

# Achelous and Hercules beyond Human and Non-Human: Blurred Hierarchies in Book 9 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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## Abstract

This paper examines a passage in book 9 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the river god Achelous recounts how he lost a fight to the civilising hero Heracles. It has been suggested in previous scholarship that the *Metamorphoses* challenge the basic self-definition of 'human' in the Roman world, based as it was on the antithesis between man and animal, as well as on the opposition between human and divine. This paper argues that the narrative of the wrestling match between Achelous and Hercules contributes significantly to blurring the distinction between 'human' and 'non-human' through a complex and multifaceted manipulation of the identities of both Achelous and Hercules. Traditionally an emblem of the triumph of human civilisation over animal wildness, Hercules here becomes assimilated to both a god, through the continuous foreshadowing of his apotheosis, and to a wild beast. His hypermasculinity and uncontrolled violence, so vastly praised in ancient literature before Ovid, cast a shadow in the poem over the human nature of this supposed representative of humanity. Achelous' animal-like character, on the other hand, is continuously endowed with heavily anthropomorphic features, while his divine nature is progressively and disquietingly emphasised. In playing with the conceptual axis distinguishing divine, human, and animal in classical literature, this passage deserves attention within the scholarly discussion of hierarchical play in the *Metamorphoses* and of the tendency of the poem, in Italo Calvino's words, of lingering on the "indistinti confini tra mondi diversi". This paper also explores the relevance of such tendency to the extra-literary, political world of Ovid's time, and raises questions on the political relevance of hierarchical play in poetry more broadly. It is now accepted in scholarship that Hercules constituted a powerful

symbol of the emperor’s propaganda: Ovid’s playful reflection on human and non-human acquires then potentially subversive connotations that require further investigation.

More than twenty years ago, Charles Segal memorably commented on a much-discussed topic in Ovidian studies, namely the poet’s play with hierarchies and structures within the *Metamorphoses*:<sup>1</sup> “[Ovid] challenges one of the pillars of the classical epic tradition, that is, the classical definition of human nature, which, from Homer through Plato and Aristotle, is founded on the antithesis between human and bestial. In place of this view of a stable human nature, Ovid presents a world where the boundaries between humans and animals are dangerously fluid”. Taking my cue from Segal, I examine the figure of Hercules in book 9 of Ovid’s poem and argue that the wrestling match between Hercules and Achelous is an important locus of intense reflection on identity, a locus whose superficial neatness gives way, on closer inspection, to an intricate web of blurred categories and contrapuntal ironies. I argue that Hercules and Achelous confound typical categorisations of Greek-Roman epic and myth. Specifically, the definition of human identity, which should be fundamental to the encounter between the civiliser Hercules and the monstrous Achelous, is complicated by the adherence of both characters to several realms and identities. I argue that Achelous’ multiple identities—god, monstrous beast, man-like figure, inanimate river—produce comic but destabilising effects, effects which are paralleled by the ironic presentation of the hero. The destabilising political undertones of Hercules’ representation in Propertius 4.9 have long been acknowledged;<sup>2</sup> it is time to reassess the treatment of the figure in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. God, human, animal, and even inanimate object: these categories of definition seem to fall apart, creating a world of ironies, a carnivalesque Bakhtinian world. Refraining from reviving now outdated definitions of Augustanism or anti-Augustanism, I claim that this typically Ovidian carnival should be seen as

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<sup>1</sup> Segal 1998, 10. Cf. Calvino 1979, 7; Barchiesi 2005, cxvi; Li Causi 2022, 121.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer 2001.



possessing subtle yet tangible undertones that make Ovid’s play with hierarchies something more than a formalistic matter of literary irony.<sup>3</sup>

### The Divine Achelous

Book 9 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* begins with the river-god Achelous’ account of his wrestling match with Hercules in the contest to win the hand of Deianira. Achelous is entertaining his guests, Theseus and his companions, in the palace where he lives, when he is asked about the origins of his broken horn. The god proceeds to tell how he fought with Hercules and how the hero eventually managed to beat him and break his horn, whose mutilated extremity then provides the occasion for a brief aetiological account of the origins of Cornucopia. From the very first lines of the book, the picture Ovid paints of this god is humorous and betrays theriomorphic traits, of which his pathetic, broken horn is the first hint. However, Ovid goes on to make Achelous’ status as a god not only evident, but even the main reason that prompts him to challenge Hercules. The divine status of Achelous is explicitly established at 9.16: *turpe deum mortali cedere dixi* (‘it is a shame for a god to give way to a mortal’).<sup>4</sup> Achelous’ claims of superiority are based on his divine status and his scepticism about Hercules’ divine ancestry (23-26). It is this specific provocation that enrages Hercules and triggers him into fighting. Achelous’ claims, undermined as they can be by the god’s comic and boisterous self-reported behaviour, are valid:<sup>5</sup> while Hercules’ genealogy might be divine, he still remains a mortal at the time of the fight.

But Ovid’s ironic strategy cannot allow the confrontation to be so clear-cut, to be weighing god against mortal. An enjambement, almost an afterthought, intervenes to disturb the straightforward identification of roles in the wrestling match: *nondum erat ille deus* (‘he was not yet a god’, 17). This is only the beginning of a series of disturbances of distinctions between

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Barchiesi 2005, clvii-clxi.

<sup>4</sup> All translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Secci 2009, 39 notices that Achelous applies a thoroughly Homeric principle, ‘the unquestionable superiority of gods over men’.

mortal and divine, and of the corresponding hierarchy: Ovid presents the struggle between Hercules the man and Achelous the god to then casually proceed to allude to Hercules’ apotheosis, indeed narrated at length in the same book. Synchronically and diachronically, the ironies of divine and semidivine identities intrude within the text. However, there is more to this than the simple disturbance of this hierarchy.

There are grounds to believe that Ovid reserved special emphasis on the definition of divinity in the encounter between Hercules and Achelous. Book 9 itself introduces the first apotheosis within the *Metamorphoses* and stages a divine council. Before book 9, however, book 8 also crucially hinged upon the true nature of the gods and the respect that is due to the celestials within a series of tales of punished hybris and rewarded piety.<sup>6</sup> In book 8, it is the same Achelous who tells Theseus about Perimele’s transformation into an island (590-610), evidence of his own divine stature. After Achelous’ rape of the woman, Perimele’s father attempts to murder her by pushing her off a cliff, but the river-god, thanks to his special acquaintance with Neptune, secures Perimele’s salvation and transformation into an island. The fact that Achelous is a god is also underscored by a sacrilegious comment made by the ‘scorner of the gods’ (*deorum / spreitor*, 612-613) Pirithous, one of Theseus’ companions,<sup>7</sup> putting into question the gods’ powers of metamorphosis (614-615). The myths of Philemon and Baucis (611-724) and of Erysichthon and Mestra (738-878) follow as exemplary tales of the power of the gods and as cautionary stories of theodicy.<sup>8</sup> The power of transformation is, therefore, an important symbol of divine stature by the end of book 8, when Achelous in fact interrupts his tales of transformation by shifting the focus on his own powers: *Quid moror externis? Etiam mihi nempe novandi est / corporis, o*

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<sup>6</sup> Otis 1970, 171.

<sup>7</sup> Otis 1970, 202. Notice also that Pirithous is defined here as *Ixione natus*, the son of Ixion, who tried to rape Hera: Hill 1992, 234.

<sup>8</sup> Otis 1970, 171. But cf. Green 2003.

*iuvenis, numero finita potestas* (‘Why do I linger on stories of others? I myself, too, have the power of transforming, young men, though my choice of forms is limited’, 879-880).<sup>9</sup>

### The Human Achelous

Everything at the beginning of book 9, then, seems set up to present yet another tale of divine power.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Ovid anticipates in the aforementioned line that the god’s opponent can only marginally stand as an emblem of humanity, while also imbuing Achelous’ character in this book with typically Ovidian humour. Achelous’ parodic depiction, however, goes beyond simple humour, and in fact anthropomorphises him. Far from the frightening Achelous that terrified Sophocles’ Deianira (*Trach.* 6-19),<sup>11</sup> the Ovidian Achelous kindly entertains his guests with tales,<sup>12</sup> sadly recounts how he lost the wrestling match to Hercules,<sup>13</sup> and is visually maimed. The humanisation of the god is perspicuous in the fight itself; yet it is also in the narrative frame of his reported speech that the reader perceives that this all-too-human deity is ridiculously attempting to magnify the struggle as well as his performance in it,<sup>14</sup> often subtly undercutting his own narrative. At 31-32, for instance, he trenchantly admits that he entertained the possibility of withdrawing from the fight and that he had perhaps been too much of a bragger: *puduit modo magna locutum / cedere* (‘I had spoken words of pride and so was too ashamed to withdraw’). The most striking element, however, of the god’s anthropomorphic depiction is indeed his human aspect. The most immediate literary precedent of the fight was probably Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, where the god took on the appearance of a bull for the entire duration of

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<sup>9</sup> Boyd 2022, 8. Green 2003, 41 sees the connection between Pirithous’ comment, Lelex’s intervention and the divine nature of their host and argues that Pirithous’ scepticism dumbfounds the audience precisely because they fear Achelous’ reaction: cf. Boyd 2022, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Otis 1970, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Secci 2009, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Speech-making can often be taken as a sign of the character’s humanity in the *Metamorphoses*. Cf. Fantham 2004, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ironically contrasted with his previous confidence in his physical abilities in book 8: Kenney 2011, 395.

<sup>14</sup> Secci 2009, 36. The process of Achelous’ humanisation began already in book 8, with his cave resembling villas owned by wealthy Romans: cf. Due 1974, 80; Kenney 2011, 359.

the struggle (cf. ὑψίκερω τετραόρου / φάσμα ταύρου, ‘the appearance of a four-legged, high-horned bull’, 508-509).<sup>15</sup>

As we will see later with Hercules, turning the spotlight on the body is an important humanising procedure that emphasises man’s susceptibility to suffering and pain. As Secci has it: ‘Hercules wins the struggle comprehensively and permanently maims his divine opponent, who is left in the very human condition of nursing his wounds and trying to see the positive side of the events. Such an ending thus gives more substance to the sad introduction at *Met.* 9.1-5ff: Achelous’ attempt to soften the blow would fit an inferior human opponent much better than the *dominus aquarum*’.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, it is the continuous and detailed description of Achelous’ all-too-human body that receives the attention of Ovid in recounting the first part of the fight, starting from the lively picture of the river-god taking off his ‘green clothes’ (*viridem... vestem*, 32).<sup>17</sup> Almost cinematically, we hear of his neck (*modo cervicem*, 37), twinkling legs (*modo crura micantia*, 37), breast (*mea pectora*, 51), arms (*bracchia*, 52), back (*tergoque*, 54), arms again, now described as covered in sweat (*sudore fluentia multo / bracchia*, 57-58), whole body (*corpore*, 58), neck again (*cervice*, 60), knees (*genu*, 61), and finally his mouth biting the dust (*harenas ore momordi*, 61). Ovid-Achelous resorts to an iterated, almost hammering use of polyptoton to visualise the (human) bodies of both Hercules and Achelous pressing against each other and mirroring each other: *cum pede pes iunctus, totoque ego pectore pronus / et digitos digitis et frontem fronte premebam* (‘[we were] joined toe to toe; leaning forwards with my whole chest, I pressed my fingers against his fingers and my brow against his brow’, 44-45).<sup>18</sup> Even when Achelous decides to change his shape into that of a snake, Ovid cannot refrain from underlining the ironic and stark contrast between his status as a god and his human form: *inferior virtute*

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<sup>15</sup> Kenney 2011, 399. Sophocles’ Deianira does speak about the different shapes of Achelous, but he is never completely anthropomorphic: φοιτῶν ἐναργῆς ταῦρος, ἄλλοτ’ αἰόλος / δράκων ἐλικτός, ἄλλοτ’ ἀνδρείω κύτει / βούπρωρος (‘a roaming bull, then a writhing, gleaming snake, then again a man with the face of a bull’, 11-13).

<sup>16</sup> Secci 2009, 46. Notice Achelous’ emphasis on his panting and his general difficulty to withstand Hercules: this diverges from Sophocles’ version (ἦν δὲ μετώπων δλόεντα / πλήγματα καὶ στόνος ἀμφοῖν, ‘there were horrible blows on the foreheads and groaning from both’, 521-522).

<sup>17</sup> Anderson 1978, 420.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 10.361 *haeret pede pes densus viro vir.*

*meas devertor ad artes / elaborque viro longum formatus in anguem* (‘defeated in virtue, I turn to my skills, and I slip away from that man taking the shape of a snake’, 62-63). As has been pointed out, *viro* means *ei* and refers to Hercules, but is used in conjunction with *virtute* to obliquely comment on Achelous’ loss of masculinity and humanity—which in its turn ironically clashes with his previous pompous self-presentation as a god.<sup>19</sup>

### The Animal Achelous

With a touch of typically Ovidian humour, Achelous realises that he is *inferior virtute* (62), inferior in ‘manliness’ but also in ‘humanity’. The acknowledgment of such inferiority paradoxically leads him to adopt even conceptually ‘inferior’ forms—first that of a snake, and then that of a bull. While his snake form was alluded to by Sophocles’ Deianira, in the *Trachiniae* Achelous fights mainly as a terrifying and powerful bull, and it was probably as a bull that the Ovidian reader was expecting Achelous to fight. Instead, Ovid has Achelous beginning the fight in human shape, as we saw, and alludes to his following transformation as a bull in an interesting simile at lines 46-49, right after lingering on the striking spectacle of Hercules’ and Achelous’ all-too-human bodies mirroring each other:

non aliter vidi fortes concurrere tauros,  
cum pretium pugnae toto nitidissima saltu  
expetituri coniunx; spectant armenta paventque  
nescia quem maneat tanti victoria regni.

‘Just so have I seen strong bulls charge together, when the most beautiful heifer  
in all the glade is the prize for the fight; the herds watch in terror, not knowing  
who will win so great a kingdom’

It has not escaped notice that this strongly evokes the famous Virgilian simile in book 7 of the *Aeneid* (715-719) comparing Turnus and Aeneas to two enemy bulls charging into battle for the rule of the grove.<sup>20</sup> In that context, the grandeur and significance of the last duel,

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<sup>19</sup> Anderson 1978 *ad loc*; Hill 1999, 137; Kenney 2011, 401.

<sup>20</sup> Kenney 2011, 399.

foundational to the epic as a whole, is magnified by the serious analogy that compares the two heroes to fierce bulls and focuses on the reaction of both herd and herdsman. Differently from Virgil, however, the metaphor here is trivialising and contributes to Achelous’ ridiculous characterisation in a complex way. The metaphor clearly foreshadows Achelous’ upcoming transformation into a bull which will prove a failure.<sup>21</sup> In general, the simile humorously pokes fun at Achelous’ animal nature and at his animal shape, which the audience must have been expecting since his appearance in the poem in book 8. The metaphor does not magnify, then, the two fierce opponents in the same way it did with Turnus and Aeneas; rather, it obliquely comments on the violence and animality of the fight (an oblique comment that we have to take, as we will see, as relevant both to Achelous and Hercules). And yet, while humorously assimilating the two contestants to animals, Ovid adds a further twist to the comparison: Virgil’s frightened *iuvencae* (12.718) become Ovid’s *coniunx*—a humorous and humanising term first applied to animals by Ovid.<sup>22</sup> Achelous and Hercules, both human in shape, become here humorously assimilated to two bulls in a metaphor that underscores their bestiality and yet slightly humanises the animals to which they are compared.

Achelous’ transformation into a snake (64-65) gives Ovid the chance to compare this episode to Hercules’ heroic exploits and establish a connection between his role as an *alexikakos*, a civiliser and slayer of monsters/wild animals, and his role now in the fight (67-76):

‘cunarum labor est angues superare mearum’  
dixit, ‘et ut vincas alios, Acheloe, dracones,  
pars quota Lernaeae serpens eris unus echidnae? [...]’  
quid fore te credas, falsum qui versus in anguem  
arma aliena moves, quem forma precaria celat?’

‘It was the labour of my cradle to triumph over snakes,’  
He said, ‘even if you happened to be the strongest of all serpents, Achelous,  
would you not be just a small part of the Lernaeian hydra, being one snake only?’  
[...] And what do you think will happen to you, turned into a fake snake,

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<sup>21</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 97; Kenney 2011, 399.

<sup>22</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 97; Bömer 1977, 289; Hill 1999, 137.

wielding arms that you do not own and hiding in precarious shape?’

While *precaria* denotes a “sense of instability” and suggests that “Achelous’ tenure of the snake form is no more secure than it would have been if he had won it by prayer from a capricious divinity”,<sup>23</sup> Hercules’ taunt compares Achelous to both the serpents that he strangled in his cradle and the hydra of Lerna, and thus presents the river-god as the latest addition to the list of monsters that he tamed.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Ovid seizes on the opportunity to connect the stories of Achelous and Nessus, and compares the two in 98-106, thus presenting the two ‘monsters’ as equivalent. At the same time, Ovid’s account of the fight draws heavily not only on the *Aeneid* as a whole and on the last fight between Aeneas and Turnus, but also, and specifically, on the encounter between Hercules and Cacus from book 8 of the *Aeneid*. As Ovid’s Achelous metamorphoses into a snake only after Hercules’ fourth attempt and is compared to the hydra, so Virgil’s Hercules overpowers Cacus after his fourth try and is then praised for having slayed the hydra;<sup>25</sup> Hercules chokes Achelous “just as Hercules had choked Cacus as if Cacus was a snake”.<sup>26</sup> In evoking Hercules’ civilising powers against the forces of wildness and monstrosity, both in the direct metaphor and in the allusion to the Hercules-Cacus episode in book 8 of the *Aeneid*, Ovid invites us to see Achelous as another example of the forces of animality tamed and civilised by the hero. All this, of course, while also humorously humanising the ‘monster’ and framing the episode within the precedent (and following) discussion of divine nature.

### The Fluid Achelous

Achelous’s character, just like the element it embodies, is constructed and painted as essentially fluid. This is not simply metaphorical, and Ovid takes great pleasure in building his

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<sup>23</sup> Anderson 1978, 422-423; Hill 1999, 138.

<sup>24</sup> What is more, the myth of the hydra is usually taken to be emblematic of Heracles’ victory over the forces of water: cf. Salowey 2021. Lactantius and Servius did interpret the hydra as a symbol of the swamp around Lerna which Heracles drained and ‘conquered’. If Ovid was already aware of the symbology, here the reference to the hydra would be further significant and appropriate to the river-god.

<sup>25</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 158.

<sup>26</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 98.

characterisation around his literal fluidity. It is exactly river-gods and sea nymphs that constitute a favourite Ovidian element of destabilisation of identity and categorisations. As Feeney brilliantly argued, Ovid takes pleasure in emphasising “the tension between the anthropomorphic deity and its natural element when that element is water, so mutable and resistant to shape”; this is obvious especially in the poet’s treatment of Achelous, who, for instance, speaks as if he wished to protect Theseus from the dangers of his waters and as if he had nothing to do with them.<sup>27</sup> “The more Achelous concentrates on the harmony between his personality and his element—Feeney observes—the more difficult it becomes for the reader to overlook the split”.<sup>28</sup> Achelous’ paradoxical identification as natural river and (anthropomorphic) god is emphasised; the contradiction is not accepted but exposed by Ovid.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, if, as has been suggested, shapeshifters in the *Metamorphoses* inhabit a liminal space between divine and mortal (since the gods in the poem are able only on occasion to change shape), Achelous thus appears far from assimilable to a god.<sup>30</sup> And this at the end of a book fully devoted to the importance of religiousness and to the acknowledgment of divine nature, and at the beginning of another that starts with Achelous’ refusal to give way to a mortal and reaches its climax with the first deification of the poem. I have proved, however, that this fluid, metamorphic figure is carefully and subtly shown in the epic to oscillate between not only human and immortal, but also between human and animal, divine and animal.<sup>31</sup> The general instability of his figure is to be finally perceived in the humorous split between his identity as a river and his anthropomorphic shape described by Feeney. As it has been suggested, finally, it is not only the shapeshifters’ power that is different from that of the gods; it is really the fluidity of

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<sup>27</sup> Boyd 2022, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Feeney 1991, 233-235. Cf. Anderson 1978, 421 on 9.57: “the river-god’s limbs flow not with usual water, but with sweat caused by his vain efforts” (cf. also 9.39-41). Cf. also Solodow 1988, 94; Li Causi 2000, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Li Causi 2000, 44.

<sup>30</sup> Forbes Irving 1990, 171; Fantham 1993, 21. Hercules is said to have fought against another shapeshifter at 12.536-576. There Periclymenus, like Mestra in Achelous’ narrative, is human and sympathetic, while Hercules is not: cf. Fletcher 2005, 313.

<sup>31</sup> Notice the hybrid iconography of Achelous as a man-headed bull in archaic Greece: Isler 1970, 123-191; Gais 1978, 356.



their entire being that differentiates them from the disguising gods of the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>32</sup> Achelous’ mythical identification as a body of water, its fluidity, both literal and metaphorical, the oscillation of its figure between divine, human, and animal, seem particularly appealing to Ovid’s reflection on identity<sup>33</sup>—one that should be appreciated for its humorous tones, but whose serious implications should not be overlooked.

### Hercules: Human or not Human?

While it is impossible to give a comprehensive account of the development of Hercules’ figure in Greek and Roman myth,<sup>34</sup> some elements of his characterisation are recurrent and widespread. Chief among them, Hercules’ role as a primal contributor to the establishment of human civilisation is perspicuous: as Hawes says, “for all his violence, Heracles is nonetheless a civiliser”.<sup>35</sup> That Hercules stands as the civilising forces of humanity against wildness is evident from the myths of the labours and the *parerga* dealing with the hero’s encounter with monsters and savage animals,<sup>36</sup> but also with inanimate natural forces—among which bodies of water seem to play a privileged role in his myth.<sup>37</sup> As a tamer of both animals/monsters and the flowing forces of nature, Hercules’ status as a hero thus became overlapping with his role as a civiliser, and, ultimately, with his metaphorical value as a symbol of humanity.<sup>38</sup>

In his larger-than-life yet human outlook, Hercules did not differ considerably from Theseus, Perseus, and Jason, also standing for the civilising forces of humanity. Nor are his divine genealogy and catabasis unique to him. His final victory over death also does not single him out as special. But Hercules is unique in being the only hero to be properly deified<sup>39</sup> and become

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<sup>32</sup> Forbes Irving 1990, 171; Fantham 1993, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Feeney 1991, 235. Cf. Li Causi 2000, 42-43, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Loraux 1990, 22. Cf. Galinsky 1972a; Padilla 1998; Blanshard 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Papadopoulou 2005, 5-6; Hawes 2021, 402; Barker and Christensen 2021, 290; Anderson 2021, 383.

<sup>36</sup> Hawes 2021, 402.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Anderson 2021, 382; Romero-González 2021, 270.

<sup>38</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 149; Li Causi 2021, 47. The same applies to Hercules’ allegorical role established since Prodicus. Cf. Hawes 2021, 403.

<sup>39</sup> Barker and Christensen 2021, 292. Cf. Shapiro 1983, 9.

object of religious cult,<sup>40</sup> to the point that his “ambiguous status, hero *and* god, presented a dilemma of ritual protocol”.<sup>41</sup> Papadopoulou argues in her quick summary of the history of Hercules’ figure throughout the centuries that “an aspect of Heracles which is evident in every examination of him is his fundamental ambivalence”, a type of multi-layered double-sidedness that nevertheless expresses itself mainly in his mortal-immortal nature.<sup>42</sup> While Hercules’ religious role progressively declined in Hellenistic times, it was revived and magnified in Roman times,<sup>43</sup> when, however, critics such as Euhemerus, Diodorus, and Lucretius also questioned the divine nature of the hero.<sup>44</sup>

Ovid devotes space to Hercules’ apotheosis, a choice that runs counter to that of Sophocles in *Trachiniae*.<sup>45</sup> In the past, scholars have entirely accepted the seriousness of Hercules’ deification and his metamorphosis into a god, to the point that Heinze spoke of the ‘sublimity of the divine’ in the episode and Fränkel assimilated the religious elements in the narrative to features of the ‘theology of early Christianity’.<sup>46</sup> This view, however, is complicated by the Heracleian ambiguity that Papadopoulou rightly detects in the figure of the hero at large and that Ovid explores in connection with his immortal yet mortal nature. The wrestling match with Achelous, in particular, is a focal point of tensions where both opponents claim divine nature for themselves. Achelous’ divine nature, as we have seen, is very much at the centre of the narrative, and the thematic progress in book 8 invites us to see Achelous’ tale as the continuation of a series of tales on the powers of the gods (*turpe deum mortali cedere*). But the immortal half of Hercules’ being complicates the picture (*nondum erat ille deus*). The entire struggle is anticipated not only by Achelous’ boastful claims of divinity, but also on Hercules’ divine genealogy, which the hero himself employs to persuade Oeneus (*ille Iovem socerum dare*

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<sup>40</sup> Shapiro 1983, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Shapiro 1983, 10, 13-15 and Pindar’s ἦρωες θεός (*Nem.* 3.22). The difficulties mainly consisted in the difference between rituals reserved to god cults and those dedicated to hero cults. Cf. Paus. 2.10.1; Hdt. 2.44.

<sup>42</sup> Papadopoulou 2005, 4; Romero-González 2021, 274.

<sup>43</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 126.

<sup>44</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 130-131. Cicero euhemerises Hercules’ apotheosis at *Nat. D.* 2.24.

<sup>45</sup> Nethercut 2016, 129; Romero-González 2021, 274.

<sup>46</sup> Heinze 1919, 316; Fränkel 1945, 81; Bömer 1977, 278.

*se.../...referebat*, ‘he referred to giving Jupiter to her as father-in-law’, 14-15). Achelous’ rhetorical strategies, which aim at presenting the fight as one between mortal and immortal, thus focus on undercutting Hercules’ claims to divinity in lines 21-26. It is not simply that he is a man and ‘not yet a god’; as the story of the hero unravels, Ovid unambiguously refers to his double nature: the point in Jupiter’s speech in the council is exactly that Hercules is endowed with the natures of both mortal and immortal (248-256). His two parts (*materna...parte*, ‘in his maternal part’, 251; *parte...meliore*, ‘in his best part’, 269) have been coinciding in his being from the beginning. As it has been recognised recently, Ovid underscores the difficulty with which Hercules is admitted to the Olympus,<sup>47</sup> and in so doing he emphasises his liminal nature between man and god. Ovid then wittily makes the struggle between Achelous and Hercules ambiguous,<sup>48</sup> and this ambiguity is complicated as well by Achelous’ hybrid nature. Is a god fighting against a god? A god against a monster? A man against a god? A man against a monster?

While Hercules’ apotheosis does occupy a privileged position in the book, it becomes hard to agree with Heinze and Fränkel when noticing the way Ovid deals with the divine apparatus at the moment of Hercules’ apotheosis.<sup>49</sup> Far from conferring a spiritual aura, the *augusta...gravitate* (‘august dignity’, 270) that he assigns to the moment of the hero’s deification, Ovid imbues the council of the gods with humanising humour. It has been noted that Ovid describes the council as a typical meeting of the Roman senate; “he applies to the deities the class distinctions found in Roman society; already in their first appearance (1.171-74), they are divided into *nobiles* and *plebs*”.<sup>50</sup> The same happens here, and Jupiter speaks as if he were “the *princeps* thanking the Senate for a favour done on behalf of a member of his family”.<sup>51</sup> In the middle of the first apotheosis of the poem, Ovid seizes on the opportunity to continue his typical

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<sup>47</sup> Nethercut 2016, 139.

<sup>48</sup> The comparison between the two (with its ensuing tension) is articulated in these terms also when Achelous is gone from the narrative. The river-god’s confrontation with Pirithous, *Ixione natus* (cf. *supra*), had centred on the demonstration of divine power; in the Nessus narrative, however, it is Hercules who becomes the spokesman of piety against a son of Ixion (123-124).

<sup>49</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 103.

<sup>50</sup> Galinsky 1975,170; Tissol 2002, 306.

<sup>51</sup> Kenney 2011, 422-423.

process of humanisation of the gods. Hercules, then, is about to leave the world of men behind to join an Olympus where gods speak exactly like men on earth.

The same humanising humour reduces Hercules’ heroism. While Galinsky believes that humour does not impair Hercules’ heroism in the narrative of his fight with Achelous,<sup>52</sup> humour belittles and humanises the hero, both in the Achelous narrative and beyond. It is not only his apotheosis,<sup>53</sup> but the general treatment of his figure that undercuts the seriousness of the divine hero. For example, talking about Hercules’ ironic reference to the Lernaean hydra, Solodow observes: “Mythology so handled is brought and kept firmly within the realm of the familiar. [...] by giving life to the inanimate and rendering the divine human, Ovid makes mythology the everyday, flesh-and-blood world of his reader. [...] Ovid’s version of mythology intimates that the past was not larger than life: it was like the present. There were no heroes: mankind was made up of men like ourselves. [...] The humour in the poem pares away the abstract and the exaggerated; it keeps things concrete, small, and human”.<sup>54</sup>

In many ways, Hercules does remain a powerful symbol of humanity and mortality in book 9. This does not simply mean that Ovid belittles his divine status through irony; instead, he emerges as a symbol of mortality especially through his death. His agony is recounted in grim detail: the same body that had functioned as a mirror to Achelous’ own human shape (cf. *supra*) is described as it is consumed and destroyed by the fire (166-175): Ovid’s spotlight is turned onto his body (*membris*, 168), mangled limbs (*laceros artus*, 169), great bones (*grandia...ossa*, 169), blood (*ipse cruor*, 170), breast (*praecordia*, 172), his whole body again (*toto...corpore*, 173), sinews (*nervi*, 174), marrow (*medullis*, 174), and hands (*palmas*, 175). In Segal’s insightful words, “to speak of the body in classical literature is to speak of mortality. The body is the constant reminder of our creatureliness, our kingship with other living, and dying beings, and so our distance from the undying gods”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 159.

<sup>53</sup> Kenney 2011, xxxii.

<sup>54</sup> Solodow 1988, 108-109. Cf. also Otis 1970, 200.

<sup>55</sup> Segal 1998, 13.

### The Animal Hercules

Ovid, however, does not limit himself to lingering on the ambiguity of Hercules’ being and he complicates the picture of the hero’s identity through subtle allusions to his sub-human nature. Hercules’ uncontrolled hypermasculinity became problematic already in classical Athens. The avenues for philosophical and literary meaning, however, were diverse: poets and philosophers made sense of Hercules’ ‘outsized physical prowess—the problematic core of his heroism’<sup>56</sup> in various ways, allegorising his strength as moral fortitude<sup>57</sup> or, like Euripides and Seneca, turning it into a source of tragic pathos.<sup>58</sup> To an extent, Hercules’ hypermasculinity and corporality made him comic. It was paradoxically Hercules’ own exceptionality as a man that made him a symbol of human transgression—an unflattering and problematising part of his symbolism that laid the foundations for his fortune in comedy, where he was represented as a glutton and a drunkard. Ovid humorously alludes to the comic tradition in what is supposed to be the most serious moment in book 9 and fundamental to the story of Hercules’ apotheosis, i.e., the moment of his death. His proverbial gluttony echoes in the sarcastic metaphor that compares the dying hero lying on the pyre to a drunken banqueter (237-238): *haud alio vultu, quam si conviva iaceres / inter plena meri redimitus pocula sertis* (‘just as if you reclined in a banquet with garlands on your head amid cups full of undiluted wine’).<sup>59</sup> As Galinsky has it, “he of the big appetite, who spent all his life drinking and eating, should pass away accordingly”.<sup>60</sup>

What is more, Hercules’ comic transgressions paradoxically allowed his character to be specifically assimilated to animals and made him a favourite figure of satyr-play.<sup>61</sup> His mythical

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<sup>56</sup> Hawes 2021, 405.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; Galinsky 1972a, 190.

<sup>58</sup> In Seneca’s *Hercules Furens* Hercules’ hybriatic depiction is compounded with an emphasis on his strength: *iter ruina quaeret et vacuo volet / regnare mundo, robore experto tumet / et posse caelum viribus vinci suis / didicit ferendo* (67-70). Cf. Galinsky 1972a, 169, 174 and *Constant.* 2.1-2.

<sup>59</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 102; Galinsky 1975, 103.

<sup>60</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 159. Gais 1978, 369 notices the similarity in the iconography of Hercules as banqueter and Achelous as banqueter, suggesting a relationship of assimilation between the two iconographies. If this were to be true, Ovid could be alluding to Achelous here.

<sup>61</sup> Papadopoulou 2005, 7.

strength, as well as his comic traits associated to his physicality, often made his character strangely similar to that of his bestial and monstrous antagonists.<sup>62</sup> The problematic violence of his figure made him, in some circumstances, an ambiguous character ‘transgressing the borders between civilization and wilderness as well as between humanity and bestiality’.<sup>63</sup> His violence was particularly problematic in the narrative of his madness, especially in Euripides’ *Herakles*, where the hero’s murder of his children deprives his previous heroic exploits of meaning.<sup>64</sup> Acutely aware of this, Ovid disseminates small yet humorous elements of Hercules’ bestiality throughout book 9.

Achelous’ challenge and taunt to Hercules had been cut short, within the river-god’s narrative, by the hero’s brisk comment: *melior mihi dextera lingua / dummodo pugnando superem, tu vince loquendo* (‘my right hand is better than my tongue. You can be better than me at speaking, as long as I am better than you at fighting’, 29-30). While Hercules’ impulsivity, as well as his physicality, do not constitute a problem here,<sup>65</sup> they become more emphasised in the Nessus episode.<sup>66</sup> There is something here about his blind resort to strength and lack of consideration that is not entirely flattering. For instance, boasting that he has already defeated a river (Achelous), he dives right into the river that blocks his way without pausing to reflect on the best way to cross it (or on the potential danger of leaving Deianira alone with Nessus): *‘quandoquidem coepi, superentur flumina’ dixit / nec dubitat nec qua sit clementissimus amnis / quaerit et obsequio deferri spernit aquarum* (“since I have already begun”, he said, “let us triumph over the rivers”: he neither hesitated nor looked for the calmest spot of the river to cross, and he disdained to be carried by favourable waters’, 115-117). In doing so, Galinsky notes, he is

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<sup>62</sup> Anderson 2021, 386: ‘the bestial or semi-bestial aspect, the similarity in some respects between Hercules and his arch-enemies the centaurs, and not least the strongly burlesque aspects of so many episodes, make for a continuing enigma’.

<sup>63</sup> Kirk 1977, 16; Loraux 1990, 24; Papadopoulou 2005, 7. Cf. Barker and Christensen 2021, 298 on Hercules’ antisocial behaviour as a sign of his sub-human nature; Li Causi 2021, 64.

<sup>64</sup> Li Causi 2021, 61, 64.

<sup>65</sup> But cf. *concrediturque ferox* (31). *Ferox* is applied both to Nessus later (101) and twice to Cacus in *Ov. Fast.* I 550, 570.

<sup>66</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 98-99.

implicitly giving Nessus the chance to run away with Deianira on his back,<sup>67</sup> and is outsmarted by the savage, semi-bestial centaur. The story of the monstrous Achelous had foreshadowed Hercules’ encounter with the feral Nessus in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, and had then introduced the fundamental issue of the opposition between man and animal;<sup>68</sup> in Ovid, instead, the two stories remain juxtaposed but the polarity becomes way more unstable than in the tragedy. These terrifying monsters are really humane hosts and logical beings;<sup>69</sup> Hercules, on the other hand, acts like a strongman and is somewhat pathetic.

What is more, Ovid takes the opportunity of narrating Hercules’ death, with the ensuing apotheosis, to offer his personal take on the *topos* of the madness of the hero—as mentioned above, an ambiguous part of the Herculean myth that also provided space for problematising the hero’s violence. It is then not surprising to find explicit metaphors assimilating Hercules to animals as Ovid tells of Hercules’ manic agony; all this, of course, right before the supposedly serious and extraordinary apotheosis sanctioning the hero’s transformation into an Olympian.

Just before he dies, Hercules is indeed compared to a bull in a second bull simile (204-206):

dixit perque altam saucius Oeten  
haud aliter graditur, quam si venabula taurus  
corpore fixa gerat, factique refugerit auctor.

‘He spoke and went around high Oeta, wounded, just as a bull carries around  
the spears that have transfixd it in its body, while who is responsible for the  
wound has fled’

Ovid’s witty metaphor obliquely compares him both to Nessus, in the specific reference to the shaft that has pierced the body of the animal, and to the bull shape of Achelous. Far from being mere humour, Ovid is inspired by a heavily problematic comparison in Euripides’

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<sup>67</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 159.

<sup>68</sup> DuBois 1991, 96-97, especially 102-103: “the hybrid creatures Achelous and Nessos are excluded from the circuit of exchange of women. Their violence marks them as outside the circuit of culture”. Cf. Easterling 1982, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Stoessl 1945, 80, according to whom Nessus “behaves like a Venetian gondolier”. Cf. the humanising portrayal of the centaurs, especially Cyllarus and Hylonome, in book 12: DeBrohun 2004, 437ff.; Reed 2013, 401.

*Herakles*, where the hero’s frantic violence in the throes of Lyssa (madness) indeed allows Euripides to compare him to a bull (867-870):<sup>70</sup>

ἦν ἰδοῦ· καὶ δὴ τινάσσει κρᾶτα βαλβίδων ἄπο  
καὶ διαστρόφους ἐλίσσει σίγα γοργωποὺς κόρας.  
ἀμπνοᾶς δ’ οὐ σωφρονίζει, ταῦρος ὡς ἐς ἐμβολήν,  
δαινὰ μυκᾶται δέ.

See! Look at how he tosses his head already at the outset and rolls his flashing eyes from side to side saying nothing! And he cannot check his panting like a bull about to charge, and he bellows terribly.

As has been noted, this is part of a larger assimilation in the play of Hercules’ figure to those of his monstrous enemies, a process of animalisation particularly visible in Euripides’ description of Hercules’ madness and uncontrollable violence.<sup>71</sup> However strictly we read Ovid’s Euripidean intertext, it is undeniable that his simile, while imbued with humour, activates a deeper level of meaning. The metaphor indeed anticipates Hercules’ murder of his friend and servant Lichas, a completely meaningless death given Lichas’ utter innocence, of which the responsibility can only be ascribed to the hero’s violence and aversion to speech. Hercules is described as roaring, groaning, and uprooting trees (207-210), the last of which finds a striking parallel in Ovid’s portrayal of Cacus in *Fast.* 1.570. Hercules sees Lichas and ‘with the pain building up all his rage’ (212; notice the word *rabies* and its animalising touch)<sup>72</sup> asks whether he is the one to blame. Ovid describes the incident by indulging in the depiction of Lichas’ fear, again presenting Hercules as flawed by the same impulsivity and lack of consideration that he had also exhibited in normal, previous circumstances. Lichas tries to speak and explain (*timide verba excusantia dicit*, ‘shy, he tried to excuse himself’, 215), but Hercules does not let him finish (*dicentem*

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<sup>70</sup> Notice that Ovid is comparing Hercules not simply to a bull, but to a wild bull: cf. Bömer 1977, 340, who also does not find a model for the simile here. To my knowledge, the case for a relationship of intertextuality has not been made before, but it is likely, given Ovid’s patent gesture towards the Euripidean Heracles in 203-204, and the atheistic scepticism of Hercules at 203 f. evoking Euripides’ Heracles at 1340-1346: cf. Galinsky 1972b, 101.

<sup>71</sup> Li Causi 2021, 66.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *Met.* 1.234, 4.503, 11.369, 11.370, 14.66, 15.521.



*genibusque manus adhibere parantem / corripit*, ‘he snatched him as he was still speaking and attempting to clasp his knees’, 216) and violently hurls him into the sea, killing him (216-218).

It is clear that the bull simile thus foreshadows Hercules’ savage behaviour; it also invites us to reconsider the meaning of the first bull simile used in the narrative of the wrestling match with Achelous. While it anticipated Achelous’ bull shape, it is possible to see that a glimpse of its animalising function must have been transferred from the hybrid god to the hero. The violence of the fight would then become much less celebrated and more problematic in Ovid than Virgil.

The ‘animalising’ procedure activated by both bull similes is in fact in line with Ovid’s trivialising use of metaphors derived from the animal world and applied to the gods. As Galinsky noted, Ovid does not simply humanise the gods to create humour; it is really their ‘sub-human’ behaviour, compounded by their animal transformations, that Ovid showcases so as to deprive them of their *maiestas*.<sup>73</sup> Metaphors and similes play a fundamental role in the poem in this process of animalisation of the gods: the lustful Mercury gazing at the girls in the Panathenaic procession is compared to a greedy kite in a way that debases the god.<sup>74</sup> Even when the gods’ behaviour is not directly despicable, their assimilation to animals, be it metaphorical or metamorphic, disturbs their majesty and creates humorous and disquieting effects: this is the case for Jupiter, who abducts Europa after transforming himself into a playful bull that leaps around waiting to be patted and kissed.<sup>75</sup> The bull simile(s) can be framed perfectly within this picture of the animalising function of metaphors in the *Metamorphoses*. Less disquieting but still witty is the final metaphor applied to Hercules at the beginning of his apotheosis (266-270):

utque novus serpens posita cum pelle senecta  
luxuriare solet squamaque nitere recenti,  
sic, ubi mortales Tiryntius exuit artus,  
parte sui meliore viget maiorque videri

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<sup>73</sup> Galinsky 1975, 162.

<sup>74</sup> Galinsky 1975, 164-165.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

coepit et augusta fieri gravitate verendus.

‘as a snake uses to revel and shines bright in its new scales after stripping off its old age with its skin; so when Hercules stripped off his body, he gained strength in his better part, started looking bigger and becoming awful in his august dignity’

Far from being a simple reference to the poison of the hydra that is killing him, the simile also connects again the hero to his long-gone antagonist Achelous and the *forma precaria* much spurned by Hercules.<sup>76</sup> Just as Achelous’ snake form was ‘precarious’ and—according to Hercules—not the real form of the god’s being, Hercules’ mutating skin seems to characterise his previous mortal form as also false. This, however, is contradicted by *parte sui meliore*, which presents a picture of Hercules’ identity just as hybrid as Achelous’. As often in the *Metamorphoses*, the presence of verbs and nouns denoting skins, induments, and clothes (here *exuit* and *pelle*) does not simply point at the falseness of appearances and forms, but rather at their precariousness.<sup>77</sup> Forms, be they divine, human, or animal, appear in the poem to be unstable, like clothes and skins to be continually worn and taken off from an undefined substance that constitutes identity:<sup>78</sup> it is the uroboric quality of the image of the serpent, shedding its skin not once, but perpetually, that undercuts the stability of Hercules’ new condition.<sup>79</sup> Hercules does not simply takes on a different status: bull, serpent, man, god—just like Achelous, he is perpetually shifting between them.<sup>80</sup> Just as Propertius’ Hercules becomes assimilated to Cacus,<sup>81</sup> so does Ovid’s Hercules shadow the hybrid, undefined, fluid Achelous.

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Hill 1999, 138 on *precaria*.

<sup>77</sup> Li Causi 2022, 126-128.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. *Contra*, cf. Galinsky 1999, 105, arguing that the *Metamorphoses* mostly reinforce the idea of stability of the self.

<sup>79</sup> Hutchinson 2008, 226-227 parallels Hercules’ narrative with Iphis’, the last in the book, and notes that Iphis’ story questions the firmness of the division between hierarchical categories (in that case, male and female).

<sup>80</sup> Cf. the recent reconsideration of the Caeneus episode by Northrop 2020, 35: Caeneus’ hybridity is underscored by their confrontation with the equally biform centaurs. Notice that Caeneus is explicitly compared to Hercules at 12.536-541. Cf. also Spencer 2001.

<sup>81</sup> Spencer 2001, 270.

### The Divine Emperor?

Hercules’ depiction as human, superhuman and subhuman and the narrative of his fight with Achelous do not simply constitute a literary issue. While the complexity of both characters adds to the humour and wit of the poet, it is important to perceive how such disturbances of categorisations can permeate, subtly yet cleverly, the political dimension of the poem. The final line in the narrative of Hercules’ apotheosis, with its tantalising *augusta ... gravitate*, introduces the *vexata quaestio*: is Augustus alluded to here?<sup>82</sup>

In a series of articles, Galinsky argued that by the time Ovid wrote the *Metamorphoses* Hercules had become an Augustan symbol.<sup>83</sup> Although we do not have evidence to argue that Augustus himself wanted to promote such a connection, Hercules is often connected to Augustus, directly or indirectly, in the poetry of Horace and Vergil. However, Galinsky is most persuasive in his analysis of the relationship of intertextuality between the *Aeneid* and Ovid’s Hercules in the *Metamorphoses*. Finding a series of connections in the *Aeneid* approximating Aeneas to the Greek hero,<sup>84</sup> Galinsky argues that Virgil’s narrative of the fight between Hercules and Cacus anticipates the final battle between Aeneas and Turnus.

Ovid’s Hercules is fundamental to Galinsky’s argument: he seems to have read the connection between the two stories and to have been aware of the equation Hercules=Aeneas=Augustus. Indeed, the episode of Hercules’ fight with Achelous resembles and echoes in many respects the encounter of Aeneas and Turnus (cf. the bull simile above), but also takes elements from the fight between Hercules and Cacus in the same book (cf. *supra*).<sup>85</sup> Ovid thus seems aware of the Augustan connotations of the figure of Hercules, reading the narrative of the fight between Hercules and Cacus as a fundamental political episode in the poem.<sup>86</sup> What is more, Hercules seems to have been not simply a flattering and apt parallel for

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<sup>82</sup> Fränkel 1945, 212; Galinsky 1972b, 104.

<sup>83</sup> Galinsky 1972a, 1972b, 1975. Cf. Loar 2021, 507-520.

<sup>84</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 107.

<sup>85</sup> Galinsky 1972b, 94-98.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Loar 2021, 512. Cf. Ov. *Fast.* 1.544-586 with Barchiesi 1997, 96-99.

Augustus because of its pacifying merits (*vindice terrae*, 241).<sup>87</sup> Rather, his apotheosis may have provided grounds for Augustus’ superhuman qualities in life and his literal deification after his death, as Hor. *Carm.* 3.9-12 also suggests.<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, Galinsky’s argument has not been entirely accepted,<sup>89</sup> and it has been put into question that Ovid’s take on the Hercules-Cacus story in *Fasti* might have (anti-)Augustan connotations: while recognising the allusion to Augustus in Virgil, Propertius, and possibly Livy, for instance, Holzberg takes the Ovidian retelling of the story as devoid of political polemic, and unusually serious for the poet’s standards.<sup>90</sup> While it is wise to advise caution in always reading Hercules in Augustan literature as a symbol of the princeps, and even more so in the case of his apotheosis for chronological reasons,<sup>91</sup> the story of Hercules’ *alexikakia* seems to have been particularly laden with political connotations. As Clauss observes about the Ovidian retelling of the Hercules-Cacus myth in *Fasti*, Ovid juxtaposes the prediction of the apotheoses of the members of the imperial family with the story of Hercules and the hero’s apotheosis:<sup>92</sup> “what was implicit in the Virgilian, Livian, and Propertian accounts of the Hercules-Cacus narrative Ovid makes explicit: he identifies the unnamed ruler who is unequivocally associated with Hercules”.<sup>93</sup>

While caution should be advised against too easily reading Ovid politically, Hercules *alexikakos* does seem to provide a special model for Augustus. I hope, however, to have shown that his characterisation in the *Metamorphoses* would be far from uncomplicated, should this be the case, and that Hercules’ apotheosis would not simply pay homage to the emperor.<sup>94</sup> As in

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Loar 2021. Cf. also Nethercut 2016, 137 and Cass. Dio 56.36.4-5, who considers Augustus better than Heracles.

<sup>88</sup> Loar 2021, 510; cf. Galinsky 1972b, 106; Harrison 2018, 340-341.

<sup>89</sup> Beek 2023, 196-197.

<sup>90</sup> Holzberg 2012, 460-61.

<sup>91</sup> But cf. Kenney 2011, 422.

<sup>92</sup> Clauss 2016, 77.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Barchiesi 1997, 99; Barchiesi 2005, clvii. Cf. also Tissol 2002 on humour in the political apotheoses of the poem.

Propertius’ treatment of the episode of Hercules and Cacus in 4.9, Hercules’ figure and its ambiguity is fundamentally destabilising.<sup>95</sup> In the *Metamorphoses*, the wrestling match between the Greek hero and Achelous, supposedly representative of the chaos and disorder that Hercules has subdued, is a focal point of ironies and tensions. Using a shapeshifter/water deity (both destabilising figure types in the *Metamorphoses*), Ovid’s reflection on the instability of identity both problematises a clear-cut definition of the fight between Hercules and Achelous (human vs god? Beast vs god? God vs god? God vs beast?) and is projected from Achelous to Hercules. This ‘Bakhtinian carnival’, to say it with Segal,<sup>96</sup> should not simply be perceived as a brilliant example of literary wit: the examination of the Hercules-Achelous episode alerts us once more to the potential political significance of hierarchic play. Such an extra-literary, political significance, I maintain, should be perceived even if Hercules were not an *alter ego* of Augustus here. As Galinsky has it,<sup>97</sup> ‘in the context of the Augustan religious revival his [Ovid’s] emphasis on the comic [...] human qualities of the gods amounts to something more than an aesthetic exercise’. The same can be said about his divine hero, symbol of humanity, pacifier of monsters, himself mirroring the hybrid creature that confuses boundaries and hierarchies.

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<sup>95</sup> Spencer 2001, 263-264 *et passim*.

<sup>96</sup> Segal 1998, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Galinsky 1975, 173.

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