With a title like that, you might be expecting to read about Steve Reeves as the wooden, muscle-bound Hercules of the 1950's, or perhaps about Kevin Sorbo as a bouncier Hercules of the 1990's. But the ancient heroes of modern film don't all bear ancient names like Hercules or Perseus (Harry Hamlin) or Jason (Todd Armstrong, of Argonautic fame, not the goalie-masked hero-villain of *Friday the 13th*). In the last few issues of *Labyrinth*, we've had occasion to look at the life-pattern of ancient heroes, and how it applies not only to Greek myth, but also to heroes constructed by modern imaginations, heroes such as Aragorn. But Tolkien's character still inhabits a traditionally mythic world, full of Elves and wizards and demonic creatures and magical talismans. It isn't that much of a leap from the world of ancient European mythology to Tolkien's Middle-Earth. What about 20th-century heroes who break away from that kind of world and operate in an environment that is less obviously "mythic"?

The most obvious modern cinematic hero of this type is Luke Skywalker. In fact, he's really sort of a "transitional" hero, who still has one foot in a traditionally mythic environment. The world of *Star Wars* is futuristic in its hardware, but in its society it's still a very mythical, magical place (long ago and far away). This kind of environment is especially conducive to Luke leading a life that is very similar to that of the many heroes of Greek mythology, at least as far as we can tell in the absence of a finale to Luke's story.

His birth is a mystery to him, as Oedipus's was to him. When we first encounter Luke, he lives with two people he believes are his aunt and uncle. They have brought him up, and clearly have kept the secret of his own birth from him. The crisis comes when Luke reaches young manhood, and is feeling the need to embark on some kind of quest to prove himself. Like the ancient Greek hero Theseus, this quest will not only establish Luke as a hero and help him fulfill his personal destiny, it will also bring him face to face with his own past. Luke, like so many Greek heroes, discovers that he is not who he thought he was, and that the truth about his own birth is an uncanny one. Since this is *Star Wars*, and not Greek mythology, Luke does not turn out to be the son of a god, like Hercules; but he is the son of an individual with magical powers that seem semi-divine: Darth Vader. Furthermore, as is often the case, the hero's father is an enemy, a threat to the hero. Oedipus's father tried to have him killed as an infant; the baby was rescued and brought up far away, only to return when he reached manhood and (unwittingly) kill the man who had tried to kill him years before. Although we are told little about the circumstances of Luke's birth in the films, it seems likely that he was brought up as he was in order to keep him safe. But a hero must fulfill his destiny and eventually come to a reckoning with that primal figure of hostile authority.

When Luke initially set out on his quest, there was no notion that it would reveal his own past to him. His motives were more straightforward: vengeance for the deaths of his "aunt and uncle", and a response to the plea for help from Princess Leia. The royal maiden almost always plays a part in the hero's career, and Luke's story is no exception. But contrary to later (highly romanticized) fairy-tales that most of us grew up on, Greek myth was somewhat ambivalent about the role played by the princess in the hero's story. Sometimes she's merely a passive character waiting to be rescued, like Andromeda, who waits helplessly for Perseus to rescue her from the sea-monster, and subsequently marry her. Andromeda herself has little personal impact on the story, and so she can safely become Perseus's bride. But sometimes Greek princesses are a little more active, and hence a little more dangerous. Medea and Ariadne both betrayed their own fathers in order to help the heroes they fell in love with, Jason and Theseus. As a result, neither of these love stories had a happy ending: Jason and Theseus both ultimately abandoned their princesses (in Medea's case, with horrifying results).

While the *Star Wars* story is certainly less grim than ancient Greek myth often was about its female characters, we'd have to say that as a personality Leia has more in common with an active royal maiden like Ariadne or Medea than with a passive character like Andromeda. Does she have anything else in common with them? Well, perhaps the most obvious thing she does that they also did, is fight on the hero's side against her own father. Since Darth Vader also turns out to be Leia's father, in a sense she too, like the women of ancient Greek myth, "betrays" her father for the sake of the hero. And, also like Ariadne and

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Medea, she ultimately does not form a permanent relationship with the hero (Luke). Of course, as things turn out in the *Star Wars* trilogy, this is a positive development, since Leia is discovered to be Luke's sister. But even here there is a faint reflection of some of the grimmer aspects of ancient myth, where unwitting incest is committed by the royal princess and heroes such as Oedipus or King Arthur.

Other aspects of Luke's heroic life reflect ancient models as well, but perhaps we should take a quick look at another hero who inhabits a less obviously mythic world than Luke Skywalker. John Connor, the child hero of Terminator 2, is also endowed with the characteristics and life story that qualify him for the role. Threatened from birth, John's childhood is also spent away from his true parents. Since he lives in modern-day L.A., John's upbringing reflects a harsher scenario of a succession of foster homes interspersed with periodic interludes spent with a mother he believes to be crazy. But beneath its trappings of modern realism, the hero's story remains the same. John has been told the truth about his conception and his destiny, and so does not have to discover it for the first time when he sets out on his own version of the heroic quest; but since he has never believed what his mother told him, it comes as a new discovery for him. John's father, while not divine or magical, was brought together with his mother in an uncanny way, through the medium of time travel; John himself, like so many Greek heroes, is illegitimate. Separated from his father by the latter's death, the structure of the story will still allow John to meet his father again in adulthood. Unlike Luke and many Greek heroes, John's own father is no threat to him. But as in the story of Perseus, there was a threat present at his birth, or rather, before his conception: the Terminator. When the time comes for John to assert his heroism (somewhat earlier in his life than is usual for heroes), he re-encounters that same threat from his own past: the same force sends an evil Terminator after him, though this time in a different guise. And John is able to encounter that threat successfully because he has the uncanny helper that a hero often has: Perseus had Athena, Luke had Obi-Wan Kenobi, and John has Arnie (not to mention his own mother!).

In the case of the *Star Wars* trilogy, it seems pretty clear that George Lucas was deliberately modelling his story and his characters on the prototypes of ancient mythology. So it's not surprising that Luke fits the pattern as well as he does. But is it so deliberate in the Terminator films? Or are they just one more indication that the ancient Greek hero-story is alive and well and living in Los Angeles?

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