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*Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives  
of the Metamorphoses  
in Europe, from Books  
to the Arts*



IL CAPITALE CULTURALE  
*Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*

**eum**

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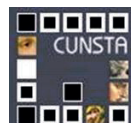
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# *Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives of the *Metamorphoses* in Europe, from Books to the Arts*

edited by  
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# Weaving Myths: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Labours of Hercules Tapestries in the Renaissance

Anne-Sophie Laruelle\*

## *Abstract*

The *Labours of Hercules* was a particularly prolific motif for tapestries in the Renaissance. The iconographic scheme of the Hercules series synthesized an enormous range of ancient and medieval philosophical and didactic erudition. This paper will examine an episode especially favoured in the sixteenth-century series: the fight between Hercules and the river-god Achelous (*Metamorphoses*, IX, 1-100). In scholarly literature, the scene has often been interpreted as the battle of Hercules against the Cretan bull. However, this episode was widely superseded by Hercules' struggle against Achelous, due to the authority of Ovid's texts. It will delve deeper in the matter by focusing on a curious detail: all tapestries depict Achelous with a human body and a bull's head. This finding provides valuable new insights regarding this idiosyncratic and complex iconography.

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## 1. *Introduction*

The *Labours of Hercules*, one of the most popular literary and artistic themes of the Renaissance, was a particularly prolific motif for Netherlandish tapestries<sup>1</sup>. The iconographic scheme of the Hercules series synthesized an enormous range of ancient and medieval philosophical and didactic erudition, the roots of which stretched back to works like Boethius' *De consolatioe philosophiae*, Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum gentilium* or the *Ovide moralisé*. This paper will examine an episode especially favoured in the sixteenth-century tapestry series: the fight between Hercules and the river-god Achelous (fig. 1). In scholarly literature, the scene has often been interpreted as the battle of Hercules against the Cretan bull. However, this episode was widely superseded by Hercules' struggle against Achelous in the Renaissance, due to the authority of Ovid's *oeuvre*. Considering that Achelous could be depicted in several different forms, all his forms will be discussed.

## 2. *The reception of Ovid's Hercules*

In his works, Ovid gives only two accounts on the life of the demi-god Hercules. They focus almost exclusively on his wife. The first reference is found in *Heroids*, the famous fictitious love letters written by mythological or legendary heroines complaining about the absence of their loved one. Letter IX, from Deianira to Hercules, expresses the wife's jealousy towards her rival Iole, as well as her resentment against Omphale, after enumerating her husband's female conquests<sup>2</sup>. The second commentary on Hercules' life is found in the *Metamorphoses*, the most important reference book of Greco-Roman mythology in the Christian West. In this text, Ovid chose to treat three episodes of the hero's life: his fight against Achelous to obtain the hand of Deianira, her abduction by Nessus the centaur, and the tragic episode of Hercules' death<sup>3</sup>.

Achelous is the name of the longest Greek river, in Aetolia, and the name of the river-god. The latter was said to be the son of Ocean and Thetys and was linked to the cycle of the Hercules' *Labours*. Achelous asked his neighbour, king Oeneus of Calydon, for the hand of his daughter Deianira. As a river-god, Achelous had the gift of metamorphosis and could take any form he fancied (a snake, a dragon, etc). Now this gift frightened Deianira, who was upset at

<sup>1</sup> See Laruelle 2019 and 2020a.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *Heroides*, epistle IX. This letter draws extensively on Sophocles' *Trachiniae*.

<sup>3</sup> Hercules dies because of a poisoned shirt which Deianira gave him to take her revenge on his infidelities. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 1-100 (Achelous) and IX, 101-272 (from the episode of Nessus until the death of Hercules and his apotheosis).

the idea of such a worrisome husband. When Hercules presented himself at Oeneus' court and asked for her hand, Deianira immediately accepted. Hercules, however, had to win her off Achelous, who refused to resign himself to his fate. The river-god attacked Hercules, and thanks to his gifts, Achelous came in three forms: in human form, then in the aspects of a snake and a bull. That's when Hercules vanquished Achelous by tearing off one of his horns. The latter relinquished his right to marry Deianira in favour of Hercules.

This episode was known in medieval times from Servius' *In Vergilii Aeneidem commentarii*, then popularized thanks to Boethius' *De consolatione philosophiae* and the three Vatican Mythographers<sup>4</sup>. Among all the classical poets that inspired artists and scholars during the Middle Ages, Ovid ranked first. The three episodes in Hercules' life were retained in the famous medieval adaptation of the *Metamorphoses* dating from the early fourteenth century, the *Ovide moralisé* in verse<sup>5</sup>. The *Ovide moralisé* follows the content of the *Metamorphoses* quite closely, but the author adds moral, historical, allegorical commentaries, as well as entirely new episodes, from a Christian perspective. This Christian dimension regarding Hercules was already tangible in Boethius' *Consolatio* and also Fulgentius's *Mythologiae*, but it is a constant element in the *Ovide moralisé*.

Indeed, numerous parallels are drawn between Hercules and Christ: the fable of Hercules with the centaur Nessus represents «God, le biau combateour / Et le glorieus vainqueur» (the handsome fighter / And the glorious victor) who triumphs over the Devil, and the trials undergone by the hero are assimilated to Christ's earthly tribulations<sup>6</sup>. The same process is found in the *Ovide moralisé* in prose and Pierre Bersuire's *Ovidius moralizatus*:

Sed pro certo Hercules, id est Christus, per incarnationem veniens ipsam liberavit et equos veloces et candidos, id est viros fideles et innocentes et iustos, pro salario inde speravit. Sed quia Troia, id est mundus, ipsos reddere renuit, ideo finaliter iste Hercules Christus secundo veniet et ipsam in iudicio destruet et totaliter dissipabit<sup>7</sup>.

But, we know that Hercules, that is to say Christ, through the incarnation, freed her and expected as a reward to receive fast white horses, that is to say faithful, innocent and just men. But since Troy that is to say the world, refused to pay up, this Hercules Christ returns a second time, and in the last judgment destroys it and annihilates it entirely.

<sup>4</sup> For Servius and Hercules, see Lafond 2016. Boethius is the first to add the episode to his list of the *Twelve Labours* (*De Consolatione*, IV, 7, 13-35): «fronte turpatus Achelous amnis / ora demersit pudibunda ripis» («Achelous, his brow disgraced / hid his shamed face in his river-bed»). For Boethius, see Courcelle 1967. On the transmission of the Hercules myth to the Medieval period, see Jung 2002.

<sup>5</sup> *Ovide moralisé*, edited by De Boer 1915-1936. On the enthusiasm for Ovid in the Middle Ages, see especially Demats 1973, pp. 61-177; Coulson, Roy 2000; Possamai-Pérez 2006; Harf-Lancner *et al.* 2009; Clark *et al.* 2011; Biancardi *et al.* 2018, pp. 259-285.

<sup>6</sup> *Ovide moralisé*, book IX, v. 475-476.

<sup>7</sup> Berchorius, edited by Engels 1962, p. 159.



The Christian tradition considered Hercules to be a *typus Christi*, a model of the faithful Christian's struggle against evil. Also associated to *Fortitudo*, he was considered since medieval period as a model of 'active' Virtue; which consisted of courage, intrepid acts and erudition<sup>8</sup>.

The *Ovide moralisé* had an enormous impact on the French and Netherlandish literary and artistic works dedicated to the figure of Hercules from the fifteenth century onwards, especially on the writings of Christine de Pizan or Raoul Lefèvre<sup>9</sup>. Lefèvre increased interest in Hercules because of his role in the story of Troy. In his *Recueil des histoires de Troie*, Lefèvre uses the Ovidian fable to tell the story of the fight between Hercules and Achelous, like Boccaccio in his *Genealogia deorum gentilium*<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, he feels the need to report the opinion of 'poets' on this subject, which is justified given Ovid's notoriety in the end of the fifteenth century:

Les poetes escrivans celle conqueste que fist hercules sur achelous, faindent que achelous se combatit premier en guise de homme et quil fut vaincu. Apres quil se mua en guise de serpent, cest a entendre en subtilite et en malice comme il fist en assaillant hercules de nuyt. Finalement et quil le combatit en guise de thoreau et que hercules luy rompit une corne entendants que au derrenier achelous fut fier comme ung thoreau, car il mouroit dorgueil quant il fut prins et que hercules luy rompit une corne cest adire son royaulme quil rompit et destruisit<sup>11</sup>.

Poets evoke how Hercules subjected Achelous. They say that Achelous fought first as a man and was defeated. Then he turned into a snake, that is to say, into subtlety and mischief, and attacked Hercules during the night. Finally, he fought him as a bull, and Hercules snapped off a horn, Achelous being proud as a bull, for he was full of pride when he was caught. Hercules finally broke off one of his horns, that is to say, his kingdom which he broke and destroyed.

A careful examination of the use of Ovid's texts in Lefèvre's *Recueil* is quite revealing because it inspired many works of art until the end of the sixteenth century, among which Netherlandish tapestries<sup>12</sup>. Interestingly, the form taken

<sup>8</sup> See Ettliger 1972, pp. 119-142; Allan, Anagnostou-Laoutides, Stafford 2020.

<sup>9</sup> For the impact of the *Ovide moralisé* on Christine de Pizan, see Dulac 2002. For Lefèvre, see Jung 1966.

<sup>10</sup> It is the ninth of the thirty-one *Labours* of Hercules described by Boccaccio («Nono Acheloum superavit, cuius facti fabula ubi supra de Acheloo. De quo Ovidius: Vosne, manus, validi pressistis cornua tauri?»), see Boccaccio, edited by Romano 1951, Liber XIII, pp. 632-638. For Lefèvre, see the chapter entitled «Comment hercules senamoura de dyanira. Et comment achelous et hercules eulrent bataille lung contre laultre et fut achelous vaincu' / 'Comme[n]t hercules mist a oultranche le roy achelous. Et comment il espousa deyanira» («How Hercules fell in love with Dejanira. And how Achelous fought Hercules and was vanquished' / 'How Hercules submitted King Achelous and married Dejanira»). Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 22552, fol. 151v-157v.

<sup>11</sup> Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 22552, fol. 157v.

<sup>12</sup> Although the title relates to the Trojan cycle, Le Fèvre gives an important place to Hercules. This book, in three volumes, was a real best-seller: there are no fewer than twenty man-

by Achelous is found both in the illustrations of the *Recueil* and the survival tapestries, as explained below.

### 3. *The Labours of Hercules in the visual arts*

Ancient writers never agreed on the exact number of labours and also contradicted each other regarding their order<sup>13</sup>. They had, however, established a list of twelve labours, which was never reproduced as such in the visual arts during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Here the importance of Boethius' *Consolatio* and Boccaccio's *Genealogia* must be emphasized<sup>14</sup>. Since the appearance of Boethius' *Consolatio*, the episode of the fight of Hercules against Achelous is part of the cycles of the Labours of Hercules in various artistic media.

In the arts, only a handful of projects shows a very clear intention to depict the number of twelve. Few rooms can accommodate twelve large tapestries, while for frescoes, for instance, the Labours usually occupy friezes, or spaces requiring little space, which allows artists to represent twelve Labours – but often more. For the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, only fifteen cycles are preserved outside the tapestry medium; some of the best-preserved examples come from Italian peninsula (e.g. frescoes of the Palazzo Paradiso in Ferrara, or the Castello di Bracciano near Rome). The difficulty of identifying other achievements lies in the preservation of the latter. Actually, the most popular Labours cycles are probably tapestry series, for which we can count around one hundred preserved pieces and more than thousand inscriptions in princely inventories<sup>15</sup>.

The tapestries, conceived as series, are fundamentally linked to the daily life of the rulers<sup>16</sup>. Its primary function is to decorate a wall, as a fresco, but also to preserve from the cold. They had the advantage of being portable; an essential factor for princely courts until the end of the century. It is undoubtedly the most expensive work of art in an interior decoration, far beyond painting.

uscripts and a dozen printed versions preserved! The *Recueil* was further 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*). For the arts and tapestry medium, see Laruelle 2019 and 2020a.

<sup>13</sup> Stafford 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Boethius established a list of twelve labours (book 4, 7.13-35) that replaces five of the canonical labours (Geryon, the Augean stables, the Amazons, the bull and the Cerynian hind) with other exploits previously considered to be secondary (Achelous, Antaeus, Cacus, the centaurs and Hercules carrying the heavens).

<sup>15</sup> Laruelle 2019.

<sup>16</sup> See Campbell 2002.

Tapestries are not just decorative pieces, they are used for political purposes. Many rulers have used woven narratives to increase their prestige, spreading the image of a courtly prince, holder of chivalrous virtues, defender of the Christian faith and fighting his enemies. It is also one of the most prominent diplomatic gifts. This support is therefore a privileged observatory to deepen the reflection on the signification of the Herculean figure for the princes in the Renaissance.

The goal was not to slavishly imitate ancient works: *Labours* were specifically chosen by the authors of the cycles. The selection for tapestry series is probably more important than for another artistic media, for which it was easier – often cheaper – to retain many details of the life of Hercules and translate them into images. Some of the *Labours* are essential and part of the demi-god's identity, while others appear more curious.

During the second half of the fifteenth century until the first decades of the sixteenth century, the tapestry series present not the canonical *Labours*, but some extremely precise and complex subjects of the life of the hero, from birth to death; a number of episodes are related to the story of Troy, his adventures with Theseus, the Amazons or his fight against the tyrant Busiris. From 1530, several themes are privileged, and they become essential for the identity of the hero until the end of the century. Nine subjects form the nucleus of woven cycles: the battles of Hercules against the Nemean Lion, Antaeus, the Lernean Hydra, Cacus, the Centaurs, Cerberus, the Stymphalian Birds, Diomedes, and Achelous. Only the first six are common to all artistic media cycles, especially paintings and prints. The tapestry medium offers a great diversity and richness in the choice of subjects.

#### 4. *The peculiarity of the Netherlandish tapestries*

The scene of *Hercules fighting Achelous* (fig. 1) has often been interpreted as Hercules fighting the Minotaur, or even the Cretan Bull<sup>17</sup>. The reason for this misinterpretation may be due to the very unusual form taken by Achelous: the river-god is represented with a human body surmounted by a bull's head.

The oldest mention of the fight of Hercules against Achelous in the art of tapestry dates back to the inventory of the tapestries belonging to Queen Isabella the Catholic drawn up in Segovia in November 1503: «Otro paño de la dicha ystoria de Hercoles en que esta peleando Hercoles con vna bestia e con vn toro y esta encima del toro vnas letras que dizen arquelaus e otras muchas figuras» (Another piece of the said Story of Hercules in which Hercules is

<sup>17</sup> See Junquera 1974; Junquera, Herrero Carretero 1986, series 23; Morte Garcia 2012.

fighting a beast and a bull, there are letters on the bull that say Achelöus and many other figures)<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, on the fifth piece of the series, which included six pieces in total, Hercules fought against a bull, with an inscription mentioning Achelous. The rest of the description is unfortunately laconic.

Only five tapestries on this subject are preserved today. Among all the editions woven on the theme of Hercules in the Renaissance, the most famous one was the series acquired by Mary of Hungary in 1535 from the Brussels workshop Dermoyen<sup>19</sup>. This set is the first documented purchase of the regent of the former Netherlands, amateur and fervent collector of tapestries<sup>20</sup>. Woven from wool and silk, the pieces originally illustrated twelve of the ancient hero's labours. Only six subjects are known to us: Hercules fighting the Stymphalian Birds, Achelous (fig. 1), Diomedes, Antaeus, the dragon Ladon in the garden of the Hesperides, and finally his fight with Cerberus.

Without neglecting the Italian style of these pieces, a single workshop specializing in the production of preliminary drawings was taken into account by scholars, as it was predominant at the time: that of Bernaert van Orley<sup>21</sup>. Van Orley ran a leading workshop in the design of tapestry cartoons in Brussels during the 1520s and 1530s<sup>22</sup>. The careful examination of a drawing which I have recently discovered supports this hypothesis [fig. 5]<sup>23</sup>. It shows the struggle between Hercules and Achelous and reproduces the identical pose of both protagonists. The drawing is unsigned, undated and attributed until now to Martin van Valckenborgh. I propose to reassign it to Van Orley's workshop.

Achelous (fig. 1) is represented with a human body surmounted by a bull's head. This peculiarity is found on all the preserved tapestries. Indeed, the river-god appears in this form in one edition derived from Mary of Hungary's series (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), as well as on an isolated piece woven in Brussels preserved at the University of Zaragoza, and finally on an unpublished fragment without borders in a private collection (fig. 6)<sup>24</sup>. Only

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ferrandis 1943, pp. 140-141. One should note that the choice of describing tapestries in an inventory is very rare because inventories do not generally contain information on the contents.

<sup>19</sup> Patrimonio Nacional, series 23 (Madrid, Palacio Real, Real Armeria). See Junquera 1974; Junquera, Herrero Carretero, 1986, pp. 155-162; Laruelle 2020b.

<sup>20</sup> On the collections of Mary of Hungary, one of the richest ensembles of the tapestry medium during the first half of the sixteenth century, see Campbell 2002, pp. 267-270; Buchanan 2015; Laruelle 2020b.

<sup>21</sup> Junquera 1974; Campbell 2007, p. 312.

<sup>22</sup> On Bernaert van Orley and the tapestry medium, see Bücken, De Meûter 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, RF 38379. It may be a drawing made for the numerous re-editions of Mary of Hungary's series. It should be noted however that it is much closer to the Madrid tapestry than subsequent re-editions. See Laruelle 2020b.

<sup>24</sup> Among the re-editions, none is extant in twelve panels. The Oudenaarde series in eight pieces, preserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (inv. KK\_T\_CI\_1-9), is the most

the tapestry from the thirteen-piece set of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria (ca. 1565) escapes this rule, since the composition of this piece derives directly from Frans Floris' engraving (fig. 3)<sup>25</sup>.

On Mary of Hungary's tapestry and derived editions, Hercules fights Achelous at the centre of the composition in the presence of one of the hero's companions. Hercules controls the river-god with his right hand and holds a horn in his left hand. The melee in the background corresponds to the defeat of Achelous' army before the final combat between the two protagonists.<sup>26</sup> The piece preserved in Zaragoza shows Hercules' struggle in a vast landscape, always under the watchful eyes of his companion. The artist did not choose to follow the model used for Mary of Hungary's series. The style and borders evoke the Brussels production of the years 1530-1550. As for the fragment, it presents a more detailed scene of the theme since we find a snake at Hercules' companion's feet, as well as the typical figure of a river-god in the background (fig. 6).

### 5. *The different forms of Achelous and the significance*

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the fight between Hercules and Achelous was seldom illustrated, except in manuscripts and printed books. Achelous' various metamorphoses were usually not represented. In the *Recueil des Histoires de Troie*, for instance, the river-god appears in human form<sup>27</sup>.

In the sixteenth century, the theme gained momentum and its iconography diversified<sup>28</sup>. Achelous regularly took the form of a bull. In Rosso's version, spread by an engraving by Jacopo Caraglio, Hercules submits an ox, from which he tears off a horn, in the presence of three naiads [fig. 2]. The same formula was used by Frans Floris in his famous series of *Twelve Labours*, engraved by Cornelis Cort (fig. 3).

It is not always easy to distinguish the fight of Hercules and Achelous transformed into a bull from the episode of Hercules wrestling with the Cretan bull in the visual arts<sup>29</sup>. The episode of the Cretan bull is part of the Canonical

complete set. For an overview, see Laruelle 2020a, p. 108. For the tapestry preserved in the University of Zaragoza (inv. E-28), see Morte Garcia 2012, pp. 51-55. As to the fragment, it was last seen in 2015 on sale at Galerie Deroyan, Paris.

<sup>25</sup> Buchanan 1994, pp. 37-62.

<sup>26</sup> An episode fully described by Raoul Lefèvre, see Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 22552, fol. 155r-156r.

<sup>27</sup> See Paris, BnF, ms. fr. 22552, fol. 155v.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview, see Bull 2006, pp. 112-114.

<sup>29</sup> See, especially, the bull depicted in the fifteenth century frescoes at the Castello Odescalchi di Bracciano: it is a representation of Achelous because Hercules tears one of his horns. The way of representing this fight is similar here to the ancient reliefs of *Mithra tauroctone*. On the

Labours in Antiquity<sup>30</sup>. According to myth a miraculous bull rose from the sea, on the same day Minos had promised to make a sacrifice to Neptune. But Minos, witnessing the beauty of the bull, spared it, keeping it among his flocks, and sacrificed another, a less precious one, to Neptune. The latter took his revenge by making the animal furious. This is the animal Eurystheus instructed Hercules to bring him alive. Hercules captured it on his own before returning to Greece. The subject was popular in Antiquity but much less so in the Renaissance.

In his 1550 print, Heinrich Aldegrever shows Achelous in human form in the foreground (fig. 4). The presence of the dragon snake, lying in the background, as well as the inscription, ensures the spectator does not confuse this scene with the episode of Hercules fighting the giant Antaeus. Indeed, Hercules' way of carrying his opponent and smothering him in the air is much more common with the latter<sup>31</sup>.

The third scheme consisted in representing each of the three metamorphoses. Since the publication of the *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare* in 1497, it is common in illustrated prints of the *Metamorphoses*, where each fight of Hercules was engraved individually<sup>32</sup>. This formula is also found, for instance, on a woodcut dated 1506 and executed by the Venetian Giovanni Andrea Vavassore. The series of Hercules' *Twelve Labours* by Vavassore is associated with Italian octaves, which proved that Vavassore knew the classical texts, in particular Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Diodorus Siculus' *Historical Library*<sup>33</sup>. The series was very successful in Europe throughout the century. The impact of Vavassore is still seen on a large number of works preserved today: such as the medallions produced by Albrecht Dürer's workshop (lost today), the carved frieze of the castle of Vélez Blanco in Spain, or the carved medallions executed by Thomas Hering in Landshut<sup>34</sup>.

frescoes, see Siligato 1981. The Cretan bull is found however on friezes inspired from sarcophagi, for example on the tapestry of the *Triumph of Hercules* conceived initially for Pope Leo X. See Karafel 2016, p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> See Stafford 2012, p. 39 and pp. 74-76. In the visual arts of Antiquity, Achelous is commonly represented as having the body of a bull and a man's head with bull's horns.

<sup>31</sup> A feat that became a canonical labour after Boethius' *Consolatio*. Antaeus was physically invincible as long as he remained in contact with the Earth, his mother, for she constantly renewed his strength. This forced Hercules, challenged to fight with his bare hands, to defeat him by killing him while holding him up in the air. In the Renaissance, the hero's duel with Antaeus is one of his best-known feats. See especially Simons 2008.

<sup>32</sup> *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare*, translated by Giovanni Bonsignori, Venice, 1497 (Paris, BnF, Rés. G-Yc-439, fol. 151). See Capriotti 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Poggio had already produced a Latin translation of Diodorus Siculus' *Historical Library* in the second half of the fifteenth century. See Cohen-Skalli, Marcotte 2015. For Vavassore's cycle, see Lenz 1924.

<sup>34</sup> On Dürer's *Twelve Labours* series, see Pauli 1908. For Vélez Blanco, see especially Scaglia 2000. For Landshut, see Arnold 1997.

The last iconographic type concerns the tapestry medium, and not the other artistic media. Indeed, for all the tapestries, we can match the figure of Achelous – with a human body and a bull’s head – with the engraved illustration of the *Ovide moralisé en prose* compiled and printed by Colard Mansion in Bruges in 1484 (fig. 7)<sup>35</sup>. This original formula was used a few years later, in Antoine Vérard’s *Bible des poètes*, published in 1493, to open «Ovid’s Ninth Book» (fig. 8), and later still in French editions of Boccaccio’s *Genealogia deorum gentilium*<sup>36</sup>. Thanks to these printed works, the battle scene becomes more inventive: Achelous is now an armed warrior with a bull’s head, and Hercules stands over him in triumph. The fight is witness by three spectators (Deianira, King Oeneus and his wife) standing in front of a castle.

Antoine Vérard was considerably indebted to Mansion’s work. His *Bible des poètes*, printed in Paris in 1493, corresponds to the *Ovide moralisé*’s content. However, from a technical point of view, Vérard’s wood engravings are a far more accomplished work. The aspect of the figures had changed: these were no longer the stylized characters of 1484. The drawing was produced by a more experienced hand. This second version will be the one used in the French translations of the Boccaccian compendium<sup>37</sup>.

Just like the many versions of the *Ovide moralisé* that emerged during the Middle Ages, Mansion offered a vernacular translation of the *Metamorphoses* adapting the Ovidian content to the realities of a Christian world<sup>38</sup>. In his attempt to reveal the meaning of Ovid’s stories, he offered to reveal the true meaning of the various metamorphoses. His work enabled Christian readers to «discover, under the appearance of imposture and sacrilege, an exact and holy doctrine»<sup>39</sup>. The goal of the compiler was also educational and didactic. The structure of each fable was very clear: after exposing the fable, he offered his readers a historical interpretation (*historial*), and then a moral meaning.

His translation was rewriting myth, as is clear from the three fables in the story of Hercules. The fable of Achelous illustrated the struggle between

<sup>35</sup> *Ovide moralisé*, Bruges, Colard Mansion, 1484 (Bruges, Openbare Bibliotheek Brugge, ms 3877, fol. 219r).

<sup>36</sup> *La Bible des Poètes*, Paris, Antoine Vérard, 1493 (Paris, BnF, Livres rares, VELINS-560, fol. 237). Indeed, Boccaccio’s thirteenth book begins with an identical engraving from 1498 (Boccace, *De la généalogie des dieux*, Paris, Antoine Vérard, 1498-1499. Paris, BnF, RES-J-845, fol. 212) until 1531 (Boc[c]ace, *De la généalogie des dieux*, Paris, Philippe le Noir, 1531. Paris, BnF, RES-J-1833, fol. 216).

<sup>37</sup> But not in *Le Grant Olympe des histoires poëtiques du prince des poètes Ovide Naso en sa Methamorphose*, Lyon, R. Morin, 1532, fol. 302. The text is derived from Vérard’s *Bible des poètes*, but the illustration of Achelous is the same that we found in *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare* translated by Giovanni Bonsignori (see n. 22).

<sup>38</sup> See especially Demats 1973; Moss 1982; Amielle 1995; Moisan, Vervacke 2003; Viel 2004, pp. 25-44; Cerrito 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Demats 1973, p. 11.

Christ and the Devil. Deianira was in fact Eve («deyanira [...] puet ester e[n] tendue dame qui est fille de dieu le pere» / «Deianira [...] should be understood as the lady who was the daughter of God the Father»), tempted by the devil-Achelous («laquele par le pechie dadam nostre premier pere, et par les vicieuses plaisances mises deuant elle mises par achelon le cornu, qui est a entendre le dyable denfer»/ «who by the sin of Adam, our first father, and by the vicious pleasures placed before her by Achelous the horned, who is in fact hell's devil»). Hercules-Christ («hercules cest adire jhesucrist le filz de dieu nostre redempteur»/ «Hercules, that is to say, Jesus Christ the Son of God, our Redeemer») came to fight the devil-Achelous in this world. The devil took various fallacious forms, snake and bull, to deceive him, but Hercules-Christ defeated him and broke his horns, thus depriving him of his power. Hercules-Christ broke into hell and brought back the righteous souls. The redeemer finally broke the horns of the master of sinners for the benefit of the righteous. The chosen illustration of Hercules breaking off Achelous' horn depicted in the book, and after in the tapestry medium, is significative. The crucial scene is carefully selected to express the Christian ideology.

Thus, Mansion revealed the hidden meaning of the Ovidian fable. The other two fables regarding Hercules (Nessus; Death of Hercules) – not illustrated – served more as *exempla* to Christians, i.e. they constituted a model of what could happen to mortals who gave into deadly sins, namely, Lust with regard to the fable of the centaur Nessus. The Death of Hercules evoked the efforts of the human soul to attain Immortality<sup>40</sup>. The virtuous were invited to overcome concupiscence through a contemplative life in order to be admitted in Heaven<sup>41</sup>. At the end of the book section, the narrator summarised the various points and added a list of Hercules' *Labours*. More broadly, the *Labours of Hercules* were purposefully linked to the challenges faced by Christian souls in order to attain salvation, and can be interpreted as symbols of the recipient's devotion to religion.

During the first half of the sixteenth century, the editions of the *Ovide moralisé*, the *Bible des poètes* and Boccaccio's *Genealogia* in French, are still printed in France and the Low Countries. This contributed to disseminate the motif, both literary and visual. The use of many literary references throughout these books (e.g. to Servius, Fulgentius the Mythograph, or Rabanus Maurus) suggests that those were intended for literate and knowledgeable readers.

<sup>40</sup> An idea which was first expressed by Boethius in his *Consolatio* (IV, 7, 32-33). He explained that the labours earned the hero both Heaven and Immortality, and recommended that readers consider him a model: «Ite nunc, fortes, ubi celsa magni ducit exempli via» («And now, courage, go where the noble path leads to this great example»).

<sup>41</sup> One should note that the themes of Nessus and the Death of Hercules were used together at various times in the sixteenth century, especially on Leo X's tapestry series of the *Grotesques*, woven before 1521, to illustrate the theme of Death and Resurrection. See Karafel 2016, p. 115.



Other elements tend to show that the authors' wished to address the princes directly<sup>42</sup>.

It is therefore not surprising to find the Ovidian representation of *Hercules fighting Achelous*, and its multiple underlying meaning, only on tapestries at the end of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. The programs of these gigantic wall pieces, intended for princes and sovereigns, like Mary of Hungary, were generally elaborated by the well-educated entourage, humanists and intellectuals, that surrounded these rulers. For the elite audience, Hercules represented clearly a virtuous stronghold erected against pride and presumptuousness, since he fights sins or vices, but also a paragon of the qualities of the Christian prince who knew how to act and fight against wrongdoings... before reaching an immortal glory. The authors of the programs and the artists found the perfect illustration of this fight in Ovid. The tapestry series could thus serve as an *exemplum virtutis*, in accordance with the tradition of the mirror for princes.

These series were intended to function as a sophisticated celebration of princes' Christian virtues in terms of classical models. Hercules was included because of parallels drawn by contemporary commentators between the mythic hero and the rulers. The patron has commissioned a design that appealed to him for reasons of individual taste and interest, but also demonstrative and explicitly propagandistic: the patron paraded role models and concepts with which he or she wished to be allied. Like Hercules, many other figures from classical history and medieval mythology provided resonant role models for tapestry. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that most themes were of a type that would appeal to a broad range of patrons (and could be customized, for instance, by the inclusion of armorial borders).

This brief tour of the Ovidian editions, artworks and tapestries on this theme demonstrates the wide variety of treatment experienced by the figures of Hercules and Achelous between 1450 and 1600. The Flemish tapestries of this period closely followed the formula imagined by the artists in Colard Mansion and Antoine Vérard's *oeuvres*. They bequeathed to subsequent generations of artists an illustrated model of this fable adapted to Christian beliefs and intended for princes.

<sup>42</sup> «pour gouverner sagement, il faut pratiquer la vertu du juste milieu; savoir tempérer de mansuétude la sévérité parfois nécessaire» («to govern wisely, one must find the right balance in ones' actions, to know how to temper the necessity of severity with benevolence»), see Viel 2004, p. 42.

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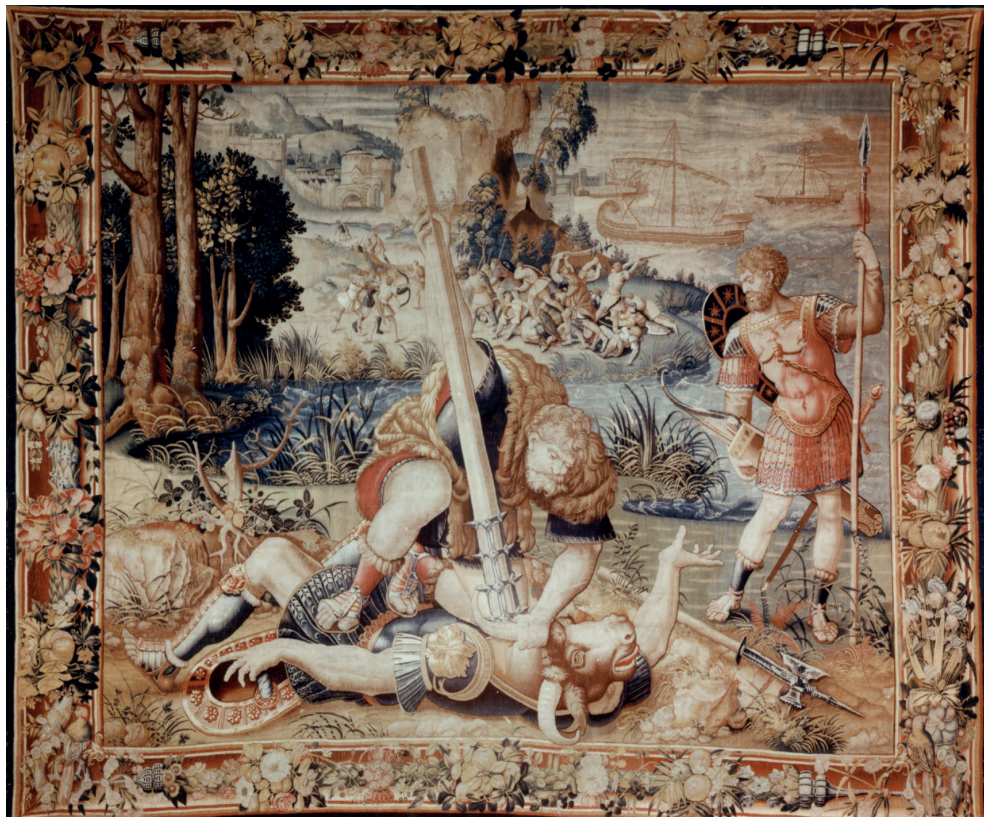
*Appendix*

Fig. 1. *Hercules fighting Achelous*. Tapestry woven in the workshop of Willem Dermoyen, Brussels, ca. 1535. Wool and silk, 361×417 cm. Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional, series 23. Image © Patrimonio Nacional



Fig. 2. Jacopo Caraglio, *Hercules fighting Achelous* (ca. 1526-1527). Engraving, 21×18 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (49.50.208). Image © The MET / Public Domain



Fig. 3. Cornelis Cort (after Frans Floris), *Hercules fighting Achelous* (1563). Engraving, 23×29 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (RP-P-H-H-1139). Image © Rijksmuseum / Public Domain



Fig. 4. Heinrich Aldegrever, *Hercules fighting Achelous* (1550). Engraving, 11x7 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (17.37.127). Image © The MET / Public Domain





Fig. 5. Unknown designer, workshop of Bernaert van Orley (?), *Hercules fighting Achelous* (ca. 1535). Pen and brown ink, with white highlights on paper, 23,4×36,3 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Image © RMN, Paris



Fig. 6. *Hercules fighting Achelous*. Tapestry fragment woven in Flemish workshop, ca. 1540-1550. Wool and silk, 308×347 cm. Unknown location. Image © Public Domain



Fig. 7. *Ovide moralisé*, Bruges, Colard Mansion, 1484. Bruges, Openbare Bibliotheek Brugge, ms 3877, fol. 219r. Image © OBB – Bruges / Public Domain



Fig. 8. *La Bible des Poètes*, Paris, Antoine Vérard, 1493. Paris, BnF, Livres rares, VE-LINS-560, fol. 237. Image © BnF

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