Demigod, god or monster? Rick Riordan's Hercules

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§1 Introduction: Demigods, gods and monsters

Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* books, aimed largely at a middle school audience, incorporate an ever-increasing breadth of mythical characters, figures and places. Initially focusing on Greek mythology, Riordan's work now additionally encompasses Roman, Egyptian and Norse mythology. To date, he has published four full series taking place in Percy's universe, while a fifth is currently underway and further material may well be forthcoming. The first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), focuses specifically on Greek gods and myths, while the second, *The Heroes of Olympus* (2010-2014), blends Roman and Greek material. In addition, his *Kane Chronicles* (2010-2012) take the Egyptians as their subject matter, while *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard* (2015-2017) adds Norse gods into the pantheon. Riordan's latest series *The Trials of Apollo* (2016-2020) allows him to expand his presentation of Greek and Roman mythology yet further. Spin-offs and other merchandise abound, including various short stories which expand and even link the main sets of books. It is worth noting that the books are framed very much within the conventions of video games, with which the target audience is likely to be familiar.[1] Thus, characters gain experience by fighting monsters, they acquire special abilities or equipment, and monsters can be fought on multiple occasions since they vaporise when destroyed only to reform later in the series.

Even within his Greek and Roman narratives, Riordan's work adapts and reinterprets an immense number of mythical stories and introduces readers to a potentially bewildering array of ancient characters, from those who are very well-known, to more unusual figures. To assist his young readers to follow and keep track of such an extensive cast, Riordan adopts a schema involving fixed categories of character-types; namely regular mortals, demigod heroes, and ancient mythical characters. Regular mortals usually do not interact with the mythical world (although there are some notable exceptions) and act as if they are living in the world with which we are familiar. Demigod heroes, on the other hand, are those characters who are nonetheless mortal but distinguished from the former group by special abilities inherited from their divine parent. These characters occupy both the ordinary familiar

1Further on Hercules in video games, see Beaumont in Blanshard and Stafford 2020.

world, and also the mythical fantastic world. On the other side, ancient mythical characters in Riordan's work are usually presented as either gods or monsters, although later books feature ancient mortal characters who have been resurrected and often turn out to be monstrous in some way. Neither of these latter categories are precisely mortal, although it is possible for them to die or be killed. The gods are eternal (although they can die), and monsters always eventually reform after being destroyed by a demigod hero.

I will confine this analysis to Riordan's first two series, but I will include any short stories linking them. The first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009) starts with the premise that the Greek pantheon of Olympian gods are still alive and continue to have illegitimate children with mortals. These children, who are brought up by their mortal parent, are all demigod heroes, who must spend their teenage years fighting for their survival as they are constantly attacked by mythical monsters. The first book, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2005), introduces Percy, a dyslexic and ADHD twelve year old who constantly seems to get into trouble. He learns that this is because he is a demigod son of Poseidon — so his dyslexia is because his brain is hard wired to understand Greek, and his ADHD is a result of his excellent battle reflexes. Percy discovers this after fighting a minotaur and waking up in the summer camp for training demigods to fight monsters, Camp Half Blood, which is a sanctuary for demigods where they can be safe from monsters. Each book in the first series contains a quest which Percy takes part in, building up towards a larger struggle between the gods and Titans. Thus, in Lightning Thief, Percy has to rescue Zeus's lightning bolt from Hades and return it to Olympus. In *Sea of Monsters* (2006), the quest is to locate the Golden Fleece and bring it back to the camp, and in *The Titan's Curse* (2007) the quest is to rescue Artemis who has been trapped to hold up the sky in place of Atlas. *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008) focuses on a quest to explore Daedalus's labyrinth, leading on to *The Last Olympian* (2009) in which the demigods and Olympians fight the Titans to save the world.

Riordan's subsequent series, *The Heroes of Olympus* (2010-2014) is structured more holistically, although it also contains shorter quests leading to a climatic battle, this time of demigods and Olympians against giants. In this series, the Greek demigods discover their Roman counterparts based at Camp Jupiter, and the two sets of demigods must work together. In the first book, *The Lost Hero* (2010), the demigods from Camp Half Blood undertake a quest to free Hera (also Juno), and in the second book *Son of Neptune* (2011)

Percy, together with Roman demigods from Camp Jupiter have to free Thanatos. The Greek and Roman demigods then team up for the remaining three books, and seven demigods travel to Rome and Greece. In *The Mark of Athena* (2012) they have to find the Athena Parthenos, in *The House of Hades* (2013) they have to close the doors of death. Finally, *The Blood of Olympus* (2014) concludes the series, culminating in the gigantomachy.

§2 Herakles: a multiplicity of identities

Herakles or Hercules is an interesting figure to examine within this framework because he transcends these boundaries in many ways. Stafford has noted the hero's own ubiquity in Greek mythology, exemplified by his copious representations in both art and literature:

> Herakles is the quintessential Greek hero. In antiquity he featured in more stories and was represented more frequently in art than other hero or god – some ancient writers speculated that there must have been two, three, six, eight or even as many as forty-three heroes of the same name.[2]

This multiplicity provides Riordan with a rich set of representations of Herakles to engage with, both directly and indirectly. Herakles' role within the *Percy Jackson* books is limited: he appears only twice within the first two series, indirectly in a dream in *The Titan's Curse* (2007), and directly in *The Mark of Athena* (2012b). However, as the modern demigods follow quests and kill monsters, Herakles' presence is felt on a number of other occasions, not least because the range of monsters he encountered provides fruitful material for the books. In this chapter, I will examine how Riordan develops the figure of Herakles for a young twenty-first century audience, and how he uses the hero to question the distinctions he sets up between gods, demigod heroes and monsters in the various narratives. Riordan is not consistent in the way in which he refers to the hero, and thus he uses the names Heracles and Hercules within his work more or less interchangeably.

Herakles was an ambiguous figure already in the ancient world, since his extended storyline allowed him to cross multiple boundaries in unusual ways. Deacy has examined

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2Stafford, 2012, xxv. For the tension between three different versions of Hercules and those versions in competition in the construction of national identity with reference to Spain, see Fernandez-Comacho in Mainz and Stafford 2020.

Herakles' 'tendency to move between opposite categories' in the context of his relationship with Athena.[3] Equally, Stafford has observed that the 'popular modern image of Herakles as the butch super-hero, whose mission it is to rid the world of monsters and villains, is only one side of the story',[4] because many ancient stories surrounding Herakles did not just focus on his monster-killing abilities, but also focus on his moral choices, his personal struggles, his madness and his eventual deification. Galinsky has argued that the contrast between Herakles as a mortal hero and as a divinity determined many of his literary fortunes.[5] This is certainly a recurring feature in archaic accounts of the hero, and also qualifies Herakles' two appearances in the *Percy Jackson* books.

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus comments on Herakles' ambiguous status when he encounters him in Hades (*Odyssey* 11·601-2):[6]

> I caught sight of the mighty Herakles,
> a phantom; he himself delights among the deathless gods.
> εἰσενόησα βίην Ἡρακληείην,
> εἴδωλον: αὐτὸς δὲ μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι
> τέρπεται

Odysseus qualifies that his encounter is with Herakles' εἴδωλον (*eidōlon*, 'phantom'/'image'), since the actual Herakles αὐτὸς (*autos*, 'himself') really dwells among the gods. Herakles is thus unusual in that he can effectively exist in two forms at once, both as his *eidōlon* and as his real self. But this only exemplifies one way in which Herakles can hold multiple identities simultaneously. His literary appearances as a character in both tragedy and comedy, as well as his cult status as a fully-fledged divinity are further instances of the multifaceted nature of his identity. In Riordan, Percy discovers that Herakles had his own television series among the gods, *Heracles Busts Heads* (*Sea of Monsters*, 97). When he is puzzled by the ubiquity of Herakles, fellow demigod Annabeth explains that Herakles 'had a great publicist' (*Demigod Diaries*, 95). Percy later observes that Hercules, as he is

3Deacy 2005, 37.

4Stafford 2005, 71.

5Galinsky 1972, 6.

6All translations are my own.

more regularly (although not always) known in the books, was 'like the Starbucks of Ancient Greece. Everywhere you turn – there he is' (*Mark of Athena*, 319). Percy's banal comparison of Herakles with an American coffeehouse chain is typical of his perspective and linguistic register, appealing to young readers who may find such descriptions more accessible. Perhaps ironically, Percy himself never meets Herakles directly, but Percy is correct that the figure of Herakles as a demigod hero lies behind many of his adventures in the first series.

§3 Herakles: demigod hero

During the first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009), Percy is frequently haunted by the figure of Herakles as a demigod hero and his various quests – sometimes literally. Before he learns that he is a demigod, Percy recalls that when he was a toddler, he had somehow managed to strangle a snake with his bare hands in his cot (*Lightning Thief*, 40), although he makes no comparison to Herakles at that point. In the second book, *Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters*, Percy ponders setting out on a quest to rescue his friend Grover from the Sea of Monsters, although he has expressly been denied the permission to do so. Hermes, disguised as a jogging delivery man, asks Percy what his favourite constellation is. This is a question that essentially asks him for his favourite mythological character. Percy declares (*Sea of Monsters*, 95):

> 'Uh, I like Heracles.'
>
> 'Why?'
>
> 'Well … because he had such rotten luck. Even worse than mine. It makes me feel better.'
>
> The jogger chuckled. 'Not because he was strong and famous and all that?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'You're an interesting young man.'

Percy's answer surprises the god, because Percy focuses on the ways in which he might identify with the hero's problems, rather than on his more common and well-known heroic aspects. In doing so, Percy draws parallels between his position as a demigod and that of Herakles. Here, Percy concentrates on the events that happen to demigods (whether that is himself or Herakles), rather than how each individual might choose to act in different

situations. However, events over the next two books force Percy to question his admiration of Herakles and reassess his impression about what makes a demigod heroic.

Perhaps not coincidentally, Hermes hands Percy a gift of a thermos flask which is decorated with images like those found on Greek vases (*Sea of Monsters*, 97):

> The sides of the flask were enamelled with red and yellow ancient Greek scenes — a hero killing a lion; a hero lifting up Cerberus, the three headed dog.

Percy correctly identifies the hero depicted as Herakles. The images represent two of Herakles' most famous labours: killing the Nemean lion and stealing Cerberus from Hades, both images of what Hermes labels the 'strong and famous' figure of Herakles (*Sea of Monsters*, 95). In addition, Hermes explains that the flask is 'a collector's item' from the divine television series *Heracles Busts Heads* in which the hero becomes entertainment for the Olympians with displays of his strength and bravery (*Sea of Monsters*, 97). By giving Percy the flask as a gift, Hermes invites a direct comparison between Percy and the hero, which is followed up in later books in the series. The description of the television series draws out another irony: although Herakles should be one of the gods, he is caricatured for his violence and provides low-level entertainment for the other immortals. This figure is of a similar type to the comic appearance of Herakles in the *Birds* of Aristophanes, although in *Birds* Herakles is mocked for his gluttony rather than his strength. The flask contains 'the winds from the four corners of the earth' (*Sea of Monsters*, 98) to help Percy locate his goal, in a reworking of the bag of winds which Aeolus gives Odysseus to help him reach Ithaca (Homer, *Odyssey* 10.18-25; Apollodorus, *Library* 5.7.10). For the initiated reader, Percy is positioned between two key heroes, although only Herakles is named, and it is on Herakles that Percy's attention is focused.

§4 Twelve Labours and other monsters

Percy encounters a great many monsters, particularly in the first series (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, 2005-2009) where he is the main focal character. A number of his monstrous encounters echo those associated with Herakles and his labours. The canonical twelve labours of Herakles were not established before the Classical period, and

perhaps only as late as the Hellenistic era.[7] Brommer has attributed the twelve labours to the subsequent fame of the metopes on the temple of Zeus at Olympia and regarded them as key in eventually establishing the canonical twelve at a later date.[8] Percy's adventures across the first two series (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, 2005-2009, and *The Heroes of Olympus*, 2010-2014) present variations on ten of the twelve canonical labours, and include a few extra deeds of Herakles along the way. Riordan does not distinguish between the canonical labours and the additional deeds, drawing on both indiscriminately. Each encounter is conducted with a twist from the original, re-framing it within a new and different context. The Cretan Bull and Kerynitian Hind have not yet featured in the books from the first two series or the linking stories. The Amazons feature in the second series*Heroes of O*, where they run the online business 'Amazon'. Percy first meets them in *Son of Neptune*, but they eventually become allies, rather than enemies to be overcome on a quest. The current Amazon queen is a modern demigod named Hylla, and is thus a contemporary of Percy and the other demigods. Hylla describes how Herakles stole the belt she is wearing from her predecessor Hippolyta, declaring that it took the Amazons 'centuries to recover it' (*Son of Neptune*, 327). The Amazons are presented as an alternative group for modern demigods, like Camp Half-Blood and Camp Jupiter, rather than the monstrous tribe which Herakles defeated. The figure of Herakles is sidelined in this encounter.

However, many other labours of Herakles invite more direct comparison between the ancient hero and the modern demigods. These comparisons are particularly evident in *The Sea of Monsters* (2006) and *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (2008), and they are central to Percy's understanding of himself in the middle book, *The Titan's Curse* (2007). Percy encounters Cerberus on his first visit to the underworld in *The Lightning Thief*; although he merely needs to evade the monster, rather than carry it off. Percy wrestles with the sea god and shape-shifter Nereus in order to find out information to help him on his quest in *The Titan's Curse* (212-7). Nereus notes that the scenario is a regular one which he has undertaken with other heroes before Percy, although he does not name Herakles. Percy's underwater skills serve him to good advantage in this encounter, since he is able to capture Nereus without drowning, and thus overpowers the old man without relying on brute

7Heslin 2005, 89. For a summary of the canonical labours, see Stafford's forword to this volume. On the formation of the canon, see Stafford 2012, 24-30.

8Brommer 1986, 60 and 63.

strength. Percy and his companions hitch a ride on the Erymantheian boar in *The Titan's Curse* (161-6), rather than capturing it, allowing them to travel a significant distance. The boar is presented as a gift from the god Pan, rather than a monster that must be killed, although it nonetheless tries to terrorise the locality. The boar is hazardous to Percy and his companions, and they must dodge the dangers to subdue and immobilise it before they can climb on its back and ride it. Percy encounters the Nemean Lion in *The Titan's Curse* (133-8), although he distracts it by throwing an ice-cream sandwich into its mouth, thus allowing his companion Zoë Nightshade to fire the killing arrow. He meets the Lernean hydra in *Sea of Monsters*, although again he is unable to defeat it alone; another demigod, Clarisse the daughter of Ares, rescues him by blowing up the hydra with a cannon (137-40). There is an overt comparison with Herakles when Percy and Annabeth are attacked by Stymphalian Birds during a chariot race at Camp Half-Blood in *Sea of Monsters* (76-80). Realizing that they are unable to hold off the birds, Annabeth recalls that:

> 'Heracles used noise! Brass bells! He scared them away with the most horrible sound he could – ' (*Sea of Monsters*, 78)

Percy and Annabeth scare the birds by playing the *Greatest Hits of Dean Martin*, allowing the demigod offspring of Apollo to shoot the birds. Thus, in each of these encounters, Percy does not defeat the monsters single-handedly as Herakles did, and nor does he strike the killing blow (where one is required). Instead, he works together with his companions to avoid, tame or defeat the monsters. His companions are not always willing allies: neither Clarisse nor Zoë wish Percy to be part of their quests, let alone to help him. However, Percy's assistance in defeating the Nemean Lion earns him some grudging respect from Zoë, allowing him to take part in the quest in *The Titan's Curse* from that point.

In *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, three of Herakles' labours are combined into one episode. Percy and his companions visit the cattle ranch of the triple-bodied Geryon (150), who manages the stables of Augeas (139-48), which in turn house the flesh eating horses of Diomedes (136). Percy's approach to each task is different from Herakles': Percy is never required to steal, he does not complete tasks for financial rewards and he rarely kills the monsters himself. In *The Battle of the Labyrinth*, Percy offers to clean the Augean stables for Geryon in order to release his companions, who are being held prisoner by Geryon, and he

'remembered how Hercules had done it' (141). But when he goes to the river nearby intending to channel its waters to the stables, he meets the river's strong-minded Naiad, who compares him directly with Herakles, both in appearance and in his plans for using her river:

> This is freshwater territory, mister. The last guy who asked me this favour – oh, he was way better-looking than you, by the way – he convinced me, and that was the worst mistake I've ever made! Do you have any idea what all that horse manure does to my ecosystem? Do I look like a sewage-treatment plant to you? My fish will die. I'll never get the muck out of my plants. I'll be sick for years. NO THANK YOU! (*The Battle of the Labyrinth*, 142-3)

The thought of being seen like 'a bully, a son of Poseidon throwing his weight around' (143) to divert the river makes Percy feel ashamed. He does not want to be identified with Herakles, and gives in to the Naiad's wishes not to use her river. The Naiad shows Percy how sea water had once covered the land millions of years beforehand, as there are thousands of fossilised ancient sea shells left in the soil. This enables Percy to clean the stables by using the shells to call up the power of the seawater, thus relying on his own abilities rather than bullying a naiad into doing it for him. Here, Herakles is a negative role model that Percy can identify against: Herakles bullies weaker beings, such as the Naiad, into undertaking his tasks for him, and has no concerns about the environmental consequences. By contrast, Percy's environmental awareness becomes greater throughout the first series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, as Salzman-Mitchell has argued (2018). The Naiad's remark that Herakles was 'better-looking' than Percy is interesting, since Percy himself is always represented as being good-looking, even though he shows no signs of acknowledging this himself. The Naiad's remark is thus a taunt to motivate Percy to consider his attitude to Herakles, rather than a genuine comparison of his aesthetic qualities.

In the short story *Percy Jackson and the Staff of Hermes* in *The Demigod Diaries* (2012a), Percy fights the giant Cacus who has stolen Hermes' caduceus. Cacus points out to Percy that Herakles was the only demigod who ever defeated him, casting Percy in Herakles' shadow again, while Percy complains at the ubiquity of Herakles: 'Always Hercules. What is it with Hercules?' (*Demigod Diaries*, 95). Percy's motivation is, like Herakles', to retrieve a stolen item: the cattle for Herakles, and the caduceus for Percy.

However, the cattle Herakles recovered were stolen by him from the monster Geryon, while Percy aims to rescue the caduceus for Hermes. Percy fights the monster together with Annabeth, and only by working closely together are they able to take back the caduceus and defeat Cacus. Herakles lies behind this adventure, but once again as a negative model: he fought Cacus to retrieve something which he had stolen from someone else, making him no better than Cacus in this respect. Percy, Annabeth and Herakles save the local neighbourhoods from the fire breathing Cacus (who appears in Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.184-305 and Ovid, *Fasti* 1.572), and in Percy's case, causing a fair amount of damage along the way, but this is a by-product of their primary objectives. While Herakles serves himself and Eurystheus, Percy and Annabeth serve the gods.

Percy visits the garden of the Hesperides and temporarily holds up the sky in *The Titan's Curse* (253-5). Percy is not the only character to undertake this challenge in *The Titan's Curse*: Atlas tricks Percy's antagonist, the demigod Luke, into holding up the sky, and Luke in turn tricks Annabeth into taking on its weight until Artemis rescues Annabeth by taking the weight upon her own shoulders. Percy in turn frees Artemis by taking the weight of the sky instead, so that she can fight against Atlas, and subsequently trick the Titan into undertaking his former task again (*Titan's Curse*, 255). All these characters undertake this element of Herakles' labour, although Annabeth and Percy (and even Artemis) are motivated by the prospect of rescuing someone important to them, while Luke is tricked by Atlas himself. Percy's key motivation in this quest is to free his friend Annabeth, and neither he nor any of his companions need to steal a golden apple from the garden of the Hesperides. The ways in which the demigods act contrast with the way in which Herakles acts in this labour. Apollodorus suggests that Herakles held up the sky so that Atlas could steal the apple for him, and he subsequently tricked Atlas into resuming his post after the Titan helped him (*Library*, 2.5.11). In this account, neither Herakles nor Atlas are trustworthy, both acting for their own ends.

Percy's attitude towards Herakles changes dramatically during *The Titan's Curse*, the third book in the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series. He fights the Nemean Lion alongside Zoë Nightshade, an immortal girl who is one of the Hunters of Artemis. At this stage, Zoë's real identity is unknown both to Percy and to the reader, but she is later revealed to be one of the Hesperides, although she has been eternally exiled for helping Herakles trick Atlas into stealing an apple from the garden. We learn that it was Zoë who

originally created Percy's sword, *Anaklusmos* or Riptide, as a gift for Herakles when he was about to face the dragon Ladon. After they kill the Nemean Lion it melts away in the manner of dead monsters in the series 'until there was nothing left but its glittering fur coat'(*Titan's Curse*, 138), which is left behind as a trophy of war, to be claimed by the demigod who defeated the monster. Zoë tells Percy to take the lion's skin, which has metamorphosed into a long brown coat. Zoë's instruction further aligns Percy with Herakles, since he is already carrying the sword she originally made for the hero. Percy feels uncomfortable taking the coat, commenting that it's 'not exactly my style' (*Titan's Curse*, 138), but wearing it somehow brings him closer to Herakles. Wearing the coat, which is an impenetrable piece of armour, and carrying his sword, Percy has a dream. In the dream, he experiences, from the hero's viewpoint, the moment when Zoë gave Herakles the sword Riptide, which Percy himselfhe has been using since Chiron gave it to him two years earlier (*Titan's Curse*, 148):

> In my dream, I was somebody else. I was wearing an old-fashioned Greek tunic, which was a little too breezy downstairs, and laced leather sandals. The Nemean Lion's skin was wrapped round my back like a cape, and I was running somewhere, being pulled along by a girl who was gripping my hand tightly.

Percy realises that, aside from wearing unfamiliar clothes, he feels like someone else in other ways: he feels 'stronger than I'd ever felt before', and his voice sounds different, 'deeper, much more confident' (*Titan's Curse*, 149). His vocabulary becomes notably more formal and slightly archaic. He claims, 'I have bested a thousand monsters with my bare hands' (*Titan's Curse*, 149) and later, when Zoë gives him the hairpin which will become his sword, he asks, 'How will this slay Ladon, pretty one?' (*Titan's Curse*, 150). This forms a contrast with Percy's more usual casual language for fighting monsters, where he uses verbs like 'explode' and 'vaporise', which emphasise the video-game style in which the monsters are killed.

However, Percy finds that the way Herakles thinks does not match his own thought processes, and not just in terms of linguistic register. Although the hero in his dream is never identified by name, Percy realises from that dream that Zoë once knew Herakles. Zoë refuses to say the hero's name, but claims that Percy must know who he is since all 'boys want to be just like him' (*Titan's Curse*, 194). Zoë presents Herakles as a selfish and

dishonest hero, rather than a role model for a young male demigod. When Percy asks why he has only ever heard of four Hesperides, and never of Zoë, who was the fifth, she informs him (*Titan's Curse*, 194):

> Because I betrayed my family and helped a hero. You won't find that in the legend either. He never spoke of me. After his direct assault on Ladon failed, I gave him the idea of how to steal the apples, how to trick my father, but *he* took all the credit.

Zoe's story follows the pattern of those of Ariadne and Medea, girls who betrayed their families to help a hero, and were later cast aside by that hero. Like Ariadne and Medea, Zoë provided the hero with clever ideas when Herakles proved unable to defeat the dragon by brute force. Herakles, however, claimed all the credit, writing Zoë out of the story. As a result, when Percy later needs to make a sacrifice to Poseidon, he takes off the lion-skin coat, and he finally acknowledges that the hero in his dream was Herakles (*Titan's Curse*, 230):

> I realised I *did* know who Zoë's hero had been; the one who'd ruined her life, got her kicked out of her family and never even mentioned how she'd helped him. Hercules, a hero I'd admired all my life.

Herakles is no longer someone Percy can admire, as he does not share the same values as Herakles. Percy throws the lion-skin coat into the sea as a sacrifice, as he says his survival does not depend on the coat. His statement 'I'm not Hercules' (*Titan's Curse*, 230) is an affirmation of his own distinct identity as a demigod, and that his approach both to monsters and to heroic tasks is different. Percy does not fight alone, but as part of a team. He does not steal things to gain financial rewards. However, he does fight to protect his friends. This code is at odds with the Herakles presented in the first series.

§5 God or hero?

In the first series, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, Herakles appears only indirectly as the demigod hero for Percy to compare himself with. However, in the ancient world Herakles was not just famous as a demigod hero, but also worshipped as a divinity. The

peculiarity of this double identity is reflected in Pindar's description of Herakles as a ἥρος θεός (*hēros theos*, 'hero god') in *Nemean* 3 (ll. 20-25):

> Yet to travel further is not easy, over the untrodden sea beyond the Pillars of Herakles. The god-hero set them up as famous tokens of sailing limits. He subdued mighty beasts in the sea and by himself he tracked currents in the shallows, until he reached the boundary which sends people home.

οὐκ ἔτι πρόσω
ἀβάταν ἄλα κιόνων ὕπερ Ἡρακλέος περᾶν εὐμαρές
ἥρος θεός ἄς ἔθηκε ναυτιλίας ἐσχάτας
μάρτυρας κλυτάς: δάμασε δέ θῆρας ἐν πελάγεϊ
ὑπερόχους, ἰδίαι τ'ἐρεύνασε τεναγέων
ῥοάς, ὁπᾶι πόμπιον κατέβαινε νόστου τέλος.

Currie has examined the complexity of the term ἥρος (heros, hero), suggesting that it has two distinct uses, a non-religious meaning which indicates social status, and a religious use, which indicates a lower social echelon of minor deities[9]. Pfeijffer notes that Pindar's description is exceptional because two mutually exclusive nouns are juxtaposed, 'hero' and 'god' (ἥρος/*heros* and θεός/*theos*), but there is no way to tell which one qualifies the other: thus 'Herakles is a "god-hero" and a "hero-god"'.[10] Pfeijffer notes that Pindar is usually careful to distinguish mortals from immortals, since these are two mutually exclusive categories.[11] Pindar's ambiguous phrase is perhaps particularly appropriate to the context as he describes the Pillars of Herakles, the pillars that mark the point beyond which no mortal can sail, and thus an uncrossable boundary. Pindar implies that the victor cannot go beyond this point, as only Herakles in his exceptional double form was able to cross the boundary to set up the Pillars which mark the end point. Pindar describes the actions Herakles undertook as a demigod hero (killing sea monsters) as the skills enabling him to reach the final boundary of travel, while he was able to create the Pillars only in his divine form as a god.

9 Currie, 2005, 63-6.

10 Pfeijffer 1999, 292.

11 Pfeijffer 1999, 203.

This makes the noun phrase apt, as it reflects the two aspects, or forms, which Herakles can take.

However it is this second form of Herakles, the god who set up the Pillars to mark the limits of travel, who appears as a character in Riordan's second series, *The Heroes of Olympus*. The modern demigods encounter Herakles in person at the Pillars in the third book of the series, *The Mark of Athena*, when they need to travel to Italy and Greece on their quest. For Pindar (*Nemean*, 3.25), the Pillars mark the τέλος (*telos*, 'limit') from which it is only possible to return home. However, for the American demigods, the Pillars signal a difficult entrance to, rather than an impossible exit from, the Mediterranean, as they have to pass between them in order to reach Italy. As they approach the Pillars, the demigods see the words *non plus ultra*, 'nothing further beyond', written between the pillars (*Mark of Athena*, 320), although this motto is associated with the Pillars only from the sixteenth century[12]. From their perspective, these words become a sign to keep them out, and they can see Herakles guarding the Pillars as a doorkeeper (*Mark of Athena*, 321):

> If they wanted to pass into the Mediterranean, they couldn't avoid this meeting.

They have to encounter Herakles in order to enter the Mediterranean sea, and they realise that this meeting will form the latest challenge in their journey. Herakles becomes a task or labour which they have to overcome. The god Herakles is even more difficult to manage than the hero Herakles who lied and cheated. The modern demigods hope that since Herakles was once like them, he might be reasonable, until one demigod observes that Herakles 'was a son of Zeus, but when he died he became a god. You can never be sure with gods' (*Mark of Athena*, 321). The figure of Herakles as a divinity is thus set up as resembling the other Olympian gods in the series – unreliable and frequently unhelpful.

Percy, much to his disappointment, does not get to meet Herakles himself, since that honour goes to two of his companions: Jason, a son of Jupiter, and Piper, a daughter of Aphrodite. *The Heroes of Olympus* series features the gods in both their Roman and Greek forms. This has a rather devastating effect on the immortals, as we are told by the goddess Nemesis, who is unaffected (*Mark of Athena*, 70):

12 Rosenthal, 1971.

> The Olympians are torn between their two natures, called on by both sides. They become quite schizophrenic, I'm afraid. Splitting headaches. Disorientation.(, 70)

Jason volunteers to meet the god on the grounds that they share the same father (Jupiter or Zeus) and therefore he hopes that they might get along. Herakles appears as his Roman form Hercules, and explains that he is not much affected by the duality of his nature, and that his Roman form is not really that different to his Greek form (*Mark of Athena*, 324):

> 'I was called Heracles. Then the Romans came along and named me Hercules. I didn't really change that much, though lately just thinking about it gives me splitting headaches.'

Although Riordan is not consistent about naming the hero in the first series, the form Hercules dominates in the *Heroes of Olympus* series. This is unusual because most divinities in this series appear in the form in which the demigod imagines them, namely Roman for demigods from Camp Jupiter, and Greek for those from Camp Half-blood. The figure of Hercules appears to change visually very little, even though he flickers while explaining his dual nature. This lack of change is not entirely accurate, however. The river god Achelous claims that Hercules is 'the name most people know him by… his *brand*, if you will. Hercules is nothing if not image-conscious' (*Mark of Athena*, 334), and Achelous offers a different representation of Hercules than the one that Hercules enacts. But with his free guidebook to the local sights and his brand-name Hercules, the figure of the god is in fact quite different from the traditional Greek figure of Herakles that Percy imagined, saw pictures of and dreamt about in the earlier series,.

Hercules does indeed appear to be 'image-conscious', since he is concerned with how people see him, and Piper thinks he looks 'handsome in a rugged way' (*Mark of Athena*, 323), rather than like a caveman as she had initially thought. However, Hercules is dissatisfied with his lot, complaining that being a doorkeeper is dull, since he claims to be missing a potentially exciting social life back on Olympus. Ironically, the mood of his divine form perhaps resembles his shade in Hades in the *Odyssey*, where he focuses on the harshness of his existence while alive (*Odyssey* 11.620-2):

> I was the son of Zeus son of Kronos, but I had immeasurable misery, for I was given to the hands of a very much worse man, who laid harsh trials on me.
>
> Ζηνὸς μὲν πάϊς ἦα Κρονίονος, αὐτὰρ ὀϊζὺν
> εἶχον ἀπειρεσίην: μάλα γὰρ πολὺ χείρονι φωτὶ
> δεδμήμην, ὁ δέ μοι χαλεποὺς ἐπετέλλετ' ἀέθλους.

When the shade of Homer's Herakles addresses Odysseus in this way, it is meant sympathetically, in that he understands the trials of a hero sent out on harsh quests; it is rather different when Riordan's divine Hercules complains about his immortal existence. Jason and Piper feel more hopeful when Hercules appears at first sympathetic to their mission, remembering what it was like to be a demigod, and offering to set them a very simple quest to allow them to prove their worth so that he can let them enter the Mediterranean. Hercules recalls 'after all those labours I had to complete for my evil cousin Eurystheus, well… I don't want to be *that guy*, you know?' (*Mark of Athena*, 326). However, when he discovers that Hera sent them on their mission, his whole demeanour changes, and he sets them a challenging quest. His resentment of Hera focuses not on his heroic actions or the hardship of his labours, but on his personal life and unheroic death (*Mark of Athena*, 327):

> My first family: dead. My life wasted on ridiculous quests. My second wife dead, after being tricked into poisoning me and leaving me to a painful demise. And my compensation? I got to become a minor god. Immortal, so I can never forget my pain. Stuck here as a gatekeeper, a doorman, a… a butler.

This reaction contrasts with Homer's *eidōlon* of Herakles from the *Odyssey*, where his grief was caused by his servitude, which forced him to carry out 'harsh trials' (χαλεποὺς… ἀέθλους, *chalepous aethlous*). The adjective χαλεποὺς/*chalepous* indicates that the labours were cruel, harsh and bitter, while Riordan's Hercules dismisses the quests as a 'ridiculous' waste of his life, rather than a source of misery and suffering in themselves. Nonetheless, Hercules sends Jason and Piper on a quest from his personal life: to take the

other horn of the river god Achelous, who fought Hercules in a contest for his second wife Deianeira.

Here, Hercules is a bitter and resentful god. He is unlike the divine Herakles in the Homeric *Hymn to Herakles*, which presents the god as dwelling in eternal bliss, in the house of Olympus with a goddess for his wife (*Homeric Hymn 15 to Herakles*, 4-8):

> Now, delighted, he dwells in the noble abode of snowy Olympus, and is married to fair-ankled Hebe.
>
> νῦν δ' ἤδη κατὰ καλὸν ἔδος νιφόεντος Ὀλύμπου
> ναίει τερπόμενος καὶ ἔχει καλλίσφυρον Ἥβην.

This situation of Herakles as a god is far removed from his situation in Hades, and the sentence is framed as a contrast, 'now' he is happy, while before he endured hardships. Riordan's Hercules, on the other hand, is no happier as a god than he was as a mortal demigod. Achelous gives the demigods a different version of Hercules's situation, suggesting that he is free to live in Olympus with Hebe, as the *Homeric Hymn* describes, but that he *chooses* not to do so (*Mark of Athena*, 339):

> He married Hebe, the youth goddess, but still he is rarely at home. He dwells here on this island, guarding those silly pillars. He says Zeus makes him do this, but I think he prefers being here to Mount Olympus, nursing his bitterness and mourning his mortal life.

As a god, Hercules has rejected the potential for a happier existence, and would rather be exactly like 'that guy' Eurystheus, who challenges others to complete 'ridiculous quests' in order to feed his own bitterness and grudges. This is far from a heroic image, and not a figure the demigods can admire. Although Piper and Jason complete the quest Hercules sets them, and retrieve Achelous' other horn successfully, they refuse to give the prize to the god.

§7 Conclusion: monster

Piper comes to the conclusion that Hercules is 'a bitter, selfish jerk' (*Mark of Athena*, 346) who wants to harm people because he harbours grudges. Ultimately, the demigods are forced to defeat Hercules just as if he were another monster. Piper points the horn, which has become a cornucopia, at Hercules, and she literally buries him under a mound of fresh food. This plays with the popular image of Herakles as a glutton, and is a typically comic way in which she can overcome the god. When they return to their companions on the ship, Percy helps by sending a huge wave, which knocks Hercules down again, burying him in a mixture of seawater and fruit (*Mark of Athena*, 348-9):

> Piper heard Hercules shrieking and struggling somewhere underneath. Apparently even the l strongest god in the world could be caught off guard when buried under fresh produce.

The demigods have to treat Hercules the god no differently to the monsters they encounter, defeating him in order to progress. Rather than setting them a challenge, Hercules has literally become one of their challenges. Piper realises that the problem with Hercules is that he does not behave in the way she understands that a hero should behave (*Mark of Athena*, 346):

> A hero couldn't control the gods, but he should be able to control himself.

Hercules, on the other hand, cannot control his own emotions, but is driven by his desires, self-image and grudges.

Usually, when the demigods encounter gods, they try and to behave at least partially respectfully towards them. In both the Titanomachy of the first series and the Gigantomachy of the second, their allegiances in the end lie with the gods, who are their family. Pietruszewski has described the books as 'morally ambiguous', since almost every main character 'is an illegitimate child from an illicit affair', and many of the demigods never find out the identity of their divine parent.[13] The gods do not represent an ideal family at any point in the saga, and they frequently do not support each other. In the final battles of both *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* and *The Heroes of Olympus* the gods fight against their own

13Pietruszewski 2013.

family; their parents, the Titans, and their grandmother Gaia, respectively. Brown has noted that the gods are, 'at best, the least worst camp'[14] and, as a group, the gods are certainly not above blame. Herakles the demigod hero and Hercules the divinity have different characteristics in the *Percy Jackson* books. The demigod hero lies, cheats and steals. He works by and for himself and is motivated by his own fame and self-image. As a divinity, Hercules is self-centred, bitter and harbours grudges, and these characteristics motivate his actions against others. These qualities make him monstrous, rather than heroic, in both guises. Thus, in the *Percy Jackson* universe, both as the demigod Herakles and as the divine Hercules, Herakles is ultimately presented not as a hero to be emulated or a god to be respected, but as a monster to be defeated. The multiplicity of ancient traditions about Herakes enables Riordan to transition Herakles from hero and god to monster.

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