# The Many Faces of Herakles

by R.L. Fowler

Greek mythology presents many puzzles, but none is perhaps so puzzling as Herakles (or Hercules as the Romans called him). Hundreds of stories were told of him; he was honoured in cult from one end of the Mediterranean to the other; people from all walks of life, from the humblest peasant to exalted Roman emperors, found something in him to emulate. Perhaps in some prehistoric era there was a single Herakles, but from the earliest times that we know of him he already has many faces, each one answering to a quite different description.

He is, first of all, the performer of mighty deeds. Most famous are the "twelve labours", a cycle that was established by the fifth century B.C. if not earlier. Although a son of Zeus, Herakles was dogged from birth by bad fortune and was fated to live a life of toil. The story goes that Zeus made the mistake of vowing on the day he expected Herakles to be born that a child of his blood destined to be "lord of all who dwell around him" would come into the world that very day. Zeus' wife Hera, who was consumed with rage and jealousy at yet another product of her husband's many affairs, arranged that Herakles' birth should be postponed and that Eurystheus, a descendant of Zeus through the hero Perseus, should be born instead. Thus it was that Eurystheus held sway over Herakles and imposed on him the twelve labours.

First Herakles had to kill the dreaded Nemean lion, who was invulnerable. Herakles solved the problem by strangling it; he then used the beast's own claws to skin it, and adopted the hide as his own armour. The standard picture of Herakles in Greek art drapes him in the lion's skin, and gives him the primitive weapons of club, bow and arrow; the overall effect is savage and quite remote from the disciplined hoplite of the Greek city-states. Secondly, Herakles tackled the Lernaian Hydra, a seven-headed serpent with an annoying habit of growing new heads where old ones were cut off. For this adventure Herakles needed help from his nephew Iolaos, who cauterized the stumps with a firebrand as Herakles lopped off the heads, and also dispatched a pesky crab that Hera sent to complicate matters. The third labour was to capture the Erymanthian boar, who did not present a great problem; Herakles simply netted the thing. The story seems to exist more for the comic ending in which Herakles presented the live boar to Eurystheus; painters loved to show the coward cringing in a huge storage-jar, begging Herakles to remove the beast. Next came the Kerynitian hind, who was sacred to Artemis and so could not be killed; Herakles chased the animal for a year before succeeding in capturing it, and then had to face the anger of the goddess. He managed to blame Eurystheus for his offence, and was allowed to take the deer to him before releasing it. The Stymphalian birds, a flock of man-eaters, were next shot by the master-archer; he then turned his attention to the stables of Augeias, owner of huge herds of cattle, who, however, never bothered to clean up after them. Herakles flushed out the prodigious heaps of manure in a single day by diverting the river Alpheios.

These first six labours all took place in the Peloponnese, close to Herakles' home in Tiryns (close to one of his homes, that is; Thebes also laid claim to him). The remaining labours took him further afield. First came the Cretan bull, who proved no more difficult to capture than the Erymanthian boar. The man-eating mares of Diomedes, a Thracian king, were potentially dangerous; but they became tame the moment Herakles fed them their owner. The oddest labour of all was to fetch the girdle of the Amazon queen Hippolyte; the Amazons being formidable (and hitherto unbeaten) female warriors, this task was something like plucking Attila the Hun's beard. The usual story has Herakles capturing the queen's sister and obtaining the girdle for ransom; but a variant has him defeating the Amazon army.

The last three labours can easily be seen as different versions of a single theme: the ultimate challenge, the conquest of death. To

capture the cattle of the monstrous, three-bodied Geryon, Herakles had to travel in the Cup of the Sun beyond the stream of Ocean, far beyond the western edge of the known world. In mythology such a journey is equivalent to passing out of the mortal world into that of eternity. The garden of the Hesperides, nymphs whose name means "daughters of the west", was similarly located; Herakles had to fetch the golden apples they guarded. Finally (although this labour is sometimes listed as second-last) Herakles had to descend to the Underworld itself, wrestle with Hades, the god of death, and bring back the three-headed dog Kerberos who guarded the entrance. The conquest of death idea here is quite clear.

The common theme of these last three labours already points the way to a different view of Herakles than the simple "he-man" figure he is often thought to be. After Herakles died himself he was not buried in the normal way but taken directly up to Mount Olympus to join the company of the gods; he married Hebe, whose name means "youth", a transparent allegory of his newly acquired immortality. From the simple adventurer, Herakles has been transformed into a hero who overcomes all obstacles, including the final one, death. It is in this capacity that he was the first foreigner to be initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, the annual festival of Demeter near Athens where celebrants hoped to gain life after death through their devotions.

Another interpretation fixed to Herakles fairly early on was that of a civilizing agent. After all, anyone who eliminates all those destructive monsters from the face of the earth has done a great deal to clear the path for peaceful, settled existence. Also relevant here is Herakles' connection with the gymnasium (he was quite naturally a patron saint, so to speak, in view of his unmatched athletic ability). The gymnasium was a hallmark of Greek civilization, one of the first public institutions to be established when the Greeks built cities.

Herakles was very popular with ordinary people too, not only with those who looked for high-minded symbolic meaning in his life. For he was one of them: forced to toil and sweat his whole life through for another master. But in the end he got his reward and married Hebe herself. People prayed to him for small favours and asked him to protect their property. They also liked his festivals very much, for huge quantities of meat were the order of the day. It is doubtless a projection of the festival atmosphere that the Herakles of Greek comedy is a glutton and a drunkard.

The origins of Herakles are lost in time. Many scholars have noted the strong similarity between Herakles and the Phoenician god Melqart (whose temple at Cadiz is the site of the original Pillars of Herakles), and have argued strongly that Herakles' constant involvement with animals and his generally primitive appearance point to a much older origin in the Stone Age. The "shaman" or magic man who can curb the powers of nature and make the hunt successful is a figure known the world over, and one who doubtless goes back to the hunting-gathering stage of human society.

However that may be, Herakles afforded ample material for story-tellers, writers and artists. The canonical Twelve Labours are only a small part of his activity; in between them he fitted in scores of "parerga" or incidental exploits (like sacking Troy single-handedly - -a feat that later took a whole army ten years to accomplish - and even helping the gods in their fight against the Giants). In each of these stories new aspects of Herakles could be developed, adding new faces to the many he already had.