

THE DEATH OF HERACLES

Taking his bride, Heracles headed for Trachis, a city built in a gorge above a plain northwest of Thermopylae, whose king had offered him hospitality. On the way he had to cross the river Evenus, where the Centaur Nessus ferried travelers for a small fee. Nessus had lived in the Peloponnese until Heracles drove him out in his squabble with the drunken Centaurs, long ago. Deianira got on the Centaur's back while Heracles easily swam to the other side, but in the middle of the river Nessus assaulted the young woman. When Heracles saw what was happening, he shot the Centaur with a poisoned arrow (Figure 14.11). Nessus staggered ashore and with dying words instructed Deianira to collect his blood and semen, a powerful love potion, should she ever need it.

Heracles and his new bride stayed at Trachis. Still resenting his treatment at the hands of Eurypus of Oechalia, who had cheated him of Iolê, Heracles organized a military campaign. He sacked the town, killed Eurypus, took the girl, and retired to a cape on the long island of Euboea to prepare a sacrifice to his father Zeus, in thanks

for his victory. He sent a messenger, Lichas, across the strait to Trachis to fetch a clean cloak for the sacrifice. Deianira, learning about Iolê, now remembered the love potion:

[555] Preserved in a bronze container for many a year,
I keep an old gift of the ancient Centaur,
which, still a maid, I took from the shaggy Nessus
as he lay dying, weltering in his blood.

560 He used to carry people in his arms
for a trifling fee, across Evenus' river,
in his arms, not bothering with oars or sails.

565 He carried me too, held up against his shoulder,
when first I followed Heracles as wife,
so ordered by my father. Out in midstream
he fondled me with his lubricious hands.

I screamed aloud, the son of Zeus spun round
and from his hands let fly a feathered arrow,
which whistled into his lungs. The dying Centaur
gasped out a few last words: "Child of old Oeneus,
you are the last I shall ever bring across.

570 So listen carefully, and profit from my labors.
Take in your hands a blood-clot from my punctured lungs,
black with Hydra's bile, which Heracles
smeared on his arrows. This charm will never fail

575 to bind his heart: He will never look again
at another woman, to love her more than you."

With this in mind, my friends, since Nessus died
I have kept the venom, safely locked away.

Now I have brought it out, to stain this shirt.

580 All is made ready, as the living Centaur directed.

SOPHOCLES, *Women of Trachis* 555-581

569. Centaur Deianira's father, Oeneus ("wine-man"), was king of Calydon.

She gives the shirt to the messenger, Lichas. In Sophocles' play, Hyllus (Hylus), oldest son of Heracles and Deianira, tells his mother what happened next:

[749] Because you insist, I'll tell the whole sad story.

750 When Heracles had sacked the town of Eurypus,
away he marched, with trophies and great loot.
There is a Cape Ceneium, washed by the waves,
at the very tip of Euboea, where he dedicated
an altar and grove to his ancestral Zeus.

755 After my separation, I was overjoyed
to find him there, about to offer up
a splendid sacrifice. But just as all was ready,
his faithful herald Lichas came from home,
bringing your deadly gift, the envenomed shirt.

760 He put it on, according to your command,
then offered up a dozen perfect bulls,
the best of all the booty, and made ready,



FIGURE 14.11 Heracles and Nessus, a large Attic vase, c. 610 BC, used to mark a grave. Averting the attack on his wife, Heracles seizes the Centaur's hair, presses his left foot into his back, and prepares to bury his sword in the monster's chest, unimpressed by the Centaur's appeal for mercy by touching Heracles' chin. Heracles' name is written above him (from right to left), and Nessus' name (spelled NETOS) before his chest. Heracles wears a simple cloak crossed with a telamon ("strap") to support his sword scabbard under his left arm. He does not wear the lion skin, nor carry bow or club. Note his neatly trimmed mustache against the shaggy, unkempt beard of the Centaur. The belly of the amphora (not shown) preserves one of the earliest representations of Perseus slaying Medusa. (National Archaeological Museum, Athens; Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens)

a hundred victims of every sex and age.

At first, poor man, his heart rejoiced at the show,
and he prayed with fervor, wearing your recent gift.
But then, as the blood-fed fires of the sacred rite
blazed up and joined the resinous firewood's heat,
and his whole body broke into a sweat,
your shirt, as tight as any builder's mortise,
clung to his ribs, and then to every limb.
On every bone came cramping, torturing, fire,
as the serpentine and deadly venom gnawed.
He screamed in pain to bring him hapless Lichas,
who had no share at all in his distress.

775 "What scheming made you bring this deadly garment?"
Poor man, what did he know? He kept repeating
the gift was yours alone, he just the bearer.
As Heracles was listening to his words,

780 a wrenching torment tore apart his lungs.
He seized poor Lichas by one ankle joint
and dashed him down against a wave-washed reef.
The white stuff of his brain, marbled with blood,
burst from his shattered skull and soaked his hair.
No bystander but gasped and groaned in horror,
at Heracles' torment, Lichas' death,

yet not a soul dared to approach the hero,
now squirming in anguish, groveling on the earth,
now starting up in sharp spasmodic pain.
The cries of Heracles reechoed from the rocks
on every side—Locrian cliffs and headlands of Euboea.

790 At last, exhausted, he collapsed to the ground,
cursing and groaning at the bitter wedlock
with you, the marriage bargained from old Oeneus,
which poisoned his life. At last he raised his eyes
uncertainly from the thick and clinging smoke,
and saw me weeping in the stricken crowd.

795 "Come near, my son," he called, "don't run away,
though it may mean you join me in my death.
Lift me, carry me out, where none can see my pain.
If you have any pity, take me across the water
far from this place, and let me not die here."

800 At this command, we laid him in a ship
and painfully rowed him here in his distress,
screaming in torment. When you see him next
he may still be alive; more likely not.

SOPHOCLES, *Women of Trachis* 749-806

Years before, Zeus warned Heracles that no living man could kill him, but that he would die by the hands of the dead: The bile from the dead Hydra, coursing in the veins of the wounded Nessus, killed him (folklorists call this the dead-hand motif). Seeing what she had done, Deianira stabbed herself. Writing in death's

agony, Heracles commanded Hyllos to marry Iolê, dragged himself to the top of Mount Oeta behind Trachis, made an enormous pyre, and lay down on it. No one dared to light the pyre, remembering the fate of Lichas, until a passing shepherd named Philoctetes (fil-ok-tê-têz) dared to do it. In gratitude, as his last human act, Heracles gave Philoctetes his bow, later important in the Trojan War.

A cloud gathered around the pyre, thunder cracked, and Heracles was raised into heaven—his *apotheosis* ("the process of being made a god"). When the ashes cooled, only his armor was found, no trace of bone. His spirit was led in high procession to the halls of Zeus on Olympus, where he became a god and married Hebe (hê-bê), "youth." Although Odysseus saw him in the underworld, that was not the real Heracles, but only a shade, a phantom:

[601] My eyes fell next, after him, on Heracles' apparition,
a mighty form but a ghost, for he himself sits in the midst
of the banquet of deathless gods, with Hebe, fair-ankled maiden,
daughter of glorious Zeus and Hera of golden sandals.

605 From around him rose the terrified din of the gibbering phantoms,
who fluttered away as he came, an image of blackest night.
He carried his bow at the ready, with an arrow upon its string.
His eye glanced fiercely around, always preparing to shoot.

610 He wore an enormous game-bag strapped to his mighty chest
and a golden sword-belt as well, that pictured wonderful actions:
hunts of savage bears, wild boars, and fierce glaring lions;
hand-to-hand fighting, battles, murder, and sudden death.
Skilled as he was, this maker of Heracles' wallet and sword-belt
could never hope to design another such wonderful work.

615 Heracles knew me at once, as soon as his eyes fell upon me.
Sadly shaking his head, he spoke words flying right to the mark:
"Son of Laërtes, descendant of Zeus, inventive Odysseus,
are you too forced to endure some destiny loaded with trouble,
like that which I had to bear, alive in the light of the sun?"

620 Although a child of Cronian Zeus, I carried limitless burdens
for a man far worse than myself, who exacted impossible tasks.
At last he ordered me here, to return with the hound of Hades—
no labor, or so he thought, would be harder for me to accomplish.
Yet I carried Cerberus up and away from Hades' domain,
625 with Hermes to show me the way, and gray-eyed Athena to help me.

HOMER, *Odyssey* 11.601-626

Observations: Heracles *Kallinikos*, "Handsome in Victory"

Heracles' name, which seems to mean "the renown of Hera," or "he who gives renown to Hera," appears puzzling, because Hera persecutes Heracles relentlessly. In the Greek Bronze Age, however, when parts of this myth may have taken form, Heracles was perhaps a common name, like John or Paul, applied to the common folk tale hero who suffered greatly, then was rewarded at the end. The origins of Heracles remain obscure, and we do not know where his legends first appeared in Greece. The Argive plain, where he served Eurystheus, and Thebes, where he was born and first married, have equally strong claims. His character is complex and hard to summarize. Although often called the archetypal Greek hero, to the Greeks of Homer's day he was already old-fashioned, evoking a bygone age when violence could solve every problem. The historical period that begins with Homer was a tamer time (although still murderous) in which the stories of Heracles served as examples of the dangers of excess, though often with a humorous twist.

Heracles does everything too much. He commits terrible crimes, followed by humiliating expiation. He violates the most sacred human obligations, killing his wife, children, and his guest-friend Iphigenia, after which he must live in degrading bondage first to the cowardly Eurystheus, then to a woman as her sexual plaything and slave; he wears woman's clothing. A passing reference in Homer speaks of the time when Heracles shot Hera in the breast with an arrow. Another passing reference in Homer mentions that he even shot Hades "at the Gate, among the dead." Here is the hero's essence: reckless, fearless, sometimes tricky, getting away with things others cannot, violating every convention, attacking the very gods. He embodied the Greeks' naive eagerness to try anything without fear of the result, which too often proved disastrous. He destroyed evil, sinned greatly, loved unwisely, fathered a whole race, and died shamefully at a woman's hand. Yet he received his triumphant reward.

Of course, other heroes challenge Death—Gilgamesh inquires of Utnapishtim who never died, Perseus slays the death-dealing Gorgon, Odysseus and Aeneas

descend to the underworld—but none so often or explicitly as Heracles, and no other is rewarded at the end with immortality, Heracles' reward for completing the Twelve Labors. After death, Heracles married Hebe, "youth," on Mount Olympus, that is, he never got old. In life he journeyed to the underworld and brought back Cerberus. The triple-bodied Ceryon lives across water (where death's realm lies) in the far west (where the sun dies daily), and from there Heracles returned. The souls of the dead often are pictured as birds: Heracles slays the death-dealing species that hovers around Stymphalus. Busiris is the Egyptian lord of the dead, but Heracles kills him. He wrestles Thanatos, "Death," to the ground and frees Alcestitis. The apples from the Hesperides' garden grow on the tree of eternal life; they fall, although temporarily, into Heracles' hands. In one version, his pursuit of the apparently harmless Ceryneian deer also takes him to this garden, for the deer is the magically but dangerous animal that appears in folktales, leading the hunter from the everyday world to the other side of the mirror, the land of dreams and of the dead.

As the best-loved of all Greek heroes, Heracles was *alexikakos*, "the averter of evils," summoned as a god to turn away disease, human and animal attack, and every kind of harm. The most common oath in Greek was "By Heracles!"—just as we might say, "By God!" He was the paradigm of heroic tragic existence, but in many humorous tales, and on the comic stage, his reputation for womanizing and gluttony made him a figure of fun (Figure 14.12). Heracles is not a hero who fights other heroes, like the warriors before the walls of Troy and Thebes. Like Gilgamesh, or the biblical Samson (who also killed a lion and was destroyed by a woman), he is the toughest, the strongest man on earth, another folk tale type, the animal-slayer who made the world safe by destroying dangerous beasts.

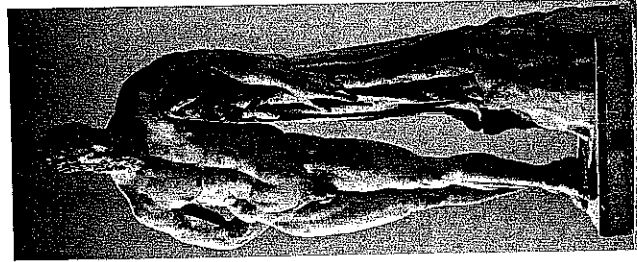


FIGURE 14.12 The Heracles of Perseus, marble Roman copy of Greek original by Lysippus, fourth century BC. The once elegant, aristocratic hero has become a muscle-bound brute as he leans wearily against his club covered by the lion skin. This is the gross, overmuscled Heracles parodied by the comedians. From the backside you can see that he holds the apples of the Hesperides in his hand. (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, Italy; © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York)