

CHAPTER 10 HEROES AND HEROINES OF MYTH

MAIN POINTS

1. The adventures of the Greek heroes typically follow a traditional pattern. The hero is often born in an unusual fashion, faces great danger early in life, and possesses great powers. On reaching adulthood, seeking to test his own powers, he embarks on a quest or series of quests during which he will learn about himself, his society, and his universe.
2. The hero's trip to the Underworld has been interpreted as a descent into the "womb" of the Earth-goddess, connecting the masculine ego of the hero with the feminine principle, the unconscious, or the realm of the instincts. Rejoining the animus with the anima, the psyche can be made whole.
3. The hero figure is isolated by his own uniqueness in striving toward excess and immortality. Gilgamesh also personifies this trait. This isolation extends to relationships with women, since domestic contentment can distract the hero from his task.
4. The hero is a phenomenon of a fallen world and has a redemptive function. By his half-divine nature, his glorious deeds, and his relentless pursuit of immortality, the hero uplifts humanity from its dismal condition and reminds us of our godlike potential.
5. In his role as protector of society, the hero is also a divided being. Paradoxically, the hero's great warrior skills, his potential for violence, and his often rash nature themselves become destructive and dangerous.
6. Most heroes are deified and enjoy veneration in cult. Example: Oedipus experiences apotheosis (transformation into a god) and will be a blessing spirit for the land.
7. The pattern of the heroic career includes miraculous conception/birth, threat to the hero in infancy and later, journeys and tasks, a return to society with a new understanding.
8. Perseus, one of the earliest Greek heroes, shares some characteristics with later heroes, but an important difference is that he maintains mutually supportive relationships with women. He may be a product of the time when goddess-worship was still widespread.
9. Perseus's special conception/birth: Danae was impregnated by Zeus, who assumed the form of a golden shower. Threat: Acrisius put Danae and Perseus into a chest and set them adrift on the sea. Quest: to protect Danae, Perseus seeks the head of the Gorgon, Medusa. Athene and the Graiae (who represent an aspect of the Great Goddess) help him with magic weapons.
10. Perseus uses his shield as a mirror when he attacks Medusa. He kills her. Pegasus springs from her neck.
11. Medusa is a complex figure. Her wings and hair of snakes are inherited from the ancient goddess. The Egyptian goddess Isis likewise was often depicted as a winged goddess.
12. Perseus saves the princess Andromeda, returns home, and saves his mother. He then returns his weapons to Athene.
13. The Perseus myth has an etiological function, as it explains the origin of several constellations. Perseus himself achieves immortality in the heavens.

NOTE: In one version of the myth of Medusa, Athene becomes jealous of Medusa's beauty and makes her so horrible to look at (hair of snakes) that all who look directly at her are turned to stone. Perhaps Athene's continued jealousy partly motivates her encouragement of Perseus to behead Medusa.

14. A new patriarchal type of hero succeeds Perseus: Bellerophon riding the Pegasus.

15. Heracles is semidivine, like Perseus, but more troubled and troubling than he. Heracles's characteristics: unnaturally brave and strong, protective of society, and capable of animal-like behavior.
16. Heracles's conception and birth: Zeus, disguised as Alcmene's husband, impregnates her. Threat: Hera is angry and threatens him in various ways. Quest: the Twelve Labors.
17. Heracles embodies the heroic predicament of how to fulfill the demand for godlike knowledge and achievement while bound to a mortal body. At the same time, such a hero is a threat to the gods.
18. Heracles's divided nature, half-man, half-beast, echoes that of the centaurs; the multiple associations of the hero with beasts suggest the battle with the beast within. Trained to use his strength to kill, how does a hero control the violence when he leaves the battlefield?
19. The Twelve Labors are Heracles's punishment for killing his wife, Megara, and their children in a fit of rage.
20. Heracles fulfills the hero's most significant function: to extend the parameters of human experience, imagination, and knowledge. In his journeys to the Underworld, he transcends the limits of the human condition and achieves a form of immortality.
21. Heracles's death is caused by his new wife, Deianeira, who tries to tame him. Some versions of the myth explain that Heracles's soul goes to the Underworld, while his reputation is immortal. Other versions tell of his upraising to heaven by the gods. Homer says that his human part remains in Hades while his divine self resides with the gods.
22. Theseus was the son of Aegeus or, in another version, of Poseidon. To claim his inheritance, he meets a challenge and is thus recognized as royal prince of Athens.
23. Theseus goes to Crete where he confronts and kills the Minotaur with the assistance of Ariadne. He deserts Ariadne after the adventure is over. Generally, in fact, his relationships with women—Helen, Persephone, Hippolyte, and Phaedra, as well as Ariadne—are unhappy.
24. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur may represent a shift in political power relations at the end of the Minoan Period, despite the fact that Theseus himself may be a later construction of Athenian mythology.
25. Despite political problems, Theseus unifies Athens.
26. Jason is grandson of the wind god Aeolus. Like Theseus, he has to meet a challenge to claim his inheritance. Threatened by his uncle Peleus, who does not wish to recognize Jason as rightful king, he goes in quest of the Golden Fleece. He sails in a ship named Argo with a crew called Argonauts.
27. Jason's helper-maiden is a protegee of Hecate, Medea. The power of Hecate helps Jason obtain the fleece and escape; Jason's quest is less heroic than quests of previous heroes since it deteriorates into a search for wealth and status.
28. Jason and Medea have to take refuge in Corinth when they antagonize the people of Iolchos. At Corinth, they produce two children. Jason deserts Medea. Medea, in revenge, wreaks havoc.
29. In her role as the source of fertility, as in her connection with dragons—the dragon who guards the Golden Fleece and the winged dragon who pulls the chariot—Medea carries out the creative and transformative functions of the ancient Goddess.
30. Jason dies when a ship's beam hits him on the head; contrary to previous heroes, he is not elevated to divine status.
31. Heracleian hero myths often emphasize that the hero is half-human and half-divine; other myths give an alternative perspective by reminding the Greeks of the ideal of

moderation. In his nature, which mingles strengths with attendant weaknesses, the hero urges consideration of human potential and also human shadows and the need to observe limits.

NOTE: The ideal of moderation became an integral part of later Greek virtue ethics. In the fourth century B.C., the philosopher Aristotle outlined the rule of the Golden Mean, which states that a good person must strive for the proper balance between too much and too little effort and feeling. In the story of Icarus, the son of Daedalus, he is given a pair of wax wings by his father so that they can escape the wrath of King Minos after Daedalus helped Theseus. Icarus does not heed his father's advice of moderate flying and flies so close to the sun that his wings melt; he falls into the sea and drowns. The flight of Icarus is traditionally used as an example of hubris, overblown confidence in oneself, but since Icarus refuses to listen to his father's advice of not flying too low or too high, it is also a classic example of the Greek moral value of doing things in the right amount, not too much or too little. See also Chapter 21.

32. Phaethon, the son of Helios, asks his father if he can drive the chariot of the sun for a day. Helios agrees, but Phaethon loses control of the horses, creating the Milky Way and setting fire to the earth. To save the earth, Zeus kills Phaethon with a lightning bolt. Moral: Even a semidivine being must observe certain limits or face disastrous consequences.
33. There are striking women in Greek myth but, unlike the heroes, they are rarely viewed as role models for the young.
34. The role of heroine in Greek mythology reflects the role of women in Greek society: submissive, obedient, and loyal.
35. The "heroine" usually does not go on a quest, engage in combat, or seek immortality.
36. The best-known rite of passage for young Greek women was the Brauronia, celebrated at Artemis's temple at Brauron, near Athens. The ritual is a collective celebration in which young girls dressed as bears dance in recognition of their wild nature before settling into the married life of the adult female.
37. There are several patterns of "heroism" for women. First, the woman may be the "perfect" mother (Semele, Danae) or wife (Alcestis, Andromache) of the hero. Mothers must consort with the divine, which often ends unhappily. Marriage to a hero also often proves deadly.
38. The woman may become the "Bride of Death" (Iphigenia, Cassandra, Antigone) by choosing, for some reason, death rather than marriage.
39. She may be a helper-maiden (Medea, Ariadne). If she becomes sexually involved with the hero, he deserts her. Athene is the model for the helper-maiden, but her divine status protects her from such serious complications.
40. Some women (Atalanta, Agave) are "hero impersonators." Such a woman challenges expectations, but since there is no socially acceptable avenue for such challenge, her attempt is doomed. She is often described as "monstrous" or "manlike." No glory awaits her efforts.
41. Greek myth includes stories of a very few "victorious" heroines (Nausicaa, Penelope). Such women use their wits to maintain a certain sort of independence.
42. Psyche, a victorious heroine, appears only in a late source. She marries Eros, travels to the Underworld, completes labors. She is assisted by nature. She falls into a deep sleep and awakens, changed, a mature woman ready for real marriage. She does not avoid marriage.

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Perseus, Greek hero

Danae, his mother

Acrisius, her father

Dictys, Perseus's foster father

King Polydectes, Dictys's brother

Athene

The Graeae, three old hags with one eye between them

Medusa, one of the three Gorgon sisters; turns men into stone

Pegasus, the winged horse

Andromeda, Ethiopian princess, later Perseus's wife

Bellerophon, Pegasus's rider

Heracles, the strong hero

Gilgamesh, king of Uruk

Hera

Megara, Heracles's first wife

Deianeira, Heracles's second wife

Nessus, a centaur

Theseus, Greek hero, son of Aethra and Aegeus (or Poseidon)

Aegeus, his father, the king of Athens

Ariadne, daughter of King Minos

Daedalus, Minoan inventor

Hippolyte, the Amazon queen

Hippolytus, her son with Theseus, accused of raping Phaedra

Phaedra, Ariadne's sister, Theseus's wife

Jason, Greek hero, grandson of the wind god Aeolus

The Argonauts, Jason's fellow heroes, the crew of the ship Argos

Aeson of Iolcos, Jason's father

Pelias, Aeson's brother

Chiron, the centaur who reared Jason and taught Asclepius

Medea, the daughter of Aetes, king of Colchis

Phaethon, son of Helios and mortal Clymene

Helios, the sun god

Asclepius, the first physician

Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods

Amazons, a race of warlike, outside-living, free women who live on the edge of the world

Alcestis, wife who agrees to die in the place of her husband Admetus

Ariadne, Cretan princess who helps Theseus in his confrontation with the Minotaur

Atalanta, a strong and energetic young woman who resists marriage and challenges suitors

Agave, mother of Pentheus, whom she kills in a Dionysian frenzy

Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, whom she kills in revenge for her daughter Iphigenia

Iphigenia, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, who offered her as a sacrifice in order to advance his war effort

Nausicaa, princess of Phaeacia, who meets the bedraggled Odysseus on the beach and assists his reception at the court of her mother and father

Penelope, wife of Odysseus, his equal in initiative and daring, who acts the helper-maiden for him upon his return to Ithaca

Psyche, the young woman ("Soul") who marries Eros and must go on a quest to recover his love