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Imitatio heroica

On the Impact of a Cultural Phenomenon

The concept of *imitatio heroica* as we employ it here warrants some explanation as it is rarely used in literary studies or history, and hardly ever applied in the study of visual images in art history and popular culture (*Bildwissenschaften*). *Imitatio heroica* refers to the imitation of *heroic* figures – their deeds, images and ideas – by *historical* figures who simulate their appearance and/or practices. We are focusing on the portrait as the primary visual medium. A portrait is a representation of a historical figure who can be identified by name, inscription, unique physical feature, gesture, iconography, or the external resemblance to the person being portrayed (Buschor 7; Fittschen 4; Brilliant 8; see also Preimesberger et al. 17-21). What, then, do we gain by employing *imitatio heroica* as a concept? In addition to answering this question, we will discuss the impact of the phenomenon of heroic representation in general and discuss related research questions.

Definition of terms

The expression *imitatio heroica* is a neologism, there are no classical examples for this collocation. Synonymous with 'heroic imitation', it has been used in contemporary literary studies and modern history to describe the practice of imitating 'heroic' behaviour. It refers to those men and women wishing (or expected) to bring back the heroic by explicitly emulating heroic figures. For example, references to the myth of the heroic Battle of Langemarck were employed in order to inspire heroic action in Germany after 1914

(Naumann 41-42, 70, 76; Behrenbeck; Borchmeyer 59; Satjukow 42; Schilling 101, 121; Telesko, *Erlösermythen* 148; van Marwyck 265; Esposito 206; and Weinrich 197). Cultural studies lacks a comprehensive term for describing such references – also in earlier periods and in non-performative occurrences – to models that are regarded as heroic, and whose appropriation and imitation in visual culture can be regarded as heroizing.

Visual studies, on the other hand, currently has several terms to describe partial aspects of this phenomenon. The terms 'theomorphic portrait' and its counterpart 'heromorphic portrait' (which is already used in British comic studies) describe the phenomenon in which a portrayed person resembles a godly or heroic image, either through attributes or other significant features (de Chapeaurouge 262-302; Bergmann 18). These terms are relatively neutral and descriptive. Other terms, which are more commonly used, refer explicitly to the (postulated) semantics of such a phenomenon. An 'allegorical portrait' is one that goes beyond references to a person and their social position or other historical aspects, and additionally expresses abstract ideas about the person portrayed (without necessarily relying on heroic or divine figures or attributes) (Wind, *Allegorical Portraiture* 138-162; id., *Hume and the Heroic Portrait*; Walbe). This subgenre of portraiture came to be known as *portrait historié* in the eighteenth century – a French term that highlights the narrative situation in which the portrait is implicitly contextualized through figurative and attributive additions.[1] Both terms extend beyond the descriptive in that they (try to) make a distinction between the portrayal of a person and a portrait's 'allegorical' or narrative content. A portrait that utilizes heroic or divine attributes in the depiction of a historical figure is sometimes referred to as an 'ideal portrait'.[2] This term implies a categorical difference between portrait and ideal, and suggests intentional idealization in the sense of aggrandization.[3] The term '*apotheosis* portrait' (*Bildnisapotheose*) goes even

further and marks the *apotheosis* of figures through divine and/or heroic attributes that are intended to raise them above the sphere of humans and into the realm of the gods (Wrede, esp. 1-9; see also note 16). The figure's deification does not necessarily need to refer to a religious process, and so it may be visually implied, rather than explicitly depicted. The so-called 'identification portrait', on the other hand, does not suggest an *apotheosis* of the person portrayed, nor is this portrait a simple illustration of this phenomenon. Rather, it identifies the person portrayed with a heroic or divine model through attributes, supporting figures and analogies with virtues, qualities, names and events (Polleroß, *Anfänge* 17; Walbe 95; see also Telesko, *Geschichtsraum Österreich* 80-83). However, it is impossible to determine whether these pictures are intended as analogies or as a form of identification. These are two very different things, after all: To become Hercules (identification) is not the same as sharing some traits with Hercules (analogy). The term 'costume portrait' does not emphasize identification with the model, but rather a distance between the model and the represented figure: the representation is described in terms of a costume or guise. The opposite of this is the 'crypto portrait' or 'concealed portrait' – a form that has its origins in antiquity[4] and displays a 'concealed' and negative reference to the person portrayed, but has been given some characteristics of a heroic or divine figure. The historical figure is no longer recognizable in the portrait and their identification is therefore dependent on the beholder's associations with the historical figure; as a result, the distinction between portraits and allegorical pictures that lack portraying qualities is suspended.

Although these categories of portrait may adequately describe certain elements of the imitation of heroes and gods, they do not capture the phenomenon in its entirety. It is therefore necessary to remedy the lack of systematic structure and consistency in terminology. Attempts to do so have revealed that all types of portrait describe a visual referential relationship between a historical figure who is portrayed and a heroic, divine or otherwise exceptional figure who serves as a model. The historical figure can be referred to as the target figure of the *imitatio* and the model as the source figure, or prefiguration.[5] The content, message and effect of this construction of a referential relationship are not identical in every case, however. It is therefore important to establish an overall term for defining all forms of reference and time periods in question – one that does not depend on the reference's interpretation and one that allows us to

work in a transdisciplinary manner, without falling prey to anachronistic assumptions.

For this reason, we have developed the term *imitatio heroica* in analogy with other forms of *imitatio*. *Imitatio* describes a common form of creating references in cultural practice since antiquity – whether in poetry or rhetoric – as *imitatio auctorum* or *imitatio veterum* (imitating ancient authors) (Kaminski; also see Rombach) or as *imitatio naturae* (related to the theory of mimesis in art) (see Jørgensen; Petersen). The doctrine of virtues also teaches us *imitatio morum*, which is the principle of achieving exceptional morality by imitating the virtuous behaviour of certain models (de Rentiis, *Imitatio morum*). This notion was primarily influenced by the concept of *imitatio Christi*, which is grounded in the New Testament and spread in Christian late antiquity. Building on the pagan (Greek) and Jewish concept of *imitatio Dei*, *imitatio Christi* is significantly different in that, instead of a portrait-like imitation of a transcendental, primary image, there is the perspective of an existential imitation as a successor of a divine *and* human model figure.[6]

In all the usages above, the source figure is referred to in the genitive case (*Dei*, *Christi*) and, as a result, the focus of the phrase rests on the reference to the source figure. In the case of the allegorical and the ideal portraits, the question as to which model is referred to remains open. Theomorphic or heromorphic portraits, on the other hand, highlight the form of reference, 'identification portrait' highlights the reference's result. All cases are concerned with the nature of the reference or its result – for example, a distinguishing or extraordinary quality, or a divinization. That is why the description of the *imitatio* as *heroica*, in other words as heroizing, is fitting. It encompasses all forms of representation – including non-visual and/or performative representations of historical figures or their prototypes – which establish a referential relationship to figures regarded as heroic by adopting or imitating these source figures, or aspects thereof, and applying these to the target figure of the historical person. An analogous term would be *imitatio divina*, already used in late antiquity.[7] The term thus emphasizes the result of the accentuation, its heroizing effect, while the imitated source figure and the form of reference is less important. We are concerned with the very processes and effects of heroization that constitute the semantics and functions of the heroic for the target figure.

While this perspective broadens our discussion, it is less valuable as an analytical tool. The term does not specify or explain the forms, practices and semantics of the *imitationes* in question. On the other hand, the term *imitatio*

heroica is not limited to pictures, but can also be used in the research of performative and textual practice, meaning that the term has an open and integrative function. Regarding its wide range of descriptive potential, its functions, and the resulting research agenda, are clear. Only the precise differentiation between the various forms and practices of *imitatio heroica* will enable us to better understand its functions and semantics. This differentiation, paired with an expanded perspective, leads to a critical re-evaluation of the terms that have previously been used unsystematically to describe different forms of *imitatio heroica*.

Imitatio and prefiguration

As the name implies, *imitatio heroica* focuses on the distinguishing function the imitation exerts for the target figure, whether this imitation was applied by others or the figure themselves. This phenomenon, however, has another side, illustrated by Hans Blumenberg in *Arbeit am Mythos* (*Work on Myth*) in 1979. Blumenberg regards a historical person's 'self-reference' to a figure who is considered a 'hero' to be an important element of the mythical ways of thinking that continued into modernity. As an example, he points out Goethe's reference to Napoleon: "Goethe himself is always the point of reference – either openly or covertly – when he speaks of Napoleon" (*Work on Myth* 483).[8] Goethe also projects the ancient figure of Prometheus, which he also recreates as a poetic character, onto Napoleon. While Blumenberg did not pursue this phenomenon further in *Arbeit am Mythos*, he did consider Hitler and the National Socialists' use of myths as political instruments later in his posthumously published *Präfiguration. Arbeit am politischen Mythos* (Prefiguration. Work on Political Myth) (2014). In the title, he introduced the term *prefiguration* to describe the reference to (heroic) models. In this monograph, Blumenberg writes that the "act of emulating a prefigurate", which is his expression for the imitation of the model figure, "is connected to the expected creation of an identical effect [as for this prefigurate]" (Blumenberg, *Präfiguration* 11). He especially stresses that the "model [...] for the prefiguration is not born, but is made [...] when the pervading one makes it possible to recognize the one imbued [...]. What is repeated becomes [...] a mythical agenda [...] through repetition in the first place" (ibid.). The "work on myth" for the *imitatio heroica* – if we understand it as a prefiguration – refers to how the prefigurate, or

source figure, acquires (new) meaning only in the process of prefiguration. It therefore does not exist as a fixed, more or less unchangeable phenomenon, but only takes shape and acquires an ascribed meaning through the (alleged) imitation. Each act of imitation thus also transforms the source figure which is, after all, as a prefiguration is rather asserted than proven. For example, according to Blumenberg, Napoleon becomes a new figure through Goethe's reference to him as a model, and Hitler and Goebbels' perspective on Frederick the Great also changes the idea of him. The imitating target figure thus portrays himself (in this case) as the "enforcer of a historical right" (ibid., 15). In this way, prefiguration becomes an instrument of legitimizing rhetoric. It acquires a kind of magical nature as the fulfilment of providence or a revenant (ibid., 1, 17), while also acting as a promise for an otherwise uncertain future. Most importantly, prefiguration lends "legitimacy to a decision that is extremely contingent and unexplainable" (ibid., 10). It is a "singular instrument of justification in weakly motivated actions" and positions people and actions "in the zone beyond doubt" because "what has been done once before does not require [...] reconsideration" (ibid., 14, 15, 9). Prefiguration is a rhetorical technique that generates security in times of crisis by appearing to provide ultimate justifications and by refusing to grant legitimacy to arguments and criticism. It also resembles heroization and other forms of social symbolization, because the same is true for the heroic.[9] At the same time, this marks the socio-political dimension of prefiguration.

We can rely on Blumenberg's ideas as arguments for a broader understanding of heroic imitations, or *imitationes heroicae*, and for borrowing rhetorical terminology and techniques. At the same time, however, we should keep in mind Blumenberg's point that imitations are always processes in which not only the target figure of the imitation is ascribed heroic meaning, but the heroic model figure is also always reconfigured. We should therefore not forget that these imitations fulfil specific political functions that require further explanation.

Jehan-Georges Vibert's In the Emperor's Image: Defining the problem

We will now take a late nineteenth-century painting, *In the Emperor's Image* by Jehan-Georges Vibert, as a starting point for our investigation. This example serves to specify the research questions and analytical problems involved in

the phenomenon of visual and performative imitation.

Jehan-Georges Vibert (1840–1902) was a French salon painter who created a large number of oil paintings between 1866 and 1899 (especially after 1871) while living in Paris. These satirical and critical works feature French clergymen, often in a historicizing perspective on the First French Empire.[10] *In the Emperor's Image* (**fig. 1**) is an example of his satirical work and it was auctioned to an unknown buyer at Sotheby's in New York in 1975.[11] The painting shows the interior of a dressing room. In the rear on the left is a dressing table with bottles of perfume. In the front on the left, a tricorne and a pair of gloves lie on a round table, in easy reach of the door. In the back on the right is a gold-framed portrait of Napoleon I in uniform, hanging above a chest of drawers on which an *Empire* vase is standing. The portrait of Napoleon I shows him in his typical pose, his right hand in his waistcoat. The painting's main figure, a clergyman, is standing in the centre, wearing a crimson robe and polished shoes. He is nearly ready to leave and is turned slightly to the left. In front of him, next to the wall on the left, is a bronze bust of Napoleon I in general's uniform. This particular bust represents just one of the many busts of the emperor in circulation at the time. The clergyman is holding a small mirror in his left hand and a hairbrush in his right. His eyes are focused on the bust of Napoleon as he attempts to style his hair toward the front in the fashion of the emperor. He is inspecting his progress in the mirror. Compositionally, the clergyman's head is between and at the same height as the bust and the painting of Napoleon. This invites a comparison between the clergyman and Napoleon and enhances their similarities; because the cleric is depicted in three-quarter view, just like Napoleon in the painting, the beholder can directly compare their hairstyles. This reveals the practical process of portrait imitation: a member of the clergy is attempting to copy a pictorial representation of a heroically elevated figure before stepping out into public.[12]

What is happening here is clear, or as clear as the objective of this process can be. What is the aim of this Napoleon impersonator? What semantics are associated with his *imitatio heroica*, and what meaning does the painter lend to this scene?

What we know for certain is that the priest is preparing to walk out the door and show himself in public, which may explain his careful emulation of the deceased emperor. His purpose, however, could be one, or several, of the following:
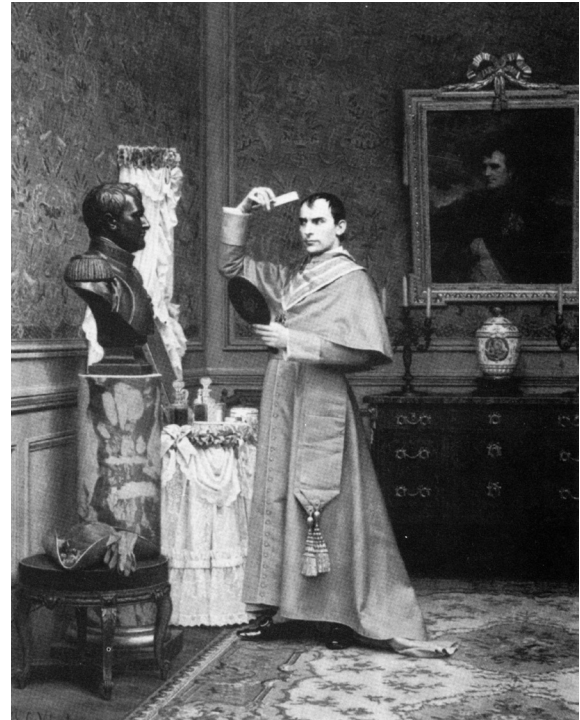(1) The clergyman wants to style himself as a new Napoleon of sorts. He thus exemplifies

Fig. 1: Jehan-Georges Vibert, *In the Emperor's Image*. Late nineteenth century (oil on canvas, 45 × 35 cm), whereabouts unknown.

common methods of retrospective legitimation, as practiced in other forms – for example, by Napoleon III in France (Ménager; Kopp[13]). The clergyman associates the emperor's hairstyle with power, influence and 'imperial' status. However, his dress is proof that he is neither a politician nor a military man, although Napoleon is unmistakably both, as seen in the two portraits. The clergyman is thus unable to play a similar role to Napoleon in these fields, as he is unmistakably a clergyman. This means that the imitation is either an absurd exaggeration – a clergyman is hardly capable of achieving the same status as Napoleon I, much less excel him – or it is a selective reference to Napoleon's great status, and not to his role as soldier and emperor. The clergyman (and with him, the clergy as a whole) strives to acquire imperial-like power, although this power is not fitting for his profession. The point of reference is Napoleon's status: in the imitator's eyes, the hairstyle radiates something heroic. A quality is transferred here from role model to imitator, and so the relationship between the church (the clergyman) and authority (Napoleon) is the central theme of this picture.

(2) A second approach to this painting assumes a different view of the relationship between the imitator and imitatee. By imitating Napoleon, the clergyman intends to demonstrate his veneration for and feelings of closeness to the emperor. During the Second French Empire

of Napoleon III, when Vibert first began painting, positioning oneself in relation to Napoleon Bonaparte was significant, and the painting may serve as a reminder of this significance. In his admiration of Napoleon, the clergyman also takes sides in political conflicts; his *imitatio* shows a commitment to the hero of the empire. In this case, the theme of the painting is the relationship between the church and politics.

(3) The third reading of this *imitatio* is much less direct and argues that the clergyman simply wants to appear stylish. The fashion of the Second French Empire borrowed many historical elements from the era of Napoleon I's reign; this style could be imitated without inherently implying a particular political leaning. Thus, in his vanity, the clergyman merely wants to look fashionable. Whether he is aware of the potential political relevance of this style is unclear, as the painting focuses more on form than on content. The theme of the painting would thus be the clergyman's vanity.

In the context of Vibert's ironic and critical point of view, one could argue that all three themes can be found in this painting: the clergyman's vanity and hunger for power, Napoleon I's role in French politics, and the relationship between politics and the clergy in France in the late nineteenth century. Clearly, Vibert was not interested in the ways in which imitating a hairstyle may be problematic. Rather, all three analyses play a role in this painting.

If we are to take the practice of performative *imitatio heroica* depicted here seriously for our investigation and leave aside the shift that is indicated by the representation of this practice in a painting as compared to the reality of this practice, then we must first clarify what form of reference to the heroic model can be found in such *imitationes heroicae*. This includes the visual or linguistic means that are employed, for example, through hairstyle, clothing, posture, physiognomy, name, location, etc. This leads us to the question of whether the relationship between the imitatee and imitator is represented directly or indirectly. In other words, does this imitation primarily refer to the model being imitated, or does it refer to something related, such as a fashion trend – something that is not a direct quality of the model? In this context, we must also question whether a concrete object of the imitation actually exists, or whether the imitating subject is appropriating a certain object, habitus, style of clothing and so forth, one that is not associated with a particular heroic figure, but rather with the heroic in general. An important aspect in both cases is the question of whether, based on a representational image, it is possible to determine if a certain amount of vagueness is a fundamental part of such imitative representations. This brings us to the semantics of this phenomenon. Which features of the imitated person does the *imitatio* refer to as their ascribed qualities: political status, occupation, social role, external influence, or personal or structural qualities? How many of these qualities are transferred to the imitator through the act of imitating the source figure? And what relationship does the imitatee hereby establish to the imitator: Is the imitator a follower, someone who identifies with the imitatee and feels close to them? Finally, we must ask how the heroic model – in the case of Vibert's painting, Napoleon – is refigured through imitation.

Imitationes heroicae in portraiture: Hercules as a model

In order to better illustrate the questions and problems at hand, we will now discuss three instances of Hercules imitations from three different eras and cultures as examples of concrete forms of heroic imitations in portraiture. Based on these examples, we will demonstrate the scope, functions and semantics of *imitatio heroica*.

Qualities and heroic aura: Commodus and Hercules

We begin with the famous bust of Emperor Commodus, which shows attributes of Hercules and dates back to 192 A.D., during the Roman Empire. It belongs to the Musei Capitolini in Rome (**fig. 2**).[14] Including its plinth, the marble bust is 133 centimetres tall. It was found on Esquiline Hill in Rome in what was part of the emperors' garden in antiquity. Its outstanding quality and complex pictorial language indicate that it was a courtly gift to the emperor (see Grüner; Giuliani).

The bust was originally presented in the semi-public context of the imperial court. When Commodus suffered *damnatio memoriae* after his murder in 192 and all of the portraits of him were removed, the bust, which had been made shortly before his death, was apparently hidden or put into storage. It survived, preserved under the earth, until its discovery in 1874. The bust shows Commodus with his hair in the style common for an official portrait of an emperor and his head does not resemble Hercules in the least. Rather, it is the lion's skin Commodus is wearing that refers to Hercules, along with the club

Fig. 2: *Bust of Commodus as Hercules*. Believed to be from 192 A.D. (marble) Musei Capitolini, inv. no. 1120, Rome.

he is holding in his right hand and the apples in his left, referencing those Hercules stole from the paradise garden of the Hesperides as his last labour. The pedestal is particularly rich in detail and contains a celestial globe with stars and the zodiac. The visible zodiac sign indicates the month of October, which Commodus renamed "Hercules" in 192 A.D. The celestial globe is not part of the canon of Hercules' attributes; rather, it represents world supremacy and *aeternitas*. Two cornucopias frame the celestial globe. These horns of plenty symbolize prosperity, abundance (*abundantia*) and happiness (*felicitas*) – none of which is an attribute to Hercules either. Between the upper parts of the two cornucopias is a curved shield with an eagle's head on each upper tip and a gorgon's head on a scaly skin at its centre. The shield's form is typical for the Amazons, a mythical tribe of warrior women conquered by Hercules. The eagle stands for Jupiter, while the scaly skin beneath the gorgon's head is the so-called *aegis*, which Jupiter gave to his daughter Minerva for protection. The cornucopias are held by a kneeling woman (a second woman situated symmetrically on the right is missing), whose dress indicates that she is an Amazon. The upper torsos of two

tritons – male nautical creatures – in the same size were also found alongside the bust. Their inward-facing arms reach upward, framing the bust symmetrically (**fig. 3**). In many reliefs from this period, figures such as these would hold a flowing robe, symbolic of happiness (*felicitas*), behind a bust of this kind, and we can assume that this bust would have once also had such a robe. The nautical creatures and the flowing robes in marble may be compositional elements that embellished the bust, but they do not refer in any way to Hercules.

Semantically, although Commodus is portrayed in an easily recognizable, official portrait, there are also several references to Hercules as a hero and a conqueror, as well as to Jupiter, Hercules' father. However, these references are interwoven with references to certain qualities such as prosperity, abundance and happiness.

It is not by chance that Commodus was associated with Hercules. Commodus was referred to as Hercules Romanus, and he renamed one of the calendar months Herculeus after the hero (and thus, indirectly, after himself). He regarded himself as *victor*, like Hercules, who had conquered the Amazons. As a result, the bust is generally interpreted as an illustration of this connection, of Commodus *as* Hercules Romanus.[15] But what does this mean, and how exactly was Commodus heroized in this way? During his lifetime, the emperor was neither a god nor a *divus*, although he was worshipped by a cult. The portrait is also not an absolute identification of the emperor with the hero Hercules: Commodus is still explicitly, recognizably himself, as the portrait's head shows. Furthermore, in this portrait Commodus encompasses more than Hercules's essence, as we can see in the attributes that do not relate to Hercules. Does Commodus therefore embody certain qualities of Hercules in combination with other classically extraordinary
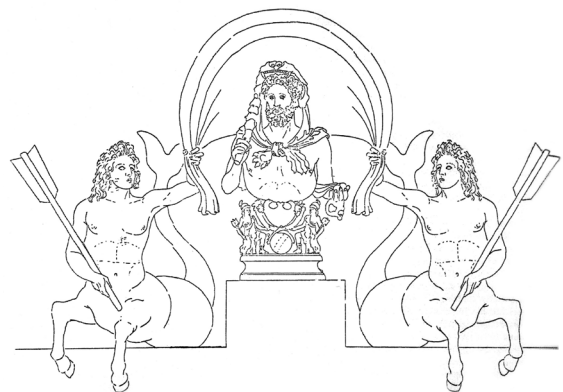

Fig. 3: Illustrated reconstruction of arrangement of the bust of Commodus.

qualities? This interpretation would assume that analogies with virtues and names metaphorically illustrate Commodus' apparent qualities through 'pictorial images', using heroic and divine iconography without Commodus being depicted as a god or hero.[16] Or does Commodus' emulation (*aemulatio*) of Hercules refashion the hero into a 'new Hercules' – perhaps even a better Hercules – in the face of the reality of the Roman Empire?[17] Through Commodus, Hercules would thus acquire an aspect of rulership. We could also inquire how the odd and inconsistent accumulation of attributes in this bust could be understood, for these attributes create an allegorical character that goes beyond the mythical figure of Hercules. The accumulation of these odd, inconsistent attributes constructs a heroic aura, rather than definite heroic semantics; this bust of Commodus is a heroizing *imitatio*, not an *imitatio* of a demigod and hero.

Could the attributes perhaps be read like verses of a poem of praise, of a panegyric for the ruler,

and therefore less as a heroization in the strongest sense and more as a praise of a ruler by means of heroic clichés – in other words, as a poetically charged praise of virtues (see Hallett 223-264)? That the bust was a courtly gift speaks in favour of this interpretation. As it is, while the bust leaves many formal and semantic questions unanswered, it also contributes to the understanding of different types of *imitatio heroica* in the portraiture of ancient Rome.

A *paragone*: Albrecht Dürer's *Hercules Fighting the Stymphalian Birds*

Albrecht Dürer's painting *Hercules Fighting the Stymphalian Birds* of 1500 (**fig. 4**)[18] represents a second type of heroic imitation in portraiture. The painting (which is now unfortunately in poor condition and has a cut on the upper edge) (Anzelewsky 171-172) shows the hero in profile,
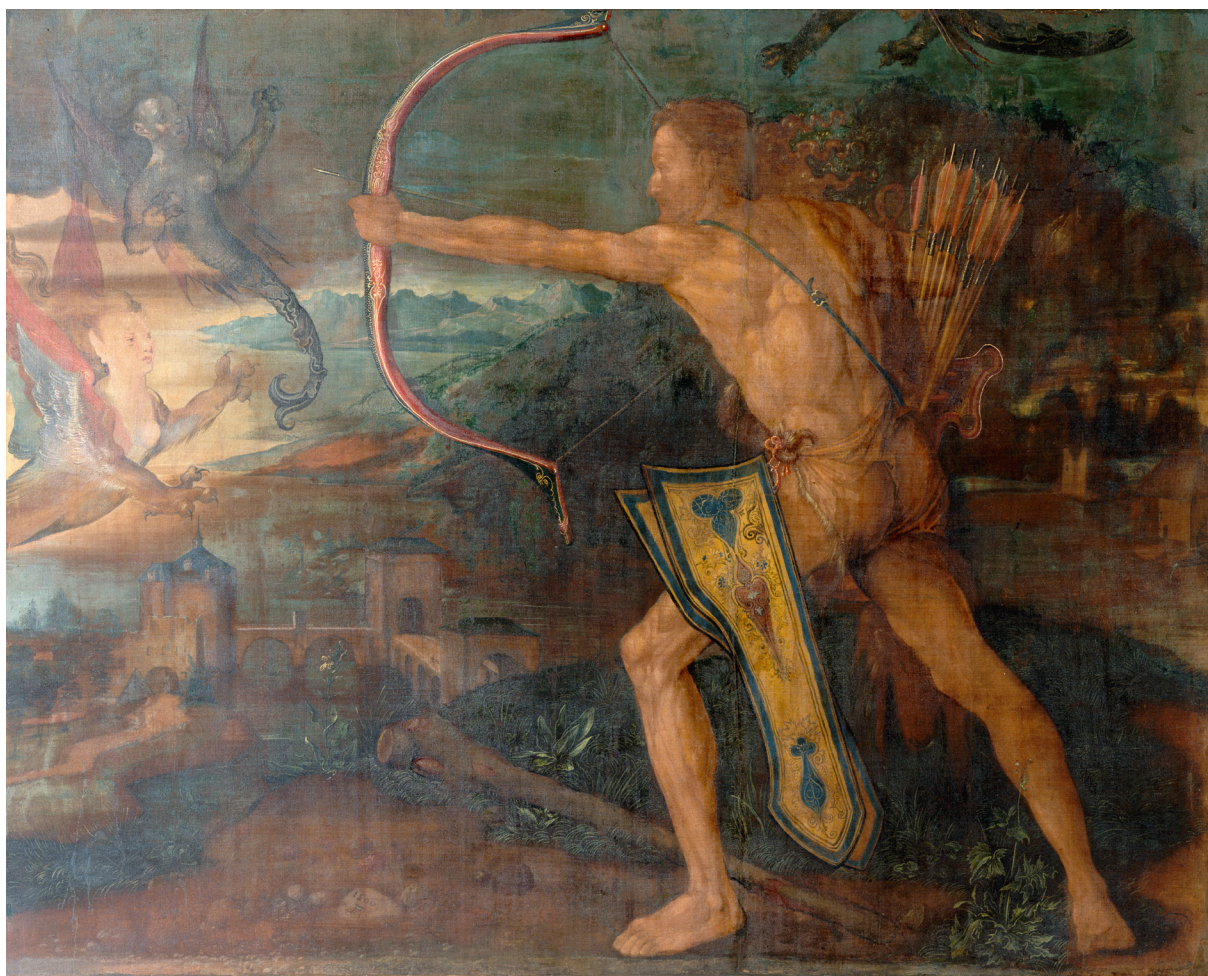

Fig 4. Albrecht Dürer. *Hercules Fighting the Stymphalian Birds*. 1500 (oil on canvas, 84.5 × 107.5 cm), Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, inv. no. GM 166.

wearing nothing but a loincloth made of lion's skin. With his body tense and his back turned toward the beholder, Hercules is slaying the metal-feathered birds rising from the swamp of Stymphalos on his left as part of his twelve labours. The lion's skin, which hangs loosely on his body and is visible between his legs, as well as the mighty club lying on the ground, the powerful archer's pose, and finally the iconographic context – the killing of mythological hybrid beings – would all be familiar symbols of the ancient hero to the contemporary beholders of the painting.

However, Dürer's depiction of Hercules' long, curly and windswept hair would have seemed discordant to even those who were only mildly familiar with ancient images of Hercules. Even from his profile, it is clear that Hercules' striking facial features bear little resemblance to the ancient ideas of Hercules.

Just like Commodus' bust, for which the emperor's features were mingled with Hercules' (Hess 143), Dürer added his own facial features to the ancient hero: in his self-portraits of 1498 (Dürer, Madrid) and 1500 (Dürer, Munich), Dürer is sporting his distinctive long, brown curly hair and Roman nose.

It is important, however, to establish a still more precise description of this Hercules imitation. By assuming the pose of Hercules, Dürer identifies his own image with that of the ancient hero. The richly ornamented bow case and the architecture of the buildings in the background also testify to the painter's lifetime, the early sixteenth century. What then was Dürer's aim in presenting himself in the pose of an ancient hero?

Firstly, the naked figure allows Dürer to showcase his knowledge of human anatomy and his ability to render an anatomically correct representation of the human body. He thus demonstrates that he is abreast with the latest trends of Italian painters, who used ancient statues as models and for whom the naturalistic representation of the human body was of the highest value.[19] By portraying himself in this martial pose, the painter also subversively implies that he is ready to battle these models from antiquity.

This particular form of portrait imitation must also surely be understood in the context of the intellectual, humanist circles of which Dürer was a member. Scholars believe that Dürer painted this picture for one of his humanist friends, Willibald Pirckheimer (see Strieder 30-32), because Pirckheimer's inventory lists a Hercules painting that could be identical with this one (see Hess 143). Believing that this painting was created in a humanist context, scholars have therefore relied on the ancient author Pliny the Elder in their explanation. Pliny once described a painting by Apelles as such: "It is by his hand [Apelles'] too, it is generally supposed, that the Hercules, with the face averted, now in the Temple of Anna, was painted; a picture in which one of the greatest difficulties in the art, the face, though hidden, may be said to be seen rather than left to the imagination" (Plinius, *Naturalis historia* 35: 95).

In his remarks, Pliny praises Apelles' ability to leave the face recognizable, even when the painting's perspective shows Hercules from behind. This is surely what Dürer is attempting to emulate in his painting, and so Pliny's next remark about Apelles also applies to Dürer: "He also painted a figure of a naked Hero, a picture in which he has challenged Nature herself."[20]

A combative Hercules with the face of Dürer can thus be understood as a kind of *imitatio heroica* in which the painter expresses his own heroic rivalry with ancient models and even nature itself. While the ancient bust of Commodus attributes heroic and godly qualities to Commodus, while also making the mythological figure of Hercules accessible to people in Commodus' time, Dürer draws on the different roles and characteristics of Hercules for this self-portrait and, by doing so, transfers these heroic qualities to himself. At the same time, Dürer engages in what is known in Italian art history as a *paragone* – an artistic comparison – with an ancient painter who allegedly painted a similar picture, meaning he strives toward an emulation (*aemulatio*) that will surpass the ancient artist. This *imitatio* is much more multifaceted and complex than a simple, selective identification with the represented hero. According to the humanist credo, it was important to prove oneself virtuous and to avoid envy in one's artistic endeavours of competing with nature and antiquity. However, both may be represented in this (in many respects) 'hero-like' portrait of a painter who was already celebrated as the new Apelles around 1500.[21]

Virtuous rule: Maximilian I of Bavaria and Hercules at the Crossroads

Hercules continued to remain a popular model of reference for early modern rulers. The scene of Hercules at the crossroads is one of the traditional pictorial subjects that could be used to invoke specific virtues. For example, Johann Sadeler the Elder used this iconography in a copper engraving in 1595 (**fig. 5**),[22] which shows the young hero standing between *Virtus* (virtue) and *Voluptas* (pleasure) at the crossroads, symbolized by the

Fig. 5: Johann Sadeler. *Hercules at the Crossroads*. 1595 (copper engraving), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. no. 15–43.

Fig. 6: Johann Sadeler. Broadsheet commemorating the ascension of Maximilian I of Bavaria as Hercules at the Crossroads. 1595 (copper engraving).

Pythagorean 'Y'. The rough path of virtue behind Virtus leads to Mount Parnassus, which is signified by Pegasus in the background. On the other road, Voluptas also beckons the hero. Hercules' posture does not reveal a decision favouring either side, although he is looking at Virtus, who has taken hold of his arm. The sensuous, but immoral path leads to death and decay, as indicated in the background in the motif of a shipwreck. The ship is a familiar metaphor for life and the shipwreck thus represents the end that all things immoral must face. Hercules lets his club rest casually against his shoulder and wears nothing but a lion's skin draped over his loins. Above his head, we see Mount Olympus, where Minerva is begging Jupiter to help his son Hercules determine the right path, as heralded by Fama (fame).

Although this work dates to 1595, the dedication above, along with the Bavarian crest embroidered on Fama's flag, all clearly refer to Maximilian I of Bavaria, who was appointed joint ruler with his father Wilhelm V. However, this reference to Maximilian I is merely implicit: the scene itself does not refer to the lifeworld of Maximilian I; instead, the mythical and allegorical figures remain enclosed in a world of their own. This was bound to change.

The very same year, Sadeler made a second version of this engraving in which Maximilian I is shown in an imitation of the portrait of Hercules (**fig. 6**) (Panofsky 116-118, fig. 57 a; Pigler 125-127; Strauss no. 7001.432 S2). In this version, Hercules' head has been replaced by Maximilian's, which is easily recognizable by his hairstyle and Van Dyke beard. The implicit reference to the ideal figure of Hercules is thus transformed into an explicit imitation in terms of attributes and scenery. The purely allegorical composition of the first version focuses on Maximilian, who, like Hercules, was expected to behave virtuously as a ruler and for whom Hercules was held up as a virtuous model for his future rule. In the second version, the reference to Maximilian is more explicit, as Hercules is depicted with the portrait of Maximilian's head, which makes the message more concrete and directly understandable as a result. As with the instructions given in so-called mirrors for princes, this may refer to a prospective choice, but the chances of this expectation being fulfilled are significantly enhanced.

Maximilian identifies with the virtuous choice of Hercules. The inscription (identical in both copper engravings) is no longer the only connection of the allegorical scene to Maximilian;[23] the picture itself now has a concrete temporal point of reference: Maximilian's ascension when he was 22 years old. This implies that the imitation of Hercules as a virtuous hero is reduced to his choice at the crossroads – in other words, the model of Hercules is used selectively for one of his labours, while his other glorious achievements are not associated with Maximilian.

The choice of Herculean iconography for Maximilian must therefore be regarded as an allegorically plausible *imitatio heroica*, according to pictorial tradition and the direct model of the allegorical representation. First, the Bavarian House of Wittelsbach had commissioned the writer Johannes Turmaier (also known as Johannes Aventinus) in 1521 to write a history of the Bavarian duchy in which Hercules was identified as the first Duke of Bavaria (by creating a genealogical connection between the patriarch Alemanus and the ancient hero). Second, Maximilian's Jesuit education also included moralistic theatre plays, which he attended when he was roughly ten years old, and he played Euphronius, who had to choose between studying and a sensuous, carefree life in the educational comedy *Von der Erziehung und dem Unterricht des Euphronius* (Educating Euphronius) (Dotterweich 74-75).

In addition to satisfying the period phenomenon of a princely house referring to Hercules and the trend of archaizing representations, the *imitatio heroica* in Sadeler's copper engravings expresses and legitimates concrete political claims. As with the bust of the Roman Emperor Commodus, it is easy to see how a portrait can have a stronger effect and be more understandable to a larger group of recipients than a textually explicit or pictorially implicit reference.

Definitions, problems, key questions

Summing up the definition of terms, the description of the phenomenon based on Vibert's painting and the three examples of Hercules imitations, we can argue that future research of the *imitatio heroica* must not only describe the forms of each *imitatio*, but also address the following basic definitions, problems and key questions.

In terms of definition, an *imitatio heroica* indicates a referential relationship that is established between a heroic or divine source figure (object, model, prefigurate) who is imitated and a target

figure who imitates this figure or to whom the imitation is attributed, either performative through specific actions, or in the form of media representations. Possible source figures are gods or human figures, such as heroes and other mythological characters, especially biblical and other religious or fictional personages to whom extraordinary qualities have been ascribed and who have thus been elevated to models. These imitations can be identified through certain forms of reference, either by attributes such as clothing, jewellery, and other accessories; physiognomy and certain physical characteristics; names; scenes; certain typical gestures like actions or types of images that are characteristic for a certain model. Imitations can also be identified contextually through an environment or a constellation of figures that is characteristically associated with a model. Although these different forms of *imitatio* can be combined, their semantics and functions remain undetermined. In all cases, the association with the source figure is selective and does not refer to all of the model figure's qualities. Moreover, the *imitatio heroica* always accentuates the target figure, usually in an admiring manner, although this can be satirically inverted. In either case, the source figure also undergoes re-formation in the process of imitation, meaning imitations can be regarded as processes of prefiguration in the sense of Blumenberg.

Terms like 'theomorphic', 'heromorphic' and (in some cases) 'allegorical portrait' can define the formal aspect of this phenomenon neutrally and descriptively. However, the multitude of additional terms used in research shows that a further differentiation between the various functions and semantics of such processes of imitation is still needed. In the past, formal and semantic aspects have often become mixed without much reflection. This is why we need an in-depth analysis to identify the above-mentioned formal qualities of the *imitatio* before attempting to determine its semantics and social and political functions.

The following issues and key questions, which are important with regard to the *longue durée* and the transformations of the practice of *imitatio heroica*, are addressed in the contributions to this collection.*

Setting the concrete formal referential relationship between target figure and source figure aside for a moment, it is imperative to ask whether the forms of references in pictorial representations

* This and the following references refer to the edited volume *Imitatio heroica*. Heldenangleichung im Bildnis (von den Hoff et al., *Imitatio*).

in particular (but not exclusively) are direct or indirect. Does the imitation make an explicit reference to the source figure, or is the reference established through other figures, patterns of behaviour, or prevailing styles or fashions? These questions are discussed here primarily in the contributions by Christina Posselt-Kuhli and Martin Kovacs, who focus on the heroizing portraits of rulers, as well as by Felix Heinzer in his analysis of the ancient and heroic-seeming terminology used for describing Christian 'athletes' through the new semantics in early Christianity. Katharina Helm's study also addresses the heroizing function of antiquity in general, while Hallie M. Franks discusses the heroic connotations of certain patterns of behaviour (not merely figures) in the hunting scenes portrayed on the graves of Macedonian noblemen in the late fourth century BC. In many instances, the distinction between direct and indirect references in images and texts is blurred, and this elucidates the potential of the *imitatio heroica* to act as an ambivalent, multi-perspective form of expression. Nevertheless, it is still important to determine how explicitly and distinctively the heroic is understood in each case, and how implicitly it is rooted in the cultural economy as a 'cliché', as part of the educational canon or as a fashionable trend. Stefanie Lethbridge, in her study of de-heroizing imitations in eighteenth-century caricatures, illustrates the extent to which the heroic can even be in danger of losing its emphasizing character. *Imitatio heroica* also enables us to approach the phenomenon of the normalization of heroic formulas and patterns of behaviour.

The edited volume also examines the characteristics of the emphasizing connection between the target figure and the heroic model. According to Blumenberg's idea of prefiguration the key point to this connection is that the *imitatio* claims the hero as a predecessor (prefigurate), the imitator as the hero returned. However, is an imitation actually meant to indicate identity between the two, or does it only indicate following, or a kind of succession that defines the imitator's actions, or even one that serves to inspires him or her to potentially surpass the source figure (*aemulatio, superatio*) (see Green 1-26; Bauer; Döpp; Pochat; and Müller et al.)? Is it meant to provide a specific comparison (*comparatio*), indicate analogies between different virtues and qualities, express a strong association with the heroic in general, or serve as a mere piece of heroic décor for the target figure, or is the very lack of clarity significant in this regard? This is an important theme in virtually all of the contributions in the volume, as can be seen in Stefanie Lethbridge's demonstration of

how eighteenth-century caricatures play with the potential of variable associations between target and source figures. Yet, how can we distinguish between different associations and their intentions? Another issue is the fundamentally different types of associations with source figures like heroes and gods, or even God, in ancient polytheistic cultures as compared to monotheistic, Christian cultures since antiquity.

In the case of each *imitatio heroica*, we must ask at which level it can be 'believable' and plausible. Can we regard an emperor as Hercules? Do we see him as similar to Hercules? Or is this only a rhetorical statement, perhaps just a pompous cliché? And did this not mean something different in polytheistic antiquity than it did in later periods? Why can certain imitations be only either unbelievable or especially popular at certain times or with regard to certain people or media? We can begin to understand these questions only within the context of the intended character of the association between the model and target figure.

On the one hand, each *imitatio heroica* is strongly determined by the historical target figure, because the imitation requires the historical figure's actual presence in an image, text or performance. The heroic model, or source figure, on the other hand, is only present in and through the historical figure. Through the *imitatio heroica*, the heroization of the target figure and the presence of the heroic model both acquire poignancy as the heroic comes to life in the present day of each imitation, as demonstrated by Blumenberg's concept of prefiguration. We could therefore say that – contemporary message and meaning aside – the *imitatio heroica,* the comparison between a historical personage and a heroic figure, elevates the historical figure, while increasing the presence of the heroic figure within the historical figure's own time. Whether different media and/or historical constellations favour the heroization of the target figure or the evocation of the source figure – in other words, whether the prefiguration or the *imitatio* is in the foreground – remains an open question. Or does its potential lie precisely in the fact that both are achieved and superimposed at the same time? Caterina Maderna takes this question as a starting point to demonstrate the projective nature – and pictorial 'Romanization' – of heroic models in pictures of Greek myths on Roman sarcophagi.

When we think of an imitation, we tend to seek what *connects* the imitating with the imitated figure; all too often, we overlook what *distinguishes* them. Because it always works selectively, the *imitatio heroica* excludes the source figure's unflattering qualities or practices

from the transfer to the target figure without this being made explicit. No imitation of Hercules includes the killing of his own children – an aspect that is ascribed to him in an ancient myth. A complete identification with the source figures is never intended, as has been highlighted by the pictures of deceased Romans superimposed on Greek heroes found on Roman sarcophagi, or in the imitations of Alexander, which Martin Kovacs explores in his contribution to the volume. We should therefore consider not only the degree of similarity or difference in the association between the imitator and imitatee, or the relationship between partial quotes and the entirety of the represented figure, but also which criteria are necessary for the interpretation of the imitation to be 'correct', including, for example, social status, level of education and knowledge of traditions. This is especially the case regarding imitations in the context of the reception of antiquity, as discussed by Katharina Helm. It is also true for more elitist educational traditions – for example, as expressed in Dürer's painting of Hercules or in Roman sarcophagus reliefs, both of which rely on Greek myths of heroes and gods from the time of the Roman Empire as part of the educational canon. For how long and to what degree was this an elitist phenomenon and thus a means of distinction?

The *imitatio heroica* encompasses a relatively high concentration of heterogeneous, possibly even vague allegories, due to the combination of references to different source figures and the selection of their qualities. There are many meanings within a picture of a Roman emperor, a Renaissance painter, or a German duke with a club and lion's skin, but the semantics remain anything but clear – even when we attempt to recontextualize the meanings to determine their 'primary' message. The semantics of the *imitatio heroica* are thus indeterminate *per se* and remain relatively vague. As a result, there may be another potential of this accentuating form of representation that may be similar to the possibilities of the heroic itself: the hero is an ambivalent figure and can change in meaning. The representations of Roman emperors in the style of gods and heroes further demonstrates this potential, as Dietrich Boschung discusses in his chapter in the volume.

In order to understand these semantics, it is necessary first and foremost to examine the different media, social and political contexts, in which imitations of heroes are used. Most importantly, this applies to the actors of, and those addressed by, the *imitatio*, because it is important to distinguish between self-heroizations and heroizations by others. Which social groups

util-ized these imitations when, and who were their recipients? Dürer's self-portrait 'as' Hercules is not the same as the portrait of the Roman *princeps* 'as' Hercules in a bust given as a present to the emperor himself. Heroic imitation in a portrait intended for a royal court differs, in turn, from one in a graphic print. Such differentiations enable us to explain what functions the *imitatio heroica* performed, and whether it served as a form of social or political distinction or equalization. They also help us to understand why the upper classes favoured heroic patterns up until the early nineteenth century. We can also discern media-related phenomena, as Olivier Bonfait demonstrates in his article on the gradual progression of images of kings to the highest position on painted ceilings, a place originally reserved for heroes and gods, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. That the imitation of heroes can also be politically inopportune is the subject of Dietrich Boschung's analysis of the first Roman princeps Augustus, in which he focuses on the techniques used to elevate a ruler, without rendering him heroic.

Other important aspects are the conjunctures and transformations over the *longue durée*, not only of the target figure, but also of the source figure of the *imitatio heroica.* The canon of (often ancient) figures that have frequently reoccurred throughout the centuries seems to have been rather small. It is thus important to investigate why (and how) the selection of certain relevant qualities disambiguated the multifaceted meanings of these ancient figures, and how these images shifted in various contexts. What was the impact of Christianization on these figures, and what other roles could Christian heroes play? And why has Hercules – as the figure who oscillates most between god, demigod and human in antiquity – remained so important for so long, surviving religious and political revolutions, especially in the European context (see Vollkommer; Kray/Ottermann; and Polleroß, *Hercules*)?

These observations and questions reflect the foundations and goals of the SFB 948 "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms", as explored in the conference papers included in the volume, and they reflect the objectives of the future research of *imitatio heroica* in other periods and media. These observations and questions can therefore be understood as the first steps on the path toward a systematic understanding of this long-term, cultural, visual and performative phenomenon.

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1   Kiss 103-104; Polleroß, *Sakrales Identifikationsporträt* 1-2. For more on the use of the term around 1700, see Ahrens 15.

2   This is the case primarily for referring to antiquity as the 'statuesque ideal portrait'. The reference to the medium of the statue is irrelevant for the phenomenon, because it also appears in painted form or in busts. See Niemeyer 11, 54-55; and Maderna 15-16.

3   For more on a differentiated notion of the ideal, see Hölscher.

4   Ladner 78-97; Polleroß, *Sakrales Identifikationsporträt* 6. For more on antiquity, see Preisshofen 50-69.

5   For more on prefiguration in the sense of Hans Blumenberg, see section 2 of this introduction.

6   See Crouzel; de Rentiis, *Zeit der Nachfolge*; Crouzel/ Mühlenkamp, for more on the Christian tradition especially col. 541-563. See also Taveirne with further references.

7   As in Ambrosius' "Hexameron 6, 7, 43", 234; see also Siebigs 395, footnote 119 (for this source, we thank Peter Eich).

8   For this source, we thank Achim Aurnhammer.

9   See Langbein 158, 161-163; Soeffner 163; as well as (in the context of the research concept of the SFB 948) von den Hoff et al., *Heroes* 13; Asch 200-202.

10   For more on J.-G. Vibert, see Morton; Bénézit. See also the personal testimony "J.-G. Vibert, Autobiography" and the articles on his paintings published in 1896 in *The Century Magazine 1895*, 78–81.

11   On the auction, see *19th Century European Painting*, Sotheby – Parke-Bernett Auction Catalogue, New York, 4 June 1975, no. 202; Brilliant, Portraiture 83-95, fig. 33. See also Pollini's review of D. Boschung, "Die Bildnisse des Augustus." Berlin: Mann, 1993: 723-733, fig. 14. The current location of the painting could not be determined.

12   For more on Napoleon's heroizations, see Marquart.

13   For this source, we thank Benjamin Marquart.

14   25 August 2014 <http://arachne.uni-koeln.de/item/objekt/16564>; Fittschen/Zanker 85-90, no. 78; Hannah; von den Hoff, *Commodus* 115-135; Dubbini.

15   For more on Commodus and Hercules, see Meyer-Zwiffelhoffer; Hekster.

16   See Bergmann's interpretation in *Strahlen der Herrscher* 38-39 and Maderna 122; also see Hallett, passim; as well as Clauss's critical view.

17   For more on this, see Hallett 238-240, 242-247. For more on the idea of the *aemulatio* in this context, see Green.

18   See Anzelewsky 171-172; Hess and Eser 360; Knacker.

19   Hercules nude and seen from behind in a lunge position primarily reminds us of prints by Antonio Pollaiuolo and Andrea Mantegna. See Hess 143; Knacker 318.

20   This does not refer to yet another picture of a hero, as indicated in many translations. We thank Felix Heinzer for his support in rereading the Latin passage.

21   For more on the epigrams of Konrad Celtis, who called Dürer a "second Phidias and Apelles", see Grebe 78-89.

22   See Thieme/Becker, vol. 29, 300-301; id., vol. 32, 306-314; Glaser 202-203, no. 13; Pigler, vol. 2, 125-127; de Hoop Scheffer/Boon no. 556; and Strauss no. 7001.437.

23   The inscription reads: "VIRTUS Huc Jove nate gradum flectas,hac itur ad astra, / Honos principium, finis Olymus erit. / VOLUPTAS Huc o flos juvenum propera, per amaena rosarum / Atria te ducam, regna beata vides. / HERCULES Cui parebo miser: placet haec, placet illa, sed ambas / Qui sequar: haec coelum, cogitat illa stygem. / IUPITERI fer opem Pallas virtuti fractaque cedat / Altera, namqs stat hoc ordine agone salus."

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94

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