

Annibale Caracci, “Ercole in Bivio” (Hercules at the Crossroads), 1596 for the ceiling of the Palazzo Farnese in Rome

Mastery Image

Caracci recreates in this large ceiling painting the narrative attributed to Prodicus, an ancient Athenian philosopher. According to Prodicus’ story, Heracles found himself in his youthful adulthood at a cross-roads. Two women appeared to him — Virtue and Vice (Pleasure) are shown here as allegorical figures — and each tried to entice the potential hero to follow her path.

Here, the strapping young man is certainly Heracles, appointed with nothing but a club (no Nemean Lion yet). Vice offers (right) the enticements of short-lived gratification, Virtue points to a arduous pathway up a barren slope atop which the winged horse Pegasus awaits. A shadowy figure lower left is already recording the decision as the first of Heracles’s exploits.

Caracci’s painting stands at the head of many such depictions from the Mannerists through the Enlightenment and beyond.



- Prodicus, “The Choice of Hercules” told by Socrates in Xenophon [Memorabilia 2.1.21-34](#) (click for link to Perseus page)
- E. Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege, und andere Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst*, Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 18 (Leipzig, 1930).
- K. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme: the adaptations of the hero in literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Totowa, NJ, 1972): pp. 101ff., 198ff., 213 ff.
- George Frideric Handel, “The Choice of Hercules,” oratorio 1751
OGCMA0529HeraclesChoice_Handel
- Flitcroft and Hoare used the Choice of Heracles at Stourhead Landscape Gardens to good effect. [OGCMA0530NOTHeraclesChoice Flitcroft](#)