



Heracles's Twelve Labors

Author: Pseudo-Apollodorus
Time Period: 999 BCE–1 BCE
Country or Culture: Greek
Genre: Myth

OVERVIEW

The great warrior Heracles (more commonly known by his Roman name, Hercules) is the subject of a large range of myths and legends. Carrying a wooden club and wearing the fur of a lion, he battles his way across Greek and Roman mythology, crushing poisonous snakes with his bare hands as a baby, sacking the great city of Troy, and adventuring in new lands with the legendary Argonauts. He seems to be in a continuous process of falling in and out love, fathering fifty sons at one moment and building a shrine to his fallen male lover in the next. Representing the heights of masculinity, heroism, and strength, Heracles and his myths are dominant forces in Greek mythology. It is the story of his twelve labors, however, that is most familiar to modern audiences.

The story of Heracles's twelve labors is an important component of both the life of Heracles and the progression of Greek mythology. Before the myth properly begins, Heracles is driven into a rage by the goddess Hera. Heracles is the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, and jealous Hera, the immortal wife of Zeus, makes a project out of tormenting the earthly hero. In that rage, Heracles slaughters his children. Seeking forgiveness, he visits the oracle of Delphi and is ordered to serve his cousin Eurystheus, the king of Tiryns. Hera and Eurystheus then set Heracles to his labors, which are designed to kill the hero, testing his strength, endurance, and wit in the most extreme of circumstances.

The myth is an engaging and thrilling read, as Heracles completes seemingly impossible tasks and encounters the greatest monsters and gods of all Greek mythology. However, the myth is most important on a symbolic level. Greek culture separated the realm of the earth and mortality (the chthonic realm) from that of the

sky and immortality (the Olympian realm). The tale of Heracles's twelve labors is the story of the chthonic and mortal hero proving his might and elevating himself to the Olympian realm. He is a champion of Greek civilization and of the immortal Olympians who lord above it. Because of this, as he conquers the great beasts of the wilderness and vanquishes entire armies, he is demonstrating the power and value of the chthonic and Olympian realms both. When he completes his final task and returns from the underworld, he represents the ultimate triumph, moving beyond the confines of mortality and becoming a deity. The rare story of a chthonic hero overcoming his own nature, the myth of Heracles's labors speaks to the hopes of Greek civilization and to the belief that within one's earthly self might rest something heroic, legendary, and immortal.

SUMMARY

The son of the god Zeus and the mortal Alcmene, Heracles is both blessed and cursed from the start of his life. Incredibly mighty and heroic, he accomplishes feats of great strength at a young age. However, the goddess Hera, Zeus's wife, decides to punish Heracles in order to take revenge for her husband's infidelities. One day she drives Heracles into a frenzy, during which he kills his children. When Heracles then goes to the oracle of Delphi to seek forgiveness, Hera influences the oracle, who tells Heracles that he must swear allegiance to his mortal cousin Eurystheus for twelve years, after which he will be redeemed and gain immortality. Hera, who is in league with Eurystheus, plans to set Heracles to such great tasks during this time that he will meet his mortal death.

Eurystheus immediately orders Heracles to complete ten great labors, which Heracles attempts with legendary heroism. First, he slays the Nemean lion, an invulnerable beast born to the monster Typhon. When he brings the body of the beast back to Eurystheus, Eurystheus realizes how strong Heracles truly is and commands

“When Hercules [Heracles] asked Pluto [Hades] for Cerberus, Pluto ordered him to take the animal provided he mastered him without the use of the weapons which he carried. Hercules found him at the gates of Acheron, and, cased in his cuirass and covered by the lion’s skin, he flung his arms round the head of the brute, and though the dragon in its tail bit him, he never relaxed his grip and pressure till it yielded.”

Bibliotheca

that he never enter the city again and instead bring proof that he has completed each task to the city gates. Next, Heracles slays the Lernaean hydra, a nine-headed beast that had been killing cattle throughout the countryside. When he fights the monster, he realizes that for every head he cuts off, two more grow in its place, and so he instructs his nephew, Iolaus, to burn the necks to prevent new heads from growing back. Eurystheus, however, denies the success of this labor, as Iolaus had assisted Heracles in the battle.

For his third labor, Heracles captures the Cerynithian hind, a beast precious to the goddess Artemis, after chasing it for an entire year. Next, he goes to capture the Erymanthian boar. While this task is simple compared to the others, Heracles stops to visit the centaur Pholus and, after being convinced to drink the wine that belongs to the other centaurs, finds himself in a bloody battle when those centaurs return. For his fifth labor, Heracles is ordered to dispose of the dung of the cattle of King Augeas in a single day. The son of a god, Augeas has seemingly endless cattle. After convincing the king to pay him for the work, Heracles redirects mighty rivers into the cattle yards, washing the dung away. However, Eurystheus rejects this labor on the grounds that Heracles received payment for completing it.

For his sixth labor, Heracles chases away the birds of Stymphalus by clanging together castanets given to him by the goddess Athena. Next, he captures the Cretan

bull, showing it to Eurystheus before letting it go free again. For his eighth labor, he captures the man-eating mares of King Diomedes, the son of the god Ares. In addition to slaying Diomedes and taking the mares, Heracles founds a new city on the grave of Abderus, who had been the mares’ caretaker before dying during the battle. For his ninth labor, Heracles goes to fetch the belt of Hippolyte, who is the queen of the Amazons, a community of fierce warrior women. On the way to Hippolyte, he slays a massive army that attacks his ships. Hippolyte at first offers the belt freely, but Hera, disguised as an Amazon, convinces the female army to attack Heracles, and so he is forced to kill them all. Next, Heracles travels a great distance and kills many people in order to fetch the cattle of Geryon, a monster with the body of three men.

Eight years and one month after the start of the labors, Heracles finishes the tenth task. However, because he received help with the second labor and payment for the fifth, Eurystheus requires two more tasks of him. For his eleventh labor, Heracles must fetch the apples of the Hesperides from the ends of the earth, where they are guarded by the Hesperides themselves as well as an immortal dragon. Rather than steal the apples himself, however, he convinces the Titan Atlas to do so for him. Because Atlas has been punished by Zeus and tasked with holding up the sky, Heracles takes his position temporarily and tricks Atlas into holding the sky when he returns. Finally, Heracles enters the underworld itself to capture Cerberus, a three-headed hellhound with the tail of a dragon. After successfully wrestling the beast without using weapons, Heracles is allowed to bring it to the gates of Eurystheus, though he returns it shortly after. With this final labor complete, Heracles concludes his obligation to Eurystheus, having done exactly as the oracle of Delphi asked of him years before.

ANALYSIS

The lyric poet Pindar, one of the most influential poets of ancient Greece, describes Heracles with the term *heraos theos*, meaning that he is both a hero and a god. This epithet captures the core of the myth that surrounds Heracles. Born to a mortal mother from her union with an immortal god, living as the greatest earthly hero before ascending to the heights of Mount Olympus, and at once cursed and blessed by the most powerful deities in the Greek pantheon, Heracles is the rare figure that transcends the divide between the realm of the mortals and that of the gods.

As Heracles's most famous myth, the story of the twelve labors offers a detailed exploration of how the mortal hero ascended to the heights of immortality. The world of Greek mythology was split between the chthonic realm and the Olympian realm. The term "chthonic" refers to things that are of the earth, which in Greek culture encompassed humanity, the underworld, death, monsters, and heroes. Temples were built to chthonic figures, particularly by cults devoted to heroes, and sacrifices were made at these locations prior to similar sacrifices to the gods. The Olympian realm, in contrast, was the fixed and relatively inflexible world of the sky, Mount Olympus, and the Greek pantheon. While mortals regularly entered the world of chthonic heroes after death, those worshipped in the Olympian realm never died, living on in the heights of the sky. The labors of Heracles, then, are the challenges that the mortal hero must overcome in order to become immortal, as declared by the oracle of Delphi. Because of this, the long list of battles and tribulations can be understood not as arbitrary wars with monsters and warriors but as one man triumphing above the chthonic realm, conquering earthly things with such might that he ultimately ascends as an Olympian deity.

Although Heracles is not fully mortal in lineage (Zeus, his father, is the god of the sky and the most powerful force associated with the Olympian pantheon), it is important that from the start of his twelve labors, he is firmly and unambiguously a chthonic hero and not an extension of the Olympic world he champions. This is almost always the case for a figure born to a mortal mother and an immortal father, but in the instance of Heracles, it is particularly important to understand his mortality and his connection to the earth. The fact of his mortality is made clear first by the oracle, who declares that he can only become immortal by completing his vassalage to Eurystheus, and second by the scheming of Hera, who intends to kill him through the extremity of the labors. It is also, importantly, because of his chthonic origin that Hera torments him in the first place, angered by the insult of her divine husband taking a mortal woman as a partner. Heracles, then, is entirely of the earthly realm and, as such, fits in the long tradition of folk heroes in Greek and pre-Greek culture. His masculinity, skill as a warrior, sexual appetite (he has hundreds of partners, both male and female), and adventuresome spirit identify him as a typical Greek hero whose role is to protect and champion Greek civilization in the face of the chthonic threats of monsters, the natural world,

and death. Through figures such as Heracles, the people of Greece could see their own triumph as the greatest people in the chthonic realm.

The labors of Hercules, then, are labors in which Hercules conquers the chthonic realm to which he belongs, facing the most dangerous elements and monsters the world has to offer. His first task, that of killing the Nemean lion, makes this clear. The Nemean lion is the child of Typhon, the greatest of all the monsters in Greek mythology, and the grandchild of Gaia, the goddess of the earth itself and one of the few immortal deities to be associated with the chthonic. By facing the Nemean lion, Heracles is directly battling the ideal of the chthonic monster. It is important also that at this time in Greek history, lions had likely not been brought to the Greek state and instead had only been learned about through travels. Therefore, the Nemean lion with its invulnerable pelt also represents the fear of the unknown in the natural world, the rumor of great beasts outside the protection of Greek civilization. When Heracles tracks down this beast and defeats it, his triumph represents the triumph of all Greek people over the mysterious beasts and threats of foreign lands. A similar interpretation can be applied to the Lernaean hydra, the beast of the second labor and also a child of Typhon.

The first labor also includes an important aside that helps define the meaning of Heracles's quest. Before approaching the Nemean lion, Heracles comes across a man who is preparing to make his regular sacrifice to the beast. Heracles stops him, however, and insists that the man wait. If Heracles dies in battle, he instructs, the man should make the sacrifice to him as a hero. If Heracles succeeds, the sacrifice should be made instead to Zeus. Had Heracles perished, he would have fit neatly into the tradition of hero cults that celebrated many historical and legendary figures from the chthonic realm. Put another way, in death, his mortality would be official, thus making Heracles a hero. However, in conquering the beast, Heracles instead directs the man's sacrifice toward Zeus and the Olympian realm. This is important in that while Heracles fulfills the trajectory of the hero and champions Greek society, he also transcends that role, directing the glory not to himself but to the gods. From the start, he is crossing the divide between the chthonic and the Olympian, acting as a champion of both realms at once.

The first two labors having proven that Heracles is mighty enough to conquer any dangerous beast, the next labors test a different set of skills. Instead of vanquishing

a fearsome monster, Heracles must capture a hind (deer) and a boar. While Eurystheus selects mystical versions of these animals, with the hind being faster than an arrow and the boar fearsome and strong, they are both animals that are the common objects of hunts. In capturing the boar and the hind, Heracles represents the success of mortals in conquering the natural world to provide food and sustenance for themselves. This is stressed through the fact that the hind is the sacred animal of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, while the boar likewise roams in the forests that Artemis sometimes calls home. In capturing the hind, Heracles angers Artemis, who comes to stop him accompanied by her brother, Apollo. However, Artemis hears Heracles's story and comes to approve, giving his mortal task the blessing of an immortal. This again blends together the chthonic and the Olympian, with Heracles's success dependent on both his earthly skills and the blessing of the gods.

The fourth and fifth labors involve side stories in which there is conflict between Heracles and centaurs, moments that heighten the tension between humanity and the natural world. Centaurs, in their half-human and half-horse form, often represent the link between civilization and wilderness. This dual nature makes centaurs seem monstrous to many humans in Greek mythology, especially as they seem to suggest that humans themselves might still have feral, unsophisticated elements to their being. Heracles encounters and, through violence, conquers this nature in both labors. In the fourth, he visits a centaur friend, Pholus, who in entertaining Heracles and offering him wine demonstrates that it is possible to overcome one's bestial nature and embrace civilization. However, the other centaurs succumb to their wild roots, attacking Heracles and meeting their death. The other centaur to whom Heracles expresses affection is Chiron, a legendary teacher and giver of wisdom in Greek mythology. When Heracles inadvertently injures Chiron with an arrow, he rushes forth to remove the weapon, which suggests that even as he conquers the animal instinct of some centaurs, he still respects the wisdom available through the natural world and humanity's own conflicted nature. Likewise, Heracles pauses during his fifth labor in order to kill a centaur who plans to take a human woman as a wife. This follows the labor in which Heracles cleans the massive stalls of a thousand cattle and demonstrates the dominance of domestication and farming over chthonic beasts. These two examples make clear the relationship between Heracles and the natural world: humans can gain wisdom from their own

animal natures, but only if they conquer those natures and take care not to indulge them too fully (as in the carnal relationship suggested by the marriage between centaur and human).

The risk of unleashing the wild nature of beasts within humanity is realized in the sixth, seventh, and eighth labors. In these tasks, Heracles captures first the violent Stymphalian birds, then the legendarily fierce bull of Crete, and finally the man-eating mares of the warrior king Diomedes. In every instance, Heracles successfully captures or defeats the animals. However, other myths reveal that the birds of Stymphalian go on to pester the legendary heroes known as the Argonauts. Similarly, the story of the seventh labor mentions that Heracles eventually sets the Cretan bull free, after which it begins to harass the people of the city of Marathon. These instances show that the beasts, even once conquered, can again wreck havoc if they are unleashed within civilization. In contrast, the flesh-eating mares are likewise released but instead make their way to Mount Olympus, the home of the gods. The beasts are quickly destroyed by the animals of the mountains, suggesting that the Olympian realm (in contrast to the chthonic realm) has nothing to fear from untamed wilderness.

While the first eight labors pit Heracles against the beasts of the earth, the ninth and tenth labors amplify the danger and the level of his challenge. He has already, in diverse ways, proven his superiority over the greatest of monsters. However, he has not proven similar superiority over other humans, a necessary step if he is going to elevate himself to the status of the immortals. In the ninth labor, he battles the legendary Amazons, a group of fierce women warriors, as well as the armies of a number of other leaders and warriors. While at first Heracles's reputation is such that Hippolyte, the ruler of the Amazons, offers him the belt requested by Eurystheus freely, Hera spreads discontent among the Amazons, resulting in the battle. These battles do not represent Heracles turning against or conquering human civilization, but rather serve to demonstrate his godlike superiority in military matters. The armies he slaughters are massive, yet the hero does not tire, pressing on toward victory.

Heracles also challenges the core elements of the natural world in the ninth and tenth labors. Once again, this is a heightened conflict in comparison to what came before, emphasizing that Heracles is not only demonstrating superiority over untamed nature but also reaching total deification, which will separate him from the chthonic realm. During these labors, Heracles

MYTH INTO ART

Widely considered the greatest artist of the Italian Renaissance, Michelangelo frequently drew inspiration from the myths of Greek antiquity. His drawing “Three Labors of Hercules” depicts the hero fighting with the Nemean lion, with Antaeus, and finally with the hydra. The drawing does not include the intense attention to detail that characterizes Michelangelo’s more famous works, such as the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. However, it conveys the typically Renaissance sense of grandeur that defines the time period.

Like many of his contemporaries, Michelangelo was interested in large, expressive, ornate art that inspired awe in its audience. He was drawn to sprawling narratives and dramatic details, such as the biting heads of the hydra and the torn mouth of the lion depicted in his drawing. In this sense, classical antiquity was a fertile source of inspiration for the artist.

Stories such as the myth of Heracles’s twelve labors are packed with action and grand themes, such as the struggle for immortality.

In “Three Labors of Hercules,” Michelangelo draws not only from the narrative details of the Heracles myth but also from styles and poses from mythology. It was common in ancient times to carve sequences of drawings (often even of Heracles) onto sarcophagi or other objects or structures. The progression of poses Michelangelo selects here mimics many of those sequences as well as similar drawings of Heracles by other Renaissance painters and artists. While not rendered at the grand scale of some of his other works, Michelangelo’s drawing shows that the legendary hero was thrilling enough to capture the eye of one of the most gifted and dramatic artists of all time.

comes into continual conflict with humans fathered and monsters formed by Poseidon, the god of the sea. Poseidon is associated with terrible floods and earthquakes, natural disasters that seemed to rise spontaneously from the earth to destroy civilization. When Poseidon sends sea monsters toward coastal cities during the labors, however, Heracles quickly destroys those monsters in battle. In a similar move, exhausted by the heat of the sun, Heracles turns his bow and arrow toward the sky. While he certainly cannot defeat the sun and the sky in battle, the god of the sun is pleased by Heracles’s courage and rewards him with a golden goblet in which to sail safely.

With the original ten labors complete, Heracles has demonstrated his mastery over all aspects of the chthonic realm. He has killed the monsters of unknown lands, has domesticated the wildest beasts of Greece, has overcome the elements, and has vanquished entire armies. This mastery more than fulfills the qualifications for becoming a legendary hero and inspiring a chthonic cult. However, as the oracle has promised, Heracles is destined for an even greater place in mythology, and consequently, he must complete two more tasks that extend beyond the realm of the earthly hero.

For the eleventh task, Heracles must fetch the apples from the garden of the Hesperides. This garden, located

in the distant west, far away from Greece, is the property of Hera herself. In it, she planted an apple tree given to her by Gaia on the day of her wedding to Zeus. The fruit of this tree gives immortality to anyone who fetches it, but it is also guarded by an immortal dragon and by the Hesperides nymphs themselves. By claiming these apples, Heracles is essentially entering the realm of the gods, both trespassing into Hera’s sacred space and gaining for himself one route to immortality. However, as he is still a mortal hero, he cannot enter the garden himself. He seeks the assistance of Atlas, a Titan who has been condemned to spend eternity holding up the sky. Heracles momentarily takes the place of Atlas and symbolically becomes at once of the earth and of the sky, his body dividing the realms yet in contact with them both. It is by taking this position and acknowledging these dual roles that Heracles is able to obtain the apples. When Atlas returns, Heracles tricks him into resuming his position and is able to deliver the fruit to Eurystheus.

While Heracles has completed this task, he has not actually gained immortality, and the apples are returned to the garden out of respect. Instead, it is through his final labor that he truly conquers death. In this labor, he must go into Hades (the underworld or the realm of death) and retrieve Cerberus, a monstrous hellhound

with the tail of a dragon that guards the gates. Many figures in Greek mythology attempt to enter the realm of the dead, but very few successfully return to the world of the living. In entering this realm, Heracles confronts the greatest power in the chthonic realm and proves that he, like the Olympian gods, is unaffected by this danger. This is the true divide between the chthonic and the Olympian: it is not that the Olympian gods are reborn after death but rather that they do not die. Likewise, even if a hero is memorialized in temples and worshipped at festivals, he still faces a mortal death and is still sent to the underworld. Heracles overcomes this threat, traveling with the secrets of the Eleusinian cult and wrestling Cerberus. Heracles's triumph over Cerberus suggests that even were he to find himself in Hades with the other mortal heroes, he would not be contained there, as his might is such that he could win his freedom at any time. To heighten this contrast, he comes across Theseus, the legendary chthonic hero and founder of Athens, who, unlike Heracles, is unable to escape the underworld.

His labors complete, Heracles is free to go on to other adventures with the promise from the oracle that he will one day become immortal. Indeed, in later legends, his earthly body is destroyed in a funeral pyre he built himself, while his godly form rises to the immortal realm of the Olympians. However, the labors of Heracles themselves end long before he meets this destiny. The labors, then, are not about the existence Heracles will share on Mount Olympus, nor are they about immortality and godliness, even as those rewards drive the story from the start. Instead, the myth of the labors is about the triumph of Greek civilization over the untamed and often frightening natural world. Heracles is the greatest hero to come out of antiquity, a legend born in the chthonic realm. His greatest feat, however, is not simply his brutish triumph over beasts and monsters. Rather, his glory is the glory of all Greece, of the earth and of the gods. In directing sacrifices to Zeus and obeying the command of the oracle of Delphi, Heracles offers the devotion and respect expected from the chthonic realm. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is by becoming an ideal of chthonic life that Heracles is elevated at last to the Olympian realm, indicating that perhaps the two realms are not be as separate as they seem.

CROSS-CULTURAL INFLUENCE

The ancient Greek Heracles was the pinnacle of the masculine hero, capable of conquering entire armies and slaughtering ferocious beasts. He fathered children

with nearly a hundred women, traveled to the ends of the earth, and defended the entirety of Greek civilization on many occasions. However, the heights of Greek masculinity do not match up neatly with modern ideas of masculinity. The ancient Heracles was also a playful figure, enjoying leisurely games and spending time with his children when possible. In addition to his many wives, he took on countless male lovers to whom he expressed passionate, unabashed romantic love. In the ancient context, these qualities made him even more heroic and masculine, even if they seem incongruous with contemporary ideals of masculinity and heroism.

Primarily because of his role as the ultimate hero, the myths surrounding Heracles have had a significant legacy through the modern day. Countless European and American films revisit the Heracles story, including the 1997 animated Disney musical *Hercules* and a long series of popular Italian adventure films from the mid-twentieth century. Comic books, theatrical productions, and television series have also regularly featured Heracles. Almost without exception, however, these portrayals focus on a version of Heracles who fits comfortably into modern ideas of masculinity. He is presented as a stern or angry figure, quick to fight and lacking the playfulness and romanticism of the Greek myths. While he may rescue endangered strangers, as he does in the ancient stories of the twelve labors, the modern Heracles rarely falls in love with those strangers and even more rarely has his heart broken by them.

One of the few contemporary exceptions to these portrayals is found in the book *Autobiography of Red* (1998) by the Canadian-born poet and classicist Anne Carson. A novel written in verse fragments, the work is a retelling of the tenth labor of Heracles, during which he battles the monster Geryon. Carson takes some inspiration from the ancient poet Stesichorus (Stesichoros), whose long poem *Geryoneis* tells the myth from Geryon's perspective. While the *Geryoneis* is largely lost to time, existing only in a few fragments of text, those fragments inspired Carson to create a modern version of the myth that likewise tells the story from Geryon's point of view. However, while the *Geryoneis* focuses on the violence of Heracles arriving at Erythea, the island where Geryon resides, and killing the supposedly immortal monster with a poisoned arrow, Carson instead imagines Geryon and Herakles (in her spelling) as young lovers, with Herakles abandoning Geryon and breaking his heart. In presenting Herakles as causing emotional rather than physical violence, Carson focuses the reader's

attention on a different aspect of the myths surrounding the legendary hero, highlighting the often romantic and sometimes tragic core of Greek mythology.

The narrative of *Autobiography of Red* begins when Geryon is a young, sensitive boy, interested in art and close with his mother. While the mythological Geryon is a fiery beast with three heads and three sets of arms who is typically accompanied by his two-headed hound, the Geryon of Carson's story is a slight boy with beautiful red wings, hardly someone to be feared. Geryon's early life is marked by tragedy when his older brother sexually abuses him, traumatizing the young boy and forcing him further into the seclusion of his mind. However, he begins to engage with the world again when a new boy, Herakles, arrives in town. Geryon almost immediately falls in love with Herakles, and the two have a brief affair until Herakles eventually abandons Geryon and leaves the town. The devastated Geryon retreats again into his mind. A few years later, he travels to Argentina, knowing that his lost love might be there. Geryon by chance encounters Herakles, who is accompanied by his new lover. The three men form a sort of love triangle, with the infatuated Geryon reaching out for brief moments of sexual contact and affection from Herakles. At the novel's conclusion, the three travel to a famous volcano and stand at its molten edge, uncertain what to do with the complicated love that exists among them.

The Carson version of the myth might seem, outside of a few telling details, nearly unrecognizable to audiences familiar with the tenth labor of Heracles. There is no violent battle, no command from Hera or promise of immortality to give the story a sense of importance or legendary inspiration. However, Carson is focused less on the narrative details of swordfights and monstrous hounds and more on the emotional core at the heart of much Greek mythology. In her own appended translation of the Stesichorus text, for instance, she includes a simple fragment announcing that "the red world / And corresponding red breezes / Went on Geryon did not" (xv). These simple lines, presenting simply the information that Geryon has died, have an emotional and lyric intensity that makes that information into something deeply moving. Stesichorus, though engaged in a project very different from Carson's, still saw the sense of loss and sadness present in the myth. Geryon at once belongs to the world, a place in which even the breeze is as red as he is, and is separate from that world, brought to death by Herakles. There is romantic and emotional

depth to the myths of Heracles, Carson reminds the reader, even if modern versions of those myths rarely include those aspects.

This moment of lyric intensity in the *Geryoneis* is the dominant mode in Carson's modern version. Just as in Stesichorus's text, Geryon is red, although this red marks him as different from, rather than part of, the world. Because of this, the young boy becomes obsessed with volcanoes and other fiery landscapes, seeing in them a home that he does not find in daily life. What remains the same, however, is the sense that the world itself has gone on while Geryon has not and that it is the fault of Heracles that this separation exists. After Heracles has broken the red boy's heart, Geryon cries into the night, his voice "upcast to that custom, the human custom of wrong love" (75). Carson is deeply engaged with the sense that love itself, an experience so often idealized and treated as "right," can in actuality be wrong (just as Heracles, in his righteous quest, is actually leaving great destruction and sadness in his wake). More than this, however, Carson notes that the experience of wrong love is itself a "human custom," a tradition all humans experience. Because of this, the Geryon apart from the red world in the *Geryoneis* and the Geryon left heartbroken by Heracles in *Autobiography of Red* are in many ways one and the same, linked by that sense of abandonment and betrayal.

The shift from physical violence to emotional violence is also appropriate in light of the history of Stesichorus himself. Stesichorus wrote many centuries after the myth of Heracles had become common. The story of the twelve labors was popular enough that even though most audiences could recall the details on their own, writers such as Stesichorus were able to tell their own versions, remaking a myth that had been remade many times before. In this context, Stesichorus shifted the perspective of the myth from Heracles to Geryon while also shifting the sympathies of the audience. Geryon, a supposedly immortal figure, is slaughtered by the single-minded and uncompassionate Heracles. The monster, in no uncertain terms, becomes a sympathetic victim. Likewise, Stesichorus breaks apart the traditional metrical qualities of Greek poetry, creating a new rhythmic form in order to tell the myths in an unfamiliar and surprising manner. Carson, in writing a novel in verse, maintains this tradition. The Heracles and Geryon she creates are both familiar and unfamiliar, just as the poetic fragments of her novel are both recognizable and unusual. By basing this narrative off the Stesichorus

fragments, she reminds her readers that such revision of classic myths is not a betrayal of the originals but rather a continuation of an ancient tradition in which writers keep stories alive by telling them in new ways.

This sense of connection through revision, of understanding the past by engaging with the contemporary world, resonates throughout *Autobiography of Red*. A large array of myths and legends have persisted through the centuries, and while figures such as Heracles seem to dominate these cultural traditions, unchanged after all that time, they are in actuality always remade, their narratives and meanings shifting. When the Herakles of *Autobiography of Red* brags that he is “a master of monsters” (129), the meaning of his declaration is heightened and complicated by humankind’s many cultural legacies. What does it mean to hold power over another person, whether through physical strength or emotional dependency? How do humans make monsters out of one another, and when does the monster actually deserve sympathy and understanding? Who is the hero: the dashing and powerful warrior, the sensitive and kind monster, or both? Questions such as these, nestled at the heart of the labors of the Heracles, are deep and complicated enough that they draw readers in today just as they did thousands of years ago. As much as Heracles himself might seem a bundle of contradictions and Carson’s version of the myth a departure from the intent of the original narrative, it is the availability of these

different interpretations that makes the legendary hero so much more than a mighty warrior with a quest for immortality.

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