Mythical Language and Idiom: Crash Course World Mythology #41

Crash Course: World Mythology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=qmpDK-8ib2Y
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/qmpDK-8ib2Y

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Mythology, and today we behold our own apocalypse. Yes, it is the end of our time together on this here earthly plane. Our journey together has surely been epic, and we could go on for months with more exciting and uncomfortable stories of floods and incest. But alas - Thoth and I must retire to the spiritual realm atop Mount Crash Course.

Throughout this series, we've examined myths from around the world and across the centuries. We've met vomiting gods and responding dragons. We've met Loki, who was the worst, and Freya, who in my mind, is the best. A cat chariot! A battle swine! What a lady!

What ties all these stories we discussed together is that they're powerful. They're meaningful enough to be preserved and passed down through generations. And so, they can help us understand the world. They provide insight into how previous civilizations made sense of their circumstances.

Myths can hint at some of the deep structures of our collective psyche and even offer a glimpse into our own minds. And they're the best place to go for good, reliable information about unicorns. Elephants' feet! I still can't get over it.

[Opening music]

Today, in our final episode, we examine another legacy of the most impactful myths: the way they've seeped into the very language I'm speaking. We're going to focus on Greek because those have had a profound effect on the English language, though it is true that we got a lot of really good words from Egyptian - behemoth, chemistry, pharmacy. Hmm? Oh yeah, you're welcome. Credit where credit is due, I mean, you did invent writing.

Anyway, listing every example of mythical influence on English would be a Herculean task: a phrase we know from our episode on Herakles, which implies great difficulty and a requirement of great strength. And remember, Herakles took nine years to complete his labors, so a Herculean task can also be one that requires incredible patience, dedication, and effort.

Speaking of tasks, maybe you've heard of a Sisyphean one? This one's named after Sisyphus, who we've never discussed, so this is a perfect Thought Bubble opportunity.

Sisyphus is king of Ephyra; he is known as the craftiest of all men (crafty as in sneaky, though, not like scrapbooking). And Sisyphus isn't just crafty, he's also ruthless. He invites visitors to his kingdom, and then murders them! He even plans to kill his own brother, Salmoneus, by marrying his daughter, Tyro, making her bear a son who will kill his granddad. Talk about a long con!

In some versions of Sisyphus's story, he angers Zeuz by claiming to be craftier than the Father of the gods himself. In another version, Sisyphus tells the river Asopus that Zeus is having an affair with his daughter, the nymph Aegina.

Every version of Sisyphus's story has the doomed king angering one god or another. In some stories, he chains up Thanatos, the god of death, so that no one could die. In other stories, he tricks Persephone into letting him escape the underworld by convincing her that he wasn't buried properly.

Once he's finally in Hades for keepsies, Sisyphus's punishment is that he's forced to roll a huge boulder up a hill in the Underworld. Just as he's about to get it to the top of the hill, it rolls back down and he has to start all over again. Up the hill, down the hill, up the hill - forever.

And that is why today we use the term Sisyphean task to mean anything both pointless and endless.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

We can also find a whole treasure-trove of linguistic references by turning to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, two of Greek mythology's all time greats. In fact, the word "odyssey" is one itself.

You might know that an "odyssey" can mean any long, meandering journey. And you have the protagonist of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus, to thank for that particular turn of phrase. Although, in Greek, his name means trouble, not travel. Though, given how often my flights are delayed, I buy it.

Because Odysseus' odyssey is such a difficult journey with so many elements, it gives us a bunch of great ways to describe overcoming obstacles. Something's "siren song," for instance describes its hard to resist temptation. The siren song of that fifth brownie for lunch.

But in *The Odyssey*, this comes from sirens, beautiful women who are actually scary, half bird monsters. Living out at sea, the sirens have an irresistible song that lures sailors to their death. Odysseus is warned about this whole situation by the beautiful witch Circe, but he decides that he just has to hear their song. And I get it, no one wants to be out of the loop on the hot summer jam.

So, while his men plug up their ears with wax and steer the ship, he gets tied to the mast. They sail past the sirens, and Odysseus can't do anything but struggle in vain as his head is filled with the magical song. And so today, if you tell someone you are "tying yourself to the mast", it means you see trouble on the horizon and you are taking steps to protect yourself from doing something that you're going to regret. Like having a sixth brownie with lunch.

There's one more phrase from *The Odyssey* that's worth mentioning, and that's "being caught between Scylla and Charybdis", which I promise, is a thing people say. It's a much less common version of saying that you are stuck between a rock and a hard place, except in this situation it's a weird octopus thing and a whirlpool. This is another close shave for Odysseus because his route goes directly between these two beasties. Scylla is a sea monster that began her life as a beautiful girl, but was transformed into a hideous monster with six heads on long necks, lots of tentacles, and a waist ringed with dog heads.

And just across the narrow straight less than an arrow's shot away is Charybdis. Charybdis didn't start life out as a young girl. Charybdis is pretty much just a giant whirlpool mouth monster thing, and all Charybdis does is deliver entire ships to their doom. So, Odysseus gets the heads up from Cerci, who says just sail closer to Scylla, no big deal, she's gonna lean over, she's gonna gobble up six of your men, one for each head, but come on, isn't that better than losing the whole ship? Odysseus follows her advice, loses six men, but lives to finish his journey. And so being stuck between a Scylla and Charybdis isn't just about having to make a tough decision, it's knowing that one decision might be right, even if it costs ya.

The Iliad, which is primarily the story of the Trojan war also gives us a few turns of phrase. At the very start of *The Iliad*, Paris, the younger son of the Trojan king Priam, is asked to choose which goddess is the most beautiful: Athena, Hera, or Aphrodite. He chooses Aphrodite because she promises him the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen of Troy. But Helen is already married to the Greek king Menelaus.

Epically long story short, Paris steals Helen, or Helen runs away with Paris, depending upon your version. To get Helen back, the

Greeks launch a few ships - let's say a thousand - and they invade Troy. Boom, Trojan war. Helen becomes a symbol for unsurpassed beauty, "a face that launched a thousand ships" - the type that makes men stupid. Although, I suppose it is possible that Paris wasn't so bright from the get-go.

The Trojan war to get Helen back goes on for 10 years, 9 of which are pretty boring, but eventually we get to the Trojan Horse. For years, the Greeks have been unable to break though the walls of Troy, and so one day, they roll a huge wooden horse up to the gates and they leave it as a gift.

Eventually, the Trojans wheel the big horse inside past the gate. When night falls, the super-secret hidden Greek soldiers inside the horse burst out, do some stabbing, and open the gates. A Trojan horse is now shorthand for a back stab in the form of a gift. And fun fact, as of recently, it was proposed that the Trojan horse may have been real, except it was a ship left in front of a sea gate.

And speaking of great downfalls, we also get a phrase from Achilles, one of the great heroes of the Trojan war. When he was a baby, his mother Thetis took him to the river Styx, held him by the heel, and dipped him into the magical waters. The contact with the Styx's water made Achilles practically invincible. No one could hurt him in combat, that is, except for the one place on his heel where his mother held him. It's precisely this weak point that Paris takes advantage of with a single shot of an arrow at Achilles' heel, killing the stalwart Greek hero. This is why "Achilles heel" can refer to anyone's area of vulnerability, often one that's secret despite their seeming resilience. Let's be honest, though, you're more likely to reference the timeless myth of Kal-El and call this your Kryptonite.

When you start looking, there are almost too many myth-inspired phrases to mention. Take "the Midas touch". This, of course, is from the tale of King Midas, who wishes for everything he touches to be turned to gold. He gets his wish only to discover that gold food isn't all it's cracked up to be. And this is kind of ironic, because we tend to use the phrase Midas touch to refer to people who have success in every endeavor. I guess people mostly remember the first part of the story, and forget about the part about accidentally turning your daughter into precious metal and then almost starving to death.

An even more common term is narcissism. This comes from the story of Narcissus, who was so beautiful, that he fell in love with his own reflection in the water and drowned. Now, we use narcissism to mean pathological self-involvement. Oh, and also, before he drowns, he's so busy loving himself that he spurns the affection of a nymph, Echo, who is cursed by Juno to speak only by repeating the words of others.

We could go on for days with mythological metaphor, idiom, and turns of phrase that have found their way into English. Adonises, Gordian knots, leaving no stone unturned, being mercurial, having a nemesis, or even a phobia, and there are tons more. These stories have impacted the very language we use and the ways we understand each other, and much of our culture.

At the beginning of the series, we established a definition of myths, saying that they are meaningful stories with staying power. Stories told for generations. Explaining the mythological origins of common words and phrases shines a light on how deeply ingrained they've become in our culture. They're a reminder of how myths, even ones from millennia ago remain with us.

You, me, Thoth - we've been though a lot together. We've watched sky dad and earth mom fight, we've seen worlds begin and end, we've seen Loki be the worst, and we've witnessed just an unbelievable amount of weeding. Tigers were ridden, Gorgons were defeated, coyote had some diarrhea. Hey, it happens. We hope that you had a good time; learned a thing or two about how and why we tell stories, where we find meaning in the world, and why we seek to create it.

Thoth and I are more than proud to have been your guides on such an awesome journey. Now, before we make our way to that bit of the Elysian fields reserved for Crash Course hosts, we want to leave you with a question. What stories of today will become myth tomorrow?

We often think of myths as ancient, but a story told over a dozen generations, it's got to start somewhere. In a hundred or a thousand years, some tales we're telling right now may provide our descendents with heroes, tricksters, maybe even a few monsters. Let's just hope whatever they are, they inspire more beauty than battle, more camaraderie than conflict. From me, Thoth, and the rest of the Crash Course Myth team, we'll see you soon, so long, and thanks for all the myths.

Crash Course Mythology is filmed in the Chad and Stacy Emigholz studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support of our patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love though a monthly donation and help keep Crash Course free, for everyone, forever. Crash Course is made with Adobe creative cloud. Check the description for a link to a free trial.

Thanks for watching and now that the show's over, it's time to throw a bacchanal. Ambrosia for all. And by Ambrosia, I mean tater-tot pizza.