Herakles. Or Hercules. A Problematic Hero: Crash Course World Mythology #30

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're talking about another hero. One who eventually becomes a god, a demi-god. Which is another way of saying semi-god. Kinda.

Anyway, it's our old friend Herakles, which some call Hercules. Sometimes a man, sometimes a god, but always a guy who really knows how to rock a lion skin.

Right, Thoth? Oh! No-I mean, you look really good too! Very heroic.

[Intro music]

Herakles has a reputation for being kind of a brute. All brawn, no brain. But remember when we talked about Herakles in an episode about tricksters? Remember how he tricks Atlas into holding up the sky forever? He may be buff, but Herakles sure ain't dense.

Though, he doesn't always make the best choices. Sometimes Herakles is his own worst enemy. Even worse than the hydra, and that was a pretty bad one. But, wait, let's not get a*head* of ourselves.

Like many heroes, Herakles had a miraculous birth. Zeus, god of lightning bolts, but not consent, takes a liking to Alcmene, the Queen of Thieves. Zeus transforms himself into the form of the King Amphitryon, and sleeps with the Queen.

Nine months later, Alcmene gives birth to two boys, Iphicles and Alceides. One of them is Amphitryon's son, and the other is Zeus'.

But ah, divine boys, which is which? This is how sitcoms get started.

When Hera finds out about this debacle - yet another Zeusian infidelity - she sends two revenge serpents to Iphicles' and Alceides' cribs. When the King and the Queen rush in, Iphicles is crying and Alceides is holding the two serpents strangled in each of his tiny baby hands.

Mystery solved, I guess. Alceides would later become Herakles. Alceides is raised as Prince of Thieves, but he's a bit of a problem child. His godlike strength keeps getting him into trouble.

At one point, he gets so mad at his music teacher that he smashes a lyre over his head and kills him. This is the last straw for Amphitryon and the King sends the dangerous demi-god princeling away to tend sheep.

As a shepherd, Herakles gets to put his great strength to use. A monstrous beast named the Lion of Cithaeron has been terrorizing the cattle of Thespius, King of Thespiae. When Herakles catches it and slays it, Thespius is so overjoyed that he allows him to take one of his fifty daughters to bed each night. Gross.

Eventually Alceides moves back to Greece and marries Princess Megara. They start a family and things begin to settle down. Despite the earlier adventures though, this is where we get to the turning point in Alceides' life. Suddenly, he goes mad. He takes his three children and two of his nephews, and burns them alive.

There's some ambiguity here in the story. Whether this madness was Alceides finally giving into his wild nature or whether it was caused by a vindictive Hera, who can really hold a grudge.

But either way, when Alceides comes to his senses, he implores an oracle for help. The oracle tells him, "Appease Hera. Change your name to Herakles. And to atone, you must travel to Tiryns and allow your rival, King Eurystheus, King of Tiryns and Mycenae, to set your punishment for killing your children."

This is the beginning of the Ten Labors of Herakles. Yep! Ten. Don't worry, we're gonna get there.

When Herakles arrives and tells Eurystheus what he's done, the King of Tiryns gives him a set of impossible tasks. These ten labors will take Herakles far and away, confronting all manner of monster. And if he succeeds, he won't just atone for his family-murdering, he'll also be granted immortality.

These are the heroic tasks that made Herakles famous. Let's count them off.

One: the Nemean Lion.

Harkening back to his days as a lion-slaying shepherd, Herakles' first labor is to go to Nemea and kill a monstrous lion. This lion's skin can't be pierced by arrows or spears, but Herakles doesn't let this stop him. He puts the beast into a chokehold and strangles him. Check!

Herakles must then defeat the Lernean Hydra, a swamp dragon with nine heads. Every time he slices off one of the heads, two grow back in its place and before long, Herakles is practically drowning in craniums.

Luckily, his nephew Iolus (who somehow managed to avoid the nephew killing by fire) brings Herakles flaming torches. The torches cauterize the dragon-neck-wounds, preventing Hydra from multiplying. Herakles kills the hydra, dips some arrows into its bile (you know, just in case) and returns triumphant.

But Eurystheus tells him, "This isn't Herakles and Iolus's ten labors! You can't get outside help! So that one doesn't count." Second labor: disqualified.

For his third labor, Herakles must capture the Golden Horned Hind of Ceryneia. Alone. It's tough, but after some chasing or trapping (depending on which version you prefer) Herakles snags the hind. Check!

Next, Herakles must go to Psophis and kill the giant Erymanthian Boar. On the way, he stopped at the cave of the centaur Pholus and accidentally kills him with one of those hydra-bile soaked "just in case" arrows. After burying the centaur, Herakles traps the boar and takes it to Mycenae. Check! But also, rest in power Pholus.

So far, all of Herakles labors have been giant, scary beasts of the land. For his fifth labor, Eurystheus tells him he must clean out the stables of Augeas, King of Elis. Augeas owned 3,000 immortal cattle and hadn't cleaned his stables in 30 years. That's about 650,000 pounds of immortal dung. Yes, we did the math.

Herakles agrees and says to Augeas, "If I manage to clean all of this out in a single day, will you agree to give to me a tenth of your immortal cattle?" Oh, tricky Herakles is back!

Augeas agrees and, instead of grabbing a dung shovel, Herakles goes upstream and diverts two nearby rivers through the stables. The water washes out years of dung in minutes. Augeas, who thought this labor was impossible, bails on the deal. Herakles takes him before a judge and wins the case. But Augeas flies into a rage and banishes him before Herakles can claim the cattle.

Herakles returns to Eurystheus empty-handed only to have Eurystheus announce that this labor didn't count, because Herakles tried to get paid for it. Fifth labor, disqualified!

After the immortal dung debacle, Herakles is back to wrangling monstrous animals. This time in Arcadia, where he must drive away the Stymphalian birds. Herakles scares them off with just a pair of bronze castanets. Sixth labor, check! Easy-peasy. Birds hate castanets.

Thoth, you're ibis. Not a... flamenco.

Herakles seventh labor is to capture the rampaging Cretan Bull, which he could do in his sleep at this point. Seventh labor, no sweat, a-check!

Next, Herakles has to go to Thrace to capture the man-eating Mares of Diomedes. There's a lot of different versions of this one, but they all end the same way. Eight labor, a-check.

Herakles ninth labor is to fetch the belt of Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons. At first, Hippolyte agrees to just give Herakles the belt. But then, Hera, of course, starts a rumor that Herakles has come to kidnap Hippolyte, and the Amazons jump them. In the ensuing struggle, Herakles kills Hippolyte and takes her belt. Ninth labor, check. Hippolyte, you barely knew thee.

Just one labor left, but there were two disqualifications. For Herakles' final three labors, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The tenth labor takes Herakles far to the west, to Eurytheia, where he must seize the red cattle of Geryon. On the way, Herakles is so angry about how hot the sun is that he aims his bow and arrow at it. The sun is so impressed with Herakles bravery that he gives the hero a golden cup. And it's not just any cup, it's a magic cup. That's also a ship.

After Herakles kills Geryon and his herdsmen and his two-headed guard dog, he uses the cup to transport the cattle back across the sea. But then they escape and he has to chase them all over Europe. When Herakles finally gets them to Eurystheus, the King sacrifices them to Hera. That's labor ten check! And tells Herakles, "Okay, you screwed up twice though, so here are your two make up labors."

Labor eleven is collecting golden apples from the nymphs, the Hesperides. This is the one where he tricks Atlas into helping him. He also helps Prometheus, you know how this turns out, ch-ch-ch-check.

And then the twelfth and final labor is to travel to the Underworld and bring back that damned doggo, Cerberos, Hades' three-headed guard-pup. Herakles travels to the land of the dead where Hades happens upon Herakles and tells him, "You can have Cerberos, but only if you can defeat him without any of the weapons you've brought."

Herakles agrees, snags Cerberos around the neck and chokes him into submission. He drags the dog to Eurystheus, gets him to sign off on the final labor - that's the check to end all checks - and then returns Cerberos to Hades.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

After all that adventuring, Herakles manages to complete his ten-turned-twelve labors.

While this is Herakles most famous story, it's far from his last adventure. He gets married again! That's right, no happily ever after with Megara. Disney lied to you. Eventually, he even manages to achieve that elusive immortality, though, it's at great cost.

Well after his twelve labors, Herakles is crossing the river Evenos with his new wife, Deianira. The ferryman, a centaur named Nessus, tries to rape Deianira midstream and Herakles kills him. But with his dying breath, Nessus tricks Deianira into preparing what he tells her is a love potion which she can use if Herakles ever loses interest in her.

Herakles later falls in love with Iole and, in order to win him back, Deianira soaks his shirt in Nessus's "love potion", a.k.a. and of course a horrible poison (because what else would it be? Nessus was clearly a bad guy!). Herakles puts on the shirt and dies an extremely painful death, burning on his own funeral pyre.

Finally, Zeus tells Hera, "Hey, enough is enough," and sends Athena down to make Herakles immortal and bring him to Mount Olympus. So Herakles becomes a god and gets to live on Olympus. Right near Hera.

So, what makes Herakles, a screw-up and a child murderer, such an enduring hero? I mean, as demi-gods go, the guy isn't exactly a role model. He sleeps around, he loses his temper, he kills people.

The ancient world seemed to love him for the variety and the excitement of his adventures. But what do we do about Herakles today?

Herakles presents kind of a problem. He's been given power and strength and brains, all courtesy of a creepy, absent, irresponsible father, but he still has to struggle to live an ethical life. Maybe we don't have to fight hydras. I mean, I hope we don't. I definitely hope I don't. Yet, we do have to all work to try and live with each other. Respectfully and responsibly.

We can't rock a lion skin, but maybe we can rock that. See you next time in the last in our hero series - about Ma'ui. You're welcome.

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Thanks for watching and thanks to the U.S.D.A.'s animal manure management brief for informing our manure math.