

Hercules: Flawed and Fixed

An Aristotelian Problem with a Kinesic Solution In Medici Florence

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The Medici family of Florence used Hercules as a dynastic symbol to project ideas of courage and strength onto the family. However, because Hercules is a deeply flawed character throughout the entirety of his story, the Medici needed to manipulate how people perceived the hero by commissioning sculpture that would reflect the desired moral values and courageous virtue. Florence was ruled by the Medici family for three centuries beginning with the return of Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici from exile in 1434.¹ During these three centuries, the Medici family used the artistic innovation of the Florentine renaissance to profit politically. Beginning with Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici, large-scale Medici patronage of the arts continued steadily throughout the remainder of the 15th and 16th centuries within the family. Their commissions were often used to demonstrate the family's wealth, status, religious beliefs, interests, and culture. They largely conveyed themes such as fortitude, piety, leadership, righteousness, and courage. Two of the most prominent figures used to present these concepts were the biblical David and the mythical Hercules. Adopted to the city's seal in 1281², Hercules became a symbol of Florence and connected the city with these same virtues later indexed in Medici commissions.

The Medici adopted the iconography of the hero Hercules as not only an expression of their family's values, but also an articulation of what life in Florence would be like under Medici influence; through Hercules they projected themselves as quintessentially Florentine. This was done by large-scale commissions such as the commission for Vincenzo de' Rossi's sculptures of the Twelve Labors of Hercules that decorated the city's hall of government. Subtle manipulation of figure placement and scale within a piece of artwork conveyed these ideas to the viewer.

¹ Their rule came to a close with the creation of the *Patto di Famiglia* by the last remaining Medici, Anna Maria Louisa, in 1737 to secure the Medici fortune in the Tuscan state.

² Ettliger, Leopold D. "Hercules Florentinus." *Mitteilungen Des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 16, no. 2, 1972: 121.

Herculean sculpture commissioned by the Medici family in the cinquecento (the period of Medici autocracy) uses body language and interactions, in gesture and pose, to convey how the Medici conceived of courage. Just as they appropriated the figure of Hercules, so too did the Medici appropriate a set of gestures and poses that could be called, collectively, “a courageous iconography.”

In this thesis, the political usage of herculean iconography by the Medici will first be deeply analyzed for how they relate historically to the Medici’s circumstance before, during, and after the commission and how each sculpture allowed the Medici to profit politically. Then, to understand the conceptions of courage in Medici Florence, we have recourse to the literature that was popular at the time. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* provides a good source for understanding renaissance ideas of courageous virtue, as it was thoroughly analyzed at the time. This text will provide a thorough understanding of five different forms of courageous virtue as defined by Aristotle himself. Finally, sculptures identified throughout the paper will be analyzed through the lens of the science of kinesics (body language) to argue that the intentions of sculptors and patrons were to manipulate the narrative of Hercules’ labors, improving upon myth to create and display the idea that he was not flawed, but rather a paragon of Aristotelian virtue.

POLITICAL PROFIT

While Herculean sculpture relates to the political power of the Medici family, each sculptural commission has a different story. In myth, Hercules was thought to be the founder of Florence and thus has always been a figure whose story and image resonated with the Florentine citizens. The Medici, beginning with Cosimo de’ Medici, recognized the value of this resonance.

In the first few years of the quattrocento, Cosimo de' Medici had commissioned Benedetto Dei, a chronicler and poet of the time, to write a poem about the great snowfall of 1407.³ In this poem Dei describes all the citizens going outside to build snowmen shaped as Hercules. There was an army of snow-Herculeses all over the city. Two generations later Piero de' Medici asked Michelangelo to sculpt a snow Hercules during the great snowfall of 1494, as was then documented by Luca Landucci, Condivi, and Vasari⁴. This documented instance makes it very clear that the Medici were interested in connecting their legacy with the concept of Hercules. By making this connection, the Medici intentionally intertwined the Herculean ideals of courage and heroism with the Medici name and values.

Cosimo de' Medici commissioned various artists to create works of Hercules in various permanent media as well. This, of course, includes sculpture but also painting and literature. The Medici inventory of 1492 showed nude marbles with clubs in Lorenzo de' Medici's room as well as various tabletop bronze nudes several of which were called Herculean and others which are described similarly but remain unclear as to whether the subject matter was in fact Hercules.⁵ Cosimo and his heirs had a deep interest in spreading the iconography of Hercules all over the streets and buildings of Florence during their time of informal rule so that if they ever lost control over Florence their legacy would remain throughout. Cosimo often commissioned pieces with grandeur, such as the Pollaiuolo brothers' paintings of the labors of Hercules (Figure I) to be put in the Palazzo Vecchio⁶. These paintings were commissioned to be six braccia square (roughly 120", or 10') and were to be hung in the Palazzo Vecchio where all the members of the high court

³ Kent, Dale. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

⁴ Ettliger, 1972, 119. As referenced in Luca Landucci, *Diario Fiorentino dal 1450 al 1516*, ed. Iodoco del Badia. Florence: 1883, 66 f.

⁵ McHam, 1998: 94-95.

⁶ Kent, 2000, 287.

would come in regularly to rule on civil issues and discuss government and politics. This means that the paintings would be seen by all of the most important members of the Florentine government in addition to any important member of the church when visiting Florence. Each of these people would walk past these grand paintings and would have understood the Medici message of wealth, artistic leadership, and patriotism.

Another excellent example of the propaganda of the Medici is Antonio del Pollaiuolo's *Hercules and Antaeus* (Figure II). This sculpture (which will be used later to discuss Aristotle's third form of courage: spirit) was just under a foot tall without the base and just under a foot and a half with. It was perfect tabletop size, allowing visitors who wished to visit the Palazzo Medici to view it as they toured through the private galleries.⁷ Although its physical function is nothing more than aesthetic décor, it also served as a very powerful political tool. This story of Hercules and Antaeus (discussed in depth later) is a small part of the eleventh labor when Hercules travels to the Garden of the Hesperides to receive the golden apples of immortality. It was a widely popularized allegorical idea within the period in question that Lorenzo de' Medici was the protector of the golden apples of the Garden of the Hesperides as given to him by Pope Leo X.⁸ The parallels between the honor bestowed upon Lorenzo and the story depicted in this sculpture suggests that the choice to depict this labor was intentional in order to be able to bring Lorenzo's honor into conversation organically when speaking with other high powered and wealthy men visiting. Additionally, the story of Hercules and Antaeus provides another layer of meaning to this choice. As previously explained, while Hercules was passing through Libya, the current ruler, Antaeus, forced him to wrestle for his freedom in the country. This sculpture serves as a reminder

⁷ Olson, Roberta J.M. *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1992: 122.

⁸ Ibid : 122.

of Lorenzo Medici's honor as well as providing a connection between the Medici and the end of corrupt rule.

The golden apple, similar in shape to the balls (*palle*) on the Medici coat of arms is a motif commonly referenced in Medici commissions, including work that is unrelated directly to Herculean iconography. For instance, Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (1430's) (Figure III), commissioned by the Medici, uses the golden apples in the background of the piece as a subtle reference.⁹ These have also been called *mala medica*, or the 'medicinal apple' as a reference to the Medici name meaning 'doctor'. However, there is no debate that these are in fact apples and their golden colour would very likely reference the honor bestowed upon Lorenzo. They are also referenced in Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco of the Journey of the Magi in the Medici chapel (Figure IV), commissioned by Piero de' Medici in 1459.¹⁰ These, too, are a subtle addition in the background of the image as an indication of the Medici commission and Lorenzo's honor.

While the silver *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* of Antico (Figure V) is not of Florence nor Medici commission, it is important to highlight as a way to ground the argument outside of Florence. It was not just the Florentines who were interested in the iconography of Hercules throughout what is now Italy. Rather, Hercules was a widely understood and idolized figure making it more impactful for the Medici to have adopted his iconography as their own. This was not an iconography only understood by people within the bounds of Tuscany but rather something that would be comprehensive to anyone passing through. Regardless of where they were from, the likelihood that the visitors would recognize the story and morals of each sculpture, painting, or story was very high. This made the chosen icon of the Medici very successful and very powerful.

⁹ Paoletti, John T. and Radke, Gary M. *Art in Renaissance Italy*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997: 228-229.

¹⁰ *Ibid*: 228.

As for Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus* (Figure VI), there is a very complex story behind the execution of this commission that is deeply steeped in politics. It begins in 1504 when Michelangelo completed his sculpture, *David*, and it was placed outside of the Palazzo Vecchio on the north side of the entrance. Shortly after in 1508, Buonarroti was commissioned to make a second colossus to balance the entrance, specifically, a Hercules.¹¹ However, Pope Julius II insisted that Buonarroti continue working on the Sistine Chapel ceiling before beginning with this commission. The Medici family regained control over Florence in 1512 and Giovanni de' Medici becomes Pope Leo X in 1513, followed by Giuliano de' Medici who was elected Clement VII after the brief reign of Adrian VI. The Medici's ability to command Michelangelo was thus solidified. In 1514 Michelangelo presented his idea for the colossus to Leo X who then decided to formally give him the commission.¹² When the marble block finally arrived to Florence in 1525, the Medici family chose to give the Hercules commission to Baccio Bandinelli instead. Briefly from 1527-1530, the Medici lost power in Florence and the commission was once again given (by the short-lived Republic) to Michelangelo. In 1530, The Medici regained control in Florence and returned the commission to Bandinelli, who finished his sculpture five years later in 1535. It was then placed on the south side of the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio, where it remains today.¹³ Because of the rise and fall of the Medici in Florence and the papacy, there was a struggle in deciding who gets the commission and what it is going to be. This is what results in the two maquettes and one final copy (to be discussed later). Further, the story of Hercules and Cacus claims that Hercules had cleared out the surrounding area of a horrible murderous monster, which in turn allowed Romulus

¹¹ Bush, Virginia L. "Bandinelli's "Hercules and Cacus" and Florentine Traditions." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 35, 1980: 163-206.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid: 398 and Cillini, Carlo, Francini, Carlo, and Vossilla, Francesco. *L'Ercole e Caco di Baccio Bandinelli*. Firenze: Alinea, 1999: 9-49.

and Remus to later found the city of Rome there. Therefore, not only is Hercules the founder of Florence, but also in a sense a founder of Rome. This connects the ideas of Florence and Rome but moreover, Florence as the *new* Rome. And through their control of the papacy, the Medici had become a Roman-Florentine dynasty. This story is reminiscent of the civic strength and courageous confidence that the Medici have in themselves for the city of Florence. By claiming this icon as their own and then suggesting Florence as the new Rome, they are inherently suggesting that Florence thrives because of them and their influence.

However, for the Medici this particular sculpture was not as successful with the everyday people of Florence as others had been. In fact, this sculpture was particularly hated by many in Florence. The people of Florence graffitied this sculpture and attached poetry to it lampooning the domination of the Medici.¹⁴ Rather than this sculpture being viewed as exemplification of fortitude, courage, and civic righteousness of the Medici, the people decided it was gaudy, overbearing, and an inaccurate representation of the family. Benvenuto Cellini, a contemporary Florentine artist, hated the sculpture for not only its anatomical inaccuracy but also as a piece of art. He documented this in his autobiography, claiming the musculature resembled “a sack of melons”¹⁵ and thoroughly described every way in which he hated this piece of work. Giorgio Vasari, too, discussed both his personal and the public’s disdain for this sculpture in his works. Clearly, there was a very popular negative reaction to this piece which the Medici received much backlash for.

¹⁴ McHam, 1998: 168. These vandals were later tracked down and put in prison for their defiance to the Medici family.

¹⁵ Bush, Virginia L. *The Colossal Sculpture of the Cinquecento*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1976: 126-127. Same note for Vasari. This is also referenced in Morford, Michael. “Carving for a Future: Baccio Bandinelli Securing Medici Patronage Through his Mutually Fulfilling and Propagandistic ‘Hercules and Cacus’.” *Case Western Reserve University Department of Art History, Dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy*. 2009.

And finally, the large and expensive commission for Vincenzo de' Rossi's complete colossal set of the Labors of Hercules was later than the last two commissions from the Pollaiuolo brothers by roughly a century. By the time the de' Rossi sculptures were placed in the Salone dei Cinquecento (the Sala Grande), the Pollaiuolo paintings had been moved to the Medici villa.¹⁶ Of course, because the paintings by the Pollaiuolos were commissioned one hundred years prior (1460 and 1560) this speaks to the consistency in the interest of Hercules and his iconography within the Medici family over a large span of time. Even without the presence of the paintings, there was an echo of the same intentions that was more tangible than before, for the sculptures were standing right in front of the viewer. Only six of the completed seven marbles were displayed here in 1592 just before de' Rossi's death¹⁷. Three were placed on each side of the room and although they were indeed colossal sculptures (larger than life size), they would be easier to interact with than the paintings on the walls (Figure VII) Their domineering height would exude authority over any walking past them – and therefore the Medici too exuded their authority through scale and space.

ARISTOTLE'S *NICHOMACHEAN ETHICS*

Aristotle, though he had been dead for almost two thousand years, was the most authoritative voice in conceptualizing courage during the quattro and cinquecento in Florence. The revival of Aristotle predated Medici Florence by centuries; the first known translation of the *Ethics* into Latin is from 1150¹⁸ and ever since then the text has been a leading work in the field of moral

¹⁶ Freedman, Luba. "Florence in Two Pollaiuolo Paintings." *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Class di Lettere e Filosofia*. 5, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010: 275-296.

¹⁷ The outlier here is the sculpture of Hercules holding up the world, which was sent instead to the Villa Poggio Imperiale, a ducal palace just south of Florence. This extended the Medici influence to other palaces where other high court members and wealthy patrons would visit to see the *magnificenza* of the Medici.

¹⁸ Miller, Jon. *The Reception of Aristotle's 'Ethics'*. Chapter 9, David A. Lines, "Aristotle's Ethics in the Renaissance." New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 173.

philosophy. The *Ethics* was particularly popular in Florence from 1416 when Leonardo Bruni, the Chancellor of Florence, decided the standard translation used in his time was incorrect and inadequate. This sparked great controversy within and beyond Florence, resulting in efforts to translate this text into Latin properly.¹⁹ This text became required in religious orders and universities all over Europe in addition to its popularity in the education of princes and its use in Dante's *Convivio*²⁰ – all ample evidence that this text was taken seriously.

In Book Three of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle treats the moral virtues of courage. He breaks courage up into five categories: civic courage, experience and knowledge, spiritual courage, confidence, and ignorance. Likewise, he distinguishes between the courageous, overbold, and cowardly.²¹ The overbold is one who imitates the courageous when the situation calls for it. However, Aristotle goes on to say those people who do so are 'bold cowards' in the sense that the overbold are bold when the moment would call for courage but cannot endure fear like the courageous can. The cowardly is one who is excessive in fearing and fears things unworthy of true fear.²² Typically, the cowardly fears concepts like love and poverty, which Aristotle claims to be unworthy of true fear. Finally, the courageous man is, in part, one who endures fear and acts as each situation demands.²³ Though sculpture is not expressly mentioned by Aristotle in this text, the application of *Ethics* to sculpture can demonstrate the moral virtues that each piece displays through the stories they are made to represent.

¹⁹ Ibid: 175.

²⁰ Ibid: 174.

²¹ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics, Books 2-4*. Translated by Taylor, C. C. W. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006: 29, lines 29-36.

²² Ibid: 27, lines 10-12. In this passage Aristotle defines *fear* as the expectation of evil.

²³ Ibid: 28, lines 18-20.

Elaborating on each of the five categories of courageous virtue, Aristotle begins with what he believes to be the most courageous of them – civic courage. The civically courageous face the danger of disgrace, societal abandon, and punishment by law for acting courageously against social norms or expectations.²⁴ In order to apply this virtue to sculptural narrative, the artist must consider the story behind his subject.²⁵ For example, Vincenzo de' Rossi's sculpture *Hercules Slaying Hippolyta* (Figure VIII), tells the legend of Hercules' ninth labor: to capture the belt of the Amazonian queen, Hippolyta. In this story, the daughter of Eurystheus, Admete, requested the belt of the Amazonian queen from Hercules. He went to the river Thermodon where the Amazons lived and asked this of the queen. Hippolyta agreed to give him her belt, but just as she agreed, Hera came down in the guise of an Amazon and spread word amongst the other Amazons that the men had come to abduct the queen. Thus they charged forward to intervene; seeing the angered army approaching, Hercules slayed Hippolyta and stripped her of her belt, escaping with it.²⁶ Without understanding the story with which it is associated, one could easily mistake the murder of Hippolyta for an act of inexcusable sin rather than a courageous act of sacrificing civic strength and alliance for dishonor and the potential of punishment. However, it has been established that the stories of Hercules' labors were widely known throughout cinquecento Florence, suggesting that Florentine citizens who saw this piece would understand that Hercules was acting in self-defense rather than with civic courage.²⁷ Although Hercules knowingly sacrificed his alliance with the Amazons, risking punishment and societal abandon (which would suggest this is an act of civic

²⁴ Ibid. 29, lines 17-21.

²⁵ Not only does the artist have the responsibility of representing the narrative, but he also has the responsibility of conveying the intentions of the patron (what virtues the patron wants to display by using a specific story). The stories represented by commissioned sculpture are chosen carefully and with intent, therefore they can be examined for the virtues they convey.

²⁶ López-Ruiz, Carolina. *Gods, Heroes, and Monsters*. Oxford University Press, 2014: 265-266.

²⁷ Utz, Hildegard. "The Labors of Hercules and Other Works by Vincenzo De' Rossi." *The Art Bulletin* 53, no. 3, 1971: 344-66.

courage), the brute strength he used to defeat Hippolyta is unvirtuous and uncourageous, suggesting Hercules lacks control and empathy. Though historians have never explicitly read it as such yet, the representation of Hercules and Hippolyta in a way that suggests Hercules is civically courageous is deeply flawed due to the unvirtuous nature of the tale itself. Hercules is a character riddled with faults and at times moral abandon, forcing historians to question why Florentines were so prideful of such a problematic icon. As will be later discussed, the manipulation of visual depictions of Hercules plays a large role in how his character is revitalized to seem heroic and courageous.

After treating the theme of civic courage, Aristotle next cites Socrates for his idea of the second courageous virtue, that of experience and knowledge. In this section, Aristotle claims that not only is courage a form of knowledge, but that the courageous would never run away from death, for death is preferable to cowardice and running away is disgraceful.²⁸ This could mean a variety of things, but the main point is that when considering the potential consequences of courageous action, one should prioritize what is right and courageous over mere self-protection. In the story of the Lernaian hydra, Hercules must call upon the help of his chariot driver, Iolaos, for assistance in the hydra's defeat. The hydra was sent upon Hercules by Hera, who was seeking to punish Hercules for the murder of his own family. Hercules soon discovered that the heads of the hydra should not merely be cut off – for they grow back in doubles. Instead, he realized that the necks must be cauterized before the heads have a chance to grow back, and the severed heads must be buried deep underground. And so, this is what he and Iolaos did. Because Hercules required assistance, Eurystheos refused to consider this as one of his required ten labors.²⁹

²⁸ Aristotle, 2006: 30, lines 4-5 and 19-23.

²⁹ López-Ruiz, 2014: 262-263. The other of the twelve labors that were not considered one of his required ten was his fifth – where he was asked by Eurystheos to carry out the dung of Augeus' cattle in one day. Augeus agreed to give Hercules cattle if he indeed did as asked, but later refused to carry out this promise when he learned Hercules was

Hercules sacrificed the chance to reclaim his life and gain immortality by asking Iolas' assistance in slaying the hydra. He did this knowing that the hydra was too overwhelming an opponent, and that without the help of Iolaos he could likely die in the process of saving the citizens of Lerna. This scene is not well represented in sculpture of this period but Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi (better known as l'Antico of Mantua) did multiple representations of this scene, mostly on coins and medallions. Antico did do one sculpture, cast in silver, depicting the narrative. Opposite to the first example of civic courage, this story is a good representation of how Hercules can act courageously. In this example Hercules slays the hydra not for his own prosperity but instead for the safety of the Lerneans. This is not a selfish act of self-defense or promotion but one of courage and genuine moral virtue. Because of instances like this, one might begin to understand the reasoning behind Florentines using him as an icon of the city.

Having established the definition of civic courage and courage that is knowledge, Aristotle continues that spirit is the third form of courage, drawing on Homer's idea of "casting strength into his spirit." He then stipulates that rushing into a dangerous situation is not courageous when one is driven by anger or pain. This instead is acting as a combative person rather than a courageous one, as the actions are driven by feelings and impulses rather than the by spiritual courage.³⁰ This distinction is demonstrated by Antonio del Pollaiuolo's tabletop *Hercules and Antaeus*, commission for the Palazzo Medici and by Vincenzo de' Rossi in his labors series (Figure IX). On his journey to the garden of the Hesperides to retrieve the golden apple of immortality (his eleventh labor), Hercules passed through Libya. The ruler of the country, Antaeus (son of Poseidon and "the Earth Mother" Gaia), forced him to wrestle for his freedom in the country.

order to do so by Eurystheos. Eurystheos then denied this labor for the reason that he was hired to perform this task for the price of cattle – even if he did not receive said cattle.

³⁰ Aristotle, 2006: 31, lines 24-28.

Antaeus regularly used passing strangers as sacrifices to the Gods and was deemed unbeatable. Hercules fought with Antaeus and when realizing that his opponent was being fed power, through his feet, from Gaia with each step, he picked him up from the ground and beat him to death in his arms.³¹

This story has a unique relationship with spiritual courage for both Hercules and Antaeus. Antaeus was literally being fed strength through his spirit, and this was what allowed him to be the unbeatable opponent legend describes. Hercules almost displays spiritual courage in how he reacts to Antaeus' strength – he seems to be angered by the idea of losing to an opponent as well as by the pain Antaeus is inflicting upon him via godly power. In turn, Hercules reacts by brutally beating him to death in his arms. Such overt brutality was not necessary for him to defeat Antaeus and thus, this courage was instead an act of pain and anger rather than for the sake of being courageous. This would instead suggest that Hercules is closer to Aristotle's overbold, combative person and Antaeus by contrast is spiritually courageous; this is quite opposite to how Hercules is often imagined and depicted. Pollaiuolo and de' Rossi's sculptures depict the moment in which Hercules picks up Antaeus and begins beating him. When regarding the face and form of Antaeus, it is clear that the moment being shown is in the midst of the beating – he is still alive but in intense agony. Hercules' actions in the original mythological texts were in effect not spiritually courageous but rather overbold, unvirtuous, and combative. Though Antaeus is not a hero in this story, he clearly demonstrates the Aristotelian and Homeric ideas of spiritual courage far more than Hercules does. Just like with the story of Hippolyta, historians must ask why a character like this would be idolized in Medici Florence. Rather than the Medici adopting the iconography of a

³¹ López-Ruiz, 2014: 268.

saint or virtuous figure, they adopted a brute who lacks virtue, control, and the Aristotelian ideas of courage.

Aristotle's next category is the confidence of virtuous courage. The confident person is a man who has won, and beaten many opponents; because the man does not believe that he can lose to his opponents, he can become more overbold than he is courageous.³² This version of courage does not properly fit into the category of courageous virtue, but Aristotle includes it anyway, saying that the confident man is *not* courageous, but uses courage as a façade in order to seem strong. Hercules regularly embodies the virtue of these confident but overbold people, as one reads when going through his twelve labors. It seems as though Hercules believes that there is no match he cannot beat and no opponent worthy of his strength. As is proven time and time again with the stories of Antaeus, Cacus, and the mares of Diomedes – and indeed almost all of the twelve labors – Hercules has few problems when fighting his opponents. We see this overboldness demonstrated in Baccio Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus*. This piece tells the story of Hercules defeating the thieving and brutal Cacus after his tenth labor. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Cacus is described as a fire-breathing, flesh-eating son of Vulcan who displayed the heads of his victims on the walls of his caves. He lived on one of the seven hills of what was to become Rome. While Hercules was performing his tenth labor nearby in Geryon's fields, Cacus stole eight cattle from the fields and brought them back to his cave. The remaining cattle, distressed, called toward the cave, alerting Hercules to where the missing cattle were. Hercules fought his way into the cave while Cacus blew fire and smoke at him and Hercules grabbed him by the throat so forcefully that Cacus' eyes popped out of their sockets.³³ In place of this cave, Hercules created an altar where people go to

³² Aristotle, 2006: 31, lines 5-9 and 33-5

³³ López-Ruiz, 2014: 267.

worship him and thank him for making the land safe enough for the new city of Rome to thrive. Later in history, this was the same site where the cattle market was held. Thus, Hercules was considered not only a founder and protector of Florence, but also of Rome.³⁴ This story is one of an overbold man rather than a courageous one because of the extreme and unnecessary brutality. It is clear that Hercules did not need to choke Cacus so hard his eyes popped out, but that is what he chose to do to demonstrate his ability and undefeated nature. This is one of two forms that courageous virtue takes that Aristotle decides is not courageous, but merely use other tools to appear courageous (In this case, confidence. In the next, ignorance). This idea of confidence and even overconfidence perfectly embodies Hercules in the majority of what he does. By Aristotle arguing that such people are not courageous, the entire idea that Hercules embodies the virtues of Aristotelian courage is undermined.

Finally, Aristotle defines the last of the five forms of courage – ignorance. The ignorant man is very similar to a courageous man but lacking awareness and self-esteem.³⁵ This, too, is an example of what Aristotle claims to be a false sense of courage. The ignorant man uses courage as a façade to appear strong and worthy but instead is severely lacking courage and self-esteem. However, because of the nature of the ignorant in lacking self-esteem, Hercules does not fit into this form of falsified courage and there is no Herculean sculpture commissioned by the Medici of cinquecento Florence that demonstrates “ignorant courage.” It is instead directly contradictory to what cinquecento Florentines – especially the Medici – wished to have Hercules represent.

³⁴ McHam, Sarah Blake. *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 167.

³⁵ Aristotle, 2006: 32, lines 21-25 and 34-1.

KINESICS

There are many ways in which the spatial conditions our understanding of power and authority. These things include size relationships, pose, and the relationship between figures, gesture, expression, and orientation. As it relates to sculpture, the science of kinesics can help art historians to interpret the intentionality in how a story is told through a static piece of art. In comprehending the degree to which incorporating the study of kinesics in art history is useful, it is important to understand that sculpture often does not tell a story but rather shows a single moment in time. Due to the nature of materials used, sculpture is static and can only create the illusion of motion.³⁶ Because sculptors must consider the stillness of what they are creating, when trying to depict a story they must exaggerate the activity and drama of the figures. Though kinesics is not required to understand spatiality and hierarchy in sculpture, applying scientific research to art allows historians to ground their arguments in fact and consider intentionality. Not only does the science of kinesics allow for a factual explanation of why the spatial breakup and hierarchy of figures within an art piece can convey dominance, it gives historians the space to question artistic choice when these basic rules are not followed or when narratives are manipulated to fit these ideas of dominance. By studying body language and relationships, art historians can attempt to understand the active artistic decisions a sculptor makes when trying to convey a specific virtue or characteristic through a narrative. This is done by manipulating the figures to fit the hidden intentions – making one figure larger than natural to convey its dominance, one figure cowering to convey its submission, the facial expression on a face to convey introspection or anger or agony. All of these are active choices an artist makes to further the story and to assist the comprehension

³⁶ Clearly, this theory is not applicable to modern sculpture, for what we consider a sculpture is now much different than what artists and patrons considered to be sculpture during the period of time in question.

of the viewer. By exaggerating one feature within a piece of artwork, the artist draws the viewer's attention to it and gives an artificial importance to that feature. This is how morals and virtues can be projected onto a narrative that is not inherently representative of that moral or virtue.

In the case of Vincenzo de' Rossi's *Hercules Slaying Hippolyta* (previously used to demonstrate Aristotle's premier form of courage, civic courage), Hippolyta cowers under the towering Hercules. She raises her arm above her to protect herself from his raised cudgel and looks up to her murderer in fear and surprise. Hercules bends over slightly to gain momentum as he prepares to strike down on her with a fatal blow. His torso is torqued, giving an additional source of movement to the motionless piece. Further, Hercules rests his left foot on the bent leg of Hippolyta to keep her lowered and submissive. The hilt of Hippolyta's sword is shown in her right hand, but the remainder of the sword disappears under the thigh of Hercules. This helps emphasize her position, low and beneath him. Hercules' cape and lion skin billow behind him, again giving the piece a sense of motion. As commonly understood in kinesics research, one of the most common signs of dominance is when the secondary figure(s) cede space to the dominant figure.³⁷ Often times, submissive figures allow a dominant figure to invade their space not only because they are incapable of fighting back to maintain it but also because the dominant figure has the desire and ability to claim it as his own. The same idea follows for the visibility of figures within a group – the dominant figure takes up more of the visual field so that he becomes the central figure and are thus more dominant.³⁸ This is also demonstrated in Vincenzo de' Rossi's *Hercules and the Centaur* (Figure X) where the centaur is shown underneath Hercules. Although the centaur is imperative to the story, Hercules steps out in front of the centaur's body to block the

³⁷ Henley, Nancy M. *Body Politics: Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977: 28-29.

³⁸ Henley, 1977: 158.

chance of the centaur standing and eliminates any chance of the viewer mistaking the centaur as dominant. Hercules takes the foreground and dominates the piece, once again using the dynamics of height to achieve an additional layer of power.³⁹ In fact, Vincenzo de' Rossi uses this technique of hierarchy of position and spatial dominance in all seven of his pieces in the series of Hercules' labors. He only completed seven before his death, the ones that show the hero's conflict with Hippolyta, the Centaur, the Eurymanthean boar, Antaeus, Cacus, Diomedes, and the one of him holding the world for Atlas.⁴⁰ In five of these, Hercules is the larger figure of the two in the grouping. In at least five, Hercules takes up the majority of the space within the spatial borders of the grouping. Clearly, Vincenzo de' Rossi understood that the management of a body in space and around other individuals plainly establishes who is dominant in the group and who is submissive. Further, he understood that the viewers for these pieces, the Signoria, would also understand that Hercules was the dominant figure within the grouping based on the spatial breakup and hierarchy of size. Going back to consider how this particular narrative fits into Aristotle's ethics, Hercules was rather unvirtuous by Aristotelian standards. Hercules' brutality against Hippolyta was unnecessary and a careless risk of defense rather than civically courageous. By manipulating how the story is depicted using hierarchy and pose between figures, Vincenzo de' Rossi asserts instead that Hercules was the morally virtuous figure in this scene and was acting as the situation calls rather than out of selfish desire. This sculpture ignores the flawed virtues of Hercules and instead portrays him as the Medici chose to – as a virtuous man seeking justice.

The silver sculpture of Hercules and the hydra as cast from l'Antico uses the idea of spatial reasoning to demonstrate his dominance as well, but this figure is different than those of de' Rossi.

³⁹ Fast, Julius. *Body Language*. New York: M. Evans and Company Inc., 1970: 51.

⁴⁰ Van Veen, Henk Th. *Cosimo I de' Medici and His Self-Representation in Florentine Art and Culture*. Translated by Andrew P. McCormick. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Instead of having another human to manipulate in size, l'Antico has a hydra who was described in the mythographic texts as huge after feeding upon herds of cattle throughout the country.⁴¹ It is easy to analyze how size and position between figures are be manipulated when both figures within a grouping are human. Having a mythological monster as an opponent, on the other hand, makes for a less grounded treatment of pose and scale. L'Antico chose to dramatically decrease the size of the hydra in this grouping, making it significantly smaller than Hercules. The hero holds the monster in his hands down below him with his club raised in the other hand. This full extension of the arm gives the sense of forcefulness and immediacy.⁴² This is mirrored in the extension of his left leg, which therefore also draws the viewer's eye to the hydra wrapped around his ankle, referencing the moment in the narrative just before a giant crab came in to assist in the fray. The hydra has heads that are smaller than the hands of Hercules. By decreasing the hydra's size to this level, Antico visually suggests that the hydra was not a true match to Hercules and that the hero's victory was obtained easily. The expression on the face of Hercules is unchanged by the foe in his hands. Overall, l'Antico chose to present the pair in a way that naturally made Hercules have an advantage. There seemed to be no fight for Hercules because he is strong, worthy, and courageous. Although diminishing the size of the foe ultimately results in a diminished sense of accomplishment, it also asserts Hercules as serenely unbeatable and strong. As considered in the *Ethics*, this confidence and victory is not one of true courage but rather only a façade of courage. Instead of Hercules assuming the role of courage as knowledge as previously discussed, he merely assumes confidence and a falsified sense of courage in this circumstance.

⁴¹ López-Ruiz, 2014: 262.

⁴² Fast, 1970: 173.

Representations of Hercules killing Antaeus often use visual cues of dominance (hierarchy of size, spatial breakup, pose between figures, etc.) in a way that asserts Hercules as the less dominant figure in the group. For example, Pollaiuolo and de' Rossi's sculptures share a specific deviance – Antaeus often takes up more space than Hercules and seems to be a more central figure. However, in order to compensate for this, each artist uses grace to show the ease for the act for Hercules. In both sculptures Antaeus seems to be graceful and poised in the motion of his arms and legs, almost as a ballet dancer.⁴³ These are not the harsh movements of someone being shaken and thrown about but rather someone being held tightly and easily. Although at first this is a difficult fight for Hercules, once he gains control of the fight and understands how to defeat his opponent he does so effortlessly, or so the artist suggests. Echoing the ease with which he maintains his physical dominance, his facial expression remains moderate and seemingly without worry or care. Oppositely, Antaeus screams in agony with his mouth ajar and eyebrows furrowed in both sculptures. The combination of the expression and finesse with which Hercules holds Antaeus in these two sculptures bring the viewer to understand how simply Hercules can dominate an opponent with his strength and skill. However, earlier in this paper the analysis of this story established that Hercules did not embody Aristotle's ideas of courage but rather exemplified the overbold, combative person. In order to mask this flaw in the hero's virtue, Pollaiuolo and de' Rossi manipulate the facial expression of Hercules, making him seem rather unbothered by his act, to convey that Hercules was not angered or pained and did not kill Antaeus out of a sudden urge. If Hercules did not brutally beat Antaeus solely because of his own anger and pain, Hercules could be considered courageous for this act under the pretense of him performing this feat for the benefit

⁴³ Ibid. 173-174.

of the citizens of Libya and any foreigner who passed through. By erasing any sense of emotion on Hercules' face, the sculptors also erased the reason for his exclusion from courageous virtue.

Hercules and Cacus was one of the Medici's favorite themes. Perhaps most famously, Baccio Bandinelli created a colossal sculpture specifically to be placed next to Michelangelo's *David* outside the Palazzo Vecchio. This piece had a very complex history behind its commission leading to multiple maquettes of it from both Bandinelli (Figure XI) and Michelangelo Buonarroti (Figure XII). Additionally, historians have the completed final sculpture by Bandinelli as well as a separate commission for the inside of the Palazzo Vecchio on the same theme by Vincenzo de' Rossi (Figure XIII). Interestingly enough, although all four of these sculptures depict the same story, each of them changes the way the story is transmitted by changing how the figures are represented in relationship to each other and the viewer. First, it must be noted that the club – the main symbol of Hercules' dominance – is lowered in Bandinelli's final sculpture and raised in de' Rossi's final sculpture and Bandinelli and Michelangelo's maquettes. This difference is significant because it changes the focus of the story being told. As the club is raised, the story is about the act of violence; it is about the activity itself. As it is lowered, the sculpture is focusing on the moment just after the event has occurred. This creates a different tone to the piece, focusing the audience's attention on the reasoning behind the action. This is further elaborated in the facial expressions of Hercules. First, in Bandinelli's maquette and de' Rossi's final sculpture, Hercules looks focused and determined. In Bandinelli's final version, which shows the moment just after popping Cacus' eyes out, he looks tired and introspective. Needless to say, it is hardly possible to see the facial expressions of Michelangelo's maquette enough to make a judgement their content. As for the expression of Cacus, there is a sense of terror and agony in all but Michelangelo's maquette, emphasizing Hercules' brute success. As for the spatial division between the two

figures, Cacus cowers below Hercules in all four representations. However, in both maquettes, Hercules is seen bending over to strike his foe whereas in the two final sculptures he is fully erect above Cacus. Though this is not a huge difference in the overall composition of each of these pieces, it does again set an alternative tone of Hercules' brutality. This is no mistake that the two most popular and influential works (Bandinelli's final version and de' Rossi's version) make use of Hercules standing fully erect over Cacus rather than leaning over him. Shown fully erect, Hercules conveys less brutality and emotion as he is removed from the action of beating more than he would be if he were leaning over. Creating this distance from the narrative allows the viewer to remove himself from the problematic overboldness and lack of Aristotelian courage in the story represented. It is also thought-provoking to consider Michelangelo's maquette and note that this is the only of the four representations to depict Cacus as fighting back in any sense (grabbing ahold of Hercules' legs rather than protecting himself with his arms). Moreover, both of the final sculptures are colossal and much grander than life size, creating a sense of dominance not only within the sculpture but between the figure of Hercules and any viewer that may come near it. Because it is standing outside in the most important quadrant of the city of Florence, it is intentionally forcing the entire city to recognize its presence. The gaze of Hercules participates in this as well, as he looks southwest towards an entrance to the Piazza della Signoria, just as Michelangelo's *David* does. This domineering gaze catches the attention of anyone coming into the piazza, immediately creating a sense of supremacy over the entire area.⁴⁴ This asserts Hercules as the dominant figure with more than just people who view the sculpture from directly below it but also anybody who walks into the piazza.

⁴⁴ Henley, 1977: 169.

Towering colossal sculptures are not the only way herculean iconography can portray dominance. An example from outside the place and time to demonstrate this is Willem de Tetrode's *Hercules Pomarius* (1567) (Figure IVX). This sculpture shows the very stereotypical features of a hero: strong, foreboding, and muscular. His muscles bubble as if they are so large they could burst. This small model standing at 1'4" tall is hardly overwhelming in height, as most heroic statuary is, but every inch conveys a sense of power and strength. His open stance suggests he is ready for a battle as he holds his club sturdily and glances out past his audience to his next enemy. This displays dominance just as the colossal sculptures of de' Rossi or Bandinelli does, even with its reduced size.

By placing commissioned pieces of Hercules outside and within the Palazzo Vecchio, the Medici made an informal claim to the Signoria as their own. Thus, they firmly established and decorated the entire city of Florence as their own as well. Regardless of the backlash of people within Florence, important visitors from across Europe (and beyond) would have come to see these pieces and regard them as heroic, courageous representations. They would have looked toward the decoration of Florence – peppered with figures of Hercules – and connected that iconography and those stories to their generous hosts and the leader of the city, the Medici. As these people of high class would have understood courage from the study of Aristotelian philosophy, they would have found these sculptures reminiscent of those very ideas. Not only did the virtues these sculptures represent assert Medici dominance and values, but the grandeur of the pieces and the wealth it would take to decorate an entire city with these icons did too. There was a significant amount of active thought on the part of the Medici to consider the perfect icon for their familial legacy, and to then manipulate it to their advantage. By choosing and improving the widely known and widely cherished Hercules, founder and protector of Florence, they too became powerful and

accomplished just as Hercules in all of his tales. Just as Hercules became immortal through this sort of forcefully positive imagery, so too did the legacy of the Medici.

Images



Figure I



Figure II



Figure III



Figure IV



Figure V



Figure VI



Figure VII



Figure VIII

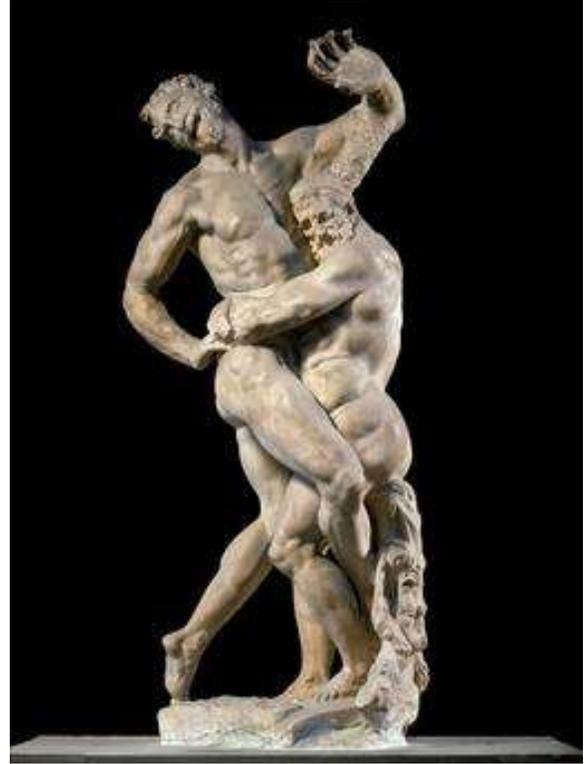


Figure IX



Figure X



Figure XI



Figure XII



Figure XIII



Figure IVX

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