

Epilogue: The Death of Heracles

I hope you've been convinced by these speculations, of the spiritual importance of the myth of Heracles' Labors. Keen insight has been disguised in an adventuresome format, to entertain as well as enlighten. In his time he exemplified the best of human striving for excellence. It's a shame his star has fallen so far. My intent is to set it back where it belongs.

One more lesson can be gleaned from the account of Heracles' last days.

Despite his semi-immortal status, Heracles was eventually killed by a poisoned cloak, the Shirt of Nessus, which was accidentally presented to him by his wife, who thought she had infused it with a love potion. Once donned, the cloak could not be removed, and it burned so painfully it caused Heracles to cast himself on a funeral pyre and die. Afterwards he was taken by Zeus to Mount Olympus and honored for his exploits.

There are a smattering of folktales from all over the globe in which a "robe of honor" presented to someone is actually a poisonous gift that cannot be removed and kills the one who puts it on. These stories symbolize the corrosive effect of being esteemed for what we do. Adulation, which seems so innocent on the surface, will actually demean our spirit if we get wrapped up in it as an ego trip. The cloak converts direct, living experience into a static narrative, and it's very hard, if not impossible, to strip it off again. This is also the shortcoming of religions: they provide an attractive blanket promise, but it can undermine the motivation to explore and expand spiritually if votaries suppose they have already found what they need by simply signing on.

The warning of the burning cloak is most apt for those who probe beyond ordinary boundaries. After returning from a deep penetration into the Unknown, savvy explorers need to retain some measure of the naked unpretentiousness that lofted them there, despite society insisting on their donning garments—outward distinguishing marks of personality—once again. Any sense of

accomplishment or honor, in fact any conceptual framing at all, will tarnish the purity of the state of openness arrived at.

Heracles mostly lived and wrestled naked, because garments are impediments to free movement. However we may clothe our bodies, we should follow his example in living psychologically and spiritually unencumbered.

We have been brought up on heroic folk tales of overcoming great obstacles to arrive at a peak condition, which are then finished off abruptly with a line like “and they lived happily ever after.” The Greek gurus preferred to leave us with a note of caution. Our challenges never end. We are never fully finished, fully realized, and it would be the death of us if we ever were. Science seeks certitude, but it must never imagine it has found it, or there will be hell to pay. Climb your Olympus, but know it is not your permanent abode.

This titanic anticlimax to Heracles’ life of heroic service was undoubtedly appended to warn against hubris. Going into the depths and reemerging is meant to recover who we truly are. It is not intended to convert us into a god or a star, and if that becomes our self-image we are doomed. The admiration of our dearest friends is the most hazardous of all homage, because we don’t suspect it of harboring any danger. We wear their cloaks without suspicion. This is why the Bhagavad Gita advises us to maintain equal-minded poise in fame as well as shame: either one can fatally disrupt our equanimity.

It is curious that in his very first Labor Heracles obtained an invincible cloak of lion skin through his own efforts, and for his finale he is gifted another cloak to carry him off, making him vulnerable once again. There is a dialectic perfection to it. The importance of what we wear, in psychological terms our personality, is a central motif in every life. We are instructed to be extremely careful how we dress ourselves, since it is not at all easy to remove what we have once imprinted as our self-identity. Our individual existence is no more than a momentary pulsation on the

surface of true Existence, which is the Absolute, Tao, Brahman, Divine.

In conclusion, in the most essential words of the Perfected Ones of the Bhagavad Gita: Svasti—May it be well!