BIÈVRE-PERRIN, FABIEN

(GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG/AIX-MARSEILLE UNIVERSITÉ -
LABEXMED, USR 3155 IRAA)

The Different Faces of the Lernaean Hydra in Contemporary Pop Culture: From Cinema to Videogames,

KEYWORDS

Videogames, Cinema, Hydra, Herakles, Pop culture

ABSTRACT

The Lernaean Hydra is one of the most famous ancient monsters. As Herakles' opponent in his second labour, it has known a great success through reception since Antiquity. Through the centuries, the monster has been through many evolutions: it has grown horns and legs, sometimes it even breathes fire! In this article, we will see how this mythological figure manifests itself in recent pop culture, especially in the movies and video games, as well as how it has evolved.

Fabien Bièvre-Perrin

THE HYDRA is one of the prominent monsters within the most taught and represented Greek myths, the labours of Herakles. The Lernaean Hydra has enjoyed popular fame through the story's recounting since Antiquity. This multi-headed monster is the source of a great variety of citations, from politics to literature and to all kinds of media productions. In this article, we will see how this mythological figure manifests itself in recent popular culture through movies and video games.

1. The Original Hydra

In Greek and Roman myths, the Hydra ("water snake") is a serpentine water monster, whose lair is the lake of Lerna, in Argolid, an entry to the Underworld. Its parents are Typhon and Echidna, two noxious creatures, who bequeathed to their offspring their serpentine nature. The Hydra possessed many heads; the number differs from one source to another. Seven seems to be the most popular number. Soon, the sto-rytellers made the monster evolve, enabling it to regenerate twice as many heads as lost.

Herakles is confronted with this creature during the second of his labours. To kill it, he asks his cousin Iolaos for help. Together they cut off all the heads and burn the wounds in order to prevent the heads from growing back. In some versions, Herakles cut off the one immortal head with a sword given to him by Athena and placed it under a rock. He then dipped his arrows in the monster's poisonous blood.

In Antiquity, the Hydra is mostly depicted as an opponent to Herakles, in a position state of attack or defence (Fig. 1). It is usually the fight itself that is represented, even if most of the time, the hero is already shown winning over the monster. His arm is raised, a weapon in his hand, ready to strike a fatal blow. In both Greek vases and Roman mosaics, the Hydra is either represented as a kind of snake-knot with several heads, but only one tail, or as a multi-headed snake with a big tail. During the Roman period, Iolaos has a tendency to disappear from the picture. The number of heads varies a lot, there seems to be no rule, but they often bear a crest with an unclear origin. The size of the head varies, but it occupies similar scales to the hero. The artists try, each in their own way, to give the idea of a body entirely covered with scales, necessarily widened according to the scales of the depiction. When considering bronze sculptures, the monster's appearance is more naturalistic: the Herculaneum example is of a snake similar in size to a python, it is wrapped around a trunk, its five heads moving around

aggressively. In some representations, we can see the large crab which Hera sent, to distract Herakles, hoping to kill him. Despite this, the hero crushed the crab with his feet.

2. The Contemporary Hydra

Our contemporary Hydra which haunts the marshes, attacks Heracles, and other related heroes has little to do with the original mythological monster. First of all, it has migrated to various countries and environments, sometimes far from water. It also grew considerably in size, often becoming gigantic. It acquired legs and dragon-like ears/horns which appeared to crown its head(s). In some cases, it even breathes fire. This legged-Hydra has proliferated in the visual arts, gradually becoming dominant, without ever totally eradicating its predecessor.[1] It seems less furtive and agile. It has become unbalanced, as its change in size implies. It is scarcely larger than a big serpent in antiquity, yet it became a progressively gigantic creature, constituting a brutally impressive "end-of-level Boss" in popular computer games and film. How does one go from a historical snake with many heads to such a hybridised modern chimera?

The following table summarizes some of the Hydra's characteristics in some outstanding movies, peplums, superhero, fantasy films,[2] and video games. Many examples exist in popular media such as comics and tabletop role-playing games.[3] Thus, this essay only deals with a small part of the corpus and a more systematic and thorough approch has to be done.

Movies and Television	Date	Head(s) Type	Legs	Breathing fire	Gigantism
Les Douze Travaux d'Hercule / Hercules and the Big Stick (Émile Cohl)	1910	Birds and fish (?)	X		

---

[1] In biology it's called an intraguild predator.

[2] On the relationship between peplum and other films, including fantasy films, see Delon (2014).

[3] In peplums, Hervé Dumont lists only two occurrences before 2009, so my list must be almost exhaustive – Dumont (2009) 164, 168. See also Solomon (2001) 6, 102, 114-115, 123-124, 297.

	Date	Head(s) Type	Legs	Breathing fire	Gigantism
Gli amori di Ercole (Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia)	1960	Dragon	X		X
Jason and the Argonauts (Don Chaffey)	1963	Dragon			X
Hercules: The Legendary Journey	1994	Dragon	X	X	X
Hercules (Disney)	1997	Dragon	X		X
Hydra (Andrew Prendergast)	2009	Worm			X
Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief (Chris Columbus)	2010	Dragon	X	X	X
Marvel Movies	Since 2010	Octopus			
Hercules (Brett Ratner)	2014	Dragon			X
Videogames	**Date**	**Head(s) Type**	**Legs**	**Breathing fire**	**Gigantism**
Heroes of Might and Magic	Since 1986	Varies	Varies		X
Final Fantasy	Since 1987	Varies	Varies	Varies	
Age of Mythology	2002	Dinosaur	X		X
Titan's Quest	2006	Dragon	X	X	X
Pokémon (Hydreigon)	Since 2010	Dragon	X		X
Warriors Orochi 3	2011	Dragon		X	X
Dragon's Dogma	2012	Serpent			X
Kid Icarus Uprising	2012	Dragon			X

World of Warcraft	Since 2014	Dragon	X		X
Atlas	2018	Dragon	X	X	X

3. The Laws of Evolution

The first reinterpretation of the Hydra is seen at the end of the medieval age. There is evidence to suggest parallels from Graeco-Roman representations of the monster colliding with representations of dragons and biblical monsters, in particular the dragon of the Apocalypse.[4] Like the Hydra, this beast has regenerative abilities, (such as a mortal wound which heals itself), more than one head (usually seven, as in most recounting of the Hydra's depictions), and is emergent from the sea. But the dragon of the Apocalypse looks like a leopard, has the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion. Then, after a long absence, the Hydra makes a notable reoccurrence in the sixteenth century with new features including, various heads, two or four feet, (sometimes webbed, like an amphibian), it breathes fire and many more of the original features. Herakles often looks like Saint Michael or Saint George's slaying the dragon. The influence of Christian literature is clear and explains the popularity of the myth.[5] During the Renaissance, the rediscovery of ancient depictions of the Hydra restores a more traditional representation, but the influence of other monsters like the Chimera or ancient statues such as the Laocoön accelerates the iconographic diversification of the Hydra (Fig. 2). Later, the significant archaeological discoveries in Pompeii and Herculaneum in particular inspired artists to return to the antique models. We can think of Gustave Moreau's *Héraclès et l'hydre de Lerne* (1876, Fig. 3) or Rudolf Tegner's *Herakles and the Hydra* (beginning of the twentieth century). Iolaos is rarely represented helping Herakles.

Those last models seem to have inspired the serpentine Colchis dragon which Ray Harryhausen conceived for Jason and the Argonauts in 1963 (Fig. 4). His version of the monster could be interpreted as an animated evocation of the ancient paintings and their modern revivals with a touch of

---

[4] Revelation 11:7; 13:1-10 ; 17:7-18. Originally, the Hydra is not a Greek *drakōn* but a water snake – Ogden (2013) 28, 383 (Chap. 11: "The Birth of the Christian dragon").

[5] In Late Antiquity, Christian literature interpreted this episode as a precursor myth about the fight between good and evil, making Herakles a symbol of Christ – Eppinger 2015. The sixteenth century represents a kind of golden age for Herakles in France – Jung (1966) –, after a period of disinterest when physical strength is no longer glorified – Gaignebet (1975) 116–117.

medievalism as portrayed by the heads and the choice of colours. Except for the very kitsch Gli amori di Ercole, Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia in 1960, no peplum had depicted on film the multi-headed monster. However, Herakles and Maciste were confronted by lions, crocodiles, and even dinosaurs or vampires, yet no Hydra was present. With the Harryhausen model, the Hydra becomes a pop icon, even without the presence of Herakles. Its influence is perceivable in various peplums, cartoons, television series such as in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999).

With the innovations in video games and the transition to 3D during the 90's, as well as with the resurgence of popularity of peplums in the 2000's, creators made the Hydra a classic opponent in their scenarios and adapted it to their needs. Despite the influence of Harryhausen, the legged Hydra becomes the main artistic representation of the mon-ster. Is this a simple escalation in "monster design"? An attempt to create a new version to avoid accusations of plagiarism? A desire to renew the range of ancient monsters, or to take advantage of the possibilities offered by advancing technology?

The success of medieval fantasy and dragon movies at the beginning of the 21st century (Lord of the Rings, Eragon, Reign of Fire, Dungeons & Dragons...) is linked in no small part to advancing animation technology which reused the Hydra.

Concerning video games, it is also possible that the additions of legs to the monster made it easier to mobilise the creature, the movements of a snake previously made it too difficult to render. The fact that in 1997, the Disney's Hydra was the only character completely animated in CGI, (Computer-Generated Imagery), is particularly notable. It is note-worthy that a computer game was released along with the film.

Beside their monstrosity, the success of Hydra-like monsters is clearly linked to their ability to regenerate. It's one of the main "characteristics" listed for Hydras in video games and a graphic challenge opportunity in movies (but in some cases, the heads don't grow back, as in Kid Icarus Uprising, 2012). An interesting point is that the gamer would often anticipate the heads to grow back knowing the name of the creature or recognizing it from its appearance, unlike the movie heroes. Indeed, in the Disney movie or in the first Percy Jackson, the young heroes make the mistake of cutting off the heads of the chain, creating a gigantic monster. The Hydra is also probably popular because of its likeness to medieval dragons. It allows for a diversity in monsters' natures, it gives an ancient and aquatic counterpart

to their flying cous-ins. This characteristic is very useful in the scenarisation of a movie when the monster can hide in plain sight, rising from the waters by surprise, as shown in the Brett Ratner movie (Hercules 2014).

The Hydra also appears in a more subtle manner in popular culture. Indeed, the term is often used to refer to sprawling, secretive and dangerous organisations. The best example would be the terrorist organisation Hydra in the Marvel Universe. Its motto is a statement of resilience and growing strength: "If a head is cut off, two more shall take its place". The logo, however, is more evocative of an octopus than a Hydra. A probable reason for it would be that the octopus and the Hydra have both been used in propaganda and politics for the same reasons: to represent corruption, or a sly and erratic political enemy (Fig. 5; Fig. 6; Fig. 7).

4. Conclusions

The Lernaean Hydra is a key figure in classical themed movies and videogames. Its abilities and acquaintance with other popular monsters (dragons, Kraken, Chimera) made it a perfect opponent for heroes and gamers (who are often alone facing the beast, just as Iolaos disappeared from most representations). Unlike other monsters that can be the subject of some sympathy, Medusa can be seen as a victim for example,[6] the Hydra is always an incarnation of evil, probably because of the legacy of the beast of the Apocalypse. Its symbolism and political uses are also important in its contemporary reception. Hydras are perceived as malicious, vicious and unpredictable creatures.

It's the classical context or the onomastics that convey the Hydra its identity.[7] Multi-headed monsters in non-classical themed movies and video games are rarely Hydras, they're less maleficent, often abnormalities of Nature or the result of failed scientific experiments.[8] The gamer or the specta-

---

[6] See Cixous (1976) and its legacy in recent pop culture. Even Cerberus can be represented sympathetically (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 2001).

[7] Even in *Percy Jackson,* the Hydra is staged in an "ancient" location, the Nashville's Parthenon – Besnard (2017).

[8] The thriller *Hydra* directed by Andrew Prendergast in 2009 is a particular case as the movie has nothing to do with classics, except that the monster, awoken by an archaeologist, was sleeping since Antiquity.

tor identifies the Hydra by its ancient origins and its specificities, and associates it to a particular imaginary:[9] the monster is alien to our world, an absolute evil force, like an illness,[10] neither a curiosity of nature, nor a human error.[11] In all, the Hydra gives substance to what any hero must oppose, and therefore gives the possibility of overcoming it.

---

[9] It is the perfect horror monster as Mathias Clasen puts it in his article "Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories" – Clasen (2012) 224, 227.
[10] Hydra can be an allegory of cancer.
[11] It can also be seen as primordial – Hougron (2005).

Bibliography

Amandry (1944). – Pierre Amandry, 'Skyphos corinthien du Musée du Louvre', Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot 40 (1944) 23–52.

Benoit (2008). – Monique Benoit, 'Ilana Löwy L'emprise du genre. Masculinité, féminité, égalité. Paris, Éditions La Dispute, 2006, 277 p. [book recension]', Recherches féministes 21, 1 (2008) 189–193.

Besnard (2017). – Tiphaine-Annabelle Besnard, 'L'Athéna Parthénos américanisée : de la sculpture d'Alan LeQuire au décor du film Percy Jackson, le Voleur de foudre', in: Fabien Bièvre-Perrin (ed.), Antiquipop (Lyon 2017). Online: https://antiquipop.hypotheses.org/2559.

Carlà-Uhink & Freitag (2015). – Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Florian Freitag, 'Ancient Greek Culture and Myth in the Terra Mítica Theme Park', in: Classical Receptions Journal 7 (2015) 242–259

Carlà-Uhink & Freitag (2018). – Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Florian Freitag, '(Not so) Dangerous Journeys: The Ancient Mediterranean and Ancient Mythological Sea Travelers in European Theme Park Attractions', in: H. Kopp & C. Wendt (ed.), Thalassokratographie. Rezeption und Transformation antiker Seeherrschaft (Berlin 2018) 283–300.

Carlà-Uhink (2017). – Filippo Carlà-Uhink et al., ' (Alte) Geschichte in der Werbung: Berichte aus einem Heidelberger Seminar [Joey Rauschenberger] ', in: Thersites 6 (2017) 367–457. Online: http://www.thersites.uni-mainz.de/index.php/thr/article/view/73

Cixous (1976). – Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', Signs 1, 4 (1976, translation 1975) 875–893.

Clasen (2012). – Mathias Clasen, 'Monsters Evolve: A Biocultural Approach to Horror Stories', Review of General Psychology 16, 2 (2012) 222–229.

Cuvelier (2018). – Pierre Cuvelier, 'Le Choc des titans et ses répliques : diffusion et réappropriation ludique de nouveaux types figurés mythologiques dans les arts visuels', in: Fabien Bièvre-Perrin & Élise Pampanay, (ed.), Antiquipop : La référence à l'Antiquité dans la culture populaire contemporaine (Lyon 2018). Online: https://books.openedition.org/momeditions/3383

Delon (2014). – Gaspard Delon, 'Avatars du péplum ? Présences de l'Antiquité gréco-latine dans les genres cinématographiques du fantastique, de

la fantasy et de la science-fiction', in: Mélanie Bost Fievet & Sandra Provini (ed.), L'Antiquité dans l'imaginaire con-temporain. Fantasy, science-fiction, fantastique (Paris 2014) 65–79.

Dumont (2009). – Hervé Dumont, L'Antiquité au cinéma. Vérités, légendes et manipulations (Paris-Lausanne 2009).

Jung (1966). – Marc-René Jung, Hercule dans la littérature française du XVIè siècle : De l'Hercule courtois à l'Hercule baroque (Genève 1966).

El Kenz (1992). – David El Kenz, 'Le roi de France et le monstre dans les gravures : genèse et déclin politique d'une image aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles', Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps 28 (1992) 3-7.

Eppinger (2015). – Alexandra Eppinger, Herkules in der Spätantike (Wiesbaden 2015).

Gaignebet (1975). – Jean-Baptiste Gaignebet, 'Essai sur le cheminement d'Hercule au cours de l'Histoire de France', Provence historique 99 (1975) 111–124.

Harryhausen et Dalton (2008). – Ray Harryhausen & Tony Dalton, A Century of Model Animation. From Méliès to Aardman (New York 2008).

Hougron (2005). – Alexandre Hougron, 'La figure du monstre dans la littérature et au cinéma : monstre et intertextualité', La page des Lettres (2005). Online: https://lettres.ac-versailles.fr/spip.php?article28#s-References

Kerenyi (1959). – Karl Kerenyi, Asklepios, archetypal image of the physician's existence (New York 1959).

Kokkorou-Alevras (1990). – Georgia Kokkorou-Alevras, 'C. Herakles and the Lernaean Hydra (Labour III)', in: LIMC V, 1 (Bern 1990) 34–43.

Maréchalle (2018). – Stéphane Maréchalle, 'Portrait d'Henri IV en Hercule terrassant l'hydre de Lerne', Petite galerie ! (Paris 2018). Online: https://petitegalerie.louvre.fr/oeuvre/portrait-d%E2%80%99henri-iv-en-hercule-terrassant-l%E2%80%99hydre-de-lerne

Mailley-Von Arx (1982). – Marie-Christine Mailley-Von Arx, 'Art grec archaïque et rapport sociaux : pour une approche du fonctionnement de l'icône dans la société grecque archaïque', Dialogues d'histoire ancienne 8 (1982) 283–302.

Murphyao (2015). – Amanda Murphyao, 'The Many-Headed Hydra: Monstrous Representations of Canadian Confederation and the American Civil War in Cartoons, 1861-1867, This dissertation is going to be fun,

like dessert (Ottawa 2015). Online: https://dessertating.word-press.com/2015/04/16/Hydra/

Ogden (2013). – Daniel Ogden, Drakon: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds (Oxford 2013).

Solomon (2001). – Jon Solomon, The Ancient World in the Cinema (New Haven 2001). If added in footnote 13.

Shapiro (1990). – Harvey Alan Shapiro, 'Old and New Heroes: Narrative, Composition, and Subject in Attic Black-Figure', Classical Antiquity 9, 1 (1990) 114–148.

Ulrich (2010). – Stefan Ulrich, 'In der Hydra-Republik', Süddeutsche Zeitung (14/10/2010). Online: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/skandale-in-frankreich-in-der-Hydra-republik-1.999892

Venit (1989). – Marjorie Susan Venit, 'Herakles and the Hydra in Athens in the First Half of the Sixth Century B. C.', Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 58, 1 (1989) 99–113.

Wolff (2018). – Nadège Wolff, '« Kid Icarus » : un héros antique qui peine à prendre son envol ? Du rétrogaming au retour en fanfare dans les années 2000-2010', in: Fabien Bièvre-Perrin (ed.), Antiquipop (Lyon 2018). Online: https://antiquipop.hypotheses.org/3833.

Zavadski (2014). – Katie Zavadski, 'Putin's Birthday Present Is a Hercules-Themed Art Show About How Manly and Amazing He Is', Intelligencer (6/10/2014). Online: http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/10/putin-birthday-present-hercules-art-show.html
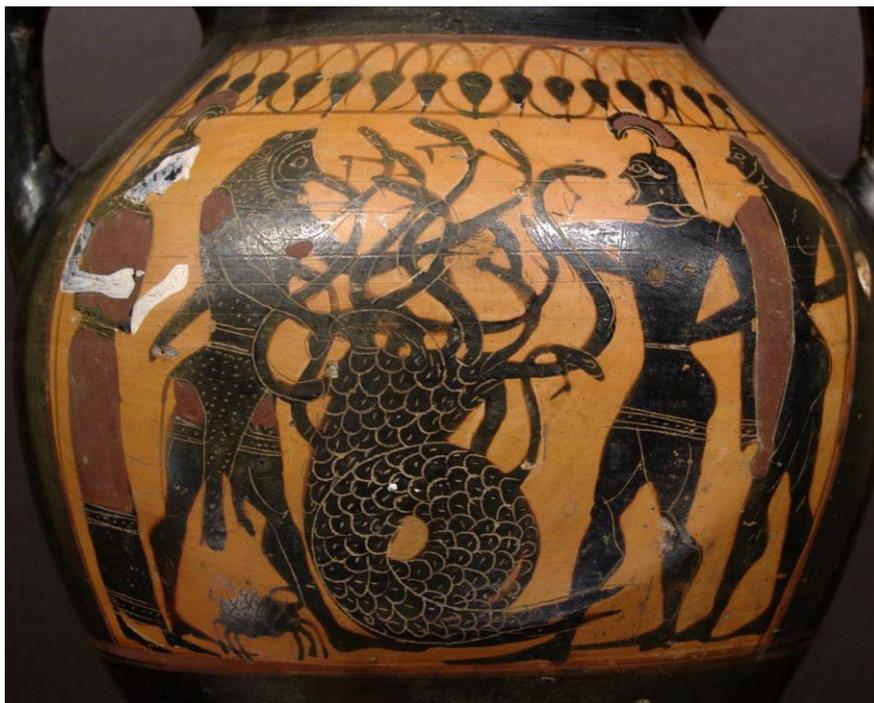
Figures

Fig. 1. Heracles and Iolaos fighting the Lernaean Hydra. Black figure amphora. Manner of the Princeton Painter (circa 540-530 BC). Musée du Louvre, Atlas database: entry 5795. Public Domain.

Fig. 2. Marco Marchetti from Faenza. Herakles and the Hydra from Lerna (1555-1556). Oil Painting on wood. Palazzo Vecchio Museum. Public Domain.
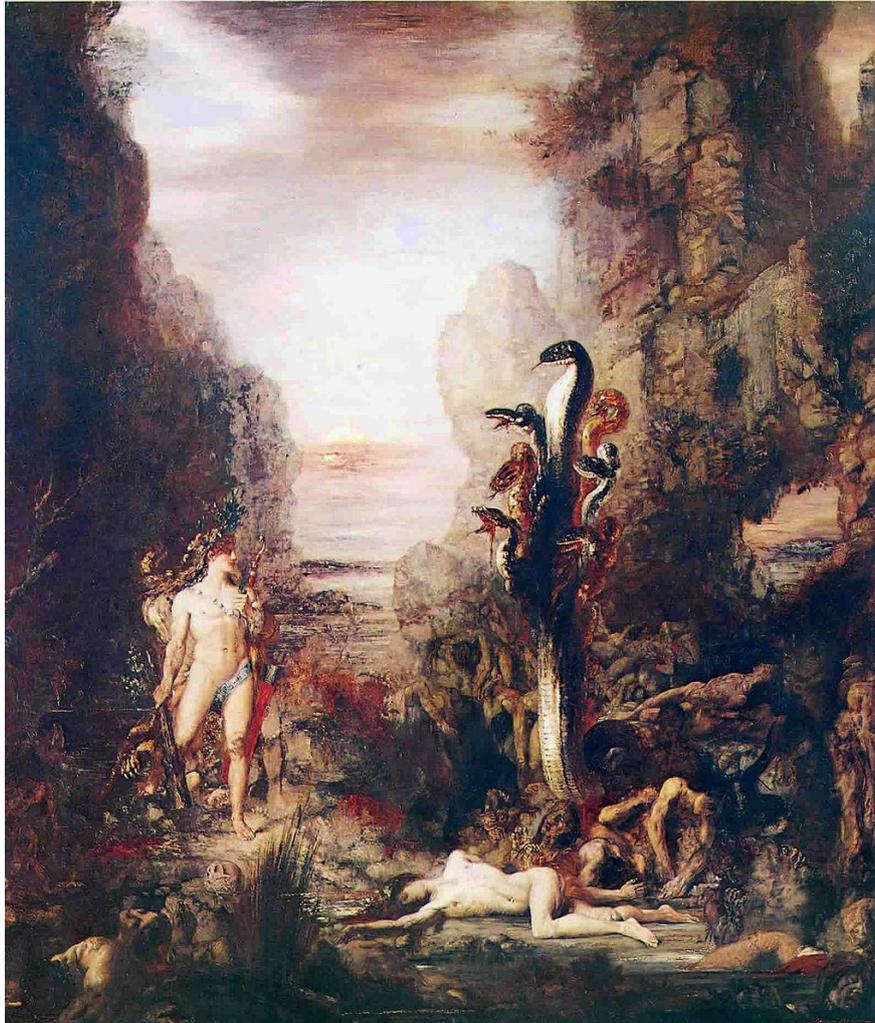
Fig. 3. Hercules and the Hydra Lernaean by Gustave Moreau (1876). Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, 1964.231. Public Domain.
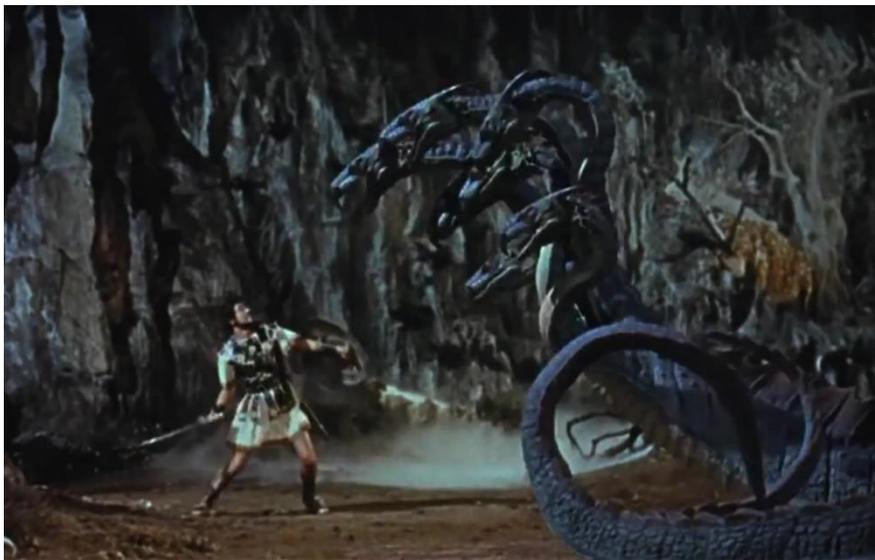
Fig. 4. *Jason and the Argonauts*, trailer for the film (Columbia Pictures, 1963). Public Domain : https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jason_and_the_Argonauts_(1963)_Hydra_fight.png?uselang=fr

Fig. 5. Toussaint Dubreuil (?): Portrait of Henry IV as Hercules Slaying the Lernaean Hydra (circa 1600). Musée du Louvre, Atlas database: entry 1110. In this painting, the Hydra is associated to unsubdued Catholics – Maré-challe (2018). Photography by Sailko (CC BY 3.0): https://commons.wiki-media.org/wiki/File:Toussaint_Dubreuil_(cerchia),_ritratto_di_en-rico_IV_di_francia_come_ercole,_1600_ca._01.JPG
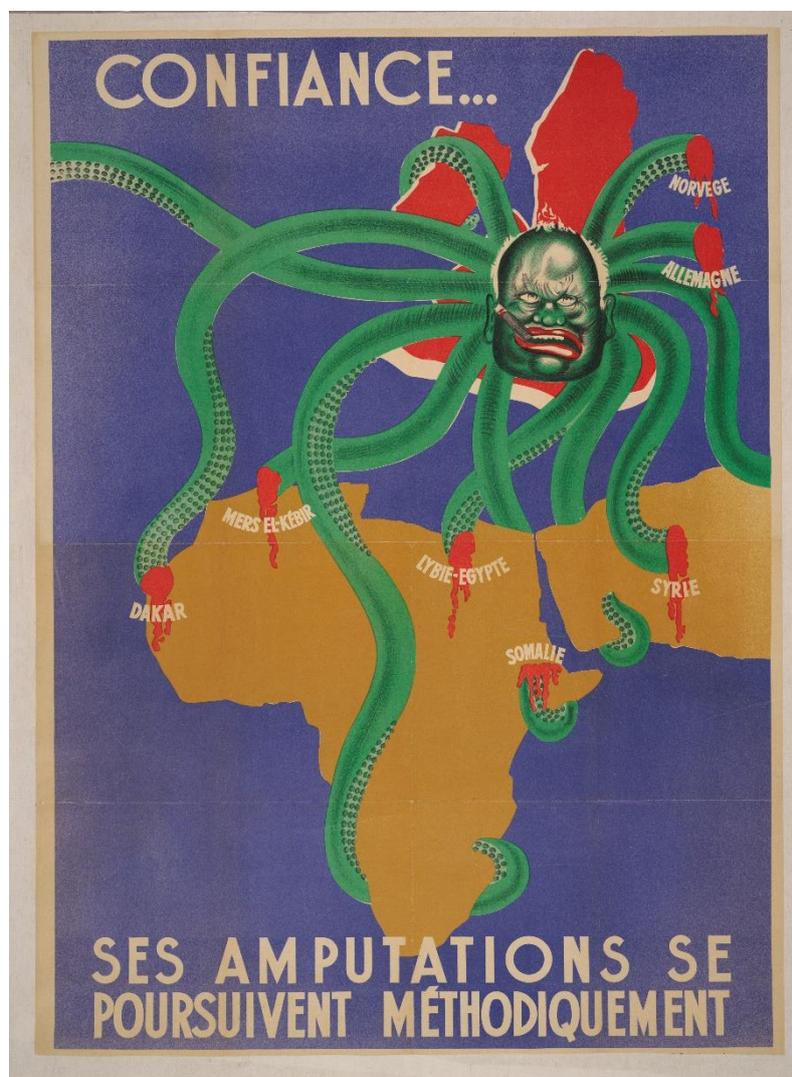
Fig. 6. « Confiance – ses amputations se poursuivent méthodiquement »
[Have Faith - its systematic amputations are continuing], by S.P.K., 1942.
CC BY-NC-SA 3.0: Cornell University – PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive
Cartography.
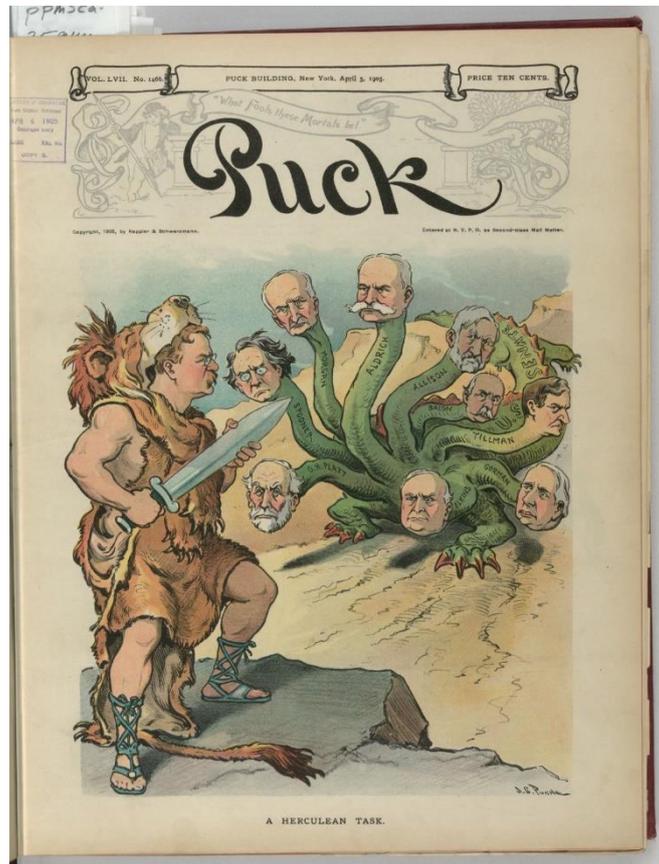Online : https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:19343465

Fig. 7. Theodore Roosevelt as Hercules battling a nine-headed Hydra (each head is identified as a senator, the tail as the U.S. Senate). John S. Pughe, 1905. Prints and Photographs division. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o278090.

Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University (These images are presented through a cooperative effort between the Library of Congress and Dickinson State University. No known restrictions on publication)