

The Last Act

Immortality is something that for millennia humans strived to achieve. With every invention, there is hope that it could lead to endless and ageless life, except for one man. In the modern world, he is insignificant; he lives a dull and basic life for he feels there is nothing to live for. No one needs him to travel to the underworld; they do not need him to rescue them from Nessos, the evil Centaur. They do, however, need him to clean out stables. He moves through the days as a shadow in the background: immaterial and forgotten, for he is known only in myths. Heracles used to be his name. Now turned into myths and legend, presumed to be dead, he quietly roams the streets of Swansea never forgetting but always forgotten.

Morbidly he thinks about the ease with which humans can take their own lives, it is not difficult for them; stop breathing, bleed out, fall a great distance. Any of these would swiftly end their lives. Heracles had tried all of these and many more in desperation to escape the mundane everyday life, finally to be free of this world and transverse the world beneath.

He was not old, yet he acted it. He allowed the knowledge of his age, over two thousand, shape his movement. Many saw him as a crippled old man, just waiting for death, when he was actually the prime age of thirty-five, physically, not mentally.

While sleeping in his depressed state of mind he dreams about his glory days. When all of Rome and Greece loved him so much that he featured in nearly everything, from art to literature. Miserable in his endless life he eats his hours away (nothing really changes) consumed by the ease to consume more he would go for days where he would just eat. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to think he was morbidly obese; apparently, a demi-god cannot get fat. As he eats and eats, shovelling the food into his mouth two hands at a time, a thought strikes him. It surprises him, as he has not needed to think in almost five hundred years. He thinks, forcing the cogs in his brain to start moving again, the strain very evident on

his face. Suddenly the thought becomes clear: “d-d-d-danger.” He immediately jumps up in anticipation for the attack; nothing comes.

A high-pitched deafening scream suddenly irradiates around Heracles. “DANGERRR!” He recognises the voice; it has been a long time since he has heard it but it was good to remember her. It is the scream of Athena, goddess of war, half-sister to Heracles. He had forgotten about her. She continues to say “There’s danger, Heracles, little brother, you are needed once more. Quick, you must hurry; there is not much time. You will find the danger where knowledge reaches minds; where books cover walls. Go now, I will see you soon.” As quickly as the voice came it disappeared, Heracles was alone once again.

Heracles was never the smartest person around but he always knew how to help. It takes a few painful minutes for Heracles to figure out where the danger is but luckily, he has picked up a thing or two in his never-ending life. He rushes gallantly towards Swansea University; once on campus he does not stop to catch his breath. He continues rushing past all the young students unaware of the danger that surrounds them. They are blurs, unrecognisable, he moves at an inhuman speed. Finally, he reaches the library and storms inside. He stands in the centre not knowing which direction to go until he hears the voice again, a voice that makes him feel at home. “Go to the west-wing, down two floors”. He smiles knowing that she is watching him, knowing he is not alone. Within seconds he is downstairs finding himself in the Latin and Ancient Greek section of the giant library (what are the chances). He searches with fervour for the danger, not knowing what he is looking for. He hopes that Athena will help again but she says nothing. He keeps searching, getting more and more impatient.

A simple box of average size, ironically, under Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*, the play which depicts Heracles’ death. He slowly bends down, reaching his right hand toward the golden clasp that is holding the lid shut. He pulls open the clasp; with a small click the

box opens. What is revealed makes Heracles' heart sink; modern technology has never been his strong point but he knows he is looking at a bomb. He looks around him and pulls a switch sounding an alarm to evacuate the building. Five minutes remaining on the clock. Not enough time to get help. Not enough time to do anything. He is frozen, for the first time in his long life he is defeated. He cannot beat the bomb and he knows there is no chance that the building has been fully evacuated. He looks at the timer seeing the last ten seconds of his life ticking by, realising that this could be his end. He throws himself onto the bomb hoping that his body would shield the blast, minimising its damage. The timer reaches zero.

The burning pages of *Women of Trachis* fall slowly to the ground landing in ashes of what once has been. There is nothing but silence.

Justification

I came up with *The Last Act* myth while reading Euripides' *Heracles*; in this tragedy Euripides challenges the traditional recount of Heracles and his labours. He does this by changing the cause for Heracles to embark on his labours. Traditionally, Heracles embarks on his labours after he killed his wife and children, not before as Euripides does. In *Heracles*, Heracles is on his final labour, going to the underworld, but when he returns he is driven mad and he kills his wife and children. This made me consider what happened after Heracles is poisoned by the cloak, sent to him by Deianeira in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*. Traditionally he becomes immortal and allowed into Olympus. He then marries Hebe, Hera's daughter. I wanted to explore what would happen if Heracles was granted immortality but Hera refused to let him live in Olympus and was not allowed to marry Hebe. Like Euripides I challenged the traditional representation of the great hero.

The Last Act is set in the modern world because the idea of immortality is something strived for in modern medicine. Making a modern invention destroy immortality represents

the impossibility of immortality and shows how modern civilisation is destroying itself. This is similar to Deianeira, in *Women of Trachis*, because she tries to use a love potion on Heracles to make him love her but this results in his death, as it was actually a poison. There is a theme of striving for the impossible, which will cause the inevitable: death. *The Last Act* is a suitable myth because it ends in death similar to both *Heracles* and *The Women of Trachis* and the traditional myth of Heracles as seen in Apollodorus' *The Library of Greek Mythology*.¹

The Last Act is a Heracles myth because of the characterisation of Heracles. This can be seen in the traditional aspect of Heracles' large appetite which is shown in many Greek plays, most prominently in Aristophanes' *Frogs* and also in Euripides' *Alcestis*: 'tell those whose job it is to lay on plenty of food'. (L.548) Also, in *Alcestis*, Heracles is not shown as the most aware. Not realising that they were mourning the loss of Alcestis, he has to be told directly, "it's Admetus' wife who has died." (L.822) This can be seen in *The Last Act* with his difficulty in understanding basic modern technology, but when it matters he knows what he has to do which can also be seen in *Alcestis* (L.840) with him going to get Alcestis from Death and return her to Admetus.

In addition, Athena often helps Heracles during his labours.² This is seen in *The Last Act*, as Athena warns Heracles about the danger in the library. She helps him with what he was unable to do himself, to die. It is their final act together. *The Last Acts* ends with an image of *Women of Trachis* burning: this is to link the original death of Heracles with him burning at the pyre, which is what is left in the audience minds in *Women of Trachis* as Heracles is carried off stage (L.1264). This confirms to the reader that Heracles has died in *The Last Act*.

¹ Apollodorus, II.7.7.

² Apollodorus, II.5.6.

There is also the continuing threat of Hera throughout Heracles' life that continues in *The Last Act*. Hera is never directly referenced as trying to take Heracles' life. The audience only know that she is mad at Zeus for having a child with Alcmena: 'Zeus [...] made me an object of hatred to Hera' (L.1264). Hera placing the bomb that would kill Heracles is her final revenge on Zeus but without realising, she helps Heracles. This can be seen as her finally accepting Heracles and allowing him to go to Olympus and marry Hebe. It could also be that she successfully finds a way to end Heracles' life, making her triumphant in her hatred for him.

There are many aspects within *The Last Act* which correspond to writers in the ancient world. This makes it a fitting myth, in keeping with what the ancient audience would have understood while adapted to entertain a modern audience and maintaining an element of realism to the story.

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