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'I SHALL SING OF HERAKLES': WRITING A HERCULES ORATORIO FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Emma Stafford and Tim Benjamin

The idea was born in the bar of the Queen's Hotel in Todmorden, a small Pennine mill town in the north of England, on the border between Yorkshire and Lancashire.[1] Composer Tim Benjamin and classicist Emma Stafford were having a celebratory drink there in April 2015, after a successful performance by Todmorden Choral Society and Orchestra of Mendelssohn's *Saint Paul* in which both had participated. Benjamin wondered aloud if Hercules would make a good subject for a modern oratorio. Stafford directed him to her 2012 book *Herakles* for an idea of the extraordinary variety of stories which attached to the hero in antiquity, and the wealth of post-classical precedents for any new dramatic treatment. Many conversations and many pints later, in April 2017 Benjamin's musical drama *Herakles* was premiered in Todmorden's magnificent neoclassical Town Hall, the town's Choral Society and Orchestra augmented by professional instrumentalists and solo singers, and an actor-narrator familiar from stage and screen. The performance was filmed, an edited version (with subtitles) receiving its first public screening at the University of Leeds in July 2017, and being subsequently made available on DVD.[2]

This chapter reflects on the process by which the work was composed and produced. It includes direct quotations from a talk delivered by Benjamin ahead of the Leeds film-

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[1] Thanks to Ant Peter and Tim Benjamin for commenting on a draft of this chapter.

[2] See https://herculesproject.leeds.ac.uk/musical-drama/ (accessed 04/09/2022), with links to a version free to stream (https://livestream.com/uol/herakles).

screening, and some quotation of both libretto and musical score.[3] Of particular interest from the point of view of this volume is Benjamin's decision to base his narrative on the Prodikean 'Choice of Herakles' story, foregrounding an aspect of the hero which is much less well known to a modern audience than his monster-slaying exploits – and compounding the unfamiliarity by following a relatively obscure version by the second-century CE Dio Chrysostom. Unpacking this decision involves some background on Benjamin's earlier work, which demonstrates a longstanding interest in engaging with historical events and in setting a wide variety of texts, including some ancient Greek. Comparison with the few previous musical treatments of the Choice story is also relevant, in terms of the dramatisation – the use of a narrator, the role of the chorus, and the casting of Herakles himself as a treble. I then review the way in which the Dio Chrysostom story and other ancient texts are adapted for the libretto, before considering the casting and musical characterisation of the protagonists. The chapter concludes with brief reflection on the actual performance and the response of the twenty-first century performers and audience to this adaptation of Herakles' Choice.

1. Benjamin's approach to story-telling

Benjamin, by turns a writer, director (stage and screen), and composer, describes himself as a storyteller. To date he has written ten operas, starting with *The Bridge*, which won the 1996 Stephen Oliver Prize for Contemporary Opera. This one-act drama, with libretto by David Edgar, is set in a remote Scandinavian villa where, symbolically, a child is building a model bridge while diplomatic representatives of warring factions engage in tense, UN-sponsored

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[3] Benjamin's talk was recorded and is included in the live-stream version of the film mentioned above (n.1). Thanks to Tim for permission to use his materials here.

negotiations. The one-act opera *The Corley Conspiracy* (2007) was Benjamin's first experiment in setting 'found texts':

> When I write dramatic works, I often like to use 'found texts'. This is the idea of taking a text that is perhaps mundane and seeing poetry within it, and elevating it to a text suitable for music, poetry, or other artistic endeavour. This has roots in Dadaism, but it is also similar to the principle of collage – juxtaposing ordinary images in a way that lends new meaning.

Here the text is taken from Usenet posts by the pseudonymous conspiracy-theorist Mike Corley from the 1990s, in the early days of the public internet. In collaboration with Sean Starke, Benjamin selected and adapted posts and responses to create a narrative of the rise to popularity of Corley's Orwellian ideas and subsequent falling from favour. Amongst Benjamin's more recent creations, the full-length opera *Emily* (2013) is likewise notable for a libretto consisting almost entirely of found texts. First shown at the Hippodrome theatre in Todmorden, *Emily* tells the story of Suffragette Emily Davidson and her famous death after being struck by a horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913, using the words of court transcripts, newspaper reports, letters and suffragette songs and slogans. The libretto of *Madame X* (2014), based on Jacobean revenge tragedy, saw Benjamin's first collaboration with Anthony Peter, while the music is a modern take on the style of Handel's Italian operas. For the two one-act dramas premiered together in 2015 as *Life Stories*, the libretto of *Silent Jack: His Sorrowful Lamentation and Last Farewell to the World* was again written collaboratively by Benjamin and Peter, telling a story loosely based on the real-life highway woman Katherine Ferrers, while Benjamin adapted *Rest in Peace* from Anton Chekhov's very short story of 1882, *Life as a Series of Questions and Exclamations*. After *Herakles* (2017), Benjamin

would pursue Greek mythology further, returning to a Baroque-inspired operatic form, in *The Fire of Olympus or On Sticking it to the Man* (2019), which transposes the stories of Prometheus and Pandora to a dystopian present-day setting – as foreshadowed in the final lines of *Herakles*.[4]

Against this background, it is not surprising that Benjamin's early thinking on the Herakles theme included a search for 'found text' which might be pressed into dramatic service:

> I quickly rejected a simple romp through the famous labours as too obvious and, well, a bit laboured. I began to see Herakles as a kind of Everyman: a story about a person, maybe a real person, far older than Christ, and whose name still travels the world, still has common resonance today. The trope of an Everyman is one that I find dramatically very appealing...
>
> My first instinct in portraying a present-day, still-wandering Everyman was to find modern, everyday references to Herakles and try to arrange them into a larger scale collage. The bulk of the 'text' I found consists of a long list of very diverse products, which are amusing when presented together, but I don't think they form a useful dramatic basis or a revealing collage. Examples:

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[4] TIME: 'Perhaps now you should hear the story of Prometheus, and the pains he took to promote you posterity…' For details of all these works, see Benjamin's website (https://timbenjamin.com/) and the website of Radius Opera (https://radiusopera.org/productions/) (both accessed 09/09/2022). Other work includes chamber music (e.g. string quartets, serenade for tenor-horn and strings, theme and variations for vibraphone), film and TV scores, electronic music.

1. Hercules Sealing Products – Quality Seals Fast!

2. Hercules High performance microcontrollers, with fail safe detection logic.

3. Hercules Flugelhorn stand – also suitable for soprano saxophone.

4. Hercules Lantern, the coverage of a lantern with the direction of a torch.

5. Hercules Universal Tablet Holder – who better to look after your tablet than the strongman of Mount Olympus.

This got me thinking that perhaps Herakles was the world's first 'brand', a vehicle upon which to attach hopes and dreams, a story to which everyone can add. Running shoes help you run, but with Nike shoes you can be faster! Handbags provide useful portable storage, but with Hermes bags you can be glamorous too! We notice of course that both Nike and Hermes are also classical Greek references, but they are recent; contrast with Hercules, whose name has been repurposed since before the time of the Romans, when his was already an ancient story.

I widened my search for suitable texts, to try and capture the sense of many generations – over centuries – absorbing and using these 'Hercules brand values'.

Stafford's knowledge of texts and images relating to the hero, from both classical antiquity and later cultures, enabled her to suggest a wide variety of sources, from Homer and Ovid to Boethius and Dante. At some point, the ancient Herakles' involvement with Apollo's Oracle at Delphi sparked the idea of using an oracular figure as a speaking narrator, following the precedent, in terms of genre, of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. A coherent story proved hard to pin down, however, amidst the wealth of references to the hero over the ages – a problem experienced by modern film-makers, too, who have tended to cast him in stories often far

removed from the ancient tradition.[5] Eventually, however, a particular ancient Greek text caught Benjamin's attention, a version of the 'Choice of Herakles' theme:

> This story was attractive for many reasons – an unusual moral basis, potentially strong and mysterious characters, and perhaps above all, the unexpected inclusion of a <u>boy</u> Herakles, rather than the standard strong-man. From a musical perspective, this was starting to take an exciting form: I had my oracular narrator; a choir that could play the part of a traditional Greek dramatic chorus; Zeus; and the appealing opportunity to use a treble for the title role.

2. The tradition of Herakles' Choice

The 'Choice' story was first told by the fifth-century BCE sophist Prodikos, who apparently attracted large audiences to his lectures in Athens.[6] It is preserved for us in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* or *Memoirs of Socrates* (2.1.21-2), where Socrates is depicted as using it to illustrate an argument about the importance of hard work and self-control, which make for a better life and attract the approbation of others. In brief, the young Herakles goes out to a quiet place to contemplate which path he should take in life. He is approached by two women, Virtue (*Aretē*) and Vice (*Kakia*) personified, each characterised by her physical

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[5] See Stafford 2021 on film-makers' responses to the absence of an authorative ancient text, such as exists e.g. for the story of Odysseus.

[6] Harrán (2007, 114-20) discusses Prodikos' tale in the context of other ancient stories centring on the notion of a binary choice; a notable comparative example is the Book of Proverbs' representation of Wisdom and Folly in personified (female) form (especially Proverbs chapter 9).

appearance: Virtue is 'pretty to look at and of free-born nature, her body adorned with purity, her eyes with modesty, her figure with reserve, and with white clothes', while Vice is 'grown into plumpness and softness, her face made up so that it looked whiter and rosier in appearance than it actually was…' Each outlines to Herakles a different path he might follow, Vice's way offering pleasures of the flesh (tr. Stafford):

'… you will always be considering what tasty food or drink you can find, what sight or sound may please you, what scent or touch you may enjoy, which boyfriend's society will gratify you most, how you can sleep most comfortably, and how you can come by all these with the least trouble.'

The road of Virtue is, unsurprisingly, the harder one, including such prerequisites for winning divine and human approval as 'if you want to be physically able, you must accustom your body to be subject to your mind, and train it with hard work and sweat'. Although Herakles' reactions to each speech are not made explicit, the conclusion strongly suggests that Herakles chose to follow the virtuous path: 'such, as Prodikos tells it, was Virtue's education of Herakles'.[7]

The story was re-told by a number of later Greek and Roman writers, including Cicero, who refers to it in his treatise *On Duties* (1.118) of 44 BCE, in the context of advising

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[7] On Prodikos' story, see e.g. Kuntz 1994, Sansone 2004, Stafford 2005, Stafford 2012, 123-4. For the place of the story in a broader 'intellectualisation' of Herakles, see Galinsky 1972, 101-25; and see Blanshard 2005, 32-8 on the story's long-lasting structural appeal.

his son on career choices.[8]   Herakles' youth is emphasised in the version related by the fourth-century CE Saint Basil of Caesarea in *On the Value of Greek Literature* (5.55-77), which equates the hero's age with that of the young nephews to whom the treatise is addressed – the context nicely demonstrating the story's aptness for adaptation to a Christian world-view. It was subsequently revived in Renaissance literature, the first substantial post-classical version appearing in Coluccio Salutati's monumental *On the Labours of Hercules* (3.7.1-4) of 1406. The overtly allegorical nature of the tale, with its opposition of the two personified abstractions, seems particularly to have appealed to early modern writers, along with its didactic potential. A full Latin translation of Xenophon's Greek text was presented in the 1440s, for example, by the scholar Sassolo da Prato to Alessandro, youngest son of Gianfrancesco di Gonzaga, ruler of Mantua, a dedicatory preface again commenting on the similarity in age between Hercules and the young noble.[9] The possibility of dramatising the tale is explored as early as 1518 in *Tugent Spyl: Hercules am Scheideweg* (*Virtue Play: Hercules at the Crossroads*) by Sebastian Brant, best known for his moral satire *Das Narrenschiff* (*The Ship of Fools*).

The story's strong visual element also appealed to early modern painters, as demonstrated in over fifty examples collected in Panofsky's influential *Hercules at the Crossroads*, a catalogue now supplemented by Rose and Davies, whose surveys include later

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[8] Cicero is also responsible for 'The Dream of Scipio' (*Republic* 6.9-26), in which the young Roman general is presented with a choice between virtue/justice and pleasure/injustice. For musical settings, see below n. 24; for Raphael's *The Dream of Scipio* or *Vision of a Knight* (1500) see Harrán 2007, 117-18 fig. 1, and Davies 2023, 37-40 pl. 16.

[9] See Deligiannis 2020.

works and parodic treatments.[10] An example which draws particular attention to the idea of the difficulty of the virtuous life is Annibale Carracci's *Choice of Hercules* of 1595-7, in which a muscular, nude Hercules with prominent club is seated on a rock between the two standing females, a scantily-clad Vice on the right, and on the left a more modestly-attired Virtue, pointing out a narrow rocky path zigzagging up the mountain behind.[11] The theme's popularity is reflected in the fact that by the early eighteenth century it is the focus of a treatise by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, promoting the painting of exemplary subject matter to inspire virtue in the beholder: *A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgement of Hercules according to Prodicus, lib. II. Xen. De mem. Soc.* (1712-14).[12] Shaftesbury's identification of the 'bad' female figure as 'Pleasure' follows a precedent set as early as Cicero, who translates Xenophon's general *kakia* (wickedness, vice) as the more specific *voluptas* (sensual pleasure). More pronounced variations in the identity of the two female figures between whom Herakles must choose occur already in the second century CE in Lucian's *Dream, or Lucian's Life* (6-9), in which the author imagines his younger self torn between the virtuous Education (*Paideia*) and a craftsman's life with Sculpture (*Hermoglyphikē*). In the eighteenth century such parodic treatments can be seen for example in Joshua Reynolds' portrait of the famous actor David Garrick, *Garrick*

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[10] Panofsky 1930; Rose 2011, 234-86; Davies 2023, 1-137.

[11] Commissioned for the Farnese Palace Camerino, now in the Capodimonte Gallery, Naples. Panofsky 1930, 124-9 fig. 65; Davies 2023, 7-10 pl. 4. See further below on the mountain path.

[12] Discussed in the introduction to Mainz and Stafford (eds) 2020, 1 and 4-7; see fig. 1.2 for the painting Shaftsbury commissioned to illustrate his treatise, Paolo di Mattheis' *The Choice of Hercules*, 1712; Panofsky 1930, 131 fig. 77; Davies 2023, 8-9 pl. 5.

Between Tragedy and Comedy (private collection, 1760-1) and Angelica Kaufmann's *The Artist Hesitating Between the Arts of Music and Painting* (1791, Nostell Priory).[13]

The eighteenth century also sees the story's brief period of currency in musical drama of various genres.[14] This begins in 1733 with Bach's cantata BWV 213 *Hercules auf dem Scheidewege* (*Hercules at the Crossroads*), also known as *Laßt uns sorgen, laßt uns wachen* (*Let Us Take Care, Let Us Watch Over*).[15] Written with Bach's regular librettist Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici), this was produced in Leipzig for the 11th birthday of Crown Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony on 5th September. The context of the commission explains the unusual choice of subject-matter, the didactic tale being apt for the occasion, while the protagonist's youth is reflected in the role's setting for a contralto. Perhaps more unexpected is the casting of Virtue (Tugend) as a tenor, paired with a soprano as the specific vice of Lust (Wollust). Hercules' decision to shun Lust comes as early as the fifth movement (of 13), in which his determination is reinforced by the interjections of 'faithful Echo'. Virtue's reaction is to welcome Hercules as 'my rightful son' (no. 6) who will 'soar on my wings… like an eagle to the stars' (no. 7), recalling the double-eagle which featured on the Elector of Saxony's coat of arms. Any paternal relationship, however, is forgotten by the time we hear Hercules' and Virtue's joint recitative and aria, in which the pair sound like lovers: 'Who can separate such a union?' (no. 10), 'Kiss me,/ I kiss you,/ like those who are

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[13] Davies 2023, 5-14 pls 3 (Kauffmann) and 6 (Reynolds).

[14] Recently surveyed in Davies 2023, 71-80.

[15] For detailed discussion, see Whittaker 1959, 620-40; Bach's and Handel's settings of the story form the central case studies of Harrán 2007. I have used translations of the text from programme notes to the 1995 Philips Classics recording.

betrothed' (no. 11).[16] A fourth solo voice, the bass Mercury, appears in recitative no. 12 to

declare: 'Behold, you gods, this is a picture / of the young Crown Prince Frederick of

Saxony' – thus making the prince's implied identification with the virtuous Hercules utterly

explicit. A four-part choir has a rather limited role, representing Ordinance of the Gods

(Ratschluß der Götter) with the eponymous 'Laßt uns sorgen' opening chorus, and returning

at the end of the cantata as the Muses, to fête young Friederich. While the cantata as a whole

is less often performed than Bach's sacred works, the music will be familiar to many listeners

because of its almost wholesale reuse for the *Christmas Oratorio* (1734-45), despite the very

different narrative contexts. Such 'recycling' was common practice for the period, though it

might seem surprising that, for example, an aria designed to represent Lust's attempted

seduction of Hercules (no. 3) could be re-purposed as the *Oratorio*'s lullaby for the infant

Christ – though both begin 'Schlafe mein Liebster' ('Sleep, beloved').[17]

Recycling is also a feature of Handel's one-act oratorio *The Choice of Hercules*

(HWV 69), produced at Covent Garden in London in March 1751. Handel had previously

treated the hero's death story in his better known oratorio *Hercules* (London 1745), discussed

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[16] Harrán (2007, 130-1) describes the pair's speech here as 'so emotional as to border on the

erotic'.

[17] For a detailed comparison of the two versions of the aria, with consideration of the

practical circumstances of their composition, see Braatz 2011. Whittaker 1959, 620-40

presents and enlarges upon Terry's (1928) arguments for the relevant movements of the

Christmas Oratorio having been written *before* the cantata, despite the oratorio's later

performance date.

elsewhere in this volume.[18]   For the new project, however, he was able to draw on unpublished incidental music he had written for a projected *Alcestis* play by Tobias Smollett, while basing the libretto on Robert Lowth's *The Judgement of Hercules, a Poem* (1743).[19] Hercules is once again cast as a contralto, and the 'bad' Pleasure as a soprano, but this time Virtue is a mezzo: the overlapping ranges of the three voices are put to especially dramatic effect in the trio (no. 18) 'Where shall I go?', expressing Hercules' dilemma – the question is asked as many as seventeen times.   A fourth voice, a tenor, is briefly introduced as An Attendant on Pleasure (Air 16), who urges Hercules to 'Enjoy the sweet Elysian grove', but variety is ensured by more use of the chorus, which is heard in five movements as against Bach's two.   The hero's decision here is dramatically delayed until a recitative and aria near the end (nos 22-3), followed only by a final celebratory chorus (24).   The preceding movements give the competing personifications ample opportunity to expound their alternative offers.   Pleasure outlines an idyllic life with her retinue on the 'myrtle plain' with 'fragrant bower, cool fountain, shady grove' (no. 2), where Hercules may 'beneath the woodbine's shade repose' (no. 4) and find 'all that can raise or sate desire' (no. 5).   Virtue counters with the claim that Hercules has already proved himself above such 'grov'lling taste' – 'His childhood, in its earliest rise, / Bespoke him gen'rous, brave and wise, / And manhood shall confirm his choice' (no. 7) – before exhorting him to pursue martial glory: 'In peace, in war pursue thy country's good…' (no. 10), 'So shalt thou gain immortal praise' (no.

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[18] See chapters by OKell and Rocklein; see also Solomon on the death story in Cavalli's *Ercole amante* (Paris 1662).

[19] The complete libretto is available at http://opera.stanford.edu/iu/libretti/choice.htm, and Lowth's poem at http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?textsid=34157 (both accessed 09/08/2021).   Both texts are also reproduced in Davies 2023, 225-37.

11). Pleasure's final words stress how easily her life may be attained – 'Short is my way, fair, easy, smooth and plain' (14) – but it is Virtue's call to 'Mount, mount the steep ascent / And claim thy native skies!' (nos 19-20), rousingly repeated by the chorus (no. 20), which wins the day.[20]

Very likely to have been influenced by Handel's version is John Stanley's cantata *The Choice of Hercules*, variously dated between 1751 and the early 1770s. Stanley directed performances of several of Handel's oratorios in the 1750s, and used them as models for his own oratorios *Zimri* (1760) and *The Fall of Egypt* (1774). Though best known today for his Trumpet Voluntary and works for organ, he wrote as many as nineteen cantatas, his Opus 9 including the mythologically-themed *Pan and Syrinx* as well as the *Choice*. In the absence of a modern edition, the cantata is relatively obscure, though Frost provides brief discussion of the manuscripts which preserve the piece in the British Library and the Rowe Music Library of King's College, Cambridge.[21] Stanley's Hercules is cast as a bass, as was common in musical treatments of other parts of his story – e.g. Handel's *Hercules* – but is exceptional in treatments of the Choice, where the hero's youth is usually emphasised by his casting as a contralto. Pleasure is once again a soprano, Virtue a contralto. A final chorus in three parts could have been sung by the soloists, but the substantial overture requires two trumpets, as well as two oboes, strings and continuo – suggesting a relatively formal performance context.

More or less contemporary with the London productions was Johann Adolf Hasse's one-act opera/festa teatrale *Alcide al bivio* (*Hercules at the Crossroads*), produced in Vienna

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[20] Baxter's scathing review of Pro Arte's recording dismisses the whole piece as 'minor Handel', in which 'the three main characters lack real personality', with 'an appealing but slight score' (Baxter 1985, 214).

[21] Frost 1972; he notes (p.291) some specific examples of similarities with Handel.

in 1760.[22] Like Bach's, this version of the story was performed for a particular occasion, this time the wedding of Archduke Joseph, later Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, to Isabella of Bourbon-Palma on 8th October, in the Redoutensaal of Vienna's Hofburg.[23] Joseph was just 18 or 19 at the time, so the didactic element was again apt. This is a larger-scale work, running to around an hour and a half as against the c.45 minutes of Bach's and Handel's versions, divided into twelve scenes (each including a number of related recitatives and arias), with full orchestra and chorus. Hercules is again a contralto, but this time both Virtue and Pleasure are sopranos; additional characters are Fronimo (tenor), the young Hercules' tutor, who appears at the beginning and returns in Scene 9, and Iris (soprano), who appears in scene 12 to deliver the blessing of the Olympian gods; the chorus variously represents the followers of Pleasure or Virtue. The librettist Pietro Metastasio was well educated in classical literature, and had previously (1758) collaborated with Hasse on another one-act opera, *Il Sogno di Scipio*, based on the tale in Cicero's *Republic*, in which the young Scipio Ameilianus (tenor) is faced with a choice between Costanza and Fortuna (both sopranos).[24] Metastasio makes clear that he has consulted Xenophon's text by using Greek names for the two personifications: Virtue is 'Aretea', while Pleasure is 'Edonide', a corruption of the Greek *Eudaimonia*, 'Happiness', a pseudonym which Xenophon's Vice applies to herself.

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[22] The complete score is available from the Münchener Digitalisierungs Zentrum digital library at https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00033119?page=,1 (accessed 30/06/2022).

[23] The occasion is immortalised in Martin van Meytens' painting *Wedding Supper* (1763, Schönbrunn Palace collection).

[24] See above n. 8. Metastasio's *Scipio* was set by a number of other composers, notably in 1772 by Mozart (K126). On Metastasio's relationship with Greek sources, see Burden 2010.

The length of the piece affords even more opportunity than Handel's version for prolongation of the choice, the competition between the two personifications being particularly fierce in scene 5 (illustrated in Figure 14.1), expressed in magnificent coloratura arias by both Aretea and Edonide.[25] There is, however, a twist in the plot: not only does Hercules choose the way of Aretea (scene 10), but Edonide decides she should accompany him on virtue's path (scene 11), a decision celebrated in a quartet including Fronimo, extolling the serenity of a life governed by reason and virtue – 'what a sincere, what a true pleasure!'

A dozen years later, in Weimar, Anton Schweitzer's opera/lyric drama *Die Wahl des Herkules* was yet again written for the edification of a young ruler, being performed on 3rd September 1773 to celebrate the seventeenth birthday of Karl August, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach. The libretto was by Karl's tutor, the influential poet Christoph Martin Wieland, who again uses Greek names for the two personifications, Arete (Virtue) and Kakia (Vice), although the text is in German.[26] Earlier the same year (May 1773), Schweitzer and Wieland had already collaborated on an *Alceste*, based on Euripides' *Alcestis*, and featuring a bass as the adult Hercules.[27] In the *Choice*, the cast is limited to Hercules and the two personifications, with no other characters or chorus to distract from the words of the three protagonists. As usual, the personifications each outline their life-styles, Vice offering an existence like that of the Olympian gods, all enjoyment and no work, whereas Virtue's path is

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[25] Cf. Davies 2023, 78-80 pls 24-5 on illustrations to Metastasio's libretto.

[26] The complete text is available at https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/wieland/wahlherk/wahlherk.html (accessed 22/07/2022). Parker 1962 identifies similarities between Wieland's text and Goethe's *Faust*.

[27] Napolitano (2010, 43-4) cites Schweitzer and Wieland's *Alceste* as a rare example of German musical drama's engagement with Greek tragedy pre-Wagner.

'steep and rough and thorny, it scares the weakling, but see, O son of the gods, where it leads!' ('Mein Weg ist steil und rauh und dornenvoll, / Er schreckt den Weichling ab; / Doch sieh', o Göttersohn, wohin er führt!').   And again as usual, despite some prevarication, Hercules' decision is never really in doubt. In response to the presentation of Hercules in the earlier *Alceste* as excessively virtuous, a young Goethe produced the farce *Gods, Heroes and Wieland*, towards the end of which Hercules explicitly references Prodikos' story, and jokes that, had *he* met Virtue and Vice, he would have tucked them one under each arm and carried them off.[28]

3. Ancient texts with a modern twist

The variations in the Choice scenario in early modern renderings have some precedent already in antiquity, as we have seen (above). The version followed by Benjamin is that of Dio Chrysostom, who included it in a speech made *On Kingship* (1.52-84) to Trajan at the beginning of his reign in the early second century CE.[29]   Here the two female figures are Kingship (*Basileia*) and Tyranny (*Tyrannis*), embodying the specifically political 'virtue' and 'vice' between which the new emperor must chose. Dio prefaces the story with a preamble distancing himself from any controversial implications, putting it in the mouth of an old

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[28] A complete text is available at https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/goethe/wieland/wieland.html (accessed 24/07/2022). Parker 1962 identifies similarities between Wieland's text and Goethe's *Faust*.

[29] Benjamin used the Loeb translation, Cohoon 1932. Dio's use of the myth here is discussed in some detail in Moles 1990, 318-31 and Visa-Ondarçuhu 2008; see also Gangloff 2006, 256-60, 310-11, and 321-31. On Trajan's broader identification with Herakles-Hercules, see briefly Stafford 2012, 154.

woman he met on his travels in the Peloponnese, when he found himself at a rural sanctuary sacred to Herakles. She tells the tale of Zeus' desire to help his young son Herakles become a ruler 'able to do the most good for the greatest number of people' (1.65), to which end he sends Hermes to take him on a journey (1.66-67 trans. Stafford):

> [Hermes] led him over a secret path untrodden by men, till he came to a conspicuous and very high mountain peak, the sides of which were terribly steep with sheer precipices and with the deep gorge of a river encircling it, giving out a great rumbling and roaring. To those looking up from below the crest above appeared single, but it was in fact double, rising from a single base, and indeed the two peaks were far from one other. One of them was called Peak Royal, sacred to Zeus the King; the other, Peak Tyrannous, named after Typhon.

The two peaks are characterised by their affiliations, on the one hand to the rightful king of the gods, on the other the monstrous Typhon, who traditionally tried to overthrow Zeus' rule (Hesiod, *Theogony* 820-68).[30] The dramatic landscape includes an unexpected element, as Benjamin observes:

> One curious aspect of Chrysostom's version is that the route to Tyranny is hard – a narrow, twisting path from which it would be easy to fall. Moreover, on the path there are treacherous bandits and the corpses of previous unwise travellers. By contrast, the route to Royalty's peak is broad and easy. This is at odds with the usual Choice story, whereby Herakles must give up a voluptuous temptress in Vice for a presumably strict

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[30] On this part of the Greek creation story, see Stafford 2009, 427-30.

but righteous life with the modest Virtue. It is also at odds with what we, today, expect from metaphors of struggle – that one must put in hard graft or give something up before we have a chance of success or redemption – Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours, Christ in the Wilderness, Victorian Temperance – that is, a good life is hard to attain but evil and corruption are easy.

The idea, indeed, goes all the way back to Hesiod, who articulates his brother Perses' choice in life as being between the short, smooth road to Wickedness (*Kakotēs*) and the long, steep road to Virtue (*Aretē*; *Works and Days* 287-92). Moles makes the interesting suggestion that 'By transposing the physical characteristics of the roads, Dio… gives a pointed reminder of the fate of tyrannical emperors' – in other words, the metaphor refers to the potential *implications* of the 'wrong' choice rather the process of attaining it.[31]

Whatever Dio's thinking here, Benjamin's version maintains the description of the two personifications' abodes. However, he makes two major changes to the story:

First, we have spent more time on the journey undertaken by Hermes and Herakles. This is barely a sentence in Chrysostom's original. In our version, they fly over the ancient world on a route from Greece to the distant Himalaya mountains via the Mediterranean, the plains of Asia, and the valleys of northern India. In each of these locations Herakles witnesses the fall of an ancient civilisation and an object lesson in leadership.

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[31] Moles 1990, 326.

This journey allows latitude in particular for some interesting work for the chorus, as we shall see (below), and it reflects another oratorio that Benjamin acknowledges as a great influence, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*:

> It has several similarities to my *Herakles* (and an even bigger orchestra). The soul of Gerontius – who is an Everyman figure, much as I see Herakles – is taken on a journey; he passes through contrasting landscapes: purgatory, a peaceful place where souls are confined in tedium; past the gates of hell, where the chorus has huge fun pretending to be demons; he hears choirs of angels; he arrives at the throne of judgement; and at the end Gerontius is promised a re-awakening. Once you have heard our story of Herakles, perhaps you will spot a few similarities.

The second change is more radical, in that it goes to the very heart of the Choice. Traditionally, Herakles of course chooses Virtue – though this is not actually made explicit in Xenophon's text, and in many of the Renaissance paintings the hero's body-language suggests he is strongly attracted to Vice. Dio Chrysostom's version duly has the young Herakles chose Royalty, a fairly obvious message to Trajan to avoid the tyrannical tendencies of some of his predecessors; this choice is rewarded by Zeus with 'kingship over all mankind', and the narrator goes on to elaborate on how this wisdom is greater than the monster-slaying for which Herakles is traditionally famous (*On Kingship* 1.83-4). Benjamin's twenty-first-century hero, however, has other ideas:

> The second major change, which I will only allude to for now and which might take you by surprise, is driven by a desire for insight into the inexplicable politics of the modern world, rather than the Roman empire over which Trajan was about to rule.

Often, in modern times, we seem to find political choices presented – like Virtue and Vice – as two extremes, one of which is right and one of which is wrong. But there seems to be no universally accepted 'right answer'. Right and wrong depend entirely on your perspective – it's a kind of Hegelian nightmare. Clinton or Trump? May or Corbyn? Reagan or Gorbachev? Communism or Capitalism? With us or against us? In or Out? For every person who wants 'yes', there's another who wants 'no'. Who can say which is right when margins of apparent victory are very small? This is the challenge that faces Herakles. Zeus wants to prepare him to be the king of all mankind, but presents him with an invidious choice.

We will return to Herakles' answer shortly.

In addition to the Dio Chrysostom, two other ancient texts are incorporated into the libretto. The opening and closing chorus is based on Stafford's translation of the *Homeric Hymn to Herakles the lion-hearted* (no. 15), a text which manages the extraordinary feat of summarising the whole of the hero's story in a mere 9 lines. Comparison of the texts shows Benjamin's typical adaptations to be a slight shortening and/or simplification of the wording to facilitate their setting to music:

Homeric Hymn to Herakles (trans Stafford)	**Benjamin, *Herakles* Part I**
I shall sing of Herakles, son of Zeus, by far the best of men on the earth,	I shall sing of Herakles,
	Son of Zeus,
whom Alkmene bore in fair-dancing Thebes,	By far the best of men on Earth,
after she had lain with the dark-clouded son of Kronos.	Born in fair Thebes to Alkmene who lay with Zeus, dread son of Kronos.
Once he used to wander over the unmeasured land	Herakles!

and the sea, sent by lord Eurystheus, and on his own account	Wanderer! – in unmeasured lands and on unbounded wine-dark seas,
he both performed and endured many violent deeds.	To perform great deeds both violent and noble,
But now he lives happily in the fine seat of snowy Olympos,	To endure. His labours done, the best of men now lives among us, Immortal.
and has fair-ankled Hebe as his wife.	
Hail, lord, son of Zeus: Grant me excellence and wealth!	Hail, Herakles, son of Zeus!

The other ancient text needed more radical adaptation to fit the dramatic context: a well known passage from the *Odyssey* (11.605-26) in which Odysseus meets the shade of Herakles in Hades. As Odysseus tells it, he is of fearsome appearance (trans. Stafford, after Murray-Dimmock 1998):

About him there was a clamour of the dead, as of birds flying everywhere bewildered; and he like dark night, with his bow uncased and an arrow on the string, gazed about him terribly, like one about to shoot. Terrifying was the belt about his breast, a gold baldric, on which wondrous things were fashioned, bears and wild boars, and bright-eyed lions, and conflicts, and battles, and murders, and slayings of men. May he never have designed, or design again, another such, he who devised that belt by his art. He in turn knew me when he saw me with his eyes, and weeping spoke to me winged words: 'Son of Laertes, sprung from Zeus, Odysseus of many devices, ah wretched man, do you, too, drag out an evil fate such as I once bore beneath the sun's rays? I was the son of Zeus, son of Kronos, but I suffered beyond measure; for I was made subject to a far worse man, who laid on me difficult labours. Once he even sent me here to fetch the Hound, for he could not devise for me any task harder than this. I

carried it off and led it out from the house of Hades; and Hermes escorted me, and

flashing-eyed Athene.'

This striking description was too good to omit, but would not have fitted the young Herakles

of our story. Instead, early in Part I the Narrator introduces a flash-forward to a meeting long

after the events directly related in the oratorio, between an older Herakles and Royalty and

Tyranny, cast down to Hades after their rejection. Odysseus' third-person narrative is

transformed into dialogue, the part of the older hero taken on by the Chorus:

TYRANNY: Terrifying is the plate of gold about your breast

On which wondrous things are carved:

ROYALTY: Bears and wild boars,

Conflicts and battles, war!

TYRANNY: Lions with blazing eyes,

Murders and slayings of men.

ROYALTY: About you rises the clamour of the dead scattering in terror;

TYRANNY: Terrifying is your bow, an arrow on the string…

CHORUS (*as an older Herakles*):

Wretched women! Fallen women!

I am not the cause of your misery.

Zeus it was, Zeus it is, Zeus is guilty.

I was the son of Zeus, I was my father's son.

I have endured woe beyond measure;

I have endured more pain than it is right for man to bear;

I have endured labours without end.

I was made subject to Eurystheus,

A king without valour or virtue.

Eurystheus sent me here

To seize the Hound of Hades.

No task more daunting; no task more dangerous.

4. Musical style and dramatisation

Benjamin's approach to the music which would bring these texts to life included some rich orchestration:

> I wanted to create a sound-world which could evoke the essence of the ancient, the alien world of Gods, Heroes, and Titans, but by using sounds and music which would be familiar enough to a modern audience to draw them into the story and to relate to the characters. I've done this through some fairly unusual combinations of instruments, trying to create music that has an exotic, perhaps other-worldly flavour, but which also has a certain familiarity. Listen out, in particular, for the contrabassoon, the vibraphone, the piccolo, the harp, and the tuba.

These instruments, alongside a full complement of strings, woodwind, brass and percussion, made up an orchestra with more than 50 players. The 70-strong chorus (Figure 14.2) also had an important part – indeed multiple parts – to play:

> I wanted to give the chorus a central role: as in Greek drama, when the chorus speaks or sings, it punctuates a vital moment, and allows the dramatist to speak directly to the audience to explain the meaning of events… … But more than that, I wanted the

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chorus to take on characters in the story: and so they do, variously becoming the voice of the adult Herakles, acolytes of Royalty, minions of Tyranny, and the voices of lost civilisations.

These various roles were characterised by different styles of music. In the opening and closing chorus mentioned above, for example, the use of unison passages emphasises the unity of 'the people' singing of Herakles. By contrast, when the chorus is representing Tyranny's followers, they are required to improvise with repeated and overlapping T, K, Sss and Fff noises (Figure 14.3), creating an intimidating overall impression.

The treatment of the solo parts is in keeping, in many respects, with our historical comparanda. Where nearly all the eighteenth-century works indicated Herakles' youth by allocating the part to a contralto, Benjamin took the opportunity to cast a boy treble, evoking a tradition of church music. The impression of a very young hero is reinforced by the music associated with him:

The boy Herakles is given disarmingly simple music, and is usually accompanied by a harp (evoking a Greek lyre) and piccolo in the instrument's lowest register (where it has a very pleasant, folky sound rather than the more recognisable high and piercing tone), and sometimes also by a solo violin. Herakles almost always sings one note to a syllable, reinforcing his youthful, innocent nature. Of all the roles, he is the most direct and honest – he has no hidden agenda or pretensions. You will, however, hear that the piccolo seems to be slightly off-key compared to Herakles and the harp – this expresses Herakles' doubts and questions...

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The childlike characterisation makes Herakles' eventual response to the Choice all the more striking. He rejects the dilemma set up for him by Zeus altogether, responding 'I choose neither!' Instead, in the same deceptively simple melodic style as his earlier appearances, he propounds a remarkably mature philosophy of human self-determination (Figure 14.4):

> I choose neither Tyranny nor Royalty.
>
> I choose a new path fit for mankind.
>
> Tyranny and Royalty both claim to rule,
>
> But who can rule a river?
>
> A river makes its way towards the sea,
>
> Meeting many obstacles:
>
> a narrow pass, a cataract, river-banks that crumble,
>
> an unbounded plain; like a river,
>
> man must find his own way to reach the open sea
>
> Destiny and Fate must pass away
>
> And mortals learn themselves to lead.

We have seen less consistency in the eighteenth-century casting of Virtue and Vice, but Benjamin's decision to make Royalty a soprano and Tyranny a mezzo follows a long, if not entirely consistent, operatic convention of the soprano heroine, with mezzos playing supporting or villainous roles (Figure 14.5). Again, the music associated with each furthers the characterisation present in the narrative:

> For Royalty, I have used the very highest reaches of the soprano voice, again in an
>
> operatic sense a dramatic coloratura soprano – characters such as Norma, Lucia,

Verdi's Lady Macbeth, and perhaps most famously Mozart's Queen of the Night. The ultra-high range of the voice is intended to illustrate the great heights of nobility and purity that Lady Royalty seeks to instil. When Royalty sings, she has a kind of restless, unsatisfied motif, with short rising scales, all over one syllable – always rising, always seeking the light. Through this device, and the general high pitch of her voice, I intend that we quickly come to recognise when the side of the coin that is Royalty is present.

By contrast, Tyranny, a mezzo, dwells in the low, murky reaches of morality and politics. She is obsessed with wealth and power. So, I use a low, rich voice – the dramatic mezzo-soprano. For operatic roles we can refer to The Countess in *The Queen of Spades*, or Fricka in *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. Given that Lady Tyranny is obsessed with wealth, and the opulence of her throne-room as described in the text, I thought I would use musical hints from the Baroque to characterise her. This is also a sort of pun, as when we talk of something being baroque-with-a-small-B, we often mean something that is lavish, extravagantly ornate, and convoluted or even lurid. Lady Tyranny, therefore, has a tendency to sing very many notes to one syllable, and to be accompanied in places with a musical style evoking the Baroque, thinking for example of Handel's operas...

The eighteenth-century versions likewise vary in their use of additional soloists, over and above the three characters essential to basic Choice scenario. One of the aspects of the Dio Chrysostom version which appealed to Benjamin was the presence of two further figures which lent themselves to casting as contrasting adult male voices, bass and tenor, making up a standard quartet with the soprano and mezzo (Figure 14.6):

Next, Zeus: the bass voice is often given to fatherly, elderly, or kingly characters (Mozart's Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*, Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, Wagner's Wotan, and so on – and the Angel of the Agony in *Gerontius*). In my oratorio, Zeus really takes his time – he has eternity on his side, after all, or so he thinks – so his music is always slow, and forcefully expressed. He is a powerful, uncompromising character. I've chosen to accompany Zeus with a solo tuba: a sound which seems to make your whole body resonate, and which is well-suited to the ponderous nature of Zeus...

Now, Hermes. Again, using operatic stereotypes: the heroic tenor – think of Otello, Siegfried, Tannhäuser. I chose this kind of voice partly for that reason – to exploit a stereotype in order to quickly establish common ground. But also, I think the heroic, flashy character suits Hermes very well. Indeed he boasts in his introduction to Herakles that he is 'fleet of foot, fast as thought, faster than Helios' hastening horses!'. This voice provides a great contrast to the gentle, innocent, and unadorned voice of Herakles...

The four distinct vocal styles of the adult characters are shown off at the work's climax, in the gods' response to Herakles' decision and Zeus' judgement, in a very lightly accompanied quartet.

Apart from the sung roles, Benjamin's use of a speaking narrator is novel in comparison to earlier settings of the Choice. As mentioned above, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* provides a precedent for such a role, in an opera based on Sophocles' tragedy, but there the sung text is in Latin, the Narrator's spoken vernacular providing a vital service in moving the story along in a language more familiar to the audience. Being in English throughout, *Herakles* has no need of such an interpreter, but the narrator nonetheless acts as a mediator

between the audience and the drama, much as the Chorus Leader of a Greek tragedy might do. She personifies Time, existing above and beyond the drama, and so able to both introduce and comment on the story.

5. Conclusion: performance and reception

Publicity for the premiere made use of imagery reflecting Dio's 'very high mountain peak', the home of Royalty and Tyranny, represented by a view of Mount Everest, with the remains of a Greek temple in the foreground (Figure 14.7). The temple here is in fact that of Zeus at Nemea, its ruinous state appropriate for the end of the story, when Herakles has rejected the rule of the Olympian gods. In mythological terms Nemea is also, of course, the site of the adult Herakles' most famous labour, wrestling the lion whose pelt becomes one of the defining features of his image.

Todmorden's Town Hall provided a particularly apt setting for this premiere, because of its neoclassical decoration. When the building was erected in 1875 it sat astride the county boundary, so architect John Gibson conceived of a design for its pediment featuring Yorkshire and Lancashire personified at its centre (Figure 14.8). Just as Royalty and Tyranny have suitable acolytes, each county is characterised by the figures which extend to the corners of the triangular space: Yorkshire is accompanied by agricultural workers, Lancashire by workers in the cotton trade. Inside the concert hall, too, a set of eleven plaster medallions by sculptor Charles Mabey depicts allegorical figures in classical dress, including the universal virtues of Peace and Justice as well as such specifically Victorian values as Science, Manufacturing and Commerce. Immediately above the concert platform recline Art, Music and Literature (Figure 14.9).[32]

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[32] For more detail on, and images of, the building, see Stafford 2016.

The concert hall was full to capacity for the premiere, creating a vibrant atmosphere, matched by the relatively large scale of the musical forces assembled. Feedback from the performers, unsurprisingly, focused on the music:[33]

> Initially I found the music difficult, discordant and strange – but I enjoyed the final performance – dramatic and exciting.

> Although I am not greatly taken with 'modern music', I really enjoyed taking part as a singer in the Herakles project. It was great to feel part of a big local community event; and the actual performance was memorable!

The sheer drama of the piece is indeed reflected in the intense expressions on the faces of the performers as captured by the film. Members of the audience responded not only to the music but also to the narrative:[34]

> The music sometimes expresses feelings not explicit in the words, indicating a truth the words are ignoring. This helps tell a complex story. [There are] many beautiful passages, especially Herakles' reply to Zeus' question.

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[33] A short questionnaire was distributed to performers at the afternoon rehearsal; 60 responses were returned.

[34] A similar questionnaire was distributed to audience members at the start of the concert; 71 responses were returned.

I was very taken with the notion that Herakles brought a kind of 'redemptive' quality to the world.

This final comment is particularly interesting as it reflects something of the response of Christian writers, from late antiquity to the Renaissance, who saw Herakles as a proto-Christ.[35]

The great majority of both performers and audience agreed that the work had changed their idea of the hero Herakles. This might indeed have been the reaction of audiences who heard Prodikos' original renditions of the Choice story, conditioned as they would have been by a literary and visual tradition of the monster-slaying strong-man already well established by the late fifth century BCE. It is the monster-slaying Herakles who has remained most consistently in vogue since antiquity, but the oratorio's success demonstrates that there is room also for the more reflective hero of the Choice. And as for Benjamin's critical change to the story, we have seen not only minor variations but even a fairly major plot-twist in ancient and early modern versions of the tale: this is yet another demonstration of our hero's versatility and ability to appeal across the ages.

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[35] See Allan, Anagnostou-Laoutides and Stafford (eds) 2020.

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CAPTIONS

Figure 14.1 Hercules between Happiness and Virtue; illustration for Hasse's *Alcide al Bivio* in *Opere di Pietro Metastasio* vol. XII (Padua 1811). Image: Public Domain (https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38332002).

Figure 14.2 Todmorden Choral Society and Orchestra. Photo: Nic Chapman.

Figure 14.3 Pages from the choral score, courtesy of Tim Benjamin.

Figure 14.4 Zachary Smith (treble) as Herakles: 'Where do the birds live?' Photo: Nic Chapman.

Figure 14.5 Rebecca Moon (soprano) as Royalty and Elspeth Marrow (mezzo) as Tyranny. Photo: Nic Chapman.

Figure 14.6 In rehearsal, Jean-Pascal Heynemand (tenor) as Hermes and James Fisher (bass) as Zeus. Photo: Marcos Avlonitis.

Figure 14.7 Publicity material, courtesy of Tim Benjamin.

Figure 14.8 Lancashire and Yorkshire personified on the pediment of Todmorden Town Hall, John Gibson (1875). Photo: Andy Wade Photography.

Figure 14.9 Rehearsal, showing the interior of Todmorden Town Hall. In the foreground, Narrator Claire Benedict and the young Herakles, Zachary Smith. Photo: Marcos Avlonitis.