

The Exemplary Hercules from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and Beyond

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Contents

Preface VII
Acknowledgements XIV
Notes on Contributors XVI

Introduction: The Transmission of a Classical Tradition in Theory and Practice 1
Valerie Mainz and Emma Stafford

PART 1

Applying the Model of the Princely Ruler

- 1 The Choice-Making Hercules as an Exemplary Model for Alessandro and Federico Gonzaga and the Fifteenth-Century Latin Translation of Prodikos' Tale of Herakles by Sassolo da Prato 25
Ioannis Deligiannis
- 2 *Macte animis, Caesar, nostros imitare labores*: Hercules and the Holy Roman Empire 47
Paul Gwynne
- 3 Hercules in the Art of Flemish Tapestry (1450–1565) 97
Anne-Sophie Laruelle
- 4 Prince Charles Alexander of Lorraine and Hercules: A Political Emblem between Tradition and Innovation 119
Annie Verbanck-Piérard
- 5 *Monstrorum domitori*: Emblematic and Allegorical Representations of the Herculean Tasks Performed by José I, King of Portugal (1714–77) 149
Filipa Medeiros Araújo

PART 2***Exploiting the Model***

- 6 What Identity for Hercules Gaditanus? The Role of the Gaditanian Hercules in the Invention of National History in Late-Medieval and Early-Modern Spain 175
Pamina Fernández Camacho
- 7 Monstrous Masculinity? Hendrick Goltzius' 1589 Engraving of *The Great Hercules* 194
Joanna Woodall
- 8 Literary Hard Labour: Lyric and Autobiography in Joachim du Bellay 235
Marc Bizer
- 9 Voltaire's Hercules 246
Russell Goulbourne

PART 3***Challenging the Model in the Later Eighteenth Century***

- 10 Hercules the Younger: Heroic Allusions in Late Eighteenth-Century British Political Cartoons 265
Alexandra Eppinger
- 11 Hercules, His Club and the French Revolution 293
Valerie Mainz
- 12 New Representations of Hercules' Madness in Modernity: The Depiction of Hercules and Lichas 320
Manuel Caballero González
- 13 How Hercules Lost His Poise: Reason, Youth and Fellowship in the Heroic Neoclassical Body 346
Tomas Macsotay
- Index 379

Hercules in the Art of Flemish Tapestry (1450–1565)

Anne-Sophie Laruelle

From the end of the fourteenth century, large-scale figurative tapestries counted amongst a dignitary's most costly possessions.¹ They were considered an expression of 'magnificence', one of a prince's primary virtues, and they became an essential belonging of princely treasure.² They are listed in inventories far above paintings and alongside jewellery, silver and gold plate, and illuminated manuscripts. Tapestries were one of the most expensive types of figurative art, especially those which were woven with a large proportion of silk, silver and gilt-metal thread.³ Such movable wall hangings were an elite, although also ephemeral, form of interior decoration. Flemish tapestries have, indeed, rightly been described as the 'mobile frescoes of the North'.⁴ On a daily basis, and especially on noteworthy occasions such as those celebrating weddings, dynastic events, tournaments and official receptions, the tapestries that adorned the rooms and halls of residences conveyed multiple meanings. Series of tapestries depicting narrative cycles might, additionally, offer up certain more specific messages about the social standing of hosts and also of their guests. Tapestry was, furthermore, a major and monumental figurative medium which could be used by patrons for the parade of imagery – of ancestors, of military conquests, or of the historical and mythological heroes with whom they wished to be associated.

The *Labours of Hercules*, one of the most popular literary and artistic themes of the Renaissance, were exploited as particularly prolific motifs in series of

1 I wish to express my gratitude to Dr Valerie Mainz for her careful readings and valuable suggestions. I also wish to thank Professor Dominique Allart for her kind interest in the preparation of this paper.

2 The concept of 'magnificence' can be defined as 'the public demonstration of power and wealth through lavish and tasteful expenditure and generosity' (Campbell 2002c, 15).

3 For example, Pope Leo X's *Acts of the Apostles* tapestries were reputed to have cost between 1600 and 2000 ducats each, so the entire series must have cost some 16,000 ducats or more (more than five times the amount that Michelangelo was paid for painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). See Delmarcel 1999, 17; Campbell 2002b, 10.

4 *Les fresques mobiles du Nord* was the title of an exhibition at *Hessenhuis Anvers* in 1994 and its associated publication, which contains the article of van Tichelen 1994.

tapestries.⁵ Why was Hercules repeatedly shown in tapestry, if not because of the special meaning princes, the privileged recipients of the tapestries, bestowed on this figure? As other contributions to this volume demonstrate, Hercules, more than any other hero, served as a model for the princes because he embodied the *virtus heroica*, the ‘active virtue’ of courage, intrepid deeds and erudition.⁶

This chapter is based on a few examples and will focus on the period between the middle of the fifteenth century, when the story of Hercules first appeared in tapestry, and the year 1565, just before the revolts of the Eighty Years’ War. During this period, several quality tapestry series were produced on this subject in the best weaving workshops of the Franco-Flemish Netherlands: Tournai, Brussels, Oudenaarde, Enghien, Bruges and Antwerp. An exceptional quantity of around 100 pieces and fragments of tapestry have been preserved.⁷ In addition to this, numerous references to Hercules in inventories and descriptions confirm the importance attached to this figure and suggest, furthermore, that the iconography of this hero was far more complex than has been previously thought.

1 Hercules’ First Appearance in the Fifteenth Century

The first tapestries to show Hercules were woven by workshops from the so-called ‘Franco-Flemish’ territories at the beginning of the fifteenth century with the earliest mention to be found in an inventory of tapestries belonging to Charles VI, the Valois King of France.⁸ Listing several hundred tapestries with gold, this inventory, drawn up in March 1422, shortly before the death of Charles VI in October of that year, attests to the size and splendour of the French royal collection. Unfortunately, no tapestries showing Hercules and dating back to this time are preserved. Over the next ten years, the tapestries of

5 This subject forms the focus of the author’s doctoral thesis: Laruelle 2019.

6 See chapters by Deligiannis, Gwynne, Verbanck-Piérard and Medeiros Araújo.

7 This is a huge number, considering that only a very small proportion of tapestries have survived due to bad storage conditions, wars, fires, distributions among heirs, etc, which led to the material loss of thousands of tapestry series. See Campbell 2002b, 6–10.

8 The so-called ‘Franco-Flemish’ category enables us to list fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century tapestries for which the production place is unknown. Marks on tapestries only became compulsory in 1528 in Brussels and in 1544 for the other Flemish centres, in order to fight against fraud. On these questions and methodology, see Bertrand and Delmarcel 2008, 227–50. For Charles VI’s tapestry ‘Ung grant tappiz de Herculez [...]’ (‘a great tapestry of Hercules’), see Guiffrey 1887, 91.

Charles VI were largely dispersed through gifts and appropriations, as a result of the orders of John Duke of Bedford, English regent in France for the young King Henry VI.⁹

Around 1450, some princes had tapestries depicting the figure of Hercules in their possession, including the Este family at Ferrara, Juan II of Castile, and William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk.¹⁰ Inventories indicate that several pieces decorated a bedroom being, for instance, hangings for the walls and the bed. One of the features of these series is the association of the story of Hercules with that of the Amazons. Today two preserved pieces might be correlated with these series, one illustrating *Hercules Establishing the Games on Mount Olympus* (Glasgow, Burrell Collection) and the other the *Tournament of the Amazons* (Boston, MA, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum).¹¹ Hercules founding the Olympic games was a well-known subject in the mid-fifteenth century, possibly inspired by the rediscovery of Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* and its account of the event. This Greek text of the first-century BCE was translated into Latin by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, around this time.¹² The inclusion of Orithya, queen of the Amazons, and her sisters Menalippe and Hippolyta in such a scene is, however, unusual. There is no literary precedent for the presence of all three Amazons at Hercules' initiation of the games and they are identified in the tapestry by the use of inscriptions on their garments. As Campbell has suggested, the inspiration behind this set of Hercules and the Amazons is most likely to have been Christine de Pizan's text, *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (*Book of the City of Ladies*) of 1405, a moral treatise containing female *exempla*.¹³ This popular book, a firm favourite amongst princesses in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, recounts the deeds of virtuous women of the past and present, whether historical and/or mythological in origin with the Amazons, being female warriors, serving as exemplars for contemporary noble women.¹⁴ It is worth noting that the tapestries were displayed in the great chamber: both husband and wife could equally recognize themselves in the prestigious figures of Hercules and the Amazon queen, respectively.

9 See Stratford 1993, 86–9.

10 For the Este tapestries, see Forti Grazzini 1991, 53–62. Juan II acquired some tapestries of 'la estoria de Hercoles e de las amazonas' ('the story of Hercules and the Amazons') in Tordesillas around 1453; this set was then probably inherited first by Enrique IV of Castile, and then by Isabella of Castile. On Isabella, see Delmarcel 2005. For William de La Pole, see Campbell 2007a, 35–40.

11 Cavallo 1986, 20–5, no. 1; Bulst 1993, 206–16. For a recent overview, see Cleland and Karafel 2017, no. 90.

12 See Cohen-Skalli and Marcotte 2015, 63–107.

13 Campbell 2007a, 40.

14 See especially Bell 2004.

2 The Perfect Knight of the Burgundian Period

The depiction of Hercules in tapestries found favour at the court of the Dukes of Burgundy, at the same time as the publication in 1464 of the *Recueil des histoires de Troie* (*Account of the Histories of Troy*, hereafter the *Recueil*) by Raoul Le Fèvre, chaplain to Philip the Good.¹⁵ As mentioned in the introduction to this volume, although the title relates to the Trojan narrative, Le Fèvre gives an important place to Hercules in his account. This book, in three volumes, was a real best-seller; there are no fewer than twenty manuscripts and a dozen printed versions preserved, all of which appeared before the middle of the sixteenth century with William Caxton's English translation of 1471 reprinted many times as *The Ancient History of the Destruction of Troy* or just *The Destruction of Troy*. The *Recueil* was, furthermore, promoted by the publication of excerpts with titles which emphasise Hercules' role: *Les hystoires d'Hercules* (*The Stories of Hercules*) or *Les proesses et vaillances du preux Hercules* (*The Prowess and Valour of Hercules*), and when published in English, *The Book of the Strong Hercules*.¹⁶

At the court of Burgundy, the life of Hercules had already been illustrated on tapestries during the 'Feast of the Pheasant' given by Philippe the Good in Lille in 1454; according to the chronicler Mathieu d'Escouchy, 'the room was large and spacious, lined with very fine tapestries, on which was shown the life and mystery of Hercules, richly woven and well made'.¹⁷ In addition, in July 1468, the hero's life was performed on stage in Bruges, on the occasion of Charles the Bold's wedding to Margaret of York.¹⁸ In the nine days of jousting and banqueting that comprised the festivities presented in honour of the married couple, the guests were treated to a dramatized version of the principle events of the life of Hercules.¹⁹ This 'pantomime' was extensively documented in the accounts of the court chronicler, Olivier de la Marche (c. 1425–1502). For that special occasion, Hercules embodied the model of the ideal ruler for, in addition to being the perfect knight, the hero demonstrated moral force since, due to his exceptional attributes, he had succeeded in overcoming monsters and tyrants.

15 For the *Recueil des histoires de Troie*, see Jung 1966, 16–30; Jung 2002, 9–69 (*Recueil*, 58–9).

16 Jung 1966, 27.

17 "[L]a salle fut grande et spacieuse qui fut tendue de tapisserie moult belle, en laquelle estoit la vie et mistère d'Herculez, moult richement et bien parée"; see du Fresne de Beaucourt 1863–1864, 131. All translations are my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

18 For a detailed discussion of both events, see Jung 1966, 30–6.

19 See Cheyns-Condé 1994; Ross 2012.

The success of the Hercules motif at the court of Burgundy can also be explained by a desire to legitimize the dynastic claims of the Dukes of Burgundy with regard to the claims of other rulers. The ancient hero was considered by the Dukes to be their mythical ancestor, as claimed by Olivier de la Marche, who noted that Hercules, on his way to Spain, passed through the region of Burgundy and, when there, married a noblewoman named Alise. Their union had produced a number of children from whom the earliest Burgundian kings were descended. As proof, the chronicler cited the existence of an ancient city named 'Alesia', after lady Alise, although this city had long ago been destroyed by war:²⁰

But I take courage and fearlessly recount what Diodorus says, who in fact supposes that the aforesaid Hercules, in making his voyages, and even going to Spain, passed through the country which is now called Burgundy, and there took in marriage, according to the law, one of his wives called Alise [...] And he says that from this Alise he had offspring, from whom came and descended the first kings of Burgundy.

Le Fèvre's *Recueil* was the inspiration for numerous tapestries on the Herculean theme that date to the last third of the fifteenth century. A few surviving pieces, probably woven in Tournai between 1470 and 1500, were inspired by this text: *Hercules' Birth and Youth* (Brussels, Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire); the *Conquest of Sheep Island* (Tournai, TAMAT); and *Hercules Saving Hippodamia from the Centaurs* (Paris, Mobilier National).²¹ On the *Conquest of Sheep Island* (Figure 3.1), one interesting detail appears: Hercules wears the necklace of the chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece, established by Philip the Good in 1430. Hence, the hero introduces himself as a knight of the Order, whose task was the defence of the Christian faith.²² So the first tapestry set was probably woven for the Dukes of Burgundy or a member of their close entourage.

20 Beaune and d'Arbaumont 1883, 43 (see also Millar 2001):

"Mais je prens courage et hardement de reciter ce que dist Dyodore, qui met en effect que ledit Hercules, en faisant ses voyages, et mesmes en allant en Espagne, passa par le pays que l'on nomme à present Bourgoingne, et [y] print en mariage, selon la loy, l'une de ses femmes nommée Alise [...] Et dit que de ceste Alise il eut generation, dont sont venus et yssus les premiers Roys de Bourgoingne."

21 Asselberghs 1967, 19–21; Dudant 1985, 39–46.

22 The order's remit is described by Le Fèvre as: 'La deffence de la saincte foy crestienne, ou pout deffendre, maintenir ou restablir la dignité, estat et liberté de nostre mère sainte Église et du saint siège apostolicque de Romme [...]' ('The defence of the Christian Faith, or the ability to uphold, maintain, or restore the dignity, status, and liberty of our Holy Mother Church and the Holy Apostolic See of Rome') (1881, 214).

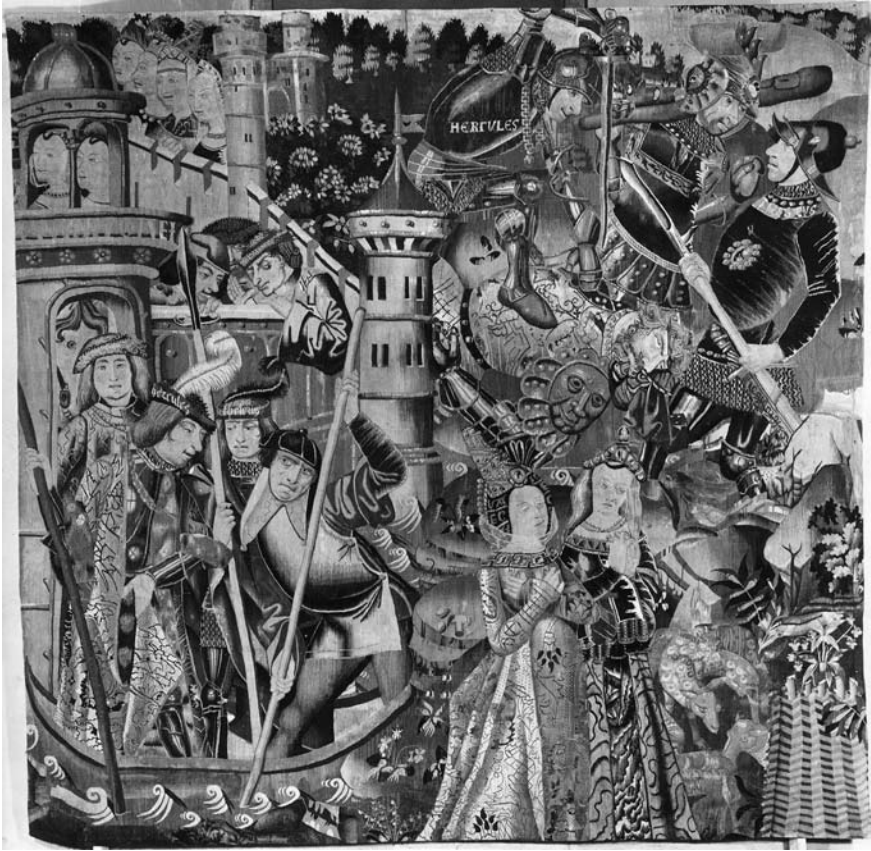


FIGURE 3.1 *Conquest of Sheep Island*; tapestry woven in the Southern Netherlands, probably Tournai, c. 1480. Wool and silk, 296 cm × 296 cm. Musée de la tapisserie de Tournai
PHOTO © KIK-IRPA, BRUSSELS

Another tapestry from the same period illustrating *Hercules' Youth* is now divided into three fragments: *Hercules Strangles Two Serpents in his Cradle*, *Juno Suckling Hercules* and *The Arming of Hercules* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum).²³ The fragment with Juno nursing an infant Hercules in the presence of Minerva (Figure 3.2) is one of the few preserved tapestries inspired by the narrative elaborated by Diodorus (book 4, 9.6–7). Diodorus relates that the goddess herself, while she was in the company of Minerva, accidentally found the child. Both were much impressed by the beauty of Hercules with Minerva suggesting that Juno should suckle him. The boy received the nourishment, but

23 Inv. BK-17251-A/B/C. See Hartkamp-Jonxis and Smit 2004, 37–41, no. 6a–c.



FIGURE 3.2 *Juno Suckling Hercules* (fragment) from *The Youth of Hercules*; tapestry woven in the Southern Netherlands, c. 1480. Wool and silk, 195 cm × 107 cm. Rijksmuseum (Inv. BK-17251-B)

PHOTO © RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM, RELEASED INTO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

the task was not easy, and smarting under the pain which she suffered from the pressure of his lips, Juno threw him hastily from her arms. Minerva then picked him up, carried him away and delivered him to Alcmena. The drinking of Juno's milk would make Hercules immortal.²⁴

3 The Growing Significance of the Hercules Theme

Demand for tapestries increased at the end of the fifteenth century, probably prompted by a competitive spirit of emulation amongst the princely rulers of the courts of Western Europe. With the publication of Annius of Viterbo's *Antiquitatum Variarum* (*Commentaries on Antiquity*) in 1498, the princes had the opportunity to compete in constructing their personal ancestries that were to be traced back to the figure of Hercules. For this publication, Annius of Viterbo claimed to have discovered ancient texts and inscriptions that were, in fact, his own fabrications; he invented royal genealogies under the name of the ancient author Berosus and distinguished three separate figures of Hercules: the Hercules of Libya, ancestor of the Gallic, Spanish and Italian kings; the Greek Hercules, destroyer of Troy; and a Hercules 'Alemannus', ancestor of the Germanic kings.²⁵ Annius' false claims enabled rulers to appropriate for themselves lineages, which were potentially prestigious on account of the associations that might be inferred from the heroic precedents set by the exploits of Hercules.

Preserved inventories attest to the fact that the Kings of France, Spain and England all bought tapestry series on the theme of Hercules. Unfortunately, none of the surviving pieces can be attributed to any of these rulers but archival evidence still provides us with information as to the prevalence of such a tapestry theme within the court culture of the period. For example, in 1513, when Tournai was under English rule, the new governor of the city, Sir Edward Poynings, was offered a set of Hercules tapestries. There can be little doubt that the theme perfectly suited the remit of the governor of the region with a goal being also to promote the town's products to the new English overlords. The contract stipulated that the series had to be woven in the workshop of a famous weaver from Tournai, Clément Sarrasin, with the best materials. The best wool was to be used and the garments of all the principal figures were to be in

²⁴ The scene is only rarely depicted in antiquity, too: see Stafford 2012, 174.

²⁵ On Annius of Viterbo (born Giovanni Nanni), see Fernández Camacho in this volume. See also Jung 1966, 50.

silk; whilst yellow silk was to be used to depict the highlights in gowns of cloth of gold, green and blue silks were to show up the highlights in gowns of velvet.²⁶

4 A Personification of Christian Virtues

A fragment entitled *The Death of Hercules on Mount Oeta* (London, Hampton Court Palace), woven probably in Tournai around 1515, may have belonged to the English cardinal Thomas Wolsey, a major political force during the reign of Henry VIII.²⁷ Although it has not been possible to establish this fragment's provenance, finding tapestries on ancient subjects in the dwellings of rich prelates should not come as a surprise. The Cardinal and Prince-Bishop of Liège, Érard de la Marck, also owned a seven-piece set on the theme of Hercules.²⁸ Indeed, the hero perfectly embodied the Christian virtues of the Renaissance for his labours could provide parallels with the struggles of the Christian soul to attain salvation.²⁹ Some of Hercules' exploits were even integrated into the borders of the famous set of the *Acts of the Apostles*, commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1515 and woven in Brussels from cartoons designed and painted by Raphael.³⁰

26 All the early Tournai archives and library materials were destroyed in the bombing of the city during the Second World War. The contract is now lost, but it was published by Soil 1892, 398–9:

“Le samedy xvii^e jour de decembre l an mil v^e et treize messieurs les quatre chiefs de la loy de ceste ville et cité de Tournay [...] pour fournir et accomplir la promesse faicte à hault et noble M. de Ponnichs [...] de lui faire présent de par icelle ville d'une chambre de tapisserie, marchanderent à Clement Sarasin tappissier de faire et composer une chambre de tapisserie ystoriée de la vie de Hercules [...] esté devisé que lad. tapisserie sera faicte de moyenne sayette de bonne layne et de bonne soye de venise gaune verde et bleue.”

“On Saturday 17th December 1513, the four gentlemen who are chief justices of this town and city of Tournai [...] in order to provide and fulfil the promise made to the high and noble M. de Ponnichs [...] to make him a gift from this same city of a full suite of tapestries, they negotiated with Clement Sarasin, weaver, to make and put together tapestries telling the story of the life of Hercules [...] it was agreed that said tapestry suite would be made of regular *sayette*, of good wool and good Venetian silk of yellow, green and blue.”

27 Royal Collection Trust/ Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, inv. RCIN 1268. One other piece from the same suite, depicting *Hercules at the Gates of Calydon*, survives in the Glasgow Museums collection, see Cleland and Karafel 2017, no. 91. The fragment in question is mentioned in the collection of Henry VIII in 1547. The inventory of Cardinal Wolsey mentions at least four pieces on this subject. See Campbell 1996, 73–136.

28 The suite has disappeared, but it was described in the Cardinal's inventories, see Steppe and Delmarcel 1974, 35–54 (Hercules, 39–40).

29 The history of Christian appropriations of the labours is explored in Allan, Anagnostou-Laoutides and Stafford (eds) 2020.

30 Campbell 2002d.

In fact, two Hercules figures, *Hercules Holding up the Heavens* and *Hercules Killing the Centaur Eurytion*, appeared originally in the border of Raphael's *Paul Preaching at Athens*. As John Shearman has demonstrated, Hercules was included because of parallels drawn by contemporary commentators between the hero and Leo X, and because the labours were interpreted as a demonstration of Leo's devotion to religion.³¹ Leo was, moreover, born Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici, the second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, ruler of the Florentine republic and member of the Medici family, who had their own links with the mythic hero.³² Hercules was also shown on the borders of two re-editions of the series of the *Acts of the Apostles* (c. 1550), preserved in Mantua and Madrid.³³

An example of the proliferation of the Hercules theme in tapestries falling within the remit of Renaissance courtly patronage is the tapestry of the *Triumph of Hercules*, from the set of the *Triumphs of the Gods*, also called the *Antiques*.³⁴ The designs of this series, dated between 1517 and 1520, are attributed to Giovanni Francesco Penni and Giovanni da Udine, who followed on from the precedents set by Raphael.³⁵ The *Triumph of Hercules* survives, as does the *Triumph of Bacchus*, from the seven-piece set purchased by Henry VIII, which is a slightly modified re-edition of the series that once belonged to Leo X.³⁶ The original set served both to celebrate Leo and the Medici family, and to deliver a Christian message of struggle, redemption, and resurrection to eternal life.

31 See Shearman 1972, 89. The lion-skin as *insignia leonis* was discussed by Bishop Giles of Viterbo with reference to Leo X (see *Historia viginti saeculorum*. Ms. Lat. 351, fol. 6^v, 36^r and 316^r). This idea was mentioned by Brandolini in the preface to his *Dialogus Leo nuncupatus* printed in 1513, see Brandolini 1753, 69. Moreover, in his *Herculis Vita* (1539), the famous scholar and poet Lilio Gregorio Giraldi established a relationship between Hercules and Leo, and interpreted the labours in parallel with Christian religion, especially Paul's sermon (see Giraldi 1580, 1.555).

32 On Florentine political usage of Hercules, see Stafford 2012, 218–19, and also Sienkewicz in Allan, Anagnostou-Laoutides and Stafford (eds) 2020.

33 Campbell 2002d, 187–218; Delmarcel and Brown 2010, 66–77. Delmarcel noticed that the first re-edition, now lost, must have belonged to King Francis I. Indeed, one recognises 'eloquent' Hercules, the prototype of the 'Hercules gallicus' (the 'Gallic Hercules'), and therefore the King of France, on which, see Brown and Delmarcel 1996, 155–6; Delmarcel 1999, 146. For the 'Gallic Hercules' see the introduction to this volume and the chapter by Bizer.

34 Royal Collection Trust / Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, inv. RCIN 1363.

35 Campbell 2002e, 246–52. See also Karafel 2016.

36 This series, called in 1608 'Grottesco di Leone Xmo' ('Leo X's Grotesques'), disappeared in the eighteenth century. See Campbell 2002e, 225–9; Karafel 2016.

5 Mary of Hungary's Series and Related Tapestries

During the second quarter of the sixteenth century, the desire of the European princes to be assimilated symbolically to the figure of Hercules became even more evident. Francis I, Henry VIII, and Charles V were in constant rivalry, competing for the title of 'the new Hercules', with particular reference to the 'Libyan' Hercules of Annius of Viterbo and to the 'Egyptian' Hercules of Diodorus.³⁷ According to Annius of Viterbo, followed later by the historiographer Jean Lemaire de Belges, the 'Libyan Hercules' symbolized the prince's physical potency of masculine military might.³⁸ Over time the 'Libyan Hercules' became associated with the Emperor Charles V, while King Francis I embodied the 'Hercules Gallicus', an image of Hercules consonant with the humanist ideals of eloquence and prudence.³⁹ As might be expected, the tapestry series devoted to this theme multiply around this time.

It is in this context that the most famous tapestries of Hercules were purchased from a Brussels workshop in 1535 by Mary of Hungary, Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands and sister of the Emperor Charles V. Woven in wool and silk, the tapestries originally illustrated twelve of the hero's exploits. It is worth noting that the ancient canon of the twelve labours was not reproduced in the medium of tapestry during the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Hercules was the demi-god who embodied the ideals of strength, fortitude and bravery and the six pieces of the set which currently survive in the Spanish royal collections (Patrimonio Nacional, series 23), are of Hercules fighting the Stymphalian birds; the Cretan bull; the mares of Diomedes; the giant Antaeus; the dragon of the Hesperides; and the three-headed dog Cerberus.⁴⁰ As noted in the volume's introduction, this choice of subject matter reflects the influence of the medieval Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (book 4 poem 7.13–35), in which five of the canonical labours (Geryon, the Augean stables, the Amazons, the bull and the Cerynian hind) are replaced with other exploits (Acheloos, Antaeus,

37 Diodorus speaks of three heroes of the name of Hercules, the most ancient of whom was the Egyptian, a son of Zeus. The second hero was a Cretan, and one of the Idaeian Dactyls, and the third or youngest was Hercules the son of Zeus with Alcmena, who lived shortly before the Trojan war (book 3, 74.4–5).

38 Annius of Viterbo 1498, book 15, fol. 141–143; Lemaire de Belges 1510, book 1, chap. 7–11. See Jung 1966, 52–4.

39 On the affiliation of Francis I with the figure of Hercules and on the rivalries between these monarchs, see Laruelle 2017c and n. 33. For Charles V, see Checa Cremades 1999.

40 Junquera de Vega and Herrero Carretero 1986, 155–162. On the collections of Mary of Hungary and Charles V, see Buchanan 2015.

Cacus, the centaurs and Hercules carrying the heavens).⁴¹ The *Consolation of Philosophy* was widely translated and reproduced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Unfortunately, very little information concerning the use of this Hercules series has come down to us but it is likely that Mary of Hungary's purchase from the Dermoyen workshop was made, as on many other occasions, to serve the interests of her brother.⁴² Conscious of the need to articulate a specific image of power linked to the House of Austria, the new series on the subject of Hercules was probably used to consolidate and propagate a mythic, heroic persona for an absent Charles v.⁴³

The series was so successful that it was reproduced in Brussels and other centres known for specialised quality weaving, particularly in Oudenaarde and Enghien. The best preserved of these is the eight-piece set woven in Oudenaarde around 1550.⁴⁴ Campbell has speculated that Henry VIII would have acquired a version of that series, because the King owned nine sets (comprising about 55 tapestries) on his death in 1547.⁴⁵

The expenditure that the rulers and other contemporary patrons lavished on tapestry during the sixteenth century encouraged the Flemish manufactories, especially Brussels, to heights of artistic achievement that have never been surpassed. The workshops were more and more inventive and found alternative formulae to seduce the princes. This stimulated an unprecedented number of narrative tapestries on the theme of Hercules, of which the finest were of great material richness and iconographic complexity. A further distinction needs briefly now to be made here between the tapestries where Hercules is surrounded by decorative *grotesques* and the tapestries exclusively dedicated to his labours.

41 On Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and posterity, see Gibson 1981. An interest in the labours is also present in several influential books of the fourteenth century: Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* of 1360–74, in which the author quotes no fewer than thirty-one labours; Le Fèvre's *Recueil* (see above); as well as the anonymous *Ovide moralisé* (1340).

42 Because of his absences Charles had only limited contact with the Flemish weavers in Brussels and he acted through his sister. It was Mary who arranged and supervised his important tapestry acquisitions such as *The Story of Joshua* (1544) and *The Conquest of Tunis* (1546–1554), see further Buchanan 2015.

43 For Hercules and the House of Austria, see Checa 1999.

44 Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, inv. Cl/1–9. For an overview, see van Tichelen 1994, 53–60.

45 Campbell 2007a, 310; Campbell 2012, 56.

6 *Grotesque* Tapestries

The Flemish weavers specialized in the production of decorative *grotesque* tapestries. The French word *grotesque*, derived from the Italian word *grottesco*, was a style of tapestry was inspired by ancient designs discovered at the end of the fifteenth century in the underground rooms, or grottoes, of the *Domus Aurea* (Golden House) of the Emperor Nero in Rome.⁴⁶ It is also the name given to the decorative formula that Raphael and his assistants developed in Cardinal Bibbiena's *Loggetta* and *Stufetta*, the Vatican Loggia, and the Villa Madama in Rome between 1515 and 1530. So-called *grotesque* ornament appeared in France a short time later in the paintings made for the palace at Fontainebleau. In the Low Countries, the first tapestry series that marked the introduction of such *grotesque* work was the set ordered by Pope Leo X from Pieter van Aelst of Brussels around 1520.⁴⁷ In the middle of the sixteenth century, the artists Cornelis Bos, Cornelis Floris and Hans Vredeman de Vries produced many ornamental engravings in the *grotesque* idiom which were used for the closely related ornamentation of many Flemish tapestries during the second half of the century, which were sophisticated, complex and refined in handling and design.

Unfortunately, only a few Hercules-themed pieces in this style have survived; all are dated to the period 1550–60 and they include *Hercules Fighting the Nemean Lion* (Miami Vizcaya and Gardens Museums, inv. D TAP 009), *Hercules with Cacus, Atlas, Cerberus* (Philadelphia Art Museum, inv. 1930-1-205/206/207), *Deianira* (formerly Vic, Museu Episcopal), and *Hercules with the Lernean Hydra* (Vic, Museu Episcopal, inv. MEV 56).⁴⁸ The last bears the mark of the town of Oudenaarde. Here Hercules' exploits are depicted in large medallions inserted within a fantastic, *grotesque* decoration, made of imaginary beings, volutes, masks and draperies. That the Oudenaarde *grotesque* tapestries, inspired by Italian models, were highly appreciated by Renaissance sovereigns, is demonstrated, for example, by their inclusion in the collections of Margaret of Parma, Governor of the former Low Countries (r. 1559–1567), the natural daughter of Charles V and of Jeanne van der Gheynst (herself the daughter of a weaver from Oudenaarde), who owned a series of eight such tapestries.⁴⁹

46 See Dacos 1969.

47 See above and n. 36.

48 See further de Meûter and Vanwelden 1999, 124–6.

49 Now lost, but recorded in inventories of the Farnese family, see Forti Grazzini 1999, 143–72 (Hercules, 158).

7 Series with the Labours

There were many widely spread and much appreciated series of tapestries that were entirely dedicated to the *Labours of Hercules*. The tapestry collection of Margaret of Parma deserves special mention in this respect because it helps us to understand the collection practices of contemporary monarchs. Like other rulers, she owned several series of Hercules-themed tapestries.⁵⁰ The principal account of her collection is the description of the rooms that were dedicated to the wedding festivities of her son, Alessandro Farnese, at the Coudenberg Palace in Brussels, in November 1565. The Italian chronicler Francesco de Marchi described a fourteen-piece set of the *Labours of Hercules* with 'forest landscapes' and stated that these tapestries were displayed in the guardroom of her private apartment.⁵¹ De Marchi's description conforms to the content of numerous tapestries produced by the workshop of Frans Schavaert in Brussels, between 1550 and 1560 (Figure 3.3), in which the *Labours* are indeed located in a northern forest inhabited by exotic animals. The tapestries illustrate the deeds as described by Le Fèvre in his *Recueil*.⁵² This book was, indeed, still very popular during the middle of the sixteenth century. The border includes medallions and cartouches, which evoke the satirical works of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

Another exceptional five-piece set depicting the *Labours of Hercules* is kept in Paris and Ghent.⁵³ Surrounded by a decoration of large acanthus leaves, Hercules' exploits (with the Nemean lion, the Lernaean hydra, the horses of Diomedes, the Stymphalian birds, and the serpent of the Hesperides) are placed under upper medallions that have allegorical figures of the Liberal Arts (Rhetoric, Geometry, Music, Dialectic, and Grammar). The programme is completed in the lower medallions by a parallel account of the life of King David, taken from the Bible. On the tapestry depicting *Hercules Fighting the Stymphalian Birds* (Figure 3.4), the top section, for example, includes the personification of Dialectic, the art of reasoning, with the imagery below being of David playing the harp and being threatened with a spear by King Saul (1 Samuel 18.11; 19.9–10).

50 See, for example, the case of Henry VIII (cited above, n. 45).

51 de Marchi 1566, fol. 15^r. See further Bertini 1999, 133.

52 Four tapestries are currently preserved in Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels (inv. 8867–8870) and many isolated pieces still survive. For a recent overview, see Laruelle 2017a, 785–91.

53 Four pieces are preserved in Musée du Louvre, Paris (inv. OAR 4–7) and one piece in the Provinciaal paleis van Oost-Vlaanderen, Ghent. See Delmarcel 1982; Delmarcel 1999, 203–7; de Meûter and Vanwelden 1999, 127–31; de Meûter 2012, 46–59.

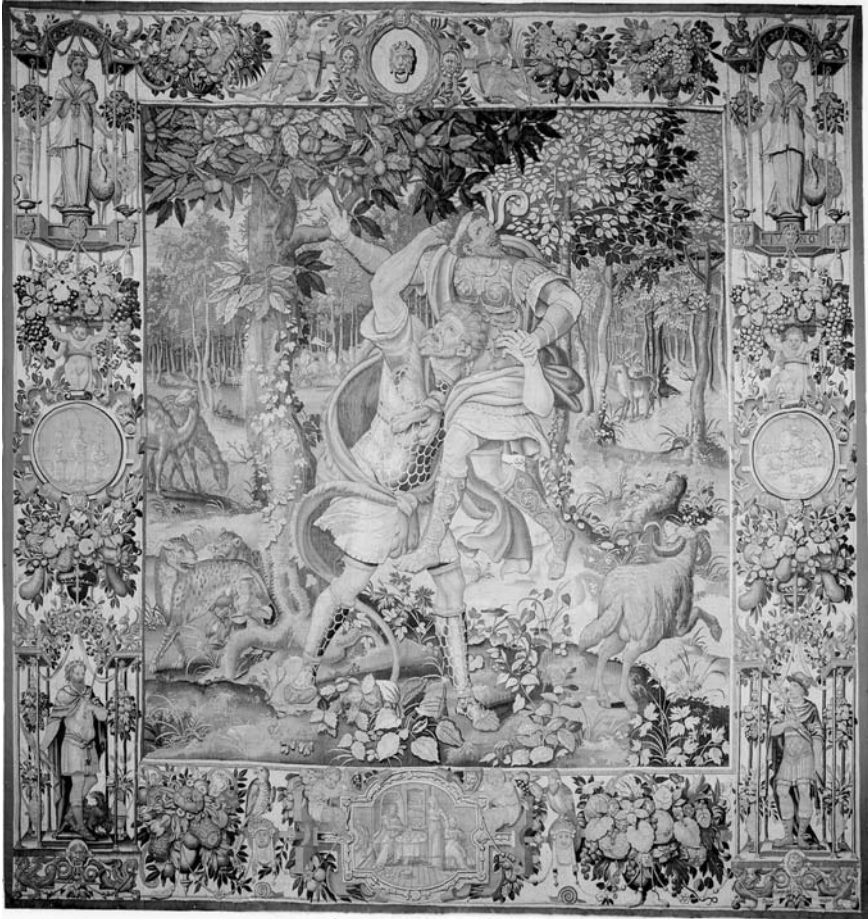


FIGURE 3.3 *Hercules and Antaeus*; tapestry woven in the workshop of Frans Schavaert, Brussels, c. 1560. Wool and silk, 425 cm × 410 cm. Musées royaux d' Art et d' Histoire, Brussels (inv. 8868)

PHOTO © KIK-IRPA, BRUSSELS

The figure of David was also a favoured model for Renaissance rulers so the iconographic complexity here suggests that the set must have belonged to a sovereign.⁵⁴ Delmarcel sums up its meaning as follows: 'One can only accomplish heroic and virtuous acts when one has had a serious intellectual education'.⁵⁵ Le Fèvre, in his *Recueil*, had already written 'how Hercules, with King

54 Campbell 2007a, 177–87.

55 Delmarcel 1999, 204.



FIGURE 3.4 *Hercules fighting the Stymphalian Birds*; tapestry woven in Oudenaarde, c. 1550–60. Wool and silk, 345 cm × 320 cm. Provinciaal Paleis van Oost-Vlaanderen, Ghent
 PHOTO © KIK-IRPA, BRUSSELS

Atlas, began to study the science of astronomy and the seven liberal arts.’⁵⁶ The combination of these two themes, Hercules and the Liberal Arts, was, indeed, common in the Renaissance, the best-known example being the dual cycle of paintings painted by Frans Floris for the merchant Nicolas Jonghelinck (1555–1556), one of which represents Hercules and the other the Liberal Arts.⁵⁷

56 Le Fèvre 1495, fol. 144^r–147^r: ‘Comment Hercules print le roy Athlas et commença a estudier la science dastronomie et les sept ars liberaulx’.

57 See van de Velde 1965, 123.

Hercules also held a particular significance for Bavarian dukes. Indeed, in his *Bavarian Chronicle* of 1533, the historian Aventinus (or Johannes Thurmair) explained that the founder of the Bavarian dynasty was ‘Hercules Germanicus’.⁵⁸ The theme is exemplified by another fine series, likely to be from an Antwerp workshop, which is remarkable for its vivid and complex iconography.⁵⁹ This thirteen-piece set was commissioned by Duke Albrecht v of Bavaria for his palace at Dachau around 1565, using the intermediary of the Antwerp merchant Michiel de Bos.⁶⁰ The series, woven in blue and white, the heraldic colours of Bavaria, was accompanied by other pieces incorporating the Duke’s arms. The designs were based on the engravings made by Cornelis Cort, themselves inspired by the paintings of the Flemish artist Frans Floris.⁶¹ The new tapestry series was an intrinsic part of the genealogical decorative programme of the *Festsaal* (banqueting hall) at Dachau.

8 Conclusion

The popularity and the importance of Hercules is thus demonstrated by the existence of numerous distinct series of tapestries, woven between 1450 and 1565, which survive in complete and fragmentary sets. The illustrious hero provided an attractive model for rulers and the nobility to emulate with contemporary interest in this figure being further stimulated by the humanism that was flourishing in Western Europe and that was bringing with it a growing awareness of the classical world.

The set produced in the 1560s for Albrecht v, Duke of Bavaria, is the last great series of tapestries on the subject of Hercules and furnishes an epilogue to this chapter. The Low Countries were at this point enmeshed in an era of violent turmoil with economic disruption, religious strife, social unrest and civil wars resulting in the breaking up of the United Provinces. These events had a devastating impact on the tapestry industry, for the zealotry of some of the Reformers encouraged the skilled weavers to migrate to foreign countries.⁶² Various testimonials confirm that it became difficult to acquire new series on the subject of Hercules.⁶³ It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century, when a

58 Buchanan 1994, 56.

59 Munich, Schloss und Park Nymphenburg, Hauptverwaltung, inv. BSV.WA0065-0077.

60 See Buchanan 1994, 37–62; Heym and Sauerländer 2006.

61 On Cort’s engravings, see Sellink 2000, 31–59, no. 172–81.

62 For an overview, see Campbell 2007b, 17–27.

63 The correspondence between Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle and Viron, his

new Golden Age was ushered in under the joint governorship of the Habsburg Archduke Albert and of his wife, Duchess Isabella Clara Eugenia, the daughter of Philip II of Spain, that Hercules reappeared on tapestries in Flemish workshops.

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'maître des comptes', is informative in this respect. See Picquard 1950, 111–126; for Hercules, see a letter dated 16th August 1566.

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