

# Heroes in Mythology

## III. Heracles

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### 1. Heracles and Woman

In our previous discussion, Heracles completed his twelve labors in expiation for killing his children, as he had been directed to do by the Delphic Oracle, though the act had been instigated by Hera who had driven him mad. When he returns home to Thebes his wife, Megara, is thirty-three years old. Time for heroes and their women does not take its toll in the same way as for normal humans in these stories. In spite of 20 years of wandering, Odysseus returns to a Penelope as beautiful as when he left and the same may be said for Helen, etc. But Heracles gives her to his nephew, Iolaus, supposedly sixteen years old at the time, saying that his time with her had been inauspicious, and goes to look for another, younger wife.

Considering the problems that he had put her through, it would seem that this was a bit hardhearted, to say the least. The number of his and her children that he had killed is hard to determine, being anywhere from two to eight, depending on the text used. But, in any case, the problem of his wife's attachment to the children does not arise. In fact, the fathering of children is typically the prerogative of the hero in mythology, little problem arising from which woman is the mother. Even before marrying Megara, Heracles was supposed to have impregnated the fifty daughters of Thespieae in fifty nights through the machinations of their father who tricked him into it, fearing that his daughters might match up with lesser men. This resulted in fifty-one sons, twins making up the extra amount. There are, in fact, versions in which Heracles impregnates them all in one night. In either case, this would be a feat unrivaled except, perhaps, in Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*.

Sexual power of the male is indeed part of the hero mystique. And not simply the power, but the ability to have the woman bear male children is significant. The fact that there were fifty-one males born from fifty couplings certifies the heroship and virility of the man, (the word "virility" itself meaning "manliness"). Not only is superiority of "maleness" portrayed in the stories of Heracles, but the total "otherness" of woman, as Simone de Beauvoir describes it in her seminal work, *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir sees the woman as a servant to the species, or even a slave to it. The woman shall bear the hero who shall bend the will of the world to his, and she shall partake of his fame. But she is ambivalent in the sense that she may only partake of it if she somehow controls

him, while if she controls him, he will not be able to perform his heroic deeds as champion. Thus, the woman, according to the view of Beauvoir, was never in a position of reciprocal equality with man. While woman was worshipped as the Mother Goddess and source of life, she was even then the "Other", set apart from man. When the male began to realize his power and claimed the wealth of the world for himself, Woman was removed from the throne and made a chattel, and she herself became a part of the goods of the world, to be bought and sold much like any other chattel that was "owned". And she was made to serve the purposes of the species, to nurture it and insure its well-being.

In Greek mythology the human female is described as an owned object, faithful or not to the owner. Before marriage the owner is the father, afterwards the husband. It is only the goddesses who act in their own stead, and then perfidiously, jealously, vainly and spitefully. Perhaps the only time women in mythology act in a way that is described as less than evil is when they are amorous or helpless and need to be saved by the hero as Andromeda was by Perseus. This describes an attitude toward women among the ancient Greeks which is the source of the modern European attitude, although not limited to Europe. The idea of paternity rather than maternity being the determining factor in the relationship of the child to society, as well as its maleness or femaleness, is an idea that the Greeks shared with the Jews and Romans and, perforce, with Christianity.

That the first-born *son* is the heir, the one who assumes the crown or receives the inheritance, has ancient roots. Only the priestess, such as the above-mentioned Delphic Oracle, or the Vestal Virgins of Rome, had any authority as a female within the human society, and this being allotted and circumscribed by men.

In the transition from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal one, one of the major problems that arose was the certainty of paternity. The mother was certainly sure of being the mother but the father had only a tenuous relationship which was impossible to prove by any means available to the ancients. Thus, as is insisted upon by Shere Hite in her work, *The Hite Report*, steps had to be taken to ensure that the child who was the heir was actually the child of the man from whom he (or she) was to receive the inheritance. The first step was marriage which was a means of binding a woman to one man. From its inception, the purpose of marriage was to ensure the fidelity of the woman, not of the man. In most societies, the infidelity of the wife is considerably more blameworthy than that of the husband. Even in the Bible, the adulterous woman is to be stoned, while the man is hardly mentioned. In the eighth chapter of John in the New Testament, Christ is heard forgiving the woman taken in adultery by a kind of trick wherein he says, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." This suggests that the people (men) involved were not exactly inexperienced in extra-marital activities.

Marriage certainly is an attempt to insure the direct lineage from father to child, but simple marriage has often not been thought sufficient, and additional

safeguards have been devised from laws demanding the total withdrawal of women from male society as in parts of the Moslem world, to chastity belts to guard the female, (actually the husband from being cuckolded). In most Western societies today, the major additional safeguard is the ideal of *love*. *Endless love, eternal love* are the expressions which speak of the binding force and make anyone who would betray this force terribly shame-stricken. This ideal does, however, often become its own worst enemy in today's society, since, having become such an ideal, when the object (partner) changes, it is natural that the marriage bond should be dissolved in favor of the new object. But even in this dissolution, the laws definitely favor the male portion. The divorce in most societies has been much easier for the male than the female. In many societies it was impossible for the female to initiate a divorce. In the Bible reference is made to "putting one's wife away," and in Japan the phrase "mi kudari han" (三下り半) refers to the husband's right to divorce his wife by writing a short statement which extends to only three-and-a-half lines.

This double standard is so well known that it hardly need be pointed out. The source of the standard, however, being directly related to the means by which patriarchy is established and maintained in human society, can hardly be emphasized enough. And the double standard is nowhere more pronounced than in the mythical hero in whom sexual prowess is a natural display of heroism and, perforce, an ideal of the society which accepts him as hero.

## 2. Heracles and Omphale

After giving away Megara, Heracles goes looking for a new wife and hears that his friend Eurytus is offering to marry his daughter Iole to any archer who can outshoot him and his four sons. Heracles, of course, easily wins the contest but Eurytus reneges on the promise, blaming Heracles for getting rid of Megara after murdering her children. Upon which he drives Heracles out of the palace.

Here, in what seems to be a rather unfair twist to the tale, the only son of Eurytus who took Heracles' side, is tricked into believing that Heracles has stolen the twelve prized brood mares of his father, and dissembling, has himself invited as Heracles guest at the palace in Tiryns. Heracles, discerning that he is suspected and feeling himself unjustly so, leads Iphitus to the highest tower and pitches him off. Graves again seems to think that this murder is a metaphor for the sacrifice of the King's *tanist* at the end of the year or cycle of years for which the consort of the priestess queen was allowed to live. It must be noticed here, however skeptical one may be of such an interpretation, that the one who is killed is not the one that is inimical to Heracles, but the very one who takes his side against his brothers and father. This is reminiscent of friends throughout mythology beginning with Gilgamesh and Enkidu among others, one of whom comes to grief.

And now, again, as after murdering his own children, Heracles feels the need of purification. He goes to Neleus, King of Pylus for purification but Neleus

refuses. One of his sons, Nestor, does consent to do the job, but it apparently doesn't take since Heracles goes off again to the Delphic Oracle for enlightenment on how to be purified. The oracle, however, refuses, damning Heracles for murdering his guest.

Hospitality has certain rules in most societies, and though the trick of inviting enemies to a banquet or such and then doing them in when they get drunk is a treachery recurring throughout the history of every society, the fact that an invited enemy would even consider accepting such an invitation presumes that certain privileges are awarded "guests", privileges which derive from a certain duty on the host to honor anyone invited to his home. The breach of this code infuriates the Oracle. On the other hand, her refusal to help infuriates Heracles who plunders the shrine of its votive offerings and pulls away the tripod upon which the Pythoness, Xenoclea, sits.

The Delphic Oracle was called the "Pythoness" and was especially guarded by Python Apollo. This, however, is somewhat of an anomaly, since Apollo is a solar god, and the snake is most often seen in mythology as an associate of the moon goddess. In the first chapter of his work, *The Masks of God*, entitled *The Serpent's Bride*, Joseph Campbell quotes from Frazer's *Golden Bough*:

"... There is a grove dedicated to the god, with a circular enclosure, within which are snakes – playthings, surely for the god. And they are approached only by the maiden priestess. She is naked, and she brings to the snakes their food. These snakes are declared by the people of Epirus to be descended from the Python at Delphi. And now, if when the priestess approaches them the snakes are seen to be gentle, and if they take to their food kindly, this is said to mean that there will be a plentiful year and free from disease; but if they frighten her and do not take the honey cakes she offers, they portend the reverse."

Now, the snake is definitely associated with the agricultural societies worshipping the Great Mother and not with the male divinities of the shepherd societies. But this shrine at Delphi associated with Apollo is seen by Campbell, Frazer, Graves, and others, as an amalgam or compromise worked out, in a sense, so that male Apollo should maintain authority over the shrine, while the functions should belong to the goddess.

Another curious aspect of the Delphic Oracle is that it was considered the earth's navel, and in the shrine there was a white stone bound with a red ribbon to represent the navel and umbilical cord. This also would definitely refer to the life-giving power of the goddess. But in the story of Heracles, the tale is compounded further because Heracles is eventually told by the Pythoness to spend a year in servitude to Queen Omphale whose name means "navel". It is easy to imagine this relationship between Heracles and the Python, Heracles and Omphale, and even Heracles and Hera, as symbolizing what Neuman or Jung would call the restraining force brought to bear on the Hero by the Mother, and that exercised on the child by the human mother as Beauvoir describes. While Heracles fights with Apollo, they eventually take each other's hand in that friendship that seems

to be reserved for only male heroes in mythology, albeit, in this case, one is a god and the other only human.

Heracles fights with indignant Apollo, apparently on even terms until Zeus parts them with a thunderbolt, making them clasp hands in friendship. Whereupon Xenoclea gives Heracles the word that he will only be cleansed by being sold into slavery for one whole year. When Heracles asks who will buy him, he is told, "Omphale".

Heracles is taken to Asia by Hermes, the patron of all financial transactions and sold as a nameless slave to Omphale, as the Pythoness foretold. She was a queen who had been bequeathed her kingdom by her husband, Tmolus who had fallen in love with a huntress-attendant of Artemis. In spite of her protests he followed her to her mistress' temple and ravished her on the goddess' own couch. The girl hanged herself but Tmolus was killed by a mad bull sent by Artemis that tossed him into the air and onto some pointed stakes where he died. The mad bull can only remind the student of mythology of that begged by Ishtar from Anu to punish Gilgamesh for his rejection of her. It is almost too obvious that Ishtar and Artemis are indeed the same Great Mother figure who use the bull, the very symbol of fertility, to murder the transgressors against herself or her favorites.

Heracles does yeoman's service for Omphale, and several anecdotes are related in the mythology. Towards the end of his service he kills a gigantic serpent that had been destroying men and crops, and the grateful Omphale, finally discerning who he is, releases him and sends him back to Tiryns. Omphale, of course, had bought Heracles as a consort rather than a fighter, and he sired three, or perhaps four sons by her, each of who had illustrious offspring as befits the children of a hero.

The main episode that occurs while Heracles is with Omphale is the one in which Heracles and Omphale go out to visit the vineyards of Tmolus together. Omphale is seen by the god Pan who is stricken with love for her and vows he will love her forever. When Heracles and Omphale reach their destination it amuses them to exchange clothes and after dinner they sleep on separate couches in a grotto, having vowed a dawn sacrifice to Dionysus who requires marital purity on such occasions. Pan sneaks into the grotto in the dark and mistakes Heracles for Omphale because of the clothes. Heracles wakes up and kicks him across the room. Afterwards, much chagrined, Pan spreads the rumor that Heracles is a transvestite.

It is true that in some Cretan works of art at Knossus and elsewhere, men going to sacrifice wear woman's clothes. Graves feels that the story, while somewhat whimsical, would obliquely refer to an early stage of development in the sacred kingship from matriarchy to patriarchy wherein the king, as queen's consort, was allowed to make the sacrifices in her stead, dressed as the queen.

The episode does, in fact, give no apparent reason for Heracles and Omphale wanting to change clothes, and for modern Westerners, there could be little other reason than a certain trans-sexual tendency. But, considering the extent to which

heroes in general, and Heracles in particular, were considered "manly" by the Greeks, it would seem that there must have been some way at some time in which a man dressing as a woman would be considered a normal occurrence. The fact that Pan would be able to spread "rumors" that Heracles was a transvestite, however, would also indicate that at the time which this myth had reached its final form, transvestitism was considered unnatural, as it is today. The evolution of the myth perhaps parallels the evolution of the culture from matriarchy to patriarchy.

### 3. Hesione and other Heroic Tales

Among other adventures Heracles has is one in which he saves the maiden Hesione from the sea monster sent by Poseidon. This is an obvious reprise of the Perseus-Andromeda adventure, and both probably derive from images of the Sumerian myth wherein Marduk vanquishes the sea monster, Tiamat, who is an emanation of Ishtar. Heracles also offers to destroy the sea monster and does so by jumping down its throat and spending three days in its belly, losing all his hair in the struggle. The three days in the belly of the sea monster parallel those of Jonah in the Bible, and the loss of his hair Graves ascribes to symbolizing the waning of the power of the sun and the sacred king as the year reaches its end, and draws a parallel also with the story of Samson and Delilah.

Heracles proceeds to fight his battles and indeed, do everything in reprise of more ancient myths, including those in which he establishes the Olympic Games. This, however, is obviously an interpolation by a much later Greek mythic bard, as the Olympic Games became the calendar for the ancient Greeks who dated their beginning at 776 B. C., some five hundred years after the Trojan War is supposed to have been fought, during which, according to Homer, the games were introduced by Achilles in honor of the slain Patroclus, as is described in the 23rd book of the Iliad.

In Greek tradition the Olympic Games were instituted in honor of Zeus and were veritably religious ceremonies. It is difficult for the modern Western mind to understand an athletic contest in terms of religious worship unless the idea of the winner of a contest in some way attains a position of "godship" in one form or another. A clue to the psychology here may come from the Mayan culture of southern Mexico as it existed up until the invasions of the Spanish in the early 1600's. The Mayans have described in pictures contests much like modern soccer games in which the captain of the winning team, *not that of the losing team*, was sacrificed as the the fertility god of that year. The Olympic Games apparently originated in a contest or contests to determine the god or king for that year who was to be sacrificed at its end.

Attributing the institution of the Olympic Games to a hero such as Heracles or Achilles would be a natural inclination as the winner of the Games would be the epitome of the hero, albeit, a short-lived one. Graves even draws attention to the awarding of the crown of laurel, which may have been mistletoe, to the

winner as the crowning of the soon-to-be-sacrificed king with the bow of magically fertilizing properties, as described in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Another thing that befalls Heracles is being wounded in the thigh when he attacks Sparta to punish the sons of Hippocoon. He is soon healed by Asclepius but the wound in the thigh is significant in its indication of sacredness. Jacob being wounded in the thigh by the archangel after a night-long wrestling match is part of the same tradition. The thighs were considered by Greeks and other ancients, including the Hebrews, as sacred portions of the body, the most appropriate for burnt offerings, and the mark of a god, as, for example, Hephaestus, Aphrodite's husband, or Ares, who is wounded in the thigh during battle by Heracles himself. Graves, in his novel, *King Jesus*, gives Jesus a disfigured thigh after a struggle with some Kenites as an indication of his kingship and Messiahship, as prefigured by the wounding of Jacob by the archangel.

#### 4. Heracles and Deianeira

Heracles, having no legitimate offspring, decides to find a wife, and courts Deianeira, the supposed daughter of Oeneus, but, in reality, the daughter of Dionysius. He has to contest for her hand with the river god, Achelous, who he handily defeats. After marrying Deianeira and going off on some more adventures, he accidentally kills a kinsman of Oeneus at a feast by cuffing him a bit too hard for being clumsy. He feels he must atone for this by going into exile with Deianeira. They start off and come to the river Evenus in flood where the Centaur Nessus offers to carry Deianeira across for a small fee while Heracles swims. Heracles throws his club and bow over and plunges in, after which Nessus takes off with Deianeira in the other direction. Then he throws Deianeira to the ground trying to violate her but Heracles grabs his bow and puts an arrow into Nessus. Nessus wrenches the arrow out and tells Deianeira that by mixing his blood with olive oil and anointing Heracles' shirt with the mixture, Heracles will be cured of unfaithfulness, then dies. Deianeira puts the ingredients in a jar and keeps it without telling anyone. At this point Heracles has already become the father of four boys and a daughter (his only one) by Deianeira.

Heracles then chooses this time to revenge himself on King Eurytus for reneging on his promise to give him his daughter Iole in marriage after having been beaten in the archery match. He gathers allies and storms Oechalia, the city of King Eurytus, and captures Iole who watches him kill her entire family rather than yield to him. She then jumps off the walls of the city but is saved by her billowing skirts. Graves assumes that this episode has its source in a Mycenaean picture which showed the goddess Demeter, corn goddess, hovering in protection over the city Oechalia, "House of Flour".

#### 5. Apotheosis of Heracles

Heracles sends Iole back to Deianeira and prepares to perform the thanksgiving rites to his father Zeus for the victory at Oechalia, asking Deianeira to send him

a new shirt and cloak for the occasion. Deianeira does not exactly enjoy having Heracles' latest mistress living under the same roof with her at Trachis, and decides to use the potion given her by Nessus to insure Heracles' love for her. She soaks wool in the liquid, weaves Heracles a shirt from it, and sends it off to Heracles by the courier Lichas. Only after he has left on the return journey to Oechalia does Deianeira discover part of the wool that was left over burning on exposure to sunlight. She immediately perceives that she has been tricked by Nessus and sends a messenger after Lichas. The messenger arrives too late to stop Heracles from putting on the shirt and sacrificing twelve bulls to Zeus. But the heat from the sacrifice melts the poison in Nessus' blood which then covers Heracles and rots his flesh. The pain is unbearable and Heracles rages, overturns altars and throws himself into the nearest stream to no avail. He comes upon Lichas cowering in the woods and throws him into the sea. He intends to go and kill Deianeira but she kills herself first in remorse, and Heracles is convinced that she is innocent. Heracles then asks Hyllas, one of his sons by Deianeira, that he be taken to the top of a mountain and burnt and then makes Hyllas promise to marry Iole when he comes of age. Hyllas, though scandalized by these requests, promises to carry them out.

A pyre is prepared and, as his companions look on, Heracles climbs atop it and asks that the pyre be kindled. No one dares until the son of a passing shepherd is induced to perform the task. As the flames rise Heracles spreads his lion's pelt cloak on the wood and lies down upon it. Then thunderbolts shriek down from the sky and the pyre is at once consumed.

Zeus, in Olympia, is proud that his son has acted so nobly, and commands that the gods and goddesses prepare to receive Heracles as one of their number. Hera grumbles but goes along, content to have the shepherd's son who lit the pyre bitten by a snake. And thus, Heracles, his mortal body consumed, arrives in Olympia a divine being, riding on a chariot sent by Zeus to fetch him and greeted by Athena.

Zeus also persuades Hera to adopt him by the ceremony of rebirth, that is by going to bed, pretending to be in labor, and then producing him from under her skirts. This Hera does and from thenceforth loves Heracles as a son, marrying him to her daughter Hebe.

The death of Heracles would again seem to symbolize the death of the king-consort to the great mother. The person lighting the fire is the tanist who would replace the king and marry the queen, in this case Iole, and then in turn be killed by a snake's bite at the end of his term, with the snake again appearing as the symbol of the Great Mother.

That Heracles becomes a god is necessarily of later mythic conception, since Homer, in the *Odyssey*, places his shade in Tartarus. It was undoubtedly the fact that the myths achieved written form somewhat around 750 B. C. after the Greek acceptance of a Phoenician alphabet that the evolution of the myths was delayed and finally stopped around the fourth century B. C. In this case, the

earliest records, as we may call the *Odyssey*, disagree with those coming only slightly afterwards, such as Hesiod, in making Heracles a god or a mortal.

## 6. Conclusion

As mentioned in the previous paper, that Heracles should be a god is somewhat in opposition to the nature of a hero in that the hero must represent the human in order that he help humanity realize its potential in the struggle against its fate. In *Gilgamesh* we saw the necessary reconciliation of man to his fate of death. In Heracles, however, in the finished form of the myth, we have a hero overcoming death, achieving a happy end that one may expect from a modern action drama or movie. It is definitely the popular will to achieve such an ending. I believe, however, that this is not only *not* the original form of the myth, it also goes against the purpose of hero-type myth, in so far as it can be said to have an independent purpose.

I suggest that the stories of Heracles are derived from the unconscious desire to express the struggle of humankind against fate, be it expressed in monsters, war, individual combat, or the Great Mother, and in the birth of a heroic tale, identification with the hero is a basic necessity. With this identification comes a certain fatalistic knowledge that denies final victory to the mortal. As long as the naturally desired end of overcoming is balanced with a realistic, fatalistic awareness of mortality, the myth serves as a vehicle for the human, and expresses his ideals. When, however, mortality is taken from the hero, the ability of the mortal to identify is also taken away.

Modern movie heroes such as Superman or Rockie must have weaknesses that are conceived of as being plausible in order that the tales about them achieve popularity, that is, that people may identify with them. The ability to identify with Superman is his apparently very human appearance as Clark Kent, but one of the basic difficulties with Superman stories is how to make him weak enough to create the plausibility of his downfall. Too many "magic bullets", for example, which hit only enemies but never scratch the hero eventually make a war drama implausible and then unpopular.

The tales of Heracles are in many ways similar to movies about Superman, Rockie, or Luke Skywalker. They express the ideals and feelings of the people and give them someone "heroic" with whom to identify. Unfortunate from one point of view is that their popularity produces sequels which emphasize the most popular aspects of the previous tale, more strength, more power, but less weakness and less mortality. The tales of Heracles, which originated, I believe, as stories which expressed not only the ideals and longings of the people, but in a psychological sense, the struggle to human consciousness, became the equivalent of a weekly TV series in which the hero has a weekly enemy to overcome and does so with very predictable regularity.

Perhaps as the ancient world achieved a certain freedom from the thrall of a religion which was bound to the eternal return of the seasons, and the Great

Mother who not only gave life, but took it away with absolute jealousy toward all its aspects, people had less need of perfect identification and could allow the hero final victory. I would say, however, that tragic drama is nearer to the earlier heroic myths than are the adventures of Superman or Dirty Harry. Tragedy, while it may burden the imagination with sorrow, carries with it a universal realization of the human condition. For that reason, I would not characterize the myths of Heracles in their final form, as the most creative and expressive of the ideals of the ancient Greeks. But remaining within them are clues to the values of those people, and what they perceived as the fate against which they were forced to struggle.

#### Footnotes:

1. Beauvoir, Simone de; *The Second Sex*: trans. H. M. Parshley: (New York: Bantam Books, 1961); pp. 40-96.
2. Hite, Shere; *The Hite Report*: (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1976); pp. 240ff.
3. Campbell, Joseph; *Occidental Mythology, The Masks of God*: (New York: Penguin Books, 1964): p. 20.
4. Graves, Robert; *The Greek Myths*: (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955); vol. 2, p. 162.
5. Frazer, J. G.; *The Golden Bough*; (London: Macmillan Press, 1922).
6. Graves, Robert; *King Jesus*; (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1946).

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