Tricksters: An Introduction: Crash Course World Mythology 20

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're gonna start the first of a few episodes on a show favorite: trickster stories. But be warned, trickster myths can get sexy, a little gross, and they are filled with betrayal, but we should be able to handle it.

Right Thoth? Ooh Thoth, Stan just texted me, you have been promoted to host. So, uh, I'm just gonna go and grab a coffee. See you later. Good luck.

[Opening music]

Just kidding, there is no way that Thoth could host this show. He's like, thousands of years old and he only speaks Ancient Egyptian, which literally nobody understands. But roping some sucker into doing my work is exactly the sort of thing a trickster would do.

Trickster stories are traditionally very popular, and for a good reason. In many trickster stories, the underdogs come out on top. And not by virtue of their superior strength or immortal attributes either, but because of their smarts. Another appealing thing about tricksters is that they are transgressive, they're rebels, and who doesn't love a rebel? Just ask Ares, Greek god of war and rebellion, or James Dean, the American god of pomade and leather jackets.

A good place to start is mythologist David Leeming's description of a trickster: "The trickster is at once wise and foolish, the perpetrator of tricks and the butt of his own jokes. Always male, he is promiscuous and amoral; he is outrageous in his actions; he emphasizes the 'lower' bodily functions; he often takes animal form. Yet the trickster is profoundly inventive, creative by nature, and in some ways, a helper to humanity." So, amoral and scatological, but otherwise a good guy. We all have that friend, I think.

Let's begin in Africa. African trickster stories remain popular and frequently have ambiguous or morally dubious endings. According to Thury and Devinny, "Unlike European folktales, which usually have a happy ending, trickster stories typically end in disharmony."

So let's see exactly what they mean by disharmony in the Thought Bubble.

Anansi the Spider and his son, Kwakutsin, are farmers having a bad year because of a drought. One day Kwakutsin is out for a walk, lamenting the poor harvest, and he sees a hunchback dwarf by the side of the road. The dwarf asks Kwakutsin what's wrong, and when he explains, the dwarf promises to help. He tells Kwakutsin to find two small sticks and tap him lightly on his hump while singing. So tap tap and it begins to rain. Soon the crops start growing.

Anansi thinks he can do better and goes to look for the dwarf himself, making sure to bring two big sticks. The dwarf tells Anansi to tap him on his hump again, but Anansi ends up hitting the dwarf so hard that he kills him. Now Anansi is scared because the dwarf was the king's favorite jester, so he puts the dwarf's body in a kola tree and waits.

When his son Kwakutsin comes by and asks his father if he has seen the dwarf, Anansi tells him the dwarf is climbing the tree looking for a kola nut. As Kwakutsin climbs up the tree, the dwarf's body falls down to the ground. Anansi cries out that his son has killed the king's jester, but Kwakutsin knows Anansi's tricks and replies that the king was actually angry with the dwarf, and now he could go to the king and collect a reward. Knowing there is a bounty, Anansi exclaims that he had killed the dwarf.

Anansi arrives at the king's court and discovers, the king was not angry with the jester, but now he's certainly angry with Anansi. The king orders the body of the dwarf to be put in a box, which Anansi must carry on his head forever, unless he finds someone else to carry it. Eventually Anansi comes across Ant, and asks him to hold the box while he goes to the market, and wouldn't you know it, Ant falls for it. This is why, to this day, we see ants carrying great burdens.

Thanks Thought Bubble. It's probably becoming clear why a lot of us, you know, just don't trust spiders.

In a number of ways, this is a classical African trickster story. It features animals with human characteristics interacting in a human world. The trickster is initially undone by his own greed. If Anansi had just listened to his son and not tried to outdo him, he would have been okay. Also maybe he shouldn't have tried to frame his son for a murder.

But Anansi fails in his attempt to hide his crime because his son knows his reputation for duplicity. Despite his cleverness, Anansi's greed gets the better of him. His desire for the reward leads him to admit his bad deed and be punished for it. And if he did end up carrying the coffin for eternity, the story might provide a lesson about justice, but Anansi being a trickster, is able to convince someone else to bear his burden, so he gets off scot-free.

The ending of the story does explain a natural phenomenon, why ants are so industrious, but the story isn't exactly a model for good behavior. In the end, Anansi gets away with killing the dwarf. His comeuppance is brief and the only thing he learns is that ants are total suckers. It's really like a Quentin Tarantino film of trickster myths.

The story of Anansi and the ant bears some resemblance to one of Hercules' labors. We'll talk more about Hercules when we get to our episode on heroes, but the long and short is that he had to do twelve labors and completing them cemented his reputation. One of these labors, the eleventh, was to gather Zeus's golden apples from the far end of the earth. These apples were guarded by a dragon and the Hesperides, nymphs who were the daughters of Atlas, the Titan with the unenviable task of holding the world of his shoulders. Talk about legendary back pain!

It took a long time and a number of adventures before Hercules even found out where the apples were, but eventually he is told about them by another trickster, Prometheus. You remember him, he is the guy who stole fire for the humans and was punished by being chained to a rock and having his liver eaten daily by an eagle? Well, good news: eventually Hercules kills that eagle, and in return Prometheus tells him that the way to get the apples isn't to fight a dragon, but to simply ask Atlas. Atlas can easily get past his daughters and that Mr. Dragon, no sweat.

So Hercules makes a deal with Atlas. Hercules will hold up the world giving Atlas a much needed break and, in return, apples. Atlas is thrilled, because, I mean, think about it, how would you feel holding up the literal world all the time? So he leaves, he goes and he grabs the apples.

The problem is that when he returns, he tells Hercules that he really doesn't want to hold up the earth and the sky anymore, so like, maybe that's just your job now, Hercules? I don't know, just spit balling here. So here's Hercules, he can't move; he's holding the world after all, but he does some quick tricky thinking. He tells Atlas sure, he'll do it, but can Atlas take the earth and sky back for just a second while he gets some padding for his shoulders? And when Atlas agrees, Hercules grabs the apples and vamooses. Tricksters tricking tricksters. How do you like them apples?

In these stories, we see that it often doesn't take much for a trickster to figure out how to fool the object of his tricks, sometimes called a dupe. Often the dupe doesn't really deserve it, although it's hard to feel sorry for Atlas, who was attempting some minor league trickstering himself. While tricksters can be seen as playful scamps, they also show us that play can be dangerous, especially when, like Anansi, we let it go too far.

In the Anansi story the trickster acts as what Leonard and McClure call a moral counterexample: "Tricksters are frequently greedy and lazy, dishonest and gluttonous, vain and impulsive. Thus, they can be seen as agents of chaos, for society provides the greatest advantages to the greatest number only if everyone restrains his or her impulses and cravings and makes allowances for the needs of others."

We're usually better off when we don't lie or cheat each other, but that's exactly what tricksters do. We're typically happy when they are punished for their tricks, but this doesn't always happen. Trickster stories can be especially troubling because not only do they usually get away with their tricks, but are often celebrated for it. Tricksters aren't all bad though. The trickster can provide a model for the oppressed to reclaim some autonomy in the face of overwhelming power.

This is one of the main lessons of the Br'er Rabbit stories, which are descended from African trickster stories, but transplanted into the context of chattel slavery in English-speaking North America. Br'er can be seen as representing slaves who would use their ingenuity to thwart and outsmart cruel plantation owners.

Maybe then it's worth asking what would happen if the tricksters just always won. And the truth is, while some tricksterism may be justified and a little bit of transgression here and there is fun, if everyone decides that its okay to beat dwarfs to death in order to double the amount of rainfall, metaphorically speaking, that wouldn't be great.

Trickster stories are often morally ambiguous in this way. Even Br'er Rabbit isn't always clearly the good guy, and that's one part of why we like them so much, maybe. Sometimes it's simply a thrill to break the rules. We as humans can see ourselves pretty clearly in the trickster myths. It's hard to identify with someone who can hold the the world or who goes on errands for the father of creation, but we've all at least tried our hand at bamboozling someone into taking over our responsibility. Sorry Thoth. You're a good sport.

Thanks for watching, we will see everyone next week.

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Thanks for watching, and you know, if you ask me, that eagle also came out ahead in this deal.