Labours*), a collection of twelve short stories featuring her most famous character, Hercule Poirot.² At the beginning of this book, we find our detective seriously considering finally retiring. However, after a conversation with a classicist, he decides to find a fitting climax to his career: an *emulatio* of the works of his heroic namesake. So, he waits and picks twelve cases that allow him to follow in the footsteps of Hercules, not literally, of course, but symbolically: 'That would not only be amusing, it would be artistic, it would be *spiritual*' (*Labours*, 17).³

The *Labours* was originally well-received, even though critics commonly hold that Christie's plots and narrative talent are better suited to novels rather than short stories.⁴ Nowadays, *Labours* is regarded as the best of her short-story collections. Poirot's performance is always at a level we expect of him, the separate stories generally have a strong and interesting plot and there is an obvious theme to tie them all together. Moreover, 'the parallels between modern reality and ancient myth are wittily and skilfully made'.⁵ This chapter takes a closer look at those parallels. Hence, after reflecting on Hercule as Hercules (§2), the chapter will present a short description of Poirot's twelve assignments (§3), after which it will analyse how the mythical labours of Hercules are adapted by Christie into cases for a modern detective (§4), especially looking

¹ This chapter is a translation and adaptation of an article which first appeared in Dutch in *Lampas* (Koning 2014).

² The stories were originally published in the monthly *Strand Magazine*, from November 1939 (#587) to September 1940 (#597). However, the twelfth and final story was only published in the collected volume.

³ All the quotes from and references to *The Labours of Hercules* (hereafter *Labours*) are taken from the so-called Agatha Christie Signature Edition (Christie 2001).

⁴ An opinion shared by the author herself, see Osborne 2000, 248.

⁵ Osborne 2000, 230.

at ways in which the mythological subtext is used and how ancient motifs are connected with the modern story. The issue under consideration is whether Christie's book is a serious dialogue with the ancient myths or whether the idea behind her *Labours* is no more than a narrative gimmick.

2 Hercule versus Hercules

Agatha Christie had a keen interest in the ancient world. Her interest was first piqued through her travels, and it was further deepened through her marriage to her second husband, Max Mallowan,⁶ an archaeologist whom she had met on the British excavation site at Ur. Christie enjoyed working together with her husband on location, acquiring an intimate knowledge of practical archaeology that would serve her well in her books;⁷ *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), which deals with the murder of an archaeologist's wife on an excavation site in Iraq is a good example, and there are others.⁸

It appears that Christie was less well informed about ancient Greece,⁹ an intellectual hiatus that she may have regretted, and Poirot perhaps mirrors this unease, when his guest, the (fictitious) classicist Dr. Burton, cites a brief passage from the *Iliad* (*Labours*, 13–14):

And Poirot, watching him, felt suddenly a doubt – an uncomfortable twinge. Was there, here, something that he had missed? Some richness of the spirit? Sadness crept over him. Yes, he should have become acquainted with the Classics ... Long ago ... Now, alas, it was too late...

6 Mallowan worked on archaeological sites in Ur, Niniveh and Nimrud. Christie was advised by her publisher to keep the last name of her first husband, Archibald Christie, because she had already published several books before her second marriage.

7 The same is true, and to a much larger degree, for Christie's knowledge of poisons, acquired during her work as a nurse during World War I; as an author she soon taught the entire world about the deadly powers of her favorite poison, arsenic.

8 Naturally, *Death on the Nile* (1937) springs to mind; somewhat less well-known, perhaps, is *Appointment with Death* (1938), in which a murder takes place during a tourist's trip from Jerusalem to Petra. In 1946, Christie published a work of non-fiction describing the work of Mallowan in Syria (Christie 1946) and she also wrote a play and a detective novel that take place in Ancient Egypt, *Akhnaton* (1937) and *Death Comes as the End* (1945), respectively.

9 Ancient Greece is remarkably absent from Christie's works. There is one adventure, the short story *The Oracle at Delphi*, in the collection *Parker Pyne Investigates* (1934), that is set in Delphi, but the site serves only as a backdrop for a kidnapping and there is no engagement with antiquity.

After his guest has left, Poirot realises that he may still make up for the lack of a classical education by consciously following the greatest hero of ancient Greece, Hercules (of whom he has apparently, implausible as that may seem, never heard before). Hence, he decides to immerse himself in mythology and has several books brought to his study. One citation makes it possible to identify one of those books as the well-known *Classical Dictionary* by John Lemprière, a book that not only served as an important work of reference for Poirot, but also for Agatha Christie herself; she generally follows it, and there are a number of similarities.¹⁰ Here author imitates protagonist, for it is very likely that not only Poirot, but Christie as well 'read diligently, making notes, frowning, consulting [...] slips of paper and [...] other books of reference' (*Labours*, 15).¹¹

Poirot's study of the myth of Hercules does not, at first, lead to feelings of great affinity: 'What was he but a large muscular creature of low intelligence and criminal tendencies!' (*Labours*, 16).¹² Poirot is about to give up on the project, and understandably so because Poirot appears to have been originally created as Hercules' opposite. When Poirot first appears, in Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, published in 1920, he is described as follows:¹³

He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg [...]. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound.

10 Or the *Classical Dictionary Containing a Full Account of all the Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors* in its full title. The first edition hails from 1788, followed by many reprints. The book was an obvious choice for a reference book at the time that Christie was working on the *Labours*. For similarities, see e.g. verbal similarity (n.24) and the appearance of harpies and Stympalian birds in close proximity (§4).

11 That Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* was not Christie's only source for the myths connected to Hercules is not only implied by the fact that Poirot had multiple books delivered to his study but also suggested by certain details in the *Labours* that do not appear in Lemprière, for example, the nine heads of the hydra and the use of a bronze rattle to scare off the Stympalian (as Christie spells them) birds.

12 It is not just Hercules himself but rather 'the whole classical pattern' with which Poirot finds fault: the gods make use of aliases as do modern criminals, being involved in all kinds of crimes and not showing the least bit of interest in 'decent family life'. This ironical framing of the gods through the lens of a rather uptight detective is well done by Christie.

13 Christie 2006, 26–27.

It seems that Christie was amused by the idea of providing this caricature of a man, who may have been given the name Poirot because of his pear-like shape, with Hercule as a first name. Perhaps Christie always intended that Hercule would one day follow in the footsteps of Hercules. She makes the issue explicit in the prologue of the *Labours*, by raising the question of the fitness of names. Dr. Burton gives several examples of ill-fitting names (a dark-skinned girl called Blanche, an impatient girl called Patience, etc.) culminating in the observation that Poirot does not resemble Hercules at all. A brief description, containing the phrases 'small neat person', 'egg-shaped head' and 'immense moustache' (*Labours*, 11), which make it strongly reminiscent of Poirot's debut introduction, confirms Burton's apposite remark.

Despite all such obstacles, however, Poirot perseveres, clinging to the one resemblance that he does share with Hercules: 'Both of them, undoubtedly, had been instrumental in ridding the world of certain pests ... Each of them could be described as a benefactor to the Society he lived in...' (*Labours*, 17). Poirot thus consciously chooses to ignore a significant part of the hero's mythology: 'no women, no shirt of Nessus ... The Labours and the Labours only' (*Labours*, 18).¹⁴ Poirot's *dōdekathlos* will, of course, not consist of physical achievements; the detective being famously the champion of the 'little grey cells'.

It is obvious by now that Poirot's labours will only symbolically refer to the deeds of Hercules.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is significant that Dr. Burton's citation from the *Iliad*, just a few pages before, already points to this conclusion.

14 Just two pages earlier, there is a reference to Hercules' filicide as a horrible part of the myth, when Poirot, while searching through the mythological handbooks, suddenly remembers a French criminal called Adolfe Durand, 'a creature of oxlike strength who had killed several children' (*Labours*, 16). On Hercules' filicide in Euripides' *Herakles* and modern adaptations of it, see Hamstead's chapter in Stafford (ed) forthcoming.

15 This symbolical use of the *dōdekathlos* as a means of structuring the narrative is somewhat reminiscent of Charlotte Yonge's novel *My Young Alcides* (1875), in which the clever translation of the labours resembles Christie's. However, the story of Yonge, a devout Tractarian, is driven by a strong ideological bent as the Hercules-like hero is portrayed a sinner trying to find redemption by a long and arduous struggle to embrace the cornerstones of the Christian faith, and although Yonge did not intend her story as an allegory, she does understand the figure of Hercules as a paradigm of 'repentant man conquering himself' (Preface). For a full discussion of the ways in which 'the incidents of the myth provide a structure for the theme of repentance and spiritual growth' (Schultze 1999, 394), see Schultze 1999. In contrast, Christie's enterprise is more ironic and playful, lacking the severity and purpose (and the continuity of the story arc) of Yonge's tale.

Dr. Burton had cited two lines from the twenty-third book: μήτι δ'αὖτε κυβερνήτης ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντῳ / νῆα θοὴν ἰθύνει ἐρεχθομένην ἀνέμοισι (23.316–317), translated by Burton himself as 'By skill again, the pilot on the wine-dark sea straightens / The swift ship buffeted by the winds'.¹⁶ These words are spoken by Nestor to his son Antilochus, just before Antilochus enters the horse race that is part of Patroclus' funeral games. Nestor's words emphasize the importance of μήτις (*mētis*, 'cunning' here translated as 'skill')¹⁷ in a case where victory cannot be achieved by physical prowess as Nestor explicitly states that Antilochus' horses are the weakest in the field.¹⁸ Hence, the words are very appropriate at the start of Poirot's own heroic enterprise.¹⁹

3 Hercule's *Twelve Labours*

What follows below is a short description of Hercule Poirot's *Twelve Labours*.²⁰

- 16 I have not been able to trace this translation to a published source; it is unlikely to be Christie's own (see further n.19) and though the translator may be among the circle of her acquaintances it is not possible to ascribe it to any particular individual, although that individual may have been familiar with her work and the endeavour being undertaken in the *Labours*.
- 17 Obviously, it is the idea of 'brain over brawn' that Christie needs here, so one might have expected a more 'intellectual' translation of μήτις (*mētis*). Interestingly, Detienne and Vernant define *mētis* as a kind of mental intuition, especially suited for situations where 'rigorous logic' is unhelpful (1991, 3–4); logic, of course, is the ultimate weapon of Poirot, to whom intuition is inimicable, so such an understanding of *mētis*' range may have prompted Christie's translator towards the choice of 'skill' or Christie into substituting 'skill' into a translation.
- 18 Homer, *Iliad* 23.308–14 (trans. Murray rev. Wyatt): '...you know well how to wheel about the turning-post; yet your horses are slowest in the race: therefore I think there will be sorry work for you. The horses of the others are swifter, but the men know not how to devise more cunning counsel than you do. So come, dear son, lay up in your mind cunning (*mētis*) of every sort, so that the prizes not slip away past your grasp'.
- 19 The quote is thus well-chosen, but does not provide proof that Christie understood ancient Greek, for it contains two spelling errors. The (consistently) wrong spelling Hypolyta for the Amazon queen Hippolyta later in the book is another indication that Christie did not know Greek; the reversal of the y and i seems to be an impossible mistake for anyone with a classical education. Nevertheless, the possibility exists that this mistake was deliberate (and therefore not corrected during the editing and publication processes), to ironically hint at the fictional nature of the painting of the Girdle of Hyppolyta (see §3.9 and n.24), although I think this is unlikely.
- 20 For a summary of the ancient Hercules' labours, see Stafford's Preface to this volume.

3.1 *The Nemean Lion*

Despite the fact that Poirot intended to wait for a case worthy of a hero, he is obliged to investigate the kidnapping of a Pekinese (a type of canine also known as a 'Lion Dog'); not really a 'proper labour of Hercules' (*Labours*, 20).²¹ Poirot surprises his wealthy and rather unpleasant client by solving the mystery very quickly: we learn that there is a second Pekinese, owned by the client's maid. It is this animal, trained to run home whenever it is released, that is used as a 'double' to stage the kidnap. The name of the animal – Augustus – is one of several ways to emphasize the difference between Poirot's achievement and the exemplary one by Hercules.

3.2 *The Lernean Hydra*

In this tale, the hydra takes on the shape of a 'vile network of lies and suspicion' (*Labours*, 61), a band of gossipers that works overtime when the wealthy spouse of a young doctor dies rather suddenly. The innocent widower, afraid of all the suspicions and accusations, does not dare to marry again. Poirot cracks the case by taking out 'the original head' (*Labours*, 92) of the monster, a lovesick nurse who wanted to marry the doctor herself.

3.3 *The Arcadian Deer*

When Poirot's car breaks down in the middle of the countryside, he meets a young man who has all the looks of a 'shepherd in Arcady' (*Labours*, 100). The young man has fallen hopelessly in love with a young dancer with golden hair, who has suddenly disappeared completely. Poirot is moved by pity to take on the case, and soon finds himself on a time-consuming chase all over Europe, following all kinds of misleading clues until he at last tracks her down in the Swiss Alps.

3.4 *The Erymanthian Boar*

While in the mountains, Poirot accepts an assignment from the Swiss police to trace an escaped criminal described as a 'wild boar, ferocious, terrible, who charges in blind fury' (*Labours*, 137). The mission is to capture the rogue alive. After a rather exciting hunt, that involves the violent murder of a man attacked with 'savagely and unbelievable ferocity' (*Labours*, 150), who appears to be the target at first, Poirot catches the gangster, who had hidden himself in a remote, snow-covered hotel in the Alps to undergo plastic surgery.

21 The dog is later ironically labelled 'a veritable lion' (*Labours*, 27).

3.5 *The Augean Stables*

The former Prime Minister of England appears to have embezzled party funds for years, and a scandal may erupt that could destroy the brilliant career of the new Prime Minister, a sympathetic young man. The Home Secretary wants Poirot to prevent the news from hitting all the tabloids. The assignment seems a far cry from Poirot's usual detective business, but he is persuaded when his client (unwittingly) presents the case as one involving the cleaning of an Augean Stables. Curiously enough, the newspaper editors visited by Poirot employ the same imagery, presenting themselves as ready to send a 'purifying flood of Public Opinion' (*Labours*, 174) through Parliament.²² Poirot is unable to stop them and stages a personal scandal involving the wife of the Prime Minister, one that is soon refuted afterwards. He thus builds a dam of mud to re-route the rivers 'Romance and Sentiment' and distracts all attention from the real scandal.

3.6 *The Stymphelean Birds*

A lovely holiday location near the (fictitious) Stempka-lake sees a young politician getting accidentally involved in a murder case; immediately afterwards, he is blackmailed. Two residents of the hotel, Polish sisters who are remarkable for their 'long, curved noses' (*Labours*, 190), immovable faces, 'loose cloaks' and 'claw-like hand[s]' (*Labours*, 190), behave in a suspicious way. Poirot investigates and uses the telegraph, a modern rattle, to find out the actual blackmailers were two charming British ladies.

3.7 *The Cretan Bull*

Poirot is hired on behalf of the son of an admiral ('tall, magnificently proportioned, with a terrific chest and shoulders, and a tawny head of hair', *Labours*, 228), who is considering killing himself because he thinks he is losing his mind: it appears he is caught in nightly fits of rage that cause him to wreak havoc on the countryside. Poirot's investigation, however, shows him to be perfectly healthy: the fits of madness are caused by poisoning with hallucinogenic drugs. The person responsible is the admiral himself, who just recently found out that the boy is not actually his own son.

22 For the use of the Augean Stables in eighteenth-century British political cartoons, see Ep-pinger in Mainz and Stafford (eds) 2020. See also A. Michalopoulos in this volume for the metaphor in the modern Greek press.

3.8 *The Horses of Diomedes*

The horses of the myth take the form of a general's daughters,²³ who seem to have come under the nefarious influence of a young drug dealer. The girls are initially described as 'man-eaters' (*Labours*, 274) because of their sexy appearance; soon, however, it turns out that the young women, guided by the general (who is not actually their father), are themselves the main distributors of a small drug-dealing organisation, thus 'feeding, like the mares of Diomedes, on human flesh' (*Labours*, 288). Poirot quickly uncovers the scheme and makes the girls testify against their 'master'. And so, hope remains that they can still become 'tamed' members of society.

3.9 *The Girdle of Hyppolita*

The Girdle of Hyppolita (*sic*) is the name of a Rubens painting that has been stolen. It is Poirot's task to retrieve the 'recent discovery, a hitherto unknown masterpiece'.²⁴ The detective chooses to combine this assignment with another, the disappearance of a young lady who was sent to a French school for young girls but never arrived there. We soon find out that the luggage of the missing (and quickly recovered) girl was used to smuggle the Rubens. Poirot connects the dots, saves the day and at the end of the tale is surrounded by the 'Amazons' of the girls' school who demand his autograph (*Labours*, 316).

3.10 *The Flock of Geryon*

Poirot investigates the leader of a sect who goes by the name of the Shepherd. The sect's secret doctrine apparently describes the Shepherd as having three heads: one of gold, one of silver and one of copper.²⁵ Members who mention the Green Hills Sanctuary in their will all meet suspicious (and early) deaths. In the end, Poirot unmasks the charismatic charlatan (who is constantly flanked by a sidekick described as a 'faithful watchdog', *Labours*, 339).

23 One of them is described as a 'filly', 'tossing her head in an effort to throw back the thick mane of blue-black hair' (*Labours*, 270).

24 *Labours*, 293. Christie is being ironic, of course. There is no painting by Rubens with that name. Christie did, however, choose a plausible subject for her non-existent masterpiece, for Rubens painted various Amazonomachies.

25 Christie's use of the word 'flock' in the title (instead of the more usual 'cattle') may already point to her adaptation of Geryon into a metaphorical rather than literal shepherd, although it should be noted that Lemprière speaks of 'flocks' as well, s.v. Hercules (1820, 337).

3.11 *The Apples of the Hesperides*

An art-collector has acquired a golden chalice with a picture of a snake and an apple tree on it, but the piece has gone missing. Poirot tracks the object with the help of detectives all over the world (functioning as Nereus and Prometheus from the myth), and travels to the most western part of the world (Ireland!) to find it. The chalice is in a monastery, guarded by nuns (the modern Hesperides), but still Poirot manages to reclaim it. Fortunately, the client returns the chalice to the nuns on the advice of Poirot.

3.12 *The Capture of Cerberus*

Drugs are dealt in a trendy nightclub called *Hell* (fittingly decorated with numerous references to the Underworld). A raid by the police is ineffective; Poirot investigates and finds the location of the drugs: hidden in the mouth of a giant watchdog (naturally) called Cerberus. From there it is an easy trick to find the drug-dealer.

4 'What have the classics got to do with it?'²⁶

As the summary above (§3) demonstrates, Christie has gone to considerable lengths to modernise the labours of Hercules and adapt them to fit her own great hero.²⁷ Instead of physical challenges, the twentieth-century Hercules deals with deceit, fraud, blackmail and cases of false identity. The monsters of myth resurface in new shapes: a wild boar is a gangster, the hydra a network of lies and gossip, the Amazons young ladies in a girls' school. But how deep is Christie's connection to the ancient myth? Does this case of reception revolve around a number of surface resemblances, or is there more to gain for the informed reader (such as the classicist)?

The first thing to note is that most references to the myths of Hercules are quite explicit and hardly subtle. This could of course be expected, since Christie was not writing for classicists alone. The larger audience, that presumably only vaguely knows of the *dōdekathlos* at best, needs clear clues to follow the main theme through the several stories of the collection. This means that the works of Poirot and Hercules are compared explicitly and repetitively in all of

²⁶ Most people whom Poirot meets during his labours do not see or appreciate the parallels with the labours of Hercules. This also holds true for Lady Carmichael, who is being questioned by Poirot on the drug-dealing 'daughters' of General Grant, and whose question (*Labours*, 276) I use for the section title.

²⁷ There can be no doubt that Poirot is the most famous creation of all Christie's detectives. He features in thirty-three novels and fifty-four short stories: see Fitzgibbon 1980, 45.

the short stories. One example is chapter 3, *The Arcadian Deer*: in a story of about twenty-five (small) pages there are five comparisons between the deer and the elusive dancer;²⁸ and to top it all, the boy looking for her resembles a 'young shepherd in Arcady' (*Labours*, 100). In *The Augean Stables*, no fewer than three people, independently of each other, compare the political scandal to the mythical stables. Slightly more subtly, when Poirot goes looking for the Veratrino Chalice (in *The Apples of the Hesperides*) he is aided by a man called Atlas and when Atlas is complaining while helping Poirot cross the monastery wall, the detective says: 'Be quiet. It is not the weight of the world that you have to support – only the weight of Hercule Poirot' (*Labours*, 366).²⁹

Christie knows, of course, that the references are numerous and can be overly transparent; she actually lets us know that she realizes this, rather subtly, in *The Erymanthian Boar*. In this tale, Poirot receives a written assignment to capture a gangster called Marrascaud, a criminal described as a 'wild boar'. This is an easy clue for the informed reader, but Poirot too marks this reference as an 'odd coincidence' (*Labours*, 128). Christie's self-referential irony is put to use later in the story, for when the undercover-agent (who turns out to be the gangster) uses the same words to characterize the criminal (*Labours*, 137, see below), we are beyond coincidence: Poirot can be sure that this man has gone through his belongings and has read the assignment. This is a remarkable passage, showing Christie's awareness of the dangers of over-doing a resemblance.

This particular passage is also noteworthy because Christie reflects on her own project in yet another way. Marrascaud, who poses as an agent (whereas the actual agent is posing as a butler), tries to convince Poirot that the man he is looking for is a real thug: 'I never heard of him as an expert in disguise. He has not the guile and cunning of a serpent. He is a wild boar, ferocious, terrible, who charges in blind fury' (*Labours*, 137). Here Marrascaud attempts to deceive Poirot by describing himself as a typical opponent for *Hercules*, while being in disguise at the time, and thus a true catch for *Hercule*.

Naturally, Marrascaud's plans to fool Poirot are a *mise-en-abîme* for Christie's attempts to throw off the reader. Matters surrounding the identity of the characters belong to the core of the detective-genre. Christie has written twelve short detective-stories but can add extra riddles to them because of the over-arching theme: the audience is invited to guess which modern character

28 Her golden hair, reminiscent of the golden horns of the mythical deer, is mentioned at *Labours*, 104, 107 and 121; it is also revealed that the girl was dancing in a show called *La Biche au Bois* ('The Doe in the Woods', *Labours*, 110), and she resembles a 'stricken deer' (*Labours*, 122).

29 After the deed is done, Atlas fears he will be caught in the morning, and Poirot reassures him that 'tomorrow the world is yours' (*Labours*, 366).

stands for which mythological one.³⁰ Sometimes, Christie tries to mislead the reader with respect to this game of association. A good example of such an additional mystery can be found in *The Stymphalean Birds*, one of the most successful stories in this respect. The two Polish sisters with the distinctly bird-like appearance (*Labours*, 190, above §3.6) seem the most likely suspects behind the blackmailing of the main character. Surely, they must be the birds! But no: as it turns out, the real culprits are the sympathetic and charming British ladies whom the protagonist has just recently befriended. In this story, readers could have seen through the explicit and obvious references Christie repeatedly provides (e.g. 'still faces, curved beaks of noses, long claw-like hands', *Labours*, 211) by picking up on other hints that Christie has dropped. For example, a remark from one of the British ladies, which is placed at the beginning of the story, informs the reader 'you can't possibly tell what people are like just by looking at them' (*Labours*, 195), an observation that turns out to be a very valuable hint indeed. In this case, classicists, or readers familiar with stories of the labours of Hercules, actually do have an advantage in guessing the identity of the criminals, for the bird-like Polish sisters have been called 'harpies' just before (*Labours*, 194), and, as we all know (and as Lemprière emphasizes in his *Classical Dictionary*),³¹ the Harpies are different creatures than the Stymphalean birds, although they are confused sometimes.

Another story which is similarly enriched for the classicist, is chapter 10 (*The Flock of Geryon*), in which the cult leader has a sidekick who is described as a 'faithful watch-dog' (*Labours*, 339). Classicists will understand him as the transformation of Geryon's watchdog, Orthus, especially when he occasionally growls at someone, although this is little more than an 'in' joke that, while it consolidates the identity of the Shepherd/Geryon, does not add to the nuance of the narrative or its investigative task.

Another detective-story that is enriched by knowledge of the mythological material is chapter 7, *The Cretan Bull*. One of Christie's biographers speaks of 'only the remotest connection between the Poirot story and the legend of Hercules',³² but that judgement underplays the multi-layered nature of the story. When taken at face value, the story invites the reader to identify Hugh (the young man whose situation causes his fiancée, Diana, to employ Poirot) with the bull. Hugh is described as someone with a 'tremendous air of strength and virility about him' (*Labours*, 228), and Poirot even makes the comparison

30 These 'extra' riddles are especially prominent and relevant in chapters 4 (*The Erymanthian Boar*), 6 (*The Stymphalean Birds*) and 7 (*The Cretan Bull*): see discussion below.

31 S.v. 'Stymphalus', Lemprière 1820, 736.

32 Osborne 2000, 229.

explicit by saying, 'He is the young Bull' (*Labours*, 229); and, of course, the young man is said to experience fits of rage that create a great deal of damage to the countryside (*Labours*, 226).³³

Yet the mystery turns out to be more complicated than that, and the story is far more tightly connected to the myth than one would think at first. First of all, Hugh is from a family of sailors, a reference to Crete and its naval importance.³⁴ And we discover that Christie must have studied 'Cretan' mythology, when Poirot discovers that Admiral Chandler is not Hugh's real father (which is the very reason why he is trying to make him commit suicide). Hugh's biological father is instead a good friend of the Admiral, a Colonel called Frobisher. The ancient myth of the bull and the Minotaur is clearly visible here (*mutatis mutandis*, of course), with Hugh being the bastard son ('Minotaur') of whom the Admiral ('Minos') is ashamed; and that means Frobisher is the character who should be identified with the bull.³⁵ Only when (or if) the reader has figured that out, is it possible to realise that Christie had actually already given the reader a clue to this identity. Christie's earlier description of Frobisher contained the information that he is 'restless' and 'irascible', with the 'habit of drawing down his brows over his eyes and lowering his head, thrusting it forward' (*Labours*, 228).³⁶ As is usual in Christie's works, the reader has missed the valuable clues and focused instead on the thing upon which she wanted the reader to focus.

The classicist occasionally has the advantage of the general reader in another respect as well; whoever knows the myth of Hercules is able, at least sometimes, successfully to predict some of the events in the story. For instance: that Cerberus, the virtually immovable watchdog of the nightclub of the final tale, will eventually have to leave his place to come outside could easily be anticipated. Similarly, it is hardly a surprise that the golden chalice that Poirot steals from the monastery is eventually restored, for the stolen apples of the Hesperides are eventually returned to the garden as well. And, just as the

33 In addition, Hugh himself claims that he was a 'mad bull' (*Labours*, 240) in one of his nightmares, and describes himself as 'strong as a bull' (*Labours*, 244).

34 One of the ancestors of the Chandler family 'sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh in fifteen-something-or-other' (224); this may even be a reference to the reign of Minos, also fifteen-something-or-other (albeit BCE).

35 The woman involved in the love triangle had passed away a considerable time before and her name is never mentioned, but a portrait shows her 'radiant vitality' (*Labours*, 232), which could be a reference to Minos' wife, Pasiphae (Πασι-φάη, lit. 'Shining out all around').

36 Cf. the later allusion to this description, which presents the characteristic gesture: 'He [Frobisher] squared his shoulders, suddenly thrust his head forward pugnaciously' (*Labours*, 233).

horses of Diomedes become tame after Hercules has fed them their master, there is still hope for the charming drug-runners of General Grant, as long as they testify against him; for the general himself 'must be destroyed – destroyed utterly' (*Labours*, 288).

5 Conclusion: 'the spirit of the original'

Right after his translation of the lines from the *Iliad*, Dr. Burton sighs that 'you can never really get the spirit of the original' (*Labours*, 13), which bodes rather ill for Christie's (and Poirot's) project; perhaps it is impossible to have Poirot, described as 'modern' in the very first line of the *Labours*, complete a truly Herculean achievement. However, there are good reasons to believe that Christie is in fact successful, in a way that transcends the mere gimmick or simple narratological device.

It cannot be denied that Christie goes to considerable lengths sometimes to create a parallel to an actual labour of Hercules, with the result that the link occasionally seems somewhat contrived or over-explicit. On the other hand, the author is obviously well aware of this, as demonstrated by the self-referential irony: in *The Erymanthian Boar*, an 'odd coincidence' is turned into a clue to solve the mystery, and in *The Cretan Bull*, just as in *The Stymphalean Birds*, the explicit comparisons are meant to throw the reader off the scent, in a typical piece of Christie misdirection. In order for this sleight of hand to work, some of the explicit comparisons in fact have to be true. The high quality of Christie's adaptation can further be demonstrated by the fact that the original myths are never explicitly mentioned or retold, and that fairly short (and dramatically rather uninteresting) labours of Hercules are elaborated into full-blown (if short) stories. Finally, given that Christie did not have a classical background, the author very rarely departs from the ancient tradition, if at all.³⁷

37 Apart from the incorrect spelling of Hippolyta, and the fact that Poirot defeats the hydra by destroying its 'original head' (a weakness not mentioned in ancient sources, although some authors do mention that one of the heads was immortal), the only unconventional detail I could find was the rather curious one that the Nemean lion would have a 'skin of invisibility' (*Labours*, 52). It cannot be a simple mistake for 'invulnerability', because it is the Pekinese's very capacity to 'disappear' that is central to the plot of the story. The departure from tradition, therefore, cannot be ascribed to Poirot (who makes the remark) either; it must be Christie's. On the other hand, it is interesting that Poirot does express the wish to have the dog's 'mantle of invisibility' (*Labours*, 52) for himself, referring to the iconic skin taken from the Nemean lion by Hercules. Could it be that Christie is not in error but is pointing to the fact that Poirot, working with stealth and discretion, is better served by a skin of invisibility?

It is to be regretted, perhaps, that Christie has focused so exclusively on the particular labours and did not pay much attention to the other parts of the myth of Hercules; on the other hand, this focus was delineated in the Prologue: 'The Labours and the Labours only' (*Labours*, 18). There are only a few references to the larger framework of the Hercules myth. For instance, a couple of Poirot's clients resemble Eurystheus, the mythical king of Mycenae who imposed the labours on Hercules, in both their greed and arrogance.³⁸ Moreover, on the very last page of the *Labours*, Poirot appears to have rediscovered his youth after he has met an intriguing woman in *Hell*: he sends her a large number of roses and is suddenly walking around energetically, 'almost sprightly' (*Labours*, 412). 'Really – at *his* age!', is his secretary's response. Could this rejuvenation be a reference to Hercules' marriage to Hebe, goddess of youth? In the myth, of course, Hercules did not marry Hebe after finishing his last labour, but only after his agonizing demise – but Christie may well have felt Poirot's descent into *Hell* could be interpreted as a symbolic death that could lead to symbolic rejuvenation.

This last observation leads to the question of the narrative arc of the twelve stories as a whole. Obviously, the labours-model facilitates a collection of episodes that are as loosely connected as the labours of Hercules themselves; taken as such, Poirot's project is a brilliant strategy to join more-or-less-separate tales under one heading and create a sense of unity. It is difficult, however, to find hints of further unification, although one may argue that, perhaps, Poirot becomes more and more heroic throughout the collection. The first tale, at least, is very obviously about the mismatch between the ancient hero and his modern imitator: the Nemean lion has been downgraded to a Pekinese dog, comically called 'Augustus' to further emphasize the insignificance of Poirot's endeavour. Soon after that, however, Poirot faces some rather mean and dangerous criminals, engages in serious travel, and gets better and better at recognizing and commenting on similarities with Hercules' activities. Did Christie choose the Pekinese in the first tale to contrast with the huge Cerberus in the last tale as a means of indicating the progress of Poirot's 'Herculeanisation'? The potential reference to Hercules' marriage to Hebe and Hercules' rejuvenation and deification at the end of the book may suggest that Poirot has inadvertently become more like the ancient hero than he planned. Incidentally, at a meta-level, such a covert reference to Hercules' deathlessness is quite suitable for the (supposedly) last performance of Poirot as a detective, foreshadowing the ever-remaining interest in Christie's most famous and best-loved character.

38 This is especially obvious in chapters 1 (*The Nemean Lion*) and 11 (*The Apples of the Hesperides*).

It is possible to conclude that Christie's collection is a very successful example of modern reception of the Hercules-myth. The ancient hero is incarnated in an extremely unlikely avatar, and so the mythical tales are modernised with intelligence. The short stories show many similarities with the *dōdekathlos*, and there is plenty of attention to details in the ancient tradition of the labours as it has come down to us. Occasionally, Christie digs deeper, by turning the mythical parallel into an extra mystery, or even commenting in cryptic fashion on her own enterprise.

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