



The old myths, like a bad game of telephone, have been retold into amorphous blandness – like Will Rogers’ old joke that it’s not what you don’t know that hurts you, but what you think you know, but don’t.

You don’t know Hercules. Worse, you think you do, but you’re wrong.

What I discovered, and continued to discover throughout what turned out to be an astoundingly successful collaboration between myself and Pak that lasted until last year, was a complex, tormented, violent, passionate character. He was not good because he was noble, but because when he saw a wrong he acted without thought to right it; but, enslaved by impulse, he committed as many crimes as he rectified.

Ultimately, what Hercules is, is a man: the man, the epitome of all that is right and wrong with that gender, and that is why our paternalistic society has remained obsessed with him for centuries. He is a hero, and a worker, and a breadwinner, and a warrior, and a lover. Also, a wife-beater, a philanderer, a murderer, a drunkard, and a lazy good-for-nothing.

Hercules at the Crossroads
(Corbis)

He did not choose just one road, Virtue, and walk down it never to be seen again. He has faced that crossroads and had to make that choice most days of his life. And at times he has chosen wrongly. Many times.

So have we all, and that's why we see ourselves in him.

This is his story.

Fred Van Lente, Brooklyn, 2012

CLASSICAL SOURCES

Wherever possible I've tried to follow the ancient sources to construct my Hercules narrative. As these sources, written across centuries, often contradict each other, I've synthesized as best I could these oxymoronic elements into a seamless cause-and-effect narrative without sacrificing, I hope, much "accuracy," whatever that means in this context, in terms of the original, accepted legends.

Some of the most moving accounts of Hercules' life are in the dramas of the ancient tragedians. Euripides' *Heracles* served as the basis for my and Greg Pak's modern series of graphic novels, *The Incredible Hercules*. The poet and classicist Anne Carson adapted that play and three others into a wonderful book called *Grief Lessons*; I'm using her translation here. Euripides' earlier play, *The Children of Hercules*, provides great insight into other players in this great drama, his mother, Alcmena, his sidekick and lover Iolaus, and his son Hyllus. Euripides' *Alceste* tells of Hercules' rescue of the titular queen while performing his Eighth Labor. Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* is a character study of his doomed wife Deianira.

Any survey of Classical poetry involving Hercules should start at Ovid's justly beloved *Metamorphoses* ("Transformations"), a Roman account of the ancient myths written at around the same time as Christ's birth. Here I'm using a very "modern" free verse translation from Charles Boer. *The Shield of Heracles* is a ballad of the battle between the hero and Ares' monstrous son Cycnus by Hesiod. As one might tell from the name, Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica* narrates the adventures of Jason and the crew of Argo, of which Hercules was a member. Bacchylides' *Ode V* relates the hero's journey into the Underworld.



Bust of Hercules in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Si Sheppard)

Other, non-fiction ancient sources include the great travelogue *Description of Greece*, written by Pausanias in the second century AD, which I've used to invoke the landscape of the Mediterranean world as explored by Hercules during his adventures. Diodorus Siculus's *Library of History* helps us understand how ancient peoples tried to separate fact from myth. Apollodorus's *The Library* is an invaluable collection of those myths from the Classical Greeks themselves.

PRINCE OF THEBES

The Family of Hercules

Hera, Queen of Olympus, dreamt of War in Heaven. Her husband and brother, Zeus, wielder of the thunderbolt, had seized power from their forebears, the Titans, the monstrous sons of Mother Earth (Gaea) and Father Sky (Uranus). The more human-looking gods were direct descendants of the youngest Titan, Cronus, who agreed to help his mother slay his father for imprisoning her other children, the Cyclopes, in the subterranean depths of Tartarus. After Cronus castrated Uranus and hurled his manhood into the sea, the dying Sky-Father warned his treacherous son that he, too, would be slain by his own offspring. A panicked Cronus swore to avoid that fate, becoming as ruthless a tyrant as his father. Betraying his mother, he assumed the throne of Heaven and swallowed each of his children as they were born. He missed only wily Zeus, who was spirited away by his mother, Rhea, to be raised in a nearby cave. She tricked Cronus into devouring a rock swaddled in a baby's blanket instead.

Once he reached manhood, Zeus infiltrated Cronus's court as a cup-bearer and slipped him a poison that forced him to vomit up the children he had swallowed: the sea god, Poseidon; dark Hades, soon to be lord of the Underworld; maternal Hestia of the hearth; beautiful, passionate Hera; indefatigable Demeter of the harvest. Once freed, the gods united to destroy Cronus and his brother and sister Titans.

The two forces waged an unimaginable battle for supremacy across Thessaly, ending only when the triumphant gods hurled the monsters' broken forms into the depths of Tartarus to join the Cyclopes, never to be heard from again. With Father Sky dead, Atlas, the general of the Titans, was forced to keep the heavens aloft on his shoulders. Clever Prometheus, though spared the vengeance of the gods in the initial Titanomachy, would earn Zeus's enmity by sharing the divine secret of fire with primitive man, and so the new King of the Gods chained him to a rock to have his immortal guts forever devoured by an eagle, only for them to grow back to be devoured all over again the next day.

Nevertheless the Titans' cousins, the Giants, remained free and unconquered. The blood from the castrated penis of Uranus had fallen in great drops to the land of Phlegra, setting the plains on fire and birthing these incomprehensibly awful creatures who then scattered across the Mediterranean world. Hera, blessed with the gift of prophecy since she was a girl, saw that the time would come – and soon, in the way the gods