Hermes and Loki and Tricksters Part 2: Crash Course World Mythology #21

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey, there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're continuing with Tricksters.

We're going to look at tricksters as a culture hero, meaning someone whose creativity adds to the culture of the mythological world they inhabit. We're going to focus on Europe in this episode, looking specifically at Hermes, the Greek version of Thoth here, and also Loki, who in today's myth actually somehow isn't the worst...sorta. I mean, he does disguise himself as a biting fly so he's definitely not like the best.

[Opening music]

We haven't talked much about Hermes because there aren't too many myths where he's a main character - usually he's a messenger, more than a central focus. But hey, fun fact, he has a big presence in statuary. Hermes was a phallic god and all around Greece you could find square pillars topped with a bust of his head and featuring a male member. These are called herms and were frequently placed at crossroads.

Since Hermes was also the god of travellers and roads maybe these herms were meant to...point travellers in the right direction? Tricksters like Hermes are often associated with extreme sexual appetites and also with creativity - a connection which makes a lot of sense when we think back to our stories about creation of the world. But instead of getting into all that, let's explore one of the famous myths about Hermes, which begins when he was just a wee little baby trickster.

Okay, so, baby Hermes sneaks out of his cradle and killed a tortoise. I don't know what you were expecting; we're talking about tricksters. Anyway, he turns the tortoise shell into a lyre which he starts to play, inventing lyrics to accompany his music; pretty creative for a baby. He probably went to a Montessori school. Then Hermes gets hungry, but not for milk; he wants some meat. So he runs to Pieria where his brother Apollo keeps his sacred cattle.

Hermes steals fifty cows and hides them in a nearby cave. To get them into the cave, he makes them walk backwards so their footprints would be difficult to follow. He also invents some backwards sandals that hide his own tracks- again, clever baby.

Hermes whips up a fire, kills two of the cows and roasts them but doesn't eat them, which is kind of strange since he's supposedly so hungry. Instead, he hides the meat and cow-skins in the cave, throws his sandals in the river and covers over the fire. Then he just strolls on back to his cradle.

Apollo soon learns that some of his cattle are missing and he is furious. Despite all of Hermes' stealth efforts, Apollo figures it all out and threatens to throw him into Tartarus. Hermes defends himself saying he's only a baby, how could he steal fifty cows?

Apollo doesn't care how old his brother is but he can't punish Hermes without some judgment from their dad. Zeus listens to Hermes' denials but doesn't believe him and orders the baby to bring back all those poor cows. Afterwards, Hermes and Apollo make up and they exchange gifts.

Apollo gives Hermes a whip as a symbol of cattle tending and the caduceus as a symbol of heraldry, indicating Hermes' position as messenger of the gods. Hermes gives Apollo the lyre he had invented and this becomes Apollo's symbol as a God of music.

Although many tricksters seem more human or more animal than divine, Hermes is definitely supernatural. There's obviously something pretty special about this baby who's not only an able thief, but a smooth talker and a tortoise murderer to boot. As David Leeming observes, in this myth, "Hermes has the trickster qualities of deceitfulness, trickery, childishness, amorality, humor, extreme inventiveness, and great charm."

It's his inventiveness that makes him a culture hero, though - his creation of the lyre is incredibly important. It becomes Apollo's main instrument and one of his symbols of his divine attributes. It's also significant because songs are one of the ways stories like this one were passed down in the Ancient Greek world. And there's also something interesting about Hermes having to kill an animal to create the lyre. Perhaps, it's a reminder that creation is often the flip-side of destruction - that the two sometimes require each other.

Either way in this story, Hermes' mischief is basically harmless unless you're a cow or that poor tortoise. So I guess not really harmless, just harmless by like normal deity standards. And it ultimately brings about something positive for all involved. Again, except the cows and tortoise. It also explains the origin of a mythical artifact that defines the character of the god Apollo and the Greek culture that worshipped him.

For our second story, we have another myth where the trickster's mischief impacts a whole culture; as with many Norse myths it begins and ends with Loki who is the - well you get it.

One morning Thor wakes up next to his beautiful wife, Sif, and sees that something is missing: her beautiful blonde hair. Sif is understandably upset, and she begs her husband to fix the problem. Thor has a sneaking suspicion and heads off to see Loki.

At first, Loki denies doing anything but when Thor threatens to break every bone in Loki's body, Loki admits that yes, he'd stolen Sif's hair. He'd been hitting the mead and got to thinking wouldn't it be funny, you know, disappearing hair?! Hiarious! Unsurprisingly, Thor doesn't appreciate the humor and threatens him again with a most Norse undoing, so Loki offers to fix the problem saying that he can get Sif even better hair.

Thor agrees and lets Loki venture to the land of the dwarfs. What is it with tricksters and dwarfs? After that Anansi story from the last episode, I have a bad feeling about this.

His first stop - the sons of Ivaldi, three dwarfs known for their ability at the forge. Loki says that the gods of Asgard know of their great ability but that really they're only the second best craftsmen among the dwarfs, behind the brothers Brokk and Eitri. The sons of Ivaldi declare that they will not be outdone and promise to make three treasures for the Gods - one of which Loki says must be magical golden hair.

Then Loki goes off to see Brokk and Eitri- you can probably see where this is headed - he tells them about what the sons of Ivaldi are going to do and Brokk, the talker says that he and his brother can outdo those Ivaldis, no problem. Loki bets him he can't and Brokk takes the bet, but says that if the gods like his and Eitri's treasures best, Brokk gets to take Loki's head. Loki accepts.

Eitri, the master craftsman amongst the two brothers, tells Brokk to man the bellows and to keep pumping no matter what, so the temperature of their forge remains constant. Brokk keeps up his pumping for the first two treasures despite being bitten on the hand and then the neck by a large pesky fly who is, of course, Loki.

By the time Eitri is working on the third project, Loki the fly is really beginning to worry that he might lose the bet, so he starts biting Brokk's eyebrows. At one point, Brokk brushes the blood from his eyes and just for a second breaks his rhythm. When Eitri finishes making the treasure, he chastises his brother for the imperfections caused by his erratic oxygenating, but says that his gifts will have to

do. Loki brings the Ivaldis treasures back to Asgard, Brokk brings his and his brother's.

Loki reveals his treasures first and we reveal the Thought Bubble to see who wins.

The first treasure is Sif's new head of hair made from gold. When she puts the wig on, it fuses with her scalp and behaves like real hair. She is ecstatic; the gods are impressed. Next, Loki presents Odin with a spear-Gugnir. When thrown, it always hits its mark- useful for an old one-eyed God with suspect aim. Also, any oath sworn on Gugnir is unbreakable. Odin is pleased, but not effusive in his praise - classic dad move.

The final treasure is for Freyr, brother of Freya, who we've discussed in the past. This treasure looks like a handkerchief but when unfolded it becomes Skidbladnir, a magic boat big enough to carry all of the Aesir and it will always have a fair wind - pretty great for a seagoing people. Loki is pleased but Brokk is still confident that his gifts will be better.

First, he unveils a golden bristle boar, Gullinbursti. It glows in the dark, pulls Freyr's chariot, runs over water, and goes faster than any horse. Freyr is pleased but Loki says it's nothing compared to a folding ship which is just, I mean, come on! It's a glowing chariot boar!

The next gift is a golden armband called Draupnir which Odin wears. Draupnir multiplies itself - every night eight identical rings drip from it greatly enriching its owner. Why gods need gold is a bit beyond me, frankly, but hey, Odin? Psyched.

The last gift is Eitri's third project, the one erratically oxygenated. It's a hammer, and even Brokk has to admit that the handle is a little too short, but that doesn't really matter once Thor gets his hands on it. This is Mjolnir, an unbreakable hammer - it always hits its mark and always comes back to the hand that throws it and for Thor, it's love at first sight. The rest of the Aesir agree because with Mjolnir, Thor always will be able to protect them from giants.

The Aesir announce that Brokk and Eitri's gifts are the best and they're all happy, except for Loki, who totally dumped on himself.

Thanks Thought Bubble!

Now that he's lost the bet, Loki starts sweating and making excuses to Brokk, but Brokk only pulls out his knife and starts talking about all the stuff he and his brother are going to make out of Loki's head. Increasingly desperate, Loki starts looking to the other gods for help but no one's buying it.

A bet's a bet and Loki lost, even after cheating. Loki thinks quick: he's got one more trick up his sleeve. Loki explains that yes, Brokk does have a right to his head, but that the bet didn't include any part of his neck, so he's welcome to the head, but only if he can get it without cutting the neck.

Brokk calls shenanigans and appeals directly to Odin, but in perhaps the earliest example of getting off on a technicality, the one-eyed all-father agrees with Loki and Brokk has to go home with his own head in his hands instead of Loki's.

Classic trickster stories like these often involve serious transgressions against society. In this case, it's stealing and not just from humans, but from other gods. Neither Loki nor Hermes has a good reason for their thefts either. In fact, their excuses are downright immature. I was drunk and I'm a baby. Though to be fair, both do end up presenting important gifts to their fellow gods, ones that become foundations of the stories told about them for millennia.

Loki, in particular, shows us that while tricksters often get away with their tricks, the result is not always a foregone conclusion. Despite his best efforts, Loki is set to pay a stiff price for stealing Sif's hair - first at Thor's hands and then at Brokk's. In both cases, it's only his wit that saves him. Like Anansi, Loki can talk his way out of a pickle and in this way provide a model for human behaviour that other gods who rely on their supernatural gifts simply can't. Most of us don't have super strength or magic hammers but we all have brains and the ability to solve problems, even if we're the ones who made those problems for ourselves in the first place.

Just don't go trying to grift any rubes. You might not get lucky like Loki and you could end up losing a little bit too much off the top. Thanks for watching, we'll see you next time!

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Thanks for watching and if I were Brokk and Eitri, I would have given Loki's head to Samson. That's a man who knows how to use the jawbone of an ass.