

Heroes in Mythology

II. Heracles

Thomas F. Guerin

1. The Hero and the Great Mother

A hero is a symbol, in a sense, of the culture from which he springs. He defines the the culture in terms of value judgements, ideals. Heracles does this for the early Greeks as Gilgamesh did for the Sumerians. But the hero is also a representative of humanity as a whole, humanity rising to a greater consciousness which is the basis of culture.

Neuman, in his work "The Origins and History of Consciousness," describes the hero as a revolutionary stepping out where others dare not, to challenge and defeat the archetypical Great Mother who represents the unconscious.¹⁾ The Great Mother is an element in all mythology and is represented in the concrete by such goddesses as Ishtar, Demeter, Artemis and Isis. Though there may be an historical connection among some of these goddesses, there need not be. While Joseph Campbell in the "Masks of God" traces the route of mythology from Mesopotamia to the American continent by showing similarities in the forms, especially as agriculture is introduced into a new area, Neuman in his work "The Great Mother" insists that She is archetypical and is therefore found in every human society, even those not connected in any way, becoming historically distinct even as Her influence on a particular society wanes.

The Great Mother represents the unconscious in man. (Though it is out of fashion to use the masculine singular of "man" and the masculine pronoun to represent humanity as a whole, Neuman and Jung, for reasons of psychological balance, consider the unconscious as female, the basic attribute of the Great Mother, and the conscious as male. And therefore it seems appropriate to use the masculine pronoun in this case.) She has two aspects, the gentle one of nourishing her children, and the terrible one of restraining and reingesting them. In the "Terrible Mother" aspect She demands total sacrifice and total subservience, and finally a return to her womb, from whence is born again the child for which she can care as the loving Mother.

It is this endless repetition which man, as hero, breaks out of. Here is a psychological expression of the Buddhistic notion of reincarnation and man's need of breaking out of its eternal repetition in order to achieve Nirvana. In the destruction by the Great Mother of any consciousness of individuality, man experiences Her force and perceives part of it as his own. He then gains control of it. In this way he becomes conscious of self through the very act of destruction by the Terrible Mother.²⁾ This process, latent in the memory of any society,

gives birth to the hero myths in which the hero establishes his heroism by fighting a dragon, a monster, a snake, etc. all representations of the Terrible Mother. The snake, especially, as what Neuman calls the "uroburos" represents the most primitive stage of the unconscious. (The snake represents both womb and phallus and, in swallowing itself, describes the endless repetition of birth death and rebirth.) The development of consciousness, a revolution that gave man the tool which freed him from the limits of instinct and made the path to infinity possible, was achieved by the heroes who fought against the Terrible Mother.

The terrible aspect of the Great Mother is also symbolized in nature in such species as those in which the female devours the male after mating. It would seem that this is one of the most efficient ways for nature to assure its perpetuation. The male's single usefulness as male is to provide the seed while the female must provide and sustain the potential new members of the species. What is more efficient than finding a new purpose for the male as a source of sustenance for the female and young?

It is probably not correct to class humans zoologically as belonging to a species in which the female devoured the male. That phenomenon occurs, perforce, in species which have only a short lifespan precluding multiple use of the male's fertilizing power. It is however, very near to the religious practices of many prehistoric societies in which the male consort to the priestess-queen was killed to provide the blood-seed for the future crop-generation. The practice was not efficient in terms of nature, perhaps, but it afforded a stable framework which the human species could cling to in a world which, while cyclic in most natural phenomena, could not be manipulated to any great extent. The repetition of the seasons, the growing cycle, the revolution of the heavens all pointed to this birth, death and rebirth cycle, and thus to the Great Mother.

That the actual political revolution that occurred in which the consort-king overthrew the priestess-queen gave birth to many hero myths and stories of sexual conquests of male gods, etc. is the theory put forward by Graves and Frazer.³⁾ Neumann and Jung would probably not deny the existence of such political revolutions, but would see the development of hero myths deriving from the revolution in the psyche which formed the ego out of the unconscious. They make the hero stage one that is necessary on the way to consciousness, not only for the individual, but for a particular culture and for the human race as a whole. They would see the two aspects of the Great Mother in *every* mother, and the hero's fight against the mother in every mother-child relationship.

Neuman and Jung view the history of the human race from a psychological standpoint which strives to understand the development of man in terms of internal history, that is, his spirit. While the philosopher might describe man as a "thinking animal" the psychologist would describe him as "consciousness." These two ideas hardly exclude each other, but do display the difference in approach of the two categories. The psychologist would not accuse man of

"thinking," since what he views as the core of the human is not an ability to reason, but an awareness, especially an awareness of self. At some point in his life every human wonders why he or she is him- or herself, and not someone else. This is the question that absorbs the psychologist. The philosopher attacks the same question obtusely when he attempts to define the "individual." The nearest plausible philosophical answers derive from Existentialism, Sartre, Kierkegaard and others who define the individual consciousness as the sum of one's experiences. These do explain the differentiation of the individual, but not the development of the consciousness itself nor how experience differs between humans who are conscious and experiencing animals who do not possess consciousness as defined by the psychologist. Scholastics and others avoid the problem completely by ascribing individual awareness to the existence of a soul which is infused into a physical entity at conception or shortly thereafter.

Neuman and Jung see human consciousness as a developing thing, not something which is infused or reaches a critical level and is then static, but an activity which has had, has, and will have a progressive awareness. The ego, or individual conscious, is a developing thing which continues to develop in the individual or in the culture as a whole. Thus cultures are more or less advanced in accordance with the level of consciousness-ego awareness found within them.

This idea may have far-reaching effects in terms of evaluation of the level of development of a particular culture.

The extent of the freedom from the Great Mother achieved by the individual, or a particular culture, may indeed be the yardstick by which the evolution of that individual or culture may be judged. And the freeing of the individual from the grip of the Great or Terrible Mother is certainly symbolized by the hero in mythology. Here the word "mythology" is not used in the sense of "fairytale" but with the meaning of "history," in the sense of a stage of humanity which must have been undergone, no matter whether the written history remains or not.

The hero in mythology is not, therefore, simply the star of an entertaining story, nor a god. He is not a god because he must represent society. On the other hand, he must be more than simply man since he must make a step beyond the normal, human attitude.

The hero serves a particular purpose for the society of which he is a hero. This purpose is one of being a revolutionary, that is, achieving freedom from the nourishing and destroying Great Mother. It means being nonconservative, actively seeking freedom from the destroying, but also nourishing aspects of the Great Mother.

2. The Greek Hero

The classic Greek hero we know from Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus and others is a race apart, or rather, an age apart. The Greeks viewed their history in relation to metals, descending, in a sense, from the original paradise into which they had been placed, the ages were those of gold, silver, bronze and iron. This

division did not originate with the Greeks but was perhaps an import from Persia.⁴⁾ The Greeks however, had a tradition of heroes which stood apart from these and thus a new period was interpolated between the bronze age and the present, iron age. This was the Age of Heroes, which can be given a period of about four generations around the time of the Trojan War also given a rather definite date around 1,200 B. C.⁵⁾

It was in this period that the larger-than-life heroes performed their deeds and achieved their glory. The wanderings of Odysseus and the exploits of Aeneas happened during this period. And it was in this period that the Greeks and Romans of a thousand years later found their ideal men.

I would not place bounds too strictly on this period however, since Heracles, for example, roams far and wide both geographically and temporally and his very popularity increased his range continually as each locale claimed to be the site of one or another of his exploits.

The period was far enough removed from Homer and Hesiod's time to avoid the taint of modern scepticism in the gods and heroes and the events that occurred. Some four to six hundred years had elapsed before the Iliad was written down. This time differential lent the period a cloak of ancient mysteriousness and fostered the assumption that things had been different then. But it was not so far distant that it had no connection to the Greeks of Homer's or Hesiod's day. Thus, this Age of Heroes was to serve as a source of Greek legends, myths, tragedies and cultural ideals.

3. Heracles

The quintessential hero of Greek mythology is Heracles. Not only does he define the characteristics of "hero" as far as the Greeks are concerned, he defines the idea of hero even down to the present day in the Western world. Compared to the Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, of whom we treated in the previous paper, the literature concerning the exploits of Heracles is overwhelming in its profuseness. Every little town around the Mediterranean Sea expanded the escapades of Heracles to include themselves in some way, much as every little town on the eastern seaboard of the United States has a bed that George Washington slept in. Now it is rather hard to distinguish the "original" Heracles, "Hercules" to the Romans, who became a household name in the literature of the West.

Heracles is thus not only the epitome of ancient Grecian culture, in many ways he embodies the ideals of modern Western culture as well. It might even be said that he is representative of the revolutionary force that gave birth to Western culture.

One of the most popular heroes of mythology, the story of Heracles would incorporate several volumes and the classic Greek mythological anthologies are not for us to repeat in detail here. But for our purpose of describing how this mythological hero is expressed in Western cultures and expresses the ideals of Western culture, we will examine some of the major episodes of the story of

Heracles, relating them to their cultural aspects, especially in terms of the development of a cultural consciousness.

4. Heracles, Hero and God

Heracles is somewhat of an anomaly since he was born a man but achieved the status of a god, being made immortal at his death. This immortal status, however, seems to have been attached to him rather late in the legend-building process. In the Iliad from around 700 B. C. Achilles states that Heracles is mortal while in the Odyssey, written only a little later, Odysseus sees Heracles among the gods.⁶⁾

That Heracles died and went down to Hades like all men would seem to be the natural form the hero legend would take insofar as the hero must be godlike to be admired and honored, but he must also be manlike to enable the common man to find a certain identity with the hero through which he can challenge his fate. The very popularity of Heracles the hero apparently heightened demand that he overcome the single object of man's eternal frustration, death. But the difference in the attainment of godhood is that his apotheosis came only after his death, and his deeds done as a hero before this still brought him honor as a human.

5. Heracles The Twin

As other heroes too numerous to mention, but including Gilgamesh, Achilles, Perseus and Romulus, Heracles was the child of a god and a human. Zeus was his father and Alcmena, who had just married the Prince of Tiryns, Amphityron, was his mother. Zeus sneaked into the marriage bed before Amphityron, who was out fighting the Teleboans. When he returned and slept with his wife the same night, twins were duly born to Alcmena. Here is a royal twin situation that repeats itself throughout mythology. Elsewhere in the Greek myths there are the famous Dioscuri, Castor and Polydeuces; in the Bible Jacob and Esau; in Roman myth, Romulus and Remus.

The fact of being a twin would necessarily be more than simple historical decoration on the tale of the hero, since "twinship" in itself has always presented a problem to any particular culture. Psychologically speaking, twins form an exclusive society within themselves and identical twins, especially, incorporate a number of opposites within their physical and psychological makeups. Physically, most identical twins are naturally opposed in dominant side, that is, one is left-handed, one is right. As a general rule, one tends to be outgoing, the other retreating. These "twinly" characteristics are usually extreme in mythology. While Castor and Polydeuces are devoted brothers, most of the others are not, contriving to kill or otherwise overcome their twin, such as in the cases of Heracles, Jacob and Romulus.

Neuman categorically states that the conflict between twins in mythology "... belongs to the symbolism of the Great Mother. It appears when the male

attains to self-consciousness by dividing himself into two opposing elements, one destructive and the other creative ... this separation and the consequent emergence of the twin-brother conflict mark an important stage on the way to the final dissolution of the uroboros ... and the consolidation of ego consciousness."

"... just as the motif of twins is a determining factor in the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Set and plays an equally decisive part in the Canaanite mythology, where it appears as the struggle between Baal and Mot, Resheph and Shalman – so we find it, with personalistic variations, in the Bible story of Jacob and Esau ..."⁷⁾

In Neuman's view, the splitting of the male into two confronting, hostile males, the individual, no longer confronted with the overwhelming Terrible Mother, is able to defend himself for the first time.

"This psychological development corresponds to a change in the original fertility ritual that forms the background of these myths. In the beginning, the young fertility king was killed, his corpse cut up and spread over the fields, and his phallus was mummified as a guarantee of the next year's crops... In later times, the sacrifice seems to have been replaced by a combat. The annual king consolidated his position and was permitted to fight for his life in combat with the next claimant. If defeated, he was sacrificed as the old year; if victorious, then his opponent died in his stead. Later, when the matriarchate changed into a patriarchate, a rite of renewal was celebrated annually or at set intervals, and the king was kept alive because the vicarious human or animal sacrifices at the feast ... rendered his death unnecessary."⁸⁾

We can easily see that Neuman is concerned with the struggle of the consciousness to awaken in the individual and in society as a whole. He is concerned with the process by which an individual becomes conscious and reaches adulthood, or fails to reach adulthood. And he sees within mythology the symbolism of this process.

Graves also views the myths of the twins as symbolism, but sees them simply as symbolizing an actual evolution in society from the matriarchate to the patriarchate. He sees the twins as representing the annual king and his tanist.⁹⁾ It also represents a later development in the progression from matriarchate to patriarchate, one in which the king must have an alter-ego to undergo the sacrifice so that he may continue. That is to say, the king will die but not die. Dying in the king's place will be one who is figuratively his twin. But Graves also speculates that there is a problem as to which twin is the older, the older being the king. In the Heracles mythology some traditions make Iphicles the older, and Heracles his tanist who later overcomes him in the battle for survival.¹⁰⁾

Whether the twin-hero is a symbol of man's psychological development or of his historical and social development is difficult to determine, and, in fact, the two theories are not even exclusive. The anthropologist would make one more

observation, however, that the law of primogeniture is very old and that twins confound this custom particularly. The birth of Heracles is delayed by jealous Hera in favor of an entirely different child after she has had Zeus swear that the firstborn to the House of Perseus would rule. Then Heracles and his twin, Iphicles, were born and Zeus is exasperated that his favorite son is not to rule as he thought.

Jacob and Esau in the Bible find themselves in conflict over birthright in the same way. On their way out of the womb Jacob grabs Esau's foot as if to pull it back. In the end, even though Esau is awarded first-son status, Jacob makes off with the main prize, the blessing of their father Isaac.

The establishment of a clear right of primogeniture is basic to most societies even today in establishing rights among children of the same family towards property and royal privilege. And this seems to have been the predominant custom in Greece during the classical ages of from 700 B. C. to 200 B. C. and even down to the present day. The near universality of this system, however, does not necessarily deny its arbitrariness. The majority of primitive societies would favor the older child simply because it would be stronger and probably more capable. It is mythology which insists that though the first born is stronger and privileged by nature, even though older by but a few moments, it is the hero that is able to establish dominance over the older.

6. Heracles and the Serpents

A famous episode of Heracles' childhood concerns the introduction of two snakes by Hera into the bedroom where he and Iphicles are sleeping in order to kill Heracles. However, he calmly overcomes the snakes, strangling them with a certain amount of glee. Another version of the same episode was that the snakes were introduced by Amphityron in order to ascertain which was Zeus' son and which his own. In either case, the ease with which the baby Heracles overcomes the snakes proves his semi-divinity.

The snake in mythology, however, is not simply a malevolent animal capable of dealing death with its fangs. One may be surprised at the frequency with which the snake appears in mythology, and though it has great power, the power is not necessarily that of evil. Gilgamesh had the plant of eternal youth stolen and eaten by a snake. And thus the snake itself achieved the capacity for eternal youth, which it displayed to the ancients by shedding its old skin annually. The ancients perceived this as a renewal of youth for the snake. Only in the Bible is the snake cursed and shorn of his legs to crawl in the dust because of its perfidy. Even there, however, the snake has demonstrated a certain superiority over man.

Snakes appear in the Greek myths on the side of the Good Mother in the form of Athena holding one in each hand, and on the side of the Terrible Mother Medusa whose snake tresses were so terrible to behold. They also appear in the Bible in Exodus as Aaron's rod which becomes a snake when thrown down before

the Pharoah and as the golden image which cured the Israelites of their sickness brought on by their infidelities. They are both good and evil, but predominantly symbolize life, not death, in mythology. Even the snakes that were sent into the room where Heracles and Iphicles were sleeping were beautifully "azure scaled" though they had instructions, as the servants of Hera, to kill Heracles.

7. The Madness of Heracles

While the name "Heracles" means "The Glory of Hera," Hera herself detested this particular hero as the product of one of her husband's infidelities. There is a remnant of a cult of Hera which had Heracles as her own son but the main tradition is that there was a continual opposition between Hera and Heracles. The tradition which holds Hera to be the mother of Heracles would fit even more readily into Neuman's reasoning concerning the emergence of consciousness, since the mother and child would then come into conflict as the hero-child began to emerge from the unconscious, Hera being then, the Great Mother. It may be that the mother of Heracles was originally Hera, but was eventually changed in order to help explain the hatred of Hera for Heracles.

Heracles marries and has children which makes Hera fear that he will be achieving some kind of honor, and she drives him mad. In his madness he mistakes his own children for enemies, shoots them with arrows and throws their bodies into the fire. When he recovers his sanity he goes to Delphi to ask what he should do in repentance. At that the "Pythoness . . . advised him to reside at Tiryns; to serve Eurystheus for twelve years; and to perform whatever labors might be set him in payment for which he would be rewarded with immortality. At this, Heracles fell into deep despair, loathing to serve a man whom he knew to be far inferior to himself, yet afraid to oppose his father Zeus."¹¹⁾ Thus begin the twelve labors of Heracles.

Madness is frequent in Greek mythology with Hera being the cause and the result being the murder of the mad hero's child. Another example is Dionysius, also born of Zeus as the lover of Semele, the daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes. When Semele is already six months with child, Hera in disguise persuades her to demand that Zeus, who has hidden his identity, show whom he is. Zeus gets angry and throws a thunderbolt which consumes Semele but not the six-month fetus which Zeus then sews up in his thigh until time for birth, much as he bore Athena from his head. Hera has the Titans tear the baby Dionysius to shreds, but like Osirus reconstituted by Isis in the Egyptian myth, Dionysius is reconstituted by his grandmother, Rhea. The reborn Dionysius is brought to King Athamas of Orchomenus and his wife Ino who are persuaded to rear the child in the women's quarters, disguised as a girl. But Hera, undecieved, punishes the royal pair with madness, so that Athamas kills his own son Learches, mistaking him for a stag.

This madness, brought on by Hera and resulting in the death, not of the madman but of his child, is repeated often enough to have Robert Graves see it

as a symbol of the symbolic death of the king and the sacrifice of the tanist, the Great Mother-priestess role being assumed by Hera.

Neuman sees the madness of Dionysius, and the madness which Dionysius himself inflicts on many through his orgies, as the dissolution of the consciousness. The human who has reached a certain level of consciousness and recognizes his individuality, that is, his separation from the Great Mother, is an anathema to Her, and the object of attempts to make him return.¹²⁾

Neuman, in relating madness caused by Dionysius in mythology, points out that those driven mad by Dionysius don women's clothing and join the orgies, often to be killed, such as in the case of the heroic King Pentheus, killed by his mother while wearing women's clothing during an orgy. This orgiastic aspect of the cult of Dionysius is usually attributed to his love of wine, and thus drunkenness. It would seem, however, that the drunkenness of wine is also a form and symbol of madness and a repression, to that extent, of consciousness.

Orgiastic cults never limit themselves to alcoholic intoxication. In fact, the greater number of the cults that have been investigated up to now use one or another of the naturally intoxicating herbs or flowers. Robert Graves believes that the "Ambrosia" of the Dionysius cult was made from a raw mushroom, *amanita muscaria* which induces hallucinations, senseless rioting, prophetic sight, erotic energy, and remarkable muscular strength."¹³⁾

It would seem also that madness, so frequent in mythology, has some part to play in the development of heroism. Perhaps it represented the struggle to attain a higher level of manhood or bravery. Those who are driven mad usually kill others, but are sometimes killed, making it a condition from which one might recover, but again, might not. Recovering however from madness, the dire deeds perpetrated must be atoned for in some way. Thus Heracles goes to Delphi.

Madness was, therefore, a condition both culpable and non-culpable. The crimes were committed, in a sense, because of the very strength and valor in resisting the gods, in Heracles' case, the Goddess. But they still did harm to the populace, as Gilgamesh abused his privilege as king and two-thirds god. They therefore must be atoned for.

8. The Twelve Labors of Heracles

As atonement for the crimes committed during his madness, Heracles receives the advice of the Delphic Oracle to submit to serve Eurystheus for twelve years and perform whatever labors are demanded. The twelve labors were originally ten, but Eurystheus renegged on two claiming that Heracles had had help on one and had tried to make a profit on another.

The number twelve is rather frequent in mythology, twelve being, for example, the number of the tribes of Israel, the number of the reigning gods and goddesses of Olympus, the signs of the Zodiac, and, of course, the months of the year. There have been many attempts to coordinate Heracles' labors

with the signs of the zodiac, but they are rarely convincing. While there is a lion and a bull, the crab and others have to be rather twisted to fit. The animals involved in the labors may perhaps have had connection to the seasons. The lion, Leo, the bull, Taurus, and the watersnake, Aquarius, along with Scorpio fell at the solstices and equinoxes. Graves believes that Scorpio has become the boar of Heracles' fourth labor. The ritual killing of these animals would symbolize the king's dominion over the seasons that they ruled.¹⁴⁾

The origin of the number twelve as the Western symbol of completeness observed in the use of it in divisions of the minute and hour and year, table settings, etc. probably derives from the yearly lunations even though the number of lunations in a solar year number a day over thirteen. In Egypt and elsewhere, however, the extra month had a somewhat unlucky aspect, being the time in which the old king was to be sacrificed to prepare for the new year-king. Though the idea that thirteen is an unlucky number is usually attributed to the New Testament episode of Christ and his disciples eating the Last Supper at which the thirteenth member was the traitor Judas, it seems that the number was unlucky long before this, the perfect number being twelve. To the Hebrews, the "twelve tribes" was another way of saying "all the people of Israel," and twelve multiplied by twelve gave a number symbolic of a multitude, as in the Book of Revelations of the New Testament when 144 thousand is given as the number of those saved. For Heracles, twelve tasks is the sum of his heroship, perfection.

The motive for the labors of atonement is somewhat rare in mythology. More frequent is having tasks set by a father as a condition for gaining the hand of his daughter in marriage. This would also fit in with the competition among the young men to become the consort of the priestess-queen for the year, a theme that Graves insists runs throughout Greek mythology. Here, however, he is silent on this point. Neuman, on the other hand, sees these labors as a form of the "Dragon Fight" which signifies the emergence of the hero. That is to say, the hero must struggle at some time or other against the Terrible Mother in one form or another, be it a dragon, a bull, a Gorgon, or whatever. Neuman has chosen to call it the "Dragon" simply because this is the most familiar archetype to Western cultures that have inherited the chivalaric literature of the Middle Ages.

In the *first labor*, Heracles returns wearing the skin of the lion of Nemea. Frazier and Graves feel that this is symbolic of the ritual fight of the newly selected, or reselected king, with wild beasts, that is, of people dressed as wild beasts. Neuman sees the skin as a trophy, as does the myth itself, but one signifying a new level of ego-consciousness achieved through victory over the Terrible Mother. On the other hand, Campbell insists that Heracles is a primitive hunting-society hero. Hunting societies, while beseeching the Earth Mother for fertility, also were wont to talk to the gods through a shaman, usually through a shaman who ritually wore the pelt of some beast. The wearing of the pelt

made the shaman one of the gods, or at least their representative. In this interpretation, Heracles wearing the skin of the lion would be lifted above the level of the normal human.¹⁵⁾

The *second labor* in which Heracles is aided by Iolaus in killing the monster Hydra is said by Graves probably to represent an actually historical event in which there was an attempt at the suppression of the Lernaean fertility rites. New priestesses kept appearing until the Achaeans, or perhaps the Dorians, burned the temple down.¹⁶⁾

Iolaus is also given the role of tanist by Graves, and though denying such a symbolism is difficult, to affirm that all male pairings in mythology are references to the king and his tanist is to make mythology extremely mechanical in its symbolism.

The *third labor* in which a golden-horned deer sacred to Artemis is brought back unharmed to Tyrins, is thought by Graves to represent the conquering of some shrine of Artemis by the Achaeans. But he also points out that, in Europe, only reindeer have horns. Deer with horns could be known as far south as Greece only through word of mouth over the amber-trading route from northern Europe, or otherwise remained in extent for thousands of years from the end of the last ice age when reindeer did indeed roam far to the south, as attested to by the cave drawings at Les Eysies, Rouffignac and elsewhere.

The *fourth labor* in which Heracles kills the Erymanthian boar is thought by Graves to symbolize the ritual battle of the king with the wild beast of the season, similar to the labor involving the Nemean Lion, the boar having been substituted for the scorpion of the Zodiac.

For the *fifth labor* Eurystheus tries to humiliate Heracles by ordering him to clean the stables of King Ageius in a single day. This Heracles manages by changing the course of two rivers. Eurystheus, however, disallows this labor since Heracles deceived Augeius by offering to do the job for a reward of cattle. The significance of the labor is not clear, but the theme of the king attempting to humiliate the tanist-suitor is certainly present.

The *sixth labor* was to drive away the man-eating birds of the Stymphaian Marsh which had brazen beaks, claws and wings. They had been frightened by the wolves of Wolves' Ravine and had flocked to the Marsh. They sometimes took to the air in great flocks to kill men and beasts by discharging a shower of brazen feathers and at the same time dropping poisonous excrement which blighted the crops.

Heracles drives the birds away using a great rattle made by Hephaestus and given him by Athena to scare them and make them flock up, then shooting them down as they flew off.

Graves sees this labor as not belonging to the marriage-task sequence but glorifying Heracles as a healer who expels the fever demons, identified with the marsh birds. But there also seems to be an historical aspect to the myth in which a matriarchical society of witches were suppressed, or perhaps massacred,

by a tribe of Achaeans.

In the *seventh labor* Heracles captures the Cretan Bull after a prolonged battle. With the extensive mythology concerning bulls throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean, there are many other similar tales with which to compare this, including the fight of Theseus with the Minotaur, which would indicate same Cretan Bull. On Crete itself, rituals in which the bull played a central part are frequently depicted. In Egypt, Apis the Bull was worshipped in Egypt since the First Dynasty (*circa* 3,000 B. C.), many mummified bulls are found in Saqqara, and bulls are found frequently even in the cave drawings of Lascaux and Altamira dating from 15 to 30 thousand years ago.

Among other symbolical and magical properties, contact with the horn of the bull carried with it the power of fertilization. The bellow of the bull was thought to make it rain, being likened to the sound of thunderstorms, and *rhombi*, or bullroarers, were swung around to induce rain while torches were flung to simulate lightning and came to suggest the bulls' fiery breath.¹⁷⁾

Fighting a bull, or someone disguised as a bull was a ritual task imposed upon the candidate for kingship, and Heracles again succeeds in this task of the kingly candidate. The ritual surrounding the bullfight in modern Spain and Mexico may not be directly related to that primitive ritual, but the mystique surrounding the *torero* and his masculinity makes the conception of what part the fighting of the bull, or dragon, played in the creation of the hero.

For his *eighth labor*, Heracles is ordered to capture the four savage flesh-eating mares of King Diomedes. He captures the mares, floods a plain to block his pursuers, then captures Diomedes and feeds him to his own horses. Here the sacrifice of the king at the end of his reign and the ritualistic cannibalism accompanying it is almost too bluntly symbolized.

In a typical suitor-candidate tale, for his *ninth labor* Heracles is to bring Amazon Queen Hippolyte's golden girdle to Euystheus' daughter, Admete.

Heracles' victories over the Amazons are only some of many found in Greek mythology. Among others who fought and conquered the Amazons are Theseus and Dionysius. The Amazons are matriarchal and originally were supposed to break the bones of the male children so that they could not fight. They are particularly associated throughout the myths with the Moon Goddess, Artemis, as the basic fertility symbol. That there were ever warlike women who would conquer in battle is highly problematical, but that there were warlike matriarchal tribes is certain. The Hittites are thought to have originally been patriarchal, but had accepted goddess-worship under the influence of matriarchal societies in Asia Minor and Babylonia and may have even been responsible for the worship of Artemis at Ephesus. It is in the myths concerning the Amazons that the evolution of what eventually became the Greek culture turning from matriarchy to patriarchy can be envisaged.

The golden girdle of Hippolyte involves a rather erotic symbol of the marriage bed in which the man takes the girdle from his bride. This too, from the

patriarchal viewpoint represented a conquering of the female principle.

In seeking the golden girdle of Hippolyte, Heracles makes a long journey and happens upon many unrelated adventures, much in the manner of Odysseus and Aeneas. In this and other myths, tales were added by the relater to fit the audience and to include their ancestors or their district within the tales. It thus becomes difficult to separate which parts of the tales are of the earliest origin and which parts are only interpolations to suit the listeners.

During his *tenth labor* to fetch the famous cattle of Geryon, Heracles erects his famous pillars at the Straits of Gibraltar. Getting the cattle back to Mycenae, Heracles encounters again a myriad of adventures which attach his name to places from Spain to Ithica. Heracles' journey across the sea in a bronze urn is similar to that of Gilgamesh in his trip across the Sea of Death and may, in fact, have been derived from it.

Heracles performed the ten labors assigned by Eurysheus in a little over eight years, but the second and fifth were discounted, so he was ordered to do two more. Thus, for his *eleventh labor* Heracles was ordered to fetch the fruit from the golden apple tree planted in Hera's garden on the slopes of mount Atlas and guarded by the dragon coiled around its trunk. Heracles is warned not to pluck the apples himself but have Atlas, who had taken a gardener's interest in the welfare of the apple tree, to pick them for him. This he does, spelling Atlas in his task of holding up the firmament, and tricking him into taking up the burden once again after Atlas has returned from picking the apples.

Again Heracles travels around founding cities and killing monsters before he gets back to Mycenae.

The dragon or serpent coiled around the trunk of the tree of golden apples is all too similar to the Tree of the Fruit of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. Though the fruit of the tree of Eden is not specified as being apples, tradition has always made it so. In this case the apples were supposed to have been a wedding gift from Mother Earth to Hera. The important figure here is undoubtedly the snake or dragon coiled around the trunk. The snake symbolism is found again tied to the Terrible Mother, in this case Hera. In Genesis, the snake, rather than guarding the fruit, tempts Eve into eating it. And this contradictory situation can easily be conceived of as the result of the patriarchal system of the Jews conflicting with the matriarchy. That is to say, the snake, being a representative of the Great Mother, and therefore an enemy of God the Father, will have attempted to draw away or harm the creations of the Father.

So often in mythology, the fruit of trees is given marvelous properties or plays a major role in the tale. The Trojan War may be said to have started because of a golden apple. In Genesis God drives Adam and Eve out of Eden because he fears that "... next they may eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and become like unto Ourselves."¹⁸⁾ The motive for the exile from Eden was the jealousy of God for his position, not wishing any others to equal Him, placing

Him in direct opposition to the Great Mother. His main attribute was eternal life, the object of the quest of Gilgamesh and other mythological heroes.

Heracle's *twelfth labor* was to bring the dog Cerberus up from Tartarus and this is a portion of almost every hero myth, the descent into the world of death and the return. From Gilgamesh to Christ, the hero descends into hell and returns with some sort of prize. Symbolic death and resurrection were part of the ritual as the king began to refuse to die at the end of his allotted year or series of years. At one point the king would have hidden in a cave or such while the tanist was sacrificed, and then returned, as it were, from the dead to begin the new year. Gradually the tanist became unnecessary to this symbolic death but the symbolism of overcoming the most terrifying of human trials, death, remained an important aspect of the hero's activities.

Analyzing the hero's sojourn into hell psychologically, the struggle into consciousness out of the unconscious is symbolized very clearly, with the Terrible Mother's overpowering centripetal attraction dragging the human hero into the everlasting darkness of the unconscious, only to have the hero escape, whether by trickery or force, and prove again his heroism and to represent mankind in the everlasting search for everlasting life.

9. The Hero Unto Himself

At the end of these twelve tasks which Heracles has supposedly performed to atone for the murder of his own children while mad, he gives his wife, Megara, to his nephew, remarking that his own union with her had been rather inauspicious. He then goes off in search of another wife and other treasure.

The hero in Greek mythology, and in other mythology as well, is hardly a social reformer. He does not perform great deeds to save his countrymen. The heroes who fought the Trojan War were not fighting out of patriotism. They could be coerced into fighting out of a sense of debt or loyalty, especially one imposed upon them by the family, but they fought only for honor and loot. Just as Gilgamesh seeks escape from death for himself, not for mankind as a whole, Heracles, Odysseus, Achilles, Hector, Menaleus, and all the rest perceive their battles only in terms of what they can get out of them in terms of loot and honor, and perhaps personal honor was the more important of these. Honor, of course, meant being perceived as fearless in the face of an enemy. Achilles makes a mess of the Trojan war because of his anger that Menaleus takes the prettiest captive girl for his own. No matter that the girl in concrete terms was hardly worth the gold, etc. that Menaleus offered in exchange. Achilles was dishonored where it hurt, in not getting his proper share of the loot.

Heroes, including Heracles, are not bound by modern ideas of social responsibility and are certainly not moral reformers. They are almost totally self-centered in outlook, the welfare of the society around them scarcely being referred to, except in the breach. But heroship in mythology is not a social affair, it is rather the symbolism of the aspirations of the individuals in a

culture; it is the common man's freedom from commonness, and unconscious. In the literature and stories of today's society the hero is always given a socially acceptable motive for his actions. But the attraction to Superman or Rambo is not their righteousness but their fearlessness in overcoming all obstacles. So it was with Heracles.

We will continue with the story of Heracles as he again sallies forth to his fate and achieves his apotheosis.

1. Erich Neuman; *The Origins and History of Consciousness*; Princeton U. Press, 1954; p. 154. Here Neuman discusses Jung's view of the hero's fight with the Great Mother. "... he shows, first, that the hero's fight is the fight with a mother who cannot be regarded as a personal figure in the family romance. Behind the personal figure of the mother there stands ... the mother archetype. Jung was able to prove the transpersonal significance of the hero's fight because he did not make the personal family aspect of modern man the starting point of human development, but rather the development of the libido and its transformations. In this transformation process the hero's fight plays an eternal and fundamental part in overcoming the inertia of the libido, which is symbolized by the encircling mother-dragon, i. e., the unconscious.
"Jung's second conclusion ... demonstrates that the hero's 'incest' is a regenerative incest. Victory over the mother, frequently taking the form of actual entry into her, i. e., incest brings about a rebirth. The incest produces a transformation of personality which alone makes the hero a hero, that is, a higher and ideal representative of mankind."
2. Neuman; p. 316.
3. Robert Graves; *The Greek Myths*; Penguin Books, Middlesex, England; 1955; and J.G. Frazer; *The Golden Bough*, Macmillan Press, London, 1922.
4. M.I. Finley; *The World of Odysseus*; Viking Press, New York, 1954; p. 26.
5. Finley; p. 27.
6. Graves; Vol. I, p. 70
7. Neuman; p. 96.
8. Neuman; p. 98.
9. See "Heroes in Mythology, I. Gilgamesh" for an explanation of the word "tanist."
10. Graves; Vol. II, Vol. I, p. 250.
11. Graves; p. 101.
12. Neuman; p. 90.
13. Graves; Vol I, Forward.
14. Graves; Vol II, p. 130.
15. Campbell, Joseph; *Primitive Mythology, The Masks of God*; Penguin Books; Middlesex, England, 1959; p. 289 *et alia*.
16. Graves; Vol. I, p. 110.
17. Graves; Vol. II, p. 122.
18. Genesis, Chapter 4, verse 12. The Douay version of the Bible is used here.

Bibliography

- Cambell, Joseph. "Occidental Mythology, The Masks of God." New York: Penguin Books, 1964.
- Davidson, H.R. Ellis. "Gods and Myths of Northern Europe." Middlesex, England:

- Penguin Books, 1964.
- Finley, M. I. "The World of Odysseus." New York: Viking Press, 1954.
- Graves, Robert. "The Greek Myths." Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1955.
- Hooke, S. H. "Middle Eastern Mythology, from the Assyrians to the Hebrews." Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961.
- Kirk, G. S. "The Nature of the Greek Myths." Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974.
- Neuman, Erich: Ralph Manheim, trans. "The Great Mother, An Analysis of the Archetype." New York: Princeton U. Press, 1963.
- Neuman, Erich: R. F. C. Hull, trans. "The Origins and History of Consciousness." Princeton U. Press, 1954.
- Rosenberg, Donna. "World Mythology, An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics." London: Harrap, 1986.