OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by
Katarzyna Marciniak

OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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PART III

Holding Out for a Hero... and a Heroine

Edoardo Pecchini

PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH THE CLASSICS: HERCULES AS TRAINER IN TODAY'S LABOURS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

This chapter focuses on questions that arise at the intersection of multiple disciplines. I will try to draw connections between the Classics, literature (and more broadly narration), psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, and education. Concentrating on the myth of Hercules and his character, I will try to make a contribution to the understanding of dimensions of human nature such as impulsiveness, anger, aggression, and violence. Hercules, together with his adventures and efforts, has the thickness and ambivalence typical of the figure of the Greek hero, and his myth lends itself to use, if well known, even as an educational tool.

I will talk about how it is possible to employ Hercules' story as a prolific setting for creating games and activities that teach social skills and competences which promote the development and maintenance of good mental health. I will reflect on the possibility of using this setting to a certain extent also for psycho-educational activities with a preventive and rehabilitative value.

Introductory Remarks: *Coscinocera hercules*

"Hercules – Herakles in Greek – was probably the most adaptable, and adapted, mythological hero in Graeco-Roman antiquity. The range of his qualities, from prodigious strength to moral and intellectual wisdom, was extraordinary. So was the range of his exploits, and their geographical compass" – this is how Karl Galinsky introduces his discussion of the reception of Hercules' myth.[1]

[1] K.G. [Karl Galinsky], "Hercules", in Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis, eds., *The Classical Tradition*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, 426.

This demigod is a multifaceted figure, perhaps one of the most recognized characters in later cultures. The list of his representations based on *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts* is second only to Venus/Aphrodite in a head-to-head competition of forty-five pages versus forty-eight.[2] Hercules' depictions range from the *homo virtuosus* to the Ἀλεξίκακος (Alexíkakos), from the disturbing μαινόμενος (*mainómenos*) to the reassuring "peplum" action hero. All across Europe, the figure of Hercules was largely used in heraldry and in family trees by regal and noble families. In paintings and in the arts we have a full spectrum: from Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and Peter Paul Rubens through Antonio Canova and Salvador Dalí up to teenager comics. As for the cinema industry, there are about forty movies about Hercules. The action hero portrayed by Steve Reeves was one of the greatest box-office successes ever. Hercules' adventures were set all around the known world, and he was sent to place two pillars in the sea as advice for humanity but also as a warning to the threats coming from the unknown horizon and as a limit for human knowledge.

Starting from the horizons inspired by Hercules' Pillars, I would like to begin the chapter with a warning to mariners, as if we were moving in the waters of the Strait of Gibraltar – metaphorical waters where questions and reflections from various disciplines converge. The risk is that our ship (perhaps we could more realistically define it as an inflatable dinghy) finds itself in turbulent waters and without a precise course, without a trajectory, ending up sucked over the Pillars to get lost in the vast ocean as a clumsy "neo-Odysseus", or running aground on the beach of some seaside resort on Sundays. So, I would like to start by providing some navigation coordinates, in the form of a couple of questions, to try to "hit the mark".

Looking at the title of this chapter, the first question, or rather the first group of questions, concerns the concept of mental health promotion and its relationship to similar but distinct concepts, such as prevention and disease. Mental health is a broad notion that does not only imply the absence of disease or infirmity.[3] It is not just about surviving disease but also about living, and living with a good quality of life. But what is the difference between health promotion and prevention? Prevention derives from specific diseases. However, the two

[2] Jane Davidson Reid and Chris Rohmann, *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300–1990s*, vol. 1, New York, NY, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, s.v.

[3] "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" – as defined in the Constitution of the World Health Organization, October 2006, https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/constitution-of-the-world-health-organization (accessed 20 July 2021).

concepts may partially overlap. Broadly speaking, we can say that preventive interventions can be carried out with a focus on the management of risk factors (primary prevention), or on early diagnosis (secondary prevention), or on the reduction of the severity and complications of already established diseases (tertiary prevention). In the second case (which is frequent in the developmental age[4]) the overlap can occur between preventive intervention and treatment.

But are we talking about projects in the field of health promotion or prevention, or real interventions in the rehabilitation context? Regardless of the purpose of the given intervention, activities should always be evaluated and chosen within evidence-based contexts – that is, demonstrable data obtained through reproducible studies.

The area we are talking about presents important organizational and objectification difficulties as well as significant ethical implications. Because of this, in some contexts projects are developed to integrate various research approaches, the so-called mixed methods. One should be careful not to propose interventions based on solely adding the suffix "-therapy" to the name of the object used in the activities in the absence of scientific data (and in reference to conditions that imply a mental illness). This practice risks creating even dangerous misunderstandings as well as being methodologically incorrect. For this reason, it is better to use the Classics as tools within activities whose criteria have been elaborated in proper contexts.

But what is the use of talking about the Classics if the activities in their "frame" have already been thought of and verified elsewhere? The answer lies in the fact that it is surprising to note how well the Classics lend themselves to being the setting for psychoeducational activities. They can be used so easily, and they are such a diverse mine of ideas, that one wonders what runs through their plots, what defines them. Saturninius Secundus Salustius, a Neoplatonist from the fourth century AD, already said that some stories speak of ταῦτα δὲ ἐγένετο μὲν οὐδέποτε, ἔστι δὲ ἀεί – things that never happened, but always are.[5]

[4] By "developmental age" I mean the period of life of the human individual that goes from birth to adulthood and which is marked by the development of a series of functions and processes, ranging from the sense-perceptive and motor ones to the intellectual, affective, and social ones.

[5] Saloústios, "Περὶ θεῶν καὶ κόσμου" [Perì theõn kaì kósmou; On the Gods and the World], Wikisource, https://el.wikisource.org/wiki/Περὶ_Θεῶν_καὶ_Κόσμου (accessed 21 July 2021); translation after: Sallustius, "On the Gods and the World", in Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, London: Watts & Co., 1935, 205: "Now these things never happened, but always are". See also Salustio, *Sugli dèi e il mondo*, ed. Riccardo Di Giuseppe, 2nd ed., Milano: Piccola Biblioteca Adelphi, 2000, 127.

But which Classics will we refer to? And through what tools and in what terms will we talk about these Classics?

As mentioned above, we will discuss Hercules' myth, and we will therefore have to clarify which Hercules we mean, in reference to which episodes of his myth, and to define which authors and types of artistic expression will be examined.

Let us now come to the last big question: what do we mean by myth? This is obviously a huge point, and the debate is still open. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the various answers given by scholars to this question. For the purpose of my research, I limit myself to establishing what follows. Myth is something we cannot completely define: it is hard to give an exhaustive answer, since the definition depends on one's objectives and context and on many other factors. This frustrating position, facing complexity without easy answers, is an obvious but never stressed enough point. This finds interesting parallels, for example, with the complex and apparently disappointing answers that we can obtain from studying genetics or neuroscience. We would all like to find the single gene or the single brain anatomical structure responsible for a given function, but usually it does not go so smoothly. Similarly, when we are dealing with myths, the further we go in our attempts to define work areas and answer questions, the more we open ourselves up to new questions and new parallels.

In this sense, perhaps it is worth integrating the metaphor of navigation by sea to move on to another idea of travel: that of the erratic flight[6] of butterflies and moths. Maybe it is no coincidence that *Coscinocera hercules* (see Fig. 1) is one of the most famous *Saturnidae* and is competing for the title of the largest moth in the world? When it flies it seems to go nowhere: yet it manages to detect a few pheromone molecules at a distance of several miles. I think many of us can say the same after reading Euripides or Aeschylus or... whichever author, in your own case, has allowed you to hit the mark.

We will try today to do the same, leaving the Pillars facing the ocean and Cartesian sea routes to follow the amazing flight of *Coscinocera hercules* in search of the Hercules Myth.[7]

[6] This is also a huge approximation and I am just taking some poetic licence: various types of flight have been studied by experts and, moreover, moths and butterflies are divided into two different groups in the order *Lepidoptera*.

[7] I know what someone could argue: we could end up burnt by a light bulb. So, in case of night flight, everyone please turn off portable electronic devices and artificial lights and keep your fingers crossed.

Figure 1: *Coscinocera hercules*, Australian Butterfly Sanctuary – Kuranda near Cairns, Queensland, photograph by Dinkum (2008), Wikimedia Commons.

The Importance of Storytelling

The beauty and usefulness of referring to Hercules' myth as a setting is that it can be employed, with the precautions that we will see, regardless of the specific field in which the operator will work (be it teacher, educator, psychologist, or other), for games and activities valid for all levels of intervention, from health promotion, through the three levels of prevention, to treatments. This is possible because it is useful, in general, to provide a context, a setting, to give a credible narrative model to children and teenagers.

In the world of advertising, products are hardly presented with a systematic list of pros and cons, even though it would be infinitely more logical to do so. We can all recall examples of advertising for the most prosaic objects associated with poetic narrative frames and the most melodramatic soundtracks. Alexander the Great, when he decided to leave for his conquest, went to the tomb of Achilles (Plut., *Alex*. 15). He constructed his enterprise (whether good or

not, that is not the point) as a narrative. This parallels the way our brain works. Various studies have dealt with the subject, noting how information associated with the involvement of the emotional system is more likely to remain etched in our memory.[8]

A great challenge, then, could be to provide children with attractive frames and contexts for educational and growth activities. Rather than criticizing advertising companies or political communication systems for doing so, we could use the same techniques for our purpose (as many teachers know). Provide not only notions but also emotions and fun in an adequate way.

It is possible to approach the importance of narration from other points of view as well. We tell stories to our children almost instinctively,[9] as a type of care. Storytelling, especially through the interactive involvement of children – for example, thorough dialogic reading – could foster cognitive and emotional development in early childhood and perhaps, even if to a lesser extent, in later ages. Likely the usefulness of telling stories to children will be increasingly validated also by scientific research, as it has happened in the case of the importance of breastfeeding. For example, Robin Dunbar, a neuroscientist and anthropologist, talked about storytelling as a sort of grooming practised by humans.[10]

Mankind, or at least *Homo sapiens*, seems incredibly attracted to stories and narration. The sociologist of communication Walter R. Fisher and the ethnologist Kurt Ranke are the first, to my knowledge, to have coined the term *homo narrans* in the last century.[11] Jerome Bruner[12] theorized that "narrative thinking" organizes our everyday interpretations of the world. The importance of narration is also argued by contemporary scholars, such as the historian Yuval Noah Harari, who inserts it as a pillar of the so-called cognitive revolution that was to take

[8] For more on this issue, see, e.g., Lisa Anderson and Arthur P. Shimamura, "Influences of Emotion on Context Memory while Viewing Film Clips", *American Journal of Psychology* 118.3 (2005), 323–337; Chai M. Tyng, Hafeez U. Amin, Mohamad M.N. Saad, and Aamir S. Malik, "The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory", *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01454.

[9] Even if it does not come to us naturally to feel comfortable in the shoes of storytellers… or (which is worse, of course) to be sufficiently able storytellers.

[10] Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, London: Faber & Faber, 1996.

[11] Kurt Ranke, "Kategorienprobleme der Volksprosa", *Fabula* 9.1–3 (1967), 4–12 (esp. 6), https://doi.org/10.1515/fabl.1967.9.1-3.4; Kurt Ranke, "Problems of Categories in Folk Prose", trans. Carl Lindahl, *Folklore Forum* 14.1 (1981), 1–17 (esp. 5).

[12] Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Words*, Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1986.

place 70,000 years ago, and which supposedly lead to the predominance of the *Homo sapiens* species over the others.[13]

Narrating is associated with the development in the human being of a greater ductility of language, linked with other dimensions studied by neuroscience: imagination, make-believe, mind reading, perspective-taking, theory of mind, and other aspects. Language cannot be understood as a simple ability to produce vocal or communication sounds: areas in which other animal species achieve brilliant results.

Choosing the Most Suitable Form of Communication: The Narrative Medium and Dialogic Interaction

Another aspect is to grasp the specificity of the different artistic languages and how they can be received in a different, more or less effective, way, based on the characteristics of the given individual, in particular in the developmental age. When we work with children, it is particularly important to take into account the stage of development, cognitive and emotional abilities, and the social context.

An aspect that emerges from practical activity, in particular with individuals who have behavioural issues, is that the use of text in the strict sense as a communication channel lends itself to a series of complications: there can be important difficulties in reading, understanding the text, in concentration. This does not mean, however, that children are not "hooked" or may not be interested in a story. Sometimes it is just a question of selecting a more suitable narration mode: simplified text? a text associated with illustrations? audiobooks, oral or audiovisual narration? Just to mention some possible options. Moreover, once you have decided on the medium, it is desirable to involve and interact with individuals in the narration and in activities and games. These two moments can be separated or can occur at the same time.

In the present chapter I limit myself to giving an overview about dialogic reading. This type of interaction is a source of great satisfaction when you work with children, and it shows the complexity of the narrative task. It can be defined, to quote Carmen Zavala Iturbe, as:

[13] Yuval Noah Harari, *Da animali a dèi. Breve storia dell'umanità*, trans. Giuseppe Bernardi, Firenze: Giunti Editore, 2018 (ed. pr. in Hebrew 2011), 35.

> [T]he process of having a dialogue with students around the text they are reading. This dialogue involves asking questions to help children explore the text at a deeper level, including defining new words, analyzing the components of a story and being able to talk about the text. In other words, dialogic reading is a form of guided and scaffolded reading where the focus is on interpretive and critical comprehension more than on accuracy and fluency.[14]

It is possible to implement dialogic reading through prompts and questions at different levels. Below I cite the concise elaboration by Zavala Iturbe, with minor adjustments (added in square brackets) for the purposes of my research:

> **P.E.E.R.**
> The basic dialogic reading technique is the P.E.E.R. sequence. This is where the teacher:
> **P** – Prompts the child to say something about the text
> **E** – Evaluates the response
> **E** – Expands on the child's answer by rephrasing it or by adding information
> **R** – Repeats the prompts to see if the child has learned from the expansion
> What kind of prompts do I give my students?
> **C.R.O.W.D**
> There are five types of prompts typically used in dialogic reading. These can be remembered with the acronym C.R.O.W.D.:
> **C** – Completion prompts
> Learners are asked to fill in a blank at the end of a sentence. They are typically used with rhyme stories or repetitive phrases. For example: The [monster's] name was… [Hera sent Ate to…] [Iolaus' help] is a good…
> **R** – Recall prompts
> Children are asked to say in their own words what has happened so far in a story or text. They can also be asked to talk about a story they have already read. Recall prompts help learners understand a text or remember events. For example: What happened to [Hercules]? What is the first thing that [he] saw? […]
> **O** – Open-ended prompts
> Children are usually asked to focus on the pictures that accompany a text. The aim is for learners to notice details and to check comprehension. For example: What is happening in this part of the story? […] Who can you see in this picture?

[14] Carmen Zavala Iturbe, "What Is Dialogic Reading?", *World of Better Learning*, 18 April 2019, https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2019/04/18/dialogic-reading/ (accessed 17 July 2021).

W – Wh-prompts
These prompts are usually questions that begin with what, where, when, why, and how. Children are asked to look for a specific correct response. For example: (Pointing to a picture) Who is this? What colour is her dress? What does this animal eat? What is the forest like?
D – Distancing prompts
Children are asked questions that help them reflect on their own experiences, based on the input from the text. They help children form a bridge between a text and the real world.[15]

Approaches to Text from Plato to Kant, from New Criticism to the Reader's Reception

The choice of the artistic language for operational purposes brings us the utility of dealing with semantics, hermeneutics, aesthetics, literature theory, and all those disciplines that study the dynamics of production and reception of a narration, be it oral, written, audiovisual, or mixed. Roughly summarizing, we can say that to understand a narration we can look at it from the point of view of the narrator's intentions or from the point of view of the reception of the narration, at the time of the narrator or in subsequent periods, and depending on the type of readers considered. It is possible to further distinguish who may be the implicit reader/listener/spectator of the narration according to the author, a category that does not necessarily have to coincide with the recipient explicitly stated by the narrative and which may also not coincide with the real receiver.

This type of dynamics is known to critical theories that analyse individual languages (in the developmental age we can indulge in various possible combinations, which can be reassembled almost like Ikea furniture, of the languages of literature, literature with images, oral narrations, oral narrations with images, theatre, film, etc.). The disciplines mentioned above can help with proper analysis, but an in-depth discussion of the subject is not possible here.

As Michael Gazzaniga argues, it could be said with great approximation that theorists oscillate between the Platonic position (in which beauty is independent of the observer) and the Kantian position (in which beauty is in the eye of the observer).[16] In the theory of literature, the two extremes can be identified in currents such as the New Criticism that dominated in the 1940s and 1950s

[15] Ibidem.
[16] Michael Gazzaniga, *Human. Quel che ci rende unici*, trans. Laura Sparaci, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2009 (ed. pr. in English 2008).

(which equates the meaning of the text with the text) and, at the other end of the spectrum, the reader response theory (which argues that what the text "is" cannot be separated from what the text "does" or from how it is received).

Without going into the dialectic of those who deal specifically with these questions on the essence of works of art, for our objectives it is useful to place ourselves in the intermediate position, a position that allows us to make use of both perspectives. We can draw inspiration and learn from how the traits of a character – for example, Hercules – have been received over the centuries and for which narratives it was a source of creativity, and we can also explore the reception of such narratives in the past and in the present.

The perspective of specific categories of receptors, based on age, social context, and psychological structure, provides us with ideas for more in-depth critical analyses but also with ways of developing further narratives or more targeted teaching activities. Moreover, the variability in reception is not only inter-individual but also intra-individual. Depending on the moment of one's life, a certain work can be received differently.[17] Greek myths are an example of narration that can provide this wide variability in reception, as we will see in the specific case of Hercules.

Hercules, That Is, "Power Is Nothing without Control"

A famous 1990s advertisement shot by Gerard de Thame marketed Pirelli tyres in a unique way. Carl Lewis (the man who at the time was the record

[17] This versatility of the receptive dynamic is so well known that in some contexts (e.g., in the script and in the production of cartoons) one can distinguish jokes purposefully targeting different age groups at the same time, usually on the one hand children and on the other the parents (on this topic, see also Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991). Some masterpieces, such as Pixar's *Finding Nemo* (dir. Andrew Stanton, 2003), go beyond only presenting jokes and can be considered to all intents and purposes works that speak to adults and children. In the case of *Finding Nemo* we have two characters, the father and the son, and we can identify two evolutionary arcs. The son "with the lucky fin" will become aware of his own abilities; the father will overcome his anxiety and overprotectiveness towards his son, linked at least in part to the trauma of having helplessly witnessed the killing of his partner by a bad predator greedy for clown fish. The story has a universal value; it speaks to us both of growth in autonomy (even for those who may have a disability) and of growth in fatherhood. Likewise, it is probable that the reactions of a child and a father who have recently lost their mother/wife for some sad reason are more intense than average at the cinema. Maybe it is not time for them to go see *Finding Nemo* yet. Maybe it could be painful but useful. But the same cartoon could be perceived differently by a child with a congenital arm problem, and still differently by a child who has recently lost his arm to trauma or disease, and so on.

holder in the 100 metres) tried his hand at a *sui generis* workout. He deviated from the junctions of the Brooklyn Bridge to start crossing the waters of New York Bay, ploughing them barefoot with long strides. The runner, animated by a superhuman energy (from a sort of μένος [*ménos*], we could say), climbed, with great antigravitational leaps, the Statue of Liberty and finally took a jump that carried him with a millimetre stop on two feet onto the beak of the Chrysler Building eagle. He followed the slogan "Power is nothing without control".[18] This phrase perhaps describes the deepest essence of the Hercules myth for our purposes. Strength is a feature to be handled with care, and characters that embody it can fall victim to their own power. The strong-man character often is portrayed as a one-dimensional action hero for entertainment or as a promoter of violent cultures. He can be likewise doomed to a negative or self-destructive fate. A great gift can also become a great curse. However, the Hercules myth has many versions[19] and can be presented also with a positive evolution, unlike in the case of characters such as Achilles, a hero as gifted as Hercules but destined for a bitter and melancholic glory, and marked by premature death. More optimistically than in the story of the son of Peleus, Hercules will learn to control himself. His life will be littered with mistakes but ultimately he will emerge victorious in the glorious battle of life. He will not be a lost soul in Hades; on the contrary, he will descend there not once but twice. And, finally, he will have his apotheosis by climbing into the sky, on Olympus, to be with his father, Zeus.[20]

[18] See The Hall of Advertising, "Pirelli – Carl in New York (1995, UK)", YouTube, 24 February 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dua35KT8Aps (accessed 16 July 2021).

[19] [Galinsky], "Hercules", 426–429. Hercules could be the glutton, the drunkard but also the warder of evils, the glorious victor, the wrestler. He could be the εὐεργέτης (*euergétēs*), the benefactor of men and gods, but at the same time he could be the Ἡρακλῆς μαινόμενος (*Hēraklẽs mainómenos*). The charisma and at the same time the fatal flaw of Hercules was his strength. The myth highlighted the positive aspects but also the risks and consequences to which one was exposed if in possession of a great dowry, a fact that did not always please the gods and in the case of Hercules, in particular, did not appeal to Hera.

[20] In the reception of the myth, there is a long list of authors who (intentionally or not) portrayed the strength and charisma of Hercules in the ethical framework of the *vir perfectissimus* who chooses between virtue and vice; see Susan Deacy's chapter "Hercules: Bearer of Hope for Autistic Children?", in this volume, 251–274. Among others, the list includes Fulgentius of Cartagena, Isidore of Seville, Annibale Carracci (in the Farnese Palace), Dante Alighieri, Pierre de Ronsard, John Milton, etc. The point for our purposes, as we will see, is to select a story that is positive but not too moralistic.

The Main Goals of Our Activities

In this chapter, I discuss the use of the myth of Hercules in a specific category of children and teenagers, characterized by behavioural disorders, impulsiveness, aggressiveness, or violence. In some conditions, and especially with children with these behavioural disorders and poor metarepresentative and verbalization skills, Hercules' myth is a precious instrument to access their world and communicate with them.

Indeed, one of the main methodological risks in psychoeducational interventions consists of imposing standard models that, in spite of starting from the analysis and needs of individuals, try to "force" them into activities based on a theoretical and hypothetically coherent approach, which is often scarcely integrated. The best approach and combination must be analysed in every single case, focusing on the child's individual history, age, and cognitive level.

Actually, one of the advantages of Hercules' myth is that the story is told with simple plot lines, often not coherent – this means flexibility for programming interventions. The myth is characterized by a great variety of events that can be selected; therefore, the frame is open to modifications. Many psychoeducational activities, for individuals or for groups, can be organized in a flexible way, considering every single need, and the approaches adopted can be sometimes more cognitive-behavioural and sometimes more psychodynamic.

It is not possible to describe here the methodology of all possible treatments, nor to present a review of the experimental studies carried out by various scholars. Nevertheless, it is possible to give an overview of the main goals of activities. A good reference to deepen the topic is the research of Zipora Shechtman, based on which the following objectives can be distinguished:

- improve the management of emotions;
- increase empathy;
- develop perspective-taking;
- decrease the influence of the dynamics of power;
- increase self-control;
- develop problem-solving skills;
- directly or (even better) indirectly introduce some reference models.[21]

[21] Zipora Shechtman, *Treating Child and Adolescent Aggression through Bibliotherapy*, New York, NY: Springer, 2009.

Some of the most relevant topics are presented in this chapter, without claiming to explain every single detail and a thorough intervention scheme. In the solutions presented below there were no differences between the treatments for pre-pubertal children and teenagers, and only young males were involved, for the sake of brevity.

Anger, Rage, Impulsiveness, Aggressiveness, and Violence

It is useful to recognize and manage the reactions and internal mechanisms of children and teenagers, both for the professionals who work in the rehabilitation programmes and for the children themselves. A good and not theoretical, boring way to thematize these elements is through stories, literary characters, and myths. To approach what modern neuroscience has to tell us about passions and emotions (concepts that are anything but simple to define) we can move on with a look back at the ancients.

The *Iliad*, a poem that is said to have started Western literature, begins by referring to a particular emotion: μῆνις (*mẽnis*), the rage or wrath of Achilles. To be more specific, various terms with different shades are used to define anger in the *Iliad*. In addition to *mẽnis*, we can identify μένος (*ménos*; 'angry energy'), θυμός (*thymós*; 'angry impulse'), ἄχος (*áchos*; translated as 'angry pain'), κότος (*kótos*; 'rancour'), χόλος (*chólos*; 'rancorous/indignant anger of the powerful who must accept an outrage').

The ancient characters of Greek literature were indeed animated by intense and varied emotions. The heroes and the gods themselves easily lost control and could be dominated by what we would associate today with our inner world, but which they, effectively from a narrative point of view, projected outwards and often personified. But more specifically, what were the categories and dynamics that the ancients used to describe what happened inside them when they were animated by passions? And can the culturally particular way of describing by the ancients a phenomenon that arises and is structured within our biology have any relevance today? Can we draw parallels between their perspective and ours?

To answer these questions we can move on to what neuroscience tells us about the knowledge of our basic emotional systems. It is possible to make a distinction, as Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven explain in their book *The Archaeology of Mind*, between the basic emotion or primary process of anger (an emotion without an object), the secondary process of rage (which has an identifiable object), and the tertiary processes of revenge and hatred (typical of human beings and

reflecting our cognitive ability to think about the wrongs we have suffered).[22] The primary and secondary processes of anger and rage are emotions that can move us[23] towards aggressiveness, at least a certain type of it – the impulsive one.

Aggressiveness (Latin *aggredior* – 'to advance', 'to attack') may be defined as a drive or a 'movement towards', a primitive push to survive. Also, this drive may be adaptive and is not always negative. In order not to become a disorder, individuals must manage it effectively in a balanced way. Being aggressive does not imply becoming violent.

Impulsiveness (from the Latin verb *impellere* – 'to push forward') may be defined as a tendency to adopt behaviours (reactions or impulsive actions) in an uncontrolled way, because of the lack of inhibitions or the alteration of one's psychic faculties. This concise definition is effective with respect to our goals because it helps us understand how impulsiveness only partially overlaps with aggressiveness and violence. People can be impulsive also in areas that are not related to the latter.

Impulsivity can be associated with neural circuits involving the ventral striatal complex, the thalamus, the prefrontal ventromedial cortex, and the anterior cingulate cortex. Impulsivity can also be considered as an endophenotype of symptoms related to specific brain circuits which are present transdiagnostically. In fact, it corresponds to a form of cognitive inflexibility.[24]

Violence (Latin *vis* – 'force') is a more complex concept. It describes dynamics that are more markedly associated with (primary or secondary) benefits, though often dysfunctional. In many cases, it is connected to a sense of power and is considered to be something negative for the child's educational and psychological development. As Filippo Muratori sums up:

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[22] Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions*, New York, NY, and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012, 100.

[23] The root of the word "emotion" comes from the Latin verb *moveo*, *movere* with the addition of the prefix "e": 'to move from'.

[24] For more on impulsivity, see Jeffrey W. Dalley, Barry J. Everitt, and Trevor W. Robbins, "Impulsivity, Compulsivity, and Top-Down Cognitive Control", *Neuron* 69.4 (2011), 680–694, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2011.01.020; Jeffrey W. Dalley, Adam C. Mar, Daina Economidou, and Trevor W. Robbins, "Neurobehavioral Mechanisms of Impulsivity: Fronto-Striatal Systems and Functional Neurochemistry", *Pharmacology, Biochemistry and Behavior* 90.2 (2008), 250–260, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pbb.2007.12.021; Naomi A. Fineberg, Marc N. Potenza, Samuel R. Chamberlain, Heather A. Berlin, Lara Menzies, Antoine Bechara, Barbara J. Sahakian, Trevor W. Robbins, Edward T. Bullmore, and Eric Hollander, "Probing Compulsive and Impulsive Behaviors, from Animal Models to Endophenotypes: A Narrative Review", *Neuropsychopharmacology* 35.3 (2010), 591–604, https://doi.org/10.1038/npp.2009.185; Trevor W. Robbins, Claire M. Gillan, Dana G. Smith, Sanne de Wit, and Karen D. Ersche, "Neurocognitive Endophenotypes of Impulsivity and Compulsivity: Towards Dimensional Psychiatry", *Trends in Cognitive Science* 16.1 (2012), 81–91, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2011.11.009.

> Violence and aggressiveness are not synonyms, although they share the same roots. In order for an aggressive behaviour not to become violent, many biological, psychological and social factors must be taken into consideration, most of which are still largely unknown.[25]

Psychology and psychiatry distinguish many types of aggressiveness: externalizing or internalizing, verbal or physical, impulsive, proactive, or callous/unemotional.[26] Impulsive aggression can involve the orbitofrontal cortex and the amygdala. Instrumental aggression and violent sociopathy can be mediated by the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Affective violence aggression can be mediated by the ventro-medial prefrontal cortex. Psychotic aggression/violence can be mediated by mesolimbic and mesocortical pathways.[27]

Coming back to our myths, it is central to note how Hercules is a hero who is a master of his own abilities, but this is the result of a journey in which the ancients apparently did not miss anything of these "circuits".

With regard to the developmental age, the way in which the adolescent Hercules gets angry with his professor Lichas can be used as an example of externalizing and impulsive, unplanned aggressiveness that the hero later regrets (see Figs. 2 and 3). Moreover, it is possible to focus on the concept of irreversibility and on the irreversible consequences of this angry (although involuntary) behaviour. On the contrary, the way in which Eurystheus talks to Hercules when he cancels the labour of the Augean Stables[28] is a good example of planned and callous, unemotional aggressiveness.

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[25] Filippo Muratori, *Ragazzi violenti. Da dove vengono, cosa c'è dietro la loro maschera, come aiutarli*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2005, 14 (my translation).

[26] Impulsive aggression correlates more with the anger system and with impulsiveness. The more calculated, predatory form of aggression can be related to the research system, in other words to reward. To find out more, see, e.g., Panksepp and Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind*, 110.

[27] For more, see Leslie L. Iversen, Susan D. Iversen, Floyd E. Bloom, and Robert H. Roth, *Introduction to Neuropsychopharmacology*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009; Jerrold S. Meyer and Linda F. Quenzer, *Psychopharmacology: Drugs, the Brain, and Behavior*, Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 2005; Gordon M. Shepherd, ed., *The Synaptic Organization of the Brain*, 5th ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004; Larry R. Squire, Floyd E. Bloom, Susan K. McConnell, James L. Roberts, Nicholas C. Spitzer, and Michael J. Zigmond, eds., *Fundamental Neuroscience*, 2nd ed., San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 2003; Stephen M. Stahl, *Essential Psychopharmacology: Neuroscientific Basis and Practical Applications*, ill. Nancy Muntner, 4th ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[28] Or (an example from another myth) when Polydectes sends Perseus to fight against Medusa and potentially die.

Figure 2: Antonio Canova, *Hercules and Lichas* (1795–1815), Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome (2011), photograph by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3: Screenshot from a video showing neurons involved in the processing of emotions. Video produced and edited by Melanie Gonick; neuron imaging: Anna Beyeler and Craig Wildes from the Laboratory of Kay Tye, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Used with permission.

Ménos and Ate and the Neural Pathways

However, more specifically, what is the relationship between the mental processes and the internal mechanisms of these children and the categories of the ancients? First of all, it is possible to notice that some adolescents with impulsive and aggressive behaviours "do not remember what happened". Sometimes they blame a sort of "external force" that gets the better of them. They regret the consequences of their actions, and they ask themselves questions like "What came over me?", or similar. Nevertheless, they tend to repeat their behaviours and to put themselves in the same situations without learning from previous experiences.

Such statements and circumstances are similar to the dynamics found in descriptions of characters of Ancient Greek culture: in some texts these dynamics are presented as a sort of energy or fury (*ménos*) incited in the individual by the gods, while in others they are portrayed as personified characters: Ate – "the eldest daughter of Zeus"[29] – or Lyssa – "the anger of wolves" and "the warrior

[29] Giulio Guidorizzi, *I colori dell'anima. I Greci e le passioni*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2017, 36 (Hom., *Il.* 19.91–92; my translation).

fury".[30] In fact, the words ἄτη (*átē*), λύσσα (*lýssa*), and μένος (*ménos*) in the history of Ancient Greek literature progressively and partially overlapped.[31] Ate and Lyssa belong to a group of personified entities often found in Homer and in Archaic Greek poets (for example, Φιλότης [Philótēs; Love] and Ἔρως [Érōs], but also as Αἰδώς [Aidṓs; Shame] or Ἔρις [Éris; Discord]). These personified figures are described as having an objective existence of their own, which can be experienced through the senses, but at the same time they operate in the human soul and generate passions. What in modern terms is the psychological life of an individual in its complexity with its inner conflicts, in Ancient Greek culture takes the form of a dialogue between external impulses that conflict with each other in the mind, as in a small theatre of the soul.[32] *Ménos* is neither a personified character nor a part of the mind. Most of the time it is presented in literature as a sort of augmented energy, but over time the term started to partially overlap also with madness or – we could say so – "mad fury". Athena, for example, makes Diomedes invincible by doubling his *ménos* against the Thracians and blows *ménos* into Laërtes to fight against Eupeithes. Similarly, Apollo helps Glaucus, not to mention all of Achilles' episodes.[33] In later times,

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[30] Giulio Guidorizzi, *Ai confini dell anima. I greci e la follia*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2010, 37. In this chapter, the names Ate and Lyssa are capitalized, while the term *ménos* is lower-cased and italicized.

[31] The meaning of Ἄτη (Átē) on the one hand and on the other Λύσσα (Lýssa) or *ménos*, and cognate terms, changes over time and it is not possible here to deepen their significance. For this purpose, it is better to refer to specific works on this topic, such as Suzanne Saïd's "From Homeric *Ate* to Tragic Madness", in William V. Harris, ed., *Mental Disorders in the Classical World*, "Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition" 38, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2013, 363–395; or Douglas L. Cairns's "*Atē* in the Homeric Poems", in Francis Cairns, ed., *Papers of the Langford Latin Seminar*, vol. 15, Cambridge: Cairns, 2012, 1–52. See also Ruth Padel, *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992; Ruth Padel, *Whom Gods Destroy: Elements of Greek and Tragic Madness*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995; Debra Hershkowitz, *The Madness of Epic: Reading Insanity from Homer to Statius*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; Hansjakob Seiler, "Homerisch ἀάομαι und ἄτη", in *Sprachgeschichte und Wortbedeutung. Festschrift Albert Debrunner gewidmet von Schülern, Freunden und Kollegen*, Bern: A. Francke, 1954, 409–417; Simon Bennett, "Plato and Freud: The Mind in Conflict and the Mind in Dialogue", *Psychoanalytical Quarterly* 42 (1973), 91–122; Simon Bennett, *Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece: The Classical Roots of Modern Psychiatry*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978; Simon Bennett, "Mind and Madness in Classical Antiquity", in Edwin R. Wallace and John Gach, eds., *History of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology*, New York, NY: Springer, 2008, 175–197; Joseph Stallmach, *Ate. Zur Frage des Selbst- und Weltverständnisses des frühgriechischen Menschen*, Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1968; William F. Wyatt, "Homeric Ἄτη", *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982), 247–276.

[32] Guidorizzi, *I colori dell'anima*, 37.

[33] See, e.g., Hom., *Il.* 10.482.

the two personified characters, Ate and Lyssa, and the experience of *ménos* became central in classic Greek tragedy as they were used to describe explicitly madness. Especially Euripides in his *Herakles* (Ἡρακλῆς μαινόμενος; *Hēraklē̃s mainómenos*) places divine intervention and psychological explanation of behaviours very close together. However, taking into account the fact that "madness", from the perspective of modern science, is an imprecise concept, and considering that impulsive and aggressive behaviours are not equivalent to mental illness, it is better to start with a reflection on Homer's concept of *ménos* and of Ate.

Ate and *ménos* are indeed two key words that allow us to create a link with contemporary neuroscientific perspectives. In this sense, they can be seen as two sides of the same coin. In other words, we can talk about a prevalence of impulses from the primitive brain in the case of an increased amount of *ménos*, or a deficit of cortical control, as far the "blindness" implied by Ate is concerned. What does this dysregulation imply? It obviously depends on the register and the perspective that we want to adopt, but with a little imagination we can engage the two perspectives in dialogue.

Ménos: The Primitive Drive?

As mentioned before, *ménos* can be described as an "excess of energy". A distinctive feature of the Homeric Greek hero is the impetus, the intensity with which emotions are experienced. Passions are, if we can say so, the background noise of the *Iliad* and to a lesser extent also of the *Odyssey*.[34]

Giulio Guidorizzi[35] and Ruth Padel[36] underline in their essays how the sudden and intense emotional changes that characterize the heroes are often caused by an increase of energy/fit/rush (Hom., *Il*. 10.482),[37] fury (Hom., *Il*. 5.125), force (Hom., *Il*. 16.529; *Od*. 24.315–319).[38] This power is blown into men by the gods. But how does the drive, the energy of *ménos* interact with the impulse, the thinking, and the actions of the epic Greek hero?

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[34] Guidorizzi, *I colori dell'anima*, 16.

[35] Ibidem.

[36] Padel, *In and Out of the Mind*, 25–26.

[37] See also Omero, *Iliade*, ed. and trans. Giovanni Cerri, Milano: Bur Rizzoli, 1999, ad loc.

[38] See also Omero, *Odissea*, ed. and trans. Vincenzo Di Benedetto and Pierangelo Fabrini, Milano: Bur Rizzoli, 2010, ad loc.

Simone Weil starts from the centrality of force, which leads to the experience of the absence of limits to one's actions and therefore to the affirmation of impulsiveness,[39] while Guidorizzi emphasizes the value of the term "energy", which he translates as *thymós*, more than the term "force"; he also highlights how it is the *thymós* that stimulates the actions of the Greek hero.[40]

Ménos is semantically related to the term *manía* but cannot be equated with it. In both cases it is an experience of an increased amount of power. But the *Hēraclẽs mainómenos* is the "furious" Hercules; he is different from the *manía* of Dionysian rituals. Incidentally, the reduced need for sleep and an increase in the state of brain activation are associated with the basal forebrain, the thalamus, and the hypothalamus. Delusions of grandeur are associated with the prefrontal cortex and with the nucleus accumbens circuits. *Ménos* could be correlated to impulsiveness or also to rage and anger, and, like Ate, imply a blackout – a blindness – of the neocortex in the control of the thalamus and the primitive brain, leading to an absence of critical evaluation of consequences, inability to postpone gratification in favour of immediate gratification, and lack of premeditation.

Ate and the Internal Cortical Mechanisms according to the Ancients: Had the Ancients Already Guessed the Correlation between the Neocortex and the Amygdala?

Ate could correlate, at least in the less premeditated manifestations, to an ineffective control of the neocortex over the amygdala (see Fig. 4). The amygdala is the "sentinel of emotions" and is strongly linked with the development of fear and anger. When activated, it triggers a series of immediate reactions, including the production of hormones, which causes the fight-or-flight response, mobilizes the movement centres, the cardiovascular system, the intestines, and the muscles.

Without the control of the neocortex, behavioural responses turn out to be particularly emotional, approximate, and impulsive, and in worst cases the amygdala starts a sort of "neural sequestration" in order to produce an emergency reaction. The neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux deepened this topic and discovered the existence of neural pathways from the eye and the ear that bypass the neocortex and by going through the thalamus connect directly to the

[39] Simone Weil, *La rivelazione greca*, ed. Maria Concetta Sala and Giancarlo Gaeta, Milano: Adelphi, 2014 (ed. pr. in French 1951).

[40] Guidorizzi, *I colori dell'anima*, 17.

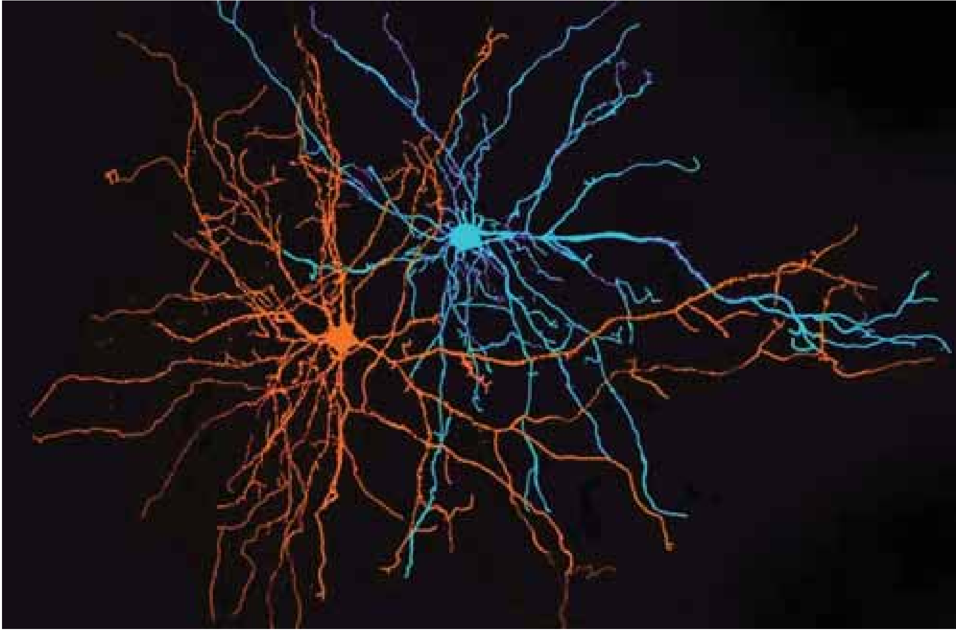

Figure 4: Two neurons of the basolateral amygdala, photograph by Anna Beyeler and Praneeth Namburi, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Used with permission.

amygdala.[41] The majority of the fibres, on the other hand, arrive at the neocortex, which, through a series of cascading circuits, analyses the information it receives and through the prefrontal lobes mitigates the more rapid and instinctive reactions triggered by the amygdala, and provides a coordinated reaction.

By the way, the amygdala is not so easy to be classified in its role and does not lend itself to rigid dualistic perspectives that view the body and the mind as opposite poles. It is related also to a better comprehension of reality and to "emotional intelligence". Antonio Damasio, among others, focuses on the connection between emotions and rationality – as one of his books suggests, starting from the evocative title: *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. In his studies on the effects of lesions from the circuits between the prefrontal lobes and the amygdala, he underlines that the emotional dimension is important in the decision-making process.[42] There is, therefore, a com-

[41] Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998 (ed. pr. 1966).

[42] Antonio R. Damasio, *L'errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, trans. Filippo Macaluso, Milano: Adelphi, 1995 (ed. pr. in English 1994), 96.

plementarity between the limbic system and the neocortex, and in particular between the amygdala and the prefrontal lobes. Specifically, the orbitofrontal area is important in evaluating and correcting the emotional responses in progress, and also from the neuroanatomical point of view it is correlated through a monosynaptic path – "a virtual highway" – to the amygdala.

Thus, coming back to our personified Ate, we could say that when she walks on the heads of mortals and of gods, neocortex control over primitive drives, and especially over the reactions of the amygdala, is somehow decreased. When the ancients spoke of Ate walking on their heads and blinding them in some way, it can be said that they described inadequate top-down cognitive control, the lack of inhibitory control by cortical mechanisms over stimuli coming from below.

Emotional Alphabetization with the Ancient Greeks and the Crucial Trick of Ate

Thus, coming back to our previous distinction of primary, secondary, and tertiary processes, it is possible to develop activities focused on emotional alphabetization in which boys can recognize anger, impulsiveness or augmented energy, or other inner dynamics, representing them through annoying characters with which they can interact. A central role can be played by the evil and treacherous Ate which impairs mental clarity and problem-solving skills.

But is this playful proposal a distortion of the meaning of Ate as it is presented in classical literature? Homer applies the words of Ate in a context where the conception of mental illness is confused, among others, with impulsiveness, aggressiveness, or immoral behaviour. To sum up, we can say that Homer's Ate can have two main interpretations: damage of mind and damage in life or fortune. As Suzanne Saïd notes, "Ate and cognate terms are applied to a wide range of behaviors that turn out to go against the best interests of the author".[43] On the other hand, the words μαίνομαι ("experience a heightened amount of μένος"[44]) and Λύσσα are "applied to some harm inflicted by the subject on others"[45] and are often characterized by physical symptoms of the subject. They can be used as an insult or to condemn immoral behaviour (for a pejorative

[43] Saïd, "From Homeric *Ate* to Tragic Madness", 364.

[44] Hershkowitz, *The Madness of Epic*, 144; the scholar quotes Anne Giacomelli, "Aphrodite and After", *Phoenix* 34.1 (1980), 8–9.

[45] William V. Harris, ed., *Mental Disorders in the Classical World*, "Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition" 38, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2013, 16.

purpose). As E.R. Dodds states in his seminal book *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951):

> [A]lways, or practically always, Ate is a state of mind – a temporary clouding or bewildering of the normal consciousness. It is, in fact, a partial and temporary insanity; and, like all insanity, it is ascribed, not to physiological or psychological causes, but to an external "daemonic" agency.[46]

In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon, talking about his wrong behaviour towards Achilles (when he steals Briseis from him), refers to Ate and Zeus himself:

> ἐγὼ δ' οὐκ αἴτιός εἰμι,
> ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς καὶ Μοῖρα καὶ ἠεροφοῖτις Ἐρινύς,
> οἵ τέ μοι εἰν ἀγορῇ φρεσὶν ἔμβαλον ἄγριον ἄτην,
> ἤματι τῷ ὅτ' Ἀχιλλῆος γέρας αὐτὸς ἀπηύρων.
> ἀλλὰ τί κεν ῥέξαιμι; θεὸς διὰ πάντα τελευτᾷ.
> (Hom., *Il.* 19.86–90)

> Not I was the cause of this act, but Zeus and my portion and the Erinys who walks in darkness: they it was who in the assembly put wild *ate* in my understanding, on that day when I arbitrarily took Achilles' prize from him. So what could I do? Deity will always have its way.[47]

It would be quite unusual to provide such a justification today. Ate is considered by modern readers an excuse to avoid one's responsibilities. But, as Dodds explains, there are no legal consequences of avoiding responsibilities for the Ancient Greeks because Agamemnon reacts to the bad action:

> οὐ δυνάμην λελαθέσθ' Ἄτης ᾗ πρῶτον ἀάσθην
> ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ ἀασάμην καί μευ φρένας ἐξέλετο Ζεύς,
> ἂψ ἐθέλω ἀρέσαι, δόμεναί τ' ἀπερείσι' ἄποινα.
> (Hom., *Il.* 19.136–138)

> But since I was blinded by *ate* and Zeus took away my understanding, I am willing to make my peace and give abundant compensation.[48]

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[46] E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1951, Kindle ed., loc. 135; see also the Italian translation: *I greci e l'irrazionale*, trans. Virginia Vacca De Bosis, Milano: Rizzoli, 2017 (ed. pr. 2009), 47.

[47] Trans. (here and thereafter) from Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, loc. 82; see also *I greci e l'irrazionale*, 44.

[48] Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, loc. 99; *I greci e l'irrazionale*, 45. See Hom., *Il.* 9.119–120.

The primitive Greek justice does not consider the purposes but the action. According to Dodds's analysis, unsystematized and irrational impulses leading to shameful actions tend to be excluded from the ego and ascribed to external causes. Therefore, the scholar hypothesizes that Homer's characters use Ate to project in good faith their unbearable feeling of shame onto an external power.

This analysis can be used to talk about the behaviour of children in the developmental age. As I have mentioned above, children sometimes claim that there is a voice telling them what to do. According to Dodds and his analyses, Greek men talk to their *thymós*, which suggests what to do and the words to be said. The hero tends not to experience it as a part of him: usually the *thymós* is an independent and internal voice. This habit of objectivizing the emotional impulses, treating them like the non-ego, may occur during the developmental age and is not uniquely related (luckily) to a hallucinatory state. However, it is useful to record and consider such perception and communication modalities and use them in a positive way during clinical interviews. If they are treated in a very explicit or trivial way, they might become a source of shame (or blame or suffering), and they can harden some specific defence mechanisms in individuals. Sometimes children immediately regret their actions and state that they did not mean to perform them.

According to Dodds's research, again, the "impulsiveness of Homer's men" needs to be analysed. It is an amusing interpretation, and although it makes us smile, generally speaking, it is a positive attitude: the young patients can be considered as Homer's growing heroes, ready to be great with their daily deeds, but still in danger of getting blinded by Ate or performing dangerous actions against themselves or other people.[49]

[49] At the same time, also Martin Persson Nilsson's words in "Götter und Psychologie bei Homer", *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 22.2 (1923/24), 363–390, are significant, when he talks in a less pleasing way about the "psychische Labilität" of Homer's heroes. His conclusions are summed up in his *History of Greek Religion*, trans. F.J. Fielden, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925 (ed. pr. in Swedish 1922), 122, quoted after Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, loc. 55; *I greci e l'irrazionale*, 45. Homer's heroes are "especially subject to quick and violent changes of mood". Nilsson also underlines (ibidem) that today a person with this kind of temperament "is apt […] to look back with horror on what he has just done, and exclaim, 'I didn't really mean to do that…'". Probably, according to Nilsson, the term "psychische" has the same meaning as according to the Attic authors of the fifth century. They defined the ego of the ψυχή (*psychḗ*) as emotional rather than rational. They described the *psychḗ* as the place where there are braveness, passion, piety, anxious animal appetites, but never or hardly ever before Plato as the place of reason. By the way, as in the Homeric poems, children "refer" to Ate not as something originally related to guilt, but to the consequences of their actions. In their reception, Ate could be more often linked to the punishment brought by the Erinyes, embodied by a very strict teacher or mother.

Perspective-Taking and Empathy

Another big area of interest is the management of perspective-taking skills and empathy. Perspective-taking could be defined as the cognitive capacity to consider the world from another individual's viewpoint.[50] It is connected with the ability to detect social signs, which are often wrongly interpreted by children with behavioural disorders. Facial expressions and behaviours of people are often considered threatening and invasive and cause dysfunctional or unjustified reactions or behaviours. Children justify them on the grounds of preventive reasons. Often we listen to statements such as "You win if you attack first", "If they do not immediately see me as a tough guy, they will think I am a sissy", etc. Empathy is a word derived from the Ancient Greek ἐμπάθεια (*empátheia*) and is a complex and multifaceted cognitive and emotional process that could be defined as the ability to understand and/or share the emotional feelings of another person.[51]

It is a mistake to automatically associate these deficits with aggressive, violent, or immoral behaviour; nevertheless, they can aggravate behavioural problems. Furthermore, it is also possible that such skills can get altered in their development due to dysfunctional social and educational influences. The lack of perspective-taking skills and empathy is often precociously structured at an early age, and it is important to provide early interventions, taking into account that these deficits are often difficult to deal with and cause deep frustration in families and professionals who work with such children. We can choose between affective, cognitive, and mixed approaches. In this chapter, I would like to talk about the first ones for the sake of brevity and because narrations and stories are particularly suitable for working on emotional involvement.

Affective approaches originate from the idea that emotional exploration should come before the phase in which cognitive and behavioural instructions and suggestions are given.[52] Many of these children already know, theoretically, how they should behave, but they do not behave that way. They perceive moral models as boring and judgemental, and these models make them feel unease or

[50] Adam D. Galinsky, William W. Maddux, Debra Gilin, and Judith B. White, "Why It Pays to Get Inside the Head of Your Opponent: The Differential Effects of Perspective Taking and Empathy in Negotiations", *Psychological Science* 19.4 (2008), 378–384, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02096.x.

[51] Kimberley Rogers, Isabel Dziobek, Jason Hassenstab, Oliver T. Wolf, and Antonio Convit, "Who Cares? Revisiting Empathy in Asperger Syndrome", *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 37 (2007), 709–715, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-006-0197-8.

[52] See also Shechtman, *Treating Child and Adolescent Aggression*.

guilt. Thus, it is useful to make them aware of aspects of their emotional life that disturb their growth and behaviour. Moreover, it is good to work with characters they can identify with and whose emotions they can recognize and share because, as readers, they do not need to personally challenge their own attitudes (at least at the beginning). If children empathize with the protagonist, they do not use dysfunctional repression and projection mechanisms and go through a cathartic experience (which is a well-known mechanism in the Greek Classics).

The episode in which Hercules hurts his family is a key event that often touches these children, as they have often reacted against and violently hurt their family members. Their experience is in many cases ambivalent and painful: on one hand, it causes a sense of dysfunctional power and gratification, while, on the other hand, it brings about feelings of guilt which are difficult to bear and often repressed. Every child or adolescent experiences this dynamic in variable proportions. Hercules, with his innate impulsive and aggressive drives, offers an insight into their problems from a safe distance that allows them to talk about threatening and painful topics and dynamics. Above all, he offers positive problem-solving strategies that create positive emotions and feelings of hope.

Shechtman in one of her studies underlines how useful the cathartic experience is, especially in aggressive children: "Aggressive children are filled with anger that has to be released before any change can be achieved. Thus we want them to go through a cathartic experience",[53] and she goes on: "Self exploration should precede cognitive learning and only later should guidance and instrumental help be provided".[54]

Guilt Society and Shame Society

When you work with this modality, an element often stands out: the feeling of guilt, as already mentioned above. For an in-depth analysis, it is necessary to acknowledge how these children and adolescents experience the feeling of guilt and what the mythological passages can suggest in this sense. The distinction between shame society and guilt society might help us understand such dynamics and their therapeutic implications. With these children the common intuition is to focus on the concept of shame society because they are more interested in respect than in morality.

[53] Ibidem, 64.
[54] Ibidem, 68.

The feeling of guilt may have evolved in the first developmental phases. In 2007, research by Grazyna Kochanska and Nazan Aksan[55] on 106 pre-schoolers "certified" what every mother knows based on her common sense: children, even when they are young, show empathy, are sensitive to the violation of rules, and distinguish what is right and wrong.

Children and adolescents with behavioural disorders may have a deficit in the ability to experience the feeling of guilt and apparently are more focused on their reputation. The problem for some of these children is not the moral one, since they only do not want to be caught red-handed and they do not want to suffer the consequences of their actions. On the other hand, sometimes a paradoxical situation arises: they do a bad thing and they secretly hope or provocatively want to be identified as the authors of the prank or crime. The bad action is a dysfunctional way to be demonstrative and to build their own self-esteem, as they feel rewarded at the idea of being scolded by their mum or being registered on camera and posted on the Internet with the "coolest" facial expression by friends. This group basically has a less favourable prognosis from a behavioural point of view. The "highest good" for these children is apparently the same as for Homer's characters. It is not to act according to one's conscience, but to have τιμή (*timḗ*), good reputation. Achilles says: "Why should I fight [...], if the good [ἐσθλός; *esthlós*] fighter receives no more *timḗ* [ἰῇ τιμῇ; *iệ̄ timệ̄*] than the bad [κακός; *kakós*]?" (Hom., *Il.* 9.318–319).[56]

It is interesting to consider these words of Achilles and also more broadly the dynamics of the classical heroes from the point of view of developmental psychology, especially referring to Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. Achilles apparently reasons according to the reciprocity criteria of stage 2, which are individualism, instrumental purpose, and exchange. Individuals pursue their interests and let others do the same. What is right implies a fair exchange. We could also refer to stage 3, which involves interpersonal expectations, with individuals promoting trust and loyalty as foundations of moral judgements. But the way Greek heroes reason apparently does not go beyond the conventional level of intermediate internalization. Such level is similar to the one of children with behavioural disorders, who are identified with these stages of their developmental path.

In John C. Gibbs's approach, most adolescents in the world use the moral mutuality judgement of stage 3 and, from late adolescence, many individuals

[55] Grazyna Kochanska and Nazan Aksan, "Conscience in Childhood: Past, Present, and Future", *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 50.3 (2004), 299–310.

[56] Trans. from *The Greeks and the Irrational*, loc. 353; see also *I greci e l'irrazionale*, 59.

start to understand the importance of conforming with standards and institutions for the common good of stage 4. However, not those with behavioural disorders.[57]

According to a twenty-year-long longitudinal study conducted by Ann Colby, stage 4, which was not present in the moral reasoning of ten-year-old children, was reflected in 62% of thirty-six-year-old people, and stage 5 (social contract orientation) did not appear until the age of twenty to twenty-two and did not characterize more than 10% of the individuals.[58] From studies on moral psychology we infer how culture can especially influence the chance of achieving stage 5 and 6 (universal ethical principle orientation).[59]

Even without referring to children who already have severe behavioural disorders, if it is true that many impulsive children regret what they have done, it is also true that such dynamics are not always so clear and linear. Many derive a sort of satisfaction from their uncontrolled crises, in a more or less refined way. Having a whole school class or one's parents in a corner may give a great feeling of power.

If we talk of Hercules' myth with some of these boys, from the point of view of reading reception theory, some associations they express are evocative: the classmates become the heads of the Hydra and the teacher becomes Eurystheus. Some children, in order to scare others, often without truly aggressive purposes, bring knives or self-made weapons to school. If children have poor personal and social skills and are good at beating others, Hercules can be identified with a giant madman, in accordance with the creepiest machismo. Such individuals end up becoming followers, ready to slap their victims but remaining at the disposal of the leaders with good cognitive skills, who are true puppet masters with strong antisocial tendencies. Both the former and the latter may end up becoming narcissistic personalities who rarely feel guilt. In these cases some operators could decide that the therapeutic goal of their activities is to help these children experience a positive feeling of guilt. This awareness becomes

[57] John C. Gibbs, *Moral Development and Reality: Beyond the Theories of Kohlberg, Hoffman, and Haidt*, Boston, MA: Allyn Bacon, 2014 (ed. pr. 2003).

[58] Ann Colby, Lawrence Kohlberg, John C. Gibbs, and Marcus Lieberman, *A Longitudinal Study of Moral Judgment*, "Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development" 200, vol. 48.1–2, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

[59] John Snarey, "A Question of Morality", *Psychology Today* 21.3 (1987), 6–8; Ann M. Huebner and Andrew C. Garrod, "Moral Reasoning among Tibetan Monks: A Study of Buddhist Adolescents and Young Adults in Nepal", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 24.2 (1993), 167–185; John C. Gibbs, Karen S. Basinger, Rebecca L. Grime, and John R. Snarey, "Moral Judgment Development across Cultures: Revisiting Kohlberg's Universality Claims", *Developmental Review* 27.4 (2007), 443–500; Joan G. Miller, "Cultural Psychology of Moral Development", in Shinobu Kitayama and Dov Cohen, eds., *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*, New York, NY: Guilford, 2010, 477–499.

the basis needed to internalize the importance of social rules. In other words, experiencing a healthy feeling of guilt in these situations may be considered a therapeutic success because we are not dealing here with neuroses and overwhelming feelings of guilt, but with the exact opposite.

Knowing the Text and the Versions of the Myth: The Twelve Labours – Balance between Identification and Safe Distance

In this view, regardless of the methods selected, it is important for the therapist and the educator to have a deep knowledge of the literary texts that are being used. It is helpful to know the possible versions and interpretations of the story and the characters. This means having many opportunities to develop and provide effective activities; it also enables one to know most of what could emerge from the direct work with the children, including any unsettling and unexpected considerations on their part.

As we can guess, among all the myths featuring Hercules, the Twelve Labours are the most popular one. The choice of using the episodes of the labours aims at achieving many goals: Hercules is a "who do I want to be like" model, his labours are short episodes, easy to tell, and may be used in many sessions; also, the labours imply various skills which can be introduced through specific activities and games.

The myth of the Twelve Labours enables us to find a balance between identifying with the character and exploring potentially destabilizing emotions from a safe distance. It is difficult to find this delicate balance in a story. Through the identification with Hercules, the child expresses their emotions and conflicts from a safe distance, as an observer, and at the same time experiences more "cathartic" dynamics.

The event of Hercules' madness (see Fig. 5) may be a good way to introduce an activity on affective empathy or an activity on perspective-taking without directly addressing the child's personal experiences. In this passage, one empathizes with the victim who is at the same time the author of the evil action. This literary episode is peculiar because usually the identification and the emphasis are only with and on the character who is an innocent victim. Hercules, instead, clearly expresses how his lack of self-control hurts first of all himself, and this is true of all those who do not have any self-control. Those people empathize with someone who would otherwise be difficult to identify with. Through the

expedient of Ate-induced madness it is possible to work both on the violent side of the hero and on the victim side, without being too moralistic. That is why Ate's character is so interesting for our purposes.

Figure 5: Asteas, *Krater of the Madness of Heracles*, red-figure pottery calyx type, ca. 350–320 BC, National Archaeological Museum of Spain, Madrid, inv. no. 11094, photograph by Antonio Trigo Arnal, Wikimedia Commons.

Hercules behaves badly because of Hera, and it is not his fault. This can be reassuring. It is not a limitation of the suspense, from a narrative point of view, and the reason is so creative that a glimmer of projection is still involuntarily present. Since children do not have to talk about the causes and do not feel guilty, it is possible to focus on the process through which Hercules loses control, clouded by Ate. When engaging in activities centred on the myth of the Twelve

Labours, one could mention the episode of madness, but in some situations it can be skipped over without affecting the narration.

The Labours imply various skills that may be introduced through specific activities and games, which can be part of a more "cognitive" approach to treatment. They introduce many skills of the character. The therapist can choose which labour to talk about, according to the goals that are to be achieved and the children's needs. The episodes are easy to tell; they can be divided into many sessions and adapted to the age of the listeners. The frame of the story enables us to extend it or cut it, or to add some narrative elements to adapt the episode to one's needs, without affecting the story and the cohesion of the myth.

In the myth no one tells Hercules what he must change in his behaviour and there are no tirades about self-control. On the contrary, the oracle tells him that through the Twelve Labours he can make up for it. The Labours indirectly and unknowingly to the hero give him a chance to grow. Not only will he use his strength but also many other physical skills; he will also have to develop virtues such as patience and perseverance. He will have to learn how to ask for help, use problem-solving techniques, accept unfair and biased judges who are similar to how the young people perceive teachers and educators. All these issues would make children with these disorders jump out of their skin if they were directly addressed. Instead, no one judges the hero – it is the hero who judges himself, and the reader desires to help him find justifications. The public supports him.

Hercules as a Hero Who Bounces Back from Failures

The process of identification with the character of Hercules deserves further remarks because depending on how it is presented or received, it can lend itself to different results. Usually, as mentioned above, he is perceived as a "who do I want to be like" model, full of positive features, but at the same time he is not moralistic or judgemental. This helps the children we are discussing identify with him. Simultaneously, some of his features may be viewed as ambiguous. He can be considered as an anti-hero or even a completely negative character.

This ambiguity is typical of many characters of Greek mythology,[60] and from an educational point of view on the one hand this can be a problem because there is the risk of providing a bad example for kids, while on the other

[60] For more on the ambiguity of the Greek hero, see Angelo Brelich, *Gli eroi greci*, Milano: Adelphi, 2010.

it is an opportunity because it is an excellent narrative vein for introducing children to the complexity of reality.

A perspective that can be a good compromise, or, better, synthesis, is one that sees Hercules as a sort of "bouncing back" hero. He does not give up. He is not perfect (the *vir perfectissimus*), and he has made some mistakes, but at the same time he does not feel discouraged, he bounces back from his own failures and tries to better himself by helping other people. Although he has to make an effort to keep his self-control and to avoid Ate's bad influence, he manages to do great things for mankind, thus giving hope to children.[61]

I am not going to discuss here whether resilience is innate, and whether it can be protected or implemented. In general clinical and public health, interventions can have a role in improving the chances of resilience among children affected by adversities, although it is not clear to what extent. Hercules can be considered from this perspective as a resilient character, who has been exposed to various stresses. Presenting Hercules in this light is common but not obvious. Hercules comes from the classical Greek tradition, which does not include one-dimensional characters (completely good or evil). If we take into account all the different episodes of Hercules' life history, we can say that it is a litany, to quote Jess Nevins's popular work,[62] of misdeeds as well as triumphant acts. Could ancient classical heroes be considered at the present time good educational characters? And, more generally, is there a hero that is the gold standard as an educational model? The answers to these questions are probably that it depends on the target audience, on our definition of a hero in the context of our culture and historical period, and of course on how we present him.

Many scholars have reflected on what is the archetype of a hero and how this archetype evolves over time. The first landmark work of the past century is Otto Rank's *Der Mythus von der Geburt des Helden* (1909), partially influenced by Freudian theory. Two remarkable responses to Rank's reflections, among several, were those of Baron Raglan (FitzRoy Richard Somerset), *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936) – influenced by James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) – and of Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) – influenced by Carl Jung's heroic archetype. In the twenty-first century, there have been many other attempts and works on these aspects but,

[61] For the messianic figure in youth culture, see also Michael Stierstorfer's chapter in the present volume, "From an Adolescent Freak to a Hope-Spreading Messianic Demigod: The Curious Transformations of Modern Teenagers in Contemporary Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature", 219–229.

[62] Jess Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger: The 4,000-Year History of the Superhero*, Santa Barbara, CA, and Denver, CO: Praeger, 2017, 173.

to sum up, a good operational definition of a contemporary hero is provided by Rüdiger Bartelmus within his *Heroenkonzept*.[63] The most important features of the contemporary hero are: unusual origins, superpowers, extraordinary skills and abilities, extraordinary devices, special weapons, special look, coded name, double identity, extraordinary enemies, missing or defaulting government that does not protect the people, and – last but not least – heroic mission. Among all these features[64] the key point from an educational perspective is how we present the heroic mission. An operational proposal[65] could be "selfless and aimed at aiding the oppressed, whether victims of crime or of the aggressions of evil men and women, monsters, governments and/or states/nations".[66]

Referring to Hercules' character, we can all agree, as states Nevins, that he has many qualities of the *Heroenkonzept*. He has an unusual origin (he is the result of an intercourse of Zeus with a mortal woman); he has strength as his superpower; he has the ability of fighting; he has a club as his trademark weapon; he has a lion's skin as his trademark costume; and he has extraordinary enemies. As far as his heroic mission is concerned – here is the point – it can be interpreted as self-motivated (redeeming himself after a crime, pursuing *arete*), or the emphasis can be put on selfless behaviour (for example, fighting against a monster to defend helpless inhabitants).

In Nevins's view, Hercules fails to meet contemporary standards (although "his flaws and misdeeds render him so fascinating").[67] This is clear if we refer to episodes like Hercules' service for Omphale or like having sex with King Thespius' fifty daughters. However, we could just omit these parts of the myth, since we are not compelled to use all the episodes coming from different traditions with different underlying motivations. But we can argue that also in more common and well-known episodes of Hercules' history presented to children and youngsters we have potentially negative elements which need to be considered from an educational point of view.

Neither does Hercules fit the model of the so-called underdog hero. Regardless of whether he is to be classified according to Nevins's categories or not, this great – dramaturgically speaking – character is frequent in children's literature and arouses strong emotions and identifications in the auditorium. The underdog's

[63] See Rüdiger Bartelmus, *Heroentum in Israel und seiner Umwelt*, "Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments" 65, Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979.

[64] Ibidem.

[65] Ibidem.

[66] Nevins, *The Evolution of the Costumed Avenger*, 8.

[67] Ibidem, 25. It should be noted that Nevins's perspective is not educational.

story starts with all the odds against him. Often he is full of flaws (inexperienced and with low self-esteem, he is not conscious of his own potential, etc.), but in the end he is successful. I think we all love this type of story. This is a great pattern to work with kids. Hercules in part recalls it. He can be perceived as a son left alone by his biological father, opposed by his stepmother, with some flaws, etc., but in my opinion he is not a character presented as a loser at the beginning of the story.

The conclusion of this excursus is that for our educational goals we can employ Hercules as a useful model, presenting him not as an epic hero, or as a *heros-theos* (hero-god) who is ultimately invincible, or as an anti-hero, or as an irreproachable model, or an underdog, but as a "bouncing back" hero. This allows us also to present a broader idea of "strength". We could indeed present the strength of Hercules as resilience. This complex concept is borrowed from materials' science and in a nutshell it can be defined as "the ability of a substance to return to its usual shape after being bent, stretched, or pressed".[68] In psychology, it is a debated concept[69] but we could say that it is the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity. Who more than Hercules, who began his life with two snakes attempting to kill him, can be considered a victim of stressors and a champion of resilience? We could also talk of strength of character, moral strength, and self-improvement, even though these are all different concepts. By the way, Hercules combines all these aspects: physical strength, strength of character, optimism, resilience, morality, self-improvement, and other skills we are going to see, all in a good mix that gives as a result a hero who bounces back.

Potentially Negative Elements in the Reception and Management of the Myth

What follows is a brief evaluation of the potential negative aspects of the character. In addition to his strength and courage, some children focus on the violent details of killing monsters or animals (suffocating, hunting, strangling,

[68] "Resilience", Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/resilience (accessed 28 July 2021).

[69] Quoting Helen Herrman, Donna E. Stewart, Natalia Diaz-Granados, Elena L. Berger, Beth Jackson, and Tracy Yuen, "What Is Resilience?", *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 56.5 (2011), 258–265, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F070674371105600504: "Definitions have evolved over time but fundamentally resilience is understood as referring to positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity".

beheading, etc.). Some of them may derive a variable degree of satisfaction from that. This is a typical point where erroneous assessments can be made, and it is important to assess the situation as a whole. Violent tendencies cannot be ascribed to a child just because he exults at seeing a monster killed. Nevertheless, it may be useful to note that some children are especially attracted to the topic of power, and that they concentrate on the pleasure originating in the submission of the monsters or the respect resulting from their defeat. They are apparently less interested in the monster being defeated because it is bad or in the altruistic and helpful approach that characterizes the hero. A partial explanation is that in some contexts, where violence is the role model, what children have suffered is idealized, desired, and performed in turn. Therefore, a character like Hercules might be misunderstood by these youngsters. They might focus only on his violent or excessively macho elements, therefore transforming him into an anti-hero or a negative character, one to their liking.

Such observations are similar to the outcomes of some studies in this field. As far as the pre-pubertal age is concerned, significant research about the fantasy games of children with possible behavioural disorders has been conducted by Judy Dunn and Claire Hughes and published as "'I Got Some Swords and You're Dead!': Violent Fantasy, Antisocial Behavior, Friendship, and Moral Sensibility in Young Children".[70] As for adolescence, we need to mention Rolf Loeber, Jeffrey D. Burke, and Dustin A. Pardini's investigation from 2009.[71] It shows that male adolescents living in adverse cultural and socio-economic conditions believe that being "tough and masculine" is desirable and must be proved through violence. These individuals' life projects are often focused on obtaining respect from their social context through violence. This is sometimes even more important than achieving other apparently key benefits, like, for example, earning money effortlessly.

It may be interesting at his point to ask whether Greek tragedies could be of current relevance from the perspective of the developmental age and of literature for minors. Are the issues and conflicts of these giants of human dramaturgy too far removed from the dynamics of children and young people? Are they too complex or raw? Observing how some young people receive specific episodes, it could be argued that it is reality itself that can be harsh and complex. Hard life can reach some of these young people probably before

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[70] Judy Dunn and Claire Hughes, "'I Got Some Swords and You're Dead!': Violent Fantasy, Antisocial Behavior, Friendship, and Moral Sensibility in Young Children", *Child Development* 72.2 (2001), 491–505.

[71] Rolf Loeber, Jeffrey D. Burke, and Dustin A. Pardini, "Development and Etiology of Disruptive and Delinquent Behavior", *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 5.1 (2009), 291–310.

Greek tragedies, putting them in touch not only with the problematic external world but also with the rawness of their inner dynamics. If we examine some of these children's aspirations, dreams, and their attention to appearances, Seneca's Hercules seems to be echoed: he has no limits; he is obsessed with respect, personal fame, and power. Considering, for example, verses 1138–1143 of *Hercules furens* and then verses 1153–1159, when he wakes up after his fit of madness, some questions may arise, according to John G. Fitch.[72] They are more connected to the hero's narcissistic worry that he might not be invincible than to the empathic and affective level:

> Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?
> Ubi sum? Sub ortu solis, an sub cardine
> Glacialis Ursae? Numquid Hesperii maris
> Extrema tellus hunc dat Oceano modum?
> Quas trahimus auras? Quod solum fesso subest?
> Certe redimus [...].
> (Sen., *HF* 1138–1143)

> What place is this, what region, what tract of the earth? Where am I? Beneath the sun's rising, or beneath the turning point of the icy Bear? Can this be the limit set to Ocean's waters by the farthest land on the western sea? What air do I breathe? What ground lies under my weary body? Certainly I have returned [...].[73]

> Arma quis vivo mihi
> detrahere potuit? Spolia quis tanta abstulit
> ipsumque quis non Herculis somnum horruit?
> Libet meum videre victorem, libet –
> Exsurge, virtus! Quem novum caelo pater
> Genuit relicto? Cuius in fetu stetit
> Nox longior quam nostra?
> (Sen., *HF* 1153–1159)

> Who could strip my armour from me while I lived? Who stole such mighty spoils and had no dread of Hercules even in his sleep? I long to see my conqueror. Rouse yourself, my courage! What new son did my father leave heaven to sire? For whose begetting was night delayed longer than mine?[74]

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[72] John G. Fitch, "*Pectus o nimium ferum*: Act V of Seneca's *Hercules furens*", *Hermes* 107.2 (1979), 240–248.

[73] Trans. from John G. Fitch, ed., *Seneca's* Hercules furens*: A Critical Text with Introduction and Commentary*, Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1987, ad loc.

[74] Ibidem.

From a syntactic and expressive point of view, Kathleen Riley underlines how "vivo mihi" (1153), and the auto-reference to Hercules (1155), and "meum victorem" (1156) show the selfish point of view in this situation.[75]

If we consider the verses in which Hercules notices he has lost his family (1161–1168), his answer is more concerned about the loss of his *virtus* and the offence, the so-called narcissistic wound, rather than about having a normal reaction characterized by pain and empathy:

> Quis Lycus regnum obtinet,
> quis tanta Thebis scelera moliri ausus est
> Hercule reverso? quisquis Ismeni loca,
> actaea quisquis arva, qui gemino mari
> pulsata Pelopis regna Dardanii colis,
> succurre, saevae cladis auctorem indica.
> ruat ira in omnes: hostis est quisquis mihi
> non monstrat hostem, victor Alcidae, lates?
> (Sen., *HF* 1161–1168)

> What Lycus holds the kingdom? Who dared encompass such crimes in Thebes once Hercules had returned? All you who dwell in the districts of Ismenos, the fields of Attica, and the realms of Dardan Pelops, beaten by two seas: run to help, point out the source of this cruel carnage. My anger must pour out on all: my enemy is anyone who does not identify my enemy. Are you hiding, conqueror of Alcides?[76]

The absence of empathy is also to be found in the following verses:

> Pectus o nimium ferum!
> quis vos per omnem, liberi, sparsos domum
> deflere digne poterit? Hic durus malis
> lacrimare vultus nescit.
> (Sen., *HF* 1226–1229)

> O heart too fierce! Who can weep worthily for you children, scattered throughout the house? This face, hardened by sufferings, is incapable of weeping.[77]

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[75] Kathleen Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles*: Reasoning Madness*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, 86.

[76] Trans. from Fitch, ed., *Seneca's* Hercules furens, ad loc.

[77] Ibidem.

Like in *Hercules furens*, those who work with individuals with conduct disorders notice how they are focused on themselves and, above all, are not empathetic with the emotional world of other people. Some of these children live in a social context that teaches them to repress their feelings and not to develop empathy.

Within this frame of reference, it is possible to mention another small yet significant episode of the mythological tradition, in line with Seneca's point of view. From the walls of the city of Tiryns, Hercules throws a man who is guilty of having doubts about him and who suspects him to be a cattle thief.[78] In

[78] See Ps.-Apollod., *Bibl.* 2.6.2: μετ᾽ οὐ πολὺ δὲ κλαπεισῶν ἐξ Εὐβοίας ὑπὸ Αὐτολύκου βοῶν, Εὔρυτος μὲν ἐνόμιζεν ὑφ᾽ Ἡρακλέους γεγονέναι τοῦτο, Ἴφιτος δὲ ἀπιστῶν ἀφικνεῖται πρὸς Ἡρακλέα, καὶ συντυχὼν ἥκοντι ἐκ Φερῶν αὐτῷ, σεσωκότι τὴν ἀποθανοῦσαν Ἄλκηστιν Ἀδμήτῳ, παρακαλεῖ συζητῆσαι τὰς βόας. Ἡρακλῆς δὲ ὑπισχνεῖται: καὶ ξενίζει μὲν αὐτόν, μανεὶς δὲ αὖθις ἀπὸ τῶν Τιρυνθίων ἔρριψεν αὐτὸν τειχῶν ("Not long after, some cattle were stolen from Euboea by Autolycus, and Eurytus supposed that it was done by Hercules; but Iphitus did not believe it and went to Hercules. And meeting him, as he came from Pherae after saving the dead Alcestis for Admetus, he invited him to seek the kine with him; but going mad again he threw him from the walls of Tiryns"; trans. from Apollodorus, *The Library*, vol. 1, trans. Sir James George Frazer, London and New York, NY: William Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921, 238–239); Soph., *Trach.* 270–273: ὡς ἵκετ᾽ αὖθις Ἴφιτος Τιρυνθίαν / πρὸς κλιτύν, ἵππους νομάδας ἐξιχνοσκοπῶν, / τότ᾽ ἄλλοσ᾽ αὐτὸν ὄμμα, θατέρᾳ δὲ νοῦν / ἔχοντ᾽, ἀπ᾽ ἄκρας ἧκε πυργώδους πλακός ("Furious at this treatment, when afterward Iphitus came to the hill of Tiryns on the track of horses that had strayed, Heracles seized a moment when the man's eyes were one place and his thoughts another, and hurled him from a towering summit"; trans. from Sophocles, *The Plays and Fragments*, vol. 5: *The Trachiniae*, trans. Sir Richard Jebb, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892, 46–47); Hom., *Od.* 21.22–30: Ἴφιτος αὖθ᾽ ἵππους διζήμενος, αἵ οἱ ὄλοντο / δώδεκα θήλειαι, ὑπὸ δ᾽ ἡμίονοι ταλαεργοί: / αἳ δή οἱ καὶ ἔπειτα φόνος καὶ μοῖρα γένοντο, / ἐπεὶ δὴ Διὸς υἱὸν ἀφίκετο καρτερόθυμον, / φῶθ᾽ Ἡρακλῆα, μεγάλων ἐπιίστορα ἔργων, / ὅς μιν ξεῖνον ἐόντα κατέκτανεν ᾧ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ, / σχέτλιος, οὐδὲ θεῶν ὄπιν ᾐδέσατ᾽ οὐδὲ τράπεζαν, / τὴν ἥν οἱ παρέθηκεν: ἔπειτα δὲ πέφνε καὶ αὐτόν, / ἵππους δ᾽ αὐτὸς ἔχε κρατερώνυχας ἐν μεγάροισι ("And Iphitus, on his part, had come in search of twelve brood mares, which he had lost, with sturdy mules at the teat; but to him thereafter did they bring death and doom, when he came to the stout-hearted son of Zeus, the man Heracles, who well knew deeds of daring; for Heracles slew him, his guest though he was, in his own house, ruthlessly, and had regard neither for the wrath of the gods nor for the table which he had set before him, but slew the man thereafter, and himself kept the stout-hoofed mares in his halls"; trans. from Homer, *The Odyssey*, vol. 2, trans. Augustus T. Murray, London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1919, 304–307; on the same vv. there is a scholium citing Pherec., *FGrHist.* 3 F 82); Diod. Sic. 4.31.3: Ἰφίτου δὲ τοῦ Εὐρύτου τὸ γεγονὸς ὑποπτεύσαντος καὶ παραγενομένου κατὰ ζήτησιν τῶν ἵππων εἰς Τίρυνθα, τοῦτον μὲν ἀναβιβάσας ὁ Ἡρακλῆς ἐπί τινα πύργον ὑψηλὸν ἐκέλευσεν ἀφορᾶν μή που νεμόμεναι τυγχάνουσιν· οὐ δυναμένου δὲ κατανοῆσαι τοῦ Ἰφίτου, φήσας αὐτὸν ψευδῶς κατῃτιᾶσθαι τὴν κλοπὴν κατεκρήμισεν ἀπὸ τοῦ πύργου ("But Iphitus, the son of Eurytus, harboured suspicions of what had been done and came to Tiryns in search of the horses, whereupon Heracles, taking him up on a lofty tower of the castle, asked him to see whether they were by chance grazing anywhere; and when Iphitus was unable to discover them, he claimed that Iphitus had falsely accused him of the theft and threw him down headlong from the tower";

some versions it seems that Hercules performs this action because he is really guilty, while in other versions it is just a fit of madness. In yet other versions, as highlighted by Robert Graves and others, it is done in cold blood because it is a way to wash away the offence of the lack of respect. It is interesting how the confusion among the various versions mirrors the questions of the people working with minors, when they try to understand the intentions of some specific delinquent actions.

Potentially Positive Elements in the Reception and Management of the Myth

Below, the potentially positive elements in the reception of the myth are analysed. First, let us create a list of Hercules' features that children may notice:

- Children realize that Hercules is aggressive like they are with their teachers and that he has the same behavioural disorders they have. As a student, the hero killed his music teacher with a lyre because he had applied a teaching method Hercules was not used to.[79] This behaviour is similar to theirs;

trans. from Diodorus of Sicily, *Books II (Continued) 35–IV, 58*, trans. Charles Henry Oldfather, London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1935, 440–441); see also Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955 (published in Italian as *I miti greci*, trans. Elisa Morpurgo, rev. Chiara Gallini, Milano: Longanesi, 1963, 482).

[79] Paus. 9.29.9: λέγεται δὲ καὶ ἄλλα τοιάδε ὑπὸ Θηβαίων, ὡς τοῦ Λίνου τούτου γένοιτο ὕστερον ἕτερος Λίνος καλούμενος Ἰσμηνίου καὶ ὡς Ἡρακλῆς ἔτι παῖς ὢν ἀποκτείνειεν αὐτὸν διδάσκαλον μουσικῆς ὄντα ("Other tales are told by the Thebans, how that later than this Linus there was born another, called the son of Ismenius, a teacher of music, and how Heracles, while still a child, killed him"; trans. from Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, vol. 4, trans. William H.S. Jones, London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1935, 298–299); Ps.-Apollod., *Bibl.* 2.4.9: οὗτος δὲ ἦν ἀδελφὸς Ὀρφέως: ἀφικόμενος δὲ εἰς Θήβας καὶ Θηβαῖος γενόμενος ὑπὸ Ἡρακλέους τῇ κιθάρᾳ πληγεὶς ἀπέθανεν: ἐπιπλήξαντα γὰρ αὐτὸν ὀργισθεὶς ἀπέκτεινε ("This Linus was a brother of Orpheus; he came to Thebes and became a Theban, but was killed by Hercules with a blow of the lyre; for being struck by him, Hercules flew into a rage and slew him"; trans. from Appollodorus, *The Library*, vol. 1, 176–177; he mentions the teacher's name: Linus); Diod. Sic. 3.67: τὸν δὲ Λίνον ἐπὶ ποιητικῇ καὶ μελῳδίᾳ θαυμασθέντα μαθητὰς σχεῖν πολλούς, ἐπιφανεστάτους δὲ τρεῖς, Ἡρακλέα, Θαμύραν, Ὀρφέα. τούτων δὲ τὸν μὲν Ἡρακλέα, κιθαρίζειν μανθάνοντα διὰ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς βραδυτῆτα μὴ δύνασθαι δέξασθαι τὴν μάθησιν, ἔπειθ᾽ ὑπὸ τοῦ Λίνου πληγαῖς ἐπιτιμηθέντα διοργισθῆναι καὶ τῇ κιθάρα τὸν διδάσκαλον πατάξαντα ἀποκτεῖναι ("Linus also, who was admired because of his poetry and singing, had many pupils and three of greatest renown, Heracles, Thamyras, and Orpheus. Of these three Heracles, who was learning to play the lyre, was unable to appreciate what was taught him because of his sluggishness of soul, and once when he had been punished with rods by Linus he became violently angry and killed his teacher with a blow of the lyre"; trans. from Diodorus of Sicily, *Books II (Continued) 35–IV, 58*, 306–307).

especially when they throw objects, such as pencil cases, books, and chairs, at their teachers.

- Children let off steam, are aggressive, or have fun abusing animals and notice that Hercules started behaving this way as a baby by strangling snakes.
- Some boys think that their stepmothers (or, generally speaking, their parents) do not love them and they fight with them, much like Hercules, who feels that Hera hates him (and so it is). Frequently they experience anger crises or run away after fighting with the new partner of their parents.
- Some of them have uncontrolled behavioural crises involving their parents and siblings, which often require the intervention of the police or social services. They feel in harmony with and similar to Hercules, who committed evil actions against his family.

These features create a non-judgemental, non-moralistic, and non-perfect character. Older children do not feel that the story is pervaded by unrealistically optimistic and annoying ideas. Such qualities paradoxically give children more hope and are a way of introducing psychoeducational activities in a more positive way.

What Is the Best Version? The Labours after the Madness

Another point, with educational implications, is whether to choose a version with Hercules' madness at the beginning of the Twelve Labours – following the tradition of Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* and Hyginus' *Fabulae* – or at the end of the Twelve Labours, following Euripides' version. This part of the story may be, in some cases, a resource and a facilitator for elaborating on one's personal experiences, whereas in other situations it becomes a problem. There are no simple recipes, and all options have pros and cons. Here the reading reception approach shows its merits and potentials because it can provide information to guide the operators' choices on what to propose. It is necessary to know the clinical and social conditions of the child, their cognitive and emotional developmental stage, and their re-elaboration skills.

Most editions for children put the episode of madness at the beginning. Placing Hercules' madness or crime at the end of the Twelve Labours portrays the hero's efforts without a happy ending, creates misunderstandings among children, and discourages adolescents from facing their labours in an optimistic way. Nevertheless, Euripides' version could help to show how a certain type of behavioural path can lead to serious problems.

In some versions the episode (Hercules' killing of his family) is openly described as "madness". In other versions, their authors instead just hint at a crime committed by Hercules in the past, before starting his adventures. It is useful to consider the text and how Hercules' madness is acknowledged in some specific groups of children in order to decide what the best version is.

Some of the children that have mentally ill relatives could be needlessly scared by the use of the term "madness" – which is a general term that might be superficial or stigmatizing. In these situations the word madness could be avoided. One can opt for the term "crime" or "evil action" or "involuntarily hurting" (without explaining the details), ascribing Hercules' evil actions to Hera's malicious intervention. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider that some of the children's parents are criminals, and then talking about Hercules as a hero might be a problem. Other children have assisted in their parents' violent actions (such as beating or stabbing or killing a parent and/or brothers/sisters). In such cases we are dealing with a crime but a mental health problem in the offender cannot be ruled out.

The Most Suitable Interpretation: Self-Regulation

In addition to the various versions of the myth, there are also several interpretations. It is impossible to talk about them in detail here, but – to sum up – the approach that seems to be the most suitable, in light of our analysis, is the one that focuses on self-control and self-regulation, that is, on the balance between the satisfaction of impulses and facing reality and its limits. Such an interpretation suits the identification of Hercules with a "bouncing back" hero, who, on one hand, is not too perfect and superficially optimistic and, on the other hand, not too pessimistic and nihilistic. Hercules is aware of the fact that, despite being a hero, he can voluntarily or involuntarily hurt people.

There is an external mediator that makes the hero not completely responsible for his actions and this awareness is therefore more bearable. As a hero, Hercules feels failure, pain, and irreversibility. In order to improve and free himself from this situation, he decides to submit to authority, although the leader is unworthy (the treacherous Eurystheus; see Fig. 6). While serving the leader, Hercules follows the rules and at the same time makes efforts to help other people, at least in some labours. He uses his own autonomous judgement while also respecting authority. He performs the tasks even if the leader is unfair in evaluating their accomplishment. He does his "homework" because he is aware that it is the right thing to do, regardless of the envious referee and

of prompt praises. In other words, he delays the immediate satisfaction of his impulses and desires in order to achieve more evolved goals, using his skills with responsibility.

Figure 6: A fragment of a black-figure amphora depicting Heracles showing the Erymanthian Boar to Eurystheus hiding in a storage jar, inv. no. 198042 MNW, National Museum in Warsaw, photograph by Steve K. Simons. Used with permission.

This emphasis on individual responsibility and self-control gained by Hercules is in line with some psychological and pedagogical theories. The psychologist William Damon, for example, lays stress on the benefits of putting children in a context with rules and challenges, based on the fact that children grow healthier if they challenge themselves with actions aimed at making them feel useful to themselves and to society.[80] This approach assumes that it is possible for children to deal with morality and individual responsibility – that is, that they are able to perform evil actions even as children. It is a different approach from the one that relies on the optimistic myth of the noble savage and on the idea of childhood being permanently innocent and remote from the moral problem. One of the points of the Hercules myth is that sometimes evil actions, regardless of intention and of any mitigating factors (in Hercules' story we can mention Ate's influence), have irreversible consequences.

[80] William Damon, *Più grandi speranze. Contro la cultura dell'indulgenza in casa e a scuola*, trans. Elena Campominosi, Milano: Longanesi & C., 1997 (ed. pr. in English 1995 as *Greater Expectations*).

In our work there is a delicate balance between the activities aimed at understanding the importance of irreversible actions (and therefore the responsibility for performing such actions) and the rehabilitation and chance to make up for one's mistakes. Choosing the interpretation that thematizes the reality principle[81] means reading about and presenting some of Hercules' features in a way that prepares the young people to deal with these issues in a balanced way.

The reality principle is a key point also for promoting mental health. If on a behavioural spectrum we set on one end the perfect hero (who perfectly and unrealistically controls his own inner dynamics and morality) and on the other we put a dysregulated and impulsive character, we could set our model in the middle. This "imperfect" or "in medio stat virtus" model has a more realistic and solid psychological structure than the two exaggerated and distorted extremes. In this context, it is worth recalling how dramatists and political regimes have used these models for different purposes. As for the past century, we can recognize the first extreme in the rhetoric of the *Übermensch* preparing and supporting totalitarian systems, whereas at the beginning of the twenty-first century we can see how dramatists worked on the second extreme, deconstructing Hercules' perfection and turning his power against him. The character becomes the victim of his inability to control himself; seemingly as hard as steel, he becomes as fragile and liquid as postmodern cultures, reminding us of Seneca's *Hercules furens* and its pessimistic atmosphere. In this regard, the theatrical plays of Archibald MacLeish, Daniel Algie, and Simon Armitage are to be mentioned as benchmarks. For now let us observe that these contrasting hero models can work in fiction but do not function well in education.

From a narrowly psychological point of view, the two opposite dynamics are joined in the same pathological pattern. Riley in her essay refers to two researchers who deepened the topic. The psychiatrist Jack Levin, Head of the Brudnick Center on Violence and Conflict of Northeastern University of Boston, has found common traits in "family annihilators": autarchic and solitary personalities, like Seneca's Hercules, they are rigid, narrow-minded, used to being "alone in command", and incapable of facing the limits of reality and life's frustrations.[82] In another study, by Larry Milner, the psychiatric conditions of the parents that imply filicide are grouped under a psychological pattern defined

[81] Understood as the ability of the mind to assess the reality of the external world, and to act upon it accordingly.

[82] Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 324; see also Kevin Toolis, "Family Man", *The Guardian Weekend*, 13 July 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2002/jul/13/weekend.kevintoolis (accessed 16 March 2021).

as "the Hercules complex".[83] The model of the hero we propose here is different from all those mentioned above.

Walt Disney's, Euripides', and Seneca's Versions of Hercules as Vectors of Different Approaches to Dealing with the Principle of Reality

If we present Hercules' myth to children and adolescents following an underlying (and not too explicit) dialectic between the pleasure principle[84] and the reality principle, they find more positive and open-minded suggestions. The theme of extraordinary strength and "cool" monsters may be included in the growth of the hero, who in the end has a more mature and integrated personality. He is neither a monolithic and innately perfect hero nor a mentally insane villain nor an anti-hero who is still ambiguously a victim of his *hubris* despite performing good actions.

The screenwriters of Walt Disney's cartoon version from 1997 (dirs. Ron Clements and John Musker), who operated within the principle of the reality modus, probably did not choose this point of view by chance. On the surface the story seems sugar-coated, without the conflict with Hercules' stepmother, Hera, and his subsequent madness. The authors decided to completely leave out the negative event of the madness-crime. Since the film was a mass product, this choice enabled them to market it as widely as they could. Nonetheless, there are some educational hints in the aforementioned point of view. The protagonist is a clumsy but strong boy with hyperactive traits, very similar to children with behavioural disorders.[85] Adopted as a child by Alcmene and a pacific version of Amphitryon, he has difficulties caused by his strength, hyperactivity, and exuberance. Instead of becoming depressed, he starts training to become a hero in order to find his place in the world, fulfilling his divine nature but then giving it up for love. It is true that the plot, which ends with the liberation and conquest of a young girl, includes some Oedipal conflicts. But most of the story is focused on the growth of the young man and his desire to find his place in the world, which includes also, but is not limited to, a romantic relationship.

[83] Larry S. Milner, *Hardness of Heart/Hardness of Life: The Stain of Human Infanticide*, Lanham, MD, New York, NY, and Oxford: University Press of America, 2000 (ed. pr. 1998), as cited in Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 324.

[84] Understood as the instinctive seeking of pleasure and avoiding of pain to satisfy biological and psychological needs.

[85] More specifically, Disney's Hercules vaguely recalls ADHD symptoms. The first scene, when the young hero accidentally destroys the colonnade of the city, is amazing. In this way, he provokes the anger and judgements of the entire city, and not for the first time.

Disney's Hercules does not question the value of divinity, even if, in the end, he prefers to take the path of mortal life to achieve fulfilment. This is different from Euripides' version, according to which divine nature is perceived negatively. As Riley observes, it implies a definitive lack of transcendental elements or of Hercules' divinization and the relationship with anthropomorphic gods.[86] The hero is someone who has the courage to endure life, ἐγκαρτερήσω βίοτον (Eur., *Her*. 1351; "I shall have the courage to endure life"), and who puts fate above the power of the gods:[87] οὐδεὶς δὲ θνητῶν ταῖς τύχαις ἀκήρατος, / οὐ θεῶν, ἀοιδῶν εἴπερ οὐ ψευδεῖς λόγοι (1314–1315; "fate exempts no man; all men are flawed, and so the gods, unless the poets lie").[88] He focuses on the human relationships, such as paternity, sonship, friendship, and not on the relationship with the gods. More specifically, Hercules prefers Amphitryon to Zeus: πατέρα γὰρ ἀντὶ Ζηνὸς ἡγοῦμαι σὲ ἐγώ (1265; "I consider you as my father not Zeus").[89]

Reflecting on the concept of fatherhood and on the role of the father in educating to moral responsibility, it is worth mentioning Riley and George Devereux who describe the characters of Amphitryon in Euripides' *Herakles* and Cadmus in *The Bacchae* as fathers who play maieutic roles (not to say psychotherapeutic) and help their children become aware of the evil actions they have committed.[90] Although they are welcoming and are not hard on their children, they are far from the too "friendly" fathers who try to justify or make light of their children's actions, and who are more concerned about defending them from the unfair judgements of society than educating them and providing them with a solid psychological structure.

In addition to avoiding the topic of Hercules' divine paternity, Euripides introduces the value of φιλία (*philía*), human relationships, and ἀρετή (*aretḗ*) with some specific elements: ὅστις δὲ πλοῦτον ἢ σθένος μᾶλλον φίλων / ἀγαθῶν πεπᾶσθαι βούλεται, κακῶς φρονεῖ (1425–1426; "whoever wants to acquire wealth or power rather than good friends is a fool").[91] How relevant are these

[86] Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 45; M.S. Silk, "Herakles and Greek Tragedy", *Greece and Rome* 32.1 (1985), 1–22.

[87] Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

[88] Trans. by David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Euripides, *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides*, vol. 1, New York, NY: Modern Library, 1956, 359), quoted by Thiher, *Revels in Madness*, 26.

[89] Trans. from Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 41.

[90] Ibidem, 39; George Devereux, "The Psychotherapy Scene in Euripides *Bacchae*", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 90 (1970), 35–48.

[91] Trans. from Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 90.

words of Euripides for the kids we work with? Victor L. Ehrenberg states that the *aretḗ* of Euripides' work is "demythologized": "Man must rely on himself and his fellow-men to build his world, proudly and courageously defying the blows of fate".[92] Moreover, H.H.O. Chalk, quoted in Riley's essay, underlines the connection between *philía* and *aretḗ* and how the tragedy experienced by Hercules leads him to fully appreciate the value of friendship. The scholar emphasizes how the earlier βία (*bía*), symbolized by his bow and arrows, is "now strengthened by his [Hercules'] new understanding, induced by pain, of the hateful consequences of his actions".[93] The value of *philía* is clearly expressed also in verses 1218–1220:

> τί μοι προσείων χεῖρα σημαίνεις φόνον;
> ὡς μὴ μύσος με σῶν βάλῃ προσφθεγμάτων;
> οὐδὲν μέλει μοι σύν γε σοὶ πράσσειν κακῶς [...].
>
> Why move your hand to warn me that you have a fear? Are you afraid that your greeting might pollute me? I don't care if I share your suffering [...].[94]

And in verses 1398–1400:

> Θησεύς: παῦσαι: δίδου δὲ χεῖρ' ὑπηρέτῃ φίλῳ.
> Ἡρακλῆς: ἀλλ' αἷμα μὴ σοῖς ἐξομόρξωμαι πέπλοις.
> Θησεύς: ἔκμασσε, φείδου μηδέν: οὐκ ἀναίνομαι.
>
> THESEUS: Enough. Give your hand to a friend who wants to help you.
> HERAKLES: Be careful that the blood of my pollution does not wipe off on your clothes.
> THESEUS: Wipe away! As much as you like! I do not reject it.[95]

Nevertheless, as mentioned above in the section about the potentially negative elements of the myth, introducing Greek tragedies in a psychoeducational context is an amazing opportunity, but it might support in youngsters

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[92] Victor L. Ehrenberg, *Aspects of the Ancient World: Essays and Reviews*, Oxford and New York, NY: Blackwell and Salloch, 1946, 163–165, quoted after Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 45.

[93] H.H.O. Chalk, "*Arete* and *Bia* in Euripides' *Herakles*", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 82 (1962), 14, https://doi.org/10.2307/628540; Arthur W.H. Adkins, "Basic Greek Values in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Hercules furens*", *Classical Quarterly* 16.2 (1966), 216–217, quoted after Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 40.

[94] Trans. from Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 42.

[95] Ibidem.

a pessimistic or nihilistic view of life. Trying to empower individuals through the disapproval of divine characters and based on the awareness of one's moral faultiness (without mediations) assumes that individuals have solid and developed psychological structures. A superficial reading of Euripides' tragedy may result in a nihilistic view of fate and in misinterpretations of what friendship is. It may just confirm a defiant adolescent in finding a peer that merely supports him in what he wants to do, regardless of the rationality of the action. Often one hears from an adolescent who has beaten his own parents during an argument that the only thing that matters is the support from his friends. The adolescent identifies with Hercules, a hero who disregards gods and parents, supported by his friend/Theseus.

Another important contribution to the study of distorted connections with reality and to the analysis of violent behaviours, as already mentioned, is to be found in Seneca's *Hercules furens* and in the works that follow his tradition. Also here a pivotal point is the skill of developing healthy relations, and it is quite useful to refer to Riley's essay and to the works mentioned by her. Furthermore, Levin's studies have some interesting implications for the developmental age. The scholar, as mentioned above,[96] has found out that family annihilators are lone wolves who do not share decisions and who always need to be leaders,[97] precisely like Seneca's Hercules. Also from Seneca's reception we can deduce that a pivotal point for mental health is the skill of developing human relations, and much can be done in the developmental age to work on these personality features and to prevent future problems: learning to work in a team, share one's efforts, and show one's own weaknesses without shame and with a positive attitude. Another useful contribution comes from the psychiatrist Jonathan Shay. He works with men, often veterans, who have committed extremely violent actions. Shay has especially analysed the state (defined as "berserk") of traumatized veterans and has identified the loss of control as a common trait among people who have committed violent actions.[98] The definition of Shay's berserk may be, as Riley asserts, compared to Hercules' loss of control and to Homer's meaning of Lyssa, used in the *Iliad*. In this context, Riley mentions the example of Hector's frenzy:

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[96] See above, p. 317.

[97] See Toolis, "Family Man", quoted by Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 324.

[98] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Characters*, New York, NY: Atheneum, 1994.

> Ἕκτωρ δὲ μέγα σθένεϊ βλεμεαίνων
> μαίνεται ἐκπάγλως πίσυνος Διί, οὐδέ τι τίει
> ἀνέρας οὐδὲ θεούς: κρατερὴ δέ ἑ λύσσα δέδυκεν.
> (Hom., *Il.* 9.237–239)
>
> And Hector exulting greatly in his strength rages fearfully, trusting Zeus, and regards not men nor gods; and mighty madness has possessed him.[99]

Contemporary theatre offers some contributions following Seneca's tradition. Very cruel and intense performances depict Hercules without limits and self-control in the aforementioned plays – Archibald MacLeish's *Herakles*, Daniel Algie's *Home Front*, and Simon Armitage's *Mister Heracles*.[100] *Mister Heracles*' madness has specific similarities to the fury of the heroes and characters of the *Iliad*, where Lyssa is used to describe the state of mind and the cruelty of the soldiers.[101] Like Seneca did before them, MacLeish and Armitage put the reason for Hercules' madness in a psychological context, specifically in a disorderly and exaggerated *modus vivendi*.

Referring to a Definition and to the Pros and Cons of the "Hercules Complex"

Referring to Milner's work and to the descriptions and suggestions from Seneca's play, and those connected to it, we could define the "Hercules complex" as a natural predisposition to aggressiveness and overindulgences due to environmental

[99] Trans. from Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 41.

[100] The American dramatist Archibald MacLeish re-elaborates Hercules' myth and madness in his *Herakles*, conceived and published during the Cold War. MacLeish represents *hubris*, as noted by Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 279–337, through uncontrolled and limitless scientific research. The protagonist is Professor Hoadley, physicist and Nobel Prize winner who shares many of the features of Seneca's Hercules. *Home Front* was a performance staged at La MaMa Theater in New York in 2006, directed by Randahl Hoey and written by Daniel Algie. Algie re-imagines Hercules coming back to Thebes after his mission to Hades. The hero is a Vietnam veteran who suffers from PTSD. Instead of accepting help, he focuses on his feelings of guilt and on a deviant autarky (αὐτάρκεια; *autárkeia*) that leads him to attack his family, mistaking them for enemies. Simon Armitage in his *Mister Heracles*, staged on 16 February 2001, co-directed by Natasha Betteridge and Simon Godwin, presents Hercules as a soldier working for a military organization (the equivalent of the character of Eurystheus). He comes back to his wife, Megara, in a post-apocalyptic scenario after a Herculean mission/labour in which he has explored other planets.

[101] Riley, *The Reception and Performance of Euripides'* Herakles, 331.

stressors or cultural and social influences that lead to violent and sometimes dumb actions.

Talking about a structured "Hercules complex" implies making some distinctions and should not be subject to generalizations, considering the overworked trend of using Greek characters for defining psychological problems and the risk of an overestimate of the incidence of such a complex in the population. Broadly speaking, indeed, it could be possible to use it as a concept that helps to define the difficulty to keep one's self-control. But not all cases of a loss of control are so serious – a five-minute outburst does not make you a murderer with a "Greek-character complex". Most of all, although some of the personalities of the family annihilators could be characterized by this complex, many other episodes of violence follow different trajectories and can be connected to personalities different from the ones linked to the Senecan drama.

Seneca's point of view, as well as Euripides', can provide us with a lot of suggestions: especially the concept of the dynamic and progressive elements that lead to violence and crimes. Nevertheless, such thematizations might end up being moralistic and boring for children, like the story of the ant and the cicada.[102] Although in a less elaborated way, many children are aware that some of their actions are wrong and will have negative consequences in the future. The problem is that they just prefer not to think about it and live in the present. They choose to live like cicadas and dislike the ant. Therefore, talking about the risks of living like Hercules without limits and rules is not useful. In these situations it is more helpful to establish effective limits, connected with daily life, that make them experience the negative consequences or the positive benefits of their conduct. Discussing how bad they are and how they are unable to control themselves is futile. This is also why the tradition that presents Hercules choosing between good and evil or between Virtue and Vice[103] is not always appealing.[104]

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[102] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976; in Italian as *Il mondo incantato. Uso, importanza e significati psicoanalitici delle fiabe*, trans. Andrea D'Anna, Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 1977.

[103] Represented, among others, in Lucas Cranach's (1472–1553) or Pompeo Girolamo Batoni's (1708–1787) *Hercules at the Crossroads* paintings.

[104] Of course it depends on the children one is working with. A promising laboratory of Prof. Susan Deacy involving autistic children starts precisely from this perspective; see her chapter "Hercules: Bearer of Hope for Autistic Children?", in this volume, 251–274. On the therapeutic value of the myths, see also the chapters by Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, "New Hope for Old Stories: Yiyun Li's *Gilgamesh* and Ali Smith's *Antigone*", 345–370, and by Krishni Burns, "La Fontaine's Reeds: Adapting Greek Mythical Heroines to Model Resilience", 327–342.

Conclusions

We are at the end of the voyage, following the erratic flight of our *Coscinocera hercules* to discover Hercules' myth. I tried to give an overview which is inevitably incomplete. It is challenging to talk about a story referring to different age groups and about children with different psychological characteristics. Moreover, it is difficult to consider a narrative regardless of the specificity of the narrative medium and the way in which it is presented. Furthermore, one thing is to talk generically about activities that promote mental health as I have done in this chapter and another thing is to prove it through evidence-based scientific studies.

There are some educational implications in this character and his story that I tried to outline. These tips could certainly be questioned. There is a position in the criticism of children's literature that argues that art (and literature, which is part of it) must not be "useful" (*ars gratia artis*) and that children must be left free to make their own associations and deductions. It is a position that certainly has important and sharable arguments. Yet, it is not a neutral choice when you decide which version of a story should be referred to, unless you propose that all versions should be presented. This is even more true if the choice is made by operators who want to propose games and activities with that specific narrative setting and that are supposed to have educational aims.

Certainly having educational purposes is at risk of ideological or preconceived or moralistic positions towards those who receive the contents of the educational proposal and towards the narration with which we are dealing. The best thing to do could be to declare one's theoretical framework and the reasons for the proposals, assuming we are sufficiently transparent about ourselves and our choices, but it is much easier to do that with adult interlocutors than with minor ones.

There is just one thing I would suggest to the readers of this chapter: Greek myths deal with big issues and whatever choice the operator makes, it is better to do that with awareness. If we are talking about an educational or rehabilitative setting, my personal position is that it is useful to adopt a theoretical approach that studies the reception of stories and fosters dialogic interaction between the story, the narrator, and children. Moreover, you have to know well the personal story of the interlocutor and your educational purposes.

In conclusion, if we consider how children with aggressive or violent behavioural disorders interpret the features of Hercules and if we examine the positive value of this character from the perspective of working with them, we can state that he is a model who potentially provides children with hope, without being

"too perfect". Treating behavioural and aggressive disorders by using anti-heroes or more ambiguous characters would be more difficult. Hercules is, instead, a symbol of strength and courage; many children and adolescents definitely love and need such qualities to overcome the difficulties in their lives.

Hercules shows humility and self-control: he agrees to obey his cousin's commands, although he does not like him, and children and adolescents often have difficulties in respecting their educators' or teachers' authority because they are perceived as unfair and unworthy. Hercules is a helpful hero. To some extent, this character accepts the challenge to better and redeem himself and help the community. This is a very positive message.

The hero may be considered and presented as a "bouncing back" hero who made big mistakes but has not given up. He struggles to keep his own self-control and learns how to avoid being influenced by Ate, and by doing this he makes the world better. Children and adolescents with behavioural disorders could appreciate Hercules' story presented in this way, because his character is not judgemental and moralistic: the hero has features similar to their own and his success instils hope in them. The frame story of this myth is suitable for many age groups and approaches. The episodes of the Twelve Labours are short and flexible: they can be adapted for games and preventive and rehabilitative psychoeducational activities, and this can have as a result the promotion of a healthy mental development that should be analysed in further studies.

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana
From the editorial review

Our Mythical Hope is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College
From the editorial review

Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" […]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. […] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw
From the introductory chapter

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