

**scripta 14.6: Hercules dies**

This extract is from Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book 9. Ovid retells the gruesome story of Hercules' death. This myth gives Ovid the opportunity to rework epic poetry's most traditional material: the magical and marvellous tales of mighty heroes.

Hercules was killed by a poisoned tunic, sent to him by his wife Deianira. Deianira believed that Hercules was in love with another woman and mistakenly believed that the tunic she sent him would restore their love. Unfortunately the tunic had been soaked in poison; this poison ate into Hercules' skin and caused a terrifyingly painful death.

Ovid uses Hercules' death scene as a moment for Hercules - overboiling with blistering rage at what has happened to him - to retell his own story, list his great achievements and lambast the gods for not saving his life. Thus Ovid is able to create within his poem another epic poem in miniature and - at the same time - a death scene so melodramatic and implausibly prolonged as to be tinged with comedy.

The extract below is from the beginning of the sensational death scene: we hear the gory details of the moment where the poison works its way into Hercules' body, its power exacerbated by the heat of the fire from the sacrifice which Hercules happened to be making at the time on Mount Oeta.

The poison's energy grew hot, and - released by the flames - it spread, carried widely throughout Hercules' limbs. While he could, Hercules held back his groans with his usual courage, but after his resolve had been beaten by the pains, he knocked aside the altars and filled the groves of **Oeta** with his cries. There is no delay; he tries to tear off the deadly cloak but, wherever he pulls at it, the cloak pulls off his skin, and - disgusting to tell - either it sticks to his limbs (the attempt to remove it, futile) or it rips open his mangled flesh and shows his massive bones.

There is no limit: the greedy flames dissolve his heart, and dark-coloured sweat drips from all over his body.

- 1) What is Hercules doing on Mount Oeta? Explain the reference to altars and flames.
- 2) How does Ovid show Hercules' strength and size?
- 3) Do you find this scene melodramatic? Explain your answer.